

Special Issue Reprint

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# Do We Now Have a Logical Argument from Evil?

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Edited by  
James Sterba

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# **Do We Now Have a Logical Argument from Evil?**



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Editor

**James Sterba**



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## About the Editor

### James Sterba

James Sterba is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in ethics and political philosophy. 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 as well as an earlier one, resulted from work funded by the Templeton grant. Sterba is also planning to guest-edit another Special Issue for *Religions* on the topic "Is Ethics without God Possible?" a topic that is closely related to the topics of this Special Issue as well as the other Special Issue he guest-edited for *Religions*.



# Preface

Over fifty years ago, Alvin Plantinga convincingly overturned John Mackie's attempt to provide a logical argument from evil that showed that the God of traditional theism was logically incompatible with all the evil in the world. After the defeat of Mackie's argument, a consensus emerged among theists and atheists alike that logical arguments from evil were untenable. However, in 2019, I published *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Palgrave paperback), in which I argued that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world. My logical argument from evil has attracted a variety of responses. In 2021, I guest-edited a Special Issue of *Religions* in which sixteen contributors challenged my God argument, and I responded in the same issue. The editors of *Religions* were so pleased with this first Special Issue that they invited me to edit a second one, and I chose a topic that raises essentially the same concerns as the first. This second Special Issue has forty contributors, to which I was also able to respond in the same issue.

Now responding to contributors has led me to change my argument in a number of ways, which I have indicated in my responses. Nevertheless, 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.

Accordingly, this second Special Issue, taken together with the first, should be of great help to readers seeking to determine whether the God of traditional theism is logically compatible with all the evil in the world.

**James Sterba**

*Editor*



Editorial

## Forty Contributors: A Response

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In July of 2021, I finished guest-editing a Special Issue for *Religions* on the topic of my book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* That Special Issue contained what was then an unprecedented sixteen contributors, alongside my response. As it turns out, the editors at *Religions* were so pleased with the contributions to this Special Issue that they asked me to guest-edit another one. I accepted their offer and picked a topic closely connected to the topic of the first Special Issue. Since the argument of my book purports to be a logical argument from evil, one that shows that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world, I proposed as the topic for this new Special Issue “Do we now have a logical argument from evil?”

That we would now have a logical argument from evil would itself be an unprecedented event in light of Alvin Plantinga’s refutation of John Mackie’s purported logical argument from evil more than 50 years ago in *God and Other Minds* (1967). From that time to the present, it was unclear how anyone inclined to defend atheism could continue to approach the problem of evil as Mackie had done. This helps explain why philosophers who still wanted to defend atheism turned their attention to a new strategy—that of developing what came to be called evidential arguments for atheism. Atheists were no longer trying, as Mackie had, to add necessary premises to their arguments in support of atheism. A consensus had formed that “logical” formulations of the problem of evil were untenable.

In 2019, however, with the publication of *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* I challenged this consensus. Drawing on yet untapped resources from moral and political philosophy, I claimed to have put together a Mackie-style logical argument from evil. Not surprisingly, my challenge has itself been challenged.

In 2020, there was an author meets critics session at the annual meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion in San Diego. The papers from that session, my responses, and another set of afterthoughts from my critics, along with a response from me, were then fast tracked for publication and came out in a Special Issue of the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* early in 2021. The main argument of my book was also presented and discussed over Zoom at a number of places and debated over Zoom at Princeton University in 2021, the same year that the Special Issue of *Religions* on the topic of my book was completed. In 2022, I made more Zoom presentations of the argument of my book and then debated the argument in person at the annual meeting of the Southern Evangelical Seminary (SES) Conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, before an audience of over 800. Now, we have just completed the Special Issue of *Religions* on the topic of whether we now have a logical argument from evil, with its even more than unprecedented forty contributors, together with this response.

Need I say that writing this response has truly 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; sometimes, a Zoom meeting; and in one case, two such meetings, which led to improved or better-understood responses. All these responses taken together have turned out to be almost as long as my contribution will be to a debate book with Richard Swinburne on essentially the same topic as this Special Issue, which is now being copyediting. If successful, my response here, together with the debate book to be published with OUP, should serve to reverse the consensus that has persisted among both theists and atheists ever since Plantinga’s refutation of Mackie’s argument from evil more than 50 years ago.

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

### 1. Mark Johnston

Mark Johnston allows that my God argument has achieved “something significant”. It has succeeded, he thinks, as an argument against further consideration of the Mackie-style conception of an omni-God that “has haunted analytic philosophy of religion since 1955”. Still, Johnston also thinks my argument fails because it does not consider how an account of creation affects our understanding of what an all-good, all-powerful God can and cannot do.

As it turns out, my God argument does incorporate a distinction between ethics before creation and ethics after creation that can be used to meet Johnston’s challenge. Yet, rather than show how this distinction can be so used, I want to focus on how Johnston thinks his own account of an ethics of creation undermines my argument.

According to Johnston, we face a difficult challenge in coming up with a defensible answer for why God would create, which in turn places limits on what God could create. Johnston, through a process of elimination, comes up with “to manifest the glory of God” as the only possible reason that God could have to create. He also reasons that the anti-life, ill-designed material universe in which we live could hardly be God’s creation. He concludes that God would need to have created more perfect beings lacking any material embodiment, which he calls archons, and it would have to be through the sinful rebellion of one of these archons that the material world with all its life forms including ourselves was created. This is how, on Johnston’s account, all the natural and moral evil enters the world, not through God’s direct creation, but either through the action of one of those archons that God did directly create or through the action of humans, like ourselves, whose bodies were created by an archon but whose souls were directly created by God and embedded in the bodies the archon did create.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, we might ask did God not know that horrendous evil might result from giving the beings that he did create the unconstrained freedom and power to create other life forms and give them full reign over ourselves, whom he did not fully create? Johnston’s answer seems to be the following:

Antecedent to such free choices [of the beings God did create] there is nothing settled as to how they will turn out. Thus, God does not create free rational wills while knowing that they will make [evil choices].

Now, Johnston also takes this answer to be directed at an objection coming from an archon who, after conforming his will to evil, might then ask God “Why did you make me, knowing I would freely reject you.”

Yet after receiving the above response from God, surely a wiser and more inquisitive archon would have further asked: “So, knowing that I might turn to evil as I have, why did you not commit yourself at creation to restraining the amount of evil and that I and other archons like me might later inflict on others and each other?”

Notice that something like this implicit commitment to restrain later if necessary happens with human procreation. When parents bring children into the world, they surely do not know at birth whether their children will attempt to do something horrendously wrong later in life. Good parents just do what they can to care for and to protect their children as they grow up. If, however, later on, one of their children, now a teenager, is about to use a hammer on a younger brother to settle a score, surely good parents know it is time to step in and stop a serious assault from occurring when they are able to do so.

So, why is God not in a comparable situation when an archon or one of us is about to inflict horrendous evil consequences on an innocent victim? Of course, no one, not even God, let us assume, could have known at creation or at birth that years later, we would be making a choice as to whether to inflict horrendous evil consequences on an innocent victim. But, that is irrelevant. What is relevant is that God, if he exists, would know at creation for archons and at birth for us that if either of us later in our lives chooses to inflict

horrendous evil consequences on innocent victims, especially if that interferes with both archons and ourselves having an equal freedom to accept or not God's offer of friendship, he could have chosen to prevent just such horrendous evil consequences. Accordingly, God need not, at their creation, give archons the unconstrained freedom and power to create other life forms and to have full reign over ourselves whom, according to Johnston's story, God did not fully create.

Interestingly, Johnston himself employs a parent example that is very similar to the one I have just used for the purpose of supporting his own view. Here is Johnston's example:

Two parents may reasonably adjure from strict oversight of their 16-year-old son. Suppose the son purchases a baseball bat and uses it to bash a schoolmate, so badly that the schoolmate never recovers cognitively. A teacher who could intervene looks on and does nothing. The teacher's failure to intervene is, or is at least morally equivalent to, his permitting the act to occur. He could have intervened, but he let it happen. In that sense he permitted the bashing of the schoolmate to take place. But the parents have not permitted the bashing of the schoolmate. What they permitted was scope for their son's free action not hemmed in by their oversight.

Now, as it turns out, I agree with the conclusion that Johnston draws from his example. In it, the parents are justified in adjuring from strict oversight of a 16-year-old son with respect to his purchasing and using a baseball bat. By contrast, the teacher who could have intervened to stop the assault is grossly negligent for failing to do so.

However, Johnston's example is relevantly different from the parent example I used. To make the cases relevantly similar, imagine the parents in Johnston's example are now standing right next to the teacher as their son starts to lower the bat onto his schoolmate, and imagine that the parents, like the teacher in Johnston's example, do nothing to stop the assault. Surely, when the example is so modified, we cannot help but judge the parents, like the teacher, to be grossly negligent for not preventing the horrendous assault, even more negligent than the teacher, given that they are the boy's parents.

Of course, the point of my example, which now holds of Johnston's modified example, as well, is that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would always be in an analogous situation to the parents and the teacher and, so having the relevant knowledge but standing by and doing nothing. Hence, God would be grossly negligent for failing to prevent the consequences of horrendous evil assaults, other things being equal.

Now in his example, Johnston talks about the parents reasonably abjuring when they leave their son free with respect to his purchasing and using a baseball bat. But, we clearly do not think that the earlier reasonable abjuring of the parents extends to the situation where they are standing right next to the teacher as their son starts to lower the bat onto his schoolmate. That is why we would strongly condemn the parents if they do nothing. Their reasonable abjuring no longer continues to hold in this new situation.

Yet could it be different for God with respect to his dealing with the archons and with ourselves? Could it be that God could reasonably abjure in order for us both to be equally free to accept or not God's offer of friendship?

Let us reflect back on my original example of the parents and their children. Surely good parents would want to establish a loving relationship with their children. So, imagine again that one child, a teenager, is about to use a hammer on a younger brother to settle a score. If the parents intervene and stop their child's attack, and they would do the same for their other children, the result would be an equalizing of freedom for all their children. However, if the parents do not intervene to prevent their children from inflicting such horrendous evil consequences, the parents would not be engaged in a loving relationship with their children. Accordingly, just as a loving relationship with one's children requires parents to equalize the freedom of their children by preventing the infliction horrendous evil consequences on them, likewise for the God of traditional theism, if he exists, to provide us with an equal opportunity to be friends with himself must ensure that none of us are constrained by the imposition of horrendous evil consequences from being equally



free to accept or reject his offer of friendship. Of course, given all the horrendous evil consequences that obtains all around us in the world, we know that that its prevention has not taken place (in violation of my MEPRs). Therefore, we can only conclude that the existence of the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with the all the evil that exists in the world.

## 2. Marilie Coetsee

While Marilie Coetsee thinks that I am approaching the problem of evil from a Kantian or nonconsequentialist perspective, I consider the three Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs I–III) that are central to my approach to be acceptable to both consequentialists and nonconsequentialists alike. I should also mention that MEPRs I–III have been recently changed so that they better avoid the moral kindergarten objection that William Hasker has raised to my God argument on three separate occasions.<sup>2</sup> Coetsee should also be aware of this change since she cites my contribution to the first Special Issue of *Religions* where I make it.

Now, Coetsee objects to my God argument, claiming that it would be reasonable for would-be victims of the infliction of horrendous evil consequences to consent to God's permission of that infliction if it were logically necessary for them to receive a great good in a heavenly afterlife, a possibility that Coetsee maintains, appealing to skeptical theism, for all we know, might well be the case.

In response, I argue in support of MEPR II that the would-be victims of the inflictions of horrendous evil consequence are morally required to prefer not to have such consequences inflicted on them, given that God could provide us all with the greatest good of the opportunity to be friends with himself without permitting horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on us. If this were not the case, God would not be perfectly free to offer his friendship to us, and hence, he would not be the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism. God could also provide us with the resources for a decent life and equally good opportunities for soul-making without permitting horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions to be inflicted on us. Given then that in any heavenly afterlife, victims of the infliction of horrendous evil consequences would know that this is the case, it would be totally unreasonable for them to consent to the tradeoff that Coetsee favors.

The second objection Coetsee raises to my God argument is to claim that if God actually did prevent wrongdoers from completing the final step of their wrongdoing and inflicting horrendous evil consequences on their would-be victims, as needed, eventually, wrongdoers would no longer be able to form the intention to impose horrendous evil consequences on their victims.

But, is that a problem? Consider how something similar would likewise obtain if we lived under an ideally just and powerful political state. In that case, imagine that the various structures and agents of the ideally just and powerful state had effectively prohibited wrongdoers from inflicting horrendous evil consequences on their would-be victims to a degree that it became difficult to impossible for wrongdoers to even intend to inflict such consequences on their would-be victims. I do not think that if that were the result of effectively prohibiting the infliction of horrendous evil consequences on would-be victims, the good people in an ideally just and powerful state would object to such measures on the grounds that the ideally just and powerful state's prevention of the infliction of horrendous evil consequences on innocent victims had gone too far.

Moreover, notice that assessing the different stages of free actions differently is something we do ourselves through our political institutions. For example, notice that those of us with bad thoughts and intentions who, for various reasons, never go on to threaten or take significant steps to impose bad consequences on others do not, on that account, make it into the criminal justice systems of the political states to which we belong. This is because our political institutions are focused on preventing and deterring that final stage of immoral actions, the stage that takes away the significant freedoms of would-be victims, thus punishing only those who are found guilty of inflicting or are about ready

to inflict such bad consequences on others. Hence, just as we morally expect an ideally just and powerful political state to prevent, where possible, the final stage of especially horrendous evil actions; likewise, we should morally expect the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism to prevent the final stage of especially horrendous evil actions, as needed.

It is also important to recognize that without God's prevention of horrendous evil consequences, as needed, people will not be able to equally exercise their freedom to be virtuous or vicious, a freedom that Coetsee champions in her essay. Instead, some of us will be able to exercise far more such freedom while others of us will only be able to exercise far less or none at all—a fundamentally unjust outcome for which God, if he exists, would be responsible.

### 3. Erik J. Wielenberg

Erik J. Wielenberg credits me with “reinvigorating” the logical argument from evil against the God of traditional theism. Still, after summarizing my argument, he claims to have found a weakness in it, which he then devotes most of his paper to attempting to remedy. As I see it, however, Wielenberg's summary misses key elements of my argument, and when those elements are taken into account, my argument works without Wielenberg's proposed remedy.

Now, Wielenberg recognizes that I want to substitute something from the Pauline Principle into my Mackie-style argument in place of the failed moral and metaphysical principles that Mackie had employed in his own argument and which Plantinga had so devastatingly critiqued more than 50 years ago.

Accordingly, Wielenberg offers the following as capturing what I want to take from the Pauline Principle for my argument:

It is immoral for God to intentionally permit horrendous evil caused by immoral actions in order to attain some good or to prevent some evil.

Let us then consider the objection that Wielenberg raises to this principle and see how the three Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs I–III) that I actually claim to derive from the Pauline Principle would deal with it. Wielenberg asks us to consider a case in which a good that vastly outweighs the evil can be attained only by intentionally engaging in the evil. This is a case where evil is carried out or permitted to achieve a vastly greater good. So, how do my MEPRs apply to this case?

Now it is often thought that the greatest good that God could provide us with is friendship with himself, and Wielenberg says as much in his paper. It is also understood that God could not just make us his friends. Thus, if God were to offer us friendship with himself, the highest sort of friendship, we must be free to accept or reject that friendship and God must be free to offer or not offer it to us.

In the case of God, this implies that his provision of the opportunity to be friends with himself could not be logically conditional upon his permission of especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. The God of traditional theism could not be constrained in this way with respect to his offer of friendship; otherwise, he would not be all-powerful and, hence, not the God of traditional theism. This means that the opportunity to be friends with God must fall under the domain of MEPR III as a good that is not logically connected to God's permission of especially horrendous evil consequences. From this, it follows that there are countless logically possible and morally unobjectionable alternative ways that God could provide this opportunity to us if he wanted to do so. Thus, according to MEPR III, God would be morally required to use one of the many alternative ways of providing the opportunity instead of providing it by allowing especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions.

Likewise, we ourselves cannot be completely free to accept or reject God's offer of friendship if God were allowing horrendous evil consequences to be imposed on ourselves and others to get us to turn to him. That would clearly be a coercive influence on our choice,

depriving us of the opportunity to be completely free to accept or reject the opportunity to be friends with the God of traditional theism.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, what of those cases to which Wielenberg refers where people do turn to God and seek his friendship even while believing that this God of theirs does allow horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on the innocent, themselves and others included? What these people are clearly failing to recognize is that if God had permitted horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on them to get them to turn to him, God would thereby be taking away their ability to completely freely and lovingly respond to his offer of friendship.<sup>4</sup> In addition, those who would only turn to God if he allows horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on themselves and others would not be turning to God for the reasons God wants, and so, they would not be appropriate candidates for friendship with him.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Bruce Russell

Bruce Russell and I have been discussing the problem of evil since 2013 when I invited him to defend his views at a one of the two conferences on Ethics and the Problem of Evil that I organized at the University of Notre Dame with a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. At the time, Russell was a long-time defender of a probabilistic argument against the existence of God, and I was just a neophyte to discussions of the problem of evil, one who was just beginning to explore the possibility of a nonprobabilistic argument against the existence of God. As it turns out, it is because my discussions with Russell have continued intermittently over the years and, in fact, continued right up to just before Russell's submission of his contribution to this Special Issue that I am able to get right to the heart of the disagreement between the two of us.

Unfortunately, at the heart of our disagreement is a misunderstanding. Consider my MEPR III:

Do not permit rather than prevent 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.

This requirement is supposed to be an exceptionless (necessary) moral requirement. Consider what it claims. Put colloquially, it says the following: Do not secure a good using morally objectionable means when you can easily secure the same good by using morally unobjectionable means. What then is there not to like about this requirement? Is it not an unobjectionable moral requirement? Somehow, Russell fails to understand it for what it is. He wants to add a clause to it, which he claims would turn the requirement into one that is similar to the requirements in his own argument against the existence of God. Yet, unfortunately, by his own admission, that would make my requirement into a much weaker one than I have just shown it to be. In my argument, violations of the requirement imply that God is logically incompatible with the evil in the world, whereas in the transformation Russell proposes, he claims, the requirement only implies that God is unlikely given all the evil in the world. But, why should I adopt Russell's transformation of MEPR III, when the interpretation I have just provided and shown to be a necessary moral requirement supports a much stronger conclusion?

Now, consider my MEPR I:

Prevent rather than permit 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.

MEPR I, as I explain, should be interpreted to include another clause: "when no other good or goods are at stake." Then, the requirement, put more colloquially, is as follows: Prevent horrendous evil consequences when one can easily do so without violating anyone's rights and no other goods are at stake. Here too, what is there not to like about the requirement? Surely, like MEPR III, it is a necessary moral requirement. Unfortunately, here too, Russell

wants to transform MEPR I into, by his own admission, a much weaker requirement than the one I have just shown it to be. Untransformed, violations of MEPR I imply that God is logically incompatible with the evil in the world, whereas with Russell's transformation, he claims that MEPR I only implies that God is unlikely given all the evil in the world. But, why should I adopt Russell's transformation of MEPR I when my untransformed MEPR I can be clearly seen to be a necessary moral requirement that supports a much stronger conclusion?

What then about MEPR II? The requirement is as follows:

Do not permit rather than prevent especially horrendous evil of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have.

Now, I have to admit that MEPR II cannot as easily be shown to be a necessary moral requirement as MEPRs I and III. Much of my argument is designed to show that it is just that. However, as Russell begins his interpretation, my clause "they would morally prefer not to have" becomes simply "they would prefer not to have", which significantly affects the meaning of the requirement. Here and elsewhere, Russell needs to interpret MEPR II the way I have set it out if he is to properly evaluate it.

Thus, I content that Russell has his work cut out for him if he is to properly evaluate my argument. He needs to recognize that MEPRs I and III, as I have interpreted them, can be seen to be necessary moral requirements and not analogues of the admittedly weaker moral requirements that are found in Russell's own argument. He also needs to focus his attention on MEPR II to see whether, under my interpretation, it too can be seen to be a necessary moral requirement and thereby help to secure the conclusion of my logical argument against the existence of God.

Now, I happen to know that Russell has been invited to provide just such a new evaluation of my logical argument against the existence of God for a future publication. So, stay tuned.

## 5. Elif Nur Balci

Elif Nur Balci thinks my argument that God is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world works against Plantinga's Free-Will Defense but not against a structuralist Free-Will Defense that is complemented by the ethical views of the Mu'tazila school of Islamic theology and its great scholar Qadi Abd al-Jabbar.

Now, Balci rightly indicates how a structuralist approach directs our attention away from individual evil actions and their consequences toward structural evils and their consequences. Such an approach, however, does not evade my critique of traditional theism because my Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs I–III) apply both to individual evil actions and their consequences as well as to structural evils and their consequences.

Accordingly, the most relevant part of Balci's challenge to my view comes from the ethical views of the Mu'tazila school of Islamic theology and its great scholar Qadi Abd al-Jabbar, who, like myself, is concerned about both the individual and the structural evils in our world. Comparing the two views, Balci opposes my freedom critique of God's permission of especially horrendous evil consequences to Abd al-Jabbar's defense of God's permission of such consequences on grounds of justice. Here, Balci argues that justice is served for Abd al-Jabbar if "God commands and prohibits, sends prophets commanding good and forbidding evil, and gives moral responses in the form of interrogation, reckoning, and punishment". God need not do more.

Yet, suppose that God could prevent a young child from being violently assaulted and rendered painfully crippled for the rest of her life. Suppose further that God has already done all the things with respect to the would-be perpetrator that Abd al-Jabbar claims justice requires, except for reckoning and punishment in an afterlife. Now, I claim that justice requires that God still do more in this case, as do my MEPRs. I have also argued that a just and powerful state would do more too.

Interestingly, Balci has also allowed that a just and powerful state would do more, but then, she contends that this is because such a state is not concerned enough about the moral agency of its members. In contrast, I contend that it is actually to secure sufficiently adequate moral agency for all its members that a just and powerful state would intervene to prevent horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions from being inflicted on its innocent members, thereby taking away the significant freedom those members require in order for the virtue of all its members to be fairly tested. Of course, I further argue that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, should be doing the same, as needed.

## 6. Matthew Flannagan

Focusing on my use of the Pauline Principle to construct a logical argument from evil, Matthew Flannagan seeks to show that while we humans, because of our fallibility, are required to abide by the Pauline Principle and thus should not directly pursue the maximization of utility, God, who would not at all be constrained by fallibility when pursuing the maximization of utility, would, accordingly, not be similarly bound by the Pauline Principle.

Along the way, Flannagan presents a form of divine command theory that would turn Plato's Euthyphro dilemma into an empty choice. On Flanagan's construal, Euthyphro's choice becomes as follows:

Are actions right because God, who always acts in accord with impartiality and benevolence, commands them, or does God command actions because they are required by impartiality and benevolence?

Nevertheless, the real problem with Flannagan's critique of my God argument is that he fails to take into account that I do not endorse the Pauline Principle as it is usually understood but only endorse what I take to be three minimally demanding necessary moral requirements that I derive from the principle and call Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs I-III). It is these three moral requirements that, I claim, apply both to God and ourselves. Unfortunately, Flannagan never considers my defense and application of these requirements, which are so central to my God argument, although he does mention them once.

## 7. Robin Collins

The first thing to note about Robin Collins's critique of my God argument is that it is contradictory to describe my argument as attempting to show "that for some evils, it is morally wrong for God to allow them even if they are necessary for a greater good." This is because assuming that the greater good is understood to be a morally better outcome, then the claim would be that it is morally wrong to do what is morally better, which cannot be correct. To remove the contradiction, my view would have to be understood as claiming that it is morally wrong for God to allow certain evils even if permitting them were necessary to achieve some (great) good.

Collins goes on to raise two counterexamples to my Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II, which is as follows:

Do not permit rather than prevent especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide would-be beneficiaries with goods they would morally prefer not to have.

Focusing on the would-be victim of especially evil consequences, Collins asks us to imagine that that this person, when pre-existent, might well consent to enter this world of ours and suffer horrendous evil consequences for the sake of some (great) good, either for themselves or others.

But, who is it that is making this choice? Is it our 10-year-old selves or our 20-, 40-, 80-year-old selves with the values and character we had at each of these or other stages of our lives? Just suppose it is your 40-year-old self that is making the choice. Surely that self

could not be consenting to start your life all over again. The past of your 40-year-old self is set. Even God cannot change what happened to you in the past.

Nor would it help to hypothesize a non-developing pre-existent self, whose nature is determined by God, who is consenting to enter this world of ours and suffer horrendous evil consequences for the sake of some (great) good, either for themselves or others.

Arguably, the best way to understand Collins's consent counterexamples is to imagine consent being given in an afterlife where one has a chance to reflect back on that time of one's life when God permitted horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on you to provide you with a good that is logically dependent on God's permission of that evil, and then ask, would you now consent to or approve of God's action?

My contention is thus that you would morally prefer that God had prevented rather than permitted the horrendous evil consequences on which that good depends given that you did not need and could easily do without that good because you had available to you the greatest good of the opportunity to be friends with God, the resources for a decent life, as well as equally good opportunities for soul-making, without that good on which God's permission of horrendous evil would depend. Since you find yourself in a heavenly afterlife while knowing that God did not respect your moral preference in this regard, you would know that whatever God put you there could not be the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism. The God of traditional theism would not have allowed horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on you in such a case.

Collins also objects that a God who respected my MEPRs would be interfering too much in our lives. Yet, under the best of conditions, the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would only be the enforcer of last resort for the ideally just and powerful political states in our world, and there is no way we could morally object to living with an ideally just and powerful political state functioning in our lives. Nor would it be reasonable to object to God's preventing horrendous evil consequences to assist us in bringing about such ideally just and powerful political states where none existed.

Collins objects to the idea that God would be morally required to respect MEPRs I-III. However, I do not think he appreciates how minimally demanding these necessary requirements of morality are. They are so minimally demanding that we humans rarely, if ever, violate them. Surely, what is easy for us to do cannot be difficult for God to do. Yet, maybe the objection is that God cannot be subject to anything, even the requirements of logic. But, if God is not constrained by the laws of logic, then the justification for permitting evil consequences as the only logically possible way of achieving some good would no longer obtain to justify God's permission of evil. And, if God is subject to the minimally demanding laws of logic, why then would he not be subject to the minimally demanding requirements of morality as well?

## **8. IBruce R. Reichenbach**

IBruce R. Reichenbach objects to my God argument on the grounds that the moral principles it appeals to "are much too stringent to function to determine moral obligations and moral goodness." However, the central principles of my God argument are my three moral evil prevention requirements:

### **Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I**

Prevent rather than permit 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.

### **Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II**

Do not permit rather than prevent especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions on their would-be victims in order to provide would-be beneficiaries with goods they would morally prefer not to have.

### **Moral Evil Prevention Requirement III**

Do not permit rather than prevent especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions (which would violate someone's rights) in order to provide goods to which we do not have a right that are not logically dependent on God's permission of those consequences when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods.

Now, these MEPRs are defended as exceptionless minimal components of the Pauline Principle never to do evil that good may come of it that would be acceptable to consequentialists and nonconsequentialists alike, and, it turns out, they are not very demanding at all, as evidenced by the fact that we rarely, if ever, act in violation of them and that no moral requirement that is not very demanding on us could be too demanding for the God of traditional theism.

Moreover, given that in my contribution to the first Special Issue of *Religions* that I guest-edited on the topic of my God book, I limited these MEPRs so that they apply to just "especially horrendous evil consequences" rather than "significant and especially horrendous evil consequences" in response to an objection, William Hasker raised in his contribution to that first Special Issue an objection that Hasker has now chosen to no longer press against my argument.<sup>6</sup> This change makes these MEPRs which we rarely, if ever, violate even less demanding than they were before in my argument.<sup>7</sup>

How then could Reichenbach think that the moral requirements of my God argument "are much too stringent to function to determine moral obligations and moral goodness." It is because he introduces into my God argument conflict resolution principles which I defend in my work in environmental ethics as applying to humans only and not to God at all. While it is true that some of these conflict resolution principles are morally demanding, none are put forward as necessary moral principles that apply to God as well as humans, as is the case for my MEPRs and Natural Evil Prevention Requirements (NEPRs).

Hence, once Reichenbach's criticism of my God argument is directed away from my principles of environmental ethics, as it should be, and directed instead against the MEPRs and NEPRs of my God argument, it totally fails.<sup>8</sup>

## 9. Stephen T. Davis

According to Stephen T. Davis, my God book is "full of fascinating arguments." Surprisingly, however, Davis has not yet found a way to agree with any of them. In particular, he does not agree with the arguments I give for my central thesis that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, should prevent rather than permit especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, as needed. Against this argument, Davis contends that if God had made a world such that his existence and desires were known to us, then we would no longer be rationally free to go wrong. But, if knowing of God's existence and desires renders us no longer rationally free to go wrong, what about knowing of the existence and desires of parents and political states? Would knowing that parents and political states exist and have desires for us, if and when they do, also render us no longer rationally free to go wrong? How then could we want none of these to exist so that we could be completely rationally free in some strange sense? Furthermore, is it not what parents and political states do to us, not simply whether they exist and have desires for us, that is relevant to how free we are? And, if this is the case, do we not want parents, political states, and even a God, if he exists, as a last resort, to impose appropriate restraints on our freedom rather than not to impose any restraints at all?

Another reason that Davis provides for not accepting the arguments I give for my central thesis is that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, could compensate for whatever horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions he permits in this world by providing us with the opportunity to be friends with himself, particularly in an afterlife.

Now let us allow that God's providing us with the opportunity to be friends with himself is the greatest good that God could provide to us. Of course, we must be free to accept or not accept God's offer of friendship and God too must be free to offer it or not. This means that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, cannot be logically constrained

to permit the horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on innocent victims before he could offer his friendship to us. Given then that God could offer us his friendship without permitting the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions to be inflicted on innocent victims, then, being all-good, that is exactly how God would provide us with this opportunity to be friends with himself. Of course, we know that has not happened given the horrendous evil consequences that obtain all round us in the world.

We also know that God could not provide us with the opportunity to be friends with himself in order to compensate us for his permitting horrendous evil to be inflicted on us because that would mean God was compensating us for something he should not have done in the first place, and that is not something the all-good, all-powerful God could ever be doing, although imperfect creatures that we are, we do that sort of thing all the time.

Davis points out that in what he calls a “Sterba-world,” which is a world where the God of traditional theism does what I claim he should be doing, there would be few atheists, and Davis takes that to be a criticism. As it turns out, I agree with Davis’s inference, but I do not take it to be a criticism. This is because I only think that it is reasonable to be an atheist in a nonSterba-world, like our own, where the presence of horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions all around us is logically incompatible with the existence of the God of traditional theism.

Lastly, Davis is mistaken in thinking that God, if he exists, would be free to offer his friendship to just anyone, independently of what the would-be recipients have done with their lives. For example, even the God of traditional theism, could not offer his friendship to a child molester unless that person was committed to reforming, thereby making himself somewhat less unworthy of friendship with God.

#### **10. Raphael Lataster**

Raphael Lataster, the author of a 332-page defense of an evidential argument against the existence of God, attempts to give a fair assessment of my logical argument from evil. He starts out well, noting the God, whose existence, my argument claims, is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world, is the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism. But then, very quickly, he loses focus on the God of traditional theism by citing as a critic of my argument, Elizabeth Burns, who endorses a limited God hypothesis and by suggesting that defenders of theism can simply alter their notion of God to escape the conclusion of my argument.

Lataster gets back on track when he suggests that the God of traditional theism’s reasons for permitting horrendous evil may be inscrutable to us. But here, it would have been necessary for Lataster to consider the way I attempt to show how we have sufficient knowledge to show that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would be logically incompatible with all the evil in the world. Thus, in Chapter 6 of my God book, I show how all the goods that God could provide to us are either goods to which we have a right or goods to which we do not have a right, each of which further divides into either first-order goods that do not logically presuppose the existence of some serious wrongdoing or second-order goods that do logically presuppose the existence of some serious wrongdoing. This gives us a fourfold classification of all the goods that God could provide to us. I then show by the application of my MEPRs I-III to this fourfold classification of goods that the God of traditional theism would be logically incompatible with all the horrendous evil in the world. Unfortunately, Lataster does not even consider this argument, which is something he needs to do to have a defensible critique of my logical argument from evil.

#### **11. Jacqueline Mariña**

In her thoughtful paper, Jacqueline Mariña claims that the ultimate goal for beings like ourselves is “to enter the divine life.” I would call this entering into friendship with God. I would further contend that if God is the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism, then he must be free to offer us his friendship to us. This would mean that it could not be the case that the God of traditional theism must first permit the horrendous evil



consequences of immoral actions before he could offer us the opportunity to be friends with him. It is also understood that God could not just make us his friends. Thus, if God were to offer us friendship with himself, the highest sort of friendship, we must be free to accept or reject that friendship and God must be free to offer or not offer it to us.

In the case of God, this implies that his provision of the opportunity to be friends with himself could not be logically conditional upon his permission of especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. The God of traditional theism could not be constrained in this way with respect to his offer of friendship; otherwise, he would not be all-powerful and, hence, not the God of traditional theism. This means that the opportunity to be friends with God must fall under the domain of MEPR III as a good that is not logically connected to God's permission of especially horrendous evil consequences. From this, it follows that there are countless logically possible and morally unobjectionable alternative ways that God could provide this opportunity to us if he wanted to do so. Thus, according to MEPR III, God would be morally required to use one of the many alternative ways of providing the opportunity instead of providing it by allowing especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions.

Likewise, we ourselves cannot be completely free to accept or reject God's offer of friendship if God were allowing horrendous evil consequences to be imposed on ourselves and others to get us to turn to him. That would clearly be a coercive influence on our choice, depriving us of the opportunity to be completely free to accept or reject the opportunity to be friends with the God of traditional theism.

Yet, what of those cases where people do appear to turn to God and seek his friendship even while believing that this God of theirs does allow horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on the innocent, themselves and others included? What these people are clearly failing to recognize is that if God had permitting horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on them to get them to turn to him, God would thereby be taking away their ability to completely freely and lovingly respond to his offer of friendship.<sup>9</sup> In addition, those who would only turn to God if he allows horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on themselves and others would not be turning to God for the reasons God wants, and so, they would not be appropriate candidates for friendship with him.<sup>10</sup> Finally, those who turn to God under these circumstances should realize that the God to which they are turning, if he exists, could not be the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism.

Mariña also objects to my God argument that reincarnation could provide the perpetrators of horrendous evil consequence sufficient opportunities to "make up for what they have done" and for victims "to continue their progress in virtue" after they have suffered from horrendous evil consequences. Here, Mariña seems to imagine each of us having a continuous conscious awareness of the many beings we inhabit over the course of our multiple incarnations. Although this is an unusual way to conceive of reincarnation—usually the re-incarnate are not understood to be continuously consciously connected to their previous lives—still, our having many reincarnated lives could not serve to justify God's permission of horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions from being inflicted on us in each of our multiple incarnations. This is because God could have provided us with the opportunity to be friends with himself, the resources for a decent life, as well as equally good opportunities for soul-making without permitting such horrendous consequences. Hence, we would be morally required to prefer not to have such goods that are logically conditional on such horrendous consequences.

In addition, Mariña objects to my God argument, stating that I fail to take into account all the goods, particularly the spiritual goods that God could provide us only by permitting horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. What is relevant here is that Mariña herself fails to take into account that in Chapter 6 of my book, I divide all the goods that God could provide to us, his creatures, into a fourfold classification of goods.<sup>11</sup> (For more on how I use this fourfold classification of goods to evaluate all the goods that God could possibly provide us, including spiritual goods, using my three necessary Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs I–III) to conclude that God is in widespread violation

of these exceptionless components of the Pauline Principle, see my responses to Perry Hendericks and Michael Beaty in this Special Issue.)

## 12. Gili Kugler

Gili Kugler presents a striking interpretation of the God of Ezekiel 16 as a malignant narcissistic deity and of his chosen people who see themselves as being trapped in an abusive relationship with him. While what we see as immoral, even evil, actions of the God of the Hebrew Bible are usually interpreted by theists as the mistaken views of the people of the times as to what is immoral and evil, Kugler shows that the author of Ezekiel 16 saw the people of Israel as trapped in an abusive relationship with a narcissistic deity. I find this shocking.

Moreover, it does raise the related question where one is to go if one recognizes, as one should, the success of my logical argument from evil. Accordingly, at the end of my God book, I asked whether it might help to avoid the conclusion of my logical argument against the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God to hypothesize a limited god? I argued that such a god would have to be either extremely immoral or extremely weak, and I recommended against taking either option. Kugler's contribution to this Special Issue further provides us with the strongest of reasons against taking the God of Ezekiel 16 as a viable option, although at the time the text was written, it may have seemed to those for whom the text was written as though this was only option available.

## 13. Carlo Alvaro

Carlo Alvaro contends that God should have made us noncorporeal beings, like himself, so that we would have been without the evil and suffering we have experienced due to our embodied existence.<sup>12</sup> He argues that given that God, if he exists, has not done this, it shows that he is not the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism. Hence, Alvaro's argument, like my own, purports to be a logical argument that shows that the God of traditional theism is incompatible with all the evil in the world.

Now, Alvaro allows that as unembodied beings we could still go wrong and rebel against God. Nevertheless, Alvaro argues the following:

even if creatures that were created directly in heaven could rebel against God or turned away from God, God could simply discipline and rehabilitate the naughty and the insubordinate. And the advantage of creating human beings directly in heaven is obvious—they would never experience horrendous evil and suffering [of our embodied existence].

Yet, how would we know that the evil and suffering we would experience as unembodied beings would not be as least as great as the evil and suffering that we now experience as embodied beings? The Bible tells us that angels, or the unembodied intelligent beings that God is said to have created, have been able to do a great amount of evil and impose a great amount of suffering after they rebelled against God. So, why should we not think that as unembodied beings, we would not be able to do at least as much evil and impose at least as much suffering? If so, there would be no moral advantage to God's creating us as unembodied beings rather than as embodied beings, as Alvaro maintains.

In addition, near the end of his paper, Alvaro himself raises a serious objection to his own logical argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism:

It is always possible that God, if he exists, might have some morally sufficient reasons, which we might not yet or might never fully understand, for allowing evil and suffering and not creating us in heaven in the first place.<sup>13</sup>

Since Alvaro raises this possibility and then fails to show that it is not really possible, he thereby has undermined his own logical argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism. This is because such an argument must show that there are not morally sufficient reasons for what, if God exists, would have to be his permission of all the evil and suffering in the world, and Alvaro does not even try to do this here. By contrast, my logical

argument shows that God, if he exists, by permitting all the horrendous evil consequences in the world, would be in violation of exceptionless moral requirements (my MEPRs I–III) and so would not be the God of traditional theism.

Hence, it follows from the objection that I raised to Alvaro’s argument and from Alvaro’s own objection that he has not provided us with a logical argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism. Of course, this still leaves, Deism, Alvaro’s preferred option, as an open possibility even in the face of the success of my logical argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism. Nevertheless, this possibility would have to be weighed against competing scientific explanations for the origin of the universe, and it is not likely that Deism would fare well in that comparison.

#### 14. Jeffrey Jordan

Jeffrey Jordan groups together my argument from natural evil against the existence of God and Michael Tooley’s argument from natural evil against the existence of God as both incompatibility arguments, both claiming that God is incompatible with the existence of all the natural evil in the world. In doing this, Jordan has neglected a more established way of classifying arguments against the existence of God as either logical or evidential. According to this more established classificatory scheme, my argument would be regarded as a logical argument while Tooley’s would be regarded as an evidential argument. What makes my argument a logical argument is that beyond its assumption that moral and natural evil exists (without which there would be no problem of evil) and its assumption that an all-good, all-powerful God exists (which is made for the sake of argument), its only other premises are purportedly necessary premises.

Now, almost everyone in philosophy knows that when John Mackie tried to defend a logical argument from evil, so understood, Alvin Plantinga decisively overturned it. As a consequence, for more than fifty years, virtually no philosopher has ventured to put forward another Mackie-style logical argument from evil until the publication of my *Is A Good God Logically Possible?* in 2019. Consequently, I think it would be much more informative to retain the distinction between logical and evidential arguments, rather than group my argument together with many other arguments from evil, and maybe with all such arguments, if we also recast probability arguments from evil as incompatibility arguments, which we seemingly could do.

Turning to Jordan’s critique of my logical argument from evil, Jordan rightly concludes that if God did not violate my MEPRs and my NEPRs, every rational person would know that the God of tradition theism exists. Moreover, Jordan thinks the following:

A knowledge of God’s existence however would result in an evaporation of the space necessary for free moral development in much the same way that crime decreases in those areas known to be under closed-circuit TV surveillance.

But, surely Jordan does not think that the closed-circuit TV surveillance of ATM machines is morally objectionable on the grounds that it constrains free moral development. What Jordan is failing to recognize here is that having the option to do great good and great evil is not needed for the exercise of high virtue. In fact, having one’s own freedom constrained as well as the freedom of others to do evil is what is required to be more virtuous.

To see why this is the case, compare the capacity for being virtuous of wealthy individuals acting alone to meet the needs of the starving, possibly in a state of nature, to the capacity of the same individuals for being virtuous when they are constrained and empowered through a political state’s requirement that all its members fairly contribute to meeting the needs of the starving. Political states are thus used to collect resources, both from those who would otherwise be willing and from those who would otherwise be unwilling, to fairly contribute to meeting the needs of the starving. Accordingly, wealthy individuals who willingly act through such political states would, other things being equal, be more effective at meeting the needs of the starving than those who just act alone to do so as in a state of nature. Hence, these individuals would turn out, other things being equal, to be more virtuous in this regard as well. Accordingly, if the God of traditional theism

were to further support just and powerful political states by being the enforcer of last resort, virtuous behavior could flourish, as never before.

### 15. Daniel Lim

Daniel Lim takes up two critiques of my God argument that were raised by William Hasker and Cheryl Chen, respectively, in their contributions in 2021 to the Special Issue of *Religions* that was devoted to the argument of my book *Is A Good God Logically Possible?* In so doing, Lim makes some interesting critical points against Hasker and Chen, as well as against myself. Here, I will just respond to the critical points Lim raises against my own view.

Concerning Hasker's critique, Lim thinks my response to the kindergarten objection works against the way that objection has been raised by Swinburne, and Murray and Rea, but not against the way that Hasker has recently employed the objection against my view. Thus, he quotes Hasker:

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. To be sure, some exercise of free will, even in immoral actions, would still occur, but only on relatively trivial matters. I once described this as a situation in which God was in effect running a moral kindergarten, allowing us to develop our characters by arguing over the blocks, but ready to intervene before anyone actually gets hurt! (Hasker 2021, p. 210)

Yet, Hasker raised this objection, as he had on two previous occasions, before I had made a significant revision in my view to deal with it. What I did is propose to further limit God's intervention to allow soul-making to also range over significant evil consequences. After I made this revision, Hasker stopped raising his kindergarten objection to my account, including turning down the opportunity to do so in this Special Issue. Thus, for Hasker, at least, it would appear that the revision I made sufficed to answer his kindergarten objection.

Lim also objects to my account on the grounds that if God did prevent horrendous evil consequences as needed, we would no longer suffer from the expectations that the significant evil consequences we experience might turn into horrendous evil consequences. Surely, this might well happen, but where is the objection? If we were living in an ideally just state that with very limited surveillance was able to detect and prevent all violent assaults among its citizens, as needed, could its citizens still reasonably object that they no longer feared that they might suffer from such assaults, as had previously been the case? I think not.

Concerning Chen's critique, Chen had objected to my view, claiming that it was logically possible that in a hypothetical world where God prevents all the horrendous evil consequences, as needed, everyone would intend to do horrendous evil actions all the time. In response, I had argued if this were the case, it would show that the inner morality of people in the actual world is just as bad as that of people in the hypothetical world because people's intentions would no longer have the normative significance we normally take them to have. Hence, the morally best that God could do for either world under such an assumption is to prevent people from suffering from the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Of course, this is something God would only do in Chen's hypothetical world, thus supporting my argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism in the actual world in which we live.

In opposition, Lim claims that the intentions of people in the actual world in Chen's example are morally better than those of people in the hypothetical world. However, Lim does not explain how they could be morally better given that they are assumed to share a common moral structure in both worlds.

At the very end of his paper, Lim argues in favor of my view that even if the actual world were morally preferable to my hypothetical world in Chen's example, as I argued it is not, it could still be the case that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would not

have created the actual world since it violates my MEPRs. But, here, I much prefer my own way of supporting my argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism.

#### 16. David Kyle Johnson

David Kyle Johnson thinks that the logical problem of evil, as I understand it, either commits one to atheism or to a version of theism that practically all theists would regard as a heresy. But, why does he not think, as I do, that the problem of evil commits us to the conclusion that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world? It is because he thinks that theists have the option of being committed to open theism according to which “God does not know what the free creatures he creates will choose or what the subsequent consequences of their choices will be.” Given what Johnson takes to be the constraint of open theism on what God could know, he thinks that it would be reasonable for God to adopt a policy of absolute noninterference, or what he calls a Divine Prime Directive, as God’s best option for relating to creation. If this were the case, there would then be a way of evading my conclusion that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world.

Clearly, a god who is committed to a Prime Directive of absolute noninterference would be logically compatible with all the evil in the world, contrary to the conclusion of my argument. Yet, in what sense is open theism committed to the view that the God of traditional theism does not know what the free creatures he creates will choose or what the subsequent consequences of their choices will be? Suppose we distinguish between inner acts and outer acts, which include the consequences of our actions, and suppose we focus on outer acts just as they are occurring or about to occur. Here, it is clear that the God of traditional theism could know about people’s outer acts, especially the consequences of their acts when they are occurring or about to occur, just as we ourselves can come to know about each other’s outer acts including their consequences when they are occurring or about to occur. Yet, this is all the knowledge that is required for MEPRs I–III to apply and deliver their conclusion that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world. Hence, while under open theism, God does not know what the free creatures he creates will choose or what the subsequent consequences of their choices will be until those choices are made, the view does not preclude the knowledge that is needed for my argument to reach that conclusion that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world.

#### 17. Joe Milburn

Joe Milburn thinks that there are two ways that theists might successfully respond to my God argument. The first is by denying that a perfect being needs to act in accord with my MEPRs I–III. This, he calls the exceptionalist response. The second is to deny that God’s acting in accord with my MEPRs would imply an absence of especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in the world. This, he calls the compatibilist response.

Now, with respect to the exceptionalist response, Milburn argues that God in his greater wisdom may have ways of exempting himself from MEPRs I–III that we lack. Yet, consider MEPR III:

Do not permit rather than prevent 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.

This requirement is supposed to be an exceptionless (necessary) moral requirement. Consider what it claims. Put colloquially, it says the following: Do not secure a good using morally objectionable means when you can easily secure the same good by using morally unobjectionable means. What then is there not to like about this requirement? How could one take exception to it? Would it not be like taking exception to  $2 + 2 = 4$ , and why would God do that? Moreover, I maintain that MEPR I is similarly unobjectionable, and while I

have to admit that it does take more to establish the same for MEPR II. Still, I claim to have done that as well.

Now, in support of his compatibilist response, Milburn argues that if “God always, or for the most part, prevented the evil consequences of immoral actions from taking place, we would not be the radically interdependent creatures we essentially are.” But, here, Milburn fails to take into account that my MEPRs I–III apply only as a last resort and, thus, only after all measures to foster such interdependence that are morally justifiable to the would-be victims of such evil consequences have been exhausted.

Milburn goes on to assess how well MEPRs I–III work in support of an evidential argument against the existence of God, concluding that they work better for Creator Theology than Perfect Being Theology, hence the title of his paper. However, since I think I have just undermined Milburn’s critique of my God argument as a logical argument against the existence of God, I think I can put off assessing his comparative merits of my God argument as an evidential argument against the existence of God.

### 18. Daniel Molto

Daniel Molto begins by surveying mainly the critiques of my God argument that are found in the first Special Issue of *Religions* that I guest-edited that were published on the topic in 2021. He does not similarly survey my responses to those critiques, except for my response to Janusz Salamon because it is just Salamon’s line of critique that Molto himself wants to pursue.

Molto, like Salamon, argues that God has given humanity as a whole the right of sovereignty analogous to the way that our practice of international law bestows the right of sovereignty on de facto separate political states, providing them with considerable authority vis-à-vis themselves and stateless people. However, Molto, unlike Salamon, argues that such a right is logically compatible with my MEPRs I–III and with all the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions that obtain in our world. Of course, if Molto were right about this, if his critique worked, that would totally undermine my logical argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism. But, does Molto’s critique work?

Molto thinks his critique easily delivers the compatibility of MEPRs II and III with all the horrendous evil consequences in the world but contends that its compatibility with MEPR I depends on how the reference to “anyone” in the requirement is interpreted. If it can refer to “humanity as a whole,” then Molto maintains that this requirement too is compatible with all the horrendous evil consequences that obtain in our world.

What is my assessment? At least initially, it would have been more promising for Molto to make his compatibility claim against MEPR I and MEPR III rather than against MEPR II and MEPR III. This is because both MEPR I and MEPR III are concerned with avoiding rights violations and that could include avoiding violating humanity’s right to sovereignty if that right could be defended.

In contrast, MEPR II makes no direct reference to rights violations but instead is concerned with the moral preferences of the would-be beneficiaries of God’s permission of horrendous evil consequences. So, MEPR II raises a special problem for Molto’s critique, as it did for Salamon’s. Molto even quotes part of the objection I had to Salamon’s critique on just this point:

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. (Sterba 2021, p. 6).

How then does Molto respond to this objection I raise to Salamon's critique? Molto responds that my argument requires that people's preferences be constant when they are not. But, my argument was not about people's preferences generally, which surely can be inconstant, but about the moral preferences of the would-be beneficiaries of goods that are logically dependent on God's permission of horrendous evil consequences, goods which the would-be beneficiaries do not need and can easily do without, given that they can have the greatest good of the opportunity to be friends with God, the resources for a decent life, as well as equally good opportunities for soul-making, without being provided with those goods on which God's permission of horrendous evil depends. Hence, the moral preference not to have goods that are logically dependent on God's permission of horrendous evil consequences under these conditions is a preference it would be morally wrong for the would-be beneficiaries not to have. This should suffice to show that Molto's critique fails to satisfy MEPR II, which should also suffice to defeat his critique.

### 19. J. Brian Huffling

J. Brian Huffling is responding to an earlier critique I made of his view. His response, I think, serves to bring our views closer together. Huffling maintains that when he applies various terms to God, he is speaking analogically and that is my view as well. Accordingly, when Huffling calls God just and merciful, he wants these and other claims about what moral virtues God has to be understood analogically, and so would I. So, how then can Huffling claim that God has moral virtues analogous to the way we have moral virtues without God's also being a moral agent analogous to the way we are moral agents. I do not think Huffling can consistently do this.

So, why then does Huffling not admit that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would have moral virtues, be a moral agent, and have moral obligations analogously to the way you and I have moral virtues, are moral agents, and are subject to moral obligations? Huffling wants to resist this inference because he does not think that God could be subject to standards such as the standard requirements of morality. However, Huffling does think that God is subject to the standard of logic, analogous to the way we are. For example, even in this paper, Huffling maintains that "God cannot will to create x and will not to create x". So, why then would God not, like us, also be required to abide by the moral requirement, Do not torture innocent beings for the fun of it.

My MEPRs I–III are likewise similarly minimally demanding moral requirements. In fact, we humans rarely, if ever, fail to abide by them. So, why then is God not bound by these requirements as well? Surely, requirements that are easy for us to abide by cannot be difficult for God to abide by. Of course, if the God of traditional theism was abiding by these minimal moral requirements, our world would be radically different from the way it is.

### 20. Jonathan C. Rutledge

The overwhelming majority of defenders of traditional theism endorse an all-good, all-powerful God who, like ourselves, is subject to moral reasons and thus is a moral agent. Nevertheless, there is a small minority of defenders of traditional theism endorsing an all-good, all-powerful God who is not, like ourselves, subject to moral reasons and thus is not a moral agent. For the most part, Jonathan C. Rutledge aims to support this minority perspective in his contribution to the Special Issue.<sup>14</sup>

In my God book, most of the argument is directed at the majority perspective, although I do, in Chapter 6, critique Brian Davies's defense of the minority perspective, and elsewhere in the book, I have a brief critique of Mark Murphy's defense of that same perspective.<sup>15</sup> In his contribution to this Special Issue, Rutledge seeks to undermine my critique of Davies's defense of the minority perspective by utilizing Murphy's defense of that perspective.

A central thesis of Murphy's defense is that (1) X is fundamentally good (bad) for A does not entail that (2) X is a reason for all agents to promote (prevent) X. Rutledge then attempts to support this thesis with the following example:

[H]aving sufficient nutrition is a valuable state for my dog, and I tend to think, in virtue of the relationship I bear to my dog, that this value gives me a requiring reason to feed her (a requiring reason not shared widely if at all). Indeed, were someone to try and feed my dog without my permission, I might be reasonably upset. It is my responsibility to take care of her, and, on the assumption that I am fulfilling that responsibility, other agents are precluded from doing so. In other words, other agents seem to have requiring reasons not to feed my dog (despite the fact that doing so is to aim at a valuable state of affairs for my dog).

Yet, does this example really support Murphy's thesis? Imagine I learn that Rutledge is seriously ill, and soon thereafter, his dog shows up on my doorstep gaunt and agitated. Would I not have a moral reason to feed the animal despite, under normal conditions, it being the case that Rutledge's special caretaker relationship to the dog overrides that reason? Is this not a clear counterexample to Murphy thesis?

Rutledge wonders how I might try to defeat Murphy's thesis head on by showing that (1) does entail (2). Actually, to find what Rutledge is looking for here, he needs to go no further than the book I published just a few years before my God book with the suggestive title *From Rationality to Equality*. In the first half of the book, I argue from a seemingly nonmoral ideal of rationality to morality, and in the second half of the book, I extend the argument to endorse a deeply egalitarian morality. This is, I think, the kind of argument that Rutledge was looking for me to provide.

Of course, I did not introduce this rationality to morality argument into my God book because I did not really need any such argument to deal with the overwhelming majority of theists at which my God argument was directed. Moreover, I think the argument I used against Davies's minority perspective in Chapter 6 shows Davies's view to be inconsistent without having to appeal to my rationality-to-morality argument. Nevertheless, that argument was always there prominently in my work in moral and political philosophy in case it was ever needed.

Now, Rutledge thinks I can get the same logical incompatibility results I get from my God argument by dropping the assumption that God is moral and just assuming that God is loving. While I do appreciate the offer of help, I am concerned that the noncomparativeness that Rutledge wants to incorporate into his understanding of loving will render it unable to do what would be required of it.

## 21. Patrik Hrmó

Patrik Hrmó seeks to contrast the approach to the problem of evil that I take in my God book, which, I claim, leads to the conclusion that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world with a Thomistic approach to the problem of evil, which, he claims, is perfectly compatible with the God of traditional theism.

Hrmó, while agreeing with me that God, if he exists, would be a moral agent, faults my approach for attributing obligations to God and for not recognizing that God's nature is the standard of goodness. Now, I will not repeat my argument here that the God of traditional theism is analogously subject to moral obligations just as he is subject to the laws of logic and so cannot do what is logically impossible to do.

With regard to God's nature being the standard of goodness, I contend that the standard for goodness, especially the standard for moral goodness, must be a norm, a requirement that one ought to act or be in a certain way. In the case of morality, the ultimate norm is something like treat all relevant interests fairly. By contrast, the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would be a concrete rational entity not an abstract norm. Such a rational entity, if he exists, like ourselves, would be subject to the requirements of morality just as he would be subject to the requirements of logic and cannot do what is logically impossible for him to do.

Furthermore, Hrmó, in his attempt to defend God as a moral agent maintains, "Permission of evil can be ascribed to God only accidentally because God does not will evil



essentially (since he essentially wills the good not the privation of good).” But, if this exonerates God from responsibility for the evil in the world, then it exonerates wrongdoers as well. This is because we could also claim that the actions of wrongdoers are directed at something good, and that wrongdoing is just a privation of goodness in their acts which they do not essentially will. We can further maintain that this privation in the actions of wrongdoers is simply a byproduct or a means of achieving the good toward which their acts are directed. Given then that we can parallel both God’s and wrongdoers’ relationship to evil, we would have no reason for not exonerating both God and wrongdoers for the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in the world, an outcome that would be morally unacceptable.

## 22. Michael S. Jones

Michael S. Jones’s contribution to this Special Issue is an outcome of a discussion we have been having over the last few years. Jones argues that in my work in ethics, I reject cultural relativism on the grounds that there is a sorites objection to it. To maintain consistency, he contends that I should reject my own God argument on the grounds that a similar sorites objection can be raised to it. Yet, I contend that I do not use a sorites objection against moral relativism nor can a sorites objection be used against my God argument.

One of the reasons I have for rejecting moral relativism is the problem that the view has in determining exactly what the requirements of morality are supposed to be relative to. It is said that they are relative to and a product of a particular cultural group. Yet, must that group be a society as a whole, or could it be a subgroup of a society? And, why can morality not be relative to each individual? Why can moral requirements not be determined just by each individual’s own personal reflection and thereby be relative to and applicable to that individual alone? If we allow all of these possibilities, then, any act (e.g., contract killing) could be wrong from the point of view of some particular society (e.g., U.S. society), right from the point of view of some subgroup of that society (e.g., the Mafia), and wrong again from the point of view of some particular member of that society or other subgroup (e.g., law enforcement officers). Now if this were the case, then obviously, it would be extremely difficult for us to know what we should do, all things considered.

This is one of the reasons, but not the main reason, I have for rejecting moral relativism, but it is not a sorites objection. This is because I am not claiming that a society as a whole, subgroups within that society, and individuals are no more distinct from each other than grains of sand, as obtains when a sorites objection applies. Rather, I am saying that moral relativism offers us no reason for not specifying morality in terms of one of these distinct entities rather than the other, and this creates an insolvable problem about what we morally should do.

By contrast, in my God argument, I provide moral reasons, in fact, morally exceptionless reasons, for preventing horrendously evil consequences of immoral actions but not, say, the trivial evil consequences of immoral actions. Nor are paradigm cases of horrendous moral evil, with their characteristic features of structural injustice, related to paradigm cases of trivial moral evil, without any such features of structural injustice, no differently than grains of sand are related, as would have to obtain if a sorites objection applied here.

Jones also raised a different, nonsorites objection to my God argument, claiming that if God were to prevent all the horrendous evil consequences in the world, then the most evil consequences that remained would become the new horrendous evil consequences and that this could happen again and again until what are trivial evil consequences for us became the new horrendous evil consequences. It turns out that Bruce Reichenbach raised this very same objection to my argument in his contribution to the first Special Issue of *Religions* that I guest-edited. Accordingly, I think the response I gave to Reichenbach in that first Special Issue holds here for Jones as well.

### 23. Andrea Aguti

Andrea Aguti begins his paper with a useful history of the logical argument from evil from Mackie to the present. The first claim that Aguti makes against what he calls my attempt to “resurrect” the argument is that my attempt does not work against the possibility of limited gods. Yet, as Aguti himself recognizes, I never claim that it did. I am only arguing against the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism. So, my argument is directed just at the possibility of the God of traditional theism.

Aguti then does go on to directly challenge my argument. He claims it has two components. The first is an argument that the Free-Will Defense does not work if one accepts a morally qualified conception of freedom. The second argument appeals to obligations that I claim the God of traditional theism would have that are derived from the Pauline Principle.

Against the first argument, Aguti claims the theist should recognize the limitations I find in a Free-Will Defense and turn instead to a Greater Good Defense to justify God’s permission of horrendous evil consequences in our world. Yet, at the end of Chapter 2, I propose to take up the possibility of such a Greater Good Defense in subsequent chapters. Unfortunately, Aguti never considers the logical argument that I go on to develop against just such a defense.

With respect to my argument that the God of traditional theism would have obligations derived from the Pauline Principle, Aguti initially endorses the view that God is simply not subject to obligations, but then, he takes a step back, maintaining instead that while God has no moral obligations, “he cannot do certain things that are morally significant.” For example, God cannot lie or want to do evil. Aguti then opts for a combined natural law/divine command theory where presumably natural laws impose obligations except where divine commands require something else, as Aguti suggests, was the case in the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Applying then his natural law/divine command theory to MEPRs I–III, Aguti seemingly maintains that God, like us, does abide by these requirements, but, in God’s case, these requirements are subject to a few divine command exceptions.

Yet this interpretation will not work. First, MEPRs I–III are minimally demanding requirements, and we rarely, if ever, are in violation of them. So, why would it not be even easier for God to adhere to them as well? Nor would it make sense to appeal to divine command theory to create just a few permitted violations for God. This is because any god who exists would not just be engaged in a few violations but in widespread violations of these requirements due to what would have to be, if any such god exists, his widespread permission of horrendous evil consequences in our world.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, this cannot be accounted for by appealing to a few exceptions for God grounded in divine command theory, such as, for example, Abraham’s sacrifice of his son Isaac, which arguably is itself not even a morally justified exception.

### 24. Richard Carrier

Richard Carrier thinks I have put together “a very good evidential argument from evil—arguably a decisive one.” Still, he claims I have not shown what I claim to have shown, which is that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil, especially the horrendous evil in the world. Carrier further believes that the argument of my book succeeds everywhere against theistic defenders except where I come up against Michael Bergmann’s skeptical theist challenge in Chapter 5. I find this surprising when you take into account that my developing argument against theism is only fully set out in Chapter 6 and thereafter. To me, this shows that Carrier has not yet gotten my God argument fully in his sights.

Even so, Carrier goes on to provide just the kind of skeptical theist challenge that he thinks my God argument fails to address. He asks us to consider the following scenario:

It so happens, unbeknownst to us, that it is logically impossible for God to create a paradisaical world without a concomitant purchase through a particular array of suffering. Accordingly, the reason God cannot undo this feature of existence

is that it cannot be undone; no power can logically exist that would overcome it. And it so happens that if God alleviates any of that suffering, by intervening or even speaking to the persons who, collectively, must pay this price, the effect is at once undone, like touching an electrical current to ground. And this, too, unbeknownst to us, is logically necessarily the case, and thus no power of any god can undo it.

Here, I would argue that the God of traditional theism could not be constrained with respect to his offer of friendship in a paradisiacal world; otherwise, he would not be all-powerful and, hence, not the God of traditional theism. This means that the opportunity to be friends with God must fall under the domain of MEPR III as a good that is not logically connected to God's permission of especially horrendous evil consequences. From this, it follows that there are countless logically possible and morally unobjectionable alternative ways that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, could provide this opportunity to us if he wanted to do so. Thus, according to MEPR III, the God of traditional theism would be morally required to use one of the many alternative ways of providing the opportunity instead of providing it by allowing especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions.

But then, at the end of his paper Carrier further argues the following:

[E]ven if you can come up with some genuine proof of the logical impossibility of the scenario I just described—because you still have infinitely more unknown scenarios to similarly disprove before you can prove them all impossible. Perhaps one day someone will come up with a sweeping proof that proves all such unknown scenarios impossible; and perhaps that will complete at last the logical disproof of a good God's existence. But that day has not yet come. There is no such proof in *Sterba*.

It is just here that Carrier's failure to have my argument fully in his sights comes into play for my argument does have a way of dealing with all the possible scenarios that Carrier is envisioning. This is because, as I show in Chapter 6 of my *God* book, all the goods that God could provide to us are either goods to which we have a right or goods to which we do not have a right, each of which further divides into either first-order goods that do not logically presuppose the existence of some serious wrongdoing or second-order goods that do logically presuppose the existence of some serious wrongdoing. This gives us a fourfold classification of all the goods that God could provide to us. I then show by the application of my MEPRs I–III to this fourfold classification of goods that the existence of the God of traditional theism would be logically incompatible with all the horrendous evil in the world.

## 25. Christian Danz

Christian Danz proposes a novel solution to the debate over the logical problem of evil. Reflecting on our inability to resolve this debate between theists and atheists, Danz suggests that we treat "statements about God not as factual or representational statements, but as descriptions of the structure of religious communication".

He begins by illustrating the intransigency of the debate with the opposing arguments of John Mackie and Richard Swinburne. Rather than continuing what he regards as an irresolvable debate over the logical argument from evil, Danz argues that it makes more sense to interpret God to be "an expression and representation of religion, more specifically for our purposes, an expression and representation of the Christian religion." The Christian religion, as Danz sees it, is not an explanation of the world, but its own form of communication besides other cultural modes of communication. Its objects come into existence only in the Christian religion and are not given outside of it.

However, the attractiveness of Danz's proposal is a function of what he takes to be the irresolvable character of debate between theists and atheists over the logical argument from evil understood objectively, especially as it unfolded between John Mackie and theists, particularly the debate Mackie had with Alvin Plantinga. However, at the time that debate took place, it was not thought to be irresolvable. In fact, soon after the debate between

Mackie and Plantinga took place, it was widely held by theists and atheists alike that Plantinga conclusively showed against Mackie that it may not be within God's power to bring about a world containing moral good but no moral evil, and so that God was logically compatible with at least some moral evil in the world. Moreover, Mackie himself agreed about the failure of his argument.<sup>17</sup> Thus, a consensus held among philosophers of religion, and even among philosophers generally, that Plantinga had succeeded in his debate with Mackie. Given the widespread agreement over Plantinga's success coming from a profession in which there are few points of widespread agreement, I do not think that this is a place where we should refuse to give such debates an objective interpretation. The debate has one empirical premise that there is evil in the world, especially horrendous evil consequences. After that, the debate is just about entailment relations between conceptual claims. Philosophers and theologians should be able to achieve objective results in such a domain.

Of course, my God argument is going against this more than 50-year consensus, maintaining as it does, that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil, particularly all the horrendous evil, in the world. I even challenge Plantinga's claim about God's compatibility with just some evil in the world when that some evil is understood to be horrendous evil consequences.

What my argument has going for it is that I have been able to bring the resources of moral and political philosophy to bear on the problem which tended not be done, and I also have had access to many of those working on this problem today who are publishing in English, as is evidenced by these two Special Issues in *Religions*. Surely, if someone puts forth a conclusive objection to my God argument, as was true in the case of Mackie's God argument, it should soon be recognized as such. As far as I can tell, that has not yet happened.

## 26. Adam Noel Wood

In his contribution to this Special Issue, Adam Noel Wood challenges my claim that the God of traditional theism is required to abide by my MEPRs I–III and NEPRs I–IX, which Wood, lumping together, calls Evil Prevention Requirements (EPRs). Now, Wood's overall conclusion is that EPRs involve "too robust assumptions about God's purpose in creation" and so can be rejected on that grounds. He gives an example of a requirement that does not involve such assumptions:

Don't allow sin (moral evil) and suffering for the sake of one's own amusement.

Let us call this Wood's EPR. So, how does Wood's EPR compare to my EPRs? Let us take a closer look at just one of those requirements, MEPR III:

Do not permit rather than prevent 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

Now, put colloquially, MEPR III says:

Do not secure a good using morally objectionable means when you can easily secure the same good by using morally unobjectionable means.

What then is there not to like about this requirement? Is it not an unobjectionable moral requirement?

So, if all of my EPRs can be seen to be like MEPR III, what would be objectionable about them? Accordingly, my EPRs, particularly MEPRs I–III need to be carefully examined before rejecting them as "too robust assumptions about God's purpose in creation." Wood has not done this. (For more on how to do this, see my response to Bruce Russell in this Special Issue.)

## 27. Perry Hendricks

Perry Hendricks thinks my argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism fails because it focuses on “known facts about evil” (an expression I never use) and neglects logical possibilities and logical connections. However, I divide all the goods that God could provide to us, his creatures, into a fourfold classification of goods. There are goods to which we have a right and goods to which we do not have a right, each of which further divides into goods that are logically dependent on God’s permission of especially horrendous evil consequences and goods that are not dependent on God’s permission of especially horrendous evil consequences. This being the case, my view clearly does not neglect logically possibilities and logical connections.

To better see that this is the case, consider the following skeptical theist challenge to my argument and then how I would respond to it. This challenge has the same structure as the challenges that Hendricks raises to my own argument and my response to it parallels the response I would want to make to Hendricks’s own challenge.

The challenge asks us to consider the possibility that knowledge of the Lisbon earthquake could make its way to some distant planet where it functions as the basis for soul-making among the inhabitants of that planet. Why then is this not a possible good that could justify God’s permission of the Lisbon earthquake here on our earth? Surely, it seems like the kind of good that is thought to be beyond our ken that skeptical theists like to appeal to as providing a possible justification for the horrendous evil consequences that God is acknowledged to permit on Earth. It is just here that I would want to go on to explain that when the skeptical theist appeals to goods that are thought to be beyond our ken to justify the evils of which we are aware, I would want to employ my fourfold classification to determine which type of good it is. Then, I would argue that for all goods of that type, we still know enough about them to determine that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism cannot justifiably permit especially horrendous evil consequences in order to secure goods of that type.

For example, in the case of the Lisbon earthquake, described above, there is a second-order good that logically depends on God’s permitting the consequences of the Lisbon earthquake. Yet, given that this good is one to which its beneficiaries do not otherwise have a right but one that is logically dependent on God’s permission of the consequences of the Lisbon earthquake I would apply to it the following requirement, which is an exceptionless minimal component of the Pauline Principle to establish its impermissibility:

### Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II

Do not permit, rather than prevent especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide would-be beneficiaries with goods they would morally prefer not to have.

My contention is thus that the would-be beneficiaries on the distant planet would morally prefer that God prevent rather than permit the horrendous evil consequences on which the good depends given that they can easily do without that good because they can still have the greatest good of the opportunity to be friends with God, the resources for a decent life, equally good opportunities for soul-making, and all other goods that are not logically dependent on God’s permission of horrendous evil consequences. Moreover, the would-be beneficiaries are also morally required to oppose the provision of goods they do not need and can easily do without when those goods come at the high cost of the infliction of horrendous evil consequences on innocent victims, and the high cost of undermining an equal opportunity for soul-making, as would be the case here. Accordingly, by virtue of MEPR II, God, if he exists, would respect the moral preferences and the moral requirements of the would-be beneficiaries and prevent rather than permit the horrendous evil consequence on which the goods in question logically depends.

Given, then, the way my argument works against this particular skeptical theism challenge, it follows that it would similarly work against the structurally similar examples that Hendricks raises in his paper to challenge my argument. Hence, there is no need to

go through each of Hendricks's examples separately. My fourfold classification of goods used with my MEPRs works against them all.

### 28. Amir Horowitz

Amir Horowitz seeks to defend my God argument against two objections that have been raised against it. The first is that God cannot "logically" prevent all evils. The second is that the moral requirements that my argument defends may not apply to God.

Now, to deal with the first objection, Horowitz critiques the way Perry Hendericks deploys this objection against my God argument in this Special Issue. It turns out that I have my own way of dealing with this objection, which I suggested in my response to Hendericks provided just previously. Unfortunately, I do not think that Horowitz's way of dealing with Henderick's objection on my behalf works because it relies on the claim that "God can (in both the causal and the 'logical' senses) create any good without permitting any evil." The 'logical' sense here taken from Hendericks means to do something by doing something else that logically entails it, from which it follows that God logically cannot create for us the soul-making opportunity to care for a victim of serious assault without permitting that assault. Consequently, God cannot causally or "logically" provide that soul-making opportunity to care for a victim of serious assault without also permitting that assault. So, I do not think Horowitz's objection to Hendericks works here. Instead, I would rely on the objection I used against Hendericks earlier in this essay.

Happily, I can completely endorse the various ways that Horowitz defends my view against the second objection that the moral requirements that my argument defends may not apply to God. I would just add to Horowitz's defense the reply that I made to Toby Betenson in the first Special Issue of *Religions* I guest-edited, where he argued that the grounds for obligations to God and the grounds for our obligations to an ideally just political state are different. There, I argued that two authorities are completely analogous. Legitimate divine authority is understood to be grounded in the will of God. Hence, 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. Moreover, this is just what we would expect to be the case in order for my analogy of an ideally just and powerful political state to work.

### 29. Michael Douglas Beaty

I think Michael Douglas Beaty has the distinction of having the second longest essay of all the contributors to either of the two Special Issues that I have guest-edited for *Religions* (Mark Johnson has the longest). His contribution is also notable for not ever mentioning my Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs I–III), which together with my fourfold classification of all the goods that God could provide to us (also not mentioned), are used to constitute my main argument that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible, especially with all the horrendous evil consequences in the world. In my book, I only present this argument for the first time in Chapter 6 and thereafter. Interestingly, Beaty does not cite anything from my book that appears in Chapter 6 or thereafter.

So, what is my main argument? In Chapter 6 of my God book, I provide a fourfold classification of all the goods that God could provide to us. I then show by the application of my MEPRs I–III to this fourfold classification of goods that the God of traditional theism would be logically incompatible with all the horrendous moral evil consequences in the world. In this way, the various possible goods that Beaty speculates may provide a justification for God's permitting of horrendous evil consequences are shown not to serve this purpose.

For example, the great good of the beatific vision understood as the opportunity to be friends with God can be provided to us without God's permitting horrendous evil consequences to be inflicted on us or anyone else, and so this should be the morally preferred way for God to provide us with that great good. And, when I pointed out to Beaty in an e-mail that this great good of having the opportunity to be friends with God cannot be conditional on God's permission of horrendous evil consequences, he responded

by claiming that friendship with God/Christ (or, I might add “getting into it”) can be “costly.” Yet, even if that were true, what I have shown is that it cannot be conditional of God’s permission of horrendous evil consequences, and that is all that is needed here for the success of my logical argument from evil.

It is also the case that assuming the incarnation, redemption, and glorification of Christ, there was no need for Christ to suffer from God’s permission of the infliction of horrendous suffering that was said to be imposed on him. From a theological perspective, any way that Christ could have lived a good life would have sufficed to bring about our redemption. Moreover, if God had prevented the horrendous suffering that was said to be imposed on Christ, his life on Earth would be more like that of a Nelson Mandela, a Dolores Huerta, or a Mohandas Gandhi (without his assassination), each of whom in different ways provided a powerful example of how we should live our lives. Accordingly, for those of us whose Earthly lives resembled the lives that we are now assuming that Christ along with the likes of Mandela, Huerta, and Gandhi would be able to live because God was preventing, as needed, especially all the horrendous evil suffering in the world, it would be possible to experience a deep sharing with Christ as well as with these other moral heroes, both now and in any afterlife, a deep sharing that Beaty, following Marilyn Adams, affirms is a way of experiencing the greatest good that God could provide to us.

Moreover, in the first Special Issue of *Religions* on my God book, I limited my MEPRs so that they apply to just “especially horrendous evil consequences” rather than “significant and especially horrendous evil consequences” in response to an objection William Hasker raised in his contribution to that Special Issue, an objection that Hasker has now chosen to no longer press against my argument.

This change makes these MEPRs which we rarely, if ever, violate even less demanding than they were before. In fact, I do not think Beaty has recognized how minimally demanding my MEPRs really are. For example, put colloquially, MEPR III says the following:

Do not secure a good using morally objectionable means when you can easily secure the same good by using morally unobjectionable means.

What then is there not to like about this requirement? Is it not clearly an unobjectionable moral requirement?

And, what about MEPR I? Put more colloquially, it says the following:

Prevent a significant evil when one can easily do so without violating anyone’s rights and no other goods are at stake.

Here too, what is there not to like about the requirement? Surely, it too, like MEPR III, is a necessary moral requirement.

Now, I have to admit that MEPR II cannot as easily be shown to be a necessary moral requirement as MEPRs I and III, but I think I have shown how it can be done, as well.

Of course, if you do not pay any attention to my MEPRs and do not come to understand how minimally demanding they really are, then you are not going to be able to appreciate the force of my argument.

So, Beaty definitely needs to take into account the heart of my argument: my MEPRs I–III and their application to the fourfold classification of all the goods that God could provide to us. Moreover, I am confident Beaty will do so in what I expect will be his next attempt to undercut my logical argument from evil.

### 30. Eric Reitan

Eric Reitan raises two challenging arguments to my logical argument against the existence of God. First, he argues that God’s justification for constraining freedom can be undercut by the fact that God, by virtue of an unlimited divine power to redeem evils, has an alternative means of guaranteeing that horror victims have lives whose value is undiminished by horror. That God can effectively erase the evil from the world after it has occurred by fully redeeming it (something none of us can do), Reitan contends, could arguably entail

that preventing the evil from happening in the first place no longer functions as a sufficient justification for violating the *prima facie* prohibition against freedom-constraining acts.

Second, Reitan argues that given divine omnipotence, God would become the *de facto* governing authority of the world unless God does far, far less in terms of freedom-policing than God is capable of doing. In fact, even a tiny fraction of the power at God's disposal would, if implemented in the project of policing misuses of freedom, reflect a level of sovereign authority over the world that swamps what any elected human authorities could achieve. Hence, if there are moral principles that require consent of the governed before someone may adopt the role of sovereign governing authority over the world, God may be morally precluded from exercising even a fraction of the policing power at God's disposal absent such consent.

With respect to his first argument, Reitan contends that evil can be redeemed either by being engulfed through the bestowal of that great good of the beatific vision or by becoming an integral part of a greater good as anyone who suffers from horrendous evil could experience a deep sharing with the resurrected and glorified Christ, at least in the next life, given that they have both suffered horrendous evil in this life. This is a deep sharing that those who have not suffered horrendous evil in this life would lack even if they too enjoyed a heavenly afterlife.

Nevertheless, the beatific vision understood as the opportunity to be friends with God can be provided to us without God's permission of horrendous evil consequences being inflicted on us or anyone else, and so that should be the morally preferred way for God to provide us with that great good. It is also the case that a deep sharing with Christ in this and in any afterlife could still be had if Christ's redemptive suffering in this life had not ended with his horrendous passion and death. Clearly, this too would have been a morally preferred way of achieving a deep sharing with Christ.

Moreover, with respect to his Reitan's second argument, even though God, being all-powerful, could dominate all aspects of our lives, God's goodness should lead him, as I have argued, to just prevent the especially horrendous consequences of immoral actions, as needed.

### 31. Christopher J. Insole

Does Kant have a theistic solution to the problem of evil? Christopher J. Insole hopes to have shown that he does. First, Insole argues that if God were to secure the Kantian greatest good for us after we have acted by making happiness proportionate to virtue, this would also ensure that my MEPRs would be met. But, that is not the case. Ensuring that happiness is in proportion to virtue is perfectly compatible with failing to prevent the infliction of horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions on innocent victims when that can easily be done and no greater good is at stake. But, such failure to prevent horrendous evil consequences would, of course, be a clear violation of my MEPRs, making it logically incompatible with the God of traditional theism.

An analogy here is a political state that left its citizens perfectly free to do whatever good or evil they wanted until they all reached the age of forty, and only then restricted their freedom by distributing happiness in accord with virtue and unhappiness in accord with vice. Surely, such a political state would have failed to prevent serious harm from being inflicted on innocent citizens during the first 40 years of their lives (analogous to our life on earth) and would have been blameworthy on that account. Hence, the first Kantian line of argument that Insole employs fails to provide a theistic solution to the problem of evil.

Now, the second Kantian line of argument that Insole employs to save God from the problem of evil is different. Here, Insole directly relates this line of argument to the following Mackie-style formulation that I give my God argument in *Is A Good God Logically Possible?*

- (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, especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission.
- (4) 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, which contradicts (1).

Clearly, Insole’s first attempt to save traditional theism attempted to undercut premise (3) of this argument by maintaining that if God were to distribute happiness in accord with virtue and unhappiness in accord with vice, that would likewise secure God’s adherence to my MEPRs. Now, I have showed why this is not the case.

In his second attempt to save the God of traditional theism, Insole contends that Kant could reject premise (4). As Insole puts it, “The Kantian argument will hold that we are able to believe that, in some sense, such horrendous evil consequences do not really obtain, although they appear to.” Insole also notes that in the *Groundwork*, Kant says that we can never recognize whether an action is actually grounded on conformity with the moral law, rather than happening to coincide with it. This argument seems right because we can never show with logical certainty that there is horrendous moral evil in the world. That there is such evil in the world has to always be an inference to the best explanation from the evidence we do have. It is just a highly supported empirical claim, again, not something we know with logical certainty.

Nevertheless, the argument from evil was always understood to have one empirical premise in it—that premise being that evil, especially horrendous evil, exists. Theists, when attempting to undermine the argument, have almost always been willing to concede this one empirical premise to atheists, given that they would not wish to deny it themselves. Of course, denying this premise remains an option for the theist to use to undercut the argument from evil. Yet, this was not an option I was willing to allow with respect to my God argument. I was concerned with coming up with an argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism under the assumption that evil, especially horrendous evil, consequences exist in the world. An argument from evil cannot proceed without some such assumption.

Nor is it clear that Kant himself was willing to entertain the possibility that evil, especially horrendous evil consequences, do not exist in reality in his noumenal world. Kant’s remarks about evil could be interpreted as simply affirming that we do not know that evil exists with logical certainty without denying that evil, especially horrendous evil, consequences exist in reality in the noumenal world.

Moreover, only this interpretation which assumes that evil exists in reality in the noumenal world is compatible with Insole’s first attempt to save the God of traditional theism from the problem of evil by assuming that God would distribute happiness in accord with virtue and unhappiness in accord with the vice. Obviously, such a distribution presupposes that good and evil exists in reality in the noumenal world. Hence, Insole’s two attempts to save the God of traditional theism from the problem of evil not only fail to undercut my God argument, they also are inconsistent with each other.

### 32. Charles Champe Taliaferro

Charles Champe Taliaferro tells us that horrendous evils that occur are not permitted by God in the sense that they are deemed good or justified or approved of by God; they are, instead, against God’s nature and will, a violation of what God wills for the creation. Taliaferro further tells us that God has a reason to destroy/annihilate all agents of grave wrongdoing. Yet, while Taliaferro thinks that a retributive response is justified, he claims that this is compatible with God’s merciful goodness not to destroy/annihilate grave wrongdoers but to act (in this life and the next) to redeem them through repentance, moral, and spiritual transformation.

Yet, the whole focus of Taliaferro's account is on the perpetrators of horrendous evil and on how God could justifiably annihilate them for their actions but chooses instead to show them mercy and redeem and transform them to bring them into loving union with himself.

What is missing from Taliaferro's account is what it would take for the would-be victims of horrendous evil consequences to be treated justly and mercifully by the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism. For that story to be told and to make sense, the parallel story about God's permission of evil consequences in the world would have to be significantly changed. The change required is that would-be inflictors of horrendous evil consequences would have their wrongdoing significantly constrained because that is what is necessary for the God of traditional theism to have acted justly and mercifully to would-be victims. This is because there is no possible way that even an all-good, all-powerful God could fully restore what is taken from the victims of horrendous evil consequences and because there is no other goods that the would-be victims of such consequences would morally prefer to have that God would not be able to provide to them without permitting the infliction of such consequences on them. This follows from the application of specifically MEPR II to the fourfold classification of goods that God could provide to us. Unfortunately, Taliaferro does not even consider my use of this requirement in his paper.

### 33. Marco Hausmann and Amit Kravitz

Marco Hausmann and Amit Kravitz begin their paper with what they call a historical digression to the views of Leibniz and Kant. Leibniz, they tell us, had argued from our world's being the best possible world to the conclusion that God is justified in permitting all the evil in our world. Of course, if my argument shows that God is not justified in permitting the horrendous evil consequences in our world, as I claim it does, then, it follows that this is not the best of all possible worlds.

For Kant, Hausmann and Kravitz tell us, God is not in a position to know what a free agent would chose or would have chosen had God not intervened, and so God is not in a position to identify "would be wrongdoers." Hence, they claim God is not well placed to prevent would-be wrongdoers from imposing horrendous evil consequences on their victims. But, remember that my Moral Evil Prevention Requirements only demand that God prevent the (external) horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, such as stopping the bullet before it reaches an innocent victim, and God would always be able to do that, as you and I sometimes are able to do as well. This is something God would be doing, as needed, if he were all-good. (For more on why Kant fails to deal adequately with the problem of evil, see my response to Christopher Insole's essay in this Special Issue.)

When Hausmann and Kravitz turn to a direct examination of my God argument, they get themselves tied up in logical knots by thinking that I want God to prevent actions that will have horrendous evil consequences when my stated view is that I only want God to prevent the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, leaving the evil actions simply bereft of their evil consequences, something we ourselves are sometimes able to do when we are confronting evil people in the world. Now, there is more to which I could object, but one way or another, it would come back to the mistake that I have just exposed in Hausmann and Kravitz's argument.

### 34. Daniel Rubio

To undercut my God argument, Daniel Rubio argues (i) God is not subject to moral obligations and (ii) God can defeat evils by incorporating them into an incommensurately valuable friendship with each human. Properly appreciated, Rubio thinks this shows that my new logical argument relies on false premises that cannot easily be repaired.

Now, against (1), I argue that even assuming that God is not subject to moral obligations, as Rubio contends, God's failure, if he existed, to prevent the horrendous evil consequences of all the immoral actions in the world when he could easily have done so without either producing a greater evil or failing to secure a greater good is still morally evil.

It would have resulted in far more evil consequences than has been produced individually by all the greatest villains among us. Hence, all we need here to support a moral condemnation is that God could have acted otherwise and that no sufficient good or prevention of evil would have resulted from his not doing so.

Against Rubio's attempt to support (1) by claiming that there is no world that it would be wrong for God to create, I argue in my God book (p. 191) that it would be wrong for God to create a world whose creatures would be better off not existing. I also address Mark Murphy's attempt to show that God is not subject to moral obligations, to which Rubio appeals for support, in my response to Jonathan C. Rutledge's contribution to this Special Issue, which is focused on Murphy's work.

In his attempt to support (2) and show that despite God's permission of horrendous evil consequences God would still be overall good in relationship to us, Rubio gives us an example modeled after Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens's *Christmas Carol*. Clearly, Scrooge, after a life of moral indifference to the needs of others, did turn out in the end to be good and generous, but clearly, the God of traditional theism cannot start out, like Scrooge, being morally indifferent and then become morally virtuous.

Now, assuming we were to introduce Christian assumptions of the incarnation, resurrection, and glorification of Christ as both God and man into the discussion, Rubio thinks he can use these new assumptions to claim that anyone who suffers horrendously in this life could experience a deep sharing with the resurrected and glorified Christ in the next life, given that they have both suffered horrendous evil in this life. This is a deep sharing that those who have not suffered horrendous evil consequences in this life would lack even if they were enjoying a heavenly afterlife. Accordingly, those who suffer horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in this life may be said to morally accept, at least in the next life, God's permission of that suffering being imposed on them because they now recognize how it makes a deep sharing with the resurrected and glorified Christ possible who likewise suffered from horrendous evil. Yet, I contend that during the earthly ministry of Christ, there was no need for him to suffer from God's permission of the infliction of horrendous suffering that was said to be imposed on him. From a theological perspective, any way that Christ could have lived a good life would have sufficed to bring about our redemption. Moreover, if God had prevented the horrendous suffering that was said to be imposed on Christ, as he was required to do, Christ's life on Earth would be more like that of a Nelson Mandela, a Dolores Huerta, or a Mohandas Gandhi (without his assassination), each of whom in different ways provided a powerful example of how we should live our lives. Accordingly, for those of us whose Earthly lives resembled the lives that we are now assuming that Christ along with the likes of Mandela, Huerta, and Gandhi would be able to live because God was preventing, as needed, especially all the horrendous evil suffering in the world, it would be possible to experience a deep sharing with Christ as well as with those other moral heroes, both now and in any afterlife.

### 35. Timo Koistinen

In his paper, Timo Koistinen explores DZ Phillips's criticism of the Free-Will Defense and mainstream theodicies, claiming that Phillips's critique is partly relevant to my own God argument. Specifically, Koistinen maintains that Phillips's criticism of traditional defenses of theism is more radical than mine because he thinks I share a consequentialist ethical perspective with traditional theists that is wrongheaded from the beginning. Yet, as I repeatedly point out in my book, the moral framework I utilize, captured by my MEPRs I–III, is acceptable to consequentialists and nonconsequentialists alike. Accordingly, my view would not be subject to Phillips's critique of the excesses of consequentialism, which do not obtain in the context in which I am applying them.

Now, while both Phillips and I reject the attempt by traditional theists to find morally adequate arguments to show why God can allow (or could possibly allow) horrendous evil and especially horrors, such as the Holocaust, Phillips finds them absurd, while I find them

logically incompatible with the exceptionless minimal requirements of morality captured by my MEPRs I–III. Here, I think, my critique is stronger.

However, Phillips does go beyond my view in the rejection of a God who is all-powerful in favor of a limited God whose power is a love that is unable to prevent the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, as needed. Of course, I cannot show that such a limited God is logically incompatible, especially with all the horrendous evil in the world. Nevertheless, I see no good reason to postulate a God more limited than we are with respect to his ability to prevent horrendous evil consequences.

### 36. Gerald Harrison

Gerald Harrison argues that my God argument fails because he claims it is logically possible that we all live in a penal colony that an all-good, all-powerful noncreator God established to prevent himself and good people from being harmed by the bad people in the world. According to Harrison’s account, God, a noncreator God, started out abiding by MEPRs I–III with respect to all the inhabitants of our world, but then, the task became so arduous that God, acting in the spirit of MEPRs I–III, moved all bad people to a penal colony where he justifiably gave up enforcing MEPRs I–III anymore. Harrison presents this as counterexample to my God argument, which maintains that God is morally required to abide by MEPRs I–III in our world.<sup>18</sup>

Here are two reasons for thinking that Harrison’s imaginative counterexample does not work against my God argument. First, it is impossible for the all-powerful, all-good noncreator God that Harrison is imagining to be exhausted and put upon by adhering to MEPRs I–III. These requirements are rarely, if ever, violated by ourselves, and it would be unbelievably easier for an all-good, all-powerful God to abide by them. Hence, that is just what such a God, if he exists, would be doing. Second, Harrison fails to take into account how my often appealed to analogy of an ideally just and powerful political state provides a model for how good people should be collectively involved, each doing their fair share in maintaining a social structure that does generally effectively prevent horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions with God functioning only as the preventer of last resort. Moreover, when such just institutions are not in place, an all-good, all-powerful God could serve as an initiator of practices that would effectively move us toward just such institutions. In so doing, an all-good, all-powerful God would thereby involve at least good people in the implementation of MEPRs I–III. He would do this not to meet a nonexistent obligation to do it all by himself, but rather because this would be the way that we could be most virtuously involved in the task.

### 37. Luis R. G. Oliveira

Luis R. G. Oliveira finds himself in what he regards as a somewhat awkward position of being an atheist while supporting Alvin Plantinga’s Free-Will Defense of theism against my logical argument from evil in support of atheism. Let me see if I can help him out.

At the end of the first chapter of my book after the Introduction, I conclude that we cannot say that God’s justification for permitting the moral evil in the world is the freedom that is in it because God could have reduced the moral evil in the world by increasing the significant freedom in the world, and that has not been done. Hence, I concluded there that there is no Free-Will Defense of the degree and amount of evil in the world. In the chapter, I point out that whenever vicious assaults occur, they result in a morally unacceptable distribution 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 that everyone should have.

Now, Oliveira seeks to undermine this argument by contending that while the freedom of the assaulters are significant freedoms, the freedom of their victims not to be assaulted do not have that same status. This is because, Oliveira tells us, significant freedoms are “a necessary condition for desert and responsibility” and that they “involve power and opportunity.” This seems right. But, while this holds true for the freedom that vicious

assaulters exercise, it is no less holds true for the freedom that victims of vicious assaults are denied. The same kind of freedom that is being badly exercised by assaulters is being denied to their victims.

Nevertheless, recognizing that the exercise of freedom by wrongdoers logically entails the suppressing of those same freedoms of their victims does not suffice to show that some other goods with freedom embedded in them, like the opportunity to console the victims of vicious assault, might not justify God's permission of those assaults. Further argument is required.

Now, in my God book, I characterized this pursuit of possible justifications for God's permitting especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions as searching for a greater good justification, but it can also be characterized as continuing the pursuit of what, assuming the God of traditional theism exists, would be a Free-Will Defense for God's permission of especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions that obtain in our world.

Accordingly, in Chapter 6, I provided a fourfold classification of all the goods (with freedoms embedded in them) that God could provide to us, and then using the necessary Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs I–III) that I carve off from the Pauline Principle, I apply them to show that for all such goods, it is not logically possible for God to permit especially horrendous consequences of immoral actions to attain those goods. Thus, it is only by fully developing my argument for the logical incompatibility of the God of traditional theism with especially all the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions that obtain in our world that I am able to fully establish that Plantinga's Free-Will Defense, taken up at the beginning of my book, is a failure.

### 38. Asha Lancaster-Thomas

I am in complete agreement with Asha Lancaster-Thomas critique of Jerry Walls's attempt to use an account of the compensation that the God of traditional theism could provide in an afterlife to undercut my God argument. I particularly like the way Lancaster-Thomas shows that, on Walls's account, freedoms that would still be valuable to people in the afterlife are inconsistently denied to them there, but not denied to them while they are in this life.

Overall, Lancaster-Thomas maintains that "God should adopt a principle of limited intervention not only in the earthly life but also in the afterlife." Here too, I could not agree more. In the same year that I published my God book, I published an article in *Religious Studies* in which I argued that God should use a principle of limited intervention to do justice in the afterlife, leaving unsaid in that article, to make publication more likely, that my fuller view, like Lancaster-Thomas's, is that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would be doing the same in this life with respect to wrongdoing as he would in any morally defensible afterlife.<sup>19</sup>

### 39. James Henry Collin

James Henry Collin proposes to undercut MEPRs I–III, which are the normative requirements that I claim support my logical argument against the existence of God by providing a viable alternative moral framework derived from the writing of Issac Qatraya, a 7th Century writer also known as Issac the Syrian.

According to Issac, participation in the life of God (theosis), which for him seems to go beyond just friendship with God is something to which we all have a right and also something for which Issac, being a universalist, thought we would all eventually partake. Issac further held that suffering, even terrible suffering, is required to forge a saintly moral character, which was required for theosis. From this, it is said to follow that God needs to permit especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions if we are to attain that theosis to which we have a right. The right we all have here, Collin tells us, is analogous to a right to welfare, to which welfare liberals are committed. However, I think

that there are good reasons to think that this is not an alternative moral framework but rather a grossly immoral one.

First of all, a God who must, as a matter of right, provide his friendship, even a share of his inner life, to all is not as free as we view ourselves to be in choosing intimate friends and so this could not obtain for the all-powerful God of traditional theism. Second, to attain theosis and participate in the inner life of God, God must arrange that there are sufficient inflictors of horrendous evil consequences in the world and that these inflictors themselves, and everyone else, suffer sufficiently from horrendous evil consequences, presumably by incentivizing would-be inflictors of horrendous evil consequences, in order to make theosis possible for all. However, I think this would involve the God of traditional theism in a morally horrendous project.

Now, Collin thinks that my alternative moral project would permit large numbers of people to fool the God of traditional theism by coming close to imposing horrendous evil consequences on others, thus forcing God to engage in many unnecessary preventions of actions that would never have morally evil consequences. Yet, I contend that the God of traditional theism would never be so fooled. He would always be able to detect the external beginnings of horrendous evil consequences that we creatures fail or are unable to prevent, and then prevent just those consequences himself. Hence, what we would have, under my moral alternative, is not moral chaos, but, in its best manifestations, ideally just and powerful political states with God functioning as a preventer of last resort.

#### 40. The End

Forty contributors are surely a lot to respond to in one paper, but I think I have done my best. Responding to the contributors of these two Special Issues (56 contributors all tolled) has led me to change my argument in variety of ways:

1. Willian Hasker has helped me see the need to narrow the scope of my Moral and Natural Evil Prevention Requirements to especially horrendous evil consequences in order to more clearly avoid kindergarten objections.
2. Luis Oliveira has led me to see that my argument against the Free-Will Defense that I take up in Chapter 2 is not complete until it merges with my argument against the Greater Good Defense that I take up throughout the rest of the book.
3. A number of contributors have led me to see the need to deepen my reliance on an ideally just and powerful state with its goal of providing equal significant freedom to all of its members as well as to see the need to provide greater clarity as to how my MEPRs I–III apply to all the goods that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, could provide to us.

Nevertheless, 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.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In order to explain how the nonmaterial beings whom God creates could themselves produce so much evil, Johnston relies upon a mistaken view of practical reason that Henry Sidgwick defended at the end of his *Methods of Ethics*. Moreover, correcting what is mistaken about Sidgwick's view immediately suggests a better way to think about how God or any of his creatures could do evil; see (Sterba 2013, pp. 48–49).
- <sup>2</sup> The change I made to more clearly avoid a Hasker's kindergarten objection is to limit the evil consequences that God should prevent to just "especially horrendous evil consequences" rather than "significant and especially horrendous evil consequences."
- <sup>3</sup> Wielenberg's usage here, borrowed from Peter van Inwagen, is somewhat suggestive of Jean Jacques Rousseau's paradoxical idea that we should be "forced to be free", which employed two contrasting senses of freedom to work. (See *On the Social Contract*, Book 1, Chapter 7). Here, however, only the noninterference sense of freedom is being employed throughout. So, we just get a contradiction.

4 It is worth noting here that neither God’s complete freedom nor our complete freedom is understood here to be absent moral constraints. For example, God is constrained in not offering his friendship to a committed child molester without a moral transformation.

5 Peter van Inwagen has stressed our need to turn to God for the right reasons. See most recently the summary of the exchange between van Inwagen and myself that took place in 2022 on a *Religions* webinar Atheist/Theist: Point/Counterpoint. <https://www.mdpi.com/about/announcements/3315> (accessed on 3 October 2023).

6 After pressing this same objection in three successive publications, Hasker was invited to object, if he still saw the need, to my now modified view in this current Special Issue, but he chose not to do so.

7 Reichenbach cites Hasker’s contribution. So, I assume he saw my response as well.

8 Now, in *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* I did refer to one of my environmental conflict resolution principles on one occasion just to illustrate how we could have moral obligations to nonhuman living beings, while at the same time noting that this illustration was not part of my God argument.

9 Again, it is worth noting here that neither God’s complete freedom nor our complete freedom is understood here to be absent moral constraints. For example, God is constrained in not offering his friendship to a committed child molester without a moral transformation.

10 See #5 above.

11 Since all but one of Mariña’s many citations to my book are to passages that come earlier than Chapter 6, it may be that Mariña did not even notice this fourfold classification of goods that I first introduced in that chapter and employ thereafter.

12 Note that Alvaro is assuming that there are two radically different ways that *we* could be—an embodied way and an unembodied way. He is not comparing a world of embodied creatures with another world of unembodied creatures. This second alternative is open to an objection: better for whom? This is because there is no existent for whom things could have been made better. However, that objection does not hold against Alvaro’s account, provided that we can make sense of ourselves as being either embodied or unembodied.

13 As I mentioned at the beginning of this response paper, after a contributor’s paper was published, I sent that contributor a draft of what was going to be my response to see if the contributor had any objections that I should take into account so as to then revise the responses I would be publishing.

That is what I did for Carlo Alvaro. Now one of my criticisms of Alvaro’s paper was directed at the passage to which this note is attached. As it turns out, when I told Alvaro that I was going to criticize this passage, unbeknownst to me, he had the passage removed from his paper so as to remove the basis for one of the two main criticisms I was going to make of his paper.

Alvaro and I both knew that authors should not change their papers after publication in order to remove passages that they found out were going to be criticized. But that is just what was allowed here. In response, I have retained in my paper the passage I quoted from Alvaro’s originally published paper, and I have also attached this note to allow readers to know what happened in this case.

14 I say “for the most part” because at the end of his paper, Rutledge provides me with an alternative way of defending my own view.

15 J. Brian Huffling, who has contributed to both of the Special Issues I guest-edited for *Religions*, is attempting to develop Brian Davies’s defense of the minority perspective.

16 Nor would this god be the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism.

17 Responding to Plantinga’s argument, Mackie himself conceded “that the problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another” (Mackie 1982, p. 154).

18 Now Harrison thinks that God’s being noncreative is helpful to his defense of theism against my logical argument from evil, but what is crucial for my argument is whether God can be claimed to be all-good and all-powerful rather than whether he can be claimed to be a creator or not.

19 See (Sterba 2020).

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Article

# How Did Evil Come into the World? A Primordial Free-Will Theodicy

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**Abstract:** James P. Sterba has provided a compelling argument to the effect that given the extent of significant, and indeed even horrendous, evil that an all-good and all-powerful being could have prevented, there is no God. There is a hidden assumption in Sterba’s reasoning, involving an inference from God being able to do anything metaphysically possible (omnipotence) to his being, after creation, able to prevent evil. As what follows shows, that isn’t a purely logical matter. It depends on ruling out a determinate theological account of how creation limits what is then metaphysically possible for God, an account set out in detail below. So Sterba’s argument is not deductively valid, unless that account is incoherent. Accordingly, we are back in the realm of total judgments of theoretical plausibility, and the effects of God-given grace on what then will strike one as the right view to live by.

**Keywords:** God; Neo-Platonism; the problem of evil; the free will defense; God’s reason for creating; the Principle of Sufficient Reason; why there is something rather than nothing; modal argument for God’s existence; the origin of evil; omnipotence; abjuration; the mismatch between God’s reasons for creating and the total face of the material universe; fine-tuning as demiurgic work; negative demiurgy; holiness; the Beatific Vision; God’s redemptive back-up plan; grace; the importance of a community of grace

Error circa creaturas redundat in falsam de Deo scientiam.

*Summa Contra Gentiles*; II, 3.

James P. Sterba’s *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Sterba 2019) presents one of the most detailed developments in the analytic tradition of the *moral* argument against God’s existence. He claims that given the extent of significant and indeed, even horrendous,<sup>1</sup> evil—which an all-good and all-powerful being supposedly could have prevented—it follows *deductively* that there is no God.

If Sterba is correct, then—in contrast to all the other central and disputed questions of life—when it comes to the question of whether there is a God, we are *not* left adrift in the epistemic “rag and bone shop” of mere plausibility, of credences here and credences there, armed only with the “Bayesian”, and no doubt reasonable, permission either to adjust our prior credences or instead conditionalize on them in the light of new evidence; in this case, evidence concerning the extent of significant, and indeed horrendous evil.

On the matter of God, many do find themselves in the epistemic rag and bone shop, whether they then go on to call themselves believers, agnostics or atheists. Not Sterba. He claims to have decisively ruled God out. The right credence is zero. The door that once seemed open is now decisively closed.

That is important, if true. As argued in “Why Did the One not Remain Within Itself?” if there is a defensible non-zero credence associated with the existence of God, understood as Absolute—that is, Unsurpassable and Undiminishable—Goodness, then the expected utility of any one of our acts, i.e., the chance weighted measure of that act contributing to the goodness of total reality impersonally considered, is the same as the expected utility of any other. Namely zero. Consequentialism, and even the consideration of consequences,

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when understood just in terms of the potential impact of available acts on impersonal goodness, then provides no rational guide to action (Johnston 2019).

We must then look for a standard of right action other than that of *meliorism*, the standard of trying to make reality better. A certain kind of Neo-Platonic theism, of the sort articulated below, provides that standard. My thought was that we then have a novel practical argument for believing in the kind of God which that form of theism brings into view. For such a God provides the required standard for action, namely *holiness* understood as excellence in manifesting the Good, which in its turn requires radical abandonment to the Good, including the proper subordination of one's own good to the Good. Such *holiness* is the orientation which is the internal necessary condition of entering into the Beatific Vision, the participation in the joyful affirmation of Goodness Itself that makes up the Divine life.

If Sterba is right, that novel practical argument does not leave the starting gate. The mere chance of God existing, where God is understood as the Good itself, and hence as absolutely and so unsurpassably good, does not render expected utility maximization otiose. For there is no such chance.

Sterba employs two argumentative strategies. The first begins by defending three "exceptionless minimal prevention principles" in accord with the plausible core of the Pauline Principle: Never do evil so that good may come of it. The second involves an invidious comparison between what God, if he exists, has failed to prevent, and what a just and powerful political state would prevent, if it could.

Sterba argues for the following refinement of the Pauline Principle, the first of three such refinements, which he takes to be acceptable to consequentialists, non-consequentialists, atheists and theists alike.

Prevent, rather than permit, significantly 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.

Sterba goes on to observe that given that there are unprevented significant and indeed horrendous evils which God could have prevented, it follows that God is less than morally perfect. And that appears to show there is no morally perfect being that would deserve the title "God".

Explicit in Sterba's reasoning is his conclusion that the so-called free will defense, due to Alvin Plantinga,<sup>2</sup> namely that evil exists as an inevitable upshot of our libertarian freedom, is inadequate. Agreed. Yet, the free will defense is not logically, or metaphysically, incoherent. As Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity* makes clear, incoherence is not one of Plantinga's strong suits.<sup>3</sup>

Even so, the standard free will defense has three familiar soft spots.

First, we need an explanation of just why having *libertarian* free will is crucial in God's creative plan—so crucial that the risk of horrendous moral evil is not a reason against creating beings that can freely choose even horrendous moral evil. Why wouldn't the creation of beings that are rationally coerced by the Good have been sufficient for God's purposes?

Secondly, the free will defense is presented as an account of why *we* are able to be sources of significant, and indeed horrendous, *moral* evil. It thus seems to come too late to be the full account of source of those *natural* evils, such as the system of predation, which long preceded our free choices.

Thirdly, having and misusing libertarian free will seems compatible with being in, perhaps unwittingly, a moral playpen i.e., a situation in which one's free decisions aimed at significant, and especially horrendous, moral evils would be rendered relatively harmless. Why didn't God make aiming at serious evil a quixotic enterprise, that just seems for no discernible reason not to get very far?

Here, Sterba's comparison with a just and powerful political state is an embarrassment for the thought that evil free wills could not, or should not, be "play-penned". For that is precisely what a just state would do *if it could*.

That illustrates Sterba's method. He is not concerned to claim that the free will defense is metaphysically or logically incoherent. He is not *that* interested in ontotheology. Rather, he thinks that clearly true moral principles are enough to cut through the details. His view is that it would be morally illegitimate not to playpen free agents capable of significant evil, if one could.

My argument will be that when it comes to the question of moral illegitimacy, the ontotheology of the Theodrama of Creation and Redemption turns out to be pivotal. I shall present an account of the Theodrama that (i) is not incoherent (a lowish bar, which is set by Sterba's own ambitious aim of demonstrating incoherence) and (ii) would, if true, explain why God's not play-penning his dangerous creatures is morally legitimate, in that it does not violate any obvious moral principle. Though no mere ontotheology can save us, there is an ontotheology that can save us from Sterba's argument.

That might give the impression that the following is just an analytic exercise of finding a way to block an argument.

I suspect that any such impression will dissipate as we proceed.

### 1. The Main Problem with Sterba's "Logical" Argument: God Can't!

Sterba adroitly develops the worry as to why God has not prevented significant and indeed horrendous evil into a *moral* argument against the existence of God, one tranche of which is this:

- (i) There are significant, and indeed horrendous, evil consequences of immoral actions which an all-powerful being could have prevented without violating anyone's rights;
- (ii) If God exists, then he is all-good and all-powerful;
- (iii) An all-good and all-powerful being would prevent, rather than permit, all 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;

Therefore, there is no God.

That is an argument that God does not exist from (a) the extent and depth of moral evil, (b) necessary truths concerning what would lie in the essential nature of God, were God to exist, and (c) necessary moral truths. If it is valid and the premises are true, then we would have "a logical argument from evil" in Sterba's intended sense.

I accept premise (i). God could have prevented evil arising by remaining within himself. That would not have violated anyone's rights. No creature had a right to exist. And when we examine God's reason for creating, we will see that God also had an *adequate* reason to remain within himself, perhaps a reason deriving from the very risk of evil arising, a risk he would have to take on in manifesting his nature by creating free creatures who might reject him.

Whereas a decisive reason for an action is one for which the reasons outweigh the reasons in favor of all the alternative actions, an *adequate* reason for an action is a reason that is not outweighed by the reasons in favor of any of the alternative actions.

God's creating was a contingent matter. Indeed, it was closer than a close call; though it wasn't a mere toss-up, or a mere opting, as in a Buridan's ass case. There were adequate but not decisive reasons for God to create, and adequate but not decisive reasons for God to remain within himself, the latter perhaps having to do with the very possibility of evil arising. If God had chosen to create or alternatively to remain, there would have been an adequate reason for that choice. His choice was the intelligible choice to act on the one reason rather than the other. Hence creation is contingent. God could have remained within himself.

I also accept premise (ii) with the caveat that being all-powerful means being able to do anything *metaphysically* possible, anything compatible with the essential natures of the things and events in question. Compare being all-knowing, which is knowing everything that it is metaphysically possible to know. The scope of metaphysically possible knowledge expands as free creatures by their free choices close off branches in their open futures.

So too, the scope of what is metaphysically possible contracts with creation. To take a trivial contraction, it is then no longer metaphysically possible for God to have not created. A non-trivial contraction which turns on what I call God's necessary "abjuration" is the central focus of this paper.

Sterba's argument fails by his own "logical" standard because (iii) is not a necessary truth. There are accounts of the nature of an all-good and all-powerful God, and of why he created, on which (iii) is false.

The flaw in the argument lies with the contextually sensitive notion of being "all-powerful". God is all-powerful or omnipotent in that he can do anything that is metaphysically possible. But what is metaphysically possible for God changes as a result of creation. He remains all-powerful, even though the scope of what is metaphysically possible narrows thanks to creation. There is a coherent theological model of how reality stands on which (iii) is false. For that premise applies to immoral acts and their consequences which occur after creation.

The same flaw attends Sterba's appeal to his other two "Moral Evil Prevention Requirements", as applied to an all-good and all-powerful being, and which could, either of them, drive Sterba's argument, by taking the place of (iii).

An all-good and all-powerful being would not permit, but would 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.

An all-good and all-powerful being would not permit, but would instead 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.

God would prevent such things *if he could*. But as things stand after creation, God *doesn't* prevent such things, because he *can't*.

In broad strokes, the thought is that it is somehow internal to his creation that he then can't prevent significant, even horrendous, evil consequences of immoral actions. He remains all-powerful, able to do anything that is metaphysically possible, even though the scope of what is metaphysically possible is contracted by his very act of creation.

That, I hope, will come alive as a real theological option when we dwell on the nature of God, on his available reason for creating, on what sort of creation accords with that reason, how evil arose within God's first creation, how that evil played a role in the creation of the material universe, and God's redemptive Plan B, i.e., God's response to evil.

## 2. A Neo-Platonic Conception of God

To get anywhere with the question of *why* God created, and how it is that creation constrained what was metaphysically possible for God, we will have to make some initial assumptions about the nature of God, and then explore the question of his reason for not remaining within himself relative to those assumptions.

The assumptions that follow are close to central, and enduring, though sometimes controverted, elements in one traditional theistic conception of God. These assumptions are pressed into service here because their implications are well understood, thanks to a long history of sophisticated thought and commentary. If true, the assumptions express *de re* necessary truths concerning God and creation. In the background is the basic picture: while God exists necessarily, creation is a contingent operation. There might have been no creation at all.

I do not say that the Neo-Platonic theism that follows is the core or essence of theism. Given the tangled history of theism, that kind of claim is extremely problematic, and perhaps even insulting. Still, we have to work with assumptions. I present them now as characterizing the best "God of the Philosophers" that I happen to know. (I am happy to be shown a better one.)

Even relative to the assumptions stated above, finding an answer to our questions of why God created and why he can't prevent evil will prove difficult. Without them, or some other set of equally constraining and historically well-understood assumptions, the questions as to why God created and why he can't prevent evil arising in creation even though he is omnipotent, indeed is Power Itself, are best passed over in silence.

The Neo-Platonic element in what follows has at its core a model of the ground of the truth of certain kinds of predication. For some predicates *F*, things are predicatively *F* by standing in an appropriate relation to the *F*, a thing that is constitutively *F*—equivalently “an eminent exemplar of *F*-ness”. When there is one such exemplar, we may speak of *the* Form of *F*, the unique thing that is constitutively *F*, such that other things get to be *F* in virtue of standing in an appropriate relation to it. When the relation in question is necessary, such as the relation of numerical identity, the thing in question is essentially *F*. When the relation is contingent as with the relation between a created thing and a creator that is constitutively *F*, then it is contingent that there is a thing which is predicatively *F*.<sup>4</sup>

Some examples, simply to convey the general idea. Spatiotemporal regions are constitutively “sized shapes”. For a material object to have a physical shape of a certain size is for its outermost parts to be bounded by or “abut” a spatiotemporal region constitutively that size and shape. Or consider an updated version of something like the sense-data theory. There are visual expanses, which are constitutively some determinate shade of color bounded by a visual shape. For a surface to be colored is for it to *habitually appear to be pervaded by an expanse of that color*. In this way, surfaces are predicatively colored in virtue of a relation to something constitutively colored, an expanse of a determinate shade of the color in question.

Taking seriously that model of a distinctive class of predications and their ground, here is the framework within which I am operating:

1. God is Subsisting Existence, i.e., the Form or Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, with respect to which all other existents are, via creation, derivative participants in Subsisting Existence. This account of what God *is* has consequences for what is properly predicated *of* him: as the Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, he lacks nothing in the way of existence, it lies in his essence to exist. So the question of the ground of his existence, the question of why it is that a thing with his nature or essence exists, does not arise. (Which is not to say that we have, in the fashion of the ontological argument, an a priori basis for asserting the existence of God. Instead, the situation is this: if God, so conceived, exists then he is an autonomous existent, i.e., the fact of his existence does not require a ground.)
2. God is the Good, the Form<sup>5</sup> or Preeminent Exemplar of Goodness, with respect to which everything else that is good is a derivative participant in that Goodness. This account of what God *is* has consequences concerning what is properly predicated *of* him. He lacks nothing in the way of goodness. He has, by his essence, every positive value or perfection it is possible for him to have simply (i.e., not in virtue of some relation to other things) and he has these to a degree that is unsurpassable.
3. God is Power Itself, the Form or Preeminent Exemplar of Power. This account of what God *is* has consequences for what is properly predicated *of* him. As the Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, he lacks nothing in the way of power; it lies in his essence to be able to do anything metaphysically possible, i.e., anything consistent with the consequences of his essence and the essences of other things. (Contrary to Descartes, it is not a limitation on God's power that he can't make  $2 + 2 = 5$ . That is because of the essences of 2, the function of addition and 5.)
4. God is Knowing Itself, the Form or Preeminent Exemplar of Knowing. This account of what God *is* has consequences for what is properly predicated *of* him: as the Preeminent Exemplar of Knowledge, he lacks nothing in the way of knowledge, he knows everything that can be known.

5. God is Rational Willing Itself, the Form or Preeminent Exemplar of Rational Willing, he lacks nothing in the way of rational willing; so his will is perfectly responsive to reason.
6. Now we come to creation. God's creation was *ex nihilo*; it was not some operation on preexisting materials, whose natures placed an antecedent limitation on God's will. Nor was it some operation on some preexisting *abstracta*, such as the laws of what would be matter, were those laws instantiated. There was nothing over and above God to which he had to accommodate his creative power.
7. God's creating was a contingent act; he had libertarian freedom to remain within himself: there could have been no creation at all.<sup>6</sup>

On this Neo-Platonic conception, God is not just the so-called Omni-god, i.e., something predicatively all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing. To leave it at that suggests that the standards of goodness, power and knowledge are not grounded in God but somehow stand over and above him and are such that with respect to those standards he receives the highest possible mark. For then, as a rational will, God's choices would be prescribed by what is independently good, and proscribed by what is independently bad. He would be under an axiological constraint that does not derive from his nature. The same worry arises for so-called Perfect Being Theology. Does God just get perfect scores by some independent standards of goodness, power and knowledge? The Neo-Platonic conception says no; God's predicative perfections—being perfect in goodness, in power, in knowledge and in rational willing arise from what God constitutively *is*. (Self-identity is the purest case of participation.)

Claims 1–5 begin with identities. Identity is symmetric, and more relevant here, reflexive and transitive. So, it follows that the Form or Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, and of Goodness, and of Power, and of Knowledge, and of Rational Willing is numerically one and the same thing! The corresponding predicative features had by creatures, i.e., their existence, goodness, power, knowledge and will, seem to be quite disparate things. Just how they converge when we trace them back to The Source of all things is beyond me. The only thought I have is that Existence, Goodness, Power, Knowledge, and Rational Willing are abstracted out aspects of Self-Affirming Activity Itself, the Preeminent Exemplar of Self-Affirming Activity. There would be some defect in Self-Affirming Activity Itself, if it was not also the Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, Goodness, Power, Knowledge, and Rational Willing.

I do not offer that as an explanation of anything. From our vantage point, the only grip we have on Self-Affirming Activity Itself is by way of these notions of Existence, Goodness, Power, Knowledge, and Rational Willing.

As Preeminent Rational Willing, perfectly responsive to value, God fully affirms his own Goodness, Power and Knowledge. Hence the thought made vivid by Aquinas, that the inner life of God is filled with something like unsurpassable joy in response to things being exactly as they should be. The promise of the Beatific Vision, as I understand it, is that God's creatures, to the extent that they approach holiness, will somehow participate in that joy.

The crucial thought is that holiness is the freely chosen orientation of one's will to the valorizing of the Good above all, thereby subordinating one's own good to the Good. Holiness is the metaphysically necessary condition for coming to participate in the inner life of God. Finding God's offer rationally coercive, and so having no rational freedom to choose to reject it, is not enough.

Holiness is the proper exercise of libertarian free will in response to the non-coercive offer of grace.

### 3. God's Existence and Creative Freedom as the Ground of Original Contingency

There is pro tanto evidence that the God just characterized exists. The evidence takes the form of an inference to the best explanation. Such a God would provide an adequate explanation of contingency.

The guiding premise of the “modal” cosmological argument, which I believe can be given a sound form, is that if something is existentially contingent, i.e., exists, but might not have existed, then its existence requires some explanation, ultimately not a causal explanation, but in the end an ontological or *grounding* explanation.

Yet there is an immediate problem in appealing to an essentially existing being, such as God, as the ground or ontological explanation of contingency. Grounding, or ontological explanation, appears to have the following character: the full ground of some state of affairs or fact is such that its obtaining necessitates that fact. But we were looking for an ontological explanation of contingency *as such*.

It appears that the so-called Principle of Sufficient Reason, namely the principle that every non-autonomous fact—every fact whose holding does not have an explanation in terms of the essences of the items figuring in that fact—has a complete ontological explanation, in terms of autonomous facts, generates the central claim of Spinoza: everything is as it must be. For a complete ontological explanation *necessitates* what it explains.

#### 4. The Principle of Adequate Reason

To explain contingency as such, we should set aside the Principle of Sufficient Reason in favor of a Principal of Adequate Reason. The idea of adequacy comes from the context of choice. Whereas a decisive reason for acting is a reason that is stronger than any reason for the alternative courses of action, an adequate reason is one that is at least as strong as any of the reasons supporting alternative courses of action.

(The basic idea) Autonomous facts are those facts whose obtaining arises from the essence of the constituents. (For example, the fact that Mark Twain and Samuel Clemens are numerically identical.) Such facts require no explanation. All non-autonomous facts are explicable, in the sense that there must be completely adequate reasons for them.

(The crucial gloss) However, these reasons can take different forms. Sometimes, such reasons are found in a necessitating ontological explanation, which would show how derivative things must be as they are, given more fundamental things. Alternatively there can be completely adequate but non-decisive and so non-coercive *practical* reasons for choice and intentional action, reasons which provide a non-necessitating explanation of the choice and the corresponding action.

The idea that we have rational freedom in a choice situation is the idea that we can face choices in which there are merely adequate reasons for acting in any of the differing ways that the choice situation presents. A rational will is free to choose to act on any of those reasons, which then can be cited as the reason from which that will acted.

That is how contingency originally appears. God is rationally free to create, or alternatively, to remain within himself. His reason for creating is an adequate but not a decisive reason to create. That is how the ontological explanation of original contingency, explains contingency *as such*. There is no “modal collapse”, no reduction of everything to a necessity, as with Spinozism.

The trivial case of rational freedom is that of mere opting, as in a “Buridan’s ass” case. Say you need a fountain pen and there you are at the pen shop equidistant from two *Jacques de Molay* mediums, both priced the same and indistinguishable one from the other. You take one of the *Jacques de Molay* mediums to the counter and pay for it. There was no decisive reason to buy the pen you bought, rather than the other; but there is a completely adequate reason for buying that pen: you needed an affordable fountain pen and *this*—the one you bought—is an affordable fountain pen. You also had a completely adequate reason for buying the other pen instead; namely, you needed an affordable pen and *that*—the other one—is an affordable fountain pen. You have adequate reasons for choosing either pen; you are *rationally free* to go either way.

There is a more interesting sort of case in which one might find oneself with completely adequate, but no coercive or decisive reasons. Some choice situations may present

conflicts of incommensurable values, or more generally incomparable values—to drop the implication that is commensuration or quantitative comparison of the relevant values that is really at issue. These would be values that are of such different kinds that it seems artificial to regard them either as equivalent in weight or rank, or as involving one value that is weightier than, or to be ranked more highly than, the other.

Creation was not a Buridan's ass choice, for the value of God's remaining within himself, and the value of God's creating, do not exhibit equal helpings of the very same sort of value. God could have had rational freedom to create, or alternatively, to remain within himself, either from the counterbalancing weight of some reason not to create, or from the incomparable values presented by the option of remaining within himself, and the option of creating.<sup>7</sup>

Suppose as is argued below, that God's reason to create was to manifest his own nature, i.e., his Goodness, Power, Knowledge, and his Free Rational Will. In acting, God always affirms the Good, and his own Good, for he is the Good. Consequently, there is no distinction between God's Good and the Good.

Yet any creaturely manifestation of free rational willing, however perfect of its kind, will face a choice of fundamental orientation—a choice God cannot face—namely whether to subordinate its own good to the Good, or to subordinate the Good to its own good. The latter is the choice definitive of a morally evil will. Suppose then that any adequate manifestation of God's nature involves the creation of free rational wills, as perfect of their kind as they can be compatible with their being creatures. God will know that in any such manifestation, there is the *possibility* that some of these creatures will make the free choice definitive of an evil will. Accordingly, God has a strong reason against creating, namely that even in any defective manifestation of his nature the possibility of lucid evil has the possibility of arising.

God's foreknowledge is here understood to concern merely the possibility of lucid moral evil arising, not of its actually arising. The latter depends on an act of libertarian free will on the part of God's first creatures. There we are in the realm of fact-less future contingency. There is no "thin red line"—no set of truths about what *will* in fact happen, already there to be known by Omniscience. Antecedent to such free choices there is nothing settled as to how they will turn out.

Thus, God does not create free rational wills while knowing that they would make the evil choice. Accordingly, those among the first-created who conform their will to evil cannot reasonably object— "Why did you make me, knowing I would freely reject you?"

## 5. Why Did God Create?

"Who can fathom the mind of God?" That is deeply appropriate as an expression of intellectual humility. Yet, it is often used as a cover for intellectual laziness. For given what God *is*, we can know something significant concerning what his mind *is not*. When it comes to the available reasons for God to act upon, his ways are not our ways. For many of our reasons to act derive from our finitude, incompleteness and need. God has no such reasons. In the best case, our reasons derive from attachments to and compassion towards specific existing beings. But even that could not be God's reason for creating, for the specific existing beings have to be there anyway to be loved or cared for, and so be the source of such reasons. Nor, in creating was he aiming to improve reality. Reality was already unsurpassably good. Why then did God not leave well enough alone?

What then was the reason *from which* God created, rather than remain within himself? Coming to clarity on that is crucial to understanding how evil came into the world. And only when we have a satisfactory etiology of evil can we reasonably consider the prospects of a theodicy.

The bare voluntarist answer to the effect that God just willed creation without having any reason to create ignores the fact that God's willing, as opposed to a being's merely emanating, is the operation of a pre-eminently *rational* will; a will that is always consonant

with the intellect's appreciation of at least a completely adequate reason that favors the choice in question. Otherwise we will have no ground for contingent creation.

What then was God's reason for creating? In asking this question, we are not looking for a rationally decisive or coercive reason for creating. For a central aim of the present effort is to explain how God, in creating, genuinely had the option to create, or alternatively remain within himself. Moreover, we are not looking merely for *prima facie* or *pro tanto* considerations that might favor creation, but would not in themselves provide a completely adequate reason to create.<sup>8</sup> What we are after is illumination as to the kind(s) of reason(s) which could make up a completely adequate reason to create, something that could make rational sense of creation, even while allowing for the rational option of refraining from creation.

To summarize: if God had a reason to create then it would be a completely adequate reason, a reason that would justify his creating. This reason could justify his creating, even if it was not a decisive or rationally coercive reason, i.e., a reason that required him to create. Creation would thus be grounded; its occurrence would be explained by a free choice of God's, but it would not thereby be necessitated by God's nature.

On traditional theistic views, God in creating was not perfecting his nature. Nor was he advancing his own self-interest, i.e., fulfilling some need of his which otherwise would have been unmet. Nor was he under an authoritative command (explicit or implicit) to create, or if he was it can only have come from himself, which simply pushes the question back to the reason for that command.

Nor was he morally obliged to create. To whom? By whom? Kantians might reject those two questions, by urging that the source of moral obligation is not in directed duties toward others but in the requirements of rational willing; so that moral requirements are the upshot of clearheadedly giving the law to oneself as a free being. But on such a Kantian view, in the case of a preeminently rational will such as God, moral reasons would coercively or decisively support whatever they support. So, if God had a moral reason to create, creation would not be contingent. But we are here trying to make real sense of the traditional notion that contingency arises from God's rationally free choice.

Did God create out of reasons of personal attachment? Such reasons though they take the form of propositions concerning how the act in question would benefit some given person, require a basis in virtue of which they count as, and have rational force as, reasons of personal attachment. The basis involves some significant personal relationship already existing between the agent and the beneficiary. The basis must be in place, in order for there to be a reason of this kind in play. In that sense, the basis must be in place *prior to* the act in question being a reasonable act to perform in the light of the reason of personal attachment. The same applies to reasons of special responsibility; the incurring of the special responsibility must be in place prior to the reasons arising from what is good for some already given group of people. Let's concentrate on reasons of personal attachment; the considerations evinced will apply *mutatis mutandis* to reasons of special responsibility. The basis requirement is then this:

The basis B for some proposition P being a reason of personal attachment for an agent to perform some act will involve some personal relationship between the agent and the potential beneficiary or beneficiaries described in P. The basis B must be in place prior to the act in question for P to be a reason of personal attachment for that act.

Typically, but not always, the required priority is realized by temporal priority, i.e., the basis B is in place before the act emerges as an option. If the act has to be already performed for the basis to be in place, then the relevant proposition is not a reason of personal attachment.

However, the requirement of priority, the requirement that is usually realized by temporal priority, is inherently ontological. The act cannot be ontologically prior to the basis. That is, the particular basis B for some proposition's being a reason of personal attachment for an agent to perform some act cannot be ontologically dependent on the agent's performance of the act.<sup>9</sup>



Consider for example, God and Gabriel. God's loving Gabriel ontologically depends on Gabriel's existing, and Gabriel's existing ontologically depends on God's creating Gabriel. So, by transitivity, God's loving Gabriel ontologically depends on God's creating Gabriel. It follows that God's loving Gabriel, or indeed his having any personal attachment to Gabriel, cannot be the basis for the proposition—creating Gabriel would benefit her—being a reason of personal attachment for God to create Gabriel.

The upshot is that God cannot have reasons of personal attachment to create particular persons. They are not yet *there* to be objects of attachment!<sup>10</sup>

## 6. What Then Was God's Reason to Create?

The Baltimore Catechism presents the following Q&A:

Q. "Why did God make us?"

A. "God made us to show forth His goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in heaven."<sup>11</sup>

The doctrine seems clear enough. God created for this reason: to show forth his Goodness, to manifest his glory, *inter alia* to us, in this life and in the life to come by drawing us by way of his non-coercive grace toward Heaven, which I understand as the Beatific Vision, the participation in his own self-affirming joy. Thus, in his commentary on the sentences of Peter Lombard, Bonaventure highlights the "doubled" movement of God's self-manifestation, remarking that God created all things "not to increase his glory, but to show it forth and to communicate it".

Creation is not there to improve things in any impersonal way; there is no sort of melioristic consideration that would recommend it, for since Absolute Goodness already exists reality is already *unsurpassably* good. Nor is creation an expression of God's antecedent love for us, for love metaphysically presupposes the existence of its object. Instead, God's reason to create is to manifest his glory, to show forth his infinite goodness to his creatures whom he lovingly invites into his inner life.

To enter a clarification concerning the implications of Manifestationism: it is an account of God's *reason* for creating. In no way is it at odds with the idea that God is loving or generous or just *towards his creatures*. The point is only that those attitudes cannot be the grounding reasons for his creating, since they themselves are partly grounded in the existence of his creatures.

As Bonaventure's remark indicates, there are two separable "moments" in God's self-manifestation. First, the creation of other beings that manifest his glorious nature. Then, the closing of the circle of manifestation via God's invitation through grace to those creatures, to freely enter into the joy of his inner life, the joy that affirms Goodness itself. Nothing could be more loving than that.

Yet therein lies the rub. Fully entering into the joy of God's inner life has a constitutive necessary condition that no degree of forbearance or forgiveness on God's part can waive or suspend. That condition is what we might call *holiness*, the free and full affirmation of the Good, even at the expense of subordinating one's own narrow good to that affirmation.

Why can't God suspend that requirement? Is he not a God of love? Yes, but he is not a God who can do the metaphysically impossible. A will's being fundamentally self-valorizing metaphysically excludes its entering into the joy of God's own self-affirmation, the full and complete affirmation of the Good. Only a holy will, a will that has freely subordinated its good to the Good, can do that.

Full-blown holiness is beyond most of us, as we presently stand. As I have argued elsewhere, if holiness is a viable project for us then even though we are essentially embodied wills, our present embodiments must be contingent. Other future embodiments must be available for the quality of our wills to develop appropriately in response to grace.<sup>12</sup>

## 7. The Mismatch between Divine Manifestation and the Material Universe

On the face of it, the foregoing serves to intensify the problem of evil. Given God's nature and given that God's reason for creating was for the sake of self-manifestation,

creation should be nothing like the material universe as we now know it to be thanks to the science of astrophysics. The Psalmist was mistaken: the heavens—at least if understood as the vast reaches of the material universe—do not proclaim the glory of God.

My friend Edward Turner, an astrophysicist at Princeton University specializing, among other things, in planets in the “Goldilocks zones” of their suns, and a man of no evident theological leanings, once said to me, half-jokingly:

The creator, if there is one, seems to have been fascinated with huge gappy structures, violent collisions, spheroids of boiling metal, colossal explosions, gigantic self-sustaining fireballs, sinkholes that devour everything in their vicinity, enormous temperature variations, and ever-thinning gas. It is as if the universe were just some incredibly self-indulgent display of power over matter, on an unimaginably massive scale.

Astrophysics tells us that the material universe is gargantuan. It is so large, and so gappy, that considered as a four-dimensional whole *almost* none of it contains, or will come to contain, anything that could plausibly be taken to be intrinsically valuable. Moreover, the natural telos of the material universe—the future that it is moving towards given its initial conditions and the laws of matter—is ever-thinning gas *per secula seculorum*. Furthermore, the basic structure of the laws of matter is deeply unfriendly to life—as the argument from fine-tuning *starts out* by recognizing! Even given fine tuning, the planetary period, let alone the much shorter period during which there is planetary life, is no longer than the blinking of a cosmic eye in the forward-infinite history of the ever-expanding universe.

On most reasonable calculations, the apparently fine-tuned universe meanders around for billions upon billions of years before there appears anything approximating to life, let alone anything capable of embodying wills. That is puzzling if it was God who created the material universe. Having fine-tuned the laws of matter, he could have begun things in an initial universal condition that was already hospitable to life, consciousness, and the appearance of wills.

Moreover, we now know that the appearance of life is both adventitious and precarious. When life appeared on Earth most of it was wiped out during several discernible periods. For example, 2300 million years ago, during the Great Oxidation event, 75% of all anaerobic species were lost, due to a toxic rise in atmospheric oxygen. The geological record tells us that during the Permian Extinction, 200 million years ago, Earth’s biodiversity in the sea plummeted by 95%. And 70% of terrestrial mammal species were lost. There is no reason to suspect that the Earth itself is especially vulnerable in these ways. Life’s presence on any planet is adventitious and precarious.

Then there is the as-if-demonic character of the evolutionary route to the appearance of embodied rational intelligence, i.e., the blood-soaked struggle for survival, the system of predation, the pitiless cycle of hatching, matching and dispatching, the charnel house of hunger, sickness and predation that makes up much of wild nature.

Then, there is human incurvature, i.e., the natural corruption of the human will, due to the self-protective character of our evolved hominid embodiments, as shown in our habitual tendency to put our finger on the scales in favor of ourselves and our own. In my view, our hominid embodiments account for the original character of our sinfulness, or natural resistance to the Good. The appeal to a supposedly specific human fall fall from grace on the part of privileged ancestors of ours is quite necessary.

Then there are the large-scale structural defects of human life; including arbitrary suffering, the decay of corrosive aging, our profound ignorance of our condition, the vulnerability of everything we cherish to time and chance, and finally, to untimely death.

Let us not omit the negative correlation between having a good will and being happy, thanks to the ruthless competitive system which favors predatory bad wills, the system known as human history, whose briefest and not too inaccurate summary is “The bastards tend to get away with it.”

And then there is the hiddenness of God (if God exists).<sup>13</sup>

To be clear, matter is not evil. The material universe itself is not malignant, nor malign. In looking for the right word, I was drawn to an old contrast that ancient Astrology made among the planets. The material universe is not benefic; it is malefic, i.e., unfavorable to the manifestation of Goodness.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this malefic character of the universe, there is still much room in human life for great love and life-affirming joyfulness.<sup>15</sup> But that room has to be found in the interstices of the malefic progression from the vast original explosion to the ever-thinning gas. As we know, from even a quick glance at human history, any such found-room will be fragile, all-too-fragile. Hope and joyfulness are entirely compatible with the obvious thought that whether or not we have a true home, *this* is not our true home.

Given its malefic character, the material universe is obviously not a *theophany*, a manifestation of God's goodness and power.

One might cast that point in the form of a new anti-theistic argument, an argument from the mismatch of God's available reason for creation, and the form creation appears to have taken.

- (A) If there is a God, his reason for creating would have been to manifest his glorious nature, his Existence, his Goodness, his Power,
- (B) God's act of self-manifestation would have been *indefective*, i.e., perfect as an act of that type. (For any imperfection in that act would be traceable to a prior limitation in God's Goodness or Power or Knowledge or Will.),
- (C) God's glory is not manifest in the heavens, understood as the total face of the material universe as Astrophysics, and other settled sciences reveal it to be,  
Therefore,
- (D) Either the material universe is not God's direct creation, i.e., not part of his creative self-manifestation, or there is no God,
- (E) But if God exists then God is the direct creator of the material universe. (A central commitment of orthodox theism),  
Therefore,
- (F) There is no God.

Given manifestationism, we have the pivotal premise (B)—there can be no defect in God's *act* of self-expression that is his creating. Given the unlimited power that God can deploy in creating, God's creation therefore must be an *indefective expression of God's nature*. Crucially, as we shall see, that inference remains in place even if the ineffective expression comes with a self-limitation on God's part, at least that if self-limitation is necessary for that ineffective expression.

The depressing fact is that we do not see such an ineffective expression around us. If this is all, if this material universe is the whole of non-divine reality, then we are done. There is no self-manifesting divine reality. As I see it, this is a decisive argument against pantheism. The material universe is not the body of God. It is not a theophany—which also tells against my former commitment to panentheism (Johnston 2009).

The theological reply, if there is one, must lie in the unseen aspect of God's created reality. There we may find an answer as to just how it is that (E) is false.

## 8. What Then Did God *Originally* Create?

Recall what we were led to understand God's nature to be, in order for his creative act to provide an adequate ontological explanation of original contingency. He has to be a free rational will with an adequate though not decisive reason to create. That reason to create is to manifest the glory of his nature, i.e., his being the Preeminent Exemplar of Existence, Goodness, Knowledge, Power and Free Rational Will. God's self-manifestation occurs not just to display his nature to an admiring audience, but to draw his sentient creatures into the joy of his inner life.

God's act of self-manifestation is utterly free of defect. Otherwise, we have the contradictory result that the defect originated in him. What then would God's ineffective

self-manifestation have to be, as far as it concerns the nature of the creatures he intends to lure by grace?

Being indefective, it would have to consist of beings who are as good,<sup>16</sup> knowing, powerful and freely rational in their wills as they can be, compatible with them being creatures. Material embodiment imposes its own arbitrary limitations on the scope of free will. So, it would be no part of the essential natures of such creatures. These first creatures therefore would be “pure spirit”, i.e., free rational wills whose nature and activity requires no material embodiment.

The first creation was thus indefective relative to God’s reason for creating. There was no defect in God’s creative act. The first creation, the *pleroma*, would be unimprovable *along the relevant dimension* of giving expression to God’s nature as the eminent exemplar of Good-Affirming, Powerful, Knowing, and Free Rational Willing.

Again, God’s self-manifestation has a doubled aspect. The first created wills are themselves manifestations of God’s nature. But further, their vocation is holiness, i.e., to manifest in their turn God’s nature, by freely valorizing the Good over their own good, over the sheer enjoyment of their own power and might.

They, like all created free wills, are called to be holy, each to be a *theotókos*; one who in accord with the lineaments of its nature bears forth or manifests Goodness itself in thought and action.<sup>17</sup>

A possible outcome is that the first creatures by their freely chosen orientations, locate themselves at various places along the spectrum from self-valorization to God-bearing. What each of the first creatures in their turn create will manifest the determinate orientation of its will.

To state the obvious, we are not to be found among these first creatures. We are very far from being at the center of created reality. The thought that we are is a narcissistic anthropocentric error, one perhaps abetted by a theological misinterpretation of the meaning of the Incarnation as somehow being a response to the supposed special ontological dignity of humanity. It wasn’t. It is simply absurd, if not obscene, to suppose that anything with a hominid embodiment could be at the center of created reality. The Incarnation is not a responsive appreciation of our hominid condition; it is a gratuitously loving outreach whose purpose is to redeem that condition.

The doctrine of the Incarnation is at the very heart of revealed Christian theology. The claim that we are not among the first creatures is instead a consequence of rational reflection on the nature of God, on contingency, on creation and on God’s available reason for creating. If it is a result, i.e., if the argument so far has been good, it is a result, not in revealed, but in natural theology.

It is however a result that may bring to mind a confusing distractor that appears in different religious traditions. I refer, of course, to the so-called angels. In the culture circle that surrounds me, talk of angels and demons is regarded as ludicrous, perhaps even a sign of incipient psychosis. Given my friends’ conception of what angels and demons would be, if there were any, I entirely sympathize.

As Gregory the Great reminds us, the Latin “angelus”, meaning messenger or representative, is not the name of a nature, or kind of being. It is the name of a function, the function of being a messenger of God.<sup>18</sup> A better name for the first creatures might be the name Paul uses in Ephesians, ἄρχοντες—the archons—the most ancient of created wills. It is odd enough to free us from images of babyish putti symbolizing Cupid, or of those winged beauties modeled on the Roman messenger god Mercury.<sup>19</sup>

If our argument has been good, the first creatures are nothing like that. To use “angel” as a characterization of their *nature* amounts to a theological slur! The archons are not cherubic in form. They do not have wings. Indeed, they are not by nature embodied at all. They would have to be as good of their kind, as knowing, as powerful and as freely rational in their wills as they can be, compatible with being creatures. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite draws the natural conclusion: “their firstness of origin endows them with the power to originate” i.e., to create.<sup>20</sup>

Accordingly, my assumption is that at least some of the archons are powerful enough to be universe creators, and that such an archon's choice of creative medium and just how they mold that medium into a universe reflects the archon's freely chosen orientation with respect to the Good, i.e., the extent to which the archon has escaped self-valorization in favor of God-bearing.

Hence it would not be a surprise if one of the archons at the self-valorizing end of the spectrum was sufficiently knowing and powerful to play the Demiurgic role, i.e., to try its hand at fine-tuning the basic laws of matter in order to originate a stable material universe. In doing this, that archon would not be manifesting God's glory, but only its own power and might.

The result would accord with what we observe: the material universe occludes the glory of God, not only in respect of its tediously gargantuan character, but most notably by including natural, and then, moral evil.

### 9. Sin and Natural Evil

A free will's failure to manifest God, in proportion to its own knowledge and power, is a defect in that will. That failure is definitive of *hamartia* or *sin*, a defective orientation of the will, which involves valorizing in mental and bodily action the manifestation of one's own good, i.e., one's own degree of nature-relative perfection, one's own power, one's knowledge, over the manifestation Goodness itself.

We shall explore just how such a defect could arise in an archon, a being that is an indefective manifestation of God's glory. But if it did arise in a will as powerful as it can be, compatible with it being a specific kind of first creature, and if that will chose to manifest its power by creating the material universe, then we would have the basis for an etiology of evil.

It would be this: natural evil arose from sin, but it was not our sin.

That is, natural evil along with its container, the material universe, entered reality as a result of archonic sin, the willed subordination of manifesting Goodness, Power and Knowledge, to the display of the archon's own goodness, knowledge and power. The material universe came into being as a result of an archon's self-valorizing act of manifesting its power by creating in the medium of matter, a medium that occludes, rather than manifests, God's Goodness.

Talk of archonic, and in particular Demiurgic, sin only makes sense within the Theodrama of Creation.<sup>21</sup> (Otherwise, it falls somewhere between pure fancy and outright lunacy.) The point of God's creating was the manifestation of his nature—his Existence, his Goodness, his Power, his Knowledge, his Rational Freedom—in his creatures, who could in turn manifest these features of the Divine nature in their own creative action, in accord with their own natures.

Sin is the failure of a free rational will to freely orient itself toward God-bearing. It consists in deploying one's gifts, one's goodness, one's power, one's knowledge and rational freedom fundamentally for one's own good rather than for the sake of manifesting Goodness. Simply put, to be in sin, is to be a self-valorizer rather than a God-bearer; to freely valorize the achievement and manifestation of one's own good over one's manifesting Goodness Itself. The opposite of sin is thus not conventional righteousness, but holiness.

Knowing that matter is a medium that naturally occludes rather than manifests his Goodness, and creating in order to manifest that Goodness, God could not have created the material universe. Instead, he manifested his Goodness, Power, Knowledge and Free Rational Will by creating free wills, each in its kind-relative way, as good, and as powerful, and as knowledgeable, as is possible compatible with it being a creature of God.

The material universe was the result of a freely chosen repudiation of holiness by some archonic will bent on displaying its power, even at the cost of occluding God's Goodness.<sup>22</sup>

## 10. A Fortunate Fault That Should Not Have Been

We must refuse the temptation to go on to think of the material universe itself as somehow evil. True, the more a will approaches perfection the more horrendous its sin, if it sins. In the case of the archon who took upon itself the Demiurgic role, the sin in question therefore deserves its familiar name—*evil*. That evil is a defective condition of the will of the Demiurge.

It does not follow that the material universe itself is evil. The material universe is not a will.

Nor does it follow that the flesh is somehow evil. We should rejoice in our present embodiments despite their obvious limitations. For they are the means by which our wills are subserved and implemented.<sup>23</sup>

The thing that follows from the material universe being the product of archonic evil is that the material universe is a mistake; it should not have been.

The Theodrama of Redemption, in particular the free provision of grace to help resist the incurvature that comes with our hominid embodiments; all that, along with the pivotal moment of salvation history, the embodiment of the Christ, is a response to that “should not have been”. In the totality of creation and redemption, the creation of the material universe becomes a fortunate fault, in part because it provides us with embodiments which enable us to exist and find our way to God.

I suspect that this is close to something that a certain kind of Neo-Platonic Christianity would say in response to the malefic progression that is the material universe. Perhaps the so-called *Secret Revelation of John* is a mythic anticipation—via the descent from the archonic marvel Barbelo to the disaster that is Yaldabaoth, the myth’s creator of the material universe—of something like this account of the etiology of evil.<sup>24</sup> But unlike *Secret John*, the present account is not well-characterized as Gnostic. Salvation does not come from *gnosis*, or secret knowledge, but from the acceptance of grace.

The role of *gnosis*—of knowledge of God’s reason to create, and the subsequent quite bumpy progression of his doubled aim of manifesting himself in creatures who would freely choose to manifest his Goodness in their own creativity and thereby enter into the joy of his own inner life—is to fend off those intellectual discouragements, such as the argument from evil, which close our hearts to grace. The deliverances of *gnosis* are thus just counterweights to the discouragement of the intellect. They do not add up to an adequate form of response to those suffering badly, or fatally. That’s for grace alone. A theodicy should not take the form of a justification of suffering, but rather the offer of a detailed understanding of how suffering is compatible with the existence of a loving God.

God is not the creator of the material universe. Instead, he simply found therein the kind of neural, or functionally equivalent, complexity that enabled the embodiment of his second creation, namely independently created but necessarily embodied *wills*, i.e., conscious valuers of value, who can act to secure those values.

We are such embodied wills, whom God now aims to draw to himself through the offer of grace. The irony at the heart of the Theodrama is that we would not have been, but for original Demiurgic self-valorization.

The fall of the archon who then became the Demiurge was, for us, the real *felix culpa*, or fortunate fault.

## 11. As Yet Unanswered Questions

God did not originally will the fortunate fault. He is not the direct cause of natural evil. Since archonic sin is the outcome of a genuine free will, the liberty to settle some part of the ontologically open future, God could not have foreknown that any particular archon would make the evil choice. For there was, as yet, no fact to be known.

The fault was made fortunate—even though it should not have been, it was *redeemed*—by God’s Plan B, the creation of embodied wills, and the Theodrama of their redemption from hominid incurvature. But what went wrong with Plan A? How was archonic sin even possible given the original perfection of the archons?

Why did God allow archonic sin, and having allowed it, why did he not limit its naturally evil effects? Why were the archons not play-penned?

Moreover, how could any archon think it could hope to valorize its own good over the Good, and then flourish by taking on the Demiurgic role, when that would put it at odds with Goodness, Power, Knowledge and Free Rational Will itself?

## 12. The Fall of the Archons

“Lucifer” has become a name for a prince of evil or “darkness”, the very exemplar of what should not have been, namely one who lucidly employed his own gifts to reject the call to holiness, instead deploying his freedom to do what served his own good, including the unbridled exercise of his power and knowledge in the domination and temptation of other wills, including latter-day embodied wills such as our own.

Let us also follow the tradition in supposing that “Michael” is a name for a preeminent archonic will who freely accepted the call to be a manifestor of Goodness itself, i.e., to be a God-bearer.

Why did God make Michael and Lucifer, and the other archons, free to reject him, free to form their nature as self-valorizers rather than theotokoi? It must have been that what was most valuable in creation was precisely the free, i.e., rationally uncoerced, acceptance of that call, the free identification with the Good; i.e., the response to God’s self-manifestation by way of becoming a being that would further manifest the Good, i.e., God himself. That would be a free acceptance of an invitation to participate in the joyful life, i.e., the self-manifestation of God.

Yet that choice would come at the cost of radical abandonment to the will of God, the forgoing of any self-expressive project at odds with that will.

## 13. The Problem with the Standard Etiology

The problem with tracing the etiology of evil to the fall of one of the archons, say Lucifer, is easily stated: Given their degree of perfection, their standing as the first fruits of God’s self-expression, how *could* any of the archons have made the mistake which constituted their fall?

Here we find two distinguishable but interrelated sources of puzzlement. The first begins with the question: How could the perversion of archonic *rational wills* have arisen, since they are the first and best finite expressions of God’s nature as the preeminent exemplar of Rational Willing? How could the fallen first created wills have *rationally* chosen evil, without that choice being the result of some already present defect in their wills or in their intellects? But if the archons who fell were either antecedently perverted or ignorant of crucial matters that were available by the light of natural reason, how then could they be fully culpable, and, as we are told, unforgivable? Worse, wouldn’t those supposedly explanatory defects be imputable to a defect in God’s own self-manifestation? Still worse, wouldn’t God’s defective self-manifestation then be the original source of evil?

The second source of puzzlement has been given much less play by the tradition. To my mind it is the deeper source. It survives even if the first set of questions is fully put to rest; say by admitting that there is no coercive or decisive reason not to valorize one’s own good above all.

The second source of puzzlement begins with an appropriate appreciation of the elevated status of the archonic intellects—the first created wills are, we must suppose, maximally great natural theologians, since they are ignorant of nothing attainable by the light of natural reason. (Again, otherwise there would have been an antecedent defect in God’s act of self-manifestation, a contradiction given what has been established.) How then could a choice to be evil have appeared to the first created wills to be even so much as a *viable* option? Could they not have reasoned that the choice of subordinating the Good to their own good would immediately make them enemies of the Good, i.e., enemies of God, so that their Creator would be obliged by his nature to immediately undermine any further elaboration of that choice? How could the fallen first created wills reasonably have

expected to *reign anywhere*; that is, to effectively bring about the detailed entailments of their choice, *even in a Hell of universal egoism*?

Knowing what the first created wills, as the greatest natural theologians, seemingly must have known, wouldn't each of the archons be in a position to recognize that there is a coercive reason *not* to choose to be evil? Namely, that any such choice would incur the wrath of God, so that any implementation of that choice would be frustrated, or rendered ineffective. Predictably and obviously, there would be no chance to "reign" in Hell, or anywhere else.

Nor could the first created wills, the archons, these first fruits of creation, have been weak-willed, and certainly not so weak-willed as to choose evil, in the teeth of a coercive reason against making the demonic choice. So the choice that supposedly constituted the Great Fall, it seems, was just not an option for the first created wills. How *could* they have fallen?

Indeed, how could those who remained faithful to the Good have faced any real option of rationally doing otherwise? Why do we credit the archangel Michael for faithfulness to the Good, when given *what he must have known*, it was the only rational option, and so that given *what he was*, his faithfulness was the coercively rational choice, which he could not help but make?

So far, we have located the etiology of evil in the metaphysically evil choice of an archon to refuse the call to be one of the theotokoi, rather than a self-valorizer. But we have yet to make sense of how it was a possible choice.

Once we see how *that* is possible—how God must abjure in order to make it possible as part of securing in creation the very thing he created to secure—we shall be understand just why God can't.

The very thing that makes sense of an archonic etiology of evil, opens up the possibility of a theodicy.

#### 14. The Possibility of Evil as a Condition of Creation

In creating—in freely manifesting his nature as the Eminent Exemplar of Existence, Goodness, Power and Rational Willing—God created powerful, uncoerced, free rational wills, as close to him in nature as their being creatures allow.

God himself has libertarian freedom to create, or alternatively, remain within himself. Therein lies the ground of the contingency of creation. It would thus be a defect in God's self-manifestation if in manifesting his nature he created beings who lacked libertarian freedom. The first created, the "archons", face a choice that God could not face. For God, there is no distinction between affirming his own good and affirming the Good; for he is the Good. But created rational intelligences encounter a fundamental choice of orientation with respect to the Good. Shall they subordinate their own good to the Good, or shall they subordinate the Good to their own good?

In this choice of orientation, the archons have rational freedom, as God did when it came to creation itself. There is no decisive reason on either side. Either choice of fundamental orientation would be rational, and either choice could be lucidly conducted under the guise of the good, i.e., in each choice, intelligible goods are affirmed and sought. How could the self-valorizing choice present itself as an intelligible good to a rational will?

Here it may be helpful to recall a modern thought. Either choice on the part of the archons exploits one or another side of what Henry Sidgwick, in *The Methods of Ethics* called the dualism of practical reason (Sidgwick [1874] 1981).<sup>25</sup> As he put it, there is no rationally coercive ground to organize one's life around "the Universal as opposed to around the Egoistic principle", or vice versa. Sidgwick despaired that this meant that "the Cosmos of Duty is reduced to Chaos".<sup>26</sup> I agree, if we mean by morality a moral system which omits the offer of grace as part of the invitation to holiness, i.e., being a manifestor of the Good rather than a valorizer of one's own good. Perhaps that is what Sidgwick unwittingly discovered, a radical incoherence in a morality unmoored from an understanding of grace and its relation to the will.



Sidgwick did say that his “Chaos” arose because there was no God who would orchestrate a system of Cosmic Justice to resolve the dualism of practical reason *de facto*, as it were, by offering the Egoist a coercive reason to act as a Universalist. But that is precisely what God does not do.

In the lurid sermons that peppered my youth, Hell, the bottomless, shoreless pit of fire, somehow inhabited by “the worm that dieth not” and the likes of the demonic face-grinder—don’t ask!—was presented as just such a threat. The real “Hell” is not a place or a threat. “Hell” is better understood as a name for the inner condition of the purely self-valorizing will that remains resistant to grace. Sidgwick’s *de jure* dualism of practical reason remains. It is not the sort of thing that could be resolved *de jure* by Divine threats or promises directed at a will’s narrow self-concern.

Given the dualism of practical reason, there is nothing *per se* irrational in lucidly subordinating the Good to one’s own good. *It is just that this is the very definition of having an evil will.* An evil will is not *per se* an irrational will. The fault in such a will is much worse than irrationality. The fault just is that it is a will that places its own good above the Good. Hence the metaphors, inadequately anthropomorphic as they are, of Lucifer’s defiant disobedience, of his overweening self-assertion—“I will scale the heavens, I will set my throne above the Most High”—as Isaiah 14:14 has Lucifer (or is it Nebuchadnezzar II?) put it.

Despite the best attempts of philosophers to show otherwise, orienting one’s life around the Egoistic principle is not *per se* condemnable by natural reason limited to its own domain. It all depends on your power relative to other agents, and your vulnerability relative to other agents. In calling that orientation evil, one is correctly siding with the opposing orientation, but not on grounds that can be made adequate by natural reason, as Sidgwick himself came to conclude.

In originally manifesting his own nature, God’s project is to make beings as perfect in natural reason and will as they can be compatible with their being creatures, and yet have them settle the quality of their wills *utterly freely* by facing the fundamental choice as to whether to subordinate their good to the Good. Not only are the archons not coerced by natural reason to make that choice—the egoistic choice would not *per se* be a naturally irrational choice—but also, and crucially, they must be left uncoerced by any possible natural understanding of the downstream advantages and disadvantages of their choice.

God’s knowledge does not involve foreknowledge of the outcome of genuinely free choices, for those outcomes are not “yet” settled. There is nothing to be known about just how the choice of fundamental orientation on the part of this or that archon will turn out.

Still, God has taken on a great risk in manifesting his nature in creation, for he must know what lucid evil wants—as we now know as a result of many evil human wills tipping their hand throughout human history. *Evil wants self-glorification, domination and emulation of its egoistic maxim on the part of less powerful wills.* In this way, evil diffuses itself, potentially creating a realm of evil.

Why would God take on such a risk of his first creatures making the evil choice of valorizing their own good over the Good? The reason must lie at the heart of God’s self-manifestation. His self-manifestation is not just an extraordinary display to his first creatures, as if they were just a created audience there to appreciate it. It is a standing invitation to their wills, to freely reject the project of self-valorization, and choose holiness, *i.e.*, to be God-bearers in all that they think and do, in that way enter into the Beatific Vision, and experience the joy of God’s own inner life.

That invitation comes in the form of grace. Grace is the invitation to a will to move in the direction of holiness. But the invitation is not coercive; there must be acceptance of the invitation on the part of the will.

It must be then that God, in manifesting himself in creation, aimed for creatures who might freely accept the grace to be God-manifestors, in effect *theotokoi*, and thereby be suitable subjects of the Beatific Vision.

It has all been for the sake of freely accepting, at the cost of one's own self-valorization, the underserved gift of entering into the joy at the heart of God's inner life, the joy of affirming his Goodness, as he himself necessarily does.

The terrible risk of holiness lucidly refused, by creatures as powerful as they can be compatible with being creatures, may have been the adequate but not decisive offsetting reason against creation. If so, therein lies the source of contingency in creation. God's adequate reason for creating, the reason he went with in creating, is his self-manifestation in creatures who themselves might freely choose to manifest his Goodness, within the limitations of their nature.

In identifying the perfect completion of holiness as the Beatific Vision, we must not think of that as a rationally coercive incentive for the will that is yet to choose between self-valorization and holiness. The will that is yet to make that choice finds self-valorization equally rationally compelling, and so finds itself in the condition of facing a momentous choice, with adequate but non-coercive reasons on both sides.

### 15. The Obvious Worry

Is there not a rationally coercive reason available to each archon to avoid self-valorization, one available prior to any such choice? Given the power of their intellects, wouldn't the archons have immediately arrived at something like this.

*(Overriding Negative Incentive) If I subordinate the Good to my own good then I will have made myself the enemy of the Good, who is all powerful, and who will then effectively negate my project of evil, namely the project of seeking self-glorification, domination, and emulation of my maxim by the part of lesser wills, by putting me in a moral playpen, where none of that is actually realized.*

No; quite the opposite. Since they have no defect in their reason, the archons would know that if Overriding Negative Incentive were true, then God would have failed to create free beings as perfect as they can be compatible with their being creatures, who then would face the rationally uncoerced choice internal to the point of creation—the choice of becoming God-bearers. And their own self-knowledge would tell them that God did not fail; for there they were.

To elaborate that point, given the archon's undoubted grasp of natural theology, the archons, both those who would be faithful and those who would fall, already knew something which we may model as the conclusion of a discursive argument.

### 16. The Archons' Deduction from Their Own Situation to God's Abdurance

What Anselm, in *The Fall of the Devil* said of Lucifer is true of the other archons. They are not "obtunsa mentis" (dull-witted).<sup>27</sup> They have a lucid understanding of their own situation. For example, they are naturally able to know the following propositions:

1. In creating, God was aiming to manifest his own nature as The Good, as Power, as Knowledge and as Uncoerced Rational Willing, and invite them by grace to share in the joy of his inner life, on the constitutive necessary condition of holiness, namely the free, i.e., even rationally uncoerced, subordination of one's own good to the Good,
2. There could be no defect in God's act of self-manifestation, so it must involve creating rationally uncoerced free beings as perfect in power and natural knowledge as they can be compatible with their being creatures,
3. We are such creatures,
4. We will face a rationally uncoerced choice of fundamental orientation; i.e., whether to subordinate our own good to the Good, or vice versa,
5. But then, since God's project in creating us was to create rationally uncoerced free beings who would freely choose holiness, if one of us were to subordinate the Good to his own good then God would not effectively negate that being's project of creative self-display,

6. Thus we know that God cannot, consistent with his creative intent, “play-pen” the downstream effects of any archon’s self-valorizing project, such as (say) the joyful self-display of realizing its own universe,
7. That is, we know that God would *abjure* if one of us were to subordinate the Good to his own good. He will not negate that being’s entailed project of employing its creative power in self display. God will allow the full use of that being’s power and might, to do precisely that,
8. To be sure, each of us is now presented with grace, with the invitation to be holy. But this too must be a non-coercive offer, an offer we can *viably* refuse,
9. Only God can create a will, only God can offer non-coercive grace to that will. Only God can exploit material or other functionally equivalent complexity to embody a will that requires embodiment for its operations,
10. So, if we were to subordinate the Good to our own good, if we were to be self-valorizers rather than God-bearers, then the most God can do to interfere with our self-valorizing creations, would be to offer the other created wills he embodies in the universes we create their the non-coercive grace not to adopt the maxim of self-valorization,
11. It is rational to hope that even given the offer of grace, many wills may choose self-glorification, domination, and will hope for the emulation of their self-valorizing maxim on the part of other wills. Likewise, it is rational to hope that given the offer of grace, many wills will move toward holiness,
12. Reality may thus become a battle for the allegiance of wills; in this battle we have an uncoerced free choice as to which side to take,
13. Betting against the acceptance of the offer to grace is not a rational error. If it were, we would not face that choice, for our rational will is an indefective manifestation of God’s nature,
14. Some of us have the power to create material or other realms in which sufficient complexity appears for the embodiment of a newly created will if God so decides to create such a will,
15. In that case, the project of self-valorization has a reasonable chance of being emulated. Materially embodied wills are especially likely to valorize their own good over the Good, so those of us who chose self-valorization are likely to find in the created material realm, a widespread emulation of our maxim of self-valorization,
16. So, resisting the offer of holiness, in the name of valorizing one’s own good, is a completely viable project.

This archonic deduction is just our way of discursively representing what each archon must have always already naturally known in order to have a *free uncoerced* and non-quistotic choice, a choice which settles that archon’s basic orientation with respect to the Good.

Thus, the archons who valorize their own good over the Good know they possess an unbreakable non-interference pact, arising from a necessary condition on the very purpose of creation: God’s abjuration. God will not interfere in their created realms except by way of grace’s non-coercive offer to the wills that have been embodied in that realm by God, if any there be.

The archons realize that only God can create wills, and that some wills require for their existence a material, or functionally equivalent, embodiment, to subserve the inputs to, and implement the operations of, their wills. A self-valorizing archon’s creation, however magnificent as a form of self-display, and however much a source of joyful achievement, will be devoid of other wills unless there arises within the archon’s created realm sufficient material, or functionally equivalent, complexity to subserve and implement the operations of some will that requires just such an embodiment.

So, a self-valorizing archon who seeks the emulation on behalf of another will of its maxim—“Let my own good be prioritized over the Good”—will naturally seek to bring about within its created realm just such complexity, as a kind of invitation to God to create, and there embody wills, that cannot exist without embodiment. The archonic invitation is

also a challenge, an opportunity to demonstrate again the ineffectiveness of non-coercive grace, and the viability of self-valorization.

There begins the struggle for the allegiance of wills, the battle between self-valorization and grace.

Why should God take up the challenge, why does he not leave the archons with their lonely realms, or as it might be, their universes? Why engage in a second creation.

First, for the sake of those wills that would not exist but for being originally embodied in the way made possible by the complexities of the archonic realm. But second, in the hope that the developing holiness of the embodied wills so created, will shame the self-valorizing archon into repentance of its choice, into acceptance of grace and subsequent spiritual development. This is the great motif of the recuperation of the fallen archons, a variant of which has been recently revived in Peter Forrest's *Developmental Theism*.<sup>28</sup>

Here then is the Theodrama of Creation. God's *naturally knowable abjuration* is a necessary condition of his ineffective self-manifestation, of his creating fully free beings as perfect in will, power and intellect as they can be, compatible with being creatures, creatures who then face the rationally uncoerced choice as between holiness, or self-valorization.

God's abjuration follows from the point of his creation, namely his manifesting his glory in and to creatures who might in their turn *freely choose holiness*, that is making themselves manifestations of God's Goodness. That is why he cannot intervene or prevent, but only offer his grace.

Holiness cannot be rationally coerced. Nor can it be waived as a condition of the success of the second movement of God's creation, namely luring his creatures by grace into accepting the invitation to enter into his inner life. Here the "cannot" arises *from the nature of holiness*, and *from the nature of what it is to enter into God's inner life*. In that sense, the "cannot" represents not a limitation on God's power, but a limitation on what is metaphysically possible.

That is the etiology of evil. Moral and then natural evil originally arises because of the rational rejection of God's non-coercive offer, via grace, of holiness, the internal necessary condition of entering into the joy of his inner life.

## 17. The Theodrama of Redemption

What does any of that have to do with us? At best it depicts us, along with other animal wills, as being embodied on a planet in a malefic material universe that should not have been—a universe that is the product of the self-display of some enormously powerful archon who chose to valorize its own good over the Good.

Being embodied is essential to us; we owe our present existence to our animal embodiments. And those embodiments owe their existence to evolution, which in its turn owes its existence to the cooling of the Earth within a certain range, and that owes its existence to . . . and so on, until we arrive at the creation of a material universe that should not have been. Doesn't that mean *we should not have been*?

Worse, from the point of view of moving toward holiness, our wills are maimed by our hominid embodiment. Hominid wills are directed at their own species-relative good, and at reproducing the species, and the valorization of the kin structure that is the local and familiar source of reproduction and support of the young of the species. And even among the primates, we are remarkably status-obsessed, second only perhaps to the chimpanzees. In all these ways, we habitually subordinate seeking the Good to our own securing of species-relative goods—the phenomenon described by Martin Luther, when he wrote "Homo incurvatus in se"—the human being is turned in upon itself. We are naturally disposed to put the finger on the scale in favor of ourselves, and ours. Given our hominid embodiment, we are singularly ill-suited to answer the call to holiness.

Still worse, there is something in the archonic deduction that should trouble us. It lies in the nature of evil to want self-glorification, domination *and emulation of evil's maxim, on the part of lesser wills*. This is how evil diffuses itself, by seducing other lesser wills into solidifying themselves around the evil maxim: let my good be valorized over all other

Good. And we are such lesser wills. Has God, by abjuring, then simply abandoned us to the depredations of the evil ones?

By exploring the Theodrama of Creation, and indicating how evil came into the world, we now have an *etiology* of evil. But without an exploration of the Theodrama of Redemption we have as yet no *theodicy* of evil, and so no complete response to Sterba-like moral qualms about God's First, and Second, Creation.

### 18. Should God Have Created, Given That Creation Required Him to Abjure?

God, though omniscient, i.e., knowing all that it is metaphysically possible to know, does not have foreknowledge, or middle knowledge, of the outcome of libertarian free choices, including those of the archons. For antecedent to the choice there is no outcome to be known. (Cf. Open Theism.)

Nor need we accept the doctrine of Divine concurrence, namely that an evil free choice requires God's upholding it in existence. His abjuration is *inter alia* the renunciation of any capacity to veto the existence of certain choices, and their implied projects. That proposition is also derivable from the premises of the archon's deduction from their knowledge of what God, in creating, wanted. For otherwise, the archons would lack the rational option of self-valorization. For then choice of holiness, of free self-constitution as a God-bearer, in response to non-coercive grace, would not be available to them. There would be no rationally uncoerced choice to valorize the Good over one's own good. Yet that is a necessary condition of entering into the inner life of God. And I am supposing that this is the telos of God's self-manifestation, of the reason from which he created. He created in order to manifest his inner life to his creatures by sharing it with them. But again, the possibility of their sharing his inner life has a necessary condition; their free, uncoerced turning towards the Good in a radical way, so that their manifestation of the Good takes priority over their own good.

The necessary condition for God's direct or first creation being indefective as an inviting manifestation of his own nature to his creatures, and so *the necessary condition for creation itself*, is that he knowably abjures from acting to decisively prevent the choice of self-valorization, and from decisively frustrating the characteristic projects of the self-valorizers.

Knowledge is factive. So God *does* abjure, i.e., limits his power to intervene to frustrate the projects of the self-valorizers. Consequently, after creation he *cannot* prevent horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Importantly, his non-prevention of "horrendous evil consequences" of immoral actions does not amount to his *permitting* those consequences.

Is abjuration *itself* a kind of permission for all the acts that would not have occurred without it? I do not see that. Two parents may reasonably abjure from the strict oversight of their 16-year-old son. Suppose the son purchases a baseball bat and uses it to bash a schoolmate. A teacher who could intervene looks on and does nothing. The teacher's failure to intervene is, or is at least morally equivalent to, his permitting the act to occur. He could have intervened, but he let it happen. In that sense, he permitted the bashing of the schoolmate to take place. But the parents have not *permitted* the bashing of the schoolmate. What they permitted was scope for their son's free action not hemmed in by their oversight.

However, and here we come to the nub of the matter, in some variants of the case, the parents may be highly blameworthy. Say the son had known psychopathic tendencies. Then they had no right to abjure, no right to allow him scope for destructive action not controlled, or "play-penned", by them. Still, the object of appropriate blame is not that they *permitted* the bashing, but that in abjuring, they wrongly took a significant *risk* of such things occurring. Taking that risk is the morally indefensible thing.

This is where the argument against God's existence *might* be effectively pressed—(i) through (v) comprise an inconsistent set of propositions. Should we not reject (i)?

- (i) God exists and God is the creator of original contingent reality,
- (ii) Given the reason that God created *from*, and what form God's creation therefore must take, creation essentially involves both creating free wills and God's own abjuring

- from decisive intervention, on behalf of the good, in their self-constituting choices and the entailed projects,
- (iii) The act of creating a powerful free will whose action is unrestricted by God's own decisive intervention on behalf of the good is morally indefensible,
  - (iv) Therefore creation is morally indefensible,
  - (v) God is free of any moral fault.

Something needs to be said about (ii). Couldn't God have settled for less than giving his creatures the dangerous opportunity of freely choosing holiness, the necessary condition of entering into his inner life? Could he not instead have created an impressive range of creatures which manifested all the great powers enumerated above, except for libertarian freedom. Presented with the Good they would have no viable choice not to prioritize their life around it.

Such creatures would not make a mistake with respect to value, but they would not be capable of satisfying the condition for entering into God's inner life. They would, none of them, be free self-valorizers with all the potential for self-indulgent, and destructive display. By the same token, they would, none of them, be free God-bearers.

There would have been nothing resembling holiness, but only universal rational admiration for the Good.

What then would be defective about that form of self-manifestation?

Creation itself would then just have been an enormously impressive display on God's part, with God's creatures being mere admiring onlookers—ideal *pets*, as it were. That creation would have been an impressive Divine performance, but not the expression of Divine love. God's self-manifestation was loving precisely in this: it took the form of a non-coercive invitation to enter into his inner life.

God, we are told in the first epistle of John, is Love. In the present context, I take that to mean that because of his nature, God's self-manifestation could only take the risky form of the invitation to holiness, addressed to beings with libertarian freedom, who could without any rational failing reject the invitation to enter into the joy of his inner life in the name of valorizing their own good above all else.

Then there is the import of God's Plan B—the Theodrama of Redemption—which offers all, including the victims of significant and even horrendous evil, the non-coercive grace to move towards holiness, i.e., to become God-bearers rather than self-valorizers, and thereby enter into the Beatific Vision, participation in the inner life of God, to the degree that they do become holy.

So now, the premise required to lock in logically the moral proof that God does not exist would be something like this:

*It all should not have been:* Considering the scope of significant and especially horrendous evil, no all-good being would abjure even if there would be no creation without that being's abjuration.

That is not clearly the correct moral reaction. It is hardly a reaction required by obvious principles of morality, especially given the Theodrama of Redemption.

### 19. Why the "Second" Creation?

In what sense are *we* God's creatures? Is it only that we are creatures of his creatures, as with the various breeds of *Canis familiaris*? No, God directly creates, and finds available embodiments for, our wills.

The natural workings of the Demiurge's material universe eventually generate our bodies. Doesn't the internal development and operation of those bodies metaphysically guarantee that we come to be embodied in them?

No, that reductionist view of the body-mind relation is deeply dubious on empirical, and philosophical grounds (Johnston Forthcoming). Moreover, in accord with the long-standing Christian rejection of Traducianism—the doctrine that the human will is created by sex alone—I take it that *only God can create a will*. So, I take it that God finds in the lineage

of the hominids enough neural complexity to provide for the embodiment of independently created human wills. God creates and embodies each embodied will upon the appearance of an adequate material embodiment for that will. The generation of a body with sufficient neural complexity is but an “invitation” for God to create a will so embodied.

Elsewhere, by way of providing a general theory of embodiment, I have argued that although we are essentially embodied wills, our present embodiment is not essential to us (Johnston Forthcoming).<sup>29</sup> In finding embodiments in this material universe for our created wills, God places us in jeopardy of being buffeted by the wind and the waves of matter, but that is the condition of our coming into being and beginning our own movement toward the inner life of God, through these embodiments and future embodiments other than these.

If a material universe had a form which offered no prospects of embodied wills moving toward the inner life of God under the encouragement of his grace, then there would be no point in God’s accepting any natural invitation to create and embody wills in that universe.

Importantly for the present account, that places a lower limit on how bad, how antipathetic to spiritual development, the work of a universe-creating archon can be, if wills are to be embodied in that archon’s created universe. There must be a chance of the effective workings of grace, if there are to be embodied wills found in that universe. Not being capable of creating wills, no archon can create an irredeemable hell of suffering.<sup>30</sup>

Still, God has taken on a great moral risk in creating our wills and embodying them in hominid form. For as we know all too well, with our hominid nature comes a great propensity for reactive, and worse, calculated violence (Wrangham 2019). Even if the fallen archons cannot be play-penned, why can’t *we* be play-penned, in effect rendered relatively harmless, and so left incapable of doing so much evil?

The objection is that even if the present account exculpates God when it comes to natural evil, it does not explain why God does not intervene in order to limit the destructive effects of human moral evil.

The answer lies in what lucid evil wants, something we know as a result of many evil human wills, throughout human history, tipping their hand. *Evil wants self-glorification, domination, and the emulation of its egoistic maxim on the part of other wills.* In this way, evil diffuses itself, potentially creating a realm of evil wills, those who share the maxim in their own de se way: let *my* good take priority over the Good.

That, I take it, is part of the point of the Demiurgic creation of the material universe. It is not just a self-satisfying display of the power to realize a gargantuan material realm. It is something much more sinister—a necessary first move in the battle for the allegiance of materially embodied wills. That allegiance is not a matter of idle devil worship. It results in the diffusing of the evil maxim through the community of embodied wills, in part by way of the demoralizing character of their evolved destructiveness.

That is an inherent part of the goal of the fallen archons’ original choice. They battle for the allegiance of embodied wills, a battle in which the destructive and demoralizing character of the moral evil of those embodied wills works to produce a realm of evil, a realm in which their maxim “Let my good be valorized above all else, even the Good itself” is emulated. That suffices for evil to triumph; its minions need not worship the good of their masters in order to become blind to the Good.

Given that part of the inherent goal of the fallen archons who chose self-valorization, then for God to play-pen us then would be, impossibly, to renege on his original abjuration, the very thing that made for free acceptance, or alternatively rejection, of holiness.

Though having others emulate their maxim is part of the inherent goal of the fallen archons, our being among the targets of that goal is conditional on our existing; i.e., on God creating a will which he then embodies.

God could have turned down the offer to put embodied wills in such jeopardy. Then we would not have existed, we would never have faced the gracious offer of entering into the inner life of God. There would have been no Second Creation.

The moral indictment of God now turns on the claim that there should not have been a Second Creation, at least not one involving human beings.

But of course, that claim will not be found plausible by those who have encountered the transforming effects of grace in their own lives, and who hope for growth in grace in their present embodiment, and those to come.

Indeed, God's taking the risk of the Second Creation is an absolute precondition of everything we value.

Should he not have taken that risk, even given his redemptive plan?

## 20. Is the Possibility of Profanation a Decisive Reason against Any Creation?

By a profanation I mean a great moral wrong that should not have been, no matter what subsequently happens. Pure consequentialists who make the wrongness of an act turn on its total consequences deny that there are profanations in that sense. I reject that view, and with it an associated view of the effects of redemption.

That is, I reject the idea of redemption being a compensation so great that the consequentialist calculation obliterates the "should not have been". Imagine a crazed pseudo-believer who murders a child immediately after her baptism, in order to guarantee her entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. That is a profanation, it absolutely should not have been, even if the intended result *were* to be secured.

Great moral wrongs remain what they were; they are not made right or acceptable by redemption. Even so, the victims of such wrongs can be made more than whole by being led to the Beatific Vision, perhaps through many embodiments and exposures to grace.

Important here is that God did not allow, rather than prevent, any particular profanation. True, he could have "prevented" creation and all that it involves. He could have remained within himself. There would have been no profanations. There would have been no creatures. And there would have been no sharing of the joy of his inner life with his creatures.

Recall the ground of the contingency of creation. God had an adequate reason to create, one that included a plan to redeem them if his creatures go badly wrong. He also had an adequate reason to remain. Was it the risk of evil triumphing?

Should God not have created? Did the possibility of profanations arising within creation constitute a decisive reason not to create?

Sterba, by insisting that he has a "logical argument against the existence of God" has implicitly taken on the burden of explaining why, if the God described here existed, there would have been a *decisive* moral reason for him not to create, and in particular not to create us. My challenge to Sterba may now be simply stated: Articulate an obvious moral principle which implies that conclusion.

In doing that it is not enough to emphasize the range and depth of evil. It itself, emphasizing that may amount to no more than filling out God's *adequate* reason to remain within himself, the other part of the ground of the contingency of creation.

That would be the thing that made creation closer than a close call.

## 21. A Weak God?

Sterba, at the end of his book, considers an objection to his whole approach: "Might it not help to avoid the conclusion of my argument against the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God to hypothesize a limited god?"

He replies:

Unfortunately, such a god would have to be either extremely immoral or extremely weak. Such a god would either have to be extremely immoral, 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 with some greater good. Alternatively, such a god, while morally good, would have to be extremely weak either because he is logically incapable of preventing the evil consequences that we are only causally incapable of preventing or because he is logically incapable of providing us with goods to which we are not



entitled without permitting us to suffer especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, something that we ourselves are only sometimes causally incapable of doing. Surely then no useful purpose would be served by hypothesizing such a limited god who would either *be so much more evil* than all our greatest villains or, while moral, would *be so much less powerful* than ourselves.<sup>31</sup>

Sterba mentions Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne as defenders of a God of limited power. (Whitehead 1926; Hartshorne 1967). There is, of course, much more going on in both Whitehead and Hartshorne.

God never ceases to be omnipotent, i.e., capable of doing anything metaphysically possible. He is omnipotent, but because of what creation understood as ineffective self-manifestation metaphysically requires—his knowable abjuration—he is unable to do what is then impossible, i.e., to help by directly changing the wind and the waves, or by directly staying the hand of the evildoer. That is the extent of his abjuration; the extent of what is required for him to manifest his nature in and to his creatures.

Though God in creating necessarily abjures, God is not powerless to help us resist evil. He continually offers non-coercive grace to our wills; grace which, if accepted by a will, can lead that will to change the winds and the waves, and stay the hands of evildoers, for the sake of the Good.

That's entirely consistent with the archonic "deduction" and hence with the scope of God's abjuration. Especially concerning for us is that the fallen archons appear to like their chances. The victory in the battle for the allegiance of wills is not a foregone conclusion.

Shall the non-coercive offer of grace be indefinitely resisted by enough of us to make God's redemptive project a failure in the end? I hope that this is not true, and that by the power of this grace, perhaps in our case over many embodiments or lifetimes, all will be brought to share in God's inner life to the extent that they have become holy.

*God has placed his cause in our hands.* To that extent his "weakness" has become commensurate with ours. Such is the cost of his loving invitation to enter into his inner life by the path of deepening holiness. Nevertheless grace, the sufficient means to move toward holiness, i.e., God-Bearing, is continually on offer. Grace bids us welcome. Its message in the face of our own sense of defeat, guilt and self-accusation is "Who made you, but I?"<sup>32</sup>

What would it be for us to be God-bearers, to have a will oriented around manifesting God's Goodness? It is not a hard scholarly question. Look to the Beatitudes (Matthew 5; 1–12), and to Paul's paean to love in 1 Corinthians (13; 4–8). Of course, the thing one finds when one is presented with that ideal form of life is that it is not within one's natural power to be like that. Grace is required for it to be even so much as an option.

The case I have made here, turning as it does on grace and its effects, perhaps over many embodiments or lifetimes, is only a sliver of what needs to be said. I have dwelt only on the interior workings of grace in turning an individual will toward the Good. For an individual, the signs of grace are joyful gratefulness for what one has already been given, compassion for all who share our fallen condition, turning up for those in urgent need, and trust in Goodness, even *in extremis*.

That said, the great collective task is finding or forming communities built around sources of grace. The reverberation of grace within a face-to-face community is what makes God-bearing visible and viable. The genuine grace-based communities are those whose members have already signed up for the healing of the broken world by manifesting God's Goodness.

It is a litmus test for genuine religion, whether or not it calls itself religion. And it is day-to-day work, mostly involving falling and getting back up again for the sake of others.

## 22. In Conclusion

In order to arrive at a systematic answer to the question posed by Sterba's clarifying and ambitious arguments, I have worked to provide an alternative to the theologically jejune specter that many in the analytic philosophy of religion have called "God". Doing that required developing a much more detailed account of what God is, and of what he

is up to in creating. I have also hinted at the significance of Plan B, the Theodrama of Redemption.

Given this background, I do not see how to construct a viable deductive argument from clear moral truths and the facts concerning evil against the existence of God, understood as Existence, Goodness, Knowledge, Power and Free Rational Will Itself, the One who contingently created to manifest his nature by having his creatures freely enter into the joy of his inner life, by the necessary path of holiness, i.e. freely becoming God-bearers rather than self-valorizers.

Though I suspect Sterba may disagree, I say that creation, as it is here explained, was—even given its risks—morally legitimate, particularly in the light of God’s redemptive plan. Saying that does not involve the denial of an obvious moral truth. By my lights, we therefore do not have a “logical” argument from evil, in Sterba’s intended sense.

Epistemically speaking, we are back in the old rag and bone shop. Humanly speaking, we are left with of the comparative plausibility and the comparative inspirational force of total interpretations of what it is all about. The worry about the uselessness of expected utility maximization as a rational guide in action remains in place.

Even so, I take Sterba to have accomplished something significant. He has refuted *a god*, a god whose creating does not significantly change the scope of what is metaphysically possible. Thereby, I think he has succeeded in providing an argument against further consideration of the theologically jejune specter that has haunted analytic philosophy of religion since 1955. I mean the thing bequeathed to us by John Mackie’s argument in “Evil and Omnipotence” concerning the “Omni-god”-creator of the material universe, a being who is all-good and all-powerful and *for some undisclosed reason* creates a malefic material universe with extensive evil in it (Mackie 1955).

That is a god without an evident Plan A, let alone a Plan B.

God is all-good and all-powerful. But he is also the God of a specific creation. And he has a particular plan of redemption. It is to such a God—to his reason for creating, to what he accordingly created, and to the possibility of redemption from the effects of misused freedom on the part of his first and second creatures—that philosophy of religion might now look.

What I have offered, simply in that exploratory spirit, might be termed a *Primordial Free-Will Theodicy*. Creation is God’s free, rationally uncoerced, self-manifestation, and it has a doubled aspect. Its first movement is the bringing into being of created wills, its second is the invitation to them via grace to deploy their libertarian freedom to enter into the joy of God’s own inner life. An internal necessary condition of the acceptance of that offer is holiness, the free uncoerced subordination of one’s good to the Good.

For the two movements to succeed, God must knowably abjure. Specifically, he must knowably intend to let those archons who choose to valorize their own good over the Good have free reign in the use of their creative powers, even up to not interfering in any of their created universes, except by way of grace’s effect on the wills, if any, that God then embodies in those universes.

God, consistent with his aim in creating, cannot play-pen his first creatures. They know that. Though only God can create a will, there is the possibility that a Demiurge creates a universe where possible wills that require some embodiment or other could find suitable embodiments. If God then creates and embodies a will in such a universe, the Goodness of God guarantees that however things go for that will in that embodiment, the concrete offer of grace will continually remain. This aspect of the Theodrama of Redemption is, I believe, a source of great hope.

For it means that for each of us, there will always be a path to our true home.<sup>33</sup>

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## Notes

- 1 Sterba follows Marilyn Adams in using the term “horrendous evil” for evil that renders the life of its victim not worth living, absent compensation in an afterlife. Adams (1989).
- 2 For the canonical statement of the free will defense, see Plantinga (1978).
- 3 (Plantinga 1974) develops an idea of individual essence, on which the essential specification of a possible individual is available to God. In (Johnston 2019) I argue that this does not reinstate the thought that God created us because he loved us before we existed.
- 4 As is evident already in the *Parmenides*, the principle needs to be restricted to be plausible. For the ground of being dirt is a mere arrangement of matter, while the ground of being a bed is a mere arrangement of matter in conformity with the will of the person that made it, or designed the machine that made it. There is no Form of dirt or of the bed. What is the required restriction, and why does the restriction hold? A guess—any predication where the arrangement matter is not essentially part of the ground of its truth, in the sense that there are cases where the predicate applies, in which this is not so, has a ground partly in terms of participation in a Form.
- 5 As with spatiotemporal regions and expanses of color, Forms are *particulars not properties*. Properties—understood as things picked out by canonical property designators of the form “the property of being F” are mere reifications of the corresponding predications. We can do without them, and simply work with real predicables, such as color, pitch, shape, size, charge, spin, location, etc. See (Johnston MS1 Forthcoming) for a full discussion of the consequences of recognizing that properties are “pleonastic” entities.
- 6 This is the conviction Aquinas aims to defend in Book 1 of the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Chapters 75–86. Still, there is an undeniable tendency shown in those very chapters, toward implying that creating *something or other* is necessary for God.
- 7 For a fourth way in which God could have rational freedom to create, or alternatively to remain within himself, see Johnston (2019).
- 8 If one has a prima facie reason to do something, then unless the prima facie reason is able to be undermined, i.e., shown not to be a reason at all, that reason is then a pro tanto reason, i.e., one that contributes to a complete case for doing the thing in question. Pro tanto reasons differ from mere prima facie reasons in that they retain their force, even if outweighed, whereas mere prima facie reasons may be undermined and so may make no contribution to a complete objective case for performing the act. A complete case for performing an act may be compatible with having rational options, i.e., there may be other acts in the choice situation, such that the agent has a complete case for performing them as well. So, complete reasons may not thereby determine the rational will; they need not be decisive reasons.
- 9 For a useful discussion of the notion of ontological priority, see Fine (1995).
- 10 Which is not to say that his act of creation was not loving. It conferred on his creatures, i.e. wills both unembodied and embodied, the possibility of entering into the joy of his inner life.
- 11 *Baltimore Catechism No. 2* Question 3, at Project Gutenberg, and Vatican I, in its characteristically blunt tone, declares something like manifestationism de fide: “If anyone denies . . . that the world was created for *the glory of God*, let him be cut off [from the community of the faithful and the saving grace of the sacraments].” Session 3 of Vatican I, *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith: On God the Creator of All Things*, Canon 5.
- 12 On how it could be that this is not our only embodiment, see the account of the mind-body problem in Johnston (Forthcoming).
- 13 On divine hiddenness, see Schellenberg (2015). I believe that the materials for a reply to Schellenberg are to be found below. God has to be hidden, with the crucial exception of grace, for redemption to be what it is, the freely rejectible invitation to approach the inner life of God on the internal necessary condition of approaching holiness.
- 14 What of those magnificent images of deep space, first from the Hubble Space telescope, and now from the James Webb Space telescope, which NASA has provided for public consumption. Aren’t they beautiful, even awe-inspiring? Yes they are. They were selected by NASA from hundreds of thousands of shots, and then photoshopped for public consumption. No one should think the original images of deep space are fakes. It is just that the colors have been added either for artistic reasons, or for aiding in the scientific interpretation of the original grey scale images in question. There is nothing dodgy about that, it is just inevitable. The images are originally in the grey scale because black and white cameras have more resolution than RGB-color registering cameras, which disregard a good deal visible light in reconstructing colored images. The Webb telescope specializes in the infrared range. What color are the things omitting such infrared radiation? There is no viable scientific answer. Pythons use a kind of infrared vision to “see” prey based on the heat they omit. What color are their thermal images? The pythons are not telling us, and even if they did, we would only have analogical knowledge of the colors in question. Though we sometimes see heat rising, we have no idea of what it is like to have a visual system that is significantly sensitive to infrared radiation. If we consider the appearance of the humanly visible light emitted by the stars, dust and clouds of gas in deep space, the color range produced by sampling that light with the human retina would be in the whitish beige range. That is not exactly an ugly palette, but it is a bit drab when it comes to motivating Congress to maintain NASA’s huge budget.
- 15 See the “ode to joy” at the end of Johnston (2014).

- 16 This is metaphysical goodness, i.e., having the perfections appropriate to the kind of thing you are. The archons' initial freedom leaves the question of their moral goodness ontologically open, to be determined by their fundamental choice.
- 17 In the Eastern churches, "*Theotókos*" is a title given to Mary, the human being regarded as the preeminent exemplar of holiness, abandoning, in response to the Annunciation, all prospects of a self-valorizing life, in order to take on her offered role in salvation history, including seeing her son savagely beaten and bleeding to death upon the cross. It is, among other things, a wonderful pun. For she is also taken to have been a God-bearer in an utterly literal way.
- 18 Gregory, *Homilia* 34.8 (PL 76.1250): "Sciendum quoque quod angelorum vocabulum, nomen est officii, non naturae."
- 19 The context in which Paul uses that term does have the ominous implication that some of them are our spiritual enemies, that they are dark powers that work to occlude God. "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the archons (the Greek is ἄρχοντες), against those princes of this world, those cosmic powers of darkness that are the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." *Ephesians* 6: 12.
- 20 See the 2005 St. Petersburg translation of (Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite 2005, p. 127).
- 21 To adapt a term from the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.
- 22 For a brilliant exploration of the early Christian development of this idea, see (Litwa 2021). Upon reframing the whole question of Marcionism, and defending Marcion against his orthodox opponents, Litwa introduces the term "negative demiurgy" to describe the views of Marcionite and Sethian Christians. Litwa writes:  
Negative demiurgy, I think, should not be understood as the central idea of a separate religion or religious phenomenon. Instead, I take it as a particular view possible in several discrete traditions. It is, to be sure, a minority position in the Abrahamic traditions. Yet it should not be left unstudied, not only since it is important for early Christian history and the history of biblical interpretation, but also because it is alive and well in modern times.
- 23 For an account of embodiment in terms of the relations of subserving and implementing, see Johnston (Forthcoming).
- 24 As King (2009) argues, "gnosticism" is not a very useful scholarly term.
- 25 (Sidgwick [1874] 1981). For an attempt to restore the "Cosmos of Duty" within the context of "a non-religious ethics" see the argument against the self-interest theory in Part 3 of Parfit (1984). For an account of why it fails see Johnston (1992).
- 26 Sidgwick, op. cit. p 473.
- 27 See the Schmitt translation of Anselm's *De Casu Diaboli*, Anselm (1946)
- 28 Peter Forrest (2007), best read in conjunction with Bergmann et al. (2011).
- 29 See Johnston (2020, Forthcoming) for an account of what we would have to be for ethical life to be viable.
- 30 What of the suffering of non-human animals? If they are embodied wills, do they not then deserve embodiments other than these? See (Johnston MS2 Forthcoming).
- 31 Sterba (2019), p 192. Here it seems that Sterba's considerations against a weak God do not have the required *logical* character to meet the standard of deductive proof Sterba has set himself. "Surely, no useful purpose." Surely? With a credence of 1?
- 32 Cf. George Herbert's poem *Love Bade Me Welcome*, which some have found to be a door to grace. Others may find the door more inviting, thanks to Ralph Vaughn Williams' musical setting of the poem in his *Five Mystical Songs*. Myself, I prefer the poem.
- 33 Thanks to Lara Buchak, David Builes, Andrew Chignell, Marcus Gibson, Sherif Girgis, Alex Kerr, Harvey Lederman, Sarah-Jane Lesle, Daniel Rubio, Gideon Rosen and to members of the audience at my 2021 Keynote Address at the inaugural conference of the Princeton Project in the Philosophy of Religion, for helpful questions and suggestions. Special thanks to James Sterba for helping me see the ambitious scope of his argument, and to Gabriel Citron for illuminating correspondence concerning the similarities and differences between God's abjuration as I see it and the Divine *tzimtzum* described in the Lurianic Kabbalah.

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Article

# In Answer to the Pauline Principle: Consent, Logical Constraints, and Free Will

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**Abstract:** James Sterba uses the Pauline Principle to argue that the occurrence of significant, horrendous evils is logically incompatible with the existence of a good God. The Pauline Principle states that (as a rule) one must never do evil so that good may come from it, and according to Sterba, this principle implies that God may not permit significant evils even if that permission would be necessary to secure other, greater goods. By contrast, I argue that the occurrence of significant evils is logically compatible with the existence of a good God because victims of significant evils may themselves reasonably consent to their suffering. In particular, I argue that they may be able to accept their suffering if it turns out that there was no way for God to secure relevant greater goods (or prevent other, greater evils) except by way of allowing their suffering, and God also provides them with other compensating, heavenly comforts. After using this consent-based argument to address Sterba's *logical* problem from evil, I briefly consider how this argument may also help address a related *evidential* problem from evil, which suggests that while it is possible that victims of significant evils would consent to their suffering, it is *unlikely* that they would do so. While I do not provide a definitive solution to this evidential problem of evil, I highlight one important example of a trade-off that God may need to make that would—along with the provision of compensating, heavenly comforts—potentially persuade victims of significant evils to consent to their suffering. Specifically, I argue that there may be a necessary trade-off that God needs to make between permitting significant evils (on the one hand) and protecting a certain, morally significant form of free will (on the other hand).

**Keywords:** problem of evil; skeptical theism; consent; free will; Pauline Principle; Doctrine of Double Effect

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## 1. Introduction

How do we reconcile the existence of a good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God with the far-reaching presence of pain and suffering among God's creatures? It is not difficult to think of reasons why God might allow us to experience *some* pain. Perhaps some measure of pain is necessary for prodding a growth in moral character (Hick 2016), or perhaps it is a necessary side-effect of God's choice to give us free will (Plantinga 1977). However, the more one begins to take seriously the scope and intensity of people's suffering, the more difficult it becomes to square that suffering with the supposition that a good, all-powerful God exists. As James Sterba (2019) points out, it seems that God could prevent the most significant and horrendous evils while still protecting adequate opportunities for character development and the exercise of free will.<sup>1</sup> For instance, while the freedom of abusive parents might be limited to some extent if God intervened to prevent them from carrying out the full measure of the torment they sought to inflict on their children, such an intervention would by no means need to *wholly* deprive those parents of free will, and the children could no doubt adequately grow their character without having to undergo the agony of abuse. (Indeed, their suffering would surely tend to do more to *undermine*, rather than promote, the healthy development of their character.)

Given these facts about the scale and scope of human suffering, advocates of *evidential arguments from evil* conclude that it is *improbable* that God exists (Rowe 1996). Sterba (2019,

2021), however, reaches a stronger conclusion. He argues that the significant, horrendous evils we observe in our world are *logically* incompatible with the existence of a good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God. On his view, it is not just improbable, but *impossible*, that such significant evils could occur in circumstances where a good God also exists.

Sterba's logical argument from evil draws from resources in ethical theory that philosophers of religion have too often overlooked. Many philosophers of religion working on the problem of evil have implicitly presupposed a consequentialist framework (Bergmann 2014; Pike 1963; Plantinga 1977), according to which the 'end' of securing the greatest possible aggregate good can in principle justify the 'means' of permitting some lesser evils (at least assuming that those lesser evils are *necessary* means to securing the greater good). Evidential arguments from evil that draw on this framework may suggest that it is improbable that the scale and scope of suffering we see is necessary to secure any such greater goods. However, Sterba's argument appeals to moral ideas familiar from an alternative, Kantian framework to argue that the scale and scope of suffering we see could not, *even in principle*, be justified just by reference to the (alleged) fact that such suffering may be necessary to promote other, 'greater goods'.<sup>2</sup>

To make his argument, Sterba points readers to the Pauline Principle, which holds that (as a rule) one must never do evil so that good may come from it (Sterba 2019, Chapters 1 and 4). *Even if* the horrendous evils we observe were necessary means to achieving greater goods, this principle implies that God's greater 'ends' still could not justify the 'means' of God's permitting the (supposedly) 'lesser' evils we observe. Even if letting a child be tormented by their abusive parents was offset by some 'greater good', for instance, God would (on Sterba's view) still *in principle* be wrong to allow it. Thus, the occurrence of horrendous evils not only seems to make the existence of a good God *unlikely* but (on Sterba's view) altogether *rule out* the possibility of the existence of such a God.

As Sterba acknowledges, the Pauline Principle admits of some exceptions. It may, for instance, be permissible to use lesser evils as means to securing greater goods if those evils are trivial or easily repairable (Sterba 2019, pp. 2–3ff and 49–50ff, 76). Sterba also grants that allowing or perpetuating even significant harm may be justified if that allowance is the only way to prevent even greater harm from befalling other innocent victims. For example, if the only way to prevent a military despot from killing twenty innocent civilians is to kill one innocent civilian yourself, you may potentially be justified in doing so. In *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, Sterba addresses such exceptions to the Pauline Principle up front, and he focuses considerable effort on arguing that they would not suffice to excuse God in permitting horrendous evils (*ibid.*).

However, there is also one additional route by which exceptions to the Pauline Principle may be justified, which Sterba allots less attention to: namely, lesser evils may be permitted in pursuit of greater goods if those who undergo those lesser evils consent to their suffering.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I use this kind of argument—which I call the *Consent Argument*—to argue against Sterba's logical argument from evil. I argue that the existence of significant evils is not *logically* incompatible with the existence of a good (all-powerful, all-knowing) God because victims of significant evils may themselves reasonably consent to their suffering.

My argument proceeds as follows. In Section 2, I outline the Consent Argument and address Sterba's initial objections to it. In Section 3, I draw on the resources of skeptical theism to argue that God's allowance of significant evils may, for all we know, be logically necessary to securing greater goods or preventing even greater evils. If victims of significant evils are provided with compensating, heavenly comforts *and* there does turn out to be this kind of logical trade-off between their earthly suffering and the realization of other, greater goods (or the prevention of other, greater evils), then, I suggest, even victims of significant evils may in principle consent to their suffering.

I take it that the arguments of Sections 1 and 2 suffice to show that Sterba's *logical* argument from evil does not stand, at least as it is currently articulated. For if, for all we know, there are grounds on which victims of significant evils can themselves reasonably

consent to their suffering, then we are not yet in a position to conclude that those evils are logically incompatible with the existence of a good God. Still, this response to Sterba's logical argument from evil does not provide a positive explanation of why God may need to permit significant evils or specify the grounds on which victims may consent to those evils. As I discuss in Section 4, without these further details, the evidential problem of evil still persists. In Sections 4 and 5, I begin to address the evidential problem of evil by exploring one candidate explanation for why victims of significant evils may reasonably consent to their suffering. In particular, I contend that victims of significant evils may consent to their suffering because of certain trade-offs that exist between God's making room for such suffering and the preservation of a morally significant form of free will.

## 2. The Consent Argument

In the course of addressing skeptical theist responses to his argument, Sterba (2019) entertains the possibility that God's choice to permit innocent individuals to undergo significant suffering may be excused if those individuals themselves gave their informed consent to such suffering. As he notes, our earthly observations suggest that "nothing like informed consent typically obtains" (Sterba 2019, p. 74). Sterba then also briefly considers the possibility that victims may consent *retroactively* to their earthly suffering in a heavenly afterlife. While the claim that one may be able to retroactively consent to decisions that impact you (like God's decision to allow your earthly suffering) might initially seem strange, Sterba's use of this language in his argument is plausibly meant to convey the idea—commonly agreed to by authors writing on contractualist ethics and political philosophy—that decisions can be morally justified by the fact that they are *or would be* reasonably acceptable to those impacted, given adequate information.<sup>4</sup> I will follow Sterba in speaking interchangeably about retroactive consent and 'acceptability' and assume with him (and others) that retroactive consent can at least sometimes have normative power.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Sterba goes on to argue that retroactive consent may not be forthcoming in the case of those who have suffered significant evils because God's permission of the relevant suffering seems to violate the Pauline Principle. Given that God ought not to have allowed evil in the interest of securing greater goods, Sterba writes, "victims may never be able to... find reasonably acceptable the infliction of such [suffering] on themselves" (Sterba 2019, p. 75). Sterba presupposes that God's permission of suffering violates the Pauline Principle and uses that as a basis to argue that victims of significant evils would not consent to their suffering. But Sterba is not entitled to assume that God's permission of suffering violates the Pauline Principle *unless* he can already show that the relevant consent would not be forthcoming. As Sterba notes, the Pauline Principle sits at the heart of the Doctrine of Double Effect, and—as Warren Quinn argues—this doctrine plausibly reflects Kantian ideals. As Quinn points out, it is plausibly the Kantians requirement that we show respect for others as ends-in-themselves—that is, that we show regard for them as rational autonomous agents with inviolable dignity and worth—that explains why individuals have a right (as Quinn puts it) "not to be sacrificed in strategic roles over which they have no say" or "to be pressed . . . into the service of other's people's purposes" (Quinn 1989)—even if those purposes serve some other, greater good. But while Kantian ideals explain why it would, *in general*, be wrong for God to violate the Pauline Principle, those ideals also suggest that the *consent* of individuals to undergo relevant instances of suffering would excuse God's choice to permit those sufferings. For if individuals, by their own rational, autonomous choice accept their suffering, then God would not show disregard for their rights by permitting them to suffer as a means to promoting a greater good (or preventing an even greater evil). Call this the *Consent Objection* to Sterba's logical argument from evil.

In *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Marilyn McCord-Adams (2000) provides resources for developing at least one version of the *Consent Objection*. There, she suggests that God's permission of horrendous evils may be excused at least in part by virtue of the (supposed) fact that God could guarantee to those who suffer horrors a life which is, on the whole, a great good to them—for instance, by offering them an experience of Divine beauty



and goodness in an afterlife that is “immeasurable and incommensurate with . . . created goods or ills” (McCord-Adams 2000, p. 147). McCord-Adams notes that such beauty and goodness must be “great enough” to “defeat”—or, we might add, in some other sense compensate for—relevant sufferings not only from an external point of view, like God’s, but also *from the point of view of the person* receiving those goods (ibid., p. 145). If victims of horrendous evils can, in the afterlife, enjoy goods that they themselves recognize to be “immeasurab[ly]” better than the suffering they experienced on earth, and they accept that this makes their life on the whole a great good to them, that may (it seems) open up the possibility that they would retrospectively accept their worldly suffering.

Such heavenly acceptance of this-worldly suffering, however, cannot simply be taken for granted. In particular, one cannot reasonably expect victims to consent to their suffering if there turns out not to have been any good reason for them to undergo it. Consider an analogy. A grown-up child might reasonably continue to object to the inaction of a parent who, for little reason or simply out of indifference, stood by when she was undergoing harrowing pain—even if that parent later tries to curry favor with her by inviting her to live with him rent-free in his mansion in Los Angeles. Indeed, that child may not only *not* consent to her prior suffering but also reasonably *reject* her parent’s invitation to the mansion. No matter how ‘heavenly’ the material conditions of life in the mansion, the prior indifference the parent showed toward her suffering might make unpleasant the thought of continued life with him. Similarly, victims of significant evils may not consent to their suffering—even if God provides great heavenly comforts—if God simply stood by and watched their suffering when their suffering was not necessary to secure any other important values.

The success of the *Consent Objection* thus depends not only on the future provision of sufficient heavenly comforts, but also on the past necessity of God’s having *needed* to make certain, reasonable trade-offs to secure other moral goods that required relevant victims to suffer. As noted in the introduction, Sterba grants that, in theory, God’s permitting significant evils could be excused *if* that permission were genuinely necessary to avert an even greater evil. In making that admission, Sterba did not take into account the possibility that victims might consent to their suffering. Once we take this possibility of consent into account, we might plausibly *also* argue that God’s permission of significant evils could be excused if that permission were genuinely necessary to secure a greater good. Specifically, if victims themselves found that greater good to merit their willing, sacrificial suffering and—in combination with their own later enjoyment of heavenly comforts—thus found there to be sufficient reason to consent to that suffering, then (it seems) God’s ‘trading-off’ their suffering for the sake of securing some other, greater good could also be excused. I will speak interchangeably from this point on of trade-offs meant to secure greater goods and trade-offs meant to prevent greater evils. I will call the argument that victims of significant evils might possibly consent to those evils, given (i) their future enjoyment of incomparably wonderful heavenly goods and (ii) the this-worldly trade-offs that must be made between those evils and other even greater evils *or* other, greater goods, the *Consent Given Trade-Offs* argument.

If the *Consent Given Trade-Offs* argument succeeds, Sterba’s logical argument from evil fails. For, if it is possible that victims of significant evils might consent to their suffering, then significant evils are logically compatible with the existence of a good (all-powerful and all-knowing) God. However, Sterba might object to *Consent Given Trade-Offs* on the grounds that there are no relevant trade-offs that an *omnipotent* God would be required to make between (on the one hand) preventing significant evils and (on the other hand) preventing other even greater evils (or securing other even greater goods). I address this objection in the next section.

### 3. Skeptical Theism and Divine Trade-Offs

While Sterba’s commitment to the Pauline Principle keeps him from giving substantial consideration to the possibility that God may be justified in permitting significant evils in

order to secure greater goods, he gives more serious attention to the possibility that God may be excused in permitting significant evils if that permission is necessary to prevent an *even greater evil*. As he points out, if the only way to prevent a military despot from shooting twenty innocent civilians is to do as she asks and shoot one innocent civilian yourself, you may be justified in doing so. We might be inclined to think that the same kind of excusing argument for shooting the innocent civilian that applies to you in this case could be extended to apply to God's choice to permit significant evils.

However, Sterba ultimately denies that this extension can be made; God's permission of lesser evils, he argues, cannot be justified by reference to a supposed need to prevent even greater evils. As Sterba argues, this is because God would not face the kinds of limitations that we do in having to make trade-offs between allowing lesser evils and preventing more significant evils. Whereas we lack the causal power to simultaneously save the one and the twenty, an all-powerful God could (Sterba points out) do both (Sterba 2019, p. 50). God could, for instance, refuse to kill the one and then cause the military despot's guns to malfunction or misfire to also prevent her from shooting the other twenty civilians. Although Sterba does not discuss this argument as it applies to trade-offs made for greater goods, we can assume that he may also try to apply there; Sterba may argue that because God is all-powerful, God would not be constrained to make trade-offs between allowing significant evils and securing greater goods. Call this objection to my *Consent Given Trade-Offs* argument the *No Trade-Offs* objection.

In defending the *No Trade-Offs* objection, Sterba makes reference to cases—like the despot case noted above—where God's use of God's unlimited *causal* powers is what seems to make it possible for God to both prevent a significant evil *e* and *simultaneously* prevent a greater evil *E*. But Sterba's defense presupposes that the relevant trade-offs between *e* and *E* are always of a causal nature; that is, Sterba assumes that absent divine intervention, if a significant evil *e* is prevented, that would (only) *causally* necessitate the occurrence of the greater evil *E*. Scott Coley (2021) challenges this assumption. Drawing on the resources of skeptical theism, Coley suggests that (for all we know) there may be *logical* entailment relations between such *e* and *E*: it may be that if one prevents *e*, that would then *logically* entail that *E* must occur (Coley 2021). For all we know, there may also be logical entailment relations between significant evils *e* and much greater goods *G*, such that if one prevents *e*, that would logically entail that *G* could not be realized. If either kind of logical entailment relation exists (between *e* and *E* or between *e* and *G*), then even an all-powerful God would face some trade-offs in their decision to prevent significant evils. God would no more be able to prevent relevant significant evils *e* while *simultaneously* preventing *E* (and/or securing *G*) than God would be able to create a round square. Call this response to the *No Trade-Offs* objection the *Logical Trade-Offs* response.

Coley grants that the notion that there may be *logical* entailment relations between the occurrence of significant evils and prevention of even greater evils (or the securing of even greater goods) may seem "truly foreign to us." (ibid., p. 2). Most trade-offs between significant evils and greater goods (or greater evils) that *we* are familiar with may well be of the causal kind that Sterba has in mind, and so it is not surprising that Sterba's *No Trade-Offs* argument focuses on such cases. But, as Coley rightly points out, the fact that we have difficulty imagining a logical entailment relation between a significant evil *e* and a greater good *G* (or greater evil *E*) does not show that such entailment relations do not exist. Indeed, as Coley points out, *skeptical theists* might well argue that it is unsurprising that such entailment relations are not immediately imaginable to us since (skeptical theists might say) there is little reason to expect that the entailment relations that *we* are familiar with are representative of the kind of entailment relations there actually are (ibid.).

Sterba's response to Coley's argument takes a strange turn, and I will only briefly address it here. At one point in his argument, Coley says that "in terms of causal powers, God is more powerful than we are" (ibid.). Coley says this with the apparent aim to suggest that, even if God is logically prevented from *simultaneously* preventing *e* and preventing *E* (or securing *G*), God may still be more causally powerful than us in having the capacity to

either prevent  $e$ , taken in isolation, or prevent  $E$  (or secure  $G$ ), taken in isolation. However, Sterba interprets Coley as making the claim that God is more powerful than us because God has a causal ability to prevent each significant evil  $e$  while also simultaneously preventing greater evils  $E$  (or securing greater goods  $G$ ). Given this reading of Coley's argument, Sterba understandably objects: "Coley's argument fails," he writes, "because neither God nor anyone else could be causally able to do what is logically impossible for them" (Sterba 2021, p. 20). Coley's argument, he concludes, "is based on the possibility of an impossibility and so does not work." (ibid.)

To illustrate the structure of Coley's argument and help respond to Sterba's objection, it may be useful to consider an example. Consider *Professor's Dilemma*:

*Professor's Dilemma*: Professor Deos has unlimited causal power to give her student Morty any grade she wishes. Suppose that there is something intrinsically bad about giving a student a failing grade, but that Morty's work also clearly does not merit anything better. Suppose also that considerations related to fairness would make it even worse for Professor Deos to inflate grades and so give Morty a passing grade.

In this scenario, Professor Deos has the causal power to prevent Morty from suffering the evil of failing ( $f$ ) and also has an independent causal power to prevent the even greater evil of grade inflation ( $I$ ). Professor Deos thus is more powerful than Morty, who can do neither  $f$  nor  $I$ . Still, even though Professor Deos has causal power to prevent *one* of either  $f$  or  $I$ , the logical entailment relations between  $f$  and  $I$  still constrain her from preventing *both*  $f$  and  $I$ . For, given the nature of Morty's work and the defined standards of earning a passing grade in the class (we may suppose) there is no logically coherent way for Morty both to get a passing grade *and* to avoid grade inflation. Even though Professor Deos is causally omnipotent with respect to assigning grades, she is also still logically constrained to permit Morty to suffer the lesser harm of getting a failing grade if she is going to prevent the even greater evil of grade inflation.

Like Professor Deos, God may be more casually powerful than us in being able to prevent either *one* of a significant evil  $e$  or a greater evil  $E$ , while nevertheless *lacking* the causal power to simultaneously prevent  $e$  *and* prevent  $E$ —precisely because it is logically impossible to prevent  $e$  while also preventing  $E$ . If this is right, then God may face genuine trade-offs between preventing significant evils and preventing even greater evils; the same logic suggests that God may face genuine trade-offs between preventing significant evils and securing even greater goods. What's more, if God does face such trade-offs, then victims of significant evils may come to regard God's choice to allow significant evils as reasonable, and (so) consent to their suffering—at least assuming that they are also offered heavenly comforts which make their own lives, on the whole, a great gift to them. If, as I have argued, this *Consent Given Trade-Offs* argument is right, then Sterba's logical argument from evil does not succeed (at least not as it is currently articulated). For if it is logically possible that victims of significant evils can themselves reasonably consent to their suffering, then it is not logically impossible that such evils could co-exist with the presence of a good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God.

#### 4. A Logical Entailment between Permitting Significant Evils and Protecting Significant, Free and Effective Choice

Even if, as I have argued, the *Consent Given Trade-Offs* argument shows that Sterba's logical argument from evil fails, an *evidential* argument from evil may still succeed. Evidential arguments from evil often presuppose a consequentialist framework, but Sterba's work provides the basis for a novel kind of evidential argument based on *deontic* premises. In particular, one might draw on Sterba's work to argue that the occurrence of significant evils serves as good evidence against the existence of a good God because it is very unlikely that there are logical entailment relations between allowing significant evils and preventing other greater evils (or securing other greater goods); this (one might argue) makes it very *unlikely* that relevant victims of significant evils would consent to their suffering.

In this section and the next, I address this deontic form of an evidential argument from evil. Although I do not pretend to neutralize the argument, I aim to reduce its persuasive force by discussing at least one concrete example of a case where God may be logically constrained to make a trade-off between significant evils and greater goods and where victims of significant evils might regard that trade-off that God must make as a reasonable basis for consenting to their suffering. Specifically, I argue that God may need to make a trade-off between preventing significant evils on the one hand, and, on the other hand, giving human beings a capacity for a certain kind of morally significant free will—a form of free will that I refer to as *significant, free and effective choice*. I suggest that there is a logical, conceptual connection between possessing this kind of free will (on the one hand) and (on the other hand) having the ability to carry out significant evils, and that as a result, God could only avoid the occurrence of significant evils if God gave up on securing the alternative good of significant, free and effective choice. In the next section, I then return to discuss when and why victims of significant evils may consent to their suffering given their knowledge of this trade-off between protecting significant, free, and effective choice and permitting significant evils that God must make (and assuming an additional, appropriate provision of compensating heavenly comforts).

According to Sterba, God does not need to make any trade-off between preserving morally significant forms of free will and allowing significant evils. In particular, Sterba contends that God could prevent significant evils while simultaneously preserving for human beings a morally significant form of free will by simply preventing each perpetrator of a significant evil from successfully completing the *final step* of her action, with its horrible consequences for victims (Sterba 2019, p. 21). Sterba grants that, by intervening in the last moment of (say) an assaulter's attempt to assault her victim, God would restrict some aspect of her freedom to 'successfully' inflict harm on her victim. However, he argues that the protection of *this* aspect of her freedom should not take a moral priority over the freedom of the relevant victim *not* to be harmed (ibid., Chapters 2 and 4). The loss of external efficacy of the assailant's choice to inflict significant harm is thus (according to Sterba) not morally worrisome or lamentable.

Sterba suggests that God can intervene to prevent the final steps of someone's act to commit a significant evil and still allow her full freedom in planning, intending, and "even tak[ing] initial steps toward carrying out" her immoral actions (ibid., pp. 51, 53). By contrast with the loss of freedom to effectively inflict pain—which Sterba takes *not* to be morally significant—Sterba seems to acknowledge that there is something morally valuable in protecting this form of 'inner,' psychological freedom, i.e., someone's freedom to consider different possible good and evil ends, evaluate their merits, and form and act on intentions to pursue those ends. Thus, Sterba denies that God's decision to block the final steps of acts of significant evil would reduce our freedom to a kind of 'kindergarten' or 'playpen' freedom in part on the grounds that that blockage would not interfere with anyone's use of these relevant 'internal' freedoms to plan, intend and act on the intention to commit a significant evil (ibid., pp. 53–54). For now, I follow Sterba in taking the moral significance of such inner freedoms for granted; I will discuss them in more detail in the next section. Since Sterba's argument claims that God can block the external consequences of choices to commit significant evils without obstructing any morally significant exercise of free, inner agency, I will call Sterba's argument the *Unobstructive External Intervention* argument—or simply the *Unobstructive Intervention* argument.

The *Unobstructive Intervention* argument is particularly credible when considered against the backdrop of the larger, Kantian framework Sterba presupposes. On standard interpretations of this framework, all the elements of choice that matter for the evaluation of someone's moral agency are located *within* the psychology of the agent herself. Thus, all the *morally significant* aspects of a villain's choice to commit a significant evil remain intact so long as she considers the reasons for pursuing her ends, freely forms an intention to commit a significant evil in pursuit of those ends, and then freely acts on that intention. If, by bad luck, her action does not bring about the external *effects* she intended it to, that need

not (in a Kantian framework) necessarily undermine the freedom of any *morally significant* aspect of her choice.

One intuitive objection to Sterba's *Unobstructive Intervention* argument targets the Kantian approach to moral agency that that argument seems to presuppose. This objection insists that a morally significant form of freedom requires not only 'inner' abilities to choose and act on intentions but also 'outer' abilities to—as Michael Murray puts it—"affect the course of the world" by way of one's actions (Murray 2008, p. 136). I will follow Murray in saying that morally significant forms of agency thus require not only (inner) *free choice* but also (outer) *effective choice* (ibid.). Murray (2008) and Hasker (2020) use this kind of argument about outer effective choice to suggest that Sterba reduces human freedom to a kind of 'kindergarten' or 'playpen' freedom. However, as alluded to above, Sterba has addressed this argument: he claims that there is no significant moral loss to depriving human beings of effective choice when it comes to significant evils because those evils interfere with the more important right that victims have to be free from being victimized. Sterba also notes that, even if God prevented human agents from exercising effective choice when it came to choices to inflict *significant harm* to others, God could still preserve their capacity for effective choice when it came to many other wrong and moderately hurtful choices (Sterba 2021).

More may be said on behalf of Murry and Hasker's arguments about effective choice. For instance, if victims of significant evils themselves thought that giving human beings a capacity for effective choice when it comes to significant evils was 'worth' the costs to their own earthly freedom, and so consented to God's making that trade-off, then Sterba's argument on behalf of the priority of victims' freedom would not succeed. However, rather than focusing just on arguments about the value of (outer) effective choice, per se, I will proceed to highlight the relationship *between* (outer) effective choice and (inner) free choice.

*Even if* one grants that the most morally significant aspects of an exercise of free choice reside within the psychology of the chooser, I contend that 'external' facts about what it is (or is not) possible for you to efficaciously carry out may still matter because those 'external' facts can constrain the scope of the kind of 'inner' moral agency that is available to you. Against Sterba's *Unobstructive Intervention* argument, I will argue that interventions that God makes with respect to the external consequences of agents' choices will thus *also* restrict what kind of exercise of 'inner' moral agency is available to them with respect to those choices. If my argument is right, then God may face a trade-off not only between allowing significant evils and preserving efficacious choice (as Murray and Hasker suggest) but also between allowing significant evils and preserving a certain kind of robust, *inner* moral agency—a kind of agency that Sterba himself seems to acknowledge is important for raising us up and out of the sphere of 'kindergarten' or 'playpen' freedom. There is a trade-off, in other words, between preventing significant evils (on the one hand) and (on the other hand) protecting significant, (inwardly) free and (externally) efficacious choice.

Briefly put, I contend that if God makes it impossible for an agent to effectively carry out a particular intention to  $\varphi$ , then that impossibility can undermine her capacity to even coherently consider and act on an intention to  $\varphi$ . Below, I consider two versions of this response to *Unobstructive Intervention*. First, I put forward what I call the *Impossible Intentions Objection*. According to this objection, one can only make an *intentional* choice to  $\varphi$  if one has certain *beliefs* about the possibility of successfully  $\varphi$ -ing, and God's consistent intervention to prevent significant evils from successfully being brought about would thus end up undermining agents' capacity to coherently form and act on intentions to commit significant evils. Second, I advance (what I call) the *Impossible Alternatives Objection*. I suggest that if, as Sterba contends, God's good nature logically required God to always prevent people from carrying out significant evils, and so made the existence of such evils impossible, *that* would also make it impossible for human agents to even coherently entertain *carrying out a significant evil* ( $\varphi$ -ing) as a possible alternative to pursue in action.

Michael Murray alludes to, but does not fully spell out, the *Impossible Intentions Objection*. In *Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering*,

Murray (2008) tells the story of himself as a young schoolboy who, together with a group of other young kindergartners, set out to fly off a concrete wall in their playground. Murray recounts that, after about twenty minutes of experiment—in which a variety of children with different degrees of strength and skill all found themselves continuously crashing to the ground—they all decided that flying was simply “not in [their] future.” (Murray 2008), p. 137. Having decided this, he notes, neither he nor (as far as he knows) any of his kindergarten peers ever made further attempts at self-propelled flight. Moreover (he writes), he suspects that “none of my kindergarten companions *could* now even form the intention to fly off the wall.” (ibid.)

Murray does not go beyond reporting his ‘suspicion’ that he and his friends *could* no longer coherently form the intention to fly, but that suspicion would gain wide support from philosophers of action, many of whom take there to be a close conceptual connection between intending to  $\varphi$  and having certain beliefs about the possibility of *successfully*  $\varphi$ -ing. To begin, consider the ‘strong’ cognitivist claim that *intending to*  $\varphi$  just is a matter of believing that one will  $\varphi$  and do so precisely because of that intention.<sup>6</sup> Although space does not allow for a full review of the standard arguments for this claim, one can begin to appreciate the motivations for it by noting, as Paul Grice (1971) did, that there seems to be something odd, and even paradoxical, about asserting that “I intend to do  $\varphi$ , but I might not do it.” Strong cognitivists hold that the unintelligibility of such claims shows that having an *intention to*  $\varphi$  conceptually requires one to also possess the *belief* that one *will*  $\varphi$ .

If the strong cognitivist understanding of intention is right and if, as Sterba suggests, a good God would always prevent people from effectively bringing about significant evils, then (it seems) it would not take long before human beings would no longer be able to coherently form intentions to carry out such evils. Just like it did not take long for Murray and his kindergartner friends to realize that their attempts to fly would inevitably fail, it would also not take long for human beings to realize that their attempts to commit significant evils would inevitably fail. Since human beings would no longer be in a position to *believe* that they could successfully carry out significant evils, they would also no longer be in a position to coherently form or act on intentions to carry such evils. In this way, the external limits God placed on efficacious action would constrict the scope of our inner agential capacity to choose.

Sterba responds to Murray’s version of the *Impossible Intentions Objection* by pointing out that a wrongdoer could doubt her capacity to  $\varphi_e$ —that is, carry out a significant evil  $e$ —while still anticipating that she *would* be able to  $\varphi_{e^*}$ —that is, carry out some close variant of  $e$ ,  $e^*$ . For instance, even if a wrongdoer came to realize that she could not successfully carry out an attempt to torture someone by waterboarding them, she might nevertheless still believe that she would be able to torture that person by subjecting him to extreme sleep deprivation. At first glance, Sterba’s response seems on track. Granted, it does seem that past failures to commit significant evils would eventually *detract* from the strength of such a wrongdoer’s belief that she would be successful in bringing about the *next* evil  $e^*$  she tried to commit. However, one might argue on Sterba’s behalf that the wrongdoer would not need to have certainty about the success of  $\varphi_{e^*}$ -ing to coherently intend to  $\varphi_{e^*}$ . As Robert Audi (1973) suggests, it’s quite plausible that I could (for instance) intend to go see a friend for the weekend even if I am not *certain* that (say) my flights will not be cancelled (Audi 1973). Sterba might thus insist that a wrongdoer could form and act on the intention to *carry out a novel significant evil* ( $\varphi_{e^*}$ ) even if God had prevented other, past instances of attempts at significant evils from being successful.

In line with the above argument, I agree that a wrongdoer would not need to believe that she would *definitely* be successful in  $\varphi_{e^*}$ -ing in order to coherently intend to  $\varphi_{e^*}$ . However, I contend that someone contemplating  $\varphi_{e^*}$ -ing would still need to believe that she could at least *probably*  $\varphi_{e^*}$ . As Audi points out, even if an intention to go visit my friend’s house is compatible with an acknowledgement that it is *possible* that I will not successfully arrive there, it would surely still be incoherent for me to tell my friend that “I intend to come visit you for the weekend, though I believe it *improbable* that I will do so.”<sup>7</sup>

As human beings continued to try to commit significant evils, they would over time come to realize that a wider and wider variety of attempts at such evils ( $\varphi_e \dots \varphi_e^*$ ) had all come to naught. So, over time, it would become increasingly obvious that one would not be able to successfully carry out the next, new kind of significant evil  $\varphi_e^*_{+1}$ ; eventually we would consider it at least improbable, if not nearly impossible, that  $\varphi_e^*_{+1}$  would succeed. God's consistent interventions to prevent acts of significant evil from being successful would thus still, in the long run, undermine human beings' capacity to coherently form and act on intentions to bring about such evils.<sup>8</sup>

If *Impossible Intentions* is right, then God could not prevent significant evils from being successfully carried out without thereby also imposing corresponding limits on human beings' inner freedom to select and act on intentions to commit such evils. In the next section, I consider in more detail whether and when victims of significant evils might treat this trade-off between allowing significant evils and preserving the relevant kind of inner free choice as part of an acceptable justification for God's having permitted those evils to occur. First, though, I complete this section by briefly exploring another way in which God's intervention to prevent significant evils might serve to restrict the scope of human beings' inner, free moral agency.

Suppose that Sterba is right, and that if a good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God exists, God's nature would *logically* require God to prevent anyone from ever being able to effectively carry out a significant evil. Suppose further that, as many classical theists hold, if such a God exists, then that God also exists *necessarily*. In particular, suppose that—if there is such a God at all—then there is no possible world in which that God could *not* exist.<sup>9</sup> If one accepts both of these claims, then if God exists, it also follows that there could be no possible world in which significant evils could be successfully carried out. The act of *successfully carrying out a significant evil* ( $\varphi_e$ -ing) would not only be outside of our causal reach;  $\varphi_e$ -ing would also be metaphysically impossible. Call this claim about the metaphysical impossibility of  $\varphi_e$ -ing the *Impossible Evils* claim.

If *Impossible Evils* is true, then—at least on some standard theories of representational content—it would also be impossible for us to have coherent thoughts including the content ' $\varphi_e$ -ing'. According to advocates of possible world semantics, for instance, the meaning of a proposition  $p$  is constituted by the set of possible worlds in which  $p$  is true.<sup>10</sup> Since any proposition  $p_{\varphi_e}$  that involved ' $\varphi_e$ -ing' would, in Sterba's proposed scenario, not have *any* possible worlds in which it would be true, there would be nothing for a thought pertaining to ' $\varphi_e$ -ing' to refer to; thoughts about the possibility of ' $\varphi_e$ -ing' would lack any substantial content or meaning. Causal theories of mental representation deliver a similar verdict. Very roughly, these theories hold the content of a mental representation  $m$  is determined by the object or state of affairs that does—or at least would under idealized conditions—reliably cause  $m$  to occur.<sup>11</sup> As Roy Sorensen (2002) points out, if there is no possible objects, states of affairs, or conditions that could causally trigger the formation a particular kind of mental representation  $m$ , then  $m$  would (on a causal theory of representation) lack any genuine content (Sorensen 2002). Thus, one might plausibly conclude that on a causal theory of mental representation, if ' $\varphi_e$ -ing' was metaphysically impossible, there could be no mental representation with the content ' $\varphi_e$ -ing'.

If either of the two above prominent theories of representational content are right and *Impossible Evils* is also true, then—in a scenario where God exists and prevents all significant evils—human agents would not only be unable to coherently intend to ' $\varphi_e$ ' but also be unable to coherently *conceive* of the possibility of  $\varphi_e$ -ing, coherently imagine  $\varphi_e$ -ing, or coherently consider the moral merits or demerits  $\varphi_e$ -ing. Trying to imagine, consider, or evaluate the act of  $\varphi_e$ -ing would be on a par with trying to imagine, consider, or evaluate the act of ( $\varphi_C$ ) *putting colorless green ideas to sleep*, or ( $\varphi_{XYZ}$ ) *ingesting XYZ, rather than H<sub>2</sub>O, by way of drinking water*. Since  $\varphi_e$ -ing would be equally as impossible as  $\varphi_C$ -ing or  $\varphi_{XYZ}$ -ing, the thoughts of a person who considers the 'possibility' of  $\varphi_e$ -ing would be equally confused and meaningless as the thoughts of a person who considered the 'possibility' of  $\varphi_C$ -ing or  $\varphi_{XYZ}$ -ing. In a scenario where God prevented all significant evils, and was, along the lines

of Sterba's suggestion, *logically* constrained to do so, there would simply be no coherent alternative of ' $\varphi_e$ -ing' for moral agents to even consider or think about in the first place. Call this the *Impossible Alternatives Objection*.

The *Impossible Alternatives Objection*, like the *Impossible Intentions Objection*, suggests that God's interference with the external consequences of actions that would otherwise give rise to significant evils ( $\varphi_e$ ) has implications not just for the scope of (outer) effective choices to  $\varphi_e$  but also for the scope of our capacity for *inner* free choices to  $\varphi_e$ . Specifically, God's consistent interference with the external consequences of  $\varphi_e$ -ing would make it impossible for us to meaningfully consider  $\varphi_e$ -ing and/or form or adopt an intention to  $\varphi_e$ , and so we could no longer meaningfully *choose between* committing a significant evil or not. We might be able to choose between committing a moderate evil or not or acting to bring about a significant good or not, but a coherent thought of committing a significant evil or not either could not occur to us, or even if it could, it could not coherently be translated into any meaningful intention to act on it.

### 5. Consenting to God's Trade-Offs: The Goodwill and Significant, Free and Effective Choice

In Section 2, I argued that the existence of a good God would be logically compatible with the occurrence of significant evils if the victims of those evils gave their informed consent to their suffering. In Section 3, I suggested more specifically that such informed consent might be forthcoming if the suffering of those victims was in some sense compensated for by their eternal enjoyment of heavenly comforts, *and* they could see that God's permission of significant evils was necessary to prevent even greater evils or secure even greater goods. Finally, in Section 4, I gave one example of a case where a permission for significant evil might be necessary to secure a potentially greater good, that is, the good of human's capacity for significant, free and effective choice.

Will victims of significant evils consent to God's making a trade-off in favor of preserving significant, free and effective choice at the cost of their suffering? It is difficult to say. As I've noted, the *possibility* that they might suffices to address Sterba's logical argument from evil. However, to address an evidential argument from evil, one must show not only that it is possible that victims of significant evils would reasonably consent to their suffering but also that they would *likely* do so. I do not establish this likelihood here and so do not pretend to resolve the evidential argument from evil. Still, I highlight the value of significant, free and effective choice with an aim to better elucidate why victims of significant evils might potentially regard that good as a reasonable ground on which God might have allowed them to suffer.

First, consider some of the costs of a 'playpen' freedom in which individuals are unable to make *efficacious* choices to commit significant evils. In that scenario, the only way that someone could have a significant impact on the world around her is by having a significant *positive* impact; the possibility of having a significant *negative* impact on the world would be out of the question. In these circumstances, the motives for committing significant goods would be easily warped by temptations to merely display *some* exercise of significant power, rather than being marked by a *specific* desire to have a positive social impact. Consider by comparison wealthy benefactors who seek to have their family name memorialized on the buildings they help fund. We are often suspicious of their motives because it seems that they are just as, if not more, interested in having their name memorialized on an important building, as they are in the moral value of the services the building might provide. And, while we still might give them some credit if we know they *could* have chosen to use their funds for more nefarious ends, we would likely retract even that credit to the extent that it turned out God had intervened to make such more problematic ends off limits to them. In a world where God only allowed us to exercise significant power for God's pre-approved, positive ends, we would all be in the position of that kind of 'benefactor', and our motives to pursue significant goods would—for good reason—be similarly subject to suspicion.



This worry about moral corruption is especially significant if a Kantian framework for ethics is correct. While Sterba does not explicitly rely on that framework, Kantian premises provide perhaps the most natural support for the Pauline Principle that sits at the heart of his argument, and Sterba sometimes makes reference to Kantian ideas in his discussion.<sup>12</sup> As a result, a Kantian complaint about his argument may be particularly concerning. Kantians hold that the goodwill—the will motivated to act on the moral law for its own sake and not for any extrinsic rewards—is the only thing with unconditional, intrinsic moral worth. A world full of acts that happen to produce good consequences, but in which the people committing those acts are not acting on moral motivations, would thus (on this view) lack any significant moral value. God’s decision to deprive human beings of the ability to commit *significant* evils would of course not totally deprive them of a capacity to act on moral motivations, and so such a world would not (by Kantian standards) be absent of all moral value. Nevertheless, that value would be significantly undercut by the fact that choices to exercise *significant* moral agency (by way of pursuing significant moral goods) would be significantly more prone to corruption and the significant expression of goodwill correspondingly diminished.

This worry about undercutting the operation of the goodwill is further amplified when we add on to God’s interference with outer, efficacious choices for significant evils the associated constraints that such interference imposes on our inner exercise of significant, free moral agency. If the argument from the last section is correct, then—if someone decided to use her power to have a significant impact on others—that decision could never involve a free choice *between* bringing about a significant good or bringing about an alternative, significant evil. Thus, our decisions to commit significant goods would not only be liable to *becoming* corrupted over time (as was just suggested); those decisions would also *from the start* intuitively fail to have the kind of significant moral worth that genuine choices *between* significant goods and significant evils would have. Because a meaningful option to choose to commit a significant evil was removed, a person’s choice to commit a significant good would no longer express her willingness or desire to *prioritize* the significant good over the correspondingly significant evil she could commit. Thus, by depriving us of a capacity for significant, inner free choice, God would once again shrink our corresponding capacities to exercise the goodwill in significant ways. The robust exercise of the one thing that Kantians take to be most critically important to realizing moral value would be further undermined.

It is difficult to say for certain what victims of significant evils would say about the above costs that would be associated with preventing their suffering. Perhaps if given immeasurable compensating, heavenly comforts and given an understanding of the nature of the trade-off God is faced with, they would themselves accept as reasonable God’s choice to preserve significant, free and effective choice at the cost of allowing significant evils. However, those of us who have not undergone significant evils ourselves are not well-placed to understand the suffering of those who have been subject to those evils or (as a result) to try to evaluate how that cost of suffering ‘stacks up’ against the alternative of protecting significant, free and effective choice. It seems that, from our perspective, we should thus allow space for the epistemic possibility that such victims of significant evils would not consent to their suffering.

While our limited epistemic capacities may force us to remain in the dark about whether victims of significant evils will consent to their suffering and (so) whether the evidential problem of evil can be adequately addressed, God would not necessarily face this limitation. Traditional conceptions of God hold that God can foresee the future, and Molinists in particular hold that God has “middle knowledge” with respect to what individuals *would do if* faced with certain circumstances and possibilities for choice.<sup>13</sup> If Molinism is true, then God can foresee which potential victims of significant evils would (one day) come to see God’s trade-off in favor of significant, free and effective choice as reasonable and—in combination with relevant heavenly comforts—thus consent to their suffering. Moreover, if God can foresee that a certain set of victims *would* consent, then God could ensure that only those victims are subject to significant evil. God could create human

beings with significant, free and effective choice while respecting the rights of victims and (so) not violating the Pauline Principle.<sup>14</sup>

## 6. Conclusions

Sterba argues that God would not deprive us of any morally critical form of free will if God merely blocked the final consequences of our choices for significant evil—and he might have been right if those final consequences could be blocked *without* interfering with deeper forms of free, inner moral choice or associated, robust capacities to exercise the goodwill. However, given the close connections between (outer) efficacious choice, (inner) free choice, and associated exercises of goodwill, God’s blockage of the final consequences of our choices for significant evil takes on a greater significance. God would not simply be engaging in contingent interventions to prevent the effects of significant evils, but would also be shrinking our more general capacities for significant, free and effective choice and—in so doing—limiting the scope of our exercise of goodwill.

Some might try to argue that in divesting us of critical elements of significant free, inner moral agency, all for the sake of producing better consequences later, God would violate the same Pauline Principle Sterba initially appealed to in order to mount his argument. Additionally, Sterba sometimes appeals to the idea that God should protect just those freedoms that the just state would, and one might argue that in effectively ‘putting out of mind’ the possibility to consider and act on intentions to commit certain significant evils, God would obstruct a kind of liberty of thought or conscience with which (it is normally thought) a just state should *not* interfere. A full analysis of these further arguments, however, would require more space than is available here.

Setting aside the question of whether God would in some way wrong us by giving us the kind of limp and lopsided moral agency I have described above, the arguments I have reviewed highlight the significant moral costs of doing so. If victims of significant evils themselves regard those moral costs as prohibitive, and can—especially in light of other, compensating heavenly comforts—consent to their suffering, then God could permit significant evils even while retaining God’s goodness. Additionally, as I pointed out in Section 3 (echoing the work of Scott Coley), there may, for all we know, be *other*, additional trade-offs that God must make that make God reasonable in permitting significant evils and that even victims could accept as reasonable grounds for such a permission. Still, absent knowledge of these trade-offs and of victims’ attitudes about them, we cannot draw any definite conclusions. Even if a good God is logically possible, the evidential argument from evil remains unsettled.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 2, “There is No Free Will Defense”.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of the role of Kantian ideas in Sterba’s argument, see Sections 2 and 5.

<sup>3</sup> As I discuss further in the next section, Sterba does give these arguments *some* consideration (Sterba 2019, pp. 73–76).

<sup>4</sup> Sterba talks interchangeably about retroactive consent and ‘reasonable acceptability’. For further discussion of contractarian ideas see, e.g., (Rawls 1999; Sayre-McCord 2013; Scanlon 2000).

<sup>5</sup> For other discussions of retroactive consent outside of the standard literature on contractualism, see (Carter 1977; Chang 2020; Dworkin 1972; Gersen and Suk 2017).

<sup>6</sup> For classic discussions, see (Davis 1984; Harman 1997). For more recent defenses, see (Broome 2009; Ross 2009; Wallace 2001).

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 388. For related arguments, see (Adams 1995; Mele 2022).

<sup>8</sup> One might argue that God could avoid this consequence by deceiving wrongdoers and making them think that acts of significant evil had been successful even when they were not. However, traditional conceptions of a perfect God would plausibly rule out this possibility. God’s goodness would intrinsically and necessarily prevent God from engaging in such deception. For further discussion of this idea, see (Murray 2008, p. 138).

<sup>9</sup> This is just one among several interpretations of the idea that God exists necessarily.

- <sup>10</sup> For an introduction, see (Lewis 1970).
- <sup>11</sup> For an overview, see (Adams and Aizawa 2021).
- <sup>12</sup> See discussion of Quinn (1989) in Section 2, as well as Sterba (2019), pp. 76 and 108. Sterba also frequently frames his approach as a deontological approach, and Kantianism is perhaps the best known and most well-defended form of deontological ethics.
- <sup>13</sup> Prominent defenses of Molinism include (Dekker 2000; Flint 2018). For a survey of recent work on Molinism, see (Perszyk 2013).
- <sup>14</sup> By contrast to Molinists, open theists hold that God cannot foresee what free choices human agents will make (Hasker 2008). If open theism is true, then God cannot foresee whether victims of significant evils will consent to their suffering. Thus, God takes a significant moral risk in allowing significant evils. Still, knowing that God could not have foreseen any decision to consent (or not), victims of significant evils may still come to the conclusion that God was reasonable in taking that risk—i.e., in making a trade-off in favor significant, free and effective choice—given the cost of the alternative and given God’s power to also provide immeasurably good heavenly comforts. If they judge God’s risk to have been reasonable, that may provide its own grounds for consent.

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Article

# Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil and the God Who Walks Away from Omelas

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**Abstract:** The logical argument from evil, generally thought to have been defused by Alvin Plantinga's free will defense, has been reinvigorated by James Sterba's exposition and defense of a new version of the argument that draws on recent work in moral philosophy. Whereas J.L. Mackie's argument uses what can now be seen to be overly simplistic principles to try to establish a logical incompatibility between the existence of God and any evil at all, Sterba's argument uses more sophisticated moral principles and seeks to establish a logical incompatibility between the existence of God (specifically, the God of Perfect Being Theology) and specific sorts of evil that our world contains. Here, I provide a brief exposition of Sterba's argument and then sketch one possible theistic response to the argument. On the basis of that discussion, I conclude that Sterba's argument is not decisive as it stands. However, I then develop a revised version of Sterba's argument and argue that the Perfect Being Theist faces the following dilemma: she can answer the revised version of Sterba's argument only by accepting a position that is deeply at odds with commonsense morality. Therefore, although Sterba's argument does not quite succeed, it points us in the direction of a serious problem for Perfect Being Theism.

**Keywords:** evil; God; Sterba; Plantinga; Mackie; Pauline Principle; theodical individualism; Omelas

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## 1. Introduction

The logical argument from evil, generally thought to have been debunked by Alvin Plantinga's (1974) free will defense, has been reinvigorated by James Sterba's (2019) exposition and defense of a new version of the argument that draws on recent work in moral philosophy. Whereas J.L. Mackie's (1955) argument uses what can now be seen to be overly simplistic principles to try to establish a logical incompatibility between the existence of God and any evil at all, Sterba's argument uses more sophisticated moral principles and seeks to establish a logical incompatibility between the existence of God and specific sorts of evil that our world contains.<sup>1</sup> Throughout this discussion, I understand God as the one and only essentially omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, necessarily existing ultimate creator and sustainer of the universe. This is the God of so-called "Perfect Being Theology"; while hardly the only conception of God found in the Christian tradition, it is the one that is assumed by Sterba (2019, p. 1), as well as Plantinga and Mackie. Accordingly, I will focus here on *Perfect Being Theism* (or *PB-theism*), understood as the claim that the God of Perfect Being Theology exists.

In what follows I provide a brief exposition of Sterba's argument and then sketch one possible theistic response to the argument. On the basis of that discussion, I conclude that Sterba's argument is not decisive as it stands. However, I then develop a revised version of Sterba's argument and argue that the PB-theist faces the following dilemma: she can answer the revised version of Sterba's argument only by accepting a position that is deeply at odds with commonsense morality. Therefore, although Sterba's argument does not quite succeed, it points us in the direction of a serious problem for PB-theism.

## 2. Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil

The central elements of Sterba's argument can be stated as follows:

### Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then God does not intentionally permit horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
2. Necessarily, if God exists and there are horrendous evils caused by immoral actions, then God intentionally permits horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
3. So: necessarily, if God exists, then there are no horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
4. However, there are horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
5. Therefore, God does not exist.<sup>2</sup>

Sterba's defense of (1) rests on a moral principle that Sterba labels the "Pauline Principle". He initially states the principle this way: "Never do evil that good may come of it" (Sterba 2019, p. 2). He notes that there are various exceptions to the principle, one of which is that doing evil in order to achieve good can be permissible if the evil is trivial. As an example of such a case, Sterba offers "stepping on someone's foot to get out of a crowded subway" (Sterba 2019, p. 2). Sterba also explains that the principle is restricted to cases in which the agent *intentionally* does evil. So a better statement of the principle is:

It is immoral to intentionally engage in non-trivial evil so that good may come of it.

Other remarks by Sterba suggest additional tweaks to the principle. Sterba asserts 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*" (Sterba 2019, p. 56). That yields:

It is immoral to intentionally engage in non-trivial evil in order to attain some good or to prevent some evil.

Sterba is of course particularly interested in the Pauline Principle as applied to God. Sterba focuses on God's permission of immoral human actions that cause *horrendous* evils. Following Marilyn Adams (1999, pp. 26–28), Sterba understands horrendous evils as those that constitute a prima facie reason for doubting that the lives of those who participate in such evils could be a great good to them on the whole (Sterba 2019, p. 14). Sterba further claims that "when the evil is significant and one can easily prevent it, then permitting evil can become morally equivalent to doing it" (Sterba 2019, p. 51; Hasker 2017, p. 155). Since God can easily prevent any evil, in God's case permitting horrendous evil is morally equivalent to doing it. Incorporating all of these elements yields the following principle:

**Pauline Principle:** It is immoral for God to intentionally permit horrendous evil caused by immoral actions in order to attain some good or to prevent some evil.

Presumably, if God, a morally perfect being, were to permit horrendous evil caused by immoral acts at all, He would do so only in order to attain some good or to prevent some evil. That assumption together with the Pauline Principle entails the first premise of Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil. The second premise, which I will assume to be true for the sake of argument (and in any case I find to be plausible), is based on the idea that because God is omnipotent and omniscient, then any horrendous evils caused by immoral actions that occur, as it were, on His watch, are ones that He intentionally permits.

In Sterba's view, if God existed, He would run the world similar to the way that an ideally just and powerful government would run society: He would adopt a "policy of limited intervention" (Sterba 2019, p. 62; Tooley 1980, pp. 374–75) aimed at protecting people's basic rights and freedoms while preventing significant moral evils. Some evil would be allowed, in order to preserve a significant degree of freedom, allow for some soul-making, and give people's choices some moral weight, but the many horrendous evils of our world, such as genocide and slavery, simply would not be permitted. Since our world is obviously not governed by such a policy of limited intervention, God does not exist.

### **3. A Weakness in Sterba's Argument**

A weakness in Sterba's argument emerges when we consider the following question: what about a case in which the good produced or the evil prevented *vastly outweighs* the

horrendous evil? Sterba acknowledges that cases in which a much greater evil can be prevented only by intentionally engaging in evil may be exceptions to the Pauline Principle (Sterba 2019, p. 50). What about a case in which a good that vastly outweighs the evil can be attained only by intentionally engaging in the evil? The “trivial evil” exception itself suggests that such cases may also constitute exceptions to the Pauline Principle. After all, the evil of having one’s foot stepped on is trivial only in comparison with the much greater good of getting out of a crowded subway. Accordingly, we may distinguish stronger and weaker versions of the Pauline Principle. The stronger version is the one stated above; the weaker version is:

**Weakened Pauline Principle:** It is immoral for God to intentionally permit horrendous evil caused by immoral acts in order to attain some good (unless that good vastly outweighs the horrendous evil and can be attained in no other way) or to prevent some evil (unless that evil vastly outweighs the horrendous evil and can be prevented in no other way).

As part of his defense of the Pauline Principle, Sterba writes:

Suppose parents you know were to permit their children to be brutally assaulted to make possible the soul-making of the person who would attempt to comfort their children after they have been assaulted or to make possible the soul-making that their children themselves could experience by coming to forgive their assailants. Would you think the parents were morally justified in so acting? Hardly. Here you surely would agree with the Pauline Principle’s prohibition of such actions. (Sterba 2019, p. 57)

I agree with Sterba’s perspective on this case; however, a key feature of the example is that the good produced by the horrendous evil in this example (soul-making) does not vastly outweigh the horrendous evil of the brutal assault. A PB-theist might plausibly argue that while the Weakened Pauline Principle may be true, the Pauline Principle is false. That opens up the following strategy for the PB-theist: making the case that it is possible that there is a tremendous good (or tremendous evil) that God can attain (or prevent) only by intentionally permitting horrendous evil caused by immoral acts. Indeed, a claim often advanced by Christian theists is that a certain sort of union with God is a tremendous good. Here, is how Jerry Walls explains this idea in a recent response to Sterba’s argument:

[I]ntimate relationship to God is an incommensurable good . . . A loving relationship with God is the greatest possible good and the loss of this relationship is the worst possible evil . . . this supreme good is incommensurate not only with other goods, but also with evils. There is simply 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. (Walls 2021, p. 4).<sup>3</sup>

If that is plausible, it provides the PB-theist with an incommensurable good they can use to respond to Sterba’s argument. However, another important element is required: the PB-theist must make the case that it is possible that God can provide (at least some of) us with this great good only by intentionally permitting some horrendous evils caused by immoral acts. Indeed, it is precisely here that Sterba objects to Walls’s reply to his argument: “Friendship with God . . . is not logically dependent upon God’s permission of the horrendous evil consequences . . . God could always offer us his friendship whether or not we have suffered from those consequences” (Walls 2021, p. 7).

However, another common theistic claim is that the great incommensurable good that God seeks has the appropriate exercise of (libertarian) human free will as one of its components. For example, C.S. Lewis identifies the great good for human beings as *freely* loving God. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis has the devil Screwtape explain the idea as follows:

[God] really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His



own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His . . . But you now see that the Irresistible and the Indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of His scheme forbids Him to use. Merely to override a human will . . . would be for Him useless. (Lewis 1996, p. 4)

Peter Van Inwagen offers a response to the argument from evil that is similar in some ways to Lewis's response. Van Inwagen proposes that it is a very real possibility that humanity has become separated from God and that God has initiated a "rescue operation" with the goal of bringing it about that "human beings once more love God" (Van Inwagen 2006, p. 87). Like Lewis, Van Inwagen proposes that this requires that human beings *freely* love God, and so the rescue operation requires the free cooperation of the humans that God is trying to rescue. Furthermore:

For human beings to cooperate with God in this rescue operation, they must know that they need to be rescued. They must know what it means to be separated from him. And what it means to be separated from God is to live in a world of horrors. If God simply "canceled" all the horrors of this world by an endless series of miracles, he would thereby frustrate his own plan of reconciliation. If he did that, we should be content with our lot and should see no reason to cooperate with him. (Van Inwagen 2006, p. 88)

There is some empirical evidence for van Inwagen's contention here. For example, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart provide extensive evidence for this claim:

[P]eople who experience ego-tropic risks during their formative years (posing direct threats to themselves and their families) or socio-tropic risks (threatening their community) tend to be far more religious than those who grow up under safe, comfortable, and predictable conditions. (Norris and Inglehart 2004, p. 5)

That suggests at least that a world without any horrendous evils would be a less religious world than the actual world. Modifying van Inwagen's proposal slightly yields the thought that, for all we know, there are some people who will cooperate with the divine rescue operation—and who will (eventually) freely love God—if and only if God permits some horrendous evils that result from immoral action.

Suppose, then, that the PB-theist claims that it is possible that (i) freely loving God and, through one's free choices, attaining eternal loving union with God in the afterlife is an incommensurable good that swamps all earthly goods and evils and (ii) there are some people for whom God can attain this great good only if He intentionally permits some horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.

In connection with claim (ii), a defender of Sterba's argument might well ask: how can that be, given that there is no logical entailment between a person's freely loving God and God's permitting horrendous evils? That question takes us back to one of the central lessons of Alvin Plantinga's version of the free will defense, namely: given the truth of Molinism, there are some worlds that are logically possible and nevertheless cannot be actualized by God (Plantinga 1974, pp. 180–84; Flint 1998, pp. 51–54). To elaborate: Imagine a person who, in honor of Tolstoy's character Ivan Ilyich, we may call "Ivan". And suppose that Ivan is what we may call a *hard case*, which can be defined thusly:

Creature C is a *hard case* = df. For any possible world in which C exists, C freely loves God if and only if the world contains some horrendous evil caused by immoral acts.<sup>4</sup>

That Ivan is a hard case is not a necessary truth; rather, it is a contingent truth—but a contingent truth that is not up to God or under His control. That will be the case if the various counterfactuals of freedom about Ivan—all the claims about what Ivan would freely do, were he placed in various circumstances and able to act freely—have certain truth values. Under Molinism (and Plantinga's free will defense), such counterfactuals of freedom are *prevolitional* truths, meaning that their truth value is not up to God (Flint 1998, pp. 42–43). God is dealt a certain hand of true counterfactuals of freedom, as it were,

and must work within the constraints imposed by those true counterfactuals (Craig 2017, pp. 38–39).<sup>5</sup>

To sum up: the PB-theist can maintain that it is possible that there are some hard cases and, in order to provide such hard cases with ultimate happiness, the greatest good, God intentionally permits some horrendous evils caused by immoral actions. This action on the part of God violates the implausibly strong Pauline Principle but does not violate the more plausible Weakened Pauline Principle.

In a discussion with van Inwagen regarding this sort of argument, Sterba argues that by intentionally permitting horrendous evils caused by immoral actions, God would motivate people to turn away from Him rather than become friends with Him. As Sterba puts it, if “harm is being inflicted on innocent people and evil people are doing well, then neither will be motivated to become friends with God” (Sterba et al. 2022). There are two weaknesses in this reply. The first is simply that to defeat Sterba’s ambitious argument, it need only be the case that it is *logically possible* that there be some hard cases, as it surely is. Second, and more significantly, there is evidence that Sterba is mistaken about how actual people in the actual world respond in the face of horrendous evils caused by immoral actions. Sterba is certainly right that *some* people will be reluctant to be “friends with God” in the face of horrendous evil, but the claim that *all* people will be reluctant in that way is false. Popular thought has it that people sometimes turn to God in the face of suffering (e.g., “there are no atheists in foxholes”), and there is systematic research that supports this idea as well. In a recent paper, psychologists Rosemary de Castella and Janette Graetz Simmonds document spiritual and religious growth in ten female survivors of trauma. One of their subjects, “Caroline”, was a victim of rape (which surely qualifies as a horrendous evil resulting from immoral action) that resulted in pregnancy and birth of a daughter. The authors report that Caroline “had lapsed in her religious practice before the rape but subsequently rediscovered her Catholic faith and has developed a deep spiritual life” (de Castella and Simmonds 2013, p. 539). Reflecting on her experience, Caroline explains: “I do believe that suffering is for a reason and that we suffer to reap the reward later...I never would have contemplated or understood life as it is to me now” (de Castella and Simmonds 2013, p. 546) and that her life “is now about being a disciple here on earth” (de Castella and Simmonds 2013, p. 550). Additionally, a recent study of evangelical Christian cancer patients found that two-thirds of these patients reported not experiencing a “spiritual struggle” or conflict between their cancer diagnosis and their beliefs about God. In fact, according to the authors of the study:

For those who did not experience spiritual struggles, a strengthening rather than a diminishing of the beliefs that typically give rise to theological attempts seemed to occur. Rather than challenging God’s love, suffering led these participants to experience increased confidence in God’s goodness. Rather than challenging God’s power, their suffering led them to a greater understanding of God’s control. Rather than challenging God’s omniscience, their suffering caused them to express intellectual humility in the face of God’s knowing. (Hall et al. 2019, p. 272)

Still another recent study found that “traumatic events can lead to both increases as well as decreases in religious beliefs and activities” (ter Kuile and Ehring 2014, p. 359). Human responses to horrendous evil are complex, but the empirical evidence supports the popular view that at least sometimes, confrontation with horrendous evil leads people to turn toward God rather than away from Him.

In the famous exchange between J.L. Mackie and Plantinga, Plantinga sought to refute Mackie’s claim that there is no logically possible world in which both God and evil exist by providing a possible model in which God and evil do co-exist. It seems to me that this basic strategy can be used to defeat Sterba’s newer logical argument from evil as well. What I have offered above is a possible model in which God exists and intentionally permits horrendous evils caused by immoral actions. If this model is logically possible, then the first premise of Sterba’s argument is false, for that premise asserts that God’s existence

is logically incompatible with God intentionally permitting horrendous evils caused by immoral actions. Thus, Steria's new logical argument from evil succumbs to a modified version of Plantinga's old free will defense. However, I think that Sterba's application of the Pauline Principle nevertheless advances the debate between PB-theists and atheists, as Sterba's argument can be modified to present a dilemma for the PB-theist. That dilemma is the topic of the next section.

#### 4. God and Omelas

In characterizing horrendous evils, Adams offers the following list of examples of such evils:

[T]he rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one's deepest loyalties, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas. (Adams 1999, p. 26)

As I noted above, Adams says that such evils threaten to prevent the lives of those involved in them from being great goods. However, she also writes that such evils "constitute reason to doubt whether the participants' life can be worth living" and "seem *prima facie*, not only to balance off but to engulf any positive value in the participant's life with which they are not organically connected" (Adams 1999, p. 26). Those remarks are at least suggestive of a conception of horrendous evils according to which they are *prima facie* life-ruining—that is, they are so bad that unless they are outweighed or defeated by some vastly better good, they render the lives of those who participate in them worse than no life at all. I point this out not to raise an interpretive question about how Adams understands horrendous evils but rather because in this section I wish to focus on evils that are *prima facie* life-ruining (*pf-life-ruining* for short). I think it's quite plausible that our world contains some evils of this sort. Adams suggests that "the individual's own estimate is a major piece of evidence as to whether his/her life has been a great good for him/her on the whole" (Adams 1999, p. 27), and certainly in the course of human history many people have sincerely believed that their lives have been worse for them than not existing at all.

Suppose, then, that God faces the following dilemma: He can actualize a world in which a great many free creatures attain the great good of eternal loving union with Him only if He permits there to be one free creature that undergoes *pf-life-ruining* evil *and* that this creature not attain eternal loving union with God (or any other good that vastly outweighs the *pf-life-ruining* evil).<sup>6</sup> In this imagined scenario, God faces what we may call an *Omelas situation* after Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (Le Guin 1991). Le Guin describes a city, Omelas, in which all the citizens save one live incredibly happy and joyous lives. However, their happiness and joy depend entirely (for reasons never fully explained) on the suffering of a single, feeble-minded child locked away in a small chamber somewhere beneath the city. Toward the end of the story, Le Guin explains that a tiny minority of Omelasians, upon coming to understand the conditions of happiness in Omelas, decide to leave Omelas altogether. Le Guin's idea seems to be that these "ones who walk away from Omelas" correctly recognize the injustice of Omelas and their walking away symbolizes their rejection of the unjust arrangement. For present purposes, we may define an *Omelas situation* this way:

God faces an *Omelas situation* = df. in every world that God could create that includes some free creatures who freely love God, there exists at least one free creature that experiences *pf-life-ruining* evil and does not acquire a good that vastly outweighs that *pf-life-ruining* evil.

What would a morally perfect God do if faced with an *Omelas situation*? It seems to me that a morally perfect God would refrain from creating any free creatures at all. He would, as it were, walk away from Omelas. Why? Because to actualize such a world would be to consign one creature to an existence that is a great evil to it overall in order to attain

ultimate happiness for a great many others, and that is deeply unfair. In acting in this way, God would be treating the sacrificed creature as a mere means, using it like a pawn in chess (Freelin 2008, p. 71; Maitzen 2009, pp. 116–17; Maitzen 2013, pp. 259–60).<sup>7</sup> Divine justice is incompatible with God sacrificing some creatures in order to attain salvation for other creatures (Tooley 1991, pp. 111–13). As Shoshana Knapp puts it, “[t]he architect of Omelas . . . is supremely guilty” (Knapp 1985, p. 79). Further, according to Marilyn Adams, “God could be said . . . to love individual human persons in particular, only if God were good to each and every human person God created” (Adams 1999, p. 31). Assuming that God’s moral perfection includes love for every individual human being, then, even if it (somehow) is morally permissible for God to sacrifice some for the sake of others, doing so seems to be incompatible with God’s moral perfection, which requires more than merely not acting immorally.

The morality of Omelas would perhaps be different if the suffering child would eventually share in the incredible joy and happiness of the other Omelasians. It is perhaps telling that in his exchange with Sterba, van Inwagen says:

If terrible things had happened to me in this life . . . and in a future life of peace, and love, and joy that was beyond anything I could have imagined, [and] I can see that but for God’s allowing terrible things to have happened to humanity as a whole, distributed by chance . . . that *me and all my friends here* wouldn’t possibly be in this life of peace and love and joy without God’s having done that, if that was the only way to do it, I would say “thank you, God, for having made that choice”. (Sterba et al. 2022, emphasis added)

The Pauline Principle tells us not to do evil that good may come of it. In the previous section I argued that, roughly, the principle should be modified to say: do not do evil that good may come of it—unless that good is *really* good. Reflections on the case of Omelas suggest that the principle should be modified further still: do not do evil to a person that good may come of it—unless that good is *really* good *and* accrues to the person to whom you do the evil. More precisely:

**Agent-Relative Pauline Principle:** It is incompatible with God’s moral perfection for God to intentionally permit person P to experience pf-life-ruining evil in order to attain some good—unless that good vastly outweighs the pf-life-ruining evil, can be attained in no other way, and accrues to P.

Assuming that God is morally perfect and that if He intentionally permits P to experience pf-life-ruining evil at all He does so in order to attain some good, it follows that:

**Limited Theodical Individualism (LTI):** If God intentionally permits person P to experience pf-life-ruining evil, then P acquires a great good that vastly outweighs the pf-life-ruining evil.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing on LTI, we can advance the following revised version of Sterba’s argument, where an *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evil is one that is not followed by a vastly greater good within the existence of the person who undergoes it:

Sterba’s Revised Logical Argument from Evil

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then God does not intentionally permit *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evils.
2. Necessarily, if God exists and there are *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evils, then God intentionally permits *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evils.
3. So: necessarily, if God exists, then there are no *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evils.
4. However, there are *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evils.
5. Therefore, God does not exist.

The controversial premise here seems to be (4). Obviously, our world contains pf-life-ruining evils not redeemed *in this world*, but the theist is likely to reply that such evils may be redeemed in the afterlife. After all, even if some pf-life-ruining evils appear to us to

be unredeemed, it may be that all such evils are redeemed in some way beyond our ken. Adams explains her perspective this way:

[M]any horror participants die defeated, without believing in God, without recognizing divine solidarity with them in horror participation and without appropriating any positive significance that this confers . . . full recovery from horror participation usually takes place post mortem . . . God keeps us alive, heals our meaning-making capacities, wins our trust, and teaches us how to make positive sense of our lives. (Adams 2013, p. 21)

Suppose, then, that (4) is false. In that case another problem for the PB-theist arises: if (4) is false and God exists, then it seems that we all have powerful reasons to inflict pf-life-ruining evils on others, for by doing so we guarantee that they will attain a vastly greater good. As Jeff Jordan puts it, the falsity of (4) in a theistic universe “guarantees the operation of a kind of fail-safe device that renders every instance of [pf-life-ruining evils] an instrumental good for [the] sufferer” (Jordan 2004, p. 174). In short, the PB-theist faces a dilemma: if (4) is true, then Sterba’s revised argument establishes that there is no God, but if (4) is false, then God’s existence makes a hash of common-sense morality. For if (4) is false, then inflicting pf-life-ruining evil on another person is an effective way of forcing God’s hand and guaranteeing that the other person will receive a tremendous good that swamps all the goods and evils of this life—including the pf-life-ruining evil that you inflict upon them. Thus we have a powerful reason to inflict pf-life-ruining evil on others. That does not mean that we have a grasp of *God’s* reason(s) for permitting such evils. *Our* reason for inflicting pf-life-ruining evils is that doing so guarantees a great good for the person upon whom we inflict the evil—a good so great that the goods and evils of this world are insignificant in comparison.

In defending a somewhat similar argument, Stephen Maitzen employs the following analogy:

[S]uppose that an abundantly available vaccine were, despite the painfulness of receiving it, known to produce a net benefit (the painfulness included) for everyone who receives it. Suppose, further, that no less painful procedure produces the same benefit. Under those circumstances, how could we ever have a *moral* obligation to prevent vaccination? (Maitzen 2009, p. 111)

Indeed, in Maitzen’s scenario, it seems that we would have a powerful moral reason for vaccinating others. Similarly, if we know that God exists and (4) is false, then we can “vaccinate” others against missing out on ultimate goods by inflicting pf-life-ruining evil on them. A highly effective way of carrying out such a program would be to focus on children, who are particularly vulnerable and innocent: inflict pf-life-ruining evil on a child, kill the child, and you have guaranteed a great good for the child, a good in comparison with which your evil acts are insignificant. Christian philosopher William Lane Craig suggests that God allows some babies to suffer and die for the moral development of their parents and that such babies receive “a compensation so incomprehensibly great that it is incommensurable with the suffering” (Moreland and Craig 2003, p. 116). In “Rebellion”, the famous chapter from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov describes various horrifying acts of violence inflicted upon children. It seems that if anything is morally wrong, these acts of violence are. However, if God exists, (4) is false, and (LTI) is true, then these horrible actions result in tremendous goods for their victims and so in fact turn out to be acts of great beneficence. This result turns commonsense morality on its head and is wildly implausible. Since (LTI) follows from the plausible Agent-Relative Pauline Principle, the PB-theist must either accept (4) and give up PB-theism or deny (4) and abandon commonsense morality. Therefore, while Sterba’s original argument is not decisive, it ultimately points us in the direction of a serious problem for Perfect Being Theism.

## 5. Conclusions

Perfect Being Theism has a moral problem. A great many people in our world experience horrors that threaten to make their overall existence worse than not existing at all. A just and loving God would not permit some to have an existence worse than not existing at all in order to achieve tremendous goods for some others. So if our universe is one in which some people undergo horrors that give them an overall existence that is worse than not existing at all, then there is no God. Accordingly, if God does exist, then all horrendous evils in each person's life are ultimately redeemed, swamped by incommensurably greater goods within that person's life. Furthermore, if that is the case, then inflicting horrendous, potentially life-ruining evil on another person is the best thing you can do for them, and we should all try to do this to others. However, that is crazy. So PB-theism entails either that God is unjust or unloving or that a crazy moral view is true. Either way, Perfect Being Theism is false.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The primary moral principle to which Mackie appeals is that "a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can" (Mackie 1955, p. 201). As I explain below, Sterba instead appeals to the more plausible "Pauline Principle".
- <sup>2</sup> See Sterba (2019, pp. 189–90) for a similar formulation of the argument.
- <sup>3</sup> Variations on this basic theme include: Adams (1999, pp. 82–83); Moreland and Craig (2003, pp. 544–48); Stump (2010, pp. 386–88); Tracy (1992, p. 311).
- <sup>4</sup> This concept is similar to Plantinga's concept of *transworld depravity*; see Plantinga (1974, pp. 186–88).
- <sup>5</sup> Here I deviate from Van Inwagen, as he denies that there are any true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (Van Inwagen 2006, p. 80). Plantinga's free will defense seems to entail that God is unlucky when it comes to the truth values of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (Windt 1973); the current proposal entails that God is *really* unlucky in that regard.
- <sup>6</sup> This scenario is, of course, inspired by Ivan Karamazov's famous "rebellion" in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*; see also James (1891, p. 333).
- <sup>7</sup> Question: why should God not instead be seen as akin to a person who flips the switch to divert the runaway trolley to a side-track so that it kills one person rather than five, or as a platoon leader who sacrifices one soldier to save the rest of the platoon? (see Mawson 2011). Answer: God, as creator of the universe, can avoid all such scenarios by not creating them in the first place. So, God would be more akin to someone who sets up the trolley situation in the first place, and then flips the switch (see Boorse and Sorensen 1988, p. 118).
- <sup>8</sup> Marilyn Adams endorses an even stronger requirement—that the life-ruining evil be *defeated* (Adams 2013, pp. 19–20). That stronger requirement is compatible with my argument but not required by it. John Zeis (2015) argues for a similar conclusion on the grounds that God's permission of evil in the world must satisfy a *proportionality* requirement. Zeis writes: "God's will is unthwartable, and since He wants the good for everyone, He would bring it about that the evil which every person suffers is defeated. So, the proportionality condition is met by God when the evil state of affairs is ultimately defeated" (Zeis 2015, p. 137).

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Essay

# A Dilemma for Sterba

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**Abstract:** James Sterba argues that a good God is not logically possible. He argues that what he calls the Pauline Principle, which says that we should never do evil that good may come of it, implies that a good God would prevent horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. However, there are plenty of examples of such actions in our world. So, a good God does not exist. I offer an example from Derek Parfit, and one of my own, that calls the Pauline Principle into question. Sterba believes that what he calls Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs) follow from the Pauline Principle, and that they are necessary truths which imply that a good God would prevent horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Whether these (MEPRs) follow from the Pauline Principle or do not, they may be necessary truths that could form the basis of Sterba's argument. However, I argue that they are not necessary truths. If modified to become such, Sterba faces a challenge from the Skeptical Theists that can only be met by turning his argument into an evidential version of the problem of evil. I compare Sterba's argument with my version of the evidential argument from evil that says that if God exists, there is not excessive, unnecessary suffering and whose second premise says there is. I argue that it is easier to establish that there is excessive, unnecessary suffering than to establish Sterba's second premise (once his principles are modified). That second premise will say that there are no goods that logically require God to allow immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences. Sterba faces a dilemma: either he has an unsound logical argument or a weak evidential argument for the non-existence of God. In either case, he does not have a good logical argument for atheism.

**Keywords:** the problem of evil; Pauline Principle; Doctrine of the Double Effect; Skeptical Theism; Moral Evil Prevention Requirements; horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions; inference to the best explanation

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## 1. Background

James Sterba has offered a version of the problem of evil whose essential premise is: necessarily, if God exists, there would be no horrendous evil in the world that results from immoral actions. Obviously, there is such horrendous evil in the world. It follows that God does not exist.

I have offered a similar argument whose first premise is: necessarily, if God exists, there is not excessive unnecessary suffering, that is, there is not way more suffering in the world than need be allowed to bring about some great good or to prevent some great bad.<sup>1</sup> The second premise asserts that there is excessive unnecessary suffering in the world. Look around at all the terrible suffering of innocents. The argument concludes that God does not exist.

However, Sterba and I arrive at our first premises in different ways. Sterba argues from what he calls the Pauline Principle to what I called his essential premise. Roughly, the Pauline Principle says, "Never do evil that good may come of it," and Sterba derives his essential premise from a more detailed and careful formulation of that principle.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, I derive my first premise from considerations of similar moral premises offered in earlier versions of the argument from evil that were defeated by counterexamples. John Mackie argued from: necessarily, if God exists, there is no suffering (or evil) in the world



to God's non-existence. Alvin Plantinga argued that God would want people to have free will, and so it is possible that people misuse their free will and cause suffering (or evil) in the world. Hence, it is not necessarily true that if God exists, there is no suffering (or evil) in the world.

Perhaps Mackie should have started with the following principle: necessarily, if God exists, there is no *unnecessary* suffering in the world, that is, no suffering beyond what must be allowed to produce some great good or prevent some great evil. Theists might argue that free will is a great good, so the suffering that results from its exercise is not unnecessary. So, God could allow that sort of suffering. However, people could have significant freedom with a lot less suffering. There is a lot of unnecessary suffering in the world. Given the moral principle that starts the second version of the argument from evil, it follows that God does not exist.

However, Peter van Inwagen argued against the idea that God would not allow unnecessary suffering, pointing out that there may be some limit to the amount of suffering or evil that God can prevent without losing great goods or allowing great evils.<sup>3</sup> If that limit is reached, much good would be lost, or much bad would no longer be prevented. However, that limit can be more and more closely approached without incurring such catastrophic consequences. Call a unit of suffering a "dolor," and assume that if God reduced the suffering in the world to 100 dolors, either great good would be lost or even greater evil would be produced<sup>4</sup>. However, if God reduced the dolors to 101, that would not happen. And, it would not happen if he reduced them to 100.5, or 100.25, or 100.125, and so on. So, halfway between the point where God stops reducing dolors and the 100-dolor limit, there is a lesser amount of dolors where God could have stopped without reaching the catastrophic limit of 100. In other words, there will always be *some* unnecessary suffering because a good God must stop reducing dolors at some point before the 100-dolor limit, and between that point and the limit there will be unnecessary suffering that he could have prevented but did not. I accept van Inwagen's objection to the principle which says that God would not allow *any* unnecessary suffering, and counter with my own principle which says that God would not allow *excessive* unnecessary suffering, i.e., *way more* suffering than he need allow to have some great good or prevent some great evil. That sort of suffering is way beyond the limit that van Inwagen posits in his critique of the moral premise in the argument from evil that says that God would not allow *any* unnecessary suffering.

My approach to arriving at the moral premise in the argument from evil parallels how some epistemologists argue for an analysis of knowledge. They start out by considering the proposal that: necessarily, S knows that P if and only if S has a justified true belief that P. Gettier examples have been used to show that these conditions are not sufficient for knowledge. People then modified the proposal by adding a "fourth condition" to the three conditions of J = justification; T = truth; and B = belief. For instance, some proposed that knowledge requires that the justification not be based on any false beliefs = not-F. And, the proposal became: necessarily, S knows that P if and only if S has a JTB and not-F. However, counterexamples were produced against that proposal. And, further proposals were offered involving JTB + no defeaters (or no ultimate defeaters). A third proposal was that knowledge is JTB + S's belief is the result of some reliable belief-producing mechanism or cognitive faculty. My justification of the moral premise in my argument, which I claim is necessarily true, rests on the same analytic methodology of proposal, counterexample, new proposal, counterexample, etc., which underlies the justification of the analyses of knowledge that I have outlined above.<sup>5</sup>

However, Sterba has a different approach to justifying his moral premise, which he also claims is necessarily true. He tries to derive it from his detailed specification of the Pauline Principle. He offers three of what he calls Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs), which are his detailed specifications of the Pauline Principle, and argues from them to the conclusion that, necessarily, if God exists, there are no horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. I will argue that, as stated, these MEPRs are not necessary truths, and that once they are modified to become necessary truths, Sterba faces a similar challenge

from the Skeptical Theists that I face. The modified principles will have to include the qualification that allowing horrendous evil consequences is not logically required to bring about great good or prevent great bad. The Skeptical Theists will claim that we are in no position to judge that this is true. Additionally, Sterba will then have to appeal to some evidential considerations to meet this challenge.

The second premise in my argument is that there is excessive unnecessary suffering. The Skeptical Theists object to this premise, saying that we are in no position to judge that there is excessive unnecessary suffering. We do not know if all the goods and bads of which we are aware are all the goods and bads there are. We do not even know if they are a representative sample of them. Furthermore, we are unable to know what must be allowed for what, so our judgment that all the suffering of innocents that we see is *not needed* to bring about some great good, or prevent some great bad, is unjustified. We are like someone out in the country who claims that he can tell whether some canine-looking animal two hundred yards away is a coyote, even when it is nearly dark, but cannot really distinguish a coyote from his neighbor's German Shepherd at that distance and in those lighting conditions. We are in the dark, so to speak, when it comes to God's purposes and what is needed to realize them. We can see the outlines of a coyote on a moonlit night, and the outlines of God's plan, but we are like the person in the country who is in no position to judge that he is looking at a coyote because we are in no position to judge why God permits this but not that.

I counter that if the Skeptical Theist's objection to the argument from evil is a good defense of theism, so is the defense of the Young Earthers of their view which says that the Earth was created recently (6000 years ago, 100 years ago, or even 5 min ago) with all its signs of age and with people having a great deal of seeming historical and scientific knowledge. The Young Earthers I have in mind are Skeptical Theists, but they go further. They say that, for all we know, God created the world recently with people with what seemed to be historical and scientific knowledge because of the practical benefits this seeming knowledge provides. It allows people to better cope with their surroundings and interact with others, and it does not involve the enormous suffering of people and animals that would occur if, as on the standard account, humans acquired this knowledge gradually over thousands of years. In addition, humans can focus on their primary task of soul making right away and do not have to wait around millions of years for their ancestors to evolve to the point where they have the capacity for soul making. The Young Earthers disagree with the Skeptical Theists only about when the universe began and what the initial conditions were at the moment of creation. They agree with the Skeptical Theists and the scientists about the laws of nature that operate on whatever the initial conditions were.

The view of the Young Earthers can be seen as offering a more specific form of a "soul-making" theodicy. The "soul-making" view says that God created a universe where intelligent and rational beings like us would eventually emerge because it is a good thing to have a world with such creatures in it who can become worthy of a relationship with God through their free choices in the world.<sup>6</sup> The Young Earthers add that a loving God would not want his creatures to be thrown into such a world without the theoretical and practical wisdom needed to better navigate in that world. On the standard view, it has taken thousands of years to acquire the relevant knowledge and wisdom we now possess, and there has been enormous suffering of innocent animals and humans over the millennia. The Young Earthers agree with the Skeptical Theists that we are in no position to judge that there is excessive unnecessary suffering, but go further and say we are in no position to judge that God did not create the world recently for the reasons they give.

If asked why God did not create humans with more theoretical and practical reason, and create them sooner than he did, the Young Earthers admit that they have no answer. However, they point out that traditional Skeptical Theists have no answer to the question why God does not prevent more suffering than he has, and why there seem to be relatively few rational beings with free will in the universe.

The defense by the Young Earthers of their view is obviously not a good defense. However, the defense of the Skeptical Theists is the same sort of defense; both offer a sketch of God's plan and the same sort of undercutting defeater against the arguments of their opponents. They both hold, essentially, that we are "in the dark" when it comes to God's plan beyond its general outlines. The defense by the Young Earthers of their view is not a good one; thus, neither is the defense of the Skeptical Theists against the problem of evil.<sup>7</sup>

Sterba and I have similar arguments against theism in that we both claim that the moral premise we offer is necessarily true, and that the world is such that its consequent is not satisfied. However, his would be a better argument if his first premise were a necessary truth. That is because it says that, necessarily, if God exists, there is no horrendous evil in the world that results from immoral actions, and his second premise is the obvious claim that there is such evil. My first premise says that, necessarily, if God exists, there is not excessive unnecessary suffering in the world. However, my second premise says that *there is* excessive unnecessary suffering in the world, and it is not as obvious that this is true, as the Skeptical Theists try to argue. I will argue that the three principles that Sterba's argument rests on are not necessary truths and so they do not entail that: necessarily, if God exists, there is no horrendous evil in the world that results from immoral actions. On the other hand, I argue that if his principles are modified to become necessary truths and appealed to directly in his argument, that argument will face the same problem as mine. It will have to contain at least one premise that the Skeptical Theists will not grant, one premise that they will maintain we are in no position to judge whether it is true or false. I offer an objection to Skeptical Theism, but that still leaves a burden on both Sterba and me to justify our second premise: on him, to justify that there are no great goods that can be obtained (or great bads prevented) only if God allows horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions; on me, to justify that there is excessive unnecessary suffering. To meet the challenge of the Skeptical Theists, Sterba's argument will have to become an evidential version of the argument from evil, and then there will be better versions available of that sort of argument.

## 2. Some Basic Distinctions and Principles

Before I address Sterba's argument, and my objections to it, I want to introduce some distinctions on which his argument relies. The first is between first-order and second-order goods. Examples of first-order goods that Sterba offer are preventing a child from going hungry or some innocent person from being assaulted. Examples of second-order goods presuppose the existence of wrongdoing, whereas first-order goods do not. An example of a second-order good that he gives is receiving medical aid after having been brutally assaulted. The second distinction that Sterba introduces is that between goods to which we have a right and those to which we do not. You have a right not to be assaulted and a right that I do not take your car without your permission. It would be nice of me to give you USD 100 as a Christmas gift, but you have no right to receive a gift from me. The following two-by-two matrix indicates the four possibilities involving these two distinctions. The MEPRs with Roman numerals represent which of Sterba's "Moral Evil Prevention Requirements" apply to that type of case. The numbers in the cells just facilitate reference to a particular cell.

All of Sterba's principles concern moral requirements to prevent horrendous evil that results from immoral actions. His first principle, MEPR I, states that there is an obligation to prevent actions that would violate a person's right to some first-order good as long as that prevention does not violate anyone else's rights, and failure to prevent those actions would result in horrendous evil. So, his first principle would imply that God would have an obligation to prevent someone from raping, beating, and killing a little girl as long as his doing that did not violate anyone else's right. MEPR I places a lot of moral weight on whether prevention would not violate anyone's rights and how much harm intervention would prevent.

**Table 1.** Rights to Goods and Types of Goods.

	Goods to Which We Have a Right	Goods to Which We Have No Right
First-order goods (do not presuppose serious wrongdoing)	MEPR I (1)	MEPR III (3)
Second-order goods (presuppose serious wrongdoing)	MEPR II (2)	MEPR II (4)

Sterba's second principle, MEPR II, says that there is an obligation to prevent immoral actions that produce horrendous evil even if the victims would be greatly benefitted by secondary goods they have a right to (e.g., in terms of compensation and rectification), provided that the victims would rather not have their rights violated than to have them violated but then be greatly compensated. So, God should not let someone be raped and beaten and then greatly compensate them in a way to which they have a right if that person would prefer not being raped and beaten to being raped and beaten and then compensated. So, on this second principle, God would intervene to stop such horrendous evils. MEPR II places a lot of moral weight on the consent of potential victims.

His third principle applies to the case where a person does not have a right to some first-order good. Here, Sterba thinks that there will always be another way for an all-powerful God to provide some relevant great good without allowing the immoral action that would produce horrendous evil consequences for a victim. For instance, God could provide the potential victim his friendship without them having to undergo terrible suffering, and there is no greater good than that. So, God could at least stop the potential rapist and bring the potential victim to him even if the potential victim has no right to union with God. MEPR III places a lot of moral weight on avoiding needless harm.

With these three principles, Sterba thinks he has closed the door on its being permissible for God to allow horrendous evil that results from immoral action. God should intervene if no rights would be violated; he should intervene if rights to second-order goods would exist but the potential victim would prefer not being horrendously harmed to being harmed and having those second-order goods provided; and he should intervene if there are always other ways that God could provide the potential victim with some great good, such as union with Him, without allowing evil acts that result in horrendous suffering. Sterba thinks that these types of cases exhaust the possibilities and so if God exists, he would intervene to prevent immoral acts that cause horrendous evil. In short, if God exists, he has no good reason to allow horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Either not enough good will result from allowing those actions or some will but the potential victim would rather not have it, or whatever good that results from allowing such immoral actions can be had without allowing them. However, we see that horrendous evil has resulted from such immoral acts. So, God does not exist.

### 3. Moral Evil Prevention Requirements

I now want to focus on the three Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs) that Sterba offers. The first one applies to first-order goods to which we have a right, say, a right not to starve to death or be assaulted.

#### 3.1. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I

Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially 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 (Sterba 2019, pp. 126, 184).<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps for the sake of clarity it is best to re-write this principle as a conditional statement:

MEPR I\*: If you can easily prevent the horrendous evil consequences of an immoral action without violating anyone's rights and the potential victims have a right that those evil consequences not be visited upon them, you are morally required to prevent those consequences.

This principle, like all of Sterba's three principles, leaves out an important 'unless' clause. In this case, it is: U1 = unless it is logically necessary that this immoral action with its horrendous evil consequences be allowed in order to acquire some great good or to prevent some great bad which overrides the *prima facie* wrongness of failing to prevent that immoral action. The Pauline Principle says that we should not do (or allow) evil that good may come of it, but it should allow for the exception where it is impossible for us to bring about a great good without doing evil. Suppose two children of a terrorist are choking to death and you and a friend can save both by performing the Heimlich maneuver. Suppose, also, that the only way to prevent the terrorist from detonating a bomb in New York that will kill thousands of innocent children is to let one of his innocent children choke to death (thereby allowing evil) to show him you are serious about also letting the other son die, if he does not abandon his plan. In this case, it would not be wrong to let one of his children choke to death if that is the only way to stop the terrorist from blowing up New York. It is this sort of case that motivates the addition to MEPR I\* of the unless clause that I proposed.<sup>9</sup> Of course, because God is all-powerful, he could prevent the terrorist from blowing up New York without letting one of his children die. So it would be permissible for God to allow horrendous evil only if allowing it is *logically necessary* to bring about some great good or prevent some great bad. Hence, the statement of U1 is in terms of what is logically necessary because MEPR I is used by Sterba to apply to God. Sterba may accept the addition of U1 to MEPR I and then argue that it is never logically necessary for God to allow such immoral action because God could always be friends with the evil perpetrator, that being friends with God is the Supreme good, and nothing can add to it to make things better.

Skeptical Theists can deny that we are in a position to judge that "nothing can add to friendship with God to make things better for a person." They can argue that, *for all we know*, allowing, say, significant freedom, which includes the freedom to commit heinous acts that produce horrendous suffering,<sup>10</sup> is needed to provide at least some of the goods that are in what Stephen Wykstra calls "God's total axiological space" (Wykstra 2017, p. 138). According to Wykstra, there are goods that we on earth can share with God, and "Our own growth into being friends with God involves being baptized into these goods" (Wykstra 2017, p. 137). However, *for all we know*, there are other goods that God is aware of that are beyond our ken. Therefore, the Skeptical Theists can hold that, *for all we know*, God must allow immoral actions with horrendous evil consequences for us to acquire those goods. Thus, we cannot know that U1 is not satisfied and so cannot know that if God exists, he would prevent the kind of immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences that MEPR I\* addresses.

The second MEPR applies to all second-order goods, both to those to which we have a right and those to which we do not. Those are the cases in Row 2 of Table 1.

### 3.2. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II

Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions [to be inflicted on rational beings which would violate their rights] simply to provide [themselves or] other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have (Sterba 2019, pp. 128, 184).<sup>11</sup>

Writing this requirement as a conditional, we get:

MEPR II\*: If you can [easily] prevent the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of an immoral action [to be inflicted on rational beings, which would violate their rights], simply [in order] to provide [those rational beings, or] other rational beings, with goods they prefer not to have, you should prevent those consequences.

The phrase "with goods they prefer not to have" should be taken to mean "where they would prefer not to suffer the horrendous evil consequences to suffering them and being

provided the relevant second-order goods.” As it stands, MEPR II\* gives a large moral role to the preferences of the rational beings who are the potential victims of actions that produce horrendous evil consequences. According to MEPR II, if the rational beings prefer no horrendous evil and no great good to horrendous evil and great good, then the evil should be prevented. Presumably, if they preferred having that evil plus the compensating good to no evil and no good, then prevention of the evil would not be obligatory.

Does their preferring no horrendous evil and no great good, together with the other conditions, entail that prevention is required? Here is a less extreme case where prevention does not seem required and even seems wrong. Suppose Jung is the younger of two brothers; Matt the older (more “Mature”) brother. Jung accidentally rips one of Matt’s favorite posters of Steph Curry, star guard of the Golden State Warriors. In a rage, Matt fetches a hammer to smash Jung’s Lego replica of Frank Lloyd Wright’s house, Falling Waters. It has taken Jung weeks of painstaking effort to build the replica. Their mom, Agnes, can stop Matt from smashing his brother’s Lego replica, but she does not because she wants him to experience remorse over what he has done. It is part of her plan to stop the downward slide of Matt into being a cold and selfish individual. Assume that she knows her plan will work. Part of her plan also involves buying Jung a new set of Falling Water Legos and compensating him by taking him to Legoland in Michigan, a place he has always wanted to visit. However, after she allows Matt to smash Jung’s Lego house, reprimands him, and then offers to take Jung to Legoland and buy him a new set of Falling Waters Legos, he does not want to go and have a new Lego set. He just wants his replica of Falling Waters back. He prefers to have it and no trip to Legoland to having it smashed to bits but a trip to Legoland and a new set of Falling Waters Legos. Matt does feel terrible about smashing Jung’s masterpiece. He is remorseful and his slide into selfishness is halted.

Was it wrong for Agnes to allow Matt to smash Jung’s house? Maybe. This is a borderline case. However, if this was the only way to prevent Matt’s moral character from descending to new depths, it seems at least morally permissible for Agnes to fail to prevent his action. It might even be *the morally obligatory thing* for Agnes to do even if it were rational of Jung to want her to prevent Matt from smashing his Lego house. Suppose that if Matt had not been allowed to smash Jung’s house, in a fit of frustration he would have smashed his own head with the hammer and Agnes could not have prevented that. Then, she should not have stopped Matt from destroying Jung’s replica of Falling Waters even if it were rational for Jung to want her to intervene. The point is that Jung’s rational preferences do not settle the issue of whether prevention by Agnes was required, permitted, or prohibited. Jung is not the only person involved; the effects of prevention or non-prevention on Matt are also morally relevant. There may be goods, or the prevention of bads, *for Matt* that make allowing him to harm Jung morally obligatory even if Jung would rationally prefer that they not be allowed to their being allowed and his being greatly compensated. Sterba seems mistaken in thinking that an action is morally permissible only if it is “reasonably acceptable to all affected” (Sterba 2019, p. 73 and note 13; 74–75; 93–94). It may not be reasonably acceptable to the rich to be heavily taxed to help the poor or to provide opportunities to the less fortunate, but morally permissible (and even obligatory) to tax them heavily. Similarly, allowing some bad consequence for X, and then compensating him, can be morally permissible if the alternative is allowing some even worse consequence for Y, even if allowing that bad consequence for X, and then compensating him, is not reasonably acceptable to X.

Strictly speaking, the Matt/Jung example is not a counterexample to MEPR II because the example does not involve horrendous evil consequences of an immoral action. The disappointment, anguish, and hurt that we can assume Jung feels when his brother smashes his Lego house are evil consequences of an immoral action, but they do not rise to the level of *horrendous* evil consequences. However, there is a kind of Principle of Proportionality that seems relevant here: harm done (or allowed) can be morally counterbalanced if it is required to prevent even greater harm or to bring about great good. It seems permissible to slap hard the child of someone abusing a dog if that is required to make him release the dog

and, as I wrote earlier, it seems permissible to let a terrorist's child choke to death in order to prevent him from blowing up New York. In Parfit's example, it is permissible (even morally required) to cause considerable harm (100,000 deaths) to prevent even greater harm (say, 300,000 deaths that would ensue if the war dragged on). These examples support the Principle of Proportionality, and it supports the conclusion that it can be morally permissible to allow horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions if that is logically required to prevent some greater evil or to produce some great good. The Matt/Jung example shows that potential victims do not have a moral veto that makes it wrong to fail to prevent harm to them in circumstances where it is rational for them to prefer not to be harmed and not compensated to being harmed and then compensated.

### 3.3. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement III

Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions (which would violate someone's right) in order to provide would-be recipients with goods to which they do not have a right, when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods (Sterba 2019, pp. 128, 184).

Re-writing this as a conditional, we get:

MEPR III\*: If you can [easily] prevent significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, which would violate someone's right, in order to provide would-be recipients with goods to which they do not have a right, then you should prevent those consequences provided there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods.

The first thing to say about MEPR III\* is that it does not seem to speak to the case where God might allow horrendous evil consequences of some immoral action but *not to provide goods to people other than the agent*. He might allow the agent to perform the action *for the good of the agent, that is, the wrongdoer*, and merely foresee the horrendous evil consequences for the victims. The Doctrine of the Double Effect and the Pauline Principle can allow that such actions are morally permissible.<sup>12</sup> The point of allowing horrific actions need not be to provide the potential victims with "[first-order] goods to which *they* do not have a right." Whatever goods the non-agents receive would be part of the compensation (and so part of the justification) for allowing the horrendous evil consequences, but not the reason for allowing them. The main reason for allowing the action might be that without this opportunity, the agent would not have an opportunity to be worthy (or not less unworthy)<sup>13</sup> of God's friendship. Or there may be other significant goods beyond our ken that logically require that people be allowed to perform immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences. Theists might maintain that it is that consideration, when coupled with compensation for the victims, which makes allowing actions that result in horrendous consequences permissible, all things considered. The compensation to the victims might be immediate union/friendship with God which, for the sake of argument, I will assume no one has a right to. However, the good provided as compensation is not by itself what makes it permissible for God to allow awful consequences.

Even if we grant that the sort of good the compensation represents could be provided to the potential victims in many other morally unobjectionable ways, it does not follow that the good of the agent could be provided in many other morally unobjectionable ways. What is at issue is the total amount of good, and avoidance of bad, for the agent and the victims. To focus only on the good and bad for the victims is akin to focusing primarily on whether the victims could reasonably accept their suffering (which was the focus of the Jung/Matt example and its relevance to MEPR II). The mistakes are similar: the moral assessment of prevention vs. allowing is too narrow. It ignores what is good for the agent and presupposes that the agent could have those goods without God's allowing his actions that produce horrendous suffering.

#### 4. Skeptical Theism

None of Sterba's three MEPRs are necessarily true. All of them ignore the moral relevance of the interests of the wrongdoer. All of them need to add an 'unless' clause that says: God should prevent immoral actions with horrendous evil consequence **unless** it is logically necessary for God to allow such actions and their consequences to acquire some great good, or to prevent some great evil (or bad), which overrides the *prima facie* wrongness of failing to prevent the immoral action. The Skeptical Theists can contend that we are in no position to judge whether it is logically necessary for God to allow horrendous evil consequences to bring about great goods or avoid great evils.<sup>14</sup> Sterba disagrees. He says to the Skeptical Theists that, "it turns out that we really do have much more knowledge here than we might initially have thought" (Sterba 2019, p. 82). However, much of that knowledge is supposed to be knowledge of the specific Pauline Principles, whose truth is now in question.

What Sterba says about our *not needing* the opportunity to perform immoral actions with horrendous evil consequences to prevent great harm or to obtain great good may be true, but how does he know this and why is he even justified in believing it? Perhaps there are Christian doctrines that imply it is true, but why are we justified in believing them?

Furthermore, even if we are justified in believing that significant and extreme freedom is not logically required to become worthy (or not unworthy) of God's friendship, why think that we are justified in believing there are not *other goods* besides God's friendship that logically require God to allow some immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences? Even if we grant that friendship with God is the supreme good, it does not follow that there are not other great goods that can make one's life even better than just having friendship with God. Perhaps Christian doctrine says that there are no such additional goods or that people would not want them once they have had friendship with God. However, unless Christian doctrine has independent support, there is no reason to think that an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing being would not be aware of such additional goods and no reason to think that people would not want them even if they had friendship with God. And, for all we know, having these goods requires that people have significant freedom, i.e., the opportunity to perform immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences. Skeptical Theists can hold that, for all we know, this is true.<sup>15</sup>

Sterba's MEPRs are not necessary truths. To turn them into necessary truths, we have to remove the "reasonably acceptable by all" requirement in MEPR II. Allowing some action that harms some might not be reasonably acceptable to them because they are ignorant of relevant facts or considering only their own interests and those for whom they care. A condition should be added to all the MEPRs that says: unless allowing horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions is logically required to produce some greater good or prevent some greater evil/bad. However, once that condition is added, the Skeptical Theists pose a serious challenge about how we can know that allowing such horrible acts is not needed for significant freedom that, in turn, is needed to be worthy of a deep friendship with God (as Bergmann (2014, p. 213) and Wykstra (2017, p. 137) suggest). Additionally, for all we know, there are other great goods beyond our ken that the agent, or even his victims, can have only if God allows immoral actions with horrendous evil consequences.

Recall Wykstra's remark about God's total axiological space. He says that there may be goods in that space of which we are unaware, and it may be logically possible to have those goods only if the horrendous evil that results from the exercise of significant freedom is allowed. For all we know, those goods, apart from the good of friendship with God, are good enough to tip the balance in favor of non-intervention by God to prevent horrendous suffering. For all we know, the good whose realization requires allowing the horrendous evil, plus the good which serves as compensation to the victims, are together so good that God is morally required to allow the immoral act that will result in horrendous evil.



## 5. A Reply to the Skeptical Theists

Up to this point, my critique of Sterba's argument can be put in terms of a dilemma: either his MEPRs are not necessary truths or if they are modified to become necessary truths, the resulting argument must contain a premise that the Skeptical Theists will say we are in no position to judge, that is, a premise we are not justified in believing is true. However, why should we worry about what the Skeptical Theists will say? Have I not shown that Skeptical Theism has unacceptable implications, implying that we are not justified in believing that Young Earthism is false?

I think Sterba can avail himself of this reply, but the question will remain as to whether he is justified in believing that significant freedom (which includes the freedom to perform immoral actions with horrendous evil consequences) is not required for other goods that are good enough to make it permissible for God to allow horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Even if the Skeptical Theists have failed to show that Sterba is *not justified* in believing that God would not allow horrific actions, it does not follow that he *is justified* in believing that God would not allow them. Suppose it *seems* on reflection that significant freedom is *not* itself good enough, nor is it morally required for other goods that are good enough, to justify God in allowing immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences. Is the best explanation of its *seeming* that way that it is that way?

The challenge I face is to justify my claim that there is excessive unnecessary suffering.<sup>16</sup> I say it *seems* that way on reflection, and that the best explanation of its seeming that way is that it is that way. That is a better explanation than it *seems* that way to our finite minds but really is not that way because God has a plan, the details of which are beyond our grasp, where allowing all that suffering is needed to bring about the goods that are part of that plan.

Sterba might avail himself of a similar reply. He might say that his explanation is better than one that says that God has a plan according to which significant freedom is logically required for there to be other great goods beyond our ken, and it is better to make room for significant freedom and those other great goods, and to compensate the victims of its misuse, than to deny significant freedom and the other goods which it makes possible.

It may *not seem* to some people that significant freedom and other goods to which it may be logically linked are not good enough to justify non-intervention and *not seem* to some that there is excessive unnecessary suffering. However, we could ask, "What is the best explanation of immoral actions that result in horrendous evil consequences and of all the suffering we see: (1) that there just are evil people and no God to prevent their actions or (2) that there is an all-knowing, all-powerful, wholly good God who has a plan the details of which we cannot grasp but that includes allowing these evil people to perform their very evil actions?" The issue still is about what the best explanation of something is, whether it be seemings or what we observe in the world. Internalists in epistemology might favor the appeal to seemings, externalists to facts or what we know. However, either route should lead to the same conclusion and is based on appeal to Inference to the Best Explanation (IBE). Other things being equal, an explanation that involves reference to mysterious reasons or causes that are beyond our grasp is never as good as one that does not.

If Sterba appeals to (IBE) to reach his conclusion, our arguments against the existence of God will be very similar. We will both start by offering moral premises that are necessarily true. Sterba's premises will be the modified MEPRs I have argued he should accept; mine will be the proposition that, necessarily, if God exists, there is not excessive unnecessary suffering. We will then assert other premises that Skeptical Theists will claim we are in no position to judge. One of Sterba's will be that we are justified in believing that significant freedom is not required to be worthy (not unworthy) of God's grace and friendship. Another of his will be that we are justified in believing that significant freedom is not required to acquire great goods other than God's friendship. Those premises will be difficult to defend. My burden will be to justify the premise which says that there is excessive unnecessary suffering. Both of us will then conclude that God does not exist.

Sterba faces a dilemma. Either he sticks with his original MEPRs, or he does not. If he does, he cannot show that it is necessarily true that if God exists, there are no immoral actions with horrendous evil consequences because the MEPRs that are the basis of this claim are not themselves necessary truths. So, he will not have a sound logical argument from evil. If he does not stick with those MEPRs but adopts the modified versions of them that I recommended, then his argument will become another version of the evidential problem of evil, not a version of the logical problem of evil. In either case, he will not have offered a sound logical argument from evil. In addition, that version of the evidential argument from evil will be weaker than some of its rivals. It is not easy to show that the following is true: God is not logically required to allow some instances of immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences in order to obtain great good or to prevent great evil.<sup>17</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Gewerbestrasse, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2019). Sterba's central arguments imply that God would not allow *any* horrendous evil consequences of immoral action. However, in (Sterba 2019, p. 65) he indicates that what is incompatible with God's existence is "the distribution and amount of moral evil that exists in the world." Of course, this would follow if God would not allow *any* horrendous evil consequences of immoral action, but it is not the conclusion he directly argues for. Hereafter, reference to Sterba's book will be made in the text as (Sterba 2019, p. xxx).

<sup>2</sup> See (Sterba 2019, p. 2) for his initial statement of the Pauline Principle.

<sup>3</sup> (van Inwagen 1996, pp. 234–35). There he responds to my (Russell 1996). I respond to his comments in (Russell 2018).

<sup>4</sup> (Feldman 1978, p. 24) uses "dolor" to refer to a unit of pain. I use it to refer to a unit of suffering.

<sup>5</sup> (Feldman 2003, Chpts. 2–3) employs this approach to the analyses of knowledge.

<sup>6</sup> Sterba will say "not unworthy" because he thinks that if people were "worthy" of a God relationship, they would deserve it, and have a right to it, but he thinks that none of that is true. See Footnote 12, below.

<sup>7</sup> (Sterba 2017) misunderstands my argument in his comments on my essay (Russell 2017). Given what I say about a defense offered by Peter van Inwagen, he thinks that I should reject Young Earthism for its implausible implications (Sterba 2017, p. 159). And I do! My criticism of Skeptical Theism is an argument about arguments: if Skeptical Theism is a good defense against the problem of evil, then the Young Earthers have a good defense of their view against standard science. However, the Young Earthers' defense is not a good one. So, by modus tollens, neither is the Skeptical Theists' defense a good defense against the problem of evil.

<sup>8</sup> This is a slight re-wording of Sterba's statement of MEPR I that appears in the text of his book. There is no change in the meaning.

<sup>9</sup> (Parfit 2017, pp. 347, 374–76) imagines two nuclear policies to end a war with Japan. The first involves dropping a bomb on Japanese civilians that will kill 100,000 innocent people in Tokyo. However, it will give the Japanese generals what they believe is an honorable way to admit defeat and surrender (Parfit 2017, p. 347). The other option is to drop the bomb on an uninhabited offshore island as a display of force that will also cause the Japanese Government to surrender for the same reason. However, in a couple of weeks winds will blow the radioactive fallout over Tokyo and that will eventually kill 200,000 innocent civilians. The Doctrine of the Double Effect (DDE) implies that we should adopt the second option. However, Parfit thinks that we should adopt the first option, and it violates the Pauline Principle, although Parfit's target is the Kantian principle against using people as mere means. On Sterba's account of the Pauline Principle, it says we should never do (or allow) immoral actions that result in horrendous evil that good may come of it (at least if the victims do not consent). I think this example shows that if an enormous amount of good can be produced, or bad prevented, only by violating the Pauline Principle, it should be violated. This is a serious objection to the Pauline Principle itself even if not to the specific MEPRs that Sterba offers. See, (Parfit 2017, pp. 374–76).

<sup>10</sup> I am using "significant freedom" to include the ability to successfully perform immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences. Sterba has a different account of "significant freedom." For him, "significant freedoms are those freedoms a just political state would want to protect since they would fairly secure each person's fundamental interests" (Sterba 2019, p. 12). Presumably, a just political state would not want to protect the freedom to perform immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences.

- 11 On the basis of correspondence with Jim Sterba, I have added the material in brackets in the statement of MEPR II.
- 12 In his response to essays in his collection (Sterba 2017) argues that the *Doctrine of the Double Effect* (DDE) does not apply to God because “nothing God does is merely foreseen” (Sterba 2017, p. 156). However, “merely foreseen” just means not directly intended, nor intended as a means. In allowing an agent to perform an action with horrendous evil consequences because allowing it is needed *for the good of the agent*, God need not be using the suffering of the victims as a means to benefit the agent, nor would he directly intend that suffering. Hence, the suffering of the victims would be merely foreseen in the sense relevant to the DDE and the Pauline Principle.
- 13 Sterba writes in terms of becoming less unworthy to receive God’s friendship and only cites Christian orthodoxy against the view that we could become worthy of God’s friendship (Sterba 2019, note 42, p. 103). Someone might worry that if we could become worthy of that friendship, then we would have a right to it. However, that does not follow. When we advertise for a job in philosophy, we receive applications from a lot of candidates who are worthy of being hired. However, that does not mean they have a right to be hired. I will write of being worthy of God’s friendship, but nothing substantial turns on this. Christians can replace “worthy” by “becoming less unworthy” if they wish.
- 14 Michael Bergmann writes that just because we cannot think of any reason why God’s allowing horrors is required “for opportunities to grow ever deeper into God,” it does not follow that there is reason to believe that there are not such reasons (or even that it is likely that there are not) (Bergmann 2014, p. 213). His remarks would seem to generalize to cover intrinsic goods other than our relationship to God, if there are any.
- 15 (Bergmann 2014, pp. 208–09) thinks that we have no good reason to believe that the goods and evils we are aware of are representative of the goods and evils that could make it permissible for God to fail to prevent “horrors.” See, also, note 13 above. (Tooley 2020, pp. 220–21) argues that this reference to “representative goods” is going to undermine all inductive inference. However, Bergmann could return to his general point stated in Footnote 13, namely, that we have no reason to believe that God’s allowing horrendous evil is not logically required to acquire certain great goods, or to prevent certain greater evils. That is because we do have reason to believe that God would be aware of goods and evils that are beyond our ken and aware, in ways we are not, of what must (logically) be allowed for what. Tooley himself thinks that the following claim needs support: it is not logically necessary for God to allow the horrendous evils we are aware of in order to prevent even greater evils we are unaware of. See his (Tooley 2020, p. 219).
- 16 Unlike Sterba, I do not have to show that significant freedom is *never* good enough to justify non-intervention, only that if God exists, there would be *more intervention*.
- 17 I want to thank Jim Sterba for inviting me to submit an essay on his book and for the many email exchanges we have had over the years. He has the patience of Job and to the highest degree the intellectual virtue of encouraging criticism as a means for arriving at the truth. I also want to thank three anonymous referees whose comments enabled me to make changes that I believe improved the essay. Finally, I want to thank my colleague, Mark Satta, who made comments on my Young Earthism objection to Skeptical Theism.

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Article

# A Modified Free-Will Defense: A Structural and Theistic Free-Will Defense as a Response to James Sterba

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**Abstract:** In his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba argues that the Plantingian free-will defense, which reconciles the existence of a good and omnipotent God with the existence of evil, is a failed argument when it comes to the terrible evils in the world. This study discusses that Sterba's claim is invalid when Plantinga's free-will defense is modified with a structural perspective. In order to reconcile the structural and inevitable possibility of evil with God's moral imperatives, a structural free-will defense was complemented by an Islamic moral theology that Mu'tazila and its great scholar Qādi Abd al-Jabbar advanced. Such a modified free-will defense can show that the existence of all evil, including terrible ones, is still compatible with a good and omnipotent God.

**Keywords:** God; moral; morality; evil; theism; Mu'tazila; James Sterba; Qādi Abd al-Jabbar; justice

## 1. Introduction

The problem of evil, the existence of evil despite God's omnipotence and impeccable goodness, is a puzzle that is constantly on the agenda in the contemporary philosophy of religion. This is so because atheists base their most fundamental objections to the existence of a perfect and good God on the persistence of evil. How could a good God allow humans to suffer evil that was not caused by their actions? In his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba takes this old and now prevalent debate into a new context.

The free-will defense of Plantinga (Plantinga [1974] 2001) has been accepted as a widely agreed answer to the logical problem of evil in contemporary philosophy (Sterba 2019, p. V). He developed this theory in response to J. Mackie's claim that God cannot be both omnipotent and unable to create a universe containing only moral goodness (Mackie 1982, p. 154). For Plantinga, the coexistence of God and evil logically does not pose a problem because the moral goodness of our actions depends on our freedom to perform them. The same freedom allows us to commit evil deeds. For God to create a morally good world, there must be people who are free to do good and evil (Plantinga [1974] 2001, p. 31). In his recent work, Sterba developed a new critique of Plantinga's free-will defense. Although he found Plantinga's logical solution to the problem of evil impressive, Sterba argued that the problem of evil is basically an ethical problem and, therefore, should be solved with an ethical perspective. In this vein, Sterba argued that Plantinga's free will defense is a failed theory from an ethical point of view. Underlining that the problem of evil in contemporary philosophy should be discussed not as a logical or epistemological<sup>1</sup> problem but as an ethical problem (Sterba 2019, p. 5), Sterba drew a new and instructive route to this very old debate. This new route compels theists studying philosophy, such as I am, to consider new possible answers to the problem of evil within sources of ethics.

## 2. Discussion and Argument

In this study, focused only on the "There is no Free-Will Defense" (Sterba 2019, p. 11) claim, which forms the first chapter of Sterba's book as well as its backbone. In this part, Sterba debated the problem of evil as a moral discussion. Here, Sterba's first and foremost

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critique was that the amount and degree of moral evil cannot be justified in Plantinga's free-will defense. In conjunction with the first, his second critique was that Plantinga's argument that the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically compatible is a failure when it comes to significant and terrible evils (Sterba 2019, pp. 11–12).

Sterba distinguished between two things here: significant freedoms and additional freedoms. Accordingly, God not interfering to guarantee the significant freedom of humans, for example, in the form of fundamental rights and freedoms, is a divine failure, while Him not interfering to guarantee additional freedoms is a requirement of existing free will. For Sterba, the problem of evil in this context is not related to additional freedoms but a moral problem posed by significant freedoms. As understood by Sterba, Plantinga's free-will defense is a failed defense as it fails to justify why God allows the use of some significant freedoms when they cause horrendous evils (Sterba 2019, p. 12). Indeed, in Plantinga's defense, God allows evil in order to create the free will. However, when God permits terrible evil, some significant freedoms are destroyed, resulting in the minimization, not the maximization, of free will. Sterba put it this way: "God can also promote freedom, in fact, promote far greater significant freedom, by actually interfering with the freedom of some of our free actions at certain times" (Sterba 2019, p. 27). In Plantinga's defense, God does not do this and therefore such a defense does not seem to be a genuine free will defense.

The first question I face here is whether the free-will defense is still an adequate one, given the amount and degree of evil. The second question is how horrendous evils in which any significant freedom is violated can continue to be morally defensible in logical harmony with the existence of God. Sterba thinks that Plantinga's free-will defense fails to answer these two questions. I agree with Sterba on this point. However, my disagreement with Sterba is limited to the fact that Plantinga's free-will defense is an incomplete one.<sup>2</sup> This incompleteness is related to Plantinga's discussion of the issue from a narrower perspective, keeping it only within the limits of modal logic. However, unlike Sterba, I believe that the issue of horrendous evil can be explained in the context of the free-will defense while remaining ethical.

What I proposed here is a modification of Plantinga's free-will defense. This modification occurs in two ways. The first is related to the understanding of the free-will defense as a structural theory, which rejects Sterba's first criticism that the degree and amount of evil cannot be justified by the free-will defense. My second modification suggests that the structural free-will defense theory must be complemented with theistic moral content. Such a modification rejects the second criticism of Sterba that God does not prevent significant evils so that the existence of God's omnipotence and significant evils is logically incompatible with each other. Here, for the first modification, I refer to the idea of structure in sociology, and for the second modification, I refer to the views of the Mu'tazila school<sup>3</sup>, which philosophically discussed the problem of evil in Islamic theology for the first time, and especially by its top moral theorist, Qādi Abd al-Jabbar<sup>4</sup> (d. 1024). My aim from these two modifications was to give a positive answer to Sterba's question: "Whether or not an all-good God who is also presumed to be all-powerful is logically possible given the degree and amount of moral evil that exists in the world?" (Sterba 2019, p. 1).

Before proceeding with the explanation of my thesis, I need to explain the probable reason why Plantinga's free-will defense cannot respond to Sterba's criticisms.

### 3. A Reappraisal of Plantinga's Free-Will Defense

The weakness of Plantinga's free-will defense against Sterba's first criticism is related to its limitations rather than its substance. Plantinga and Sterba treat free will from two different perspectives. Where Plantinga focused on free will from a general perspective irrelevant to specific cases, Sterba focused on free will from a particular person's perspective. Indeed, Plantinga says:

"What is relevant to the Free Will Defense is the idea of *being free with respect to an action*. 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 . . . It is within his power, at the

time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it.”<sup>5</sup>

This perspective of Plantinga, which takes into account the freedom to do as well as the choice not to do, explains the possibility of human moral actions. It is the “freedom to refrain from performing evil” that makes moral acts possible for human beings. Otherwise, the choices of human beings become a necessity, not a moral act. However, this explanation does not refer to any moral implications of the evils that a free person will cause (Plantinga [1974] 2001, p. 31). In other words, what is missing in Plantinga’s defense is the perspective of the victim, who is exposed to evil actions of humans who exercise their free will. Plantinga realized that his thesis explains nothing about the victims and their sufferings. His following sentences seem to confirm this understanding:

“Neither a defense nor a theodicy, of course, gives any hint as to what God’s reason for some specific evil—the death or suffering of someone close to you, for example—might be. And there is still another function—a sort of pastoral function” . . . Probably neither will enable someone to find peace with himself and with God in the face of the evil the world contains. But then, of course, neither is intended for that purpose” (Plantinga [1974] 2001, pp. 28–29).

Similarly, Plantinga states that to address the specific evils that befall us would be to address a different dimension of the problem of evil:

“ . . . suffering and misfortune may nonetheless constitute a problem for the theist; but the problem is not that his beliefs are logically or probabilistically incompatible. The theist may find a religious problem in evil; in the presence of his own suffering or that of someone near to him he may find it difficult to maintain what he takes to be the proper attitude towards God. Faced with great personal suffering or misfortune, he may be tempted to rebel against God, to shake his fist in God’s face, or even to give up belief in God altogether. But this is a problem of a different dimension. Such a problem calls, not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care.” (Plantinga [1974] 2001, pp. 63–64).

The perspective subjected to specific evils, which I call the victim perspective, has no place in Plantinga’s free-will defense; in addition, it is only associated with “pastoral care”. However, Sterba insisted that this perspective be included in the defense of free will. Sterba’s insistence on the need to guarantee important freedoms for everyone, including victims, shows that he incorporates the victim’s perspective. Thus, Sterba logically rejects the exclusion of a particular person whose significant freedom is not guaranteed in a particularly terrible event in Plantinga’s free-will defense. According to him, a free-will defense must also include an explanation for those whose significant freedoms have been usurped (Sterba 2019, p. 26).

The possible question here then might be: What does the free-will defense mean for the particular victim who has to suffer terrible evil because of a freely chosen action by a free agent? The fact that Plantinga leaves out the perspective of a particular victim by saying that this is “a different dimension” should not allow us to exhaust any alternative interpretations of the Plantingian defense. Hence, Sterba’s conclusion “there is no free-will defense” seems to be valid only within the confines of Plantinga’s defense.

What kind of theory would that be if I tried to extend the free-will defense to the ability, unlike Plantinga, to include both perspectives? In other words, how is it possible to transform the free-will defense into a theory that both explains the acts of free agents and offers a convincing explanation for the victims’ suffering? I answer this question in a way that can satisfy both of Sterba’s criticisms. As in the name of the title “there is no free-will defense”, Sterba rightly stated that Plantinga’s free-will defense cannot justify a particular significant evil. Sterba explained this by stating that the distribution of freedom in instances of significant evil is morally unacceptable:

“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 that everyone should have.” (Sterba 2019, p. 13).

Sterba’s second critique of an immoral distribution of free will, given the amount and degree of freedom, is about God’s role in that distribution. At this point, Sterba drew an analogy between a just state and God, stating that just states limit the freedom of the potential aggressor due to the harm they can inflict on innocents (Sterba 2019, p. 13). Accordingly, he proposed that we should expect God to do more than a just state, which is a moral duty for an omnipotent God (Sterba 2019, pp. 28–29). However, this hope appears to be a clearly “failing” hope in the examples of people who have suffered the terrible evils that Sterba gives in his book (Sterba 2019, pp. 20–24). It is here that Sterba questioned, with a Humean reproach<sup>6</sup>, why does God fail this hope? I think it is possible to reformulate Sterba’s standpoint here with the following question: How could an all good, all just, and all-powerful God, provider and giver of the freedom to all of us, allow humans to suffer from an evil that was not caused by their free actions? In terms of God’s moral status, it seems imperative for a free-will defense to give a morally adequate answer to this question.

For this, I want to explain what it means to think of free will structurally, which is the first and fundamental step of the two modifications I proposed to the free-will defense.

#### 4. Structural Understanding of Free-Will Defense

Such as Sterba, I confirmed that God permits a disproportionate use of freedom and its horrendous evil results (Sterba 2019, p. 23). However, I suggested that this divine permission should be understood as structural permission. I borrowed the idea of the structure that I used here from structural theory in sociology (see for example, Mayhew 1980, pp. 335–75) but in a simple way. In structural understanding, processes and practices, in general, are explained in terms of a structure that makes them meaningful. In structural theory, processes and practices are caused by structural determinants. Building on this understanding of the structure, I formulated my structural theory of free will. I argued that, rather than focusing on individual acts and their results, we should focus on the structure in which free will operates. Accordingly, structural free will refers to a standard and general structure in which all human actions occur. I reconstructed Plantinga’s free-will defense with a simple modification as “structural free-will defense”. The idea advocates free will as a possibility for all human beings but not the free will distributed among individuals. Therefore, issues such as how this possibility is realized through human actions and what proportion and amount of evil these actions cause became irrelevant to the structural free-will defense. The structural free-will defense cannot be criticized here by pointing out a specific freedom and a particular evil case because the structural free-will defense focuses on the structure in which good and bad actions become possible.

Since freedom has to be understood as a general opportunity in the structural free-will defense, the distinctions such as significant and insignificant freedom (Sterba 2019, p. 11) are inappropriate. Likewise, this defense does not distinguish between significant and insignificant evil (Sterba 2019, p. 15). Such distinctions are about individual actions and consequences, but structural free will is unrelated to the individuals. For this reason, the structural free will defense is unaffected by the consequences of individual actions and, therefore, cannot be overturned by individual instances of evil. In the structural free-will defense, there is no distinction between the person who uses their free will and the person harmed by this action. Evil is only related to structural free will as a general possibility. In this context, Sterba’s judgmental expressions such as “unacceptable”, “unjust”, “better”, or “morally defensible distribution of freedom” (Sterba 2019, pp. 15, 18–19) are not judgments that can be drawn from my structural free-will theory.

The other part of this structure is related to Sterba’s second critique; the existence of God and the existence of horrendous evil are logically incompatible. In the structural defense of free will, God is the creator of this structure. Just as structural free will has nothing to do with individual moral free will, God acts in harmony with this structure as

the creator of it. In other words, God, the creator of this structure, cannot be understood as one who dispenses free will to each individual for use in each particular action, thus openly permitting evil acts. God does not prefer one's freedom to another's freedom. God does not give somebody more significant freedom and deprive others of it. God allows individual human actions, whether good or bad, to take place, and this permission should be understood as general permission. God has revealed this structure in a way that guarantees the free action of everyone.<sup>7</sup>

In the structural free will defense, the logical possibility of everything is guaranteed. The possibility of evil is violated when the suffering of the victim is rendered impossible by divine intervention. In this case, the moral benefit of choosing not to commit evil disappears, as this destroys the most basic purpose of the creation of humankind as a separate being. Therefore, God cannot be held responsible for the moral consequences of any evil act of an individual who uses the freedom provided by this structure. How the individuals use this freedom is entirely up to them. In this context, Sterba's critique of why God does not intervene in evil but rather allows it (Sterba 2019, pp. 25–27) is not a relevant question given the structural understanding of free will. However, the moral justification for why God created such a structure and why God does not structurally interfere with human choices cannot be explained by the structural free will defense theory alone. In other words, if we confine the explanation of the existence of evil to the logical possibility of all, God's morality and creation become untenable. At this point, an analysis of the moral relationship between God and humankind is needed. This relationship can best be explained by remaining within theism. Therefore, the structural defense of free will should be complemented by a certain kind of Islamic moral theology.

### 5. A Theistic Ground in the Structural Free-Will Defense

First of all, it is worth noting that we do not encounter a discussion of the problem of evil *per se* in Islamic moral thought as in Western philosophy. The first philosophical question that began to emerge from the seventh century onward was not "does man have free-will?". Rather, it was a God-dependent question: "Does man have free-will against the divine will?" (Watt 1944, pp. 1–2). In the context of this question, the first place to look in Islamic thought is the Muslim speculative theology school Mu'tazila, which started to emerge in the eighth century (Cf. Hourani 1985, pp. 93–94, 256). This school engaged with the God-dependent context of the free-will debate in a purely rational way compared to its historical rivals.

I did not intend to present the free-will theory of the Mu'tazila school in all its details here. Building on Qādi's argument, I tried theistically to complement my response to Sterba's critiques. According to Sterba, the free-will defense in which free will is itself not promoted cannot be accepted as a valid free-will defense. However, Qādi would understand the promotion of free will not as the promotion of the amount and distribution of free will itself but as the promotion of the principle of justice. In other words, a possible contemporary Mu'tazilite free-will defense would be a free-will defense in which justice is promoted.

Before moving on to Qādi's arguments, we analyzed Sterba's claim on the promotion of freedom through his criticism of Plantinga. Plantinga's defense of free will was centered on the possibility of the existence of the moral good. Plantinga put it this way:

"A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all . . . He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so." (Plantinga [1974] 2001, p. 30).

From this, Plantinga drew the following logical conclusion:

"The heart of the Free-Will Defense is the claim that it is possible that God could not have created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if



so, then it is possible that God has a good reason for creating a world containing evil.” (Plantinga [1974] 2001, p. 31).

Sterba affirmed Plantinga, stating that some evils in the world are understandable from his perspective. However, in the free-will defense, the existence of evil should not be justified by the existence of moral goodness alone. I agreed with Sterba on this point. However, as stated earlier, Sterba pointed to a different and more critical perspective: “God can also promote freedom, in fact, promote far greater significant freedom, by actually interfering with the freedom of some of our free actions at certain times” (Sterba 2019, p. 27). For this reason, Sterba stated that significant freedom can only be possible by restricting insignificant freedoms, which is the behavior expected from an omnipotent God. I think that Sterba grounded this expectation by focusing on divine power. In this case, the moral relationship between God and humans becomes a relationship built on the omnipotence of God. Since Sterba focused on the divine power in the moral relationship between God and human, he rightly compared God to a just state. According to his comparison, God could prevent terrible evil much more easily than a just state could do, but He does not. Extending his examples, Sterba also compared God to fictional superheroes such as Superman, etc., questioning God’s non-intervention in dreadfully evil acts: “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?” (Sterba 2019, pp. 19–20).

Sterba justified the aim of promoting free will in the free-will defense with the existence of an asymmetrical power difference between God and human beings. Before proceeding with Mu’tazila, there is the historical projection of Sterba’s position in Islamic thought. Sterba’s power-oriented thinking of the God–human relationship is an askew repetition of the way of discussing human freedom in the Ash’ari school, which is the contemporary and opponent of the Mu’tazila school in Islamic thought and also has an essential place in Islamic moral theology. For the Ash’arites, the main reason why man’s free will is not given sufficient importance in the moral relationship between God and humans is that God could use His unlimited power in an unlimited way (Eş’ari 2017, pp. 65–75 and 85–95). Cf. (Hourani 1985, pp. 65–66, 118–19; Ozdemir 2001, pp. 250–51). However, Sterba appealed to the limitlessness of the divine power to increase human freedom. In other words, the way to promote human freedom is through the exercise of God’s unlimited power to limit human free action. But, this is quite irrational for the Mu’tazila, who argue free will in terms of God’s justice.

### 5.1. A Free-Will Defense with a Divine Justice Perspective

The Mu’tazilite free-will debate is a debate putting God’s justice at its center. The divine justice includes mainly two things in Qādi’s thought: 1. All the acts of God are good, He never commits evil acts; 2. God never neglects what He is supposed to do, such as rewarding His creations (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 26). Cf. (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 1, p. 214). My structural free-will defense theory needed to operate on these theistic foundations. I elaborated on them more through Mu’tazila and Qādi.

#### 5.1.1. A Justice-Centered Free-Will Defense

In Mu’tazilite thought, God never wants or conducts evil. God is above all evil (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 16). The only way to keep God away from evil is to understand evil as an outcome caused by human’s free will. The fact that man can be justly held responsible by God is only possible if God gives man free will. Since humans are held responsible for their free will, they are the creator of their own actions, whether significant or insignificant, good or bad (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, pp. 94–95). Qādi put this as the following principle: “The servants’ deeds are created by themselves, not by God” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 77).

The fact that humans are chiefly responsible for all of their own actions and God’s moral disinterest in individual acts of human beings are related to the moral relationship between God and human beings built on the principle of justice. A particular ontological

metaphysics between God and humans supports this relationship. In Islam, as in Judaism and Christianity, God is a being with absolute sovereignty and absolute power. The human under the divine sovereignty is an agent being morally tested by God. It is expressed in the Qur'an as follows: "He is the One Who created death and life in order to test which of you is best in deeds" (67:2). They cannot act independently of their ontological status as tested by God. However, this ontological commitment of humans to God does not determine how they will behave in this test. For whomever God is testing, it is sure that they will receive righteous rewards and punishments from God due to their relationship with the just God. Therefore, in this relationship, God is also morally responsible to give just responses to His servants (Attar 2010, p. 86; Güler 2016, pp. 37–55).

In the Qur'an, human freedom is treated as uninterrupted freedom, and the responsibility of a person for the consequences of an action depends on this uninterrupted character of freedom. For instance, in the Quran, God says:

"Say, O Prophet, "O humanity! The truth has surely come to you from your Lord. So whoever chooses to be guided, it is only for their own good. And whoever chooses to stray, it is only to their own loss. And I am not a keeper over you." (10:108)<sup>8</sup>.

This Quranic perspective supports Mu'tazila, as it understands that the freedom for any act is a necessary rational condition of human beings' moral responsibility (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 85). Put differently, the moral responsibility of human beings can only be possible in the existence of the following condition: a person's free will is possible only when other persons are not helped by divine intervention. In this context, we can conclude that, in Mu'tazilite thought, if the free will is to be promoted on behalf of the free-will defense, unlike Sterba, it will not happen in the case where God intervenes in the free will of some people. If free will is to be promoted, this is only possible in the Mu'tazilite formula, in which the moral relationship between human's accountability and God's just responses is not violated. Every essential or insignificant intervention of God towards human freedom is not a promotion of freedom but rather a detrimental one for the Mu'tazila, who consider free will only in the context of divine justice. A God who interferes with human's free will cannot continue to hold humans accountable in a just way. If God occasionally intervened in human actions, there would be no point in divine condemnation and the questioning of it (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 102). Qādi expressed this as follows:

"... the one who is compelled (mulja') not to do a bad or evil act does not perform it actually, because he/she is compelled, and not because it is evil. Yet, it was proved that deserving praise and award follows restraining from doing evil because it is evil, not for anything else..." Quoted by (Attar 2010, p. 93).

As can be understood from this excerpt, for Qādi, an action that will be the subject of divine moral judgment must be an act of complete free will and uninterrupted. This thought cancels out Sterba's strong expectation of divine intervention during one's plan to commit an evil act. In general, Mu'tazila is entirely alien to the discussion of free will independent from a justice-oriented relationship between God and humans. Sterba's advocacy of free will is not based on this kind of relationship and therefore easily suggests that God, such as a just state, must sometimes apply interventions in human actions in order to protect and promote people's freedoms. Yes, that is precisely what a just state does. A just state is responsible for the "unjust distribution of freedom" (Sterba 2019, p. 19). We rightfully expect the police to catch and punish the person before committing any terrible evil. While a divine intervention on free will displaces the justice and responsibility relationship between God and humans, there is no such relationship that can be displaced between the just state and the individual. A just state does not care whether a person is an absolute moral agent. Likewise, superheroes will not be concerned about it, as they are just focused on their strength and what they are capable of. Neither is it related to making

people morally liable. Qādi seemed to express this, at least for his own time: “No one but God can impose genuine moral obligations” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 318).

The Mu’tazilite justice-centered free-will defense needed combined with my structural free-will theory. First, Sterba’s statements should be reconfirmed as follows: “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” (Sterba 2019, p. 23). However, unlike Sterba’s thoughts, God has chosen not to interfere with individual human freedom. It should be understood as a structural non-intervention. This shows the moral justification of this non-intervention from the Mu’tazilite perspective of divine justice. Nevertheless, Sterba seemed to express from the outset that he would not buy this kind of justification because it is not related to the free-will defense. He says: “So if God is justified in permitting such moral evils, it has to be on grounds other than freedom . . . ” (Sterba 2019, p. 23). However, Mu’tazila did not distinguish the free-will defense from the justice of God. Furthermore, Sterba added,

“if there is a justification for the moral evil in the world that renders it compatible with the existence of God, it has to be in terms of securing some other good, or goods . . . If we are successful in finding such a justification, we will have a defense of the degree and amount of moral evil in the world. But it will not be a Free-Will Defense” (Sterba 2019, p. 23).

This judgment of Sterba is a result of his focus on the fact that the free-will defense can only be thought of as a defense in which freedom, as an amount and degree, is promoted. However, such as Mu’tazila, there is the structural defense of free will in which God’s justice as an amount and degree is promoted. In this way, while disassociating the existence of God and evil through the structural defense of free will, it is understood that God’s non-intervention in evil is a structural non-intervention rather than an individual one. This non-intervention is also justified through the moral relationship between God and humans, which appears only in theism. However, this should not be understood as a condition/cause of God’s Own justice. Otherwise, we might end up with an interpretation in which we accuse God of allowing evil only to do His justice.<sup>9</sup> Free will (non-intervention) and justice (intervention) are not in causal relations. Rather, they are two complementary graces in God’s relations with human beings. The simultaneous occurrence of these two blessings inevitably constitutes a violation of one of them. Therefore, they are complementary in the totality of the relationship between God and human beings. When we think in this totality, evil is not a condition/cause of God’s justice, but a possibility in free will.

In this way, the structural defense of free will can only be rationally defended in a totality in which no theistic elements, such as God’s justice, human responsibilities, and human ontological and metaphysical status against God, are overlooked. At this point, the example that Silvia Jonas used between a chess piece and a chess game is very useful in understanding the relationships between the existence of evil, the structural understanding of evil, and the theistic explanations of evil. She stated:

“Can we meaningfully imagine a chess piece, for example, one that plays the role of a rook, independently of a chess game? No, we cannot. This is because, in the absence of other pieces, a chessboard, and two players, we wouldn’t know how to think about its moves, its position, etc. In other words, we can only comprehend a chess piece like the rook in conjunction with all other constituents of the game, just like we can only understand the number three in relation to the rest of the natural-number-structure” (Jonas 2018, p. 162).

As in the case of the Jonas’ analogy, the free-will defense is not logically possible when it is isolated from its structure in which free will is exercised. In the structural free-will defense, the existence of an individual evil cannot be understood without the reference to the structural body of free will. This brings us to the logical possibility of all, either good or bad, the fundamental feature of the mundane life. In religion, the mundane life is not independent of God’s just rewards and just punishments. Otherwise, when these

two are not considered together, the question of God's morality arises, even if the free will created by God is understood. Ignoring the integrity of the theistic structure in interpreting evil will result in a failed interpretation of the relationship between the existence of evil and God.

### 5.1.2. Evil in Terms of God's Power

In Qādi's understanding, the fact that God is not associated with any evil and man is positioned as solely responsible for his evil acts shows that God cannot be blamed in two ways. First, because God is not responsible for the evil act, he cannot be blamed for it. Here, all responsibility belongs to the person with free will, as stated above. Second, God cannot be blamed for allowing or not intervening in evil acts. This issue is unrelated to the omnipotence of God for Qādi. He made an obvious statement by saying that divine will and divine power have nothing to do with evil: "When we describe God as just and wise, we mean that he never commits ugly acts, does not choose ugly deeds, does not violate what is obligatory for him, and everything he does is good" (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 8). Qadi understands that even though God does not perform evil actions does not mean that He is unable to perform them (Watt 1944, p. 81). Perhaps this is the subject closest to the problem of evil in the Islamic tradition as in Western philosophy. Qādi stated quite clearly the following:

"They said that if God could do ugly deeds, it would be obligatory for him to do it. We say: Not every person capable of evil has to do it. Do you not see that we sometimes sit even though we can stand and sometimes remain silent even though we can speak? How do you deduce that the omnipotent must do what is necessary in any case? For example, God can cause the apocalypse right now, but we cannot say that He is not able to do so just because He did not do it." (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 30).

He also said:

"Your Lord does not wrong anyone. If He cannot do this, it would not make sense for Him to boast of not doing oppression. Just as . . . it does not make sense for a disabled man to boast of not climbing walls and giving up raiding his neighbors' houses because he is not mighty, so is the situation here." (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, pp. 30–32).

According to Qādi, God's inaction to perform evil is explained not as a weakness of divine power but as God's knowledge of the evil of evil acts and not being obliged to perform evil (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 80). The same is true of God's inaction in preventing a terrible evil. Again, we see that a power-centered moral relationship has not been established between God and humans. Therefore, both Hume's critique of the relationship between God and evil and Sterba's critique that, despite being omnipotent, God does not prevent terrible evil is unrelated in terms of God's power. As a matter of fact, according to Qādi, for instance, God cannot be held responsible for the burning of a child in a tandoor. It is not the act of "burning" created by God that should be blamed here; the one who is responsible is the person who brings him close to the fire or throws him into the tandoor (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 58). We also see that the Qur'an supports this perspective. For example, "that is because of what your hands have sent ahead, and because God is not tyrannical to the servants" (8: 51). Another verse says: "Whoever does good, it is to their own benefit. And whoever does evil, it is to their own loss. Your Lord is never unjust to His creation" (41:46). Qādi underlined that if God both makes man responsible for his actions and simultaneously intervenes in his actions simply because of His omnipotence, the test of humans will become absurd. Such a contradictory act of God would also make many of God's interactions with humans absurd, whereas God commands and prohibits, sends prophets commanding good and forbidding evil, and gives moral responses in the form of interrogation, reckoning, and punishment (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 85).

### 5.1.3. Evil and the Theory of *Aslah*

Another area where the idea of divine justice extends is the principle that God would not refrain from doing what was obligatory for Himself. What acts of God cannot be thought of as reluctant to do? This area is related to the theory of *aslah*, a well-known concept in Islamic moral theology. The word *aslah* means “the most appropriate, most useful, the best thing about the human” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 1, p. 216). As the second way to promote freedom in the world, let us recall Sterba’s critique that God should restrict some significant freedoms, but He does not (Sterba 2019, p. 12). This criticism seems to be closely related to the theory of *aslah*, and it is possible to formulate the question as follows: Does God have to do what is best for His servants? The following statements of Qādi are highly relevant to this question:

“They said: Surely, the fact that God knows the evil and oppression in the life of this world, and that He has the power to prevent them, but does not prevent them, indicates that He has willed them. The thing that indicates this from the sensible world is this: Surely if the king does not prevent any evil that he knows from his people and army, although he has the power, this attitude indicates that he wants the evil to happen.” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2. p. 272).

Qādi answered this with an example:

“Because even though they know that Jews and Christians under the leadership of both imams and Muslims do not prevent them from going to synagogues and churches, it does not mean that they want them to continue . . . We do not find it appropriate that omnipotent God should prevent unbelievers from disbelief as long as they continue their responsibilities. Because here is the abolition of responsibility and the annulment of deserving praise and blame. How can their saying “God can prevent them” be true in this situation? He does not do this so that the responsibility would not be lifted and the reward and punishment would not be canceled.” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2, p. 274).

As seen, Qādi rejected the understanding of the theory of *aslah* as the expectation of God’s intervention in all kinds of evil. Let us recall here Sterba’s criticism of why God does not guarantee well-deserved rights by restricting undeserved rights (Sterba 2019, pp. 21–23). Qādi’s attitude towards *aslah* is also valid for this criticism of Sterba. Unlike Sterba, Qādi responded to this criticism of all kinds of rights that humans deserve or do not deserve, again within the scope of divine justice and human’s accountability (Aytepe 2017, pp. 242–44). Therefore, the issue of preventing terrible evil to guarantee deserved rights is not a duty of God.

Nevertheless, Qādi limited the theory of *aslah* only to the moral and religious sphere. In the moral and religious field, God’s obligation to conduct what is best for humans is also a logical result of divine justice. God is responsible for providing a suitable and facilitating environment for humans to fulfill their responsibilities. In this regard, Qādi said: “We regard grace as obligatory upon God in supporting the responsible persons or removing their hindrance to choosing the right”. In the same place, he also said: “Grace means that which makes one choose the moral and avoid evil, or make one more inclined to choose the moral or abandon the evil” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2013, vol. 2. p. 354). Elsewhere, Qādi referred to these divine supports as the physical and cognitive power and necessary tools that God has given to humans, removing the obstacles to finding the truth, giving health and sufficient time, instilling goodness in the mind of humans, sending a prophet to humans, and receiving rewards, praise, and punishment both in this world and in the next world as a result of their actions (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 100).

According to Qādi, God does not act in a way that distort humans’ good behaviors. At this point, Qādi made the following analogy: “When a person invites someone to dinner sincerely, he/she should do things that will make it easier for him/her to accept the invitation rather than things that will cause him/her difficulties. God also similarly treats His servants” (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 114). It also states in the Qur’an that it is easier

for people to comply with God’s call for good: “Had it not been for God’s grace and mercy, you would have followed Satan—except for a few”(4:83)<sup>10</sup>. For Mu’tazila, the only area where God can be accused is not related to His allowing evil but to His negligence to create the necessary environment and good cognitive and spiritual readiness not to commit any evil. It would be a moral weakness for God to withhold such graces from His servants. A just God is free from such weaknesses (Kadi Abdülcebbar 2017, p. 100).

To include the theory of *aslah*, which is valid only in the religious field, in my defense of structural free will, the morally obligatory *aslah* to God is the giving of suitable environments that will make humans more prone to goodness. In other words, with the theistic content of structural free will, human beings have been structurally manipulated for the better. God has structurally given the same blessings to every human being, and therefore, each person is inherently more motivated to perform good than to perform evil. Examples such as God’s creating conscience in man and sending prophets to warn people can be understood in this context. The Prophet’s calling people to the good without abolishing their freedom of choice is an example of manipulating this structural free will for the better. The person who chooses to perform evil has the opportunity to perform this act, and the fact that structural free will has been manipulated for the good does not eliminate this possibility.

## 6. Conclusions

In this study, I suggested a revision to Plantinga’s free-will defense in order to meet Sterba’s two significant criticisms on the problem of evil, the failure of the free will defense in justifying the amount and degree of evil in the world, and indefensibility of a morally good God allowing terrible evil to occur. In response to both criticisms, I proposed two modifications to Plantinga’s free-will defense: understanding free will as structural free will, and complementing the structural free will with a specific moral theology. By understanding structural free will as the conditions in which human acts occur, I disassociated free will from any individual actions and its results. Structural free will refers to the possibility of all, either evil or good. Therefore, God cannot be held responsible for the moral consequences of any evil act of an individual who uses the freedom provided by this structure. By a specific moral theology, I proposed a moral defense of the structural free will that makes terrible evil possible as a human choice. Although human beings are independent in their acts in this world due to the structural character of free will, they will receive righteous rewards and punishments from God, due to their relationship with the just God. This justice of God does not interfere with structural free will, nor does it leave victims alone with their sufferings.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Against the logical argument of evil, Rowe develops an evidential objection. For him, although the existence of evil is not logically incompatible with the existence of God, it is still a rational basis for atheists’ arguments. Rowe says: “... there are instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitted some evil equally bad or worse”. (Rowe 1979, p. 338).

<sup>2</sup> Here, I am aware that Plantinga’s free-will defense was not designed for the logical harmony of God’s existence and the terrible evils Sterba mentions. In this study, however, I suggest that an answer to Sterba’s critique can be integrated into Plantinga’s free-will defense. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>3</sup> For a useful introduction for Mu’tazila, see (Ormsby 1984, pp. 16–30).

<sup>4</sup> From now on, I call him as Qādi.

- <sup>5</sup> (Plantinga [1974] 2001, p. 29). Italics are in the original text.
- <sup>6</sup> Hume says here: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?” (Hume 1998, p. 63).
- <sup>7</sup> In this study, I am not advocating a deistic understanding of God when I argue that God does not interfere with free-will and that God is only in a structural relationship with the acts of human beings. In my understanding, God is structurally in contact with the world and human beings at all times. God is recreating this structural relationship moment by moment. So the God I’m trying to understand is still the God of the Abrahamic religions. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.
- <sup>8</sup> The translations used from the website (<https://quran.com/>) (accessed on 20 July 2022). Also see similar verses in the Quran for example; 18:29, 25:57, 39:15, 41:40, 73:19, 74:37, 76:29, 80:12, 81:28.
- <sup>9</sup> God’s justice can be understood in two ways. The first is that God gives a reward to the victims of free will He created. Second, it is human’s responsibility how to use free will, and therefore God rewards those who are aggrieved as a result of human action. Reward and punishment, which are God’s justice, are the result of free will, something God created. Let us imagine, human beings might not have used their free will for evil. In this case, God’s punishment ceases to be an inevitable result. So, punishment is only an option. As Keith Ward wisely points out that we can consistently think that God creates the possibilities of evils without wanting actual evils to happen. (Ward 2007, pp. 48–49; Søvik 2011, p. 43). I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.
- <sup>10</sup> See also another examples in the Quran: 16:18, 28:73,30:23, 49:8, 3:152, 3:164.

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# Is Theism Incompatible with the Pauline Principle?

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**Abstract:** This paper criticises James Sterba's use of the Pauline principle to formulate a logical version of the problem of evil. Sterba's argument contains a crucial premise: If human agents are always prohibited from doing some action, God is also prohibited from doing that action. This implies that the Pauline principle applies to both Divine and human agents. I argue that any Theist who affirms a divine command theory of ethics can consistently and coherently deny this premise and its implication. If a divine command theory is coherent, a theist can affirm that the Pauline principle governs human agents' actions but not God's actions. I will also criticise Sterba's criticisms of a divine command theory and argue that they fail.

**Keywords:** divine command theory; evil; god; sterba; planting; mackie; pauline principle

## 1. Introduction

Mackie (1955) argued that "The traditional problem of evil" showed that "several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another" (200). If a "wholly good omnipotent God" exists, then it follows logically that evil does not. Theists believe in God and evil, so their fundamental beliefs are inconsistent.

Mackie's conclusion was that the theist's essential beliefs entail a contradiction. Most philosophers of religion have rejected Mackie's conclusion. First, Plantinga (1974, pp. 10–24) pointed out that there is no *explicit* contradiction between the claim that God exists and the claim that evil exists. Consequently, Mackie needed to explicate premises that bring out this implicit contradiction. Nor will just any premise do the job. To show that nonexistence of evil is *entailed* by "essential theological doctrine" these premises must be express propositions that are either necessarily true, essential doctrines of theism, or logical consequences of such propositions (Plantinga 1967, p. 117). Mackie failed to identify such premises. While he claimed to cite only "quasi logical truths". He relied on controversial moral claims which are neither necessarily true nor an essential part of theism, nor claims a theist accepts or is committed to.

Second, it appears one can prove that the existence of God and evil are logically consistent. To prove two propositions are consistent, one needs only to come up with a logically possible situation where both would be true (Plantinga 1986, pp. 122–23). Consider Augustine's thesis: "[God] judged it better to bring good out of evil, than not to permit any evil to exist" (Augustine 420). This claim would, if true, entail that God and evil exist. So long as Augustine's thesis is logically possible, it follows that God and evil are logically consistent. In a later monograph, Mackie (1982, p. 154) himself concluded, "we can concede that the problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another". For these reasons, more recent defenders of the argument of evil have tended to offer inductive or abductive versions of the argument.

James Sterba's monograph "Is God logically Possible" is an exception to this trend. Sterba believes a logical version of the argument from evil is defensible. Theists do affirm a contradiction. The implicit contradiction can be explicated by appealing to an important principle widely accepted in moral and political philosophy—the Pauline principle: the principle that it is wrong to do evil so that good may come (Sterba 2019). The theist is committed to this principle, and it rules out the possibility of Augustine's theses being true.

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## 2. What Is the Pauline Principle

Before examining Sterba's argument, let us clarify the Pauline principle. The Pauline principle receives its name from the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the Romans, Paul said: "And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), 'Let us do evil that good may come'? Their condemnation is just" (Rom 3:8 NASB). In this passage, Paul rejects the imperative: let us do evil that good may come of it. Paul contends that people who accept this principle are endorsing something immoral. What does he mean?

The context is illustrative. Paul has just addressed the question: does Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant they made with God mean that God will be unfaithful to his promises? His answer is an emphatic no. God remains faithful to his covenant, despite human unfaithfulness. In fact, Israel's violation of God's commands tends to bring out and emphasises God's faithfulness. It shows that God is faithful even when humans are not. However, this answer invites a challenge. Does that not mean disobedience to God's commands has had good consequences? However, if disobeying God's commands has good consequences, does that not mean breaking them was permissible? Would that not give us a valid excuse, or justification, for violating his law?

The quoted passage above is Paul's response to this challenge. He notes that the objection contains an assumption. It is permissible to perform an action forbidden by the Torah if we know good consequences will follow from it. Paul sees this assumption as false; he thinks it is a dangerous rationalisation. If God forbids a certain type of act, then actions of that type are morally wrong regardless of the consequences. The fact that that kind of act may, on occasion, have good consequences does not excuse or justify it. These actions remain forbidden *regardless or independent of whether they have good consequences*.

Paul's views on this matter were probably nuanced. Paul was a Jewish rabbi. Jewish Halakah affirmed that the saving of life takes precedence over virtually all other commandments. According to the principle: *Pikuach Nefesh*, almost all the commandments of the Torah are rendered inapplicable in a critical situation, where obeying them would hinder an agent's ability to save himself or someone else. Jesus appears to have accepted this principle<sup>1</sup>, and Paul, a Jewish rabbi, probably did. However, *Pikuach Nefesh* is not a justification to violate a rule whenever one perceives good consequences will occur. The justification appeals to one concrete foreseeable short-term consequence: where human beings will die, and the only realistic way to save a person's life is to perform the prohibited action. Moreover, *Pikuach Nefesh* did not apply *all* the commandments. There were commandments that one could never disobey at all, even if doing so would save a life—specifically, the commandments prohibiting murder, sexual immorality, and idolatry. One was not allowed to kill an innocent patient and harvest his organs even though doing will save lives. Nor could you not commit rape or adultery or apostate and engage in idolatry because someone threatened to harm you if you did not. These rules continue to apply and binding even if we perceive the consequences of breaking them are good.

Consequently, when Paul rejected the slogan "do evil so that good may come," he reflected a conviction deep in Jewish and Christian thought; this intuition can be broadly understood as deontological or anti-consequentialist in spirit.<sup>2</sup> Many types of actions are prohibited by virtue of their description as certain types of actions, regardless of any further consequences.<sup>3</sup> The fact that we perceive that, on some occasions, an act that falls under that description will result in some greater good does not justify or excuse it. If an action falls under a description that we are morally prohibited from doing, we must not do it, even if we perceive that good results will follow from doing so.

This intuition is often used in arguments against act utilitarianism. Consider a famous case. A doctor secretly kills one patient and transplants his organs—his heart, kidney, liver, eyes, and so on—to a different person who needs them. Alternatively, cases where a sheriff frames an innocent person for a crime to deter rioting lynch mob from killing, maiming, and destroying property. Many people have strong intuitions that it is wrong to do these actions, even though doing so seems, on the face of it, to have good consequences. Doing so violates specific moral rules, such as not murdering or do not frame innocent people we

should obey even if we perceive that good consequences might result from breaking them. Much opposition to utilitarianism, particularly in religious circles, stems from the power of these intuitions.

### 3. Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil

Sterba repeatedly utilises the Pauline principle to construct a logical problem of evil. Throughout his argument, Sterba repeatedly appeals to "Moral Evil Prevention Requirements," which he justifies by saying, "This requirement is a minimal exceptionless component of the Pauline principle". Requirements Sterba believes God violates in permitting evils in the world. Sterba does believe there are exceptions to the Pauline principle he discusses exceptions to the principle where the "evil done" inflicts trivial harm, the harm is repairable, or the good that comes is substantive. However, these do not affect his central argument, which is that it is wrong to do evil for a core case of actions, even if one perceives that good will come of it.

However, strictly speaking, Sterba's views on the principle are irrelevant. The conclusion being defended is that *theism* is logically inconsistent. So, the question is whether theists accept or are committed to the principle. For this reason, the fact that the Pauline principle is endorsed by Paul and is deeply rooted in Christian and Jewish thought is important. Sterba highlights a tension or apparent contradiction between moral beliefs a theist typically accepts and his belief that God exists.

Here is the problem: certain evils occur in the world. God is omniscient and omnipotent, knows about and has the power to stop these things from happening, but he does not. Suppose Augustine's thesis is true; God judged it better to bring good out of evil than to permit no evil to exist. In that case, God would be "doing evil" so that good will come of it. One cannot claim that God and evil co-exist if one also accepts the Pauline principle.

Sterba spells this problem out as follows: First, he argues that the Pauline principle applies to specific acts of permitting evil:

So then let's consider the second type of case where God's permitting a significant evil is the means to provide some significant good rather than to prevent some significant evil. Consider a case involving just human agents. Suppose parents you know were to permit their children to be brutally assaulted to make possible the soul-making of the person who would attempt to comfort their children after they have been assaulted or to make possible the soul-making that their children themselves could experience by coming to forgive their assailants. Would you think the parents were morally justified in so acting? Hardly. Here you surely would agree with the Pauline Principle's prohibition of such actions. Permitting one's children to be brutally assaulted is an action that is wrong in itself, and not something that could be permitted for the sake of whatever good consequences it might happen to have. That is why the Pauline Principle prohibits any appeal to good consequences to justify such actions in such cases. So for human agents, given that such intrinsically wrongful actions would significantly conflict with the basic interests of their victims, there are no exceptions to the Pauline Principle for cases of this sort where the significant evil that is to be done is just a means to securing a good to which the beneficiary is not entitled.

Second, he argues that if the Pauline principle prohibits human beings from permitting evils like this, it must also prohibit God from doing so (Sterba 2019, p. 57).

Moreover, if there are no exceptions to the Pauline Principle for humans in such cases, then the same should also hold true for God. 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. So, for contexts where the issue is whether to permit a significant evil to achieve some additional good, God, like us, would never be justified in permitting evil in such cases. (p. 57)

According to Sterba, the Theist is committed to the following five propositions.

[P1] There are many types of actions that human agents are always morally prohibited in virtue of their description as certain types of actions, regardless of any further good consequences they perceive will follow from these actions.

[P2] Acts permitting people to inflict significant harm on others fall into this class of actions.

[P3] If human agents are always prohibited from doing some action, then God is prohibited from doing that action.

[P4] If an omniscient and omnipotent person exists, then he permits people to do acts that inflict significant harm on others.

[P5] If a morally perfect person exists, he will not do any morally prohibited action.

These five propositions, however, entail a contradiction. The theist, therefore, has an incoherent set of beliefs. He cannot consistently believe that God exists, the kinds of evils we see in the world, and affirm the Pauline principle.

#### 4. A “Divine Command Defense” Response to Sterba’s Argument

I believe a Theist can coherently affirm the Pauline principle by rejecting [P3]. I will make two responses. First, I will argue that any theist that accepts a divine command theory of ethics can (and should) reject it [P3]. Second, I argue that a theist who is a divine command theorist can coherently claim that the Pauline principle is a constraint on the actions of human agents but not a restraint on God’s actions. While it is morally prohibited for human agents to do evil so that good may come, God is not subject to such prohibition.

My argument can be seen as offering a “divine command” defence to Sterba’s logical problem of evil. In the literature on the problem of evil, a defence is a logically possible or coherent model which, if true, would allow both God and the kind of evils specified to co-exist. It is unnecessary to maintain that the model is true to show that the two propositions are logically consistent. The model simply has to be possible or coherent. While I do believe a divine command theory is true. I will argue here that it is possible, and this model of the relationship between God’s commands and morality is coherent. If I am correct, a Theist can consistently accept the Pauline principle and that God permits people to inflict significant harm on others.

##### 4.1. *Divine Command Theories and God’s Obligations*

My first response is that any theist who accepts a divine command theory of ethics has reasons to reject [P3]. According to [P3]: If humans are always morally prohibited from doing some action, God is also prohibited from doing that action. There are two assumptions packed into this claim. The first is that both God and human beings have moral duties. Deontological properties such as being required, prohibited, wrong, and morally right apply to both human and divine actions. The second is that the content of these prohibitions is the same in both cases. I maintain that any theist who maintains a divine command theory has reasons to be sceptical of both these assumptions. Consequently, if a divine command theory is coherent, one can consistently deny [P2].

##### 4.1.1. Does God Have Moral Duties?

Consider the assumption that God and humans have moral obligations and duties. In an earlier paper, I criticised deontological versions of the problem of evil for making this assumption. Standard versions of divine command meta-ethics hold that the property of being morally required is (identical to) the property of being commanded by God. I argued that one implication of a divine command theory of ethics is that God does not have obligations, and hence, strictly speaking, nothing he does can be right or wrong (Flannagan 2011). Craig notes, “nor, plausibly, is God bound by moral duties since he does not issue commands to himself”. (Craig 2003, p. 529). Similarly, in an article defending the claim

that God has no obligations, William Alston states, “we can hardly suppose that God is obliged to love his creatures because he commands himself to do so” (Alston 2005, p. 204).

Craig and Alston’s arguments seem sound. If the divine command theory of ethics is true, then a person  $p$  is obligated to do an action  $a$ , if and only if God commands  $p$  to do  $a$ . It follows, then, that God is obligated to do  $a$ , if and only if, God issues commands to himself. Moreover, if a divine command theory of ethics is true, people engage in wrongdoing if and only if they disobey a command that God issues to them. Hence, if the divine command theory of ethics is true, God can do wrong only if he (i) commands himself to do something and (ii) proceeds to disobey this command.

Neither of these conditions seems likely. It is unlikely that God issues commands to himself. Why would he need to? If he wanted to do something, would he not just do it? Moreover, it seems absurd to suggest that even if God issued commands to himself, he would disobey them. That would suggest that God displays some form of weakness of the will, and it is not clear that weakness of the will is compatible with a supremely excellent being such as God.

#### 4.1.2. Is the Content of God and Human Obligations the Same?

Similar things can be said about the second assumption, that the content of God and human obligations are the same. Recently, Tony Alimi has argued that a divine command theorist can and should hold that God has moral obligations (Alimi 2020). Alimi argues that a divine command theory sees moral requirements as a kind of social requirement. The word social requirement comes from Adams (1999). It refers to interpersonal demands one person makes on another and holds them to account for performing. Human beings can and do make such demands upon each other which are seen in social practices of demanding, commanding, blaming, punishing, sanctioning, and so forth. Divine command theorists understand moral requirements as idealised social requirements. It is implausible to claim that the property of being morally required is identical to the property of being socially required by any actual human agent. However, Divine command theorists contend that it is plausible to identify the property of being morally required with the property of being socially required by an idealised agent: one who is fully informed, impartial benevolent and so forth. If God exists, he best fulfils the role of such an agent.

Alimi suggests that a similar line of argument should be extended to the practice of promising. Humans have a social practice of imposing social requirements on others via commanding, blaming, and so forth. However, they also practice imposing social requirements upon themselves by issuing promises or making covenants, while it is implausible to identify the moral obligations of human agents with whatever that agent covenants to do, the covenants or promises of an idealised agent are a different matter. Alimi argues that humans’ moral requirements should be identified with commands God issues to humans, whereas God’s obligations are identified with his covenants. In this analysis, God has self-imposed duties; his moral goodness involves fidelity to his promises or covenants. God is the source of all obligations, his own and human. However, they are generated in different ways (Alimi 2020).

Let us assume Alimi is correct here, and a divine command theorist can coherently claim that God has “self-imposed” duties of this sort. [P3] assumes the content of these obligations is the same. Whatever God commands human beings to do, he also binds himself to do for human beings by covenant. Is this plausible? I do not think it is and certainly do not think a divine command theorist is committed to this claim. At first glance, the claim seems false. God commands husbands not to commit adultery. Does he make a covenant to not commit adultery on the off chance he might be tempted to cheat on his wife with another woman? Does God promise to honour his mother and father to ensure he will live long in the land and prosper? Or does God covenant to “submit to the governing authorities”?

These conclusions seem absurd. God does not have a wife, nor is he married; in fact, he probably is not literally male, female, or sexual. Nor does God have parents, nor is

his welfare threatened by living in a society where children do not support their aged parents. Nor is God subject to human authorities. These differences between God and human beings mean that many paradigmatic examples of commands God gives to humans are inapplicable to him. One significant difference between God and human beings is that humans are fallible. The fallibility of human agents means that many things God prohibits humans from doing are not things he would prohibit himself from doing.

This last point is worth elaborating on a bit. Tuckness notes that many 18th-century divine command theorists adopted what he called the *legislative perspective*, whereby “one can determine the correct moral action by asking what moral code a benevolent God would promulgate to *human beings*” (Tuckness 2021, p. 8). That the code is promulgated to *human beings* is important. “A crucial feature of the legislative point of view is imagining morality as a code highly analogous to a legal code such that one must consider effectiveness of sanctions, fallibility and bias in enforcement, likelihood of popular acceptance, and so on” (p. 87). Tuckness adds:

“One can even stipulate that God, as a benevolent legislator, must attend to the same kinds of considerations as a human legislator. The divine moral code’s content must account for the *selfishness, fallibility, and other limitations* of the mere mortals on whom it is imposed”. (emphasis added) (p. 8)

Discussing Locke, Tuckness adds:

“Because God relates to the law of nature as a legislator, He cannot treat the law of nature merely as a set of principles of evaluation. The law of nature is also an instruction to *fallible persons* to act in specific ways, and as a rational legislator, God considers the imperfections of the beings who will execute the law on Earth”. (Tuckness 2000, pp. 370–71)

A divine command theorist understands human morality as commands that God: an impartial benevolent agent has promulgated for *human beings*. Because humans have certain imperfections, are fallible, partial, suffer from weakness of the will, and are prone to rationalisation, God accommodates or adapts the commands he issues to take this into account. Consequently, what a loving and impartial person commands a human to do is not necessarily the same as what he would do. One cannot extrapolate from the fact that God prohibits human agents from doing some act that God is also prohibited from doing it.

#### 4.2. Divine Command Theories and the Pauline Principle: A Historical Model

One may argue that the above line of argument is inadequate. Granted that some of the duties God imposes on humans would not apply to God. However, this might only apply to impossible or inappropriate actions for God. God cannot be expected to do or be obligated to do what is impossible, inapplicable (or inappropriate for a being such as God. Requirements to refrain from adultery, honour one’s parents and obey the governing authorities would be examples. However, where actions are possible, applicable, or relevant for God—these would constitute self-imposed duties. Could the Pauline principle not be an example?

This reply is too quick. My point is not just that some of the duties God imposes on humans would not apply to God. I also explained why this is the case. Some duties God imposes on humans do not apply to God or are inappropriate for God because God differs from human beings in certain respects. I stressed that one crucial difference relevant here is that humans are fallible. The fallibility of human agents means many requirements that God imposes on humans are inapplicable when applied to God.

This brings me to my second response. My second response is to sketch a model of the relationship between God and morality that, if coherent, enables one to claim that human beings are prohibited from doing evil and that good may come, and God is not. According to this model, the reason human beings are prohibited from doing evil that God may come is because of their fallibility. This model is found in the writings of George Berkeley. However, it is not unique to him. It represents the standard way Theists thought

about God's commands and morality in the 18th century. Brogan (1959) argues that this is the position of John Locke. Loudon (1995) finds elements of it in Butler's writings. It is found more clearly in the writings of people such as Daniel Waterland (1730), John Gay (1731), Thomas Rutherford (1744), John Brown (1751), and Some Jenyns (1757). Edmund Law (1758), Abraham Tucker (1768). It finds its most systematic exposition in the work of William Paley (1785) and John Austin (1832).

Berkeley's divine command theory is expounded in his sermons on *Passive Obedience*. Berkeley states that we "denominate" things "*Good or Evil*". As they are fitted to augment or impair our Happiness". By contrast, "moral goodness" consists "in conformity "to the laws of God". Berkeley appears to use the phrase "good or evil" to refer to the concept of "wellbeing" or "prudential value": what is good or an individual. By "moral goodness," Berkeley had a deontological concept in mind. The term is used synonymously with doing one's "duty" following "natural law," following "moral rules," or "precepts". By which actions are praised or blamed. When Berkeley contends that "Moral Goodness" consists of "Conformity to the Laws of God". He identifies himself as a divine command theorist about deontological properties (Berkeley 1712).

Berkeley articulated the relationship between moral(deontological) and non-moral (prudential)goodness in a dense passage:

Now, as God is a Being of Infinite Goodness, it is plain the end he proposes is *Good*. But God enjoying in himself all possible Perfection, it follows that it is not his own good, but that of his Creatures. Again, the Moral Actions of Men are entirely terminated within themselves, so as to have no influence on the other orders of Intelligences or reasonable Creatures: The end therefore to be procured by them, can be no other than the good of Men. But as nothing in a natural State can entitle one Man more than another to the favour of God, except only Moral Goodness, which consisting in a Conformity to the Laws of God, doth presuppose the being of such Laws, and Law ever supposing an end, to which it guides our actions, it follows that Antecedent to the end proposed by God, no distinction can be conceived between Men; that end therefore itself or general design of Providence is not determined or limited by any Respect of Persons: It is not therefore the private Good of this or that Man, Nation or Age, but the general wellbeing of all Men, of all Nations, of all Ages of the World, which God designs should be procured by the concurring Actions of each individual. (Berkeley 1712)

Because God is impartial and benevolent, his goal in issuing the commands he does is that human beings will collectively promote the happiness of his creatures impartially considered. Berkeley proceeds to identify two ways God could promote this goal.

Either (a) God commanded "everyone upon each particular Occasion, to consult the Publick Good" directly "and always to do that, which to him shall seem in the present time and circumstances, most to conduce to it". Without the injunction of any specific universal Rules of Morality" Or (b) God enjoined "the Observation of some determinate, established Laws, which, if Universally practised, have from the Nature of things an Essential fitness to procure the wellbeing of Mankind".

Berkeley offered "several strong Objections". Against the first of these methods. One can discern five such objections in his writing. First, we lack knowledge of the long-term consequences of actions and the relevant counterfactuals and cannot accurately make interpersonal utility judgments. For this reason, it is easier "to Judge with certainty, whether such or such an Action be a Transgression of this or that Precept than whether it will be attended with better or ill Consequence". Second, even if we could calculate the long-term consequences of our actions, doing so would Take up too much time "to be of Use in the affairs of Life". Third, the rule "do what you believe will promote the public good" is too vague, indeterminate, and imprecise to serve as a standard for evaluating, praising, and blaming the behaviour of others. Fourth, this indeterminacy means we cannot predict how others will behave. Consequently, we could not coordinate our actions with them. Fifth, human beings lack the relevant "Disinterestedness" (impartiality) to be able to promote

the common good directly. For these reasons, Berkeley concludes that God will follow the second method. He will promulgate “fixed determine rules” which “if Universally practised, have from the Nature of things an Essential fitness to procure the wellbeing of Mankind”.

In identifying these two ways God’s commands could promote the public good. Berkeley anticipated the distinction between rule and act utilitarianism. His arguments against the latter anticipate the standard self-effacing objections to utilitarianism. He saw that anyone committed to promoting the happiness of others would not command fallible people like us to accept act utilitarianism as a rule or decision procedure. Public endorsement and acceptance of the rule “do whatever maximises utility” would not, in practice, maximise utility. If fallible people like us attempted to determine what to do on a case-by-case basis based on our assessment of the consequences, we would fail to maximise utility. Instead, an impartial benevolent person would promulgate a *deontological* code that would maximise welfare if fallible agents like us attempted to follow and internalise it. Acts are morally wrong if they violate this code, even on occasions where agents perceive that violating the rules will have good consequences. Berkeley explains:

It must indeed be allowed, that the rational Deduction of those Laws is founded in the intrinsic Tendency they have to promote the Well-being of Mankind, on Condition they are universally and constantly observed. But though it afterward comes to pass, that they accidentally fail of that End, or even promote the contrary, they are nevertheless binding, as hath been already proved. . . . That whole Difficulty may be resolved by the following Distinction. In framing the general Laws of Nature, it is granted, we must be entirely guided by the Publick Good of Mankind, but not in the ordinary Moral Actions of our Lives. Such a Rule, if universally observed, hath from the Nature of Things, a necessary Fitness to promote the general Well-being of Mankind; therefore it is a Law of Nature: This is good Reasoning. But if we should say such an Action doth in this Instance produce much Good, and no Harm to Mankind; therefore it is lawful: This were wrong. The Rule is framed with respect to the Good of Mankind, but our Practice must be always shaped immediately by the Rule”. (Berkeley 1712)<sup>4</sup>

Berkeley refers to “laws which if Universally practiced” or “observed by all Men” or “universally observed”. This sounds like Berkeley believes an act is morally wrong if and only if it is forbidden by rules which will procure well-being if they are universally *complied* with. However, his argument suggests he had something closer to acceptance utility in mind. His argument considers the consequences of people sincerely attempting to follow the rule but failing to do so due to limited knowledge and time. It considers the results of people using it as a rule for evaluating others’ behaviour, praising and blaming people according to their best fallible judgments. He also considers the expectation effects of attempting to coordinate behaviour. In doing so, he envisages a society where the expectation is that everyone will try to follow the rules but may misapply them. Those who receive the commands in question are fallible, prone to error bias, have weakness of the will, and so on.

Philosophers have found the mix of rule utilitarian and divine command ethics in Berkeley’s thought puzzling. Stephen Darwall (2006) argues that the best way to interpret Berkeley is to distinguish between his metaethical and normative theories. His metaethical theory attempts “to answer metaphysical questions of what goodness and rightness, respectively, are” (p. 314). On the other hand, his normative theory “concerns what actions or things are good right” (p. 314). Berkeley proposed a divine command *metaethical* theory; “moral goodness consists” in “Conformity to the Laws of God”. However, Berkeley’s *normative* theory was rule-utilitarian. The property of being morally required is identical to the property of being commanded by God. What God commands us to do, is follow a code of rules, the widespread acceptance of which would promote happiness. For Berkeley, this normative theory is a plausible implication of his meta-ethical theory. Suppose the property of being morally required just is the property of being commanded by God. In

that case, moral properties will supervene upon the rules promulgated by an impartial benevolent, fully informed person.

Berkeley clearly defends the Pauline principle. He maintains that God's law prohibits us from doing certain actions even when we perceive that doing them has good consequences. However, God prohibits human agents from doing this because of their fallibility. Human agents lack the ability or time to make long-term utility calculations, are partial, and cannot predict how others will behave or see the sincerity of their reasons. These limitations mean that human agents will not promote common well-being if they attempt to do evil that good may come. However, God is not fallible in these ways. God is impartial; he can instantaneously make long-term utility calculations; he does not need to co-originate his actions and can infallibly predict how people behave. Consequently, there is no reason to think he cannot or would not do evil so that good will come of it.

I have defended two claims. First, I have argued that if a divine command theory is true, then [P3] is false. It is questionable that God has duties, and even if he does, it is dubious that what God commands fallible human beings to do is the same as what he commits to doing. Second, I have sketched a model of divine command theory that applies this point to the Pauline principle. In this model, God commands humans to follow the Pauline principle because of their fallibility. Because he is not fallible in this way, he is not required to follow this principle. If this model or something like it is coherent, then a theist can consistently accept the Pauline principle as a constraint on human action without contending it applies to God.

### 5. Is a Divine Command Theory Coherent?

However, is this model coherent? I believe it is and have argued for this conclusion elsewhere. Here, I will limit myself to Sterba's key objections to a divine command theory.

#### 5.1. Interpretative Problems

Sterba asks what role humans play in interpreting God's commands. If God has issued commands to human beings, then "God as a one-person legislature with ourselves having a role analogous to the judiciary and executive branches of government". However;

[t]he U.S. judiciary in interpreting the laws often tries to determine what purpose the legislature had in passing a particular law, and whether that purpose accords with the U.S. Constitution. And sometimes the US judiciary strikes down laws passed by the legislature as unconstitutional. According to divine command theory, however, there would be no comparable role for humans to have with respect to the commands of God. We couldn't, for example, strike down any of God's commands because they failed to accord with some independent moral standard. Thus, our role in interpreting and applying God's commands under divine command theory would be narrowly circumscribed. (Sterba 2019, p. 114)

Here, it is difficult to see what the problem is supposed to be. First, even if God is a "one man" legislature, it does not follow that human agents must have a role analogous to that of the judiciary and legislature. Citizens in a country often can have significant roles in interpreting the law without being judges authorized to strike laws down. A police officer, for example, must be able to interpret the laws governing policing and determine whether a given offender has violated the law. A businessman needs to be able to interpret tax laws and work out how to regulate his behaviour by them. A lawyer must give his client reliable advice on his legal duties. Every day, citizens need to understand their legal obligations and try and discharge them. A soldier must understand international conflict laws and operate according to them. The fact that none of these people operate as judges who can strike the laws down does not mean there is something mysterious about people's role in interpreting the laws.

Second, Sterba contends that a judicial body which lacks the authority to strike legislation down based on some "independent standard" must have a "narrowly circumscribed role" in applying and interpreting the law. This is false. Many commonwealth countries



have judiciaries that cannot “strike down laws passed by the legislature”. For example, my own country, New Zealand, holds to the Westminster doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty. This is a feature New Zealand shares with numerous other parliamentary democracies. Is the judiciary in all these non-American countries “narrowly circumscribed,”? Are we are at a loss to know their role is?

Third, Sterba’s reasoning implies that if a metaethical theory does not entail that human beings can “judicially review” and “strike down” moral laws based on some independent standard, it is a problematic theory. This seems an odd desideratum. No plausible ethical theory grants such power to human agents. A contractualist will not hold that individual human beings can strike down rules that all rational contractors would agree on. Rule utilitarians do not believe that human agents get to strike down rules that have the optimal acceptance utility. Ideal observer theorists do not hold that human agents can strike down the rules that a fully informed impartial spectator would endorse. So, why is it a problem that human agents cannot strike down laws God promulgates? Of course, humans will try to discern the relevant rule accurately in all these cases and they may dispute *that* a proposed rule is one a rational contractor would agree to, promotes utility, or would be endorsed by an ideal observer. Similarly, people can try to discern God’s laws and dispute that a purported rule comes from God. The situation appears the same in both cases.

### 5.2. *Conflicting Rules*

Sterba raises a second objection that “divine commands could, presumably, come into conflict” (Sterba 2019, p. 114). Suppose God commanded human agents “to love and care for their family members, and also to love and care for the deserving poor”. If we have limited resources, we may face a situation where we cannot do both. Sterba writes:

Here we seem to require some kind of a background theory that compares the good that would be accomplished in each case as well as weighs the competing obligations involved, and then makes a recommendation about what should be done. Yet divine command theory provides no such background theory for resolving conflicts between commands. Under the theory, each command is obligatory simply because it is commanded by God. Conflicts that arise among God’s commands could be appropriately resolved only by yet another command of God that shows which command has priority. This is because, according to divine command theory, the resolution of conflicts always could go either way. So there is no way for us to figure out, in advance, how it should go. This then would leave us with only a very minimal role when interpreting or applying the commands of God, and in cases where those commands conflict, we would be at a complete loss as to what to do. (Sterba 2019, pp. 114–15)

I will make two points in response. First, Sterba simply assumes that God would issue conflicting commands. It is unclear why he thinks this. The divine command theorist believes God is an omniscient, rational, impartial, and benevolent agent. It is not obvious that a rational agent like this would give contradictory commands. Indeed, nothing about the thesis that the property of being morally required is identical to the property of being commanded by God entails this conclusion.<sup>5</sup> It is true that if God issued two commands, he mentions “love family members and love the deserving poor,” and he did so imprecisely, as absolute perfect duties with no further explicit or implicit qualifications, then there would be a clash. However, there is no reason why a divine command theorist must or would attribute a moral code as simplistic as this to God. Religious traditions often have far more sophisticated hermeneutics and casuistry than this illustration suggests.

Second, no “background theory that compares the good” that divine command theorists can employ is false. I mentioned one representative historical example above. Like most divine command theorists, Berkeley understands God as benevolent and impartial. God’s commands co-ordinating human acts towards promoting the common good. What rules take precedence in clashes or what exceptions are built into rules is determined by the

acceptance utility of those rules. The Pauline principle is precisely such a rule; it specifies that when certain types of moral prohibitions conflict with a general requirement to do good, those prohibitions take precedence. Berkeley adopted this principle because its acceptance promotes the commongood, better than a rule which allowed people to do evil so that good may come.<sup>6</sup>

### 5.3. Epistemological Problems

Sterba also objects that a divine command theory faces a problem in “determining what God has commanded us to do”. This is because:

It would seem that divine command theorists maintain that God’s commands are received through special revelations to particular individuals or groups. But if the commands of God are made known only to a few, how can others know what those commands are or when they are reasonably bound to obey them? Presumably, people can only be morally bound by commands they know about and have reason to accept. (Sterba 2019, p. 115)

However, this attacks a straw man. Divine command theorists do not maintain that God’s commands are only received through “special revelations” to “particular individuals or groups” and “known only to a few”. Divine command theorists maintain that the property of being morally required is identical to that of being commanded by God. Nothing about this thesis commits its proponent to deny a doctrine of general revelation whereby the basic requirements of morality are known to all. Most divine command theorists have held to such a doctrine. Indeed, the divine command theorists whose model I am appropriating did.<sup>7</sup>

Sterba’s claim that “commands can morally bind people they know about and have reason to accept” is ambiguous. It fails to discriminate between recognising the content of a command: imperative expressed and recognising that it has been commanded.<sup>8</sup> It is the former, not the latter, which is important. I have argued elsewhere that to be bound by a command, it is sufficient that the person in question can recognise the imperative expressed by a command, understand it has authority, and that they are accountable to it. I gave the following example. Suppose, for example, an owner of one of the beachfront properties in Orewa puts up a sign that states, “private property do not enter, trespassers will be prosecuted,” John sees the sign and clearly understands what it says. He understands the sign as issuing an imperative to “not enter the property”. John recognises this imperative as categorical and is telling him not to trespass; he also recognises this imperative as having authority over his conduct and recognises that he will be blameworthy if he does not comply with this imperative. However, because of a strange metaphysical theory, he does not believe any person issued this imperative, and so is not strictly speaking a command. He thinks it is just a brute fact that this imperative exists. Does this metaphysical idiosyncrasy mean that the command does not apply to him and that he has not heard or received the command the owner issued? That seems to be false. While John does not realise who the source of the command is, he knows enough to know that the imperative the command expresses applies authoritatively to him and that he is accountable to it (Flannagan 2017, p. 351).

### 5.4. Conflicting Commands

A further problem Sterba cites is disagreement over what God has commanded.

Different individuals and groups have claimed to be recipients of special revelations that conflict in ways which would support conflicting moral requirements. Of course, if some of those who claim to have received a special revelation rise to power, they may be able to force obedience on the rest. But, then others would have no independent reason to go along with that forceful imposition. (Sterba 2019, p. 115)

This objection assumes that a metaethical theory is problematic unless it identifies moral wrongness with a property of actions that people do not disagree over the application of. If different communities and individuals will dispute whether a class of actions has the property in question and if one could rise to power and impose their belief on others, then the property in question is not the property of being morally wrong.

This assumption is problematic. If true, it would rule out not just a divine command theory but almost every and any meta-ethical theory being proposed today. Consider the property of maximising utility. Different individuals and communities can and do disagree over which actions maximise utility. Alternatively, consider Kantian ideas of the categorical imperative; Kant believed lying violated the categorical imperative, even in cases where one was lying to protect people from a would-be murderer. Many others disagree. People disagree over which actions have *sui generis* non-natural properties or would be endorsed by rational contractors under a veil of ignorance. On a whole host of issues, such as capital punishment, euthanasia, abortion, affirmative action, war, redistribution of wealth, equality, and minimum wage laws, welfare rights, individuals disagree over whether the actions in question have the property of being morally wrong. Sometimes people who favour one answer come to power and pass laws that prohibit or permit their favoured activity. Given this, it is hard to see why the fact that a meta-ethical theory implies this could occur is a problem for the theory. It is a fact about moral judgments that people disagree over their application in various cases.

### 5.5. *The Anything Goes Objection*

Sterba contends the most serious problem with divine command theory is what has been labelled the “anything goes objection”:

Just anything could turn out to be the right thing to do, such as torturing babies for the fun of it, depending on the sheer commands of God. But the idea that just anything could turn out to be the right thing to do, irrespective of how harmful it is to human beings, has been widely seen by theists and atheists alike to be sufficient to defeat the view. (Sterba 2019, p. 115)

Suppose the property of being morally required is (identical) to the property of being commanded by God. Sterba contends that entails means that anything at all could be morally required. Why? He does not say. Presumably, the assumption is that it is possible for God to command anything at all, no matter how harmful, even torturing children for fun. However, why think this?

Divine command theorists do not contend that moral requirements depend upon the commands of just anyone. Moral requirements depend on *God’s* commands. According to the conception of God presupposed: God is an all-powerful, all-knowing, essentially *benevolent, and impartial* agent who sustains and providentially orders the universe. It is central to Berkley’s position that what God commands is co-extensive with what rules a benevolent, rational, impartial person who is fully informed would endorse for fallible agents like us. Given this, the assumption that God can command anything at all: even baby torture, holds only if it is possible for a fully informed, rational, benevolent, and impartial person to endorse a command to torture babies. However, this is unlikely. Sterba uses the example of baby torture because he views it as an action that no virtuous person could ever knowingly entertain.

However, suppose I am mistaken about this, and it is possible for an essentially benevolent, omniscient, impartial person to command the torture of children. Child torture would only be commanded in situations where an impartial and benevolent person aware of all the relevant facts could endorse a rule permitting it. Under these hypothetical circumstances, it is hard to see how one could take for granted that it was morally wrong.

The upshot is that a divine command theory does not have the implications that Sterba contends they do. Divine command theories do not entail that anything could be right or wrong. Instead, they imply that an action can only be permissible in situations where it

is possible for a fully informed, rational, loving, and impartial person to endorse a rule permitting it, far from being an implausible implication this is quite plausible.

Does this reply not assume a moral standard that governs God's commands antecedent to those commands, a standard that governs not only those commands but also God in making them? This kind of rejoinder is misleading. All this reply does is assume that a person with the character traits mentioned: impartial benevolent, rational and omniscient, would not command rape. One does not need to assume these things are morally required prior to God's commands, nor does anyone need to assume that a loving and just person would prohibit these things because they are morally required.

Of course, one can use the language of "standards of love" or "standards of impartiality" here and claim that God's commands follow antecedent standards in this sense of the word. However, using this sort of language does not mean antecedent moral requirements or obligations guide, God.

Here, we need to distinguish between what we might call "standards that are loving" or "standards of impartiality" from moral requirements. Mackie (1977) provides a helpful illustration of this distinction. Mackie famously argued that no objective moral requirements existed. Our moral discourse, which presupposes the existence of such requirements, is systematically in error. However, Mackie explained that this did not commit him to "denying that there can be objective evaluations relative to standards', taking", as an example, the standard of justice:

In one important sense of the word, it is a paradigm case of injustice if a court declares someone to be guilty of an offence of which it knows him to be innocent. More generally, a finding is unjust if it is at variance with what the relevant law and the facts together require, and particularly if it is known by the court to be so. More generally still, any award of marks, prizes, or the like is unjust if it is at variance with the agreed standards for the contest in question: if one diver's performance, in fact, measures up better to the accepted standards for diving than another's, it will be unjust if the latter is awarded higher marks or the prize . . . The statement that a certain decision is thus just or unjust will not be objectively prescriptive: in so far as it can be simply true it leaves open the question of whether there is any objective requirement to do what is just and to refrain from what is unjust, and equally leaves open the practical decision to act in either way. (Mackie 1977, p. 184)

Mackie seems to be correct. A person who embraces his error theory and believes no actions are morally wrong can still understand the concept of what is loving and impartial. This person could know that this idea of love and impartiality entailed specific standards and recognise paradigmatic examples of love and impartiality. He could, in many cases, tell whether particular behaviour was loving or partial. He could choose to live in accord with these standards, and he could choose not to live in accord with them. He would simply reject that there was an objective moral obligation to behave in accordance with such standards. The questions of whether an action is impartial and loving and whether it is obligatory are, in principle, separate questions.

This distinction has application here. A Divine command theory entails that, prior to God's commands, no action is morally wrong, required or prohibited. However, this does not mean that actions cannot be loving or impartial prior to God's commands. Prior to God's act of commanding, certain rules will be such that any loving and impartial person would endorse them. They are rules which, if generally adopted or internalized by fallible human beings, will promote human welfare. However, antecedent to God's commands, there will be no moral requirement to act according to such rules.<sup>9</sup>

### 5.6. *Is This Picture Consistent?*

I argued that it is incoherent to claim that God: a loving and impartial omniscient person, would endorse a rule permitting baby torture and that baby torture would be wrong in those same circumstances. In his discussion of Brain Davies, Sterba suggests a possible

line of response to this. Sterba cites Davies's claim that "God could never command us to torture children because in effect that would involve him in contradicting himself or going against his nature as the source of creaturely goodness" (Sterba 2019, p. 116) he re-joins;

"However, if God cannot command us to do anything that goes against the law of reason that he embedded in our hearts because that would involve God in a contradiction, then, it would also seem that God could not act against that same law of reason that he embedded in our hearts because that too would involve God in a contradiction".

We could put Sterba's point like this: If God's commands express (or are consistent with) his essential character, then how can it be consistent with his character not to act in accord with those same commands? If the commands God imposes on humans arise out of God's impartial benevolence then, these very same qualities would require that God, who is essentially impartial and benevolent, to act in accord with these commands it would be a contradiction of his character if he does not refrain from that action.

This objection contains a false premise. It assumes that if one person's commands to another person reflect certain character traits, consistency with those character traits means the first person must follow that command. This is false. Consider an example. A loving parent sets their 9-year-old daughter a bedtime of 8:30 p.m. This parent's command reflects their loving character; it does not follow, however, that being loving requires that the parent herself must go to bed at 8:30 p.m. Or consider an experienced surgeon. Out of concern for his patients, he prohibits inexperienced junior surgeons from performing certain operations without supervision. This does not mean his concern leads him to refrain from doing this surgery himself.

Or consider an example from Thomas Carson. Suppose I have an irrational fear of dogs. A friend asks me to take care of his dogs while on vacation. A fully informed, rational person would not fear dogs and would not hesitate to look after them. However, a fully informed, rational person would probably not advise me as I am now to do so. Given my intense fear of dogs, things will likely turn out badly if I look after them (Carson 1990). Cases like this show a distinction between what a rational, fully informed person would do and what he would tell people like us, who are not always rational to do. A similar distinction applies to God. What an omniscient, loving impartial agent would himself do is not the same as what he would command beings like us to do. There is no inconsistency or incoherence in recognising this distinction.

These examples also address a related objection; it would be hypocritical to not abide by a demand one imposes on others. While this claim may appear to be a popular truism, it is false. Parents tell children to go to bed at 8:30 p.m without themselves being morally required to go to bed at 8:30 p.m. The fact that parents go to bed later does not make them hypocrites. Governments prohibit private citizens from punishing people for crimes, yet that does not entail that governments cannot punish crime. Stunt men warn those who watch their stunts to "not try this at home" it does not follow from this that they are hypocrites when they perform stunts. Husbands object to other men attempting to make love to their wives, and it does not follow that they are hypocrites if they make love to their wives, and so on. In many contexts, the difference between people's knowledge, character, abilities, relationship, and authority means it is not hypocritical for one to tell the other to do something that she herself would not do.

What is going on in these examples? It is important to see that while the actions done and commanded in each case differ, the values expressed are the same. The surgeon is concerned for the well-being of his patients. He both performs surgery and prohibits others from doing so because of this concern. The government is motivated by promoting the common good via a just social order. The prohibition of private punishment and their willingness to punish themselves reflects this motivation. The stuntman is concerned about the safety of others; those safety concerns motivate their own practice of stunts and the advice to others not to try them. A fully informed, impartial person who advises me not to care for my friend's dog is motivated by concern for my welfare and the dog's welfare. The

same concern leads him to be willing to look after the dogs himself. In each case, what the person motivated by such character traits would command others to do is different from what he himself would do and does. In each case, there is no inconsistency or hypocrisy on the part of the commander. Why is this? The answer is straightforward; there are important differences between the commander and commanded. The commander has knowledge, expertise, ability, or a social role that the commanded does not have. These differences mean that what it is loving and impartial to instruct the commanded to do is different from what a loving and impartial commander would himself do in the circumstances.

Berkeley maintained precisely these sorts of differences applied to God and humans when it comes to promoting the common good. God has epistemic abilities and abilities of impartiality and benevolence that human agents lack. These differences mean that harmful consequences will follow if humans attempt to promote the common good directly. These consequences will not follow if God attempts to do so because God does not have these limitations. Consequently, while a loving and impartial person would command us to follow the Pauline principle, he himself would be free to violate it.

### 5.7. Can God Be Coherently Called Good?

At one point, Sterba raises a different concern. If God is not subject to moral obligations, or his obligations are radically different from ours, how can God be coherently called good? Referring to Brian Davies's view that God has no moral obligations. Sterba states, "[E]ven Davies were to find a defensible way of showing that God is not subject to moral requirements, he still would need to find a way to characterize God as good in some other way than being morally good" (Sterba 2019, p. 117).

This is particularly pertinent in this context. Above I cited Berkeley's divine command theory as a coherent model whereby Theists could accept the Pauline principle applies to human agents and not God's. However, Berkeley appeals to God's goodness in his argument. Berkeley argued, "Now, as God is a Being of Infinite Goodness, it is plain the end he proposes is *Good*. . . . The end, therefore, to be procured by them, can be no other than the good of Men". However, is this not incoherent? If moral goodness consists "in conformity to the laws of God". The content of this law is based on God's "infinite *goodness*"; God must be a good antecedent to issuing any commands. Goodness then would exist prior to itself.

The distinction Berkeley drew between moral (deontological) and non-moral (prudential) goodness resolves this problem. We "denominate" things "good or evil" . . . "as they are fitted to augment or impair our own Happiness". By contrast, "moral goodness" consists "in conformity to the laws of God". To be sound, Berkeley's argument requires only that God be good in the *first* of these senses not the second. When Berkeley says God is infinitely good, we should interpret him as using the good in the nonmoral sense to refer to a disposition God has to promote the long-term happiness of his creatures. Antecedent to issuing any commands, God is impartial and benevolent, a being who seeks or aims to augment the good or happiness of human agents. It is this sense of good that is relevant to the argument. Because God ultimately seeks the good or wellbeing of his creatures, and he is impartial, it follows that he aims at this when commanding. Berkeley's argument does not require that God has duties or is subject to the same moral obligations and requirements humans have.

Does not this strip God's goodness of any coherent meaning? I do not think so. On my interpretation of Berkeley, God's goodness will not be understood deontologically in terms of obeying duties. However, even if God does not have duties, it does not follow that he does not or cannot have certain character traits. God can be benevolent: disposed to seek the well-being of his creatures and impartial. God will not be under any obligation to be impartial or seek the welfare of his creatures. However, that does not mean he cannot behave lovingly and impartially. God does not have to have a duty to do something in order to do it.

Of course, how God expresses his impartial benevolence will differ from what God commands us to do. Because of human fallibility, human agents will collectively promote

the common good indirectly by following a deontological moral code. This code lays down various determinate actions that are prohibited regardless of the consequences. By contrast, God can act more like an act utilitarian, individually calculating the good infallibly on a case-by-case basis without being subject to deontological side constraints. Because humans cannot accurately make such utilitarian predictions, many of God's reasons will appear opaque to them. However, that God expresses his impartial benevolence differently and promotes the common good more directly does not mean he cannot be sensibly said to be impartial and benevolent.

Nothing in Berkeley's conception precludes saying God is faithful to whatever covenants that religious traditions attribute to him. If Alimi is correct, God can even be said to have self-imposed duties to act according to the terms of such covenants. However, once we grasp that what God would commit to doing himself differs from what God would command humans to do, we cannot assume that God has covenanted to follow anything like the Pauline principle.

## 6. Conclusions

Unlike Mackie, Sterba's argument from evil relies on the Pauline principle: that it is wrong to do evil that good may come. Because Jews and Christians widely accept this principle, he exposes a potential inconsistency in theists' beliefs that Mackie failed to exploit. However, to make the argument work, Sterba assumes a crucial premise: If human agents are always prohibited from doing some action, God is prohibited from doing that action. I have argued that theists are not committed to this premise and can coherently deny it. A theist who is a divine command theorist can be sceptical that God has moral obligations, and that God and humans have the same moral obligations. This is because divine command theorists understand morality in what God commands human beings to do. What God commands human agents will consider the fallibility and limitations of human agents. I have also sketched a model of the relationship between God's commands and morality whereby the Pauline principle is based on such considerations. Human agents are subject to the principle because of their fallibility and epistemic limitations. Theists can consistently deny Sterba's crucial premise if this model is coherent. Sterba's arguments against a divine command theory fail to rebut or show that it is incoherent.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Mark 3:1–6, and Luke 13:10–17.

<sup>2</sup> I am using the word "consequentialist" here to refer to forms of act consequentialism, where an act is morally right iff doing it has better (actual or foreseen) consequences than any alternative action. Below I will note that certain forms of rule consequentialism can be used to support the Pauline principle. Francis Howard Snyder has argued that rule consequentialist theories should be classified as deontological theories. Just as a rubber duck is not a duck rule, consequentialism is not consequentialism (Howard-Snyder 1993).

<sup>3</sup> This characterisation comes from Elizabeth Anscombe, see (Anscombe 1958).

<sup>4</sup> Brandt (1972) makes a similar point. Responding to Nagel's objection that utilitarianism cannot justify absolute prohibitions on non-combatant immunity that apply, regardless of the consequences. He writes

A rule-utilitarian is certainly in a position to say that utilitarian considerations cannot morally justify a departure from these rules; in that sense they are absolute. But he will of course also say that the moral justification of these rules lies in the fact that their acceptance and enforcement will make an important contribution to long-range utility. The rule-utilitarian, then, may take a two-level view: that in justifying the rules, utilitarian considerations are in order and nothing else is; whereas in making decisions about what to do in concrete circumstances, the rules are absolutely binding. In the rule-utilitarian view, immediate expediency is not a moral justification for infringing the rules (p. 147).

The similarity to Berkeley is apparent.

<sup>5</sup> See (Donagan 1977, pp. 146–49) for a critical discussion of the idea that precepts of a rational law must conflict.

<sup>6</sup> Tuckness (2021) argues that Paley, who adopted essentially the same kind of divine command theory as Berkeley, worked out potential qualifications to rule in apparent clashes by “envisioning cases where a rule that includes an exception produces better results than one without an exception and so some rules should have escape clauses built into them.” (p. 86).

<sup>7</sup> Immediately after the passage cited above, Berkeley (1712) adds:

Hence upon an equal comprehensive Survey of the general Nature, the Passions, Interests, and mutual Respects of Mankind; whatsoever practical Proposition doth to right Reason evidently appear to have a necessary connexion with the universal Well-being included in it, is to be look'd upon as enjoined by the Will of God. For he that willetth the end, doth will the necessary means conducive to that end; but it hath been shewn, that God willetth the Universal Well-being of Mankind should be promoted by the concurrence of each particular Person; therefore every such practical Proposition, necessarily tending thereto, is to be esteemed a Decree of God, and is consequently a Law to Man. . . . These Propositions are called Laws of Nature, because they are universal, and do not derive their Obligation from any Civil Sanction, but immediately from the Author of Nature himself. They are said to be stamped on the Mind, to be engraven on the Tables of the Heart, because they are well known to Mankind, and suggested and inculcated by Conscience. Lastly, they are termed Eternal Rules of Reason, because they necessarily result from the Nature of Things and may be demonstrated by the infallible deductions of Reason. (Emphasis original).

<sup>8</sup> See (Peoples 2011) for a good elaboration on this point.

<sup>9</sup> I discuss and defend this response in more detail in (Flannagan 2021).

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Article

# Major Gaps in Sterba's New Atheological Argument from Evil

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I first offer several scenarios where Sterba's argument based on the Pauline Principle fails: specifically, one in which we all consent to living an earthly life in some prior existence (*prior-consent* scenario), one in which the victims *would approve* of the evil being done to them for some greater good (*would-approve* scenario), and one that combines one of these two scenarios with the stipulation that the greater goods redound to the victims (*victim-beneficiary* scenario). Along the way, I claim that a version of the Kantian principle that persons should not be treated as mere means, but as ends in themselves, better captures the intuitions used in support of the Pauline Principle. After this, I present two further significant problems with Sterba's arguments. First, I argue that his claim that God should prevent the serious evil consequences of our free choices fails to consider the degree to which such a policy would make us aware of God's monitoring of our every move. This in turn would greatly diminish our ability to make morally significant choices. Second, I point out flaws with his argument for the applicability of the Pauline Principle to God's choices, particularly objecting to his argument that any greater-good theodicy implies that God would desire that people sin so that good may come, something he claims is morally perverse.

**Keywords:** logical problem of evil; Sterba; preexistence of souls; Origin; theodicy; defense; God's moral obligations; Kantian ethics; categorical imperative; connection building theodicy

This essay was written in reply to James Sterba's invitation to respond to his purported new logical problem of evil. In my reply, I consider both his summary version of his core argument as presented in his essay "Is a good god logically possible?" (Sterba 2020), along with his much more elaborated version given in his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Sterba 2019). I have not consulted additional elaborations and defenses that he has made of his argument since then, though I have been in touch with him about a couple of points. I want to thank him for presenting an original thought-provoking perspective on the problem of evil.

## 1. The Context for the Problem of Evil

I will first sketch the overall context of discussions of the problem of evil. Usually, these discussions assume a minimal requirement for calling God "good," specifically the so-called *Greater Good Principle* (GGP). This principle can be roughly stated as follows:

GGP: For all evils E, an all-good, all-powerful God would only allow E if God's allowing E is necessary for the existence of a greater good.

(For articulating the GGP, I consider the prevention of a greater evil to be equivalent to bringing about a greater good, though when we discuss Sterba's argument it will be important to distinguish the two). Using the GGP, the atheist argument from evil can be roughly stated as follows:

1. There are many evils in the world for which we cannot find (after much thought) the kind of greater good required by the GGP.
2. The fact that in many cases we cannot find such greater goods gives us a good reason to believe there is no such greater good.

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3. Hence, by the greater good principle, an all-good, all-powerful God does not exist.

In response, theists either offer theodicies, which attempt to provide plausible reasons for why God might allow the evils in question, or they offer what are called defenses. There is some controversy about how to define a defense. As I define it, a defense denies premise #2 either by providing a reason for God's allowing evil that one argues is logically possible and not highly implausible, or by invoking the *skeptical theist* strategy. The latter involves claiming that since God's mind is infinite, and ours is finite, even if there exist the required greater goods, we would not expect to find them. Thus, the fact that we cannot find them does not give us sufficient reason to think they do not exist. As an analogy, the fact that we have not yet found intelligent extraterrestrial life does not mean it does not exist since the universe is so vast that even if such life existed we would not expect to find it.

## 2. Sterba's Argument

Recently, some atheists have responded to the theodicy and defense strategies based on the GGP by appealing to some non-consequentialist ethical principle that implies that for some evils in the world, it is morally wrong for God to allow them even if they are necessary for a greater good. The idea is similar to the claim that it would be wrong to execute a person known to be innocent to mollify a mob demanding justice and ready to burn down a large city, even if one were to save more innocent people by the execution.

Sterba offers one of the most developed, if not the most developed, version of this type of atheist argument, making his work of particular interest. The fundamental non-consequentialist ethical principle he appeals to is what he calls the *Pauline Principle* according to which one should "never do evil that good may come" (Sterba 2020, p. 204). He then argues that this principle should be expanded to include that one should never *allow* evil that good may come if one can easily prevent the evil. From now on, when I refer to the Pauline Principle, I implicitly refer to this expanded version of it.

In his 2020 summary article, Sterba begins by distinguishing between goods to which we have a right and those we do not. As far as I can tell, goods to which we have a right are goods others are morally obligated to give us if they can reasonably do so without violating other obligations. However, I do not think that this distinction ultimately matters much for his argument, and thus I will only look at the case involving greater goods to which no one has a right; this is the harder case for theists to defend anyhow, since if one has a right to a particular greater good, that gives God an additional reason for permitting those evils that are necessary for that greater good.

To deal with greater goods for which we do not have a right, Sterba invokes what he calls *Moral evil prevention requirement 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 2020, p. 206).

Although in the above quotation Sterba is unclear whether "other rational beings" includes the person experiencing the evil consequences, in an email he said he revised his principle to include any "would-be beneficiary." Using the specific example of rape, he then claims that any such goods that might come from evil are goods that the beneficiary of such goods would morally prefer not to have, a claim I will call the *beneficiary preference claim (BPC)*:<sup>1</sup>

Consider the opportunity to console a rape victim. No one is entitled to be provided with such a good and its very existence depends upon God's permission of a rape. Given then that the would-be beneficiaries of this good would morally prefer that God had prevented the rape rather than that they receive this good, God should have acted to respect their moral preferences. Even the perpetrators of such wrongful deeds, who later have the opportunity to repent them and seek forgiveness would *always* morally prefer that God had prevented the external consequences of their immoral deeds (Sterba 2020, p. 207, *Italics mine*).

Sterba does not clarify what it means to say that the goods are ones that they would “morally prefer not to have,” but I assume this could mean one of two things: (1) they are goods that they would prefer not to have and it is morally *permissible* for them to prefer not to have them; or (2) they are goods that they would prefer not to have and it is morally *obligatory* for them to prefer not to have them. Under interpretation (1), if the good is a greater good and there is no better alternative for achieving that good than allowing the evil in question, then any consistent consequentialist would prefer that God did not prevent their deeds, contrary to what Sterba clearly wants to say. Thus, I assume interpretation (2) is correct, not (1).

### 3. First Set of Problems: Three Scenarios

For now, I will grant that the Pauline Principle (which Sterba bases his other principles on) applies to God, though I will question this at the end of this essay. To get his argument to work, he would need to show that there are no counterexamples to the BPC. However, I can immediately think of three scenarios that potentially violate the BPC: namely, one involving consent before having an earthly life (*prior-consent* scenario), one in which the victims *would approve* of the evil being done to them for the greater good in question (*would-approve* scenario), and one that combines one of the last two scenarios with the stipulation that the greater goods redound to the victims (*victim-beneficiary* scenario). These are elaborated next.

#### 3.1. Prior-Consent Scenario

Suppose, as the early Christian theologian Origen thought, we existed before our life on earth. Further, suppose that we freely chose to be born in a situation where we *could* potentially be subject to substantial evils, or even commit such evils, and we did so for the possibility of some set of greater goods, either for ourselves or others. Finally, suppose that we all choose under a “Rawlsian veil of ignorance” in which we do not know what situation we will be born in, including our sex and genetics. In such a scenario, I see nothing wrong in God allowing such evils to occur. Furthermore, it seems that all parties would prefer for God to allow the evils for the goods to exist.

In reply, Sterba might claim that it is morally wrong to consent to being in such a situation. He suggests such a reply in a footnote, claiming that “in standard informed consent cases, one is consenting to something that would not be wrong if one consents to it” (Sterba 2019, p. 99, n. 15). This might be true under some appropriate definition of “standard,” but even if this is true, it says nothing about whether there are cases in which such consent would be morally permissible. To argue that there are such cases, I first consider a more mundane example in which it does seem such consent is morally permissible. (I should note that this example, and the ones for the other scenarios, are a little complicated because I am constructing them so that it is clear that the evils are being allowed for the existence of greater goods, not for the prevention of greater evils, since Sterba allows for the latter sort of exception.<sup>2</sup>) In further support of the moral permissibility of this scenario and the other two below, I will also show how their moral permissibility can be justified by Kant’s categorical imperative that a person should never be treated as merely a means to an end, something I argue undergirds the Pauline Principle.

Here is my mundane example. Suppose a group of beings want to reach perfection in love, a perfection that will give them bliss for all eternity. Some beings are already perfect in love, but others are not since they still have evil tendencies in their character. For those who are not, perfection in love can only be reached in two ways: (1), by allowing their evil tendencies to be acted out in a full-fledged way, and then recognizing the evil of their actions, repenting, and performing sufficient penance; or (2), by their turning to love in the face of temptation. Furthermore, because of the kind of connection the beings have with each other along with other constraints, these greater goods cannot be accomplished by a mere simulation or any other means that does not involve the victims actually suffering the consequences of their actions. The morally perfect beings want to help the others become

perfected. So, they agree to create a world in which both the imperfect beings and perfect beings enter, and in which the imperfect beings are strongly tempted to do evil.

Two claims seem highly plausible for this scenario. First, the reason for the consent is based on the existence of a greater good, not merely the prevention of a greater evil. Second, the perfect and imperfect beings do nothing morally wrong in together creating such a world and entering into it for the greater good to be realized. A primary reason for this is that all beings involved have consented to the situation. Since Sterba is claiming that the existence of evil in the world contradicts the existence of God under highly plausible assumptions, he must show that there are no plausible prior-consent scenarios in which it would be morally permissible to offer such consent. As is, he does not even consider this type of scenario.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.2. *Would-Approve Scenario*

In this scenario, the victims do not give their prior consent to God's allowing their victimization but God knows they will give their uncoerced approval in the afterlife when they are fully informed of the greater good resulting from their victimage. I will now argue that this after-the-fact approval is sufficient to make it morally permissible for God to allow their victimage. I argue this by both giving a this-worldly example and then justifying it using the Kantian Principle that in the last subsection I claimed underlies the Pauline Principle.

Consider a case in which two sisters—Jane and Kate—are in an automobile accident. The accident damages one of Jane's kidneys in such a way that it needs to be removed, causing her to lack sufficient stamina to compete in the Olympics and win a gold medal, which she otherwise would almost certainly win given her athletic abilities. Since Jane recognizes that most people are not able to win a gold medal, Jane has stated many times to Kate and her parents that she would not consider such a loss an evil, but only the loss of a good.

Now Kate and Jane both remain in a coma for a week after the accident. Their parents must decide the day after the accident whether to ask the doctors to remove one of Kate's kidneys and transplant it into Jane, knowing that Kate will experience a month's worth of suffering but fully recover afterward without any permanent damage. If they delay, the window of time for the transplant will disappear. Her parents know that given how much Kate loves Jane, along with Kate being a convinced utilitarian, she would agree to the transplant if the potential greater good of Jane's winning the gold medal (and the consequent deepening of the love between them) would outweigh the suffering caused by the kidney removal. Further, they know that given the outweighing condition is met, Kate would very likely be angry with them for the rest of her life for not going through with the surgery.

After talking to the doctors, the parents become convinced that the good outweighs the evil, and hence give their approval for the surgery, assuming the law allows for this. In this case, it seems morally permissible, perhaps even morally required, for the parents to agree to the transplant. On the other hand, if they knew that Kate would not approve, then their approval would be on much shakier moral ground.

Of course, there are some disanalogies here to the envisioned afterlife case. For example, most victims in our world would not agree during their earthly lives to their victimage. However, this disanalogy can be dealt with by slightly modifying the above case by having Kate wake up before the surgery with temporary brain damage which makes her unable to comprehend the greater good that would be realized, and for that reason refuses the surgery. Since the parents know that once her brain is healed, she will understand and approve of what they have done, the parents allowing the surgeons to do the operation still seems morally justified. Finally, I argue below that the moral permissibility of this kind of "would approve" case can be justified by the Kantian Principle mentioned above, thus giving us a general reason for thinking that the afterlife would-approve scenario is morally

permissible even if it is disanalogous in certain ways to the mundane “would approve” example just presented.<sup>4</sup>

### 3.3. Victim-Beneficiary Scenario

What I will call the *victim-beneficiary scenario* combines one of the previous two scenarios with the additional stipulation that the greater good ultimately redounds to the victims. Intuitively this makes it even more plausible that it is morally permissible for God to allow the evil in question in the above two scenarios. In fact, concerning the “would approve” version of this scenario, there are many cases of people who say that they are glad that a certain evil befell them because of something it did for their character or view of life. In such cases, it seems implausible to say that it would be wrong for God to have allowed the evil if that is the only way the greater good in question could be obtained and God knew that in the future the victims would approve of God’s allowing the evil.

As a specific everyday example, suppose that to get the best sort of education that will open up great opportunities, a parent sends their child to a school that has harsh standards and bullying that will cause their child significant suffering. However, they also know the school has excellent counseling services that largely will prevent the suffering and bullying from permanently psychologically harming the child. Further, suppose this is by far the best school available for getting that education. Even if the child does not consent to go, the parents have good reason to think that when the child gets older, he would thank them for sending him to this school so that he could have better opportunities in life. In this case, there does not seem to be anything wrong with the parent knowingly allowing their child to suffer for this greater good since it benefits the child and they have good reason to believe the child would approve of it in the future.

### 3.4. Pauline or Kantian Principle?

Before looking at potential responses Sterba could give to these three scenarios, it should be noted that each of them satisfies the Kantian principle that persons should never be treated *merely* as a means to an end, but as ends in themselves. Roughly, for Kant, to treat a person as an end in themselves is to treat them in a way that recognizes their inherent worth, particularly as an autonomous moral agent that can choose in a non-coerced way based on their own precepts. In contrast, for one to treat a person as a mere means is to treat them in a way that uses them as an instrument for some other purpose and does so by treating them as something less than an end in themselves. (See O’Neill 2016 for this understanding of Kant’s ethics.)

This principle is satisfied in the prior-consent scenario since God treats the persons as free agents capable of deciding for themselves, which would be treating the persons as ends in themselves. This is also true of the would-approve scenario since God could still be thought of as treating them as autonomous moral agents with their own precepts, just not at or before the evil occurs. Put differently, God is allowing the evils based on the knowledge that their future selves would choose that God allows them to have been victimized in the past given that, *per impossible*, God gave them such a choice regarding these past facts. In fact, only in the afterlife would they be fully aware of the context and potential goods and evils that might have occurred because of their victimage, and so arguably only then would they be most fully moral agents. Finally, for those potential greater goods that redound to the victims of the evil, God’s allowing the evil not only values them as autonomous moral agents, but further values them by doing it for the victim’s sake, not merely for the good of others. This in turn should help remove any qualms one might have regarding the prior-consent and would-approve scenarios based on the victims still being treated merely as a means to someone else’s good, even if they consented to, or would approve of, such treatment.

I bring up the Kantian principle since it gives us a principled reason for why the above scenarios are morally acceptable. Further, I believe it is more fundamental than the Pauline Principle. A fundamental ethical principle should be stated in such a way

that the principle tells you whether an action violates the principle or not, given that one properly understands the meaning of the words used in the principle. Arguably, once we understand what it means to treat someone “merely as a means,” and the idea of treating someone as an end, the Kantian principle tells us whether or not it morally prohibits an act.

In contrast, as stated—“never do evil that good may come”—the Pauline Principle does not itself tell us what acts are prohibited. (This is also true when modifying it by replacing “do evil” with “allow evil that one could easily prevent,” a modification that Sterba argues for as noted above.) Instead, we must consult our moral intuitions to determine the exceptions to the principle, not merely to understand the principle (as in the Kantian case). For example, suppose I understand evil as doing something intrinsically evil. Then, as stated, the Pauline principle implies, for instance, that a plastic surgeon causing a patient significant suffering (an intrinsic evil) to make them look better is wrong, even if the patient consents to the surgery and the happiness it brings the patient outweighs the suffering. Further, counterintuitively, it would say the type of non-consent case in which parents allow suffering to occur to their child because it is necessary for their greater good is wrong, as in the school example above. To save the Pauline principle, one must then consider these exceptions.

On the other hand, the Kantian Principle shows why these and other exceptions hold.<sup>5</sup> Of course, one could always adopt the Pauline Principle and then add exceptions based on our moral intuitions regarding specific examples. Two things should be noted about this approach, however. First, the above scenarios appear to fall into the pattern of exceptions that Sterba allows, and thus Sterba needs to consider them in his argument. Further, if one takes this “adding exceptions” approach, then one does not know whether there are other exceptions that no one has thought of. In that case, one is open to an analog of the standard skeptical theist response to the problem of evil: just as the skeptical theist says that as far as we know there might be greater goods we have not discovered that justify God’s allowing the evils in the world, one could argue that there are further exceptions to the Pauline Principle that we have not discovered that justify God’s allowing such evils. Finally, to clarify, I am not advocating the Kantian Principle but merely arguing that it better captures the intuitions behind the Pauline Principle.

#### 4. Sterba’s Potential Responses

In this section, I consider various responses Sterba could make to the above scenarios and arguments. I begin with the prior-consent and would-approve scenarios and then address the victim-beneficiary scenario.

##### 4.1. Prior-Consent and Would-Approve Scenarios

Sterba recognizes that cases of consent might be potential exceptions to the Pauline Principle, stating that “one possible way that the infliction of harmful consequences on us might be justified is if we were to give our informed consent to them” (Sterba 2019, p. 98). Sterba rightly notes that in this world informed consent is rarely given for the evils victims suffer. However, he fails to consider the prior-consent scenario I elaborated above in which such consent is given before this life on earth, and he also fails to directly consider the would-approve scenario. Regarding the former, many Christians might find this scenario unappealing because it assumes the preexistence of souls. However, as noted above, this view was held by one of the greatest early Christian theologians, and regardless, finding it unappealing is not an argument against it. Further, Sterba purports to be offering a *logical* problem of evil, which claims there is no way of reconciling the existence of the types of evils we find in the world with the existence of the God of traditional theism. So, for his argument to work, he would have to eliminate the prior-consent scenario. Yet, since we have no independent evidence one way or another about such a preexistence, the only way he could eliminate it is by claiming either that there are no such greater goods or that it would be wrong for us to ever give such consent. Regarding the former, that would be subject to the skeptical theism objection according to which just because no one can find

such greater goods, that does not mean they do not exist. Regarding the latter, Sterba hints at this response by claiming that the Pauline Principle prohibition of God’s permitting the consequences of significantly evil actions “is even grounds for thinking that victims may never be able to give their informed consent to or find reasonably acceptable the infliction of such consequences on themselves” (Sterba 2019, pp. 99–100). Contrary to Sterba’s claim here, it seems to me perfectly moral for a person to offer such informed consent, particularly in the prior-consent scenario. Further, as far as I can tell, Sterba never offers an argument that it is not moral, whereas as explained above, my intuition for this case can be supported via the Kantian Principle, which I argued undergirds the Pauline Principle.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.2. Victim-Beneficiary Scenario

As I defined it, the victim-beneficiary scenario consists of either the prior-consent or would-approve scenarios with the additional stipulation that the greater good redounds to the victims of the evil. As noted above, this additional stipulation significantly increases the case for thinking that it is morally permissible for God to allow evil for a greater good in those two scenarios. Since Sterba does not directly address the first two scenarios, it follows that he does not address the victim-beneficiary scenario since it incorporates at least one of those two scenarios. However, he does consider those potential goods elaborated in a theodicy by the late Marilyn Adams in which the goods benefit the victim, goods that he appears to understand as a type of soul-making. (For the latter, see Sterba 2019, chp. 3, “An Attempt at a Theodicy.”) The main way in which Sterba responds to the goods that Adams cites is that they are not “organically related” to the horrible evils that give rise to the goods. This response, however, is not sufficient for rejecting my victim-beneficiary scenario since he would have to show that there are *no* plausible greater goods that would be so related. One cannot do this by merely looking at some of the major goods that people have cited that could redound to the victims.

In fact, I have developed a theodicy in which the greater goods redound to the victims and are organically related to the evils in the sense that the occurrence of the evils are not only necessary for the goods but the memory of their occurrence forms an integral part of the greater good. Thus they avoid the objection Sterba raises to Adam’s theodicy. I call this theodicy the *connection-building theodicy* (CBT), though some have suggested calling it the “love theodicy” (See Collins 2014). In brief, the CBT claims that our virtuous responses to evils result in connections of appreciation, contribution, and intimacy (ACI) that occur between the victims of evil and those who aid them, and that these connections last forever due to our having ongoing memories in the heavenly state of what others have done for us.<sup>7</sup> It postulates that some of the connections—what I call *evil transformative connections*—require the existence of corresponding types of evil. For example, person A suffering to benefit another B can result in a connection of appreciation of B for A, along with a connection of contribution resulting from A’s contributing to B. Such connections could not exist if no one suffered. I then argue that we experience these sorts of connections as intrinsically good, and postulate that the greater the sacrifice of the benefactor—such as deeply sharing in the victim’s suffering—the deeper the connection of ACI.

I further postulate that each type of connection forms its own good. Thus, even though there could be a connection of ACI without any evil—e.g., in the heavenly state, Jill could bake a cake with a trillion candles for Jane’s birthday resulting in a corresponding connection of ACI—the connection formed would not be the same good as that formed by, for instance, enduring suffering on another’s behalf. This means that if God prevented a certain type of evil, then the corresponding type of connection would never occur, and hence a certain type of good would never exist. Moreover, given these connections are intrinsically good, and they last forever, I argue that it is plausible to think they outweigh the finite evils necessary to produce them. I also attempt to show how this theodicy could deal with a variety of objections, including that of horrendous evils and that of victims that no one appears to help in this life, in which case their victimage does not appear to lead to any positive connection. Finally, because the connections exist between the beneficiary and



the benefactor, both gain from being part of the connection; accordingly, it is a case of the victim gaining a potentially greater good that would not exist if God prevented the evil, with the good being organically related to the evil.

My point here is not to argue for the adequacy of the CBT, but only to point out that there are other potential theodicies than Adams's in which the greater good redounds to the victims and that potentially avoid the objections Sterba raises to Adams's theodicy. Thus, to make his case, he would either have to consider all of these such theodicies or offer some general argument against all greater-good theodicies. He attempts to do the latter with the *perverse-incentive argument* that I critique below.

## 5. Second Set of Problems

In this section, I first argue that Sterba's proposal that God should prevent sufficiently serious evil consequences of our free choices fails to consider the degree to which such a policy would make us aware of God's monitoring of our every action. This in turn would greatly diminish our ability to make morally significant free choices. Second, I point out flaws with his argument for the applicability of the Pauline Principle to God's choices, particularly what I call his *perverse-incentive argument*, according to which God would be perversely incentivized to want people to do evil if God allowed evil actions for a greater good.

### 5.1. God's Intervening to Stop Consequences of Evil Free Choices

To preserve the type of morally significant free will necessary for soul-making while at the same time eliminating horrendous evils, Sterba proposes that God should prevent horrendous evil consequences of bad acts but allow some sufficiently minor evil consequences (See Sterba 2019, chp. 4). He does not tell us where the dividing line is between minor and major evil consequences, but for the sake of argument, I will assume there is some natural line that can be drawn. He then goes on to claim that the virtuous would not object to the consequences of their acts being restricted in this way; only the "supervicious" would. He compares his proposal to what a superhero or a perfectly just, benevolent state would do. Further, he argues that the regularities of nature required for morally significant free choice could still be maintained.

A critical issue Sterba fails to address, however, is our enormously increased awareness of God under such a proposal. Suppose every time one decided to do some evil action that had horrible consequences, such as one person stabbing another in a fit of anger, something would prevent one from doing it. In such a world, we would be hearing all the time about the latest miracle on the news and through reports of friends, and we would know that they were the result of supernatural agency because they would be counter to the natural regularities in the world. An awareness of God's watchful eye would be always there, not just for the acts that could result in substantial harm, but even for minor acts. This would largely prevent one from doing what is right for its own sake, something necessary for morally significant free will.

As an analogy, this would be like continually seeing a police car in your rear-view mirror while driving. This would largely prevent you from driving the speed limit because it is the morally right thing to do, instead of doing so to avoid getting a speeding ticket. In contrast, even though in our world one might strongly believe God is watching everything we do, it rarely reaches this level of awareness. Or, as another analogy, Sterba's proposed world would be like a future "helicopter" mother who installs "under-the-skin" security cameras on her son's body along with a device that allows her to control his body when necessary. She tells her son that she is only trying to keep him out of serious trouble and assures him that she will not interfere with his more minor missteps. It seems clear to me that this would seriously undercut her son's free choices even about minor things since he would be acutely aware that his mother is watching him.

Finally, consider Sterba's *benevolent state analogy*, according to which the kind of benevolent state we should desire is one that only allows evil consequences of an action if

the consequences are less serious than a certain cutoff. To make this state truly analogous to what he claims God should do, it would have to be a state that had security cameras and microphones everywhere: in every room of one's house, in one's car, on one's body, and so forth; otherwise, it would not be able to intervene to stop many horrible acts. (Or, at least people would have to think it is likely they had such monitoring and control devices.) Although this benevolent state would only intervene for acts that met a certain threshold of bad consequences, such interventions would constantly be reported in the news and by one's friends and family. This would make people almost constantly aware of the monitoring of the state, and the possibility of significant consequences for many morally problematic choices that were under the threshold of prevention. Once again, it seems clear to me that people's morally significant free choice would be greatly hampered even for minor bad choices.

Indeed, we can imagine deciding whether to be born into this benevolent-state world instead of our world while behind a "Rawlsian veil of ignorance" in which we do not know who we will be born as. It is not obvious to me that being born into such a benevolent-state world is preferable. I think I would rather take my chances, risking the possibility of enduring greater suffering for similar reasons to why many would be willing to risk the sufferings inherent in our world over a "dream-machine" world in which they only experience pleasure.

Now compare this benevolent-state world with our world. In our world, God might be preventing some of the worse evils—such as a global nuclear war—but these preventions are hidden enough that we are not aware of them. Further, the universe is structured so that there is a limit to the evils that can be inflicted—we can only endure so much pain, and only for a limited time because we have a finite lifespan. So, our world is structured with limits to evil while at the same time these limits do not make us aware of any divine monitoring. Of course, this opens up the possibility that God could create a world with a different law structure that allowed for less severe evils. However, I do not think any of us are in a position to conceive of such a world in sufficient detail to evaluate whether such a world would be better than ours. That said, there is one possibility for decreasing the amount of horrendous evil in our world that does not run into the above difficulties, or any other obvious ones: namely, the possibility of God's implanting in our nature some deep-seated aversion to committing horrendous evil acts, an aversion that makes us much less susceptible to perpetrating such acts. If we did have such an aversion, it would not immediately make us aware of God's watching over us—for instance, it is not obvious that it could not be explained as a product of our evolutionary development. In any case, this possibility deserves further exploration.

### 5.2. God's Obligations and the Perverse-Incentive Argument

Another weakness in Sterba's argument is his assumption that the moral obligations that apply to us also apply to God. Says Sterba,

So for human agents, given that such intrinsically wrongful actions would significantly conflict with the basic interests of their victims, there are no exceptions to the Pauline Principle for cases of this sort where the significant evil that is to be done is just a means to securing a good to which the beneficiary is not entitled. Moreover, if there are no exceptions to the Pauline Principle for humans in such cases, then the same should also hold true for God. *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.* So for contexts where the issue is whether to permit a significant evil to achieve some additional good, God, like us, would never be justified in permitting evil in such cases (Sterba 2019, p. 78).

In reply, I note that certain moral obligations might hold for us, but not for God since God is not only our creator but our sustainer. The relation of God to us is like that of parents to their children but much more so. Simply assuming that the moral requirements that apply to us also apply to God would be like assuming that since we do not have the

right to make other adults do something for their own good (except perhaps in special circumstances), we do not have the right to do this for our children. Indeed, ordinary people implicitly recognize the difference between our moral obligations and God's when they say a doctor does not have the right to play God in allowing someone to die when they could have prevented it, which implies that God does have a right to do so—that is, God has a right to play God!

In the context of the quotation from Sterba, he does not provide an argument for his claim that moral obligations given by the Pauline Principle apply to God as well as us. He does say in footnote 10 to the above quotation (Sterba 2019, p. 78) that he will provide such reasons in subsequent chapters but does not specify exactly where. As far as I can tell, the underlying reason he gives for his claim is that if the Pauline Principle did not apply to God, God would be *incentivized* to want us to do evil. He states this in the following passage:

First, it would be morally inappropriate for our receiving a Godly opportunity for soul-making to be conditional on God's permitting significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. This is because it would give us the incentive to commit, and want others to commit, significant and even horrendous evil actions, virtually without limit, so that God would permit their consequences and thereby make possible our receiving a Godly opportunity for soul-making. It would also support perverse incentives for God as well. Assuming that God wanted to provide us with a Godly opportunity for soul-making, *God would also have to perversely want us to commit significant and even horrendous morally evil actions, virtually without limit, so that God could then permit their consequences and thereby make possible our receiving a Godly opportunity for soul-making*" (Sterba 2019, p. 116, italics mine).

Although in the above passage Sterba presents what I call the *perverse-incentive argument* in the context of soul-making, later he applies it to other greater goods such as those offered by what he calls the *felix culpa* theodicy (Sterba 2019, p. 112, n. 48).<sup>8</sup> I have three major criticisms of his argument. *First*, the argument assumes that it would always be wrong for God to desire that someone intend evil so that good may come from it. However, this implies that a non-consequentialist ethic is correct; for, under consequentialism, God should desire someone do evil if the ultimate result is better than it otherwise would be. Since God follows correct ethical principles, this entails that God is *not* a consequentialist. On the other hand, a greater good resulting from someone's evil act would in itself only incentivize God to want the person to do evil if God were a consequentialist. So, for the argument to work, one must assume two contradictory things: that God both is and is not a consequentialist.<sup>9</sup>

*Second*, it seems that one could consistently hold that in some cases it is morally permissible to allow a person to commit evil so that a greater good can result, but it is not morally permissible to *want* to person to commit the evil. That is, for the cases in question, God could be what could be called a *mere-permissibility consequentialist* (i.e., a consequentialist about what is morally permissible to allow) without being either a *desire-obligatory consequentialist* or a *desire-permissibility consequentialist* (i.e., a consequentialist about what it is obligatory or permissible to desire, respectively). In any case, Sterba needs to offer an argument that for the relevant cases, *mere-permissibility consequentialism* entails *desire-permissibility consequentialism*.

*Third*, even if God were a desire-obligatory consequentialist, Sterba's claim that God would desire the person to do evil in the imagined situation does not follow. I will show this under the assumption that goods have positive utility, evils have negative utility, and the total utility for a given choice is the sum of all the utilities combined. Specifically, let  $G_p \equiv$  the utility of the good of God's *permitting* person P to make a morally significant free choice of whether or not to do a certain evil action E; let  $G_{gfc} \equiv$  the utility of the *good/virtuous free choice* of resisting the temptation of evil *along with* any consequences that occur as a result; let  $E_{fc} \equiv$  the utility of the *evil free choice* itself, regardless of whether God prevented all the intended consequences of the choice;  $E_c \equiv$  the utility of the *evil consequences* of the evil

choice, apart from the evil of the choice itself; and  $G_R \equiv$  the utility of the greater good that results from God's allowing the evil consequences. Now suppose P chooses E and God does not prevent the consequences. Then,

$$1. \text{ Total utility of P choosing E and God's allowing the consequences} = G_p + E_{fc} + E_c + G_R.^{10}$$

Next, suppose P does not choose E. P would still have the morally significant free choice to do so, and hence the good,  $G_p$ , of God's permitting the free choice would still exist. Further, the intrinsic good,  $G_{gfc}$ , of the virtuous free action of not choosing E would exist. However, the freely chosen evil, its consequences, and the resulting greater good—that is,  $E_{fc}$ ,  $E_c$ , and  $G_R$ —would not exist and hence have zero utility. Thus,

$$2. \text{ Total utility of P not choosing E} = G_p + G_{gfc}.$$

If God is a desire-obligatory consequentialist, God would *not* want P to choose E if the total utility of P *not* choosing E (given by #2 above) is greater than the total utility of P choosing E (given by #1 above). That is, if:

$$3. G_p + G_{gfc} > G_p + E_{fc} + E_c + G_R \implies \text{God does not want P to choose E}$$

Subtracting  $G_p$  from both sides, it follows from #3 that God would *not* want P to choose E if

$$4. G_{gfc} > E_{fc} + E_c + G_R \implies G_R < |E_{fc}| + |E_c| + G_{gfc},$$

where  $| |$  represents the absolute value of a quantity between the vertical bars. Finally, by assumption, the utility of the good resulting from God's allowing the evil consequences outweighs the utility of the evil consequences—which is why the good is called a *greater* good. Hence,

$$5. G_R > |E_c|.$$

It follows from #4 & #5 that God would *not* want P to choose E if

$$6. |E_c| < G_R < |E_c| + |E_{fc}| + G_{gfc}.$$

Condition #6 will be met if  $G_R$  is greater than  $|E_c|$  but not so large that it is greater than  $|E_c| + |E_{fc}| + G_{gfc}$ . This in turn implies that as long as  $G_R$  is not too large, a desire-consequentialist God would *not* want P to choose E even if the evil consequences of P choosing E are necessary for a greater good. Consequently, Sterba's inference fails.

What is the mistake that underlies the reasoning from the implicit assumption that God is a desire-obligatory consequentialist to the conclusion that God would want P to choose evil E if E is necessary for some greater good? My guess is that the mistake results from neglecting all the other utilities except the negative utility,  $E_c$ , of the evil consequences of P choosing E and the positive utility,  $G_R$ , of the resulting greater good. If we neglect the other utilities, then the utility of P choosing E simply becomes  $E_c + G_R$ , which by definition is greater than zero. On the other hand, the utility of P *not* choosing E becomes zero. Hence, if we mistakenly neglect these other utilities, it *does* follow that a desire-obligatory-consequentialist God would want P to choose E since that would maximize total utility.

## 6. Conclusions

In my critique above, I first offered three possible scenarios that are exceptions to the Pauline Principle when applied to God's allowing horrible evils for a greater good: namely, one in which we all consented in a prior existence to live an earthly life; one in which in the afterlife we would (or will) approve of God's allowing the evils that were done to us for the greater goods that resulted; and one in which one or both of the last two scenarios are combined with the stipulation that the greater goods redound to the victims of the evils. Along the way, I argued that the Kantian principle that one should not treat others as mere

means, but always as ends in themselves, better accounts for the intuitions undergirding the Pauline Principle than the Pauline Principle itself does. Further, I argued that the moral permissibility of these scenarios is not only supported by our moral intuitions, but also by the Kantian principle. After this, I presented two further significant problems with Sterba's arguments. First, I argued that his claim that God should prevent the serious evil consequences of our free choices fails to consider the degree to which such a policy would make us aware of God's monitoring of our every move. This in turn would greatly diminish our ability to make morally significant choices. Second, I pointed out flaws with his argument for the applicability of the Pauline Principle to God's choices. I particularly objected to his argument that greater-good theodicies would imply that God would desire that people sin so that good may come, something he claims is morally perverse.

I thus conclude that unless Sterba can adequately address the above scenarios, and answer the objections I raise to his other arguments, his atheological argument fails.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Part of the intuitive appeal of the BPC is that, as stated, it is restricted to the moral preferences of the beneficiaries of the goods. However, at least in the case of Christian beneficiaries, they have a moral reason that third parties lack for *not* wanting the evil: namely, the New Testament injunction to prefer the interests of others over one's own. (See Philippians 2:3-4.) However, such an injunction would not apply to a third party—such as God—that allows an evil to occur for the benefit of someone else. Thus, it is possible that third parties could morally prefer that God allow the evil consequences, whereas the beneficiaries could not without violating the New Testament injunction. In fact, if one kept increasing the greater good while keeping the evil consequences the same, it seems plausible that at some point a third party would want God to allow the evil consequences in order not to deprive people of this greater good. For example, if someone's horrible suffering for thirty minutes meant eternal bliss for the entire world.
- <sup>2</sup> One could consider the loss of a greater good an evil, hence making allowing the existence of a greater good equivalent to preventing a greater evil (namely, preventing the loss of the greater good). However, Sterba rejects this because he claims there is a legitimate distinction between the two. In any case, without this distinction, he could not make the intuitively plausible exception to the Pauline Principle of allowing evil for the prevention of a greater evil without the principle collapsing into the greater good principle. (See, Sterba 2019, p. 76, n. 8.)
- <sup>3</sup> Sterba could respond that there are no greater goods that require allowing for the existence of horrible evils, and so such prior consent would be always immoral. However, such a response reduces his argument to the standard atheist argument from evil that there are no goods that meet the requirements of the greater good principle. This in turn opens him up to the standard skeptical theist reply, along with needing to address various theodicies—such as my Connection-Building theodicy summarized below—that claim to provide such greater goods.
- <sup>4</sup> Sterba might object that the surgeons are not doing an evil act but just trying to help. However, one could imagine that the surgeons doing the transplant are recommending it so that they can earn a large amount of money (and the parents know this), and yet after consulting with other trustworthy doctors, the parents decide to go ahead with it because these other doctors recommend the transplant for the same reasons as the dishonest surgeons. As before, it seems the parents have done nothing wrong.
- <sup>5</sup> For example, Sterba must distinguish between kinds of intrinsic evils that fall under the Pauline Principle and those that do not since clearly some intrinsic evils, such as a surgeon causing a patient suffering (an intrinsic evil) for a greater good of the patient, can be morally acceptable. What does not seem acceptable is harming a person in a way that intentionally undercuts their dignity as a person: that is, treating them as a mere means and not as an end. (Similarly for allowing them to be harmed in this way when one can easily prevent it.) Horrendous evils can then be thought of as a subclass of these evils which undermine the value of a person to such an extreme that they undermine the value of a person's life as a whole, and thereby are extremely antithetical to treating a person as an end in themselves. Thus, the Kantian principle accounts for why allowing horrendous evils for a greater good is intuitively particularly problematic. (This idea of horrendous evils closely matches Marilyn Adams's definition of them as being evils "the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole" (Quoted in Sterba 2019, p. 24).)
- <sup>6</sup> If one held that all humans on earth have given their consent to live an earthly life, one might worry about consenting to potentially misusing one's free choice to commit horrendous evil acts—for example, consenting to the possibility of becoming an Adolph Hitler or Joseph Stalin. This is likely an insuperable difficulty if one is not a universalist. However, if one is a universalist, one will believe that eventually even the worst people will be brought to repentance. And, if the potential goods of giving such consent are great enough, it is plausible that they could be worth risking this possibility.

- <sup>7</sup> This includes connections of ACI that occur as the result of the victim forgiving the perpetrator.
- <sup>8</sup> Specifically, he claims in the note that the *felix culpa* theodicy is morally objectionable “because it would foster perverse moral incentives in ourselves and in God as well. In fact, it is just this same kind of perverse thinking that St. Paul was condemning among the Romans when he formulated what has come to be called the Pauline Principle—Never do evil that good may come of it” (Sterba 2019, p.112, n. 48). (As implied in the above long quotation in the main text, I am assuming that “incentivize” means “to cause one to desire”.)
- <sup>9</sup> Perhaps I have misunderstood Sterba here and his argument is meant to be a *reductio* against consequentialist ethics for situations in which an act which a person P believes is evil is necessary for a greater good: namely, that in such a case anyone who is a consequentialist and believes P’s act is necessary for a greater good should desire P to perform an act that P believes is evil. Then, the argument goes, since desiring that P do something that P believes is evil intuitively seems morally perverse (presumably even for consequentialists), this gives us good reason to reject consequentialist ethics for such cases. Even if this is his objection, it still falls prey to the second and third responses below.
- <sup>10</sup> The utility of  $G_R$  consists of the utility of *all* the consequences of P choosing E excluding the evil choice itself and the evil consequences whose utility  $E_C$  designates. That is, it includes all utilities that result from P choosing E *except*  $E_{fc}$  and  $E_C$ .

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Article

# God, Evil, and Meticulous Providence

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**Abstract:** James Sterba has constructed a powerful argument for there being a conflict between the presence of evil in the world and the existence of God. I contend that Sterba's argument depends on a crucial assumption, namely, that God has an obligation to act according to the principle of meticulous providence. I suggest that two of his analogies confirm his dependence on this requirement. Of course, his argument does not rest on either of these analogies, but they are illustrative of the role that meticulous providence plays in his argument. I then investigate the ethical principles Sterba invokes in his use of meticulous providence and suggest that not only do we often not predicate goodness of human persons based on these principles of obligation, but that these principles are much too stringent to function to determine moral obligations and moral goodness. From there, I contend that to think that God has a similar obligation regarding meticulous providence in order to be good encounters several serious problems, especially with respect to the soul-building Sterba wants to preserve. I conclude by considering Sterba's reply in terms of a limited application of meticulous providence.

**Keywords:** free will defense; providence; problem of evil; James Sterba

## 1. Meticulous Providence

Although James Sterba does not use the term "meticulous providence," the concept lies behind his critique of attempts to reconcile the existence of a good and powerful God with the presence of significant evil and suffering. As applied to God, meticulous providence (MP) presupposes that God as omniscient knows what will happen at all times, as omnipotent can bring about whatever events God desires so long as they are logically consistent, and as good would and should want to prevent or eliminate all cases of (significant) evil or suffering. Alan Rhoda notes that with MP, "God ordains [and, we might add, permits] all events. By 'ordaining' an event, I mean that God either strongly or weakly actualizes it. To 'strongly actualize' an event is to be an ultimate sufficient cause of it. To 'weakly actualize' an event is to strongly actualize conditions knowing for certain that they will lead to the event, despite the fact that those conditions are not causally sufficient for it" (Rhoda 2010, p. 283).

The thesis of meticulous providence is not new. It underlies Epicurus's statement of the dilemma: "Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?" (Hume 1980, p. 63). David Hume affirms it: "Might not the Deity exterminate all ill, wherever it were to be found; and produce all good, without any preparation, or long progress of causes and effects?" (Hume 1980, p. 70). J. L. Mackie writes, "These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely" (Mackie 1955, p. 200). Finally, H. J. McCloskey echoes this: "Surely a good, omnipotent being would have made a world that is free of evil of any kind . . . . God could modify or change the laws when evil could thereby be prevented or reduced . . . . It would be the height of presumption to suggest that . . . God could do no better. The possibility of

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miracles . . . makes nonsense of this contention . . . . It is generally conceded, as it must be, that an omnipotent God can work miracles" (McCloskey 1974, pp. 3, 95, 96).

Sterba's anti-theistic argument invokes the applicability and necessity of divine meticulous providence. "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 2019a, p. 27). Consequently, given the above properties, God can and should be decreasing "the moral evil in the world by justifiably restricting the freedoms of some to promote significant freedoms for others" and "be involved in preventing significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of natural evil upon ourselves and other living beings" (Sterba 2019a, pp. 30, 159). To address these "shoulds" regarding moral and natural evil, God must invoke meticulous providence.

## 2. Sterba's Two Analogies

That Sterba believes that the theist is committed to using MP to address evil can be seen from his employment of two analogies. The first is the analogy of superheroes. Superheroes use their superhuman powers to intervene in events "to prevent significant evils from occurring," while simultaneously preserving the "significant freedom for those who would otherwise suffer those evils" (Sterba 2019a, p. 19). In fact, not only do superhuman heroes exercise these superhuman powers, they also have an obligation to do so. "Among superheroes, the idea that they should limit the freedom of would-be villains to protect would-be victims is just taken for granted" (Sterba 2019a, p. 20). He notes that, with respect to Spider-Man, he is pressed by his uncle with the fact that with great power comes great responsibility.

Sterba goes on to liken God to the superheroes, asking "why, in the actual world, could not God, like the superheroes in our fictional world, be more involved in preventing evils that result in the loss of significant freedom for their victims?" (Sterba 2019a, p. 20). He introduces the tragic case of Matthew Shepard, who was murdered presumably because of his sexual orientation. "Surely God could have intervened in this case" to have prevented this terrible murder. Among the scenarios by which God could have intervened, Sterba suggests that God could have caused the car Shepard was in "to have a flat tire while it was being driven out of the bar's parking lot," providing incentive for him to walk to his dorm rather than riding with strangers (Sterba 2019a, p. 21). God presumably would have known the terrible outcome of that ride and both could have and thus should have intervened to prevent it. At the same time, God could have done so without affecting the significant freedom of the killers to plan the murderous attack while limiting their freedom to carry it out, a freedom to which they were not entitled in any case. Thus, Sterba invokes the moral necessity that God act with MP.

Sterba considers an objection: suppose that God had known that had Shepard lived, he would have become violent against those who were anti-gay; in this case, should not God have allowed the significant evil of his death? Again, Sterba invokes meticulous divine providence, suggesting that in such a case, God would prevent Shepard's murder but could subsequently intervene to prevent Shepard from assaulting others. In these and any other possible scenarios that involve significant evil, God, in line with MP, could and should step in and prevent or mitigate such an occurrence, and as omnipotent do it in such a way that any significant and justly held freedom of all the parties would be preserved.<sup>1</sup> The point here is that Sterba's analogy comparing God with superhumans invokes the contention that theists are and should be committed to MP, a claim that we will consider below.

Sterba's second analogy is with the just state. Sterba enquires regarding what interventions the just state would and should take regarding eliminating or preventing evil. His concern is primarily with the state's intervention in the freedom of its citizens. Just political states, he contends, aim at securing a high level of freedom for their citizens. The freedoms are both freedoms for and freedoms from. The freedoms from, however, are not freedoms from all restrictions or government intervention, but freedom from others who

would seriously restrict that citizen's significant, justly held freedoms and are consistent with promoting the significant freedoms of others in the community. It is freedom, for example, from assault, from unjust tyranny, from evils caused by free persons, or even from social structures that prevent a just distribution of wealth and freedom in a society.

It is not that the just state would eliminate all evils, for this would lead to unjustifiable restrictions on individuals, for example, with respect to their choices involving soul-building. But the ideal just state would attempt to eliminate all significant evils, even if those actions of elimination restricted freedom and soul-building.

Similarly, God "should be focused on preventing (not permitting) just the consequences of significant and especially horrendous moral evils which impact on people's lives, thus leaving wrongdoers the freedom to imagine, intend, and even to take initial steps toward carrying out their wrongdoing in such cases" (Sterba 2019a, p. 51). It is not that God has to eliminate all evils, for that would encroach unnecessarily on human freedom (Sterba 2019a, p. 55). If that were to happen, then the freedom we would be left with would hardly be worthy of the name" (Sterba 2019a, p. 52), but God ought to eliminate all significant evils, especially since God can foresee the actions and their consequences. What Sterba asks for, then, is for divine meticulous providence in cases that involve significant evils. "There are too many ways that political states and human individuals could have increased the amount of significant freedom by restricting lesser freedoms of would-be wrongdoers" (Sterba 2019a, p. 29). Likewise, God could and should have done much more to promote freedom by restricting some freedoms, but God has not intervened.

In both the just state and divine actions, Sterba recommends intervention. God allows some evil to occur so that humans can engage in soul-building. However, ultimately, God rectifies evil, for when we fail to act to prevent and mitigate significant evil, God intervenes, though evil consequences of a minor sort may still result. Since we chose not to intervene, we are responsible for those minor evil consequences (Sterba 2019a, p. 61).<sup>2</sup> But even limited intervention invokes the requirement that the just state and God operate according to MP. God "would always be in a position with respect to moral evils to prevent significant and especially horrendous consequences of all such evils that are causally related," by "sufficiently restricting the external freedom of the evil doer in each case," and "this is just what God morally should do" (Sterba 2019a, pp. 94, 96).

It might be objected that if God is all good, almighty, and omniscient, then the ante for the extent of God's intervention would be raised, for he would not be subject to the limitations that face the superhero or just state.<sup>3</sup> God could prevent all evil, significant or not. Sterba responds that this scenario creates the problem that "the freedom that we would be left with would hardly be worthy of the name" (Sterba 2019a, p. 52). God must leave some freedom for wrongdoing and hence for soul-building. However, he notes, those freedoms must be limited to events with trivial, easily reparable effects, where the consequences of the actions are not significantly evil (Sterba 2019a, pp. 49, 55). "Hence, all of these imaginings, intendings, taking initial steps, and actually realizing the consequences of one's actions [on the part of the evil doers] should provide ample training ground for soul-making" of the victim (Sterba 2019a, p. 55). Yet despite this, "God is always in a position to prevent such significant evil from happening" (Sterba 2019a, p. 56). And by parallel, God is always able to promote or produce significant good. The obligations of meticulous providence, then, go both to prevent and mitigate significant evil and to promote and produce significant good.

What Sterba presupposes, then, is that divine MP is required in cases that involve significant evils. "There are too many ways that political states and human individuals could have increased the amount of significant freedom by restricting lesser freedoms of would-be wrongdoers. Likewise, there is much that God could have done to promote freedom by restricting freedom that simply has not been done" (Sterba 2019a, p. 29). Thus, from these analogies, it is clear that Sterba believes theists hold and should hold that God should act according to MP. That is, if God exists, he would be obligated to use MP to prevent significant evil and produce significant good.<sup>4</sup> However, Sterba contends, there is

good reason to think that God does not exist because there is significant evil and lack of good in the world.

### 3. Would We Want Meticulous Providence?

Sterba's second analogy presumes that the citizens of the state would want the state to meticulously intervene to prevent significant evil, even if this means imposing restrictions on the freedoms of both the just and the unjust (Sterba 2019a, p. 60). And by parallel, it presumes that humans would want God's meticulous providence in the world, whereby God ordains or permits what is to happen, at least to prevent significant evils. "Who would object?" Sterba queries (Sterba 2019a, p. 62). In limiting freedom, the supervirtuous "should find such tradeoffs not only morally acceptable but also morally required . . . . They will surely welcome those restrictions regarding them as morally required" (Sterba 2019a, pp. 62–63).

Before we evaluate this claim, it is important to note that however one answers it, the question whether humans would want a state or world governed by MP differs from whether acting according to MP is obligatory for a person to be considered good. Here I turn to the first question, addressing the second in the next section.

There is good reason to suggest that, contrary to Sterba, humans would not necessarily welcome the restrictions that may be imposed by MP, whether imposed by a state or God. Evidence for this is to be found in the widespread anti-parentalist emphasis on freedom. For example, in the recent COVID-19 epidemic, edicts specifying mask wearing, shutting down public settings like hospitality, sports, and arts, and requiring a prophylactic to work in government or industry were promulgated for both personal and community protection. The public reaction to these restrictions on freedom was mixed. While many citizens cooperated, various states and companies took the government to court on the grounds that the edicts unconstitutionally restricted citizen freedom. People resisted not only vaccination mandates, such as ordered for health care workers, but even voluntarily obtaining vaccination. Citizens claimed that they did not want the government, through edict or legislation, controlling or dictating their behavior, even if their refusal endangered their life and that of others. Resistance to government mandates, invoking freedom, played out not only in the United States but in Europe as well. For example, over 100,000 protesters took to the streets in Paris carrying placards that read "Freedom" and "Non au pass vaccinal" (Anti-Vaccine Protesters 2022). As Steven Tipton put it: "It's an act of defiance. 'You can't make me. And I will enact my own freedom even if it kills me and others around me who (sic) I love'" (Wagner 2021).

It is true that those who resisted the vaccine may have had multiple reasons, good and bad, for their resistance. They may have combined their advocacy of freedom of choice with other reasons to resist government intervention. "Immunization resistance is complex. Concerns over the safety of vaccines may be understandable . . . [It may be] predicated on questionable notions: a mistrust of science, discredited work in vaccinology, suspicion of government, flawed anecdotes, the notion of 'individual self-management' and even conspiracy theories" (Palimaru and Dillistone 2020). Our point is *not* to evaluate the reasons, but to note that the affirmation of freedom of choice in the face of authority, even if the authority intends to benefit the governed, looms large. "If we cannot be free to make informed, voluntary decisions about which pharmaceutical products we are willing to risk our lives for, then we are not free in any sense of the word . . . . What do we want? Freedom" (Fisher 2022).<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not one thinks that the reasoning behind resistance to the dictates of authority is sound or specious, based on or ignores science, is egoistic and ignores social obligations or expresses justified individualism, understands or irrationally fails to appreciate the risks to themselves or others, comes from a supervirtuous or ordinary person, anti-parentalism and libertarianism are prevalent in Western society. Thus, it is reasonable to question Sterba's general claim that people would welcome MP as morally required.

Of course, that people manifest anti-parentalism or libertarianism and do not want those in power to exercise MP and restrict their freedom does *not* mean those in power should not exercise parentalism, for what is the case does not necessarily determine what ought to be the case. But it does give one pause regarding Sterba's claim "Who would object?" and to inquire whether MP is a requirement for being good. And it puts in question Sterba's appeal to analogies such as superheroes and the powerful just state. To the question whether acting according to MP is an acceptable moral requirement we now turn.

#### 4. Humans and the Requirement of Meticulous Providence

We have seen that Sterba invokes a version of MP. "God could always prevent the significantly evil consequences of any immoral action that is being performed without permitting the significantly evil consequences of any other immoral action that would also be performed" (Sterba 2019a, p. 78). And by extension it is easy to see that God could prevent not only significant evil consequences, but all consequences of moral evil, though, as Sterba argues, God is not obligated to do so since God would want humans to have significant freedom to allow soul-building. The fact that God can always prevent significant evil leads Sterba to claim that "it is morally required for God to do so" (Sterba 2019a, p. 80).

This leaves us with the question whether using MP to prevent (significant) evil and provide (significant) good is a reasonable and acceptable moral requirement applicable to humans and to God. Are persons or moral agents, to be morally good, required to use MP to eliminate or prevent all cases of (significant) evil or suffering and bring about (significant) good as far as possible?

Sterba provides examples where we encounter persons in significant need and for whom we could do something to meet those needs. We need not look far for such opportunities; they come to us from the suffering of millions of refugees fleeing wars in Ukraine, Syria, and Ethiopia; from the famines in countries of East Africa, where fourteen million people in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya are on the verge of starvation in 2022 (International Rescue Committee 2022); from Afghanistan, where according to the UN nearly twenty million people are facing acute hunger; from the U.S. where it is estimated that twelve million children do not know where their next meal is coming from (Facts about Hunger in America 2022). These situations report significant evil and suffering, to whose alleviation we can easily provisionally contribute. So, what obligations do we have in response to the deprivation of resources these people face? More generally, how should we invoke MP to satisfy these obligations?

To see how Sterba invokes MP to address these situations, we need to look at the ethical principles of obligation he promulgates. Sterba introduces his Principle of Disproportionality (PD): "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 2019a, p. 158).

For our purposes, we are not interested in the basic needs of non-humans but of humans. Thus, we can ask whether we can substitute "humans" for "individual animals and plants and ecosystems" in the PD. For Sterba, we can do so, for "even if we hold that all living beings should count morally, we can justify a preference for humans on the grounds of preservation" (Sterba 2019b, p. 205). This is borne out in Sterba's Principle of Human Preservation (PHP): "Actions that are necessary for meeting one's basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings is permissible even when they require aggressing against the basic needs of individual animal and plants, or even of whole species of ecosystems" (Sterba 2019b, p. 206). I have critiqued Sterba's PHP and his utilitarian argument for that principle elsewhere (Reichenbach 2021, pp. 11–12). Here I am not interested in the truth of PHP, but in the fact that Sterba invokes it. Combining the Principle of Disproportionality with the Principle of Human Preservation, we can advance what we can call the Principle of Human Disproportionality (PHD): Actions that meet non-basic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of individual humans. It is clear that Sterba himself sanctions PHD, for he notes that the Principle of Disproportionality "is

strictly analogous to the principle in human ethics that similarly prohibits meeting some people's non-basic or luxury needs by aggressing against the basic needs of other people" (Sterba 2019b, p. 506). "We are," he asserts, "only entitled to the goods and resources required to meet our basic needs for a decent life—no more. Otherwise, we would be violating the rights of distant peoples and future generations" (Sterba 2014, p. 159).<sup>6</sup>

Aggress is a broad concept. It can be used negatively to refer to one person actively and voluntarily depriving other persons of their freedom, goods, opportunities, or life. But it can also refer to actions that could be but are not done to promote meeting the basic needs of others. As Sterba states, "if you can easily prevent a small child from going hungry . . . without violating anyone's rights (or failing to meet one's basic needs), then you should do so" (Sterba 2019a, pp. 16, 126). By withholding contributions for basic needs, you have aggressed against the child. That is, aggression involves acts both of commission and omission (Sterba 2014, p. 144).

Sterba treats meeting the basic needs of others as an obligation. Thus, according to his Principle of Human Disproportionality, our obligations extend beyond merely voluntarily helping to feed these and other threatened people. Actions that fail to meet others' basic needs (which do not involve compromising one's own basic needs and rights of people) are *prohibited*. This means that the obligation is most stringent: whatever we can do to meet the basic needs of others, as long as we meet our own basic needs and do not violate anyone's rights, is obligatory. This, I take it, involves both commission and omission. The upshot of this Principle of Human Disproportionality, then, is that we are morally required to give up and use our non-basic resources to meet the basic needs of others; contrary action is prohibited.<sup>7</sup> Failing to meet the basic needs of others when it can be easily done would be aggressing against them by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.<sup>8</sup> This gives a very expansive notion to MP as a requirement for moral goodness.

Sterba provides evidence for this position in his "Ideal Transformation." According to him, were his "rationality-to-equality argument" accepted, workers who provide for the basic needs of others would allocate their own resources to meet their own basic needs; what lies beyond meeting their own needs is paid as taxes or donated to meeting the basic needs of others. And those with investments and pensions will need "to redirect their investments and donations to support the provision of a basic needs minimum for all . . . and ensure that they are getting that same basic needs minimum themselves, but no more" (Sterba 2019b, p. 138).

So much, then, for the expansive obligation of MP in regard to human behavior. We need to ask at this point whether PHD really is a human obligation. That is, is PHD, as an expression of MP, a reasonable and acceptable moral obligation and hence a criterion for goodness? For one thing, if we look at human behavior, it is obvious that human beings do not act as if the requirement expressed in PHD governs their actions. Many of us are often in the position of being able to help relieve significant suffering through contributing to any number of governmental and nonprofit organizations. Compared to the two billion in the world who make less than \$3 a day and suffer food insecurity, most readers of this article are very wealthy, possessing significant amounts of disposable income. We easily could donate our income that exceeds satisfying our basic needs to meet the basic needs of and alleviate significant ills facing the disadvantaged in our neighborhood, country, and around the world. While many of us do contribute to the needs of others, what we donate is often insignificant in comparison to our disposable income spent on non-basic things and the human needs to be met. And surely, we do not satisfy PHD by contributing everything we possess beyond what meets our basic needs. We could easily give up many things in our lives, things that are not basic needs such as a morning stop at Starbucks, a dessert at lunch, a night out at the bar, a vacation trip to England or Disney World. We contribute, but not in a way that satisfies the Principle of Human Disproportionality.

In short, few of us who have disposable income satisfy the Principle of Human Disproportionality in order to be good. We fail to distribute all or even a significant portion of our non-basic goods or wealth to satisfy the basic needs of others or to prevent others

from experiencing serious situations like hunger, malnutrition, disease, and violence, even when so doing would not deprive us of meeting our own basic needs and could be easily done. Yet—and here is the point—even though we fail to satisfy PHD by means of MP, we still consider ourselves and others who act in similar or comparable ways good when we and they contribute something to relieve suffering. In short, we do not consider PHD, as a manifestation of MP, to be a criterion of moral goodness.

It might be objected that though we do not use this Principle of Human Disproportionality to determine human goodness, this does not mean that we should not use it. It may still be such a criterion for human goodness. But why think it is a criterion of goodness? Sterba suggests a utilitarian justification for his principles: they are beneficial (Sterba 2014, p. 145). But is invoking the obligation found in PHD beneficial or, more to the point, realistic?

Sterba's demand on humans and society to use PHD to prevent (significant) evil and produce (significant) good presents an extremely high, indeed, unrealistic if not unreasonable standard. And as Sterba notes, we "cannot impose moral requirements on humans that it would be unreasonable for them to accept" (Sterba 2014, p. 146). Not even the Western religious traditions, which affirm God's existence, speak of such an obligation as PHD. Rather, they speak of limited contributions. In a communitarian society we have an obligation to contribute to the basic needs of others. The Jewish tradition commands a ten percent tithe (Lev 27:30), Christians are to be generous (1 Tim 6:18), and the Muslim tradition requires the zakāt of two and a half percent of total wealth beyond basic needs. But a principle like PHD that prohibits actions that would not contribute to the basic needs of others while not interfering with our basic needs imposes an unreasonable and probably an unkeepable requirement for being good.<sup>9</sup> That is, contributing all our disposable income and resources to meet the basic needs of others is not an obligation but a supererogatory (and extraordinarily rare) act.

In sum, Sterba claims that we should hold to the Principles of Proportionality. His defense of these ideals is a utilitarian one that alleges it would make our life better. But he presents no evidence that requiring these principles would improve our life. Rather, they set a standard for human moral obligation that we do not use in everyday life, that is not confirmed by the religious traditions that believe in the existence of God, and that presents an unrealistic, unreasonable, and, invoking the vagueness of "decent life," vague ethical ideal. Our goodness does not rest on such a radical view of moral obligations, and as such does not require us to use MP to satisfy the Principle of Human Disproportionality to be morally good.

## 5. God and the Requirement of Meticulous Providence

If Sterba's principles underlying MP present an unrealistic demand for human goodness, what about for God? For God to be good, must God engage in MP to prevent evil and produce good? The contention that God must engage in MP to prevent evil and produce good begins with the belief that God has abilities and powers that surpass those of mortals. As omniscient, God knows everything that happens, and if God has foreknowledge, he knows the future as well. As almighty, God can do whatever he chooses. And as perfectly good, God has moral obligations regarding promoting good and preventing or alleviating evil. Thus, the question arises whether possession of these super properties alter the circumstances, such that God is obliged to engage in MP to prevent evil and produce good.

Broadly, the theist can argue that defenders of the view that God is so obliged have presupposed a particular view of the relation between God and the world, and more specifically, of sovereignty and providence. This view is hinted at by Sterba's appeal to the analogy of the just state. A theist may reject the notion that the sovereign takes all matters into the sovereign's control (MP) on the grounds that this is inconsistent with meaningful sovereignty.

Invocation of MP would, as we noted above with McCloskey and others, require God to run or operate the universe by divine intervention (miracles). This view misconstrues

divine sovereignty. Sovereignty involves the relationship between the governor, who has both authority and power, and the governed. To be sovereign does not mean that everything that occurs accords with the will or design of the sovereign or that sovereigns can bring about anything they want. The ability of sovereigns to determine the outcomes depends, in part, on the type and amount of freedom granted to the governed. If the subjects possess or the sovereign grants significant freedom, then sovereigns are limited in what they can do (by virtue of the freedom granted). The more freedom sovereigns award their subjects, the less sovereigns can control their subjects' behavior without withdrawing or circumscribing the very freedom granted, and the less they are justified in intervening. The key point is that sovereignty makes no sense unless the governed have a degree of significant freedom, and that freedom imposes significant limits on the sovereign (even if self-imposed). If one invokes MP, God is not sovereign over creatures who can freely respond to him, for with MP God directly or indirectly brings about all events. Thus, the governed cannot but choose or act in a given fashion since God directly or indirectly caused their motives, intentions, thought patterns, and the desires from which they act. The goodness of the sovereign, therefore, must be seen within the limits of freedom granted and the intentions of the sovereign in granting significant freedom. (I lay this argument out much more fully in Reichenbach 2016, chapter 1).

One can see the consequences of MP intervention with respect to natural evil. If God consistently intervened in the operation of natural laws, the world would become, from a human perspective, a chaos in which human rational and moral action would be impossible.<sup>10</sup> Without regularity and order, humans could not rationally plan or calculate what actions to take to achieve particular goals. Suppose we see a person thrashing about in the middle of a river and calling for help. If God is going to control the situation through miracle, how should we act? Maybe the water will not drown the person, maybe the person will be able to get up and walk on the water out of the river, or perhaps the person will simply float to safety like a cork. How we act depends on how we can act, and how we can act depends on the way the world is and on our knowledge of the natural properties the world. Without this type of knowledge our own activity as rational beings becomes impossible, for we would not know which actions would be possible.<sup>11</sup> As C. S. Lewis writes, "Not even Omnipotence could create a society of free souls without at the same time creating a relatively independent and 'inexorable' Nature" (Lewis 1962, p. 29). If divine intervention is minimal, then the regularity observed would provide the basis for rational action. But if the amount of evil is significant, as seems to be the case in nature (Sterba 2019a, p. 11), then a view of sovereignty invoking MP yields this unacceptable situation.<sup>12</sup>

But how can God be considered good in this context? What are the mitigating factors? One way of addressing this is to inquire what purpose God might have for allowing suffering-experiencing human beings to exist and for not invoking MP. If there are reasons for divine inaction, they must be exculpatory. A possible reason, I suggest, is to make possible that there be moral agents choosing between good and evil and thereby developing their moral character.<sup>13</sup> That is, a world containing significantly free persons making choices between moral good and evil and choosing a significant amount of moral good is superior to a world lacking significantly free persons and moral good and evil. God is not obligated to operate according to MP because God desires to be in relation to moral agents who freely choose a significant amount of good (Sterba 2019a, pp. 84, 160). Since having morally significant agents presupposes the possibility of freely choosing between moral good and moral evil, giving up divine MP allows for humans to exercise morally significant freedom. As Alvin Plantinga noted, for a person to be a moral agent, the person must be at many times significantly free, and "a person is *significantly* free, on a given occasion," if that person is then free either to perform or to refrain from performing an action that is morally significant for that person (Plantinga 1974, p. 166). As such, human freedom is a great good, not in itself and not per se the highest good, since, as Sterba often points out, it can be justly restricted to bring about greater goods or prevent greater evils, but because human

freedom in general is necessary for the greater good of there being moral agents who can choose between doing good and evil.

From this it follows that it is good that humans have the ability and freedom to choose between good and evil and choose to relate to God, and although it is possible that all humans always choose to do the good (understood consequentially or deontologically), experience shows that humans do choose to do evil. That is, although there are specific evils that arise from human choices, what is necessary is that human beings be able to make choices, for without morally significant freedom they cease to be moral agents who relate to God and others. While specific evils may, but often do not, lead to a specific greater good, what is important for our purposes is that their *possibility* results from the freedom that is necessary for human agents to achieve the greater good of becoming moral beings and relating to God. The evil choices made and the evil that results are not desired, either by God or by many humans. However, their *possibility* is necessary to realize the greater good of there being moral agents and the moral good that they realize. To prevent the actuality of evil would be to prevent their possibility, which would limit human ability to choose between moral good and evil. A world run by beneficent MP would prevent such possibility.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, a world functioning on MP has serious negative consequences. If God meticulously operates the world by his actions to prevent evil actions or to bring about only good results or the results he desires, there is no reason for us to act to produce the good. As we noted above, Sterba wants to leave room for significant soul-building (Sterba 2019a, pp. 83–84, 91). However, given God’s knowledge and almightiness, God can do a much better job at any task than we can. Ultimately, if God is expected to run the world by miraculous divine intervention thereby to eliminate evils and bring about good, humans would have no incentive to act, since by MP God determines what can and cannot and will or will not be done. God would prevent the evil and promote the good. Even if humans do not act, God as perfectly good will intervene, according to MP, to eliminate gratuitous evil and meet all basic needs, if not do more. And where humans do act, God would be there to guarantee that no evil or greater evil results. Relying on God to rectify all situations would remove meaningful choice for humans to act immorally or to bring about evil; God would be expected to prevent all unjustified evil acts and deleterious consequences, so that only good could be accomplished. Consequently, there is little or no significant opportunity for moral agents to engage in significant moral decision making, to develop their moral character, or to engage in soul-building, since there are no or few morally significant situations that would present themselves. The freedom to significantly choose between doing good and doing evil is removed. It would be pointless and fruitless to plan or intend evil if the ability to carry out the plans is rendered impossible. What soul-building choices there are would be present on nonsignificant instances of evil and would occur with the knowledge, or at least belief, that a good and powerful God would intervene to save or rectify the situation regardless of what we do. Moreover, if intentions have moral values, they too would be affected; it is difficult to see how with MP God would even allow planning of significant evil even when its implementation is restricted.

## 6. Limited Use of Meticulous Providence

Sterba’s thoughtful response to this is two-fold. On the one hand, although freedom is a great good, it is not the highest or ultimate good. As such, there are times when individual human freedom can and ought to be overridden to protect the good and freedom of others. God can select those times when human freedom would result in significant evil, but the rest of the time we would be free to act on our desires. These times, however, would be such that significant evil would ultimately be prevented and significant good would be produced by God. Second, on Sterba’s doctrine of limited intervention, not all evil actions need be prevented. If God prevented the most egregious evils by restricting the freedom of the evil doer, or if the bad consequences of the most horrendous immoral actions were averted, enough opportunities would remain for moral agents to make morally significant



choices. The person could make the choices, but God would intervene in some way or ways to prevent or ameliorate the evil action. He gives the example of someone attempting to abduct a small child (Sterba 2019a, p. 61). In such a case, God can allow the kidnapping plan to be conceived and to unfold, but at some point God would intervene either to prevent or to bring to a halt the kidnapping (while at the same time allowing bystanders opportunity to develop their moral character by intervening). Divine meticulous providence would be involved in such cases, but its use by God would be limited to curtailing the consequences of freedom-depriving or significant immoral action.

Whether this limited intervention would still allow for significant moral soul building is debated (Hasker 2021; Lim 2022). Significant decisions would be at the behest of divine action, such that we would soon learn that God would only allow good acts of significant import. Actions that involve insignificant evils would be left to us. But why should we act in such cases? For one thing, if the evil is insignificant, so why should I risk any action? For another, God has superior wisdom and power, so that even these instances would be better left for God. To use one of Sterba's examples, why should I risk anything to prevent the kidnapping or avoid stepping on another's foot if God can do it more easily and successfully than I. I might be injured in the intervention or badly twist my ankle in the process (though, by a stroke of irony, if these effects were significant, God would prevent these as well). Our intellectual and moral virtue would be protected, for we have done the wise thing in turning every decision and action over to God, realizing the strong sense of MP.

Further, whether limited but significant intervention would allow enough significant moral freedom may be debated. Part of the answer depends on the amount of evil in the world. On the one hand, if the amount of (significant) gratuitous evil is not great, then Sterba's response poses no real threat to the theist, who can hold that when God either intervenes or does not intervene some purpose lies behind it. On the other hand, if the amount of (significant) evil in the world is so great and the quality so intense as to put in question God's existence, limited meticulous providence would have to be applied to such an extent that humans could no longer function as meaningful moral agents. They could plan, but allowable actions would have to be sanctioned by God. Moreover, those who plan to commit significant evil would soon discover that their actions would be fruitless. They may have freedom of choice but not freedom of action in the sense that what they desire to happen and work to achieve cannot and will not be realized. Their implementation would depend on being sanctioned by God, who would only sanction significant good. In effect, they are not really free, for although they can plan they cannot implement their plans.<sup>15</sup> Planning would be a useless endeavor for the planners of evil, for they will soon discover that such evil plans never are accomplished.<sup>16</sup>

The theist who allows for miracles would concur with Sterba that God may engage in limited intervention. The difference between the theist and Sterba's critique is in the degree of intervention and in the contention that it is required. Whereas Sterba contends that if God existed, God would be obligated to use MP to eliminate all significant evils, the theist will allow that God may intervene in a limited way, so long as significant freedom, rationality, and calculable order are preserved. It might be objected that this leaves us with no reason why God intervenes here and not there, this time and not another, in this rather than another way. The theist need not pretend to know the reasons for God intervening or failing to do so in each case of suffering, as in a similar fashion, we do not know the reasons behind many human actions. The theist is not attempting to explain individual cases where suffering occurs and God does or does not act, but addresses the general problem of suffering.

Morality involves not only consequences but, from a deontological perspective, duties and obligations incumbent upon us and our intentions. The evil intent of the attempted kidnappers still lurks, as does their failed obligation to bring about the good. One would think that God should intervene to prevent these evil intentions and desires as well, since they degrade human character and in Sterba's example, lead to some temporary if not

longer lasting dis-ease (how seriously will the attempted abduction, even if ultimately prevented, affect the child?). Finally, and significantly for Sterba's presentation, if God allows the abduction of the child even to begin to provide bystanders with an opportunity to intervene and thus develop their character, it violates Sterba's Pauline principle that evil should not be used to bring about good, in this case, soul-building.

## 7. Conclusions

Sterba's counter to a free will theodicy invokes a version of the doctrine of meticulous providence, coupled with the Principle of Human Disproportionality. We have seen that this requirement not only is not used in determining human goodness but is unattainable. When the requirement is applied to God, we would get a very different picture of divine sovereignty than that espoused by some theists. In particular, it would have significant detrimental effects to human freedom and moral action; in particular, soul building of a significant sort would not occur, for there would be no reason for the inferior party to act if the superior party has all in hand by MP. Sterba's turn to a limited application of MP is more difficult to assess, given that we lack a clear understanding of the amount of gratuitous evil that would have to be addressed. This ambiguity is sufficient to defang the evidential objection to God's existence from evil, though it is unlikely to be strong enough to convince those provoking a defense, given the persuasive power of invoking particular cases of suffering and limited intervention.<sup>17</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For Sterba, not all freedom is justly held. Shepard's killers justly had the freedom to plan the attack, but the freedom to kill was not justly held.
- <sup>2</sup> One might argue that persons might refuse to intervene in cases where they are aware of significant (or even of insignificant) evils because not intervening gives God the opportunity to manifest God's goodness. For example, inaction allows God to rescue a kidnapped child or to prevent the kidnapping, and humans are justified in not acting because God is much more proficient at these tasks than we are, especially since with his knowledge and power he can avoid serious and even non-serious side-consequences. In such cases, God, not the human who responsibly deferred to a more competent being to resolve the problem, is responsible for the resulting evil, since God as all powerful and knowing could have intervened in a way that would have prevented such consequences. Sterba rejects this analysis.
- <sup>3</sup> Underlying Sterba's invocation of MP is his belief that "God is not subject to any such limitation of power. Thus, God can negotiate crowded subways without harming anyone in the slightest. God can also prevent a temporarily depressed person from committing suicide without lying to them, and God can save all twenty civilian hostages without having to execute any one of them" (Sterba 2019a, p. 50).
- <sup>4</sup> It is important to note that the term "significant" is a person-relative term, and hence what constitutes significant evil and significant good is relative to persons and thus ambiguous. We will return to this later (see Reichenbach 2021, p. 8, for additional discussion).
- <sup>5</sup> Though widespread in American society, anti-parentalism is less apparent in totalitarian societies, probably due to the structure of those societies. It was endemic in the anti-Prohibition behavior responding to the 18th Amendment in the 1920s. In the abortion debate, prochoice advocates protest that women, not the government, should control what they do with their body in reproduction; woman have the right to bodily autonomy (Key Facts on Abortion 2022). Motorcyclists in the United States have successfully lobbied state governments to roll back laws requiring them to wear helmets, even when riders have a previous history of accidents (Faryabi et al. 2014). Although the reasons motorcyclists give may be many (The Legal Examiner 2022), one organization leader calls it a "small zone of personal autonomy" (Chapman 2010). Anti-paternalism also plays out when U.S. gun owners invoke the Second Amendment to successfully lobby not only against restrictions on possessing and carrying weapons, but even for the type of weapons they may own and carry. One can list numerous activities, such as edificeering or urban climbing, of those who willingly risk personal danger, often in the face of contrary legislation.

- <sup>6</sup> “Decent life” is itself a very ambiguous term, for what constitutes a decent life for one person or for one culture will vary greatly from what constitutes such for another person or another culture. This means that the interpretation of basic needs, insofar as it depends on what one conceives of as a decent life, will vary greatly as well, with those who possess means having a more robust notion of decent life and hence of their basic needs. To see this, one might ask whose concept of a decent life should be adopted as a standard when basic needs are considered to determine obligatory and prohibited actions.
- <sup>7</sup> In fact, Sterba goes even further to hold that “in general, we don’t have a principle that allows us to aggress against (though an act of commission) the basic needs of some people in order to meet our own basic needs or the basic needs of other people to whom we are committed or happen to care about” (Sterba 2014, p. 144). However, Sterba restricts aggression in cases of meeting our own basic needs or those of whom we care for to acts of commission rather than omission.
- <sup>8</sup> Sterba’s treatment of “the freedom of the poor not to be interfered with in taking from the surplus possessions of the rich what is necessary to satisfy their basic needs” further illustrates his commitment to this requirement (Sterba 2019a, p. 16).
- <sup>9</sup> In fact, although Sterba preferences nonviolent actions, he suggests that we are justified in using force against “rich people [who] are unwilling to make the necessary transfers of resources, so that poor people” can meet their basic needs (Sterba 2014, pp. 137, 150).
- <sup>10</sup> Sterba (2019a, p. 166) denies this result. I do not have space here to undertake the discussion; I address his response in detail in Reichenbach (2021, p. 15).
- <sup>11</sup> Reichenbach (2016, pp. 9–10). This does not mean that God cannot act directly in nature. But it does mean that if we are to be morally responsive beings, God cannot act in such a way that would result in the destruction of the natural order and in our own inability to act rationally, prudently, and morally. Operating the world by miracle to eliminate all (significant) evil to humans and nature would require this type of intervention.
- <sup>12</sup> This is a very truncated summary of the detailed argument I give elsewhere (Reichenbach 2021, pp. 10–15). I refer the reader to that discussion of Sterba’s position.
- <sup>13</sup> As Alvin Plantinga (1974, p. 165) has pointed out, for a successful defense one need not show that this is God’s actual reason; only that it might possibly constitute God’s reason.
- <sup>14</sup> This emphasis on human freedom and God’s respecting it in his desire to be in relation to humans should not be understood in the sense of there being absolute, non-interfered with freedom. Our view does not advocate or necessitate a deism where God in not involved in the affairs of the world. It is not, as one critic contended, that “free will is that important, and that fragile, [that] it can suffer no violations.” It is the degree of violations that concerns the requirement to apply MP. What theism does maintain is that a world that is fully or significantly operated by MP, where God ordains all or most events, seriously compromises the possibility of the freedom necessary for moral decision making. Of course, giving humans a say in how the world and people operate and make decisions means that God cannot guarantee how the future will turn out, for human decisions and actions are part of the mix. God’s relation to the world is more complex than MP makes out in envisioning a world run by divine intervention.
- <sup>15</sup> Hasker (2021, p. 21). It should be noted that Sterba opts for a different view of significant freedom, namely, that “significant freedoms are those freedoms a just political state would want to protect since that would fairly secure each person’s fundamental interests” (Sterba 2019a, p. 12). For him, the kidnappers are free in the sense that they can plan, but a just political state would restrict their implementing their kidnapping plan.
- <sup>16</sup> What further complicates determination of the amount of gratuitous, significant evil to be addressed is the ambiguity of the term “significant.” As we noted above, significance is person-relative, such that what is significant to one person might not be significant to another, and vice versa. This particularly comes into play when one considers quality of life situations, as over against life and death situations (quantity of life). There is no objective standard to determine the amount of significant evil in the world requiring significant intervention.
- <sup>17</sup> Thanks to anonymous referees for their helpful comments and critique.

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Opinion

# Why God Cannot Do What Sterba Wants

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**Abstract:** Sterba argues that if God existed, God would allow lower-level evils and suffering but should and would prevent all significant and horrendous evils. Since such serious evils do exist, God does not exist. In reply, I argue that in creating a Sterba world, God would be violating one of God's central purposes for the world, viz., that human beings be rationally free to deny God's existence and presence. Given the total absence of horrendous evils in Sterba worlds, despite human intentions to inflict them, it would be obvious that God exists and is at work. There might still be atheists, but atheism would be irrational.

**Keywords:** evil; horrendous evil; god; epistemic distance; freedom

James Sterba's book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, is an important work.<sup>1</sup> It encapsulates and expands on points that he has been working on for years. It is well argued and well written. It is also full of fascinating arguments. Its central conclusion is that the logical problem of evil (in Sterba's version of it) shows that God is not logically possible, where God is both all-powerful and perfectly good. In other words, the question asked in the book's title is answered with a decisive no.

I will argue against this claim. In my opinion, Plantinga's conclusion against Mackie—that the logical problem of evil does not show that the existence of God is impossible—still stands<sup>2</sup>. There is much that I could say about various parts of the book, but in this brief paper I will concentrate almost exclusively on Chapter 4, "The Pauline Principle and the Just Political State".

But before discussing Chapter 4, I must first briefly sketch out my own approach to the problem of evil.<sup>3</sup> This is necessary properly to explain my critique.

Let me begin with this question: What were God's aims in creating the universe? I think there were four main ones. (1) God wanted to create a regular and coherent world. Such a world would be largely rational and predictable. This would make it possible for human being to navigate the world well. Human learning and science would be possible. We could survive and even at times thrive.

(2) God wanted to create a world that contained the greatest possible balance of moral and natural good over moral and natural evil. For my purposes, I will define "evil" as "undeserved human suffering".<sup>4</sup>

(3) God wanted a world in which human beings were free, in a libertarian sense, to do good or evil, to obey God or disobey God, to love God or hate God.<sup>5</sup> That is, God did not want to coerce either belief in the existence of God or obedience to God's commands. God wanted people to formulate that belief and make that decision freely and rationally. Of course, God could have made the world such that God's existence and desires for us were obvious. But had God done so, the result would not be a world in which people were rationally free to go wrong. Obviously, in a world of intellectual and moral freedom, there would exist the risk that humans might go wrong. Thus, the balance of good and evil in such a world would be to a certain extent up to us rather than God.

(4) God wanted a world in which as many human beings as possible would freely and for good reasons decide to love and obey God. Now Sterba understandably insists that the problem of evil concerns not any amount of evil in the world but the amount and intensity

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of evil that actually exists in the world. Despite that point, I say that God's policy decision to interfere only rarely (i.e., to prevent suffering) will turn out wise. That is, in the end a better world will ensue than would result from any other policy God might have chosen to follow, including the policy Sterba recommends of divine interference with all suffering due to significant or horrendous evil.

How do we know that our four assumptions about the world that God wanted to create are true? Well, they are indeed assumptions; my argument depends on them. If Sterba, or anybody else, can successfully argue against them, then my argument is in trouble. However, I believe they do constitute beliefs about God that the vast majority of Jews and Christians accept; you might say that they are aspects of "the biblical view of God". Moreover, this is the view of God that Sterba is opposing.

We know that God wanted to create a largely regular and coherent world because that is the sort of world that God did create. Of course, it was entirely possible for God to have created an incoherent, random, unpredictable world, a world in which the discipline of mathematics is not helpful in understanding reality and in which science is not possible. But God did not do that.

We know that God wanted to create an overall good world because the first creation story in Genesis affirms that the world, as originally created, was good. And scripture also affirms the idea that despite evil, pain, and suffering in the world, God is working toward a transcendently good outcome.

We know that God wanted humans to have a degree of libertarian freedom because that is an assumption of scripture throughout. Granted, the biblical writers were not analytic philosophers; they did not make a distinction between libertarian freedom and other forms of freedom. But it seems to me that at least on many occasions, we are free to choose—to opt for good or evil, to love God or hate Gd. God could have created a world in which it was perfectly obvious that God existed and had certain desires for us. God could have created a world in which we were caused or compelled to obey God's commands. But God did not do that—precisely, so I think, to give us freedom to choose.

We know that God wanted human beings, despite our freedom to reject God, to come to love, obey, and honor God again because that is a grand assumption of the Judeo-Christian view of God. We believe that this is what God is working toward.

Natural evil—which is undeserved human suffering not caused by human beings—results from the kind of world God created, given its regularities and natural laws. So far as I know, God rarely intervenes to prevent suffering caused by natural events. But God promises to be with us in our suffering and to bring good out of it in the end. If God did regularly intervene to prevent suffering caused by earthquakes, pandemics, famines, etc., natural events would be highly irregular and unpredictable.<sup>6</sup>

Given God's four desires for creation, the world had to have certain characteristics. First, it had to constitute an environment in which God's existence and desires for us, as well as the short-term and especially long-term consequences of the moral and religious choices that human beings would make, would not be obvious to us. God must be slightly hidden; there must be (to borrow John Hick's term) a certain "epistemic distance" between human beings and God. Second, it had to be a world in which rewards do not immediately follow from behaving in ways approved of by God and punishments do not immediately follow from behaving in ways disapproved of by God. Third, it had to be a world in which God's grace is at least potentially available (to accept or reject) to all people.

Despite human suffering, which does indeed amount to horrendous evil for human beings on some occasions, we are asked us to trust our lives to God, who offers us the gift of grace and forgiveness, and promises us a supremely good future in the eschaton. As Marilyn Adams rightly insists, intimate fellowship with God is the highest good for human beings (Adams 1999, p. 12). The significant evil that we experience will be (as Sterba puts it) "wiped away" (p. 58). I also suspect and hope that God will provide an afterlife in which people who reject God or know nothing of God or Christianity are given a second chance to respond to God with love and obedience. Sterba calls this a "second inning afterlife", but I

deny his claim that this will necessitate a third inning and an nth-inning afterlife (p. 58). What people who do not know God will need is a genuine and informed opportunity, which God can provide in only one extra inning.

One area where we are asked to trust is the assurance that God has answers to questions than now appear unanswerable. This would include questions like, Why did God allow African slavery to exist? or, Why did God allow the Nazi holocaust to occur? Given the transcendent nature of God, the fact that there are mysteries in the area of theodicy and truths beyond our ken is not a last-ditch attempt to save Cristian theology from criticism. It is, on the other hand, exactly what that theology should lead us to expect.

I do not claim that the moral freedom that God gave us, which is a great good, is such a great good as by itself to outweigh all the evil it will make possible. Of course not. What justifies God's policy is the transcendent good that God promises in the outcome, i.e., the kingdom of God.

In the end, some evil will be used by God to produce great good (either great earthly goods or the omni-good of the kingdom of God), and all evil will be overcome and transcended in the eschaton. For the redeemed in the kingdom of God, all tears will be wiped away, all diseases will be healed, all crimes will be repented of and forgiven, all injustice will be made right, all relationships will be restored, and all suffering will be redeemed.

Sterba argues that a perfectly good and all-powerful being must prevent rather than allow the consequences of all significant and especially horrendous evils. Indeed, he says, it would be morally wrong for such a being not to do so. In order to buttress his case, he frequently uses the analogy of an ideal and powerful political state. He also appeals to the Pauline Principle (Never do evil that good may come of it [Romans 3:8]). He arrives at what he calls Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, which I do not propose to discuss because on this occasion, I am not going to object to them.

Sterba admits that if God were to prevent all the consequences of evil, the result would be “toy freedom” (Richard Swinburne) or “playpen freedom” (David Lewis); this would greatly diminish our status as moral agents. He sees that we must have genuine freedom if we are to develop the moral virtues essential to soul-making. But we do not need unlimited freedom for that. What is needed, he says, is “a world where everyone's freedom is appropriately constrained” (p. 53).

Accordingly, God must limit the significant freedom of would-be wrongdoers in order to secure the significant freedom of their would-be victims. They would still—Sterba adds—“have the freedom to imagine, intend, and even take initial steps toward carrying out their wrongdoing” (p. 53). But they would be prevented by God from actually doing the intended deeds or achieving the intended consequences. As Sterba points out, there would still be moral evil in such a world, both the moral evil of the bad intentions that potential evil-doers would formulate and the bad but not horrendously bad consequences of those evil actions that God would allow. But the upshot is that since God obviously does not follow Sterba's recommended policy, Sterba embraces atheism. The argument is:

If God exists, God must do x;

God does not do x;

Therefore, God does not exist.

Although this next point does not amount to a criticism of Sterba, we must first recognize that God cannot be expected to have created a world in which human beings do not suffer at all. It is easy to see why such a world would be inimical to God's purposes. Let's imagine a world of no pain—that is, a world in which human experience is only pleasurable, the world is entirely plastic to our wishes, and we are at, all times, blissfully happy. Let's call this a “valium world”.

Such a world would be disastrous from God's viewpoint. There would be little or no sense of morality, of some things being good and others evil. There would be little sense that our decisions and actions have consequences. There would be no compassion for others or occasion to help others. There would be no courage or heroism. There would be



no reason for moral growth or improving one's soul. There would be no longing for moral excellence or for a better world. There would be little felt reason to love and obey God. There would be no growth through suffering. Accordingly, it seems that there are certain great goods that God can only or best achieve by allowing human suffering via moral or natural evil. In a valium world, God's desires for the world would be thwarted.

But here is where we do arrive at a criticism of Sterba. Suppose that God had indeed followed a policy of interfering with the consequences of every event that would otherwise produce significant or horrendous evil. Clearly, it would not take human beings long to figure out the fact that this is indeed the world's or God's operative policy. Some humans might toy with the idea that the total absence of significant suffering in their lives is not due to God but is simply a law of nature, the way the world regularly works. But surely that idea will not wash, or last long. How could an impersonal law of nature, like gravity or thermodynamics, work that way? (We will return to this point below).

So the idea is that every time evil-doers intend to do a significantly evil act, it somehow turns out that they cannot do it, or at least that the consequences turn out to be relatively innocuous. Sterba recognizes the point that "people would just stop imagining, intending, or even taking the initial steps toward carrying out such actions" (p. 53). But he replies that potential evil-doers will not give up on their villainy. Notice, he says, that evil-doers can succeed in doing evil that causes lower-level suffering to others. So, they will "strive to find some other occasion, or some other set of circumstances, where they can still succeed at their villainy" (p. 55). No doubt they would do so. But surely, they would eventually realize that there are no other occasions where they can succeed in producing significant evil.

Sterba recognizes this point as well. He says, "So in this hypothetical world, you begin to detect a pattern in God's interventions". Suppose we behave morally and try to intervene to prevent some significant evil but are only partially successful. Then, he says, "God does something to make the prevention completely successful" (p. 61).

I have two worries about Sterba's proposal, the first less serious than the second. First, what exactly is the boundary between those lesser evils that malefactors can successfully inflict on others and those significant and horrendous evils that they cannot? Let's call lesser evils "Evils" and serious ones "EVILS". Surely the boundaries, or the criteria for placing evils in the correct category, will have to be or at least appear loose, flexible, and unclear. From our point of view (either the perpetrators or the victims) the placement of evils will doubtless seem ambiguous and even subjective. Sterba is clear that murder and serious assault, for example, count as EVILS. And presumably the experience of having a hangnail or an annoying fit of hick-ups would count as Evils. But what about the infinite number of other evil acts that could be intended?

Here is one reason that I argued earlier that a "law of nature" explanation of why suffering will work as Sterba intends will not do. It seems that there is going to have to be a personal being (i.e., God) who makes the crucial decisions. Such questions will have to be considered as: How intense will be the pain of this particular intended evil act? How long will the pain last? How many people will experience it? How terrible will be the lasting effects of the experience? Notice also that one experience of evil (e.g., being a prisoner of war) might be horrendous for one person and not for another. How can God decide? Will God be able to avoid controversies and complaints?

I do not claim that this problem of making correct and just decisions cannot be solved, especially when the person making the decisions is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good. But at the very least, I believe Sterba should say much more about it.

My second and more serious worry is that such a world as Sterba recommends—which we can call (with no offense whatsoever intended) a "Sterba world"—would also be inimical to God's purposes. Recall that God, given God's aims, wanted to create a world in which it is rationally possible to reject God. That would not be possible in a Sterba world. Belief in God would be rationally coercive. No doubt there could still be atheists, but they would be rejecting something—the controlling presence of God in the human experience of suffering—that would eventually be perfectly obvious. In a Sterba world, atheism would be irrational. It would be

obvious that no desire or intention to commit, say, murder or serious assault could ever succeed. So, if a Sterba world would be inimical to God's aims, God can hardly be blamed for God's failure to create such a world. Accordingly, Sterba's argument for atheism fails.

Of course, we are not meant to imagine that God will prevent all EVILS by miraculous and noticeable means. God will presumably work in ordinary but hidden ways to prevent significant suffering, e.g., by so arranging the world that EVILS do not occur as intended. This is perhaps not unlike the Grandfather paradox in time travel stories. We can imagine a man who loathes his grandfather, builds a time machine, and intends to travel to the past in order to kill his grandfather as a youth. Of course, he cannot succeed—if the grandfather dies as a youth, there is no grandson. This is why, in coherent time travel stories, something ordinary occurs to prevent the murder: the gun misfires, a flat tire prevents the grandson from arriving at the intended site, or whatever. So, to return to Sterba, God so arranges things that some mundane coincidence always occurs to prevent all EVILS. Thus—so we are imagining—God's actions are undetectable.

Still, it seems to me that eventually people would make the easy deduction that some unseen personal force is preventing intended and initially acted on EVILS from occurring. Certainly, God could go further than this, e.g., arrange things so that people will never smack themselves in the head and shout, "Wait a minute: God must be doing this!" That is, God could prevent such an idea from ever entering anybody's brain. But then we would not be free. We would then be back to Plantinga and Mackie. God could prevent all EVILS without making them obvious only at the cost of our intellectual freedom.

In other words, I hold that God intended to create a world in which God is epistemically distant from us. That is, God wanted it to be rationally possible for people to doubt or even deny God's existence. That, I say, would not be possible in Sterba worlds. There still might be atheists, but atheism would be irrational. Ergo, creating the kind of world that Sterba thinks God should have created, had God existed, would be contrary to God's purposes.

Three final points: first, Sterba claims (p. 148) that in a just and powerful political state the task of mitigating suffering due to horrendous evils would take priority over the task of redeeming people; ergo, that should be true of God as well. I accept the premise of the argument because just and powerful political states, like actual states, have almost nothing to do with redeeming people from sin. (They may have a little to do with rehabilitating criminals). But the conclusion does not follow from the premise. I grant that in his book Sterba frequently makes helpful use of the ideal political state. But here, the argument, "A just and powerful political state would do X; ergo, God must do X" is invalid. God is concerned with redeeming people.

Second: is heaven a valium world? I naturally know little about heaven, but I accept that there will be no place for compassion for others or chances to help others or occasions to display heroism or courage. But heaven will not count as a valium world because there will be a strong continuity with the present, non-valium world. All the denizens of the kingdom of God will have experienced the present world with its Evils and EVILS. Suffering must be undergone by redeemed people at some temporal point, but not at all times.

Third, at the conclusion of Chapter 4, Sterba says, "It would be morally inappropriate to receive a heavenly afterlife, even after having suffered significant evils that were unchosen and unaccepted, without first having gone through a soul-making where one did what could be reasonably expected to do to make oneself less unworthy of such a heavenly afterlife" (pp. 65–66).

This sentiment sounds noble. But here, Sterba seems to me to eschew the philosophy of religion in favor of doing a bit of theology. Are atheists allowed to do theology? Well, perhaps. But I just want to point out that: (1) I do not believe that I am capable of doing anything to make myself less unworthy of a heavenly reward; and (2) it is up to God and not up to us (whether we are atheists, agnostics, or theists) to decide who may appropriately receive a heavenly afterlife.<sup>7</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Page references to this work are in parentheses in the text of the present essay.
- <sup>2</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, Davis (2001, chp. 3) and Davis (2016, chp. 8).
- <sup>4</sup> For several reasons, this is not an entirely satisfactory definition of “evil”, but it will do for my purposes.
- <sup>5</sup> Sterba apparently agrees with this. He says, “. . . what God presumably wants for us is that we have the choice to love him freely or not” (p. 146).
- <sup>6</sup> Earthquake scientists, for example, might find themselves saying things like, “In the next ten years there is a 50% chance that the San Andreas fault will break and there could be catastrophic damage in the Los Angeles area, unless God intervenes”.
- <sup>7</sup> I would like to thank Colin Ruloff and Eric Yang for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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## Article

# The Argument from Evil, the Argument from Hiddenness, and Supernaturalistic Alternatives to Theism

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**Abstract:** In this brief article, I consider James Sterba's logical argument from evil, finding it to be ultimately unsuccessful. Not for the various issues Sterba raises, which do seem to be problematic if God exists, but for the logical approach itself. I encourage Sterba to shift tack, to embrace the evidential argument from evil, which is not at all concessionary, as he seems to think, and is an extremely powerful argument against the probability of theism, especially when we open the debate to the supernaturalistic alternatives to theism. I also encourage Sterba to reconsider his dismissive attitude towards the argument from hiddenness, which, in its evidential form, is also a very powerful argument against God's existence, either employed independently or incorporated into the argument from evil.

**Keywords:** argument from evil; argument from hiddenness; alternatives to theism

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## 1. Introduction

The argument from evil is a very powerful argument against God's existence. This revolves around the notion that God, the god of classical theism, who is, among other things, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, finds some contradiction with the evil or suffering in the world. The logical argument from evil has long been out of favour in the philosophy of religion; however, the evidential argument from evil, tending to focus more on gratuitous evils, and shedding the unnecessary burden of deductive certainty in favour of sound probabilistic reasoning, as argued by the likes of William L. Rowe (Rowe 1979) and Paul Draper (Draper 1989), remains.

James P. Sterba (University of Notre Dame) recently published *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Sterba 2019), arguing that God's existence is incompatible with all the evil in the world. He presents a logical argument from evil and has sportingly invited a great many talented philosophers to critique it. In this article, I consider how Sterba's opting for the logical approach is fraught with difficulty, and how a few alterations improve his argument from evil considerably.

## 2. Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil and Objections

There are different ways in which 'logical' and 'evidential' arguments from evil have been conceived (as explained in Howard-Snyder 1996). Recently I was discussing with my colleague Stephen Law, who has done his own interesting work on the argument from evil (Law 2010), and it appears that he thinks the distinction is marked effectively by the number of evils under consideration. However, when it comes to Sterba's work and my response, logical arguments involve certainty, typically revolving around notions of impossibility, whilst evidential arguments revolve around evidences that support one hypothesis over another. The first sentence of Sterba's introduction, which aligns well with his book's title, makes this clear (Sterba 2019, p. 1): "The question I seek to address in this book is whether or not an all-good God who is also presumed to be all powerful is logically possible given the degree and amount of moral evil that exists in our world." To end all doubt, Sterba,

in his conclusion, states (Sterba 2019, p. 182): “All three sub-arguments conclude to the logical impossibility of God.”

It is this that makes Sterba’s efforts here so novel: he is attempting to revive an almost long-forgotten approach to the questions at hand. Sterba summarises his argument as the aforementioned three sub-arguments (Sterba 2019, pp. 185–89). The first is his Argument from the Moral Evil in the World, which includes premises such as, “there are significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions that, if God exists, would have to have resulted from God’s widespread violation of Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I, which is logically incompatible with God’s existence, unless there is some other justification for God’s permitting those evil consequences”. The second is his Argument from the Natural Evil in the World, which finds that “the significant and especially horrendous consequences of natural evil that exists in the world would BE LOGICALLY INCOMPATIBLE WITH GOD’S EXISTENCE”. The third is his Argument from the Lack of God’s Law-like Prevention of Evil, including premises such as, “although an ideally just and powerful state would do its best to abide by Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I–III and Natural Evil Prevention Requirements I–IX, only God, if he exists, could and should insure, as needed, with law-like regularity, that there would be no significant and especially no horrendous consequences of moral and natural evil inflicted on their victims in violation of these requirements, and hence no second-order goods that would otherwise result from such evil consequences”.

I find this argument quite compelling, though not enough to declare that now we certainly have a way to conclusively prove that God does not exist. While theists cannot really move the goalposts much on God’s omnipotence and omniscience, there seems to me to always be sufficient wriggle room to raise objections about what God’s omnibenevolence really entails; what ‘good’ actually is; what ‘evil’ actually is; Reichenbach seems to do just this (see Reichenbach 2021, pp. 4–5); and what can be considered reasonable prevention requirements, trade-offs, rights, justifications, and rationale, even if that results in significant concessions or explanations that need not be probable, merely possible. Perhaps like Michael Tooley or Laura Ekstrom, I would try to convince Sterba to go down the more fruitful evidential/probabilistic route.

To assert that there is finally a sound logical argument from evil is very bold, so, naturally, there have been many replies to Sterba’s work. One of Elizabeth Burns’ objections is that “it is not necessary to define divinity in this way, and that this is the third and fatal flaw in Sterba’s argument” (Burns 2021, p. 8), going on to speculate on different ways God could be conceived, stating that “the God in question is not a God of the kind that Sterba describes” (ibid. p. 11). This is in alignment with my concern that the critics merely need to disagree on definitions, though this particular attempt seems far too costly. By making big alterations to what God is, we are no longer discussing God, the god of classical theism. Indeed, such theodicies actually reinforce the power of the argument, strengthening the view that the being in question does indeed not exist, and perhaps it is another god that exists (a notion we shall revisit).

William Hasker demonstrates another major approach to critiquing such arguments, questioning what the relevant terms, such as ‘prevention requirement’, actually mean and entail (Hasker 2021), whilst also cleverly charging that, if Sterba insists on such requirements being placed on God, then it is he, Sterba, who is guilty of crafting a straw person argument, of effectively creating his own version of God, who “was devised precisely in order to show that he does not exist”, and one who “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” (p. 7). Even if Sterba is correct, it takes little effort for the believer to quickly alter, in a relatively minor way, their view of God, not massively, just enough to avoid the consequences of Sterba’s premises. This is one of the primary reasons I find the logical approach untenable. Aside from the fact that absolute certainty is required, which is itself a likely insurmountable obstacle, if only for our cognitive limitations, the theist need only assert that the sort of god Sterba or others is arguing against is not exactly their own god.

It is all too simple for the theistic philosopher to add more and more on to the definition of their god, par for the course, unless critics opt for the evidential/probabilistic route, where this would immediately be exposed as doing nothing for (perhaps even harming) the prospects of showing theism to be probable.

Sterba acknowledges that his argument could contain a fatal flaw and invites criticism (p. 191). For me, the 'fatal flaw' is, of course, the appeal to logical argument in the first place. While theists and non-theists alike find it troubling that there would be evil in a world created and effectively run by a god who could easily prevent it, the theists' old appeal to God's inscrutability is successful, particularly if they are open to (slightly) shifting the goalposts. God could always have some absolutely befuddling—to us—reason for allowing things we consider evil, and this is made worse by the fact that maybe those things are not evil after all. Just as with most things, we cannot be certain. That is why I suspect that all the logical arguments against God's existence must ultimately fail. Despite the logical argument from evil being very powerful, including Sterba's form, bringing theists and atheists together in acknowledging that there is something quite odd about the perfect God allowing so much torment and injustice, logical arguments will always be subject to our epistemological gap. We simply cannot be sure about, well, anything (except our own existence, with some disputing even that, and perhaps, by extension, the universe's existence).

Sterba has done his homework and knows the typical objections that would arise when crafting a logical argument from evil. There is no need to repeat it all here, as appeals to nebulous concepts of God's intentions and free will are well known. Sterba, as is to be expected, finds these objections wanting, and so he should. However, it is not enough, when positing a logical argument, an argument from certainty, that the theistic hypotheses are wanting. It is not enough for Sterba to rely on words peppered throughout his book such as 'widespread' and 'significant'. When crafting a logical argument, we need to be sure, and we simply cannot be. We must accept to some extent, as Socrates allegedly did, that 'we know nothing'.

However, if we drop the requirement of certainty, and embrace probabilistic reasoning, namely 'refining' Sterba's argument into an evidential form, theism faces—at present—an insurmountable challenge. Yes, it may be possible that God has some odd reason for allowing these evils, but is it probable? Are there not alternatives to theism where the presence of these evils, amongst other things, makes more sense? Suddenly the burden is thrust right back at the proponents of theism, who can no longer appeal to mere epistemic possibilities, (not even confirmed as ontological possibilities), but must now show why their innumerable excuses and theodicies, are probable, and this they generally cannot do, especially when God's inscrutability is widely considered a feature and not a bug. However, shift tack to the evidential approach, and now the appeals to God's inscrutability fall apart, to such an extent that the case for God's existence is, in general, already over, as every excuse lumped in together with the God hypothesis drags its probability further and further downwards (see Lataster 2018).

I sympathise with Sterba, as he has taken on an impossible task. Furthermore, it is unnecessary. While it is extraordinarily difficult to produce a sound logical argument from evil, impossible even, it is just as extraordinarily easy to produce a compelling evidential argument from evil. In a flash, all the typical objections fall apart. It is not enough to simply say 'God might this' and 'God might that', and 'but will somebody please think of the free will?!'. The theist can have no compelling retort. They are in a worse position than the atheistic proponent of the logical argument. They rely on notions that are unproven and seem very improbable. 'Free will' suddenly looks to be a hollow claim when we realise that we can't be sure it exists (interestingly, the Bible hints that it effectively does not in many passages, such as 2 Thessalonians 2:13), and that we might exercise our hypothesised free will more ideally if we didn't have to face all these ostensibly unnecessarily evils that block our spiritual progress. I leave it to my fellow purveyors of knowledge to determine if the knowledge of one of the most important things one could know, that God exists, might

have some impact on us properly exercising our free will to make the crucially important decision to follow God or not, and to obey his commands, moral and otherwise.

However, it is not even necessary, once we embrace the evidential/probabilistic approach, that we thoroughly scrutinise and analyse, revealing just how improbable God's existence seems to be, compared with a naturalistic world order.

### 3. An Evidential Revision

Logical arguments from evil suffer, and Sterba's is unfortunately no exception, beholden to the fact that theists can always appeal to mere possibilities, no matter how extraordinarily improbable (such as the supernatural afterlife), as well as unknowns (God's supposed inscrutability, being particularly key). This is still possible with the evidential arguments from evil, however, they do not help, and arguably even make the situation more dire for the theist.

As outlined succinctly in *The Case Against Theism* (Lataster 2018), all the proponents of the evidential argument from evil need do is point to the apparent relative improbability of such a good, knowledgeable, and powerful god allowing seemingly unnecessary instances of suffering. It, at least, looks odd. While, on the hypothesis of naturalism, there is nothing odd about it. While on the hypothesis of naturalism, there is nothing odd about it. Nor is it odd on alternatives to both naturalism and classical theism. It would not be odd on theories involving several gods, who might plot to foil each other's plans, or a hypothesis centred around a morally indifferent god. It is not necessary for the atheist to prove that there is some incompatibility between God's existence and the presence of unnecessary suffering. So long as all else is held equal (particularly easy to do when crafting alternative supernaturalisms) or, even further, adding to the case against theism, the critics of the case for theism only need to show that the presence of unnecessary suffering is more expected in some alternative to God's existence, whether that be naturalism or other forms of supernaturalism. For example, imagine a god identical to God, except that it is not all-good or all-powerful. The presence of unnecessary suffering is more expected in this god's existence, making its existence more probable than God's. Since there are several such hypotheses, it follows then that God's existence is very improbable.

It is obvious to most that the presence of unnecessary suffering is surprising, if God exists, even to theists, who grapple with the problem of evil and try to contrive ingenious solutions. None of this would be necessary if it were so obviously expected, as it would be in naturalism or other alternatives. Theists come up with notions about the afterlife, free will, God's inscrutability, the possibility that God has perfectly reasonable but currently unknown reasons for allowing such, etc. All are things that adversely affect the probabilistic case for theism, while doing no harm at all to the cases for naturalism, certain polytheisms, certain forms of alternative monotheisms, and certain pantheisms. By broadening our scope to consider not only theism and naturalism, to consider numerous other divine models, it becomes clear that the presence of unnecessary suffering in the world is damning evidence against theism indeed, rendering theism extraordinarily improbable, even if some sort of god, such as a pantheistic one, actually exists. Hence, even if the theist refines their view of their god, helpful when swatting away the logical argument from evil, their efforts are in vain. The theist cannot refine their divine model so much that they become a pantheist, for example. It would then be they, and not Sterba, who would be describing a god quite different from what they began with.

Laura Ekstrom agrees that, while the focus on evil will be fruitful, the evidential approach is optimal, with Sterba objecting: "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 the theists to be quite significant. So, it is worth noting that it is a concession my argument does not make to the theists, but Ekstrom's does (Sterba 2021, p. 3). [Revert all this, there is no justification for editor to alter quoted passages.] The focus ought to remain on what we can demonstrate to be probably the case, rather than what our intellectual

opponents might or might not say or do. Furthermore, the possibility of God's existence is not much of a concession, since so many things are possible in an epistemic sense, and, if it is Plantinga's ontological argument that Sterba hints at, that is discredited for this very reason (confusion over epistemic and ontological possibilities), which Plantinga himself admits (Plantinga and Sennett 1998, pp. 65–71). Theistic philosophers apparently do not tend to lose sleep over the possibility that God does not exist, and I advise Sterba to be unconcerned that God's existence can be said to be possible. In any case, the evidential approach is not at all concessionary; it is the method we all use in attempting to get closer and closer to objective truths, as in the natural sciences, and, used correctly, renders theism a particularly improbable hypothesis. The case for theism is done yet more damage in expanding the evidential approach to consider all the alternative hypotheses. The only true concession is that we are intellectually humble in accepting that we can know almost nothing with certainty, but this should be considered a fundamental requirement for objective intellectuals, to avoid being lumped in with those who cling to unproven beliefs.

Sterba could say that the outs I grant the theist when it comes to a logical problem of evil are too generous, and that they would be improbable. In that, he would be correct, though this further reinforces that the more fruitful approach is evidential; the evidential approach is transparent and objective. Discussions about what is improbable or not would be futile in arguing with a theist over a logical argument; over an evidential/probabilistic argument, however, swatting away improbable theodicies is precisely the point. It is then a very easy task to show that these 'excuses' do not raise the probability of God's existence, and may even lower it, with the improbability merely shifted from one side of the equation (for instance, the consequent probabilities' or likelihoods' side) to the other (for instance, the prior probabilities' side). With the probabilistic approach, there is no reprieve to be had via improbable excuses, mere possibilities, and sooner or later the bill comes due (for more on the probabilistic approach, and how it renders theism very improbable, see Philipse 2012; Lataster 2018). Of course, I do not claim that evidential arguments will be more compelling to the populace than logical arguments. The point here is simply that, as with democracy, being a system of governance with many drawbacks, we must make do with the best we have. Tangentially, I suspect that certain actors in the field would prefer the discussion revolved around logical arguments, realising their futility, and shifting the focus away from the evidential arguments, whose conclusions are damning and indisputable.

#### 4. Hiddenness

Like so many philosophers and scholars of religion, I consider the problem of evil, or of gratuitous suffering, to be a major issue for theistic philosophers attempting to demonstrate that God, the god of classical theism, exists. Even more impressive to me, however, is the problem of divine hiddenness. It was disappointing then, to see Sterba very casually dismiss the 'need' for the problem of hiddenness in his book, presumably because the problem of evil is so powerful. Sterba even says that, if his argument works, "it would no longer make sense to go on to raise a problem of divine hiddenness".

Like the problem of evil, the problem of hiddenness is so powerful because it points to a piece of evidence in the world that seems quite odd, or is even outright unexpected, if God exists. That God would remain hidden from the people he desires a relationship with, and apparently makes it so much harder for those he gifted with more intelligence and more knowledge to come to believe in him, seems utterly preposterous. To paraphrase J.L. Schellenberg, while remaining relatively reserved, if God exists, it is at least quite odd that there also exists non-resistant non-belief (Schellenberg 1993). At best, this great non-resistant non-belief in God is not exactly expected in theism, if not outright unexpected. However, this is not the case with naturalism. In naturalism, the evidence of divine hiddenness is 100% expected. If God does not exist, we certainly would not expect him to show up. The same can be said for supernaturalistic alternatives to theism, such as the deisms. If there were a god who cared not for human interactions, and even wished to remain undiscovered, it would make sense that so many of us honest seekers after truth



do not encounter him. This makes the argument from divine hiddenness very powerful, on its own, in demonstrating theism's improbability. This evidence is more expected in naturalism, and more expected in other alternatives. It is less expected in theism. This is simply indisputable. It is not out of the realm of possibility that God, who by definition and according to theistic religious traditions, wants a relationship with us, would again have some absolutely befuddling—to us—reason to remain hidden, but it is certainly not 100% expected, as it would be for alternatives such as naturalism or certain deisms. I see no reason to overlook this, whether or not Sterba's logical problem of evil is considered successful. His position is especially troublesome, as it could be used against him. For example, if we have another good argument against God's existence—and we do (several, in fact)—we could say that we have no need for Sterba's work on the argument from evil, particularly if I am correct in supposing that the logical approach is fruitless.

Furthermore, the hiddenness of God can itself be considered a great evil. If God is so good, one would expect that God would make more of an effort to grace us with his presence, which presumably would improve all of our lives, increase our chances of ending up in Heaven rather than Hell, make life easier for theistic scholars like Craig, Plantinga, and Swinburne to convince those pesky atheists that God really does exist, help convince those who commit evil acts to reconsider, inspire those who commit good acts to continue, etc. Here, we have one more totally unnecessary, and arguably totally unexpected, evil that God is ultimately responsible for. I implore Sterba, then, to not only embrace the power of the hiddenness argument, but even to incorporate it into his work on the problem of evil, creating a 'superargument', as it were.

## 5. Conclusions

I do not wish to be overly cautious in declaring Sterba's argument a failure. As a logical argument, it just is, though that is true of nearly all logical arguments. The problem is not with Sterba's conceptualisations, which can and ought to be yet utilised, but the logical approach itself. It allows theistic critics too much wriggle room, both with a god that can be ever-so-narrowly defined, and with mere possibilities as outs. When seen from an evidential standpoint, however, Sterba's argument is a very good one, making a worthwhile contribution to the philosophy of religion.

By shifting focus to the evidential arguments against God, atheistic claims are far more reasonable and justifiable, with theistic retorts being increasingly impotent. This is amplified further when we consider the argument from divine hiddenness, alluding to yet another evil in the world, and accept that God is a very specific type of god, opening the analysis up to supernaturalistic alternatives to theism, revealing that, since many gods are very compatible with the evils in the world, including divine hiddenness, that God's existence is incredibly improbable indeed. I implore Sterba to embrace the argument from hiddenness, even incorporating it into his work on evil, and to fully embrace the probabilistic approach. I further implore the philosophers of religion, in general, to pay more heed to the supernaturalistic alternatives, so common outside of the Western world, and who must play a key role in determining the probability of classical theism being true.

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Article

# Is There a Right to Hope That God Exists? Evil and the Principle of Non-Parity

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I respond to James Sterba’s recent book ‘*Is a Good God Logically Possible?*’ I show that Sterba concludes that God is not logically possible by ignoring three important issues: (a) the different functions of leeway indeterminism (and the political freedom presupposed by it) and autonomy (the two are very different things, even though both go under the name of freedom), (b) the differences in the conditions of agency in God and in creatures, (there is non-parity in how each must apply the single moral law), and (c) the non-parity between our knowledge and God’s. I provide a brief summary of Sterba’s arguments, and I develop the following points: 1. Sterba’s argument against a Free-Will Defense hinges on his conflation of political freedom and autonomy; 2. Sterba’s crucial premise for his argument against soul-making theodicies (namely, that the “Pauline Principle” should be applied univocally across God and creatures) is false; 3. Sterba’s arguments against skeptical theism depend on his assumption that our knowledge is comparable to that of God. In each case, Sterba either does not recognize non-parity between God and creatures or does not recognize the difference between the profane (e.g., political matters) and the sacred, (e.g., spiritual matters having to do with the inner nature of the soul’s development).

**Keywords:** problem of evil; morality; freedom; autonomy; soul-making; skeptical theism

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I address James Sterba’s question of “whether or not an all-good God who is also presumed to be all-powerful is logically possible given the degree and amount of moral evil that exists in our world” (Sterba 2019, p. 1). When I ask if there is a right to hope that God exists, I am assuming that such a right means a *rational* right. Of course, there is a sense anyone should be free to hope in fantastic and utterly impossible things if they so desire, but such hope in something that cannot possibly exist, something that is logically contradictory, is not a rational hope. The right that I speak of here has to do with the *rationality* of hope, and this includes both the logical possibility of its object as well as its motivation. The hope that God exists cannot possibly be rational if God is impossible, nor can it be rational if this hope is grounded in base and unworthy motives. Importantly, the issue at stake is not whether God’s existence can be proved, or whether or not there is evidence for or against God’s actual existence. The issue is rather whether such a hope is, as J. L. Mackie put it, “positively irrational” (Mackie 1955, p. 200), so that there is no way that one could *possibly* reconcile the idea of a good, omnipotent God with the reality of evil.<sup>1</sup> The problem was already identified by Epicurus: “Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then his is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both willing and able? Whence then is evil?” The problem, however, is not just that there are evils. It is that there are *horrendous* evils, evils that threaten the very possibility that one’s life could be “a great good to one on the whole” (Adams 1989, p. 299). These are evils, not only that one might suffer, but that one might perpetrate. Examples of the former would be being tortured to the point of the disintegration of the personality and then killed or being a mother in a concentration camp forced to choose amongst her children, thereby becoming the agent of evil against a person one loves more than one’s own life. Examples

of the latter would be Medea, who in a fit of passion kills her own children,<sup>2</sup> or a torturer that tortures and kills the person he loves the most in a fit of rage. And on a larger scale, there is the Holocaust and Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There are many other bone-chilling scenarios; these are just a few.

Attempting to provide a defense of God when confronting such evils threatens to put one in the position of at least being in some significant sense tone-deaf, or of lacking empathy, or of a certain cold-heartedness. For certainly the appropriate response to such horrors is being struck dumb. It is just too hard to imagine that a good God could be the author of such a world. In providing either a theodicy or defense of God in the face of such evils, one too easily becomes like Job's friends, who did not speak "what is right" about God (Job 42:7). On the one hand, one cannot speak properly of God in such conditions by defending God. For it might seem that one is justifying or defending God against the victim, who like Job remonstrates against God. Such a justification puts one in a position one cannot legitimately occupy, a position "above" the sufferer, in such a way that defending a God who would allow it also seems to imply a justification of the suffering. As if one could fathom why this evil or suffering occurs, or as if one could oneself avoid such a fate by defending God so that one could remain untouched by the evil that in the end consumes all earthly life. This is the position of Job's friends: they argue Job must have done something wrong. On the other hand, one can legitimately take the side of those who suffer evil by validating the legitimacy of hope. For without such hope there is only the possibility of utter despair. And it is in this spirit that I undertake to answer Sterba's charge that a good God is not logically possible.

Sterba attempts to show that there can be no possible morally sufficient reason for God to permit evil. Morally sufficient reasons can be spelled out in two ways. First, if "instances of suffering result *from* goods which outweigh the negative value of suffering" (Pike [1963] 1990, p. 44). Second, if "suffering results *in* goods that which outweigh the negative value of suffering" (Pike [1963] 1990, p. 43). The claim that suffering is a consequence of God granting human beings the freedom to choose between alternatives would be an example of the first. The claim that allowing suffering is necessary for soul-making is an example of the second. Significantly, there are tight connections between freedom and soul-making, but it is important to understand which kind of freedom is at issue, and what those connections are. Sterba does not give a coherent account of what they are. How the connections are envisioned depends on the kind of freedom necessary for soul-making. Sterba argues that soul-making depends on leeway indeterminism, itself depending on there being a kind of outward, or political freedom (if another constrains me, I have also lost my freedom of choice). But, I will argue, the freedom that is important for soul-making is not leeway indeterminism but the capacity for autonomy, that is, the capacity to value what is right and good above all else. This capacity can never be threatened. Furthermore, as I argue below, it may be the case that its development may require many false starts and wrong turns (suffering results *from* those), as well as suffering itself (suffering results *in* purification). Lastly, it is important to note that no matter how many reasons failing to justify the permission of suffering are enumerated, one can never claim to have examined all the possibilities.

According to Sterba, freedom cannot justify suffering, since allowing one person the freedom to significantly harm another limits that other person's freedom. Allowing horrendous evils, supposedly a consequence of the granting of freedom, makes the granting of freedom to everyone impossible, since those who suffer them lose their freedom. Freedom, then cannot provide God with a morally sufficient reason for allowing them. Sterba then argues that horrendous evils also make soul-making impossible, since those who suffer them lose their freedom, hence their opportunities to make choices, and hence for soul-making. Sterba, however, achieves these results by ignoring (a) the differences and relations between political freedom and autonomy (the two are very different things, even though both go under the name of freedom), (b) the differences between the conditions of agency in God and in creatures, implying that there is non-parity in how each must apply the

single moral law, and (c) the non-parity between our knowledge and God's. My response will be divided into four parts. In the first, I provide a brief account of what I think are the fundamental premises grounding Sterba's argument. In the second I look at his argument against the Free-Will Defense. Sterba's argument against the Free-Will Defense depends on his ignoring the idea of freedom as autonomy, which does not depend upon leeway indeterminism. Importantly, soul-making depends on the capacity for autonomy, not on leeway indeterminism or political freedom. Yet, because Sterba has ignored the concept of autonomy, he assumes that leeway indeterminism and political freedom must obtain if soul-making is to be possible. He thereby confuses the functions of indeterminism and political freedom with that of the capacity for autonomy. The third section looks at Sterba's objections to a soul-making theodicy. Sterba's argument depends on his crucial premise that "the Pauline Principle" should be applied univocally across God and creatures. I show that it cannot. Lastly, I look at Sterba's arguments against skeptical theism, which once again depend on his assumption that our knowledge is comparable to that of God's. In each case, Sterba either does not recognize non-parity between God and creatures or does not recognize the differences between the profane (e.g., political matters) and the sacred, (e.g., spiritual matters having to do with the inner nature of the soul's development).

## 2. Sterba's Argument

The argument has many moving parts, but central to its development is what Sterba calls "the Pauline Principle," namely, "never to do evil so that good may come of it." This is supposed to be the central proposition grounding what counts as moral goodness, and hence it is taken as a principle that a good God must adhere to. Sterba takes this as a fundamental moral principal binding both God and human beings. His account greatly depends on a univocal understanding of how it applies to both human beings and God, so that Sterba argues seamlessly from human cases to how the principle should constrain divine action.

Sterba never really gives a fully adequate account of what he means by this principle up-front, and its lack of determination allows him to let it do a lot more work than it reasonably should be allowed to do. On its face, the principle is absurd even when applied to human conduct, since it can, for instance, be taken as grounding views that deny a woman required medical care in a pregnancy emergency if their embryos or fetuses still have a "heartbeat." Women in Texas and other places stand in grave risk of losing their uterus, limbs, mental functions and even their lives since doctors now will not risk helping them until the fetal heartbeat stops. The risk that both will die does not matter, because providing an abortion would be "doing evil" so that "good may come of it." Better, as many on the right have argued, not to intervene at all and let God take care of it.<sup>3</sup> My point here is that to avoid absurdity, the real content of the principle needs to be carefully delineated. We need to ask, for example, what is meant by "evil" and what is meant by "good." Are the good and evil that Sterba is talking about to be understood in terms of pleasure and happiness so that what he means is that we should never cause pain so that another pleasure may ensue? Or perhaps that we should never limit another person's happiness in order that greater happiness is to come of it later? What about the child that needs a painful operation to save their life? Should operating the child without their consent be prohibited? Let us eliminate this option as too simplistic. Perhaps what Sterba means by this principle is just a kind of anti-consequentialism, and in its place, he wants a kind of Kantian theory, where persons should never be used as *mere* means, and their autonomy and personhood must be respected. In this case, the principle would mean something like: never use a person as a *mere* means in order to create greater happiness or well-being, or even greater virtue. In this regard, it is important to stress that Kant held that we use each other as means all the time, and indeed must, given our individual finitude. What is impermissible is taking a person as a *mere* means.

Let us assume that what Sterba really means is the Kantian point that persons have a fundamental value; they are, in fact the ground of all value.<sup>4</sup> From this Sterba infers that

such a value guarantees *rights* or claims, certain things that are due to an agent just in virtue of their personhood. Persons have ends of their own. Using them as a mere means violates the very ground of value (their personhood) by treating them as less valuable than some end independent of this personhood itself. Respecting personhood thereby means respecting both the freedom of each individual and their capacity to progress in virtue, that is, ensuring that they have opportunities for soul-making. Given these inferences, Sterba comes up with the following requirements:

1. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 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) when that can easily be done.
2. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 2: 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 not prefer to have.
3. Moral Prevention Requirement 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 these goods. (Sterba 2019, pp. 126–28)

Based on these principles, along with some other important assumptions, Sterba argues that a good God could not possibly have a justification for allowing horrendous evils. No cogent account of their permission being the only means to assure something of greater value succeeds. First, the Free-Will Defense will not do, since it entails that God allows one person's misuse of freedom to severely curtail another person's freedom. In the case of the victim, God has not preserved *their* freedom. The freedom to commit horrendous evils does not preserve the significant freedom of everyone but only allows the strong to overwhelm the weak, so the latter lose their freedom. If the goal of permitting horrendous evils is preserving freedom, that goal cannot in principle be achieved by such means. An all-good and powerful God would certainly have understood this to be the case. Freedom, then, cannot be the greater good achieved through allowing evils. Surely, argues Sterba, would it not have been better if *everyone's* significant freedom had been guaranteed, so that those with evil intentions would be free, but just not so free as to have the power to make their victims suffer horrendous evils? An omnipotent God certainly could have achieved this. God, for instance, could step in at the last moment and prevent horrendous evils from happening, just like a kind of superman.

Second, the Soul-Making Defense stands or falls with the Free-Will Defense. If freedom is required for soul-making, but the freedom of some to commit horrendous evils compromises the freedom of others, then the latter group will not have the requisite soul-making opportunities if horrendous evils are permitted. The Soul-making Defense, depending as it does on the Free-Will Defense, also cannot justify the permission of horrendous evils.

Third, the permission of horrendous evils for the purposes of soul-making is also not justified if the ends are the provision of goods that have not been agreed to by the persons who participate in them (e.g., the opportunity for forgiveness), or for the provision of goods to which persons do not have a right. For instance, it is certainly reprehensible to think that God allows some individuals to perpetrate horrendous evils on their victims just so that they (the elect) could enjoy divine forgiveness.<sup>5</sup> In the latter case, one would be depriving one person of a good to which they have a right to provide another person with a good to which they do not have a right. That amounts to the mere use of one person for the purposes of conferring a non-merited good on another; in this case, the first person is treated as nothing but a tool. While there may be other details of Sterba's argument I do not mention above, this constitutes the heart of the argument. Some of those details will be discussed in the course of my larger argument.

### 3. Free Will and the Non-Parity between Autonomy and Political Freedom

There are many understandings of what free will amounts to. Sterba does not do enough to disambiguate between them. As I will argue below, Sterba's argument ultimately depends on conflating leeway indeterminism, itself depending on political freedom, with autonomy. He believes that the kind of freedom required for soul-making is contra-causal freedom, so that a lack of political freedom ("the freedom as noninterference cherished by political libertarians") (Sterba 2019, p. 27) limits it, too. He fails to see that the kind of freedom required for soul-making is *not* a freedom of indifference regarding choice, but is, rather, the capacity for autonomy and its development. Insofar as he fails to see this, he treats them as the same kind of things, having the same kinds of conditions for their exercise. They do not. In order to show why this is the case, we need to explore different senses of freedom and how they relate to autonomy and political freedom. I first discuss the original analysis of freedom Sterba works with, one grounding his whole discussion, namely a kind of leeway indeterminism where choice is indeterminate; from this he concludes that without outer freedom, one cannot have the freedom to make choices either, since in such a case one is either constrained, or is robbed of all opportunities to make choices (if, for instance, one is killed). As Sterba notes, "contra-causal freedom presupposes freedom as non-interference: you cannot be contra-causally free to do X if you are interfered with such that you are kept from doing X" (Sterba 2019, p. 27). I show that this understanding of freedom is a red herring since it contradicts the very possibility of having a will. Neither it, nor Plantinga's defense of it is relevant to the sort of freedom that genuinely matters in this context, namely, freedom as autonomy. The autonomous agent is one that acts from the right set of motives, namely, they can love the good for its own sake (Plato) or act for the sake of the moral law (Kant). I take both philosophers as aiming at the same general idea, namely, the autonomous agent understands what is right and good, acts accordingly *because* it is right and good, and is willing to give up the satisfaction of all other desires if morality requires it.<sup>6</sup> Freedom as autonomy is a central notion in the Western philosophical tradition, and is often confused with other kinds of freedom. I argue that only this kind of freedom is necessary for soul-making, and that it cannot be threatened by horrendous evils.

A common understanding of freedom is the capacity to genuinely choose between alternatives, so that at a given moment there is a real possibility that the agent can do a or b or c (or whatever number of real alternatives there might be in the case at hand). By this real possibility, we do not just mean that the conditions for freedom of choice can be met in this way: *if* an agent had a different desire, then they would have chosen differently. In these cases, all that is meant is *if* there had been a different causal chain, then things would have turned out differently. But that does not mean that given a particular causal history, an agent can do *either* a or b. It is the latter that we require for this real possibility of choice: same individual, same past, same laws in play, and yet different possible outcomes at the moment of action.<sup>7</sup> Following Pereboom, let us call this leeway indeterminism. I do not think that such an understanding of free will is internally coherent.

Even putting aside the question of causal chains, the only way we can make sense of choices is in terms of motives. The agent must have some kind of reason or end in view for their choice to make any sense. That doing a particular action was something that they found valuable at a given time can only be explained in terms of their prior beliefs and values, in short, in terms of their character. As Hume and later Mackie (1955, p. 14), would point out, short of such an account, where the action can be linked with character, with what the agent finds to be of value, the action winds up being a random one. And if the action cannot be linked with a person's character, it is hardly attributable to them. Hume put the point nicely when he noted that if we deny "necessity," the individual is "as pure and untainted, after having committed the most horrid crime, as at the first moment of his birth, nor is his character anywise concerned in his actions, since they are not derived from it, and the wickedness of the one cannot be used as proof of the depravity of the other" (Hume [1777] 1975, p. 98). A coherent theory of action requires, at the very least, that the action can be joined to the character, so that it can be understood in terms of a



person's wants, wishes, desires, and beliefs. It must be possible to give some kind of an account of *why* a person embarked upon a particular course of action if we are to attribute that action to them, that is, we need to be able to understand an action in terms of what a person considers valuable or *worth* doing. We cannot sever the relation between action and character without making the very possibility of having a will (where action is intentional and not random), incoherent. And even supposing that freedom consists in choosing a character (so that the actions then flow from the freely chosen character), given the lack of a basis establishing what is of value to the agent, that choice of character would have to be a random one. Actions taken for no rhyme or reason are random actions, and random activity stands in contradiction with the very notion of a will.

For these reasons I do not think that Plantinga's particular brand of a free-will defense is plausible, so I will not try and defend it here.<sup>8</sup> But this seems to imply that if God produces agents with given natures or characters, and those must work themselves out in given ways, then Mackie is correct. At first blush at least, it seems it should be possible that God could have created creatures that he foreknew would always choose the good freely,<sup>9</sup> for in creating them he would have been fully aware of their nature, and hence what they would have considered valuable at each point in their development. Those creatures would have been familiar with the ultimate good and its value; they would have tasted it, and *nothing* would or could ever lead them to deviate from it. Importantly, this is the final state of bliss that Christians hope to achieve; otherwise, the whole painful drama of redemption through which they came to know the depths and expanse of God's love would still not be enough to keep them from randomly turning away from God at any moment, so that the whole of human history would have been for naught. But if it is the case that the creature can indeed reach a state of knowledge or participation in the Good such that they will never turn from it or from God's love, then the question remains: why did God not make those creatures that way to begin with? A great deal turns on whether, in fact, it would have been logically possible for God to create those kinds of beings.

Importantly, a soul-making theodicy does require that we attribute a particular kind of freedom to the creature. It is not leeway indeterminism. Rather, on this account, an individual would *not* be free if it were the case that their only capacities were to love God, Justice, or the Good out of a fear of hell, or for a desire for, as Sterba puts it, "a consumer good" (Sterba 2019, p. 37). Rather, each individual must be able to develop into the sort of being that can love the Good for its own sake, and not just for its consequences. Think of Glaucon's challenge in book two of the *Republic*. We test whether a person loves justice for its own sake by stripping them of all the *consequences* of justice. That person winds up with a lifelong reputation for injustice, all earthly goods are taken from them, and finally, they wind up on a rack, their eyes gouged out. A person *must be able* to undergo all of this for the sake of justice if we are to be able to say of them that they loved justice, or the Good, for its own sake. Kant makes the point much more precisely: the good person makes action in accordance with the moral law the condition of the pursuit of happiness, the implication being that they must be able even to give up their life if moral action required it. Their soul must be ordered in such a way that they can do this, that they can recognize what is right and good as a transcendent value outweighing all earthly goods. Becoming that sort of being may require an enormous amount of moral development which may involve a great deal of suffering.

This is freedom as a kind of *autonomy*. Importantly, it does not require leeway indeterminism, namely, the capacity to choose a or b given the same set of conditions. It may be the case that all creatures are destined to develop into the sorts of beings that can love the good above all else, and that each creature has a specific path that it must traverse to get to that point. This kind of freedom may require, however, that we think of the individual as the ultimate *source* of their actions, so they are not impelled by causal factors outside their will: we must be able to say it is *they* who are developing, and who are playing an active role in their own development. An individual cannot be understood as a mere segment of a causal chain without any agency of its own. But being the source of your own action does

not imply leeway indeterminism; in fact, if actions are not determined by what a person values (if they were random), then it would be hard to attribute the action to the person in the first place.

Importantly, if freedom is understood in this way, as a kind of autonomy, then it is not the case that when one person limits the bodily freedom of another, even by causing their death, they eliminate that person's autonomy. Sterba's argument only seems to work because he conflates two kinds of freedom: freedom to do things in the world, and freedom as autonomy. He claims God's permitting evil is not justified by the opportunities for soul-making it provides

if having opportunities for 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. (Sterba 2019, p. 35)

Sterba's confusion, then, is that he believes a kind of political freedom is necessary for soul-making. Based on this confusion, he concludes "accordingly, both God and a just political state should be focused on preventing the significant consequences of moral evils, making no attempt to prohibit all moral evil because that would interfere with a person's significant freedom" (Sterba 2019, p. 59). If outer freedom were necessary for soul-making, or if the limitation of a person's outer freedom would necessarily result in a loss of autonomy in the sense defined above, then Sterba's argument would go through. But the freedom to act in the outer world (which is the kind of freedom we are talking about when we talk about political freedom) is of a very different sort than inner freedom, which concerns *what is valued* and the motives for caring for it. It is certainly possible that no external circumstances can compel an individual to have certain values. And if this is the case, the freedom of one person to inflict horrendous evils on one individual (Glaucon's torturer) does not limit the inner freedom of the individual who loves or is learning to love the good above all else. In fact, for all we know the test of such an experience might even be an important one in a soul's development, for through it the soul comes to know itself in a certain way, as capable of valuing certain things above all others. Since it is the capacity for the latter kind of freedom (freedom as autonomy) that is required for soul-making, there is no contradiction in the permission of horrendous evils and the supposition that *everyone* can maintain freedom as autonomy, or can exercise this capacity even if it is still in development. This kind of freedom just cannot be taken away. Hence, Sterba's claim that "the freedoms that victims lose by the serious wrongdoings of others are much more important than the freedoms that are exercised by those who wrong them" (Sterba 2019, p. 53) depends for its plausibility on a somewhat superficial understanding of freedom. Inner freedom, autonomy, cannot be taken away through outer actions. Replying to this objection, Sterba notes, "Nor would it do to claim that the freedom that is at issue here is an inner freedom of the will that could not be affected at all by external circumstances. This is because if that were the only freedom that was at issue here, God would have prevented all the evil in the world without interfering with this freedom at all" (Sterba 2019, p. 27). This account ignores the possibility that suffering may be something the soul must undergo for soul-making: the development of this inner kind of freedom of the soul, where the self discovers what its "proper self" values, may require not only many false starts, but many trials and tribulations as well.

Further, if we admit to the doctrine of reincarnation, even if one individual does terrible things to another, there will be multiple opportunities for both to finally get things right, for the torturer to make up for what they have done, and for the victim to continue their progress in virtue in whatever way is necessary. There is no contradiction in supposing that the experiences of all creatures can be harmonized in such a way that through their actions they each become the means for the moral development of the other.

#### 4. Soul-Making & the Non-Parity of the Application of Moral Requirements

Sterba's argument against soul-making theodicies comes on the heels of his argument against the freedom defense. He notes that evil cannot be justified by soul-making "if having the opportunity for significant soul-making in our world is dependent upon significant freedom such that a net loss of significant freedom in our world would result in a net loss of significant soul-making as well" (Sterba 2019, p. 35). Sterba claims that soul-making is dependent on our having significant outer freedom in our world. Importantly, to make this sort of claim Sterba needs to know just what soul-making really amounts to and the kind of freedom needed for it to happen. Yet, he seems to assume to know what it is, and that the "natural" opportunity for soul-making requires people to have bourgeois lives where nothing terrible ever happens (Sterba 2019, p. 84). In such a secure environment, people can develop as honest, responsible people that love their family and their work, and that should be enough for them to enter the kingdom of heaven. But what if genuine soul-making requires a lot more? What if the important freedom at issue is not a kind of political freedom in which you are free to pursue happiness and "bourgeois" opportunity for soul-making, but the development of autonomy? What if what is required is that the soul come to know itself as loving justice (or God, or the Good) above all else, and what if this just really takes a lot? Even the terrible Nietzsche claimed that it was through the hostility and cruelty of the human being's instincts turned backwards against itself, in short, through suffering, that the soul developed.<sup>10</sup>

Sterba, however, argues that it *should* not be the case that soul-making requires suffering, or at the very least, not too much of it. If it did, then God would be justified in allowing for or, even ultimately, arranging for terrible things to happen to people so that their souls can develop. But this, argues Sterba, would make God complicit in immorality. Sterba offers the example of parents permitting their children to be brutally assaulted for soul-making opportunities: they would have the opportunity to forgive, their comforters to comfort, and their tormentors to repent and be forgiven (Sterba 2019, p. 57). That, of course, would be reprehensible. It would also be reprehensible for any one of us to make another suffer because we think that they are immoral, they deserve it, or they need a bit of an opportunity for soul development.

This is the crucial premise driving Sterba's argument: "*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). In adjudicating this claim, two issues must be considered.

The first is that there is a single moral law. If we are to think of God as good, the *same* standards of goodness must apply to both God and creature. There is certainly something wrong with the claim that God is bound to moral standards different from our own, or that whatever God wills is what turns out to be good (a kind of voluntarism). Whatever idea we have of God, irrespective of its source, we must first always ask ourselves whether the God we imagine is worthy of worship, and if so, then such a God must conform to moral concepts.<sup>11</sup> These cannot themselves be derived from our idea of God, since it is we ourselves that must compare that idea with moral concepts to judge whether such a being is worthy of our worship to begin with.<sup>12</sup> I have already noted the inherent lack of clarity in what Sterba's Pauline principle enjoins. For our purposes, we can begin with the intuitive Kantian principle that persons should not be treated as a *mere* means to achieve another person's ends; each person has an inherent and absolute value. On this account, a God that creates beings predestined to eternal damnation and suffering would not be worthy of worship. That would be a clear example of a violation of the inherent worth of persons.

The second concerns the *way* in which this fundamental moral principle is applied. And it is here that Sterba goes radically wrong. For granted there is a single moral law through which the good is established, and so determinative of how we must think of an omnibenevolent will, it is not the case that this single moral law can be applied *univocally*. The conditions of agency dictate how it is to be applied and have a decisive influence on whether an action turns out to be wrong. These conditions are significantly equivocal across God and creatures, and so there is non-parity regarding how moral requirements apply to

us and apply to God. We have limited knowledge, capacities, and love. The conditions of finitude severely restrict what is morally permitted to us. For instance, it would be wrong to for us to personally “punish” a wrongdoer or to try and give them what we consider their just deserts. There are certainly moral limits to how much each of us can interfere with other people’s free choices, for instance, those of our grown children, even when we think they are making terrible mistakes. There are numerous reasons for these limits having to do with our own very own limited development. First, we do not know other people’s hearts; only God can judge the heart. This ignorance of the inner states of others also means we do not know what will ultimately fulfill them. That is something that we must allow them to find out for themselves. Second, even when we wish the absolute best for another, we have little control over what ultimately will befall them; a parent, for instance, may force a child to go into a particular field “for their own good” that ultimately leads to their ruin, a ruin the parents were powerless to prevent. Third, and perhaps most importantly, we are limited in love. For instance, too often our desire to punish is just vindictiveness or is at the very least tinged with it. And too often our belief that we know what is better for the other is just a façade for our desire to control and to have power over others. Such dynamics often prevail in family life. Lastly, we have little or no understanding of the final *telos* of the soul’s life; having no such understanding of it, we are hardly in a position to interfere too much in helping the other achieve it.<sup>13</sup>

These conditions would not hold for God, who is perfect in wisdom, power, and love. God knows the heart’s fundamental desire and what is necessary for the individual to achieve it. God knows the condition of a person’s soul at every given moment of their life, and which elements of the soul may need correction if the individual is to be able to fully understand and participate in what is of true worth. Having perfect love, God fully wills the complete fulfillment of each person, (in the Christian tradition this ultimately means being taken up into the divine life itself, that is, to become God with God). And finally, having perfect power God can ensure that this end will be achieved. For these reasons, while there is a single moral principle, what it means for God to adhere to it amounts to something very different from what it means for a creature to do so.

It is reprehensible for a parent to inflict suffering on their child so that child can have soul-making opportunities because the parent is not God, the parent does not know very much at all about the inner development of the child’s soul; they do not know what stage it is at and could not possibly know what the child really needs in relation to that spiritual development. The same is true in cases where one individual thinks they should “punish” another. No one has a right to punish the other because they do not know the heart of the other, and they never fully love the other, either. These limitations do not hold of God, who has both perfect wisdom and love. If God creates creatures whose destiny it is to become God with God, then God is still a good God when God allows horrendous evils, especially if the undergoing of such horrendous evils are necessary experiences through which the soul is prepared to enter the divine life. There may be certain virtues that can be achieved *only* in and through the suffering of certain things so that the suffering is integral to the acquisition of the virtue. God is in a position to know the ultimate needs of the soul, to love it with God’s infinite love, and to ensure that the soul arrives at its ultimate destination. Because God is working from these conditions, God’s actions are such that the personhood of the creature is respected when God allows the creature to suffer. Further, this personhood is respected if, once the creature enters its full spiritual maturity, it comes to recognize the need to have had to undergo the terrible sufferings that it underwent. Such sufferings would be considered nothing in relation to the ultimate good of entering the divine life. This cuts against Sterba’s claim that “victims may never be able to give their informed consent to or find reasonably acceptable the infliction of such consequences [horrendous evils] on themselves” (Sterba 2019, p. 75). Importantly, if this statement concerns a mere possibility, that possibility, which may not be realized, cannot speak against the possibility of God. And if Sterba is making the stronger claim that victims *will* never give this consent, there is simply no way he could know this. Sterba continuously makes claims to which he

is not entitled. From the ultimate vantage point of its full spiritual maturity, it may well be the case that what seemed very real to the soul in its earthly condition was nothing more than a kind of dream. Since God would know the creature in its final perfection, the consent of the fully perfected creature would be assured. A two-year-old may think the discipline and limitations it undergoes a terrible thing, but upon reaching adulthood may come to recognize the need for them. The same holds true for the immature soul, which upon perfection will have a very different view than it had in its immaturity. While we do not know that this story is true, it is certainly possible that something very much like it is.

*Skeptical Theism: Non-Parity between Our Knowledge and God's*

Much of what I have argued above has straightforward implications for skeptical theism. The conditions of our knowledge are radically different from the conditions of God's knowledge. We are simply in no position to know what God knows, or to love as God loves. Hence, when Sterba claims he can distinguish between "natural opportunities" for soul-making, and "Godly" opportunities for soul-making, he asserts he knows much more than he possibly can. According to Sterba, "natural" opportunities for soul-making are "the opportunities each of us must have in order to become a good and just human being" (Sterba 2019, p. 83). But what does that really amount to, when we are speaking of the heart that no one but God knows? Or whether "natural opportunities," which do not include horrendous evils, are sufficient to mold the person into the kind of being capable of knowing God? Can we even distinguish between "natural" and "Godly" opportunities for soul-making? Perhaps *all* the moments in our lives are "Godly" opportunities for soul-making, only of different kinds. Furthermore, how does Sterba know what the final telos of soul-making even is, and what it would even take to get there? He assumes that the final telos of soul-making is a kind of bourgeois state of happiness, a kind of "consumer good" of which one can become worthy through a bourgeois life, with bourgeois challenges that are not too difficult.<sup>14</sup> But how does he know this? What if the goal of soul-making is so great that we can barely glimpse an idea of it?<sup>15</sup> And what if the path to get there must seem terrible to us? These are things of which we have no knowledge, but they are certainly *possible*, and religious thinkers and mystics report that something like this is the case.<sup>16</sup>

The main claims through which Bergmann (2009, 2012, 2014) develops skeptical theism are surely correct: we may not be familiar with all possible goods, and we may not be familiar with all possible entailment relations between all possible goods and all possible evils. Without this knowledge, there is no basis for the kinds of claims Sterba makes, which crucially depend on his catalog of possible goods and possible evils and their possible relation to one another being an exhaustive one. Importantly, the relevance of Sterba's arguments against Bergmann is limited to the relation between events within natural causal chains: Sterba argues that since God is omnipotent and master of all the natural world, it makes no sense to argue that God allows one horrendous evil in order to mitigate the causal consequences of something worse occurring down the line had it not been allowed to occur. God should be able to intervene at *any* moment in a causal chain, preventing both the initial horrendous evil and the possible consequences of its non-occurrence (Sterba 2019, p. 79). The problem here is that Sterba's understanding of the relation between possible evils and possible goods is in general limited to events in causal chains that are experienced by us as good or evil. His discussion of laws of spiritual development is minimal and perfunctory. For instance, he claims to know the following:

... it would not be morally appropriate for God to make the provision of a Godly opportunity for soul-making to which we do not have a right dependent on his permitting significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, especially given that a Godly opportunity for soul-making could be provided to us in countless other ways that are morally unobjectionable. (Sterba 2019, p. 95)

But how could Sterba possibly know *which* Godly opportunities for soul-making a soul needs in order to achieve blessedness? Laws of spiritual development can at best be intimated by us “in a glass, darkly,” (I Corinthians 13:12) and Sterba can hardly claim that he fully understands how all the experiences in a human life, or assuming reincarnation, all the experiences in many lives, might shape spiritual development. Sterba would not be in a position to assess the nature of ultimate reality or the sacred, or what it would take for an individual to partake of it. He cannot rule out the possibility that there are certain experiences, perhaps absolutely terrible ones, that the soul must undergo in order to be shaped in a certain way, that is, in order for it to be able to come to know and desire the ultimate good. Such experiences might be integral in shaping the soul’s very structure of desire.

In the first part of this paper, I suggested that the key issue required in answering Mackie has to do with whether it would have been possible for God to create creatures such that they always freely choose the good. Part of the answer turns on what it means to “freely” choose the good. I have argued that we must understand choice in terms of what an agent *values*, and if this is the case choices cannot be divorced from an agent’s character. It makes no sense to speak as if an agent could really have chosen a *or b* at a particular moment, as if the two alternatives could ever appear to them as two equally weighted, live options. The agent will always assess one option as preferable to the other, and this assessment will be determined by their level of experience, maturity, and insight. Could God have created creatures capable of valuing and experiencing Godself without those creatures having had a long history of development through which they came to understand the good?<sup>17</sup> What if the creature must first explore the avenues leading away from God in order to really understand the one that leads to God? What if knowing God implies a certain capacity for *experiencing* God, one that cannot possibly be gained except through a long history of experience through which the soul is shaped? The soul comes to know where certain paths will lead because it has already traversed them, experienced dead ends, and then changed course. This is how it gains the insight necessary for it to participate in the divine life, and how it gains the maturity needed for it to be capable of loving the Good for its own sake, in such a way that once it understands it, *nothing* would ever tempt the soul to do evil or deviate from it. If a soul can participate in the divine life only insofar as it has been shaped, or has gained insight through its history, God cannot just simply create a fully perfected being. For that would mean that God would have to create a being already in possession of the experiential knowledge it requires to know God, without that soul actually having experienced that history. But this is contradictory. To claim that God is not logically possible because he cannot create such a being would be akin to claiming that God is not logically possible because God cannot create a square circle.

At the beginning of this essay, I noted the inherent difficulties of dealing with this topic—arguments must be undertaken in the proper spirit. At this very moment, there are many people experiencing horrendous evils. One need only think of flood victims in Pakistan, victims of starvation in Africa, or victims of war and horrendous torture in Ukraine. These are terrible things, and it is *our* obligation to mitigate suffering. Yet, we would be doing victims no favors in saying to them that their experiences are proof positive that there is no God, that they don’t mean anything, won’t amount to much in the grander scheme of things, and that their suffering is senseless since all that awaits is the silence of the tomb. Because we are moral beings, the very experience of suffering and evil demands of us that we *hope* that all suffering will be redeemed. The Christian might say that we must hope that the *very terrors* of the cross must be redeemed, that is, that our putting on of Christ and our suffering with him *itself* is shown to have meaning and is not just a means to an end independent of this suffering itself. The soul is made God-like through the experience itself. That God is with the soul as it suffers through this process is a comfort, as is the hope of the future estate achieved through it.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As Nelson (Pike [1963] 1990) has clearly demonstrated, the “contradiction” between the proposition that an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect being exists, and the actuality of evil only holds if it can be established that God could not *possibly* have a morally sufficient reason for creating a world in which suffering obtains. Proving that there is no *possible* morally sufficient reason, is however, a herculean task, one that Sterba believes he has achieved.
- <sup>2</sup> While this is a literary example, there are actual cases such as these.
- <sup>3</sup> The Idaho Republican Party, for instance, removed the exception for the life of the mother from its platform last July. Scott Herndon, an Idaho Republican running unopposed for a state senate seat, noted “Doctors may not intentionally kill the child in their medical efforts to treat the mother.” John Seago, president of Texas right to life, argued that doctors cannot decide that “I want to cause the death of a child today because I believe they are going to pass away eventually” (Goldberg 2022). Mary Siegler, Professor at the University of California, Davis School of Law and an expert on the history of abortion law in the U.S. sums up the reasoning behind these ideas succinctly when she notes, “There has been a growing push to get rid of life-saving exceptions. In the worldview most folks in the anti-abortion movement have, abortion is murder. It’s worse not only in the sense that it’s certain death, but that it’s intentional. From their standpoint, if some women die because they are refused care, that isn’t a certain death, there isn’t intentionally going to be a death, so that’s the lesser of the evils in that situation” (Stern 2022). Importantly, even in cases where there are life of the mother exceptions, these are very vague, and doctors can still be charged for performing the abortion in emergencies (for instance, in Texas and Oklahoma). This has resulted in the refusal or postponement of care; women have lost their uterus, wound up on breathing machines, and had other severe health outcomes (Tanner 2022).
- <sup>4</sup> This is a Kantian point. I am assuming that God is a kind of moral person, that is, an intelligent will. On Kant’s view of the divine will, see Kain (2021).
- <sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the idea of double predestination is morally reprehensible, since it implies God creates and predestines some to eternal damnation, presumably for the sake of testing the elect.
- <sup>6</sup> There are, of course, significant differences between Kant and Plato, although Kant was greatly influenced by Plato. On this see Reich (1939a, 1939b), as well as Baum (2019).
- <sup>7</sup> Pereboom calls the incompatibilism of this kind of freedom with causal determinism *leeway incompatibilism*. He rightly distinguishes it from *source incompatibilism*. Leeway incompatibilism requires “the ability to do otherwise,” whereas source incompatibilism requires that the self “be the undetermined source of one’s own actions” Pereboom (2006, p. 542); cf. Pereboom (2001, chps. 1–4). One can hold to source incompatibilism and not to leeway incompatibilism. For instance, Kant and other rationalists held that God is good by necessity and hence cannot choose evil, but is nevertheless *free* since nothing outside of God’s nature determines God’s activity. So Kant, “...freedom does not consist in the contingency of an action (in its not being determined by any ground at all), i.e., not in indeterminism...but in absolute spontaneity” (Rel. 6:50). I cannot, in the scope of this paper, engage all the contemporary literature on this issue. For a good discussion of some of the main issues at stake, see Fischer et al. (2007).
- <sup>8</sup> Plantinga’s Free-Will Defense relies on the strong understanding of freedom outlined above: the same individual, with the same past up to the moment of choice, and the same causal laws at play, has different possibilities for action at that moment. For instance, he notes that “if God *causes* Curley to go right with respect to A or brings it about that he does so, then Curley isn’t free with respect to A” (Plantinga 1974, p. 47). Presumably creating beings that would only freely choose the good, God would have brought it about that they did that (by creating *only* those) so that they would not have *really* been free. Freedom requires the real possibility to choose wrongly. Importantly, Mackie had already anticipated this kind of move, and notes that the idea of freedom envisioned here is incoherent: “If it is replied that this objection is absurd, [the objection that God could have created free beings that always do the good]... it would seem that ‘freedom’ must here mean complete randomness or indeterminacy, including randomness with the alternatives good and evil, in other words that people’s choices and consequent actions can be ‘free’ only if they are not determined by their characters . . . . But then if freedom is randomness, how can it be a characteristic of *will*? And still more, how can it be the most important good? What value or merit would there be in free choices if these were random actions which were not determined by the nature of the agent?” (Mackie 1955, p. 209).
- <sup>9</sup> What I mean by free here is that they chose in accordance with what they most fundamentally wanted, or what their true self wanted.
- <sup>10</sup> So Nietzsche: “The entire inner world, originally as thin as if it were stretched between two membranes, expanded and extended itself, acquired breadth, depth, and height, in the same measure as the outward discharge was *inhibited*” (Nietzsche [1887] 1995, p. 520).

- 11 My approach here is notably different from that of Brian Davies and Mark Murphy. Murphy rejects “God’s being bound by any moral norms whatsoever” (Murphy 2021, p. 227). Davies argues that God is not subject to moral obligations, noting that “we have philosophical reasons to deny that God is a moral agent” (Davies 2006, p. 91). Simply denying the premise that God is a moral agent may be one way to deal with the problem of evil, but it comes at great cost. Why should I *hope* in the existence of such a being? Why should I consider it worthy of worship? Without my thinking of this being in moral terms, I must think of it simply as a terrible power and might. If I were to relate to such a being at all, it would be only in terms of fear. On these points, see my forthcoming review of Murphy’s book in the *European Journal of Philosophy*. The argument that I am developing in this paper is that *assuming* that we think of God according to moral concepts that we can discover through our reason and that apply to all intelligences, it is still the case that the conditions of God’s agency are distinct from our own. There are many things that it would be immoral for us to do because of our limited knowledge, power, and goodness; to deny these facts about ourselves would be to deny our creaturely status.
- 12 Kant puts this very nicely when he notes: “Although it certainly sounds questionable, it is in no way reprehensible to say that every human being *makes a God* for himself, indeed, he must make one according to moral concepts (attended by the infinitely great properties that belong to the faculty of exhibiting an object in the world commensurate to these concepts) in order to honor in him *the one who made him*. For in whatever manner a being has been made known to him by somebody else, and described as God, indeed, even if such a being might appear to him in person (if this is possible), a human being must yet confront this representation with his ideal first, in order to judge whether he is authorized to hold and revere this being as Divinity. Hence, on the basis of revelation alone, without that concept being *previously* laid down in its purity at its foundation as touchstone, there can be no religion, and all reverence for God would be *idolatry*” (Kant [1793] 1996, Religion, 6:169n).
- 13 *What* this is certainly cannot be established outside of a faith tradition. Additionally, even *in* those traditions, the final telos and its realization is a matter of faith and hope—not of knowledge. Further, very few, if any, are in a position to explain what exactly union with God amounts to.
- 14 As Adams notes, “. . . Christians never believed that God was a pleasure maximizer anyway” (Adams 1989, p. 298). In fact, I know none of the world’s great religions that ever made such a claim, either.
- 15 So Adams (1989, p. 306), “philosophical and religious theories differ importantly on what valuables they admit into their ontology.” For instance, those who have had mystical experiences report on the *incommensurability* between their experience of God or the holy and their everyday experience of the world. Those who have not had these experiences for themselves may be puzzled by the claims of those who have had them and may be incapable of comprehending those claims. Rudolf Otto, for instance, provides a rich phenomenology of the holy as a category of value. The individual who experiences the holy is struck dumb and is utterly fascinated by the numinous. It is experienced as that which is most ultimately *real* in comparison with which all earthly reality seems like a mere dream. The numinous is experienced as having ultimate value; the creature comes to consider itself “but dust and ashes” in relation to it. While it can be experienced as something terrible, it also instills longings for it that are completely distinct from our “sensuous, psychical, or intellectual impulses and cravings.” Our desire for it has its seat in “the highest part of our nature,” which mystics called “the basis or ground of the soul” (Otto 1950, p. 36). As Adams (1989, p. 310) notes, agreement on value “is not necessary to consensus on internal consistency.” The believer can point to the fact that their belief system remains internally consistent precisely because spiritual values not recognized by the atheologian undergird it.
- 16 As an example, take the tenth-century Jewish thinker Saadia Gaon (1948, pp. 246–47), quoted by Stump (2008, p. 197): “Now He that subjects the soul to its trials is none other than the Master of the universe, who is, of course, acquainted with all its doings. This testing of the soul [that is, the suffering of Job] has been compared to the assaying by means of fire of [lumps of metal] that have been referred to as gold or silver. It is thereby that the true nature of their composition is clearly established. For the original gold and silver remain, while the allows that have been mingled with them are partly burned and partly take flight . . . The pure, clear souls that have been refined are thereupon exacted and enabled.”
- 17 My own understanding of soul-making has been deeply influenced by (Hick [1977] 2007). However, I differ from him significantly in that my own account rejects as inherently unintelligible an understanding of freedom implying leeway indeterminism.

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Article

# “And You Became Mine” (Ezek 16:8): Good and Evil in a Narcissistic God

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**Abstract:** Scholars have defended the cruel behavior of the biblical god as being justified, due to the supposition of God being perfectly omnipotent and infallible. However, one cannot be obtuse to the depictions of Yhwh himself about his feelings and actions, as expressed through biblical narratives and brought forth by his emissaries, the prophets. When observing the prophecies of Ezekiel, for example, through a modern psychological lens, God’s relationship with his subjects, and especially with his offspring—the nation of Israel—reveals clear patterns of malignant narcissistic behavior. This study proposes that evil is an immanent part of God’s nature in the Hebrew Bible. The texts make no effort to disguise God’s narcissistic nature in his behavior towards his chosen one, a behavior that resonates with patterns one would define as evil. Moreover, the texts reflect the willingness of followers to acknowledge their situation as being trapped in an abusive relationship with a vicious patron.

**Keywords:** evilness in God; biblical theology; familial imagery; divine incest; narcissistic personality disorder; narcissistic parenting; Ezekiel 16

## 1. An Epistemological Inquiry

Does God intend to be good? Or is he actually evil? Is it even possible to determine and define good or evil nature? Like the elusive notion of *God*, so are the concepts of *Good* and *Evil* fluid and relative; alternating and influenced by the observers. One may see a powerful entity inflicting harm upon a helpless party and consider this action as evil. However, such a judgment would have a cognitive bias, as the observer is always ignorant of the full circumstances in detail and of the background of the involved parties, along with their drives and motives. Often, what is perceived by one as a sharp asymmetry of power is judged differently by another. Additionally, in the case of the participants, even a supposedly stronger side would almost never see themselves as being guilty or evil. Russian soldiers in Ukraine do not perceive themselves as the “bad guys”, nor do ISIS fighters, or those who stormed Capitol Hill. Nor does any dictator that oppresses his subjects.

When defining the relative nature between *good* and *evil*, one must also consider the influential aspects of cultural and temporal factors. What today would be considered abusive or immoral, like a parent beating their child, would be, in other times, a manifestation of positive parenting, as reflected in the biblical book of Proverbs. Similarly, actions that are nowadays considered crimes against humanity, such as perpetrating destruction on cities and nations, have been depicted in the biblical text (e.g., Genesis, Exodus, Numbers) as a positive requisition by a supreme, powerful, and sometimes divine authority, who then advises his people to act accordingly (e.g., Deuteronomy, Joshua, 1Kings) in what today would be considered severe heinous behavior.

Yet, although *good* and *evil* are entirely relative, varying through cultures, generations, and perspectives, there have always been attempts to define them, or trace their essence. Such attempts have been especially ambitious considering theistic presuppositions of the

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existence of a supposedly moral role-model for humanity in the form of an omnipotent deity. Solving the contradiction between the existence of evil beside the omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient god has occupied minds for centuries, and has produced various arguments in the theological and philosophical domains.<sup>1</sup> James Sterba's recent book revisits the question from a logical-philosophical perspective, deliberating the presumption of an "all powerful, all knowing, and perfectly good god", against the universal human experience of evil. Sterba finds it logically difficult to reconcile a traditional understanding of God's perfection with the presence of evil. He contends that an attentiveness to the horrendous moral and natural evils in the world cannot help but undermine belief in the traditional deity, in whom the virtues of omnipotence, omniscience, and moral goodness are thought to coincide.<sup>2</sup> Sterba's discussion responds, *inter alia*, to the endeavors of scholars from the monotheistic faith, to reconcile the conviction of an omnipotent deity—an ideal role model for men and women, created in his image, with the existence of evil. Theists dealing with theodicy have employed various defenses and doctrines, such as concepts of moral retribution and the afterlife, to usually decline the likelihood that a supreme deity allows wickedness, or even produces it.<sup>3</sup> A supposed existence of evil in the world has often been explained in accordance with monotheistic axioms, which entail pedagogical presuppositions as to the role of God for humanity and morality.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, the attempts to associate omnipotence with goodness do not represent all monotheistic paradigms. The Hebrew Bible [HB]—a very first foundation of monotheistic beliefs and denominations, does not seem to be concerned with a possible association between the deity and depravity. Second Isaiah, for example, being triggered by the Zoroastrian religion, does not hesitate to declare that God himself is the source of evilness, as much as he is the derivation of wealth, life, and death (Isa 45:7). Could this idea imply that God not only creates or allows evil, but also contains wickedness? This question is not about the very existence of God and his actual traits, but about the way he is portrayed and perceived by humans.

While the HB contains complexities and discrepancies in the depictions of the deity, it also reflects different sets of expectations and values than those envisioned by later readers and followers. The question of this study moves from the ontological realm to the epistemological one. Rather than asking whether God is good or wicked *per se*, we ask whether he was *portrayed* as such. In the following sections, we will delve into one of the first foundations of monotheistic thought, the Hebrew Bible, to argue that the depictions of God do not presuppose goodness as a necessary characteristic of the deity.<sup>5</sup> This study will show that whether the biblical god was considered omnipotent or not (this is a whole other issue in the examination of God's nature)—evilness has been an immanent trait in representations of the deity.

## 2. "God" as a Product of Scribes and Society

Anthropomorphic imageries in the HB deliver a human-like portrait of the biblical deity. Hence, an examination of the deity's nature ought to be conducted by the same means used upon humans. Defining "goodness" and "evil" in human nature mandates an evaluation of relationships between parties and their attitude towards each other, thus revealing intentions of good will or inclination to cause harm.<sup>6</sup> This study argues that a reliable judgment of the image of the biblical god may only be obtained through an examination of his relationships with humans, and especially through his relationship with his chosen kin, Israel. This chosen kin, according to the diverse theological myths of the HB, is the one whom God singles out, saves, adopts, and takes as a wife. Thus, Israel is the ultimate candidate upon whom God's relationships can be comprehended. In some cases, it is God himself who reveals a first-person view of the relationship, by declaring his aim and purposes in maintaining the relationship.

This study departs from the philosophical discussion and moves to the literary realm, offering an analysis of the concept of an omnipotent god, as provided in one of the imageries of the HB. While cultural gaps and relative perspectives make it difficult to define

“evil”, the texts in hand reflect the perception of the scribes that good or evil coexist in the concept of *God*. This is revealed through an exposure to the deity’s inner thoughts and intentions regarding people and nations. The texts we shall see indicate the authors’ readiness to define the deity as performing merely in his own interest, and not for the “good” of others. The recipients of these texts, and the society in which the texts were produced, are familiar with such characteristics, and are willing, at a certain point, to embrace them and canonize them. Unlike voices heard today about God, it seems that the authors of the text, as well as their community, did not refrain from imagining their deity as containing *evilness*; even if not stating it directly.

### 3. For the Sake of God’s Name

When reading the illustration of God’s association with his chosen kin, Israel, in the book of Ezekiel, the reader is confronted with the protruding attribute enveloping God’s behavior—acting for the sake of God’s name. This eccentric choice is found in the different forms of the text, whether in historiographical reviews, prosaic statements, or poetic prophecies. It brings forth the complexity of the relationship between Israel and the deity, and reflects presuppositions and beliefs in regard to God’s intentions and morality. Can God’s choice to act for his name be described as pride and arrogance, and tainted by an evil root in his nature?

Prophecies in the book of Ezekiel relate a significant theological role to the name of God. First-person statements in the book convey the idea that God performs for the sake of his name, למען שמי (“for my name”, Ezek 20:9, 14, 22, 44); a name through which he should be known, both by the nation Israel (12:16, 22:16) and by others (38:16, 39:6, 13, cf., v. 21). Further verses convey that the very destiny of his people, Israel, may affect the holiness of Yhwh in the world, e.g., ונקדשתי בם לעיני הגוים (“and manifest my holiness in them in the sight of the nations”, 28:25, cf., 36:22–23); ואת שם קדשי אודיע בתוך עמי ישראל (“My holy name I will make known among my people Israel”, 39:7, cf., 39:25).

While references to God’s name are also mentioned by other prophets (e.g., Amos 2:7; Mal 1:12, cf. 2:11), the idea is predominantly found in the book of Ezekiel. Nonetheless, the BDB lexicon interprets Ezekiel’s engagement with this notion of acting for the name of God as acting *according* to his attributes, as reflected in similar declarations in Jeremiah (Brown et al. 1906, p. 2496). In Jeremiah, the references to God’s name relay the message that God acts or should act according to his divine traits (“למען שמך”, Jer 14:7, 21), and namely as a people’s savior and the keeper of the covenant (vv. 8, 9, 21), in spite of the apostasies of the sinner Judeans (vv. 7, 20). But in the theology of Ezekiel, the call of acting *for the sake of God’s name* is not stated by the people. It is God’s own announced ambition to be known and appreciated, and to be protected from profanation by any means (cf., 13:19, 20:39, 22:26). Unlike the suggestion of the BDB, the usage of God’s name in Ezekiel aims to ensure that the reputation of God will be kept, shown, and glorified.

The principle of manifesting God’s name, according to Ezekiel, is what saves the people from annihilation. Ezekiel 20 narrates that even though the people deserve to be obliterated, Yhwh refrained from abolishing them (20:14, 22), due to his concern that the situation may be misunderstood by other nations. Indeed, when God executes judgment against Judah/Jerusalem, he does it for all nations to see (Ezek 5:8, 39:21), like a father smacking his child in public.<sup>7</sup> However, the awareness of the other nations to the unfortunate situation of God’s people has also led to an erroneous interpretation of God’s capabilities. This had a negative impact on the name of God, similar to the “profanation” caused to the Sabbaths (20:13, 16, 21, 24, 22:8, 23:38), and the temple (23:39, 25:3, 28:18, 44:6, cf., 24:21). God had been at risk of becoming profaned due to the misinterpretation of his actions (e.g., 36:20–23).<sup>8</sup>

The worry about the integrity of God’s name has therefore been the incentive to implement God’s name within Israel—an application of a physical or substantial element of God’s existence: “My holy name I will make known among my people Israel; and I will not let my holy name be profaned any more; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD,

the Holy One in Israel" (39:7). For the same reason, a restoration of the exiles, God's people, would take place in the land: "... Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob, and have mercy on the whole house of Israel; and I will be jealous for my holy name" (39:25). The restoration is not a result of the people's virtues, and will not be done for their own sake. It will occur to prevent harm to God's name among the gentiles, and to implement validation of his holiness in their understanding (cf., 20:41, 28:25, 29:6, 36:21-24, 36, 39:27, 28). A similar message is stated regarding the restoration of the Judean kingship, which will not be the people's reward, but rather an opportunity to acknowledge God's actions throughout history (17:24). Similar is the case of retaliating against other nations, when God's biggest desire is to "... display my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the Lord" (38:23. Cf. 25:14, 17, 30:8, 39:6, 21, 22, 25). What does the tenet of God's acting for the sake of his name indicate as to his attitude towards his kin, and what does it reveal in regard to the objectives and intentions of this relationship? We will discuss these questions further below.

#### 4. The Deity of Ezekiel Diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder

As we can see, the concern about *God's name* in history and eschatology lies at the center of Ezekiel's theology. This concern constitutes the incentive and drive for God's relationships with others, including his close kin, and reflects characteristics such as selfishness, egocentricity, megalomania, and exploitation. These characteristics resonate with the traits listed as God's character in Richard Dawkins' 2006, *The God Delusion*. Dawkins denounces the "God of the Old Testament", for being "arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully" (Dawkins 2006, p. 51). Dan Barker, a former evangelical pastor, based an entire monograph on Dawkins's quotation, to demonstrate how *God is The Most Unpleasant Character in all Fiction*.<sup>9</sup> But one phrase is missing from both Dawkins's character description and Barker's survey, that seems to me the most applicable to the question of evilness—that is God's *narcissistic personality disorder*.

Whether deliberately or not, biblical depictions and narratives reflect tendencies of social connections and the human psyche. Over the past half century, studies demonstrated the contribution of theories in psychology for better understanding the characters and interactions involved in biblical ethos and narratives.<sup>10</sup> In 2009, Donald Capps used the 1994 *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-4) to indicate manifestations of *narcissistic personality disorder* in the biblical deity.<sup>11</sup> Capps's usage of the 1994 DSM should be carried on to the updated DSM version (5, 2013), which summarizes *narcissistic personality disorder* (NPD) as "a pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy ... present in a variety of contexts" (American Psychiatric Association 2013, p. 670). While a diagnosis of NPD requires the manifestation of at least five out of nine listed criteria, Capps argues for a diagnosis of a "complete" and acute narcissist in Yhwh, as he expects "no less of a perfect God". He thus traces all nine criteria in Yhwh's character; including grandiosity and self-importance, fantasies of unlimited success and power, jealousy, and lack of empathy.<sup>12</sup>

While the notion of *evil* is elusive and difficult to define, easier is to trace are behavioral and social tendencies, and to relate them to what one may consider wickedness or evilness. As stated by Jaycee Hallford, the psychological definition of narcissism lies as a "supplementary trait beyond evil; alongside aggression, egotism, revengefulness, hatred, selfishness, and sadism".<sup>13</sup> In the case of the biblical god, it could be attested that his behavior often reveals him as a *malignant narcissist*, as he is willing to abuse others, even those dear to him, in order to retain constant acclaim and admiration.<sup>14</sup> This diagnosis is attested in biblical stories that narrate the tendency of God to harm not only his enemies (e.g., Deut 7:18-24; Ezek 25:7-13), but primarily his beloved and chosen entities, whether sinners (e.g., Exod 32:10; Num 14:12; 25:11; 2kgs 17:18) or pious (Job 2:3). We will examine this through

the allegory provided in Ezekiel 16, where God's performance in his relationship with his chosen child clearly manifests his malignant narcissistic nature.

### 5. Assessing Good and Evil through Familial Connections—The Case of the Ezekiel Allegory

Our interpretation will demonstrate the dark picture portrayed in the tumultuous allegorical narrative in Ezekiel 16. A treacherous and violent relationship is unfurled between a narcissistic authoritarian entity, Yhwh, and the helpless dependent female child, Jerusalem. Yhwh, a patriarchal character, plays dual roles for the female entity: first a caregiver, then a husband.

The use of dual roles in depicting God's relationship with Israel is well-known in biblical prophecy. As stated in the words of Second Isaiah: "For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name . . ." (Isa 54:4. Cf. 62:5–11). A prophecy in Jeremiah, for example, shifts between father-son and husband-wife imagery (Jer 3:2–4), with allegations directed to Israel as a promiscuous wife, and longings for a trustworthy and reliable relationship through the image of a daughter: ". . . You have played the whore with many lovers; and would you return to me"; "Have you not just now called to me, 'My Father, you are the friend of my youth'" (vv. 1, 4).<sup>15</sup>

The allegory in Ezekiel 16 constitutes a similar duality in Israel's interaction with Yhwh. Nonetheless, rather than shifting between the father-daughter and the husband-wife models, indicating the elasticity of the relationship, the spousal phase is portrayed in the allegory as the final goal, the target of their relationship; whereas a child may leave the parent, a spouse is obliged to remain at his side (cf., Isa 46:4). In her new position, the girl is punished by Yhwh for allegedly violating expected restrictions that have come with the change in relationship. How is God's personality in this portrayal perceived and interpreted? Are the deeds towards his protégé considered good or evil? How were they regarded by those who produced the texts?

In a leading comprehensive commentary to the book of Ezekiel from 1997, David Block argued that what may seem to a modern reader as a "revoltingly bloodthirsty" God, who is "devoid of the most elementary compassion or decency", is only an erroneous interpretation of the biblical text.<sup>16</sup> Using the above-mentioned factor of relativism, Block underlines a gap between contemporary moral expectations and the norms/morality at the time of writing. He argues that since the covenant of Yhwh with Israel is depicted by using familial and marriage metaphors, God's conduct should be considered "logical and natural", as it manifests an acceptable response to a wife's infidelity.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, he asserts, one should refrain from judging the biblical deity as cruel or unjust, and God's wrath in the relationship "should not blind the reader to the prophet's fundamentally positive disposition toward the covenant" (Block, *The Book of Ezekiel* 1, 49). Therefore, according to Block, God's revenge and retaliation against the nation, mentioned in the allegory, are considered proportional to the depth of God's covenant love (Ibid., p. 14). To summarize, Yhwh should be judged as "a gracious and compassionate God, who not only rescued Jerusalem . . . the abandoned infant, from certain death", but also "marries her, and with unrestrained expressions of love he elevates her to the status of queen" (Ibid., p. 49).

Putting our own judgment aside, do we have tools to assess the validity of Block's suggestion of Ezekiel's god being portrayed as "gracious and compassionate"? It seems that while Block avoids judging the actions of the god of Ezekiel according to contemporary values, other presuppositions he holds come into play. Block assumes that Yhwh represents a moral and justifiable system accepted at the time of production, which had welcomed demands for obedience and compliance, as well as punishments and vengeance against one's own protégé. Indeed, the prophecies of Ezekiel do not contain an explicit criticism of God's behavior, nor define it as evil, or a source of evilness; but the prophecies do not reverberate God as conducting goodness, either. As we shall see, Yhwh of the allegory is driven by his own needs, and not by the needs of his adopted child/spouse. This correlates with the broader view of God in Ezekiel, acting for the sake of himself, with no considera-

tion for humans, including his very close kin, Israel. Traits such as these are rudimentary in NPD.

#### 6. “In your Blood Live” (Ezek 16:6): Supposed Grace and Compassion in the Allegory

The allegory of Ezekiel 16 narrates that Yhwh notices Jerusalem at a crucial moment in her life, just after being born and then forsaken by her parents—a Canaanite father and a Hittite mother (Ezek 16:3).<sup>18</sup> In the first days of her life, Jerusalem was moribund, with her “navel cord . . . not cut . . . [and being not] washed with water to cleanse . . . nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloths” (v. 4).<sup>19</sup> The lack of parental care in that crucial time of her life prompted Yhwh to approach the girl with the following instruction: “until the girl/woman exhibits the ‘ornaments of ornaments’” (v. 7) (Shields 1998, p. 8). Christl Maier suggested that the text indicates that Yhwh simply orders the infant to sprout like a plant, with no actual action of rescue or care. Thus, the girl remains in a “liminal state between the open field and the human realm”.<sup>20</sup> More bluntly, Aaron Koller recently argued that the statement does not indicate a bestowal of care and tender for the girl, and that the allegory does not at all evoke an image of adoption by Yhwh (Koller 2017, p. 410).

A completely opposite view was argued by Block, as part of his thesis regarding Ezekiel’s compassionate God. Block asserts that the statement *היי בדמיך* communicates Yhwh’s intention to fulfill a missing parental role for the girl. This idea is supported by the earlier supposition of Meir Malul, that the words *היי בדמיך* echo Akkadian formal declarations of adoption, which clarify one’s intention to rescue a child from a state of emergency and position them under new ownership.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the following phrase in the statement of Yhwh emphasizes his role in the envision of the girl’s thriving (“I made”): *השדה נתתיך כצמח* (“I made you multiply as the plant of the field”, 7a<sub>1</sub>).<sup>22</sup> As such, the statement *היי בדמיך* responds to the deprivation the girl had experienced in the beginning of her life, when “no eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you; but you were thrown out in the open field . . .” (v. 5).

At this point, we can agree with Block’s interpretation that the allegory depicts a scenario in which Yhwh steps into a missing parental role for the girl. This, however, cannot make one concur with Block’s other supposition regarding to God’s personality as gracious and compassionate. Instead, as we read the rest of the allegory through a *parental relationship* framework, God’s vicious attitude towards the child is enhanced.<sup>23</sup> As we shall see, instead of functioning as a supportive and protective parent, Yhwh inflicts upon the child violent chastisements as a medium to first and foremost satisfy his own needs and ambitions.

#### 7. “And You Became Mine” (Ezek 16:8): Exploitation instead of Grace and Compassion

We presented Block’s assertion, that Yhwh’s stepping into a parental role, as given in Ezekiel 16, supposedly manifests acts of grace and compassion. This assertion is problematic, as a further reading of the allegory reveals that God’s gracious propensity does not sustain for long, as it serves a mainly self-interested goal.

After Yhwh saves the girl Jerusalem, he recognizes her reaching puberty and womanhood—the “age for love” (*והנה עתך עת דדים*, v. 8). Consequently, he updates his intentions towards the girl and makes her available to him as a developed woman: “You grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. I passed by you (again) and looked

on you; you were at the age for love. I spread the edge of my cloak over you, and covered your nakedness" (vv. 7a<sub>2</sub>–8a). Upon recognizing the girl's feminine nature, Yhwh covers her nakedness. This act, rather than expressing care, conveys the enforcement of the new authority upon the girl: "... and covered your nakedness. I pledged myself to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine" (v. 8a<sub>2</sub>-b).<sup>24</sup> Like the image of Nebuchadnezzar stretching out his שפיריו (canopy/net, Jer 43:10, 12) over Egypt to apply his dominion over the land,<sup>25</sup> the covering of her bareness claims enduring ownership of the girl. However, within the specific familial metaphor, the covering also alludes to sexual commitment,<sup>26</sup> as is further indicated by the allusion to the blood rinsing off the girl (Ezek 16:9), possibly referring to her menstrual blood (and thus her "womanhood"),<sup>27</sup> and the so-called hymeneal blood, a result of her first sexual encounter.<sup>28</sup> Hence, the word זמית is in plural form. Thus, what started as Yhwh's parental care for the girl, has been replaced by a marital relationship enforced upon her.<sup>29</sup>

As has been outlined by several scholars, the allegory alludes to an incestuous relationship between Yhwh, an adoptive father, and his daughter, who is coerced into a wedlock.<sup>30</sup> In this, the allegory reflects a conviction that God is exempted of what is forbidden in human conduct.<sup>31</sup> The tendency of ascribing to the deity different morality also appears in biblical narratives describing or depicting God's unexplained wrath and retaliation (e.g., 1 Sam 6:19–20; 2 Sam 6:6–7), in contrast to the set of clear rules enforced in human courts (cf., Deut 24:16; Jer 31:29–30). In Ezekiel, God's destructive commandments (Ezek 20:25, 26) constitute the opposite conduct of what is expected of human individuals in society (cf. Exod 13:11–15; Lev 18:5).<sup>32</sup> The incestuous relationship is also another manifestation of this. Ruth Netzer finds a similar phenomenon in Greek mythology, where incestuous interaction is legitimately regarded in the pantheon, unlike in human families (Netzer 2020, p. 201).

As said previously, Ezekiel is not the first prophet to use metaphors of parenting and marriage in portraying the relationship between Israel and God.<sup>33</sup> However, the allegory in Chapter 16 is especially exceptional in its narrative format, its length, and its consistent focus on the parent's interest, assigning to the child an utterly passive role. Unlike imageries that attribute to the nation a role in recuperating the relationship (cf., Jer 3:19–22), in the Ezekiel allegory, the destiny of the relationship is solely dependent on Yhwh through all stages—the adoption, conversion, and restoration. The incest forced upon the child is a type of exploitation that protects the sovereignty of the parent.<sup>34</sup> The girl is needed for the parent's control and dominion, and for a recognition and validation of his grandiosity,<sup>35</sup> and so, in other words, she is the narcissists' source supply. The parent achieves sexual benefits, and ignores any harmful consequences to the child. As expected, the allegory offers no discomfort or remorse regarding the portrayal of an incestuous relationship. Instead, it reveals that the conversion of the relationship is self-serving for Yhwh, while the child gains nothing. The child, as we shall see, is suppressed under the confining cloak of a narcissistic father.

## 8. Suppressed by a Narcissist Father

There is no automatic connection between narcissism in leadership, and in a family; but in the case of Yhwh, as depicted in Ezekiel, the two phenomena coincide. Yhwh's conduct towards the adopted daughter intends to achieve her utter compliance, thus fulfilling his own needs of grandiosity.

Parents with NPD incline to perceive their children as a potential mirror of themselves, aspiring the children to fulfill their parents' visions and to grant them acknowledgement and admiration.<sup>36</sup> At first, Yhwh adorns the nation-girl with gifts (gold and silver jewelry and exquisite clothing) (Ezek. 16:11–13), and with provisions such as flour, honey, and oil (v. 13). These all aim to supplement the girl's beauty and make her "fit to be a queen" (v. 13); thus, increasing her fame and reputation "... among the nations on account of [her] beauty" (v. 14). However, the fame and beauty bestowed upon the girl ultimately served



to praise Yhwh's capacity and authority: "... for it [her beauty] was perfect because of my splendor that I had bestowed on you ... " (v. 14). While at first, Yhwh's gestures to the girl were supposedly prompted by her agony and dependency, later on her agony was the very circumstances that enabled Yhwh to take advantage of her, dismissing the aspects of care and support provided. The initial rescue thus led to dominion, and physical care was used to manifest his own splendor.

Parents defined as narcissistic often demonstrate the tendency to force expectations upon the child and, as a result, experience anger and disappointment when they lose hold of them. For parents, a sign of the child's individualism and self-exploration is experienced as hurtful and infuriating. This propensity, in most cases, exposes the parent's own drama: an underlining insecurity regarding their power in the family or elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> Yhwh is seemingly self-assured when imposing demands upon the girl, but his anger and aggressiveness towards her indicate his concern of losing control and being deprived of love and appreciation.<sup>38</sup> The girl's failure to show gratitude and compliance evokes his acute rage: "And in all your abominations and your whorings you did not remember the days of your youth, when you were naked and bare, flailing about in your blood. After all your wickedness ... " (vv. 22–23). A restoration of his confidence and self-control is later achieved by inflicting punitive measures upon the inferior girl.

In authoritative families, punishments are employed in order to consolidate power and authority. More than pedagogical tools, punishments aim to instill compliance and diminish self-esteem among targeted family members. Shifts between various types of retaliation (e.g., over-intervention, outbursts, physical abuse, emotional blackmail, anger, disregard, neglect) ensure submission to and dependence upon the powerful person.<sup>39</sup> In the allegory, sanctions are inflicted not directly by the parent, but by the girl's "lovers". God executes punishment by proxy, whom he takes "to do the dirty work". The girl is stripped, humiliated and bitten, in a violent gang rape (vv. 37–41), and thus is publicly returned to the state of "naked and bare" (v. 39), as she was before Yhwh took notice of her (vv. 4–5).<sup>40</sup> Not only does she lack the support and protection she deserves from her caregiver, but also loses any alternative she sought through betrayal, which became a source of violence and agony for her. This penalty is a radical manifestation of what Johanna Stiebert defines as the patriarchs' "honor–shame complex" concerning their daughter's behavior.<sup>41</sup> By having the girl violated and dishonored by others, Yhwh enforces upon the girl the same scenario he despised. By that, he amplifies the allegations against the girl, without admitting that it was him who had already crossed the line with her.

The execution of punishments calms Yhwh down and brings him to satisfaction. Upon achieving the girl's full submission, his confidence and tranquility are restored: "So, I will satisfy my fury on you, and my jealousy shall turn away from you; I will be calm, and will be angry no longer" (v. 42). As for the girl, she is left to bear shame and disgrace (vv. 54, 61), and becomes fully compliant henceforth, acknowledging Yhwh and nothing else (יהוה יודעת כי אני, "and you shall know that I am, the Lord", Ezek 16:62). David Blumenthal summarizes the narrative up to this stage as recounting God's taking the girl back in love after sexually abusing her.<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that this occurs only after watching her being violated and dishonored by others.

A child growing up in such circumstances does not have much of a choice. The allegory terminates with the proclamation that the covenant is reestablished, with no agency of the child or a new appreciation towards the caregiver, but rather as total submission, endured in complete silence: "... remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord GOD" (v. 63).<sup>43</sup> This submission, reaffirming the parent's grandiosity, is planned to last forever (ברית עולם, "an everlasting covenant", v. 60).<sup>44</sup>

Studies on narcissistic parenting demonstrate the various damaging consequences of such child rearing.<sup>45</sup> However, Yhwh (and the narrator) denies the girl's need for selfhood and regards her as the one to blame, rather than acknowledging her ordeal.<sup>46</sup> This

happens in the space where she mostly needs protection, a protection she cannot obtain elsewhere. Yhwh's narcissistic nature is the basis for the girl's tragic life, full of cruelty and maliciousness. Michael Coogan drew attention to this harmful relationship between Yhwh and Jerusalem in the allegory, in which the patriarch is "insanely jealous and abusive", who "subjects his wife to gang rape and gang murder, as with the Levite's concubine in Gibeah. Yet, unlike the Levite's concubine, no trace of sympathy is expressed for these wives of the deity".<sup>47</sup> Coogan's warning has been echoed by feminist scholars who saw in the allegory an endorsement of violence against women.<sup>48</sup> However, this textual evidence cannot merely be considered as misogyny. The girl/woman in the allegory signifies the larger congregation of abused men and women who receive no sympathy.

It is true that outlined here is a mere allegory, which cannot be taken literally. However, we should also admit that any depiction and representation of the deity in the Bible, and elsewhere, is an attempt to depict the abstract and unreachable. The sum of all allegorical attempts reflects the way people have perceived themselves, through a consideration of the form of the eternity and their relationship with it. With no self-reflection, or a stated criticism, this allegory constitutes an illustration of the supreme deity as inflicting malevolence upon his subjects. His behavior and inclination are comparable to that of humans, including those with a range of psychological complexes. Could we then contest the existence of evil in God's personality?

## 9. Evilness in God—Conclusions

We can now return to Block's argument concerning Yhwh's character in the book of Ezekiel, supposedly manifesting grace and compassion. This interpretation does not adhere to the image of God in theological statements spread throughout the book of Ezekiel, and it certainly does not fit the picture offered by the allegory in Chapter 16. Even if we put aside the harsh attitude towards Judah, both in the broader context and in the allegory (which may indeed be assessed differently by various scholars and generations)—we are left with God's own-declarations which deny any sign of "grace and compassion". The declarations disclose the purpose of God's interaction with the people, which is solely for the sake of God's validation and grandiosity. This determines his judgment and verdict upon the subjects—Israel/Judah/Jerusalem, which serve to amplify and disseminate his ultimate authority.

According to the declarations, Yhwh acts in consideration for his reputation and sanctification. This self-absorbed characteristic demonstrates a personality with narcissistic disorder.<sup>49</sup> The lack of grace and compassion of this character is especially conveyed through the framework of Yhwh as the people's patriarch, which admits an exploitation of the people for the sake of his strength and self-confidence. While this also reveals his insecurity, Yhwh knows how to compensate for it by controlling and terrorizing his kin. The narcissistic character of Yhwh is expressed to the fullest when dealing with those who need his protection most. His character as a supreme authority cannot be defined without acknowledging these elements, which are widely accepted as evil and cruel.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Leibniz, one of the rationalistic pioneers on the subject, suggested that God, as an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent, created the “Best of all possible worlds”. The evils that people do, even out of free will, or experience and witness, are such only due to their humanly limited understanding, as they are part of the grand formula leading to such success. See (Leibniz [1710] 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> (Sterba 2019, pp. 134–5, 190–92). See also (Wilmot 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> See (Crenshaw 1983, pp. 1–5; Swinburne 1983; Davies 2006, p. 154).
- <sup>4</sup> Another theistic suggestion is that evil is a result of the free will given to humans, and which humans can practice and control. According to Eleonore Stump, the possession of free will is such a good value (both in Christianity and in general) that it outweighs all evil in the world (Stump 1985, p. 416).
- <sup>5</sup> The link created by theists and philosophers between omnipotence and goodness is that of a deductive nature. Origen of Alexandria explains that by definition, God’s qualities are not absolute, whereas he cannot act out ‘any’ action as his actions are limited to absolute goodness, justice and wisdom (Origen 1885). John Mackie discusses the paradox existing between the three suppositions: God is omnipotent, God is wholly, evil exists, suggesting that never can the three coexist (Mackie 1955). McCloskey asserts that the existence of evil implies either that there is no God or that the “god” who exists is imperfect either in power or in goodness (McCloskey 1962).
- <sup>6</sup> Hobbes asserted that primal human nature is violent and self-serving, seeking dominance over others. He stated that *good* and *evil* are defined subjectively through personal desire or aversion (Hobbes 1939, pp. 149–50). Rousseau in contrast, believed that primal human nature was based on self-love, which did not lead to violence: “There is, then, deep in our souls an inborn principle of justice and virtue by which, in spite of our maxims, we judge our actions and those of others as good or bad; and it is to this principle that I give the name of conscience” (Rousseau [1762] 1957, p. 40).
- <sup>7</sup> Indeed, the punitive situation of the people of Israel has been supposedly known to the other nations, as they testify: “these are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land” (36:20. Cf., 39:23, in the case of “the house of Israel”).
- <sup>8</sup> And see: וְנִחַלְתָּ בְּךָ לְעֵינֵי גוֹיִם (22:16, MT: second person: “and you [sg. f.] shall be profaned”). Several ancient versions read the verb as first person, in which case the Lord refers to how his people’s sin brings disgrace upon him: “And I shall be profaned through you in the sight of the nations; and you shall know that I am the LORD” (Ezek. 22:16). For a defense of the MT, see (Block 1997; Greenberg 1983, pp. 457–58).
- <sup>9</sup> Barker surveys occurrences of all the definitions stated by Dawkins, and adds further traits, under the title “Dawkins Was Too Kind”, such as Pyromaniacal, Angry, Merciless, Curse Hurling, Vaccinidal, Abortinidal, Cannibalistic, Slavemonger; and he does not spare the image of Jesus from this.
- <sup>10</sup> See for example (Jung [1954] 2002) (e.g., “Yahweh had one good son and the one who was a failure. Both Cain and Abel and Jacob and Esau correspond to this prototype, as does the motif of the hostile brothers in all ages and all parts of the world. Innumerable modern variants cause dissension in modern families and keep the psychotherapist busy”, p. 38). (Morrow 2004), e.g., “There is evidence that the Babylonian exiles exhibited psychological symptoms known among groups of persons displaced by violent processes . . . The exiles were burdened with low esteem for the faith community called Israel to which they and the previous generation, which had actually suffered through the violence of the Babylonian conquest and deportation . . .”, p. 85); (Abramovitch 2014) (e.g., “In describing the birth of the first brothers, these opening two verses of Genesis 4 reveal much about the psychodynamics of birth order . . . Firstborns must live up to intense parental projections. Eve does not say, ‘I have gotten a child’, but ‘I have gotten a man’. Eve does not see the child, only the man he is to become”, p. 29); (Markl 2020) (e.g., “While reflection on the psychological background of ancient texts is necessarily hypothetical and speculative, trauma theory may help explain the rhetoric of blaming and shaming employed in the Song of Moses at the culmination of the Pentateuch. The Song may be understood as an intellectually worked through externalisation of self-blame and shame, an elaborate expression of cultural trauma”, p. 686).
- <sup>11</sup> (Capps 2009, p. 195). Capps mainly based his demonstration on texts from Genesis, Exodus and Job.
- <sup>12</sup> (Capps 2009, pp. 200–204). These are the nine characteristics: 1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance. 2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love. 3. Believes that he is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions). 4. Requires excessive admiration. 5. Has a sense of entitlement. 6. Is interpersonally exploitative. 7. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others. 8. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her. 9. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.
- <sup>13</sup> (Hallford and Linebach 2021, p. 27); See also (Peck 1986) stating that “In addition to the fact that the evil need victims to sacrifice to their narcissism, their narcissism permits them to ignore the humanity of their victims as well” (p. 136).
- <sup>14</sup> In 1964 Erich Fromm coined the term “Malignant Narcissism” to define the syndrome of the extreme mix of narcissism, antisocial behavior, aggression and sadism, stating that it represents “the quintessence of evil” (Fromm 1964, p. 37). Since then it has been widely accepted that malignant narcissism is a form of highly abusive and manipulative NPD. See (Shafti 2020).

- 15 Not always, however, the “daughter” metaphor in the prophetic discourse communicates a relationship of loyalty and friendship. A common use of the metaphor is for highlighting the nation’s negative traits: disloyalty (e.g., Isa 1:21; Jer 2:20; 13:22–7) and defeat (e.g., Isa 47). This tendency makes the daughter imagery close to the metaphoric usage of the treacherous wife and harlot, thus evoking the husband’s legitimacy to inflict punitive measures.
- 16 (Block 1997, p. 13). Block cites (Halperin 1993, pp. 170–71).
- 17 Cf., Moshe Greenberg’s suggestion that the act of stripping an adulterous female was an ancient judicial practice in Israel, as indicated in Hos 2:12; Nah 3:5; Jer 13:22, 26 (Greenberg 1983, p. 286). Daniel Smith-Christopher disagrees and argues that these illustrations derive from legal *divorce ceremonies* rather than public trials or punishments for adultery (Smith-Christopher 2004, pp. 144–46). Galambush recognizes here a multilayered exposure similar to that achieved in cinema through the “male hero’s gaze” which controls the spectator’s view of the woman (Galambush 1992, p. 94).
- 18 Elsewhere, Ezekiel seems to be familiar with the tradition of the Patriarchs (cf., 33:24), but opposes it in this context. This is possibly part of the attempt to emphasize the role of God in redeeming Israel from her low and condemned status. Nonetheless, this rhetoric may also derive from ethnic data, attested in other places, such as the tradition of Jerusalem’s Jebusite (Canaanite) origins (2 Sam 5:6–8), and the tradition that the Canaanite population had continued to reside in the land, alongside the Israelites. For a discussion of the purpose of this fictive genealogy and of the way it was understood by medieval Jewish exegetes, see (Rom-Shiloni 2011, pp. 99–103).
- 19 See Malul’s compelling proposal that the portrayal of the failure to wash and feed the infant signifies parental denial of legal recognition: (Malul 1990, p. 109). For a broader discussion of the practices that were deprived of the newborn girl (cutting her umbilical cord, washing her, rubbing with salt, or swaddling her), see (Philip 2006, p. 95).
- 20 (Maier 2008, p. 115). The assumption that God did not actually do anything for the infant was also pointed out by (Day 2000, p. 207). See also Halperin, who says: “So little ‘nurturant’ is Ezekiel’s God that it does not occur to him so much as to bathe the girl until he is ready to take her to bed (verse 9)” (Halperin 1993, p. 173).
- 21 Malul, “Adoption of Foundlings in the Bible and Mesopotamian Documents” (Malul 1990, p. 111).
- 22 Unlike the MT (*Masoretic Text*, Hebrew manuscript) that mentions Yhwh’s action in the expansion of the girl (רבה כצמח השדה), the NRSV translation indicates no involvement of Yhwh in the fulfilment of the girl’s growth: “and grow up like a plant of the field” (v. 7a). This contrasts not only the MT version (with the verb נתתיך, I gave/made you), but also the LXX (Greek version), which states: “πληθύνου καθὼς ἡ ἀνατολή τοῦ ἀγροῦ δέδωκά σε . . .” (δέδωκά σε, “I gave you”).
- 23 See Runions’ argument about the allegory: “to read the relationship between the woman and the deity as a sexual relationship is either to ignore the obvious parental imagery of vv. 1–13 or to tacitly condone incest” (Runions 2001, p. 160).
- 24 See Pardes: “the prophetic preoccupation with female nakedness (Ephraim, the male personification of the nation is never uncovered) seems to exhibit an all too common patriarchal need to control women’s bodies and women’s sexuality . . . to make clear distinctions between women whose bodies are owned by given men (father, brother, or husband) and those that may be regarded as public property. A woman who does not maintain her nakedness under cover exposes herself to the danger of being undressed in public” (Pardes 1992, pp. 134–35).
- 25 On the role of this motif in Mesopotamian literature and its influence on biblical imagery see (Goldstein 2020, pp. 63–76).
- 26 See Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, about the act of Yhwh’s spreading his cloak “as close as we get to a graphic image of God having sexual intercourse” (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, pp. 111, 113). This may be supported by the allusion to Ruth’s request of Boaz to spread his cloak (Ruth 3:8–9) as a supposed euphemism for sex, within the paradigm of a “legitimate intercourse” occurring “under covers” (cf. Hos 2:11). See (Kruger 1984, p. 86; Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible*, p. 134).
- 27 Cf., the NRSV translation for עדי עדים (v. 7, “ornaments of ornaments”) as “full womanhood”, implying the idea of arriving at “the time of menstruation”, the age of sexual engagement.
- 28 To these two layers of blood Koller adds the “birth blood in which the girl has been wallowing for more than a decade” (and was not taken care of, namely was not adopted, according to his thesis) (Koller, “Pornography or Theology?”, p. 411. See also Greenberg 1983, p. 278). For a discussion regarding the various types of feminine bloods see (Philip 2006, pp. 66–67).
- 29 There is no romanticism or a mutual choice here (unlike the one can be detected in the tale of Ruth and Boaz, for example, or in the images of the Song of Songs, where the woman even initiates the intimacy).
- 30 See scholars calling attention to the disturbing image of Yhwh in Ezek 16:8, playing a foster father having sexual relations with his foster daughter: (Seifert 1997, pp. 262–68; Baumann 2003, p. 161; Galambush, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel*, p. 94).
- 31 It is worth noting, however, that the father-daughter connection is strikingly absent in the list of laws that prohibit incestuous relationships (Leviticus 18, 20). The absence of an explicit prohibition of father-daughter incest reveals an ambiguity about this practice, and the possibility that at times, this type of relationship was tolerated. See (Cardascia 1980; Frymer-Kensky 1992, p. 1145; Carmichael 1995, pp. 127–28; Ziskind 1996). Nonetheless, despite the lack of explicit prohibition, it is reasonable that fathers had abode by society’s expectations and did not sexually abuse their daughters. In the words of Jonathan Ziskind, the fathers were “mindful of the social and financial advantages of offering to a prospective son-in-law a daughter who was a virgin” (Ziskind 1996, p. 130).

- 32 Julian Pitt-Rivers has demonstrated this tendency in the Hebrew Bible, in which “pure myths” reflect values that are contradictory to what is culturally accepted. See (Pitt-Rivers 1977, pp. 151–55). See also (Kugler 2017, pp. 54–56).
- 33 These themes are found in pre-exilic prophecy (e.g., Is 1:21; Jer 2:2, 3:2–10, 20; Hos 2:4–25), some of which may be the textual basis and inspiration for the lengthy allegory of Ezekiel (esp. Isa 1:21 and Hosea 2). See (Cooke 1937, p. 159; Wolff 1975, pp. 12–17, 30–37, 70–93; Setel 1985; Bird 1989, pp. 88–89).
- 34 See (Kinnear 2007, p. 8), about the reasons that drive perpetrators of incest. It may be an intense sexual desire for children (pedophilia), which is carried out upon those most available to them, their children. Or perpetrators are driven by the attempt to fulfil their sexual needs and fantasies without “harming the family” by conducting relationships outside of the family.
- 35 See the findings of Herman about the fragility and lack of security of perpetrators in incestuous relationships: “Other observers . . . have described the same fathers as ‘ineffectual and dependent,’ ‘inadequate,’ or ‘weak, insecure and vulnerable.’ Far from appearing as tyrants, these fathers emerge as rather pitiful men, sometimes even as victims of a ‘domineering or managing wife’” (Herman 2000, p. 74).
- 36 See: (Hendrick 2016, pp. 4–5, 22–23; Brown 2020, pp. 1–22); See also a website article: (Banschick 2013).
- 37 See (Myers and Zeigler-Hill 2012).
- 38 See Barker on God’s behavior, stating “Look at me! I am the great and terrible Lord!”: “It seems to me that a truly great person would not have to brag about it. Truly great people don’t need to draw attention to themselves. A truly great person is concerned about the effects of their actions in the real world, not about how they are perceived by underlings. Truly great people are psychologically secure, not dependent on the opinions of others. God is not great. He is merely megalomaniacal” (Barker 2016, *God: The most unpleasant character in all fiction*, p. 221).
- 39 See (Gardner 2004; Rappoport 2005; Brown 2020, pp. 59–60).
- 40 Ralph Klein refers to the role of “nakedness” in vv. 37–39 as a “negative inclusio” with the birth narrative of vv. 4–6 (see (Klein 1988, p. 88).
- 41 (Stiebert 2013, p. 189).
- 42 (Blumenthal 1993, p. 241). Furthermore, he emphasizes that “What is true of abusive behavior by humans is true of abusive behavior by God. When God acts abusively, we are the victims, we are innocent . . . the reasons for God’s actions are irrelevant, God’s motives are not the issue. Abuse is unjustified, in God as well as human beings”. (here p. 248). It is his opinion that an abused child must come to terms with the abusing parent, like Israel with their abusive God.
- 43 Cf. the situation where a girl’s silence during intercourse outside of marriage (including when it is forced on her) is criticized and sentenced with a death penalty: Deut. 22:23–24. In Ezek 16:63, Greenberg’s use of “absolve” instead of the NRSV “forgive” renders the Hebrew עָפַר more accurately (Greenberg 1983, pp. 273, 291). Jon Levenson identifies here “restoration [that] replaces retribution” (Levenson 2015, p. 120).
- 44 The other nations as well, according to Ezekiel’s theology, fulfil God’s goal of being recognized and known, by experiencing his divine wrath and envy in a similar way to Israel. For example, Ezekiel says in regard to Mount Seir (Edom): “therefore, as I live, says the LORD GOD, I will deal with you according to the anger and envy that you showed because of your hatred against them; and I will make myself known among you, when I judge you” (Ezek. 35:11), and Gog: “With pestilence and bloodshed I will enter into judgment with him; and I will pour down torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulfur, upon him and his troops and the many peoples that are with him. So I will display my greatness and my holiness and make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the LORD” (38:22–23).
- 45 See (Manzano et al. 2005, pp. 117, 141–49).
- 46 Cf., the reading of Levenson of this passage, which seems as identifying with the perspective of the narcissistic father: “Forgetful of her humble origins and of her husband’s generosity as well, God’s metaphorical wife has lost all sense of her dependence on him” (Levenson 2015, p. 120).
- 47 (Coogan 2011, pp. 186–87).
- 48 See Mary Daly on God’s maleness as legitimates oppression and abuse of women: (Daly 1986, pp. 98–101). Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes argued that both Ezekiel 16 and 23 encourage abuse of girl-children: (van Dijk-Hemmes 1995).
- 49 For the term “self-absorption” as a narcissistic characteristic, see (Brown 2020, pp. 14–17).

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Article

# The “Heaven Ab Initio” Argument from Evil

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**Abstract:** Logical and evidential arguments from evil are generally thought to have been rebutted by various refutations, defenses, and theodicies. While disparate, these responses employ similar strategies to show that God has morally sufficient reasons to permit evil and suffering in the world, either to preserve human freedom, for the sake of the moral growth of human souls, or to train humans to be able to act freely without sinning once in heaven. In this paper, I defend the heaven ab initio argument from evil (HAIAFE), which demonstrates that God could have accomplished all these goals, without the need for evil and suffering, by creating human beings directly as spiritual beings in a non-physical state of eternal bliss. Moreover, I will argue that the HAIAFE is both a logical argument from evil and a “deodicy”, i.e., a vindication of a deistic god.

**Keywords:** Alvin Plantinga; John Mackie; James Sterba; evil; deism; heaven

## 1. Introduction

The existence of evil and suffering in the world poses a serious theological problem for those religions that regard God as a perfect being. Philosophers have formulated the problem in two distinct forms, the logical and the evidential. The logical attempts to show a logical impossibility in the concomitance of God and evil; the evidential defends the humbler claim that extreme instances of evil and suffering in the world constitute strong evidence against God’s existence. Theists have addressed this problem by proposing various refutations, defenses, and theodicies. Perhaps, a common theistic strategy has been to show that God has morally sufficient reasons for allowing evil.

In this paper, I present the heaven ab initio argument from evil (HAIAFE). My argument demonstrates that a perfect God could and would want to create his children directly (ab initio) as spiritual beings in heaven,<sup>1</sup> thereby rendering evil and suffering unnecessary. However, while the HAIAFE demonstrates that God does not exist, when used in a cumulative case alongside other arguments, it is consistent with the existence of a deistic god. A deistic god is a transcendent entity that brings the universe into existence, but, unlike the God of monotheism, it is not a person or a moral being such that it is aware of humans and wishes to have a relationship with them. It might be beyond existence, like the Plotinian One that has a generative power but lacks awareness. Such a god, therefore, would not be affected in the way that the theistic God is by the problem of allowing horrendous evil and suffering. A deistic god can answer the question of why there is something rather than nothing, the existence of the universe from nothing, cosmic fine-tuning, and the anthropic principle. However, the main grounds for affirming the existence of such a deity lies elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The point is that because such a god is not a divine person like that of the theistic God, the existence of a deistic god that is not aware of the world explains why horrendous evil and suffering exist.

## 2. Some Preliminary Remarks

Evil is a philosophical problem that just will not go away. The classic problem of evil has been formulated as a logical and an evidential problem. Without going back to

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Epicurus, the most notable contemporary logical formulation is Mackie's, who explains it as follows:

In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false (Mackie 1955, p. 200).

Therefore, Mackie concludes, "not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational. . ." (p. 200). Similarly, H.J. McCloskey frames the problem as follows: "Evil is a problem for the theist in that a contradiction is involved in the fact of evil, on the one hand, and the belief in the omnipotence and perfection of God on the other." (McCloskey 1960, p. 97). The idea is that a logical consideration of God's attributes, especially omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, in concomitance with the fact that evil exists in the world, form a logically inconsistent set of propositions. In short, the logical formulation of the problem of evil purports to show that God's attributes and the existence of evil constitute a direct logical contradiction.

Alvin Plantinga simply notes that such a formulation does not show a direct contradiction. God, after all, might have morally sufficient reasons (reasons beyond our ken) for allowing evil. Plantinga explains this in his now famous defense, the Free-Will Defense (a version of which, by the way, is already used by St. Augustine). Plantinga argues as follows:

"A world containing creatures who are sometimes significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all." (Plantinga 1974, p. 166).

Thus, the point is that free will is so important that, as C. S. Lewis observes, God "thought it worth the risk." It was so important for God to create free-willed creatures that he was willing to run the risk of people's freely choosing to do evil. The only possibility, according to Plantinga, Augustine, and other likeminded theologians, was for God to see that evildoing would not occur. However, in order to accomplish such a state of affairs, God would have to determine humans to always choose to be moral and avoid doing evil, which would deprive them from freely choosing how to live. Therefore, God allows humans to freely sin.

Since Plantinga's defense appeared, many philosophers have acknowledged that Plantinga's argument successfully refuted the logical problem of evil. However, the scope of this article is not to assess the merits or demerits of Plantinga's defense or those of other theodicies and defenses or their objections. Many, including the very Mackie, state that Plantinga successfully solved the *logical* problem of evil. However, Mackie seems to doubt that Plantinga's defense conclusively eliminates the problem. He writes,

Since this defense is formally possible, and its principle involves no real abandonment of our ordinary view of the opposition between good and evil, we can concede that the problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another. But whether this offers a real solution of the problem is another question (Mackie 1982, p. 154).

Although the success of Plantinga's defense is arguable, it certainly redirected philosophers to a less totalizing approach that is known as the evidential problem of evil (See Rowe 1979; Tooley 2021). Evidential formulations do not claim that the existence of evil logically disproves God's existence; rather, evidential approaches attempt to demonstrate that evil and suffering constitute strong inductive evidence against God's existence.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, however, Sterba (2019) has breathed new life into the logical formulation of the problem of evil. Erik J. Wielenberg summarizes Sterba's logical argument as follows:

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then God does not intentionally permit horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.

2. Necessarily, if God exists and there are horrendous evils caused by immoral actions, then God intentionally permits horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
3. So: necessarily, if God exists, then there are no horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
4. However, there are horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
5. Therefore, God does not exist (Wielenberg 2022, p. 2).

Sterba proposes an argument according to which if God existed, then horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not exist (Sterba 2019, pp. 126–28). Sterba therefore concludes that the God of classical theism does not exist. An important aspect of my argument is that unlike Mackie and Sterba, both of whom are atheists and use their arguments to disprove the existence of God, I propose that, if successful, arguments from evil do not disprove the existence of all deities. Rather, when supplemented with other arguments for the existence of a creator, an argument from evil can be used in a cumulative case that leads to the existence of a deistic god (see for example, Alvaro 2021). Here, I would like to present such a novel approach to the problem of evil.

Before I present my argument, I need to make a few clarifications. My argument does not undermine all forms of theism, but only specific definitions of God and particular theologies and eschatologies, such as the God of the so-called “Perfect Being Theology”. As just mentioned, I believe that the conclusion to my argument can point to the existence of a deistic god. With regard to the concept of God, I am referring to the classical claim of monotheism according to which God possesses all possible perfections, i.e., omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence, omnipresence, aseity, eternity, and more. Additionally, I am referring to the particular theological view that God is a God of love who created human beings for their benefit, that is, God’s ultimate goal is to bring as many of his creatures as possible to an eternal loving relationship with their creator (to be clear, I am not referring to erotic love but to *agapē*).

The important aspect is that God’s creatures must freely accept God, which entails the possibility that such creatures can freely choose to sin and reject their creator. The notion that God endowed human beings with free will is essential to my argument. As many theists have argued, and I agree with them, without free will, humans would be God’s puppets. God does not want puppets, but rational beings who are capable of freely accepting God’s eternal love and friendship. Additionally, God is a just but merciful judge who punishes and rewards humans accordingly: roughly, good people go to heaven and bad people go to hell. Or bad people are separated from God or tortured in hell or obliterated. My view is open to all of those possibilities.

Thus, I agree that, following Augustine and Plantinga, freedom is the key to understanding the existence of evil. Specifically, I will assume that, in the free exercise of their wills, some human beings choose to sin and disobey God. God could prevent evil, but preventing it would deprive humans from their freedom to sin. Additionally, since free will is such an important aspect of God’s creation, God ought to allow humans the freedom to choose whether to be good or to be evil.

Furthermore, the specific eschatological aspect that is relevant to my argument is that God creates the physical world where humans freely decide whether to accept or reject God and, in the end, those who accept God will go to heaven, which is a non-physical state of eternal bliss devoid of all evil and suffering. Thus, the function of the physical world is claimed to provide humans with a place that enables them to hone their moral skills so that if and when they go to heaven, once in heaven, they will have learned to act freely without ever choosing to sin.

The theistic model that I assume is broad enough to accommodate the notion that God allows evil or even that God might purposefully introduce evil into the world as an expedient for promoting the process of soul-making. In this quasi-utilitarian sense, evil is necessary for the greater good. An example is John Hick’s soul-making theodicy. He writes,

... one who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptations, and thus by rightly making responsible choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created ab initio in a state either of innocence or of virtue. . . . I suggest, then, that it is an ethically reasonable judgment. . . that human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process (Hick 1977, pp. 255–56).

In short, Hick suggests that while evil is emotionally difficult to understand, it has a valuable function. God created humans in the physical world first so that they could acquire a richer moral character and a moral understanding. Hick seems to suggest that it would be possible for God to create creatures ab initio, “in a state of innocence or virtue”, without experiencing evil. However, for Hick, in a state of innocence, God’s children would not be able to achieve the significant moral growth that they can achieve in a world full of evils. This view has an intuitive ring to it as we all believe that it is more valuable for us to face adversities and learn to overcome them than to live privileged and spoiled lives—God does not want spoiled children. God created us in this world so that we learn to roll up our sleeves and deal with problems because facing problems builds strength and resilience.

Having established a specific theological framework, I now turn to the HAIAFE. Note that philosophers differentiate between natural evil, such as disease or natural catastrophes, and moral evil, such as war or slavery. As it will emerge from my discussion, my argument shows that moral and natural evil are unnecessary for God in order to accomplish his ultimate goal and, therefore, there are no morally sufficient reasons for allowing evil and suffering. That is the crux of the problem. Henceforth I will refer especially to moral evil. According to the Perfect Being Theology, there can be at least two explanations for the existence of moral evil in the world. One is that God purposefully allows moral evil because it promotes the soul-making process as, e.g., Hick suggests. According to this model, God needs to create a physical arena where his free-willed creatures develop and hone their moral character and skills, which are necessary once in heaven. Additionally, the idea is that only the individuals who have learned to freely avoid sin will go to heaven.

The other option is that God does not want or like moral evil, but, regrettably, moral evil exists because humans freely choose it. Based on this view, it is totally up to humans whether they want to use their freedom to sin or to obey God’s moral law. Theists might use the following analogy. Suppose that I lend you my hammer because you need it to build furniture; instead, you choose to use it to murder your neighbor. It would be incorrect to blame me for the murder because I lent you the hammer. I did not lend it to you to murder people but to build furniture. Analogously, the theist can argue that God gave us free will to be good and not to do evil. Thus, if we misuse our freedom and exercise it to do evil, it is not God’s fault that evil exists but ours. The goal of the HAIAFE is to show that we can hold God accountable for the evil in the world in a way that disproves the existence of God. As I shall demonstrate, because he is omniscient, God knows in advance what you are going to do with the hammer; because he is omnipotent, God can avoid creating hammers in the first place and can create us in a state where we would not need hammers (or furniture), and because he is omnibenevolent, God would want to create us in a state of joy that is devoid of evil.

In his discussion with Augustine in *De Libero Arbitrio Voluntatis*, Augustine’s interlocutor, Evodius, asks a very important question to Augustine: “Now if possible, explain to me why God gave human beings free choice of the will. If we had not received it, we surely would not be able to sin.” (Augustine 2.I.I.I). Augustine proceeds to explain to Evodius that God ought to give humans free will because without it, justice and morality would not be possible (2.I.3.5–2.I.3.7). Apparently, Evodius is satisfied by Augustine’s answer and is convinced that free will, which enables humans to sin, is such a precious good that God ought to give to us. Throughout his conversation with Augustine, never did it occur to Evodius to ask a very obvious question—“Why did not God give us free choice of the will

and create us directly in heaven?’. After all, the point or final goal is to bring humans to freely accept God and forever exist in heaven as free-willed beings alongside God.

As we have seen, some theologians have observed that all the pain and suffering and adversities that humans endure throughout their lifetimes is a sort of necessary moral training that will eventually render humans able to exercise their free will in heaven without sinning. Indeed, Augustine could answer that question simply by saying that God could have created us directly in heaven, but he gave humans the opportunity to acquire a good moral character and learn not to sin prior to their eternal stay in heaven. It is one thing to freely overcome the temptation to sin, but it is quite another to remove the possibility to sin. Namely, we all believe that there is something especially meritorious about an individual’s ability to freely choose the right path in life. For example, we praise people who earn college degrees by working hard and not those whose rich parents buy their degrees. That is why God needs to create a physical state, first, where humans undergo moral growth, followed by a non-physical state after their deaths.

Thus, the theist can defend the position that if God creates humans directly in heaven, it might not be guaranteed that humans will cooperate and freely accept God. If created directly in heaven, it is possible that they might freely go against God’s plan by *freely* choosing to reject God and to sin. Or the theist might defend the position that God allows evil in the world because evil teaches us moral lessons and makes us stronger. However, I do not think that either of these positions provides a satisfactory answer. Indeed, we praise diligent students, and we condemn cheaters. However, if God creates us in a world where college degrees do not exist because they are irrelevant, then the theist’s argument is simply a false dichotomy.

Among other things, if colleges, competition, jobs, money, and other things of that nature exist, arguably hard work and various adversities can contribute to teaching the student valuable lessons. However, in the first place, unless colleges, competition, jobs, and money existed in heaven, the moral lessons that one could learn from them would seem to be useless and irrelevant for beings that God created directly in heaven. Additionally, in the second place, there does not seem to be anything intrinsically valuable or indispensable about colleges, society, competition, jobs, and money, or any other worldly practice and objects that might require God to create the world in the way we know it. There is a rather simple solution available to God, that is, God can create free-willed and spiritual creatures directly in a harmonious state of concord and joy that does not necessitate pain, evil, and suffering of any sort. Again, when I fall down, I learn to be strong. I pick myself up, dust myself off, and start all over again. However, if falling down and dusting oneself do not exist in the first place, such a lesson is irrelevant.

Concerning the argument that if God created us directly in heaven, some of us could freely choose to sin, it suggests that in a spiritual state, it would be possible for free-willed creatures to sin and disobey God. I argue that in a spiritual world, humans would not run the same risk of sinning as in a physical world because in a spiritual realm there would not be any reasons for humans to sin and there would be all the reasons for them not to sin. Therefore, unless the theist can present some valid reason why God ought to create the physical world, I argue that an omnibenevolent God ought to create humans directly in heaven or in a spiritual world—a world where free-willed humans exist in a blissful state that is devoid of evil and suffering. Before I unpack these contentions, I will present the HAIAFE.

### 3. HAIAFE Outline and Exposition of the Premises

Put formally, we have the HAIAFE:

1. As a perfect being, God’s goal is to create free-willed creatures that choose to love God and forever exist with him in a state of eternal bliss.
2. An omnibenevolent God would want to create free-willed beings in a state of eternal bliss devoid of evil if he could and if evil and suffering were unnecessary.

3. An omnipotent God can create free-willed beings directly in a spiritual state of eternal bliss devoid of evil.
4. However, God created physical creatures in a physical world that is full of unnecessary evil and suffering.
5. Therefore, God is either not omnipotent, not omniscient, or not perfectly good. (A possible extended conclusion: 6. Therefore, there exists a deistic god that created the universe, but this god is not a person who willfully created the world or that has a relationship with humans. Hence, god cannot prevent or eliminate evil and suffering).

Clearly, the strength of the HAIAFE depends on the likelihood that the premises are true. Consider premise 1—God’s goal is to create free-willed creatures that choose to forever exist with God in a state of eternal bliss. While I acknowledge that not all theists agree upon God’s goal, this is what classical theism has been teaching all along. Why else would God create the universe? It seems evident that, in classical theism, God’s goal is to create free-willed creatures. Without free will, God’s creatures would be automata. Therefore, God creates and endows his creatures with free will and reason so that they can come to know and love their creator. Moreover, God gives his creatures the opportunity to choose to unite with their creator and live an eternal life of joy and delight in heaven or to reject God.

One might point out that one reason why God created humans is for his own pleasure. As, an example from the Bible, Colossians 1:16, states that “All things were created by him and for him.” However, being created for God’s pleasure does not mean that God created humanity as toys for his amusement. Rather, the idea is that God is a God of love and, as such, he desired to create other beings with whom he could have a loving and friendly relationship.

Therefore, according to classical theism, God made humans for their benefit. God endowed humans with the freedom of will so that they can acquire knowledge of the world and know God and build a loving relationship with God. However, God did not create human beings because he needs them. After all, the theistic God is believed to be a perfect being that needs nothing. It would seem wrong to say, for example, that God is incomplete without creation or that he felt loneliness, boredom, hunger, or fear. God loves humans but, presumably, considering that God is perfect, if we or the physical world had never existed, God would still be perfect and satisfied with his eternal existence.

The point of the foregoing analysis of God’s nature is that God’s goal for creating the world is to create creatures that are endowed with freedom of will and will benefit from knowing God and living in his presence. The important attribute is God’s omnibenevolence. This means that God is, so to speak, pure love, which means that his nature is devoid of evil. Since God is omnibenevolent, it follows that God created humans in his image as free, good, and loving creatures. As such, it is plausible to argue that an omnibenevolent God would want his creatures to have pleasant lives in the absence of violence, evil, pain, and suffering. Therefore, we have excellent reasons to accept premise 1.

Accepting premise 1 makes it easy to accept premise 2—God would want to create free-willed beings in a spiritual state of eternal bliss that is devoid of evil (moral and natural) if he could. Presumably, since God is wholly good, God’s nature is devoid of evil. It follows that God does not need or like evil; God would want to make sure that his children (or friends) would avoid all evil. Consequently, the best option for God is to create his children directly in a spiritual form in a state that will enable them to exercise their freedom without thereby causing and experiencing evil and suffering. Obviously, moral and natural evils are problems for embodied creatures that live in a physical realm with car accidents, death, violence, envy, tornadoes, earthquakes, disease, etc. However, these evils do not exist in heaven. Therefore, if God could, he would want to create his children in a non-physical realm as unembodied or spiritual beings in the first place. The only way for the theist to reject this argument is to show that it is impossible for God to create free-willed beings that can worship God directly in heaven. The theist, then, must demonstrate that in order to accomplish his goal, God is required to create physical beings in a world that contains

horrendous evil and suffering, which is what I deny in the third premise. Therefore, this supports the truth of premise 2.

The question is whether premise 3—God can create free-willed beings directly in a spiritual state of eternal bliss devoid of evil—is true. I think that virtually all theists would accept this premise, which is a direct inference from God’s omnipotence. It is often argued that God’s omnipotence should be viewed in the sense that God can do whatever is logically possible. For example, omnipotence does not mean that God can create another God. If “God” is defined as an eternal and uncreated being, it would be impossible for God to create an uncreated being. However, the fact that God cannot create an uncreated being does not undermine God’s omnipotence. Similarly, God cannot create a married bachelor or a square circle or a triangle with more or fewer than three sides. Nevertheless, it still follows that God is omnipotent. In short, omnipotence does not entail that God can bring about something self-contradictory. However, there is nothing intrinsically incoherent or impossible about God’s creating a non-physical realm inhabited by free-willed spirits that will directly experience God and freely choose to enter into a loving and friendly relationship with their father and creator. Consequently, if God is omnipotent (and heaven is not an impossible state of affairs) it follows that God can create spiritual beings directly in such a realm. Therefore, unless the theist can show that it is impossible for God to create free-willed beings directly in heaven, and that God must create humans in the physical world where humans experience evil and suffering before they go to heaven, it must be concluded that premise 3 is also true.

Premise 4 cannot be denied, God created a physical world, and the world is full of horrendous evil and suffering and natural evil. The conclusion then follows that God is either not omnipotent, not omniscient, or not perfectly good or, at any rate, not willing to avoid moral evil and human suffering. Therefore, God does not exist. Regarding the extended conclusion, the HAIAFE is consistent with the existence of a deistic god, a transcendent source or reality that does not create by willful action and is completely removed from the world. Such an entity, therefore, is not aware of humans and their suffering or joy. The important point here is that God can and would want to avoid all the unnecessary, horrendous evil and suffering that humans experience without jeopardizing his goal of bringing human beings to freely choose to unite with their creator. God can create spiritual, free-willed beings directly, in a non-physical realm that is devoid of evils and suffering.

Naturally, I now have to deal with the assertion that, if God exists, evil and suffering are unnecessary and avoidable. The fundamental question is whether God requires a physical world in order to accomplish his goal. As already mentioned, many theists observe that evil and suffering can be instrumentally good or that, at any rate, God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil and suffering. Furthermore, the theist might avail himself of two lines of argument, the first is the one already mentioned above in the quote by Hick according to which if God creates free spiritual beings directly in heaven, these beings would not be exposed to terrible, but important, character-building evils and, thereby, they would not be able to develop a deep moral character. Therefore, even if God can create spiritual beings in a non-physical state, he chooses to create physical beings in a physical world. The other is that God can create spiritual beings directly in heaven but doing so might run the risk that some of these beings will disobey or reject God.

Consider first the notion that the creation of physical beings in an evil-and-suffering-filled physical world leads humans to acquire richer and more valuable moral characters than what they would acquire if created *ab initio* in a world devoid of evil and suffering. Consider an argument that might support such a view. The theist could argue that evil and suffering are emotionally difficult to understand, but they are instrumentally good for people’s lives. The suffering and evils that we face in our lives generate wisdom, resilience, compassion, and thereby build a rich and moral character. Moreover, when we suffer, we are reminded of our fragility and finiteness.

That is why God chooses to create us as physical beings that experience suffering and evil existing in a physical world, because God knows that our experience of adversities is beneficial to us for our wisdom and moral characters. God could create spiritual beings directly in heaven where evil and suffering do not exist, but if God did so, such beings would miss out on the opportunity to learn compassion, resilience, and other moral qualities that suffering can generate. Consequently, God ought to create us the way that he did. Furthermore, as Aristotle suggests in the *Metaphysics*, and Socrates in *Theaetetus*, philosophy begins in wonder. However, if humans faced no suffering and adversities, they would not be able to create philosophy and science through which they acquire knowledge and truth. In short, good moral character and scientific and philosophical knowledge cannot be developed in a state of eternal naivete and bliss. Suffering teaches us to be compassionate and creative. Compassion is a deep awareness of the suffering of others with the wish to relieve suffering and promote well-being. So, in order to be compassionate, we must experience suffering.

Is all this true? Even if it is, why would compassion, resilience, and other virtues matter if God created us directly in heaven? After all, God is regarded as a wholly loving, eternal being that (presumably) never experienced pain and suffering. Therefore, if humans were created *ab initio* in heaven, perhaps they might never learn compassion from experiencing suffering, but what good is compassion if no one is suffering? The benefits we gain and the lessons we learn from suffering are understandable because we are physical beings that face problems inherent to our physical existence. Failing an exam, losing a loved one in a war, a broken heart, and more, can teach us to be strong, to persevere, to be resilient, and other such values. However, for spiritual beings that exist in a state of eternal bliss, those values would be useless. Furthermore, it does not seem to be true that spiritual beings created directly in heaven could not acquire knowledge and other moral qualities. Spiritual beings would have to learn a different set of virtues that are appropriate in the world they inhabit and useful for their particular nature.

The bottom line is this. Theism claims that, in the end, some human beings will unite with God and exist in a state of eternal bliss in heaven. Arguably, in heaven, human beings will not have jobs or cars or drugs or schools or weapons or any other earthly objects and practices. However, then, whichever moral lessons or practical skills that humans might learn from such objects and practices in the physical world, will be utterly irrelevant for them in heaven. According to theism, our final destination is our union with our creator in heaven. In Isaiah 65:16, the Bible says that in heaven, "... the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from my eyes." So, if the purpose of our existence is to unite with our creator and forever live in a state of eternal bliss where we do not recall our "past troubles", then our past troubles, i.e., evil and suffering, are unnecessary and irrelevant in heaven. Consequently, God can and would want to create us directly in heaven.

Consider the analogy that, as much as they love their children, parents try to prepare them to deal with adversities and disappointment, both of which life is full of. Arguably, however, all parents wish that their children live joyful lives. Additionally, if it were possible, would we not all wish that our children lived in a world devoid of evils, violence, adversities, competition, and disappointments? Now, if God creates spiritual creatures directly in heaven, it does not mean that, necessarily, such beings would be a bunch of naïve souls. It seems plausible that they would have an eternity to learn what God knows and who he is. Therefore, I do not find the notion that suffering is character-building to be a viable justification for God's creating us as physical beings in a physical world. Evil and suffering can teach us valuable lessons if and only if we are embodied beings, but such lessons would be unnecessary and irrelevant for unembodied beings. A car accident, the loss of a loved one, the Holocaust, slavery, child labor, war, and so on, might teach us something (whatever that might be) but what good are the lessons learned from such evils in heaven where, presumably, such events do not occur?

I now turn to the argument that God can create spiritual beings directly in heaven, but he does not do so because these beings might disobey and reject God. In the first place, it is

necessary to consider the nature of sin. Theists typically regard sin as any human act that violates God's moral law. For example, St. Augustine argues that evil is the privation of good as darkness is the privation of light. According to this view, sinners turn away from God's goodness and, thereby, experience evil in a way that is analogous to our experience of darkness by moving away from light. However, what is evil? Augustine provides a helpful definition of it: evil is due to sin and sin stems from inordinate desire, which Augustine equates to lust (or "cupidity" in some translations) (1. 4. 9. 22). As examples of sin, Augustine mentions sacrilege and adultery and argues that what makes such acts sinful is the fact that they stem from a person's lust: "all evildoings are evil precisely because they come about from lust, that is, from a blameworthy desire." (1. 4. 10. 34–35). Later, Augustine notes something very important, i.e., that good people are those who turn

[T]heir love away from things that cannot be possessed without the risk of losing them. Evil people, on the other hand, try to remove hindrances so that they may securely attach themselves to these things to be enjoyed. The end result is that they lead a life full of crime and wickedness, a life which is better called death (1. 4. 10. 32–36).

In the quote above, Augustine argues that evildoers attach themselves to carnal pleasures (earthly desires, such as wealth, success, food, sex, and other examples of carnal pleasure) and turn away from eternal, higher goods, such as virtue, truth, and God. It is cupidity, therefore, which is a lustful attachment to lower goods; furthermore, it is one's desire for pleasure that leads people to sin. Thus, Augustine's examples of sins are instances of lustful behaviors. He argues that sinners fear losing certain goods against their will. However, if we go by Augustine's analysis of evil, what sorts of things can spiritual beings created directly in heaven lose against their wills in heaven? As just observed, people can lose material things against their wills, things such as properties, money, a lover, and so on. They can have an inordinate desire for sex, food, success, power, and more.

Note that these are not inherently bad things. Rather, it is a person's lustful attachment to such things that causes evil. So, evildoing stems from an inordinate desire that places temporal objects above eternal ones. By eternal objects, Augustine includes wisdom, truth, virtue, the will itself, and, of course, above all, God. Now, the point that I am trying to make here is that it would seem possible for a being to sin or turn away from God if, and only if, that being has a physical body. As humans are embodied beings, they have a number of physical and psychological needs that they typically satisfy by eating, having sex, buying objects, and so on. So, it is possible for humans to attach themselves in a lustful way to material goods.

However, having considered that lower goods do not exist in heaven, then it would seem to be impossible that spiritual beings might turn away from God and attach themselves to lower goods because there are not any. For what could possibly cause them to do so? Because heaven is a state of eternal bliss, one is already completely satisfied. Since human beings have a physical body, and the body is imperfect and craves many things, it is understandable how some people become lustful and desire material things, things that produce carnal pleasures and turn one away from truth, wisdom, and God. However, a spiritual being, it would seem, would not become attached to material things because, by definition, there are no material goods in a spiritual reality. Additionally, if God creates his children directly in heaven, and the physical world never exists, then God's children would not even have the knowledge or recollection of material things but would know only eternal goods.

Furthermore, consider the following example. According to classical theism, some people earn a place in heaven while others will (again, depending on the particular religion and interpretation thereof) either go to hell or will be temporarily or permanently separated from God or possibly brought out of existence. However, think about those who go to heaven whose loved ones are separated from God or destroyed. It would be difficult for them to remember their loved ones and at the same time live a joyful existence in heaven. However, if God creates spiritual beings directly in heaven, then such problems would



never exist. If we were created directly in heaven, we would not experience the death of our loved ones.

What sort of spiritual objects could possibly be there in heaven that spiritual creatures could lose against their wills? Are we to believe that adultery, murder, theft, grave desecration, money, drugs, food and other cupidity-inducing acts and objects could exist in heaven? Presumably, spiritual beings do not require food or properties or money or drugs or jobs or sexual intercourse. So, what could possibly be the reason for sinning or turning away from God in heaven? Could souls inflict pain to other souls? Additionally, if yes, then over what? Is not heaven supposed to be an evil-free place? Therefore, if God creates his children directly in heaven, there is no reason to believe that God's children would turn away from God because there is nothing in heaven that God's children might desire. If by definition heaven is a state of eternal bliss, then nothing could be more desirable than existing in heaven.

The theist's objection, however, is that if God creates his children directly in a spiritual world, then his children may freely disobey and reject God. Consequently, in order to make sure that the creatures that end up in heaven are only those who have learned not to sin and accept God, God creates a physical world where these creatures rehearse, so to speak, before going to heaven. However, what if God creates humans directly in heaven? Why could not humans learn not to sin in a non-physical world? In other words, this would suggest that the problem of disobeying and sinning might exist both in a physical and a non-physical world. However, then, assuming that it were possible for free-willed creatures created directly in heaven to disobey God, then creating human beings in the physical world first would not help. In fact, the physical world is detrimental for humans who endure pain and suffering and for God who watches his beloved children travail through evil and adversities.

Therefore, the question is what there could be in heaven that is better than a state of eternal bliss, such that heavenly creatures might reject and turn away from God and sin, instead. Additionally, even if they rejected God, where could these creatures possibly go? Now, let us grant for the sake of the argument that, after all, the inhabitants of a spiritual world (created directly in such a world) reject God. If they did, God could simply try to correct and rehabilitate them. What is important to note is that in the case that God created only heaven and free-willed beings that inhabit it, even if some of the inhabitants of heaven were to sin, they would not have to undergo the evil and suffering that embodied creatures experience in a physical world. Arguably, adultery, racism, alcoholism, drugs addiction, terrorism, slavery, corruption, discrimination, war, and other such sinful behaviors and events would not exist in heaven. Therefore, if God's creation of a state of eternal bliss in the first place would not guarantee that creatures freely love God, there is no reason to believe that those humans who existed in a pre-mortem realm and then ascended to heaven would cooperate and freely accept to enter into a relationship with God, either.

Quite to the contrary, if God creates free-willed creatures directly in a spiritual world, these creatures will not experience evil and suffering, and it is more likely that they will cooperate and will not turn away from God. The reason for this is that, as just observed, there is nothing in heaven that could possibly interest heavenly creatures more than existing freely in a state of eternal bliss with God free from evil and suffering. I submit that we have no good reasons for contemplating the possibility that in a state of eternal bliss, heavenly creatures would freely choose to separate themselves irrevocably from God. Even if we assume the possibility that if God created only heaven and free-willed creatures born directly in heaven some of those creatures would exercise their freedom to turn away from God, they will never experience the unnecessary evil and suffering that we humans undergo in the actual world. Additionally, God could rehabilitate them or in extreme cases separate them from God. Again, it is hard to believe that between the options of eternal bliss and damnation, separation, or destruction, any rational being would freely choose anything other than an eternal existence with God in a state of bliss.

What follows from all this is that by creating spiritual, free-willed creatures directly in heaven, God can avoid not only unnecessary horrendous moral evil and suffering but also natural evil. In sum, the theist's defense is this: God can do it, but he avoids creating humans directly in a heaven devoid of evil because in such a world, God's creatures might disobey God. I found this argument unconvincing for two reasons: (a) in a state of eternal bliss there is no reason for humans to sin or turn away from God. Additionally, (b) even if creatures that were created directly in heaven could rebel against God or turn away from God, God could simply discipline and rehabilitate the naughty and the insubordinate. Moreover, the advantage of creating human beings directly in heaven is obvious—they would never experience horrendous evil and suffering. As demonstrated, such evils and suffering might teach us important values and lessons because we are embodied beings, but they are irrelevant for a spiritual being created *ab initio* in a state of eternal joy. At the same time, it is possible that these beings would freely learn valuable moral lessons; they could contemplate God, their relationship with others, mathematical objects, and more.

#### 4. The Satan Objection

There is an objection that the theist may raise, call it the Satan Objection. According to the Old Testament, the devil used to go by the name of Lucifer when he was still an angel. Some suggest that Lucifer was God's favorite angel and was very high in the ranking of all the angels. Furthermore, some believe that Lucifer was not satisfied with his state in heaven and at one point he decided to become God himself. According to the Old Testament, God was not happy about this, resulting in God's removal of Lucifer from heaven (Isaiah 14:15; Ezekiel 28:16–17). This is what many would recognize as the story of Satan's fall from heaven. The fact is that exactly whatever happened in heaven between God and Lucifer we might never know. Some theists interpret this metaphorically, others believe it literally. However, the bottom line is that Lucifer was created directly in heaven, and yet he sinned and forever separated himself from God. Additionally, if that happened to Lucifer, why cannot it happen to humans?

I have a three-pronged reply. In the first place, assume that the story of Satan's fall is not a metaphor but a fact. How would things differ in our case? If it is true that a creature that was created directly in heaven, as in the case of Lucifer, can rebel against God, then even if this creature is created in a physical world and then admitted in heaven, it seems that such a creature could still freely disobey God. If that were the case, then it would not really matter insofar as obeying God whether a creature begins its existence in a physical or in a spiritual world. An omniscient God would know prior to creating an individual whether that particular individual will sin. Moreover, an omnipotent God has the power—and literally an eternity—to morally rehabilitate a creature in heaven. In other words, whatever can be accomplished in terms of moral character building in a world that includes a physical realm first and a non-physical realm later can be accomplished in a non-physical world that does not encompass a pre-mortem, physical realm, as well. Additionally, the obvious advantage of starting from a non-physical world is the avoidance of many horrendous evils that are characteristic of physical existence.

In the second place, according to some stories, Lucifer was an angel with certain powers that no human being has. According to various interpretation of the story, Lucifer rebelled against God because he was jealous of what humans had or because, despite his high rank, he wanted more—he wanted to be God. Now, if God creates all creatures to be equal directly in heaven, instead of creating an army of angels with extraordinary power, then rank and jealousy would not be issues. Additionally, if all of God's creatures are created equal, then no creature will be jealous of any other because they will have the same lot, the same attention from their creator, and the same amount of fatherly love.

In the third place, if all of God's children were equal and created directly in a state of eternal bliss in the presence of God, there does not seem to be any reason for God's creatures to turn away from God. As already discussed, jealousy, greed, envy, and lust are problems that afflict embodied beings. Moreover, in the physical world we often experience

injustice and what we might call bad luck: good people suffer, bad people prosper, many people are born and live in extreme poverty while others are born in wealth and live in opulence. Additionally, there are natural disaster, mental and physical illnesses, aging, death, and other painful aspects that are inherent to a physical existence. However, these should not be problems that exist in heaven. Presumably, in heaven, souls do not need money or cars or food or a houses or any other material goods. Therefore, there does not seem to be a reason (or reasons) for heaven's spiritual inhabitants to turn away from God.

Furthermore, heaven's inhabitants will be completely satisfied. To give an illustration of this, in his "The Makropoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality", Bernard Williams argues that mortality is a good thing for human beings because immortality would eventually be intolerable and boring. Using heaven as a perfect example, Williams writes,

...heaven's prospects are tedious and the devil has the best tunes... serves to show up a real and (I suspect) a profound difficulty of providing a model of an unending, supposedly satisfying, state or activity that would not rightly prove boring to anyone who remained conscious of himself... boredom... would not just be a tiresome effect but a reaction almost perceptual in character to the poverty of one's relation to the environment (Williams 1973, pp. 94–95).

I am not going to give an in-depth response to Williams' argument—many philosophers have already done so. The main problem with William's argument is that it seems to look at the issue of immortality through the lenses of finiteness. Williams is right that eternity would be boring if we imagine ourselves—the way we are now with our current knowledge, experience, and thoughts—living forever. However, it is necessary to consider that immortality would be different for a spiritual being. Furthermore, consider the nature of God. If God is the being that theists have attempted to describe for millennia, he is so majestic that our finite brains cannot even begin to comprehend. Arguably, if God exists, living in his presence and learning about it and contemplating him would render every moment of eternity captivating and beautiful. Therefore, no one would turn away from God because there would be no better existence than that.

## 5. The Freedom Objection

A strong objection to God's creating free creatures directly in heaven concerns freedom of choice. Namely, one might concede that God can create free-willed creatures directly in heaven and even that many of them might live happy lives in heaven. However, if God created his children directly in heaven, essentially, he would force them to accept such an eternal life without giving them a choice. The problem is that relationships do not work so well when people are compelled to be friends. Thus, the argument goes, God does not wish to force his creatures to accept the only option available, i.e., eternal life in heaven. Therefore, God creates a physical, pre-mortem world and invites people to believe and come to appreciate God, but at the same time allows people to freely reject God's friendship.

This objection can be addressed fairly easily. In the first place, as things stand, our choices are already limited. Human beings do not choose to be born in the physical world where they experience horrendous evil and suffering. Moreover, the creation of a physical world where humans can freely decide whether to accept or reject God does not change the fact that, in the end, one must choose between an eternal, joyful existence in the company of God, or either a separation from God and a joyless and somber existence or the termination of his or her existence. However, the same choice is available to spiritual beings that are created directly in heaven. They can decide during their existence in heaven whether or not they want to continue to be there. In fact, God could even create his children in a pre-heaven reality where they can freely choose whether they wish to transition into heaven or to be obliterated. The bottom line is that the physical world is not necessary in order to allow one to choose. Furthermore, by creating his children directly in heaven, God can better accomplish his goal of bringing his creatures to a friendly relationship with their creator than he would by creating them in a physical world first. Many of God's

children might resent God due to their experiences of evil and suffering. If created ab initio in heaven, there would be no atheists or scoffers or rebels. Everyone would know that God exists and exactly what he requires of us, thereby avoiding unnecessary religious wars and disagreements.

A variant of the freedom objection is that if God created us directly in heaven, then we would be deprived from lots of choices and goods that are available only to embodied beings. It is true that many evils exist in the world, the argument goes, but let us not forget all the goods—carnal pleasures. Therefore, if God created us directly in heaven, he would not only deprive us of carnal pleasures but also, more important, from our freedom to choose carnal pleasure. My reply: This objection begs the question. It is only with hindsight that we appreciate the value of carnal pleasure. However, in point of fact, it is God that decides what reality is and what it is supposed to encompass. Thus, if created directly in heaven, it would be incorrect to say that God has deprived us from carnal pleasures. One would have to demonstrate that carnal pleasures are intrinsically good and so important that God ought to create us as embodied beings first; but I doubt that anyone could demonstrate such a conclusion.

Furthermore, consider an analogy. Imagine two little fish born and raised in a fish tank. If they were able to think like us, and if life in the tank was the only reality they knew, they would not be able to complain about the fact that life in the ocean offers more freedom and options than their life in the tank, because they would not know what a life in the ocean would be like. Similarly, spiritual beings would only know a spiritual existence and have the freedom appropriate for such an existence. The main goal that my argument attempts to accomplish is to demonstrate that a perfect God can and ought to create us directly in heaven. I concede that souls can undergo eternal moral growth in a way that is appropriate to the sort of environment they inhabit and in accordance with their nature. God can and would want to accomplish this goal without creating a world that includes horrendous evil and suffering.

## 6. The “Morally Good Reason” and the “Resurrection of the Body” Objections

Consider two possible objections. First, the theist can reply that even if the HAIAFE is valid, in the end, it is not possible to know God’s mind. Additionally, for all we know, it might turn out that God has morally good reasons for creating humans the way he did. Perhaps, when time comes and we meet him, God will explain to us why he did not create us directly in heaven. However, how powerful is this objection? Not very, I submit. Theists must confront the HAIAFE head-on and put forth some convincing argument—“for all we know” is not one.

Concerning our resurrecting in heaven with a physical body, not all theists believe that this is true. Even if it is assumed that it is, it does not undermine the HAIAFE. Theists who argue that God will resurrect our physical bodies in heaven still agree that evil does not exist in heaven and that humans will be free of sin. This does not affect my argument because if heaven is a place inhabited by free-willed, physical beings that never sin, a place where evil does not exist, then God could have directly created just that world. Theists, however, are left with bigger problems. If in heaven we get back our physical bodies, but evil and suffering do not exist (let alone hunger and other bodily functions), (a) what is the point of our having a physical body in heaven, (b) how can the physical body be unchanged and unscathed by external factors, (c) how can a physical body exist in a non-physical realm, and (d) if this is not metaphysically impossible, then God could just do that in the first place.

## 7. Conclusions

I end with three remarks. First, in this paper, I have defended the HAIAFE. The thrust of the argument is that it poses a problem for the various refutations, defenses, and theodicies that try to show that God has morally good reasons for allowing evil. Theists have argued that either evil is necessary for our moral growth or that in order to prevent

evil, God would have to reduce our freedom or that experiencing evil now prepares us to be able to freely avoid sin in heaven. As Eleonor Stump observes, in order to show that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God, "... one would need at least to demonstrate that this claim must be true: There is no morally sufficient reason for God to allow instances of evil." (Stump 1985, p. 392). The HAIAFE provides an option available to God that demonstrates that there is a way for God to create free-willed beings that can grow morally without ever experiencing evil. The option is for God to create free-willed beings directly in a spiritual form in a non-physical state of eternal bliss. In such a state, there are no objects of temptation, and by directly creating spiritual beings, God can eliminate carnal pleasure, which is the root of lust and evil and suffering. This, therefore, precisely demonstrates that "There is no morally sufficient reason for God to allow instances of evil" and, a fortiori, it shows that the God of classical theism does not exist.

Second, the HAIAFE can, in effect, be both an argument from evil and a "deodicy", in that it is a vindication of a deistic god. That is to say, that the HAIAFE disproves the existence of a theistic God who has a plan and is involved in human affairs. However, it does not disprove the existence of other gods. As part of a cumulative case alongside other arguments, the HAIAFE supports the existence of a deistic creator that does not interact with humans. However, the main grounds for affirming the existence of such a deistic god is not germane to the main purpose of the present study.

Third, I do not want to give the impression that I am declaring victory. I doubt that arguments from evil will cause theists to lose faith in God. Thus, I conclude by saying that while arguments from evil can be very powerful, I think that a more profitable way to disprove the existence of God is to rely on a holistic approach, such as the cumulative strength of many different arguments.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Here, I use the term "heaven" and "non-physical state" and other such cognates interchangeably to refer to a spiritual dimension inhabited by God and God's creatures.
- <sup>2</sup> In this paper, I can only gesture toward the main grounds for a deistic god. As examples of the grounds for a creator, see (Collins 2009; Craig and Sinclair 2009; Tipler 1988).
- <sup>3</sup> For a history of the problem of evil see (Neiman 2002; Sherry 2022; Tooley 2021). For forceful refutations of the evidential formulation see (Wykstra 1984; Alston 1991).

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Article

# Animal Suffering and the Laws of Nature

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**Abstract:** Two recent atheistic arguments from evil have made much of natural evil and the suffering of animals in their case contra theism. The first argument is that of James Sterba. Sterba's argument is an incompatibility argument premised on the claim that there are actual events logically incompatible with the existence of God. The second is that of Michael Tooley, who erects his argument in part on the claim that failing to prevent the suffering of animals cannot be justified by appeals to the great value of regular and predictable laws of nature, nor to the desirability of divine hiddenness. This article examines the arguments of Sterba and Tooley and contends that both are self-undermining. Each of the arguments employs premises that provide reason for thinking that other premises found in their arguments are false. Prior to a discussion of the two arguments, we explore the nature of incompatibility arguments, and examine three assumptions that lurk in the background of discussions of the problem of evil.

**Keywords:** problem of evil; natural evil; moral evil; logical problem of evil; incompatibility arguments; animal suffering

## 1. Introduction

Concerning the moral status of animals, Jeremy Bentham proclaimed in the late 1700s that "... the question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?" (Bentham 1789, chap XVII, note 1). The moral elevation of sentience extended the purview of the Problem of Evil. In Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), attention was focused exclusively on human suffering. Animal suffering is mentioned in Parts X and XI of Hume's *Dialogues Regarding Natural Religion* (1779), but human suffering is the primary focus. Two centuries post-Hume, however, the fact of animal suffering itself fueled arguments from evil. In 1979, William Rowe developed an influential evidential argument from evil, employing a case of a fawn caught in a forest fire, ignited by lightning, as evidence contra theism (Rowe 1979). As a case of natural evil, apparently connected to no greater good, the suffering of Rowe's fawn eluded resolution via theodicies like the Free Will Theodicy or the Soul-Making Theodicy. Natural evil is any suffering originating from natural causes. Suffering flowing out of the Black Death of the 1340s, the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815, or the Covid virus of 2020 would be cases of natural evil. Suffering resulting from predation, cancer, or other diseases, would also be cases of natural evil. Moral evil is contrasted with natural evil. Moral evil is any suffering originating from the actions, or culpable inactions, of moral agents. Natural evil and moral evil are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive concepts. Natural evil, then, is any suffering that is not moral evil.<sup>1</sup> It is evil that results from non-agential processes and forces. While there may be hard cases in which it is not clear if the evil is natural or moral, it cannot be both. Two recent atheistic arguments from evil have made much of natural evil and the suffering of animals in their case contra what we might call Classical Theism. There are varieties of theism—think of J.S. Mill's idea of a finite deity, or the movement known as Process Theism, which differ from Classical Theism. Classical Theism is the intersection of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.<sup>2</sup> More abstractly, Classical Theism is the proposition that there is an agent who is omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect and the creator of the universe. In short, that God exists.<sup>3</sup> A theist is anyone who accepts that proposition. An atheist denies it.

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The first argument is that of James Sterba, who contends that “... in the case of God, it is the absence of any law-like prevention of the significant and especially horrendous consequences of natural evil in our world that is logically incompatible with God’s existence” (Sterba 2019, p. 166). Sterba’s argument is an incompatibility argument premised on the claim that there are actual events logically incompatible with the existence of God. The second is that of Michael Tooley, who erects his argument in part on the claim that failing to prevent the suffering of animals cannot be justified by appeals to the great value of regular and predictable laws of nature, nor to the desirability of divine hiddenness (Tooley 2019, p. 23).<sup>4</sup> These arguments provide interesting variations of Philo’s second of four conditions specified in Hume’s *Dialogue XI*, “whence arises the misery and ill of the universe”:

... a capacity for pain would not of itself produce pain if weren’t for something else, namely the world’s being governed by general laws; and this seems to be in no way necessary for a very perfect being. It is true that if each thing that happens were caused by an individual volition on God’s part, the course of nature would be perpetually broken, there would be no dependable regularities, and so no man could employ his reason in the conduct of life. But if some such volitions threatened to have that effect, mightn’t other particular volitions remedy this inconvenience? In short, might not God exterminate all misfortune, wherever it was to be found, and make everything all good, through judiciously placed individual volitions, and thus without any preparation or long chains of causes and effects? (Hume 1779, p. 206)

Like Philo, Sterba and Tooley both contend that a God created world, governed by divine particular volitions, would lack the natural evil of animal suffering.

In what follows, I examine the arguments of Sterba and Tooley and contend that both are self-undermining. Each of the arguments employs premises that provide reason for thinking that other premises found in their arguments are false. Prior to a discussion of these arguments, we will explore the nature of incompatibility arguments, and examine three assumptions that often lurk in the background of discussions of the problem of evil.

## 2. Incompatibility Arguments

Two propositions are logically incompatible just in case they take opposite truth-values.<sup>5</sup> An incompatibility argument is an argument contending that certain propositions are logically incompatible, perhaps contrary to appearances. Some incompatibility arguments are what we might call “internal” incompatibility arguments as they allege that a particular theory, ideology or set of doctrines is incoherent as the theory, ideology or set of doctrines implies a contradiction. An “external” incompatibility argument is any that alleges that a particular theory, ideology or set of doctrines implies a proposition incompatible with a known fact about the world. Contrasted with incompatibility arguments are what we might call improbability arguments. An improbability argument contends that a particular proposition is probably false, given the truth of certain other propositions. Improbability arguments seek to muster strong evidence against their target proposition, while incompatibility arguments seek to show that their target—a particular theory, ideology or set of doctrines—implies a contradiction. Atheistic improbability arguments seek to show that theism is likely false based on appeals to evidence. An atheistic internal incompatibility argument purports to show that theism is incoherent, as it contains contradictory propositions; while an atheistic external incompatibility argument contends that theism is logically incompatible with a known fact of the world.

To show that two propositions, A and B, are logically incompatible even if they do not appear to be, a third proposition, C, must be conjoined to A and B, such that the set of (A and B and C), implies an explicit contradiction. To demonstrate logical incompatibility, this third proposition, which we might call “the probe”, must be a necessary truth. A necessary truth is a proposition true in all possible circumstances; it is true no matter what.<sup>6</sup> Why must the probe be a necessary truth?

A necessary truth is required as a necessary truth entails only truths. Employing a necessary truth as the probe ensures that any contradiction following from the set of (A and B and C) follows from A and B alone, since C, the probe, is a necessary truth. The role of the probe is to make it clear that a contradiction follows from the conjunction of A and B as the two are incompatible. The probe itself should play no role in generating the contradiction. Its role is to indicate the presence of a contradiction. To employ as a probe anything other than a necessary truth raises the prospect of “false positives,” giving the appearance of two propositions being incompatible when in fact they are compatible. Consider:

1. There are two animals in the doghouse.
2. All the animals in the doghouse are mammals.

Clearly, (1) and (2) could both be true, so they are logically compatible. But if we add a probe which is, let us suppose, contingently true, a problem arises:

3. There is an odd number of mammals in the doghouse.

The set consisting of (1), (2) and (3) is inconsistent. Since the probe itself should play no role in generating the contradiction, we erroneously seem to have indicted (1) and (2) of incompatibility, even though we know they are compatible. We have a false positive indicating logical incompatibility. So, not just any proposition will do as a probe in the derivation of an explicit contradiction. A necessarily true proposition is required.

Suppose it is unclear whether propositions, P and Q, are logically compatible, and we seek to determine whether they are. The standard way of demonstrating compatibility is by constructing a model. A model consists of a third proposition (or set of propositions), R, which is itself logically possible and which is consistent with both P and Q. One then conjoins R with P (or alternatively with Q). If the conjunction or set of (P and R) entails Q, then the set (P and Q and R) is consistent or possible. And if a set is consistent, then so too are all its subsets. Hence, P and Q are compatible. It is important to note that proposition R need only be possible, it need not be plausible, likely, necessary, or even true. Demonstrating logical compatibility via a model is less demanding than demonstrating logical incompatibility via a probe as the former requires only a third proposition that is logically possible, while the latter requires one that is logically necessary.

Within regard to the Problem of Evil, atheistic incompatibility arguments are typically collected under the rubric of the Logical Problem of Evil, while atheistic improbability arguments are collected under the rubric of the Evidential Problem of Evil. Theistic responses to the Logical Problem of Evil distinguish theodicies from defenses, with the latter as attempts to defeat internal incompatibility arguments for atheism by providing a model in which the suspect propositions—say:

4. God exists,
- and,
5. Evil occurs,

could be true. Recall that a model need not consist of true propositions. A theodicy is often taken to mean a plausible account of moral reasons which would justify God in permitting the evils found in the world. Theodicies are more ambitious than defenses, as they aim for plausibility, while the latter aim for compatibility. In addition to defenses and theodicies there are, of course, refutations. Simply put, refutations are nothing more than objections to specific arguments. Refutations proceed along either of two broad routes. Arguing that a premise of the target argument is false, or at least, not well supported; or, arguing that the premises of the target argument do not support its conclusion. As regards responses to the problem of evil, refutations are less ambitious than a defense, as they seek only to show that a particular atheistic argument is unsound. Refutations attempt no justification for the appalling suffering we see around us, nor do they seek to demonstrate compatibility. The argument of this paper is a refutation of two atheistic arguments from evil. Theodicies and defenses are left to others.

### 3. Three Assumptions

In his 1958 novel, *The Mackerel Plaza*, a satire on mid-twentieth century liberal Protestantism, novelist Peter De Vries has the minister, Andrew Mackerel, proclaim to his flock that “it is the final proof of God’s omnipotence that he need not exist in order to save us.” Mackerel’s proclamation would be a very high view of omnipotence if it were coherent. There are two assumptions about the idea of omnipotence, which, while coherent, are suspect. These suspicious assumptions lurk often in the background of formulations of the problem of evil. While neither Sterba nor Tooley embrace these assumptions, an examination of them is relevant for our discussion. The first assumption is that:

ASP-1: it is likely that God can do X if humans have the causal power to do X.<sup>7</sup>

This is a peculiar assumption as it is obviously false. For example, humans have the causal power to fatigue themselves but a superior being of the sort worshipped by theists, an agent who is omnipotent, could not fatigue himself.<sup>8</sup> Or again, humans have the causal power to engage in moral wrongdoing, but a morally perfect being could not.<sup>9</sup> An omniscient being could not inadvertently bring about an unintended consequence, while humans obviously can. The relevance of (ASP-1) as regards the problem of evil is found with the idea of an outweighing good or justifying reason that plays a role in discussions of the argument from evil. If there is a justifying reason for God to allow an evil E, then either God is within his moral rights allowing E, or there is some good, that outweighs E, and requires that God allow E. Indeed, there may be suffering that is within a human’s power but not within God’s to prevent without the loss of an outweighing good (Wykstra 1984, pp. 75–76). For example, there will be evils, theists insist, that God must permit if humans are to have the opportunity themselves to prevent evil. With this in mind, we see that an improvable world could be among the best possible worlds as there could be evils which humans could prevent that God cannot prevent, but which humans fail to prevent. Additionally, if (ASP-1) were true, then every version of the soul-making theodicy will fail. We can understand soul-making as, in large part, moral development. The idea is that humans must have the opportunity and freedom to mature morally, as individuals, via the prevention or amelioration of the suffering of others. Moral maturation requires actions on the part of humans, as, for example, in the cultivation of moral virtues, such as charity, bravery or kindness. One may be disposed toward charity but without engaging in charitable actions, one will not have the virtue of being charitable. Indeed, moral maturity and human soul-making require actions that seek to provide relief to a sufferer but are costly to the moral agent. Contemporary discussion of soul-making theodicies began with John Hick in the 1960s (Hick 1966). While soul-making presumably involves more than moral maturation, I will emphasize moral development in what follows.

A second assumption of interest is that:

ASP-2: It is improbable that God’s power is ever limited.

Given our reasons for denying (ASP-1), we have good reason for denying (ASP-2) as well. Additionally, suppose it is a divine goal in creation that humans would have the opportunity to make a real difference in the amount of value in the universe, say by their choices and actions in forming their characters. If God allows the moral space necessary for the determination of one’s character, think of the soul-making theodicy, then God’s power would be limited by that divine goal.

Finally, it will facilitate our discussion if we note the falsity of a third common assumption even though it is not concerned with omnipotence:

ASP-3: Moral evil occurs only because persons engage in morally impermissible, or rationally suboptimal, decisions or actions, or negligent inactions.

This assumption is false as moral evil results not just from immoral actions and choices but can also result from the morally permissible and rationally optimal actions of persons. To see this, let us adapt a case from Robert Nozick (Nozick 1974, p. 263). Suppose we have a world with twenty-six males, named: A, B, C, D and so on down to Z. In this

world there are also twenty-six females, named conveniently: *A'*, *B'*, *C'*, *D'* and so on down to *Z'*. The males are ranked from *A* (the highest) to *Z* (the lowest) by their possession of traits found desirous by females, and all agree on the ranking. So, *A* has the greatest aggregate of those traits, *B* has the second most, *C* the third most and so on down to *Z* who has the least amount. The same is true of the females, as *A'* has the greatest aggregate of those traits desirous to males, *B'* the second most, *C'* the third, and so on down to *Z'* who has the least. Again, all agree on the ranking. Persons have the freedom and right in this world to choose whether to marry and with whom they marry. All wish to marry. Naturally, *A* is the most attractive to the females, while *A'* is the most attractive to the males. Unsurprisingly, to the bitter disappointment and unhappiness of the rest of the population, *A* and *A'* marry. Left with their second choice, *B* and *B'* voluntarily marry; and so on down to *Z* and *Z'*. There has been no wrongdoing in this world, and no suboptimal decision, yet unhappiness, disappointment, frustration, heartbreak, and perhaps even despair, all intrinsically undesirable states, may all be present.<sup>10</sup> So, even though there is moral evil present, contrary to (ASP-3), it is not suffering brought about by wrongdoing.

One might object that the suffering involved in our Nozick case is an artifact of a kind of scarcity—a scarcity of diverse preferences—as the preference ranking of all the males are the same, but only one will have his top preference satisfied.<sup>11</sup> All others will not. The same is true of the females—only one of the females will have her top preference satisfied. All others will not. This scarcity results in suffering, which, according to this objection, is an instance of natural evil and not moral evil. If the preferences varied over the respective populations of males and females, rather than being uniform, there would be no suffering.

Does this objection succeed? It does not. The first thing to notice is that a scarcity can be an artifact of human decision and action rather than a natural process. In our case, there is a sufficient number of potential mates such that each person can be married. There is no lack of resources. If there is a scarcity, it is due to human choice. Second, persons are not captives to their preferences. Even if preference voluntarism, like doxastic voluntarism, is false, it does not follow that person have no control at all. Just as one can indirectly, or in a roundabout way, control at least some of her beliefs, so too one can modify, revise, and even discard a preference. Various kinds of therapies and our own experiences show that we have at least indirect control over our preferences, even if we lack direct control. Third, with at least some of our preferences, there is a close connection with reason and deliberation. Deliberating about alternatives can generate, revise or change our preferences and our rankings. Deliberation about our preferences can be efficacious. Fourth, satisfaction or not of any given preference in our Nozick case is a function of the conscious decisions of others. Agents make decisions and those decisions can impact others. Finally, notice that the size of the population is arbitrary as intrinsically undesirable states (unhappiness, disappointment, frustration, heartbreak and despair) can result as long as one person's preference is frustrated because of a decision another makes. Unrequited love may generate unhappiness, disappointment, frustration, heartbreak, and perhaps even despair, but whether a love is reciprocated depends on the decision of another.

Seeing that the third assumption is false is important as it is too often assumed that moral evil originates exclusively from the wrongful actions of moral agents. But moral evil is not limited to wrongful actions. Moral evil and natural evil are jointly exhaustive of the possibilities and mutually exclusive. Every case of suffering then is brought about either by a moral agent or a natural process or event. In our Nozick case, unhappiness, disappointment, frustration, heartbreak and despair, all intrinsically undesirable, result from the morally permissible and rational actions of moral agents. There are no immoral or suboptimal actions bringing about the suffering. The decisions and actions of agents are not instances, in the relevant sense, of natural processes or events, so they are not generators of natural evil.<sup>12</sup> While moral evil typically results from immoral actions, it can result from moral actions as well. Moreover, seeing that (ASP-3) is false shows us that there could be evil—intrinsically undesirable states—even in possible worlds in which no human ever engages in wrongdoing or makes a suboptimal decision. The common charge that

God could and should have brought about a possible world in which no moral agent ever engages in wrongdoing is underdeveloped given the falsity of (ASP-3).

#### 4. Constrained Intervention and Animal Suffering

Sterba's argument is an external incompatibility argument, which contends that the suffering of animals resulting from natural events like forest fires, diseases, and earthquakes would not occur if God existed (Sterba 2019, p. 189). Sterba presents nine alleged necessary truths stipulating moral requirements of natural evil prevention common to moral agents, whether individual or collective (an individual moral agent or a political state), and whether natural or supernatural (human or divine). For our purposes, the fourth of these nine is relevant and is distilled into the following principle:

6. for any moral agent S, S is morally required to prevent all the significant or horrendous natural evil that she can when doing so harms no human and causes no greater harm to animals.

Although not explicit in (6), the principle should be understood as incorporating an order of application such that political states have the immediate duty of preventing significant or horrendous natural evil, and individual humans have that duty only when political states have failed to act. God would be required to act if political states and individuals have failed to prevent a particular instance of significant or horrendous suffering. This order of application ensures that individual humans could engage in soul-making actions. Sterba holds that (6) is binding on any moral agent, whether individual human, political state, or God.

There is an important qualification on (6) that we should note: Sterba holds that humans have a right to moral development and soul-making (Sterba 2019, pp. 83–84, 91).<sup>13</sup> He also holds that denying persons a good for which they have a right is a kind of harm. God then is obligated to provide humans with soul-making opportunities. With this point in mind, we can revise (6) to read:

- 6'. for any moral agent S, S is morally required to prevent all the significant or horrendous natural evil that she can when doing so harms no human and causes no greater harm to animals and allows for the opportunity of soul-making.

Sterba recognizes with (6') and the other natural evil prevention moral requirements, that the creation of perverse incentives is ripe (Sterba 2019, pp. 163–64). The creation of perverse incentives is an instance of the phenomenon of unintended consequences. Unlike perverse incentives, not every unintended consequence is undesirable or negative for the agent or others, so "undesired effects are not always undesirable effects" (Merton 1936, pp. 894–904). Perverse incentives however are not just undesired and unforeseen, but, importantly, undesirable for the agent. Every unintended consequence of an agent's actions, which is undesirable for the agent, is a case of self-sabotage. Self-sabotage occurs when one's plans or behaviors backfire, whether foreseen or not. If God were to act every time that humans failed to prevent a case of significant or horrendous suffering, by ending the suffering, a pattern would be detectable. With a detectable pattern, an incentive for humans to forgo seeking to prevent significant or horrendous suffering would loom—why take taxing steps to bring about a certain event X if one can ensure that X obtains by simply doing nothing? If human moral maturity and soul-making are divine goals, then a constant intervention to mitigate significant or horrendous suffering whenever political states and individual humans have failed to act would create a perverse incentive, as it would incentivize persons to forego costly moral actions, thus, undercutting the presumed divine goal. Sterba attempts to defuse the threat of perverse incentives via his idea of constrained intervention (Sterba 2019, pp. 163–64).

Constrained intervention is the idea that God would prevent or mitigate significant or horrendous suffering when political states and individual humans have failed to do

so. This divine intervention may be via the miraculous or via divinely engineered natural means—a well-timed fire-suppressing rainstorm, say, or the extinction of a recently mutated pathogen. It may be that some divine interventions would go unnoticed, but Sterba allows that many constrained divine interventions would be obvious—thus the threat of perverse incentives. Sterba suggests three conditions that we should therefore expect as constraints on the morally required divine interventions, to avoid the threat of perverse incentives (Sterba 2019, pp. 163–64):

CI-1: For any significant or horrendous natural evil E preventable by S, if S can successfully prevent E and does so, then God does not intervene.

CI-2: If S seeks to prevent E but has only partial success, then God would intervene and successfully finish what S had started.

CI-3: If S does not seek to prevent E, assuming that God will prevent E, then God will prevent only some but not all of E's bad outcomes.

Divine intervention then is not morally required on every occasion, but only when the created agent's efforts fall short of preventing all the significant or horrendous suffering. But when a human yields to the temptation of letting God do all the work and thereby takes no action to prevent suffering, God would rescue only some of those threatened. The differential between (CI-2) and (CI-3) is detectable by humans, Sterba holds, and would motivate humans, or many humans, to do all they can, whether collectively or individually, to prevent or mitigate significant or horrendous natural evil. The idea of constrained intervention might be distilled as:

CI: as regards the prevention of significant or horrendous natural evil, divine action would be calibrated with human efforts as outlined in (CI-1), (CI-2) and (CI-3), to avoid any perverse incentive if God exists.

Proposition (CI) will serve as an implicit premise in Sterba's external incompatibility argument contra Theism.

With proposition (CI) in hand, we can now reconstruct Sterba's argument contra theism (Sterba 2019, pp. 184–89):

- 6'. for any moral agent S, S is morally required to prevent all the significant or horrendous natural evil that she can when doing so harms no human and causes no greater harm to animals and allows for the opportunity of soul-making. So,
7. Constrained intervention is morally required of God. But,
8. Constrained intervention is obviously not operative as there are many instances of significant or horrendous animal suffering that God could prevent without harming humans or other animals. So,
9. God does not exist.

Given the idea of constrained intervention, Sterba's argument presents a formidable challenge to theistic belief.

But is the idea of constrained intervention problem-free? It is not, as there is a tension between premises (6') and (7). Briefly put, Sterba holds that God would intervene to prevent significant or horrendous suffering but would do so in only a way that furthers the opportunity for human moral development and soul-making and avoids perverse incentives. That is, constrained intervention would be public or detectable, yet would be calibrated for human moral development and soul-making. Premise (6') implies that there must be space for free human moral development and soul-making, but the mechanism which avoids perverse incentives, referenced in premise (7), the public detection of God's intervention, would eliminate the space necessary for that development. In short, if (6') is true, then (7) probably is not.

Let us develop this objection a bit. Premise (6') implies that if God exists, then God's prevention of significant or horrendous suffering is limited by the need to leave moral space for human moral development and human soul-making. God would be morally restrained from preventing all significant or horrendous suffering as doing so would leave no opportunity for human moral development and soul-making. But notice that the idea of constrained intervention in (7), as a way of blunting any perverse incentive, implies human recognition of the pattern flowing out of (CI-1)—(CI-3). Human agents would realize that if they seek to prevent significant or horrendous animal suffering but are unable to complete the task, God providentially or miraculously completes it. Human agents would also realize that if they fail to rescue animals from significant or horrendous suffering, preventable suffering results as God would not honor their inaction by completing a task that they should have completed. And it seems clear enough, if one can detect divine intervention, so that one knows that God intervenes, then one can reasonably infer that God exists. Sterba's argument, then, consists of propositions that imply that God must leave moral space for human moral development and soul-making if God exists; and that God's existence is knowable as a way of thwarting perverse incentives if God exists. A knowledge of God's existence however would result in an evaporation of the space necessary for free moral development in much the same way that crime decreases in those areas known to be under closed-circuit TV surveillance.<sup>14</sup> Theistic belief would be coerced and not free if the existence of God were clear, obvious or manifest for all to grasp (See, for example, (Hick 1966, pp. 255–61, 275, 318–36); (Murray 1993, pp. 27–38); and (Murray 2002, pp. 62–82); and (Jordan 2008)).

Sterba's Just State analogy is relevant here (Sterba 2019, pp. 12, 49–69). No one would consider a state engaged in constant, pervasive and intrusive surveillance just. Any state ignoring a robust distinction between the private realm and the public, where only the latter is legitimately within the purview of governmental scrutiny, is not plausibly described as just.<sup>15</sup> The loss of liberty alone would count against a surveillance state being a just state. Indeed, it is not just liberty that is lost in a surveillance state, but autonomy and agency are compromised if not lost altogether as well. Consider that the inmates in Bentham's proposed panoptic ward would lack any real opportunity to weigh choices and act on decisions that they know run counter to what is expected given that they are under constant surveillance. Uncoerced moral development and soul-making is not possible in the Panopticon.

One might object that God's existence being known threatens human moral development and soul-making only if that knowledge is accompanied by the belief that God punishes wrongdoing or rewards right doing.<sup>16</sup> But if it were known that God would not punish wrongdoing or reward right doing, then Sterba's constrained intervention is rescued. This objection contends that an essentially morally perfect agent could prevent natural evil if the agent engaged in constrained intervention and was morally indifferent toward punishing or rewarding human actions as appropriate.

The problem with this objection is that it forfeits the idea of moral perfection. Consider again Sterba's Just State analogy. No one would hold that a state that treated criminal behavior the same as lawful behavior was acting justly. If a state neither punished where appropriate, nor rewarded where appropriate, the state would be morally indifferent and would not be just. Moreover, a state that did not make it known that certain behaviors were criminal and due punishment would also fall short of justice. Likewise, an essentially morally perfect agent could not be indifferent toward human behavior, such that the agent neither punishes Stalin, nor rewards Mother Teresa. If an agent S did not punish where appropriate or reward where appropriate (assuming ability), then there is good reason to doubt that S is morally perfect.

Since the idea of constrained intervention found in (7) is effectively equivalent to a divine Panopticon, then the space necessary for human moral development and soul-making required by (6') would be lost.<sup>17</sup> Given this, let us modify Sterba's idea of constrained intervention so that any divine intervention to prevent significant or horrendous suffering

is not a detectable matter. To see how this might work, we turn to Michael Tooley's external incompatibility argument.

### 5. Animal Suffering and "God-Willing" Laws

Tooley's argument consists of two parts, with the first part composed of thirteen premises and the second, twenty-five premises. The first part is our focus here (Tooley 2019, pp. 9–23). The goal of the first part is to show that appeals to human free will, human soul-making, the regularity of the laws of nature, and alleged desirability of divine hiddenness, are all irrelevant to the problem of animal suffering. Let us begin by outlining the first part of Tooley's argument:

10. Animals suffer. And,
11. No animal is a moral agent. And,
12. Only moral agents can deserve to suffer. So,
13. No animal deserves to suffer. And,
14. Humans do not have souls. And,
15. No human or animal now alive is identical with any that had previously died. So,
16. Soul-making theodicies cannot explain the suffering of animals. And,
17. We have good scientific accounts of the natural mechanisms that cause natural evil. And,
18. These accounts do not involve any agent causing natural evil. So,
19. The suffering of animals is case of genuine natural evil. And,
20. The prevention of the suffering of animals would not impede human freedom. And,
21. The prevention of the natural evil of animal suffering does not require the loss of regular and predictable laws, or the hiddenness of God. So,
22. No "natural religion" theodicy or defense provides a satisfactory answer to this incompatibility argument.

Part one of Tooley's argument is extremely ambitious as it would be sound only if several major philosophical problems have been solved. For example, proposition (14) implies that Cartesian dualism is false. Proposition (15) implies that reincarnation doctrines of afterlife are all false. Proposition (20) is curious as it would be an odd world in which humans enjoy the range of freedom that they do in the actual world yet cannot harm any animal even when they freely choose to do so.

Let us focus on proposition (21)—the claim that God could prevent animal suffering with no loss of regular and predictable laws of nature. This proposition might be seen as a philosophical codification of Philo's assertion that:

a being who knows the secret workings of the universe might easily, by particular volitions, turn all these happenings to the good of mankind and make the whole world happy, without revealing himself in any operation. A fleet whose purposes were useful to society might always meet with a fair wind. Good rulers might enjoy sound health and long life. Persons born to power and authority might be endowed with good temperaments and virtuous dispositions. A few outcomes such as these, regularly and wisely brought about, would change the face of the world; and yet they would no more seem to disturb the course of nature or thwart human conduct than does the present arrangement of things where the causes are secret, and variable, and complex. (Hume 1779, pp. 206–7)

Proposition (21) rests in part on premises (17) and (18). These premises assert that science generates knowledge that implies no agent causing what otherwise appears as natural evil.



Put another way, (17) asserts that science gives us no reason to think that natural evil is nothing but moral evil incognito, while (18) holds that science gives us to reason to think that natural evil is not reducible to moral evil. We should not overlook Tooley's appeal to science in (17) and (18), as those two premises entail that science and human inquiry are sufficiently competent to discover that no agent is causing what otherwise appears as purely natural forces resulting in natural evil. Put another way, we can know that the law-like regular and predictable operations observed in nature are laws of nature and not the particular volitions or actions of agents.

Tooley's assertion in (21) that God could prevent animal suffering with no loss of regular and predictable laws is built upon his idea of a "god-willing" law (Tooley 2019, p. 18). Put simply, Tooley holds that a "god-willing" law has the form that:

Whenever a natural event of type F happens, and God does not will that it not be followed by an event of type G, the event of type F will causally give rise to an event of type G. (Tooley 2019, p. 20).<sup>18</sup>

A "god-willing" law is not a natural law if by a natural law is meant a law describing only natural forces and natural causation and incorporates no theological condition. A "god-willing" law may be regular and predictable and, in those ways, mimic laws of nature, but a "god-willing" law is not a natural law, as a "god-willing" law contains a theological condition stipulating a divine volition.<sup>19</sup> Tooley holds that human investigators very probably could neither discover nor detect that regular and predictable laws are in fact "god-willing" rather than natural laws:

If there were an omnipotent and omniscient being, all of the suffering and deaths due to natural disasters and to viruses and diseases could have been prevented if such a being so chose . . . No human person would ever know that this had been done unless the deity chose to communicate that fact to humans. An appeal to the claimed desirability of the hiddenness of God does nothing to block, accordingly, any well-formulated version of the argument from evil. (Tooley 2019, p. 23)

Unlike Sterba's discoverable divine constrained intervention, Tooley holds that humans lack the competency to detect divine volition or divine activity. In this way, Tooley seeks to argue that in a God created world, God could bring it about that both that there would be no natural evil and could have done so without sacrificing science.

Notice that Tooley's argument proceeds by claiming both that God could, if God existed, replace natural or scientific laws with "god-willing" laws which would mimic natural laws and would prevent all cases of natural evil. And that if God existed and had implemented "god-willing" laws, humans would probably be incapable of discovering or detecting that the law-like operations are "god-willing" laws, as such laws would operate regularly and predictably and would seem like natural laws, except there would be no deadly earthquakes or viruses or forest fires or other natural mechanism resulting in suffering and death. The argument asserts in (17) and (18) that we can know via science that natural evil is real as there are no supernatural agents causing the earthquakes, viruses, forest fires and the like. So, according to (17) and (18), we can know that there are no agents via their particular volitions, wantonly or carelessly, bringing about evil that appears to us as natural evil but is in fact moral evil. Yet, the reasoning in support of (21) requires that, if God existed, then there would be no natural laws but "god-willing" laws, but we could not discover that fact. A "god-willing" law involves particular volitions of a supernatural agent and not general and regular natural laws.<sup>20</sup> So, Tooley's asserts both that human science can discover that the operative regular and predictable laws are in fact natural laws and are not particular divine volitions of the "god-willing" type; and that human science could not discover that regular and predictable law-like operations in nature are in fact particular volitions of the "god-willing" laws and not natural laws. But arguably if science can detect not-P, then it can detect P (for any empirical matter P). If science can tell us the polyp was not cancerous, then it could also tell us that it was cancerous if it

had been. Tooley's argument however denies this principle, as it implies that science is sufficiently competent to ensure us that the operative laws are natural and not supernatural, yet if the laws were supernatural, science would lack the competency to discover this. This asymmetry undercuts Tooley's argument. If (21) stands then (17) and (18) fall. But if (17) and (18) stand, then (21) does not. Either way, the argument undermines itself.

## 6. Conclusions

So far, I have argued that the incompatibility arguments of Sterba and Tooley, built on the idea that a theistic universe would not incorporate general natural laws, but instead a regime of predictable but particular providential volitions, both fail as each is self-undermining: one part of their argument would render another part likely false.<sup>21</sup> Of course, even if the foregoing is sound, the argument contributes nothing toward resolving the problem of natural evil.<sup>22</sup> This has been an exercise in refutation and not theodicy. Without going into any of the detail necessary, presumably the problem of natural evil, if resolvable, would require a principled and well-argued case that the following seven propositions, or propositions relevantly similar, were true:

A. The opportunity for humans to discover, generate, and disseminate knowledge, including scientific knowledge, would be a plausible divine goal in creation, in addition to the divine goal that humans can morally develop.

A1. If the opportunity for humans to discover, generate, and disseminate scientific knowledge is a divine goal, then the world could not be a world that operates on particular divine volitions rather than regular and general natural laws.

A2. A world with regularities and laws of nature as complex as that of the actual world is not surprising if the opportunity for humans to discover, generate, and disseminate scientific knowledge is a divine goal.<sup>23</sup>

A3. Given (A), (A1) and (A2), natural evil is not surprising.

B. For any person S, and any amount of evil, e, if e seems appropriate or just right for divine purposes, such that any amount less than e or greater than e would seem insufficient or excessive, then S has a reason to neither mitigate nor prevent any evil.

B1. Given (B), natural evil that seems excessive is not surprising.

C. Given (A)—(B1), that the distribution of evil is ambiguous is not surprising.

At most, the foregoing has provided some support of (A1). The problem of natural evil remains a formidable challenge to a theistic commitment even if the arguments of Sterba and Tooley contribute little to that challenge.<sup>24</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> While we focus on the suffering of nonhuman animals (hereafter: animals) in this essay, one should not identify natural evil with animal suffering.

<sup>2</sup> One could add any other theistic traditions to this intersection as appropriate.

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter I will employ "theism" for Classical Theism.

<sup>4</sup> By desirability of divine hiddenness is meant, roughly, the idea that there is good reason for God to hide or mask the fact that God exists in order to bring about or preserve an important good (if God exists).

<sup>5</sup> P and Q take opposite truth-values just in case whenever P is true, Q is false, and whenever Q is true, P is false.

<sup>6</sup> A necessary truth is a proposition true in every possible world—that is, true no matter the variation of the world or in the world.

- 7 The modality of the “can” in (ASP-1) should be understood as logical or causal.
- 8 Given that God is essentially omnipotent—that is, in very possible world in which God exists, God is omnipotent. Other counterexamples to (ASP-1): commit suicide, wear Jones’ shoes while Jones is wearing them, weaken himself, and so on.
- 9 Given that God is essentially morally perfect.
- 10 Note that any intrinsically undesirable state, for example pain, no matter the intensity, counts as an evil.
- 11 I owe this objection to an anonymous reviewer.
- 12 Even though the human mind is a product of natural selection, that fact is not relevant as regards the distinction between moral and natural evil.
- 13 Sterba distinguishes two kinds of soul-making. Humans have a right to what he calls “natural soul-making”—basically the opportunity to freely develop moral traits and virtues. To morally mature in other words.
- 14 Studies researching the crime reduction value of CCTV surveillance systems generally show decreases in crime, especially property crimes, although the results are usually reported as preliminary, modest, and in need of further study. For example, see <https://www.mtas.tennessee.edu/knowledgebase/there-empirical-evidence-surveillance-cameras-reduce-crime> (accessed on 24 July 2022). Interestingly, surveillance systems may not prevent crime, but displace it to locales lacking surveillance systems. See for example: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24737548> (accessed on 24 July 2022). Of course, displacement is indicative of deterrence—if one knows that he is under surveillance in this locale, then one’s behavior is modified until one is in another locale lacking surveillance.
- Another interesting bit of evidence about the reduction or deterrence effects of surveillance, in addition to CCTV systems, has to do with the opioid epidemic of the past few decades in the U.S. The opioid epidemic began in the 1990s. At the time, only a few states required addictive drug prescriptions to be filed in triplicate—the physician retained a copy of the prescription, the pharmacy kept a copy, and the third copy was posted by the physician to a state regulatory agency. Among the few states requiring triplicate filing were NY, TX and CA—about a 1/3 of the US population. In those states with the triplicate requirement, physicians were less likely to over-prescribe the opioids. And over the next several decades, states without a triplicate requirement suffered far greater addictions and overdoses than the states with a triplicate requirement. The explanation, in part, is that the prescriber, faced with the burden of filing the triplicate prescriptions, and knowing that a state regulatory agency had a copy, were less likely to over-prescribe. They knew that a record existed. Also, the triplicate states were not heavily marketed by the big pharmaceutical companies, pushing opioids, as the big pharmaceutical companies realized beforehand that the triplicate requirement would disincentive aggressive use of opioids. See: [https://www.nber.org/system/files/working\\_papers/w26500/w26500.pdf](https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w26500/w26500.pdf) (accessed on 28 July 2022).
- 15 A surveillance state is in effect constantly executing a general warrant allowing agents of the state to inspect any and every space seeking cause for a criminal complaint. General warrants, however, trample the legitimate privacy-interests and liberty-interests that persons enjoy. Consider the Fourth Amendment of The Constitution of the United States. It prohibits general warrants, by requiring particular conditions on warrants:
- The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.
- 16 Same as note 11.
- 17 Might this point provide an objection to theism? Some have argued, for example, that the existence of an omniscient being would result in the loss of privacy and autonomy. See, for example, (Kahane 2011). While we cannot argue the point here, one common theistic response contends that the opportunity for autonomy and soul-making requires that the world be religiously ambiguous so as to avoid the threat of a known divine panopticon. See for example (Hick 1966; Murray 1993; Jordan 2008).
- 18 A “god-willing” law would consist in part of two theological conditions describing what would occur if God willed that an event does not result, and what would occur if God willed that an event would result. (Tooley 2019, p. 20). Particular volitions may be law-like but are not properly considered laws.
- 19 Tooley holds that theists are committed to “god-willing” laws insofar as they accept that God has miraculously acted in history (Tooley 2019, p. 18). If Tooley is correct that “interventionist theists” are committed to “god-willing” laws and we retain the standard definition of a miracle, we get a very odd result. If one understands a miracle as an event that violates a law of nature, caused by God, then a miracle would be an event violating what God wills, caused by God. This odd result may sever the alleged commitment.
- 20 Could “god-willing” laws be general and not particular volitions of the divine? The answer is no – the notion of a “god-willing” law is indexed to particular outcomes or events willed by the deity. See (Tooley 2019, p. 18).
- 21 Both Sterba and Tooley hold that universal moral duties would make the individual divine volitions law-like and predictable. While the point cannot be addressed in detail here, arguably they overlook the distinction between agent-relative reasons and agent-neutral reasons. An agent-relative reason is a reason to do something (or refrain from doing something) that a particular agent might have which others lack. For example, parents have an agent-relative reason to save for their child’s college career that others lack. An agent-neutral reason is a reason to do something that all agents would have. For example, morality requires that no one torture for the fun of it. If God exists, would God, qua creator, have agent-relative reasons which humans lack? If so,

might those agent-relative reasons include moral permissions as well as moral duties, and, for all we know, override some or all the agent-neutral moral reasons which God would share in common with human agents? Recall that, even if particular divine volitions are law-like, it is contentious to call them “laws” rather than “law-like” regularities or operations.

- 22 For detailed arguments seeking to provide a theodicy regarding animal suffering, see (Murray 2008) and (Schneider 2020).
- 23 Laws as complex as the actual laws of nature would extend into deep evolutionary history and would involve pre-human suffering.
- 24 I thank Jeff Lin, Douglas Stalker, and James Sterba and three anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

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# Limited Intervention and Moral Kindergartens

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**Abstract:** Recently, William Hasker and Cheryl Chen have argued that James Sterba's argument for the non-existence of God based on the existence of horrendous evil consequences fails. Hasker, among other things, contends that eliminating horrendous evil consequences will result in a moral kindergarten. It is unclear, however, whether the elimination of horrendous evil consequences will result in a moral kindergarten. Moreover, if Hasker is right, then it may be that most people in the actual world live in a moral kindergarten. Chen argues that eliminating horrendous evil consequences may lead to a morally worse world. While Chen is ultimately right about this, it is not fatal to the basic intuition at the heart of Sterba's argument.

**Keywords:** problem of evil; moral kindergarten; James Sterba; William Hasker; Cheryl Chen

## 1. Introduction

In *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* James Sterba develops and defends an argument against the existence of God based on the existence of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. According to Sterba, if God exists, then God must govern the world according to certain basic moral requirements because God is good. For example, consider the Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I (MEPR1):

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. (Sterba 2019, p. 126)

Assuming MEPR1 is exceptionless, Sterba argues that the existence of horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions that God could have easily prevented without violating anyone's rights is logically incompatible with the existence of God. Since such horrendous evil exists, it follows that God does not exist. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to an examination of two recent, independent attacks on MEPR1.

## 2. Hasker–Sterba Debate

Hasker (2004, 2020, 2021) rejects MEPR1. His rationale, briefly, is that human soul-making takes precedence over MEPR1 and thereby creates exceptions for MEPR1. In his 2004 treatment of this issue, Hasker discusses the tension between God's intention for soul-making (which he calls the divine moral imperative or DMI) and MEPR1 (which he calls no gratuitous evil or NGE). He writes:

It seems evident to me that DMI [or soul-making] is far more deeply entrenched in the theistic worldview than is NGE [or MEPR1], so that the tension between them is an indication that NGE [or MEPR1] should be abandoned. (Hasker 2004, p. 89)

The idea is that in a world where God acts according to MEPR1, among other things, humans would (i) not have the kind of free will that is necessary for making significant moral decisions or (ii) not have sufficient motivation to act against evil since evil actions would never result in horrendous consequences. Humans in such a world would be living in a 'moral kindergarten', where God allows us to 'argue over blocks', but never lets anyone actually get hurt. Let's call this the Moral Kindergarten Response (MKR). Hasker is not

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alone in defending the MKR. Here is a sampling of two ‘standard’ contemporary variations on this response:

But God could of course arrange things so that our bad choices never had any effects. When we chose kind words, they came out of our mouth; when we chose to insult, the air did not convey the message. When we chose to strike, we became paralysed; when we chose to stroke, our hands obeyed our commands. But for God to create agents permanently so placed would be a great deceit. He would have made it seem to us as though we had power—for we could not have a choice between uttering kind words and uttering insulting words, unless we thought our attempts to talk would be successful. (Swinburne 1998, pp. 144–45)

God should put us all in a virtual playpen in which choices can be made without any real harm to others being caused. Good choices could be made, and the good consequences that follow from them allowed. But bad choices, while not prevented altogether, would be prevented from causing additional damage. Couldn’t God simply block such negative outcomes? . . . [This would come] at the price of keeping us from being able to make genuinely morally significant choices between good and evil alternatives. (Murray and Rea 2008, p. 173)

Sterba’s formulation of MEPR1, however, anticipates the ‘standard’ MKR. He agrees that eliminating all evil consequences from immoral actions will undermine human soul-making. A more nuanced way of dealing with evil is to eliminate only the ‘horrendous’ evil consequences while preserving the possibility of non-horrendous evil consequences. Let us call a world in which God regularly intervenes in this way, a HORRENDOUS-less world.

Here’s how a scenario in a HORRENDOUS-less world might pan out. A child is being abducted. You have the ability to prevent the abduction. You choose, however, not to intervene. God also (at least at the moment) chooses not to intervene. Consequently, the abductors successfully drive off with the child. Only after the child is taken does God intervene. Perhaps God makes it so that the taillight of the abductors’ car fails, and the abductors are stopped by a passing patrol car. This eventually leads to the freeing of the child. Though the child is physically unharmed and spared from horrendous evil consequences, the child is nevertheless psychologically traumatized.

Sterba summarizes what this HORRENDOUS-less world would look like at a more abstract level:

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 . . . [and leaves] you with an ample opportunity for soul-making. (Sterba 2021, p. 2)

Though horrendous evil consequences would be absent, the residue of evil consequences (hereafter, simply residue) would exist and make human soul-making possible. Thus, the MKR, at least when developed in the ‘standard’ way similar to Swinburne (1998) and Murray and Rea (2008), fails to address Sterba’s limited intervention response.

Hasker, however, is fully aware of these nuances. Nevertheless, he asserts that Sterba’s position remains vulnerable to the MKR:

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. To be sure, some exercise of free will, even in immoral actions, would still occur, but only on relatively trivial matters. I once described this as a situation in which God was in effect running a moral

kindergarten, allowing us to develop our characters by arguing over the blocks, but ready to intervene before anyone actually gets hurt! (Hasker 2020, p. 210)

It seems that the Sterba–Hasker debate, at least at this point, has reached an impasse. Both agree that a HORRENDOUS-less world would be absent of horrendous evil consequences while leaving room for the residue. They disagree, however, about what the residue makes possible. Sterba believes that the residue allows for robust human soul-making. Hasker believes that the residue does not allow for robust human soul-making.

Though it seems Sterba and Hasker have dug in their heels, I believe we can make modest progress in at least two ways. First, a little care with the terms and descriptions used to refer to the differing levels of severity of evil consequences may help. Sterba and Hasker use terms such as ‘trivial’, ‘significant’, and ‘horrendous’, but they are not always consistent with each other and with themselves. Compare, for example, how Sterba phrases his response to the MKR in 2019:

When you choose to intervene to prevent *significantly* 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 significant* evil in its own right, but it is harmful nonetheless, and it is something for which you are primarily responsible ... [and leaves] you with a *limited opportunity* for soul-making. (Sterba 2019, pp. 61–62, my emphasis)

Note that this passage and the one above from 2021 are nearly identical. The critical difference is that Sterba, in 2019, exclusively uses the term ‘significant’ to describe the evil consequences that God prevents while Sterba, in 2021, uses the term ‘horrendous’. This is strategic because the kinds of soul-making opportunities that Sterba envisions as being possible are consequently different. Sterba, in 2019, says that the elimination of ‘significant’ evil allows for a ‘limited opportunity’ for soul-making, while Sterba in 2021 says that the elimination of ‘horrendous’ evil leaves ‘significant’ evil intact, and thereby, allows for an ‘ample opportunity’ for soul-making.

To move past these terminological differences, let us dispense with morally charged words such as ‘trivial’, ‘significant’ and ‘horrendous’, and opt for numbers to represent the two levels of consequences that are relevant to the present debate. Moreover, instead of defining these levels in terms of their severity, let us define them in relation to the possibility of soul-making.

Level 1: the kind of evil consequences that does not allow for soul-making.

Level 2: the kind of evil consequences that allows for soul-making.

We are now in a position to classify some of the examples of evil consequences that have been used in this debate. The pain resulting from having one’s foot stepped on is level 1. The physical abuse and torture resulting from a child abduction is level 2.

One may worry, however, that this way of categorizing evil consequences is unrealistic since it ignores the subjective experience of these consequences.<sup>1</sup> The same consequence, after all, may be experienced in very different ways by different people. Consider two examples. A trauma victim may experience an event as deeply troubling, while another person may experience the same event as inconsequential; or consider a person who is devastated by the loss of a pet, while another person does not really feel much by the loss of a pet. If we combine the differences in the way events are subjectively experienced for different people with the claim that soul-making depends on how events are subjectively experienced, then it seems problematic to use my classification. If an evil consequence may allow for soul-making for some people but not for others, it would be unclear how this evil consequence should be classified.

The subject relativity of how consequences are experienced is equally worrisome for categorizing consequences with terms such as ‘trivial’, ‘significant’, and ‘horrendous’.



After all, one person may experience an event as ‘horrendous’, while another person may experience the same event as ‘trivial’.

Perhaps, an easy fix is to relativize levels 1 and 2 to each person. What matters then, is that there are evil consequences that are level 2 for each person in a HORRENDOUS-less world. This makes it impossible to talk about any particular consequence as being level 1 or 2 *simpliciter*. Because the majority of humans experience the various consequences discussed here (e.g., child abduction, slavery) in more or less the same way regarding soul-making, I will set aside the person relativity of levels 1 and 2 for the sake of keeping the discussion less cumbersome.

Given the level 1 and 2 categories, what are we to make of the residue? For example, what are we to make of the psychological trauma resulting from a child abduction? Should it be classified as level 1 or 2? Care is needed here. Hasker rightly notes that the severity of the psychological trauma a child experiences is affected by God’s adherence to MEPR1. He writes:

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. (Hasker 2021, p. 4)

In a world where child abductions never end in physical abuse or torture, it’s difficult to predict what the abducted child would psychologically experience. The child would have no concerns over potential physical abuse or torture so how serious could the child’s experience of the abduction be? Should we still classify the child’s experience as ‘traumatic’? What we can be sure of is that the severity of the psychological toll an abducted child undergoes would be diminished (perhaps greatly) if God adhered to MEPR1. At a minimum, this shows that the psychological experience of being abducted can no longer serve as an obvious exemplar for level 2 consequences. Indeed, something similar can be said about the other examples (e.g., providing food and shelter for a destitute person (p. 90), saving West Africans from slave trading (p. 131)) Sterba offers in his book. This then serves as a challenge for Sterba to come up with better examples—examples where the residue is (i) clearly level 2 and (ii) not affected by God’s adherence to MEPR1.

A second way of making progress in the Hasker–Sterba debate is to take a closer look at the kind of soul-making that most of us *actually* go through. We seldom (if ever) have the opportunity to stop a child abduction or free slaves. The possibility of abducting a child or enslaving others is a psychological impossibility for the vast majority of us. Most of our lives happen in the banal domain of ‘everyday life’. Nevertheless, I would like to argue that we are provided with ‘ample opportunity’ for soul-making. Consider the recent events in the U.S. and the world that are disrupting our social order: the COVID-19 pandemic, the investigation of the January 6 attack, and the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*. These are testing our collective ability to adjust, develop tolerance, and live peacefully together despite radical differences in opinions and values. Even with our civil liberties protected, these are extremely challenging times. Many have been pushed to the brink physically and psychologically.

To take a personal example, my wife and I have struggled with infertility for more than 13 years. It’s hard to describe the kind of difficulties we’ve endured during this time. I’ve lost count of the number of baby showers my wife has had to attend over the years and the number of times she’s cried on Mother’s Day while trying to be happy for all her friends with children. The remarkable ways she has persevered and learned to celebrate others despite her own inability to conceive are quite remarkable. I often look to her experiences and growth over the past years as a symbol of courage and strength that I aspire to. I realize that this is a biographical anecdote and there is nothing academically rigorous about the point I am making. However, if my wife’s life were to end now, on Hasker’s view, would she have had an opportunity for robust soul-making? It seems the answer would be ‘no’.

The point is many people in the actual world live out their entire lives without having to directly engage the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. They, by and large, live only in the residue. Given this, their lives in a HORRENDOUS-less world would be no different from what their lives are like in the actual world.

One may worry that our *awareness* of the existence of horrendous evils allows for soul-making that would not be possible if such evils did not exist (See Note 1). It is unclear, however, that this awareness plays any role in the soul-making that, for example, my wife has undergone through her years of infertility. The fact that there have been such evils (e.g., slavery, genocide) in human history is something she was not consciously aware of during her struggles. Moreover, even if she were consciously aware of such evils, this awareness, if anything, might have helped to alleviate the pain she experienced by ‘putting things in perspective’. Thus, the non-existence of such evils, by removing a possible means of easing her pain, might have provided a more robust soul-making opportunity for her.

This suggests a dilemma for Hasker. Many people in the actual world who live only in the residue either have or do not have the opportunity for soul-making. If many people in the actual world who live only in the residue have the opportunity for soul-making, then so do the people in a HORRENDOUS-less world. If it is impossible for people in the actual world who live only in the residue to engage in soul-making, then many of us (probably most of the people reading this paper) will never engage in soul-making. It seems to me that both are dissatisfying options for Hasker.

### 3. Chen–Sterba Debate

Chen (2021), similar to Hasker, rejects MEP1. Her rationale, however, is different. According to Chen, it is logically possible that more people would choose to act wrongly in a HORRENDOUS-less world than the actual world. It does not matter that this is (possibly for many) unlikely and implausible. Why, after all, would the elimination of horrendous evil consequences result in more people choosing to act wrongly? Though an explanation may be desired, no explanation is needed, since we are dealing with sheer logical possibilities. If we treat logical possibilities as the absence of conceptual contradictions, Chen can freely help herself to this possibility. After all, logical possibilities of this sort are cheap. In fact, there is no need to focus only on a HORRENDOUS-less world. Since we’re dealing with logical possibilities, we could just as easily work with all worlds that differ from the actual world in any way in terms of the way God intervenes to prevent evil consequences (ones where God never intervenes to ones where God always intervenes). We could confidently assert that in all these worlds, more people *may* choose to act wrongly than the actual world. This is a logical possibility. What matters is that this is logically possible and that is all that is needed to potentially undermine Sterba’s argument, since his argument is cast as a *logical* argument for the non-existence of God.

Sterba grants this logical possibility. The debate between Chen and Sterba rests on the moral evaluation of a HORRENDOUS-less world where more people choose to act wrongly. Chen argues that such a world is morally worse than the actual world, while Sterba argues that such a world is *not* morally worse than the actual world. However, is it obvious that a HORRENDOUS-less world with more evil intentions is morally worse than the actual world?

This is difficult to assess because evil intentions do not always carry more (or less) moral weight than their evil consequences. Our intuitions are pulled in different directions depending on the case. On one hand, one could follow consequentialist intuitions and argue that evil consequences are morally worse than evil intentions (Mill [1861] 1998). A world where someone merely desires to hurt another but does not would be morally better than a world where someone simply gets hurt in the absence of any ill intentions. On the other hand, one could follow Kantian intuitions and argue that evil intentions are morally worse than evil consequences (Kant [1785] 1997). The morality of an action should be based solely on what is under one’s control (i.e., intentions)—the consequences of such intentions are bound up in luck and are neither good nor evil. Kant writes: “Even if . . . this [intention] should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose—if with its greatest efforts it should yet achieve nothing and only the good [intention] were left . . . —then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this worth nor take anything away from it.” (Kant [1785] 1997, p. 8). The point is there is no consensus on how to assess the relative moral weight of evil

intentions and evil consequences. This complicates the moral calculus and is one of the foundational reasons we continue to have lively debates in moral philosophy.

One way to circumvent these complications is to imagine a HORRENDOUS-less world where *all* people have horrendous evil intentions *all* the time. Unlike the previous discussion where there is merely a relative increase in the number of evil intentions vs. the number of good intentions, this way of imagining the HORRENDOUS-less world results in a world that is completely saturated with evil intentions—there is not a single good intention left in this world. If this were the case, Sterba *prima facie* agrees that a HORRENDOUS-less world would be morally worse.

Surely [a HORRENDOUS-less] world [where everyone, not just more people, would all attempt to act horrendously wrong] would be morally worse than our world, and that possibility is all that is needed to undercut my argument. (Sterba 2021, p. 9)

Upon closer inspection, however, Sterba notes that the ‘inner moralities’ of the people in a HORRENDOUS-less world would be equivalent to the inner moralities of the people in the actual world. We might say that they have equivalent moral dispositions. Given this equivalence, he argues that a HORRENDOUS-less world is morally better since, all else being equal, there are no horrendous evil consequences. All else, however, is not equal. There are differences in the quantity of evil intentions across these worlds, but Sterba treats these differences as superficial—mere differences in environments (not differences in inner moralities). To use an analogy, just because salt is solid in a dry environment and dissolves in a liquid environment, it does not mean that salt itself differs in these two cases. Salt is dispositionally equivalent across differing environments. However, the dispositional equivalence across environments means little when one wants to, say, package salt in tissue paper. In this case, only solid forms of salt will do. Salt dissolved in liquid is useless for this purpose. Though salt is dispositionally equivalent across these environments, it matters whether the salt is solid or dissolved. Similarly, the dispositional moral equivalence of people across worlds means little when assessing the relative moral goodness of these worlds. It matters whether evil intentions are actualized or not.

All else being equal, a world with evil intentions is morally worse than a world without evil intentions; so even if the people across different possible worlds have equivalent moral dispositions, it matters whether evil intentions exist or not. What does this tell us about the HORRENDOUS-less world we are considering? In a world where all people have evil intentions all the time, there will no longer be any good intentions. Though horrendous evil consequences would be completely absent, good intentions would also be completely absent. How does this compare to the actual world (with its mixture of both good and evil intentions and consequences)? A case could be made that the actual world, with a mixture of good and evil intentions and consequences, is morally better than worlds where good intentions are completely absent. After all, if this were the case, a HORRENDOUS-less world would have no morally good actions. Whatever else might be said about the actual world, at least it contains some morally good actions. Consequently, it’s arguable that a HORRENDOUS-less world, despite having inhabitants with equivalent inner moralities, is indeed morally worse than the actual world.

It seems, therefore, that there is a way to maintain a Chen-style objection to Sterba’s argument. Not only is it logically possible that all people would choose to act wrongly all the time in a HORRENDOUS-less world, there is a reason to believe that such a world is morally worse than the actual world, even if the ‘inner moralities’ of the people are the same across worlds. However, even if we grant that a HORRENDOUS-less world is morally worse than the actual world, does this show that Sterba’s argument fails? I am not sure it does. Instead, what this may suggest is that there is a faulty assumption at the heart of the Chen–Sterba debate. The assumption is that God would actualize the best morally possible world (where the best morally possible world is assessed in terms of the quantity and distribution of good and evil intentions and consequences). What if the best morally possible world is simply not worth actualizing? Perhaps the lesson from this brief

discussion is *not* that God could have actualized a morally better world than the actual world as Sterba argues. It may turn out that a HORRENDOUS-less world is not morally better than the actual world. The lesson is that even if the actual world is the best morally possible world that could be actualized, God would nevertheless not actualize it because it violates MEPR1 *tout court*. Since the actual world exists, it follows that God does not exist, and a Sterba-style argument for God's non-existence remains more or less intact.

#### 4. Conclusions

Hasker (2004, 2020, 2021) and Chen (2021) have raised objections against Sterba's argument for the non-existence of God based on the existence of horrendous evil consequences. Hasker argues that a HORRENDOUS-less world results in a moral kindergarten, while Sterba argues that it does not. Progress may be made in the debate between Hasker and Sterba by focusing on the *actual* way ordinary people engage in soul-making. Given that the existence of horrendous evil consequences in the actual world has little to do with how ordinary people conduct their lives, if we assume that ordinary people engage in soul-making, then it follows that a HORRENDOUS-less world does not result in a moral kindergarten.

Chen argues that it's logically possible that all people in a HORRENDOUS-less world choose to act wrongly all the time. She goes on to argue that such a world would be morally worse than the actual world. Sterba responds by showing that the 'inner moralities' of these people would be equivalent across worlds and that, all else being equal, the presence of horrendous evil consequences in the actual world makes it morally worse than the HORRENDOUS-less world under consideration. Though Sterba is right about the equivalence of inner moralities across worlds, all else is not equal because the presence or absence of evil intentions matters, and a case can be made for the moral inferiority of this HORRENDOUS-less world with respect to the actual world. Even if this were the case, it does not follow that Sterba's argument fails because it may still be argued that God should simply not actualize a world (even if it's the best morally possible world) because it violates MEPR1.

The upshot of this brief discussion is that it seems Sterba's argument has the potential to survive both Hasker's and Chen's criticisms.

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#### Note

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Article

# God's Prime Directive: Non-Interference and Why There Is No (Viable) Free Will Defense

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**Abstract:** In a recent book and article, James Sterba has argued that there is no free will defense. It is the purpose of this article to show that, in the most technical sense, he is wrong. There is a version of the free will defense that can solve what Sterba (rightly) takes to be the most interesting and severe version of the logical problem of moral evil. However, I will also argue that, in effect (or, we might say, in practice), Sterba is correct. The only working version of the free will defense requires embracing a view that entails consequences theists traditionally have not and cannot accept. Consequently, the one and only free will solution is not viable. Unless some other solution can be found (Sterba argues there is none), the logical problem of evil, as Sterba understands it, either commits one to atheism, or a version of theism that practically all theists would regard as a heresy.

**Keywords:** logical problem of moral evil; James Sterba; open theism; divine non-interference; divine prime directive; Elif Nur Balci; Janusz Salamon; the free will defense; Alvin Plantinga

“I observe all that transpires here, but I do not, cannot, will not interfere”.

—The Watcher

*What if . . .* (Episode 1, Marvel/Disney+)

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## 1. Introduction

The free will defense only works as a solution to the problem of moral evil if one embraces a libertarian understanding of free will. If compatibilism is true, and a person can act freely even if they are causally determined to act as they will, then free will cannot explain why God allows evil. On compatibilism, “to stop that evil God would have had to violate someone’s free will” cannot be used as an excuse for why God allowed an evil because, on compatibilism, any evil could have been stopped by God (without violating free will) simply determining the agent to freely choose differently than they did. For example, on Frankfurtian compatibilism—which suggests an action is free if it done in accordance with one’s second-order desires (see Frankfurt 1971)—God could have prevented the holocaust, without interfering in Hitler’s free will, by simply giving (determining for) Hitler different second order desires.

To be sure, some have tried to defend a compatibilist version of the free will defense (see Almeida 2017; Gillett 2018). However, I take it to be widely regarded by most philosophers that such efforts are doomed to fail.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Alvin Plantinga—whose free will defense is most famous—explicitly stated that the free will defense must assume an incompatibilist view of free will (see Plantinga 1985, p. 45). It is for this reason that, in this essay in which I will be exploring whether there is a viable version of the free will solution to the logical problem of moral evil, I shall assume that it requires a libertarian understanding of free will.

In a recent book and article, James Sterba has argued that there is no free will defense (see Sterba 2019, 2020). It is the purpose of this article to show that, in the most technical sense, he is wrong. There is a version of the free will defense that can solve what Sterba (rightly) takes to be the most interesting and severe version of the logical problem of moral

evil. However, I will also argue that, in effect (or, we might say, *in practice*) Sterba is correct. The only working version of the free will defense requires embracing a view that entails consequences theists traditionally have not and cannot accept. Consequently, the one and only free will solution is not viable. Unless some other solution can be found (Sterba argues there is none), the logical problem of evil, as Sterba understands it, either commits one to atheism, or a version of theism that practically all theists would regard as a heresy.

## 2. Sterba's Problem of Evil

The strictest understanding of logical problem of moral evil—as it was articulated, for example, by Mackie (1982)—has always been somewhat uninteresting because it “overplays its hand” (if you will). It suggests that the existence of a tri-omni (all-good/powerful/knowing) deity is logically incompatible with existence of evil such that, if this traditional deity of theism (i.e., God) exists, there should be no evil at all. To defeat his argument, it seems one simply needs to challenge the necessity of the principles on which Mackie bases his argument, or just provide a single logically possible scenario in which God and a single evil event co-exist.

However, imagining such a scenario does not address the concern I have when I think about the logical problem of moral evil. I wonder, not how God could allow any evil, but how God could allow the evil that exists in our world. Especially troubling are particularly horrendous evils, that are either inexcusable (that cannot be justified regardless of their consequences) or from which it seems no moral justifying consequences do or even could come. The holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the rape and murder of small children—it does not seem that the existence of any of these evils is logically compatible with the existence of a tri-omni God—because if a tri-omni God existed, he would prevent them—and yet they occur. Combine them all together into one possible world, as they are in ours, and it seems obvious that such a world is not a world that a tri-omni being would actualize. While a world with no-evil might not be logically possible, clearly a world with much less evil than our own is (at the least, it would not contain horrendous evil); and the actualization of such a world is what a tri-omni being, by definition, would prefer.

According to James Sterba (2019, 2020), while Alvin Plantinga's famous “free will defense” was initially thought to be the agreed upon solution to the logical problem of moral evil, further debate on the issue revealed that it only functioned as a solution to a less interesting version of the problem. For example, the debate revealed issues with Plantinga's idea that all free creatures suffer from transworld depravity (so that, in every possible world that God could create, all free creatures perform some evil actions). “Faced with such dissension”, Sterba points out,

“Plantinga has entertained . . . that all he really needs to counter the argument from evil posed by John Mackie is simply to espouse the One Wrong Thesis (OW), which just claims that if God tried to actualize a morally perfect world, at least one person he creates would act wrongly. (Sterba 2019, p. 25)

However, since our world is clearly not a world where just one person acts wrongly, Plantinga's solution is uninteresting. It does not address the issue of whether the horrendous evil that actually exists in our world is logically compatible with the traditional god of theism—and that is the harder problem.

However, even Plantinga's original “transworld depravity” solution is inadequate to the relevant task. The fact it's possible that, in every possible world, every free creature does some evil action does not explain why God allows our world to contain horrendous evils. Indeed, Sterba argues that all free will solutions to this problem ultimately fail. To oversimplify a bit, given that God is all-good, he should prevent persons from doing actions that significantly curtail the free will of others—either by God preventing the person from being able to carry out the evil action that they intend to do, or allowing the evil action but keeping any free will restricting consequences from being realized. Since our world clearly includes such evils and their consequences, the existence of our world is not logically compatible with God's existence.

To my eyes, there are a few ways to defend this, all of which I believe Sterba appeals to in one way or another. The most direct way, which Sterba articulates clearly in his 2020 paper on the topic, is by appealing to the Pauline Principle, which suggests that one should never do evil so that good may come of it. Allowing someone to curtail the freedom of another, when one could easily prevent it, is an evil; and even though doing so might accomplish some other good—like the preservation of the offender’s free will, or the opportunity to show compassion to the victim—if the Pauline principle is right, such a good cannot be used to excuse the allowance of that evil. To put Sterba’s argument more precisely, the Pauline Principle entails three minimal moral requirements—and if they are right, such a good cannot be used to excuse the allowance of that evil. However, since, as Sterba argues, these principles are acceptable to consequentialists, non-consequentialists, atheists, and theists alike, the free-will defense is not an adequate response to the existence of the horrendous free-will restricting evil that exists in our world.

Second, the right of someone (A) to rob someone else (B) of their free will (e.g., by A killing B) is not as morally important as the right to free will that the other person (B) has. Since, if A intends to kill B, an infringement of free will is inevitable, God should act to ensure that the least objectionable infringement of free will occurs. In other words, since restricting the free will of a killer is less morally objectionable than the free will restriction the killer’s action will bring about, God should act to ensure that the free will restricting action of the killer does not take place. Or, if God will not stop the decision, God should ensure that the consequences of the killer’s intended actions are not felt—especially since he could do so without a major infringement of the killer’s free will (by, say, giving him a flat tire that derails his plans).

A third, related, way to defend this idea is to point out that if the existence of free will is the greater good that excuses God’s allowance of evil—which is what the free-will defense seems to necessarily imply—then God cannot allow actions that restrict the free will of others. Evils that do not restrict free will would be excusable; but acts that restrict the free will of others—especially the free will of many others—cannot be tolerated. They would reduce the overall amount of free will in the world, and thus the excuse that “God wants free will to exist” could not be invoked to explain why God allows them. If free will is a greater good, then the free will of one person should be restricted if doing so protects the free will of others.

### 3. A Possible Freewill Solution

It is with this last argument in mind that I would like to propose a version of the free will solution (to Sterba’s more interesting version of the logical problem of moral evil) that can defend the notion of God’s existence. My argument, however, should not be mistaken as an argument for theism. Despite the fact that the solution I will propose is a defense of the traditional tri-omni god of theism, it is not a solution that theists would traditionally (i.e., usually, historically, typically) be willing (or perhaps even could be willing) to accept. Thus the crux of my argument is that the only solution to the relevant logical problem of moral evil is one that is, ultimately, incompatible with (or unpalatable to) theism. It is not viable and thus theism should be rejected.

The central idea of the solution is to insist that, when it comes to the freely-willed actions of free creatures, God must maintain an absolute non-interference policy—a kind of Divine Prime Directive (DPD), if you will. In *Star Trek*, the crew of the Enterprise (or any Federation starship) is bound by “General Order 1”, also known as The Prime Directive, which forbids them from interfering in the development of any primitive (i.e., pre-warp) civilization. Even if a planet’s inhabitants are enslaving half their population, even if they are about to commit genocide, even if they are dealing out unjust punishments, even if they are about to destroy themselves or be destroyed (say by natural forces)—the Prime Directive demands that the Starship’s crew just observe and not interfere. That is not to say that Federation crews do not routinely ignore The Prime Directive. (Additionally, that is also not to say that they should not, although Picard’s excuses were usually better than



Kirk's (see Johnson 2015). However, this is what The Prime Directive demands: absolute non-interference.

If God is bound by a similar, divine, unimpeachable, version of The Prime Directive—so that no matter how good or evil a person's action is or will be, and no matter what the consequences of that action are or will be, God must not interfere in any way with their ability to freely perform and bring about the consequences of that action—then the answer to the logical problem of moral evil is obvious. God does not prevent horrendous moral evils because he is bound by a Divine Prime Directive (DPD) which entails that he cannot—and that would include evil actions that restrict or interfere with the free will of others. To work, this solution must insist that (to borrow Sterba's example) even preventing a murder by giving someone a flat tire, or (to borrow my own example) preventing the holocaust by giving young Hitler a heart attack, are off the table (see Johnson 2022). The argument would be that such actions rob the actor of the opportunity to freely choose to do the relevant actions and make their effects felt, and thus constitute violations of free will. However, if this view was embraced, it would explain why God did not and does not take such actions.

In my assessment, I am not alone. In reply to Sterba, Salamon (2021) argues that "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 . . .*". (Salamon 2021, p. 1 *emphasis added*)

I will return to Salamon's argument later.

An initial difficulty with this suggestion might seem obvious: how can a tri-omni entity be bound by a directive? The answer is obvious too, but also problematic. What's obvious is that the directive must be self-imposed. God recognizes that he should be bound by it—that non-interference is always best—and thus never violates it. He is thus not controlled or limited by some outside force; God's non-interference is just a consequence of God being the best possible being. What's problematic is, the notion that "non-interference is always best" is difficult to defend.

Indeed, in *Star Trek*, it is very obvious—quite often—that non-interference is not always the morally best policy. Genocide should be stopped, slavery should be abolished, unjust punishments should not be rendered, species-ending natural calamities should be averted. Such things are morally preferable. Likewise, it seems equally obvious that preventing murders and holocausts with flat tires and heart attacks is morally preferable. The same is true for preventing person A from unjustly restricting the free will of person B, even if it requires interfering in the free will of person A. As Sterba points out, this is why societies have laws that prevent such behaviors. We view the right to free will action as more paramount than the right of others to restrict it, and thus preserving the former is morally preferable.

The theist might attempt to defend the DPD in the same way that the federation defends The Prime Directive in *Star Trek*: we cannot see all ends, and thus cannot know what the ultimate consequences of interference will be. They might be worse, and thus we should just play it safe. (For example, perhaps someone on the planet that Picard is about to save will grow up to be the next Hitler, or Khan Noonien Singh). As a defense of *Star Trek*'s Prime Directive, this argument is problematic but perhaps defensible (see Johnson 2018). However, it decidedly cannot be used by traditional theists, who believe that God has perfect knowledge, to defend the DPD. If God has perfect knowledge, he *can* see all ends.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, this raises the specter of suggesting that, because God can see all ends, God knows that, despite how it appears to us, non-interference is always the best policy (i.e., that non-interference will always lead to the best results). This, however, is far too convenient.

Non-interference *always* leads to the better consequences? That is just special pleading. It cannot be that allowing evil will always naturally result in more good. Sometimes it would and sometimes it would not. Of course we do not know exactly how all the “would”s and “would not”s are distributed among the list of all possible evils—which evils would be made better by interference and which would not—but there are a countless number of ways they *could* be distributed. To suppose, without argument, that they happen to have the one and only distribution they must in order for God to exist—where everything is a “wouldn’t”—smacks of desperation. “God doesn’t stop evil because it just so happens that he never should” is not a real solution.

Along these same lines, however, one might insist that God does interfere when it is best, and does not when it is not—and it only seems worse to us when he does not interfere because God sees ends that we cannot see. However, this suggestion abandons the DPD under consideration in favor of skeptical theism—which is not a free-will solution and also fails as a response to the moral problem of evil because of its own faults (see Sterba 2019, chp. 4; see also, Johnson 2013, 2021). So, we still do not have what we need, which is a reason why God would embrace a non-interference policy.

#### 4. Justice Is No Excuse

In “A Modified Free-will Defense”, Balci (2022) argues that God may not interfere to prevent evils that hinder the free will of others because to do so would circumvent God’s desire for justice. Although Balci does not use the term Prime Directive, or even “non-interference policy”, she defends the same idea and incorporates it into what she calls her “structural free-will defense”.

I suggest that this divine permission should be understood as structural permission. . . . I argue that, rather than focusing on individual acts and their results, we should focus on the structure in which free-will operates. Accordingly, structural free-will refers to a standard and general structure in which all human actions occur. . . . The idea advocates the free-will as a possibility for all human beings, but not the free-will distributed among individuals. Therefore, issues such as how this possibility is realized through human actions and what proportion and amount of evil these actions cause become irrelevant to the structural free-will defense. . . . In the structural free-will defense, there is no distinction between the person who uses their free-will and the person harmed by this action. Evil is only related to structural free-will as a general possibility . . . . In the structural defense of free-will, God is the creator of this structure. Just as structural free-will has nothing to do with individual moral free-will, God acts in harmony with this structure as the creator of it. In other words, God, the creator of this structure, cannot be understood as one who dispenses free will to each individual for use in each particular action, thus openly permitting evil acts. God does not prefer one’s freedom to another’s freedom. God does not give somebody more significant freedom and deprive others of it. God allows individual human actions, whether good or bad, to take place and this permission should be understood as general permission. God has revealed this structure in a way that guarantees the free action of everyone. . . . Therefore, God cannot be held responsible for the moral consequences of any evil act of an individual who uses the freedom provided by this structure. How the individuals use this freedom is entirely up to them. (pp. 4–5)

She also rightly observes that “the moral justification for why God created such a structure and why God does not structurally interfere with human choices cannot be explained by structural free-will defense theory alone”. (p. 5) In other words, suggesting God *does* abide by a non-interference policy does not explain *why* he abides by a non-interference policy—and a successful defense would need to explain *why*. Balci, however, has an answer. She suggests God does so to promote justice. “[T]he promotion of free will

[is] not [for] the promotion of amount and distribution of free will itself but as the promotion of the principle of justice. . . . [it is] a free-will defense in which justice is promoted". (p. 5)  
How does free will promote justice? Balci tells us.

The fact that [hu]man[s] can be justly held responsible by God is only possible if God gives [hu]man[s] free-will. Since humans are held responsible for their free will, they are the creator of their own actions, whether significant or insignificant, good or bad. The human under the divine sovereignty is an agent being morally tested by God. . . . Whomever God is testing, is sure that they will receive righteous rewards and punishments from God, due to their relationship with the just God. Therefore, in this relationship, God is also morally responsible to give just responses to His servants. . . . If free-will is to be promoted, this is only possible [if] the moral relationship between human's accountability and God's just responses is not violated. . . . A God who interferes with human's [sic] free will cannot continue to hold humans accountable in a just way. If God occasionally intervenes in human's [sic] actions, there would be no point in divine condemnation . . . an action that will be the subject of divine moral judgment must be an act of complete free will and uninterrupted. (pp. 6–7)

In other words, God maintains an absolute non-interference policy when it comes to human free action because, otherwise, he will not be able to ensure justice—he will not be able to reward or punish humans for said actions. The problems with Balci's argument are two-fold.

First, it's quite clear that the rewards, and especially the punishments, that Balci has in mind do not accomplish justice. Balci's writing makes it clear that she adopts very traditional religious views, which would include the traditional notion of hell, where those who do evil in this world are punished eternally for it. However, of course, no evil that a person does in this world deserves infinite punishment because the crime and the harm it generates are finite—and it is in proportion to such things that "just punishments" are determined. Infinite punishment for finite crimes is not justice, it's overkill. Johnathan Edwards, of course argued that since sins are against God, and God is infinite, they deserve infinite punishment—but multiple scholars have shown, in detail, why this is essentially a poor ad hoc "just so" rationalization for an invented and ultimately indefensible theological doctrine.<sup>3</sup> Seymour (1998), for example, explains why the arguments of Augustine, Aquinas, and Edwards all fail as defenses of the traditional notion of Hell as a place of eternal torment, and instead argues that the only way to defend such a notion is by modifying it. Hell, if it is to be just, must be a place where people have the free will to continually sin, over and over, for all eternity—thus continually deserving, forever, more and more punishment for what they have done/keep doing. However, not only is this completely contrary to the view of hell upheld by traditional religious believers such as Balci, and indeed the vast majority of monotheists (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim),<sup>4</sup> this conception of Hell leads us to the second problem of Balci's view.

While this modified version of Hell—filled with sinners who just keep sinning and thus deserve more and more punishment—is, by itself, logically possible, it does not seem to be the kind of place that God would (or, given that he is all-good, logically could) allow to exist. What would be the point? "We need a place filled with people who just keep doing evil so I can continue to give them what they deserve for doing evil". Even if they just keep visiting punishments upon each other, this is not the kind of place that even a minimally decent being would allow to exist (if they could prevent it). Allowing evil simply for the sake of punishing evil-doers is not a noble characteristic. While I grant that persons with unreformable characters are logically possible, and that heaven could not be heaven if such persons were included in it, if God were all-good, he would not create a place where such persons could simply continue to sin and be punished for it. Their annihilation, for example, would obviously be morally preferable.

Something similar is true of allowing evil in this world for the sake of punishing evil-doers. This is not something that an all-good being can do. It not only violates the

Pauline Principle—by allowing an evil to accomplish a good—and all three of the moral principles that it entails, but it seems especially cruel. Even if a world in which a murder is punished is better than a world in which the murderer gets off “scott free”, no morally decent person would allow a murder so that the murderer could be justly punished. However, suggesting that God maintains a non-interference policy because, otherwise, he could not accomplish justice by holding people accountable for what they do, entails that God does exactly that.

To be fair, Balci insists that this is not what God does on her view.

I can justify this non-intervention through the moral relationship between God and human[s] which appears only in theism. However, this should not be understood as a condition/cause of God’s own justice. Otherwise, we might end up with an interpretation in which we accuse God of allowing evil only to do his justice. Free will (non-intervention) and justice (intervention) are not in causal relations. Rather they are two complementary graces in God’s relations with human beings. (p. 8)

However, the problem I have articulated here is not one of cause and effect. My argument is not that God’s justice causes evil, or that free will causes justice, or vice-versa, or anything of the sort. So pointing out that free will and justice are not in causal relation is irrelevant. The problem is, regardless of what Balci’s own personal view of God is, her argument *entails* that God does not ever interfere in human free actions because otherwise holding people morally responsible for their actions is impossible—and that means that *the reason* God does not step in to prevent evil is so that he can punish evildoers.

We can better understand the problem by articulating and responding to a footnote Balci added on the topic.

God’s justice can be understood in two ways. The first is that God gives a reward to the victims of free will He created. Second, it is human’s [sic] responsibility how to use free will, and therefore God rewards those who are aggrieved as a result of human action. Reward and punishment, which are God’s justice, are the result of free will, something God created. Let us imagine, human beings might not have used their free will for evil. In this case, God’s punishment ceases to be an inevitable result. So, punishment is only an option. As Keith Ward wisely points out . . . we can consistently think that God creates the possibilities of evils without wanting actual evils to happen. (Footnote 9, p. 12)

There are a number of issues here. First, there is no difference between the two understandings of God’s justice Balci articulates. “Giving a reward to the victims of free will” and “rewarding those who are aggrieved as a result of human action” are the exact same thing. Second, “rewarding the victims” of free acts is also morally problematic as a reason for allowing an easily preventable evil. No one should allow a rape so that they can reward the victim of that rape. Third, rewarding the victims of evil is not the only way to understand justice; it is not even the primary way justice is understood. Throughout the paper, it’s clear that rewarding good action and punishing evil action are the main aspects of justice that Balci has in mind. Fourth, pointing out that human beings might not have used their free will for evil is completely beside the point. Since God knew that they *could* use it for evil, if God knows he will never interfere in free will for the sake of justice, God is knowingly willing to allow evil for the sake of punishment—and that is not something even a morally decent being would be willing to do. Furthermore, on Balci’s theistic view, God clearly knew humans would use free will for evil, so the possibility that they might not is moot.

To be charitable, one might understand Balci as suggesting that God does not adopt a non-interference policy *explicitly* for the sake of punishing evil doers, but instead simply for the sake of being able to give people what they deserve—whether it be reward for doing good or punishment for doing evil. After all, that is essentially the definition of justice. The problem is, the adoption of a non-interference policy (or Balci’s structural free will

approach) is not necessary for the “reward the good” part of that equation. God could grant all humans free will and decide to not interfere when people will freely choose to do good (thus enabling him to reward them), but then *to* interfere when they freely choose to do evil.<sup>5</sup> The only reason to adopt a *complete* non-interference policy—for God to take Balci’s structural approach—is to make possible the punishment of evil; the reward of good is possible without it. So, despite what the “stated” reason is that God adopts a non-interference policy, on Balci’s “structural free will/justice” defense, in effect the reason is to punish evil-doers—and, again, that is not something a morally decent being would do.

However, this brings to mind one final possibility: What if interfering with one kind of action is not possible without interfering with the other? Justice would still fail as a reason to adopt a non-interference policy—again, as I am sure Sterba would point out, doing so violates the Pauline Principle and its three implied moral principles. However, it is to the potential impossibility of (what we might call) “compartmentalized interference” that I shall now turn.

### 5. Motivating the Divine Prime Directive

For reasons that Sterba has already pointed out, we cannot defend the DPD by simply saying that “free will is just that important”—so important that no violation can be tolerated. If it’s that important, it should be maximized, and maximization will require occasional violations (e.g., to prevent one person using their free will to violate the free will of ten others). This would be like thinking political liberty is of maximal value but then advocating for anarchy. Philosophers from Locke, to Mill, to Rawls all valued liberty, but also recognized that it must be occasionally restricted in order for it to be maximized. Popper ([1945] 2012) recognized something similar about tolerance. Tolerating everything would tolerate intolerance, so those who love tolerance must limit it. So valuing tolerance means you cannot tolerate intolerant views, valuing liberty means you cannot tolerate that which limits it, and the same is true of free will. Valuing free will means you cannot tolerate decisions that restrict or limit it in others.

Where we might start to find a viable defense of the DPD is in the very nature of libertarian free will. Consider Frankfurt-style counterexamples, which are supposed to negate libertarian definitions of free will by showing that free will does not require alternate possibilities (see Frankfurt 1969). In them, someone has a device in their brain that monitors their brain activity such that, if they are about to fail to freely decide to do X, the device kicks in and makes them do X. However, if they are about to freely choose to do X on their own, the device only monitors their brain activity and lets them do it. Frankfurt argues that if the latter occurs, clearly the person acts freely—and yet they cannot do otherwise (because, if they were about to do otherwise, the device would kick in and prevent them from doing so).

A vast literature exists on the topic, which I will not summarize here—except to point out three things: (1) I think such counterexamples fail to falsify the libertarian definition (see Johnson 2016, lecture 18); (2) if they do succeed, there is no free will solution (because, as noted above, it only works on a libertarian understanding of free will); and (3) one common libertarian response is that, if libertarian free will exists, such a device is impossible. For the device to kick-in, at least some “flicker” of a free will decision must have already occurred—enough to ground moral responsibility and say that the decision was made (see Speak 2002). In the same way, one might argue that, given the nature of free-willed decisions, it’s not possible for even God to know whether someone is about to freely decide to do good (so he knows not to interfere), or about freely decide to do evil (so he knows he should interfere). For the same reason that a device that only kicks in when you are about to “fail to decide to do X” is impossible, God cannot decide to only interfere when a person is about to freely choose to do evil. In order for free-will decisions to be possible, God simply must not ever interfere, and let us act as we will.

This cannot be the whole story of the solution, however; even if this is true, why does not God step in after evil actions are freely chosen to make sure that their severe (e.g.,

free-will restricting) consequences are not felt? To answer this question, one might appeal to free will's fragility. Perhaps free will is so delicate and unstable that no violations, even of its consequences, can be tolerated. If you violate it, *at all*, in any way, it ceases to exist. Even if you give someone a heart attack a day before they might freely choose to do evil, that is too much. One way to defend this idea would be to suggest that, if God starts interfering in free will, using his divine powers to prevent or curb the consequences of freely chosen evil actions, it will become quickly apparent that such actions are not "really possible" and thus the ability to freely choose to do them will be removed. In short, in a world in which God always acts to prevent or curb the consequences of horrendously evil acts, "the ability to choose to do otherwise" is not robust enough to ground libertarian free will.

Whether this is true is difficult to determine. On the one hand, persons and governments can interfere with free will without eliminating it; on the other hand, they are not using unlimited divine powers. If things always worked out so that, coincidentally or magically, evil actions were either always stopped or limited to non-free will violating consequences, people might stop trying. Regardless, it seems that it is at least a defensible view.

Salamon (2021) defends the idea that "God never intervenes to change the natural course of events to prevent evils" by appealing, not to ensuring justice, but simply to the greater good of "respecting human sovereignty". (p. 1) He invokes Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's doctrine of "collective selfhood", which he also takes to be a part of Dostoyevsky's solution to the problem of evil, which suggests that God relates to humanity as a whole, rather than individually. Consequently, God grants *humanity* (as a whole) free will—not individual persons—and thus necessarily never directly interferes in human actions, good or evil. Although I will return to the overall viability of Salamon's view later, I take this to be another possible defense of the DPD.<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of which option you take for defending the idea that God adopts an absolute policy of non-interference, we can now see how this solution answers Sterba's argument specifically. He admits that there are certain exceptions to the Pauline Principle. For example, if a person is forced to choose between killing one native themselves, or allowing 20 (or 200, or 2000) to be killed, the evil in question is justified. The solution in question suggests that God is forced, despite his omnipotence, to choose between there being no free will (and thus no moral good) at all, and allowing there to be whatever moral good and evil we choose to create. The suggestion here is that God is morally justified in risking the latter in the name of avoiding the former because it is a greater good.

The solution becomes unviable, however, when its consequences are considered.

## 6. Considering the Consequences

First of all, embracing the idea that God binds himself to an absolute non-interference policy is almost tantamount to embracing deism—deism being the doctrine that God created the universe but does not interfere in its operations—and most theists openly reject deism. There are, however, a few subtle differences between deism and the view being considered. Deists are traditionally more concerned with violations of natural law (not free will); deists, such as Thomas Jefferson, denied the existence of miracles. However, embracing the DPD would not mean that miracles could *never* occur—just not ones that interfere with free will (although, it should be noted, most miracles that theists believe in would interfere with free will). Another problem resides in the fact that the god of Deism is often likened to a watchmaker, who designed (or wound up) the universe and then let it go, knowing that everything that happened would be according to his design. Such a universe is a deterministic universe in which libertarian free will cannot exist; thus, on this view, no version of the free-will defense is viable. Another difference is that deists usually maintain that God is unconcerned with humanity and the goings on of the universe—but God embracing a non-interference policy does not entail that he is unconcerned.

The theological view most compatible with God embracing the DPD is Open Theism. On Open Theism, to create our universe, God did not actualize an entire possible world

(complete with our entire history, past, present, and future). He started it in such a way that it would eventually have free creatures, and then followed along with its development, in real time. On Open Theism, God is in time, not timeless, and does not have knowledge of the future. So he does not know what we will choose or what the subsequent consequences of our choices will be. (For some open theists, he *cannot* have knowledge of the future—although, they argue, that does not limit his omniscience (see Rhoda et al. 2006; Tuggy 2007).) However, on Open Theism, he can and does still care about what choices we make, and so is concerned about the fate of humanity.

To be clear, I am not saying that Open Theism is committed to the idea that God binds himself to the DPD. Even without foreknowledge, God could occasionally know that some person is about to freely choose to do something evil and act to prevent it. After all, we can do this. What I am saying is that it's easy to fit the DPD into Open Theism. God starts the universe, gives humans free will knowing that evil will likely result, but cannot foresee the exact consequences of free will decisions. This not only means that he does not know whether or not the amount of good in the world will outweigh the evil, so that the “risk of evil made inevitable by free will” will ultimately be “worth it”; but it also means he would not know the consequences of his own acts, like if he were to choose to limit certain freely willed decisions or their consequences. Interfering with free will, even once, could endanger its existence—and so, either because he still thinks it is worth the risk, or (ala Salamon) he sees humanity's sovereignty as an overall justifying good, God embraces a non-interference policy and allows human history to be solely a consequence of what we freely choose.<sup>7</sup>

However, although the DPD/Open Theism view seems to reconcile God's existence with the evil that actually exists in the world, it does come with consequences—and those consequences are consequences that most theists would not be willing to accept. For example, it means that most of the Bible must be rejected. It is full of stories and doctrines which entail that God has and is willing to interfere in the free will decisions of humans. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son (and then prevents him from doing so) (Gen. 22), “hardened the heart” of Pharaoh (Exodus 9), and then led Israel out of Egypt, intervened in many battles (e.g., Joshua 10), and controls the decisions of both kings (Proverbs 21:1) and ordinary men (Proverbs 16:9). Additionally, if free will is so fragile that God cannot give someone a flat tire to prevent a murder, he certainly cannot reveal himself to prophets, or incarnate himself, go around performing miracles, and start reforming religion.

Now, to be fair, I could be sympathetic to the argument that incarnation is the only way that God could try to influence human history, and indeed interfere with free will, without endangering it. As a human, he could interfere in free will only as much as any other human could—and since human to human inference in free will does not eliminate it, his actions as a human would not be risky. This does mean, however, that as an incarnate human God would not be able to claim he is divine, or prove to be with miracles; this would put a force behind his interference that, according to this view, would endanger free will. As C.S. Lewis put it, “Merely to override a human will (as His felt presence in any but the faintest and most mitigated degree would certainly do) would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo” (Lewis 2021, Letter #8). So, at best, the DPD/Open Theism view must consider the gospels to be gross exaggerations.

This also means that, on the DPD/Open Theism view, most petitionary prayer is completely useless. Whether it be for someone to “accept Christ”, for God to guide the actions of a surgeon, for no one to be hurt at a football game, or for a good parking spot at the mall—fulfilling a petitionary prayer almost always requires God to interfere in the freely willed actions of humans. Indeed, since on this view, flat tires and heart attacks to prevent horrendous evils are off the table, even prayers for God to alter the weather would be off the table. Most miracles certainly would not be permitted—especially those that would make God's presence obvious. At best, one could pray for God to whisper a non-interfering unclear “woo” into someone's ear.

This is all, of course, contrary to what almost all theists traditionally believe. They usually embrace the Bible's teachings (even if they do not consider it inherent), consider the gospels to be at least somewhat historical, believe that miracles have and still do occur, and believe that petitionary prayers are not pointless. However, perhaps the most unpalatable consequence of this view is that human history is completely outside of God's control. If how human history turns out is completely up to us, then there is no guarantee at all that what God wants to happen in history will happen. Not only is this unbiblical (Isaiah 46, Job 42), but it is contrary to the very idea of God's sovereignty which is arguably as much a part of the traditional conception of God as is omniscience, omnipotence, and omni-benevolence.

Now, it might be possible for a temporal view of God that embraces the DPD but that also includes divine foreknowledge to rescue divine sovereignty. On this view, God would consider multiple ways of starting the universe, look into the future of each to see how granting its creatures free will will turn out (what future will they determine for themselves), and then start the universe that has the outcome he wants. However, there are two major problems with this view. One is explaining how divine foreknowledge is compatible with libertarian free will, which I have argued elsewhere is impossible to do (see Johnson 2009). If knowing infallibility beforehand how someone will freely choose is impossible—because that entails that they could not have chosen otherwise—then it is impossible for God to predict what future free will creatures will determine for themselves. The second problem is that this view seems to land us right back into the problem it is trying to solve: reconciling God's existence with the existence of horrendous evil in the world. If God is all good, but knew the universe would turn out like it has, he should have set it up differently. For this view to work, this (i.e., our universe's history) has to be the best possible way human history could have turned out—and that is hard to believe.

### 7. Why the DPD Solution Is Not Viable

It's hard to believe, but of course it's not logically impossible—which is why the DPD solution I have articulated is at least *a* free will solution to the interesting version of the logical problem of moral evil Sterba articulates. In fact, it is the only one. Any free will solution that allows God to occasionally interfere with free will will raise unanswerable moral questions about why he did not in this or that situation—such as to prevent the holocaust or some other such horrendous evil. Now, some might think that one solution is enough to “solve” Sterba's problem, but in all fairness it is not.

Alvin Plantinga has argued that, to answer arguments which suggest that A and B are logically incompatible, one must only tell a single story in which A and B are true together—and the story need not be true or even believable (see Plantinga 1974, p. 58). While it is technically true that such a story demonstrates that A and B are logically compatible, it's not clear this tactic always solves the problem. If it is the *only* story a person can think of—the only way they can imagine that A and B are true together—then, if that person thinks that A and B are true together, it's a story that person must embrace. If the story is absurd, that is a problem. What's more, if it is established that the story in question is the *only way* that A and B could be true together, then everyone who believes A and B must accept the absurd story as true; and, again, that's a problem. Even though it is a story in which both A and B are true, if the story entails things that such persons are not willing to embrace, especially if it conflicts with things that such persons believe because they also believe A or B, then it does not function as a satisfactory answer to how, logically, such persons can believe both A and B—and that, rather than the mere logical compatibility of A and B, is the real issue.

To put it more formally, suppose you believe both A and B, but I have argued that A and B cannot be true together. You reply with a story, S, in which A and B are true together. However, I then observe that, because you believe A, you also believe C; and because you believe B, you also believe D—and I observe that story S is one that entails that both C and D are false. Since story S is not something you can believe, but it is the only explanation



you have offered as to how A and B could be true together, you have not successfully defended your ability to believe both A and B. You could logically believe both A and B if you also believed S—but you do not, so you cannot. For example, in 2011, I argued that the only way to solve the logical problem of natural evil—to logically reconcile God’s existence with the fact that the inevitability of natural disasters is woven into the very laws of our universe—is to embrace the idea that someone or something else created our universe (e.g., that we live in a computer simulation; see Johnson 2011). Since theists actively reject the notion that someone or something else besides God created our universe, this solution cannot be used by theists to logically reconcile their belief in God with natural evil.

Likewise, the solution I have proposed here, which tries to answer how God’s existence can be reconciled with the moral evil that actually exists in our world, suggests that God, without knowledge of the future, granted his creatures free will, knowing that evil would likely result, and then vowed to adhere to an absolute non-interference policy no matter how bad things got. This, however, is not a solution that theists would traditionally be willing to accept as it is difficult to defend and too contrary to the typical theist’s theology and worldview. Not only is such a policy morally problematic, but embracing this view defies scripture, renders petitionary prayers unanswerable, and denies God’s sovereignty (doctrines that theists believe primarily because they believe in God). The view is heresy.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the problem Sterba presents has no *viable* free will solution; the solution I have articulated does not explain how theists can both believe in an all-good god and acknowledge the evil that exists in the world. Additionally, unless some other kind of solution presents itself—which Sterba convincingly argues in his book, it does not—the logical problem of moral evil, as he presents it, provides adequate reason to embrace atheism.

## 8. A Final Remark

In conclusion, let me make clear that, while Salamon (2021) would undoubtedly agree with me that the DPD serves as a solution to Sterba’s argument, he would deny my suggestion that it is unviable. While he admits that there is a “need to show that [his] views are broadly compatible with at least some ‘traditional’ interpretations of theism” (p. 4), he believes he accomplishes this task. To do so, he points out how the views he defends “emerge uncontroversially from Eastern Orthodox Christianity” and lists a number of Eastern Orthodox scholars who embrace these kinds of views and ground them in “Byzantine patristic sources”. (p. 4)

To this, my reply is as follows: Like Salamon, I too know scholars—in my case they are catholic and protestant—who embrace the kind of non-interventionist Open Theism, and all that goes with it, necessary to make this solution work. Additionally, to do so, they quote scripture and ancient church founders. However, that does not mean they define what the view of the church, the vast majority of believers, or what theists traditionally believe. After all, even the most famous open theists admitted in the very title of their book—*The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*—that, although their defense of Open Theism was biblical, it was a challenge to the *traditional* view (see Pinnock et al. 1994). Indeed, when most believers find out what open theism is—including pastors, church leaders, and those most interested in doing apologetics—they object vociferously and label open theists unorthodox heretics. For example, the vote to remove open theists Pinnock and Sanders as members of the Evangelical Theological Society only failed procedurally because it required more than a majority vote. (It was just short of the 2/3 necessary to pass; see Robinson 2014).

I contend that the same would happen to Eastern orthodox scholars that openly embrace Salamon’s view and admit what it entails. Indeed, in his defense against the charge of deism, not only does Salamon admit that non-interference is not “traditional”, (p. 12), but he admits that it entails that the only way that God can “engage with and inspire human beings in the course of history” is by being “present to human consciousness”. (p. 12) This means no direct revelation, no incarnation, and (virtually) no miracles. (He

might deny that what he says here implies it is the *only* way, but like I pointed out above, non-interference entails that such things cannot happen.) Obviously, this is not acceptable to most theists.<sup>9</sup>

Likewise, he also admits that the sense of communal responsibility to which he appeals to defend his argument entails that “precise attribution of responsibility for particular evils [is] impossible (making all evil essentially social)”. (p. 13) That would mean that no individual can be held responsible for their sins—and that completely invalidates both the doctrine of penal substitution and of hell (and heaven for that matter), and the very idea that *individuals* need to be forgiven of *their* sins (which I take to be the defining characteristic of all versions of Christianity, and to be essential to monotheism in general). (Notice that, if God grants free will to humanity as a whole, and not individual humans, it also makes no sense to punish individuals for individual sins, and Balci’s whole notion of justice is out the window.)

I have no doubt that Salamon knows of scholars who argue for the acceptability of embracing such views, and do so by citing orthodox scholars. Undoubtedly, those scholars would argue that theists *should* abandon the views that they have traditionally held and, instead, embrace their view of god; and, undoubtedly, that is what theists should do if they want a version of theism that is defensible. However, this in no way makes such views traditional, and thus in no way makes his solution to Sterber’s problem viable. To put it simply, these are views that neither can nor would be embraced by the vast majority of people who do, or ever have, called themselves theists.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the picture of the universe the solution paints is almost indistinguishable from one in which God does not exist at all.

At best, it paints a universe not unlike the fictional Marvel universe, in which “The Watcher” watches the events of the multiverse—and even cares about what happens—but does not, cannot, and will not interfere. However, of course, The Watcher is not the god of traditional theism.<sup>11</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Almeida (2017) argues that, in order to solve (what I shall call the less interesting version of) the logical problem of moral evil, the compatibilist just needs to show that “there is at least one metaphysically possible world in which God coexists with evil”. (p. 57) While I am not convinced that he is right, or that such a world is possible on compatibilism, his argument decidedly does not address the more interesting problem that Sterba (2019, 2020) points out. If there is a possible world in which everyone always freely chooses to do the good, which if compatibilism is true there necessarily must be, then such a world is the kind of world God would necessarily create. Even if all possible worlds have some evil, God would still create the world with the least evil—and that decidedly is not our world, since it obviously could have less evil. Thus the existence of our world is logically incompatible with God’s existence.

<sup>2</sup> Before this essay is over, we will consider the possibility that God cannot see all ends.

<sup>3</sup> This argument never appeared until after the doctrine of hell was adopted, thus it is a “just so” justification for an invented doctrine (not the reason that it arose). For a very thoughtful and through refutation of this argument, see Patheos’ “Infinite Punishment for Finite Sins” at <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/daylightatheism/essays/infinite-punishment-for-finite-sins> (accessed on 14 September 2022).

<sup>4</sup> The view has a number of problems that make it unpalatable to the traditional theist. A lifelong sinner could stop sinning in the afterlife, and thus no longer deserve punishment. In fact, character reformation would be possible such that the sinner would no longer deserve to be in Hell. What happens then? Do they enter Heaven? Conversely, Heaven would have to have free will as well. What happens to those who sin in Heaven? Not even adding purgatory can deal with these kinds of problems. An afterlife that has these properties is nothing like theists have traditionally described.

- 5 Even if knowing beforehand how someone will freely choose is impossible, God could at least step in after the evil act is done to prevent the consequences of the evil act from being felt. Although such knowledge is not always impossible—sometimes I can know when someone is about to freely choose evil—later, I will articulate how open-theism, which suggests that infallible foreknowledge of the future is impossible for God, plays a role in the only solution that works.
- 6 It's worth noting that Ward (2007) has a similar solution, which suggests that God wants an independent universe with independent beings, and so *almost never* interferes. Engaging with Wards work here would take me too far off topic, but I will mention below (in an endnote) why I think it has the same shortcomings as Salamon's.
- 7 Notice that this makes my proposed solution somewhat like the defense of The Prime Directive that we see in the *Star Trek* Universe—at least in that, like Kirk and Picard, God cannot see all ends.
- 8 The proposed solution most certainly is not compatible with so called “classical theism”, which has been considered the orthodox view for hundreds of years; it holds not only that god is tri-omni, but insists that God is outside of time, has complete foreknowledge, and acts in the world in every moment to preserve its existence.
- 9 I believe that something similar is true of Adam Ward's view (which, recall, says that God *almost never* interferes). It gives up divine sovereignty, would have to admit that most miracle stories are fictions, embrace a very ineffectual view of petitionary prayer, could not tolerate incarnation, etc. However, a full exploration of Ward's view would require another paper.
- 10 It certainly is not compatible with “classical theism”. See note 8.
- 11 Two things are notable here. (1) Even The Watcher, by the end of the *What if . . .* series, realized that interference is sometimes morally necessary. This makes the view that God never interferes even more difficult to defend. (2) Invoking The Watcher raises the issue of whether invoking a multiverse could solve the problem of evil (see Megill 2011). However, it is not appropriate to discuss this question in depth here because it is not a free-will response and my concern here is only whether there is a viable free-will response (although it is worth noting that Ward (2007) tries to combine the free will and multiverse defense; I will save my comments on that for the hypothetical future paper I might write about his argument). Regardless, the multiverse solution is not a viable solution either because (a) it is a heretical view, (b) Monton (2010) has already explained why such solutions fail, and (c) they raise the problem of no best world, which itself entails that God cannot exist (see Johnson 2014).

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Article

# Creator Theology and Sterba's Argument from Evil

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I reformulate Sterba's argument from evil and consider the various ways theists might respond to it. There are two basic families of responses. On the one hand, theists can deny that God, as a perfect being, needs to act in accordance with Sterba's moral evil prevention requirements (MEPRs). We can call these responses exceptionalist responses. On the other hand, the theist can deny that God's acting in accordance with the MEPRs would imply an absence of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in the world. We can call these responses compatibilist responses. I argue that the availability of both sorts of responses shows that Sterba's argument should not be taken as a logical argument from evil. A good God is logically possible. However, this does not show that Sterba's argument fails as an evidential argument from evil. In the second section, I argue that if we work within the framework of what Jonathan Kvanvig calls Creator Theology (CT), the force of Sterba's argument as an evidential argument is greatly weakened.

**Keywords:** James Sterba; argument from evil; creator theology

In his 2019 book and again in his 2020 paper, both entitled *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba presents a new atheistic argument from evil (Sterba 2019, 2020). At the heart of Sterba's argument against the existence of an all-good God is the idea that God would act in accordance with a set of moral principles called *moral evil prevention requirements* (MEPRs). Sterba claims that if God acted in accordance with these moral evil prevention requirements there would be no significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in the world. However, it is clear that there are significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Therefore, Sterba claims, there is no all-good God.

In this paper, I call into question the cogency of Sterba's argument.

The paper will proceed as follows. In the first section, I reformulate Sterba's argument and consider the various ways theists might respond to it. There are two basic families of responses. On the one hand, theists can deny that God, as a perfect being, needs to act in accordance with Sterba's MEPRs. We can call these responses *exceptionalist* responses. On the other hand, the theist can deny that God's acting in accordance with the MEPRs would imply an absence of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of the immoral actions in the world. We can call these responses *compatibilist* responses. I argue that the availability of both sorts of responses show that Sterba's argument should not be taken as a logical argument from evil. A good God *is* logically possible. However, this does not show that Sterba's argument fails as an evidential argument from evil. In the second section, I argue that if we work within the framework of what Jonathan Kvanvig (2021) calls Creator Theology (CT), the force of Sterba's argument as an evidential argument is greatly weakened.

## 1. Sterba's Atheistic Argument and Theistic Responses

Sterba presents a new argument from evil. Central to Sterba's argument are two distinctions about goods. First, there are goods that we have a right to, and goods that we do not have a right to. Second, there are first-order goods, which are goods that do not logically presuppose the existence of some serious wrongdoing, and there are second-order

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goods, which do. Sterba gives the example of being free from a brutal assault as a first-order good that we have a right to; the good of coming to the aid of someone who has suffered a brutal assault is given as an example of a second-order good that we do not have the right to. With these distinctions in hand, Sterba begins to present a number of moral principles that determine when it is permissible to permit the significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions to occur. First, Sterba notes that we are obligated to provide individuals with goods that they have a right to if we can easily do so without violating another individual's rights. For instance, if we can easily provide the necessities of life to someone who lacks them without violating anyone else's rights, we are obliged to do so. Furthermore, Sterba holds that not suffering the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions is a good that we have a right to. Thus, if we can easily make it such that someone does not suffer the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating any else's rights, we are obliged to do so. Sterba puts this as follows:

Moral Evil Prevention Requirement (MEPR) 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. (Sterba 2019, p. 126)

Sterba notes that there are also second-order goods that we have a right to; we have, for example, a right to care if we have been physically assaulted. This particular good presupposes the serious wrongdoing of suffering a physical assault. However, Sterba takes it that no one would morally prefer to have these second-order goods as opposed to having the original wrongdoing never take place. As a result, it seems wrong to allow a physical assault to take place that one could have easily prevented without violating anyone's rights, just to allow the victim of the assault to exercise their right to medical care after being assaulted. From this sort of case, Sterba generalizes to the following MEPR.

MEPR 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)

Sterba then turns to goods to which we do not have a right. For both first- and second-order goods that we do not have a right to, Sterba takes the following MEPR to apply.

MEPR 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)

With these MEPRs in hand, we can now state Sterba's argument as follows:

P1. If God existed, then God would adhere to MEPRs I–III.

P2. If God adhered to MEPRs I–III, then significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not obtain.

C1. Therefore, if God existed, then significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not obtain (from P1 and P2).

P3. Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions obtain all around us.

C2. Therefore, God does not exist (from C1 and P3).

Sterba spends some time motivating premise P2 by having us reflect on God's omnipotence. God could adhere to the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III and permit significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions only if he were constrained such that it was not easy for Him to prevent significant and especially horrendous evil consequences or if he were constrained in such a way that there were goods that one might morally prefer to have, but that God could not provide without

permitting such evil consequences. Sterba argues that God is not constrained in this way. Oftentimes, we human beings find ourselves in a situation in which it is very difficult (if not impossible) for us to prevent some significant and especially horrendous evil consequences from obtaining. But this is because our causal powers are severely limited. For example, there are currently large amounts of significant and horrendous evil consequences in the world as a result of unjust wars. It would be extremely difficult, or rather impossible, for me to stop this. My causal powers are too limited. Thus, the fact that I “permit” the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of unjust wars to take place is consistent with my scrupulously adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III. But whereas there are many things that stretch or go beyond my causal powers, it cannot be like this for God. God is omnipotent; therefore, God has the *causal* power to prevent all of the significant and horrendous evil consequences resulting from immoral actions. Furthermore, Sterba argues, it cannot be the case that God is somehow logically constrained from preventing these evil consequences; if this were the case, says Sterba, then God would be less powerful than we are. For while we are only causally impotent to prevent, for example, all the suffering caused by unjust wars, God would be logically impotent to do so. But it is absurd to think that omnipotent God is somehow less powerful than we are. Therefore, God cannot be causally or logically constrained in a way that makes it difficult or impossible for him to prevent significant and horrendous evil consequences. But given that God cannot be causally or logically constrained in such a way that makes it difficult or impossible for him to prevent significant and horrendous evil consequences, it follows that if God were acting in accordance with MEPRs I–III there would be no significant and especially horrendous consequences of immoral actions (See Sterba 2020, p. 205).

Sterba spends less time motivating premise P1; it seems however, that he takes P1 to fall out of God’s perfection. The idea here can be put into argumentative form. If God were maximally perfect, then God would adhere to the MEPRs; however, if God were to exist, God would be maximally perfect. Thus, if God were to exist, God would act in accordance with the MEPRs.

This line of reasoning seems to be in the background of Sterba’s engagement with Brian Davies. Davies denies that God is a moral agent (See Davies 2006, 2011). According to Davies’ conception of God, it may seem that the subjunctive conditional in P1 is false. If God were to exist, he may or may not act in accordance with MEPRs I–III since, not being a moral agent, God is not subject to the moral law. While Sterba looks to counter Davies’s arguments for an amoral God, at a certain point he is happy to let the point stand. What is at issue is not whether God is subject to moral requirements, but whether God is a perfect being. Says Sterba:

[T]he real problem with Davies 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. (Sterba 2019, p. 117)

This is a problem, however, only if there is something in God’s nature that is incompatible with allowing such evil consequences. Presumably, what is incompatible with God’s permitting such evils is God’s perfection.

Sterba does not spend any time in defending P3. He does not need to since experience shows us that the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions regularly obtain.

This is Sterba’s atheistic argument. What are the possible responses theistic philosophers can give to it? Given the cogency of the inferences from P1 and P2 to C1 and from P3 to C2, theistic responses should focus on the premises of Sterba’s argument. This leaves theistic philosophers with the options of attacking P1 and P2 since experience confirms P3.



We can call the responses that attack P1 exceptionalist responses. This is because, *prima facie*, the perfection of finite rational beings such as ourselves would require one to act in accordance with MEPRs I-III, but if P1 is false, divine perfection is an exception to this general rule. We can call responses that attack P2 compatibilist responses since the denial of P2 implies that God's acting in accordance with MEPRs I-III is compatible with the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions regularly obtaining.

As an example of an exceptionalist response to Sterba's argument consider the following.

Exceptionalism: While it is true that human beings should act in accordance with MEPRs I-III, this is because of a deeper moral principle, namely that we have duties of benevolence. We should act in such a way that promotes the good of others. God also has such duties. But we, unlike God, have severe limitations on our ability to promote the goods of others. If we allow others to suffer the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions when we could have easily prevented this, we cannot use this to bring about their greater good. Nor can we ever make it up to them so that they might rightly accept that our treatment of them was unsurpassably good (say by giving them an infinitely long life filled with infinite value). But God does not have these limitations, for God is all-knowing, all-wise, and all-powerful. Given God's omniscience, omniscience, and omnipotence, even if we have no idea how it is that God might use someone's suffering for his or her own good, even if we have no idea how God could make it up to someone so that it could rightly be said that God's treatment of them was unsurpassably good despite allowing this suffering to take place, this does not provide a reason for doubting that God can do it. Thus, while the perfection of men and God demands that they are both beneficent, only the perfection of limited creatures like us implies that one acts in accordance with MEPRs I-III. As a result, P1 of Sterba's argument is false. (Cf. Beaty 2021; other exceptionalist responses to Sterba's argument include (Attfield 2020; Bishop 2021; Hasker 2021; Huffling 2021; Reichenbach 2021; Salamon 2021))

We can compare this exceptionalist response with the following compatibilist response to the argument.

Compatibilism:

Human beings are essentially radically interdependent. To be radically interdependent in the relevant sense is for one's happiness and well-being to be dependent on the choices and actions of others, and for others' happiness and well-being to be dependent on one's choices and actions. Thus, my happiness and well-being is dependent minimally on others refraining from actions towards me that would harm my life, my health, or my psychological integrity. Also, in a more robust way, my well-being and happiness are dependent on certain individuals entering into and maintaining special relationships of love and trust with me. But it is not just that my happiness is dependent on others. My not being miserable is dependent on others too. If others harm my life, health, or psychological integrity, if those in special relationships betray my trust and reject me, it is not just that I will not flourish—I will be deeply unhappy. And what is true of me, is true of every other human being. Furthermore, this is not simply an accidental property of human beings so that in some possible world there are humans, just like you and me, who are not, and never have been, dependent on each other in this way. Such beings might be human-like, but they would be of a different kind. Given this, it is impossible, even for the all-powerful God, to create creatures such as us and to always or for the most part prevent the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions. For if God always, or for the most part, prevented the evil consequences of immoral actions from taking place, we would not be the radically interdependent creatures we essentially are. It is true that there would be no significant and horrendous consequences

of immoral actions for us if God could easily prevent them all from happening; this is because God acts in accordance with MEPRs I–III. But even an omnipotent God cannot create essentially radically interdependent creatures and prevent all of the evil consequences their choices bring about for each other—in this case, the creatures would no longer be radically interdependent creatures! Because of this, P2 of Sterba’s argument is false. Furthermore, this does not have the absurd consequence that God is less powerful than us. The source of one’s inability to do something does not make one more or less powerful. It is logically impossible for me to become the first cherry tree to grow over 30 meters tall. It may merely be causally impossible for the cherry tree in my front yard to do so. It does not follow that my causal powers are more limited than the causal powers of the cherry tree.

I think that these responses go a far way towards showing that Sterba’s argument is not a successful *logical* argument from evil. It seems possible that there are beings whose perfection does not depend on their acting in accordance with MEPRs I–III and that the most perfect being is like this. Likewise, it is at least epistemically possible that human beings are essentially radically interdependent beings, and so, God could act in accordance with MEPRs I–III while permitting significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions to take place. When we combine both of these exceptionalist and compatibilist responses to Sterba’s argument, we have good reason for thinking that the existence of significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions seems to be consistent with the existence of God. This is not to say, however, that Sterba’s atheistic argument cannot be reframed as an evidential argument for atheism. According to evidential arguments from evil, God’s existence is not argued to be inconsistent with the existence of evil; rather, it is argued to be highly improbable. (For the *loci classici* of evidential arguments from evil, see Rowe 1979, 1991). On this reading of Sterba’s argument, the existence of significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions, instead of being taken as strictly inconsistent with God’s existence, should be taken as providing us with *evidence* that God does not exist. How strong this evidence is a function of how likely P1 and P2 are. If we take P1 and P2 to both be likely, then the existence of the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions gives us strong reason for atheism.

## 2. Creator Theology and Sterba’s Atheistic Argument

In the last section, I argued that Sterba’s atheistic argument is not a successful logical argument. It seems possible that God, while being perfect, might not act in accordance with MEPRs I–III. And it is at least epistemically possible that God could act in accordance with MEPRs I–III, while allowing the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions to occur. Things may be possible, however, while being improbable. If it is extremely probable that if God were to exist that God would act in accordance with MEPRs I–III, and that if God were to act in accordance with MEPRs I–III there would be no significant and horrendous consequences, then the existence of such consequences would be strong evidence against the existence of God. In this case, while Sterba’s argument fails as a logical argument from evil, it works as an evidential argument.

In this section, I argue that if we work within the framework of what Jonathan Kvanvig has called Creator Theology (CT), as opposed to Perfect Being Theology (PBT), the strength of Sterba’s argument understood as an evidential argument is greatly weakened.

For Kvanvig, CT and PBT are approaches to theology distinguished by their assumptions about the fundamental nature of God. According to PBT, the fundamental nature of God is to be maximally perfect (Kvanvig 2021, p. 6). Traditionally, this conception of God involves identifying the set of perfections with intrinsic maxima and then attributing these to God. Thus, God is thought to be maximally knowing, maximally powerful, and maximally good (cf. Kvanvig 2021, p. 99). According to CT, on the other hand, the fundamental nature of God is to be the asymmetrical source of all that is (Kvanvig 2021, p. 8). Whereas everything that is not God is dependent on God, God is dependent on nothing

else. It is important to note that the disagreement between PBT and CT has to do with the fundamental nature of God. Many philosophers who accept PBT will also accept that God is the asymmetrical source of all that is; many philosophers who accept CT will also accept that God is the maximally perfect being. The disagreement between these approaches to theology does not lie in the particular characteristics that they attribute to God, but rather in the characteristics of God that they take to be fundamental. The fundamental nature of God will be used to derive less fundamental aspects of the Deity. For example, we can read Saint Anselm, the prototypical perfect being theologian, as seeking to derive God's asymmetrical sourcehood from God's maximal perfection. Says Anselm,

WHAT are you, then, Lord God, than whom nothing greater can be conceived? But what are you, except that which, as the highest of all beings, alone exists through itself, and creates all other things from nothing? For, whatever is not this is less than a thing which can be conceived of. (as quoted in Kvanvig 2021, p. 144)

A natural gloss on this passage is that Anselm is deriving God's being the asymmetric source of all things from God's maximal perfection. Anselm's reasoning seems to run as follows: given that God is maximally perfect or, in Anselm's words, that God is "whom nothing greater can be conceived" and, granted that anything lacking maximal independence and maximal creative power is less than maximally perfect, then God, as the maximally perfect being, will also be the asymmetric source of all else. According to this approach, God's fundamental nature of being maximally perfect grounds God's aseity and God's absolute creative and sustaining power.

While PBT seeks to derive God's being the asymmetric source of all things from God's perfection, CT, in turn, proceeds from the opposite direction, seeking to derive God's maximal perfection from God's being the asymmetric source of all things. This derivation, unsurprisingly, is much more complicated, at least at first glance. Saint Thomas Aquinas, a paradigmatic practitioner of CT, for instance, takes the asymmetric source of everything else to be pure act. According to Aquinas, to be imperfect is to be potentially what one should be actually. Thus, the more actual one is, the more perfect one is. It follows that God, as pure act, is maximally perfect (See Aquinas 1888, Q4 A1). What is important here is not the details of Aquinas's argument, nor its ultimate viability, but the way in which Aquinas embodies the project of CT. Starting from God's fundamental nature as the asymmetric source of all things, Aquinas seeks to derive other divine attributes, such as absolute perfection. Thus, while Aquinas and Anselm both agree that God is maximally perfect and that God is the asymmetric source of all things, they embody two distinct approaches to theology.

This difference in starting points between CT and PBT has important consequences when assessing the force of Sterba's argument as an evidential argument. Starting from PBT, the maximal perfection of the Deity is a given. But if PBT is to allow for any further theological reflection, one's intuitions about what maximal perfection consists in, and what a maximally perfect being would do, need to be drawn upon. Otherwise, one would be incapable of deriving any other attributes of God from His perfection. Thus, for one working with the PBT framework, one's conception of the Deity is built primarily upon the intuitions one has about maximal perfection and what this maximal perfection implies.<sup>1</sup> It might seem highly probable to someone that a maximally perfect being would act in accordance with MEPRs I–III (even if it does not seem strictly necessary). If one then notices that in fact there is no all-powerful, all-knowing being who acts in accordance with MEPRs I–III, that instead we constantly see the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions taking place in the world, one may then take this as strong evidence that God does not exist.

Starting from CT, of course the maximal perfection of the Deity is not a given, but needs to be derived. What guides this derivation are intuitive connections between being the absolute source of all things and general ideas of perfection. We have already seen an example of this sort of reasoning in Aquinas. Aquinas connects being the asymmetrical source of all things with being pure act, and he then connects imperfection with potentiality.

As there is no potentiality in God, as he is pure act, there is no imperfection in God either; he is pure act and so pure perfection. Another quite different example of this kind of reasoning can be found in Samuel Clarke (1767). We can paraphrase Clarke very loosely as follows. God's being the asymmetrical source of all things implies that God is infinite, omnipotent, and omnipresent since nothing could constrain the asymmetrical source of all things, and nothing could exist apart from such a source. Furthermore, this asymmetrical source of all being must be intelligent given the ordered world that he has brought about. And given that this asymmetric source of all things is infinite, omnipresent, and intelligent, it is also all knowing since there is nothing that could limit its knowledge. Furthermore, given that all actions of intelligent beings are directed towards the good and fitting, except in cases of ignorance or weakness of the will, the asymmetrical source of all things always acts correctly since it is without ignorance, and being all-powerful, there is no way for it to exhibit weakness of will. But since no one but God is all-knowing and all-powerful, no one could exhibit as much moral perfection as God.

Suppose someone who followed this Clarkean line of thought also concluded that since God exhibits maximal moral perfection, it is extremely likely that God acts in accordance with MEPRs I-III. Is the fact that there are significant and horrendous consequences to immoral actions strong evidence for atheism? My claim is that it is much weaker for this individual as opposed to the individual working within PBT. This is because we can think of the evidential upshot of the existence of significant and horrendous consequences to immoral actions as being disjunctive. Something in the Clarkean chain of reasoning has gone wrong. But what exactly has gone wrong is not clear. Perhaps, we can move all the way from the fact that there are significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions, all the way back to the denial that there is an asymmetrical source of all things. Such a line of reasoning seems precarious, however. Perhaps, one should instead take the existence of significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions as evidence that God is not maximally morally perfect; or perhaps, one should take it as evidence that God's being maximally perfect does not entail that God acts in accordance with MEPRs I-III or perhaps as evidence that God's acting in accordance with MEPRs I-III is compatible with there being such consequences of immoral actions. The existence of such consequences causes a moment of cognitive dissonance, but the individual working within CT has a wide range of freedom in resolving this cognitive dissonance that does not necessarily involve rejecting the existence of an all-good God. An equal possibility is that she rejects her intuitions about what God's moral perfection implies for His actions.

In the case I am considering, someone who adopts CT can find reason for being skeptical about her intuitions concerning what God's moral perfection implies for His actions without adopting skeptical theism (or giving up on CT). (For a general overview of Skeptical Theism, see McBrayer 2010). Skeptical theism often motivates agnosticism with regard to what God would do if He exists by general appeals to our cognitive limitations. In the case I am envisaging, what motivates skepticism with regard to one's intuitions concerning how a perfect God would act are other intuitions about the connection between God's perfection, God's being the asymmetric source of all being, and our evidence that God seemingly does not act in accordance with MEPRs I-III. Something has to give, and to the extent that the perfection of God is well founded on God's being the asymmetric source of all being, it is right to give up our intuitions that a perfect God would act in accordance with MEPRs I-III or that God's acting in accordance with the MEPRs is inconsistent with the world as we know it.

Things are different for one working in the framework of PBT. It is true that the epistemic upshot of the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions is also disjunctive for someone working in PBT. In responding to the fact that the horrendous and significant consequences of immoral actions exist, one might deny that God is maximally perfect, or one might reject one's intuition that God's perfection implies that God probably acts in accordance with MEPRs I-III. But to do either of these things would be to give up on PBT. Thus, for someone committed to PBT, if they find it intuitively probable that a

perfect being would act in accordance with MERPs I–III, the existence of the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions provides them with strong evidence that God does not exist.

Of course, nothing I have said here shows that CT is a viable project. Whether it is depends upon the cogency of the arguments of philosophers such as Aquinas and Clarke working in the CT tradition. Even if Aquinas’s and Clarke’s arguments fail, however, this does not show that the project of CT is hopelessly flawed. If philosopher X fails in some project, this is weak evidence that the project cannot be successfully brought about. Furthermore, given the historical prominence of CT, it deserves careful consideration by contemporary philosophers of religion. Nor do these remarks show that philosophers working within a PBT framework will be unable to respond to Sterba’s argument construed as an evidential argument. Perhaps, further considerations about maximal perfection can dislodge the intuition that a maximally perfect being would most likely act in accordance with MEPRs I–III. Furthermore, it is always open to philosophers within the PBT framework to develop compatibilist responses to Sterba’s argument. I briefly sketched such a response above, but there are other possible compatibilist responses. For instance, one might question the coherence of holding that there can be immoral actions without the possibility of the significant and horrendous consequences to these actions. Nevertheless, any such responses provided by philosophers working in the PBT framework can be taken up by philosophers working in the CT framework who find the move from God’s perfection to God’s acting in accordance with MEPRs I–III attractive. As a result, to the extent that theorists working in CT can derive God’s perfection from his being the asymmetrical source of all things, CT provides more resources for dealing with Sterba’s argument from evil interpreted as an evidential argument.

### 3. Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that Sterba’s argument from evil fails as a logical argument. Given the possibility of exceptionalist and compatibilist responses to the argument, it seems that a maximally good God is consistent with the existence of significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions. Thus, we should interpret Sterba’s argument as an evidential argument. I have argued that for philosophers working in the CT tradition Sterba’s argument will not be as threatening as for those working within PBT. This provides further reason for exploring CT as an alternative to PBT.

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### Note

- <sup>1</sup> One might object that what is guiding our thinking in these cases is rational argumentation and not just intuition. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing this objection). Nevertheless, this argumentation seems to bottom out in one’s intuitions about maximal perfection and what maximal perfection implies.

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Article

# Human Sovereignty and the Logical Problem of Evil

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I provide a defence of theism against James Sterba's version of the logical problem of evil, at least where the focus is on moral evil (I do not have much to say about natural evil in this paper). After giving my own account of the distinction between the logical and evidential problems of evil, I set out to argue that Sterba fails to prove atheism. The problem lies with this third premise. I think that there is a possible defence according to which the three 'Evil Prevention Requirements' that Sterba endorse are all true but do not support atheism.

**Keywords:** logical problem of evil; evidential problem of evil; Sterba; Free Will theodicy; Free Will defence; sovereignty

## 1. Introduction

James Sterba's (2019, 2020, 2021) attempt to revitalize the problem of evil, in its 'logical' form, as an argument against the existence of God has been the subject of an enormous amount of literature. There are those who have contributed to the literature in order to endorse Sterba's atheistic conclusion (Ekstrom 2021), those who have contributed to suggest that the concept of God needs a radical rethink (Burns 2021; Hall 2021; Wilmot 2021), those who defend the Thomist view that God is not morally good (Huffling 2021; Bishop 2021; Fesser 2021), those who think the evils of the world are really not that bad, at least in any objective sense (Hall 2021; Reichenbach 2021) or who think that they are rendered irrelevant by the great goods that are to come (Walls 2021; Beaty 2021), those who say that Sterba's arguments go wrong by making an analogy between God and a just state (Almeida 2020; Atfield 2021; Hasker 2020, 2021), and others still. With a field so crowded, it is a tough undertaking to say something new, and I think an impossible one to say something *wholly* new. I will try to do the former, but not the latter. As I simultaneously developed my own thinking on the topic and waded through the voluminous literature, I read Janusz Salamon's (2021) article defending the claim that humanity is itself a sovereign entity and that, therefore, a good God ought not (and hence, would not) systematically intervene in our world. Thus, I found that at least one other philosopher had already presented an objection to Sterba along the lines that seemed most promising to me. So, Salamon suggests that God does not intervene in the human world more often, because to do so would violate a right to self-determination. This is a possibility I shall defend as well, and therefore, I am taking an approach that is already represented in the published literature. Nevertheless, I have wholly new arguments for this view, and though our destinations are the same, my overall strategy for getting there has little in common with Salamon's. Salamon treats this as a theodicy and locates its origin in the work of Pico della Mirandola, as well as draws supplementary hypotheses from the work of Dostoyevsky. By contrast, I will treat the approach merely as a defence and, having never read Mirandola, will leave the history of philosophy to the experts. I will also set aside Dostoyevsky, because I think that Salamon's supplementary hypotheses are liabilities in this argument. I will, however, argue that this defence serves to rebut Sterba's argument for atheism.

In addition, partly to add a position to the debate that is perhaps not worth setting out in a paper of its own, and partly because it does play a role in the main dialectic, I will begin this paper by discussing another issue: whether Sterba's version of the problem of

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evil really is a ‘logical’ version or not. I shall argue, against Toby Betenson (2021), that the traditional distinction between ‘logical’ and ‘evidential’ versions of the problem is vague and, to the extent that anything definite can be said about the distinction at all, it is a matter of degree. I shall further argue that Sterba’s version exists somewhere in the middle, in the grey zone between the two.

Having argued for these points in the first third of the paper, I will move on to the main dialectic, which focuses on moral evil (I will set aside the problem of natural evil for future research, a problem I have partially tackled elsewhere (Molto 2021)). The thesis of this section, and the central claim of the whole paper, is that Sterba fails to establish his conclusion. I will argue that the third premise of Sterba’s argument is false. As this premise involves a strict conditional, I will try to demonstrate its falsity by constructing a just-so story to serve as a countermodel. I will also consider a weaker alternative to Sterba’s third premise and argue that it is unproven. I will consider and respond to objections before concluding that if Sterba’s general approach is salvageable, it would involve pushing the argument further towards the evidential end of the spectrum.

## 2. Part I: What Is the Logical Problem of Evil?

So, what is the logical problem of evil? We are sometimes told that it is the argument that was given by Epicurus, David Hume, and JL Mackie, and it is contrasted with the more recent ‘evidential’ problem of evil.

What makes the arguments of Epicurus, Hume, and Mackie logical? In an earlier contribution appearing in this journal, Toby Betenson (2021) suggests that an argument is logical if and only if it is deductively valid. I disagree. An example of a deductively valid problem of evil argument would be this one:

**Premise:** There exist instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

**Premise:** 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.

Therefore,

**Conclusion:** There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

This latter argument may sound familiar. It is the one given by William Rowe (1979, p. 336) and is usually said to be the original evidential version of the problem of evil. It is recognized by Betenson (2021, p. 4 of 11) that this and other arguments that have historically been termed ‘evidential’ are presented deductively. He nevertheless argues that, traditional usage notwithstanding, these ought to be considered logical arguments. The difference between a logical problem of evil and an evidential one, Betenson (2021, p. 8 of 11) claims, is just that the former uses deductive reasoning, while the latter uses inductive. His argument for this position, heavily simplified, seems to be that the only apparent alternative account of the distinction between logical and evidential would be that problems of the former type are those that are wholly a priori, and that that distinction fails since no plausible problem of evil is wholly a priori. Betenson is certainly right that this alternative account of the distinction is a non-starter, but taken as an argument for his own account, this argument fails because it does not consider any further alternatives. Moreover, there are independently good reasons for rejecting Betenson’s own account of the distinction.

Not only does Betenson’s account of the distinction fly in the face of well-established usage, but it also fails to make enough room for any interesting difference between the logical and evidential problems. Any inductive argument can, rather trivially, be recast as a deductive argument.

Take some stipulatively good induction of the form

IN1

**Premise:**  $A_1$  is F.

**Premise:**  $A_2$  is F.

**Premise:**  $A_3$  is F.

...

**Premise:**  $A_n$  is F.

Therefore,

**Conclusion:** All As are F.

The reasoning is of course defeasible, and the conclusion has only been established probabilistically. However, if the reasoning does involve a good induction, it is only because this argument is *deductively* valid.

DE1

**Premise:** If  $A_1$ – $A_n$  are each F, then probably all As are F.

**Premise:**  $A_1$ – $A_n$  are each F.

Therefore,

**Conclusion:** Probably all As are F.

To attack the inference of IN1 is just to attack the major premise of DE1.<sup>1</sup> The difference between the arguments is of interest to logicians (who study the nature of inferential relations), but not to philosophers of religion (who just want to know whether the conclusion is (probably) true). So, there is no necessary link between the content of the premises and conclusion of an argument and whether it is presented deductively or inductively.

As I have said, Betenson is clearly correct that the difference is not that the evidential arguments have empirical content, while the logical arguments do not, because all problem-of-evil arguments involve empirical content. However, we regret Mackie's (1955) argument; he is clearly committed to the premise 'evil exists in the world', and this is an empirical claim. Nevertheless, what distinguishes Rowe's argument from Mackie's is the important addition of the relative clause '... which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse' (Rowe 1979, p. 336), with the result that the focus of debate is shifted from the major, conceptual premise (if there is evil, there is no God) to the minor, empirical premise (that there is evil of a certain kind). It seems to me, then, that if there is to be an interesting distinction, however vague, between the logical and evidential problems, it must have something to do with the relatively greater dependency on empirical content in evidential arguments, as compared with the greater dependency on a priori principles in the latter.

Sterba, in a brief response to Betenson, is on the right track when he characterizes evidential arguments as being such that 'the heart of <the> argument against God does not utilize logically necessary, normative, or metaphysical principles' (Sterba 2021, p. 17 of 21). However, it would be wrong to try to build a necessary and sufficient condition from this thought. The difference is not that the empirical content of evidential arguments is what is challenged by the theist in the case of evidential arguments while it remains unchallenged by the theist in the case of logical arguments. First, distinctions between classes of argument should never be drawn according to how people respond to them, human perversity being what it is. Moreover, even as seemingly unobjectionable an empirical claim as 'evil exists in our world' is disputed by those, such as Augustine, who hold that evil is an absence rather than an existence, while even the most trivial conceptual claim, for example, that God would not permit *needless* suffering, might be disputed by the Thomists, who hold that God is not subject to the moral law.

What we can say, though, is that we have a spectrum, on the evidential side of which we find those arguments for which the empirical content is greater and intended to be doing more of the heavy lifting. On the logical side of the spectrum, we find those arguments with more modest empirical claims, where the slack is picked up by a priori conceptual claims about what the world would be like if there was a God.

So, where do we find Sterba's argument on this spectrum? Well, first, we must present his argument, so here it is, in the simplest form in which he presents it (Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90):

**Sterba's argument**

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 Evil Prevention Requirements I–III <more about these later>.
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 obtaining through what would have to be his permission.
4. Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain all around us.
5. Therefore, it is not the case that there is an all-good, all-powerful God.

Undoubtedly, this argument involves greater empirical content than is found in Mackie's. Mackie's argument is supposed to work (though, famously, it does not) with only the empirical claim that there is evil existing in the world. Sterba needs more, namely, that we are surrounded by evil is significant and horrendous and the consequence of immoral actions. So, although I do not have the resources to say determinately whether Sterba's argument is a logical or evidential argument, it is quite clear that it is considerably further to the evidential side of the spectrum than Mackie's argument. I will, near the end of the current paper, argue that if Sterba's argument is salvageable, it is only by bringing it further towards the evidential side of the spectrum. Before we can get to that, though, we must see what is wrong with the argument as it stands.

**3. Part II: Contra Sterba's Premise 3**

I intend to attack premise 3 of Sterba's argument, which, once again, says: 'If God were adhering to 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' (Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90).

**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 (Sterba 2019, p. 184).

Sterba thinks that these follow from PP while respecting the exceptions to that more general principle.

Sterba also thinks that Evil Prevention Requirements I–III are sufficient to show that if there is horrendous evil in the world, then there is no God. This is where we disagree. I think that Evil Prevention Requirements II and III are true, but that they do not support Sterba's third premise. I also think that Evil Prevention Requirement I is either true or false depending on the range of the quantifier 'anyone'. If the range of that quantifier is interpreted widely enough to make Evil Prevention Requirement I true, then Evil Prevention Requirement I does not support premise 3, but if interpreted with a range suitably narrow to support premise 3, then Evil Prevention Requirement I is false. I will explain further shortly, but first, a bit more about my approach.

#### 4. A Bit about the Approach

I accept the Pauline Principle, with caveats, just as Sterba does. Moreover, I think that we may justifiably reason as follows:

If facts about the world show that God would have violated the Pauline Principle (setting aside the exceptions to the principle granted by Sterba), then there is no God.

This puts me at odds with the Thomist-inspired response to the problem of evil (see Davies 2006). For the record, I agree with Aquinas and his defenders (and Sterba, for that matter) that all predications about God are made analogically. I also agree that God is the source of morality. Perhaps it is even right to follow the Thomists in saying that God is good, but not morally good; I am not sure. However, the question before us is whether a good (morally or otherwise) God would act in a way that violates the Pauline Principle. Just as that principle (agreed exceptions aside, of course) rings true to me as a constraint on moral human action, so it rings true to me as a constraint of the actions of a good (morally or otherwise) God. If I was wrong about that, I have a much worse conceptual grasp on how God would act than I thought I did. Of course, I might well have a much worse grasp on how God would act than I thought I did, but if this move is what underwrites the apparent efficacy of the ‘Thomist’ response to the problem of evil, then that response is really just sceptical theism under another name. The view that God is good but not morally good (because, as the source of morality, He is ineligible for moral evaluation) may be true and perhaps importantly so. However, as a response to the problem of evil, it adds little, because either it must leave our intuitions about how God would act unchanged or it would tell us that our intuitions are unreliable and would then face many of the same worries as sceptical theism (admirably brought out by Scott Coley (2021)).

I am not a sceptical theist, though I think there are considerable limitations on our ability to make inferences about God’s likely patterns of behaviour and motivations (limitations are not the same thing as a complete absence), and so I believe the onus is still on the theist to propose possible reasons why God might permit evil. Happily, I believe that I can do this and thereby show that premise 3 is false and Sterba’s argument therefore fails.

So, then, I accept the Pauline Principle (with exceptions), and I accept that God’s actions would be consistent with it. I nevertheless think that there are possible reasons (for that matter, I think plausible reasons) why God would permit evil. How do we square these two claims? First of all, here is how I do not propose to square these claims: I will not point to greater goods for humans that God permits evil for the sake of, be they the same humans who experience the relevant evils or different humans. I am not appealing here to either the soul-making theodicy or free will. Given this, I can happily accept Evil Prevention Requirements II and III. Even without the benefit of great goods for humans, I propose that there is some other possible reason that God might have for permitting evil. For this reason, to be compatible with Evil Prevention Requirement I as well, it will, of course, have something to do with rights.

#### 5. Rights and the State Analogy

Whereas a common line of response to Sterba’s argument has been to challenge his analogy between God and a just state (Almeida 2020; Attfeld 2021; Hasker 2020, 2021), my intuition is that the state analogy is, at least somewhat, appropriate. Thinking about right and wrong when it comes to states can tell us something about what would be right or wrong for God. Where Sterba goes wrong, in my opinion, is which relationship between a just state and individuals he takes to be the best analogue for the relationship between God and individuals. Whereas Sterba thinks the best analogue is the relationship between the just state and its own citizens, I think the best analogue is between a just state and the citizens of a foreign country, or (perhaps even better) the relationship between a just state and people living in an unincorporated territory outside its borders. I am not the first to make this point: Janusz Salamon (2021, p. 3 of 16) points out that the notion of sovereignty that is implied in Sterba’s talk of ‘the just state’ is one according to which it is wrong for one sovereign state to intervene in the affairs of another.

**Example:** US police should not systematically act to prevent crime in Canada, even if these systematic interventions are guaranteed to succeed and it is guaranteed that no one else will get hurt.<sup>2</sup>

This would be so even if we stipulate that the US is a just state. A state cannot, in general, appeal to its own moral superiority to justify violations of the sovereignty of other states. The general rule is that sovereign entities should not intervene in the affairs of other sovereign entities. This rule may still be defeasible, of course, and indeed, in its application to God, the orthodox theist will no doubt have to say that it is defeasible, because according to orthodox theism, God does sometimes intervene in the world. Nevertheless, the defeasibility of this principle is plausible enough both for states and for God. The question we need to consider is whether this rule provides a possible explanation for the evil in the world.

It is a matter of such controversy when state interventions should take place that it would take it well beyond the scope of this paper to pass judgement on the issue; however, we do not need to answer that question in order to defeat Sterba's argument. As Sterba is intending to give a version of the logical problem of evil, he does not intend his argument to depend on the specifics of individual instances of horrendous evil. Rather, the fact that there is horrendous evil in the world (and the assumption is that no appeal to rights can explain why this horrendous evil is permitted) is supposed to be enough to show that there is no God. In fact, many of the cases Sterba uses through his book to illustrate horrendous evil are ones that would clearly not provide a suitable pretext for the intervention of one state into the affairs of another. States should not be intervening in the affairs of others to prevent murders, even horrific murders. So, this analogy between God and a foreign sovereign state does pose a threat to Sterba's argument.

Of course, Sterba might think that a just state would always intervene to prevent a genocide of the scope of the Holocaust or the Rwandan Genocide, especially if it could be guaranteed of doing so without causing any other harm. On this basis, Sterba might suggest that these events, at least, would have been prevented by a good God. However, for one thing, reliance on the details of specific examples would push Sterba's argument much further into evidential territory, to the point where in no way would we still be dealing with an example of the logical version of the problem (pace Betenson 2021, who, as we saw, wishes to give a very different and, to my mind, very odd characterization of the difference). For another thing, the analogy between God and a foreign state is just an analogy, and it must be granted that it is *possible* that the defeasibility conditions for the non-intervention rule might be more stringent for God than they are for other states.

It should now be clear why, in the previous section, I identified an important ambiguity in the quantifier 'anyone' in Sterba's Evil Prevention Requirement I. If this quantifier is interpreted to range over both human and non-human rights-bearers, such as states and sovereign authorities, then I think this Requirement is true. If it is interpreted to range over only human rights-bearers, then I contend, with William Hasker (2020, 2021), that Evil Prevention Requirement I is false. God is not refusing to intervene in the world because *individuals* have a right to non-intervention, but because humanity collectively does, on this defence. So, the analogy I am providing between God and a foreign state can serve as a motivation for either the falsity of Evil Prevention Requirement I or for its failure to support Sterba's premise 3. In the interest of space, I will only discuss the second of these options, but it should be fairly obvious from what follows how my argument would go if I had pursued the first. Let us now take a closer look at the scenario that I am claiming undermines Sterba's premise 3.

## 6. The Just-So Story

Bear in mind, unlike Salamon's related line of attack against Sterba's argument, I do not aim to provide a theodicy, merely a defence. The difference is that a defence is only concerned with defeating a necessary conditional by pointing to a countermodel, a counter-

model just being a possible state of affairs. In order to demonstrate such a countermodel, I am proposing a just-so story:

- (1) God chooses to create an entity which is the sum of all humans (call this entity 'H').
- (2) H, by its nature, is a sovereign authority.
- (3) Being a sovereign authority implies having a right to the non-intervention in the lives of one's citizens by any foreign sovereign authority.
- (4) This latter right is defeasible in some circumstances, but it holds in general such that systematic intervention is always wrong.
- (5) God's violations of H's right to non-intervention in the lives of its citizens by any foreign sovereign authorities is optimal (there is no better and morally acceptable set of possible violations than the one God chooses to realize).
- (6) God adheres to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III.
- (7) Significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions obtain through God's permission.

The purpose of this just-so story is to demonstrate the falsity of premise 3 of Sterba's argument, once again: if God were adhering to 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 (Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90). According to this just-so story, God does adhere to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, and yet significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain through His permission.<sup>3</sup> If this just-so-story is possible, then Sterba's third premise is false, not probably false, but actually false, and hence, his argument is unsound. That is because Sterba's third premise includes the modal operator 'necessarily'. On the widely accepted semantics for necessity claims, this premise is only true if it is the case that, in every possible world in which God adheres to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral action do not obtain through God's permission. If this just-so story is possible, then there is at least one possible world in which God adheres to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, and yet significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions obtain through His permission.

Sterba claims that his Evil Prevention requirements are acceptable to both deontologists and consequentialists, and I make the same claim for my just-so story. This is rather obvious in the case of deontologists. In the case of consequentialists, I simply add the stipulation that a state of widespread violations of the right to non-interventions by foreign sovereign authorities is itself a state with massive intrinsic disvalue. This disvalue, I stipulate, is greater than the combined positive value resulting from all possible positive interventions. In other words, on consequentialist grounds, it would, all things considered, be a very bad thing for God to engage in widespread violations of H's right to non-intervention and hence the wrong thing for God to do.<sup>4</sup>

Incidentally, my just-so story preserves what I take to be one of the most attractive features of the traditional Free Will theodicy, in that it offers a plausible explanation for the manifest fact (pace Leibniz) that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds. This is so even with the stipulation that the disvalue of widespread violations of the right to non-interventions by foreign sovereign authorities is greater than the combined positive value resulting from all possible positive interventions. This stipulation merely guarantees that all the worlds in which God respects the right to non-intervention are better than all the worlds in which God does not respect the right to non-intervention. But there are better worlds than ours, namely, the ones in which God does not intervene and we humans freely choose to behave better.

So, is this story consistent? I think so. Is it otherwise *a priori* false? I do not think so. If I am right in these answers, then I think the best explanation for this is that it is metaphysically possible, and that therefore, Sterba's third premise is false and his argument

fails. However, I do not expect everyone to be convinced so easily, and I will spend the rest of the paper considering objections.

## 7. Sterba's Objections

Because Salamon has already proposed something somewhat similar to the position I have set out above and received a response from Sterba, I have the advantage of advance warning of Sterba's line of attack. Sterba's central objection is this:

'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' (Sterba 2021, p. 6 of 21).

Sterba, then, seems to assume that if H has sovereign status, it is because the individuals that constitute H exercise sovereignty collectively. Moreover, this collective exercise of sovereignty depends on people's preferences. Even if we can make sense of a collective exercise of sovereignty, the thought seems to go, then it would rely on people preferring to be sovereign rather than have God systematically intervene in their lives, something Sterba doubts that people do. How am I to respond to this?

The first thing to say is to repeat that Sterba is committed to a modal claim with his third premise: every world in which God adheres to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, is a world in which there is no significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions obtaining through what would have to be his permission. As such, it is not enough for Sterba to argue that it is unlikely that, in our world, people prefer for God to intervene rather than not to intervene. Sterba must argue that this is true in any world. If there is even one world in which God adheres to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III and yet there are significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions obtaining through God's permission *because* humans constitute a sovereign entity and prefer for God not to intervene, then the necessity clause of Sterba's premise 3 is false and the argument fails.

So, is there some world in which people prefer for God not to intervene? Of course there is. Talk of 'possible worlds' is intended to model bare metaphysical possibility. *Could* it happen that people have the preference for divine non-intervention? Of course it *could*. This is enough to demonstrate the falsehood of Sterba's third premise.

However, the eagle-eyed might have noticed that, although Sterba commits himself to a modal claim in his third premise, he need not have done so. The argument would still have been deductively valid if he had replaced this premise with the following non-modal version:

3'. If God were adhering to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, then significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission.

Here, 3' can do the same work as 3, which might cause us to wonder why Sterba committed himself to the stronger version in the first place. The reason, I assume, is that Sterba thought of his third premise as a conceptual truth, in keeping with his claim that he is revitalizing the logical problem of evil. Insofar as his response to the sovereignty proposal depends on claims about what humans probably prefer, it should now be clear that it is not a conceptual truth. If true at all, it is an empirical truth, and consequently, whether the argument has any prospect of success depends on further empirical content than Sterba has anticipated, and this in turn moves the argument further towards the evidential side of the spectrum.

I am also not convinced that 3' is true at all, though. For one thing, I am very doubtful that, at any given point in time, most people have a settled preference in favour of divine intervention. Many people do not believe in God. Moreover, people engage in intentional evil action all the time, and it is part of what we mean by 'intentional' that they have a preference for their action to be effective, which means not being blocked by some divine intervention. So, it seems to me that, for all we know, there has never been a point in all of human history when the overall weight of human preferences has been in favour of divine intervention. I have another reason for doubting 3', though.

I grant that it is plausible enough that if H can be understood by analogy with a sovereign entity, and H is constituted by all humans, then there must be some connection between the circumstances in which H might waive one of its rights and the preferences of humans. So, it is plausible that a sovereign entity can waive its right to non-intervention in certain circumstances, and it is plausible that these circumstances would include cases where most of the citizens of the sovereign entity have a preference for doing so. I do not think, however, that majority preference is a sufficient condition. Imagine a case where the citizens of a relatively impoverished functioning sovereign democracy held a referendum on whether to request a wealthier neighbouring state to institute a protectorate. Even if exceptionally high-quality polling prior to the vote showed an overwhelming majority in favour of the request, it seems to me clear that it would still immorally violate the poorer country's right to non-intervention if the wealthier country were to proclaim and institute the protectorate on the basis of the polling (even if it was entirely accurate) without waiting for the referendum. What this example shows, I think, is that however we understand the rights of sovereign entities, they are unlikely to be reducible to the preferences of the population in a straightforward and synchronic way.

I do not know what sort of conditions would need to be met in order to move from the preferences of most people to the waiving of H's right to non-intervention. If H is something like a country, then a constitutionally mandated procedure may be required. If, as is more plausible, H is some less rule-governed entity, such as a culture, tribe or society (at least some of which, I think, have a right to non-intervention), then perhaps it is as simple as a public expression of majority preference. What might that look like? I do not know, but I doubt that we have very good reasons for thinking that these conditions have ever been met. I also doubt that we have any good reasons for thinking that, should they be met, God would refuse to intervene. For all I know, more people just need to pray for more miracles, and God shall make a protectorate of us. In the meantime, I think Sterba's premise 3 is provably false, and its non-modal replacement, 3', is unproven.

## 8. Other Objections

In the final section of the paper, I will consider a series of further possible objections to my just-so story and respond in turn.

**Objection 1:** It is implausible that there can be an entity which is the sum of all humans.

Response: That there is such an entity is a theorem of any mereological theory involving unrestricted composition, including the classical theories of Leśniewski (1916) and Leonard and Goodman (1940). Of course, unrestricted composition is very controversial and might be false. But it is a well-established view and, I think, has some claim to plausibility. Moreover, even if the existence of H is not justified by a mereological theory, it might still be true. After all, we have no difficulty in understanding terms such as 'humanity' and 'the human race', and these might well be taken to refer to the sum of all humans.

**Objection 2:** It is implausible that H is a rights-bearer, or that the right to non-intervention is among its rights.

Response: We talk about the rights of countries, and the right to non-intervention by foreign countries looks like a paradigm case. Admittedly, the analogy between



H and a country, like all analogies, breaks down when looked at closely, but many other arguably sovereign entities have a claim on a similar right, for example, the rights of no-contract tribes in the rainforests of South America. Consider also a science-fiction case, such as HG Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, in which a non-human species threatens all of humanity. In such a case, I think, we have no trouble in thinking about humanity as a whole as bearing the right to non-intervention.

**Objection 3:** It is implausible that H's right to non-intervention would weigh highly compared to other moral considerations.

Response: I think it may weigh very highly. Of course, political philosophy is difficult, and there will be very different opinions about this, but consider the no-contact tribe again. It is plausible, in my view, that such a tribe might bear a right to non-intervention even if the lives of the tribespeople are rendered far shorter and more painful than they might be if some state systematically intervened in their lives *against* their duly expressed preferences.

**Objection 4:** God cannot be like a foreign sovereign entity in relation to us, because He created us and sustains us.

Response: This does not follow. A state might recognize (and perhaps even should recognize) the sovereignty of another state even if it brought it into existence (Canada was created in 1867 by a piece of legislation in British parliament) or sustains it (wealthy nations that feed their poorer neighbours in times of starvation are still morally bound to recognize the latter's right to non-intervention).

**Objection 5:** If God brought H into existence, God did wrong.

Response: To whom did God do wrong? Not humans, I think. I do not think God can wrong humans by bringing them into existence, unless their existence is of overall disvalue. Moreover, it is a plausible principle of metaphysics that if we are human beings, we cannot have been anything other than human beings.<sup>5</sup> My just-so story implicitly involves the claim that part of what it is to be a human being is to be part of an entity, H, which, by its nature, has the right to non-intervention. If I exist, therefore, it is only because God chose to realize H. If H has not waived its right to non-intervention, a good God will not systematically intervene in H. Note that this is not the claim that I am a thing that could not have existed with systematic interventions in my life by a divine being. That would be implausible. I am still a human being in those possible worlds in which God does systematically intervene in H. God being good does not actually systematically intervene in H, but it is possible for Him to do so (i.e., there are some possible worlds in which He does).

So, what about those humans whose existence is characterized by an overall disvalue to themselves? I think the theist can reject that there are any such humans. There might be humans whose *lives* are not worth living, but according to (most of) Abrahamic theism, the *existence* of such humans extends beyond the mortal realm and into the afterlife, where God may yet ensure that their existence is a net benefit to each and every one of them.<sup>6</sup> Even such humans as these cannot fault God for the mere fact of bringing them into existence.

## 9. Conclusions

I am prepared to conclude that Sterba's argument, as it stands, fails to establish its conclusion. That does not mean, though, that the Pauline Principle poses no threat to rational theistic belief. There are several *prima facie* ways to attempt a salvage of Sterba's general line of thought. I believe they all involve dropping the modal content of the third premise and providing instead a positive empirical argument for 3'. Such an argument may take any one of several forms, though. It might, for example, be contended that the distribution of evils around us is not suggestive of an optimal set of violations to H's

right to non-intervention, contrary to my just-so story, and that, therefore, 3' is probably true. Alternatively, it might be contended that very specific evils in the world, such as certain instances of genocide, for example, are such that it would be morally wrong for God not to violate H's right to non-intervention in these cases. Yet another alternative would be to argue that H has probably lost any legitimacy as a sovereign entity, or that any reasonable condition on the waiving of H's right to non-intervention has probably been met. Doubtless, there are other options to these, but what I think they all have in common is that they require substantial empirical evidence. That is, each of these strategies depends on more information about the kinds and distribution of evil in the actual world or about how human history has played out, which suggests that this world is not one inhabited by a good God with morally creditable reasons for not intervening more often. Such further evidence would involve moving the argument further towards the evidential side of the spectrum, and given that the debate would then turn on how compelling this new empirical evidence is, I think we would have reached a point where we were no longer dealing with a version of the logical problem of evil.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> One short passage of Betenson's (2021, p. 9 of 11) paper suggests that he does realize this; however, why he does not see this as a serious problem for his attempted drawing of the distinction is very unclear to me.
- <sup>2</sup> We may feel different about an individual police officer stationed at the border who can shoot and kill a murderer across the border before he murders a family of five in cold blood, but that is because this scenario is moving back to the case of individual morality, not states. Although the boundary is vague when we consider specific cases, to keep our focus on states, we would need to imagine an officially sanctioned government operation to intervene in the affairs of a foreign sovereign entity.
- <sup>3</sup> Naturally, I understand 'permission' here in a way that is non-prejudicial to the claim that H has a right to God's non-intervention. For me, giving permission does not imply having a right to prevent something, merely having the ability to prevent it. So, horrendous evil happens by God's permission, in that God *could* have intervened, notwithstanding it would have been wrong for God to intervene.
- <sup>4</sup> This disvalue need not be understood as grounded in harms to individual humans, so I am not contradicting my earlier claim that my defence will not appeal to any greater goods for humans that God provides by His non-intervention. Even if this disvalue is understood as grounded in harms to individual humans, I would maintain that, in the just-so story, God is refusing to intervene *because* it is wrong, not *because* there is some greater good for individual humans.
- <sup>5</sup> I find David Wiggins's (1980, chp. 2) example compelling: God could not literally have turned Lot's wife into a pillar of sand. He might have replaced Lot's wife with a pillar of sand, but it is not possible for one and the same thing to be at one time a human and at another a pillar of sand, not even by divine intervention.
- <sup>6</sup> The author has some sympathy with the theological theory of universal reconciliation.

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Article

# The Problem of Evil and God's Moral Standing: A Rejoinder to James Sterba

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**Abstract:** This article is a rejoinder to James Sterba's response to my previous article on the topic of his book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* Sterba argues that a good God is not logically possible given the amount of horrendous evil in the world. If God did exist, Sterba asserts, then he would be able to prevent such evils from happening while not losing any goods. My original article was a response to the notion that God is morally obligated to prevent such evil. The main points considered here are whether there really is a logical problem of evil and how God can have moral virtues ascribed to him while not being morally obligated in the sense that Sterba's position requires.

**Keywords:** God; evil; moral; theism; Aquinas; Sterba

## 1. Introduction

James Sterba was kind enough to respond to an article I wrote critiquing his book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*<sup>1</sup> Sterba argues in his book that if the God of traditional theism exists, then we should not expect to see horrendous evil. Since we do, then no such God exists. Sterba examines various theodicies and defenses that are typically used to rebuff his approach to the problem of evil. In chapter 6 of his book, he critiques a position that I have attempted to use and develop: the approach championed by Brian Davies that argues God is not a moral being and thus cannot be judged as one. Further, since God is a wholly distinct being from what is experienced in this natural world, we do not understand exactly what God is. In Davies' view (similar to Herbert McCabe 2010), if it can be proven that we do not have a grasp of God's essence (other than mostly apophatic), and if we can say that God is not a moral being with obligations, then the problem of evil fails.<sup>2</sup>

My previous article was a defense of such a view. (Since I have already written on this, I will not rehearse that argument here. The interested reader can peruse that work.) Sterba offered a response to my article and this present work will serve as a rejoinder. I will provide Sterba's objections followed by a response.

## 2. Sterba's Objections and My Responses

### 2.1. Traditional Theism vs. Classical Theism

Sterba's first point seems merely explanatory. He states that I believe his book "works against the existence of God (*sic*) of traditional theism but not against the existence of the God of classical theism."<sup>3</sup> This was not exactly a point that I set out to make in my article. In fact, the word 'traditional' does not appear in it. Perhaps what Sterba meant is that since I admit most theists hold that God is a moral agent, then that line of thinking is held by "traditional" theists, as opposed to stricter classical theists. It is agreed that most theists (whether we use the term 'traditional' or 'classical') believe that God is a moral agent.

### 2.2. Rationality as a Sufficient Condition for Morality

One of my objections to Sterba's book is that he did not explain why being a rational agent is a sufficient condition for being a moral agent. If theists agree that God is a rational agent in the sense that Sterba maintains, and it could be demonstrated that being a rational

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agent suffices for being a moral agent, then it would follow that God is a moral agent. However, what is it about being rational that guarantees that the being in question is moral in nature? This is not clear in Sterba's book and he notes as much in his response to me. This of course, does not mean his position is inaccurate, but it seems to be an assumption in the book. Sterba's response is that he has noted this connection elsewhere:

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.

However, Sterba did not cite where this material is found, so the reader is left to discover that himself. Since he did not provide that reasoning and I do not know where he made the argument, I cannot respond to it. Of course, my position is that God can be 'rational' in a sense while not being moral. This point will be better explained in the next subsection.

### 2.3. *God and Properties of Creation*

One of the central disagreements between me and Sterba concerns whether God necessarily has "properties" or qualities of creation. My argument is that properties which are inherently proper to creatures cannot be said to properly "exist" in God. Sterba writes:

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.<sup>4</sup>

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. Why then can being morally good not also be understood to be an analogical property that is possessed by God and ourselves. [*sic*]

As Sterba notes, he wants to substitute "intelligence" for "morality." He then states that I "would not want to draw the conclusion that God does not have the property of intelligence." As a follower of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics, I would argue that God does not have any properties. This probably seems like a rather innocuous point; however, I will argue that it is at the heart of the argument that Davies and I are making. It is not exactly clear to me how Sterba is using the term 'property'; however, he seems to have the notion of something that is "shared" or "possessed" by God and man. This would further seem to require a rather univocal notion of any terms used for such properties.<sup>5</sup> Having said that, since that is the word I used in my previous argument and it is the word Sterba uses, I will retain it with the caveat that I do not mean something like an abstract object or that God has any properties that modifies his being as properties certainly modify ours.

So, can the term 'intelligent' be used for God? Yes, but maybe not in the exact way some people mean it. From a classical theistic point of view, one can make many statements about God from one's experience and sometimes those statements, or predicates, can be applied to God in a proper sense and sometimes those terms are applied to God in a more

improper sense, such as metaphor. It is proper to say that God is intelligent. However, what most people mean by intelligent is a human kind of intelligence. Further, when people, atheist or theist, use terms for God, they often give the term a univocal meaning. An example given in this context is the term ‘good’. When one says that a man is good and that God is good, the term ‘good’ is often taken to have the same, or at least very similar, meaning. Since man is morally good, the idea is that God, if he is good, must also be morally good. The argument that I made above, cited by Sterba, says that properties of creation cannot properly be said of God. Since I argue that morality is a property of creation, then such a property cannot be ascribed to God. However, what about intelligence, since it is generally, if not always, agreed that the God of classical theism is intelligent? Since creatures and God are intelligent, then it would seem that God does in fact possess a property of creation.

As Aquinas maintains, God is intelligent (Aquinas 1924, 1:44). He thinks this because God is an immaterial being, and also because his effects are intelligent, so he must be intelligent as well since all perfections pre-exist in God. However, what it means for God to be intelligent is radically different than what it means for humans to be intelligent. For example, in *Summa Theologiae* question 14, Aquinas explains what it means for God to have knowledge. In article 4 he says that God’s intellect is *his substance*. This is not the case with humans. This is because, per the doctrine of simplicity, which Aquinas established in question 3 and which informs question 14 article 4, “in God, intellect, and the object understood, and the intelligible species, and His act of understanding are entirely one and the same. Hence, when God is said to be understanding, no kind of multiplicity is attached to His substance” (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 14 a. 4). While being rational is generally considered to be part of the definition of being human, the difference is that all of God’s knowledge, per Aquinas, is essential to him, while knowledge is accidental to humans in terms of the content of their knowledge. It is essential to have knowledge, but not essential to have all of one’s knowledge as identical with his being.

In article 7 of question 14, Aquinas rejects the notion that God’s knowledge is discursive. Such is in keeping with the medieval and classical notion of divine eternity, following Boethius, that God does not exist in a sequence of temporal moments but enjoys all of his life simultaneously without any succession at all (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 10 a. 1; Boethius 1999, Book v chap. 6). Further, in article 8 he argues that God’s knowledge is causal. He states: “Now it is manifest that God causes things by His intellect, since His being is His act of understanding; and hence His knowledge must be the cause of things, in so far as His will is joined to it” (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 14 a. 8). This last point is radically different from creatures since humans know things passively, at least in terms of the use of the senses.

To summarize, God’s knowledge is arguably identical with his essence, not discursive, and is causal. On the other hand, man’s knowledge is not identical with his essence, is discursive, and is passive (at least in knowing the world around him and other beings).

While it is noted that such a description of God is controversial, even among theists, my argument of God’s knowledge and intelligence attempts to demonstrate that what it means for God to be intelligent is radically different than what it means for man to be intelligent. The kind of intelligence man has is indeed a “property” of a created thing, or necessary for a created thing. That is, a created thing must have knowledge contingently, while a necessary being has it necessarily. Created things learn in a discursive, passive way. The Creator on the other hand, as an eternal and necessary being, does not learn via a discursive and passive way. To be sure, given classical theism and what was argued in my last article, God is simply not the kind of being that creatures are. Divine being and created beings are literally and infinitely distinct. I maintain, then, that the kind of intelligence man possesses is inherently and necessarily a consequent, effect, and property of being a created thing. The kind of intelligence God has (is), is necessarily distinct from creation and is *sui generis* to being the Creator. So, it is proper to say that God is intelligent, but the kind of intelligence is only analogous to ours and is unique to his being. Thus, I argue that Sterba’s counterexample and attempt to show I am engaging in special pleading fails.

#### 2.4. Ascribing Moral Virtue to God

Sterba's next point is to show that it is inconsistent of me to claim that we can ascribe moral virtues to God while also claiming that he is not morally good. He states:

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 [theism] who cannot be said to be morally good.

It is understandable that one would allege a contradiction or at least inconsistency here. It seems that what is being said is that God is both moral and not moral. However, I do not think that is actually the case, and I think Sterba is moving too quickly over my point regarding the way in which God can be said to have moral virtues and the ways he cannot.

Sterba rightly notes that the way in which I have argued for God having moral virtues is analogical; however, he does not seem to see that distinction in his objection. In other words, the point that I (following Davies 2006, 2011) maintain is the way in which God is said to have moral virtues is radically different from what it means for humans to have moral virtues. It seems that what Aquinas means when ascribing, for instance, justice to God, is that God is just because he *like a just person* gives to people (and things) what are due to them. We have a notion of justice that we experience in our everyday dealings and then we in turn say that God has something similar because he gives to people what is due to them. However, as Aquinas and Davies have pointed out, terms like 'justice' cannot be used univocally between God and creatures, and there are ways justice cannot be ascribed to God at all.

The issue of morality would be analogous (no pun intended) to the property of intelligence. Classical theists, such as Aquinas and Davies, state there are certain ways in which God can be thought to have certain moral virtues. In question 21 of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas argues that there are specific moral virtues that cannot be ascribed to God since they deal with passions, which God does not have. Examples would include temperance and courage (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 21 a. 1 ad 1). These can be ascribed to God metaphorically, but not properly. However, there are moral virtues that Aquinas says God can exhibit, such as justice and liberality, since these virtues are not tied to the appetite but to the will. However, while there are two kinds of justice, says Aquinas, commutative and distributive, God can only properly be said to exhibit the latter since the former requires a debt and God does not owe anyone a debt. Distributive justice occurs when, according to Aquinas, "a ruler or steward gives to each what his rank deserves. As then the proper order displayed in ruling a family or any kind of multitude evinces justice of this kind in the ruler, so the order of the universe, which is seen both in effects of nature and in effects of will, shows forth the justice of God" (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 21 a. 1). The kind of justice that Aquinas has in mind here has to do with giving one what is due in accordance with his creative act, which is based in his will. However, one should not see an obligation here in the sense that there is some overarching, transcendent morality that rules over all rational beings (which also makes God a being among other beings instead of the *sui generis* Creator), as Sterba's view requires.

It seems that Sterba and others take such notions of justice to mean that God is under some obligation to perform certain actions and to refrain from others. This does not seem to be what Aquinas has in mind. The Book of Job is an excellent biblical example of this that I discussed in my previous work.

Aquinas argues that “no name belongs to God in the same sense that it belongs to creatures; for instance, wisdom in creatures is a quality, but not in God” (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 13 a. 5). So, whatever is meant by ‘justice’ or ‘moral virtue’ cannot for Aquinas mean the same thing when those terms are applied to humankind. Further, since Aquinas rejects the notion that commutative justice resides in God because he does not owe man anything, on Aquinas’ account God cannot be said to have obligations. However, this is exactly and necessarily what Sterba’s position requires: that God owes it to man to prevent horrendous evils. This is not at all the kind of justice that Aquinas says God has. The kind of justice that God has according to Aquinas only concerns following through with God’s creative order.

A distinction here may clarify. Aquinas maintains that there are two ways a thing can be necessary: absolutely and suppositionally (or conditionally). Something is absolutely necessary if it is definitionally true or simply must be true according to its nature, such as God willing his goodness. However, something is only suppositionally necessary if God wills it. God does not have to will the universe to be; however, supposing he does, then it is necessary that he does. However, the necessity is not one of an absolute nature, but only on the condition that he actually wills it. This is because, as Aquinas says, “supposing that He wills a thing, then He is unable not to will it, as His will cannot change” (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 19 a. 3).

This seems to be the way in which Aquinas thinks of God’s justice. Namely, that if God wills to create, then he is just to give those things what their natures require in order to be what they are. There is no moral obligation; but there is a necessity of sorts, *supposing God wills to create*. In other words, to echo Aquinas, God cannot will to create x and not will to create x.

What is missing in the discussion with Aquinas, and what may be at least implicitly rejected in his denial of God having commutative justice, is the notion of obligation. This (obligation) is the *sine qua non* of Sterba’s position and is the very thing that Aquinas seems to reject, or at least leave out. Moral virtues are not moral obligations for God as humans have obligations. Such divine moral virtues are analogical at best. To say that God is just is not to say that he is keeping some law that should not be broken. It is to say that he acts in a way analogously to how we see and think of just people: that they give to their subjects what is due. This is clear from what Aquinas says in the same article on justice:

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. (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 21 a. 1 ad 2)

God is just simply by the act of his willing, not by being obligated by some higher standard. Such is the case with the other moral virtues that Aquinas says can be ascribed to God. So, I would argue that there is a sense in which one can ascribe moral virtues to God, but they do not mean exactly the same thing for him and do not put God under any moral obligation. Since obligation is paramount for Sterba’s position, I maintain that since God is not under an obligation, the arguments from evil (logical and evidential) do not (and cannot) demonstrate that he does not exist.

In conclusion to this point, the kind of morality (and intelligence) that humans have is indeed a property unique to created beings. The way of talking about moral virtues that Aquinas and classical theists say can be ascribed to God is unique to the Creator. Thus, I believe that the above argument about God not having properties of creation, one of which is a certain kind of morality, is sound. The human kind involves aspects of morality that the divine kind does not, such as obligation.

## 2.5. Can God Perform Immoral Actions?

Sterba next argues:



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.

From what I can tell, Sterba is saying that I appear to make moral assertions or evaluations about God and in doing so I am being inconsistent with my position. I think there may be a miscommunication here. I was not trying to apply moral evaluations to God; actually, I was trying to do the opposite. My point was that when people try to argue that God is immoral, they often seem to fail to understand that God is not the kind of being that can do the kinds of things that would make him immoral. For example, God is simply not the kind of being that can murder or steal, for the reasons given in Sterba's quote. When one calls God immoral, it needs to be remembered the kind of being God is and is not. My argument is that God cannot do the kinds of things that many people charge him with. This is because they often fail to make a Creator/creature distinction and put God in the class of all other beings. An example may help.

One philosopher argues this way: God cannot be simultaneously omniscient and wholly (morally) good (Atterton 2019). If he were omniscient, then he would know what it is like to lust. If he knew what it was like to lust, then he would not be wholly good (since he must have committed the sin of lust). Thus, no such God exists.

The assumption made here is that God knows in the same manner as humans do, viz., through experience. However, if Aquinas is right about God's knowledge, then God as an eternal, immutable, impassible being *cannot* know via experience. As Aquinas maintains, God's knowledge is causal and active (since God is Pure Act). Thus, God not only does not know in the way that humans do, but he cannot commit lust since such would require passions, time, change, and imperfection (of the metaphysical sort) that God's being does not have.

Humans can do things like commit murder, steal, and lust, but that is because of the kind of being humans are. Following natural law theory, I argue that humans have an objective essence or nature and that the good of that nature can either be promoted or prohibited via certain actions. It is wrong for a human to kill another human in cold blood, but it is not wrong in the moral sense for a lion to kill a human. Most people would not say (except for maybe analogously or metaphorically) that the lion murdered the human. It is generally accepted, I believe, that lions and other animals of that sort are not moral in the sense that humans are. The assumption that is often made is that God is also under some sort of moral law, but that just does not follow. To say that humans are under a moral law and that God is too needs an argument, and I believe asserting that rationality is a sufficient condition for such morality is not enough since as argued here God is not rational (intelligent) in the same way humans are. Thus, to use rationality as a sufficient condition for morality would require an argument for the kind of rationality that God would be said to have, not merely human rationality. In short, my point with the examples above was simply that God is not the kind of being to be immoral. I was not attempting to evaluate his morality in any way; rather, I was denying such moral assessments are possible.

### 2.6. Another Inconsistency in Connection with Swinburne and Traditional Theism

Sterba's last critique of my article regards another alleged inconsistency that he says is in line with Richard Swinburne as it relates to the previous section regarding God not being able to do things like murder and steal:

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.

I did not call Swinburne a traditional theist in my previous article. Again, the word 'traditional' is not to be found in that article. I do state there, however, and maybe this is why Sterba thinks I consider Swinburne a traditional theist, that Swinburne takes God to be a moral being. However, this position is not unique to traditional theists since others, such as open theists<sup>6</sup> and those who have been termed by Davies as 'theistic personalists' generally also take God to be moral. Davies includes Swinburne as a theistic personalist.<sup>7</sup> Swinburne maintains that "there is an omnipotent person" that he refers to as God, which is a common way of characterizing God, along with treating God like other persons (Swinburne 2016, p. 228). As such, Swinburne would not be classified by all as a traditional theist.

Swinburne does seem to make the same points that I have made above as quoted by Sterba; viz., that God as the sovereign Creator of life has the right to end a person's earthly life. However, he seems to go further than I would with God having obligations and generally being moral like humans. For example, he says that God is under an obligation to give someone a good afterlife if he did not have a good earthly life. Regarding such obligations, he makes the distinction between absolute and suppositional necessity made by Aquinas (although not in those words).<sup>8</sup> In other words, God only has such obligations if he chooses to create humans.

I think all this proves is that God is neither morally indicted on Swinburne's view or my view. I do not believe there is an inconsistency here on my part as I am not claiming that God is morally justified, but that God simply cannot be immoral in these ways. Sterba thinks that Swinburne's view fails, however, my overall position is very different from Swinburne's.

### 3. Another Possible Objection

Another objection that is sometimes raised against the position maintained here is that it results in a sort of agnosticism regarding God's nature. In other words, given what has been said, one may object that we are not left with a knowledge of what God is—only what he is not. I do think that there are some positive aspects that one can maintain about God's nature, such as he is being, good, and the like. Having said that, we do not have a full grasp of what these terms mean regarding the divine nature. We can say, positively, that God is being and that God is good. However, the full meaning and understanding of such terms are not grasped by us due to the limitation of our own nature. Finite beings simply cannot grasp infinite being. Thus, there is a real sense in which we are left with a certain level of agnosticism, not about God's existence, but what he truly is in his infinite being and nature. Such does not mean we cannot make true statements about God, but it does mean that he cannot be fully grasped by our understanding.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

I appreciate Sterba taking the time and effort to interact with my article. I also appreciate his moral realism and his view that morality is objective and important. I have greatly enjoyed our interactions on this topic.

I do understand the apparent inconsistency that he and others see in saying that God can have moral virtues ascribed to him while at the same time saying that he is not under moral obligations. However, I think a strong view of analogy (especially in the vein of Gregory Rocca<sup>10</sup>, who has influenced my view of analogy) helps to clarify how God can be said to have a “property” but not have that property in the sense or mode that humans do. I hope that this article has helped to clarify my position, which is founded on Davies’ position.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> (Sterba 2019); (Huffling 2021); for his response cf. (Sterba 2021).

<sup>2</sup> The view I am espousing has some similarities with skeptical theism. For example, according to Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wykstra, there are two main points of skeptical theism. One is that supposing a theistic God exists, we should “not expect to grasp the divine purposes and reckonings behind God’s allowing these evils.” The second is that given the first point, many (if not most) arguments from evil fail. (Perrine and Wykstra 2017, p. 86). One apparent difference between what I am arguing for and skeptical theism is that the latter still appears to take God as a moral being even though we cannot understand him or his purposes.

<sup>3</sup> (Sterba 2021). All quotations from Sterba will be from this source.

<sup>4</sup> My article says “properties of creation.” In other words, any properties that are proper to the effects of creation or in creatures, rather than a single property of creation.

<sup>5</sup> In our most recent debate, that is currently unpublished, Sterba stated that he can allow for an analogical view of such terms; however, it seems that we are using the term ‘analogical’ in different ways.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. (Pinnock et al. 1994), for a discussion and overview of open theism.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. (Davies 2021, pp. 9–17), for both a discussion of theistic personalism and why he thinks Swinburne is among them.

<sup>8</sup> (Swinburne 2016, pp. 220–21). For Swinburne’s discussion on God’s general morality, cf. pp. 200–27.

<sup>9</sup> For a good discussion on this, cf. (Rocca 2004).

<sup>10</sup> (Rocca 2004). His view can be seen in my discussion of the various uses of the term ‘good’ in my previous article.

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## Article

# Divine Morality or Divine Love? On Sterba's New Logical Problem of Evil

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**Abstract:** In his recent version of the logical problem of evil, James Sterba articulates several moral principles that, on the assumption that God is morally perfect, seem to entail God's non-existence. Such moral principles, however, only apply to God on the assumption that he is a moral agent. I first argue against this assumption by appealing to recent work by Mark Murphy before, secondly, suggesting an alternative way to frame Sterba's argument in terms of divine love. One can distinguish God's motivation to promote creaturely welfare on the basis of love from a motivation grounded in morality, and I claim that doing so results in a stronger form of the logical argument.

**Keywords:** problem of evil; rationality; value theory; divine agency

In *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James P. Sterba argues that commitment to certain moral principles—i.e., principles which follow from a suitably qualified version of the Apostle Paul's emphatic thesis to *never do evil that good may come* (Rom. 3:28)—rules out God's existence (Sterba 2019). Specifically, Sterba claims that once we account *not only* for the mere existence of evil *but also* for the particular kinds and distribution of horrendous evils that actually characterize our world, a sound logical argument against God's existence (roughly in the vein of the classic Plantinga–Mackie debate) can be constructed out of those moral principles Sterba identifies—see (Mackie 1955) and (Plantinga 1974, chp. 9).<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this essay is to present an opportunity for further discussion concerning the question of why theists should think that moral principles, whatever their content, apply to God. Thinking that such principles *do* apply to God requires that God is a moral agent in some sense, and given that such a claim has been called into question by several serious philosophers and theologians, the idea that God is a moral agent is at least not analytically true.<sup>2</sup> In other words, there is room for debate here.

In chapter 6, Sterba considers one version of this objection to his argument—due to Brian Davies (2006)—that, contrary to the inclinations of many *contemporary* philosophers of religion, God's moral perfection does not follow from his perfect goodness. In what follows, I take a page out of some recent work by Mark C. Murphy in arguing that we have strong reason to deny that God is morally perfect (Murphy 2017, 2021). Even so, I think Sterba's argument can be repaired by appealing to a God of *love*, and I suggest how that repair might proceed (although I do not here suggest that the revised argument ultimately succeeds, for other objections to Sterba's argument, which I set aside for the purposes of this paper, are relevant in evaluating the revised version of his argument).

I begin by explaining Sterba's argument with a bit more precision before turning—in Section 2—to an explanation of how denying that moral norms apply to God undermines his argument. Then, in Section 3, I present arguments for why God's *absolute* perfection might be seen to preclude *moral* perfection, and close (Section 4) with an alternative version of Sterba's logical argument (henceforth, 'SLA') articulated in terms of divine love.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Sterba's Logical Argument (SLA)

Sterba begins his argument with a discussion of the Pauline Principle to “never intentionally do moral evil that greater good may come of it” (8fn5). Immediately, he notes

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that such a principle cannot hold universally since there are obvious scenarios in which it fails to hold—e.g., whenever one lies in order to protect the life of a friend. Nevertheless, Sterba takes there to be “exceptionless minimal components of the Pauline Principle” that *do* hold for all rational moral agents (including God), which he labels Moral Evil Prevention Requirements. They 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), 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.<sup>4</sup>

The rationale behind each of these principles is fairly straightforward. They all concern an agent who is considering whether or not to *intervene* to prevent the consequences of some evil; i.e., consequences they reasonably expect to follow without their intervention.<sup>5</sup> Whenever intervention (or lack thereof) would fail to satisfy any of I–III, then the agent under question must, on pain of acting immorally, refrain from intervening (or not) in accordance with the deliverances of the principles. Moreover, given God’s omniscience, God would always be aware of how these principles bear on his deliberations for action. From this we get (my restatement of) Sterba’s new form of the logical argument from evil (SLA), which I state in the form of an inconsistent set of propositions:

1. An omnipotent and morally perfect being exists.
2. An omnipotent being could always act in accordance with Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I, II, and III.
3. A morally perfect being always acts in accordance with Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I, II, and III if it is possible to do so and that being is omnipotent.
4. If a being always acts in accordance with Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I, II, and III and is omnipotent, then it is not the case that there exist significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions that easily could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without violating Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I, II, or III.
5. There exist significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions that easily could have been prevented by an omnipotent being without violating Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I, II, or III.<sup>6</sup>

The argument to the inconsistency of (1)–(5) clearly holds.<sup>7</sup> And, moreover, it is structurally very similar to Mackie’s own statement of the logical problem of evil.<sup>8</sup> What makes Sterba’s version significantly different, however, is the existential claim found in premise (5): namely, that there exist not only evils—that was Mackie’s rather minimal suggestion—but also evils that conflict with Sterba’s moral requirements. In other words, Sterba provides a more demanding existential premise—i.e., more demanding in the sense that its truth requires us to affirm more about the world—that allows for the possibility that God’s existence is compatible with *some* evil; it is just that God’s existence is not compatible with the particular evils with which Sterba is concerned (i.e., the evils we witness in the world that violate Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III). Given that (1)–(5) constitute an inconsistent set, no one can consistently affirm all five claims. Sterba, of course, argues that we should deny premise (1), which amounts to a denial of God’s existence on the assumption that God is a morally perfect and omnipotent being.

## 2. The Centrality of Moral Norms for SLA

Something that is immediately apparent after stating SLA in this way is its reliance on moral principles. For if one were to leave off these principles, then one would be leaving off those things which most distinguish SLA from Mackie's logical argument.

One thing worth noticing, however, is that Sterba's moral principles simply highlight something which is already built into Mackie's original argument: namely, that the being whose existence is being ruled out is said to be *morally perfect* (cf. claim (1) of the inconsistent set above). However, moral perfection presumes that we are talking about a *moral agent*—i.e., someone to whom the norms of morality apply—if it is to be informative at all. Suppose, for instance, that your friend tells you that their dog, Dante, is morally perfect. Confused, you press them: “What do you mean when you say Dante is morally perfect?” They respond, “Well, Dante has never done anything immoral, so surely he can count as morally perfect in some sense.” You should not be convinced. Ascribing moral perfection to something only makes sense if it is the sort of being that *responds* (or can/should respond) to moral reasons. The fact that Dante is a dog along with the fact that dogs neither can nor should respond to moral reasons precludes Dante from being morally perfect in virtue of the fact that Dante is not a moral agent.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, unlike Dante, God is fully capable of comprehending the sorts of moral principles invoked by SLA and, in virtue of this, one might think that God is a moral agent. However, moral agency includes a normative component as well: namely, that when there is a moral reason to do something, then, in the absence of contrary reasons, a moral agent is *required* to act on it, on pain of irrationality. In other words, for someone to be a moral agent, the moral considerations under question (e.g., beneficence, dignity of persons, etc.) must provide them with *requiring reasons* for action. Furthermore, in the case of SLA, what puts pressure on the theist is that Sterba takes pains to explain how God, in particular, would never have reasons to act against Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I-III. That is, God would always have *decisive* reason to follow such norms.

Let us take a moment, however, to explicate the above distinction—i.e., that between requiring and (merely) justifying reasons for action—with a bit more care in relation to SLA. First, as just mentioned, a requiring reason is a reason that *constrains* action; that is, if an agent fails to act on such a reason, in the absence of contrary reasons, then that agent acts irrationally. Of course, the agent might have reasons to the contrary, and if so, then their choice to act against such a requiring reason need not be irrational. However, if that agent fails to have contrary reasons, then, insofar as acting rationally is interchangeable with acting as reason dictates, the agent is irrational.

Secondly, *what sorts of reasons might make it rational to not act in accordance with requiring reasons?* One answer to this question is other requiring reasons. For instance, suppose a doctor has a requiring reason to act for the benefit of her patients. When faced with a patient in need of immediate treatment—e.g., an epinephrine shot to counteract an allergy—the doctor is bound by requiring moral reasons to implement the relevant treatment. However, suppose the patient has previously, in full awareness of the life-threatening potential of his allergy, declared that under no circumstances, even lifesaving ones, does he consent to receiving a shot of epinephrine. In that case, the doctor will have a requiring reason to *not* implement the treatment, i.e., a reason grounded in respect for her patient's autonomy.

A second answer to our question—i.e., *why might someone reasonably not act in accordance with one's requiring reasons*—would appeal to (merely) justifying reasons for action, where a (merely) justifying reason<sup>10</sup> for action presents an agent with rational opportunities for action without constraining the agent's action in any sense. To put it a bit more technically, a justifying reason for action makes an action in accordance with it rational, but should an agent fail to act on such a reason, even in the absence of reasons to the contrary, she is not thereby rendered irrational. Rather, she has simply chosen not to pursue something she has some reason to pursue.

Examples of justifying reasons like this are ubiquitous. There is value in pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy but there is also value in pursuing a law degree. Faced with both

options, an agent may choose to pursue one of them without pursuing the other. Suppose I choose to pursue a law degree. Does this imply that my decision to not choose the Ph.D. in philosophy was irrational? Not at all, for the decision with which I was faced was a decision between reasonable *opportunities*.<sup>11</sup>

Can such justifying reasons make it rational to act against one's requiring reasons? It can, and this is easy to see especially when the strength of a requiring reason is low. Suppose that I have promised to meet a group of friends for lunch. Keeping promises grounds requiring reasons of morality on my view, and so, I have a requiring reason to meet my friends for lunch.<sup>12</sup> However, on the way to lunch, I walk next to the oddest thing: a phone booth where passersby are invited at random to step into the phone booth before it is filled with gusts of wind and a mix of real and counterfeit Bruce Springsteen concert tickets. Obviously, the goal for each participant is to get at least one genuine Bruce Springsteen ticket, and, to my great delight, I am invited to participate. Even so, I hit a snag, for I must wait half an hour before being granted entry, i.e., something which would preclude my making it in time for lunch. Suppose I choose to wait. Am I acting irrationally? I might be acting *immorally*, for, after all, I am acting against a requiring reason of morality without having a moral reason to the contrary. Even so, my decision to try to obtain a Bruce Springsteen ticket is *intelligible*, even if one disagrees with it. Why? Well, my friends understand my Bruce Springsteen obsession, and when I tell them about it, they won't be hurt by my moral indiscretion. They know me well enough to be amused instead of hurt by such a decision, and supposing that I am aware of this, the decision becomes all the more understandable. That is, this is the sort of decision we can imagine a rational actor making without the decision being *required* by rationality (even if it were required by morality). The reason on which I act is a practical justifying reason for action, and it provides a rational opportunity for acting contrary to my moral requiring reason.

Third, consider the notion of a *decisive* reason for action. Whenever one has a requiring reason to act but there are no reasons to the contrary, then that requiring reason is also *decisive*. That is, that reason alone entails what a perfectly rational actor would do (for acting against it can be rational only in accordance with reasons to the contrary; but you have no reasons to the contrary on the supposition). Thus, if God is perfectly rational, then anytime God has a decisive reason to  $\phi$ , God  $\phi$ 's.<sup>13</sup>

Given all of this, let us return to SLA. In that argument, Sterba assumes that God is responsive to moral considerations—that is, moral considerations give God justifying reasons, at least, for acting. He does not stop there though, for, on Sterba's account, such reasons are also both (i) *requiring* for God and (ii) *decisive* when considering situations that might conflict with Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I-III. Notice, then, that if there were grounds to deny that moral reasons were rationally requiring for God as a perfect being, then SLA would be undermined. Are there any such grounds?

### 3. Divine Perfection Does Not Entail Moral Perfection

To ascertain whether or not there are grounds for thinking of God as possessing *requiring* reasons of morality, it is worth beginning with a lengthy quote from Sterba in which he responds to Brian Davies. On the view of Davies that Sterba is considering, were God to command human agents to torture children, that would involve God in a contradiction since God has built *not* torturing children into human nature itself. That is, were God to command us (humans) to torture children, according to Davies, then God would be *explicitly* commanding us to act in contradiction with those commands that are *implicit* within the human nature God has given us. Sterba responds to this idea as follows,

[I]f God cannot command us to do anything that goes against the law of reason that he embedded in our hearts because that would involve God in a contradiction, then, it would also seem that God could not act against that same law of reason that he embedded in our hearts because that too would involve God in a contradiction. Thus, God, for example, like us, would be required not to torture

children. However, Davies rejects this result on the grounds that it would make God a moral agent with moral requirements or obligations like ourselves.

How can Davies hold this? If it would be contradictory for God to implant a law in our nature that applies to all rational agents and then command that we act against it, why would it not also be contradictory for God to implant a law in our nature that applies to all rational agents and command us not to act against it, while at the same time regularly acting against the law himself in his dealings with us? (Sterba 2021, p. 116)

After restating Davies's position, Sterba reacts in befuddlement ("How can Davies hold this?"). Then, in articulating *why* he is befuddled, Sterba, in representing the commitments of Davies's view, claims that God has implanted "a law in our nature that applies to all rational agents". Although it is easy to miss, this appears to be a misrepresentation of Davies's view (or if it is not a misrepresentation, then Davies should change his view). For even if God has put a law in our nature that applies to all rational *human* agents, it does not follow that it applies to all rational agents. In other words, Sterba is assuming a sort of universal applicability that comes with such moral considerations. Specifically, Sterba assumes that the sorts of welfare values underlying the moral norms in question, first, give all rational agents *reasons* to act, and second, that such reasons would all be the same *kinds* of reasons.

Welfare values are relative to specific agents, and the presence of such values alone does not ground requiring reasons for every agent. For instance, *having sufficient nutrition* is a valuable state for my dog, and I tend to think, in virtue of the relationship I bear to my dog, that this value gives me a requiring reason to feed her (a requiring reason not shared widely if at all). Indeed, were someone to try and feed my dog without my permission, I might be reasonably upset. It is *my* responsibility to take care of her, and, on the assumption that I am fulfilling that responsibility, other agents are precluded from doing so. In other words, other agents seem to have requiring reasons *not* to feed my dog (despite the fact that doing so is to aim at a valuable state of affairs for my dog).

Even so, the sorts of scenarios involving welfare values for human agents imagined by Sterba carefully stipulate the conditions in question such that were such welfare values to provide humans with moral reasons for action, then they plausibly provide requiring reasons for all humans (i.e., irrespective of one's special relationships to those in danger of suffering). Thus, if they apply universally to human agents, then it is a natural thought that they also apply, and provide requiring reasons for action to, divine agents.

Is this natural thought correct, though? To see that it need not be, begin by noticing what my dog feeding example illustrates: namely, that there are circumstances in which the fact that (1) *X is fundamentally good (bad) for A* does not entail that (2) *X is a reason for all agents to promote (prevent) X*.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, the inference from (1) to (2) is not definitional or a matter of the nature of value (goodness/badness) itself. Rather, one must appeal to *other factors* to explain why the value under question applies to a given agent in such a way that they have a requiring reason for action.

One might try to make the move from (1) to (2) more manageable by qualifying (2) in various ways. For instance, perhaps rather than taking values to ground reasons for *all agents* to act, we might identify a particular *class* of agents as the relevant one. Aristotelians, for example, explain what it is to be a good human by appealing to action in accordance with *human* virtue. Accordingly, human agents all have requiring reasons to promote certain human goods in virtue of being human (rather than in virtue of being rational agents of some kind or another).<sup>15</sup> Since God is not human, it seems God does not have requiring reason to promote human-specific values on such an Aristotelian account. For yet another case of this, Humeans ground the reasons-conferring power of value in shared human moral sentiments such that, for any agent that possesses such sentiments, that agent has requiring reason to promote that value. Even on this account, however, such sentiments do not appear rational in any strong sense. That is, there is no reason to think that rational agency stands or falls on the possession of such sentiments, and if that is correct, then one



will be hard pressed to demonstrate that such Humeanism can show that welfare values are sufficient to ground requiring reasons of morality for a non-human, divine rational agent. Shared sentiments might ground universal *human* applicability, but they, by no means, ground universal *rational agent* applicability.<sup>16</sup>

Suppose we instead try to bridge the inference from (1) to (2) in Kantian fashion; that is, suppose we try to show that failure to promote welfare values for humans involves some sort of contradiction in reason itself. Perhaps such a project would indeed demonstrate that promoting welfare-oriented goods—like those involved in Sterba’s Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III—is required not only of humans but also any rational agent. If successful, then, such a project would establish that God does indeed have requiring, even decisive reason to govern the world in a way that is consistent with Sterba’s Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III. However, Sterba provides no suggestion about how that project might proceed; rather, he simply assumes that it can be accomplished without argument. As a result, we are left without sufficient reason to understand God as a moral agent in the sense required by SLA.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Love’s Non-Comparative Nature

So, SLA does not succeed in its current form to demonstrate the impossibility of God’s existence. Even so, were Sterba able to secure the connection between God and God’s having requiring reasons to promote human welfare in some way other than assuming that God is a moral agent, a renewed version of his argument might be successful. What other way might be available to Sterba?

To see what might succeed here, it is worth remembering that the logical problem of evil is supposed to be a problem for *theists*. Contrary to this, one (regrettably) sometimes hears theists respond to the problem of evil by saying something of the form, “Well, atheists don’t believe in evil anyway, so there’s no problem on their worldview!” Of course, plenty of atheists (e.g., Sterba himself) believe in the existence of moral evil, and they have plausibly adequate grounds for doing so. However, what an atheist believes about morality is irrelevant to the problem of evil. What matters is what *theists* believe, and this presents Sterba with an alternative route to a successful logical argument.

Even if a theist denies that God is a moral agent, most of them will affirm that God *loves* humanity.<sup>18</sup> Among other things, if *A* loves *B*, then that entails that *A* desires *B*’s ultimate good. But not only does love entail desiring the beloved’s good; love is plausibly a noncomparative state that grounds reasons for the lover to act independent of the comparative value of the beloved to other creatures. Allow me to say a bit more about this.

I love my spouse tremendously. My love for her might manifest in my cooking a hot breakfast each morning for her, expressing my gratitude and delight in seeing her each day, in encouraging her to pursue her many talents in various ways, etc. However, and this is crucial, my love for my spouse has nothing to do with how much better she is than other people or how much more suitable as a spouse she is for me. Indeed, were someone to ask me why I love her, if I responded by offering a series of *comparisons* for why it is that she is better than all other potential spouses, they could rightly question whether I truly loved her. Love involves a response to the beloved that is noncomparative, such that genuine love gives one reasons to promote the welfare of the beloved, no matter how they compare to other humans, creatures, agents, etc. Questions of the objective value they hold simply have no primary relevance in determining whether one seeks their good. One values them in loving them and that gives one reason to act to promote their good.<sup>19</sup>

Accordingly, I submit that if God loves someone, then God has requiring reasons to promote their welfare in the way that SLA suggests. Thus, if Sterba were to replace ‘morally perfect’ with ‘perfectly loving’ throughout all the premises of my earlier reformulation of his argument, the question of the argument’s success against God’s existence would no longer turn on a concept of God rejected by many theists but would instead hinge on the evaluation of the suitably changed existential premise—i.e., premise (5).<sup>20</sup>

Allow me, however, to briefly respond to one further worry inspired by Mark Murphy. In *God's Own Ethics*, Murphy contends that whatever reasons of love God has to promote creaturely well-being really amount to nothing more than moral reasons to promote creaturely well-being. Clearly enough, if Murphy is correct in this claim, then replacing 'morally perfect' with 'perfectly loving' would make no substantive difference to the success of Sterba's argument, and my suggested fix would amount to dust.<sup>21</sup>

My response to Murphy, however, goes as follows: the reasons we have that are moral are, as I understand them, grounded in the objective value of other agents. That is, we have requiring moral reasons to promote the welfare of others in virtue of the dignity they possess and the fact that our own dignity is not saliently different from theirs. This is a Kantian way of thinking about the application conditions of moral reasons to all human agents.

Very plausibly, God's own objective dignity and value surpasses our own. Well... perhaps that puts things too delicately. Perhaps I should instead say that God's value is so great that, by comparison, our objective value bears *no significance* on God's deliberations whatsoever. That is, our objective value gives God no more (in fact, less) reason to promote our welfare than the objective value of an ant gives humans reason to promote its welfare. This is part of the reason why treating God as a moral agent runs into difficulties. Notice here, however, that the entire argument for Murphy hinges on the *objective* value gap that holds between God and human agents, leaving the subjective value conferred on human agents by God's love of them to the side.

When we do attend to God's love of human agents (and the reason-conferring nature of love), things are different. The reasons of love God possesses are not responses to our objective value (at least, not fundamentally so); rather, they are grounded in God's response to *us*. That is, they arise out of a divine love for who we are, no matter how we compare to other agents or creatures.

What this means is that God's decision to love human agents gives God reason to act so as to satisfy the welfare-based moral principles articulated by Sterba. Moreover, to try and ground the reasons of love in something other than God's choice to love humans—e.g., the objective value of human agents—is to treat them, instead, as moral reasons that apply to all rational agents (and we have already seen that grounding moral constraints that apply to a divine being requires further argumentation than Sterba has yet provided).

In virtue of this, Murphy's claimed reduction of reasons of love to reasons of morality, at least with respect to what requiring reasons God would have to promote our good, fails. Thus, if a theist takes God to be perfectly loving, then they can simultaneously deny that God is a moral agent while still affirming that Sterba's Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I-III articulate conditions for action that would give God decisive reasons to act in various ways. If this is right, then Sterba's argument, reconstructed in terms of divine love, presents a more powerful version of the logical argument (though I hereby refrain from issuing any verdicts on the ultimate success of the revised argument).

## 5. Conclusions

In this essay, I have argued that, contrary to his contention in chapter 6 of *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, Sterba has not provided reason to think that God is a moral agent. This, of course, is a problem for SLA since it is predicated on the assumption that God's moral agency clearly follows from God's perfection. Nevertheless, I have suggested that once one appreciates the difference between the nature of love and reasons of morality, a stronger version of Sterba's logical argument can be developed which reestablishes the connection between the God of theism and the expectations Sterba articulates regarding divine action. Thus, even if God is not a moral agent, there remains a serious logical problem of evil facing theism.

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## Notes

- 1 Sterba divides all goods into (i) first-order and second-order goods—where second-order goods are those goods which logically require the existence of a prior evil (e.g., comforting a survivor of abuse)—and (ii) goods to which we have a right and goods to which we do not have a right. It is in exploring God’s relationship to (or permission of) various combinations of these types of goods and evils that Sterba’s argument (or arguments) rule out God’s existence.
- 2 I take the philosophers and theologians who deny that God is, necessarily, a moral agent to understand terms such as ‘God’ or ‘divine’ sufficiently well that if God’s moral agency were a mere matter of the definition of ‘divinity’, then they would not call God’s moral agency into question. The fact that they *do* question it, then, strongly implies (even if it fails to guarantee) that the idea that God is a moral agent is not analytically true.
- 3 This final section turns on the notion that love is noncomparative, and so, it can plausibly provide the needed universal applicability for welfare-based reasons to motivate God to act in the way Sterba needs.
- 4 These requirements are explicitly formulated first in (Sterba 2021, pp. 126–28), although this version of the principles is taken from 184.
- 5 Of course, in God’s case, God does not only reasonably expect the consequences to follow. He, on account of his omniscience, *knows* that they would follow without his intervention.
- 6 Sterba (2019, pp. 181–94) helpfully offers several restatements of his various arguments and sub-arguments. The above is my own restatement aiming to display the formal similarity between Sterba’s argument and Mackie’s older logical argument. Note, also, that given that (1)–(5) are in fact inconsistent, rationality does not *require* giving up claim (1). Rationality, rather, requires giving up at least one of claims (1)–(5) if one wants to avoid inconsistency.
- 7 See (Weber 2019) for a response to anyone wishing to push a paraconsistent approach to arguments from evil.
- 8 Mackie, of course, puts the argument in terms of an omnipotent and “wholly good” being, but it seems fairly clear that he has a *morally perfect agent* in mind (see “Evil and Omnipotence”).
- 9 Perhaps one should not assume that Dante is an agent in the example. I am not inclined to this, but if you are, fine. In that case, my conclusion can be reached even more easily, for if Dante isn’t an agent, then Dante is certainly not a moral agent.
- 10 From here on out, if I say ‘justifying reason’, I mean a (merely) justifying reason.
- 11 (Murphy 2017, p. 59) uses this terminology of ‘constraints’ and ‘opportunities’.
- 12 One reviewer notes the complexity of the moral nature of promise keeping and suggests I flag it here: if you doubt that making a promise grounds at least a *prima facie* requiring reason of morality for someone to act, then substitute your preferred ground for moral reasons. If someone thinks there are no requiring reasons of morality, then that disagreement would completely undermine the success of Sterba’s argument. For if no one has requiring reasons of morality, then God clearly does not either. Given that this example is just an illustration of the requiring/justifying reasons distinction, one’s choice of moral requiring reasons makes little difference.
- 13 For these distinctions in types of reasons, see (Gert 2004). See also (Murphy 2017, 2021) for arguments employing the distinction to the effect that God is not a moral agent.
- 14 The portions that are italicized in my text here come directly from (Murphy 2017, p. 49), though Murphy does not italicize them. His reflections in chapter 3 of that book guide the vast majority of my discussion in this section.
- 15 Technically, we run into a difficulty on Aristotelianism here since one might think that one ought to merely promote the human good *for oneself* in virtue of being human without also being constrained to promote that good for others as well. I set aside this issue for the sake of argument. See (Wolterstorff 2010) for a discussion of this issue in some strands of *eudaimonism*.
- 16 See (Murphy 2017, pp. 49–58) for a more thorough explanation for the difficulties faced by various ethical theories in grounding the universality of moral norms for all rational agents. My comments here on Humeanism and Aristotelianism essentially follow Murphy’s own argument there. I am streamlining that discussion due to the space limitations here.
- 17 Sterba also states, from time to time, that on an account like Davies’s or Murphy’s, God would come out as even worse than the greatest villains of history (in virtue of having permitted all the horrendous morally evil consequences of human agents). Even on the assumption that Sterba’s response to skeptical theism (see his chp. 5) is sufficient to establish that we have no reason to doubt that the evils we see that apparently violate Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I-III actually violate those requirements (along with qualifications regarding whatever claims about the entailments of value that might be implied by that claim), I think the comparison between God and history’s greatest villains is an oversimplification. On the account of God given above, God has violated no moral norms whatsoever. In other words, there is a clear sense in which God has acted in perfect accordance with the requirements of reason pertaining to him. We cannot say the same for history’s greatest villains. They *should not* have acted as they did, and in so acting, they flouted those moral norms which were binding on them. Sterba might think this difference irrelevant, but I imagine Davies and Murphy would disagree.

- 18 Adams (2000, p. 4) suggests that divine *love* is more to the point than moral goodness.
- 19 What I say here is entirely consistent with claiming, further, that there are multiple reasons for which someone might come to love another. For instance, perhaps the reason I love my spouse was grounded in the fact that she stood out to me, in comparison to others, at some time in the past. This fact, however, is about the *origins* of a relationship of love rather than about the *nature* of the reasons entering such a relationship confers upon oneself. It is the latter topic that is relevant here; that is, whatever the reasons are for why God chose to love humanity, they need not be reasons of love themselves. That is, the explanation of the origin of a relationship of love could very well involve a comparison of some sort, even if God's reasons for action that exist as a result of loving human agents are not themselves comparative.
- 20 One reviewer notes that Sterba and philosophers such as Murphy and Davies agree that premise (1) of my earlier restatement of Sterba's argument is false. They disagree, however, whether premise (1)'s falsity entails the non-existence of God. This is because Murphy and Davies deny that the concept of God includes moral perfection while Sterba affirms that it does. My contention here is that switching to love is a concession Sterba can afford to make in order to refocus the discussion on the existential premise—i.e., premise (5). Let a '\*' by each premise indicate that they have been modified to deal with perfect love rather than moral perfection. Given that (1\*)–(5\*) would remain an inconsistent set, then theists are forced to either deny that God is perfectly loving—such that God does *not* have reasons of love to promote the welfare of humans, which amount to denying that God loves human agents—or they have to reject one of the other premises. Far fewer theists will be willing to reject (1\*) as a misrepresentation of the concept of God, and so, premise (5\*) will again be the main point of contention (though, I should note, that even then, premise (3\*) may also be denied by some theists (cf. Murphy 2021, chp. 6) for independent reasons of holiness that I cannot go into for the purposes of this paper).
- 21 This is the fundamental argument in Murphy for reducing the love framework to a special instance of the morality framework.

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Article

# Does the Analogy of an Ideal State Disprove God's Existence? James Sterba's Argument and a Thomistic Response

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**Abstract:** This paper provides an analysis of James Sterba's argument from evil in the world and the author's Thomistic counterargument. Many authors of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion discuss the concept of "horrendous evils", which is a representative name for pointless evil and suffering in the world. Sterba claims that the existence of such evil is not logically compatible with the existence of the all-good theistic God. If such a God existed, according to Sterba, he would have intervened in time and prevented and not permitted horrendous evil consequences; in other words, he would have acted as an ideal state. The author of this paper argues that the analogy of an ideal state does not disprove the existence of God of theism. Furthermore, people would prefer if God was not like an ideal state. Applying the characteristics of an ideal state to a theistic God is not reasonable because it relies on anthropomorphism. Such anthropomorphism is incoherent with some basic theistic beliefs. The author of this paper applies Thomistic concepts to the problem of horrendous evils.

**Keywords:** divine goodness; horrendous evil; ideal state; James Sterba; problem of evil; theodicy; Thomas Aquinas; Thomism

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## 1. Introduction

In 2019, James Sterba published a monograph on the problem of horrendous evils called *Is a good God logically possible?*<sup>1</sup> In the book, he tries to bring to bear the "untapped resources of ethics on our understanding of the problem of evil" (Sterba 2019, p. 1). By untapped resources, he means the Double-Effect Principle (which he also calls the Pauline Principle).<sup>2</sup> He inquires whether the God of theism is good if he permits horrendous evils to happen.<sup>3</sup> He explores whether "the Pauline Principle and the analogy of an ideally just and political state are compatible with God's widespread permission of significant and especially horrendous consequences of wrongful actions".<sup>4</sup> According to Sterba, if God existed, he would act as an ideal state, which means that he would prevent all the terrible consequences of our moral wrongdoing. Sterba uses a logical form of the argument from evil.<sup>5</sup>

I argue that Sterba's analogy of an ideal state does not work (Section 9). The reason is that the analogy and the whole argument are too anthropomorphic. I support my conclusion in following steps. First, I analyze the analogy of an ideal state (Sections 3 and 4) and define Sterba's understanding of divine goodness as dependent on prevention of evil which is in contradiction according to theistic belief. Second, I present Thomas Aquinas's concept of divine goodness (Section 5). Then I compare the two concepts and explain how Sterba's concept contradicts some basic theistic beliefs (Section 6). In other words, it is better if God would not act as an ideal state. In Section 7, I elaborate on the previous conclusions by examining the nature of God's evil permission. Finally, I follow the discussion of Sterba with comments by some of his responders, and I modify their arguments based on my Thomistic research (Section 8).

## 2. The Problem of Horrendous Evils Briefly Explained

For the past decades, the philosophy of religion has been dealing with the problem of so-called horrendous evils, which is a contemporary modification of the classical problem of evil.<sup>6</sup> The problem is not of logical inconsistency but is present in terms of “the prima-facie obstacle in consistently maintaining both:

1. God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, and
2. Evil exists” (Adams 1999, p. 8).

Since antiquity, many theodicies and defenses have been formed, and they seem to be quite successful in explaining how the previous two premises can be held together so that they are not a threat to theism.<sup>7</sup> The classical metaphysical opinion on evil is that it is a privation of something good, a privation of (or in) substance.<sup>8</sup> A privation cannot be something substantial; and since God only causes/creates substance, he<sup>9</sup> does not cause/create nor is he responsible for the evil in the world.<sup>10</sup> However, contemporary atheists/atheologians claim that there is a category of horrendous evils against which the existence of a theistic God cannot be consistently held. The problem of horrendous evils deals with singular, radical, gratuitous, or pointless evils that cause horrendous damage to the lives of individuals or groups.<sup>11</sup> Marilyn M. Adams calls them *horrors*: “Horrors are evil the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to believe that the participant’s life (given their inclusion in it) cannot be a great good to him/her on the whole” (Adams 1999, p. 26). She also describes horrors as life-ruining evils that prima facie destroy the positive meaning of one’s life and that are almost impossible to defeat or balance off (See Adams 1999, pp. 82, 205; Vitale 2020, p. 7). Such evil is understood as *quantity* or *certain types* of evil (See Adams 1999, p. 14). Various authors refer to this kind of evil using different names but denoting the same reality.

Sterba speaks of horrendous evils as “significant and especially horrendous consequences” of “wrongful actions” on would-be victims (Sterba 2019, p. 6). He also calls them “immoral consequences” of wrongful actions (Sterba 2019, p. 147). Sterba elaborates on them within the concept of a state, law, and policy. According to Sterba, an ideal state would always prevent horrendous evil consequences of wrongdoers, and if God existed, he would do the same.

## 3. Sterba’s Argument and the Analogy of an Ideal State

In this section, Sterba’s argument against the existence of an all-good God of theism is explained based on the analogy of an ideal state. The concept of an ideal state relies on a specific notion of freedom and on arguments from rights and moral preference.

### 3.1. Concept of Freedom

According to Sterba, people are holders of so-called *significant freedoms* that, by his definition, 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). The notion of fundamental interests is based on the idea that “each person should have the greatest amount of freedom morally commensurate with the greatest amount of freedom for everyone else” (Sterba 2019, p. 31). In other words, exercise of our significant freedoms is not to be interfered with by the significant freedoms of others (See Sterba 2019, pp. 29–30). Any kind of wrongdoing with significant and especially horrendous consequences should not be allowed, because it destroys significant freedoms of actual and would-be victims.

### 3.2. Argument from Rights and Moral Preference

To better demonstrate the notion of significant freedoms, Sterba speaks about specific goods to which we have or do not have a right: e.g., we do have a right to freedom from a brutal assault; we do not have a right to the opportunity to provide medical aid to someone who has been brutally assaulted, etc. (See Sterba 2019, pp. 186–88) Sterba tries to determine what is the amount of evil that should not be allowed in respect to our significant freedoms.

He sets the line accordingly with his interpretation of the Pauline Principle. As a result, Sterba formulates so-called Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPR I–III):

- **MEPR-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 be easily done” (Sterba 2019, p. 184).
- **MEPR-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” (Sterba 2019, p. 184).
- **MEPR-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 these goods” (Sterba 2019, p. 184).

The main interest of these moral principles is that of maintaining significant freedoms—goods to which we have a right.

### 3.3. *Ideal State*

Sterba claims that “there is a great loss of significant freedom in our world due to all the evil that is not prevented in it” (Sterba 2019, p. 152). The function of a state, as Sterba describes it, is mostly moral evil prevention (prevention of wrongdoing). A state aims at securing a high level of justice for its members, for instance by setting laws against assault (Sterba 2019, p. 12).

States try to secure the exercise of significant freedoms of would-be victims but often fail. However, an ideal state would always be successful in securing such freedoms. It would prevent bad people from committing evil actions (Sterba 2019, p. 29). Sterba argues that, if people could decide, they would morally prefer that such wrongdoing and horrendous evil consequences would be prevented and not permitted. However, an ideal state would not prevent all wrongdoers’ immoral actions, only those with significant and especially horrendous consequences. Preventing lesser consequences of evil would tend to interfere with people’s significant freedoms. If all evil consequences were to be prevented, people would not have the opportunity for soul-making.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.4. *Final Logical Argument from Horrendous Evils*

Finally, Sterba argues, if God existed, he would act as an ideal state. He would prevent all significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions of wrongdoers on would-be victims. Sterba’s argument from moral evil is as follows:

1. (I): There is an all-good, all-powerful God.
2. (II): If there is an all-good, all-powerful God, then necessarily he would be adhering to MEPR I–III.
3. (III): If God were adhering to MEPR 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. (IV): Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain all around us.
5. Conclusion (C): Therefore, it is not the case that there is an all-good, all-powerful God. (See Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90)

## 4. Further Analysis: Divine Goodness

As Sterba describes it, an ideal state is a state that prevents horrendous evil consequences of wrongdoers on would-be victims. Preventing such consequences is *the* way of securing the significant freedoms of individuals. Prevention of wrongdoing, in the ideal state, is temporarily and morally prioritized (See Sterba 2019, p. 147). The ideal state as described is libertarian. Sterba clarifies that he refers to political libertarianism. A political



libertarian values freedom above all (See Sterba 2019, p. 31). According to Bas van der Vossen, Sterba is the kind of libertarian who holds “that each person has a maximum right to equal negative liberty, which is understood as the absence of forcible interference from other agents”.<sup>13</sup> This is where all the possibility of welfare and opportunity of happiness comes from. Sterba supports this opinion when he speaks about soul-making theodicy or redemptive suffering. According to him, soul-making should only exist within the context of not experiencing horrendous evils, as well as the best way of redemption would be the prevention of such evils.<sup>14</sup> It is important to see that the notion of happiness and welfare is based on moral preference; people would morally prefer that horrendous evils would not exist.<sup>15</sup>

Further, Sterba argues, if an all-good God existed, he would act as an ideal state. He would prevent all the horrendous consequences of immoral actions. He would not, however, prevent “lesser evils”.<sup>16</sup> God and a state can *justifiably violate* the Pauline Principle, but not MEPR I–III (See Sterba 2021, p. 12). It is important to note that God can violate a moral principle: according to Sterba, there are some things that are good for God to do and some that are bad for him to do (See Sterba 2021, p. 15). Since God has not been acting as an ideal state, he does not exist. God is not obligated to prevent “lesser evils” (which can lead to some greater goods according to the double-effect principle), but he is morally required to engage in preventing horrendous evil consequences and is acting wrongly when permitting these (See Sterba 2021, pp. 6–7). We can now see how Sterba understands divine goodness:

- (D): God is good *if and only if* he acts like an ideal state = insofar as he *prevents and does not permit* horrendous (moral) evil consequences.

We can see that Sterba’s understanding of divine goodness is somehow negative because is dependent on evil. Surely, it could be argued that the prevention and not permission of horrendous evils is something good. I will explain later why this is not a proper understanding of divine goodness.

Sterba describes God as someone who has moral obligations, as we do, and can act wrongly, as we can. God is a moral agent like humans. God is understood to be good like a human person is good, and he exists only if he is as good as an ideal state. When he acts wrongly, it is even worse than when humans do, and that would be another reason for God’s nonexistence. This personalistic (traditional) notion of God is different from what is called classical theism. Traditional theism considers God a moral agent like humans; classical theism considers God a personal or impersonal metaphysical cause of all being<sup>17</sup>. In classical theism, God’s morality is considered differently from human morality. The notion of divine goodness in terms of classical theism mostly draws from Thomas Aquinas. The following section elaborates on the classical theistic notion of divine goodness.

## 5. Divine Goodness according to Thomas Aquinas

“Goodness”, “good” or “being good” has been ascribed to God at least since Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. We use “good” for many things: a good game, a good person, even a good scam; the word “good” can be attributed in many ways. Brian Davies says, however, that Aquinas does not attribute goodness to God in this way (See Davies 2014, p. 53). Ludger Honnefelder explains how Aquinas defines divine goodness:

“... (he) begins with Aristotle’s definition: something is “good” insofar as it is “desirable” (appetible). In a first step, Aquinas concludes (1) that every being desires its perfection, (2) that this perfection or form is a similitude of the agent that causes perfection by actualizing a thing’s form, and (3) that therefore the agent cause itself must be something desirable and therefore good as stated in the previous definition. The second premise follows from the axiom that any agent acts or produces something similar to itself. If God is the first efficient cause of all things (as demonstrated in ST I q.2), then the final conclusion follows: God is something desirable, that is, “good””. (Honnefelder 2012, p. 149)

The perfection that everything seeks comes from the first cause, which is God (or is called God). According to Aquinas, things are perfect when they do not lack anything that belongs to their mode of perfection (See Aquinas 1948a, I q. 5 a. 3 c.). He uses the metaphysical categories of act and potency. Everything actualizes itself by being itself (e.g., material objects) or trying to be and succeeding at being itself (e.g., animals or humans). However, God is pure actuality (See Aquinas 1948a, I q. 3 a. 2 c.). His perfection and goodness are essential, not accidental<sup>18</sup>. He cannot undergo any improvement (See Davies 2014, p. 54). God is goodness itself (*summum bonum*) (See Aquinas 1948a, I q. 6 a. 2 c.) God is always perfectly himself.

Now, the question is whether God is morally good. God desires his own perfection according to his nature. According to Davies, Aquinas “affirms that God exists and that God is good, but he does not try to defend God’s goodness on moral grounds” (Davies 2011, p. 113). This, however, does not mean that moral goodness is not implied. Since God is the perfect being, he is pure actuality and cannot be more perfect (See Aquinas 1948a, I q. 6 a. 1 c.). He cannot do anything to improve himself, even morally. However, since he desires his own perfection, too, and does not fail in actualizing it (because he cannot), he is the moral agent par excellence. Not only is he successful in being perfect but desires his perfection *in a perfect way* because the only goal of his desire is goodness itself (which he is himself). There is no room for God to desire otherwise than good and that is why he cannot desire or do moral evil. In this sense, God is not a moral agent *like us*.

However, if God is the perfect moral agent, is he morally obliged to do good? According to Joseph Brian Huffling, a moral agent is someone who has some (moral) obligation to fulfill—therefore, God is not a moral agent. Furthermore, morality is a property of creation, but God is uncreated (See Huffling 2021, p. 3). But can we really consider God’s having moral obligations to be the condition of his moral agency? As I showed in the previous paragraph, God is to be considered the perfect moral agent. First, God’s goodness is essential, but ours is accidental which means that, for us to become morally good, actualization of our being is required (but God is pure actuality). Second, God cannot undergo further actualization because he is totally simple: there is no metaphysical distinction between act and potency of any kind in God (See Aquinas 1948a, I q. 3). Finally, according to Aquinas, God is the eternal law (*lex aeterna*), the source of the natural law and moral obligations for us. God is not subject to some greater law because he *is* the eternal law (See Aquinas 1948b, I-II q. 96 a. 1). In this sense, God is completely outside of moral obligation because he *is* the obligation. But this does not mean he is not “moral”. In fact, as I showed, God acts *completely in accordance with his own nature* which is the perfect goodness that he never ceases to be. His metaphysical goodness implies moral goodness, and that is why he is perfectly morally good even though he cannot be thought to have any moral obligations to fulfill.

Finally, it was said that God exists outside any genus or species and is totally transcendent. Thus, how can we say anything essential about him? How can we even know that he is good if our language is imperfect while God is perfection itself? If he is God, the subsisting being (*esse ipsum subsistens*) (Aquinas 1948a, I q. 13 a. 11 c.), the goodness itself (*summum bonum*), the metaphysical and invisible (non-physical) first cause of all the being (See Aquinas 1948a, I q. 2 a. 3), how can we even think about saying anything that we think to be true about him? Aquinas understands there is nothing we can understand comprehensibly of God’s essence.<sup>19</sup> In the five ways, he observes that there must be some first metaphysical cause. When we want to properly speak of God, we need to start by examining what he is not.<sup>20</sup> Then we can use words of our language that reflect some perfections (e.g., good, just, perfect, wise, power, etc.) and ascribe them to God. After these perfections are ascribed to God, we classically call them *properties* or *attributes*. It is important to note that, for Aquinas, these attributes are not ascribed to God univocally or equivocally, but analogically.<sup>21</sup> His language of God is based first on similarity with the universe and then he continues through negation to via *eminetiae*.<sup>22</sup> This is the main

difference between Aquinas's and Sterba's analogies of God, and it is also the critical spot upon which Sterba's analogy fails, as will be explained below.

We can conclude that:

- (a): God is perfectly good, the goodness itself; his perfection and goodness are essential; and he cannot improve the goodness he himself is because it would contradict the perfection, he himself is.
- (b): God is the perfect moral agent in the sense that he desires (1) his own perfection, which is goodness itself, (2) he desires it in the perfect way, and (3) he never fails in acting in accordance with his nature which is *summum bonum*.
- (c): God is not a moral agent like humans because (1) he cannot fail in doing good, and (2) he does not fall upon any moral obligation because he is the eternal law himself.
- (d): the notion of the goodness of God is taken from an analogy that is not anthropomorphic because it starts with what God is not (and he is not a metaphysical composite, he is not physical).

This last point needs to be addressed. What is an anthropomorphic analogy? The answer has two steps. First, as Aquinas says, God is not metaphysically composed, unlike us humans. He is absolutely simple, and we are not. Second, in God, perfection and goodness are not metaphysically distinct, but humans are perfect only insofar as they are good. Imagine a bad person that perfects herself by learning to be good. God cannot do that because he is good only, and this is why he is already perfect. These thoughts are in accordance with the crucial Christian belief that God is completely different from everything he created, including humans. On the contrary, according to Christianity humans *reflect* his goodness and that is why we are somehow like him, not vice versa. A proper non-anthropomorphic analogy keeps this in mind. Furthermore, seeing God as "in the image of humans" leads to understanding God as someone who can change his decisions, and decide what is good or wrong under different circumstances and this is also a problem to the fundamental theistic beliefs.<sup>23</sup>

My next step is to show the main differences between Sterba's and Aquinas's notion of divine goodness based on this anthropomorphic criterion and the consequences of Sterba's anthropomorphism.

## 6. Comparison of Sterba's and Thomistic Notion of Divine Goodness

Up to this point, Sterba's and Aquinas's ways of speaking about God have been presented. Sterba says that God is a moral agent capable of doing good or evil and acting correctly or wrongly, and claims that his existence is incompatible with the basic requirements of our morality (See Sterba 2019, p. 111). On the other hand, the Thomistic approach holds that God is goodness itself; he can only choose good; and he chooses it constantly and infallibly, eternally. Moreover, God is to be understood as *the* source of morality. Now, in the light of (a), (b), (c), and (d), the differences between Sterba's and the Thomistic notion of divine goodness can be observed:

1. An ideal state needs to do good in order to be good, but God is goodness itself.
2. An ideal state's goodness is accidental because even an ideal state has at least a logical possibility to act wrongly, but God's goodness is essential, and he cannot do evil.
3. An ideal state is not the source of goodness, but God is.
4. God is not morally obliged to do anything because he is goodness itself, the eternal law, and is not subordinated to anyone or anything; however, an ideal state would still be subject to moral obligations and international law.
5. Even in an ideal state, morals and laws are distinct, but in God, they are the same because there is no distinction in God.
6. An ideal state is established by people, somehow "created" and "run" by people; these people as individuals do not need to be morally good or perfect; and these individuals are not the state itself. However, God is uncreated; there is no metaphysical distinction in him; and he does not have parts that are either good or not good; he is the goodness himself.

The analogy of an ideal state starts with an observation of the existing world such as Aquinas does in his five ways (See Aquinas 1948a, I q. 2). However, unlike Aquinas, Sterba does not make the crucial step; he *only* applies properties of this world to God while Aquinas moves further and, through negation and eminence, finds a better way of speaking of God because he goes beyond the world observation.<sup>24</sup> Sterba does not go beyond the physical. He only idealizes what there is physically, and he does not proceed to what there is not in God (as Aquinas does). This is what Huffling already pointed out and I will return to it later.

These metaphysical distinctions, nevertheless, have some more serious consequences. If Sterba's analogy works then God exists only insofar as he prevents others from interfering with our fundamental freedoms. However, theistic God in fact does much more. To him, the perfection of human nature does not depend on some external securing of freedoms. The freedom God provides us with is different from the significant freedoms Sterba's ideal state would provide. An ideal state would make sure that we are significantly free by externally destroying all the obstacles (negative freedom), while God inspires our freedom internally (positive freedom). This is only possible when our significant freedoms are identical to the perfection of our natures. This is the possibility that the Thomistic approach provides. From the Thomistic point of view, our perfection depends *metaphysically* on being and good that are *internal* to us and exist within us. However, from Sterba's point of view, our perfection depends *physically* on some political forces that are *external* to us. I think that if God acted as an ideal state, we would not be completely free. Of course, there is still a focus on individual freedom but its source is different considering both Thomism and the analogy of an ideal state. Sterba could argue that God is somehow different from us, just like an ideal state is different from us. However, an ideal state is not a metaphysical source of being of its people.

Further, an ideal state is not a people-free entity. It is established by people, not vice versa. An ideal state could emerge from any imperfect state. Imagine that a government in a state would gradually turn into an ideal government that would create an ideal state. This cannot be applied to God because it is not possible that he comes into existence gradually. It would contradict his eternal simplicity and perfection. Also, some people would die, and some others would be elected, but this cannot happen within God because he does not have any accidental parts (I will explain this later). He cannot lose or gain anything. Finally, the function of an ideal state is only that of securing our fundamental freedoms, not creating them. An ideal state can help exercise freedoms, but it's not the source of them.

Now, I think that the biggest flaw in the analogy of an ideal state lies in the fact that it is built on moral preference of people. Sterba often argues that people would morally prefer that God (like an ideal state) would prevent and not permit horrendous evil consequences and that this preference would mean they are morally good (See Sterba 2019, pp. 63–64). Moral preference, however, differs from person to person, from time to time, nation to nation. Let's consider an example. Imagine there is a primitive tribe of X and an ideal state of Y. This primitive tribe could have its rules that function just as MEPR I–III in an ideal state. Significant freedoms in this primitive tribe indeed would be secured by its primitive "government". Consider now that, in this primitive tribe, there are ritual human sacrifices that an ideal state Y considers to be morally wrong. Suppose that the tribe X considers such sacrifices as good and that some people prepare themselves to be sacrificed because it is an honor for them. Now, we could have both X and Y acting accordingly with MEPR I–III. The only difference is that the interpretation would be different. What Y considers horrendous evil, X would not. This is a problem because while people's moral preference in both cases would be that horrendous evils do not happen, the definition of horrendous evils remains different. This is what happens when we build an argument on a moral system that derives from moral preference. Sterba may argue that the very system does not derive from moral preference, but that moral preference only proves that the system is right. However, if moral preference is the criterion of verification of the system, it means that it is the basic element without which the system could not work.

I think that all these examples show that Sterba's understanding of divine goodness, based on the analogy of an ideal state, is too anthropomorphic, based on the anthropomorphic criterion mentioned in the previous section. For such God, the definition of evil would differ from culture to culture. Other problem is that the definition D of divine goodness is based on prevention of evil, as I explained in Section 4. If the definition of divine goodness is based on prevention of evil, then it would mean that divine goodness could have various intensities and definitions based on various definitions of evil. This is a serious flaw. As a result, various concepts of divine goodness and God would emerge in the end. They all would come from *one* analogy of an ideal state but would be *different* because for each of them there would be different priorities in moral evil prevention. It is also possible that these priorities could be mutually exclusive or even contradictory.

Finally, as I said before, such anthropomorphism is not in accordance with some basic theistic beliefs. These include that God is the creator and that he is absolutely different from us, and that we are somehow similar to him, not vice versa. Of course, Sterba's analogy may have some inspiring parts. As Michael Douglas Beaty says, Christians accept the importance of such political structures, but they do not regard a government of a politically liberal democracy as a proper analogy for God. The reason is God's transcendence (See Beaty 2021, p. 5). Moreover, as Adams says, when someone wants to criticize theistic beliefs, they must do so in coherence with the belief system (See Adams 2007, p. 366). And Sterba fails to do this.

## 7. The Permission of Horrendous Evils

With what has been said so far, Sterba's argument for God's nonexistence (I–V, Section 3.4) can be disproven with Thomistic arguments in this way:

- Premise II presupposes that God has moral obligations, which has been shown not to be the case in (c).
- Premise III presupposes that God is a moral agent like us because, according to Sterba, God is good if and only if he acts like an ideal state. This has been shown not to be the case in (a), (b), and (c).
- Premise IV presupposes that evil in the world is God's fault, which has been shown not to be the case in (a), (b), and (c).
- Therefore, it is not the case that V (C) is valid.

The definition (D) in Section 4 speaks about God's permission for evil in the world—one thing that an ideal state would never allow. However, it is logically inconsistent to claim that God permits evil like we humans permit it because we are capable of willing evil. Sterba is aware of the Thomistic notion of divine goodness (explained in Section 5) and tries to contradict it,<sup>25</sup> but his comments are a result of misunderstanding Thomistic metaphysics. As Huffling puts it, Sterba simply understands the thoughts of Aquinas or contemporary Thomists in *physical* terms (See Huffling 2021, pp. 8–11). However, the Thomistic approach opens the metaphysical way: God is the perfect moral agent who wills and performs only good. Furthermore, unlike an ideal state, God is the first metaphysical principle which means that, in order to prevent evil, he does not need to secure our freedom externally, but he metaphysically inspires our freedom that derives from our being which reflects God's goodness and perfection. God inspires perfection of our natures internally, not by some external forces.

Speaking of permission of evil, some clarifications need to be addressed. Sterba understands God's permission of evil as an *intentional act*, and hence an evil act. God should *interfere* with wrongful actions. There may be some greater good coming from horrendous evil consequences, but they are irrelevant since God should adhere to MEPR I–III (See Sterba 2019, pp. 111–39). As I already explained, this is because Sterba confuses metaphysical and physical causation. According to Aquinas, God only wills good, and he *provides us* with this good (See Davies 2011, pp. 79–84). Providence is tied up with goodness on a metaphysical level. If God provides goodness only, he simply cannot provide evil. Evil does not have an essence—it is a *real privation* in essence. In this sense, evil is a *lack of*

good causation.<sup>26</sup> Permission of evil can be ascribed to God only *accidentally* because God does not will evil essentially (since he essentially wills good, not privation of good).<sup>27</sup>

By “accidentally” I mean something that is contrary to “essentially”. I am not saying that God has accidental properties. In God, everything is essential. And since he essentially wills and causes good, there is no room for essentially willing or causing evil. Eleonore Stump offers an explanation of Aquinas on this matter. Since God wills goodness only, he wills himself essentially. He also wills all the created good that his eternal substance freely creates. God wills our good and that is the way that our goodness comes to existence and perfection (See Stump 2003, pp. 106–9). Stump explains that God does not have accidental properties because he cannot change over time and he is not imperfect.<sup>28</sup> With this explanation I can elaborate more on the “accidental” claim. The effects of some good that exists can be of two types: essential and accidental. An essential effect is simply another good, and an accidental effect is something different from the original good. In this sense, evil is an accidental effect of a certain good. This is coherent with Aquinas’s point of view because he claims that evil does not exist without the original good (See Davies 2016, pp. 203–8). A sickness is just a lack of a certain perfection, which is health in this case. A sickness has some physical manifestations that emerge from something existing and hence good. But that does not mean that the sick person ceases to be good or that the idea of health is no more meaningful. It also does not mean that sickness is something good. Furthermore, the sick person is not the essential author of the sickness just as God is not the author of evil. Analogically, God’s permission of evil can be ascribed to him only accidentally because it is only the lack of perfection that he inspires or wills to inspire in a certain substance. In other words, God cannot permit evil as an intentional act of his will focused on “evil” because his will is only intentionally focused on “good”. Also, there is to notice that I am not saying anything about God’s accidental permitting evil, but about ours ascribing this permission to him as an accidental permission. That is because God only wills good, he wills it essentially and there is nothing essential outside of it (or accidental within it).

Moreover, God’s willing good only is *the* way of preventing all possible moral evil. God *inspires* perfection that moral evil is the lack of. On the contrary, if God acted as an ideal state, he would inspire our freedom externally. God’s permission or not prevention would be hence understood as an intentional act, but based on Thomism, I showed that is not the case. If God acted as an ideal state, the permission or not prevention could be understood as imperfection, while according to Aquinas, there is no imperfection in God.

To conclude, God’s permission of evil is not in contradiction with MEPR I–III. MEPR I–III suggest that if God intentionally permits and does not prevent evil, he does not exist. But I showed that it is not the case. God does not fail to act accordingly with MEPR I–III because (1) there is no imperfection in God, (2) he only wills good, and (3) he inspires our perfection (significant freedoms) internally. Even though moral principles derive from God, in the Thomist view, he is not morally obliged to them, as I said before. Such principles are for those who need to perfect themselves by acting morally. God is, however, already perfect. Speaking of God not acting accordingly with MEPR I–III is just, I think, our incapacity to physically express that God observes these principles by metaphysically being and willing good and inspiring good only.

## 8. Some Final Considerations

In Section 5, I elaborated on the notion of divine goodness as explained by Aquinas. I mentioned Huffling who argues that God is not a moral agent simply because (1) he is not created and (2) he does not have any moral obligations to fulfill. Huffling argues against Sterba’s opinion that God is moral insofar as rational. According to Huffling, Sterba ascribes rationality univocally to God, and this is a mistake (See Huffling 2021, p. 5). However, Sterba makes a good point in his reaction. He asks: if moral virtues can be analogically ascribed to God, why not rationality, too? This is the crucial point because Sterba can now claim that his argument is valid: since rationality can be analogically ascribed to God, he is

a moral agent who has moral obligations (See Sterba 2021, p. 10). I think that Huffling's point is only partially sound. As I argued in Section 5, God is the *perfect* moral agent with no moral obligations. I think that what Huffling fails to see is that for God to be metaphysically perfectly good means to be perfectly morally good as well. With such a conclusion, Sterba's point of view can be successfully contradicted.

Huffling is, nevertheless, right in his observation that Sterba misplaces the physical and the metaphysical levels when speaking about God and evil. This leads to several implications. First, Sterba misplaces the responsibility of God and wrongdoers. If evil is a privation, then immoral consequences must also be seen as a privation. If effects are like their cause, then a privation leads to another privation. The horrendous consequences of our immoral actions are not the effects of God's causation. Sterba might say that God is the cause of immoral consequences because he is the metaphysical cause of the being of wrongdoers; but again, their immoral actions are not caused by God on the metaphysical level; and Sterba overlooks the physical and metaphysical distinction (See Sterba 2019, pp. 117–19; Huffling 2021, p. 9). Second, there is a serious incoherence in saying that God (as an ideal state) should permit and not prevent lesser evils. Consider a case where a lesser evil (e.g., a light trauma on a psychological level) is the cause of some horrendous evil (a man murders those who caused this trauma when he was a child). In this case, a state's non-interfering with lesser evil leads to some horrendous evil. In this case, it is not plausible to say that an ideal state is good, and there is no point in claiming that God should act the same because this clearly leads to a contradiction. Third, according to Sterba, God should be acting accordingly with our human moral requirements based on human moral preference. This, again, is too anthropomorphic. It is logically inconsistent to say that a (non-human) God should adhere to human moral preference, God is absolutely simple (and unchangeable), but our humane moral preference changes from time to time, age to age, and culture to culture. Certainly, people would morally prefer that horrendous evil consequences do not happen, but these consequences are not God's fault, as I showed already. Finally, according to Sterba, God should intentionally allow evil to some degree; he can justifiably violate Pauline Principle. But this can only happen when a state and morals are distinct. I showed that this is not the case because God is identical to morals. God can cause the good only, and he inspires positive freedom which is freedom to do the good.

Another objection to the analogy of an ideal state was raised by Toby Betenson. He claims that we should not ascribe the properties of an ideal state to God, because (1) an ideal state has its authority granted by the people, and (2) God's obligations are not the same as the obligations of an ideal state (See Betenson 2021, p. 11). Sterba responds that what is common for both God and an ideal state (speaking analogically) is morality and its constraints (See Sterba 2021, p. 17). However, based on Thomism, I can respond to both Betenson and Sterba that God does not have *any* moral obligations and that Sterba's analogy is too anthropomorphic, as I already showed.

## 9. Final Argument

My final argument against Sterba's analogy of an ideal state is as follows:

1. Sterba claims that the God of theism does not exist because, if he existed, he would have acted as an ideal state.
2. Acting as an ideal state is to fulfill moral obligations (MEPR I–III), which means to prevent and not permit horrendous evil consequences.
3. However, God is not a moral agent like us. He is the perfect moral agent, which means that he is *summum bonum* and *lex aeterna*, the source of every moral obligation and the ultimate performer of the good according to his nature.
4. God performs the good on the metaphysical level as the first cause of every good and it makes him essentially different from an ideal state.
5. There is no possibility that God would perform evil essentially by not preventing and permitting horrendous evil consequences.

6. God's permission and not prevention of horrendous evil consequences do not happen on the essential level of his divinity.
7. Because God is absolutely good, he does not in any sense violate MEPR I–III. Also, there is no point in asking whether he should logically adhere to these because (1) he is the source of morality and (2) MEPR I–III are based on human moral preference.
8. *Conclusion:* God's permission of horrendous evil consequences does not happen essentially. God does not have any accidental properties and that is why the permission of evil cannot be ascribed to him essentially. God is essentially good and wills good only. Unlike an ideal state, God performs good essentially (perfectly), which does not make him a moral agent like humans. The results of the analogy of an ideal state do not apply to the all-good God of theism, because the analogy is too anthropomorphic. It relies on an idealized physical approach of God. Furthermore, the analogy of an ideal state is non in accordance with some basic theistic beliefs. As a result, it is not a case that the analogy of an ideal state disproves the metaphysical existence of the all-good God of theism.

## 10. Conclusions

In this article, I inquired whether Sterba's analogy of an ideal state is successful in proving that the God of theism does not exist. I think it is not. First, I examined the problem of horrendous evils and explained Sterba's notion of significant freedoms and the analogy of an ideal state. I explained that Sterba understands divine goodness as dependent on prevention of evil. Second, I explained Aquinas's notion of divine goodness as essential and non-dependent on prevention of evil. Then I compared these two concepts. Applying the anthropomorphic criterion, I showed that Sterba's concept of divine goodness (in the image of an ideal state) is inappropriate of God. Such God would not be completely good or could change over time which would not be compatible with his absolute goodness. Such God is incompatible with some basic theistic beliefs. If Sterba claims that (1) God of theism should act as an ideal state, but at the same time (2) such a claim is not compatible with those basic theistic beliefs (including non-anthropomorphic analogy), then we have a contradiction. On the other hand, the Thomistic notion of divine goodness offers a way to show the compatibility of a good God of theism and moral horrendous evil in the world. Thomistic God is understood as goodness itself and as the cause of all the being/good and, as a result, he cannot be the cause of evil which is a privation of perfection or of a good effect. God's permission and not prevention of horrendous evils are not essential. In fact, God prevents evil by metaphysically causing good and inspiring our positive freedom internally, not externally as an ideal state would do. All things considered, I think that people would morally prefer that God of theism does not act as an ideal state.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Authors use either singular or plural form depending on the meaning. The plural form is usually used when speaking of the amount, degrees, and types of pointless and gratuitous evil or its horrendous consequences, e.g., assault and rape are two different horrendous *evils*, even though they can be metaphysically conceived together as horrendous *evil*. I will refer to *evil*, or *evils* depending on the meaning.

<sup>2</sup> (Sterba 2019, p. 11). "Never do evil that good may come from it". Sterba takes this statement from the Bible, Letter to Romans 3:8.

<sup>3</sup> By theism, Sterba means traditional theism, where, according to Sterba, an all-good, all-powerful God is understood in a more anthropomorphic way; he can act either morally right or wrong and is subject to moral obligations cf. (Sterba 2019, p. 150). Another version of theism is classical where God is understood more as a personal or impersonal first metaphysical cause and the principle of all the created being; he is eternal and cannot change over time, cf. (Rojka 2018, pp. 34, 37). For the importance of the eternal God for the consistency of theism, cf. (Volek 2017, 2018). For another view on the eternity of God, where he is understood



as eternal before creation and temporal after creation, cf. (Craig 2001). For a more general approach to theism, cf. (Swinburne 2004, pp. 1–2, 93–96). Sterba argues against classical theism as well (e.g., against Brian Davies), cf. (Sterba 2019, pp. 110–39). In my argument, I will use the classical theist (Thomistic) position in a more moderate form (God as the perfect moral agent).

(Sterba 2019, p. 6). Hereafter, I will use “ideal state” instead of “ideally just and political state”.

Cf. (Špišiaková 2012, p. 81). Logical arguments from evil have a similar structure as those arguments that try to prove the consistency of the theistic statements about God and evil. Logical arguments from evil look for a proposition  $q$  which is necessarily true and its conjunction with some theistic proposition is a contradiction. The arguments in favor of theism look for a proposition  $p$  that is consistent with the statement “God exists” and its conjunction with this statement is consistent with the statement that “Evil exists”.

Cf. (Schmidt 2008, pp. 356–61). Why is there evil in the world if God exists?

For more, cf. (Calder 2018). The first one to make a distinction between theodicy and defense was Plantinga. A theodicy tries to explain the place of evil in a world made by God, while a defense tries to show that evil does not disprove the existence of God (See Davies 2011, p. 3). My argument is both a theodicy and a defense.

I will use “privation” instead of “absence”. Absence is tied up with degrees of the being—e.g., a dog cannot fly. It is, however, a positive absence because it positively determines the essence of the being (a dog is not a flying object like a bird). The term “privation” conveys that evil is some lack of the perfection that a specific being should have according to their essence (See Chignell 2021). Therefore, I will refer to evil as *privation*. Please note that some authors refer to evil as absence by technically meaning privation, e.g., cf. (Davies 2011, pp. 33–37).

Scholars debate whether we should refer to God in the masculine, cf. (Radford Ruether 2007). I will refer to God in the masculine for the reason of simplification.

This “privation theory of evil” was brought about by Neoplatonists and later by Augustine. Thomas Aquinas defines evil as some sort of negation in substance (See Davies 2016, pp. 202–8).

Here they do not speak of evil as absence but as horrendous consequences of evil/immoral actions.

(Sterba 2019, pp. 26, 147). Soul-making is the capacity of developing one’s personality and morality. Soul-making theodicy holds that evil is a necessary condition for one’s personal and moral growth, cf. (Špišiaková 2012, pp. 118–25).

(Van der Vossen 2019). Negative freedom or liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers, or constraints. Positive freedom is the presence of control on the part of the agent, cf. (Carter 2021).

For Sterba’s approach on soul-making, cf. (Sterba 2019, pp. 35–45), and on redemptive suffering, cf. (Sterba 2019, pp. 141–53).

Sterba uses this argument from moral preference on various pages, e.g., cf. (Sterba 2019, p. 184). It is also included in MEPR I–III. Cf. (Sterba 2019, p. 51). It is hard to say whether some evil can be “more” or “less” evil; it is simply “evil”. What Sterba means is that there are certain evils that do not have horrendous consequences. Hereafter, I will use “lesser evils” for such a category, having in mind that evil as a metaphysical privation of goodness does not have an amount.

Cf. (Rojka 2018, pp. 32–39, 121–22). There are different theistic notions of the person. Here I refer to the notion of person that is brought about by some contemporary theists such as Rojka, Swinburne, Plantinga, or Lucas. Their notion of person is different from the classical theistic notion of person.

See (Davies 2011, p. 114) For more, cf. (Davies 2002, p. 228).

More precisely, our intellect cannot “see” the essence of God like God “sees” it, because our intellect is not sufficient to essentially understand something that is more intelligible than us, cf. (Aquinas 1948a, I q. 12). The names that our language attributes to God (1) represent his essence but (2) imperfectly—which does not mean that God himself is imperfect, cf. (Aquinas 1948a, I q. 13 a. 1).

Aquinas holds that in God, there is no composition of (1) substance and accidents, (2) existence and essence, (3) matter and form, and therefore (4) he is pure actuality. These are the basic premises of the doctrine of divine simplicity. God is absolutely simple which means that there is no metaphysical composition in him. By examining what God is not, Aquinas finds a proper way of speaking of God. Cf. (Davies 2002; Aquinas 1948a, I q. 3).

Cf. (Davies 2002, p. 231). “New York is a city” and “Paris is a city” give us *univocal* uses of “city” and both statements are literally true. “Baseball players use bats” and “Bats have wings” give us *equivocal* uses of “bats” and both statements are literally true. “I have a good computer” and “God is good” give us *analogical* uses of “good” and both are literally true.

There are three steps in Aquinas’s notion of analogy: (1) via *positiva*—God is good, (2) via *negativa*—God is not good like us, (3) via *eminetiae*—God is the perfect goodness, the goodness itself, cf. (Rojka 2018, pp. 34–35; Aquinas 1948a, I q. 13).

In his article, Edward Feser agrees with Brian Davies that there is a very different and excessively anthropomorphic conception of God in the recent philosophy of religion, especially linked to the problem of evil. Feser uses the Thomistic concept, but not only. The Thomistic concept, however, is a very important part of the “mainstream” theistic position cf. (Feser 2021, p. 2). This mainstream position can be considered as opposite of anthropomorphic.

By “better” I mean less anthropomorphic, according to Wildman’s criteria, cf. (Diller 2021; Wildman 2017).

Cf. (Sterba 2019, pp. 134–35). Sterba argues against the Thomistic interpretation of divine goodness represented by Brian Davies.

Cf. (Aquinas 2017, p. 45). Aquinas does not think that evil is not real. Evil is a *real* privation, cf. (Davies 2011, p. 115).

- <sup>27</sup> Cf. (Aquinas 2017, pp. 45–46). Aquinas deals with the problem in a way that evil is privation of some good that is causally connected to God. He solves it by stating that these evil effects are tied to God’s causation only accidentally.
- <sup>28</sup> Cf. (Stump 2003, pp. 109–15). When speaking about various essential properties of God, Stump uses the terminology of Frege. Various properties are like various non-synonymous expressions of one thing they are referred to, such as “the morning star” and “the evening star”, cf. (Stump 2003, p. 100).

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Article

# Sterba's Problem of Evil vs. Sterba's Problem of Specificity: Which Is the Real Problem?

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**Abstract:** In 2019 the noted ethicist and political philosopher James Sterba published a new deductive version of the argument from the problem of evil to the conclusion that an Anselmian God does not exist. In this article I will argue that Sterba's argument involves a problematic sorites-type paradox that, in order to be consistent, he should view as undermining his argument, since in his previous work on ethics he viewed this same sort of problem as counting as a significant objection to moral cultural relativism. I show how his arguments involve a sorites-like paradox, explain how this is damaging to the argument from evil, and conclude by offering suggestions for how Sterba might address this weakness.

**Keywords:** God; horrendous evil; James Sterba; Pauline Principle; problem of evil; problem of specificity; sorites paradox; theodicy

## 1. Introduction

One of the most persistent and most effective arguments against belief in God is the argument from the "problem of evil" (henceforth POE). From Epicurus' day to ours, atheists have used the existence of evil as empirical evidence that an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God does not exist. And for just as long, theists have been offering responses to these arguments.<sup>1</sup> In 2019 the noted ethicist and political philosopher James Sterba published *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, adding his weight to the ranks of philosophers who argue that evil counts against the existence of God (Sterba 2019). In this book he develops a deductive version of the argument from evil that he believes conclusively demonstrates that an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent God is not logically possible.<sup>2</sup>

In his work on ethics Sterba utilizes an argument against moral cultural relativism. This argument hinges on the existence of ambiguity in moral cultural relativism that he thinks renders it incoherent (Sterba 2013, pp. 23, 25). My argument, in short, is that this ambiguity results from an implicit sorites-type paradox inherent in moral cultural relativism and that the same sort of ambiguity exists in Sterba's argument from evil. Therefore, either Sterba must revise/reject his argument against moral cultural relativism, or he must revise/reject his argument from evil. Since his argument against moral cultural relativism seems strong to me, I believe he should do the latter.

## 2. Sterba's Argument

I will begin by explaining Sterba's argument from the POE. Sterba's main areas of work are moral and political philosophy.<sup>3</sup> His work in this area is well known and highly respected.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, he has also begun working on issues in philosophy of religion.<sup>5</sup> He believes that certain strategies that have proven effective in ethics and political philosophy can be usefully employed in philosophy of religion as well.<sup>6</sup> The particular issue in philosophy of religion that seems to have captured his attention is the POE. Over the last decade he has organized two conferences at the University of Notre Dame on the topic, published an anthology on the POE, published several articles on various aspects of

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the POE, and as his own argument from evil to the nonexistence of God has developed, he has made presentations on it at many universities and conferences, including the American Philosophical Association and the Society for Philosophy of Religion. Both his book and its argument are the result of an intense period of research and productivity.<sup>7</sup>

Consistent with this strategy of applying lessons drawn from moral and political philosophy to issues in philosophy of religion, Sterba wants to apply to the POE an axiom that is sometimes called the “Pauline Principle.” This is an ethical principle relating to the Principle of Double Effect (Sterba 2019, pp. 2ff and 49–66). The Pauline Principle, which is named after the Apostle Paul, states that it is not moral to perform an evil act for the purpose of bringing about good.<sup>8</sup> This principle forms a premise of one step in Sterba’s argument. This step argues that it is not moral for God, if he exists, to perform an evil act for the purpose of bringing about good. For ease of reference, I will call this argument from the Pauline Principle the PPA (short for the Pauline Principle Argument).

Sterba acknowledges that there are exceptions to the Pauline Principle. He grants at least three: it is moral to perform an otherwise evil act (1) if the evil is trivial, (2) if it is easily repairable, or (3) if it is the only way to prevent a far greater evil (Sterba 2019, p. 3). Because of these exceptions, he focuses on the problem of the existence of “significant evils” that an omnipotent God could prevent but has not.<sup>9</sup> He focuses on significant evils precisely because he wants to use the Pauline Principle to show that if an Anselmian God (one who is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent) were to exist, then some kinds of evil that exist would not exist, and he recognizes that lesser evils may not be sufficient for this task. This distinction between lesser evils and significant evils is important to my argument: he does not appear to take the existence of lesser evils as evidence for the nonexistence of God.<sup>10</sup> Only significant evils sufficiently ground the PPA.

After introducing the PPA, Sterba moves on to anticipate various possible theistic responses. In successive chapters he discusses and responds to the Free Will Defense (chp. 2), the Irenaean or “soul-making” theodicy (chp. 3), skeptical theism (chp. 5),<sup>11</sup> the argument that God is not a moral agent (chp. 6), the greater good theodicy (also chp. 6, beginning on 125), and the redemption history theodicy (chp. 7).<sup>12</sup> In his conclusion he briefly addresses attempts to respond to the POE by limiting God’s power or holiness (Sterba 2019, p. 192). Since my objection to his argument is not dependent on the success of any of these attempts to respond to the POE, I will not take the time to discuss his attempts to repudiate them. Other philosophers have analyzed the strengths and possible weaknesses of Sterba’s contributions to each of these and their analyses have been published in this and other periodicals.<sup>13</sup>

More salient to my planned objection are certain other nuances that Sterba introduces as he develops his argument. Perhaps the most significant of these is made during his discussion of the greater good theodicy in chapter six (specifically pp. 126–30). Here, he points out that there are exactly four types of goods that might possibly justify God in causing or permitting evil: first-order goods to which we are entitled, first-order goods to which we are not entitled, second-order goods to which we are entitled, and second-order goods to which we are not entitled.<sup>14</sup> He argues that these four categories exhaust all of the possible goods that could justify God in causing or permitting some specific evil. He believes that if the goods that fall into these categories are unable to justify God in causing or permitting evil, then the greater good type of theodicy fails, since there are no goods except those that fall into one of these four categories.

Here, I must explain these four categories of goods. Sterba does not clearly define them: he seems to believe that what he means will become apparent as he discusses them. The impression I get is that by “goods to which one is entitled” he means goods to which one has a right and that it would be immoral to take from someone. Examples of these, at least according to our founding fathers, might be life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Of course, under certain circumstances it may be moral to take these from someone, so these examples are not completely uncontroversial, but in any case Sterba takes it that there are things to which people are entitled. These fall into two subcategories: first-order

goods and second-order goods. First-order goods to which one may be entitled are goods to which one has a right that do not depend on the existence of some serious wrongdoing, such as the right to freedom from brutal assault (Sterba's example). Second-order goods to which one may be entitled are goods to which one has a right that do depend on the existence of some serious wrongdoing, such as a victim's right to aid from brutal assault (again Sterba's example) (Sterba 2019, pp. 126–28).

By "goods to which one is not entitled," he seems to mean goods that one does not have a right to expect or demand and that others are not morally obligated to bestow. He does not provide examples of such goods in *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, but perhaps examples would include all luxury items and any superabundance of items that in more modest amounts are necessities. These fall into the same two subcategories as the goods to which one is entitled: first-order and second-order. First-order goods to which one is not entitled are goods to which one does not have a right and that do not depend on the existence of some serious wrongdoing, such as a luxury car and expensive meals. Second-order goods to which one is not entitled are goods to which one does not have a right that do depend on the existence of some serious wrongdoing, such as stolen goods or life-saving organs bought on the black market (Sterba 2019, pp. 129–30).<sup>15</sup>

Returning to the argument: Sterba believes that if the goods that fall into these four categories are unable to justify God in causing or permitting evil, then the greater good type of theodicy fails. Furthermore, he argues that for an omnipotent being, permitting evil is morally equivalent to causing it. According to the PPA, it is not moral to perform an evil act in order to bring about good results (with the possible exceptions noted above). Thus for Sterba, the PPA also proscribes permitting preventable evil acts in order to bring about good results. Therefore, he concludes that it is not moral for God to cause or permit evil in order to bring about any of the goods described above except possibly within the limits ascribed to the PPA: when the evil is trivial, easily repairable, or the only way to prevent a far greater evil. Consequently we see once again that causing or permitting significant evils is very difficult to justify.

One notable aspect of Sterba's argument is that he has eschewed the trend toward inductive "evidential" forms of the POE in favor of a deductive argument. In fact, he seems to view himself as fixing the problems with the deductive version of the argument developed decades ago by the Australian philosopher J.L. Mackie (Sterba 2019, 25ff.).<sup>16</sup> So let me lay out Sterba's argument deductively. It appears to be a *modus tollens*:

- Major Premise: If there is an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God, then that God would neither cause nor permit significant evil to happen.
- Minor Premise: It's not the case that God neither causes nor permits significant evil to happen.
- Conclusion: Therefore it is not the case that there is an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God.<sup>17</sup>

This appears to be a deductively valid argument.<sup>18</sup>

A second notable aspect of Sterba's argument is its roots in moral and political theory. In the introduction to his book he makes much of the idea that there are resources in moral and political philosophy that could fruitfully be brought to bear on issues in philosophy of religion. Others have applied lessons from metaphysics and epistemology to issues in philosophy of religion with great success, so I am inclined to think that this idea is a good one. His attempt to do this using the Pauline Principle is a good illustration of the possibilities of this endeavor. I would like to make my own attempt at this, taking another lesson from ethics and applying it to the PPA.

### 3. My Argument

Sterba's book on the POE is not the only place where he makes use of the Pauline Principle. He also uses it in his ethical writings; for example, on page 57 of his book *Introducing Ethics for Here and Now* he explains the Pauline Principle and discusses its

possible use as an objection to Utilitarian ethics.<sup>19</sup> Earlier in the same book he introduces another principle, one that is often called “the problem of specificity” (Sterba 2013, p. 23). This “problem” forms the basis of one of Sterba’s objections to moral cultural relativism.<sup>20</sup> It is this principle that I will attempt to apply to Sterba’s PPA to show that it fails.

Sterba’s objection to moral cultural relativism is that if morality is relative to cultural groups, then the term “cultural groups” must have a concrete referent; i.e., cultural groups must exist in order for morality to exist. However, it’s not clear that the term has a concrete referent: is morality relative to nations—each nation creating and abiding by its own set of moral norms? However, within large nations like the US there are many subcultures that have mores that are distinct from the mores of other American subcultures. Should we say that morality is relative to such subcultures? Perhaps we should, but if we do, then we must reckon with the fact that many people belong to more than one subculture. And so the analysis goes, moving to ever smaller and smaller subsections of society until one arrives at individual moral subjectivism instead of cultural moral relativism. That is why the problem of specificity is a challenge to cultural relativism. As Sterba puts it: “Any act (e.g., contract killing) could be wrong from the point of view of some particular society (e.g., US citizens), right from the point of view of a subgroup of that society (e.g., the Mafia), and wrong again from the point of view of some particular member of that society or other subgroup (e.g., law enforcement officers). However, if this were the case, then obviously it would be extremely difficult for us to know what we should do, all things considered” (Sterba 2013, p. 23).

The problem of specificity is a sort of sorites paradox. This is a philosophical problem attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Eubulides of Miletus (Oms and Zardini 2019, p. 3). “Sorites” is the Greek word for a pile or a heap, and the paradox can be illustrated by a heap of sand: 10,000 grains of sand sitting on the floor in front of us would clearly constitute a heap of sand. If we remove one grain, what is left would still be a heap. The same is true if we remove another grain. However, if we continue to remove grains of sand, one at a time, eventually the pile would become so small that we would no longer say that there is a heap of sand on the floor. The oddity is that it does not seem like removing a single grain of sand would render a heap of sand a non-heap, and we probably would not be able to identify any single grain the removal of which marked the point when the heap turned into a non-heap, but yet somewhere along the way the heap a non-heap does become.

This paradox applies to more than just physical collections of objects. Another common illustration of the paradox has to do with age: there is a very significant and very clear difference between person A at age 18 and person A at 80. When we see her now, after 80 years of life and labor, we recognize that she is old. If we saw her last week, she would still look old. If we saw her two weeks ago—or three weeks, or four weeks—she would look old to us. If we continue to subtract weeks, one at a time, we may never discover a particular week where she goes from appearing old to appearing not old. Yet if we subtract weeks, one at a time, long enough, we will arrive at a point where she is in fact very young—first 18, and then even younger, and this in spite of the fact that subtracting any specific week is an insufficient condition to make her young.

What is “old” and what is “young,” and why is it so difficult to find a clear demarcation between the two? Hrafn Asgeirsson, in an article titled “The Sorites Paradox in Practical Philosophy,” points out that part of the issue here is terminological vagueness (Asgeirsson 2019, pp. 229–45). If language were such that every word has a fixed and very precise meaning, then perhaps the problem would not exist. If “heap” was universally accepted as meaning “any collection of four or more objects stacked upon each other” (and if “old” for humans was universally understood to refer to people who are in the last third of the current human life expectancy) then perhaps there would be no sorites paradox. However, that is not how natural languages work. Nor is it how concepts work, and the real issue probably has more to do with our concepts than the labels that we give to them (see Asgeirsson 2019, pp. 321–22).

A sorites paradox occurs when there is no clear conceptual point at which we go from  $\Sigma$  to  $\Sigma'$ , no clear point where we go from not being a heap to being a heap. Such a situation could arise because no such point exists, or it could be that such a point exists but is not known. If the latter is the case, then Asgeirsson points out two further options: the transition point may be unknown but knowable or it may be unknown because it is unknowable (Asgeirsson 2019, pp. 231–33). Various scholars have opted for each of these possibilities, and as of yet there does not seem to be a consensus on which is the most accurate assessment of the problem.

Obviously, the reason that this is called a “paradox” is that while it is clear that there is a difference between a few grains of sand upon the floor and a heap of sand on the floor, we are unable to identify when the collection ceases to not be a heap and actually becomes one. I certainly do not feel old, but my granddaughter clearly views me as old. Am I old? The evidence supports both that I am and that I am not. Hence the paradox.

The “problem of specificity” objection to moral cultural relativism points out this vagueness in cultural relativism and uses it to show that moral cultural relativism is wrong. Sterba seems to endorse this argument. Hence he seems to accept that such vagueness is a significant problem for a philosophical position. I think that the same sort of vagueness appears in his version of the POE. Let me explain.

Sterba argues that significant evils are incompatible with the existence of an Anselmian God. However, he grants that the existence of evils that are trivial, easily repairable, or the only way to prevent a far greater evil may be compatible with such theism. This seems to imply that there is a distinguishable difference between theism-compatible evils and those evils that he labels “significant,” the evils that are incompatible with theism.

How does he distinguish between these? He does not say. He does give us several examples of “significant evil,” though. One of these is parents permitting their children to be brutally assaulted as a means of building character (Sterba 2019, p. 57). Perhaps an example of trivial evil would be allowing someone to steal candy from your child in order to teach him or her a lesson about sharing. Both incidents cause the child pain. In fact, a child who has his or her candy taken away can feel rather intense emotional pain. I do not know if it would rival the intensity of the pain of being brutally beaten, and I am sure it would not do the long-term damage that knowing that your parents allowed you to be brutally beaten would do. However, the comparison involves us in considering a spectrum of child-pain-inducing events and judging that some are trivial and others significant. How do we determine which is which? Can we objectively draw a line to the left of which everything is trivial and to the right of which everything is significant? It is not clear to me how we should set about doing so.

This is a problem, for some evils that person A might experience as trivial might seem very significant to person B. If person B has only experienced trivial evils, then medium evils might seem like horrendous evils to him. On the other hand, if person A has experienced tremendous evils, then medium evils might seem trivial to her.

Sterba’s PPA entangles us in a sorites-type paradox. He claims that some evils are trivial and some are significant, that the latter are not compatible with the existence of an Anselmian God, that the latter exist, and that therefore an Anselmian God does not exist. However, he has not and perhaps cannot tell us what evils are significant enough to disprove God’s existence. His argument seems to assume that we already know that significant evils exist, but perhaps the evils that we have experienced actually fall on the trivial side of the spectrum.

It seems at least possible that God is already preventing numerous evils that are even worse than the most significant evils that we now witness. What appear to us to be significant evils may be much less significant than the evils that God is preventing. Sterba could argue that God can and should prevent both those evils that are more significant than the ones that we experience and the ones that we actually do experience. However, if God were to do that, then the evils that are slightly less evil than the most significant evils that we’re currently experiencing would seem to us to be the truly significant evils and



thus in need of God's intervention. This, I suspect, would be true every time God prevents a lesser set of evils, since what we take to be significant evil is probably relative to other things that we are experiencing.

Sterba grants that the existence of small evils is compatible with the existence of an Anselmian God. Because Sterba has embroiled us in a sorites-type paradox, there is no clear point at which an evil ceases to be insignificant. Therefore, on Sterba's argument, there is no clear point at which an evil ceases to be compatible with God's existence. Hence the conclusion that any particular evil to which Sterba can point is incompatible with God's existence seems unjustified. This calls into question the minor premise of the syllogism given above.

#### 4. Conclusions

In this article I have attempted to show that because Sterba thinks that a sorites-type paradox fatally undermines moral cultural relativism, he should view the existence of a sorites-type paradox in his deductive version of the POE as undermining his argument from the POE. At this point, however, I believe it would be hasty and rash to simply conclude that I have defeated Sterba's argument. I know him to be a creative and resourceful thinker, and he may have a way around my objection. Furthermore, I myself can see several potential paths that he could try in response to my attempted critique.

One option for saving Sterba's argument would be for him to repudiate his "problem of specificity" argument against moral cultural relativism and argue that vagueness is a ubiquitous feature of human discourse that does not present a serious problem to philosophical arguments and theories. Other philosophers have already championed this position, and it would enable him to insist that any vagueness inherent in the PPA does not undermine its soundness (see Fine 2020; Keefe 2020). As an ethicist, though, I am inclined to think that the problem of specificity is a serious challenge to cultural relativism and therefore that he should not go this route.

Alternatively, he could attempt to show that the PPA does not involve a sorites-type paradox by devising a way to distinguish between trivial evils and significant evils. If this can be done, it would certainly be worth doing.

Finally, there are a number of strategies that philosophers have devised to defend their arguments against the accusation that they involve a problematic sorites-type paradox. Oms and Zardini's book referenced above discusses at least a dozen of these (Oms and Zardini 2019). Sterba might decide that one of these applies to and saves his argument.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Several anthologies provide the key texts on the POE. See (Peterson 2016; Larrimore 2001). Meister and Moser (2017) is a nice collection of contemporary essays on the subject.
- <sup>2</sup> I was not able to find an actual definition of evil in Sterba's book, but the examples that he gives and the general discussion of evil in this book leads me to believe that he intends the word to refer to something like "unjustified suffering or loss."
- <sup>3</sup> Sterba is professor of ethics and political philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. His CV is provided on the University of Notre Dame website: <https://philosophy.nd.edu/people/faculty/james-sterba/> (accessed on 1 November 2022). Of the 36 books that he has authored and edited, all but the last two are on ethics and/or political philosophy. The last two are on the POE.
- <sup>4</sup> Sterba was president of the Central Division of the APA in 2007–2008, president of the North American Society for Social Philosophy from 1990 to 1995, president of Concerned Philosophers for Peace in 1990 and 1991, and president of the International Association for Philosophy of Law and Social Philosophy, American Section from 1987 to 1989. He is a Fulbright Scholar and has been a visiting professor at the University of San Francisco, University of California at Irvine, University of Santa Clara,

Wuhan University (Wuhan, China), and Peking University (Beijing). His many grants, awards, and publications are listed here: <https://philosophy.nd.edu/people/faculty/james-sterba/> (accessed on 1 November 2022).

According to Sterba, one of the first steps in this new activity was the procurement of a 2013–2014 grant from the Templeton Foundation funding research and two conferences on the Problem of Evil. He writes, “It was only in 2013 after receiving a grant from the John Templeton Foundation that I was able to fully bring my years of working in ethics and political philosophy to bear on the problem of evil” (Sterba 2019, p. 194).

Personal conversation with Sterba, University of Notre Dame, 6 November 2021, and (Sterba 2019, pp. v, 1).

A brief account of this is found in the preface to (Sterba 2019, p. v).

Sterba interprets Romans 3:8 as providing this principle (Sterba 2019, p. 48). I’m inclined to disagree with this interpretation, but Sterba’s argument is not dependent on his interpretation of this passage and hence our disagreement on the interpretation of Rom. 3:8 is irrelevant to this article.

Sterba sometimes uses the term “horrendous evils” instead of “significant evils”, and sometimes puts the two together. He uses Marilyn Adams’ definition of horrendous evils as “[those evils] the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole,” (Sterba 2019, p. 14).

One caveat is in order here: it seems to me that Sterba might be able to argue (or might be attracted by the argument) that the cumulative weight of the tremendous number of past and present non-significant evils is sufficient to serve as evidence for the non-existence of God.

Between chp. 3 and chp. 5 lies a chapter in which Sterba significantly elaborates the PPA.

In chp. 8 Sterba discusses natural evil, but this constitutes an application or intensification of his argument from evil rather than a response to his argument.

See the many articles on Sterba’s POE in volumes 12 and 13 of *Religions* (published in 2021 and 2022), including (Sterba 2021). See also *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 87:3, June 2020. This entire issue of *IJPR* is devoted to debating Sterba’s version of the POE.

On p. 125 of *Is a Good God* he states that there are only two such types of goods, but as he discusses them, he subdivides each into two, thus yielding a total of four. On pp. 185–88 of his conclusion he reiterates this fourfold categorization.

These examples are mine rather than Sterba’s because he provides no examples.

Sterba mentions Mackie many times in his book and includes one of Mackie’s books in his bibliography: (Mackie 1982).

God > ~evil; ~(~evil); therefore ~God.

This is my reconstruction (and condensation) of Sterba’s argument, but something similar is found in (Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90). The term “omniscient” is omitted because Sterba omits it. He does not explain why he has done so, but he is clearly talking about an Anselmian God and hence I believe we should take omniscience to be assumed. However, even if we do not assume actual omniscience, clearly Sterba wants us to assume that God is aware of the horrendous evils that motivate his argument.

Interestingly, here Sterba seems to reject the Pauline Principle.

On p. 23 he briefly explains the problem and implies that it undermines cultural relativism. On p. 25 he implies that the problem of specificity is one among a number of “difficulties” of relativism, thus indicating that he considers this to be a significant objection to relativism.

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Article

# Logical Argument from Evil and Theism

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**Abstract:** The article argues that the logical argument from evil is dead, and the new version presented by James Sterba cannot resurrect it. In the first part, I say that the logical argument from evil is dead either because, in the version given by Mackie, it was successfully refuted by Plantinga and other theists or because, by inviting a reformulation of theistic doctrines, it was nevertheless superseded by contemporary versions of theism, such as open theism. In the second part, I argue that the two significant moves made by Sterba to resurrect the logical argument from evil fail in their intent either because the premise they start does not necessarily give rise to an atheistic conclusion or because the premise is unacceptable for the theist.

**Keywords:** logical argument from evil; John Mackie; James Sterba; free-will defense; theism

## 1. Premise

Thanks to James Sterba's book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Sterba 2019), the logical argument from evil has once again become the subject of debate in today's philosophy of religion. After its original formulation by John Mackie and its refutation by Alvin Plantinga, the argument seemed, with few exceptions, to have been abandoned and considered dead. Its rebirth, due to Sterba, certainly makes an essential contribution to the debate on theodicy, which is, in my view, the most significant and challenging in the philosophy of religion; however, it is doubtful that this version of argument offers an effective advancement of the discussion in this area.

The thesis I support in this article is that the logical argument from evil is dead, i.e., has become irrelevant. Therefore, the attempt to resurrect it is doomed to fail. Other types of evil arguments, such as evidential arguments, continue to challenge the theist, but not the logical one. The logical argument from evil is dead because, already in Mackie's original version, it has not achieved the purpose of refuting theism. Equally, if its purpose has been to increase the critical awareness of theism, it has already achieved this goal and can be said to be exceeded.

## 2. Why the Logical Argument from Evil Has Died by Not Hitting the Target

To understand why the logical argument from evil is dead, I refer to its original formulation, at least in the contemporary debate on the philosophy of religion, which is that of John Mackie (Mackie 1955). The argument is *prima facie* an attack on theism because it does not aim to weaken or refute the evidence in favor of the rationality of the latter, as in the case of the arguments of natural atheology, but to point out a logical contradiction within theism. The theist is committed to simultaneously affirming that (1) there is an omnipotent God, (2) this God is perfectly good, and (3) evil exists in the world. However, if God is omnipotent and perfectly good, and the evil in the world is actual, not a mere appearance, the first two propositions exclude the third because, supposedly, an omnipotent and perfectly good God can and wants to create a world where evil does not exist. However, evil exists, so there is no God.

If the argument aims to prove the inconsistency of theism, it must be said that its goal is very ambitious. If so, we should probably see in this argument the expression of the

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maximum flourishing of atheistic thought in the contemporary era. Nineteenth-century atheism mainly based its claim on historical verification: the progressive and inevitable replacement of the social functions performed by religion by secular activities, the future solution of the *Welträtzel* by scientific knowledge, cognitive mechanisms that, once brought into the light, would be stuck, feelings and emotions that, once rationalized, would have been overcome. The alternative was the heroic claim of human freedom against God, as in the case of “postulatory atheism”.

A form of atheism that has become fully aware of itself; lives in an epistemic context, having no more relevant obstacles; and, therefore, which has become bold, is ready to develop an *unum argumentum* that attempts to defeat the opponent’s field. This is precisely what the logical argument from evil does. As Mackie states, the logical problem raised by the argument is “the problem of clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs: it is not a scientific problem that might be solved by further observations, or a practical problem that might be solved by a decision or an action” (Mackie 1955, p. 200). If the problem has no solution, as Mackie thinks, the atheist has a lethal weapon in his hand against the opponent. Let us look for a counterpart to this argument in theism. We find it in the so-called ontological argument of Anselm of Canterbury, which, not surprisingly, was formulated in a flourishing era of Christian theological thought. In this case, the belief is that, given a specific definition of God that works as a premise, the argument’s conclusion is logically necessary. In both cases, you win or lose; there are no intermediate degrees.

However, philosophers have regularly questioned the certainty of producing a conclusive argument in both cases. This happens because every philosophical argument cannot avoid failure, if by failure we mean, as Peter van Inwagen says, the possibility that the members of an ideal audience, that is, impartial, intellectually honest, and endowed with philosophical and logical acumen (see van Inwagen 2006, p. 42), are not convinced by the argument. This possibility is regularly updated in philosophy, both about theistic and atheistic arguments, representing an invitation to have more modest claims. After the modern critique of natural theology and theodicy, some theists have become too modest, completely renouncing to formulate rational arguments in these areas and therefore yielding to the temptation of fideism, as happens in skeptical theism. Others have taken advantage of this criticism to develop less ambitious strategies without renouncing rational arguments. An attitude of prudence inspired the distinction, which has become classic, between theodicy and defense that arose precisely on the ground of the theistic reply to the logical argument from evil.

This argument stands or falls with the assumption that the theistic God does not have sufficient moral reasons to prevent evil in the world. Still, the theist replies that God, if he exists,<sup>1</sup> has reasons not to avoid evil in the world, although these reasons could not be those the theist thinks he has. In a defense, as Plantinga writes, “the aim is not to say what God’s reason is, but at most what God’s reason might possibly be” (Plantinga 1977, p. 28). Or, in the words of van Inwagen, the theist offers a story about God that represents “God as having reasons for allowing the existence of evil, reasons that, if the rest of the story were true, would be good ones” (van Inwagen 2006, p. 66). How good these reasons are is something to be evaluated. Still, if there are, they are, in any case, sufficient to remove the logical contradiction between the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly good God and to downgrade the logical argument to an evidential argument. According to the latter, theism is probably false, and faith in God is unreasonable. Thus, an atheist has rational grounds for not believing in God but nothing more. Even an irreducible atheist such as Richard Dawkins must concede that there is a minimal probability that God exists.

Some atheists, such as Graham Oppy, have recognized that the logical argument from evil is dead, but only in Mackie’s version, and this does not exclude that, in the future, there may be different versions (Sterba’s argument might precisely be one of these that Oppy has in mind) (see Oppy 2017, p. 63). To demonstrate the weakness of Plantinga’s free-will defense, that is, his inability to dismiss any logical argument, Oppy proposes a different one that starts from the following premises: “1. If God exists, God is the perfect *ex*

*nihilo* creator of our universe; 2. Our universe is imperfect. 3. The actions of a perfect being cannot decrease the degree of perfection of the world. 4. If God exists, then, prior to all creation, the world is perfect" (Oppy 2017, p. 54).<sup>2</sup> If we accept these premises, the world should be perfect; that is, it should not contain any kind of evil, to the point that, as Oppy writes, "even the slightest toothache is a *prima facie* intellectual problem for perfect-being theists" (Oppy 2017, p. 55). However, of course, the world contains a lot of evils, and from this, considering the third premise, we infer that God does not exist.

However, even this version of the logical argument is not conclusive. It could be that the world in *mente Dei* is not perfect as Oppy thinks it is. If a perfect world means the best of all possible worlds, then if something like this makes sense (and I think not), it is not sure that it does not contain any evil. More generally, since the world is ontologically different from God, its perfection is necessarily inferior to the divine one. Compared with the latter, the world is constitutively imperfect; that is what, from Augustine to Leibniz, has been called "metaphysical evil". In sum, a perfect but real world will never be as perfect as an ideal world which is part of divine perfection, so Oppy's third premise fails. However, even if we recognize the validity of all the premises set by Oppy, they do not necessarily deduce the non-existence of God, but only that, in the passage from the intellect to reality achieved with creation, something went wrong. In this case, the argument would strike not theism but only a version of theism, i.e., perfect-being theism. The reproach to God, in this case, would be that of having created an imperfect world, not that of existing.

Thus, even this reformulation of the logical argument from evil, like the others, fails in the sense pointed out by van Inwagen. Of course, I repeat, the failure of this argument does not mean that the problem of evil does not continue to present a formidable challenge for the theist, nor does it mean that free-will defense helps respond convincingly to all kinds of evil in the world. Michael Tooley argues that a defender of what he calls an "incompatibility argument from evil" can always render free-will defenses irrelevant "by formulating an argument from evil in terms of natural evils" (Tooley 2019, p. 6). Indeed, natural evils, the suffering of beasts, and even the suffering of human beings, who, for various reasons, cannot fully exercise their free will, are not covered by free-will defenses, or they are not in a way that seems plausible. Precisely for this reason, in her treatment of the problem of theodicy, Eleonore Stump took up the free-will defense, delimiting it "to the suffering of mentally fully functional adult human beings" (Stump 2010, p. 5). This delimitation can leave you unsatisfied, but if the defense works in this case, it shows that God has reasons for allowing evil and suffering in the world. This is sufficient to reject the logical argument from evil. If God has reasons for allowing the suffering of human beings, it is plausible to think that he also has reasons for allowing that of animals or humans who are not mentally fully functional.

### 3. Why the Logical Argument from Evil Has Died Hitting the Target

The logical argument from evil in Mackie's version is an argument against theism, that is, as an argument that refutes the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly good God. However, let us try to consider it as an argument that does not refute theism but invites the theist to understand better what it means to speak of an omnipotent and perfectly good God and have faith in him without falling into contradiction. If so, we would be faced with one of those cases in which atheistic arguments serve to purify theistic faith. In this sense, perhaps, we might interpret it in *melio rem partem*, like Hume's arguments against natural theology in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* or the argument against miracles in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. They do not dismiss theism, understood as a belief in an invisible and intelligent power that orders the course of nature (this is Hume's idea of theism, an idea undoubtedly reductive for most theists); they free it from superstition or inconsistent doctrines.

Since in Mackie's version of the logical argument, the prevailing focus is on the attribute of omnipotence, I limit myself to a few considerations on this topic. The free-will defense works only on the assumption that God cannot control the will of human beings.

This gives rise, as is known, to what Mackie calls “the paradox of omnipotence”, which arises from the following question: “Can an omnipotent being make a thing which he cannot subsequently control?” (Mackie 1955, p. 210). In his book *The Miracle of Theism*, he asserts that it is an “undecidable question” (Mackie 1982, p. 161). The notion of omnipotence implies that one can have control over anything, so its denial is self-contradictory. Still, at the same time, it is equally impossible to admit that God can control what he, as an omnipotent being, has made uncontrollable.

However, the impossibility of resolving the paradox of omnipotence logically does not present any significant objection to theism. As Peter Geach has made clear (see Geach 1977, pp. 3ff.), a theist may think that, intuitively, there are many things that God cannot do, such as telling lies or not keeping his promises, while agreeing with the fact that there is no coherent solution to the paradox of omnipotence. In doing this, a theist shows that he does not need to believe in God’s omnipotence in the sense that “God can do everything”, but only in the sense that God is almighty, that is, that he has a providential plan about human beings that can never be frustrated. Some might object that God wants the salvation of all men (according to *1 Tim 2, 4*) and that one of the outcomes of the free-will defense is that not everyone will be saved, thus frustrating God’s will. Still, the meaning of the biblical phrase is that God wants to save all those men who want to be saved, a sense that is precisely consistent with the free-will defense.

This brings us back to the core of Mackie’s objection to the free-will defense. It does not object to the idea that God cannot force human beings to choose the good but that he has not created a world where humans “always freely choose the good” (Mackie 1982, p. 164). I think that this objection must be taken seriously by a theist. There is nothing logically contradictory in assuming that all human beings can always freely choose the good; as Mackie observes, it is what Christian utopians hope will one day happen. Plantinga’s thesis about Transworld Depravity, for which “every world God can actualize is such that” the man “is significantly free in it, he takes at least one wrong action” (Plantinga 1977, p. 47), is plausible if one considers the postlapsarian state, but not the prelapsarian state. Perhaps God created the world by offering the first human beings the possibility of always freely choosing the good. Still, they simply did not do it, and the initial error resulted in the impossibility of doing so throughout the history of humanity. Did God know that they would not do it? According to Mackie, the free-will defense works fully if God does not know future contingents because, by creating free beings, he cannot make them so that he always knows what they will freely choose. This move, however, would not be painless for the theist because, as Mackie observes, it would lead him to have a minor conception of omniscience and therefore also of divine omnipotence, “to put God very firmly inside time”, contrary to the ordinary religious view of God’s eternity, and, considering that the world could even be worse than it is, to make God run a great risk, exposing him “to a charge of gross negligence or recklessness”. Nonetheless, as Mackie acknowledges, “there may be some way of adjusting these [doctrines] which avoids an internal contradiction without giving up anything essential to theism”. However, he adds, “none has yet been clearly presented, and there is a strong presumption that theism cannot be made coherent without a serious change in at least one of its central doctrines” (Mackie 1982, p. 176).

From the time Mackie made these considerations, theists have taken the path he suggested seriously, as representatives of open theism well demonstrate. For example, William Hasker is willing to acknowledge that God took a risk by creating the world. In the conclusion of his book *God, Time and Knowledge*, he states that “the best Christian theodicy will deny middle knowledge and will affirm forcefully that *God the Creator and Redeemer is a risk taker!*” (Hasker 1989, p. 205). Nevertheless, I wonder if the idea of a God who runs risks is appropriate for the theistic God. In my view, refuting God’s omniscience about the future mainly serves to avoid inconsistencies regarding this complicated issue. One of these consists, as Geach observes, in the idea common to classical theism that God sees future events as they are in themselves, evidently based on the assumption that the future “exists” already. The future, however, does not “exist” already, in a sense expressed in logic

by the existential quantifier, but consists “of certain actual trends and tendencies in the present that have not yet been fulfilled” (Geach 1977, p. 53). To affirm that God sees the future as already present is contradictory because the future, by definition, is not present. Attributing this ability to God does not magically make the contradiction disappear.

Denying that God sees the future as present does not mean denying that God knows the future because, as Geach still observes, “God knows the future by controlling it” (Geach 1977, p. 57). In other terms, the future’s divine knowledge is a function of God’s omnipotence. The image proposed by Geach of the great chess master who has everything under control and who, once established to checkmate, no one can force to improvise, is perhaps not entirely appropriate because if God does not know in advance the moves of his adversaries, he cannot even plan his moves. Maybe he will have to improvise. However, the aim of the image is precise: God’s final intentions cannot be frustrated, and what he has established, he always obtains. Therefore, for a theist, abandoning omnipotence in the sense that “God can do anything” does not mean abandoning his almightiness.<sup>3</sup>

If such a conception is plausible, theists have managed to respond coherently, using free-will defense, to the logical argument from evil. Thus, it can be overcome after having fulfilled its critical function. It has highlighted an apparent inconsistency of theism. Still, theists, through a reformulation of their theses, have overcome the objection precisely as they suppose that evil is destined to be overcome by good. Even in this perspective, therefore, the logical argument from theism is dead.

#### 4. Sterba’s Logical Argument from Evil

Having established this, what about the logical argument proposed by Sterba? Since the publication of his book, a considerable discussion has developed on it, which has seen many scholars intervene and Sterba himself replying. There is no need to repeat Sterba’s arguments, the objections raised, Sterba’s rejoinder. I would just like to make some considerations on two specific points.

First point: Sterba considers the logical argument from evil conclusive for the option in favor of atheism. He does it in general, but also personally. In a summary article of his book, he recalls that he was not an atheist until he formulated, in recent years, his version of the argument from evil and states that “my commitment to atheism is only as strong as the soundness and validity of my argument. Undercut my argument and poof, at least in my case, no more atheist” (Sterba 2020, p. 203). This statement indeed accounts for the intellectual honesty of its author and the non-dogmatic nature of his commitment to atheism. Nonetheless, making this commitment dependent on a single argument seems reckless because, as I previously said, every philosophical argument is open to relevant objections and can be fully convincing or not. However, there is another reason: I think that a well-founded option for theism or atheism should spring from a more comprehensive epistemic attitude. To be an atheist means having the conviction that theism is not the best possible explanation for the problem of the origin of the world, for the apparent design of living beings, for the issue of human nature, of the meaning of life, of the foundation of morality, of life after death, for the existence of the tremendous amount of religious experience present in the world, of miracles, etc. Mackie’s book *The Miracle of Theism*, which replies to Richard Swinburne’s cumulative argument for theism in *The Existence of God*, shows such an epistemic attitude. In this context, a single argument can be more robust and give a greater impetus to tip the scales on one side rather than the other. Still, none alone is enough, and, eventually, it is easier to refute a single argument than a series of converging arguments. Naturally, Sterba, to date, has not evaluated the objections raised to him as capable of finding a flaw in his argument. For this reason, he is entitled to consider it valid and to remain an atheist. Still, perhaps he will accept the invitation to reflect further if an option so existentially demanding, like the atheistic one, can be based on a single argument, however suitable it may be.

In this regard, it is well to add something else: let us admit that the logical argument from evil in Sterba’s version is successful and immune from flaws. Not for this, atheism



would be its logical consequence. The most consistent and frequent meaning of the term “atheist” is someone who denies God or divinities exist (see Oppy 2018, p. 3). Let us admit that the logical argument from evil makes faith in an almighty and perfectly good God inconsistent. Still, it leaves the possibility of believing in a God who does not possess one of these two properties. The finite God of John S. Mill, Max Scheler, Hans Jonas, or contemporary pantheism is a feasible option for those who look at the problem of evil as an insurmountable obstacle to believing in theistic God. According to the distinction proposed by Rowe, in the latter case, we would speak of a theism “in a broad sense” (Rowe 1979, p. 335). At most, we would talk about “implicit atheism”, as does Italian philosopher Cornelio Fabro (see Fabro 2013, p. 84) but not of “atheism” *sic et simpliciter*.

In the conclusion of his book, Sterba rejects this possibility, stating that such a God “would have to be extremely immoral or extremely weak” and “no useful purpose would be served by hypothesizing such a limited god who would either *be so much more evil* than all our greatest villains or, while moral, would *be so much less powerful than ourselves*” (Sterba 2019, p. 192). Here it seems that Sterba shares with the theist the idea that an impotent or evil god is not “God” in the real sense.

However, the greater rational coherence of a God with all the perfections does not exclude the existence of minor divinities. From the Anselmian argument, if it works, you derive the logical necessity to affirm the existence of “God”, but not the non-existence of “god”. If the only possible alternative were between theism and atheism, in the latter, we should include all conceptions of the divine other than theistic ones. However, this would have the consequence that religious views other than monotheistic ones should all be considered expressions of atheism, a contradictory consequence. Are they not religions precisely because they have some concept of the divine and worship a deity? The accusation of atheism can naturally be launched against those who have a conception of divinity other than the one held to be true (as the pagans did in ancient times toward Christians or as Christian theologians did in modern times against Spinoza or Fichte in the *Atheismstreit*). Still, those affected by this accusation can rightly reply that they are not atheists because there is no single concept of god, and one can mean different things with the term “god”. In short, the logical argument from evil can lead to atheism, but it does not necessarily do it. For being consistently atheist, there is a need to formulate not only objections to the existence of God but also to “gods” and, more generally, to the rational plausibility of a religious worldview.

So, we come to the second point: the novelty of Sterba’s logical argument from evil consists of its reformulation in moral terms. More precisely, it highlights that free-will defense does not work if one accepts a morally qualified concept of freedom and asserts the so-called Pauline Principle as a set of moral obligations to which a God with all perfections would be subject. I believe that neither of these moves can resurrect the logical argument from evil, but the reasons for failure differ. In the first case, Sterba’s move may be shared by the theist, and his defense may be reformulated successfully in terms of what Sterba himself calls “Greater Moral Good Defense” (Sterba 2019, p. 30); in the second case, instead, a theist must reject the premise of Sterba’s reasoning, declaring its irrelevance.

Let us start with the first move. Sterba states the difference from Plantinga’s conception of freedom as follows: “For me significant freedoms 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). While freedom for Plantinga indicates the ability to perform or refrain from a morally significant action, for Sterba, freedom is linked to a sphere of interests or rights that an ideal political state should preserve and which, in analogy with the latter, God should maintain too. The preservation of these interests or rights implies the practice of constraining the freedom of those who do injustice, which a just state does regularly, even if insufficiently, but which God does not seem to do, as evidenced by the presence of horrendous evils in the world. While God’s non-interference with man’s freedom is justified when dealing with lesser evils, this justification falls in the face of horrendous evils. Thus, as Sterba observes, the problem with theodicy is not that God creates us free

but that he “fails to restrict the lesser freedoms of wrongdoers to secure the more significant freedoms of their victims” (Sterba 2019, p. 29).

It seems to me that a theist can follow this line of reasoning without accepting its conclusions. A theist, that is, can agree that the free-will defense alone is not enough to face the objection based on the existence of horrendous evils because, if considered in isolation, it can give rise to a misconception that Sterba’s remarks help to highlight. The misconception consists in thinking that any interference of God with human freedom, especially with the consequences of freely chosen actions, consists of negating the latter. However, this is not the case because, as Sterba rightly observes, “God can also promote freedom ( . . . ) by actually interfering with the freedom of some of our free actions at certain times” (Sterba 2019, p. 27). Therefore, a theist should not think that the price to pay for putting the responsibility for moral evil on human shoulders is to keep God out of the game. If we admit the logical possibility of this interference, as Sterba does against Plantinga, from it one can presume, against Sterba, that God actually interferes with human freedom and that he does so with extraordinary interventions, as happens in miracles, or in an ordinary way, through worldly causality. The presence of horrendous evils does not constitute an objection to the principle of God’s non-interference. In the face of horrendous evils, a theist can only acknowledge that what one would have expected, interference from God, did not happen, not that God does not exist, or that God never interferes in human affairs.

The question that horrendous evils pose to the theist is not why God does not intervene in general but why God has not intervened in these cases. From a theistic point of view, I think there is only one plausible answer to this question: God permits horrendous evil with the aim of a greater good. This response, which is that of classical Christian theodicy, like that of Thomas Aquinas, supposes that suffering is a means to obtain goods that otherwise would not be possible. Spiritual goods in this life, the good of beatitude in the ultramundane life. Ultimately, this response denies that there are horrendous evils, that is, that there is suffering without a teleological orientation to good.

You may say that the answer is wrong because, by definition, horrendous evils are such precisely because they deny this orientation. Still, the problem lies precisely in the judgment that we express on these evils without having sufficient evidence to do so. Suppose evils are permitted to obtain spiritual goods. In that case, these are less visible than material ones, and the connection between suffering and good is often hidden. If evils are permitted to obtain the supreme good of beatitude, this good is an object of faith in this life, not of vision. In these cases, a theist has no evidence to say that evil is not absurd, but he can certainly assume that it is not if an almighty and good God exists. In this conception, the only horrendous evils are those that the wrongdoers experience and will experience as the fruit of their actions. Still, they are not even absurd because they represent the punishment consequent to their guilt. It will be noted that this response is different from that of skeptical theism, toward which Sterba shows justified perplexities: in skeptical theism, God’s reasons for allowing evil remain unknown to us, while in our case, God’s reasons may be, at least partially, known to the human being.

Assuming this point, we come to Sterba’s second move, based on the Pauline Principle. According to this principle, it is not permissible to do evil to obtain good, whatever it may be. A “Greater Moral Good Defense” seems challenged by this principle, at least in the case of horrendous evils, because trivial or easily repairable evils are an obvious exception. As I said earlier, I think Sterba’s line of reasoning must be rejected entirely on this point. The Pauline Principle prohibits doing evil to obtain good, but it does not prohibit allowing evil if this permission is the only way to prevent a greater evil.<sup>4</sup> The doctrine of the Double Effect, which relates to the Pauline Principle, explains this point, with the only difficulty in admitting that God did not foresee in detail the unwanted effects of his permission. In any case, whether God has foreseen or not foreseen such effects in detail, it remains a strong point of theism that God always wants the good and that nothing can frustrate his will, even when it is made explicit through permission of evil. The distinction of Thomas Aquinas

between antecedent and consequent can help bring this point into focus. According to this distinction, the permission of what God does not want in his antecedent will, that is, abstracting from actual circumstances, is a good thing given these circumstances and is therefore willed according to his consequent will (see Stump 2003, pp. 458 ff.). So, to give an example relevant to our problem, the choice of doing evil by one of his creatures is not willed by God according to his antecedent will but is permitted according to his consequent will not to destroy his freedom. It is true that permission, as Sterba observes, “is always an intentional act” (Sterba 2019, p. 123). Still, it is not the intentionality of the act that makes someone guilty if circumstances make it the right thing to do or the only possible thing to do.

The Pauline Principle, in Sterba’s formulation, on the other hand, takes the form of three moral evil-prevention requirements (see Sterba 2019, pp. 151 ff.), which result in moral obligations that God should satisfy in analogy to what an ideally just political state does. However, the idea that God is subject to moral obligations is inadmissible for a theist. In chapter VI of his book, Sterba confronts Brian Davies’s negation that God is a moral agent. However, I think that Davies’ thesis is not entirely representative of the theistic conception of morality because it underlies a theological apophatism that a theist may not share.

The whole question, in my opinion, should be considered as follows: God has no moral obligation, but, by his nature, he cannot do certain things that are morally significant. God, for example, cannot lie or want to do evil in the sense of the antecedent will. Thus, God is not obliged to create the world, and creation is a supererogatory act. The creation of the world and God’s providential plan, however, imply the creation of a physical order and a moral order that are in a close relationship, an order that is valid for human beings but not for God, who is its creator. God can deviate from the physical order by working miracles, that is, events that exceed or violate the causal powers of things, not their nature, and he can deviate from the moral order by commanding acts that are contrary to it, as in the case of the sacrifice of Isaac from part of Abraham. The power to command actions that violate the moral law shows the sovereignty of God, that is, of the Legislator, over the latter. This point is, it seems to me, what must be conceded to a divine command theory, but without opposing the latter to natural law theory.

The element that allows us to keep these two theories together, which are different but not necessarily opposite,<sup>5</sup> is that both natural moral law and divine command are aimed at the good or the greater good. In this sense, God can be conceived as an ideal moral agent who always acts for the good, even when it seems to us that this is not the case. A theist cannot consistently believe that God violates the moral law arbitrarily or just to demonstrate his power, nor is he forced to believe that God’s moral action completely differs from any human moral standard. The ontological difference between God and human beings justifies only a certain degree of agnosticism about what matters to us as good; God knows thoroughly what is good for us, and this knowledge justifies him in allowing evil and suffering and commanding an action contrary to the moral law. In any case, this agnosticism rests on the firm conviction that everything God does is for our good and that his will cannot be thwarted.

The idea that God has moral obligations to satisfy reveals, in my opinion, an anthropomorphic attitude toward God which ultimately produces a misconception of his nature. An ideal political state made up of human beings is undoubtedly subject to moral obligations, and human beings with superpowers (superheroes) are equally so, but God, who is the creator of everything and therefore also of moral obligations, is not. For this, I conclude that Sterba’s argument, based on the Pauline Principle, builds on a premise that the theist cannot accept.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> On this point, a theist can adopt what W. Rowe has called “the G. E. Moore shift”, which consists of assuming as a premise the negation of the opposing argument’s conclusion and drawing the negation of one of the premises of the opposing argument. In other words, for the atheist, God does not exist, but if God exists, a premise that must be acquired through arguments other than those used in the theodicy, then certainly God has morally sufficient reasons to allow evil (see Rowe 1979, p. 339).
- <sup>2</sup> In the list of Oppy’s premises, I have substituted numbers for letters.
- <sup>3</sup> Ultimately, this conception is compatible with Hasker’s view: “God knows, to be sure, that evils will occur, but for the most part he will not have specifically decreed or incorporated into his plan for the world the particular instances of evil which actually occur. And this opens up for us the possibility of attributing to God certain general strategies by which he governs the world, strategies which are, as a whole, ordered for the good of the creation, but whose detailed consequences are not foreseen or intended by God prior to the decision to adopt them” (Hasker 2004, p. 118). The difference with classical theism is that this conception admits the existence of evils in the world that are not compensated, at least in this life, by a greater good.
- <sup>4</sup> Among others, Almeida has pointed out this issue in his review of Sterba 2019 (Almeida 2020, p. 248).
- <sup>5</sup> Aquinas’ ethical thought is often understood in the light of the natural moral law’s theory. Still, it contains many elements consistent with a theory of divine commands (see Clanton and Martin 2019).

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Opinion

# Has James Sterba Established a Logical Argument from Evil or Just a Very Good Evidential One?

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**Abstract:** James Sterba's new treatise advancing a logical argument from evil against the existence of God fails in one respect and succeeds in another. As with all claimants to having found such a thing before him, Sterba fails in properly achieving a logical argument from evil. But he succeeds in producing one of the most undefeatable evidential arguments from evil yet published. Elegantly dispatching all the common defenses, Sterba shows that there is no way to avoid the force of his argument against the existence of God without adopting extraordinarily improbable hypotheses that theists can't even intelligibly articulate.

**Keywords:** God; theism; evil

In *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019), James Sterba strives to establish a logical argument from evil against the existence of a (good) god and determinedly rebuts the likes of Marilyn Adams, Alvin Plantinga, Michael Bergmann, and Brian Davies, providing throughout a very useful bibliography.<sup>1</sup> In the process, Sterba maintains that his is not merely an air-tight "evidential" argument from evil, but a *bona fide* "logical" argument from evil. I do not believe this is the case. I do believe, however, that his book establishes beyond a reasonable doubt that a good god, in any meaningful sense, cannot exist on our current observations and information. However, that conclusion depends on "our current observations and information", any of which has a nonzero probability of being false (there may be facts that have escaped our observation, or elements of our information might be incorrect), which makes his argument an evidential one, not a logical one. Yes, *if* our information is complete and correct, *then* a good god cannot logically exist. That much I believe Sterba demonstrates. But this logical impossibility is contingent on premises whose truth is not known to a logical certainty. Those premises depend on evidence, and that renders the whole argument evidential, which form of the argument is also sometimes referred to as "Inductive", "Empirical", or "Probabilistic", to distinguish it from the strictly "Deductive."<sup>2</sup> Regardless, Sterba's book has touched a nerve: in just the four years since its publication there have been over twenty-five attempts to rebut it.<sup>3</sup>

There are, of course, a number of semantic labyrinths that theists can try to use as an escape here (and they can be found repeated across many of the responses to Sterba that have been published so far), such as redefining the word "good" so that even the most monstrous of sociopaths would qualify. Sterba mostly avoids such trickery by relying on the theist's own internal logic: rather than try to "settle" a definition of "good" on one thing or another, Sterba correctly maintains that theists must mean by "good" when applied to God the same thing they mean of any person, or else they are affirming a contradiction. Since contradictory states of affairs cannot exist, their God then becomes implicated in a contradiction, and thereby becomes logically impossible, which is a victory no theist can allow. To extract God from this tragic fate requires resolving the contradiction, and there are only two ways to do this: admit to the principle (God is only good if he is good in the same sense anyone can ever be good, and thus is good according to the believer's own standards of goodness as they apply to *all* persons of whatever their knowledge and

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power, such that even any situationally different ethics deriving from greater knowledge and power must still apply equally to any person as to any god), or admit that evil people are good (and thus abandon the theist's entire ability to determine right from wrong).

Sterba's point is that if God can commit mass murder and genocide, afflict germ warfare against masses of innocent children, endorse slavery, be a material accomplice to rape, order terrorist acts and contract hits on innocent people, build environments he knows will collapse and kill their residents, fill the world with pollution he knows will afflict widespread serious harm, and the like, and still be called "good", then these behaviors, these choices, are *thereby being endorsed* as good, and anyone who conducts them is then "good" by the theist's own construction. This is, of course, too terrifying and censurable a course to take for the theist, as it would immediately establish them as no mere villains, but as the enemies of all human society. They would be more honest, then, to turn to worshiping the gods of H.P. Lovecraft. In the same fashion, redefining "God" so as to deprive that entity of greater knowledge and power than even humans collectively possess would simply negate any legitimate purpose to employing the word "God"; and anyway, this is not a popular recourse for theists either.

Accordingly, usually *different* defenses for God are deployed than these, which actually appeal to the same defenses anyone could appeal to in the same circumstances, such as "necessity" or "unavoidability" or some form of "greater good" logic. This amounts to accepting Sterba's principle that if it is a defense for God, it must be a defense for any person in relevantly similar circumstances.<sup>4</sup> But then Sterba dispatches all these more usual defenses of God. After his Introduction (Chapter 1), he conclusively demonstrates that there is no logically coherent "free will" defense (Chapter 2), that the prospects of soul-building or an afterlife do not actually resolve anything as to current evidence of any extant God's moral character (Chapters 3 and 4), that the theist's insistence that different moral standards apply to God (again redefining evil as good) is only a covert way of conceding Sterba's entire argument (Chapters 6 and 7), and that appealing to "natural evil" does not get God off of any hook either (Chapter 8). Sterba then wraps with his Conclusion (Chapter 9).

In the middle of all this (Chapter 5), Sterba addresses a completely different defense: the argument from Skeptical Theism that we cannot claim to know if God is good or evil because God possesses knowledge that we do not (he "sees the big picture"). This is the most important chapter of the book, for here lies the problem with claiming to have established a *logical* argument from evil rather than an evidential one. Sterba's other chapters adequately refute all defenses of God; none of them hold up even in respect to logic. So, as far as the rest of the book is concerned, I believe Sterba can claim to have proved a logical contradiction between presently observed states of affairs and any meaningful idea of a "good" God. The only problem is at this very juncture: whether we have all pertinent information, and whether all our information is correct. Sterba deploys good rebuttals here, but they are not as comprehensive as in his other chapters. His main foil is Michael Bergmann, and it can fairly be said that Sterba adequately dispatches all of Bergmann's arguments. However, there remains a *weak* version of Bergmann's case that remains immune to Sterba's rebuttals: if we take the position that, as Bergmann argues, scenarios we cannot imagine at present are *possible*, in which we will be mistaken as to any extant God's moral character but then abandon the inalienable requirement of Bergmann's argument that any of these scenarios be even remotely *probable*, then we end up rejecting the conclusions of both Bergmann *and* Sterba.

In other words, because it remains logically *possibly* the case that some Bergmann scenarios still exist, Sterba cannot establish a *logical* incompatibility between current observations and a good God; however, because none of those scenarios are even remotely *probable*, we are in no way justified in believing any obtain. As a result, this does not rescue God as Bergmann hoped, but rather establishes the extraordinary improbability of his existence, which warrants our abandoning belief in God. Hence, while taking this "out" rescues us from the horn of Sterba's logical argument from evil, it throws us on the horn of an evidential argument so powerful that we still ought to abandon belief in any such God.

Skeptical Theism rests on the fallacy of “*possibilter ergo probabilter*”, meaning “possibly, therefore probably”. But “possibly” does not get you to “probably”. Therefore, it cannot get you to “probably there is a good God”. To the contrary, Sterba’s demonstration of the extreme *improbability* of any Bergmann scenario being true entails the opposite conclusion: “that there is a good God is extremely improbable”. This is no mere agnosticism but an accomplished proof that such a God’s existence actually *is* extremely improbable based on present evidence. Sterba has composed a very good evidential argument from evil—arguably a decisive one—but it still technically is not a *logical* argument from evil. It is not logically *necessarily* the case that a good God does not exist; it is just extraordinarily *improbable* that one does.

This is still an important achievement. Take, for example, the fact that the Bible (Old Testament and New) universally endorses slavery (indeed, in the Old Testament, even outright sex slavery).<sup>5</sup> No one can produce any reason why a moral person would allow that to happen when they have every means to ensure it does not. God can simply tell every living soul “that’s not my book”, or literally change every such reference back to condemning slavery every time any scribe attempted to alter God’s Book. Either way, a God can ensure their will is accurately represented without violating anyone’s liberties (because no one is at liberty to commit fraud, nor can any moral society exist that allows it without even remark, much less redress). What is the probability that a benevolent God would have a valid excuse not to say one correct heavenly word to his devoted believers about this? And what evidence do we have supporting that probability? From our background knowledge of benevolent beings (billions of humans) with the power to speak unharmed (millions of humans), a valid excuse not to speak up is so rare that we never see one single instance of it. And “rare” is just a synonym of “very infrequent”, and “very infrequent” is just a synonym of “very improbable”. It is at least, in fact, millions to one against. There is no way to turn this probability around. Theists simply have no evidence that such excuses as would here be needed are any more likely than that.

So, theists like Bergmann will insist, “there could be an excuse for being totally silent about this, even though we can’t think of it”, and even propose, “none of us can think of it because we are all limited mortals”, or something to these effects. But this does not respond to the point. To the contrary, it amounts to *admitting* that the probability of there being such an excuse is extremely low, for were it at all probable, we would have thought of it by now. Humans are, after all, the same species who discovered Game Theory, Set Theory, Relativity, Evolution, and Quantum Mechanics. Humanity is no dunce. And we openly denounce slavery all the time without moral impediment, so how can humans have more power and wisdom in this matter than God? Yes, however small the probability, there is still *some* nonzero probability we are mistaken here, that we have overlooked an excuse, some set of circumstances that would indeed warrant a good person of godlike knowledge and means allowing slavery to be universally endorsed in their name for thousands of years and never condemning it in any communication from them whatever. But it is plain to see that that is extraordinarily unlikely, particularly for a God. So, if no one can come up with a reason—even in concept, much less adduce any evidence that that reason *is even true* for God—it cannot be claimed that “probably there is a reason”. To the contrary, this failure is stalwart evidence that *probably there is not*.

The probability of a good God then simply becomes “the probability that a good person with godlike means to tell us they don’t endorse slavery, nevertheless wouldn’t, and would even instead let the world claim they were all for it, for thousands of years”. A mere human in this predicament can claim ignorance, a lack of resources, or “I was dead at the time”. God has no available excuses because all known excuses are born of the limitations that, by definition, do not exist for a god. This is just one example of evident moral failure. Add to this all the other endorsements to crime and terrorism attributed to God in the Bible and all the death, pain, disease, corruption, and unthwarted crime allowed in the world, indeed even caused by its very design, and the probability that an excuse exists for every single one of these seemingly immoral decisions—an excuse not merely to do



nothing about any of these things, *but to remain utterly silent on the matter in every single case*—becomes astronomically compounded well toward zero. This cannot be gainsaid by raising mere possibilities. It is the *probability* that is at issue.

As Sterba notes when addressing every attempt to invent excuses for God in the face of overwhelming evidence of his crimes (should he even exist to be responsible for them), a god must always be by definition more powerful and cognizant than humans, indeed all of collective humanity, just to *be* a god; and yet, humans exhibit better and wiser behaviors than God must be evincing in every one of these cases. We who oppose slavery say so and openly oppose anyone who would defraud the public with false claims about our position on it; we who oppose terror and murder and disease and corruption and crime say so and even act to suppress or fix it. Plenty of us face no excuses impeding us, and even those who do face only impediments that a God would not (like being liable to being injured or killed for our troubles, not having enough money, or not knowing what to do). So, how can we, the far weaker and less informed species, be free of impediments holding back *even a god*? Such would imply that humans are more powerful or wiser than God, which negates any claim to his being a god. This takes us back to logical impossibility. The only escape for the theist is to admit the only possible way a good God can exist is on the supposition of extraordinarily improbable conditions that are nowhere in evidence. This logically entails God's existence is extraordinarily improbable.

Sterba does wish to deny this. He thinks his dispatch of all of Bergmann's arguments suffices to render all Bergmann scenarios logically impossible. But nowhere is that step reached in Sterba's argumentation. He makes a sound case against Bergmann's insistence that such scenarios are at all probable, but that is not the same thing as establishing them to be *impossible*. Consider, for example, what Sterba reports to be Bergmann's premises. For example, on p. 72, Sterba argues that Bergmann's "ST1" holds that "We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are". ST2, ST3, and ST4 advance similar assertions from different angles. Sterba refutes the "no good reason" element of all of these premises. We actually *do* have good reason to believe our understanding is representative. So, all of Bergmann's arguments fail, but they fail only to rescue God as a probable entity. They remain intact if they are weakened to only admit the *possibility* rather than the probability of what Bergmann proposes in each case; so, "It is *possible* that there are goods we don't know of", and (which must be added on top of that), "It is *possible* one or more of those *unknown* goods justifies God's total silence and inaction in every case of naturally engineered and unchecked evil across the board". One can construct the same of unknown evils (T2), unknown entailment relations between goods and evils (T3), and even an unknown "total moral value" of complex sets of affairs (T4). But taking this step renders the existence of God improbable on Sterba's rebuttal, so Bergmann fails, but so does Sterba—unless you reset Sterba's conditions of success from "God is logically impossible" to "God is extraordinarily improbable". Then he succeeds.

Sterba cannot cancel this consequence by proposing reasons why we should conclude that the existence of such unknowns is unlikely to excuse everything about God's inaction, even his complete silence, even though Sterba is right about the premise. As he notes, at no point does God seek informed consent from anyone for all the horrible things he causes and allows to happen to them, including all the horrible things he allows the authors of the Bible to claim he approves of and opposes, nor does God ever give anyone a morally acceptable answer as to why he is doing all this, nor does he ever help anyone in need, despite that being in consequence of all these things (most of which he is directly responsible for, such as viruses, bacteria, parasites, cancers, genetic disorders, tsunamis, earthquakes, floods, mudslides, volcanoes, freezes and heatwaves, vicious animals, and even susceptibility to harm *and mortality itself*). That is all true. But Sterba is wrong about the conclusion. Not being able to think of a reason that would ever justify this complete silence is not even functionally equivalent to proving such a reason *logically impossible*. It is at best equivalent to proving it extraordinarily improbable, and that is simply an evidential, not a logical argument from evil.

Consider the following scenario. It so happens, unbeknownst to us, that it is logically impossible for God to create a paradisiacal world without a concomitant purchase through a particular array of suffering. Accordingly, the reason God cannot undo this feature of existence is that it cannot be undone; no power can logically exist that would overcome it. It so happens that if God alleviates any of that suffering by intervening or even speaking to the persons who, collectively, must pay this price, the effect is at once undone, like touching an electrical current to ground. This, too, unbeknownst to us, is logically necessarily the case, and thus no power of any god can undo it. But God is a good God, so he creates a number of people, as competent adults, and tells them all of this until they fully comprehend it (as, being God, he knows when they have), and he gives them a choice: you can have your memory erased and be born and raised into a world where a certain random amount will be suffered by each, purchasing the balance of karmic energy God needs to secure you in an eternal paradise after, or God can set you in another universe where you will remember all this but endure for as long as you choose a lesser degree of mixed suffering and pleasure, neither horrendous nor wonderful, with no paradisiacal outcome (think “The Medium Place” in the afterlife satire series *The Good Place*). Again, the reason that this is the best God can otherwise do is that it is, unbeknownst to us, logically impossible for God to create or manage any better outcome in a balanced karmic product, other than through the more brutal but brief scheme to secure a place in paradise. The only catch is that if you say yes to the paradise scheme, your memory of this choice, and in fact of everything whatever, must be erased, and God can never tell you any of this while you grow up from a helpless baby through perhaps an adulthood of random length and go through a brief mortal life of random suffering—because otherwise the suffering cannot earn the purchase. And you are told all of this before choosing.

In this scenario, no one exists who did not give their full informed consent to their fate. Everyone in this world, unbeknownst to them, already fully consented to be; everyone who did not consent to this universe is in another (somewhat less interesting) universe we will never meet. The limitations on God are not of his choosing (any alternative effort he makes is thwarted by logical necessity), yet he remains godlike in power (he can create people and universes and set up this entire scheme). This explains every observation and maintains a morally good God at the helm of it all. Granted, this is a God more consistent with the one of Douglas Adams’ *Hitchhiker* novels, who left a sign on a distant planet saying, “Sorry for the Inconvenience”, than with the God of any popular theism today; however, in this scenario, none of those religions really come from God anyway but are just a part of the random karmic misery we must endure on the road to paradise.

To be clear, the scenario I just described is ridiculous and bears no appreciable probability of being true, and there is no evidence whatever that it is true, or even that a single one of its premises is true. But it has one meagre epistemic merit: *it is logically possible*. At least it is so far as we know. And indeed, I have no reason to believe this is the only scenario that could answer here. It really is not reasonable to think that I, or even all humanity, has thought of every possible thing that could be. Though it is reasonable to think that I, and certainly humanity as a whole, have thought of every *probable* thing that could be, which is what undercuts all of Bergmann’s premises. The impossibility of our having thought of every *possible* thing that could be undercuts Sterba’s claim to have established the logical impossibility of anything that might answer and could yet be true. Yes, it would have to be some truly bizarre thing like I just proposed, but that only gets us to improbability, not impossibility. It only gets us to an evidential argument from evil—albeit a very strong one.

This conclusion still follows even if you can come up with some genuine proof of the logical impossibility of the scenario I just described because you still have infinitely more unknown scenarios to similarly disprove before you can prove them all impossible. Perhaps one day someone will come up with a sweeping formal proof that establishes all such unknown scenarios impossible; perhaps that will complete at last the logical disproof of a good God’s existence. But that day has not yet come. There is no such proof in Sterba. All he argues against is the conceivable. He has nothing really to say about the inconceivable;

nor likely could he, as being inconceivable, he cannot have conceived of such things so as to formulate any objection to them. This is precisely what forestalls the conclusion that all Bergmann scenarios are impossible. At present, at least, we cannot possibly know that.

Despite this single technical objection, James Sterba's treatise is required reading for anyone aiming to advance *or* defeat the argument from evil against the existence of God. He corners and casts down every usual defense against it and leaves only one escape route: an admission of an extremely improbable state of affairs contrary to present observation, which renders the existence of a good God extremely improbable. But this does not quite achieve the esoterically specific goal of finally establishing a logical argument from evil. It does, however, more firmly establish an evidential argument from evil than any treatise heretofore. As such, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* will still have to be reckoned with by any theist still bent on rescuing their God from this fate, and it will benefit any atheist or philosopher with the converse goal to take lessons from, cite, and draw upon this work in aid thereof.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I provide a lengthier discussion of this book's contents and arguments in Richard Carrier (2019). Here I focus solely on the question posed in the title.
- <sup>2</sup> A recent top-notch defense of the "evidential" argument from evil is Raphael Lataster (2018). For a survey of "logical" and "evidential" arguments in general, see the two volumes edited by Martin and Monnier (2003, 2006). For an important discussion of the logical structure of evidential arguments against the existence of God see Herman Philipse (2012).
- <sup>3</sup> Sixteen responses were collected and published (with Sterba's replies) in a special issue of *Religions* (titled *Is the God of Traditional Theism Logically Compatible with All the Evil in the World?*, see Sterba 2022a), followed by several more in a subsequent special issue of that same journal (titled *Do We Now Have A Logical Argument From Evil?*, see Sterba 2022b), and yet more in a special issue of the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (titled *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, see Hall 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> Here it is worth noting that Sterba has contributed extensively to our philosophical understanding of "justice" and "morality" in his earlier works, especially in *Justice for Here and Now* (Sterba 1998) and *Morality: The Why and the What of It* (Sterba 2018), which critics need also take into account.
- <sup>5</sup> Apologetic denials of this notwithstanding: see Hector Avalos (2013).

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Article

# God and Evil—Systematic-Theological Reflections on the Doctrine of God

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**Abstract:** Against the background of the current debates about God and evil, the article elaborates in three stages of argumentation the thesis that statements about God must not be understood as factual or representational statements, but as descriptive elements of the reflexive structure of the Christian religious communication. On this basis, a new perspective on God's relationship to evil in the world emerges, which, in contrast to the so-called theodicy debates, includes the self-view of the religious practitioners.

**Keywords:** theodicy; doctrine of God; religion; evil

## 1. Introduction

“Either God wants to eliminate the evils and cannot, or he can and does not want to, or he cannot and does not want to, or he can and wants to. Now, if he wants to and cannot, he is weak, which is not true of God. If he can and does not want to, he is begrudging, which is also foreign to God. If he does not want to and cannot, then he is both begrudging and weak, and then also not God. However, if he wants to and can, which alone befits God, whence come the evils and why does he not take them away?” (Epicurus 1991, p. 136).

The question of how God is to be understood in the face of evils in the world was already a preoccupation of ancient philosophy, as Epicurus' considerations quoted show. In modern times, the name theodicy has become established for this task (cf. Leibniz 1996). Theodicy is concerned with an argumentative justification of God's goodness in the face of the objections raised by reason on account of the evils in the world.<sup>1</sup> The problem is evoked by the monotheistic idea of God as the creator of the world, as well as the determinations that belong to him. If God is perfectly good and at the same time omnipotent, how can there be evils in the world created by him? Against the background of these three statements—(a) God is perfectly good, (b) God is omnipotent, (c) there is evil in the world—the theodicy debate assumes the task of argumentatively demonstrating that either they can be true together or not. In this way, there arise justifications of God in the face of the evils in the world or denials of the existence of God or one of his so-called attributes, namely either his goodness (cf. Jordan 2020, pp. 273–86), his omnipotence,<sup>2</sup> or the evil.<sup>3</sup>

The following considerations are not intended to produce another positive or negative proposal how the three statements can or cannot exist together. Rather, it must be shown that a discussion of the relationship between God and evil, oriented towards the three statements, does not reach neither a plausible positive nor a negative result. The theoretical unanswerability of the theodicy problem, according to the thesis of the remarks, must be understood as an indication that statements about God are not supposed to be understood as factual or representational statements, but as descriptions of the reflexive structure of religious communication. For this reason, the considerations focus on the religious idea of God and its function in religion. An exhaustive treatment of the understanding of evil must therefore be deferred (cf. Dalferth 2006, 2008; Phillips 2005).

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The structure of the following explanations results from the stated thesis that statements about God must be understood as descriptions of the reflexive structure of religious communication. We will begin with an overview of the current theodicy debates. It must be shown that these debates neither lead to a positive nor to a negative solution of the problem at issue. Against this background, the third section develops the proposal to understand God as a representation of the Christian religion. On this basis, the relationship between God and evil can then be described in the concluding fourth section within the framework of a theology of Christian religious communication.

## 2. Theodicy Discourses

The presupposition of a metaphysical-theistic idea of God, to whom the attributes of perfect goodness and omnipotence are ascribed, is fundamental to the current debates about the relationship between God and evil. On the condition that this God is at the same time the creator of the world in which, however, evil occurs, the question arises whether, and, if so, how, the statements about God's perfect goodness, his omnipotence, and the existence of evil in the world created by him can be true at the same time. By dealing with the possible proof that these three statements can exist together, the so-called theodicy problem takes on a logical form. However, the problem is intensified by two further additional assumptions, namely that (d) good is contraposed to evil and overcomes it and (e) omnipotence must be understood in the sense of boundlessness. Through these two additional assumptions, the three statements enter into a contradictory opposition (*kontradiktorischen Widerspruch*). In this form, John L. Mackie exposed the argument in his classical essay *Evil and Omnipotence*.<sup>4</sup> His evidential argument from evil is still in the background of the contemporary controversies about the logical compatibility of God's goodness and omnipotence with the existence of evil in the world (cf. Rowe 1979, pp. 335–41; Howard-Snyder 1996; Jordan 2020, pp. 275–77). In the following, Mackie's argument must first be briefly outlined. After this brief sketch, Richard Swinburne's argument that the (physical) evils of the world are compatible with the assumption of the probable existence of God will be presented as a counterpoint to Mackie's position. On the basis of Mackie's and Swinburne's alternative solutions to the problem of theodicy, the continuation of these positions in the contemporary debates can be examined and subjected to critical reflection.

Mackie's argument in his essay *Evil and Omnipotence* aims at proving that the three statements are in a contradictory opposition, i.e., they cannot be, in a necessary manner, true at the same time. This contradiction results, as noted above, from the assumption of the two additional premises.<sup>5</sup> If God is perfectly good and his omnipotence has no limits, then both statements cannot be true together if there is evil in the world. For God would be perfectly good and omnipotent only if there were no evils in the world he created. However, since there are evils, the statements that God is good and omnipotent cannot be true, given that if God were good and omnipotent, he would overcome evil. Even the acceptance of human freedom as one willed by God, which functions as the cause of evil, does not lead out of this dilemma. This hypothesis does not exonerate God from evil because it abolishes its omnipotence (cf. Mackie 1990, pp. 33–36). Thus, evil in the world falsifies the assumption of the existence of a good and omnipotent God. God is either good and not omnipotent, or omnipotent and not good.

Richard Swinburne has contradicted this conclusion. In his argumentation, he starts from similar premises as Mackie. However, Swinburne eliminates Mackie's two additional assumptions that drive the three statements into a contradictory opposition. As a result, Swinburne is able to hold to the probability of the existence of a good and omnipotent God despite the evils in the world. For Swinburne, similarly to Leibniz, physical evils, that is, *malum physicum*, are a necessary part of the world created by God and do not contradict the assumption of a good and morally acting God. There are, therefore, moral reasons that justify the admission of evil. Without (physical) evils, Swinburne argues, human beings would not be able to learn. Evils, then, have a necessary function for the experiential acquisition of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> They lead to a higher-order good, namely, the

knowledge to avoid evils and to act freely. If God's goal is to create free and responsible human beings, then he must necessarily allow the possibility of evils.<sup>7</sup> If this is true, then the three statements, God is perfectly good and omnipotent and there is evil in the world, do not contradict each other and can therefore be true at the same time (cf. Swinburne 1987, pp. 302–3).

With Mackie and Swinburne, the basic alternative of the theodicy debates is named. While for Mackie the three statements, God exists as a good as well as omnipotent being and there is evil in the world, cannot be true at the same time, for Swinburne they are. However, Swinburne's argument remains aporetic. Evils, in his conception, have a necessary function for the emergence of higher goods. However, if evils have the function of being means to the good, then they are themselves good. This means, however, that Swinburne's attempt to prove that the coexistence of the three propositions works only through a functional cancellation of evil: evil itself surreptitiously becomes good.<sup>8</sup> The problem just mentioned also confronts the continuations of Swinburne's argument in the contemporary controversies. By arguing that God has moral reasons for allowing evils in the world, one places evils in a superordinate context of meaning that necessarily tends to abolish evils.<sup>9</sup> Even an argumentation that posits God as strictly transcendent in the sense of a *potestas absoluta* and distinguishes his morality from that of the world does not develop beyond a functionalization of evils. By postulating God in this sense as absolute omnipotence in order to dissolve the evidential argument from evil, one dissolves the concept of God itself, since such a God can no longer be distinguished from the devil (cf. Jordan 2020, pp. 273–86).

Attempts to logically justify the coexistence of the three statements, God is good as well as omnipotent and there is evil in the world, lead, as we have seen, to a dissolution of the evil. With the goodness and omnipotence of God, the evils in the world created by him are only compatible if there is a moral reason for God to allow them. It is precisely this justification of the evils that functionalizes and thereby abolishes them.<sup>10</sup> However, justifications of God's goodness and omnipotence in the face of evil no longer differ from arguments that deny that all three statements can be true together. As we have seen, it was already Mackie's thesis that the propositions that God is good and omnipotent could not coexist with the proposition that there are evils in the world. Further development of his argument has confirmed this view. James P. Sterba has clarified in various publications that moral evils contradict the assumption of a morally good and omnipotent God (cf. Sterba 2018, pp. 173–91; 2019; 2020, pp. 203–8). His argument targets the moral reasons God might have for permitting evil and it works with the distinction between permitting and preventing. If God himself acts morally, Sterba argues, then he would have to prevent evils. However, since he does not, which is evident, then God is either not morally good or not omnipotent or both (cf. Sterba 2020, p. 208).

Both defenders of God's omnipotence and goodness in the face of the evils in the world and their opponents share the same presuppositions as well as the logical procedure. The starting point is a metaphysical theistic idea of God, from which statements are produced whose compatibility is demonstrated or disputed in a logical procedure. However, even if under different signs, all these attempts come to a similar result. They resolve surreptitiously at least one of the three statements—God is good, God is omnipotent, there is evil in the world created by him—to draw admittedly different conclusions. This result, however, indicates that the entire procedure, including its presuppositions, is problematic. Not only does it hide the self-view of the persons concerned<sup>11</sup> by treating the theodicy problem as a general logical problem, but it also claims the idea of God as a principle for explaining the world. Problems such as those just mentioned raise the question of whether the three statements that produce the theodicy problem can be understood as factual statements about God at all. However, that is not the case. Statements about God, this article proposes, must be understood as descriptions of the reflexive structure of religious communication. On this basis, as will be shown, a new perspective on the problem of God and evil emerges.

### 3. God in the Christian Religious Communication

As we have seen, the logical debates about the relation of God to evil start from a metaphysical theistic idea of God. Statements are produced about God as they are produced about an object, which must be true or false. However, the presupposition of a given or postulated God, to whom statements can be admitted or denied, is confronted with both epistemological and religious objections. Against the background of the modern critique of knowledge, every idea of God and every assertion of the reality of God is a human positing and thus can be annulled again. For a religious-philosophical or theological thematization of God, this means that it cannot begin with the assertion of God's existence. God is not an object that is somehow given, nor can he be derived from the world, as is consistently assumed in the theodicy debate. The world as such does not refer to God as its ground. Only in the Christian religion is God the creator of the world. However, in modernity, religion is a cultural form alongside other cultural forms. A theological doctrine of God, which takes into account the modern critique of knowledge as well as the differentiation of culture, must consequently begin with the concept of religion and address God as a component of religion. This procedure takes up and continues the development of modern Protestant theology since 1800, which distinguishes between theology and religion and, on the level of theological science, relates the Christian religion to an underlying concept of religion. Scientific theology no longer understands its contentual statements (*gegenständlichen Sinne*) in a representational sense, but as an expression and representation of religion.<sup>12</sup> On the basis of the distinction between theology and religion, scientific theology has the task to describe, in a methodically controllable way, how the contents of religion emerge together with them. God is consequently a component of the Christian religion, which is only given in it.

Religion, which here refers to the Christian one,<sup>13</sup> has become in the history of development of (Western) modernity a particular form of communication besides other forms in culture. Christian religion is autonomous when it is self-referential, that is, when religious communication refers exclusively to itself as religion. Consequently, the knowledge to communicate religion is also part of religion. The task of theology is to describe the inner functioning of the Christian religion from the self-view of those who practice it. Since theology is science and not itself religion, it can only construct the self-view of the Christian religion (cf. Danz 2021b, pp. 139–54). As a science (*Wissenschaft*), theology constructs in itself a complete image of the Christian religion by describing it as a self-referential and self-transparent communicative event that represents itself and its inner workings as religion in the idea of God. By referring to God, the Christian religion refers to itself and represents itself. In the considerations that follow, the systematic foundations of the concept of God in the Christian religion must be briefly outlined.

God and religion emerge simultaneously in and with the Christian religious communication. The classical justifications of the Christian religion in an already given religious object or in an already given religious subject are abandoned here. God and a religious subject are components of the Christian religion, but not presuppositions from which the Christian religion could be derived or justified. Rather, the Christian religion emerges from itself in the Christian religious communication. This is a tripartite interrelationship of content, appropriation, and articulation (cf. Danz 2019, pp. 118–30; Wittekind 2018, pp. 29–55). As a religion, Christianity is dependent on a determined contentual communication,<sup>14</sup> which must already exist as a distinct form of communication in culture. However, the Christian tradition handed down in culture is not yet itself religion, but merely a reference to religion. The handed-down communication becomes religion only when it is appropriated by people as Christian religion. The appropriation of the Christian religion forms a particular structural element, since it can be neither contained in the handed down contents nor derived from these contents. However, for the Christian religion to constitute itself as a religion, a third structural element must be added, namely the symbolic articulation of the appropriated Christian religious communication. Only when Christian religious communication is articulated and embodied does it become visible and exist in culture.

The Christian religion consists of the religious use of the appropriated Christian religious communication and it arises from all three structural elements together: It depends on certain contents that must be appropriated and articulated as religion. Apart from the religious use of content in the Christian religion, the Christian religion cannot exist at all. Therefore, it is not sufficient to limit oneself—as in the theodicy debates—only to the content level of religious statements. Contents such as God, God’s omnipotence and goodness, etc., do not yet provide sufficient information as to whether they are intended to be used religiously or culturally. Religious content can also be used non-religiously in communication at any time, for instance philosophically, historically, aesthetically, etc. Consequently, in order to identify religion, the religious use and the religious intendedness of the contents in communication must be included in the determination of the concept of religion.

The Christian religion, as it has been shown, is a transparent, self-referential, and structured communication event. It presents itself with its contents and its functioning as religion. Its contents do not refer to objects given outside the communication, but to the communication itself. Christian religious contents have a reflexive function. They express in the Christian religious communication that these contents are intended as religion. This is how the function of the idea of God in the Christian religion is derived. By referring to God, the Christian religion refers to itself and presents itself as a transparent self-relation. God, as a representational content, describes the Christian religion itself both as an absolute self-relation and its knowledge of being religion. Religion and God are bound together here. When the Christian religious communication succeeds, that is, when it becomes real in culture as an autonomous form of communication, God comes into reality with it at the same time.<sup>15</sup> Since the Christian religion, by referring to God, represents itself, the Christian idea of God is to be understood *ab ovo* in a Trinitarian way. With God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit the Christian religion represents that she is dependent on a determined contentual communication that must be appropriated in an understanding manner (*verstehend*) and articulated symbolically as religion.

God thus comes in the Christian religion from God through God as God.<sup>16</sup> God becomes real in the Christian religion as the Christian religion itself becomes real. Only in this way is the word “God”, which is bound to the memory of Jesus Christ and passed on in culture, appropriated in an understanding manner (*verstehend angeeignet*) as a religion by human beings and used to articulate their religion. In the Christian religion, God represents the fact that the Christian religion arises underivably from the communicated content and has its foundation, validity, and truth in itself. God is an image of the Christian religion as religion. He is not simply an object like other objects, but such an object by means of which the function of the objects of the Christian religious communication becomes illustrative for them to be intentionally used in a religious and not in a cultural manner. Thus, it is clear that statements about God cannot be factual statements about an object. Rather, all religious statements have a reflexive function. They describe the reflexive structure of the Christian religious communication.

With the derivation of the Christian religious idea of God and its function for the Christian religion, the systematic foundations have been outlined to such an extent that God’s relation to evil can now be discussed.

#### 4. God and Evil in a Theology of Christian Religious Communication

With its idea of God, the Christian religion presents itself as a transparent, self-referential, and structured communication event. In this sense, God is not a concept that refers to a given object about which statements must be produced, but an index for the Christian religion itself (cf. Dalferth 1992; Wittekind 2018, p. 89). From the religious idea of God outlined so far, a thematization of evils emerges that opens a new perspective compared to the theodicy debates presented in the second section. For if, as explained, religious statements about God cannot be understood as factual statements about an object, then the question of theodicy, that is, whether, and, if so, how, the three statements—(a)



God is good, (b) God is omnipotent, and (c) there is evil in the world—can be true together, is misguided from the outset. Statements about God do not have a representational function but a reflexive one. They describe the reflexive structure of the Christian religious communication.<sup>17</sup> In the considerations that follow, the attributes of God must be briefly discussed on the basis of the religious idea of God elaborated in the third section, so that the question of how evil occurs in the Christian religion can then be investigated.

The classical form of the doctrine of the attributes of God as well as the substance-metaphysical version of the idea of God on which it is based can no longer be continued under the critical epistemological conditions of modernity. With this, the distinction of essence and attributes of God, which is constitutive for the classical doctrine of God, is also dropped. This distinction is comprehensible only under the assumption of the Aristotelian metaphysics of substance. Consequently, the attributes of God are not something that is added to a given essence, so that the question arises how these attributes can consistently coexist in the essence of God. Rather, the essence and attributes of God have a function for the reflexive description of the Christian religion.<sup>18</sup> Only in this way does the religious function of the idea of God become clear, which distinguishes it from a philosophical concept of God or a principle of world explanation. The Trinitarian God is a reflexive descriptive element in the Christian religion, with which the Christian religion represents its own functioning as religion in the use of contents in communication.

How must the essence and attributes of God be understood in a theology of the Christian religious communication? The starting point is the classical dogmatic determination of God as *essentia spiritualis infinita*. This determination, however, does not establish a metaphysical object to which it refers, but has a reflexive function. It describes the Christian religion as an autonomous form in culture that arises in the religious use of content in communication and knows about the religious intention of this content. The reflexive self-transparency and self-referentiality, in which the Christian religion exists in the use of contents, is represented in its idea of God. God's absoluteness and transcendence are descriptive elements with which the Christian religious communication depicts both its origin, which cannot be derived from the communicated content, and its existence in the religious use of this content. Consequently, absoluteness is not a feature of content, but an expression of the self-relationship of the Christian religion.

Similar to the Trinitarian God, his attributes must not be understood in a representational sense. They explicate the reflexive structure of the Christian religious communication in the use of contents. This is the parallel between the doctrine of the attributes and the doctrine of the Trinity (cf. Barth 1948, p. 367). However, unlike the latter, the doctrine of attributes does not explicate the structural elements of content, appropriation, and articulation, from whose interrelation the Christian religion emerges, but rather their reflexivity in the use of content in communication. God is not simply a representational content in the Christian religion, but a content that gives expression to reflexivity in the use of content in religious communication (cf. Wittekind 2018, p. 92). The dogmatic doctrinal tradition distinguished two sets of attributes of God: attributes that belong to God absolutely (*attributa absoluta*) and attributes that belong to him in his relation to the world (*attributa relativa*). This distinction is taken up here in such a way that the absolute attributes of God are related to the doctrine of God in the narrower sense and the relative ones to God's relationship to the world in the horizon of the doctrine of creation and providence.

If the attributes of God represent forms of description of the successful reflexive use of contents in the Christian religious communication, then, on the level of the doctrine of God in the narrower sense, they explicate the independence, non-justifiability, and inner functioning of the Christian religion. The unity, immutability, and infinity of God describe the transparency and self-referentiality of the Christian religion that establishes itself in communication, which is not derivable from the world, that is, from the contents of communication, and functions transparently as an autonomous form of communication in culture. While the absolute attributes of God function as descriptive elements of the transparent use of contents in the Christian religious communication, the world-related attributes of

God are concerned with the functioning of the Christian religious communication on the concrete contents, i.e., with the inclusion of the world in the Christian religion. Both forms of the attributes cannot be separated, since in each case it is God himself who comes up in the absolute and the relative attributes. Their difference lies solely in the fact that in the doctrine of creation and providence the transparent and self-referential functioning of the Christian religion represented by the idea of God is transferred to the world in the religious use of contents. God comes into the world only in the Christian religious communication, in that one's own life in the world is included in the Christian religion. Additionally, it is only here, in the inclusion of the world in the Christian religion, the problem of evil becomes virulent. It presupposes the creation of the world and is treated, in the structure of theological dogmatics, in the doctrine of providence, which forms a part of the doctrine of creation.

The creation statements of the Christian religion are also understood within the framework of a theology of Christian religious communication not in representational terms but as reflexive forms of description of the Christian religious communication (cf. Danz 2021a, pp. 1–7; Wittekind 2018, pp. 115–32). The doctrine of creation is concerned with the fact that everything in the world can become an object of religious communication and, in this way, be included in the Christian religion.<sup>19</sup> Faith in creation, therefore, does not thematize the world as such or provide an explanation of its origin. It describes the world as it appears in the Christian religion. However, the inclusion of the world in the Christian religious communication does not depend on characteristics or particularity of the world that qualify it for this. Everything in the world can be included in the Christian religion and adopted as its object. In contrast to the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of providence relates God to the life of the individual in the world. Therefore, the doctrine of providence is no longer concerned with the fact that everything in the world can become the object of the Christian religion, but rather with the application of the Christian religion to the concrete events in life. Now, what does this mean for the relationship between God and evil?

God comes to reality in the Christian religious communication. This must be constantly re-established by including the concrete events that happen to the life of a person in the Christian religion. The Christian religion depends on people's religious use of the contents in communication. If the Christian religious communication succeeds in the concrete events of life, then the Christian religion arises, which is represented in the idea of God. God is then transferred to the world and the concrete events in it. By succeeding at the concrete events of life, the Christian religious communication cannot be questioned by them. Since the Christian religion cannot be derived from contents, the nature or quality of these contents are irrelevant. By incorporating concrete events from the world into the Christian religion, they no longer have cultural or ethical significance, but become an expression of the Christian religion. This also applies to the evils that befall a person in their life. If they are included in the Christian religion, they become subject to God's power and become the object of praise and lamentation to God. God's omnipotence, similar to God's goodness, is not a representational attribute that belongs to an object. It describes the transparent functioning of the Christian religious communication based on concrete contents of communication. This has its justification, truth, and validity in itself, not in determined experiences. Thus, neither the omnipotence of God nor his goodness can be refuted by events in the world, be they positive or negative.

However, since God only comes into the world if the Christian religious communication is successful, and this communication must be constantly re-established based on concrete events in the world, there is always also the possibility that the communication does not succeed. Then, concrete experiences of evils are not related to God, because the Christian religious communication fails at them. This does not falsify God either, since there is always the possibility of interpreting experiences of evil and good in a non-religious way. The Christian religion is, as explained, not an explanation of the world, but its own form of communication besides other cultural modes of communication. Its objects come to

existence only in the Christian religion and are not given outside of it. Since religion is not an anthropological necessity, not all events in the world have to be interpreted religiously.

God's world-related attributes such as omnipotence and goodness describe, as has been shown, the transparent functioning of the Christian religion in the concrete contents of life. Omnipotence and goodness have a reflexive not a representational function. Since the reality of God in the Christian religion depends on the success of the Christian religious communication in the concrete events of life, and this success can neither be derived nor justified, the possibility of failure of this communication always remains. What does this mean for the problem of theodicy? In the first place, it is not a theoretical-logical problem that can be solved intellectually. In the second place, against the background of the outlined considerations on the function of the idea of God in the Christian religion, the theodicy problem and the different answers given to it can be understood as an abstract echo of the success or failure of the inclusion of concrete experiences in the Christian religion. However, the theodicy debate raises the success or failure of the Christian religious communication to a general logical level by abstracting it from the self-view of the Christian religion and reformulating it as a question about the possible truth of the three propositions: (a) God is good, (b) God is omnipotent, and (c) there is evil in the world. On this level, however, the relationship between God and evil cannot be resolved.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. Kant (1983, p. 105): "By a theodicy is meant the defense of the supreme wisdom of the world's author against the charge that reason brings against it from what is contrary to purpose in the world."
- <sup>2</sup> Thus Hans Jonas suggested to renounce the predicate of God's omnipotence and to hold on to that of goodness. Only in this way, against the background of the Shoah, the idea of God could be held on to. Cf. Jonas (1987).
- <sup>3</sup> Provisions that, following Augustine, understand evil as *privatio boni*, amount to an abolition of evil.
- <sup>4</sup> Cf. Mackie (1990, p. 26): "However, the contradiction does not arise immediately; to show it we need some additional premises, or perhaps some quasi-logical rules concerning the terms 'good', 'evil', and 'omnipotent'. These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do."
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Mackie (1990, p. 26): "From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that good omnipotent things exist, and that evil exist, are incompatible."
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Swinburne (1987, p. 290): "If God wants to give man the opportunity both to acquire knowledge and to determine his own destiny, he can only do so by giving him the opportunity to acquire knowledge in the normal inductive way." On Swinburne's understanding of induction, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 277–88.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Swinburne (1987, p. 294): "Assuming, then, that the world owes itself to no morally reprehensible act of creation, there must be evils of various kinds in it if such behaviors as courage, compassion, etc. are to be possible. Such evils give human being the chance to realize the highest virtues." For Swinburne, Hiroshima and Bergen-Belsen (cf. *ibid.*, p. 301) are also evils that promote a higher good. For a critique of such functionalizations of evil, cf. also Phillips (2005, pp. 49–94).
- <sup>8</sup> Swinburne's solution to the theodicy problem thus does not go beyond what Mackie calls fallacious solutions. Cf. Mackie (1990, pp. 27–32).
- <sup>9</sup> In this connection, cf. the proposal advanced by Friedrich Hermanni, who based on Leibniz, understands the evils as *logically* necessary components of the world created by God. Unlike Swinburne, Hermanni includes Mackie's two additional assumptions in his argumentation and distinguishes between a logical and an empirical theodicy problem. For him, the logical theodicy problem can be resolved solely by assuming "that the evils are not prevented by an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God because they are logically necessary elements of the unsurpassable good world he created" Hermanni (2009, pp. 16–21). Cf. also Hermanni (2002).
- <sup>10</sup> Laura Garcia's proposal does not get beyond this dilemma either cf. Garcia (2017, pp. 57–89). God, she argues, does not cooperate in evil actions because, due to his perfect goodness, he does not share the evil intention of the action. God, since he has an effect

on everything, including evil actions, only creates their conditions and allows them to happen. This model works only if one accepts the Thomistic doctrine of the two causes. However, apart from the fact that the distinction between a first and a second cause in actions cannot be maintained, it is impossible to see how a finite causality of action can exist alongside an infinite one.

- 11 In the more recent debate, therefore, the proposal has been made to combine the logical theodicy problem with an empirical one, i.e., to include the self-view of the sufferers in the debate. Cf. Hermanni (2009, pp. 16–21), Klinge (2019, pp. 165–83). However, since at the same time a metaphysical-theistic concept of God is held on to, even these extensions do not arrive at an appropriate way of dealing with the theodicy problem.
- 12 Friedrich Schleiermacher's dogmatics, *Der christliche Glaube* (1821/22; 2nd ed., 1830/31), is fundamental for this religious-theoretical reshaping of scientific theology.
- 13 Thus, a general concept of religion is dispensed with. By limiting the theological concept of religion to Christianity, the possibility is opened to recognize in theology that other religions already understand what religion is differently than Christianity. It is thus a matter of a pluralization of the understandings of religion. Cf. Danz (2020, pp. 101–13).
- 14 The Bible represents, in the Christian religion, the dependence on a determined contentual communication as memory of Jesus Christ.
- 15 This circle is explicated by the theological concept of revelation. Cf. Wittekind (2018, pp. 89–90), Danz (2022, pp. 601–26).
- 16 On this formula, cf. Jüngel (1992, pp. 521–34). In contrast to Jüngel, who constructs the Trinitarian God as the presupposition and foundation of the Christian religion of faith, here the doctrine of the Trinity is used as an explication of the self-referential structure of the Christian religion.
- 17 This was already the proposal of Friedrich Schleiermacher and his reformulation of the classical doctrine of properties against the background of modern epistemological criticism. Cf. Schleiermacher (1999, p. 254), § 50 leading sentence: "All the properties which we attribute to God should not designate anything special in God, but only something special in the way of relating the feeling of absolute dependence [*schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*] to him." Schleiermacher's redetermination of the attributes of God as structural descriptions of the religious act has been followed by the further development of the doctrine of God in the Protestant dogmatics. In contrast to Schleiermacher and 19th century theology, however, 20th-century Protestant theology no longer based the idea of God on a general concept of religion already anchored in the structure of consciousness, but elaborated the idea of God as a theological description of the religious act that, without anthropological presuppositions, originates undervivably in human beings. Thus, the doctrine of the attributes of God unfolds the reflexive structure of the self-referential revelation of God in the act of faith. Cf. Barth (1948, pp. 362–764).
- 18 In this sense, the doctrine of properties is consistently constructed in the doctrine of God in recent Protestant dogmatics. Cf. Barth (1948, p. 383), Weber (1964, pp. 463–64), Härle (2000, pp. 255–56).
- 19 Thus, the soteriological interpretation of the faith in creation as an extension of the faith in salvation is taken up and continued.

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Essay

# Evil Prevention Requirements and the God of Theism

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**Abstract:** The central argument of James Sterba’s “Is a Good God Logically Possible?” relies crucially on the notion that a good God would have to abide by various evil prevention requirements. Because it appears that God has not done so, Sterba concludes that God does not exist. I challenge the notion that theists must accept the notion that God is bound by the particular set of evil prevention requirements Sterba’s argument presupposes. However, I argue that investigating ways God may in fact be required to prevent evils may serve as a helpful heuristic for theists as they seek further to understand God’s nature and purposes.

**Keywords:** God; evil; theodicy; defense; skeptical theism; morality

James Sterba’s *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* aims to demonstrate that the answer to its titular question is “no”, in the vein of J.L. Mackie’s 1955 “Evil and Omnipotence”, but utilizing what Sterba calls “yet untapped resources of ethics” (Sterba 2019, p. 5). Central to Sterba’s tapping of ethical resources is refining what Mackie had called the “quasi-logical” rule that “good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can” (Mackie 1955, p. 200). In Sterba’s hands this rule branches into a set of “evil prevention requirements” that moral agents are obliged to obey, including three for moral evils, and no fewer than nine for natural evils. I will use the abbreviation EPRs throughout this article to refer to Sterba’s particular set of evil prevention requirements. The basic shape of Sterba’s main argument is that if God exists, he must operate according to the EPRs, but that if God did so, then we’d observe a great deal less evil in the actual world than we currently do. Hence, God does not exist.

Now theists might respond to Sterba’s argument by agreeing that God must obey the EPRs, but denying that the evils we observe in the world give us reason to doubt that he does so. My chief aim here, however, is to challenge Sterba’s argument in a different way, namely by questioning the claim that if God exists, he must operate according to the EPRs. I will argue that there are no good reasons why theists need to accept this claim. On the other hand, despite challenging Sterba’s central argument of the book in this way, I agree with him that there is a perfectly good sense in which theists can and should think of God as subject to certain evil prevention requirements. I will argue, furthermore, that it may well be profitable for them to explore the sense in which this is so. I will begin by examining in Section 1 of this paper the ways Sterba thinks God must prevent evil, if he exists, along with establishing a few things that I take it theists are committed to believing about God. In Section 2 I will argue that theists need not accept Sterba’s EPRs as constraints on God’s behavior. In Section 3 I will argue that while theists in my own Christian tradition will likely wish to reject Sterba’s EPRs as constraints on God’s behavior, they can still profitably discuss ways God is required to prevent evil as a heuristic for better understanding his nature and purposes.

## 1. Sterba’s EPRs and the God of Theism

Tacitly recognized in Mackie’s article is the recognition that good things eliminate evil as far as they can *unless* they have some good reason not to do so. Sterba’s EPRs can be thought of as ways of refining that recognition, utilizing the “resources of ethics” mentioned above, which include discussions of just political states and of the “Pauline

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Principle”: never do evil that good may come of it (see Rom. 3:8). Rather than list all twelve EPRs along with Sterba’s reasons for thinking morality requires them, it will suffice to describe generally how Sterba thinks a good God would have orchestrated things here on earth.

Sterba relies on various analogies to explore the ways God should have acted including a loving parent, a superhero, and a just political state. The latter is most pervasive. Just political states aim at the flourishing of their citizens. That means allowing their citizens freedom, but also curtailing freedoms at certain times when exercising them would impede the flourishing of others. Sterba thinks it clear that God should curtail the immoral activities of wrongdoers when they would have “significant and especially horrendous evil” effects on victims. He brings up the evil general from Ivan Karamazov’s story in the “Rebellion” chapter of Dostoevsky’s novel. A just political state would intervene if it could to make sure the general did not horrifically murder the serf boy as Ivan describes. A good God too would have intervened to make sure the consequences of the general’s horrific intent are not felt. Unlike the Grand Inquisitor Ivan introduces in the book’s next chapter, Sterba does not think it would be best to eliminate human freedom altogether. Sterba may (although I am not sure about this) agree that God and just political states can allow wrongdoers to ruin their own lives, just not those of others. Furthermore, he thinks God could allow wrongdoers to go ahead and “imagine, intend and even take initial steps toward” immoral deeds (Sterba 2019, p. 21). He might also have a good reason for allowing victims of wrongdoing to experience *some* harmful effects, so long as these are insignificant and non-horrendous, in cases when other citizens might have intervened but did not (Ibid., pp. 60–64). The idea is this. When you or I are in a position to intervene and prevent an instance of wrongdoing, and do so, God ensures that our efforts are fully successful. When we do not, he ensures that there are some noticeable and harmful, yet insignificant and non-horrendous, effects on the victim. He does this to make sure we still have ample motivation and opportunities for soul-making. Something similar is true in the case of natural evils. Just political states intervene to prevent in some degree the harmful effects of certain natural evils on humans and nonhuman animals alike, but their ability to do so is quite limited. A good God would also intervene to prevent needless suffering in sentient beings. Sterba does not think even God could prevent all significant consequences of natural evils (Ibid., p. 164). However, he thinks God could certainly limit them in similar fashion as just described: when we can intervene to limit the suffering of something like William Rowe’s fawn trapped in the path of a forest fire (say), and do so, God ensures that our intervention is successful, whereas when we do not God allows some noticeably harmful yet mitigated effects.<sup>1</sup> He does this, again, so that our motivation to intervene is not undermined, and we retain ample opportunities for soul-making. Overall, Sterba thinks that by means of such limited interventions God could have given theodicy everything they typically say they want—morally significant freedom, opportunities for soul-making, etc.—without such horrors as the death of Ivan’s serf boy or Rowe’s fawn roasting in the forest fire. Again, the basic shape of his main argument in the book is that a just political state would act in these ways if it could, hence a just God would do so as well, and being omnipotent, could do so. Since God clearly has not done so, he does not exist.

Theists of any persuasion clearly will not agree. One way they might respond to Sterba’s main argument is by questioning the possibility of God intervening in the ways Sterba describes while preserving our morally significant freedom and opportunities for soul-making. Perhaps, even if God has to obey Sterba’s EPRs, certain avenues of theodicy or defense remain open. Alternatively, skeptical theists might maintain that God does indeed obey the EPRs, but that we’re unable to access the reasons he has for permitting all the evils we observe around us. Sterba devotes much of his book to combatting these responses—closing off avenues of theodicy/defense and explaining why skeptical theism cannot rescue theists either. For my part, as I mentioned previously, I am interested in pursuing a different type of response, namely rejecting the claim that God must act like a

just political state in the ways Sterba believes—i.e., by obeying the EPRs—to begin with. I will argue this in the next section.

First, however, to scotch some possible misunderstandings, let me say briefly a few things I think theists are committed to believing about God. They must believe that God is the omnipotent and omniscient creator, and hence that he's perfectly good—the best—in a metaphysical sense of goodness: he's the most powerful being, the most perfectly actualized, etc. They must also believe, however, that God is perfectly good in the sense of perfectly possessing what we would think of in humans as good moral characteristics or virtues: he's perfectly wise, just, loving, merciful, and so forth. Having said all this, I also take it theists are committed to God's transcendence in some way or other, and hence that in some way or other God's goodness, wisdom, justice, love and mercy differ from our own. Just how exactly this is so, and to what extent, are of course disputed matters.

I make the (hopefully) uncontroversial points above partly to sort through an unhelpful round of dialectic involving God's moral agency. Sterba devotes a chapter to discussing Brian Davies's Thomistically-inspired view that God is *not* in fact, a moral agent.<sup>2</sup> I will say more about this view shortly, but for now it will be helpful simply to acknowledge that in my estimation theists—Davies included—are committed to God's moral agency at least in the sense that he is an agent—i.e., acts for reasons—and is perfectly wise, just, loving, merciful, etc.<sup>3</sup> With *that* sense of God's moral agency, furthermore, I cannot imagine Davies disagreeing.

## 2. Against the Claim That God Must Obey Sterba's EPRs

If God is a moral agent in the sense of being perfectly just, however, then here is how it looks to me like Sterba intends to convince theists that God must obey his EPRs:

- (1) God is just.
- (2) All just agents must obey the EPRs.
- (3) God must obey the EPRs.

I am not sure Sterba ever states an argument like this explicitly, perhaps because it is too obvious to be worth making explicit. However, reasoning of this sort seems to underlie much of what he does say. The trouble with this argument stems from theism's commitment to God's transcendence. The reasoning in favor of (2) draws on considerations of human cases involving superheroes, just political states, the Pauline Principle and so forth, as mentioned above. However, if theists claim that God's justice differs somehow or other from our own, then they can allege that the argument from (1) and (2) to (3) involves a fallacy of equivocation. Yes, God is just in *his* way, and yes, all just *human* agents must obey the EPRs, but since God's justice differs from ours, it does not follow that *he* must obey them. I take it this response to the above argument is just as obvious as the argument itself, and I can think of two obvious routes by which Sterba might attempt to convince theists that God must obey the EPRs notwithstanding his transcendence. I do not think either of these routes succeeds, however, and I will explain why in this section, concluding my discussion of the second with a direct argument aimed at showing that no other route is likely to succeed either.

Here is the first route by which I think Sterba might try to convince theists that God, despite his transcendence, must obey the EPRs. God is rational. However, the rules of morality, including the EPRs, are binding on all rational agents as such. Hence, God must obey the EPRs. Sterba appears to have an argument like this in mind at one point in his chapter on Davies's God-isn't-a-moral-agent view, where he remarks as follows:

[T]he law of nature that God . . . implanted in our hearts is understood to apply to all rational beings including God himself. So it would . . . be contradictory for God to implant a law of nature in our hearts that applies to himself and then act contrary to that very law he promulgated. (Sterba 2019, p. 116)

To set this in context, Davies's view (following Aquinas) is that moral rules are simply ways of spelling out what right practical reasoning for rational animals such as ourselves



involves, and some of them—the “natural law”—are “written on our hearts” (see Rom. 2:15) in such a way that we all implicitly know and acknowledge them whenever we do any practical reasoning at all.<sup>4</sup> Sterba’s point is that if moral rules such as the natural law apply to practical reasoners as such, then they must apply equally to God, who is a rational agent too, after all. Elsewhere Sterba argues extensively for the view that rationality requires morality (Sterba 2013, especially chp. 3). He does not reiterate his argument here, but does seem to presuppose it.

Whether or not I am right that this is what Sterba has in mind, here is why I think the route I’ve just described will not succeed in persuading many theists that God has to obey the EPRs. For Thomas, and for Davies, it is important that the natural law spells out the rules for right practical reasoning among rational *animals*, such as ourselves—it tells us how we must behave in order to flourish as the kinds of things we are. God is not an animal, and is perfect no matter what he does. He is indeed rational in the sense of acting for reasons, but not in the sense of working discursively through a process of practical reasoning before settling on which option is best, or most conducive to his flourishing.<sup>5</sup> This is why Davies wants to deny that God is a moral agent—because God is not bound by the rules directing our behavior toward flourishing as we are. It is the way Davies and Aquinas would claim God’s goodness transcends our own. For us, justice involves following certain rules of behavior, whereas for God it does not. What it *does* involve I will return to below. However, it seems fairly clear that the sort of argument that Sterba has given elsewhere for morality as a sort of rational compromise between egoism and altruism does involve settling on it after a discursive process, and hence will not apply to God.

Now some theists might indeed be persuaded that God’s rationality entails that he must obey the EPRs. Perhaps a sort of Platonist theist might think of moral rules as abstracta somehow binding both God and all other rational agents as such. Or perhaps a Kantian theist might think of moral rules as rules governing the will as a faculty of practical reasoning in the same way the law of non-contradiction governs theoretical reasoning. In that case, if the Kantian could be persuaded that the EPRs were among the moral rules, she might have to agree that God “has to” obey them, at least in the sense that they represent infallible descriptions of how he acts. If Sterba could show theists that they must embrace Platonism or Kantianism in one of these ways, then perhaps he could show that God must obey the EPRs. That would be an ambitious meta-ethical hurdle to clear, however, and might conflict with Sterba’s stated aim in the book of remaining neutral between a wide spectrum of different ethical outlooks.<sup>6</sup> At any rate, for the route I’ve been discussing so far to succeed, Sterba would have to show that a natural law-style understanding of God and morality is either false or incoherent, and insofar as I doubt that could be done, I doubt this route is very promising.<sup>7</sup>

A second route by which Sterba might try to persuade theists that God must obey the EPRs is by targeting their claim about God’s transcendence. Theists think God’s justice differs from ours in some way or other. But just how different is it? Sterba agrees, presumably, that it is *somewhat* different. It is much larger in scale, for example, since God rules not just over a state but the whole world. And of course when it comes to preventing evil, an omnipotent and omniscient God would not face many of the limitations that we do. In these ways Sterba can agree that God’s justice transcends ours. However, suppose a theist wants to say that the transcendence extends further—to the point where God does not have to obey the EPRs. In that case, Sterba might ask, do theists really know what they’re talking about when they ascribe justice to God? Additionally, do they have any reasons for their ascription? Antony Flew argues in a widely-anthologized short article that theistic assertions like “God is just” die a death of a thousand qualifications, to the point that they no longer count as assertions at all (Flew 1971). Sterba might argue, similarly, that unless theists acknowledge that God is just in an EPR-obeying way, their belief in his justice is meaningless, groundless, or both.<sup>8</sup> Hence, unless theists are willing to accept that their beliefs are meaningless and/or groundless, they must agree that God obeys the EPRs.

One way theists might respond to this argument is by biting the bullet, and agreeing that in a sense they *don't* know what they're talking about when they discuss divine characteristics like justice. Herbert McCabe, whose thought often aligns closely with Davies's, suggests Aquinas might have been pleased with this sort of response:

Thomas Aquinas thought that theologians don't know what they are talking about. They try to talk about God, but Aquinas was most insistent that they do not, and cannot know what God is. He was, I suppose, the most agnostic theologian in the Western Christian tradition . . . in the sense of being quite clear and certain that God is a *mystery* beyond any understanding we can have now. (McCabe 2007, p. 96)

I am not sure this is right about Aquinas myself, although McCabe certainly is not alone in describing him this way (Cf. Hector 2007; Preller 2005). Nevertheless, I think there are many theists who would respond to the Flew-style argument I just sketched by denying that their acknowledged ignorance about God's nature renders their belief meaningless or groundless in any problematic way. They might say that their beliefs are grounded in their conviction that God is telling them about himself in the metaphors, narratives, prophecies, etc. recorded in a book of scripture. They might claim that scripture allows them to understand God's justice to some limited extent, even if they lack any univocal concept of justice under whose extension both God and creatures fall. They might claim that their limited, scripturally-based understanding of God's nature is at any rate enough to render their belief meaningful in practical terms for them, in the sense of imbuing their lives with purpose, direction, etc. I can imagine theists from fideistic, apophatic or mystical traditions being attracted to some combination of these claims.

I can also imagine Sterba joining theists of a different persuasion who insist that we must possess univocal concepts that apply to God and creatures alike. Thomas Williams, for example, offers a Duns Scotus-inspired argument aimed at showing that the relationship between our concepts of God's wisdom and human wisdom (say) not only cannot be one of equivocality, but also cannot be one of analogy either—i.e., different-but-related (Williams 2005). I find Williams's reasoning persuasive myself. I think it's worth noting that even Aquinas, known for claiming that "it is impossible that anything be predicated univocally about God and creatures", nevertheless seems to agree that there are certain senses of terms like "justice", "love", "mercy" and so forth that apply both to God and to creatures.<sup>9</sup> Regarding justice, for example, Aquinas denies that the notion of commutative justice—justice in transactions or exchanges—applies in any way to God. However, he thinks the notion of distributive justice—which involves a "governor or ruler giving to each thing according to its dignity"—does (Ibid., 1a.21.1). That is, he thinks that both God and a just human ruler are just in the sense of giving to each thing under their rule according to its dignity. Pending correction by other Thomists better informed about Aquinas's views on the semantics of religious language, we might take this to mean the he thinks there is indeed a univocal concept of justice that applies both to God and creatures.<sup>10</sup> Anyhow, whatever Aquinas's view may have been, Williams's conclusion is that unless we possess univocal concepts of characteristics like justice, wisdom, etc. under whose extension both God and creatures fall, we cannot meaningfully ascribe these characteristics to God.

Suppose Williams is right; the important question then for present purposes is whether this might give Sterba a way of convincing theists that God must obey the EPRs. I think the answer is certainly not. Theists can, it seems to me, meaningfully and with good grounds assert that God is good, wise, just, loving, merciful and so forth in univocal senses of these terms even if they deny any ability on their part to understand God's purpose in creation. However, if we do not understand God's purpose in creation, then for all we know it includes some good reason for not obeying the EPRs. Hence, even if theists agree that to speak meaningfully about God requires that we possess univocal concepts of characteristics like justice (that apply to both God and creatures), this will not suffice to convince them that God must obey the EPRs.

Let me unpack this bit of reasoning. Even if Davies is right that God is not bound by moral rules in the way we are—and hence not by Sterba’s EPRs either—I think we can still rule out at least some descriptions of ways God might have operated in creation as inconsistent with his nature. While some theists disagree, my view is that God’s nature did not require him to create anything at all. Hence, although it might be said that God is just by nature in the sense that *if* he creates anything he necessarily rules creation justly, God’s just rulership need not ever have been exercised. Having decided to create, however, God’s nature requires him to rule creation justly, and also wisely, lovingly, mercifully, and so forth. Given that, consider a world with lots of evil, *none* of which serves any purpose at all. I think theists should deny that God could create such a world. God’s wise rulership requires that he have a plan or purpose for what unfolds in creation. Nor could this purpose be just anything whatsoever. I think theists should agree, for example, that God’s purpose in allowing evil could not be his own amusement. It would be cruel and contrary to God’s perfect love and justice to allow sin and suffering, say, just to amuse himself.

Importantly, however, beyond a few negative restrictions like “not allowing sin and suffering just for amusement”, I do not think theists need to claim to know what God’s purpose in creation is. Suppose God creates a world with lots of evil, none of which serves any purpose that we can discern. (I am not sure such a world is conceivable, but suppose). Such a world, however much evil it includes, would also have to be good in a variety of respects, insofar as it includes creatures exercising their powers in various respects and thereby flourishing to some extent, however limited it may be. Theists might reasonably call the creator of such a world good insofar as he has created something good.<sup>11</sup> They might call him loving insofar as he wills goods for his creatures.<sup>12</sup> They might consider him merciful insofar as he mitigates the extent to which his creatures suffer evils.<sup>13</sup> They might think him wise insofar as order in creation reflects rulership according to *some* plan or purpose, even if they do not claim to know what this involves. They might also call him just in the sense of distributive justice articulated above, namely insofar as he gives to the universe itself and to the creatures in it whatever they need to exist for some period of time and to flourish to some extent as members of their kind, however limited the extent may be. In these ways theists might meaningfully and with good grounds ascribe goodness, wisdom, justice, love and mercy to God even if the world contains lots of evil for which they can discern no purpose. Granted, the univocal concepts of these characteristics that I’ve just sketched are quite thin. They are certainly too thin to infer from any of them that God must obey the EPRs. However, they are thick enough, it seems to me, to give theists some idea what it means to ascribe them to God, along with some grounds for doing so.

I conclude from this reasoning that the second route I suggested by which Sterba might convince theists that God has to obey the EPRs will not, in fact, succeed. Furthermore, theists might advance a direct case against the possibility of his doing so by some other means:

- (4) Any convincing argument why God must obey the EPRs will involve some robust assumptions about God’s purpose in creation.
- (5) However, theists will always be in a position to deny the particular set of assumptions about God’s purpose in creation that such an argument involves.
- (6) So no argument is going to convince theists that God must obey the EPRs.

Again, I think theists must make a limited range of assumptions about God’s purpose in creation, such as the fact that he does not allow sin and suffering for the sake of his own amusement. However, theists need not accept that God’s purpose in creation is the same as that of a just political state. Nor need they accept that God has to obey the EPRs.

I take it the argument I’ve just proposed might count as a sort of skeptical theist strategy insofar as it hinges on the theist’s ability to profess a degree of ignorance about God’s purpose in creation, so as to reject any particular robust set of assumptions about what this purpose might be. It differs, however, from the versions of skeptical theism Sterba discusses in the fifth chapter of his book insofar as these accept that God is bound

by moral rules like the EPRs much as we are, but profess global skepticism about the range of possible goods that might justify God in permitting the evils we observe. On my proposal, in contrast, insofar as it is true to say that God is bound by moral rules at all—such as “do not murder”, “do not allow suffering for the sake of amusement”, etc.—the binding will stem from God’s nature together with his purposes, not some overarching set of rules binding both him and us alike. As a result, while Sterba may possibly be justified in arguing that the sort of skeptical theism he is considering “leads to moral skepticism and thus undermines morality”, I do not think the same could be said about argument from (4) to (6) (Sterba 2019, p. 76). At most it will involve a degree of skepticism about our knowledge about God, but not about human morality. Additionally, some skepticism about our knowledge of a transcendent God is something theists seem committed to anyway.

### 3. Should Theists Discuss Evil Prevention Requirements in Relation to God?

So far, my argument has been that since theists can claim that evil prevention requirements for God, insofar as there are any, stem solely from his nature and purposes, and that these remain at least partly hidden to us, they need not accept that God is bound by any set of requirements so specific as Sterba’s EPRs. A further question is whether it is open to theists to endorse Sterba’s EPRs as binding on God. Sterba himself, of course, would deny this, given that in his estimation the world as run by an EPR-obeying God would look very different from the actual world. However, as I mentioned above, theists who think God obeys the EPRs might pursue avenues of theodicy or defense within their constraints, or else might take issue with Sterba’s reasoning against the versions of skeptical theism that think of God’s morality as parallel to our own. Another further question is whether, even if it is theoretically open to theists to endorse Sterba’s EPRs, any of them ought to. Speaking solely for those within my own Christian tradition, I am doubtful that any of us should, for reasons I will explain below. If that is correct for at least some theists, however, then a third further question is whether it is in any way profitable for us to inquire about the ways God is or is not required to prevent evils. I think it can be, if approached correctly, and I will explain in this concluding section what I mean.

In an article offering “Advice to Christian Philosophers” Marilyn McCord Adams distinguishes between “aporetic” and “atheological” versions of the problem of evil, and counsels Christians to focus on the former instead of the latter (Adams 1988). When it comes to discussing evil prevention requirements for God, I agree with her. I argued at the end of the previous section that since theists can disavow knowledge in any but the most general terms about God’s purposes in creation, they will likely be in a position to reject any set of requirements so specific as Sterba’s EPRs as binding on God. However, if Sterba is correct that a successful atheological version of the problem of evil is best advanced by way of his EPRs or something like them, then it seems correspondingly unlikely that any such atheological argument will succeed. That in itself might give Christian philosophers a good reason for taking Adams’s advice and shifting our focus to aporetic versions of the problem of evil, by which she means efforts to resolve *prima facie* conflicts between commitments of the faith and the presence of various kinds of evils in the world. However, Adams herself suggests some other reasons for being leery of the kinds of theodicies and defenses that preoccupy many analytic philosophers of religion. These include reasons sometimes forwarded by proponents of the philosophical stance known as anti-theodicy, for example, that such responses to atheological arguments inevitably end up discounting the magnitude of the world’s ills in order to render them intelligible within a well-governed created order.<sup>14</sup> Or that they distort God’s nature in their efforts to engage atheologians levelly on a neutral value-theoretic playing field. Christians are better off, Adams says, focusing on God’s “agent-centered goodness”, or as she puts it elsewhere, on “*how* God can be good enough to created persons despite their participation in horrors—by defeating them within the context of the individual’s life and by giving that individual a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole” (Ibid., p. 135 and Adams 1989, p. 306). I am not myself interested in casting aspersions on the endeavor of theodicy/defense in general

terms. However, I think Adams is right that theists engaged in such practices as discussing evil prevention requirements for God ought to be wary of minimizing the reality of evil or compromising their commitments with respect to God's nature, value theory, or whatever else. They ought to heed what Adams says about "genuine continuities between theoretical and practical problems of evil", i.e., to keep firmly in mind the interplay between their theorizing and their faith and religious practice (Adams 1988, p. 140).

How might speculation about evil prevention requirements prove helpful within the ambit of the sort of inquiry Adams recommends? Consider the contrasting approaches of Adams and two other philosophers—Aquinas and Eleonore Stump—to one particular *aporia* all three face as Christians: the problem of hell. Many Christians think our scriptures commit us to believing that certain persons will not only sin grievously during their lives, but also as a result of these sins will end up eternally sundered from fellowship with God in hell. This seemingly evil state of affairs seems *prima facie* at odds not only with other scriptural passages—for instance, that God "desires all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4)—but also with other practices in our tradition, such as reciting weekly that God's "character is always to have mercy".<sup>15</sup> How to reconcile God's constant mercy and universal salvific will with the evil of eternal damnation in hell is puzzling indeed. What options are available to resolve the puzzle will depend in part on our understanding of God's nature and purposes, as well as on other factors such as how we think God's causality is related to human freedom. However, I think investigating what ways God may or may not be required to prevent evils can provide a helpful way of exploring and organizing our understanding of the ways these various factors interrelate.

To see this, a useful starting point is Adams's remark about focusing on God's "agent-centered goodness", indicating that she accepts some agent-centered restrictions on God's activity in creation. Eleonore Stump, who recognizes similar restrictions on God's activity, puts them as follows "if a good God allows evil, it can only be because the evil in question produces a benefit for the sufferer and one that God could not provide without the suffering" (Stump 2003, pp. 461–62). Adams's focus is a bit different, though similar: a good God must "defeat" any evils his creatures experience, as opposed to merely "balancing them off".<sup>16</sup> Both contrast these agent-centered restrictions on God's goodness with "global goods" such as promoting free-will, soul-making, or whatever else considered in general.

Both Adams and Stump then, I take it, would be equally opposed to the way in which Aquinas, as I read him, addresses the puzzle concerning hell. Thomas agrees with Augustine that God "wouldn't allow any evil to exist in His works, unless his omnipotence and goodness were such as to bring good even out of evil".<sup>17</sup> However, this evil prevention requirement stems just from God's nature together with his general purpose in creation, namely "that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and might be represented by them".<sup>18</sup> For God's goodness adequately to be represented, Aquinas thinks, God had to create a variety of different kinds of creatures, hierarchically arranged, including some that "can fail in goodness" and hence "sometimes do fail".<sup>19</sup> In short, Aquinas thinks, the "perfection of the universe" required that it contain evil. Furthermore, he argues, building on this theme, one respect in which evil is required for God's goodness adequately to be represented is that his justice be shown by eternally punishing sinners in hell. That, Aquinas says, "is the reason God elects some and reprobates others".<sup>20</sup> For Thomas, then, God's constant mercy means that he acts mercifully to all his creatures both by creating them in the first place and from sparing them from some suffering they could have undergone. This goes even for the damned.<sup>21</sup> It certainly does not mean, though, that he spares humans from all the sin and suffering he could have, metaphysically speaking.<sup>22</sup> Likewise God's universal desire that all humans be saved is true only of his "antecedent will", prescinding from facts about our sinfulness that his "consequent will" takes into account by damning some.<sup>23</sup> As I read him, Aquinas does not think God's goodness is agent-centered in the ways discussed above both insofar as he aims primarily at the perfection of the whole

universe, and insofar as he allows instances of sin and suffering that are not good for those commit or undergo them.<sup>24</sup>

Stump's reading of Aquinas is very different than the foregoing, as is her approach to the problem of hell. She reads Aquinas as a strong sort of libertarian who thinks that having created free creatures like us, God cannot prevent us from sinning when we make up our minds to do so. Our sinfulness infects us like a "spiritual cancer", which will kill us, spiritually speaking, by resulting in our eternal separation from God in hell, unless God administers some pretty harsh spiritual chemotherapy in the form of suffering.<sup>25</sup> God doses all of us as best as he is able, but again cannot prevent some of us from responding poorly to the treatment, and ending up eternally sundered from him in hell anyway. That is indeed very bad, but God still shows his constant mercy to those in hell by making things as good as they can possibly be.<sup>26</sup> As Stump sees his, God wholeheartedly "desires all people to be saved" and does his very best to save everyone, but is thwarted in some cases by our wicked wills together with the constraints of libertarian freedom. Nonetheless, God abides by agent-centered restrictions in that he allows evil only insofar as doing so is truly good for those who commit or suffer from it—even for those in hell.

Perhaps, Adams would reply, but Stump's God does not go far enough to abide by these restrictions insofar as the evils of hell remain forever undefeated.<sup>27</sup> Adams makes no bones about her universalism. To the "pragmatic" question "whether or not a God who condemned some of His creatures to hell could be a logically appropriate object of worship", her answer is no (Adams 1993, p. 302). This is not because God is bound by moral rules in the ways we are. Rather, as she sees it, C.S. Lewis is right to suppose that leaving humans to live out the effects of their own sinfulness in hell will necessarily result in a state of affairs quite like the traditional, Dante-esque hellishness.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, in her view, "[a]ny person who suffers eternal punishment in the traditional hell will . . . be one within whose life good is engulfed and/or defeated by evils" (Adams 1993, p. 304). God's goodness, as she understands it, requires him to prevent such a state of affairs, even if he would not necessarily be treating anyone unjustly in so allowing it.

Now Sterba does not think the measures Adams's God takes to defeat evil are sufficient for him to count as good on the whole, according to the standards of his EPRs. Part of the trouble, as he sees it, is that the only kinds of goods with which God could possibly compensate our sufferings in this life are what he calls "consumer goods", that is, "experiences and activities that are intensely pleasurable, completely fulfilling and all encompassing" (Sterba 2019, p. 36). Sterba reckons that the beatific vision, "which is said to involve ultimate communion or friendship with God" would be "the primary consumer good that would be experienced and enjoyed by those in the traditional heavenly afterlife" (Ibid.). However, it would be inappropriate, Sterba thinks, to reward persons who suffer in this life, or are deprived of goods such as opportunities for soul-making, with consumer goods in the afterlife. Such consumer goods would not only be unrelated to the goods lost through suffering, but also would be unearned—granted as a sort of consolation prize, as opposed to won through efforts at soul-making. Furthermore, they could not be chosen or accepted by the sufferers, and as Sterba sees it, morality "only justifies impositions that are reasonably acceptable to all those affected" (Ibid., p. 73). There is a sort of "informed consent requirement" for inflicting suffering. For reasons such as these Sterba dismisses Adams's "attempt at theodicy", even with its promise of universal salvation. Nor are the other responses to the problem of hell I've discussed so far any more likely to please him. Embedded in Stump's theodicy is free-will defense of the sort Sterba rejects in his first chapter. Additionally, I take it Sterba would charge Aquinas's God with blatantly violating the Pauline Principle (and probably others besides!) by allowing sin and suffering so as to better manifest his glory in the universe. Sterba, in fact, has proposed his own theistic solution to the problem of hell elsewhere, the gist of which is that the afterlife should look much the same as this one (Sterba 2020). Everyone enters the same afterlife and has the same options for choosing fellowship with God or rejecting it, except that God ensures

the afterlife society meets the standards of basic justice that Sterba thinks God *would* be ensuring now if he actually existed.

These disagreements between Sterba and the three others I've discussed highlight, it seems to me, at least three important differences between the value theory presupposed by his EPRs and that of Christians. First, Christians would not want to see the beatific vision as simply the highest among many possible "consumer goods". Communion with God is what we were made for, and it simply is the best thing for us—what we were made for—whether we like it or not. It is also of such infinite value as to swamp in comparison any evils that might be necessary for its sake. Second, without entering into thorny debates about grace and meritorious works, Christians of any sort deny that communion with God is something that can be earned. Hence, Sterba's worries about needing to earn communion with God in successive "innings" of afterlives would strike them as strange.<sup>29</sup> Third, even the most ardent theodocists among Christians typically deny that we're able to understand God's reasons for allowing particular evils in this life. Sterba writes that victims of suffering:

[W]ould have to be viewed to be incompetent throughout their entire earthly lives with respect to giving informed consent to significant and especially horrendous evil consequences that God would be permitting them to wrongfully suffer. Even so, if God's permission of the infliction of such evil consequences is to be justified then at some point these victims of wrongdoing need to be able to give their informed consent to what was done to them. (Sterba 2019, p. 74)

Christians would agree with the first statement here, about our incompetence to understand in anything more than general terms why God permits evils. They need not agree with the second statement, however, and might well prefer to maintain that we'll never understand. Due to disagreements like these, I doubt that Christians ought to endorse Sterba's EPRs. In general, recall, Sterba thinks God is required to prevent evils in basically the same ways a superpowered just political state would, equipping all of his creatures to pursue whatever aims they might have unimpeded by others and experiencing only whatever minimum of suffering is necessary for character formation in rational creatures. I argued in the previous section that theists need not agree with Sterba here, and I am doubtful that many Christians, at least, will wish to.

At the same time, however, it also seems to me worthwhile for theists to ask themselves in what ways God is or is not required to prevent evils, if they approach these questions in the aporetic way Adams recommends, and mindful of her warnings about not compromising their understanding of God's nature and purposes or the commitments of a Christian value theory. Asking themselves why God is not, in fact, obliged to operate like a superpowered just political state (if that is in fact what they decide) will force them to clarify just how exactly their understanding of God's nature and purposes differ from Sterba's. When it comes to the particular puzzle I've focused on in this section regarding hell, asking questions like whether there are agent-centered restrictions on God's goodness, or whether God's goodness requires him to defeat the evils any of his creature experience, can likewise help us understand and organize our thoughts concerning God's nature, purposes and related issues such as the relationship between divine causality and human freedom. In asking such questions theists must be careful not to put the cart before the horse. They must bear in mind that any obligations God has to prevent evil stem solely from his nature and purposes in creating. However, so long as they bear this in mind it seems to be that asking what obligations, exactly, stem from God's nature and purposes can play a helpful heuristic role in understanding them.

For my part, I am inclined to agree with Aquinas (as I read him) that there's no metaphysical reason why God could not have predestined everyone and reprobated no one. Hence, I disagree with Stump's view that hell is a sort of backup plan on God's part for those whom he could not prevent from rejecting fellowship with him.<sup>30</sup> I think it must have been part of the plan from the beginning—that the fall was "truly necessary" as is said in the Exsultet, and that "sin is behovely", as Julian of Norwich puts it.<sup>31</sup> I am also

inclined to believe, unlike Adams, that hell is populated. However, I have a very difficult time accepting Aquinas’s view that God’s purpose in allowing hell to be populated is to better represent his justice to the universe. I am inclined to agree that God’s goodness towards creatures counts as good only if it is good *for* them, in some way. Additionally, if God *isn’t* equally good and loving to everyone, as his allowing some to populate hell would appear to suggest, I am inclined to think God must base his decision about whom to save and whom to reprobate on something having to do with us, even if this cannot be a matter of earning salvation through meritorious works.<sup>32</sup> I am not sure exactly how best to balance this set of intuitions, although I’ve made a few efforts to do so (Wood 2021, 2022). It may be that at the end of the day Julian—who I think shares most of these intuitions with me—is right that we will not truly understand how to balance our beliefs about God’s nature and purposes alongside our beliefs about evils like hell until God performs some “great deed” on the last day that will show us how in the end “all manner of things shall be well”.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps we will not truly understand it even then. However, while I think there is much to admire in Julian’s willingness to hold in tension her view of God’s love and mercy with her acknowledgement of evils like hell, I think another sort of faithful response to such puzzles is to try to examine further what we truly believe about God’s nature and purposes. In doing so, sorting through the ways we believe God is required to prevent evils can play a useful role. Additionally, Sterba, who has done so in a comprehensive if questionable way, can prove a useful ally.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 161–64, referring to an example in Rowe (1979, p. 337).

<sup>2</sup> Sterba (2019, chap. 6), interacting with Davies (2006, 2009, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> I take it Feser (2021, p. 12, n. 18) is making a similar point when he calls the disagreement between Davies and Brian Shanley about God’s moral agency “largely semantic”.

<sup>4</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* (henceforth ST) 1a2ae.94.6 arg. 1 and ad 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Aquinas ST 1a.19.5 arg. 1 and ad 1 and *Summa contra gentiles* (henceforth SCG) 1.86 for the claim that reasons can be assigned to the divine will, and ST 1a.14.7 and SCG 1.57 for the claim that God’s knowing isn’t discursive, i.e., dependent on a process of reasoning.

<sup>6</sup> Sterba (2019, p. 190): “this book has focused on bringing ethics to bear on the problem of evil. The main result has been a logical argument against the existence of God based on exceptionless components of the Pauline Principle and on the analogy of an ideally just and powerful political state”.

<sup>7</sup> Sterba would also have to rule out a Divine Command Theory of morality, as he recognizes; he spends some time trying to do so at (Sterba 2019, pp. 113–15).

<sup>8</sup> Such an argument is perhaps implied by Sterba’s claim on p. 117: “even if Davies were to find a defensible way of showing that God is not subject to moral requirements, he would still need to find a way to characterize God as good in some other way than being morally good”.

<sup>9</sup> Aquinas, ST 1a.13.5. All translations from Aquinas are mine from the Latin versions available at [www.corpusthomicum.org](http://www.corpusthomicum.org).

<sup>10</sup> Obviously how to understand Aquinas on analogy and other matters relevant to religious language have been the topics of immense debate; I won’t try to encapsulate the immense literature in this note except to say that I find Hochschild (2010) very helpful.

<sup>11</sup> McCabe (2007, p. 91) helpfully writes, “What do we know of God? We know that everything he does is good, for there is no good achievement of anything, whether in nature or man, which is not done by God. It is true that these are not achievements *of* God, but the achievements of other things that he brings about. Nevertheless, they are good, and they are his work. We also know that God does nothing that is evil . . . Always to do what is good and never to do what is evil—is this not a sufficient reason for being called good?”

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas, ST 1a.20.2: “God wills some good to each and every existing thing. Whence, since to love something is just to will good to that thing, it is clear that God loves everything that exists”.



- 13 Aquinas, ST 1a.21.3: “To be sad about the misery of another isn’t attributable to God, but to dispel the misery of another is greatly attributable to him” and 21.4 ad 1: “mercy appears in the damnation of the reprobate, not indeed by removing [their damnation] altogether, but by alleviating it somewhat, when he punishes less than is deserved”.
- 14 She might lobby this particular criticism against versions of skeptical theism as well.
- 15 From the Prayer of Humble Access recited before communion in Anglican worship.
- 16 Adams (1989, p. 299), drawing on a distinction from Roderick Chisholm.
- 17 Aquinas, ST 1a.2.3 ad 1, quoting Augustine, *Enchiridion* 11.
- 18 Aquinas 1a.47.1.
- 19 Aquinas 1a.48.2.
- 20 Aquinas ST 1a.23.5 ad 3.
- 21 See Aquinas, ST 1a.21.3, quoted in n. 25 above.
- 22 This is a controversial point. As I read him, Aquinas is a sort of libertarian when it comes to human freedom, but thinks libertarian human freedom is compatible with God’s causing our free choices and actions. My reading owes much to McCabe, Davies and especially W. Matthews Grant; see Grant (2002, 2010, 2019).
- 23 ST 1a.19.6 ad 1.
- 24 See ST 1a2ae.79.3–4, where Aquinas argues first that God sometimes is the cause of “spiritual blindness and hardness of heart”, and then that blindness and hardness of heart are *not* always directed to the welfare of those blinded or hardened. The punishment of the damned, he says, is directed at the “glory of his justice”, not their welfare (*ibid.*, 79.4 ad 1).
- 25 See Stump (2003, pp. 466–73); and (Stump 2010, pp. 230–31 and 394–95) for the cancer metaphor.
- 26 Stump (1986, pp. 196–97): “what God does with the damned is treat them according to . . . the acquired nature they have chosen for themselves. He confines them within a place where they can do no more harm to the innocent. In this way he recognizes their evil nature and shows that he has a care for it, because by keeping the damned from doing further evil, he prevents their further disintegration, their further loss of goodness and of being. He cannot increase or fulfill the being of the damned; but by putting restraints on the evil they can do, he can maximize their being by keeping them from additional decay. In this way, then, he shows love—Aquinas’s sort of love—for the damned”.
- 27 Adams (1999, pp. 43–49) addresses Stump’s position along with those of Richard Swinburne and Jerry Walls, all of which she considers “mild hell” views.
- 28 Adams (1993, p. 322), referring to Lewis’s view in the *Problem of Pain*, *The Great Divorce* and elsewhere.
- 29 Sterba writes that “it would be morally inappropriate for God to just provide us with a heavenly afterlife irrespective of whether or not we did what we could be reasonably expected to do to make ourselves less unworthy of it” (Sterba 2019, p. 88). St. Paul, however, seems to see things exactly the opposite way: “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God” (Rom. 5:8–9). Sterba might rightly point out that Christians think humans must somehow accept Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf to avail themselves of justification “by his blood”. But Christians typically also insist that even the meritorious choice to accept Christ’s sacrifice is itself an unmerited gift of grace. See Stump (2003, chp. 13) for a very useful treatment of the grace/free will problem.
- 30 Stump (2010, p. 385): “Without moral wrongdoing on the part of free creatures, there would never have been suffering in the world. So God permits the misuse of free will and all the suffering consequent on it; but the world as God permits it to be is not the world as God originally planned it. The world as it is now is therefore a result of God’s ‘Plan B’ not his ‘Plan A’. A more theologically respectable way to put this point is to distinguish God’s antecedent will from God’s consequent will. God’s antecedent will is what God would have willed if everything in the world had been up to him alone. God’s consequent will is what God actually does will, given what God’s creatures will”.
- 31 Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, long text 27, as quoted in T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding”: “Sin is Behovely, but All shall be well, and All manner of thing shall be well” (Julian of Norwich 1998, p. 79; Eliot 1988, p. 56).
- 32 Here I disagree with Aquinas, who appears to think that God’s decisions about whom to predestine and whom to reprobate are entirely arbitrary: “Why these [people] are elected into glory and those others are reprobated has no reason other than the divine will, . . . just as it depends on the simple will of the builder that this stone is in this part of the wall and that other stone is in that other part” (ST 1a.23.5 ad 3).
- 33 Julian, *Revelations of Divine Love*, long text 36 (Julian of Norwich 1998, p. 91).

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Article

# Causal Connections, Logical Connections, and Skeptical Theism: There Is No Logical Problem of Evil

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I consider Sterba's recent criticism of skeptical theism in context of his argument from evil. I show that Sterba's criticism of skeptical theism shares an undesirable trait with all past criticisms of skeptical theism: it fails. This is largely due to his focus on causal connections and his neglect of logical connections. Because of this, his argument remains vulnerable to skeptical theism.

**Keywords:** skeptical theism; problem of evil

## 1. Introduction

James Sterba (2019a, 2019b) argues that known facts about evil are logically incompatible with the existence of God—an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being. Moreover, he claims that his argument is immune to criticisms stemming from skeptical theism. The project of this article is to show that his criticism of skeptical theism is unsuccessful. In essence, I will argue that Sterba focuses on the known *causal* connections of evils when he should be focusing on (un)known *logical* connections of evils, and that this is the downfall of his argument. In Section 2, I will lay out the background assumptions operating in Sterba's argument from evil and will consider his objections to skeptical theism, arguing that his objections ultimately fail. And in Section 3, I will consider the upshot of Sterba's argument from evil. In short, it (arguably) has an effect on those who offer a *theodicy* in response to arguments from evil—it is relevant to those who try to identify God's actual reasons for allowing evil—but it has no effect on skeptical theists. Therefore, his argument remains vulnerable to skeptical theism.

## 2. Sterba's Argument from Evil

James Sterba (2019a, 2019b) argues that certain known evils are impermissible for God to allow. And since God would not allow an evil that is impermissible, it follows that God does not exist. What renders these evils impermissible are certain *constraints* on God: there are certain conditions that must be met for God to allow evil, and these conditions, argues Sterba, are not met in some cases. These constraints play a crucial role in Sterba's argument, since they rule out certain kinds of responses to his argument from evil. As such, I will offer a brief outline of these constraints prior to laying out Sterba's argument.

### 2.1. Sterba's Constraints

Sterba endorses the widely held *outweighing* constraints for God to permit evil. That is, he holds that an evil *E* is permissible for God to allow *only if* it is either (i) required for a greater good or (ii) required for the prevention of a worse evil—any evil for which (i) or (ii) does not hold is impermissible for God.<sup>1</sup> Sterba (plausibly) thinks more than (i) or (ii) is required for an evil to be permissible for God—there is a further constraint on God's actions beyond (i) and (ii). In particular, Sterba holds that, for an evil to be permissible for God, it must also be in line with the *Pauline Principle* (PP), which prohibits one from performing an action that is wrong-in-itself to bring about good consequences (Sterba 2019b, p. 177). Crucially, the PP is not absolute: there are exceptions to the PP, such as cases in which

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performing an action is the only way to avoid a worse evil (Sterba 2019b, p. 177). For example, consider the following case:

TORTURE: You and three friends were hiding from a would-be torturer. Since the torturer was unable to find you and your friends, she found another person to torture instead, call her Sarah. She begins torturing Sarah—say, by reading her passages from the dreaded Hs: Habermas, Heidegger, and Hegel—and you are able to jump from your hiding spot and prevent her from engaging in this torture. If you were to do so, Sarah would be set free. However, it would result in you and your three friends being tortured.

In the case of TORTURE, thinks Sterba, you may allow Sarah to be tortured since that is the *only way* to avoid a much worse evil (i.e., you and your three friends being tortured). So, there are some cases in which it is permissible to allow evil to avoid a worse evil—the PP does not hold absolutely. Let us say that when the PP does not hold for an action *and yet* the action is permissible, that the PP is violated *in a justified way*. With this in mind, we may say that the PP adds another constraint to God in allowing evil: (i) or (ii) must hold for an evil *and* they must hold in a way that either (a) does not violate the PP or (b) violates the PP in a justified way. And so there are (at least) three constraints on God with respect to allowing evil.<sup>2</sup>

From here, Sterba pressures the theist by focusing on particularly bad evils that occur in the *final stages* of life for the victim. By isolating these cases, Sterba can (in some sense) plausibly claim that certain purported greater goods are not candidates for justifying God permitting these evils. For example, in the final stages of suffering, it might be dubious to think that any character development occurs, thereby ruling out ‘soul-building’ theodicies that suggest that one reason God allows (at least the possibility of) evil is to build character. Additionally, says Sterba, it cannot be that free will explains these evils here, since the victim plausibly has a claim to having a right to not undergo such evils.

So, some common theodicies are (arguably) rendered irrelevant due to the particular evils Sterba focuses on. What adds more kindle to Sterba’s argument is that in paradigm cases in which the PP is violated in a justified way, it is due to our *human* limitations. For example, in TORTURE, the reason that it is permissible to violate the PP is because of *human* limitations: you are not able to prevent your friend from being tortured *without* making it such that you and your three friends are tortured. And this point can be generalized: all clear justified violations of the PP involve human limitations. Indeed, Sterba says that:

[n]one of the exceptions to the Pauline Principle that are permitted to agents, like ourselves, due to our limitations of power, would hold of God. This means that the Pauline Principle’s prohibition of intentional doing evil would be even more absolute in the case of God than it is our selves. (Sterba 2019b, p. 177).

And so he says, in comparable situations, God would “always be able to prevent both moral evils.” (Sterba 2019b, p. 178). He infers from this that:

God, unlike ourselves, is never justified in permitting significant and even horrendous evil consequences of one immoral action so as to prevent the greater evil consequences of another immoral action. (Sterba 2019b, p. 178, emphasis mine).

To illustrate Sterba’s point, consider again TORTURE: while *you* cannot prevent Sarah from being tortured (an evil) because it would result in you and your three friends being tortured (a worse evil), *God*—obviously enough—could save Sarah without it resulting in you and your three friends being tortured (e.g., he could whisk all five of you up to heaven). So, while *you* would be justified in permitting Sarah’s torture on account of this fact, *God* would not. Furthermore, this applies to *all possible actions*, according to Sterba. This thesis is *crucial* for Sterba’s argument from evil: if it is false that God is *never* justified in permitting significant evil to prevent worse evil, then—as I will discuss in the section below—Sterba’s argument is vulnerable to skeptical theism.

## 2.2. Sterba's Argument Stated

We are now in a position to consider Sterba's argument from evil. Before doing so, recall the constraints Sterba puts on God for allowing evil: for an evil to be permissible, it must either (i) result in a greater good or (ii) be required to prevent a worse evil *and* (iii) they (i.e., (i) or (ii)) must hold in a way that is either (a) does not violate the PP or (b) violates the PP in a justified way. Moreover, Sterba argues that all paradigm cases in which the PP is violated in a justified way are due to *human* limitations, and so they will not help God out. Given this, we may state Sterba's argument as follows:

- (1) Goods that could be provided to us are of just two types. They are either goods to which we have a right or goods to which we do not have a right.<sup>3</sup>
- (2) With respect to goods to which we have a right, such as freedom from a brutal assault, God would never be causally stuck, as we sometimes are, in situations where we can only provide some with such goods by not providing others with such goods.
- (3) Since then God would be facing no causal or logical constraints with respect to providing us with such goods, God should always have provided us with such goods and thereby prevented the evils that would otherwise occur.
- (4) But this clearly has not happened because there are significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions that God, if he exists, would have to be permitting, and this is logically incompatible with God's existence, unless there is a justification for God's permitting those consequences to provide us with goods to which we do not have a right.
- (5) Now with respect to such goods [i.e., goods that we don't have a right], God would also never be causally constrained by lack of resources, as we sometimes are, and thereby be unable to provide us with such goods without permitting the significant and especially horrendous consequences of immoral actions to be inflicted on us.
- (6) Since then God would be facing no causal or logical constraints with respect to providing . . . us with such goods, God should always have provided us with such goods without permitting the significant and especially the horrendous consequences of immoral action to be inflicted on us.
- (7) But that clearly has not happened because there are significant and even horrendous consequences of immoral action inflicted on us which, if God exists, would have to have resulted from God's widespread permission of just those consequences, and that is logically incompatible with God's existence (Sterba 2019b, pp. 184–85).

What are we to make of this argument? The first thing to note here is that Sterba's argument makes two invalid inferences: both the inference from premise (2) to (3) is invalid and the inference from premise (5) and (6) is invalid—and for the same reason. Both premise (2) and premise (5) make a claim about God not being *causally* constrained in a particular way, and both (3) and (6) claim that, therefore, God is not *casually or logically* constrained in that particular way.<sup>4</sup> To see why this is a problem, consider a right that Sterba says we have: a right to be free from brutal assault, such as described in TORTURE. I conceded above that there is no doubt that God could prevent Sarah's torture *and* the torture of you and your three friends, and this means that he is not *causally* constrained on this matter. However, it does not follow from this that he is not *logically* constrained. To illustrate this, consider the following case:

ZUES: God created a powerful creature, Zeus. And God has made an agreement with Zues that he may create a mini-world as he sees fit—God promises not to interfere with Zeus's world.

Now, suppose that TORTURE took place within the context of ZUES. That is, suppose that Sarah's torture is taking place within a world created by Zues—a world that God has agreed not to interfere with. Let us call this world ZUES > TORTURE. In ZUES > TORTURE, God is not *causally* constrained with respect to Sarah. However, he is *logically* constrained: while he could (causally) prevent the torture of Sarah and you and your three friends (say, by zipping you five away to heaven), his contract with Zues *logically* constrains him, in the

sense that causally intervening and preventing Sarah's torture logically entails violating a different constraint (namely, that of keeping his promise to Zues). And so while God is not *causally* constrained in ZUES > TORTURE, he is *logically* constrained. In other words, ZUES > TORTURE shows us that causal and logical constraints come apart—one can be free of causal constraints but not of logical constraints. (That he is logically constrained does not mean that it is impossible for him to act. Rather, it means that it is impossible for him to act without (in this case) violating a contract.<sup>5</sup>)

Or, consider a less bizarre (but equally clearly false) example:

AUTONOMY: Humans have a right to autonomy, understood as a right to act as we see fit. And this right is absolute: it's always wrong to violate no matter what.

Now, suppose that AUTONOMY is true, and that Sami is torturing Sally. If that is the case, then while God may *causally* prevent Sami from torturing Sally (say, by whisking her away to heaven), he is *logically* constrained from doing so: he has the power to intervene, but since intervening involves violating an absolute right, he is logically constrained from preventing the torture.<sup>6</sup> (Again, that he is logically constrained does not mean that it is impossible for him to act. Instead, it just means that (in this case) it would involve violating an absolute right.<sup>7</sup>)

Alternatively, we may understand this point *axiologically*. Suppose that violating someone's autonomy is much more evil than we normally understand it. Indeed, suppose that the true disvalue of autonomy violations is so intense that violating one's autonomy is *axiologically worse* than allowing someone to be tortured. If that is the case, then, again, God will not be causally constrained with respect to preventing Sarah's torture, but he will be logically constrained, since doing so would logically entail violating Sami's autonomy—a far more valuable good. Again, this shows that causal and logical constraints come apart. (Again, it is not that God's causally constrained here. Instead, it just means that intervening would involve making matters *axiologically worse*.<sup>8</sup>)

No doubt Sterba could argue that (a) our world is not the result of this God-Zeus contract, (b) a right to autonomy is not absolute, and (c) violating Sami's right to autonomy is not axiologically worse than allowing Sarah to be tortured; however, that is beside the point. While they are false, they suffice to illustrate the invalidity of his inference from premise (2) to (3) and from premise (5) to (6). In other words, they show that lacking causal limitations does not entail lacking logical limitations, and for this reason, Sterba's argument is invalid. Of course, the argument can be repaired and made valid, and below I will consider how such an argument fares.

### 2.3. Sterba's Argument Repaired

In order to fix Sterba's argument, we need to find a way to show that God (at least probably) is not logically constrained with respect to certain evils. Fortunately for us, Sterba has provided a different version of his argument in his book that is not (at least obviously) invalid.<sup>9</sup> For this version, Sterba asks us to consider the (well-known) case from Dostoevsky (1984) in which a child accidentally causes the dog of a powerful and evil General to go lame. The General locks the child up overnight, and releases a pack of dogs on the child the next morning. The dogs tear the child to pieces in front of the child's mother. This is doubtless an instance of evil. And, Sterba uses this case for the concrete version of his argument, which he states as follows:

- (8) God's permission of the evil consequences of the General's action could not be a morally acceptable means to prevent some other greater evil consequences of an immoral action. *This is because God, being all-powerful, could always prevent the evil consequences of any action, as needed, by just sufficiently restricting the external freedom of the evildoer in each case.* Hence, this is just, I claim, what God morally should do.
- (9) Neither could God's permission of the morally evil consequences of the General's action be a morally justified means to secure some good to which we are not entitled. This is because the greatest good to which we are not entitled that God could morally

provide us with would be a Godly opportunity for soul-making, and to make the provision of that good, and other such goods to which we do not have a right, conditional on God's permission of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, like the General's, would lead to morally perverse incentives for us and for God as well. In addition, making the provision of a Godly opportunity for soul-making, and other such goods to which we do not have a right, conditional on the permission of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, like the General's, would not be morally justified because we do not have a right to such goods, and so clearly their provision could not be conditional on the violation of anyone's rights, especially when there are countless other ways that these goods could be provided that are not morally objectionable. (Sterba 2019a, pp. 96–97, emphasis mine).

Where Sterba goes astray is the italicized portion of premise (8): while it may be true that God can prevent the *causal evil consequences* of an action, it is the *logical evil (and good) consequences* that matter. For example, it may be that by preventing the causal evil consequences in the case of the General and the child, that there are worse evils that *logically* follow from doing so. And so, Sterba needs to show that (at least probably) there are not any such logical entailments. If he can do this, then he will have the tools to repair the argument as it is originally stated in the previous section.

To show that there (at least probably) are not any (great) goods or (terrible) evils logically connected to preventing the child's death at the hands of the General's dogs, he must make something like the following inference:<sup>10</sup>

- (10) We recognize no evils that are logically entailed by God preventing the child's death by dogs.
- (11) Therefore, probably, there are no such evils.<sup>11</sup>

But this is where *skeptical theism* becomes relevant. Skeptical theists (roughly) think that the fact that we don't know of any good or evil logically connected to some state of affairs is not good reason to think it is likely that there is no such connection.<sup>12</sup> And so skeptical theists will pressure Sterba to offer justification for the inference from premise (10) to (11). And Sterba is aware of this. Indeed, he considers that it might be argued that "for all we know, it could be just logically impossible for God to prevent the evil consequences of both immoral actions in such situations." (Sterba 2019b, p. 178).<sup>13</sup> What does Sterba make of this response? He asks:

Could there be entailment relations between such goods and permitting the consequences of other evils that would render it logically impossible for God to prevent both evil consequences? Yet notice how strange such entailment relations would be. 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 the lack of causal power to justify why we permit the lesser evil consumes to prevent the greater evil consequences. Now ... we are imagining that it is logically impossible for God to present 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. (Sterba 2019b, pp. 178–79).

He concludes from this that it *must be*:

that God can always prevent the horrendous evil consequences of both actions in contexts where we, due to our limited causal power, can only prevent the evil consequences of one of them. (Sterba 2019b, p. 179)<sup>14</sup>

What are we to make of Sterba's argument against skeptical theism here? First, it is worth pointing out that the fact that if *X* were true, it would be *strange* is not strong evidence for  $\sim X$ . And so, the charge of strangeness from Sterba does not seem to be doing much work. But there's more at play in Sterba's argument here than just strangeness. While his argument is not exactly clear here, the thought seems to be something like this.



Consider again Sarah's torture, call it *T*, as described in TORTURE above. If *you* prevent *T* in TORTURE, then bad consequence, call it *C* (you and your three friends being tortured), comes about. The reason *you* are morally permitted to allow *T* is because preventing *T* would result in *C*—a much worse evil, which makes your allowing *T* a justified violation of the PP. But to say that God may permit *T* must mean that while he *causally* could prevent *C*, he *logically* could not do it, and that seems to suggest that God is not nearly as powerful as we thought he is. This is because while we cannot prevent both *T* and *C*, it is due to contingent reasons. But on this view, it is *logically impossible* for God to prevent *T* and *C*. That seems to make God much less powerful than we'd like to think. And this is why we should not think God's logically constrained in these cases. In effect, this has the result that skeptical theism is false, and therefore that it will not undermine Sterba's argument.

The problem with Sterba's argument here is that he focuses on only *known causal* connections, thereby neglecting possible *unknown logical* connections. For example, one does not need to claim that God's permitting *T* is justified because if he did so, *C* would follow and he could not prevent it. Instead, it might be that God's permitting *T* would result in a different consequence *C\**, and it would be logically impossible for God to prevent *T* without allowing *C\**. Consider again ZUES>TORTURE (see above, Section 2.2): if God prevents *T*, then it logically follows that he is violated his contract with Zeus, call this consequence *Z*. So if God prevents *T*, then a rights violation occurs, namely *Z*. Notice that this is not the case for you: if *you* were causally able to prevent *T* and *C*, *Z* would not follow, since *you* never agreed to a contract with Zeus. Indeed, God *could* prevent both *T* and *C* just like we could if we were more powerful. It is *T* and *Z* that he cannot prevent both of. But then the fact that God cannot prevent *T* and *Z* does not—in any serious sense of the term—make him less powerful than us; thus, this charge of strangeness melts away. The lesson here is that what *logically* constrains God with respect to preventing an evil does not need to be the *causal* consequences *we know of* that would result from *our* preventing the evil. Once we recognize this, all charges of strangeness and powerlessness melt away.

Of course, if Sterba was right that there being a logical constraint on God here would result in him being “impossibly less powerful” than us, *then* he would be able to hold that it is improbable that there are such constraints. But Sterba's wrong, and so he cannot use this method to rule out God being logically constrained from preventing an evil. As far as I can tell, Sterba provides no other reason for thinking that God is not logically constrained. And this leaves us with no reason at all to think that God is not probably logically constrained with respect to preventing evil. And this means that Sterba's argument is vulnerable to skeptical theism: he must make an inference like that from premise (10) to (11). But this is precisely the inference that skeptical theism blocks. And hence Sterba's argument about evil is vulnerable to skeptical theism. (Here it is worth noting here that Sterba does not contest that skeptical theism, *if true*, undermines this type of inference. That is (presumably) why he argues that it is *false* rather than ineffective<sup>15</sup>).

#### 2.4. Will Other Constraints Help?

One might want to object that the issues I raise above are only issues because I rejected several constraints that he argues in favor of. That is, in footnote 2 above, I said that Sterba holds that there are the following two additional constraints on God (or anyone): (a) an action is morally justified only if it is “reasonably acceptable” to all those affected, and (b) an action should not be permitted if “significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions [occur] simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have.” (Sterba 2019a, p. 128). Call these *moral constraints*. Perhaps one would argue that these moral constraints, if accepted, would undercut the argument I gave above.

However, even if these moral constraints were accepted—even if (a) and (b) are real constraints on God (or anyone)—Sterba's argument remains undermined. This is because we are not in a position to know whether there are evils for which (a) and (b) are not satisfied. That is, we are not in a position to know whether there is evil that some persons

would not reasonably accept or evil that some persons would not morally prefer. This is because in order to know that, we need to know the *reason* that an evil was allowed (if there is any): whether a person would reasonably accept or morally prefer some evil will be influenced in a large part by whether God is *logically constrained* in the manner portrayed in the above sections (i.e., whether for some evil, there are evils or goods logically connected to the prevention of it). For example, if preventing some evil would result in an evil far worse than the one prevented, then one might reasonably accept the evil or morally prefer it.<sup>16</sup> What's key here is *what* that logical constraint is (if there is one at all)—whether one would reasonably accept an evil or morally prefer it will largely depend on the nature of the logical constraint. However, I showed above that Sterba has given us no reason to think that God *is not* logically constrained with respect to evil. Furthermore, he also hasn't given us any reason to think that if there is a logical constraint, that it is one that would not result in everyone reasonably accepting or morally preferring the evil we find in the world. But this leaves us in a state of agnosticism about whether Sterba's moral constraints (i.e., (a) and (b)) are satisfied: unless we know that either there is no such logical constraint *or* what the logical constraint is, we cannot know whether an evil is reasonably acceptable or morally preferable. Of course, Sterba points out that it may be difficult to imagine what these logical constraints might be. But that is not good reason to think there are not any such constraints. And hence even if Sterba makes use of these additional moral constraints on God (i.e., (a) and (b)), it will not help his argument from evil.

### 3. Lessons Learned

What we have learned here is that Sterba's constraints (if accepted) will have an effect on those doing the project of theodicy: they add more obstacles (such as the PP) that those advocating theodicy must hurdle. But his constraints (and argument) just does not affect skeptical theists: since the PP admits exceptions, we still need to consider whether God permitting an evil is required to prevent a worse evil (or bring about a great good) in a way that justifiably violates the PP, and skeptical theism comes into play here. And while Sterba raises some objections to skeptical theism, the objections don't consider *unknown logical* connections—they only consider *known causal* connections. This is his downfall. Perhaps there are other objections in the area that threaten skeptical theism. But as things stand, Sterba's objection to skeptical theism shares the same fate as all past objections to skeptical theism: it fails

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that there have been powerful (and to my mind *persuasive*) reasons given for rejecting these outweighing constraints. See e.g., Peter Van Inwagen (2006) and Justin Mooney (2019).
- <sup>2</sup> Sterba holds that there's two additional constraints: he holds that (a) that an action is morally justified only if it is "reasonably acceptable" to all those affected, and (b) that an action should not be permitted if "significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions [occur] simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have." (Sterba 2019a, p. 128). I will briefly discuss these additional constraints in Section 2.4. However, I don't discuss them here for three reasons. First, I just don't think it is at all plausible to hold that these are actual constraints on God (or anyone): what makes an action permissible, in my view, is (roughly) just whether its justifying reasons outweigh its requiring reasons (see e.g., Tucker forthcoming a, forthcoming b for models of weighing reasons). Talk of acceptability and moral preferability is not needed. Second, even if these were requirements, it is exceedingly difficult to tell if an action would be "reasonably accepted" or "morally preferred" by all those affected. This is because reasonable acceptance and moral preference would (presumably) be needed after *full disclosure* of the relevant facts about the world (including the necessary connections between states of affairs) and the role one's suffering (etc.) played in it. But we don't know all the relevant facts. Worse yet, it is exceedingly difficult to know under what conditions one would reasonably accept or morally prefer an evil. And third, if we set aside the previous issue momentarily, it is plausible to think that someone would reasonably accept and morally prefer an evil if the justifying reasons in favor of it outweighed the requiring reasons against it. But in that case, these constraints offer nothing beyond the ordinary requirements of morality.

- 3 This distinction between goods which we have a right to and goods which we don't have a right to is not important for my purposes. However, a brief word is in order here. Goods of which we have a right to are those that we are (in a sense) owed. And if we are not given those goods, that is itself evil. And so one way to prevent evil is to ensure that we have goods that we have a right to. Conversely, it is not evil if we don't have goods that we don't have a right to. For more on this diction, see Sterba (Sterba 2019a, pp. 126–30).
- 4 Below, I use examples to illustrate the differences between causal and logical constraints (and connections). In the meantime, we may say that (roughly) if *A* and *B* are *logically* connected, that *A* necessitates *B* or *B* necessitates *A*. And we may say that if God is logically constrained with respect to an action *A*, that (roughly) there is some negative state of affairs logically connected to his performing *A*. Next, we may say that if *A* is *causally* (but not logically) connected to *B*, then (very roughly) in our world, absent supernatural intervention, *A* follows from *B* or *B* follows from *A*. Again, these are rough approximations. My examples below should make matters clearer.
- 5 If you maintain that being logically constrained entails being causally constrained, then you can recast my objection as Sterba not providing justification for thinking God is not subject to causal constraints that we are not subject to. Nothing in my argument would be lost by recasting it in this way. Additionally, note that I have not said God *must* keep his contract with Zues. Instead, I have just noted that God *causally* intervening *logically* entails violating the contract. And since there may be cases in which God can violate contracts, it does not follow that he is *causally* constrained here. That depends on the strength of God's reasons for keeping the contract.
- 6 See Reitan (2014) for a development of a deontological theodicy—although, his theodicy, unlike my example here, is semi-plausible.
- 7 Again, if you disagree with this, my point may be recast in the way suggested in footnote 4.
- 8 Yet again, if you disagree with this, follow the instructions given in footnote 6.
- 9 While Sterba's (2019a, 2019b) have the same publication year, his (Sterba 2019b) was published online in 2018, and is an earlier iteration of his thought.
- 10 Perhaps Sterba thinks no such inference is needed. Perhaps he thinks he *can just see* that there are no evils logically entailed by God preventing the child's death in this scenario. This would be a different argument, and it would be similar to the move made by proponents of the so-called commonsense problem of evil, who think that we can see (or have justification for thinking) that there is unjustified evil. This move is difficult to justify, and will doubtless be controversial. And if he makes it, objections given to the commonsense problem of evil will become relevant (e.g., Bergmann 2012; Hendricks 2018; Tweedt 2015).
- 11 I focus on evils here since most of my discussion is related to the PP. However, a similar inference would need to be run about goods as well.
- 12 I will not argue for the truth of skeptical theism here, but see Hendricks (2020a, 2020b) for an argument for it. And see Bergmann (2001, 2009, 2012, 2014), Daniel Howard-Snyder (2009), and Hendricks (2019, 2020c, 2021) for statements and defenses of skeptical theism. For standard objections to skeptical theism, see e.g., Benton et al. (2016), William Hasker (2010), Hud Hudson (2014), and Erik Wielenberg (2010).
- 13 The way that I'm going to consider this objection does not include this "for all we know" language. I have argued elsewhere (Hendricks 2021) that this language is misleading, and that skeptical theists and their critics should not make use of it.
- 14 Sterba offers similar comments in his book, saying:  
[n]otice how strange this claim would be. Clearly, it is difficult for us to even think of cases where we causally cannot provide others with goods to which they do not have a right unless we permit them to be deprived of goods to which they do have a right. Yet, it is for just such analogous cases that we are to imagine that God logically cannot provide us with something to which we do not have a right without permitting us to be deprived of something to which we do have a right. Again, that makes God look impossibly less powerful than ourselves. Thus, we could easily imagine that we never do suffer from this sort of causal inability . . . while God would be still stuck in a logically impossibility in analogous contexts (Sterba 2019a, pp. 85–86). And several versions of his argument rely on a move like this e.g., premise (4) and premise (12) from *The Argument from Moral Evil in the World* (Sterba 2019a, pp. 186–87). This line of reasoning falls prey to the same problems as his quotes from the main text.
- 15 See Bergmann (2001); Paul Draper (2013); Hudson (2014); and Hendricks (2020b) for discussions of why skeptical theism undermines this kind of inference.
- 16 e.g., if the only way for God to prevent 1,000,000,000 Holocausts was for him to permit a single Holocaust, then it is reasonable to accept the Holocaust, and one should morally prefer it.

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# What Can God Do? What Should God Do?

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to defend James Sterba's version (2019) of the logical argument from evil against the existence of God from two objections that have been raised against it: that God cannot "logically" prevent all evils and that the moral requirements that the argument poses for God may not apply to God. I argue that these objections do not refute the claim that God can prevent and should prevent any evil and do not undermine Sterba's argument from evil to the effect that God does not exist.

**Keywords:** God; evil; Sterba; logical argument from evil

## 1. The Logical Argument from Evil

The aim of this paper is to defend James Sterba's (2019) version of the logical argument from evil against the existence of God from two objections that have been raised against it. The general idea of the logical argument from evil is simple. The argument can be presented as an argument from two premises. First, if God exists, then—being omnipotent and omnibenevolent—God would prevent the existence of any evil in the world. Second, evil exists in the world. Ergo, God does not exist. Presented in this way, the argument is an application of *modus tollens*, and so is deductively valid. This argument, and its first premise, in particular, require an elaborated defense, which is provided in Sterba's version of the argument. Sterba deals with the question "Is there a greater good justification for God's permitting significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions" (Sterba 2020, p. 204).<sup>1</sup> By considering the various goods that could be provided to us, he answers this question negatively. He argues for three moral principles, which, according to him, require an all-powerful God to prevent such evil consequences ("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) when that can easily be done.
- 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.
- 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 [goods to which we do not have a right] when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the general scheme of the argument is this:

1. There is an all-good, all-powerful God (assumed for *reductio*);
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.

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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.

Therefore, it is not the case that there is an all-good, all-powerful God. (Sterba 2020, p. 208)

Steps 2 and 3 of this four-step argument provide substance to the first premise of the above modus tollens form of the argument, the premise that God's existence implies the non-existence of evil. Most of the objections that have been raised against the logical argument from evil target this premise, that is, they deny that God's existence is incompatible with the existence of evil, and, similarly, most of the objections that have been raised against Sterba's version of the argument from evil target its premises 2 and 3. Section 2 will focus on an objection to premise 3, and Section 3—on an objection to premise 2.

## 2. Can God Prevent All Evils?

Let me start with Hendricks's (2022) claim that Sterba's argument is ineffective against skeptical theism. Sterba discusses a case where some evil (a person being tortured) is the only way to avoid a worse evil (three people being tortured in the same way). The Pauline Principle—that one is forbidden from performing actions that are wrong in themselves—does not hold in such cases. If one's action prevents the triple torture by bringing about the single torture, one's action is justified. What makes it justified, according to Sterba, is human limitations, that is, the fact that human beings cannot prevent the worse evil but by bringing about the lesser evil. However, argues Sterba, such a justification does not apply to God's actions in comparable situations, since God can always prevent both moral evils. It follows that God is never justified in permitting significant evil (Sterba 2019, pp. 177–78).

Hendricks agrees that God is always *causally* able to prevent evil (that is, evil in itself), for God can prevent the causal consequences of any action. However, he claims that there can be cases in which God is not *logically* able to do so. What Hendricks means is that there can be cases in which God's preventing evil entails violating a different constraint. To illustrate this, Hendricks asks us to imagine the following scenario:

ZEUS: God creates a powerful creature, Zeus, and God has made an agreement with Zeus that he may create a mini-world as he sees fit—God promises not to interfere with Zeus's world.

Thus, Hendricks's idea is that, for Sterba's argument to be effective, it must establish not only that God is not causally constrained in preventing people from evil actions, but also that God is not thus "logically" constrained. Only then would accusing God of evil be justified. However, Hendricks argues, Sterba fallaciously infers a lack of logical constraints from a lack of causal constraints. It is possible that God is thus "logically" constrained, as illustrated by the Zeus scenario, and so Sterba's argument fails.

Before turning to the general point that this scenario is supposed to convey, let me address the scenario itself. Is there a good reason to accept that God would be justified in preferring adherence to such agreements over the prevention of horrendous evils? Note that we should assume that the evils in question are as horrendous as may be, since extremely horrendous evils occur, and the agreement under consideration is *carte blanche*. We can look at this point from another direction. According to one view of agreements and promises, they come (or at least may come) with built-in *ceteris paribus* conditions. In this vein, God's promise to Zeus may be taken to involve a *ceteris paribus* clause to the effect that this promise does not commit God to abstain from preventing horrendous evils. If so, God could act contrary to the expectations that are built on God's promise to Zeus, without in fact breaking this promise. We may ask what the sense of the claim that promises have *built in ceteris paribus* conditions is. If this claim is a factual presumption, then it cannot be used to rebuff the Zeus objection, since a skeptical theist may claim that we cannot rule out the possibility of a Zeus scenario in which God's promise involves no *ceteris paribus* conditions, i.e., that it constitutes a reason for God to abstain from intervening in any human action, regardless of its circumstances, consequences, etc., thus resembling an oath (which typically is not taken to involve a *ceteris paribus* clause). However, this claim can also be a normative claim, to the effect that one is not required to keep one's promise under

certain conditions, e.g., when one's breaking one's promises would prevent great evils. Such a normative claim—which expresses the idea that the duty to keep promises is a *prima facie* rather than absolute duty—sounds very plausible, and it may plausibly be taken to justify God's allowing horrendous evils.<sup>3</sup> However, rebuffing the Zeus objection in this way relies on a specific normative judgment, and it is better to rebuff it in a normatively neutral way. The following reply to this objection is normatively neutral—it may be said to be meta-ethical—and as we shall see, it has the additional advantage of undermining not only the specific Zeus objection but also the general idea behind it.

Here goes. Moral agents are morally responsible for the consequences of their actions if they know that these consequences are possible, and, assuming that God is a moral agent,<sup>4</sup> then God is morally responsible for the fact that this agreement confronts God with a destructive moral dilemma, that is, one in which every choice would involve evil in itself. In other words, by entering such an agreement God has created an evil situation—one which necessarily involves an evil (either that of breaching the agreement or that of not preventing the torture)—and so is morally responsible for the lesser evil. Indeed, the torturer is also responsible for the situation in which one of the two evils is necessary, but this fact does not discharge God of responsibility since God has unnecessarily made such situations possible.<sup>5</sup>

Is it possible that God has a morally justified reason to enter the agreement in question? Whether or not such a *carte blanche* agreement, which binds God to refrain from preventing any horrendous evil whatsoever, can be justified, God could not have any morally justified reason to enter such an agreement, since an omnipotent God can prevent any evil (or, for that matter, endow any good) without entering any agreement. Can there be a relevant moral reason of another kind? The alternative relevant reason is that some actions on God's part put God under some commitment (e.g., God made a promise to make that agreement), and then God is not "logically" able to refrain from entering the agreement. However, then, we are back to square one: what could justify such an action on God's part? One might think that other events (not Godly actions) might have put God under some commitment. I do not know what other events may serve such a role, but the important point is that no other events could differ from Godly actions in the relevant respect, for an omnipotent God could have prevented them both causally and "logically".

It appears that this reply to the Zeus objection also constitutes a reply to Hendricks's general point, namely to the claim that God might have had some moral reason that makes God's preventing some evil (in the above torture case, preventing both the lesser evil and the worse one) morally unjustified. We may say that the challenge Hendricks presents to Sterba is to rule out the very possibility of God having such a reason. If the argument from evil does not rule this possibility out, it fails to rule out the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God. However, insofar as God's having such a moral reason is rooted in the occurrence of some event (whether it is a Godly action or not), an omnipotent God could have prevented the occurrence of this event, and thus escaped the destructive moral dilemma in question.

According to Hendricks (p. 668), for Sterba's argument to be sound, it must rely on an inference from the claim that we recognize no evils that are logically entailed by God's preventing evil actions to the claim that there probably are no such evils. However, Hendricks argues, this inference conflicts with the skeptical theistic claim that "the fact that we don't know of any good or evil standardly connected to some state of affairs is not good reason to think it is likely that there is no such connection" (p. 669). Sterba addresses a possible objection of this sort (2019, pp. 178–79), and Hendricks replies to Sterba (pp. 668–69), but we need not discuss this specific debate between these philosophers. This is because the reply suggested above to Hendricks's complaint regarding God being "logically" constrained to prevent the evil in question, also undermines the objection from skeptical theism. For on this reply no such "logical" connection is at all possible. To put it differently, an omnipotent God can always (causally) prevent the situation in which God's preventing an evil is "logically" constrained. Therefore, the atheists' case does not depend



on any inference from a lack of knowledge. For them, no possible fact can justify God's not preventing an evil action, since God would be unjustified in allowing any such putative fact to obtain.

At this point, it becomes important to clarify the dialectic of the debate. The skeptical theist argues that there is reason to doubt that humans are aware of the various reasons God has for permitting various evils. My reply to this claim is that we cannot be missing any such reason that is compatible with an omnipotent and all-good God, for such a God would have prevented the situation in which God has a reason to permit evils. In other words, we cannot be missing such a reason because there is no such reason. This is shown not by an epistemological discussion, but by the above meta-ethical discussion. Now it might be thought that I beg the question against skeptical theism since skeptical theism denies the possibility of meta-ethical and ethical-normative knowledge regarding God. Note that the claim that denies this knowledge is different from, and is not entailed by, the claim that we cannot know what reasons God has for permitting various evils (or, for that matter, for doing or permitting anything). The latter claim concerns factual knowledge, e.g., that we do not know whether God has entered a certain agreement, whereas the former claim has nothing to do with supposedly hidden facts related to God. Rather, it concerns the moral implication of what God did or could do (e.g., enter some agreement, interfere in some human actions), an implication that relies on nothing but the principle that evil should be prevented. This skeptical claim can be supported by appealing to global skepticism regarding moral knowledge. However, if theists adopt global moral skepticism, they do not at all need the Zeus objection or anything along the lines of this objection in order to undermine the logical argument from evil, since trivially this argument cannot get off the ground if we are not entitled to employ the principle that evil should be prevented, and adopting such skepticism straightforwardly implies that we are not. Raising objections such as the Zeus objection presupposes that moral knowledge is allowed.

Obviously, the skeptical view regarding moral knowledge that concerns God does not depend on global moral skepticism. However, it will appear that the former view is false. As we shall see in the next section, the moral requirements of preventing evil apply to God. The reasoning to this effect is purely meta-ethical reasoning, showing that God does not escape general moral requirements. If this reasoning is sound, we do have, and a fortiori can have, moral knowledge that concerns God—at least that knowledge that is relevant to the debate over the logical argument from evil.<sup>6</sup>

Let us turn to another way in which skeptical theists may be taken to undermine the argument from evil. They can argue that we cannot rule out the possibility that the evil that God permits is the source of some greater good.<sup>7</sup> Philosophers have argued that securing various goods (or features that enable the securing of goods) depends upon the existence of evil. Skeptical theists would be satisfied even with merely showing that we cannot rule out the existence of such connections between such goods and certain evils. However, just as a truly omnipotent God need not choose between two evils but can (in both the causal and the "logical" sense) prevent both, a truly omnipotent God can (in both the causal and the "logical" sense) create any good without permitting any evil. Thus, we undermine the epistemic claim that we cannot rule out those supposed necessary connections between goods and evils by showing that such necessary connections cannot obtain, and so an omnipotent God need not and therefore should not be constrained by them.

Still, it might seem that the claim that a truly omnipotent God can (in both the causal and the "logical" sense) create any good without permitting any evil should be qualified. Plantinga's (1974, 1977) free will objection to the argument from evil appears to undermine this claim. Like other opponents of the argument from evil, Plantinga points out some good that appears to be incompatible with the prevention of any possible evil. The supposed good, or value, is that of people's freedom to make the right moral choice; to freely opt for good over evil. The ingenuity of this move consists in the fact that, according to it, any intervention is wrong *in itself*. It is not that the prevention of some event would involve some other moral cost, e.g., that of breaching some agreement or of harming another

individual. Rather, any intervention is wrong in itself, according to this move, for any intervention undermines the possibility of freely choosing the good.

Sterba addresses the free will objection to the argument from evil, and an exhaustive treatment of the issue does not belong in this paper. However, I wish to make a comment that will have implications for the above argument in favor of the claim that God can prevent any evil in both the causal and the “logical” sense. We should note that the principle that lies at the heart of the free will objection—the one that attaches value to the ability to freely make the morally right choice—is a normative-moral principle. Moreover, this moral principle is extreme in two respects. First, it takes the opportunity to freely choose the good to require the possibility not only of choosing evil but also of successfully executing this choice, without God’s severing the connection between the choice and the evil (which, being omnipotent, God is able to do). Indeed, perhaps a Godly policy of intervening when one chooses evil means that one cannot truly be said to freely choose the good, for then what is often taken to be a necessary condition for free will, namely that one have the opportunity to do otherwise, does not obtain. However, in the case of one’s making the right moral choice, the fact that God would have intervened had one made the wrong choice is both extra-mental and counterfactual, and it is unclear why such a fact should decrease the worth of one’s choice; all the more so, that it should decrease it to the extent of justifying allowing evil to obtain. This brings us to the second respect—the more significant one for our concern—in which the moral principle in question is extreme. To fulfill its justificatory role, this principle must involve a particularly extreme normatively quantitative aspect, since in order to justify God’s not preventing evil actions, the value under consideration must override the value of preventing evil even when the evil is extremely horrendous. Horrendous evils occur, and God can causally prevent the consequences of any action.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the principle in question must attach an extremely high moral value to free choice. I wish to point out that given that the free will objection depends on such an extreme normative principle, which does not have a parallel in any other moral domain, we may well wonder why accept it. How can giving one the opportunity to freely make the right moral choice justify the possibility of hurting *another person*? Additionally, suppose that it justifies the possibility of hurting another to some extent—can it justify the possibility of hurting another *to whatever extent*? Can it justify the possibility of making another person suffer horrendously? Can one’s truly having a free choice between good and bad be a good reason for allowing one to be as cruel as possible to another person? Employing such a principle appears to be an ad hoc maneuver whose sole rationale is the role it plays in the (supposed) rebuff of the argument from evil.<sup>9</sup> This principle is in conflict with morality: no moral system would justify abstaining from preventing significant harm to people on the sole grounds that it is immoral to intervene with the potential harmer’s action *no matter what harm is at stake*. On the assumption that evil and suffering are morally bad, at least one who can avoid them effortlessly and without inflicting on oneself or on another any price is morally required to prevent them at least when they are horrendous. The negative value of the very fact of intervening, if it has such a negative value, cannot provide a *carte blanche* justification for allowing evil. If I can prevent murder or terrible torture, it would be ridiculous for me to justify my choice not to prevent it on the grounds that interfering with the potential murderer’s or torturer’s action is morally bad. Even if it is bad, it cannot be so bad as to allow even the most horrendous suffering. It would be similarly ridiculous to thus justify God’s choice not to prevent horrendous suffering. (In Section 3, I argue against the view that the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements do not apply to God.)

Still, the free will objection has an implication for the above argument in favor of the claim that God can prevent any evil in both the causal and the “logical” sense. This argument was based on the claim that God can (causally) prevent the obtaining of any situation that involves a destructive dilemma, one in which God should choose between two evils, hence God should never be “logically” forced to refrain from preventing evil. However, the free will objection points out that God’s prevention of evil might be morally wrong not only for a reason that has to do with the obtaining of any specific circumstances,

such as those involved in the Zeus scenario (which God could causally prevent) but also for the reason that any such intervention on God's part is, in itself, wrong. It is wrong simply by virtue of interfering with the agent's free choice, or, in other words, simply in being an intervention. The above argument has not taken this option into consideration. What it has, in fact, established is that God can prevent any evil in both the causal and the "logical" sense *unless God's intervention is morally wrong* per se. Yet, as we saw, the idea that God's intervention is morally wrong per se has to be rejected. Thus, we can stick to the claim that God can prevent any evil not only in the causal sense but also in the "logical" sense.

A few more words about the dialectic of the discussion. According to skeptical theism, we cannot know that God has no reason to allow evil. Plantinga's free will defense suggests such a reason. This reason can be characterized as the reason not to intervene in people's free actions—mere intervention is morally wrong. As part of the task of atheists who appeal to the logical argument from evil to show that under no possible scenario is it justified to allow those horrendous evils that exist in the world, the burden is upon them to rule out the possibility that interventions aiming at preventing horrendous evils are morally wrong. I indeed argued for this idea: I argued that interventions in people's actions do not possess moral values that are negative to the extent of justifying allowing evils regardless of how horrendous they may be. Thus, I hope to have carried out this burden. (The other part of that atheist task that I hope to have carried out is that of showing that God cannot have a moral reason for allowing evil that is rooted in the occurrence of some event, such as a promise made by God, since an omnipotent God could have prevented the occurrence of this event.)

Additionally, the fact that the logical argument from evil rules out the possibility that intervention in people's actions is so wrong—which means that this argument relies on a specific moral judgment—does not affect the status of the argument from evil as a logical argument. As noted, I assume here that we can have moral knowledge—that we can reason effectively about moral issues and arrive at moral conclusions. This should be anything but surprising since the argument from evil presupposes that global skepticism about moral knowledge is false—it is a moral argument. It employs the specific moral judgment that evil and suffering are morally wrong. This does not make the argument non-deductive. Of course, our moral reasoning and so our moral judgments might be wrong, but all reasoning—including paradigmatically "logical" reasoning—might be wrong. Moral claims can be legitimate links in valid reasoning.

### 3. Do Sterba's Requirements Apply to God?

Some critics of the logical argument from evil argue that some moral requirements that apply to us do not apply to God (or, at least, that we do not know that they do). Are the moral requirements to prevent the evil that is at the center of Sterba's argument such? The view that moral requirements that apply to human beings do not apply to God may be understood in several ways. First, it may be understood as a (partial) expression of the view that God is not a moral agent. I will not discuss this view here since (besides practical reasons), like Sterba and most proponents of the argument from evil, I treat this argument as an argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism, who is a moral agent. If God is not a moral agent, then no moral attribute, such as that of being morally good, can be true of God.<sup>10</sup> Second, the view that some moral requirements that apply to us do not apply to God may be understood as an instance of discriminative morality, which does not apply moral requirements equally to all moral agents even under identical circumstances. Such a view encounters enormous meta-ethical difficulties in rejecting the universal character standardly attributed to morality (see Hare 1952). This universal character means that all moral requirements apply to all moral agents under the relevant circumstances, and so, assuming that God is a moral agent, God cannot escape the universal net of moral requirements.<sup>11</sup>

A third understanding of the view that some moral requirements that apply to us do not apply to God is along the normative rather than the meta-ethical dimension. On this

understanding, the same moral norms apply to both human beings and God (indeed to all moral agents), it is just that God's unique circumstances change how those norms should be respected, if at all. Some norms that apply to human beings may not apply to God in the sense in which the norm of keeping promises does not apply to one who makes no promises. We should ask, then, whether the requirements that figure in Sterba's version of the logical argument from evil apply to God. To show that they do, Sterba appeals to an analogy of an ideally just and powerful political state. He assumes that "states, like individuals, would be required to abide by Moral Prevention Evil Requirements I–III [ . . . ] Since we know that such a state would be actively engaged in the prevention of significant and especially horrendous harmful consequences of immoral actions, we know that God, if he exists, would have to be doing the same." (Sterba 2019, p. 152)

Now there certainly are morally significant differences between the relation of God to people and the relation of such a state to its citizens. Toby Betenson (2021), for example, points out such a difference. According to him, while part of the essence of an ideally just state is its sovereign authority having been granted by the people, the sovereign authority of God is different, for the former's authority is rooted in the fact that people make up the state and people do not make up God. Thus, the grounds for the obligations of God and for those of an ideally just political state—and so those obligations themselves—differ. I leave it here open whether such a difference and others,<sup>12</sup> undermine Sterba's analogical reasoning. For I wish to suggest that Sterba need not appeal to this analogy to establish that the requirements in question apply to God. While there may be exceptions to the very requirement to prevent evil, such exceptions are irrelevant to this issue, since Sterba's requirements are concerned with evils that, in the final analysis, should be prevented if they can be prevented, and such evils exist. One might think that they should be prevented only if they can be prevented *without inflicting a higher moral cost*, but we should ignore this proviso since, as the previous discussion should have made clear, God could prevent any evil that should be prevented while avoiding any moral cost. Therefore, no circumstances that are unrelated to the mere identity of the moral agents in question can make a difference and exempt God from those requirements of preventing evil. What about circumstances that are related to the very identity of the moral agents in question? Well, any such circumstances that are supposed to make a moral difference with respect to the requirements to prevent evil, if there are such, would work in the atheist's favor. Nothing that does not exempt a weak and vulnerable being from moral requirements concerning the well-being of others can exempt an all-powerful being for whom acting justly is first nature from those requirements. A human being may enjoy various privileges owing to her or his moral record, and perhaps such privileges include exemption from various (*prima facie*) moral duties (e.g., "She has done enough. Let others contribute this time."), and the omnibenevolent God of traditional theism is supposed to have the highest moral record. However, God's moral status does not exempt God—as omnipotent and all good—from preventing evil, since God is supposed to be able to prevent any evil effortlessly and without paying any price. The idea of an exemption seems to be simply inapplicable to God.

I mentioned three understandings of the claim that the moral demands in question are inapplicable to God: the option that God is not a moral agent, the option of discriminative mortality, and the option of different circumstances. One might think of another option, namely that God is a moral agent *of a unique kind*. Murphy (2017, 2021) seems to advocate this idea. God, according to him, is motivated to act in different ways as far as human welfare is concerned: God would take human welfare to provide justifying reasons but not requiring reasons. Murphy endeavors to show that due to this aspect of the nature of the perfect being, the existence of this being is compatible with the existence of evil. I will not delve into the details of this argument. I wish to point out that the crucial issue for the defense I present here for the logical argument from evil is the question of God's moral responsibility. We should ask about Murphy's conception, and about any other conception of the way God is motivated, whether according to it God is morally responsible for the occurrence of the evils that God allows, under the assumption that it would have been

morally better that those evils had not occurred. There is no middle way, and answering this question settles the issue for the purpose of this paper. For if the answer is negative, then God is not a moral agent at least insofar as that aspect of human welfare is concerned. As noted, this paper is concerned with a God who is a moral agent, and so objections to the logical argument from evil that deny that God is a moral agent are irrelevant to it. If the answer to this question is positive, and God is morally responsible for the occurrences of those evils under the said circumstances, then, as I argued, the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements do apply to God, and the problem of evil persists.

#### 4. Conclusions

I hope to have shown that Sterba's logical argument from evil can avoid two of the critiques that have been raised against it: that God cannot "logically" prevent all evils, and that the moral requirements that the argument poses for God may not apply to God. These objections do not refute the claim that God can prevent and should prevent any evil, and do not undermine Sterba's argument from evil to the effect that God does not exist.<sup>13</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> So Sterba's argument does not deal with cases of natural evil, and neither will my discussion.

<sup>2</sup> These requirements appear in different places of both Sterba (2019) and Sterba (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Note that the factual presumption raises the "horizontal" issue of the universality of the reason in question—whether it applies under all possible circumstances or not—whereas the normative presumption raises the "vertical" issue of the strength of this reason—whether it is an absolute reason or merely a *prima facie* one.

<sup>4</sup> I will refer to this issue below.

<sup>5</sup> Since God has unnecessarily made such situations possible, then, similarly, God would not be discharged of this responsibility even on the assumption (which forms a compromise on God's omniscience) that when entering the agreement God did not foresee the actual dilemmas that would be produced.

<sup>6</sup> Of course, I do not argue here against global moral skepticism, but rather assume the possibility of moral knowledge. My claim is that if moral knowledge is possible—as the logical argument from evil presupposes—then the skeptical view regarding moral knowledge that concerns God should be rejected.

<sup>7</sup> See Coley's (2021) discussion of an objection to Sterba's argument along these lines. Coley criticizes Sterba's reply to this objection but argues that skeptical theism has unacceptable moral-epistemological implication. Sterba (2021) replies to Coley's critique.

<sup>8</sup> Sterba's reply to Plantinga's free will objection concerns its quantitative aspect: "God can promote more significant freedom over time by sometimes interfering with our free actions" (Sterba 2019, p. 27).

<sup>9</sup> Plantinga does not provide justification for the moral principle in question. He simply declares that "A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all." (Plantinga 1974, p. 166).

<sup>10</sup> See Sterba's discussion of the question whether God is a moral agent in chapter 6 of Sterba 2019. Of course, different philosophers may have different Gods in mind, and there are theists who take God not to be a moral agent (see, e.g., Davies 2006). Sterba's logical argument and my defense of it do not undermine the existence of such a God. I believe that they do undermine the existence of a God who is a moral agent. What matters is that one's argument from evil applies to God as one characterizes God, and that it is important to know whether *such a God* exists or not. It is certainly important to know whether a God who is a moral agent exists or not for various reasons. For example, there may be good reasons for worshipping and obeying such a God.

<sup>11</sup> Trivially, the view that God is subject to unique moral requirements is in conflict with the universal character of morality even if it is based on the view that morality ensues from God. This conflict pertains to the view itself, regardless of its source.

<sup>12</sup> For another disanalogy between Earthy heads of state and God see Michael Beaty (2021). Sterba (2021) replies to Beaty.

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful to Yuval Eylon, Arnon Cahen, and two anonymous reviewers for this journal for their comments, which helped me improve this paper.

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Article

# A Compensatory Response to the Problem of Evil: Revisited

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I revisit the univocity thesis, Sterba's analogy between God and a leader of a politically liberal society, and, most fundamentally, whether the existence of horrendous evils is logically compatible with the existence of a good God. I concede that the typical appeals to free will and greater goods defenses to block the logical problem of evil are not sufficient because they do not adequately address the horrendous evils that are all too much a feature of human existence. While acknowledging that a compensatory response to the problem of evil is suggested by several important philosophers, I rely most centrally on the work of Marilyn McCord Adams. In so doing, I defend the thesis that the existence of a good God is logically compatible with the existence of horrendous evils, given God's capacity to absorb, defeat, or engulf it.

**Keywords:** compensatory response to the problem of evil; existential problem of evil; free will defense; greater goods defense; horrendous evils; playpen freedom; univocity thesis; Marilyn McCord Adams; James Sterba; Richard Swinburne

I am grateful that Professor Sterba has invited me<sup>1</sup> to continue our discussion about whether the existence of evil, in the amount and kinds of evil so prominently displayed in our world, establish the conclusion that the existence of a good God<sup>2</sup> is logically impossible. I am pleased to have the opportunity to "own up" to some mistakes, and clarify my argument, as well. Sterba agrees that Plantinga, and others, have shown that a good God is logically compatible with some moral evil. His contention is that the amount of evil in our world and its kinds, especially the horrendous evils that are so characteristic of our human history, are logically incompatible with a good God.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Univocity Thesis and the Goodness of God

In my previous paper I claimed that both Sterba and I accepted the univocity thesis (at least with ascriptions of moral goodness to God) (Beaty 2021). He notes that he never employs this concept and emphatically rejects that he assumes it when speaking of God's moral goodness. In contrast, he says, "like the good Thomist I once was" we speak analogically when we make assertions about God and God's goodness. We do so "by analogy to features about ourselves and the rest of what is assumed for the sake of the argument to be God's creation."<sup>4</sup> I am unsure what he means, exactly, and how, given his arguments in his book, he is not committed to some form of univocity.

Clearly, discussions of the status of religious language in Theism is controversial, interesting, and, among some thinkers, such as Aquinas, complicated. For the purposes of this paper, I clarify my claims in the following way. Like Sterba, I accept that some of what we say about God presupposes some form of cognitivism in contrast to non-cognitivism with respect to the possible predication of moral properties. While it is true that theological and philosophical discussions of God's nature employ via *negativa* and analogies, we theists (at least some of us) sometimes attribute to God some moral properties that are best understood as being the same kind of moral property as possessed by human beings, even though God possesses them perfectly, rather than imperfectly. More importantly, I fail to see how one can get a variety of arguments from evil off the ground unless the moral concepts, and moral standards with which they are associated, are understood univocally when

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applied both to human beings and to God. The various arguments from evil are supposed to demonstrate or make it probable that God does not exist, given the amount and kinds of evil in our world. For the argument to work, God must be assumed to possess properties which when taken together support the conclusion. Moral goodness is one such property (or set of properties). A natural reading of some of the Christian scriptures presumes God can be correctly described as possessing a bundle of moral properties which it is possible (and admirable) for human beings to possess, even if we human beings possess them, when we possess them at all, incompletely, imperfectly, or only partially.

The scriptures certainly speak of God as being compassionate, just, merciful and full of loving-kindness. Consider the following passage from Jeremiah 9:23–24:

Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches; but let him who boasts, boast in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord; who exercises loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things, declares the Lord.

In Isaiah 58, God’s prophet condemns the false worship of God and insists that the true worship of God includes

*... loosening the bonds of injustice; ... undoing the thongs of the yoke, ... letting the oppressed go free, ... sharing one’s bread with the hungry, ... bringing the homeless poor into your house;*

If I accept that God is speaking through the prophet Isaiah, asserting that God loathes injustice and loves us all with a steadfast love, then I accept that I have been provided grounds or reasons for claiming that God is just and loving and so on. In so doing, I am ascribing to God the moral virtues of being just and loving and compassionate and others besides. Are these ascriptions of moral goodness to God univocal or analogical? They appear to be ascriptions of moral goodness to God that are best understood as used univocally when compared to ascriptions of moral goodness to human beings. When the good kings and men and women of Israel loosen the bonds of injustice, release the oppressed to go free, share their bread with the hungry and welcome the homeless poor into palaces and homes, they are praised for their moral goodness. So, too, the God of Israel is morally good for God is on the side of the poor, oppressed and those treated unjustly. And God is at work via God’s own initiatives to address the moral wrongs so characteristic of this world.

No doubt, if God exists as described or affirmed by traditional theists, then God possesses God’s properties, to include moral properties, in ways that human beings do not (for example, necessarily versus contingently; perfectly rather than imperfectly). And Aquinas’s rich and provocative analogical account of the theological attributes is motivated to capture the metaphysical differences, to be sure. But Aquinas’ account of analogy, as I understand it, is not strong enough to support Sterba’s argument. It appears to me that Sterba needs univocity for his argument from evil to have the force he takes it to have. If I am mistaken, I ask Sterba to make clear how his arguments that are meant to show the logical incompatibility of God and evil reflect an analogical use of attributions to God, rather than univocal ones.

Now there is a perfectly understandable way in which some of Sterba’s ascriptions are analogical rather than univocal. In just politically liberal societies, like the United States of America or Great Britain, there are laws that prohibit unjust assaults. Additionally, there are agents whose professional job is to protect the freedom of its citizens, as far as possible, from various kinds of illicit uses of freedom. Just societies have executives whose responsibilities include the enforcement of laws that curtail the freedom of those who unjustly harm or kill their fellow citizens. God is similar to the chief executive of a politically liberal society, insists Sterba. Just as those who administer or govern good political states must restrict the freedoms of would-be aggressors to secure the more “significant freedoms” of other citizens (and their would-be victims), so a good God must restrict the freedom of human

agents. By reducing the illicit freedom of many of its citizens, God would be increasing the more important “significant freedom” of its citizens, argues Sterba.

Of course, here Sterba is employing an analogy when he compares God to the leader of a politically liberal society. Unlike anyone who serves as President of the United States, God is not elected to His office as Creator, Sustainer and Ruler of the Universe. If God exists, He occupies the office of Sovereign of the Universe, eternally, and not temporally. God did not begin to occupy this office after a democratically operationalized vote of the citizens of the universe. While both God and President Biden may be ascribed as sovereigns, their sovereign powers and responsibilities bear only analogies to one another.

It is correct, I think, to say that being a president of university is similar to being the president of the United States, though in a variety of ways, these two chief administrative roles are importantly different. Nonetheless, despite their significant differences one can draw analogies between the two administrative roles that may be illuminating and useful (or not). If we appeal to an analogy between God and President Biden’s sovereign powers, how do we get the problem of evil off the ground? Typically, President Biden is not morally responsible for the morally impermissible actions of his democratic constituency. History rightly condemns many white governors of southern states for failing to do enough to promote and protect the freedoms of their African American citizens. Others are morally condemned for inciting their white constituencies to morally reprehensible actions and attitudes toward their African American fellow-citizens and neighbors. Is God morally at fault for the moral misdeeds of his constituency? For some of us, unlike Sterba, it is not obvious that God is at fault. And one part of our discontent is that Sterba’s account rests on a flawed analogy.

Let us agree that if God exists as understood by traditional theists, then God and the President of the United States have at least some responsibilities that are analogous in nature. But when Sterba speaks of the shortcomings of either the free will or soul-making defenses (and the like) he, I claim, is not consistently appealing to analogy but assumes univocity. For example, consider the following moral principle identified by Sterba.

Every moral agent has a reason not to interfere with the free actions of wrongdoers when permitting the slightly harmful consequences of those actions would lead to securing some significant moral good, in some cases, maybe just that of the freedom of the wrongdoers themselves, or to preventing some significant moral evil (Sterba 2019, p. 26).

He calls this the Principle of Noninterference or NI. By moral agent, clearly, he means someone whose actions can be correctly evaluated as either being morally required, morally permitted, morally forbidden, or morally indifferent. Moral evils are actions that are morally forbidden. These assumptions are necessary to make sense of NI. I claim that Sterba assumes univocity to prosecute his primary thesis:

... the actual world we live in is such that there is much more that God could have done to promote significant freedom in it ... Hence, the world we live in cannot be justified by the distribution and amount of significant freedom that is in it. There are too many ways that political states and human individuals could have increased the amount of significant freedom by restricting lesser freedoms of would-be wrong-doers. Likewise, there is much that God could have done to promote freedom by restricting freedom that simply has not been done (Sterba 2019, p. 29).

What the above paragraph suggests is something like the following argument:  
Argument A:

- (1) We rightly fault some political states and their human leaders because they failed to restrict in morally appropriate ways the freedoms of individuals who wronged their fellow citizens or fellow human beings.
- (2) If the theistic story is true, then God is like (the analogy) a human leader of a (liberal) political state.

- (3) If we rightly fault some (liberal) political state and their human leaders because they failed to restrict in morally appropriate ways the freedoms of individuals who wronged their fellow citizens or fellow human beings, then we ought to morally fault God for failing to promote (human) freedom sufficiently by more severely restricting the freedom of some human beings.
- (4) So, we ought to morally fault God for failing to promote human freedom sufficiently by more severely restricting the freedom of some human beings when they choose to act in morally evil or vicious ways.<sup>5</sup>

While argument A employs an analogy, its conclusion makes an assertion which does not employ analogical language. Its conclusion is best understood univocally, not analogically. To be sure, what it means for God to act or refrain from acting is a complicated metaphysical account. And, no doubt, it requires using some of our language in ways that stretch our ordinary meanings or uses of it. Nonetheless, it is unclear to me that Sterba is relying on analogy in formulating his logical argument(s) from evil (Thomistic account of analogy or otherwise) when he argues that we are in a position to see that affirming that the God of Theism exists is inconsistent with the existence of horrendous evil. Put more strongly, if Sterba is actually using language analogically, his argument fails to have the logical force it needs to establish the logically inconsistency of a good God and horrendous evil.

## 2. The Heart of the Matter and My General Strategy

The theme of Sterba's book is that he will use untapped resources from moral and political philosophy to show that the existence of evil of the kind and amount found in our world is logically incompatible with the existence of God. However, what is essential to his project is to successfully defend the following kind of argument.

Argument B:

- (1) If a good God exists, then there would not be the amount and kinds of evils (horrendous evils) that is characteristic our world.
- (2) Characteristic of our world is horrendous evils.
- (3) So, a good God does not exist.

Clearly the Argument (B) is formally valid. Is it sound? That is, are all the premises true? The critical premise is (1). Does the Theist have rationally credible reasons to reject premise (1)? I argue that theists do have credible reasons. First, a theist can appeal to the value of a world in which human beings are capable of courage or cowardice, just or unjust behavior, virtue or vice. Of course, to do so is to appeal to the familiar "greater-goods" defense. Second, the theist adds to the "greater-goods" defense an appeal to the "free will" defense. But these two, taken together are an incomplete defense of the claim that a good God is not logically incompatible with the existence of evil. More needs to be said, I contend. To address "what more needs to be said," I return to what I am calling a *compensatory response* to the problem of evil. The conjunction of these responses are logically possible. Taken together they constitute a satisfactory response to Sterba's attempted refutation of Theism, which was based on the existence of "horrendous evils." By "horrendous evils" I rely on Marilyn Adams who defines this category as follows: "evils the participation in (the doing of or the suffering of) which constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) have positive meaning for him/her on the whole." (M. M. Adams 2006, p. 32).

Let me summarize what I take to constitute the essence of my response to Sterba, as outlined above. With respect to the "problem of evil":

- (A) We see the reasons that God allows some evils.
- (B) We recognize that there are some evils for which we do not see the reason for God to allow them, but we are unsurprised by our lack of cognitive access to all of God's justifying reasons for permitting such evils.
- (C) We see how all of them can be defeated.<sup>6</sup>

To explain and defend how horrendous evils can be defeated within the framework of traditional Christian Theism, I will appeal to several important themes found especially central to the work of Marilyn Adams.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. A Greater Goods and Free Will Defense: A Helpful Beginning

In Sterba's second chapter of his book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, he argues that there is no successful free will defense (Sterba 2019, pp. 11–34; 209–21). His third chapter has as its goal to undermine a soul-making theodicy. It is important to remember that Sterba's goal is to show that the existence of a good God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil, which we typically identify as the logical problem of evil. It is important to remember that a theist does not need a successful theodicy to defeat the logical problem of evil. He or she need only show that the existence of a good God is logically compatible with the existence of evil, which must include the amount and kinds of evil we find in the actual world. In what follows, I adopt the strategy of Richard Swinburne, first by employing a version of the *Greater Goods Defense*, then, second, by appealing to the familiar free will defense.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to remember the differences between a theodicy and a defense. A theodicy aims to provide God's reasons for allowing evil, at all, and of the kinds and quantity of evils which are characteristic of our world. A defense merely claims that there are certain possible goods found in our world that provide God good reasons for permitting the evils characteristic of our world and of our human experience. An exponent of a successful defense need not claim that the goods identified which provide God reasons to permit the evils characteristic of our world are God's reasons for permitting the evils at issue. The theistic defender of God in the face of evil may be rightly skeptical about his or her grasp of God's actual reasons, yet, convinced that a good God, in fact, has good reasons.

Perhaps God wants to create some creatures that are able to freely worship God, or not, and to make other significant moral decisions about their own welfare, and the welfare of other creatures like themselves. On the one hand, this requires God to create a world which is predictable, rather than unpredictable—one that functions by stable regularities we may call natural laws. On the other, if God wants to encourage and promote and undergird stable good-making qualities which promote human flourishing (call these the moral virtues), and provide stable conditions for human beings to act from their moral duties, it is necessary that human beings have a range of morally significant actions.

Thus, it seems possible that a necessary condition of morally significant actions (those that are required, permitted, or forbidden; and of the moral virtues and vices) is libertarian freedom—a freedom to act not fully determined by antecedent causes. It also seems that it might be logically impossible for God to create human beings possessing libertarian freedom without the possibility of each human being acting badly, with respect to what is morally fitting (Swinburne 1998, "The of Moral Evil and Free Will", pp. 125–37; "Natural Evil and the Possibility of Knowledge", pp. 176–93). One way that libertarian freedom is made possible is that human beings experience desires for objects and activities that are morally blameworthy (Swinburne 1979, "Argument from Consciousness and Morality," pp. 152–79; "The Argument from Providence," pp. 180–99).

The previous paragraphs describe a world in which both natural evils and moral evils are possible.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the possibility of natural evils like broken legs or arms and psychological harm, like the pain of a broken friendship, make possible certain kinds of moral goods such as prudence (practical wisdom), temperance, courage, friendship, justice, and temperance, as well as their correlative vices—imprudence, intemperance, cowardice, enmity, and injustice.<sup>10</sup>

Now the above is a part of a familiar strategy: the greater-goods defense. When we think of people we admire, among those we list are people who have exhibited great courage in the face of real and present dangers. Included on my long list are the following: Amelia Boyten,<sup>11</sup> Fannie Lou Hammer,<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr.,<sup>13</sup> and John Kerry (Brinkley 2004). Boyten, Hammer, and King exhibited extraordinary courage during their opposition

and personal resistance to the practices of segregation in the South in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>14</sup> Former Senator John Kerry was an exceptional U.S. Navy Swift boat commander in the Mekong Delta during the Viet Nam War and, later, an antiwar activist. In both these roles and his role as US Senator, he exhibited significant levels of courage. The courage each individual exhibited was possible only because of physical, emotional, and social dangers, hence the possibility of both natural and moral evils.

First-order goods include pleasure, health, happiness, a virtuous life, friendship, personal and political freedom, and many other possibilities as well. Some first-order evils are pain, ill health, suffering, betrayal, death, slavery, and segregation. Second-order goods include sympathy, compassion, courage, perseverance, faith and a virtuous loyalty. Second-order evils include betrayal, cold-heartedness, cowardice, and disloyalty.

Most of us value our own individual freedom and we desire to live in social and political situations that encourage and promote civic life while protecting and preserving a wide range of individual freedom. At the same time a good civic life requires deterrents and penalties for those that inflict first order evils on us and our friends and fellow citizens. These deterrents or penalties will be second order goods.

#### 4. The Alleged Refutation

In Chapter 2, “There is No Free-Will Defense,” Sterba asks us to consider some familiar superheroes of our American culture such as Spider-Man/Peter Parker. Superheroes, like Spider-Man, are committed to limiting the freedom of would-be villains to protect other human beings from their vicious behavior. Sterba invites us to think about the case of Matthew Shepard, a gay man who lived in Wyoming. In a bar in Laramie, Wyoming, Shepard was befriended by two men who bought him drinks. Receiving an offer from them for a lift, Shepard was driven to a remote location, then they robbed, beat and tortured him. Hanging him on a barbwire fence, they left him to die. Discovered by a passing cyclist, Shepard later died in the hospital, never having regained consciousness.

Sterba notes that God could have intervened in this case in any number of ways and no one would have protested had God done so. In so doing, the freedom of Shepard’s assailants would have been abridged, but the more important freedoms, such as freedom from being unjustly killed or unjustly injured and the like, would have been defended or secured. Indeed, had Spiderman intervened, we would be pleased and relieved. Of course, Spiderman is fictional. Yet, Sterba thinks our public affirmation of the role of superheroes is telling. We want someone with superpowers to intervene to save us or our neighbors when we are in danger. Sterba implies that if a good God exists, that good God would have intervened.<sup>15</sup> Since there was no such intervention, God does not exist, and the free will defense of God, given the existence of such shocking horrendous evils, fails. Let’s put Sterba’s argument more formally:

- (1) If a good God exists, then a good God had a reason to interfere with the freedom of the two assailants of Matthew Shepard.
- (2) If a good God had a reason to interfere with the freedom of the two assailants of Matthew Shepard and did not interfere, then a good God does not exist.
- (3) So, a good God does not exist.

Clearly, this argument is not decisive. Suppose one accepts premise (1). Are you required to accept (2)? No, for God might have an overriding or mitigating reason for not interfering. If so, then (2) is false. I find the following account by Swinburne possible and compelling. It provides possible reasons that God did not intervene.

That human agents have libertarian freedom is a great good. Such freedom includes the capacity to do or to refrain from doing some act A. The capacity to engage in free action is a great good because it makes him or her “... a source of the way things happen in the Universe.” (Swinburne 1998, p. 84). Swinburne calls this way of acting or being in the world, a “responsibility for things.” (Ibid., p. 101). Additionally, Swinburne insists on the value of “being of use,” of helping, serving, sacrificing, that is, exercising our human freedom for good ends or purposes. (Ibid.)

In short, a good God has good reasons for creating a world with free creatures, such as human beings that have a responsibility for how the world is constituted, to some extent, both socially and physically. By so doing, God has created creatures that are capable of self-giving love, generosity, compassion, kindness; of courage, long-suffering, and humility; of fidelity in friendships, marriage, and so on. Clearly, a good God recognizes that free human beings may, on occasion, even frequently, act badly, morally speaking. We are capable of cowardice, vanity, cruelty, envy, lust, gluttony, infidelity, and a kind of anger that burns its objects and sometimes even its source(s).

Most of us, most of the time, regard human freedom as a great good and the ground of many other human goods, both moral and non-moral. When we Theists affirm the goodness of God, as Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, we affirm, among other goods, the good of human freedom. But, with this affirmation comes the recognition that we live in a world in which many human persons misuse their freedom to the great detriment of themselves, other human beings, other animals, and of other fundamentally valuable aspects of the natural world. Genuine human freedom, then, comes both the possibility of genuine moral goodness and a variety of moral evils.<sup>16</sup>

Suppose we generalize from the case of Matthew Shepard. On Sterba's view a good God would have intervened in Shepard's case and prevented the great evil of his horrific death. But there are many other similar humanly vicious acts. Is God to intervene in each and every case? We theists believe that God sometimes intervenes in our world to aid those in need. And often we pray for God's help, both in small and large matters, as the Biblical materials encourage and most Christian theologians endorse. Does this practice not undermine our belief that a good God exists? Not according to Swinburne, who says that

“... in general, if God normally helps those who cannot help themselves when others do not help, others will not take the trouble to help the helpless next time, and they will be rational not to take that trouble. For they will know that a more powerful help is always available.” (Swinburne 1979, pp. 210–11).

Yet, I concede (or confess) that the horrific evil visited on Matthew Shepard, despite its judicial resolution, may leave one theologically dissatisfied despite appeals to the good of free will and to the great good of soul-making. Is not the existence of a good God rightly called into question by the horrific suffering and the death of Matthew Shepard?

##### 5. Sterba on the Soul-Making Theodicies and the Pauline Principle

Sterba contends the answer is definitively “Yes.” He begins this chapter by reminding us that moral evils, especially horrific evils, cannot be justified by God's creating human beings with morally significant freedom (Sterba 2019, p. 49). If God is justified, it must be for other reasons. He begins his discussion of other reasons by considering soul-making theodicies. Does the opportunity for soul-making justify God's permitting the vast amount and kinds of evils our world contains? It does not, claims Sterba, because a large number of people fail to have an opportunity for significant soul-making in our world since their freedom is abridged by evildoers, a freedom evildoers should not have.

Sterba claims that there is an ethical principle that is in direct conflict with God's permitting evil. It is the Pauline Principle which claims that “one should never do evil that good may come of it.” (Ibid., p. 49). Sterba concedes that there are exceptions to the principle which include (a) the harm caused is trivial or minor (I step on your toes in pushing you away from a speeding vehicle) or (b) when what I cause is easily repairable (while driving your car I swerve to avoid a pedestrian which results in a scratch on your left fender) or perhaps (c) it is the only way to prevent a much greater set of harmful consequences (one bombs a military target that is likely to cause significant civilian deaths but which will likely prompt surrender and much fewer military and civilian casualties) (Ibid., pp. 49–50).

Additionally, Sterba acknowledges another important objection. If God acted as Sterba insists he ought, then God provides human beings with what Christian theist Richard

Swinburne called “toy freedom” and atheist David Lewis called “playpen freedom”.<sup>17</sup> Sterba comments that a playpen freedom would “greatly diminish our status as moral agents.” (Sterba 2019, p. 52). Indeed, he says,

Now no one doubts that there would be a problem if God always intervened to prevent evil. If that were to happen, then the freedom we would be left with would hardly be worthy of that name. Clearly, we must have freedom to do wrong if we are to develop through soul-making the virtue that would make ourselves less unworthy of a heavenly afterlife. But having the freedom needed for soul-making is not the same as having unlimited freedom . . . Toy freedom or a playpen freedom is a problem only where freedom is constrained too much, not where it is appropriately constrained. But when are constraints on freedom too much and when appropriate? (Ibid., pp. 52–53).

So, Sterba concedes that it would be problematic if a good God intervened on each occasion of evil to prevent it. Human beings would have only a “toy” or “playpen” freedom. He appears to endorse the good of freedom as a necessary condition of soul-making as well. His objection to the appeal to soul-making as one part of a greater goods defense is this: to admit that human freedom is a necessary condition of soul-making is not the same as having unlimited freedom. To avoid toy freedom, we need not endorse unlimited freedom, so Sterba seems to conclude: We should expect God to intervene to prevent horrific evils, a qualitatively distinctive kind of evil, let’s suppose.<sup>18</sup> Since horrific evils occur, God does not exist. But this follows only if it is reasonable to believe that a good God cannot have morally permissible reasons to permit horrific evils. I contend that Sterba has not demonstrated this to be the situation facing the theist. He needs to say more, but so do I.

## 6. The Just State, God and the Compensatory Response to Evil Introduced

Central to Sterba’s argument that the existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of God is the ideal of what [the leaders of] a just and powerful politically liberal state do (or refrain from doing). In my previous paper, I objected by claiming that Christians do not, nor should they, regard the head of government of a politically liberal society as an adequate analogy for God’s governance of the universe. Sterba’s response:

“ . . . here Beatty is not sufficiently taking into account the widespread use of analogy that compares God and Christ to an earthly king throughout the history of Christianity . . . I just draw out the moral implications of this widespread use for the God of traditional Theism.”

I agree that God and Jesus the Christ are often compared to earthly kings in the history of Christianity and in the biblical materials. When God is referred to as King of the Universe, God is being compared to an earthly King, not the democratically elected or appointed Chief of a political liberal state. Earthly Kings (or Queens) are not elected to their office by its citizenry. If the God of Theism exists, as the Supreme Being, God is neither elected nor appointed by the constituents of the universe. The implications of this disanalogy are important, and telling, in responding to Sterba’s efforts to show that the existence of a good God is logically incompatible with the existence of evil. Unlike the Prime Minister of Canada or the President of the United States, God has all of eternity to reveal and display God’s perfect moral goodness. This includes all of eternity to compensate those whose lives are vexed or shortened by horrific evils. I call this a Compensatory Response to the Problem of Evil.

Several important sources of this idea are available in the contemporary literature.<sup>19</sup> For example, in *Providence and the Problem Evil*, Swinburne says,

. . . God must choose to give each of us a life which is objectively in our best interest. . . . it must remain the case that God must not cause harm to us which is uncompensated by benefit to us . . . He must remain on balance a benefactor (Swinburne 1998, p. 232).

Eleonore Stump insists that “undeserved suffering which is uncompensated seems clearly unjust; but so does suffering compensated only by benefits to someone other than the sufferer.” (Stump 1990, “Providence and the Problem of Evil,” in Flint 1990, p. 60)). And William Alston implies that God is committed to compensation for human beings when he asserts that “Any plan that God would implement will include provision for each of us having a life that is, on balance a good thing.” (Alston 1996). But how is a good God to compensate the sufferer of horrendous evils? The short answer is that a good God must absorb those evils in such a way that the one who suffers is able to affirm his or her life, including the horrendous evils, as worth having. They do not “wish it away.” (Adams 1990, p. 219).

Most impressively, this idea is developed and defended by Marilyn Adams in a variety of venues. In her “Horrendous Evils and The Goodness of God,” she says,

Where the *internal* coherence of Christianity is the issue, however, it is fair to appeal to its own store of valuables. For a Christian point of view, God is a being greater than which cannot be conceived, a good incommensurate with both created goods and temporal evils. Likewise, a good beatific, face-to-face intimacy with God is simply incommensurate with any merely non-transcendent goods or ills a person might experience. Thus, the good of a beatific face-to-face intimacy with God would *engulf* . . . even the horrendous evils humans experience in this present life . . . and overcome any prima-facie reasons the individual had to doubt whether his/her life would or could be worth living (Adams 1990, p. 218).

By “engulf,” Adams means “a relation of organic unity between the negatively (positively) valued part and the whole, with the result that a significantly smaller negatively (positively) valued part can actually increase (decrease) the value of the whole of which it is a part.” She contrasts “engulfing” horrific evils with “balancing off”, a relation of value-parts to value-wholes. “Balancing off” is the kind of additive relation parts can bear to a whole within which one merely adds to a positively valued whole some negative part or vice versa (Adams 2006, pp. 45–46).

By engulfing the horrific evils individuals suffer, God ensures the one who suffers that his or her life is a great good to him or her on the whole. (Adams 1990, p. 218). According to Adams, this “engulfing” is possible

. . . if we can offer a (logically possible) scenario in which God is good to each created person, by insuring each a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole, and by defeating his/her participation in horrors within the context, not merely of the world as a whole, but of that individual’s life (Adams 1999, p. 55).

More will come on the logically possible scenario in the paragraph above in a moment. What is important at this juncture in the paper is to make clear the logic of compensation. In “Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation, and the Problem of Evil,” Adams argues that while instrumental reasons have a place in moral practices and moral justifications, without non-instrumental reasons we run aground when we attempt to understand how a good God is compatible with horrendous evils. Clearly, we need some non-instrumental reasons that justify the claim that God is good to created persons. It is important to recognize that a good G for which some agent S allows E is often different from the good G\* that compensates some agent T for the harm Y suffers because of E (Adams 2013, p. 17). Adams then insists that our biblical religion or faith proclaims that God is for us, not against us, and, thus, divine goodness will follow the logic of compensation. For those who have suffered horrific evils God will compensate him or her by guaranteeing that the life of each is a great good to him or her on the whole and in the end. This is possible only if all individual horrendous evils are defeated, overcome, absorbed in such a way that he or she would not wish away those evils experiences. Adams put it this way:

Divine Love would permit horrors only if God could overcome them by integrating them into lives that are overwhelmingly good for the horror-participants themselves.



Adams maintains that engulfing is possible if the following propositions are logically possible: (1) God is the supreme, incommensurate Good; (2) God is Three Persons, but one God, thus instantiating a communion of persons; (3) God in Christ suffered horrendous evil through Christ's life, passion, and death; (4) We sufferers will be greeted with gratitude by the Triune God who suffered with us and for us; (5) None of those who are now enjoying the beatific union with God will retrospectively wish their sufferings away. I see no reason to think that the conjunction of these are metaphysically impossible.

In sum, according to Christian Theism, God suffered a horrendous death in the person of Christ. Christ's suffering and death opens a way to defeat the horrendous evils both Sterba and Adams have in mind. These horrendous evils that some human beings suffer in this life become a way of entering more fully into fellowship with God through Christ. If Christian Theism is true, the supreme good for human beings is fellowship with God, to include participation in the Triune fellowship. This communion with God is the highest good a human being can enjoy. Given this great good, even the horrendous evils some human beings suffer will be defeated by being engulfed by one's fellowship with God. In short, the objectively negative features of the horrendous evils some have suffered are defeated by being engulfed by the whole, which includes among its constituents, the great good of a deepened communion and fellowship with God and other human wayfarers.

### 7. Sterba's Rejoinder

Sterba's rejoinder to a compensatory response to the problem of evil includes a number of specific objections. Let me begin by quoting him.

... that even given an eternal future it is not logically possible for God to adequately compensate for all the significant and especially evil consequences of moral action that God, if he exists, would have permitted in this world. Here, is why. First, God's restoring to exactly the way we were just before we were wronged by having the horrendous evil consequences inflicted on us in this life, which is the ideal of restorative justice, would never be better for us, given the lost time and opportunity the wrongdoing would entail, than God's preventing those consequences from being inflicted on us in the first place. Moreover, it may not even be 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 the would-be beneficiaries be provided with those goods through God's permission of them.<sup>20</sup>

Sterba claims that it is not logically possible for God to adequately compensate the victims of the evils they have suffered. This is because:

- (1) A never-sufferer is always better than a compensated sufferer due to the time or opportunities lost as a result of one's suffering.<sup>21</sup>
- (2) It is not possible for God to fully compensate a sufferer because not even God can erase the past.
- (3) So, God cannot compensate the sufferer fully.
- (4) Any God-given "greater goods" not connected to any horrendous evils could and should be given without permitting horrendous evils.
- (5) The would-be beneficiaries of these "greater goods" would morally prefer that God had prevented the consequences rather than that the would-be beneficiaries be provided with those goods through God's permission of them.

Let's begin with statement (1) which claims that "A never-sufferer is always better than a compensated sufferer due to the time or opportunities lost as a result of one's suffering."

First, Sterba's response presupposes that the conjunction of the greater-goods defense and the free-will defense, conjoined with a beatific union with God who is the Supreme Good for human beings, is a morally insufficient response to the logical problem of evil. Yet, this is an assertion, not an argument. How might one fill in the gaps to offer an argument that is consistent with Sterba's principle cited above? Let's distinguish between "ideal compensation" and "sufficient compensation."<sup>22</sup> With respect to "ideal compensation" let's stipulate that one receives exactly the goods lost for which one is to be compensated. In contrast, by "sufficient compensation" let's stipulate that one receives goods that sufficiently satisfy a person with respect to the goods that one lost. While it is true that one who loses a limb in logging operation and receives a large financial settlement via his or his company's insurance has not received "ideal compensation", nonetheless, his compensation may be sufficient with respect to his present and future good(s). Ideal compensation is not a necessary condition for sufficient compensation.

In II Corinthians 11:23–33, we readers of this letter from the Apostle Paul learn of the many ways he has suffered, both mentally and physically, because of his being a faithful servant of Jesus the Christ. He was beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and lashed, among other things. He went without food, sleep, and endured other physical and mental deprivations in order to preach what he believed to be God's good news. He recognizes that he is likely to die at the hands of the Roman or Jewish authorities. He seems to accept that he will be crucified, a horrific way to die while affirming that, in so doing, Paul will share in Christ's mode of death as a sign of his faith. Paul infers, thus, affirms that he will be compensated for his horrific sufferings and he is better for having suffered and been compensated. Clearly, Paul has in mind "sufficient compensation" and not "ideal compensation". In one New Testament passage he says,

... 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, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifest in our mortal flesh. So, death works in us, but life in you ... Therefore, we do not lose heart, though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For the momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.<sup>23</sup>

While I have a hard time imagining myself desiring such a horrific fate, I don't think it impossible for someone to do so, and there seem to be many similar first person or third person testimonies of such similar confessions. The important point is that it is both logically possible and morally permissible for God to allow someone to suffer horrendous evils, given God's capacity to sufficiently compensate the sufferer, if God is a Supreme and Incommensurate Good.

Second, our grasp of them is incomplete, partial, and subject to error. Finally, we do not expect to know them, in any exhaustive way. In contrast, we Christian Theists insist that a good God can compensate those who suffer evils, horrendous or otherwise. In short, I presume that God has justifying reasons distinct from his capacity to compensate those who suffer horrendous evils, but I don't presume to be able to grasp those in any comprehensive and exhaustive fashion.<sup>24</sup>

Third, many philosophical and religious traditions affirm the value of suffering for the good. Clearly, Plato imagines that suffering for the good of the community and its civic life, as Socrates did, is not only noble, but the one who suffers in this way will receive more than adequate compensation. This compensation comes, either by virtue of its impact on one's own character or the way in which one's virtuous community honors the one who lived morally well. Perhaps, too, if there be life after death, in the afterlife one will receive compensation by being ushered into the presence of others that, too, have lived morally

noble lives or into the presence of those capable of compensating those who have suffered horrendous evils.

If it is morally fitting or commendatory for human beings to acknowledge and compensate their fellow citizens for such service, why is it morally better for God not to allow human beings to suffer at all rather than to compensate them for suffering when it is done to achieve morally noble ends? Doesn't this merely beg the question against traditional theistic understandings of the value of human free will, of soul-making practices, and of the possibility of union with God? In a variety of his letters, as suggested above, the Apostle Paul himself testifies to the fact that he has already been "compensated" for his service and fully expects a richer, deeper, and longer-lasting compensation. While these claims may be false, they are logically possible, unless on independent grounds Sterba knows that a good God—the incommensurately Supreme God—does not exist. But if he already knows that, he doesn't need a treatise whose thesis is that the existence of a good God is logically inconsistent with the existence of evil.

Consider statement (2): "It is not possible for God to fully compensate a sufferer because not even God can erase the past." First, if it is not possible that one who suffers be restored to exactly as he or she was before the person suffers, then God cannot be faulted for not doing so, just as God cannot be faulted for not making round-squares a constituent of our world. But perhaps this response is unfair to Sterba's point. Maybe the point is that because it is impossible to restore a person to exactly to the way he or she was prior to his or her experience of an horrific evil, neither the soul-making nor the greater-goods defense is an adequate justification of horrendous evils. But this claim just gives us an additional reason to think that these two defenses are not sufficient to adequately explain or justify horrendous evils. And, I agree. The difference between Sterba and me is this: Can God sufficiently compensate the person for a real loss rather than provide an ideal compensation? My answer is "yes", which I defend below.

Second, and more importantly, let us concede that a person who suffers horrendous evils has lost much, with respect to finite and contingent goods, and these are real, substantial losses. Such real losses makes compensation morally important. Yet, since union with the Triune God is the greatest good, given the Christian story, despite God's not restoring the person to exactly where he or she was before he or she suffered, a union with God and other persons who share communion with God will more than compensates the person for their losses. Moreover, if the Christian story is true, the person so united to God and to other fellow believers will not want to be restored to "exactly as he or she was before suffering the horrific evils" because he or she will endorse their new state as better than the previous state.

At statement (3) Sterba insists that God cannot compensate those who suffer horrendous evils because God cannot restore "lost time and opportunity to the sufferer". If one places the emphasis on the quote, then it is another version of the "restored sufferer" is never as good as the "never sufferer". Another possible interpretation is to place the emphasis on a diminished moral capacity. If so, then that interpretation is unsatisfactory. Those who suffer are often at least as responsive, and often more responsive to the misfortunes of others, than those that have not suffered.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, some never-sufferers, do not suffer because they never take risks for the sake of a greater good. For example, they don't oppose racism or oppressive and evil regimes.

But, to return to the issue of compensation, if the Christian story is true, then God, the Supreme Good, has all of eternity to compensate the sufferer for having lost time and opportunity to secure certain goods constitutive or instrumentally valuable with respect to human flourishing. Thus, the "lost time and opportunity" objection is not an objection to God's capacity to provide sufficient compensation to those who suffer horrendous evils. When I forgo spending time with a family member during an anticipated vacation because it was necessary with respect to professional duties, it does not follow that I cannot make it up to that family member by some other activity or activities that satisfies, thus compensating him or her. In so doing, I have compensated them for the "lost time and

opportunity.” If I can compensate for the loss of significant goods, surely, a good God can, but even more abundantly.

What about statement (4)? I confess that I don’t grasp Sterba’s objection. What are the “some goods” not connected to God’s permission of horrendous evils? Among other things, Swinburne points out that God has a reason to create both an orderly world and a world which contains much beauty. Consider the state of Colorado. It is resplendent with snow-peaked mountains, some 14,000+ feet in height, arrayed in ponderosa pines and blue spruce forests, and drainage basins with beautiful rivers and creeks, which are bountifully housing a variety of trout species and other kinds of aquatic life. Every year there are numerous hiking, skiing or snowboarding accidents in the mountains of Colorado and rafting accidents on Colorado’s numerous rivers or creeks. Every year these accidents result in some deaths or serious injuries. The goods connected with hiking these mountains in the summer and early fall, of fishing these rivers when the ice melt has ceased, and of skiing and snowboarding are many. In 2019, there were at least 109 deaths that occurred in outdoor recreation space in Colorado. Five years or so ago, I witnessed a death on the Arkansas River, near Buena Vista, Colorado, while fly-fishing with a friend. A raft with a family on board and its skilled rafter hit some rocks in a treacherous area and one of the family members was thrown overboard. The swift water and its undercurrent pulled him under, and his body was not recovered for quite some time. This is but one death, but for his family and friends, no doubt, his death was for them an horrendous evil. Surely, they have relived that incident often, wanting to rewind the script and have a different outcome. Is Sterba’s point that a good God, if a good God existed, would intervene in every such incident so that no one would ever experience such an horrendous evil? Again, we get a “playpen” freedom, under this way of thinking, not a morally significant form of freedom. On the other hand, if a good God exists, a compensatory response is possible, though it requires, in part, a life after one’s earthly existence. But, this is a part of the story Theists defend. Nothing Sterba has said shows this hope to be impossible. And what a grand hope it is.

Now consider statement (5). Perhaps there are two ways to understand (5). First, that would-be sufferers prefer not to have the good(s) that come about from such suffering to begin with. This implication is false, if the story about Thomas Broderick as told by Tom Brokaw is true in his *The Greatest Generation*.<sup>26</sup> Broderick is a part of a contingent of American and British paratroopers that parachute into Holland to take the Nijmegen bridge. Outnumbered by the Germans, on the fifth day, he got high in a foxhole and was shot, the bullet going clean through his temple. As I read the story, while it is true that Broderick, in one sense, would prefer that he not have been shot and blinded, in another, his life that follows his response to being blinded is so rich, he does not wish his blindness away. I see no reason to think his wish, if he in fact so wished, is psychologically impossible.

Second, perhaps Sterba is claiming that all human beings would prefer that God intervene in human affairs in such a way that no human being enjoy libertarian freedom so that horrendous evils are wholly eliminated. Why think this is true? Indeed, if the Christian story is true, the beatific vision enjoyed by those who suffer horrendous evils is different and richer than those who do not suffer horrendous evils. This is because they more fully enter into the “inner life of God” because God took on the horrors Himself. This is, in part, what Marilyn Adams means by her insistence of an organic relation between the horrors suffered and the compensating goods that engulf them. The person who “dies in the Lord” will be unified to God beatifically, whether or not they have suffered horrendous evils. Those who have suffered horrendous evils will enter more fully into the inner life of God because God took horrors into Himself, as the crucified and Risen Lord. Thus, oddly enough, I confess, the horrendous evils one suffered become a means by which one enjoys the greatest good more intensely.<sup>27</sup>

One can imagine that Saint Paul grasps these truths as he attempts to live faithfully in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ. In numerous passages in the letters of Paul, he celebrates the fact that he is suffering, as Jesus did, for the sake of God’s

story of redemption for human beings. So, in a very important sense, Saint Paul did not prefer that God prevent the sufferings that he endured. He understood and accepted that his suffering is being overcome, defeated, and vanquished.

### 8. Compensation Revisited

In email correspondence with me, Sterba says,

“The real issue between us is the compensation issue. . . . The evil that God, if He exists, would have permitted is not necessary for any of us to have a decent life nor is it necessary for us to have the opportunity to be friends with God. We do not need the goods that are logically connected to God’s permission of horrendous evils. An All-Good, All-Powerful God, if He exists, would have prevented this evil whose goods we do not need. The idea that God can adequately make up in the afterlife for permitting horrendous evils, the would-be beneficiaries of which would morally prefer that he had prevented—does not make moral sense. It is like saying that Dickens’s Scrooge is perfectly good because he changed his ways near the end of his life. What we have in Scrooge is a character, who, even while he does now good things at the end of his life, would have wished he had not done what he had done earlier in his life. The God of traditional theism cannot be like that.”<sup>28</sup>

The following points are made in the text of his email quoted above:

- (1) The evils that God permits are not necessary for any of us (significantly free human beings) to have a decent life.
- (2) Nor are they necessary for us to have an opportunity to be friends with God.
- (3) We do not need the goods that are logically connected with God’s permissions of horrendous evils.
- (4) If a good God exists, then a good God would have prevented the evils for goods we do not need.
- (5) That God can actually compensate those who have suffered horrendous evils does not make “moral sense”. It is like saying God is perfectly good because he changed his ways near the end of his life while admitting that God wished God had not done what God did at some earlier point in earthly time.

While endorsing the value of human freedom, the traditional theist agrees that the moral evils God permits are not necessary for human beings to have a decent life. However, these evils are the result of human beings misusing their freedom. The natural evils that God permits are a consequence of our finite and vulnerable natures and the world which God has given us to inhabit. It is a good world, we confess, but much of its natural evils are a function of its being one in which our freedom matters since it is possible for us to harm ourselves, others, and the world in which we live. The alternative posed by Sterba is, I suggest, once again, a “play world.”

Our friendships with one another matter in a variety of ways, and in varying degrees. Whether we are speaking of the kind of friendship that Aristotle rightly calls, “another himself” (Aristotle 1985, 1166a, 30–33) or those to whom we are amiable and kind, but much less intimately related, or those with whom we are friends, in so far as share a common community or working environment, it is possible to either treat that relationship too lightly, or to treat it callously, or to betray it altogether. Sterba has given no reasons to think that being friends with God requires an entirely different set of attitudes and modes of relating. In the Gospel stories, Judas’ betrayal of Jesus is surprising and vicious precisely because Judas had exercised his freedom to join Jesus’ closest circle of friends, which included a kind of intimacy and trust for which betrayal is a great evil. The Jewish and Christian scriptures emphasize that the goods of friendship with God, Jesus the Christ, and his genuine friends, are costly. In Sterba’s world, there are no such costs. Given the absence of these costs, then, moral praise, moral admiration, and moral revulsion are not possible.

Sterba insists that we do not need the goods that are logically connected with God's permissions of horrendous evils. What are those goods, the goods connected with horrendous evils? As far as I can see they are, first, the ordinary human goods of physical and emotional well-being, grounded in food, clothing, shelter, the kind of fair and consistent application of law and order that preserves and promotes them. Sufficient conditions for them include a just and stable social order that promotes respect for fellow citizens and members of other social and political communities. And, secondly, that human beings have a libertarian freedom by virtue of which each individual becomes virtuous or vicious by freely aligning himself or herself with good rather than evil. Important commitments of politically liberal societies are a wide range of political freedom grounded in the presumption of individuals having libertarian free wills. When Sterba insists that we do not need the goods that are logically connected with God's permissions of evils he is insisting that if there were a God, we would not be significantly free, just so that the evils that vex our world would be absent. I reject his claim while I know that some theists do indeed hold that what happens in the world is the only thing that could have happened because God has decreed this be so in every detail. If human beings are significantly free and God does not intervene at every moment for the sake of the morally better, then moral evil will occur, given that there are some, indeed, a great many, vicious moral agents. And at times we cry out, "Enough, O God. Make it go away, altogether, and by Your actions, O Lord, alone!"

The uncompromisingly honest, keen-sighted theist is no naïve, besotted optimist. He or she is moved by the suffering of the world, its rampant evils and injustices as, indeed, Sterba is. It is precisely at this point, the issue of compensation for those who have suffered unjustly is morally relevant. But of the conception of God who compensates those who have suffered horrendous evils Sterba asserts: "It" [God's compensating victims of horrendous evils] makes no moral sense." This is because

- A. It is like saying Scrooge is perfectly good because he changed his ways near the end of his life while
- B. Admitting that God wished God had not done what God did at some earlier point in earthly time.<sup>29</sup>

However, I don't see the view that God's goodness includes compensating those who have suffered as subject to either of these possible shortcomings, thus, being morally, or otherwise, less perfect. I think there are a number of reasons to reject Sterba's assertion, many of which I have already identified and defended. But here is one more effort to that end.

One ordinary understanding of compensation is the activity of providing someone some significant good for the loss of some other significant good. Often we associate compensation with being provided money for a work-related physical or psychological injury. But the consultant that reviews the practices of an academic department, a family-owned business, or a public hospital and receives payment for his or her consultation is being provided some significant good for their work and the time it takes to do the work well. A significant good need not be money, however. When in a pinch, a valued colleague does more than is required for the good of the department, and in doing so, spends less time on his or her own projects or in promoting or maintaining the good of his or her family, it is appropriate to recognize and to honor his or her sacrifices. In doing so, some compensation is provided the one making the sacrifice. Given this sort of example, one can imagine the compensation taking a wide variety of forms. One might receive a monetary bonus from one's employers as a means of compensating the valued employee. Or he or she might receive public recognition in a forum and in a manner both the employee and his or her colleagues will value. It is a fundamental conviction of the Theistic religious traditions that God desires fellowship with human beings and that human beings are created for this as a constituent of their actual flourishing. Sterba has given no reason to think that it is logically self-contradictory to suppose that a good God can and will compensate the victims of horrendous evils, superabundantly, by fellowship with God. So, in contrast to Sterba, I assert that the claim that God compensates human beings for the evils, horrific

or otherwise, makes sense. It is morally and conceptually intelligible. And union with God will superabundantly compensate human beings for any and all horrendous evils they suffer.

## 9. Conclusions

I claim that Sterba has not shown that the existence of a good God is logically inconsistent with the existence of horrendous evil. I hope I have succeeded in this intellectual task. Even if I have, I know full well that I have not solved the problem of evil as a lived experience. There is more to the problem of evil than the puzzle it provides our intellects. For those who have close friends or important family members who have died, tragically or unexpectedly, the death of one of them often causes an emotional or existential crisis that I refer to in an unpublished essay, the “existential problem of evil”. Douglas Gresham, C. S. Lewis’ stepson, says of Lewis’ written response about the death of Graham’s mother and Lewis’ wife’s (Joy Davidman), that the book was “one man’s studied attempts to come to grips with and in the end defeat the emotional paralysis of the most devastating grief of his life.” (Doug Gresham 2001, “Introduction” in C. S. Lewis, p. XXI). Two other books of the same genre are Nicholas Wolterstorff’s *Lament for A Son* (Wolterstorff 1987). and Paul Wisely’s *Keeping Up The Heart: A Father’s Lament for His Daughter* (Paul W. Nisly 1992). These books are insightful but painful reflections on death and grief, written by grieving Christian wayfarers who did not expect their sorrow to go quickly away, either into that dark night or that bright noontide day. Yet, each author, like C. S. Lewis, affirmed that their faith in a good God as something, ultimately, both intellectually and morally fitting. I join them in that affirmation.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For the initial essay, see (Beaty 2021). In addition to Dr. Sterba’s invitation to continue our conversation, I am grateful for the constructive comments and helpful suggestions on this paper provided by Baylor graduate students, Mr. Nick Hadsell and Ms. Kelsey Maglio, and Dr. Todd Buras (chair), Department of Philosophy, Baylor University.
- <sup>2</sup> By ‘good God’ Sterba means the traditional Theistic affirmation of God as a being that is maximally perfect in knowledge, power, and moral goodness.
- <sup>3</sup> By good God, Sterba means the omni-God of traditional Theistic affirmations and recent discussions in analytic philosophy of religion. Richard Swinburne’s definition of the Theistic God is: a person without a body, who is eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things. See (Swinburne 1979, p. 8).
- <sup>4</sup> Sterba, his response to Beaty in *Religions* (Sterba 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> The argument posed here is not articulated, as such, by Sterba. It is consistent with his main theses and captures the force of his objections, I contend.
- <sup>6</sup> In a recent discussion with me about the problem of evil, this succinct summary was articulated by Dr Todd Buras, chair of the department of philosophy, Baylor University.
- <sup>7</sup> See especially (Adams 2013, pp. 7–26; Additionally, Adams 1990, pp. 209–21; Adams 1999, pp. 155–80; Adams 2006, pp. 53–79).
- <sup>8</sup> While many theists have provided responses to atheistic arguments from evil based on an appeal to soul-making and free will, I am primarily relying on the work of Richard Swinburne.
- <sup>9</sup> Clearly, the material in these paragraphs is not original with me. (Swinburne 1979, pp. 180–99) and (Swinburne 1998, pp. 125–219).
- <sup>10</sup> As an example of goods and evils I point to the four cardinal virtues and their correlative vices. But there are many other virtues and vices made possible by libertarian freedom.
- <sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amelia\\_Boynton\\_Robinson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amelia_Boynton_Robinson) (accessed on 8 August 2022).
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/fannie-lou-hamer> (accessed on 8 August 2022).
- <sup>13</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin\\_Luther\\_King\\_Jr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King_Jr) (accessed on 8 August 2022).
- <sup>14</sup> Born in 1950 and raised in Benton, Arkansas, I vividly remember the Little Rock Central High School “crisis” generated by the “Little Rock Nine.” See <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/central-high-school-integration> (accessed on 8 August 2022).

- 15 Clearly, Sterba thinks of God as analogous to a superhero. But this assumption is inconsistent with a correct theological understanding of the Christian (Jewish and Muslim) God. In short, this assumption is a bad analogy.
- 16 No doubt, like other readers of this essay, I lament the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the loss of life and property this war includes.
- 17 (Sterba 2019, p. 52). On this topic, also see (Swinburne 1998, pp. 242–43). Additionally, (Swinburne 1979, p. 219).
- 18 Let us accept that “horrific evils” is primarily about qualitative distinctive evils which are also displayed in quantitatively disturbing amounts.
- 19 Among those are a blog by my colleague, Dr. Alex Pruss. See (Beaty 2021).
- 20 Sterba, “Response to Beaty” in *Religions* (Sterba 2021).
- 21 This is a more succinct and pithier restatement of one of my initial premises. I am grateful to one of my reviewers for this suggested revision.
- 22 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for prodding me to make this distinction.
- 23 2 Corinthians 4: 8–12; 16–17. *New American Standard Bible: Inductive Study Bible*.
- 24 My thanks to Dr. Todd Buras—colleague, friend, and chair of Department of Philosophy, Baylor University—for helping me see this point more decisively.
- 25 See the story of Thomas Broderick, shot in the head and, thus, blinded in World War II, told by Tom Brokaw in his *The Greatest Generation*. After spending some time angry about his fate, Thomas got on with his life, both marrying, having seven children, and establishing a successful insurance business. Broderick and some of his friends established a Blinded Veterans Association so he could share the lessons of his new life with other veterans struggling with blindness. A Catholic Christian, once he got over his initial anger, he set out to be the best husband, father, businessman, and citizen he could be . . . ” (Brokaw 1998, p. 24)
- 26 See the previous note.
- 27 A recent conversation with Dr. Todd Buras – colleague, friend, and chair of Department of Philosophy, Baylor University—who helped me grasp this possibility point more clearly via several discussions of Marilyn Adams’ contributions on these topics.
- 28 Sterba, email to me on 17 May 2021.
- 29 This was in an email correspondence with me.

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Article

# Divine Omnipotence, Divine Sovereignty and Moral Constraints on the Prevention of Evil: A Reply to Sterba

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**Abstract:** In *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba uses the analogy of a just political state to develop evil-prevention principles he thinks a good God would follow. With the assumption that God is omnipotent, these principles entail that God would never permit free agents to bring about horrendous evil. But free agents routinely succeed in doing so: entailing a logical incompatibility between the world's evils and the existence of a good, omnipotent God. I challenge this conclusion by sketching two ways divine omnipotence arguably entails that God would face moral constraints on the prevention of moral evil that human agents and political states do not. If my account is sound, God would be morally precluded from functioning as a sovereign governing authority in the manner of just political states. If this is correct, Sterba's arguments might be taken to show, not that there is a contradiction between the world's evil and the existence of a good, almighty God, but that there is a contradiction between the world's evil and the common theistic belief that such a God is the sovereign ruler of the world.

**Keywords:** problem of evil; divine omnipotence; divine goodness; divine sovereignty; theodicy; teleological and deontological ethics

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## 1. Introduction

In *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba invokes the resources of moral and political philosophy to develop a new version of the logical argument from evil. He aims to show that a good God's existence is incompatible with "the degree and amount of evil that actually exists in our world" (Sterba 2019, p. 1) by formulating evil-prevention principles a good God would follow: principles drawn from the Pauline Principle (the principle that we should not do evil that good may come of it) and designed to capture our understanding of how morally good individuals and just political states would operate to prevent evil. His ultimate goal is to show that, given these principles, the degree and amount of evil in the actual world is greater than what a good God would allow to exist were that God all-powerful.

This work is important for how it centers moral philosophy in our reflection on the problem of evil. Sterba's work invites serious engagement with the question of what it means for God to be good. But while there is much of value in his attempt to show that a good God would not, if He could do otherwise, permit the degree and amount of evil in the world, I think his project falls short of demonstrating that there is a logical inconsistency between the evils that exist in this world and the existence of a good and omnipotent God.

In this essay, I will argue that there is a plausible account of God's goodness—an account reliant on the very Pauline Principle Sterba invokes—according to which God's power places moral constraints on God not imposed on those with less power. Unless Sterba can show this account to be untenable, cleaving to this account provides an escape from Sterba's conclusion.

But cleaving to this account has costs. Those who do so must renounce the common (not universal) theistic doctrine of divine sovereignty: the view that God is the sovereign ruler of the world. This doctrine lurks as an unstated assumption of Sterba's argument.

More precisely, in positing the just political state as a template for understanding how a good God would behave in relation to the world, Sterba is positing *both* (a) that a God who occupied such a role would be bound by principles of justice like those that define a just political state, and (b) that God, if existent, would occupy such a role. My account of divine goodness challenges (b) on the grounds that divine omnipotence imposes unique moral obstacles to taking up such a role. Theists who embrace my account thus preserve the compatibility of this world's evils with God's existence by holding that it is morally wrong for God to adopt such a role, and that this is why God allows evils that, were God occupying such a role, it would be impermissible for God to allow.

If this move offers the only effective response to Sterba's arguments, those arguments show something significant: they show that even if there is no contradiction between the amount and degree of evil in the world and the existence of a God who is perfectly good and all-powerful, a contradiction emerges when one adds the further doctrine (embraced by many theists) that God is the sovereign ruler of the world. Hence, unless Sterba's argument can be challenged in terms different from the ones proposed here, theists would be forced by the strength of Sterba's arguments to abandon the doctrine of divine sovereignty.

## 2. Sterba on the Free Will Defense

Sterba begins his version of the logical argument from evil by arguing that there is no successful Free Will Defense, because in the actual world there exist moral evils whose overall effect is to reduce what he calls "significant freedom", meaning the freedom "a just state would want to protect since that would fairly secure each person's fundamental interests" (Sterba 2019, p. 12). His claim is that one cannot invoke significant freedom's value as a reason for God permitting the world's moral evils, given that many of these evils reduce rather than increase the significant freedom in the world. His argument then considers other theodicies which appeal to other goods besides significant freedom, most notably the good of soul-making, and he argues that these other theodicies share a common structure: they justify God's permission of evil at least in part on the grounds that God can make up for it later.

It is here that Sterba invokes the Pauline Principle—that one ought not to do evil that good may come of it—which he takes to entail that one ought not to *permit* evil that good may come of it. But he notes that the Pauline Principle is not absolute, and that as such, there may be conditions under which one is justified in permitting evil that good may come of it. Most of the rest of the book aims to show that, with respect to the "significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions" (Sterba 2019, p. 184)—what I will hereafter simply refer to as "horrors"—no such justification exists for God permitting rather than preventing them.

To begin my critique, I need to start with the kind of freedom whose optimization Sterba takes to be at the heart of the Free Will Defense: significant freedom. The first thing to note here is that Sterba deliberately attaches to this term a different meaning from the one Plantinga attaches to the term in the latter's development of the Free Will Defense. While Sterba, as noted above, defines "significant freedom" in relation to what a just political state would want to protect, Plantinga (1974, p. 30) uses "significant freedom" to name the freedom to pursue or refrain from "morally significant actions", which are actions that it would be morally right or wrong for the agent to perform. For Plantinga, the underlying presumption is that retaining the freedom to choose between moral good and moral evil—and hence retaining the capacity to choose moral evil—has a second-order positive value that God would want to protect even if agents who choose evil thereby bring about first-order negative values. Sterba's understanding of significant freedom does not in any obvious way preserve this presumption about the second-order values God would want to preserve, presumably because Sterba disagrees with the judgment that God would value this second-order value to the extent that Plantinga presumes. As such, given the different meanings attached to "significant freedom", it is not immediately apparent that the version of the Free Will Defense Sterba critiques is identical to Plantinga's.

A more significant concern for my purposes is this: Sterba's account of significant freedom conceives it in terms of *what a just political state would want to protect*, but my critique of Sterba involves arguing that God may be morally obligated to respect expressions of freedom that just political states would *not* be obliged to protect. As such, Sterba's formulation and critique of the Free Will Defense imbeds, within his understanding of the freedom God ought to optimize, the very assumption about how a good God would behave that I want to challenge. So long as the crucial assumption is thus buried within the terminology of "significant freedom", it is difficult to formulate and discuss the critique I want to develop here; one that questions whether the principles of intervention in people's affairs that govern political state are a good model for understanding what would govern the interventions of a good God.

Fortunately, there is an alternative construal of significant freedom that, when paired with some related concepts I am about to introduce, can be used to formulate the same basic critique of the Free Will Defense that Sterba wishes to push while disentangling the key moral premise from his definition of significant freedom. Specifically, let us construe "significant freedom" as the freedom to perform actions that have effects for good or ill.<sup>1</sup> The "effects for good or ill" might be intrinsic to the actions themselves—that is, the acts might bring good or bad into the world by virtue of being *intrinsically* good or bad—or the effects might be in the outcomes of the acts. If we construe significant freedom thusly, we can define *freedom-constraining actions* as active interventions in the exercise of free choices that either (a) prevent others from performing certain kinds of actions at all or (b) block those actions from having the kinds of effects they would have (in accord with natural causal laws) absent intervention. Further, we can define *freedom-policing actions* as freedom-constraining actions performed by a just state or its agents according to the principles governing a just state.

Using this terminology, we can reformulate Sterba's critique of the Free Will Defense as pushing the following point: a just political state does the most to protect the significant freedoms that a just state *should* protect when it engages in freedom-policing actions aimed at preventing horrors either by (a) preventing agents from being able to perform horror-producing actions or (b) mitigating the effects of those horror-producing actions such that they fall short of producing horrors. Sterba notes that the successful commission of horrors does more to reduce significant freedom (not only in his sense but also in mine) than would a carefully tailored policy of freedom-policing that targets horror-producing acts. Many of the objections theists pose to God engaging in freedom-policing acts fail to recognize the possibility of (b). So, for example, theists worry that if God polices horrors, God's omnipotence will entail that no one can ever successfully commit a horror. But if no one can successfully commit horrors, then no human agent would be motivated to try to stop those trying to commit horrors. In effect, people would see their choices in response to the evil plans of others as irrelevant, because those choices are rendered insignificant (they no longer effect the world for good or ill, since God will secure the good no matter what they do). And this, theists argue, is a serious cost. But Sterba rightly responds by noting that a carefully tailored freedom-policing policy that focuses on mitigating the effects of horror-producing acts would not have this cost. He asks us to envision God allowing the actualization of *some* of the negative costs of horror attempts if human agents were available to intervene but did not make the attempt, and God helping out to ensure none of the negative costs of horror attempts are realized when human agents do act to stop the horror.

Sterba's argument, formulated in my terms, is that such a carefully tailored freedom-policing policy, with the effect of eliminating horror from the world, would do more to secure significant freedom than would a hands-off policy. Thus, God's concern for significant freedom cannot explain the world as it is, given the amount of horror that exists. And so, he concludes, there is no successful Free Will Defense.

### 3. Teleological and Deontological Formulation of the Free Will Defense

My critique of Sterba's argument rests on what I take to be a failure to recognize an important application of the Pauline Principle; a failure that impacts his initial discussion of the Free Will Defense and undercuts the decisiveness of his critique of it. In overview, the problem is this: Sterba construes the Free Will Defense teleologically rather than deontologically, and this construal can be explained by the fact that he sees the Pauline Principle as posing a problem for the justification of *permitting the evil outcomes of misused freedom*. But the Pauline Principle might be invoked at what we could call an earlier place, to pose a problem for the justification of *freedom-constraining acts*.

Let me begin by sketching out in general terms the distinction I have in mind between teleological and deontological understandings of the Free Will Defense.<sup>2</sup> By the former, I mean a formulation of the Free Will Defense that takes significant freedom to be one important good (among others) that good moral agents ought to try to promote as much as possible in the world. I should note here that such a teleological approach need not suppose that only the *consequences* of an action are relevant to the determination of its moral status.<sup>3</sup> A teleological approach could hold that acts possess, at least sometimes, an *intrinsic value* that makes them good or bad in themselves apart from their consequences. What is crucial for a teleological approach is that it construes the intrinsic moral character of an act as one good or evil that the act brings about among others. Prescriptions are then arrived at through some kind of holistic assessment of all the good and bad that acts produce. Generally speaking, teleological approaches to morality take it that an act is morally right if it does the most good; that is, it does the best job, among the available alternatives, of promoting the good and limiting the bad (however these things are understood). It is also worth noting that while the most famous teleological theory in this sense, utilitarianism, equates good and bad with pleasure and pain, other teleological theories—such as G.E. Moore's—acknowledge a plurality of goods (Moore 1922, pp. 146, 224–25).

A teleological approach to the Free Will Defense would presumably see the possession of significant freedom as a good to be promoted, and might also view freedom-constraining acts as intrinsically bad. But if one thinks that a freedom-constraining act has an intrinsic badness apart from its consequences, that intrinsic badness would be treated as one mark against it. A freedom-policing act carried out in terms of well-designed policies might, despite being freedom-constraining, have the effect of reducing the total number of freedom-constraining acts in the world. If so, then this one freedom-constraining act eliminates more instances of the badness intrinsic to freedom-constraining acts than it brings about. On a teleological approach, if all else were equal, this would be sufficient to render the freedom-policing act morally right despite its intrinsic badness. If, furthermore, one took into account the positive value of increased significant freedom resulting from the reduction of freedom-constraining acts, the case for the justifiability of the freedom-policing act would be strong despite the act's intrinsic badness: so strong there would have to be extensive negative consequences in order to judge it wrong.

But in a deontological approach, the intrinsic moral character of an act is *directly prescriptive*. For the deontologist, the intrinsic moral evil of an act is not just one value to be taken into account alongside other values in order to arrive at a determination of the act's moral status. Instead, this intrinsic moral evil is better construed as an intrinsic *wrongness*: the act is of a kind that one *absolutely* or *prima facie* ought not to do, apart from any consideration of the total value produced by the act.

The "prima facie" qualifier is intended to indicate that, at least for many deontological theories, at least some intrinsically evil acts can be justified. While some acts are, perhaps, of a kind that is never permissible (they are *absolutely* wrong), others are of a kind that may be permissible to perform with the right sort of justification: they are *prima facie* wrong. But from a deontological perspective, the justification of prima facie wrong acts does not reduce to the kind of weighing of goods and evils characteristic of teleological approaches: to justify an intrinsically wrong or evil act, for deontologists, it is insufficient to show that the evil intrinsic to the act is outweighed by the goods it generates. This is what the Pauline

Principle, under one clear interpretation, is trying to say. “Do not do evil that good may come of it” entails that an intrinsically evil act does not become permissible just because it produces more good overall.

So, what can justify an act that is intrinsically evil in the deontological sense? Given the range and diversity of deontological theories, I cannot provide a brief answer that is fully satisfying. So, at the risk of oversimplification, I will content myself with a model of justification drawn from W.D. Ross (1930), who first invoked the “prima facie” epithet to qualify moral duties and prohibitions. For Ross, to say an act is prima facie impermissible is to say it is of a kind that would render it actually impermissible were there nothing else morally relevant to be said about it; more precisely, if it were not also, at the same time, of *another* morally relevant kind. On this view, actions acquire their initial moral standing—as prima facie duties (requirements and prohibitions)—by virtue of being of a particular kind. But specific actions can be of more than one kind at once, opening up the possibility that they can simultaneously be of an impermissible and obligatory kind. When that happens, the respective moral duties need to be weighed against one another (for Ross, by an appeal to moral intuitions). A prima facie impermissible act, then, would not be justified by the total value of what it produces but, instead, be the fact that (i) it is not only of the prima facie impermissible kind but also, at the same time, of a prima facie obligatory kind; and (ii) an assessment of the competing duties renders the judgment that the prima facie obligation is more pressing (See Ross 1930, pp. 19–20).

So, for example, I may have a prima facie duty to promote and protect the welfare of my child, and I may have a prima facie duty to respect Bob’s freedom. But if Bob is harming my child and I restrain Bob to stop this harm, my action is simultaneously of a prima facie obligatory and prohibited kind. Based on moral intuitions, the duty to protect my child is weightier than my duty not to constrain Bob’s freedom, thus justifying the latter despite its prima facie wrongness.

Given the distinction between teleological and deontological approaches to understanding moral prohibitions, permissions and obligations, we can see that a Free Will Defense could be of both teleological and deontological formulations. Under the former, freedom would be construed as inherently valuable, and freedom-constraining acts are problematic because they eliminate something of value. A teleologist might concede that in addition to eliminating something valuable (the freedom of those constrained), freedom-constraining acts are inherently bad. But on a teleological approach, a freedom-constraining act would still be justified when the good produced exceeded the act’s total evil (counting both evil outcomes and intrinsic evil). While it may be difficult to compare different kinds of goods, there are cases where wicked agents act to constrain the freedom of others. In those cases, a teleological approach would justify constraining the wicked agents’ freedom based on the value of freedom itself, since the wicked agents’ lost freedom is offset by the overall increase in freedom that results, and the badness of constraining the wicked agents’ freedom is offset by preventing the badness of the wicked agents’ freedom-constraining acts.

It is this way of thinking about the Free Will Defense that leads Sterba to conclude that it fails as a response to the problem of evil. As he sees it, the world is full of cases in which wicked agents commit horrors that truncate freedom far more than would an adequately constrained divine intervention. As a case study, he examines the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard. He argues that “there was no way that failing to prevent Matthew Shepard’s murder could have been justified in terms of a gain in significant freedom when compared to the loss of significant freedom that resulted from the murder” (Sterba 2019, p. 23). Sterba concludes that “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 distribution of freedom . . . ” (Sterba 2019, pp. 23–24).

Similarly, Sterba argues that a just political state would be “committed to restricting the far less significant freedoms of would-be aggressors in order to secure the far more significant freedoms of their would-be victims” (Sterba 2019, p. 29). Here, as in the

discussion of Matthew Shepard, Sterba challenges the idea that God's respect for freedom would preclude divine freedom-constraining acts. Instead, God's respect for freedom would demand such acts because they would produce more significant freedom overall.

This is clearly a teleological approach to thinking about the Free Will Defense: Sterba argues that a just God who cared about significant freedom could do more to promote it by engaging in freedom-policing than by refraining from freedom-constraining acts. But what about a deontological version of the Free Will Defense? On a deontological approach, acts of respecting and constraining freedom have an intrinsic moral character, and this intrinsic moral character is not just one value to weigh up among others. Instead, it grounds a moral status independent of this total assessment of the resultant value.

The simplest version of such a deontological Free Will Defense would regard the duty to respect significant freedom as absolute. So construed, God would be morally precluded from engaging in freedom-constraining acts no matter how much freedom is thereby lost when immoral agents ignore this absolute principle. God's moral perfection would thus be construed in terms of obedience to an unconditional rule prohibiting even a nuanced policy of freedom-policing that increases significant freedom by constraining those who would stifle it.

While this strong deontological formulation of the Free Will Defense would reconcile the world's moral evil with the existence of a God who is omnipotent and perfectly good *in the stipulated sense*, the stipulated sense is implausible. Most have the strong intuition that a duty to respect significant freedom is at best a *prima facie* one, not absolute, and that we are justified in violating the significant freedom of agents engaged in or about to engage in horrors. Perhaps this is because we see ourselves as having a *prima facie* duty to care for others' welfare, which in turn implies a *prima facie* duty to prevent horrors when we can do so easily and without significant personal cost. Following Ross's model for justifying *prima facie* impermissible acts, we would say the act of constraining the significant freedom of wicked agents to prevent them from committing horrors is simultaneously of a *prima facie* impermissible kind (a freedom-constraining act) and obligatory kind (a horror-preventing act). Given the intuition that the latter duty is weightier, constraining the freedom of horror perpetrators is justified.

If we apply these moral intuitions to God, God would have a duty to refrain from freedom-constraining acts except to prevent the commission of horrors. But Sterba rightly notes that in the actual world, agents routinely succeed in carrying out horrors.

As such, shifting from a teleological to a plausible deontological construal of the Free Will Defense does not by itself save the Free Will Defense from the kinds of concerns Sterba raises. But recognizing the possibility of a deontological construal nevertheless opens a door that Sterba believes he has closed. The reason is this: even if we grant that, in relation to human agents, a *prima facie* prohibition against freedom-constraining acts is routinely overridden, one might suppose that the justifying conditions for such freedom violations have something to do with unique features of the human condition that do not apply to God. If that is so, then a weak deontological formulation of the Free Will Defense might yet succeed.

#### 4. Applying the Pauline Principle at an Earlier Place

Given the importance Sterba places on the Pauline Principle—a principle that firmly endorses a deontological approach to thinking about the relationship between the morality of actions and the good (or evil-prevention) that they produce—it may be surprising that when he tackles the Free Will Defense, his interpretation is so thoroughly teleological rather than deontological. But this is less surprising when we look more closely at how he applies the Pauline Principle. What I will argue here is that even though Sterba's moral approach encompasses deontological concerns, as evidenced by his invocation of the Pauline Principle, the *place* in his moral thinking at which he invokes that principle leads him to an essentially teleological construal of the Free Will Defense. And as such, he misses a more explicitly deontological construal that *invokes the Pauline Principle at an earlier place*.

To see why, let us turn to Sterba's use of the Pauline Principle. The Pauline Principle, as Sterba formulates it, states that "we should never do evil that good may come of it" (Sterba 2019, p. 49). When Sterba introduces this principle, he conceives it not as an absolute principle but, rather, as one that admits of exceptions: specifically when the evil at issue is (1) trivial or (2) easily reparable or (3) "the only way to prevent a far greater harm to innocent people" (Sterba 2019, pp. 49–50). In my terms from the discussion above, Sterba holds that *permitting evil* is an intrinsically evil kind of act; hence, it is *prima facie* wrong and in need of justification. While the fact that good comes of it is never by itself a sufficient justification, (1)–(3) may provide the needed justification.

In applying this principle to his argument, Sterba's main focus is on *permitting significant and especially horrendous moral evil*: for ease of reference, what I will refer to as "permitting horror". Sterba's argument is that to permit horror is to do evil of a certain kind, and as such falls under the Pauline Principle that one may not do evil that good may come of it. But, if God exists and is all-powerful, God clearly permits horror. As such, the theist must account for God's permission of horror by showing that it falls under one or more of the exceptions to the Pauline Principle; that, despite being *prima facie* wrong, God's permission of horror is nevertheless justified. The mere fact that good may come of permitting horror is not enough to justify it. More is needed. And classic attempts to provide that "something more" are failures.

Given where it starts, this overall line of argument is compelling. The problem lies with where this line of reasoning starts. Specifically, the kind of divine act that Sterba identifies as a case of doing evil, and hence as in need of justification, is the divine act of *permitting horror*. And the divine act of permitting horror is best described as an act of omission.

I do not want to argue that omissions cannot be intrinsically evil and hence *prima facie* impermissible. I think they can. But I also think that when the act in question is an omission—when it is a case of *refraining* from what we might call "positive" action—it must meet a distinctive condition before we can say it is intrinsically evil and so a case of "doing evil". The condition is that the positive action one is refraining *from* is not *itself* intrinsically evil. If one omits a course of positive action, P, because P is intrinsically morally wrong, then the omission cannot be intrinsically morally wrong unless (a) P is only *prima facie* intrinsically wrong, (b) the *prima facie* case against it has been overridden by the circumstances such that P is justified and (c) one persists in refraining from P. Put simply, an omission cannot be intrinsically wrong and so a case of "doing evil" if the alternative to omission is the commission of an act P, where P is an intrinsic evil whose commission is *not justified*. In such cases, the Pauline Principle applies to the commission of P and so cannot apply to its omission.

When one applies the Pauline Principle to an omission, but one has failed to sufficiently consider that the alternative to omission may be the commission of an act ruled out by the Pauline Principle, I will refer this as starting in the wrong place with respect to the application of the Pauline Principle. My suggestion here is that Sterba starts in the wrong place when it comes to applying the Pauline Principle to divine freedom-constraining acts aimed at preventing horror.

More precisely, the proposal I want to consider is this: freedom-constraining acts should be construed as intrinsic evils and hence as *prima facie* impermissible acts in need of justification. Absent justification, they are instances of doing evil, and so prohibited by the Pauline Principle.

Construed in this way, freedom-constraining acts aimed at preventing horror are intrinsically evil insofar as they are freedom-constraining, but potentially justified insofar as they prevent horrors. The ill effects of omitting the freedom-constraining act (the resultant horrors) function as a potential justification for the otherwise prohibited evil of constraining freedom. Until that potential justification is evaluated and found satisfactory, one cannot say that the omission is itself intrinsically evil. First, we must evaluate the justificatory power of the fact that omission permits horror. Only if it succeeds as a justification can we



then label the omission that permits horror as *the evil act of permitting horror*: an evil in need of justification.

What is crucial here is the sharp difference between the kind of moral reasoning required to determine whether “failing to constrain freedom would permit horror” justifies constraining freedom, when such constraint is *prima facie* wrong, and the kind of moral reasoning required to determine whether permitting horror, *posited* to be *prima facie* wrong, can be justified by the good that may come of it. The success of a project pursuing the latter, insofar as it *assumes* the success of a project pursuing the former, cannot serve as a case for the former. Thus, if one pursues the latter project without first pursuing the former, one has applied the Pauline Principle in the wrong place. This, I argue, is the mistake Sterba makes.

### 5. Unlimited Redemptive Power

This error opens Sterba up to two objections, both of which feature God’s power in different ways. The first objection I will consider appeals to God’s redemptive power. By redemptive power, I mean the power to mitigate or eliminate the negative impact of involvement with evil. We might say that evils have the power to diminish or even destroy the positive value and meaning of a person’s life. Following Marilyn McCord Adams, we can attach the label “horrendous evil” or “horror” to evil that *prima facie* strips life of positive worth or, put otherwise, “gives one reason *prima facie* to doubt whether one’s life could . . . be a great good to one on the whole” (Adams 1990, p. 211). By “participation” in such evil, Adams means both the doing and the suffering of it, since horrors have the power to strip worth in both cases, although in different ways. To say horror strips life of worth *prima facie* leaves open the possibility that some action or occurrence could restore worth to horror participants.

Such restoration is what I mean by “redemption”. On this understanding, the redemption of evil is always with respect to some person caught up in evil. When the redemption is achieved through some third party’s actions, we might call such action a *redemptive intervention*. A redemptive intervention is *partial* if, when deployed in response to evil, a person’s life acquires more value than would have been the case if the person had been caught up in the evil but not been the object of the redemptive intervention. A redemptive intervention is *complete* or total if, when deployed in response to evil, the person’s life retains all the value it would have had absent being caught up in the evil in the first place.

Adams, in her work, distinguishes between two distinct ways that God might act to restore meaning and value to the lives of those caught up in horror (Adams 1990, pp. 218–20). Both would qualify as redemptive interventions in the sense defined here. The first way God might act to overcome horror is by engulfing it through the bestowal of the beatific vision; that is, the direct experience of God’s presence and love. As Adams notes, in traditional theology the good of such direct experiential connection with God is of such extraordinary worth that it swamps all finite evils, so engulfing them that even what would seem an evil of insurmountable magnitude absent the beatific vision is, within the context of such an infinite good, rendered trivial by comparison. In addition to engulfing horror, God could also act to defeat it. By this, Adams means the act of building up around the horror something of positive value such that the evil becomes an integral part of a greater good. By making it such that the horror becomes a component of a greater good, God thereby deprives the horror of its power to diminish the meaning and value of a life: because the horror is now an integral part of a greater good so valuable that the horror victim would not want to do without that good, even though its existence depends upon the horror. Adams argues that horror calls for being not merely engulfed but defeated. In her book *Christ and Horrors* (Adams 2006, pp. 53–79), she posits the Incarnation and Crucifixion of Christ as horror-defeating divine interventions insofar as these divine acts turn the emotional place of horror into the singular place in a human life where one can exist in solidarity with God at God’s most accessibly human. This power to creatively intervene to defeat horror, combined with the infinite value of the beatific vision, entails for Adams that God’s power to redeem horror is essentially *unlimited*.

By contrast, horrors are precisely those evils that human agents are generally powerless to redeem. In some cases, horror victims may reach a place in this life where, on the whole, their lives have positive worth. But there is little human agents can do to guarantee this outcome, and many horror victims die with horror as the defining fact of their terrestrial lives. This means that if I am in a position to easily prevent someone, V, from enduring horror but fail to do so, I have chosen a path that precludes me from acting on the whole in a way that could be rightly described as “being good to V”, even in a minimal sense.

What follows is that if I can easily prevent V from enduring horror by constraining the free choices of a wicked agent, my *prima facie* obligation not to constrain freedom clashes with my *prima facie* duty to be minimally good to V. And that would justify me in constraining freedom. Given the magnitude of what is being prevented, we tend to think that even a serious constraint on freedom would be justified.

Arguably, however, the strength of this justification for constraining freedom is a function of the extent of one’s capacity to redeem the evils that result from misused freedom, precisely because, with significant capacity to redeem those evils, our capacity to be minimally good towards the victims of horror in ways that *do not* involve constraining freedom is retained. Put simply, the more power I have to redeem the evils resulting from wicked acts, the weaker my justification for constraining the agents of those acts.

Suppose I am a grade school teacher supervising children at recess, and I see an altercation among the children in which a bully starts to act aggressively towards another child. At what moment do I intervene? Immediately? Or do I give the kids the space to exercise their freedom until the bully’s actions threaten harms beyond what it is in my power to repair? It may be hard to get a clear intuition here, since the human capacity to repair harms to others is so limited (emotional harms might be particularly hard to address). Given how limited my power to repair harms is and my lack of foreknowledge of the altercation’s trajectory, I may jump in quickly rather than risk harms beyond what I can repair.

But if we suppose that God’s capacity to repair harms is unlimited, the considerations that would justify freedom-constraining interventions might not merely be *less* compelling. They might vanish altogether, such that God is morally *precluded* from intervening precisely because God has the power to meet the obligation to be good to the victims of moral evil in a different way: by engulfing and defeating the evils they endure.

Sterba (2019, pp. 141–51) does consider whether divine redemptive activity might justify God’s permitting horrors. When he speaks explicitly about redemption, he uses the term in a much narrower sense than I have defined it here: as activity aimed at assuaging the guilt and achieving the moral reform of the agents of evil. But elsewhere (Sterba 2019, pp. 36–44), he considers how friendship with God might repair the damage done to victims of horror, and how Jesus suffering along with us might be a balm in the midst of that suffering. As such, he considers the other dimensions of what I mean here by the redemption of evil: engulfing and defeating evil. And he argues, plausibly, in each of these cases, that it would be better had the evil never been done in the first place than that it be done and then redeemed. So, if redemption is invoked to justify God’s permitting horrors, it fails.

But what I am arguing here is not that God’s capacity to redeem horrors justifies God in permitting them. What I am arguing, instead, is that God’s justification for constraining freedom—namely that it is necessary to prevent horrors—is undercut by the fact that God, by virtue of an unlimited divine power to redeem evils, has an alternative means of guaranteeing that horror victims have lives whose value is undiminished by horror. God’s unlimited capacity to redeem horrors strips God of the basis for justifying the freedom-constraining acts required to prevent horror in the first place. Thus, the question of whether God is justified in preventing horror never arises, because the horror-preventing act is precluded by its intrinsic wrongness, a wrongness not overcome by a sufficiently powerful justification. Since that wrongness is not overcome, and since it is wrong for God to do

evil that good may come of it, it is wrong for God to prevent horrors; even though it is not wrong for us.

In other words, Sterba misses a way in which the theist might go about accounting for God's apparent permission of horror; a way that he misses because he invokes the Pauline Principle in the wrong place. If one invokes the Pauline Principle where Sterba does, to label God's permitting horrors as *prima facie* intrinsically wrong and in need of justification, then God's redemption of horror will be treated as a potential justification for allowing it, and a rather poor justification, as Sterba argues. But before one can legitimately address God's redemptive power on these terms, one must first invoke the Pauline Principle where I propose: to label God's freedom-constraining acts as intrinsic evils in need of justification. Here, it is the fact that these acts prevent horrors that function as the purported justification, and God's redemptive power is introduced to account for why, in God's case, this justification is inadequate.

Sterba himself notes that greater power can deprive one of justifications for action that would be available to those with less power (Sterba 2019, pp. 78–80). For Sterba, this comes up when he considers typical reasons why finite creatures such as ourselves might be justified in permitting evils to occur: because (rather routinely) we lack the causal power to prevent the evil without thereby also permitting a greater evil or the loss of a greater good. But God's unlimited causal power, Sterba argues, deprives God of this kind of justification.

The argument I propose here follows a similar principle: our performing the intrinsically evil act of constraining freedom is justified (rather routinely) by the fact that such acts are the only way available to us of being good to the victims of horror and preventing the long-term evil effects of horrors. But that sort of justification for doing something intrinsically evil is unavailable to God if God can fully meet His obligations to the victims of horror through the exercise of his limitless power to redeem horror.

Put simply, it is not in my power to fully respect the freedom of every moral agent while also fully expressing care for the welfare of every person whose welfare I have the power to impact. This is so because it is not in my power to redeem the damage to human lives that results from some misuses of freedom. So, if I respect freedom to the point of not intervening in those misuses, I fall short of respecting human welfare. But it is in God's power *both* to respect fully the freedom of every moral agent *and* to respect fully the welfare of every person (ensuring that every person has a life with as much value and meaning as it is possible for a human life to have). This is possible because of *God's infinite capacity to redeem* the lives of those caught up in even the most horrific moral evils. That God can effectively erase the evil from the world after it has occurred by fully redeeming it (something none of us can do) could arguably entail that preventing the evil from happening in the first place no longer functions as a sufficient justification for violating the *prima facie* prohibition against freedom-constraining acts.

In short, Sterba explores whether God's capacity to and intention to redeem all evil can justify His doing the evil act (of omission) that permits the evil to occur. My question is whether God's capacity to and intention to redeem all evil can undercut a justification for His doing the evil act (of commission) of constraining freedom. Even if Sterba has a sound argument against the view that God's redemptive power justifies God in permitting evil (I think he does), it does not follow that God's redemptive power cannot play an important role in establishing an effective theodicy. This is because it may be the case that what would justify us (who lack God's redemptive power) in constraining the freedom of other agents cannot justify God (who has that redemptive power) in doing likewise.

Applying the Pauline Principle at an earlier place, then, offers the basis for a deontological Free Will Theodicy, one that sees acts of constraining freedom (once there exist beings who possess it and whose nature inclines them to use and value it) as intrinsically evil and so in need of justification. While humans are routinely justified in constraining the freedom of others—at least when their actions rise to a sufficiently serious level such that they are using their freedom to commit horrors that harm both the welfare and freedom of others—this is because they lack an alternative means of showing the concern for human

welfare that morality demands. But God, by virtue of possessing unlimited redemptive power, has such an alternative means and so lacks the justification we possess to set aside the *prima facie* duty not to constrain freedom. Lacking such a justification, God's hands are tied: *morally* tied by a deontological constraint that, by virtue of our limited power, we do not possess.

The moral perspective I propose here can be summed up in terms of the following four moral claims:

1. It is *prima facie* impermissible to constrain a person's significant freedom, implying that the act of constraining the significant freedom of horror perpetrators is *prima facie* impermissible.
2. If the *prima facie* impermissibility of constraining the significant freedom of horror perpetrators is not overcome by a sufficiently compelling justification, then constraining the significant freedom of horror perpetrators in order to prevent the evil they would otherwise do amounts to a violation of the Pauline Principle. It would be an impermissible instance of doing evil that good might come of it.
3. The *prima facie* duty to show minimal concern for the good of horror victims would be a sufficient justification for performing the *prima facie* impermissible act of constraining the significant freedom of horror perpetrators *unless* the agent had available to them an alternative way to be just as good to the victims of horror; a way that did not come at the cost of violating significant freedom.
4. God's unlimited capacity to redeem evil entails that God always has available a way to be just as good to the victims of horror as God would be were God to prevent the horror; a way that does not come at the cost of violating significant freedom.

If 1–4 are true, then God's permitting horrors is not an instance of God violating the Pauline Principle but a consequence of God being morally constrained by the Pauline Principle: God is prohibited from doing the evil of constraining freedom even that the good of horror prevention may come of it. What justifies *us* in constraining freedom—the duty to be good to a horror's victims—cannot justify God in constraining freedom, because God's unlimited capacity to redeem horrors means God has another way to be just as good to a horror's victims.

Note here that my aim is not to argue that 1–4 are true. Rather, my aim is to point out that if 1–4 are true, Sterba's argument fails. And insofar as Sterba has failed to show 1–4 to be untenable, he has failed to demonstrate that the degree and amount of evil in the world is incompatible with the existence of a good and all-powerful God.

## 6. Unlimited Policing Power

In the previous section, I argued that before we can ask whether God permitting agents to perpetrate horror can be justified, we must ask whether God constraining the freedom of those agents can be justified by the horror thereby prevented. If we assume that constraining freedom is an intrinsic evil, the Pauline Principle entails that the good outcomes of constraining freedom are not by themselves sufficient to justify it. Nevertheless, constraining freedom might be justified as the only way to carry out the moral obligation to show proper concern for the good of a horror's prospective victims. And while that justification would be a powerful one for agents with limited power to redeem horror—and so would generally justify humans in constraining freedom as a means to prevent horror—it fails to provide God with a justification for constraining freedom if we assume that God has limitless power to redeem horror and is thus able to fully carry out the duty to be good to a horror's victims without constraining freedom.

In this section, I want to suggest a second way in which God's omnipotence could limit the justifications for constraining freedom available to God. In this case, however, I want to consider God's freedom-constraining activity explicitly in terms of Sterba's analogy to an ideally just political state. Sterba's assumption is that God would relate to the world in a manner analogous to such a state. And one of the key features of such a state is how it regulates the freedom of those who fall within its jurisdiction. My argument here is this:

the principles that would guide an ideally just political state are reasonable standards for assessing God, only if we assume that God legitimately (morally) may occupy the role of sovereign governing authority over the world.

A sovereign governing authority, unlike a private individual, exercises extensive power over the free choices of those who fall within the scope of the authority's rule. Such an authority establishes the limits on how freedom may be used and polices misuses of freedom. For this very reason, we tend to think that there are moral conditions that must be met before someone can assume this role. Put another way, the assumption of such a role, given that it involves the use of extensive power to significantly constrain the freedom of others, requires justification. To operate *as* a sovereign governing authority absent such a justification is to act wrongly.

An ideally just political state thus needs to be understood not merely substantively—in terms of the principles according to which it governs, including those it uses to make decisions about when and how to police the exercise of freedom among its subjects and citizens—but also formally, in terms of the basis on which it assumes the role of sovereign governing authority in the first place. And arguably, this is so because exercising governing authority amounts to extensively and systematically regulating human choices within a community by imposing rules constraining freedom and policing obedience to those rules, and such systematic control over the lives of others is *prima facie* problematic even if the principles used to govern are themselves good ones. Put in terms of an analogy, if immensely powerful aliens (unburdened by anything like the Prime Directive of the *Star Trek* universe) were to come to Earth and assume control, erasing all elected governments and human laws and replacing them with their own, there is arguably a significant basis for moral complaint against these aliens *even if the principles by which they governed are sensible and just*.

But suppose, instead of a direct alien usurpation of governing authority, a single alien with extraordinary power, raised among us and bedecked in blue tights and a red cape, makes a commitment to intervene to stop every terrestrial villain who misuses their freedom to exploit or abuse others. Sterba invites us to consider such a superhero, and thinks we will agree that there is nothing objectionable about such a hero using their power to prevent such villainy. “In fact”, he says, “inaction by the superheroes in such contexts is broadly condemned by virtually everyone . . . ”. (Sterba 2019, p. 19) He goes on to imagine that such uses of superpowers are not limited to “protecting people from serious assault” but extend to “protecting people from the significant evils of an unjust economic system, thereby securing people’s freedom in that area of their lives”, envisioning Robin Hood-like uses of superpowers to ensure equity in defiance of systemic forces at odds with equity (Sterba 2019, p. 20).

Arguably, if the power of the superhero is sufficiently limited, such interventions might still be welcomed without complaint. Even Superman is just one man, and his super-hearing has limits. Keeping the criminals in check is a full-time job even absent super-villains, and so we would not imagine that his efforts would result in one man systematically usurping the government and replacing the existing laws and policies and enforcement system with his own. But if we imagine Superman to be sufficiently powerful, then Superman doing everything within his power to prevent or correct individual and systemic evils would amount to Superman *becoming the de facto sovereign authority of the world*.

This is because, with sufficient power, Superman’s interventions would amount to the creation of *de facto* public policies. If, according to Superman’s astute sense of justice, actions of type X are wrong, then anyone who tries to perform actions of type X will be stopped regardless of whether actions of that type are against the laws laid down by the elected government. If, having read the best ethical reflections on economic policy, Superman uses his powers to police the decisions of corporate executives, stymying their efforts to maximize shareholder profits by exploiting workers and ignoring environmental health, it would mean the implementation of a new and different economic system than the one we currently have in place.

And this is something I could imagine many would object to, even if Superman is guided by sound principles. With sufficient power—the kind of power that generally in human affairs requires the coordinated activity and consent of many individuals—Superman could, hypothetically, assume the de facto role of sovereign governing authority of the world without the coordinated activity and consent of others. All it would take is a consistent commitment to constraining human freedom in accordance with a set of principles and the power to carry out that commitment with enough regularity that defiance will generally fail. In short, if we add to Superman’s already extensive powers additional abilities that enable him to implement his vision of justice on the world, it would follow that Superman’s freedom-constraining acts would become freedom-policing ones: they would be the principle-governed actions of a person who has assumed the role of supreme governing authority over the world.

Even absent the relevant level of power, there is some moral difficulty surrounding the activity of an individual intervening in free choices in the manner of a law-enforcement officer but without being officially appointed to that role. We call such individuals vigilantes, and the fact that their activities have a controversial or contested moral status even if the substance of what they do accords with our sense of justice highlights the moral significance we attach to the more formal dimension of the legitimation of freedom-policing actions. But the problem is clearly magnified if the individual has so much power that there is little difference between that individual protecting people as far as they can from the unjust effects of misused freedom, and a fleet of Kryptonians arriving on Earth and announcing that they have assumed control.

Clearly, based on traditional theistic assumptions, God has enormously more power than that Kryptonian fleet. As such, if God were to do everything within the divine power to police misuses of freedom, God would—by virtue of divine unlimited power—thereby assume the role of sovereign governing authority over the world. In fact, even if God were to do a fraction of what God could do to police misuses of freedom, God would still assume that role. If God were to assume such a role, then Sterba offers some quite sensible principles for how God should govern. As Sterba notes, it might make sense for God to leave room for humans to have an impact on the world by ensuring that, if they are in a position to prevent evil but do not do so, things turn out less well than would have been the case had the human agents intervened, but not so badly as to result in horror.

But the substantive question of how God should govern assumes an affirmative answer to the question of whether it is morally acceptable, in the world as it is, for God to assume sovereign governing authority. But it seems a mistake, given Sterba’s aim of establishing a logical contradiction between the existence of God and the degree and amount of moral evil that exists in the world, for Sterba simply to assume that there are no moral constraints against God adopting the role of sovereign governing authority over the world. And given divine omnipotence, the question of whether God should prevent all the serious moral evils that God can eliminate amounts to the question of whether God should become the sovereign governing authority over the world. If there are moral impediments to God assuming such a role, then the fact that the world does not look the way it would were God occupying and acting in accord with such a role falls short of a decisive logical case against God’s existence.

To decide whether there are moral impediments to God assuming such a role, we must have two things: a clear account of what counts as the basis for legitimately holding and exercising such authority, and an account of the conditions in this world sufficient to determine whether this basis is in place. With respect to the former, a key question is to what extent *consent of the governed* is required, and in what form, for the adoption of the role of sovereign governing authority to be morally legitimate. Our political traditions certainly affirm the idea that some form of consent on the part of the governed is required before someone can assume a role which entails such far-reaching interventions in the exercise of significant freedom.

With respect to the latter, we must consider what it would look like for humanity to give God consent to rule, and whether humanity has to any significant extent in its history done so.

Of course, there are theists who would confidently claim that God is unique in not needing the consent of the governed in order to have a right to rule, but that confidence needs to be weighed against other considerations. Arguably, the kind of autonomous agents God created in fashioning humanity possess, by virtue of their nature, a right to play a role in who adopts the role of sovereign governing authority in their communal lives. Furthermore, since God created them as the kinds of beings who not only possess but value their freedom and autonomy, God thereby brought it about that there exist creatures who have a right to not be ruled by someone without some kind of collective consent.

With respect to the latter, even in societies that profess to desire to be ruled by God there are sufficient displays of human ego and pride and posturing to allow for the interpretation that these professions are insincere, at least on a scale large enough to warrant the judgment that humanity has given consent to God taking charge in the manner of a sovereign authority.

In any event, these are issues Sterba has not taken up, and unless and until Sterba does so, his case for a contradiction between the existence of a good, omnipotent God and the degree and amount of moral evil in the world remains inconclusive. Put simply, if God doing even a fraction as much as it is in God's power to do to prevent horror amounts to God *de facto* assuming the role of sovereign governing authority over the world, and if it would be morally impermissible for God to assume such a role absent the right kind of consent of the governed, then it would be wrong for God to do even a fraction as much as it is in God's power to do to prevent horrors. Furthermore, it would, arguably, be wrong even if doing so would result in a better overall balance of good and evil in the world, including the good of significant freedom and the evil of freedom-constraining acts. Thus, again, divine omnipotence may lead to God running afoul of deontological moral constraints that would not constrain the less powerful.

The argument here is not that this is the correct moral picture to adopt, only that it has some plausibility given our larger moral views on the conditions of legitimate authority to engage in freedom-policing. Hence, Sterba must tackle this moral picture and demonstrate why it fails before he can claim to have established a logical incompatibility between the degree and amount of moral evil in the world and the existence of a good and all-powerful God.

## 7. Summary in Terms of Sterba's Moral Evil Prevention Requirements

One useful way to summarize these objections to Sterba's argument is to reframe them in relation to the three "Moral Evil Prevention Requirements" (MEPRs) that Sterba thinks have not been met by God in the world. Sterba spells these requirements out as follows:

- 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 be easily 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 action 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 these goods. (Sterba 2019, p. 184)

Essentially, Sterba argues that if God exists and is good, God will follow MEPR I-III. But if God followed MEPR I-III and was all-powerful, there would be no horrendous evil. Since there is horrendous evil, there does not exist a God who is good and all-powerful.

With respect to MEPRs II-III, it should be clear that my proposed rationale for why God permits, rather than prevents, the horrendous evils we see in the world is neither to provide other rational beings with goods they would rather not have nor to provide goods to which they do not have a right. Instead, the proposed rationale is that God is morally constrained by deontological prohibitions against violating significant freedom.

According to the first argument, the constraint comes from a *prima facie* prohibition against violating freedom: one which is routinely overridden in the case of finite persons by the more pressing weight of competing duties, but which is not so overridden in God's case because God's unlimited capacity to redeem evil entails God can meet these other duties without violation of significant freedom. According to my second argument, the constraint comes from a prohibition against becoming the *de facto* governing authority of the world without the consent of the governed: a prohibition that given God's power, God would violate if God engaged in even a fraction of the horror prevention of which God is capable.

If God permits horrors because of such deontological constraints, God is not violating MEPR II or III. Hence, there is a potential account of God's permission of the horrors of the world that is not ruled out by these requirements.

With respect to MEPR I, the deontological perspective proposed here can be seen as either calling for a revision to MEPR I or a distinct interpretation of it. On the former approach, the deontological critic of Sterba would propose the following alternative:

MEPR I\*: Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions when that can be easily done without violating any active deontological moral duty (such as those imposed by persons' rights).

The argument of this paper is that there is a plausible moral perspective Sterba has not tackled: one which holds MEPR I\*, and according to which there do exist active deontological moral duties that would preclude God from preventing horror, even in cases where no such duties obtain for persons with limited power. Where MEPR I\* would require that finite persons prevent horror, the same is not the case for God.

Alternatively, with a sufficiently robust notion of the *correlativity* of rights and duties, one might interpret Sterba's formulation, MEPR I, as equivalent to MEPR I\*: if God has a duty to respect the significant freedom of finite persons, one might say those persons have a correlative right—at least against God—for that freedom to be respected. In that case, the argument here would be that given God's unlimited capacity to redeem horrors and the way in which that strips God of the justification (generally available to humans) for violating the *prima facie* duty to respect significant freedom, the *prima facie* human right to exercise significant freedom is rendered absolute in relation to God and so entails rights against God that do not apply against other finite persons.

Whether one formulates the response as a revision of MEPR I or an interpretation of it, the conclusion is the same: a plausible moral perspective that Sterba has failed to consider entails that if God existed and were almighty and good, the horrors we see in the world might still obtain.

## 8. The Case against Divine Sovereignty

In the preceding, I have argued two things. First, I have defended the plausibility of the idea that the more power one has to *redeem* the evil consequences of misused freedom, the less those consequences can justify violating a *prima facie* prohibition against freedom-constraining acts. If God is all-powerful, then God arguably possesses an unlimited capacity to redeem evil and so is barred from all freedom-constraining actions, and so must permit horrors. That is, God is morally prohibited from policing human freedom in the ways that human political states—with their limited capacities to redeem horror—are not only permitted but morally required to do.

Second, the more power one has to prevent misuses of freedom (and the outcomes of such misuse), the more likely it is that doing everything in one's power to prevent "significant and especially horrendous consequences" of misused freedom amounts to



adopting the role of sovereign governing authority over humanity, and thus potentially running afoul of moral principles dictating the conditions under which one can rightly assume such a role. Given divine omnipotence, God *will* become the de facto governing authority of the world unless God does far, far less in terms of freedom-policing than God is capable of doing. In fact, even a tiny fraction of the power at God's disposal would, if implemented in the project of policing misuses of freedom, reflect a level of sovereign authority over the world that swamps what any elected human authorities could achieve. Hence, if there are moral principles that require the consent of the governed before someone may adopt the role of sovereign governing authority over the world, God may be morally precluded from exercising even a fraction of the policing power at God's disposal absent such consent. And it is at least arguable that human societies have only paid lip service to the idea of giving the rule of the world over to God, and there has never been anything like the consent of the governed being morally required for God to assume that role.

Both of these arguments converge on the conclusion that it is wrong for God to assume the role of sovereign governing authority over humanity. The second argument does so directly, but the first argument does so indirectly: if God is barred from constraining the freedom of others by virtue of God's unlimited power to "make right" the consequences of misused freedom, then God is morally precluded from "policing" misuses of freedom. Insofar as the role of sovereign governing authority presupposes a right and duty to police misuses of freedom, it follows that God is morally precluded from assuming that role. In fact, the first argument is more powerful than the second: if it succeeds, it may be morally wrong for God to adopt the kind of role in human affairs that a just political state adopts, even if the concerns raised in the second argument are adequately addressed. Even if some properly conceived mechanism for securing the consent of the governed in relation to God is implemented, it may be wrong for God to assume control.

This point is significant because of the extent to which theistic traditions have held that God *is* the governing authority over the world: a point especially prominent in Calvin's theology and that of those who follow him. The following is characteristic of Calvin's view:

For [God] is accounted omnipotent, not because he is able to act, yet sits down in idleness, or continues by a general instinct the order of nature originally appointed by him; but because he governs heaven and earth by his providence, and regulates all things in such a manner that nothing happens but according to his counsel . . . whereas the faithful should . . . encourage themselves in adversity with this consolation, that they suffer no affliction, but by the ordination and command of God, because they are under his hand. (Calvin 1921, p. 185)

Whatever the weaknesses of Sterba's case against the compatibility of the world's evils and the existence of a God who is wholly good and all-powerful, he makes a powerful case for the conclusion that the world is not as we would expect if such a God occupied the role of sovereign authority. I would go so far as to argue that Sterba has shown, using the model of the ideally just political state, that if God did occupy such a role, God would not qualify as morally good in anything like the sense of "morally good" we would apply to such a state. Furthermore, given the obvious good consequences of a perfect God operating as supreme governing authority, teleological considerations would speak in favor of God taking up that role. Thus, it would only be by virtue of some powerful deontological constraint against doing so that God would refrain.

Given these points, I would argue that in light of Sterba's arguments, theists should hope that some deontological features of divine goodness (if not the ones sketched out here, then other ones) preclude God from intervening in the affairs of the world in the manner of a sovereign authority. By implication, they should hope that the doctrine of divine sovereignty is false. Because the alternative may be to deny either that God is all-powerful, or that God is good in anything resembling what we ordinarily mean by that term.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This is essentially what Swinburne (1998, p. 11) means by his term “efficacious freedom”.
- <sup>2</sup> My formulation of this distinction is my own. It attempts to capture a crucial distinction between different ways of envisioning the relationship between moral obligations and the promotion of the good. I trust that it is mostly consonant with such articulations of the distinction between teleology and deontology as those found in Rawls (1999, pp. 21–22), Williams (1985, pp. 16) and Scheffler (1992, pp. 42–43), but the distinction as I articulate it here is specifically intended to capture the distinctive way of thinking about the Free Will Defense that Sterba exemplifies—and the alternative that is thus excluded—rather than to comprehensively capture how ethicists have understood this distinction.
- <sup>3</sup> Reitan (2000) formulates a point similar to the one made in this section, but in terms of the distinction between consequentialist and deontological approaches. I choose the current language to avoid the confusion that the “consequentialist” label is in danger of evoking.

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Article

# A Kantian Response to the Problem of Evil: Living in the Moral World

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**Abstract:** James Sterba has presented a powerful and existentially sincere form of the problem of evil, arguing that it is logically impossible for God to exist, given that there are powerful moral requirements to prevent evil, where one can, and that these requirements would bind an all-powerful and good God, who would indeed be able to prevent such evil. The ‘Kantian’ argument that I set out, if accepted, would undermine the following stage of Sterba’s argument: 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. The Kantian argument will hold that we are able to believe that, in some sense, such horrendous evil consequences do not really obtain, although they appear to. The claim is not that the Kantian argument is ‘persuasive’, but that if some Kantian assumptions are granted, we do have a response to Sterba, which throws open a different way of looking at things. I conclude with some more informal reflections on what we might take away from the Kantian argument, even if we do not accept the deep assumptions, or the progression of the argument. I will not worry too much about demonstrating that this is a ‘correct reading’ of Kant, although I think it is.

**Keywords:** Kant; evil; Sterba; God

## 1. Overview

A standard line of critique of analytical philosophy of religion, from various Wittgensteinian and post-Kantian traditions, is that no one has ever really been brought to religious conviction, or dissuaded from it, because of a formal argument. Sterba presents himself as a striking counter-example, insisting that he would give up his atheism, if his argument can be demonstrated to be faulty. Having formerly been religious, indeed, in a religious order, Sterba writes:

My commitment to atheism is only as strong as the soundness and validity of my argument. Undercut my argument and proof, at least in my case, no more atheist.<sup>1</sup>

As set out by Sterba, this is his argument:

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 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. (This is assumed by both Mackie and Plantinga).

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5. Therefore, it is not the case that there is an all good, all powerful God. The three Moral Evil Prevention requirements in turn, quoting Sterba, are as follows:
- Moral evil prevention requirement 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.
  - Moral evil prevention requirement 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.
  - Moral evil prevention requirement 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.<sup>2</sup>

The ‘Kantian’ argument that I am about to unfurl agrees with stages 1, 2 and 3 of Sterba’s argument above, and accepts the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements. Where the disagreement occurs is at stage 4, specifically the words I have italicised below:

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

The Kantian argument will hold that we are able to believe that, in some sense, such horrendous evil consequences do not really obtain, although they appear to. I will now give a skeleton overview of this argument, which I will then fill-out.

1. It ought to be the case that being moral is met with proportionate happiness.
2. Such a world is one where the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III hold.
3. Where knowledge is limited, practical reason enjoys freedom to hold-things-for-true.
4. In the world that appears, being moral is not met with proportionate happiness, such that in the world that appears, the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III do not obtain.
5. What appears is not fundamental.
6. Practical reason is entitled to believe in a moral realm (from 3), wherein the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III do obtain. Such a fundamental moral realm is one where God does adhere to the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III.
7. Therefore, the argument from the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III does not provide a necessary argument for the non-existence of God.

I do not pretend the argument is ‘persuasive’. Certainly, I do not ‘believe’ it. Let me say now: I am confident that this is not the counter-argument that will shift Sterba away from his atheism. But, it does seem to me that if some Kantian assumptions are granted, this does provide an interesting response to Sterba, which throws open a different way of looking at things. Perhaps, a strange and quixotic and utterly un compelling way, but, a way nonetheless.

The question arises, here, of where the burden of proof lies. A natural reaction is to affirm that it lies with the Kantian (on my interpretation), to demonstrate that the rather outlandish assumptions apply, or, that they are at all plausible. Something interesting happens, though, when we consider the strength, scope, and ambition of Sterba’s proposed argument. The point is this: Sterba does not just say that the existence of God is extremely unlikely, or improbable, given the existence of evil. He affirms that it is *logically impossible*. The strength of this claim is what may shift the burden of proof, away from the Kantian, back to Sterba, or his defender. There seem to me to be two main lines of response available to Sterba, or to a philosopher defending Sterba’s position:

- (i) To show that the required Kantian ‘outlandish’ assumptions involve affirming something that is indeed logically impossible. In this way, the claim that the existence of God is logically impossible will still stand.

- (ii) To qualify and nuance the scope of the argument for the logical impossibility of the existence of God, by specifying that it applies only to the world on a more or less ‘common—sense’ conception of what the world consists of, where apparent spatio-temporal facts and events are, more—or-less, as they appear to be.

Perhaps we might embody the second-approach by adding a further requirement, over and above the three ‘moral evil prevention’ requirements specified by Sterba. We could call this the ‘common sense preservation requirement’:

The world as it appears is more-or-less the world as it fundamentally is.

The addition of something like this ‘common-sense preservation requirement’ is interesting, as it would explicitly limit the scope of the ‘logical impossibility’ argument, in a way that is particularly germane in the context of religious belief. This is because it is a *pronounced and distinctive feature of much religious belief to claim that the world is indeed not as it straightforwardly appears to be.*

To insist on the ‘common-sense preservation requirement’ is, therefore, not a neutral thing to do, in relation to vast swathes of religious belief. It is to stack matters against the religious believer, and to denature the holistic nature of some religious belief, by lopping-off a vital element and dimension of how believers describe the world that presents itself to them. In this article, I explore how this works in relation to a Kantian worldview (on one interpretation), but a similar structural issue may arise in relation to other worldviews and fundamental metaphysical pictures: perhaps in some strands of Hinduism and Buddhism, which regard the world as it presents itself as an appearance of something more fundamental; something like this question may also arise in relation to elements of Platonism, which are present in Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas, where spatio-temporal phenomena are not the definitive ‘version’ of what is really going on.

I suspect that those more versed in the details and depth of Sterba’s arguments, across a number of works,<sup>3</sup> and in the literature arising from Sterba’s work, will have plenty to say in relation to this structural challenge, if not, so much, in relation to the Kantian specifics. The structural challenge, to summarise, is this:

To what extent does (i) Sterba’s logical argument for the impossibility of the existence of God, and (ii) similar logical arguments, rely upon the ‘common-sense preservation requirement’, in particular in relation to stage 4 of Sterba’s argument? Stage 4 of the argument, we recall involves the following claim:

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.

The possible answers, as I understand the matter, fall into two camps:

- (a) Such logical arguments do assume the common-sense preservation requirement.
- (b) Such logical arguments do not assume the common-sense preservation requirement. In either case, we have an interesting result. If (a), we face the problem that this is not a neutral requirement, particularly in relation to religious belief. If (b), how are we to go forward? Do we need, in each particular case, to show that the violation of the common-sense preservation requirement amounts to a logical impossibility? This is quite a different project from the one we started out with. The other alternative might be to abandon the claim that this is so austere an argument about logical impossibility, but that we need not insist on ‘common-sense’ in a way that so flatly excludes much religious belief and instinct. Perhaps we could frame something along the following lines:
- (c) Such logical arguments work alongside most plausible and non-extravagant ontologies, although may not work with more ‘extreme’ or ‘outlandish’ metaphysical positions. With (c), of course, the hard-work has only just begun, of specifying the bounds and limits of a plausible and non-extravagant ontology. An even more radical response would be to give up on the claim to demonstrate the ‘logical impossibility’ of the existence of God, and ‘merely’ to argue that the existence of God is impossible, given widely held assumptions about the epistemological status of statements about reality that are based upon how the world appears to us, which, although plausible,

are not logically indubitable. The burden of proof is then thrown back onto the Kantian (or to whoever is defending a perspective that goes beyond ‘common-sense’). But, this would come at some cost to anyone, including Sterba, who is eager to insist on the logically impossibility of the existence of God. In relation to this distinctive claim, response (d) amounts to a significant concession, and a retreat, albeit a dignified one.

With these wider considerations behind us, I will now set out the specifics of one possible version of this wider challenge, arising from an interpretation of Kant, which I have set out extensively elsewhere, and draw upon here. After setting out some of the wider Kantian framework in a bit more detail, I will ask what the main assumptions are, if one is to accept the Kantian argument. On the surface, it might seem that the most important assumption is a metaphysically extravagant world-view (noumena and phenomena, and so on). I will suggest that this is not the case: that the main assumptions are more epistemological, about the status of a certain type of transcendental argument, and the freedom of practical reason to make its own moves, when theoretical reason is in the dark. This complexity may make the various possible ‘responses’ outlined above even more complicated: of demonstrating that outlandish metaphysical positions are logically impossible (strategy b), or of articulating what the limits are for a ‘non-outlandish’ metaphysical (strategies b and c). This is because the metaphysically ‘outlandish’ viewpoints are better motivated than they might initially appear. They are not constructed upon some claims to supernatural metaphysical intuition or inspiration, but are grounded upon a type of epistemic humility, combined with a particular understanding of what constitutes the purposes and possibilities of belief-formation. I will conclude with some more informal reflections on what we might take away from the Kantian argument, even if we do not accept the deep assumptions, or the progression of the argument. I will not worry too much about demonstrating that this is a ‘correct reading’ of Kant, although I think it is. I will offer some grounds for finding such an argument in Kant, with footnotes gesturing to more evidence, for those who care enough.

## 2. The Kantian Picture

In this short section, I will set out a sweeping interpretative picture of how I read Kant, or, the Kant needed to give us the argument sketched out above. This is not the place to offer an extensive defence of this account. This I have attempted in various publications.<sup>4</sup> But it might be helpful, here, to locate my claims in the wider realm of ‘Kant studies’: I associate myself with a recently resurgent ‘metaphysical’ reading of Kant, which understands Kant as having more substantive commitments—ethical, ontological and theological—than more deflationary commentators thought possible or proper for Kant.<sup>5</sup> Within this movement, I have a particular interest in Kant’s theological commitments, especially with respect to human freedom as it relates to divine action. A number of recent commentators have also been interested in Kant’s theological convictions. My most distinctive claim, perhaps, is to affirm that although Kant believes in God and in a meaningful conception of transcendence, he consciously diverges from Christianity as he would have received it. My grounds for saying this have been that Kant avoids the categories of revelation, tradition, and authority, as well as denying that God can be the final or efficient cause of human action. Kant also rejects the traditional claim that loving and knowing God is our highest good. I have found this to be a more productive lens for appreciating Kant than approaches which judge Kant to be a more-or-less lousy Christian of some stripe (with different emphases on Lutheranism or a more Platonically infused theological rationalism).<sup>6</sup>

Having marked out the terrain a little, I will now move at a bracing pace through my main interpretative headlines.

For all the undoubted difficulty of Kant’s texts, a firm grasp of four principles serves to illuminate the fundamental contours of his ‘critical’ thinking (broadly speaking, Kant’s thought after 1770):

- (1) The 'inner value' of the world is freedom, and nothing else. Freedom means: setting ends for yourself, without being impacted upon by anything external to you. Other things may be admirable, or impressive, but they lack this value.
- (2) Reason is a larger category than knowledge. There is far more that we can have rational beliefs about, than we can know about. This means that Kant would not recognise the ultimate validity of a debate between 'faith and reason': because faith, religious belief (Glaube), is entirely within the stretch of reason, even though it goes beyond the bounds of knowledge.
- (3) Thinking about the 'conditions of possibility' of something can expand your knowledge, and your set of rational beliefs. Consider: if you know something, or have a rational belief about something, you can then ask, 'what else must be the case, or, what else do I need to believe, in order to make this possible?'. You then have warrant for affirming, for 'holding-for-true', whatever comes out of this conceptual investigation. You might not know it, but, as we have seen, from the second principle, knowledge is not everything. There is a caveat here: anything you come up with must not contradict something that you know. But that is a fairly minimal test, precisely because we do not know very much.
- (4) Kant thinks in a way that is big and binary. His philosophy tends to lead us to a crossroads, where he finds that everything (created and uncreated) is either this way or that way, where what is offered is an entire package, a whole and encompassing world-view. In relation to the question of morality and freedom the options are these: we either live in a 'moral world' where freedom is possible, or, we live in a world of mechanistic determinism, where freedom and morality are impossible. The former world has value, the latter world is a 'mere desert', entirely without value. Kant finds that we can, indeed, must rationally believe that the entire and whole world is undergirded by freedom, and not mechanism, and so, that it is a world with value.

Kant's 'transcendental idealism' arises from Kant's ability to affirm such a world undergirded by freedom. Putting it briskly, the idea is this: if space and time are features of the world in itself, and directly created by God, they go 'all the way down' into reality, and we are contained within them. This is bad news for freedom, because, Kant believes, space and time are through and through deterministic in ways described by Newtonian mechanism. If, then, space and time are features of our reception of the world, and not in the world in itself, this is good news for the possibility of freedom. It enables us to believe in freedom and morality. There is a conceptual space for fundamental reality to be quite other than it appears to be. Here, we can recall the third principle: something providing the 'conditions of possibility' of something is itself permitted to provide warrant for a belief, if it does not contradict what we know, because, reason is a larger category than knowledge (the second principle).

For Kant, the 'noumenal realm' is the ground of the world of appearances ('phenomena'—'that which appears'), whereby 'noumenal objects' affect us. These noumenal objects bring about our experience, which experience is always mediated through our forms of intuition, space and time. Although we understand that all our experience is always on this side of this mediation, coming downstream of how we receive the world, we also understand that it is dependent upon the world as it is in itself, even though we cannot know anything substantial about this world, except that it does indeed ground our experience. This interpretation of transcendental idealism is known in the literature as the 'noumenal-affection' account.

'Transcendental idealism', on this interpretation, has three dimensions. First of all, it sets the limits to knowledge (which, as we have seen, is a more constrained category than reason). Secondly, within those limits, knowledge is made secure. Thirdly, it opens up possibilities for rational thinking beyond the limits of knowledge. That is to say, transcendental idealism retains epistemic humility about what we can know, whilst opening up the possibility that the way things are is fundamentally different from the way things appear to be. Things appear to be determined, but this is just an appearance. We can



believe in freedom without epistemic irresponsibility, precisely because belief in freedom is a ‘condition of possibility’ of morality.

Once we are properly equipped with such an interpretation of transcendental idealism and noumenal freedom, we are ready to understand the type of transcendence that is really at work in Kant’s philosophical religiosity. The history of human actions, as with everything that appears, is the appearance of that which is fundamentally non-spatial and non-temporal, where there is no sense in which we move towards or further away from the noumenal dimension wherein morality and freedom resides. For this reason, Kant emphasises the invisibility of moral action, stating, for example in the *Groundwork*, we can never recognise whether an action is actually grounded on conformity with the moral law, rather than happening to coincide with it.

This position can be understood as delivered by a combination of the four principles set out above. Kant asks, ‘what sort of *entire world* is the condition of possibility of the freedom that is the inner-value of the world?’ (principle four). Transcendental idealism is part of Kant’s answer. Because it does not contradict what we know, but only goes beyond it, it is rational to believe it (principle two). Because, Kant thinks, it is the *only entire world*, the only way the world can be, that can sustain such an ambitious conception of freedom (principle one), we should believe in it (principle three). Furthermore, it is not rational to believe more than is required, in order to sustain the possibility of the freedom that is the inner value of the world. In these two constraints (‘we should believe’ and ‘believe no more than is required’) lie Kant’s epistemic discipline and humility.

With this in place, we are able to understand Kant’s conception of autonomy. Autonomy never appears, for Kant, in space and time. Autonomy is only possible if there is a realm of noumenal freedom, where rational will is able to will itself, in its activity of end-setting. We note, then, that the possibility of autonomy is *itself* the great philosophical-religious hope of Kant’s whole system. Only if there is a dimension of reality beyond mechanism, is end-setting, and so autonomy possible. The alternative to a moral world with freedom, is a universe without end-setting, and without freedom, which Kant tells us repeatedly, would be a sort of ‘desert’ with no ‘inner value’. Believing in the possibility of autonomy already, and in itself, leans into what we might call religious hope: the hope that things are not as they seem, and that there is a dimension to reality which is saturated with reason, wherein which we find our ‘proper selves’. The result of a fully autonomous Kingdom of Ends, where everyone acts harmoniously and universally, would be the ‘happiness’ of the highest good, where ‘everything goes according to the wish and will’ of every ‘rational being in the [moral] world’ (*CPPrR*, 5: 124).

A way to inflect all this in relation to Sterba’s argument would be to say that (‘for all we know’) it is only an appearance that we live in a reality where the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III do not obtain. I realise there is quite a lot going on in this claim. In what sense might the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements not obtain in fundamental reality, given that the world-that-appears is nothing else than an appearance (a well-founded phenomenon) of fundamental reality? I will sketch two possible Kantian responses: one apophatic, the other brave (with the potential to cause offence). Again, I am not ‘promoting’ the Kantian response to Sterba, and I state here my clear preference for the apophatic line of response. I call the response ‘apophatic’, rather than ‘agnostic’, because it arises from a rational meditation on the in principle limits of our knowledge, rather than on the insight that we simply do not know whether something is the case or not.

The apophatic response is simply to say that we have no idea how, or in what way, the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements are being fundamentally met, but that knowing that the violations of these requirements only occur in the world-as-it-appears gives us grounds for belief that things may be otherwise fundamentally, in a way, perhaps, that ‘we’ may encounter and receive full consolation for. We cannot even really try to address the issue eschatologically, that things will be ‘made right’ in time, in the *eschaton*, because time is a feature of the way we receive the world, and is not in the world as it fundamentally is. In the same way, Kant thinks that space and time are features not of the world as it

fundamentally is, but of how we receive the world: this we know, but how the world is in itself, we do not. That is the whole point of ‘transcendental idealism’.

I think it is wise to leave things there, but, in fact, Kant does sketch out some braver speculative thoughts on this matter. These braver thoughts begin with the thread of thought in Kant’s writing about God not being the creator of appearances. God, for Kant, is the author of ‘nature’, but *not* of appearances, the realm where natural evil presents itself and occurs. Kant makes this clear at a number of points:

Just as it would be a contradiction to say that God is the creator of appearances, so it is also a contradiction to say that as creator he is the cause of actions in the sensible world and thus of actions as appearances, even though he is the cause of the existence of the acting beings (as noumena). (*CPrR*, 5: 102)

Whatever God did is good, but it does not lie in the sensible world as a mere schema of the intelligible world. Thus space is nothing in itself and is not a thing as a divine work, but rather lies in us and can only obtain in us [ . . . ] The appearances are not actually creations, thus neither is the human being; rather he is merely the appearance of a divine creation. His condition of acting and being acted upon is an appearance and depends on him as bodies depend on space. The human being is the *principium originarium* of appearances (R 6057).

These initially perplexing claims are, in fact, an implication of Kant’s claim that space and time do not ‘go all the way down’ in the universe, but are features of our reception of the world, such that we are directly and immediately, the creators of space and time. God, for Kant, is the creator of noumenal substances, outside of space and time. Human beings are the direct and immediate source of space and time, and all the appearances in space and time. Given this, it is unclear what, precisely, an earthquake relates to at the ‘noumenal’ level. It is at least conceptually possible that an earthquake is the appearance of a disturbance at the level of free noumenal decisions.

This seems such an extravagant claim, that it has been used as evidence, in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, that Kant cannot possibly ascribe to a notion of the noumenal realm and noumenal freedom.<sup>7</sup> But the textual evidence does not support this *reductio*. This is because Kant himself seems to experiment, approvingly, with precisely this implication, in a passage dating either from the late 1770s, or the 1790s:

The actions here in the world are mere *Schemata* of the intelligible [actions]; yet these appearances (this word already signifies “schema”) are still interconnected in accordance with empirical laws, even if one regards reason itself, in accordance with its expressions, as a *phaenomenon* (of the character). But what the cause of this may be we do not discover in *phaenomenis*. Insofar as one cognizes one’s own character only from the *phaenomenis*, one imputes it to oneself, although it is, to be sure, itself determined by external causes. If one knew it in itself, then all good and evil would not be ascribed to external causes but only to the subject alone, together with the good and the disadvantageous consequences. In the intelligible world nothing happens and nothing changes, and there the rule of causal connection disappears. (R 5612)

The extraordinary, but consistent, thought here is that ‘if one knew it in itself’, then all good and evil, and we might include ‘natural evil’, would ‘not be ascribed to external’, that is ‘natural’ causes, but ‘only to the subject alone’. This resonates with another pregnant reflection from the 1770s, where Kant reflects that:

Between nature and chance, there is a third thing, namely freedom. All appearances are in nature, but the cause of the appearance is not contained in the appearance, therefore also not [in] nature. Our understanding is such a cause of the actions of the power of choice, which as appearances are certainly natural but which as a whole of appearances stand under freedom. (R 5369)

If this claim, about all evils depending upon freedom, is an implication of noumenal freedom, and Kant makes this claim, this provides support for the noumenal freedom interpretation of Kant. We would have to add that Kant will always be parsimonious, in

such a way that he will not make any specific claims, about any specific events. There will be no ‘moralising’, crude or otherwise, about the causes of earthquakes, or the individual springs of the tragedies suffered by individuals. There could not possibly be, given the inaccessibility of the noumenal realm. But we could know that *somehow* everything that appears is *in some way* the appearance of underlying freedom, such that tragedies, pain, suffering and natural evil are an appearance of an underlying moral disturbance. This, of course, is a ‘strange thought’, but it is a strangeness that attaches to Kant’s entire picture, and not particularly a problem in this specific case. The strange thought can quickly become an upsetting or offensive thought, if it is moralised into a thought that we ‘somehow’ are freely responsible for our own suffering. I offer no defence of the thought, but we might also note that it is an idea that is not without precedent in classical Christian theology, albeit against a different metaphysic. So, for example, Augustine, himself drawing upon St Paul, makes the suggestion that the travails and suffering of the entire creation are expressive of a deep moral fissure that enters the creation, with our free fall away from our state of original justice, into original sin.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of all this, we can revisit the summary version of my argument above, and inscribe against relevant phases which of the four Kantian principles set out above are operative:

1. It ought to be the case that being moral is met with proportionate happiness. (Principle 1, but slightly developed—acting freely is the inner value of the world, and the highest expression of freedom is autonomy, which involves acting according to the moral law).
2. Such a world is one where the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III hold.
3. Where knowledge is limited, practical reason enjoys freedom to hold-things-for-true. (Principles 2, 3 and 4)
4. It is not the case that in the world that appears, being moral is met with proportionate happiness, such that in the world that appears, the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III do not obtain.
5. What appears is not fundamental. (Principle 4)
6. Practical reason is entitled to believe in a moral realm (from 3 above), wherein the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III do obtain. Such a fundamental moral realm is one where God does adhere to the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III. (Principles 2 and 3).
7. Therefore, the argument from the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III does not provide a necessary argument for the non-existence of God.

### 3. Kant’s ‘Moral Proof’

Is anything like this argument actually set out by Kant? It may not matter much, for our constructive purposes. But, I believe Kant does set out something like this arc of thought, and will say something briefly about this. The position I think we find in Kant goes against readings that construe Kant’s ‘moral argument’ as some sort of gratuitous ‘add-on’ to an ethical system, onto a picture that should have no place for an eschatological reward. Beck<sup>9</sup>, Auxter<sup>10</sup> and Murphy<sup>11</sup> all find that the concept of the highest good, and the subsequent moral proof, is unimportant, even pernicious, introducing ‘extra-moral theological purposes’<sup>12</sup>. Other influential commentators agree (Rawls<sup>13</sup>, O’Neill<sup>14</sup>, Velkley<sup>15</sup>, Reath<sup>16</sup> and Pogge<sup>17</sup>), finding that Kant’s moral proof violates the purity of the moral law, as well as being metaphysically extravagant, at least, until the hope for the highest good has been deflated and secularised. Those who insist on the redundancy of concept of the highest good, and the moral proof that it gives rise to, tend to circle around the following set of reasons: that the highest good is never cited when Kant discusses the categorical imperative; that Kant could not (or should not) countenance a non-moral material end (happiness) when framing the moral law, and that as we cannot know the extent of another’s virtue, we are simply unable to promote the highest good (the proportionality of virtue and happiness).

On the other hand, when Kant's notion of the highest good is supported, the argument typically made is that the highest good, and, perhaps, some conception of God, is required in order to provide extra *content* to the moral law,<sup>18</sup> or by providing some sort of supportive *motivation* to obey it, if only by removing obstacles to our hope that the highest good is at least possible.<sup>19</sup> What we notice here is a shared presupposition held to by both sides: that the concept of the highest good, and the subsequent moral proof, can only be important inasmuch as it either provides extra content to the moral law, or insofar as it supports our motivation to obey it. So, where it can be shown that the highest good adds no such content or motivation, it cannot be important. My suggestion is that the concept of the highest good can remain important, and leans into the moral proof, even where its function is not that of providing the content or supporting the motivational force of the moral law<sup>20</sup>.

I would suggest that the picture is more this: the most significant move into something like hope, for Kant, is to believe in freedom at all. Once this move is made, we are already in a transcendent space of reasons, and not so very far away from the possibility of God, where God does not violate Moral Evil Prevention Requirements. I show how central it is to Kant, when thinking about God in relation to morality, that the fate of morality is closely bound up with the concept of this realm of reality beyond, and prior to, space and time: only if (deterministic) space and time do not go 'all the way down', is freedom, and autonomy, possible. As Kant puts it, if space and time are 'things-in-themselves', 'then freedom cannot be saved' (A536/B564). Only if there is a dimension of reality beyond mechanism, is end-setting, and so autonomy possible. The alternative is a universe without end-setting, and without freedom, which Kant tells us repeatedly, would be a sort of 'desert' with no 'inner value'. First of all, I set out the broad shape of the argument, as found in the second *Critique* (and I think, elsewhere, but for our purposes here, this is enough): from a need, faced with a problem, moving to a solution.

#### 4. A 'Need, a Problem, and a Solution' in the Second *Critique*

Kant's overall argument towards the highest good has the following shape: there is a need of practical reason; there is also a problem in meeting this need, upon a certain conception of the shape of reality. The need and the problem seen side by side constitute Kant's 'practical antinomy'. There is then a solution that involves modifying our understanding of the shape of reality, in such a way that the problem is dissolved. I set each of these stages out below, following Kant's paradigmatic statement of the 'antinomy of practical reason' in the second *Critique*.<sup>21</sup>

##### 4.1. *The Need of Practical Reason*

The moral law ought to have a certain end-point and completeness, such that being moral is met with proportionate happiness. If this ought to be the case, it can be the case:

In the highest good which is practical for us, that is, to be made real through our will, virtue and happiness are thought as necessarily combined, so that the one cannot be assumed by pure practical reason without the other also belonging to it. (CPrR, 5: 114)

In the practical task of pure reason, that is, in the necessary pursuit of the highest good, such a connection is postulated as necessary: we *ought* to strive to promote the highest good (which must therefore be possible). (CPrR, 5: 125)

There is a lot one might say, here, about the nature of the relationship between this contestible 'ought', and the, also contestable, claim that it 'must therefore be possible'. It is hardly satisfactory to cite here the principle extracted from Kant that 'ought implies can', where Kant tells us that 'duty commands nothing but what we can do' (*Rel.*, 6: 47). This simply repeats the controversial claim. In fact, I think Kant has quite a lot to say here that is persuasive, if we have accepted deeper premises in his philosophy in relation to the possibility of freedom.<sup>22</sup> At this point, though, our concern is to bring out the centrality of freedom and transcendental idealism in the moral proof, in relation to Sterba's argument.

#### 4.2. The Problem

If, in truth, we inhabited an entirely mechanistic space and time, with no immortality of the soul, and with no God, there seem to be two ways in which happiness and virtue might be ‘combined’. First of all, following the ‘Epicurean’ model, we can make the ‘desire for happiness’ the ‘motive to maxims of virtue’, or, following the Stoic model, we can make the ‘maxim of virtue’ the ‘efficient cause of happiness’, such that simply being virtuous (whatever befalls us) is identical with happiness. The Epicurean model, Kant declares, is ‘*absolutely impossible*’, because ‘maxims that put the determining ground of the will in the desire for one’s happiness are not moral at all and can be the ground of no virtue’ (CPrR, 5: 114). In such a case, there is nothing like morality in the world, and no ‘inner value’ to the world. The Stoic conception is ‘*also impossible*’, because any practical connection of causes and effects in the world, as a result of the determination of the will, does not depend upon the moral dispositions of the will but upon knowledge of the laws of nature and the physical ability to use them for one’s purposes. (CPrR, 5: 114)

Here, once again, Kant has in mind the world viewed as sheerly mechanistic. Upon this conception of the world, there is no necessary connection, or, indeed, even a remote possibility of a connection, between virtue and happiness, where virtue could be a cause of happiness. This is Kant’s ‘practical antinomy’, whereby, with either the Epicurean or Stoic conception:

No necessary connection of happiness with virtue in the world, adequate to the highest good, can be expected from the most meticulous observance of moral laws. (CPrR, 5: 114)

What we might note here is that Kant upholds Sterba’s Moral Evil Prevention Requirements, in a way that neither Epicureanism nor Stoicism do: Kant does not permit the thought that anything like the ‘highest good’ is manifest in a world in which virtue is met with anything other than true happiness. I take it here that Kant’s commitment to a moral world involves moral actions being met with proportionate happiness, and moral agents being protected, ultimately, against the immoral actions of others, and against other types of undeserved suffering (where ‘natural evil’, for Kant, may, in the end, be a consequence of immoral actions). As I understand Sterba’s Moral Evil Prevention Requirements, such a moral world would meet these requirements, although I anticipate that this might be a point of contention. Both Stoicism and Epicureanism in different ways encourage us to reconcile ourselves with a world in which the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements are clearly not met.

#### 4.3. The Solution

Therefore, given the need of practical reason, which must be met (we grant, for the moment), and given that the antinomy arises because of our conception of what the ‘present conditions’ are, it follows that there must be something wrong with our conception of what the present conditions in fact are. The problematic conception of the ‘present conditions’ involves construing them as being exhaustively constituted by mechanistic space and time, with no immortality of the soul, and with no God. The solution, then, is to alter our conception of what the fundamental structure of this world really is (the ‘present conditions’). The first realisation is that at a more fundamental level of reality, the world is not spatial or temporal, and so not deterministic. The noumenal world is a conceptual space within which moral freedom is possible. Kant explicitly draws a parallel between the way in which transcendental idealism offers a solution to the practical antinomy, and the way in which it similarly solves theoretical antinomies in the first *Critique*. In the first *Critique*, Kant solves, at least to his own satisfaction, the antinomy whereby it seems that we must both affirm a first cause, from which all other causes and effects follow, and also affirm that there is no first cause, because the idea of a first cause is itself incoherent, given that everything has a cause. Kant’s solution is to affirm both as true in different ways: in the realm of spatial and temporal appearances, every effect has a determining cause; but in the world in itself, prior to our spatial and temporal reception of it, there are genuine

first causes, which are not the effects of predetermining causes. This is how Kant draws the parallel between the solutions to the theoretical and the practical antinomies:

In the antinomy of pure speculative reason there is a similar conflict [to the practical antinomy] between natural necessity and freedom in the causality of events in the world. It was resolved by showing that there is no true conflict if the events and even the world in which they occur are regarded (and they should also be so regarded) merely as appearances; for, one and the same acting being as *appearance* (even to his own inner sense) has a causality in the world of sense that always conforms to the mechanism of nature, but with respect to the same event, insofar as the acting person regards himself at the same time as *noumenon* (as pure intelligence, in his existence that cannot be temporally determined), he can contain a determining ground of that causality in accordance with laws of nature which is itself free from all laws of nature. (*CPrR*, 5: 114)

Transcendental idealism, which generates the possibility of a noumenal, and therefore a moral world, removes the ‘seeming conflict of a practical reason with itself’, whereby ‘the highest good is the necessary highest end of a morally determined will and is a true object of that will’:

For it is practically possible, and the maxims of such a will, which refer to it as regards their matter, have objective reality, which at first was threatened by that antinomy in the combination of morality with happiness in accordance with a universal law, but only from a misinterpretation, because the relation between appearances was held to be a relation of things in themselves to those appearances. (*CPrR*, 5: 115)

The way that Kant’s argument for the highest good works then, is to show, with respect to the ‘problem’ that faces our need, that things (the ‘present conditions’) are indeed not as they seem: that mechanistic space and time are features of our reception of the world, and not fundamentally the way things are; that the soul is capable of an ‘*endless progress*’, and that there is a God. This way of putting the sequence is significant, because it fills in a frequently missing stage in Kant’s movement towards the highest good. Typically, even in thinkers broadly sympathetic to Kant’s notion of the highest good, there is a tendency to go straight from the need for virtue to be met with happiness, to the notions of immortality and God, with scant attention paid to the crucial middle-term, which is belief in the non-spatial and non-temporal intelligible/moral world, which fundamental reality may be one where the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements are (somehow) upheld. Sometimes this omission is philosophically well-motivated, although not, perhaps, exegetically, in that the commentator wishes to abstract Kant’s philosophical theology from a metaphysically committed interpretation of the noumenal realm, and to read Kant’s transcendental idealism in a more deflationary way. This is a curious feature of some theologically sympathetic interpretations of Kant, in that one might think that a willingness to consider the concept of God (classically, non-spatial and non-temporal) as meaningful, might help a thinker to be less allergic to metaphysical commitment. As it happens, though, theologically sympathetic readers of Kant have often tended instinctively to gravitate towards more deflationary readings of Kant<sup>23</sup>: perhaps not to surround themselves with even more metaphysical extravagance, or, perhaps, out of a sense that such a non-spatial and non-temporal space should be reserved for God alone. In any case, and for whatever reason, this intermediate move, from the possibility of virtue being met proportionately with happiness, to the noumenal/intelligible/moral realm, is often overlooked. It ought not to be, for both exegetical and philosophical reasons: for exegetical reasons, because this step is a central feature of all Kant’s discussions of the highest good; and for philosophical reasons, because this intermediate step opens up a way in which a commitment to morality and freedom already has an intrinsic momentum, in Kant’s thought, given Kant’s wider arguments and assumptions, towards hope and belief in God. If morality and freedom are possible, and we must think that they are, the step towards the possibility of happiness, I will argue, is

not a large one at all, and nor therefore, is the step towards God and immortality, to the extent that these are connected with the possibility of happiness. Indeed, the more difficult thing might be to stop the progression of ideas moving in this direction (from freedom to happiness and divinity).

## 5. Concluding Reflections

As I said in my opening remarks, I do not ‘believe’ or ‘promote’ this whole Kantian picture and argument. But it is interesting to reflect on what would make someone more likely to look on it with some sympathy. I doubt that the key thing is to be drawn to grand inflationary metaphysics (freedom, noumena) and so on. The more likely draw to the argument may be one’s attitudes to the Kantian principles set out earlier, especially, perhaps principles 2, 3, and 4. In turn, the crucial commitment in each of these principles could be summarised as follows:

- the success of transcendental style arguments at generating justified beliefs.
- the ability of practical reason to move beyond the limits of knowledge.
- the ability of practical reason, when moving beyond such limits, to think in entire systems and world-views.

None of these epistemological commitments are directly concerned with the existence or otherwise of God.

Apart from the (perhaps implausible) moves in the Kantian argument set out above, what might we take away in a ‘big picture’ sense from the possibility of this rather alternative perspective on the problem of evil, apart from the wider ‘structural challenge’ to logical-impossibility arguments that I set out at the beginning of this article? Sterba is generous and transparent in offering some personal and biographical framing for his argument, and I would like to reciprocate here by offering a more personal reflection here.

When I was teenager, I remember always having the same reaction to any sort of formulation of the ‘problem of evil’. Rather than the existence of ‘evil’ and suffering being a reason not to believe in God, it seemed to me ‘obvious’ that it was the best sort of reason to believe in God, as an expression of a type of yearning. God was the concept that should be reached for on the other side of a lament. No other concept would suffice, because it would be inadequate to the task of engaging with evil. Anything else would be unrealistic: no amount of historical or political action, or human self-improvement, or economic management, or whatever, could possibly address the evil and suffering that had already happened, let alone prevent or ameliorate what was to come. At that stage in my life, a sense of the problem of evil and suffering was my main ‘motivation’ or reason, if I had to give one, for believing in God. I think I probably tried to express this thought in school, and soon learned that it was not one of the grooves down which one’s mind was supposed to travel. At least, the formal problem went the other way round, in a way that is expressed with rigour and existential-commitment by Sterba: the existence of evil and suffering is a problem for belief in God, not a good motivation for it. I learned to keep (mostly) quiet about this. Some thirty years later, coming back to the thought, I have a few reflections about it.

First of all, something like this movement of thought expresses the momentum of Kant’s own ‘moral argument’ for the existence of God: that we live in a realm of antinomies, where things are not as they ‘should be’, and where belief in God is the only way through this situation. Secondly, I am struck by the thought that much religious and theological thinking is really quite skeptical and nihilistic, at least about the sufficiency of most purported and suggested ‘solutions’ to our various predicaments, which might be expressed in terms of antinomies (for example, between how things are, and how they ought to be). At least one striking feature of some variants of religiosity is not credulity, optimism, or confident knowledge claims about the absolute, but a sense of how partial, broken, and fragmented our condition is, where a sense of ‘wholeness’ or ‘healing’ is only gestured to in the faintest way, but where this gesturing constitutes (for some people) one of our most important ‘ecstatic’ moments. This is a very different instinct than the one

underlying Sterba’s argument, although we share an instinct that the problem of evil is of central significance in relation to belief in God. I offer the personal reflection not as a rival ‘argument’, but as an alternative perspective. It would be fascinating to explore what is ‘at stake’ in occupying these different perspectives: both in terms of the explicit arguments and reasons that might be given, but, also, the underlying intuitions, hopes and fears. Some of this exploring might be beyond the bounds of mere philosophy.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sterba (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Sterba, ‘Is a good god logically possible?’, 2, 4.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Sterba (2019).

<sup>4</sup> Insole (2013, 2015b, 2020). For articles, see the following: Insole (2011a, 2011b, 2015a, 2016, 2019a, 2019b).

<sup>5</sup> Influential ‘metaphysical’ readers of Kant include Karl Ameriks, Rae Langton, Desmond Hogan, and Andrew Chignell. More deflationary commentators include figures such as Henry Allison and Andrews Reath. A previous generation of commentators, represented by Peter Strawson, tended to read Kant as having metaphysical commitments, but in a way that was thoroughly disreputable and contrary to the deepest principles of his thought.

<sup>6</sup> Commentators who read Kant as attempting, but often failing, to express a philosophical Lutheranism, combining elements of Platonic theological rationalism, include Palmquist, Pasternack, Wood, Kain, Marina, and Kanterian.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Walker (1978, p. 149).

<sup>8</sup> Augustine (1998, Bks. 13–14).

<sup>9</sup> Beck (1960, pp. 244–45).

<sup>10</sup> Auxter (1979).

<sup>11</sup> Murphy (1966).

<sup>12</sup> Murphy (1966)

<sup>13</sup> Rawls (1980).

<sup>14</sup> Onora O’Neill ‘Kant on Reason and Religion’.

<sup>15</sup> Velkley (1989, pp. 152–53).

<sup>16</sup> Reath et al. (1997, pp. 361–87).

<sup>17</sup> Pogge (1997, pp. 361–87).

<sup>18</sup> John Silber’s defends Kant’s notion of the highest good, by claiming that it adds content to the moral law, such that the maxim to promote happiness in proportion to virtue is itself a categorical imperative. Silber argues that the concept of the highest good does vital work in Kant’s system, providing a material end (happiness in proportion to virtue), to what –Silber regards– would otherwise be Kant’s empty formalism. See Silber (1959a, 1959b, 1963). For more recent contributions to the so-called ‘Silber-Beck’ controversy see Mariña (2000), and Friedman (1984). Lawrence Pasternack’s important article, ‘Restoring Kant’s Conception of the Highest Good’, effectively cuts through some of the knots in the Silber-Beck controversy, pointing out, for example, that our contribution to the highest good need not be that of distributing happiness in proportion with morality (which only God can do), but of making ourselves worthy of the happiness that is so distributed, see esp. pp. 447–49.

<sup>19</sup> See Wood (1970, chps. 1 and 5), Beiser (2002, pp. 588–629). In some of his suggestions, Pasternack also seems to back the notion of the highest good supporting our motivation: see Michalson (2014), and Pasternack (2017).

<sup>20</sup> For a fuller articulation of what is summarised here, see *Kant and the Divine*, chps. 11–12, and ‘The Irreducible Importance of Religious Hope in Kant’s Conception of the Highest Good’.

<sup>21</sup> For a fuller account, which draws on a wide range of Kant’s texts, see *Kant and the Divine*, chp. 11.

<sup>22</sup> See *Kant and the Divine*, chps. 10–13.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Wood (1999), Pasternak (2014), Janz (2009).



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# Locating the Problem of Evil

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**Abstract:** I argue that James Sterba's argument from evil involves a category mistake. He applies moral principles that pertain to ethical requirements that apply within creation to what may be called the ethics or axiology of creating and sustaining creation. The paper includes reflection on the relationship between justification and redemption, justice and mercy.

**Keywords:** theism; naturalism; redemption; mercy

Why care whether there is a supremely good, all-knowing, all-powerful creator and sustainer of our cosmos? One reason is that if there is such a being, this is an awesome value. Arguably, *ceteris paribus*, a world with a supremely good being, is better than a world without one.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, if there is reason to believe in the great goodness of this being, there is some reason to believe that the great evils of the cosmos may be defeated and (as I have argued elsewhere) there are greater prospects of redemption and transformation than available in secular naturalism, the closest competitor to theism (Taliaferro and Meister 2016). It is on these grounds that some non-theists have gone so far as to hope that there is such a God, even though they do not believe that theism is true. Has Professor Sterba given us compelling reason to believe that there is no such being? I do not think so.

I suggest that Sterba's atheistic argument regarding evil involves a category mistake: Applying principles of moral requirement that apply to *creatures within creation* and not to *the ethics that pertain to a Creator and sustainer of the cosmos*. You and I have obligations and expectations of one another and rights that are different in kind than the obligations and expectations of God as creator and sustainer of the cosmos. In my view, Sterba employs an anthropomorphic concept of God that likens God to one of us, perhaps likening God to a human magistrate in a liberal democracy (or to a powerful nation-state) or a human bystander. There is also what I propose a problematic use of the term "permit" in Sterba's formulation of his argument that suggests approval. This is a vexing, not merely verbal point, as it violates (or overshadows) an important distinction between *justification and redemption*. In the framework of Christian theism that I defend, horrendous evils that occur are not permitted by God in the sense that they are deemed good or justified or approved of by God. They are, instead, against God's nature and will, a violation of what God wills for the creation. The locution that some evil occurs *with God's permission* suggests (even if it does not entail) divine approval. Arguably, such a suggestion is antithetical to the God of Christian, who is holy and for whom evil is an aberration, a profound violation of the purpose of creation (Taliaferro 2020).

In my response to Sterba, I shall write from the standpoint of Christian theism in the Cambridge Platonist tradition. While not enthusiastic about being labeled an apologist (as opposed to a philosopher), I write this response expressing what I actually believe to be true and have defended at length elsewhere (Taliaferro 2012). I hasten to add that I adopt a version of fallibilism and do not claim to know with (apodictic) certainty that the positions I advocate are indubitable.

Sterba's atheistic argument about evil relies on a principle of preventability that obtains in our own case. I offer this paraphrase: We should prevent horrendous evil if we can do so without committing greater evils and without violating the rights of those involved.

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This obligation that we have is intensified if we may easily undertake this prevention. We are not relieved of this obligation on the grounds that allowing the suffering will bring about great goods, especially under conditions when we can bring about those great goods without allowing the horrendous evil. We should even prevent persons from willingly undergoing suffering to aid others if we can provide that aid without the suffering. For the sake of argument, I grant that, *ceteris paribus*, we have such obligations to each other, though I have some reservations, especially about the last precept that I set to one side in this article.

Here is how I believe the problem of evil should be re-formatted to properly focus on what may be called *the ethics of creation*, rather than a principle of preventability. Do we know that the following is not the case?

It is compatible with the omnipotent, omniscient, supremely good Triune God (the apex of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful) to create and sustain a contingent cosmos in which there are stable laws of nature in which there are over 200 billion galaxies and (virtually) countless stars and planets, at least one of which has produced biota and abiota of plants and animals, some of which are sentient and have powers of thought, memory, reason, emotion, and agency, including moral agency. Living agents engage in good, healthy relations as well as horrific, unhealthy, abhorrent relations. There are the goods of biological flourishing (respiration, reproduction, etc.) freedom, family, community, friendship, and grave harms such as murder, rape, oppression, slavery, tyranny. Murder, rape, oppression, slavery, and tyranny are contrary to the will and nature of God, the God who calls all persons to justice, mutual loving compassion, our duty to relieve famines, etc. God's being is not obvious to creatures, but there are widespread ostensible experiences of God, the appearance of prophets (culminating in the ethical monotheism of the later Hebrew prophets), the apparent incarnation of this God as Jesus of Nazareth who taught non-violence and the coming of God's Kingdom, ultimately by the birth, teaching, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, life after death in which there may be the redemption of wrong-doers who might find fulfillment in union with the Triune God of love. God miraculously acts to bring about some goods and prevent some evils (sometimes through human agents, sometimes God acts to relieve famine, sometimes not) in this world, but this is far from obvious and universal. The divine seeking of redemption and justice includes life beyond this life.

Let us call the above portrait the *Compatibility Image*. It may be filled out in various ways involving nonhuman animals, God's provident leading through saints, and the prospect of Christian universalism (in the spirit of Origen of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa).

In the Platonic tradition, I hold that bare being counts as good, but it does not trump all ills. For example, a creation in which all sentient creatures endure only intense suffering that serves no good at all would not count (in my view) as a good state of affairs. Notice, I do not specify that any creation by the God of Christian Platonism must be the best possible world (a notion that I believe is as incoherent as there being a greatest possible number) (Taliaferro 1998).

A crucial difference between the above God's eye point of view and Sterba's framework is that the claim of compatibility of God and evil does not rest on God acting under the same conditions as creatures. To be specific, the all-good God of Jesus conspires in existence a cosmos in which we are called to (and thus obligated to) prevent bad things like famine, while God is not evil in creating and sustaining a cosmos in which famine occurs. God is not obligated to only create and sustain a cosmos in which famine never occurs except when that famine is relieved by creatures or God acting miraculously. By placing the problem of evil in the place where it belongs (namely in the context of theism) versus in the context of human-to-human (or creature-to-creature) we avoid introducing inappropriate moral precepts. For example, a nation state may, or may not, have some obligation to promote physical and mental equality among its citizens, but there is no obvious sense in which an all-good God must create only creatures that have physical and mental equality. The

Christian Platonic tradition has historically developed a principle of plentitude that favors diversity over homogeneity. NB: Given universalism, the above portrait would include God's saving, omnipotent love, ultimately overcoming all sin and harms. The Compatibility Image is far more detailed and Christian than the image of God and creation advanced by Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues*. I submit that the Compatibility Image seems plausible. It appears coherent and involves no obvious ad hoc element. I know of no reason to deem it a false state of affairs (contingently false or necessarily false). The Compatibility Image relies on long-standing beliefs and practices shared by many Christian philosophers over the centuries. Christianity is the largest religion in the world (according to most sociologists of religion), and so demonstrating that it is false (even necessarily false) would be a significant philosophical accomplishment.

Here, I introduce some clarification of terms. On the difference between redemption and justification: When evils occur (deliberate famine, rape, murder, etc.), these are never justified, from the moral and the theistic point of view. These acts/events should not occur. I further hold that God has a reason to destroy/annihilate all agents of grave wrongdoing. While that retributive response is justified (in my view), I follow those Christians who claim that it is compatible with God's merciful goodness to not destroy/annihilate grave wrongdoers but to act (in this life and the next) to redeem them through their repentance, moral and spiritual transformation (Taliaferro 2022). On this point, I adopt a position some might label Shakespearean in which justice and mercy can conflict and that there are cases when it is good that matters of justice are subordinated by matters of merciful redemption. Consider Portia's famous speech on justice and mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strained.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.  
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes  
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.  
His scepter shows the force of temporal power,  
The attribute to awe and majesty  
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;  
But mercy is above this scepter'd sway.  
It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;  
It is an attribute to God Himself;  
And earthly power doth then show likest God's  
When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,  
Though justice be thy plea, consider this:  
That in the course of justice none of us  
Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,  
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render  
The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much  
To mitigate the justice of thy plea,  
Which, if thou follow, this strict court of Venice  
Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there. (Act 4, Scene 1)

Setting aside the (vexing) topic of anti-Semitism in the play (not fully resolved in the literature), the speech concedes that, as far as justice is concerned, the case against the accused is compelling. The seasoning power of mercy involves curtailing the demands of justice for some good, in this case, sparing the life of the one accused, seeking his redemption (healing) rather than seeking his justification (ruling that the charges against him were not in fact justified). In my view, in cases of redemption, great goods may emerge for persons who engage in vile wickedness, but their vile wickedness is never justified or properly deemed good. They are only permitted by God to do their acts of wickedness

insofar as God does not annihilate them prior to their acts, but there is a solid and robust sense in which these acts should not occur.

Consider four objections.

(A) Presumably, in Christian theology, God should do what God should do. However, if God should annihilate evil-doers, then your merciful God should do what God should not do, namely, spare them. Isn't your view at odds with the claim that God is just?

Reply: There is some substance to this objection. On the view I am commending, justice requires stringency. Mercy is not the same as justice and can even be at odds with justice. However, mercy is not necessarily at odds with goodness. The Compatibility Image is phrased in terms of whether evil is compatible with God's goodness, not justice. On the Compatibility Image, justice is not at all overshadowed, *evils are against God's will and nature (indeed, injustice may be analyzed as that which is disapproved of or abhorrent to God), and God works in creation and in life beyond this life to defeat injustice*. The Compatibility Image may be seen as being in accord with the Biblical account of the covenant with Noah (the Noahic Covenant) when God promises not to exact justice in this life by destroying all living things due to human evil (Genesis 8:21). Historically, Christian commentators have interpreted this as God's exercise of mercy in the course of postponing the divine judgment of evil-doers.

(B) Even if it be conceded that the ethics of a creator differ from the ethics of creatures, surely a good creator should not create a cosmos with grave evils when those are not essential (necessary) to achieve great goods, including the good of redemption.

In reply, I suggest that it is compatible with God's goodness when grave harms occur in creation that are not essential (necessary) to achieve great goods. I propose that the principle (or stricture) of divine goodness motivating this objection is not at all obvious. Built into the approach to evil I am proposing in this article (and elsewhere), no evils that occur are justified or in accord with God's will. They are, therefore, not justified because they lead to some greater good. Grave, horrendous wrongs should not occur. If we have reason to believe that *only horrendous evils occur and there is no good whatever*, we have reason to believe such a creation to be unworthy of a supremely good Creator. However, the truth, I suggest, is more in keeping with the Compatibility Image than a site of unqualified horror. The Compatibility Image includes abundant good, including the good of redemption.

(C) But then isn't your God more like a "pretty good god" rather than the God of perfect being theology? Don't we expect more from God in the Anselmian tradition?

In reply, I suggest that all that is essential in reply to Sterba's argument is that he has not shown that the Compatibility Image is false (implausible, known to be impossible or implausible, etc.). Different arguments can come into play to argue for the preferability of Anselmian theism to other forms of theism. Keep in mind that the Compatibility Image can be crafted to describe our created order without ruling out God's creating and sustaining other cosmic orders of different magnitudes of goods. Perhaps, there are other creations which God does not create through evolution but by special creation (a so-called literal understanding of Genesis) or without animal predation. Given these other possible created orders, all I am contending is that it is not incompatible with the God of Christian Platonism to use evolution and predation in our created order.

An objector is likely to persist: Surely only a horrendous god would sustain a cosmos in which there are horrendous evils. I grant that there is a succinct force to such a persistent objection until the thesis is put in the context of *a created order of goods as well as ills and in which God acts in and with creatures to defeat horrendous evil, even through the incarnate suffering and redemptive power of God as Jesus in this life and the next*, etc. Taking into account the prospects of redemptive mercy does not lessen horrendous evils, but it brings to light what may be hoped for healing, not as forms of compensation or salvaged goods (as when some good is saved from a tragedy as when friendship may survive divorce), but as transformation or transfiguration that we find in traditional Christian portraits of redemption (the writings of Julian Norwich or Evelyn Underhill, Dante's *Paradiso* or C.S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*).

(D) Back to the beginning, if Sterba is right, shouldn't we hope there is no God, or not the God of Christian theism? If Sterba is correct, then the God of Christian theism is unjust. Shouldn't we hope that there is not an unjust God?

Reply: As of now, I hope that there truly is a supremely good, omniscient, omnipotent creator and sustainer of the cosmos for the reasons noted at the outset. The Compatibility Image seems to me plausible, and I have developed a series of theistic arguments elsewhere to argue not just for the coherence of Christian theism, but for its truth (Taliaferro 2012). However, let us say those specific arguments fail. If this hope that Platonic theism is true is misplaced (it is either unreasonable or based on a false metaphysic) and there is reason to believe that the creator and sustainer of our cosmos is actually unjust, then we might entertain some kind of Promethean option. If some theistic arguments are compelling, for example, versions of the cosmological and teleological arguments that do not entail that God is just, atheism and agnosticism may not be viable (justified) options. Perhaps, the existence of an all-powerful Creator needs to be acknowledged but deemed unjust or not good or abhorrent or not as good as a human liberal democracy that seeks to respect the human rights of all people. In other words, Sterba's argument about evil may not support atheism. If placed in the context of a cogent case for a version of theism, Sterba's argument might rather support the (potentially frightening) view that the God who creates and sustains the cosmos is not good or is unjust.

Summary: In this article, I have claimed that the theistic problem of evil needs to be located in the context of the ethics of creation, not in terms of the ethical requirements and expectations of the ethics within creation. I have described an overarching image of the cosmos, with its mixture of good and evil, being compatible with God's goodness. I contend that this image seems coherent or, more modestly, it is not implausible or known to be incoherent. Along the way, I have sought to clarify the difference between redemption and justification (a wrong-doer may be redeemed without the wrong-doing justified) and the relationship between mercy and justice. Divine mercy may be in conflict with the strict demands of justice. I concluded with the suggestion that Sterba's argument may not support atheism. If there are plausible reasons to believe that some form of theism is true, then Sterba's argument (if successful) provides some reason for thinking that God is not good or is unjust. While I do not elaborate on the latter possibility, I suspect the ramification of such a philosophy of God may be troublesome.

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## Note

- <sup>1</sup> A reviewer requests I clarify "better." A full account of this would require another, different paper. All I am asserting here is what I believe to be a common sense viewpoint; I think most people would reply affirmatively if asked whether it would be better for there to be a supremely good being rather than there not be a supremely good being. I am not claiming here that this is a correct judgment. But for a defense of the view that it would be good if theism is true, see *Why Believe?* by John Cottingham (2009).

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Article

# Brief Remarks on Sterba's Moral Argument from Evil

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**Abstract:** We pose two challenges to Sterba's position. First, we show that Sterba fails to consider alternative historical positions such as Leibniz's (who argues that God knows that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds) or Kant's (who suggests that God does not necessarily know what free agents would choose or would have chosen, had God not intervened), both of which bear direct relevance to some major aspects of Sterba's argument. Second, we show that Sterba neither rules out the possibility that God has always intervened in history when his not intervening would have led to significant and horrendous evils, nor the possibility that every immoral action (and its consequences) might have led to significant and horrendous evils.

**Keywords:** problem of evil; divine freedom; Leibniz; Kant; counterfactuals; possible worlds

## 1. Introduction

At the end of his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, Sterba writes:

In this book, I have drawn on untapped resources in ethics that have proved useful in resolving the problem of evil that has long troubled theists and atheists alike. Those resources cluster around the Pauline Principle that is at the heart of the Doctrine of Double Effect. (Sterba 2019, p. 181)

Earlier in his book, he explains:

In both traditional and contemporary ethics we find an ethical principle that seems to be in direct conflict with God's permitting evil and then making up for it later. The ethical principle is embedded in the Doctrine of Double Effect and frequently referred to as the Pauline Principle because it was 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. 49)

Sterba explains:

Now the Pauline Principle prohibits doing evil that good may come of it. But 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*. (Sterba 2019, p. 56)

The Pauline Principle can, accordingly, be stated as follows:

(PP) We should never *do* evil as a means to prevent evil or as a means to provide good.

Sterba acknowledges important breakthroughs in the debate about the problem of evil:

In recent years, discussion of the problem of evil in the world has been advanced by utilizing resources of contemporary metaphysics and epistemology, for example, Alvin Plantinga's application of modal logic to the logical problem of evil and William Rowe, Stephen Wykstra and Paul Draper's application of probabilistic epistemology to the evidential problem of evil. (Sterba 2019, p. 2)

Sterba is confident that a discussion of PP might lead to an even more important breakthrough in the debate:

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I think that we can expect a similar advance once we do bring to bear yet untapped resources of ethics on our understanding of the problem of evil. But I also think that this advance will be even more important than the other advances that have come from modal logic and probabilistic epistemology. [...] Bringing untapped resources of ethics to bear on the problem [...] should actually help us reach a solution to the problem of evil. (Sterba 2019, p. 5)

While discussing PP, Sterba anticipates the objection that God does not violate PP (given that God does only *permit* evil):

Now it might be objected here that while God cannot do evil that good may come of it, God could permit evil that good may come of it. Of course, moral philosophers do recognize a distinction between doing and permitting evil. Doing evil is normally worse than permitting evil. But when the evil is significant and one can easily prevent it, then permitting evil can become morally equivalent to doing it. The same kind of moral blame attaches to both actions [...] Likewise, God's permitting significantly evil consequences when those consequences can easily be prevented is morally equivalent to God's doing something that is seriously wrong. (Sterba 2019, p. 51)

At the end of his chapter about PP, Sterba concludes that

the Pauline Principle [...] shows that it would be impermissible for God to permit the significantly evil consequences of our immoral actions either as a means to prevent greater evil (given that God could prevent the greater evil without permitting the lesser evil) or as a means to securing a good to which we are not entitled (given that we humans are always prohibited from doing just that). Hence, 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 immoral actions. (Sterba 2019, p. 66)

We pose two challenges to Sterba's position: The first concerns alternatives from the history of philosophy which Sterba fails to consider (Leibniz's and Kant's); the second rests on an analytical examination of Sterba's argument.

## 2. Historical Digression: Leibniz, Kant and the Pauline Principle

It is somewhat surprising that Sterba fails to mention Leibniz' famous discussion of the Pauline Principle in the *Theodicy* (see, e.g., *Theodicy* § 11, § 25).<sup>1</sup> This is surprising for three reasons: First, Leibniz' discussion of the Pauline Principle shows that the Pauline Principle has already been applied to the problem of evil. Second, Leibniz explicitly argues that God does not violate the Pauline Principle. Third, Leibniz challenges Sterba's claim that "God could prevent the greater evil without permitting the lesser evil." For, according to Leibniz, the actual world—the world in which God permits the lesser evil—is the best of all possible worlds and, given that, God can prevent the greater evil of a worse possible world only by permitting the lesser evil of the actual world.

To elaborate on Leibniz's stance, Leibniz explicitly refers to the view that God does not violate PP, because God never *does* evil (see § 11). Sterba also admits that "[d]oing evil is normally worse than permitting evil." He hastens to add, however, that "when the evil is significant and one can easily prevent it, then permitting evil can become morally equivalent to doing it." Therefore, Sterba *appears* to appeal to an extended version of PP:

(EPP) We should never *do or permit significant* evil as a means to prevent evil or as a means to provide good, *if we can easily prevent it*

As it turns out, Leibniz not only discusses a version of PP (see § 11) but also a version of EPP (see § 25). Leibniz writes in *Theodicy* § 25:

The rule which states, *non esse facienda mala, ut eveniant bona*, and which even forbids the permission of a moral evil with the end of obtaining a physical

good, far from being violated, is here proved, and its source and its reason are demonstrated.

So, Leibniz explicitly thinks that God does not violate an extended version of the Pauline Principle (a version that not only applies to what we *do* but also to what we *permit*). To better grasp this position, let us examine some of Leibniz's main considerations.

Leibniz famously distinguishes between three kinds of evil—metaphysical (mere imperfection, i.e., finitude), physical (suffering) and moral (sin). The first kind constitutes per definition *every* possible world, the two other kinds do not (e.g., a concept of a world which entails no suffering at all is perfectly intelligible according to Leibniz; we will discuss this point in due course). Now the actual world entails physical as well as moral evil (Leibniz never doubts this), so one asks whether a morally perfect God had rational grounds to single out this world rather than a possibly different world (or not to single out a world at all—this, after all, is also considered a possibility for God). However, a different world is not a better world according to Leibniz, since God, given his decision to create, singles out the best *by definition*, as a perfect moral being. Notice that the concept of 'the best' is objective in the sense that it is independent of God's will (it is not the best because God singled it out; to the contrary, God singled it out because it is the best).<sup>2</sup>

What matters is that Leibniz distinguishes between physical and moral evil (see § 21). When it comes to moral evil, Leibniz's view is that God does not violate EPP because God never permits moral evil as a means to an end (see § 25). In Theodicy § 25, Leibniz writes:

God wills all good [...] *antecedently*, [...] wills the best *consequently* as an end [or 'intention'], [...] wills what is indifferent, and physical evil, sometimes as a *means*. But he wills moral evil only as the *sine quo non* or as a hypothetical necessity, for he is bound to singling out the best.

According to Leibniz, moral evil is not a means to attain the best, it is only impossible for God to attain the best without permitting moral evil (moral evil is a "*sine qua non*" for the best). Compare: the pain and suffering that comes with a medical surgery is not a means to save the life of the patient; it is only impossible for the surgeon to save the life of the patient without permitting that pain and suffering (and it is, in fact, not always morally impermissible for the surgeon to permit that pain and suffering even though the surgeon can easily prevent that pain and suffering, e.g., by denying medical surgery to the patient in the first place).

When it comes to physical evil, Leibniz appears to admit, however, that God violates EPP. For Leibniz admits that God "wills [...] physical evil, sometimes as a *means*" (§ 25). He explains:

One may say of physical evil, that God wills it often as a penalty owing to guilt, and often also as a means to an end, that is, to prevent greater evils or to obtain greater good. The penalty serves also for amendment and example. Evil often serves to make us savour good the more; sometimes too it contributes to a greater perfection in him who suffers it [...]. (§ 23)

What is worse, Leibniz also suggests that God might have created a possible world without physical evil (see § 9) and, accordingly, that God might have easily prevented physical evil.

Upon reflection, the fact that God violates EPP is in no way problematic, for it is clear that EPP is false. Suppose, for example, that a crazy trolley driver is trying to run a truck workman down. Suppose you can throw a switch, thereby turning the trolley onto a different spur of track (and suppose that it is obvious that this is the only way to prevent the crazy trolley driver from killing the truck workman). Unfortunately, there are five truck workmen on that different spur of track. Suppose that it is obvious that by refraining from throwing the switch (and thereby permitting the crazy trolley driver to kill the truck workman) the crazy trolley driver would succeed in killing the one truck workman, and suppose, further, that it is obvious that by throwing the switch (and thereby preventing the crazy trolley driver from killing the truck workman) you would kill the five workmen. It

is, then, clearly morally permissible for you to permit the killing of the truck workman (a significant evil) as a means to avoid the killing of the five workmen (as a means to prevent an evil) even though you can easily throw the switch.

In fact, Leibniz appears to reject EPP and to accept, instead, a restricted version of EPP. At least with respect to moral evil, Leibniz holds that evil

must only be admitted or *permitted* in so far as it is considered to be a certain consequence of an indispensable duty: as for instance if a man who was determined not to permit another's sin were to fail of his own duty, or as if an officer on guard at an important post were to leave it, especially in time of danger, in order to prevent a quarrel in the town between two soldiers of the garrison who wanted to kill each other. (§ 24)

Leibniz concludes: "It is indeed beyond question that we must refrain from preventing the sin of others when we cannot prevent their sin without sinning ourselves." (§ 27). Hence, Leibniz—if anything—appears to accept a restricted version of EPP:

(REPP-Leibniz) We should never do or permit significant evil as a means to prevent evil or as a means to provide good, if we can easily prevent the significant evil without violating our duties.

The point, however, is this: If the actual world is the best of all possible worlds, then it is impossible—even for God—to create the best of all possible worlds without permitting the evils of the actual world. In other words: God cannot prevent the evils of the actual world without refraining from creating the best of all possible worlds. However, according to Leibniz, God would not fulfill "what he owes to his wisdom, his goodness, his perfection, if he [...] chose not that which is absolutely the best" (§ 25). Thus, God cannot prevent the evils of the actual world without violating his duties. Therefore, God does not violate REPP-Leibniz.

It is clear that Sterba only *appears* to appeal to EPP. In fact, as cited at the outset of this paper, Sterba claims that "when the evil is significant and one can easily prevent it, then permitting evil *can* become morally equivalent to doing it." He does not claim that, in such a situation, permitting evil *must* become morally equivalent to doing it. In fact, as already noted, Sterba concludes "that the Pauline Principle [...] shows that it would be impermissible for God to permit the significantly evil consequences of our immoral actions either as a means to prevent greater evil (given that God could prevent the greater evil without permitting the lesser evil) or as a means to securing a good to which we are not entitled (given that we humans are always prohibited from doing just that)." Thus, Sterba—if anything—also appears to suggest a restricted version of EPP:

(REPP-Sterba) We should never do or permit a lesser significant evil as a means to prevent a greater significant evil, if we can easily prevent the greater evil without permitting the lesser evil.

The point, however, is this: If the actual world is the best of all possible worlds (Leibniz's thesis, which rests on other considerations, on which we cannot dwell here),<sup>3</sup> then it is impossible—even for God—to create the best of all possible worlds without permitting the evils of the actual world. In other words: God cannot prevent the greater evil of not creating the best of all possible worlds without permitting the lesser evils of the actual world. Therefore, God does not violate REPP-Sterba.

To be sure, Sterba might find it implausible to assume that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds. Sterba might insist there is a possible world in which God always prevents the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions. In Theodicy § 9, Leibniz anticipates a similar objection—the objection that there is a possible world without moral and physical evil:

Some adversary not being able to answer this argument will perchance answer the conclusion by a counter-argument, saying that the world could have been without sin and without sufferings; but I deny that then it would have been *better*.

In Theodicy § 10, he goes on:

It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness [...]: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness. I cannot show you this in detail. For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together? But you must judge with me *ab effectu*, since God has chosen this world as it is.

Leibniz does not deny that there is a possible world without moral and physical evil. Leibniz might, perhaps, also not deny that there is a possible world in which God always prevents the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions. Leibniz would deny, however, that these possible worlds are *better* than the actual world. For we are, on the one hand, not in a position to compare different possible worlds *in every little detail* given that possible worlds are *infinitely detailed*, and we are, on the other hand, in a position to understand that “supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best” (§ 8) and that “if there were not the best (*optimum*) among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any” (§ 8). Therefore, all a finite cognition can know according to Leibniz is *that* the principle of singling out the best world guides God’s action, and not *how* this principle can be applied.

The most important point, however, is this: given Sterba’s aim to show that “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 immoral actions” (own emphasis), Sterba would not only have to show that it is *implausible* that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds, he would have to show that it is *logically contradictory* that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds. However, Leibniz’s account, be it plausible or not, does not seem to entail any logical contradiction.<sup>4</sup>

Before delving into further details of Sterba’s argument, we wish to examine a less known attitude: Kant’s<sup>5</sup> (less known, for at first glance it seems that Kant argues that theodicy is essentially impossible). We do not intend to put forward a detailed scholarly discussion on this issue, but rather to concisely present an outline for a possible reading, which directly pertains to the issue at stake.

The Pauline Principle (“we should never do evil that good may come of it”) seems to capture the spirit of Kant’s moral theory, since it is well known that according to Kant the categorical imperative commands us to do the good, and by no means to do evil—no matter what good may come out of it (e.g., it is absolutely forbidden to lie, no matter the consequences; see Kant’s celebrated essay *Über ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen*—even lying for the sake of rescuing the life of an innocent person is forbidden).

In the theological context, however, things are more complicated. Kant holds that “morality leads inevitably to religion” (RGV, AA VI: 6; see also KpV, AA V: 129), i.e., to the realm in which the concept of God plays a constitutive role. Without getting into the question of how Kant justifies this claim,<sup>6</sup> which calls for an explanation given that the validity of morality as well as its legislative ground are independent of the idea of God, one asks how the relation between God and human freedom is thought of in Kant’s conceptual framework. Given that Kant’s religion is grounded in morality, and that his morality affirms the Pauline Principle, it seems clear that Kant’s conception of God ought not to violate the Pauline Principle.

In short: Kant thinks that the possibility of morality (its applicability to finite rational beings) can be secured only if the ‘Highest-Good’—a perfectly moral world, in which, e.g., there is a proportion between virtue and happiness—is possible (“if the Highest-Good [...] is not possible, then the moral law must be [...] on itself false [an sich falsch sein]”; KpV, AA V: 114). So, the difference between Kant and Leibniz which is relevant for the current discussion is the following: Leibniz argues that the actual world *is* the best possible, whereas Kant holds that the actual world *can become* (through the free action of finite agents) the best possible. Now the Highest-Good is not possible without the postulation of a (moral) God (see, e.g., KpV, AA V: 129). So, for the sake of morality, there is a systematic

need to postulate the possibility of the Highest-Good, and there is a further systematic need to postulate God's existence for the sake of the possibility of the Highest-Good.

Be that as it may, it follows that the concept of God is subordinated according to Kant *ab ovo* to a practical (moral) precedent requirement of the finite agent (God's conception cannot be given an *objective* sense, for this would amount to trespassing the limits of finite cognition). In light of this, one can easily grasp the way Kant ascribes attributes to God. Kant writes:

In relation to the *Highest-Good* possible under his rule alone, namely the existence of rational beings under moral laws, we will conceive of this original being as omniscient, so that even what is inmost in their dispositions (which is what constitutes the real moral value of the actions of rational beings in the world) is not hidden from him; as *omnipotent*, so that he can make the whole of nature suitable for this highest end; as *omnibenevolent* and at the same time just, because these two properties (united as wisdom) constitute the conditions of the causality of a supreme cause of the world as a Highest-Good under moral laws; and likewise all of the remaining transcendental properties, such as *eternity*, *omnipresence*, etc. (for goodness and justice are moral properties), which must be presupposed in relation to such a final end, must also be thought in such a being. (KU, AA V: 444)

In the present context, the divine attribute of 'omniscience' is crucial. According to Kant, this refers mainly to God's knowing the real incentive of the action, and not necessarily to God's knowing what a free agent *would choose or would have chosen, had God not intervened*.<sup>7</sup> This is directly relevant for Sterba's moral argument from evil. For Sterba claims that it "would be the best way to bring about a morally defensible distribution of freedom" if God intervened to "restrict a not very important freedom of would-be wrongdoers in order to secure significant freedoms for those who would otherwise be victims" (Sterba 2019, p. 56). However, if God is not in a position to know what a free agent would choose or would have chosen, had God not intervened, then God is not in a position to identify "would-be wrongdoers" and it is then, arguably, not a trivial task to stop would-be wrongdoers—and only would-be wrongdoers—from carrying out immoral plans and intentions.

This Kantian stance is similar to Leibniz's position in this sense: Kant, as Leibniz, thinks that we obtain an a priori conception of a moral God (this conception is not inferred from experience, but is grounded in an a priori moral demand), i.e., that we can tell a priori that God is moral, and that we nevertheless cannot know *how* this principle can be applied to *every* single occasion of evil we bump into in experience (the second cannot invalidate the first).<sup>8</sup> In light of such a (possible) metaphysical background, Sterba's claim that there is a logical contradiction between God's existence as an ultimate moral being and God's not preventing the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions is at the very least problematic. Here, as well, Sterba would not only have to show that it is *implausible* to conceptualize God in this spirit; he would also have to show that it is *logically contradictory*.

### 3. Further Thoughts on Sterba's Moral Argument from Evil

Be that as it may, Sterba's moral argument from evil appeals to three moral principles that, in his view, "are exceptionless minimal components of the Pauline Principle never to do evil that good may come of it which are acceptable to consequentialists and nonconsequentialists and are, or should be, acceptable to theists and atheists alike" (Sterba 2019, p. 183). The three moral principles are (see Sterba 2019, p. 184):

Moral evil prevention requirement 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.

Moral evil prevention requirement 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.

#### Moral evil prevention requirement 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.

He then, basically, argues as follows (see Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90):

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.

Notice that unlike, e.g., Mackie, Sterba does not argue that God has an obligation to prevent *every* evil: “Now no one doubts that there would be a problem if God always intervened to prevent evil. If that were to happen, then the freedom we would be left with would hardly be worthy of the name” (Sterba 2019, p. 52). Sterba only argues that God has an obligation to prevent the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions:

By contrast, what would be ideal from the perspective of freedom is a world where everyone’s freedom is appropriately constrained [...] Accordingly, I contend that if we want to appropriately constrain freedom, we should have a policy that constrains the less significant freedoms of would-be wrongdoers in order to secure the more significant freedom of their would-be victims. Surely, that would be a justified policy of constraint. In addition, it would not deprive would-be wrongdoers of their status as moral agents nor would it leave with only a toy or a playpen freedom. Thus, even when serious wrongdoers are prevented from carrying out the final steps of their evil actions with significant and especially horrendous consequences for their victims, they would still have the freedom to imagine, intend, and even take initial steps toward carrying out their wrongdoing. (Sterba 2019, p. 53)

Sterba explains further:

[...] we are not imagining that God is always preventing the evil consequences of wrongful actions. Rather, we are assuming that 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. We are also assuming that 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. 56)

There is, however, still reason to doubt that Sterba is right about God’s obligations. It is, of course, impossible to prevent the significant and horrendous consequences of an immoral action that *has (or will have)* significant and horrendous consequences. For if the significant and horrendous consequences of an immoral action that *has (or will have)* significant and horrendous consequences are prevented, then this immoral action has not (or will not have) significant and horrendous consequences (given that these consequences are prevented). It follows that one and the same immoral action *both has and has not (or both will and will not have)* significant and horrendous consequences (which is impossible). Sterba, therefore, does



surely not claim that God ought to prevent the significant and horrendous consequences of an immoral action that *has (or will have)* significant and horrendous consequences. What Sterba has in mind, presumably, is that God ought to intervene when an immoral action *would have significant and horrendous consequences if God didn't intervene* (this explains Sterba's talk of "would-be wrongdoers" and "would-be victims").

Things are not so easy, however. Consider van Inwagen's famous example of a bomb connected with a Geiger counter: "We might, for example, build a time bomb incorporating a radioactive source, a Geiger counter, and a firing mechanism designed to take a Geiger counter's 'output'—clicks or whatever—as 'input'. Such a bomb might be designed to explode if the counter, for example, clicked five times within any ten-second interval" (van Inwagen 1983, p. 192). Now add two assumptions: First, an explosion of the bomb would lead to significant and horrendous evils (such as the extinction of two thirds of the human population). Second, it is always the case that, if God did not intervene, the bomb *might* not explode (and it is, therefore, never the case that, if God did not intervene, the bomb *would* explode).

Facing this example, Sterba might want to claim that God ought to intervene (i.e., that God ought to prevent us from building such a bomb) even though it is never the case that our building that bomb *would* have significant and horrendous consequences if God did not intervene (it is only always the case that our building that bomb *might* have significant and horrendous consequences, if God did not intervene).

Now this immediately raises the question which immoral actions God ought to prevent, i.e., whether God ought to prevent only the immoral actions that *would* have or also the immoral actions that *might* have significant and horrendous consequences. It is useful to distinguish here three kinds of immoral actions:

1. Say that an immoral action is *tendentially harmful* if and only if it is true that, if God did not intervene, it *would* (eventually) lead to significant and horrendous evils.
2. Say that an immoral action is *potentially harmful* if and only if it is true that, if God did not intervene, it *might* (eventually) lead to significant and horrendous evils.<sup>9</sup>
3. Say that an immoral action is *tendentially harmless* if and only if it is true that, if God did not intervene, it *would not* (eventually) lead to significant and horrendous evils.

Sterba appears to admit that God has no obligation to prevent tendentially harmless immoral actions. The question is, however, whether (i) God has only an obligation to prevent every tendentially harmful action, or whether (ii) God has also an obligation to prevent every potentially harmful action.

Suppose, on the one hand, that (i) God has only an obligation to prevent every tendentially harmful action. It is, then, not at all clear that God has violated any obligation. The reason is this: For all we know, God *has* prevented every tendentially harmful action (for all we know, every immoral action that has in fact led to significant and horrendous evils was only potentially harmful).<sup>10</sup> Thus, for all we know, God has not violated any obligation.<sup>11</sup> There is, then, no reason to doubt that God is perfectly morally good.

Suppose, on the other hand, that (ii) God has also an obligation to prevent every potentially harmful action. There is, then, reason to doubt that Sterba is right about God's obligations. The reason is this: For all we know, *every* immoral thought, intention, action, etc., is potentially harmful (e.g., for all we know, every immoral thought, intention, action, etc., *might* eventually lead to the eternal separation from God). If Sterba is right about God's obligations, it would follow that God has an obligation to prevent *every* immoral thought, intention, action, etc. However, God has certainly not an obligation to prevent *every* immoral thought, intention, action, etc., for in that case, to use Sterba's own words, "the freedom we would be left with would hardly be worthy of the name." There is, therefore, reason to doubt that Sterba is right about God's obligations.

Now Sterba might, of course, appeal to the law of Conditional Excluded Middle (CEM):

(CEM) It is either true that (if it were true that  $p$ , it would be true that  $q$ ), or it is true that (if it were true that  $p$ , it would *not* be true that  $q$ ).

By an appeal to CEM, he might argue that every immoral action that is potentially harmful is also tendentially harmful.<sup>12</sup> He might, then, claim that God has not prevented every potentially harmful immoral action and, therefore, not prevented every tendentially harmful immoral action. It would seem, then, that—even if God has only the obligation to prevent every tendentially harmful immoral action—God has still violated his obligations. However, CEM is notoriously controversial.<sup>13</sup> Although there are attempts to defend CEM, the majority of participants of the debate appears to reject (or, at any rate, doubt) CEM. Unless Sterba is able to come up with a novel and convincing justification of CEM, there would still be strong doubts about Sterba's argument.

Sterba might, therefore, prefer to appeal to the law of Conjunction Conditionalization (CC):

(CC) If it is true that  $p$  and it is true that  $q$ , then it is true that (if it were true that  $p$ , then it would be true that  $q$ ).

With the help of CC, he might argue that every immoral action that God has not prevented and that has led to significant and horrendous evils is tendentially harmful.<sup>14</sup> He might, then, conclude that God has not prevented every tendentially harmful immoral action (and, therefore, conclude that—even if God has only the obligation to prevent every tendentially harmful immoral action—God has still violated his obligations). However, although CC is not as controversial as CEM, there is nonetheless an ongoing debate about CC.<sup>15</sup> Many participants of the debate appear to reject CC (or appear to have reservations about CC). Unless Sterba is able to come up with a novel and convincing justification of CC, there would still be strong doubts about Sterba's argument.

For this reason, Sterba might prefer to claim that God has an obligation to prevent every potentially harmful action and that it is implausible that *every* immoral thought, intention, action, etc., is potentially harmful. There are two reasons why this reply would be problematic: First, given Sterba's aim, Sterba would not only have to show that it is *implausible* but also that it is *logically contradictory* that every immoral thought, intention, action, etc., is potentially harmful. Second, it follows from the law of Counterfactual Modus Ponens (CMP) that every immoral thought, intention, action, etc., that God has in fact not prevented and that has in fact led to significant and horrendous evils is a potentially harmful immoral action.<sup>16</sup> It would, therefore, still follow that God has an obligation to prevent every immoral action that God has in fact not prevented and that has in fact led to significant and horrendous evils. This, however, is highly implausible. To see this, note that among the uncountably many events that have led to climate change (which, in turn, has led to many significant and horrendous evils) are uncountably many immoral actions (such as throwing a chewing gum package in a forest or letting one's basil plant die). Even Sterba, who appears to suppose that God has an obligation to prevent *some* of these immoral actions, is certainly not going to suppose that God has an obligation to prevent *all* of these immoral actions.

Our best guess is that, for these reasons, Sterba would want to claim that God has an obligation to prevent *all* tendentially harmful actions and that, besides that, God has an obligation to prevent *some* (but *not all*) potentially harmful actions. There would, however, still remain reasonable doubts about Sterba's argument for two reasons: First, it would, then, not at all be clear *why* God ought to have prevented some (but not all) potentially harmful actions (and, therefore, not at all be clear *which* potentially harmful actions God ought to have prevented). Second, it would, consequently, not at all be clear *that God has not* prevented every potentially harmful action he ought to have prevented (and it would, therefore, not at all be clear that God has violated his obligations).

#### 4. Conclusions

According to Sterba's moral argument from evil, there is no all-good and all-powerful God. For if there were an all-good and all-powerful God, God would necessarily be adher-

ing to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III (= Sterba’s second premise). Moreover, if he were adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, then it follows that necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission (= Sterba’s third premise).

The aim of the paper was to uncover two “blind spots” in Sterba’s moral argument from evil. First, Sterba fails to consider alternative historical positions such as Leibniz’s (who argues that God knows that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds) or Kant’s (who suggests that God does not necessarily know what free agents would choose or would have chosen, had God not intervened). Second, Sterba neither rules out the possibility that God *has* always intervened in history when his not intervening *would* have led to significant and horrendous evils, nor the possibility that *every* immoral action (and its consequences) *might* have led to significant and horrendous evils.

It seems to us that Sterba’s failure to consider these alternative possibilities casts serious doubt on the third premise of Sterba’s moral argument from evil (that significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be God’s permission, if God were adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III). For what these alternative possibilities suggest is that the task of preventing the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions might well be a task that cannot easily be accomplished (at least not in a morally unobjectionable way)—even by an all-powerful God.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> All citations from Leibniz’s work are based on the following translation: (Leibniz 2009).

<sup>2</sup> One might think that in that case God is *determined* to single out the best of all possible worlds; thus, it cannot be considered as a free act (for it seems that God could have not done otherwise). Leibniz’s argument is here more complicated; however, we cannot dwell on this issue here. For an interpretation according to which Leibniz cannot avoid such a conclusion see (Adams 1994), pp. 40–42; for a different position see, e.g., (Rateau 2014), pp. 105–9.

<sup>3</sup> Among other things, Leibniz thinks that *not creating at all* is (i) a possibility of God as well, and that (ii) this possibility is nevertheless not the best.

<sup>4</sup> Sterba might insist that, given any possible world, God—as an infinitely powerful being—would always be able to create a better possible world (compare, e.g., Aquinas’s treatment of the topic in s. th. I q. 25 art. 6). He might conclude that it is logically contradictory to assume both that God exists and that there is a best of all possible worlds. However, the argument from above works even without assuming both that God exists and that there is a best of all possible worlds. Suppose, for example, that God exists and that every possible world in which God prevents the evils of the actual world is worse than the actual world (compare, e.g., Aquinas’s suggestions in s. th. I q. 22 art. 2). It follows that God cannot prevent the greater evil of a worse world without permitting the evils of the actual world. Arguably, there is no *logical contradiction* in both assuming that God exists and that every possible world in which God prevents the evils of the actual world is worse than the actual world. The passages of Aquinas’s work can be found in Thomas Aquinas, “Summa Theologiae”, in (Aquinas 1888–1906).

<sup>5</sup> We will use the following abbreviations: RGV, AA VI = *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*; KpV, AA V = *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*; KU, AA V = *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. All citations are taken from Kant’s *Akademieausgabe* (=AA) (Kant 1900a, 1900b, 1900c).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed analysis of Kant’s argument see (Kravitz 2022).

<sup>7</sup> There are two (intimately connected) debates in contemporary philosophy of religion that turn out to be relevant in this regard: First, the debate about whether counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (e.g., counterfactuals about what a free agent would have chosen, had God not intervened) are possibly *true*. Second, the debate about whether counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, if possibly true, are possibly *foreknown by God*. See, for example, (Hasker 1989; van Inwagen 1997, 2006; Flint 1998). In view of these debates, it is far from clear whether God—as an omniscient being—would have to foreknow what a free agent would have chosen, had God not intervened.

<sup>8</sup> In a way, Kant seems to suggest a ‘philosophical defence of theism’, contrary to a ‘theodicean argument’. Roughly: To argue *that* the presence of evil in the world is compatible with God’s attributes amounts to advocating a philosophical defence of

theism; to suggest a further account of God's *possible reasons* for issuing (permitting) evil constitutes a theodicean argument. For interpretation in this spirit see, e.g., (Dieringer 2009). This analogy, however, does not capture Kant's precise intent, but this issue lies beyond the scope of this paper. For details see (Kravitz 2020).

9 Say that it is true that (if it were true that p, then it *might* be true that q) if and only if it is *not* true that (if it were true that p, it *would not* be true that q). For the interdefinability of 'might' and 'would', see (Lewis 1973, pp. 2, 80–81; van Inwagen 1997, p. 232). See also (Bennett 2003, pp. 189–92; Stalnaker 1978; DeRose 1994; Leitgeb 2012, p. 111).

10 The claim is not that *we know* that God has prevented every tendentially harmful action; the claim is that arguing that God has prevented every tendentially harmful action *is compatible with what we know*. But, again, it is enough to assume that it is *not logically contradictory* that God has prevented every tendentially harmful immoral action.

11 Sterba might insist, of course, that God would still have violated his obligation to prevent the significant and horrendously evil consequences of immoral actions. This, however, would not solve but only postpone the problem. The reason is that one might distinguish between tendentially and potentially harmful consequences of immoral actions and still maintain that God *has* always intervened in the course of events that have resulted from immoral actions when his not intervening *would* have led to significant and horrendous evils (and that he has not intervened, by contrast, when his not intervening *only might* have led to significant and horrendous evils).

12 Proof: Take any immoral action that is potentially harmful. It follows that, if God did not intervene, it might lead to significant and horrendous evils. It follows, further, that it is *not* true that, if God did not intervene, it *would not* lead to significant and horrendous evils (because of the interdefinability of 'might' and 'would'). By CEM, it is true that, if God did not intervene, it *would* lead to significant and horrendous evils. This potentially harmful immoral action is, therefore, not only potentially harmful but also tendentially harmful.

13 For a discussion of CEM, see (Stalnaker 1978; Lewis 1973, pp. 79–83; Bennett 2003, pp. 183–93; Cross 2009; Williams 2010; Leitgeb 2012, pp. 88–90).

14 Proof: Take any immoral action that God has not prevented and that has led to significant and horrendous evils. It follows, by CC, that, if God did not prevent it, it would have led to significant and horrendous evils. This immoral action, therefore, is tendentially harmful.

15 For a discussion of CC, see (Stalnaker 1978; Lewis 1973, pp. 26–31; Walters 2009; Ahmed 2011; Leitgeb 2012, pp. 86–93; Walters and Williams 2013).

16 The law of Counterfactual Modus Ponens (CMP) is the law that, if it is true that p and it is true that (if it were true that p, it would be true that q), then it is true that q. Take now any immoral thought, intention, action, etc., that God has in fact not prevented and that has in fact led to significant and horrendous evils. If this immoral thought, intention, action, etc., were *not* potentially harmful, it would not be true that (if God did not prevent it, it *might* have led to significant and horrendous evils). It would follow (from the interdefinability of 'might' and 'would') that it is true that (if God did not prevent it, it *would not* have led to significant and horrendous evils). It would follow, by CMP (given that God has not prevented it), that it has not led to significant and horrendous evils (contrary to the assumptions). This immoral thought, intention, action, etc., therefore, is potentially harmful.

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Article

# Against the New Logical Argument from Evil

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**Abstract:** Jim Sterba's *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* looks to resurrect J. L. Mackie's logical argument from evil. Sterba accepts the general framework that theists seeking to give a theodicy have favored since Leibniz invented the term: the search for some greater good provided or greater evil averted that would justify God in permitting the type and variety of evil we actually observe. However, Sterba introduces a deontic twist, drawing on the Pauline Principle (let us not do evil that good may come) to introduce three deontic side constraints on God's choice of action. He then splits the possible goods into four categories: first- vs. second-order goods, goods to which we have a right, and goods to which we do not have a right. He argues that his deontic constraints rule out each combination, thereby showing that no God-justifying good is on offer. To defuse the argument, I draw on a pair of ideas from Marilyn McCord Adams: (i) God is outside the bounds of morality, and (ii) God can defeat evils by incorporating them into an incommensurately valuable friendship with each human. Properly appreciated, these show that the new logical argument relies on a false premise that is not easily repaired.

**Keywords:** theodicy; logical problem of evil; divine goodness; God and morality; friendship with God; horrendous evil

## 1. Introduction

In *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, Jim Sterba aims to bring resources from moral philosophy—most notably the principle of double effect—to bear on the argument from evil for atheism. Opposing the general consensus in the philosophy of religion over the last half-century,<sup>1</sup> Sterba presents what he contends is a successful logical argument from evil. In contrast to so-called “evidential” arguments from evil, which aim to show that evil constitutes strong (perhaps compelling) evidence against the existence of a good god, logical arguments from evil aim to show that there is a contradiction between the existence of the type and variety of evil we actually encounter and the existence of a good god. In a sense, this is less ambitious than J. L. Mackie's (1955) logical argument from evil, which aimed to show the inconsistency of a good god with any evil whatsoever. However, the conclusion is still significant, and the stronger premise does not make the argument any less of a threat to theism.

I will develop a response to Sterba's argument, drawing heavily on the twin ideas that God is exempt from moral norms and that God can defeat horrendous suffering by willingly joining us in it while using it to form unique relationships, making existence overall a great good to every person who exists. For both, I am heavily indebted to the work of Marilyn McCord Adams. I begin by laying out Sterba's argument and the proposed moral principles it turns.

## 2. Sterba's Argument

Sterba offers us the following summary of his argument, meant to “approximate the form Mackie should have used in his famous exchange with Alvin Plantinga.”<sup>2</sup>

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- |  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1. There is an all-good, all-powerful God  | ASSUME FOR REDUCTIO.     |
| 2. If there was an all-good, all-powerful God then necessarily he would be conforming to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III  | DIVINE GOODNESS PREMISE. |
| 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 obtained through what would have to be his permission | EVIL PREVENTION PREMISE  |
| 4. Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do occur all around us, which, if God exists, would have to be through his permission<br>Therefore,  | ACTUAL EVIL PREMISE.     |
| 5. It is not the case that there is an all-good, all-powerful God  | CONCLUSION.              |

The argument is valid. So, the theist must deny one of the premises. In order to be in a position to assess the key divine goodness and evil prevention premises, we must state Sterba’s Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, which are intended as consequences of the Pauline Principle: let us not do evil that good may result.<sup>3</sup> While Sterba is not committed to the Pauline Principle in its full generality, he does believe that the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements are exceptionless consequences of it. We state them below.

1. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 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.
2. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II: do not permit rather than prevent significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions on their would-be victims in order to provide would-be beneficiaries with goods they would morally prefer not to have.<sup>4</sup>
3. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 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.

What is the significance of these principles in particular? Sterba accepts the general framework for theodicy that most philosophers of religion work in—in order for God to be justified in permitting some evil, God must either thereby gain some greater good or prevent some greater evil—but with a twist. Sterba believes in deontic constraints on the situations in which a greater-good justification would excuse God permitting some evil. He divides the possible goods into four categories: first-order goods to which we have a right, second-order goods to which we have a right, first-order goods to which we have no right, and second-order goods to which we have no right. The Moral Evil Prevention Requirements are intended to show that providing us any good in those categories at the price of allowing the horrendous effects of evil acts would violate a deontic constraint. Each has a unique role: Principle I is meant to rule out first-order goods to which we have a right, together with the resources of omnipotence; Principle III is meant to rule out first-order goods to which we do not have a right; and Principle II is meant to rule out both kinds of second-order goods.<sup>5</sup>

The first and fourth premises of Sterba’s argument are beyond question: the first is just an assumption for reductio, and the fourth is readily discernible from today’s *New York Times*. So, the second and third premises are where all of the argumentative action lies.

### 3. The Divine Goodness Premise

The key second premise will be the main focus of our discussion. First, I will review arguments from the literature for the claim that God has no moral obligations. *Prima facie*, this falsifies the second premise. I will then explore options for repairing the second premise. The options we examine will fail, and their failure will let us see what kinds of

constraints there are upon any successful revision of the second premise. In the process, we will also see a failure of the third premise.

### 3.1. Exempting God from Moral Norms

We can find three general lines of argumentation in the literature opposing the divine goodness premise. Marilyn McCord Adams denies that God has any obligations concerning creatures because of the “size gap” between them.<sup>6</sup> Daniel Rubio makes a decision-theoretic argument concluding that holding God to even a minimal normative standard results in a paradox. Mark Murphy argues that the kinds of reasons we plausibly have to align with the standard canons of morality are not applicable to the kind of being that God is. Brian Davies provides an updated Thomistic account of God as beyond morality.<sup>7</sup> If any of these arguments succeed, then the divine goodness premise is false.

Adams’s argument trades on the sheer difference between the God of the Abrahamic religions (the one she is interested in exploring) and human beings. This difference, she argues, places God outside of the network of rights and obligations that constitute morality as commonly understood.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that God is not an agent, one who sets goals and executes plans in pursuit of them. But not every agent falls within our moral community. It is common to distinguish between moral agents and moral patients, and both of these from nonmoral entities. Moral agents have both rights and obligations: things that they must (or must not) do, as well as things that moral agents must (or must not) do for (to) them. The prototypical example of a moral agent is an adult human in good health. Moral patients, on the other hand, have rights without obligations. Sentient animals and human infants are both prototypical examples of moral patients. Nonmoral entities, on the other hand, are more like rocks or hurricanes: without right or obligation.<sup>9</sup>

Just using prototypical examples, it is plain that some rational agents are not moral agents. All that is required for an agent to be rational is for it to exhibit teleological thinking: setting of goals and then executing plans aimed at achieving those goals. Its performance can then be measured by the norms of rationality. Intelligent animals such as octopi, dolphins, birds, and primates all exhibit these capacities in spades. However, it is rare (though not unknown) for philosophers to attribute moral agency to them.<sup>10</sup> The bird who kills and eats another—or even the cat who hunts for sport—is not thereby wicked. They have violated no obligation, because they are the wrong sort of thing to be obliged.

Human infants are another interesting case. While infants are not moral agents, they are clearly moral patients, and they are clearly rational agents. There is evidence of teleological and even empathetic thinking among human infants. However, attempts to analyze the behavior of infants with a moral lens leads to self-parody, as illustrated by this passage from Book I of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*:

for in Thy sight none is pure from sin, not even the infant whose life is but a day upon the earth. Who remindeth me? doth not each little infant, in whom I see what of myself I remember not? What then was my sin? was it that I hung upon the breast and cried? for should I now so do for food suitable to my age, justly should I be laughed at and reproof. What I then did was worthy reproof; but since I could not understand reproof, custom and reason forbade me to be reproof. For those habits, when grown, we root out and cast away. Now no man, though he prunes, wittingly casts away what is good. Or was it then good, even for a while, to cry for what, if given, would hurt? bitterly to resent, that persons free, and its own elders, yea, the very authors of its birth, served it not? that many besides, wiser than it, obeyed not the nod of its good pleasure? to do its best to strike and hurt, because commands were not obeyed, which had been obeyed to its hurt? The weakness then of infant limbs, not its will, is its innocence. Myself have seen and known even a baby envious; it could not speak, yet it turned pale and looked bitterly on its foster-brother. Who knows not this?<sup>11</sup>



The difference between human infants and human children, who do possess moral agency, is minuscule. Yet, it is the difference between having moral obligations and lacking them. It does not take much to stand apart from morality's grasp.

A certain kind of rationalist might object that infants, children, and animals are not moral agents because, while they have sophisticated rational capacities, they lack something that human adults have. That extra rational capacity is what puts adults "over the line". A divine agent would have superior rational capacities to human adults and so would already be "over the line". I find the "line" conception of who is and is not a moral agent unconvincing. We can reflect on this with a little science fiction (though a subject that is becoming more science and less fiction every day). One of the central problems of technology ethics is that of AI alignment. It is uncontroversial that an artificial general intelligence (AGI) could possess rational capacities superior to that of a human adult. Would this automatically make an AGI a moral agent? Not clearly. The alignment problem is the problem of designing AGI that are also moral agents. As researchers working on alignment readily admit, it is far from trivial.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, upon reflection on the variety of beings with which we are familiar, only humans who have achieved at least a few years of development count uncontroversially as moral agents. The circle of rational agents exceeds the circle of moral agents. Given that even very small differences exempt rational agents from the moral norms that govern us, we should expect that vast differences such as between the Abrahamic God and us would have the same effect.

Next, Rubio's argument takes the form of a proof.<sup>13</sup> Rubio starts with the following assumptions: first, the decision of which world to create has no optimal strategy (no best of all possible worlds); second, any world that it would be wrong for God to create is thereby impossible; third, there is at least one world which it would be wrong for God to create. Then, we can use two fairly weak principles of rational choice theory to prove that no world is possible. These principles are (i) no worst—if there are more than two options available, the worst option (if one there be) is impermissible to choose; and (ii) the independence of irrelevant alternatives—if in the choice between a and b, option b is not permissible to choose, then in the choice between options a, b, and c, option b is not permissible to choose. Rubio canvasses a number of ways out of this proof and argues that the best one is to discard the option that there is a world that it would be wrong for God to create. This effectively places God's actions beyond the reach of both morality and rationality.

Next, Murphy's argument surveys the ways facts about our well-being could connect to reasons for acting.<sup>14</sup> Major theories of the (normative) foundation of morality invoke facts about human community, psychology, or nature to explain why promoting the well-being of humans provides reasons that require action. A being like God, by contrast, is not part of a human community, does not have a human psychology, and has a divine nature.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, Murphy argues, we should not expect facts about these things to provide God with reasons requiring God to act to promote our well-being. God is not the type of thing to be bound by the moral norms you or I may be.

If even one of these arguments is sound, then God is not a moral agent. If that is true, then Sterba's second premise fails and so too does the argument.

### 3.2. *Modifying the Premise*

In response to these kinds of arguments, Sterba suggests two moves. One: retreat to a "condemnation" of God's failure to prevent the horrendous consequences of moral evil. Two: argue that even without obligations, we might still expect that God is good overall in God's relationship with others, and that a failure to observe the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements is a failure to be good in God's relationship to others. We will consider these in turn.

We will begin with the "condemnation". In summarizing his first line of response after considering Brian Davies's account of God as outside the bounds of moral agency, Sterba writes:

Even assuming that God were not subject to moral requirements as Davies contends, God's failure, if he existed, to prevent the horrendous evil consequences of all the immoral actions in the world when he could easily have done so without either producing a greater evil or failing to secure a greater good is still to be condemned. It would have resulted in far more evil consequences than has been produced individually by all the greatest villains among us.<sup>16</sup>

At first glance, it is a somewhat curious stance to take that we condemn the acts of a nonmoral agent. In failing to prevent horrendous evil, God has not failed in God's obligations to us. We do not condemn hurricanes, fires, earthquakes, and other nonmoral causes that set back our interests. Sterba's condemnation seems here like a category error.

We do, of course, sometimes perform condemnatory behavior toward nonmoral agents for reasons other than expressing moral blame, such as to alter future behavior. The parent scolds their toddler for running into the street, not because the toddler has morally erred but in hope that the relatively mild unpleasantness of the scolding will cause the toddler to be more cautious around streets. But when it comes to behavior—even behavior that does not meet the moral standard, such as an infant disrupting their parents sleep in order to be fed a few hours earlier—that ought not be deterred, condemnation is inappropriate. Premature insistence on sleeping through the night is bad parenting.

It is also unclear how this condemnation repairs Sterba's argument. In denying that God is subject to moral obligations, the theist denies the divine goodness premise. In order for "condemnation" to repair the argument, it must provide a replacement premise. Here is the natural option:

- (2\*) If God were all good and all powerful then necessarily  
 God would not do anything subject to human  
 condemnation DIVINE HUMAN APPROVAL  
 PREMISE.

In addition, Sterba suggested that we might replace talk of divine morality with talk of divine goodness in relationship to others, giving us a second replacement option:

- (2\*\*) If God were all good and all powerful then  
 necessarily God would be good overall in God's  
 relationship with others<sup>17</sup> DIVINE RELATIONAL  
 QUALITY PREMISE.

However, should the theistic denier of divine moral obligations find 2\* or 2\*\* plausible? I think not. We may start with 2\*. According to 2\*, God avoids doing things that humans condemn. Yet in several of the world's religions, we find approval for protest against divine (in)action. Much of this originates from the "Book of Job", sacred scripture to Jews and Christians, which tells the story of a man whom God allows the devil to visit with ruinous evil to demonstrate that his faith is disinterested. Job protests his mistreatment to God, and "Job [spoke of God what is right].<sup>18</sup>" Any conception of God shaped by the Hebrew Bible must reckon with stories like this. The God of these religions neither fears nor works to avoid human condemnation, even condemnation shaped by a moral code.<sup>19</sup>

This matters for a logical argument from evil. The goal of a logical argument from evil is to derive a contradiction from a conception of the divine inherent in the beliefs of the theist and our experience of evil in the world. As Mackie understood, his own project was

[to show], not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another, so that the theologian can maintain his position as a whole only by a much more extreme rejection of reason than in the former case. He must now be prepared to believe, not merely what cannot be proved, but what can be disproved from other beliefs that he also holds.<sup>20</sup>

To hold any probative force, the logical argument must address the beliefs of actual theists. Its goal is to show a contradiction. For that purpose, an assumption that divine goodness requires acting to avoid moralized human condemnation is not fit to task. Premise 2\* may be a problem for some theologies, but not for the ones we find in the world's Abrahamic monotheisms.

This brings us to Premise 2\*\*. This premise seems more promising. It is, plausibly, a religious commitment that God is good in God's relationships to others, most saliently humanity. The idea that God is "for us" is an important part of most of the world's theistic religions (although for any for which it is not, 2\*\* would not be the right replacement premise; against, say, an Aristotelian Deist, it would not go far). So, the question then becomes: are there analogs of Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III for being good in a relationship?

We will start with Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I. Is it possible to be good overall in a relationship while having violated Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I? I contend that it is and argue by example.

The reformed baker: In a small village lives a baker. Because of the village's environment, the baker's bread is crucial for the population to consume sufficient calories and nutrients to avoid the evils of malnutrition and starvation. Being a savvy businessowner, the baker had secured several years' worth of wheat futures guaranteed at good prices. One year, war came to the land and caused a massive demand shock in the wheat market. Like a savvy businessowner, the baker raised the price of bread as market forces dictated. Unfortunately, most of the villagers could not now afford bread and faced malnutrition and ultimately starvation. Because of the wheat futures, the baker could have maintained prices at prewar levels without compromising what was a profitable business, until the war's end, when wheat prices would revert to normal. One night, perhaps at the urging of a trio of spirits, the baker had a change of heart, lowered prices, and saved the villagers from hunger. For the rest of the baker's life, the baker provided the villagers with nutritious and reasonably priced bread and used the war profits to build a school for the village children.

In the reformed baker, we have a clear violation of Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I on the part of the baker. Sustenance is a basic right, and during the war, the baker could have easily provided it. Even though the baker was blameless in the circumstances that caused starvation in the village—the demand shock in food prices—he could have prevented its consequences by maintaining prices instead of war profiteering. He chose not to. But, in a change of heart, he decided to save the villagers and atone for his actions.

Was the baker good overall in his relationship to the villagers? I contend that he was. After his moral awakening, he relieved their suffering despite lacking any practical or self-regarding reason to do so. Furthermore, he took his war profits and invested them in bringing a public good to the community. The village was better off after the demand shock than before. Of course, the baker's track record was not one of uniformly acting in the villagers' interest. However, the standards for an overall good relationship are not so high. Despite violating Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I, the baker's actions were still on the whole benevolent.

Perhaps the atheist can make the following rejoinder: granting that the reformed baker shows 2\*\*'s insufficiency, we might still improve it. Instead of requiring that God be good overall in God's relationship to others, what if we require that God is *perfect* in God's relationship to others? The baker is not perfect in his relationship to the villagers, and so this newly created 2\*\*\* does not face the counterexample. This, I think, is a dead end, because we lack a sufficiently developed conception of what it takes to be perfect in relationship to others. If we define perfection in relationship as including observation of all three Moral Evil Prevention Requirements, the atheist risks victory by definition—no victory at all. We might attempt other definitions, perhaps in terms of how much weight one places on the interests of the other, but these sorts of efforts risk outstripping the commitments of the theist. The world's monotheistic religions promise a God who is for us. They do not make specific promises about how that God weighs our rights and interests against other divine cosmic purposes.

So let us stick with 2\*\* and proceed to the second Moral Evil Prevention Requirement. According to it, one constraint on greater-good justifications for allowing horrendous evil is

that the goods not be ones the recipients “would morally prefer not to have”. The use of the term “morally prefer” is somewhat puzzling. The idea of a preference is straightforward enough; what does the qualifier “morally” add? Unfortunately, Sterba does not elaborate on the idea of a moral preference. Some candidate meanings are presented below.

- MP-I: an agent morally prefers option x to option y just in case she prefers x to y and in so doing does not violate any canon of morality.
- MP-II: an agent morally prefers option x to option y just in case her ideal self prefers x to y.
- MP-III: an agent morally prefers option x to option y just in case attention to only her moral reasons would lead her to prefer x to y.<sup>21</sup>

Before confronting a revised Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II in the context of Premise 2\*\*, one should recall the great good that, in the world’s great religions, God provides to defeat evil.

### 3.3. *The Good of Divine Friendship*

The idea of defeating evil (with good) originated with Roderick Chisholm and was developed in the specifically Christian context by Marilyn McCord Adams. The central idea is that given some evil, there are two ways of providing some good in response to it. One way is to balance it off. Suppose, for example, in a mediocre world, a Chosen One breaks their arm. In recompense, that world’s deity raises the quality of the world from mediocre to excellent (perhaps by increasing the well-being of every individual from a mediocre level to flourishing). The world would be better still without the arm breaking, but the deity’s actions add far more good to the world than the arm breaking added evil. The evil of the arm breaking is balanced off by the deity’s miracle.

The other way is to defeat it. In contrast with mere balancing off, a defeated evil contributes positively to the good of the whole. It achieves this by entering into organic unity with the goods provided to defeat it. By destroying this organic unity, removing the defeated evil from the world would thereby make it worse, wounding the world by an act of vandalism. For example, a splotch of ugly color in an impressionist’s painting may enhance the value of the whole despite being ugly when considered alone. Or, closer to the relevant case, the ill fortunes of a life may nevertheless enhance its overall value by providing a good narrative structure. The mark of a defeated evil in the career of a rational being is a later endorsement; if down the line, considering only my own well-being, I prefer the suffering to be included in my life rather than out of it, it has been defeated.<sup>22</sup>

For Adams, defeat rather than balancing off is the standard if God is to be good to us. To provide that defeat, she proposes God Godself. Relying on the Christian doctrine of incarnation, she argues that God defeats horrendous suffering by voluntarily undergoing horrendous suffering, and thereby creating solidarity and relationship with the sufferers. Culminating in a beatific vision that is unique to each individual and a friendship with God that is unique to each individual, horrendous suffering is enfolded within the larger human–divine relationship. Friendship with God formed through solidarity in horrendous suffering is a second-order good, logically dependent upon the horrendous suffering of both human and divine participant. I will now argue that it is not a second-order good that its recipients would prefer not to have. Consequently, even if God is conforming to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements II, God would still allow victims to suffer the consequences of horrendous evil in order to forge a uniquely valuable friendship with them as co-sufferer. This leaves Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II intact, but at the price of the evil prevention premise.

### 3.4. *Moral Preference*

We begin with MP-I. According to MP-I, a moral preference is simply a preference that does not violate any canon of morality. Is there some moral objection to preferring a life that contains horrendous suffering that is defeated through a relationship that provides

incommensurate good? Not obviously. Something like the Pauline Principle would frown upon using the suffering of others as a way to obtain great goods, but that is not what we are talking about. Morality does not stop us from preferring a life with suffering to one without when it is our own suffering and partially constitutes a great good.

Next, MP-II. This interpretation of moral preference, somewhat inspired by virtue theory, interprets one's moral preferences as the preferences of an ideal self. It too is a nonstarter. In traditional religions, the ideal self is just the beatified self. Thus, the MP-II moral preferences are just the preferences of the beatified self.

That brings us to MP-III. Most similar to notions of moral preference we find in economics, MP-III identifies moral preferences as the way preferences would be were they informed purely by moral reasons. The extent to which morality demands we eliminate self-suffering is debatable. While the usual view holds that morality places no self-obligations upon us, there are dissenters.<sup>23</sup> Granting that a moral preference in this sense tells against accepting horrendous suffering even if it is defeated by coming to partially constitute an incommensurate good, we move now to the question of whether violating our twice-modified Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II renders one no longer good overall in a relationship. For clarity, we state the new principle as below.

Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II\*: do not permit rather than prevent significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide would-be beneficiaries with goods they would prefer not to have were their preferences shaped only by moral reasons.

Here, it seems clear that violating the modified principle does not rule out being good overall in a relationship. In Adams's view, God still provides every single person a life that is a great good to them and in which all suffering is defeated. Perhaps such a God violates the Pauline Principle, but it is hard to fathom what reasonable complaint the beatified may level.

This brings us to the third Moral Evil Prevention Requirement. According to Moral Evil Prevention Requirement III, it is impermissible to allow great evils in order to secure a good that could have been secured in a morally unobjectionable way. Does violating this norm rule out being good overall in a relationship?

We can modify the reformed baker example to argue for the negative. Suppose that instead of being a profit-seeking business owner, the baker is a single-minded education fanatic. He raises prices when the war causes a demand shock not because it is what the market will bear, but as a means to raise funds for a school. In the modified story, the school is not now a sacrifice on the part of a reformed profiteer, but the work of a myopic figure whose desire to see a school built blinds him to the suffering inflicted by high bread prices. The story still includes moral epiphany and apology, the eventual relief of suffering, and provision of a communal good. We may also add that the baker had an alternative, morally unobjectionable means of constructing a school—by organizing a community effort, for example. The modified story then speaks of a violation of Moral Evil Prevention Requirement III while still revealing a relationship that is overall good between the baker and the villagers.

### 3.5. *Taking Stock*

We have now exhausted the second line of response Sterba offers to the theist who denies that God is bound by moral norms. Ultimately, it is a failure. A requirement of goodness overall in one's relationships is no substitute for morality. Having now explored all three Moral Evil Prevention Requirements, we are in a position to draw a general lesson. Deontic status attaches to acts and is all or nothing. Once an impermissible act has been performed, there is nothing more to say. It cannot be reversed. Acts are static, confined to the location of their occurrence. Relationships, on the other hand, are dynamic. They can change. Consequently, errors in relationship can be atoned. Poor relationships can become good ones with proper devotion of resources and effort. Even when divine behavior towards us seems decidedly unfriendly, there are things God can do to rebuild

the relationship. This is not so with moral norms. Absolute norms when violated cannot be unviolated. To defend against eschatological answers to the challenge of horrendous evil such as Adams's that rely on God doing something about them after the fact, the atheist requires the stern rigidity of moral law.

The question is often raised (e.g., in Murphy 2017) as to whether a God who is not a member of our moral community is one to whom we can reasonably give worship and allegiance. I do not have space here to fully discuss this question, although I endorse Murphy's discussion as both nuanced and insightful. I will say only that a God who does not follow the rules, but nevertheless guarantees an incommensurably good life to all of God's children, seems worthy of both.

#### 4. Conclusions

Sterba's new logical argument from evil aims to show that within a standard framework for theodicy, one where divine permission of evil is justified by either providing a greater good or preventing a greater evil, consideration of a few deontic constraints on permitting evil shows that no possible God-justifying good can be found. These flow from the Pauline Principle, let us not do evil that good may result. Sterba divides goods into four kinds: first-order goods to which we have a right, second-order goods to which we have a right, first-order goods to which we have no right, and second-order goods to which we have no right. Encoded as Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, Sterba argues that his constraints rule out all four kinds of good as candidate God-justifiers.

My response began with arguments that show that God is not subject to the requirements of morality. I then considered the question of whether Sterba's argument could be modified, with the Moral Evil Prevention Requirements functioning as necessary conditions on being good overall in one's relationships. I argue that they are not. The dynamic nature of relationship allows for missteps to be corrected and compensated for. In particular, I argue that the framework for thinking about horrendous evils in the context of divine–human friendship developed by Marilyn McCord Adams shows a way for God to violate Sterba's principles while still being good in God's relationship to us. I conclude that we do not have a successful new logical argument from evil.<sup>24</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Speak (2015).

<sup>2</sup> (Sterba 2020).

<sup>3</sup> We find this sentiment in Romans 3:8, although not Sterba's exact statement of it.

<sup>4</sup> While the statements of MERP I and MERP III are drawn from Sterba's book, the statement of MERP II is a clarification on the book's version drawn from personal correspondence.

<sup>5</sup> The full version of Sterba's argument may be found in (Sterba 2019).

<sup>6</sup> (Adams 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Sterba (2019) discusses Davies's views in detail, so I will focus my exposition on the other arguments in the literature for the conclusion that God is not a moral agent.

<sup>8</sup> (Adams 1999), especially chps. 4–7.

<sup>9</sup> See Johnson (2021), Pluhar (1988) for further discussion of the moral agent/moral patient distinction.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., (Shapiro 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Augustine of Augustine of Hippo (2002).

<sup>12</sup> For example, OpenAI, one of the premier AI research groups, thinks the alignment problem should be solved with help from AI that is sophisticated but not quite AGI. See (Leike et al. 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Rubio (2018).

<sup>14</sup> Murphy (2017). See especially chp. 3.

- 15 The Christian doctrine of Incarnation presents some quibbles here but is not part of Murphy's focus.  
16 Sterba (2019, pp. 175–76).  
17 This replacement was suggested to me in correspondence by Jim Sterba.  
18 Job 42: 7, ESV.  
19 Gustavo Gutiérrez includes a useful discussion of the language of protest in response to evil in Gutiérrez, Gutiérrez (1987).  
20 Mackie (1955).  
21 This notion of a moral preference roughly corresponds to proposed economic models of rationality that take into account desires for norm-following behavior as well as desire for personal gain, cf. (Valerio and Matjaž 2021).  
22 If both Adams and Lebens and Goldschmidt (2017) are right, this choice may literally be available.  
23 (Munoz and Baron-Schmitt forthcoming).  
24 Thanks to Jim Sterba, Andrew Chignell, Alexander Englert, Elizabeth Li, Ryan Darr, Dean Zimmerman, Emily McCarty, Kenny Boyce, and Justin Mooney for helpful conversations about the topics discussed in this essay.

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Article

# A Wittgensteinian Antitheodicy

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**Abstract:** Contrary to the majority of contemporary analytic philosophers of religion, James Sterba argues in his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (2019) that Alvin Plantinga with his famous free will defense has not succeeded in solving the logical problem of evil. However, Sterba is not alone in disputing this generally accepted view in analytic philosophy of religion. D. Z. Phillips (1934–2006) has argued that the logical problem of evil has not been solved and he further holds that it has not even got off the ground. The aim of this article is to explore Phillips' criticism of the free-will defense and mainstream theodicies. His critique is relevant for Sterba's atheistic stance because Phillips' arguments are partly applicable to forms of philosophical atheism that share the same assumptions with philosophical theism. In the first part of the article, I will briefly describe the starting points of the best-known solutions to the problem of evil in analytic philosophy of religion and refer to some aspects of Sterba's arguments. After that I will explore Phillips' ethical and conceptual criticism against frameworks used in the discussion of theodicy. Finally, I will pay attention to Phillips' Wittgensteinian view of the task and the aim of philosophy in order to clarify some problematic aspects of his thought.

**Keywords:** theodicy; antitheodicy; D. Z. Phillips

## 1. Introduction

In his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* James Sterba (2019) examines the problem of evil, which in the Judeo-Christian tradition is often understood as a question: Why does an almighty and benevolent God allow evil, suffering and injustice in the world? At different stages in the history of theology the problem has been addressed in various religious contexts. In the contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, which my paper deals with, the debate on the problem of evil reflects the questions of early modern and Enlightenment philosophy. The central question concerns the truth and rationality of theism in the light of the challenge of atheism and skepticism.

It is worth noting that the problem of evil does not necessarily have to be linked to the problems of Judaeo-Christian religion. Questions of evil and suffering also arise in other religious traditions—after all, teaching about suffering is at the heart of Buddhism, for example. On a more general level, the problem of evil as an existential problem affects people regardless of their religious beliefs. For example, since the Second World War, there has been much discussion about how extreme evil, such as the Holocaust, is possible (Bernstein 2002).

I will first briefly characterize different aspects of the problem of evil and proposed solutions to it in the contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. I draw special attention to the ways in which Sterba criticizes the apologetic arguments in this discussion. After that I explore D. Z. Phillips' criticism of the mainstream approaches to the problem of evil. Phillips shares Sterba's view that theodicies do not provide plausible moral grounds for an adequate solution to the problem of evil. However, Phillips' criticism is more radical than Sterba's, because according to him, ethical and religious perspectives related to theodicy are already so wrong in its starting points that they cannot be taken seriously. Phillips' aim is not to defend atheism but to show that the debates regarding the problem of evil go astray and fail to have genuine religious and ethical meaning. In the last part of the paper, I

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will discuss Phillips' Wittgensteinian "contemplative" conception of philosophy, according to which the task of philosophy is not to prescribe a certain form religious faith, but to do justice to the meaning of religious and ethical beliefs in human life.

## 2. Identification of the Problem of Evil

In analytic philosophy of religion the problem of evil is treated as an argument against the existence of God. The debate typically starts from certain shared assumptions adopted in both theistic and atheistic philosophy of religion. In his article "Evil and Omnipotence" J. L. Mackie (1955) formulated the problem of evil by referring to three propositions:

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

Mackie argued that there seems to be a contradiction between these propositions; it is inconsistent to accept all three propositions at the same time. However, it is worth noting that he pointed out that:

the contradiction does not arise immediately; to show it we need some additional premises, or perhaps some quasi-logical rules connecting the terms 'good', 'evil', and 'omnipotent'. These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely, and then the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible. (Mackie 1955, pp. 200–1)

This argument is called "the logical problem of evil". It is often contrasted with "the evidential problem of evil", according to which the existence of evil, e.g., the existence of actual human and animal suffering, counts against the truth of theism and makes it improbable, even if there is no obvious logical contradiction between propositions (1)–(3). There is also another important distinction that is worth keeping in mind. In analytic philosophy of religion, the problem of evil is understood as an intellectual—logical, metaphysical and epistemological—problem in contrast to the existential problem of evil. In the latter case, the problem of evil is seen as a personal, subjective and practical problem that has to do with how one can cope with evil and suffering in one's life. When the problem is seen as an intellectual problem, it is treated from an abstract non-personal perspective; the intellectual problem concerns the validity and credibility of the argument from evil. The perspective of the debate is characterized by methodological ideals common in scientific inquiry, such as objectivity and the logicity of argumentation, coherence and the probability of claims that are used in developing philosophical arguments, etc. It is, indeed, striking that the debate on the matter has often been technically very sophisticated; philosophers have applied and developed various kinds of logical and analytical tools in defending their positions. The semi-scientific ideal linked with the use of technical logical and epistemological tools also characterizes works of philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga (2000) and Nicholas Wolterstorff (1983), who reject the idea of the Enlightenment scientific ideal of rationality and who think that Christian philosophers have their own methodological assumptions. Striving for objectivity in argumentation has to do with the audience of debate. The audience of discussion involves philosophers whose worldviews differ. Although analytic philosophers may suspect that the arguments put forward in the debate succeed in convincing their opponents as to whether (or not) the existence of God is compatible with evil, this does not raise the question of the meaningfulness or ideological nature of the debate. Peter van Inwagen, who doubts that all philosophical arguments (in the light of the ideal demands he describes) are failures, however, points out that:

Now if it is indeed true that no philosophical argument for any substantive conclusion is successful in the sense that I have proposed, it immediately follows that the argument from evil is not a success in that sense—given, at any rate,

two premises that I don't think anyone would deny: that the argument from evil is a philosophical argument and that the non-existence of God is a substantive philosophical thesis. (van Inwagen 2006, p. 53)

Thus, in this view, the existence and non-existence of God is a philosophical question that should be treated similar to other metaphysical questions in the field of philosophy. It is assumed that the idea of God—the idea of God's existence and non-existence—is equally understood by the parties of the debate, and their task is to offer arguments which support the truth or rational acceptability of this “substantive philosophical thesis”. The existence of God is not a scientific question, but it is an intelligible metaphysical thesis that can in principle be solved by appealing to argumentative evidence.

### 3. Best Known Answers to the Argument from Evil and Sterba's Response to Them

Plantinga (1974a, 1974b) has called into question the logical binding nature of Mackie's argument by referring to the possibility that the theistic worldview includes a claim that does not create a logical contradiction between the allegations (1)–(3). According to his famous “free will defence”, it can be thought that a world with free beings is better than a world without free beings. In addition, a benevolent God does, of course, want to create that kind of world rather than a world of robots who always do good. Free will is of the utmost value, but it includes the opportunity to do both good and evil, and this provides a possible reason for God to permit evil in the world. The price is high, but God must pay it, because free choices are not possible without the possibility for evil acts. According to Plantinga's libertarian view, free choices are not determined by previous events, circumstances and causal laws. It is person's own will that determines his or her free choices. Plantinga does not seek to present the actual theodicy, that is, to provide a plausible or probable explanation why God allows evil, but he merely seeks to present a defense that shows that the logical problem of evil described above is not logically binding, for we can imagine reasons why benevolent God may permit evil. The purpose of this defense is to appeal to a possibility; Plantinga's defense is speculation on logical possibilities. He only tries to show that the existence of evil is logically compatible with the existence of God.

Plantinga's free will defense has its roots in Augustine's theology. Another popular answer to the problem of evil is developed by John Hick (2001), who, in turn, uses Church Father Irenaeus' thoughts in developing his theodicy. The starting point of Hick's theodicy is the idea of the world as a “vale of soul-making”. The existence of evil things offers human beings a possibility to develop; the function of suffering is to refine people spiritually and morally. Richard Swinburne (1998), who, along with Plantinga and Hick, has been one of the most prominent figures in the debate, grounds his theodicy on the idea of free will and on the doctrine of the vale of soul-making. According to Swinburne, both moral and natural evil serve the overall purpose of God's benevolence; they provide people with knowledge of good and evil, and provide an opportunity to learn how to help other people and learn to show compassion, etc. In Swinburne's view, a benevolent God does not create a world without suffering. By allowing it, God gives both victims and their helpers the opportunity to grow morally. Tough conditions are required to develop our best features.

In addition to the free will defense and the vale of soul-making theodicy, one noteworthy apologetic solution in contemporary discussion is “sceptical theism”. Its basic idea can be explained by referring to an atheistic argument put forward by William Rowe (1979):

1. If God existed, no intense unnecessary suffering would be experienced by humans and animals.
2. Such suffering exists.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

Rowe does not claim that the argument is logically binding, but he says that premises (1) and (2) of the argument are likely to be true and rationally credible. However, skeptical theism denies premise (2). Although it seems that there is unnecessary intense suffering, we cannot conclude that there might not be reasons for allowing it. There is a great difference between the knowledge of man and that of an omniscient God. Stephen Wykstra (1984),

a representative of skeptical theism, argues that an almighty and omniscient God, if he exists, knows more than a person whose cognitive abilities are limited and deficient. The epistemic situation between human beings and God is analogous to the situation between young children and parents. Parents know better than their children what is good for them. Although we, as cognitively limited human beings, do not know God's reasons for allowing evil, he may have good reasons for it.

The above-mentioned topics have given birth to a wide-ranging discussion, and Sterba's book is a contribution to it. According to Sterba, a major flaw in the current debate has been that many analytic philosophers of religion—both atheists and theists—believe that Plantinga's defense of free will has succeeded in solving the problem of logical evil. Sterba does not, however, deny that Plantinga may be right in holding that it is logically possible that an all-good and all-powerful God could create a world with free creatures with some moral evil. In this respect, Plantinga's defense may be relevant for Mackie's atheological argument. However, Sterba thinks that free will defense is not plausible in the actual world or in possible worlds with significant horrendous evil:

My primary thesis here is simply that the freedom that exists, or has existed, in our world could not constitute a justification for the moral evil that exists, or has existed, in it. However, my secondary thesis is that Plantinga has not succeeded in showing that God is logically compatible even with some evil in the world, when that evil is taken to be, as it may well be, any of the significant and especially the horrendous consequences of our immoral actions. (Sterba 2019, pp. 11–12)

Sterba's criticism is not only aimed at Plantinga's views, for he also extensively criticizes other forms of contemporary theodicies. His central aim is to contribute to existing debates in this field by using and developing resources from ethical theories. They provide tools that show the central weaknesses of theodicies; after all, the problem of evil is an ethical rather than a logical, metaphysical, or epistemological problem (Sterba 2019, p. 5). What is especially original in Sterba's thought is the appeal to ideas of welfare liberalism in order to reveal the weakness of the free will defense (and weaknesses of theodicies). Sterba assumes that there is a kind of analogy between the governance of society and the world governed by the ruler of the universe. Major problems with the free will defence emerge when we examine it and the actual world in the light of the ideals of a just society. Namely, the free will defense does not take into account the idea that the restriction of freedom has a central role in a society that works in the fairest way for everyone. According to welfare liberalism, a just society offers the right to significant freedom and well-being for everyone, e.g., for both rich and poor, and for this reason society restricts people's freedom in various ways. In the light of this ideal, Sterba asks us to imagine "superheroes" who can influence society much more effectively than we can. By preventing various kinds of injustice, inequality, poverty, violence, and crimes, etc. Sterba believes that we expect these morally good fictional characters with their special abilities to make societies more just than our actual societies are. In this way they bring about a better distribution of significant freedom, for example, for those who are attacked by wrongdoers. This and much more is, of course, exactly what one would expect an all-good, all-powerful God to do. Thus, Sterba argues that:

the problem is not with God's creating us and giving us free will. Rather, the real problem comes later in time when God fails to restrict the lesser freedoms of wrongdoers to secure the more significant freedoms of their victims. Hence, the world we live in cannot be justified by the distribution and amount of significant freedom that is in it. (Sterba 2019, p. 29)

Sterba appeals to the idea that if there is a morally perfect and omnipotent God, then he would necessarily be expected to follow "Moral Evil Prevention Requirements":

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) when that can easily be carried out.

2. 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. [By these Sterba means goods such as receiving medical care after being brutally assaulted. No doubt, it would better to prevent the need for these kinds of goods rather than to have them.]
3. 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, pp. 126–28)

Sterba holds that an omnipotent God could easily prevent the evil consequences of immoral actions. Thus, if God were adhering to these requirements, then he has not permitted the existence of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions that obtain and have obtained in the actual world.

#### 4. Antitheodicy

Sterba is not alone in disputing the generally accepted view in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion that Plantinga has succeeded in solving the logical problem of evil. D. Z. Phillips argues that neither Plantinga nor anyone else has succeeded in solving the problem as it was formulated by Mackie. Phillips' approach, however, differs sharply from the way theistic analytic philosophers approach the problem of evil as he questions the basic assumptions of the debate:

if we stay within the terms of reference in which the logical problem of evil is usually discussed, we shall find that neither the proposition 'God is omnipotent', nor the proposition, 'God is perfectly good', can get off the ground—and that for logical reasons. (Phillips 2004b, p. 5)

In what follows, I deal with Phillips' critique of theistic analytic philosophy of religion. However, his critique is also applicable to philosophical forms of atheism that share the same assumptions. In this respect, his arguments are relevant also for Sterba's approach, for it shares many philosophical and theological presuppositions that give a form for debates over the problem of evil.

In addition to Phillips, there is a minority of thinkers in Anglo-American philosophy of religion, such as Andrew Gleeson (2012), Terrence Tilley (1991), Kenneth Surin (1986) and John Roth (2001), who see serious problems in the way in which analytic philosophers usually deal with the problem of evil. The common feature of all these "antitheodacists" is that they hold that the problem with the contemporary analytic discussion of the problem of evil is not only that the particular solutions proposed to the problem of evil are unsatisfactory, but the whole project of trying to justify the existence of suffering and evil in the world is mistaken. An antitheodacist rejects the fundamental presuppositions and conceptual parameters that guide theodicies. In spite of the differences between their approaches, one could say that ethical criticism plays a key role for antitheodacists in rejecting mainstream theodicy. A good example of this is Kivistö and Pihlström's (2016) extensive study, *Kantian Antitheodicy: Philosophical and Literary Varieties*. Their criticism against theodicy is based on Kantian "transcendental criticism" of the various forms of theodicy. The effort to justify the horrors of the world threatens the very possibility of a moral perspective. Kivistö and Pihlström use the term "theodicy" in a very broad sense to mean any kinds of views—religious as well secular—which try to offer justification and legitimation for horrors. Antitheodicy rejects all totalizing perspectives in which the suffering of individuals is instrumentally placed to serve some overall plan. Horrors have no sense and antitheodicy acknowledges the inconsolability of life and the futility of suffering.

Phillips is one of the best-known thinkers representing antitheodicism in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of religion. His criticisms of theodicies is closely related to other aspects of his philosophical approach. His view of philosophy and the ethical and religious spirit of his thought—which is strongly influenced by Wittgenstein and Rush

Rhees—differs sharply from contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. His most systematic presentation on the subject is *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (Phillips 2004b). In the first part of the book, he deals critically with views of analytic philosophers of religion, such as Swinburne, Hick, Plantinga and Stephen T. Davis. The second part of the book deals with “a neglected” tradition in Christianity, which offers a different understanding of faith in God and its relation to human suffering. In describing this alternative approach, he often refers to Simone Weil’s writings. Phillips thinks that Weil’s struggle “to be nothing before God” expresses a deep understanding of what Christian faith can be without any expectations of compensation or consolations offered by theodicies. In this paper I will not deal with Phillips’ account of this neglected tradition and shall instead concentrate on criticisms of theodicies and defenses in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion.

### 5. Moral Issues

One of the main problems with theodicy, according to Phillips, has to do with the consequentialist and instrumentalist approach to moral issues. Analytic theists typically defend the view that the reason for God allowing human and animal suffering is the possibility of achieving a greater good. God cannot bring about this greater good unless he allows suffering. Allowing for evil is a necessary part of God’s overall plan, and this overall plan justifies the existence of evil in the created world. From this point of view, there is no unnecessary evil, because the possibility of moral and spiritual development requires that evil things happen in the world. Evil things that happen to others are potentially morally useful for us. Swinburne writes:

And when we have not ourselves had such experience we can freely choose to seek out those who have before coming to form a view about the moral principles involved. The suffering becomes the tool which we use for our growth of moral understanding, and so in yet another way the sufferer is of use to us in helping us so to grow. (Swinburne 1998, p. 168)

Phillips finds this argument senseless. When sufferings of others are made instrumental to us, it can be said, for example, that God allows the man on the road to Jericho to be abused so that the Good Samaritan could act virtuously. The Good Samaritan could say “Thank you, God, for another possibility to be responsible” (Phillips 2004b, p. 59). It is difficult to see why one should take this kind of theodicy seriously. The effort to seek morally adequate arguments to show why God can allow (or could possibly allow) evil, and especially horrors, such as the Holocaust, is absurd. The problem is not in the details how this greater good can be conceived, for it is the whole moral framework of the debate that is distorted. Defending *omni-God’s* actions does not do justice to our customary moral perspectives.

Thus, both Sterba and Phillips share the view that theodicies do not provide plausible moral grounds for an adequate solution to the problem of evil. However, Phillips’ criticism is more radical than Sterba’s, because according to him, the consequentialist ethical perspective related to theodicy is already so wrong in its starting points that it cannot be taken seriously. The problem with the theodicist’s ethical system is not that it is prepared carelessly, but that its basic premises and ways of posing questions are totally incorrect. “The commitment to theological consequentialism, which asks us to be open-minded about the possibility of a balance for good being on the side of allowing the Holocaust, is itself a corruption of the notion of open-mindedness.” (Phillips 2004b, p. 120.).

One central problem with apologetic philosophers concerns the examples they have used in defending their theories. Although one can sometimes say that someone has learned morally important things through suffering, one cannot ignore the opposite cases. Phillips argues that the problem with the vale of soul-making theodicy is the use of one-sided examples. It is very problematic in general terms to talk about our own suffering and, in particular, about the suffering of others as an opportunity for ourselves to develop. Although in some cases this kind of talk may make sense, but it is obvious that suffering is

not always linked to the realization of some greater good. It does not make much sense to say that statistically God's programme for developing the ethical and spiritual life of the human race has worked well. Phillips invokes the counterexamples he finds abundantly in literature, (e.g., from Thomas Mann, W. Somerset Maugham, Primo Levi). One example comes from Maugham's (1948) *The Summing Up*. Maugham recalls the times when he studied medicine:

At that time (a time to most people of sufficient ease, when peace seemed certain and prosperity secure) there was a school of writers who enlarged upon the moral value of suffering. They claimed that it was salutary. They claimed that it increased sympathy and enhanced the sensibilities. They claimed that it opened to the spirit new avenues of beauty and enabled it to get into touch with the mystical kingdom of God. They claimed that it strengthened the character, purified it from its human grossness and brought to him who did not avoid but sought it a more perfect happiness . . . I set down in my note-books, not once or twice, but in a dozen places, the facts that I had seen. I knew that suffering did not ennoble; it degraded. It made men selfish, mean, petty and suspicious. It absorbed them in small things. It did not make them more than men; it made them less than men; and I wrote ferociously that we learn resignation not by our own suffering, but by the suffering of others. (Maugham 1948, p. 259; Phillips 2004b, p. 68; See also Rhees 1997, pp. 149–50)

In the light of Maugham's observation, the greater good theodicy—the search for justified reasons for allowing suffering—would be ridiculous. Can it be imagined that Maugham would have changed his view after a careful study of current arguments in analytic philosophy? Phillips considers that you do not need philosophical arguments to show the absurdity of thought that horrors are justified and necessary, because of the great value of free will or because horrors offer us—but not necessarily to the victims—a possibility to become morally good and more morally developed persons.

There are, of course, many different ideas about the ennobling effect of suffering. An anonymous referee of this article made an interesting point about Nietzsche's thought that suffering is necessary to human greatness. Nietzsche's ethics has of course nothing to do with the justification of theism, but it brings out the complexity of the matter. However, Phillips does not categorically deny that suffering can ennoble one's character. For his purposes it is enough to point out that it is extremely difficult to find such a generalization credible, and it is especially incredible in the case of horrors.

One illuminating example of Phillips' criticism concerns the use of the idea of free will in the theodicy debate. Phillips refers to a story told by Billie Holliday. It is about the fate of the wife of a famous jazz musician who was a drug addict. In a desperate situation, he needed drugs to perform a show and his wife was afraid that he would kill himself if he did not acquire the drug. She tried to protect her husband and went out to find the drugs for him and was arrested. She was not a user but in this difficult situation she took the drug in order to prove to the law that she was a user not a pusher. In this way she could protect her husband and also herself, because as a pusher, she would have received a longer jail sentence. Holliday ends the story, "And that's the way she got hooked. She's rotting in jail, right now. Yes siree bob, life is just a bowl of cherries" (Holliday and Dufty 1975, p. 93; Phillips 2004b, p. 73).

Billie Holliday sees the fate of the wife not as a story in which the wife used her freedom of will in a wrong way and but as a case where a terrible thing happened to her in trying to help her husband; Holliday says, the wife "was innocent and clean as the day she was born" (Holliday and Dufty 1975, p. 93). Richard Swinburne in commenting on this story said that the production of this example settles nothing, because we "don't know some of the crucial factors involved". For example, it is possible that the musician and his wife could have resisted (perhaps on some later occasions) the temptation to use the drug, and, if so, they share some responsibility for their troubles (Swinburne 1977, p. 129; Phillips 2004b, p. 73). Phillips says that his intention in the production of the

example is not to settle anything, but simply to “put forward the possibility that things could be as Billie Holiday says they were” (Phillips 2004b, p. 74). The central weakness in Swinburne’s response has to do with the denial of things many of us have seen. In appealing to ignorance on the contingent facts or on ignorance of the philosophical problem concerning free will, a theodist simply denies the possibility—which is obviously real for us in the context of ordinary life—that things sometimes go in a direction that is not under our voluntary control. Appealing to the ignorance of “the crucial factors” is a denial of these very common experiences. The abstract and general talk about certain moral principles that is meant to support theodicies are based on one-sided and problematic examples. This is also illustrated by the implausible parallels which theodists have offered in order to defend their instrumentalist logic; for example, allowing a child to suffer during a visit to the dentist is equated with allowing horrors to happen (Phillips 2004b, p. 36; Swinburne 1998, p. 10).

Phillips points out that the weakness of theodists’ philosophical speculations is revealed in the fact that those who develop this line of thought do not speak of horrors in ordinary contexts in the same way as they speak about them when developing their theories. Think, for example, about the idea that the genocide of the Jews might be related to some greater good. Obviously, this would be morally offensive in any normal discussions; these kinds of theodists’ speculations are out of the question in ordinary contexts. The contradiction between ordinary moral reactions and philosophical speculation shows that the language of theodicies loses its connection with ordinary moral realities. The central target of Phillips’ criticism is the confused role of scepticism associated with theodists’ theories. The problem with these theories concerns the confused meaning of words not our ignorance of some hidden knowledge of God’s benevolent purposes for us. This confusion becomes apparent especially in the light of the darkest cases, such as the Holocaust, where the idea of evil as a “necessary means to a good end” makes no sense. We *do* know that the death camps were useless and unjustified. Questioning this, saying that we cannot be sure about that, is morally absurd. Thus, it can be said that Phillips relies on mundane moral realism and what we know about moral matters (Phillips 2004b, pp. 37–38). Speculation for reasons beyond comprehension that serve a good divine purpose leads to radical moral scepticism. This is an obvious problem with sceptical theism. Saying that God is justified in allowing horrors because it makes it possible for him to achieve the best possible result although we do not know what it is, signifies a shift beyond morality.

Phillips’ arguments and his ordinary moral realism is connected to his view of the relationship between metaphysical realism and radical scepticism. A radical global sceptic assumes that we can meaningfully question our practices from outside them; it makes sense to ask if a practice is true or false, rational or irrational independently of actual practices (Phillips 2000, Chap. 3; Ashdown 2002, Chap. 1). This is also metaphysical realism’s basic assumption; there is a truth as such independently of human practices. Most analytic philosophers of religion seem to assume metaphysical realism, and this assumption plays an important role in discussions concerning theodicies and theistic metaphysics in general.

A metaphysical externalist perspective on human practices is, in Phillips’ view, based on a confusion. It is misleading to think that human practices—in the Wittgensteinian sense of the word, i.e., forms of life and language games that are part of them—are grounded in beliefs that give support to these practices from the external perspective. The central problem is the idea of objectivity that metaphysical philosophers try to seek in developing their theories. According to the externalist picture, the task of philosophy is to try to acquire a more objective understanding of some aspects of reality, e.g., morality, religion or science. This is accomplished by questioning what our established practices and ways of using language are. These practices belong to the Appearance which is contrasted to the Reality philosophy seeks to find. Wittgenstein rejected this externalist picture of the relation between ordinary life and philosophical theories and claims, “What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 116). The crux of the criticism can be formulated as follows: the talk about God’s hidden, unknown

moral reasons for allowing horrible things to happen is just idle talk that divorces moral concepts from the human life and practices in which these concepts have sense. It makes no sense to say that allowing the Holocaust is morally permitted in the light of moral standards that are wholly beyond our comprehension. The problem with theodicies is not the ignorance of God's great plan, but meaningless talk about morality outside of actual moral practices and moral language.

## 6. The Concept of God

The notion of God is also at the heart of the difference between Phillips' and mainstream analytic theists. According to Phillips, there are serious confusions in the way in which the concept of God is understood in contemporary philosophy of religion. The central problem lies in anthropomorphic ways of speaking about God as a moral person whose actions can be subject to our moral judgements. The anthropomorphic assumptions lead philosophers to ask questions that distort the meaning of religious concepts. It is a confusion to treat God as a being among other beings and as a moral agent among other moral agents. Therefore, it is not intelligible, for example, to speak about God's covenant with his people as a contract in which God stands "in reciprocal relations of rights and obligations to the other parties to the contract". It makes no sense to think of God as "part of a community of criticism and counter-criticism", as theodicists do (Phillips 2004b, pp. 148–51).

The idea that God is identified with a morally perfect being plays a central role in apologetic theism. Phillips argues that the idea of a perfect being encounters severe difficulties when it is linked with an effort to show that this being has or might have morally acceptable reasons for his actions. Phillips illuminates these difficulties by referring to an example from William Styron's novel *Sophie's Choice* (Phillips 2004b, pp. 41–44; see also Roth 2001). In this fictional story, a Polish survivor of Auschwitz, Sophie Zawistowska, a mother of two children, Eva and Jan, is forced at the gates to Auschwitz by an SS official to choose life for one of her children and death in the gas chamber for the other. In this extremely dark situation, Sophie screams "I cannot choose", but she lets Eva go. The story continues gloomily. Eva dies in a gas chamber and Sophie never learns what happened to Jan. Sophie cannot live with her decision and kills herself after the war. In considering the story, Phillips notes that we cannot, of course, condemn Sophie from the third person's perspective. For outsiders, the proper attitudes for her are pity and compassion. However, things look different from Sophie's own perspective, as her decision has stayed with her. "She is involved in a moral tragedy, where, whatever she did, would involve evil". Phillips says that "Sophie never thinks of handing Eva over as an act to be excused in the light of the total situation" (Phillips 2004b, p. 22). Now, Phillips argues that under the assumptions of analytic theism, God as a morally perfect being is seen to be a member of a moral community, and in this sense is similar to Sophie. As a moral agent, God has allowed horrible things such as the Holocaust to happen, and according to theodicies and defences he has morally sufficient reasons for that. In the light of the parallel between Sophie's case and God, the talk about God's perfect goodness appears strange. Phillips asks:

Is God to be the object of pity? Is creation a moral tragedy in which God is necessarily involved in evil? And what of God's view of what he has done? Does the Holocaust stay with him? Does he think that it can be excused in the light of the greater good that made it necessary, or does he recognize he has something to answer for? It will be obvious that within these moral parameters, there is no logical space for talk about God's perfect goodness. (Phillips 2004b, p. 43)

We are all familiar with situations in which there are only bad alternatives. However, the talk about a morally perfect person, who has allowed the Holocaust to exist, does not make sense.

Theodicists treat God as a person and as a moral agent among moral agents, and they believe that this person can be put on trial and that the task of a philosopher is to evaluate how well or how poorly God has coped with this test. This picture of God is based on conceptual confusions concerning the grammar of God in the Christian tradition.



Phillips appeals to Rowan Williams, according to whom, in orthodox Christian thought, God is not understood as a being who acts in a punctiliar way or as a being who reacts to things. According to Williams, “God is not an item in any environment, and God’s action has been held, in orthodox Christian thought, to be identical with God’s being—that is, what God does is nothing other than God’s being actively real” (Williams 1996, p. 143; Phillips 2004b, pp. 150–51).

Catholic philosopher, Brian Davies, whose thinking is based on the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, has criticized contemporary analytic discussion on the problem of evil partly on the same grounds as Phillips and Williams. Many contemporary analytic philosophers understand the notion of God in terms of “theistic personalism”, which is based on the idea that God is a person, and the concept of person, in turn, is explained by referring to characteristics of human persons. Davies argues that this anthropomorphic conception of God differs from classical theism, according to which God is not a person similar to us; the creator of the world is radically different from creatures. Therefore, Davies claims that it is a conceptual confusion to treat God as a moral agent and as a member of a moral community (Davies 2008). It is here worth noting that in many parts of his book Sterba assumes that theism includes the idea of God as a moral agent, and he relies on this idea in developing his criticism of theodicies. Sterba also devotes an entire chapter to a critique of Davies’ views (Sterba 2019, Chap. 6). However, Sterba’s criticism of Davies’ thought is not applicable to Phillips’ antitheodicy. Although there are interesting similarities between Phillips’ and Davies’ views, their philosophical traditions differ in many ways. Metaphysics plays a central role in Davies’ Thomistic thought, but Phillips, following Wittgenstein, has provided a radical criticism of metaphysics. Thus, Davies, for example, defends classical theism by appealing to a version of the cosmological argument. He argues for the truth of a metaphysical view associated with Christian theology. Phillips, in turn, does not speak about a belief in God in terms of a first cause, and he also holds that the task of philosophy is not to offer solutions to religious and theological questions. Instead, the task of philosophy is to offer an understanding of what kind of questions are being asked, and to expose various kinds of conceptual confusions concerning religious matters (Davies 2007; Koistinen 2017).

Although perhaps all analytic philosophers agree with Phillips and Williams that God is not similar to human beings or physical entities, the models of physical language nonetheless play significant roles in their discussions. Religious concepts are analysed by referring to the concepts we use when we speak about the actions of human beings, or religious concepts are analysed by referring to some abstract and general core meaning of these concepts. For example, Swinburne states that “An omnipotent being is one who can do anything logically possible” (Swinburne 1998, p. 3). Phillips argues that the abstract definition is inaccurate, for there are obviously plenty of things God cannot do. To use his (somewhat ridiculous) examples, God cannot ride a bicycle or eat ice-cream. God—or, perhaps one should add, the first person of the Trinity—who is spirit, cannot do these kinds of things (Phillips 2004b, p. 12). Phillips’ claims that it is a conceptual mistake to think of “God’s omnipotence” as if it had a meaning outside the context of its religious uses. It makes no sense to ascribe “all power” to God, because the term “power” means different things in different contexts. Therefore, it is misleading to start the discussion of what God’s omnipotence means by offering an abstract definition that is independent of religious contexts. This is, of course, based on Phillips’ Wittgensteinian view of meaning; words gain their meaning from the context in which they are used, and the aim of the philosopher is to remind us of the ordinary uses of these terms when we are philosophically confused about their meaning. Accordingly, Phillips points out that the meaning of God’s omnipotence is found in the religious life in which it is used. God’s power is a special kind of power. It is not the ability to do anything that someone *x* just happens to want to do, i.e., the abstract definition of power, such as *x* is omnipotent = *x* has an ability to bring about any logically possible state of affairs leads philosophers or religion astray. In a discussion concerning natural theology, Rush Rhees illuminates this problem as follows:

Suppose you had to explain to someone who had no idea at all of religion or of what a belief in God was. Could you do it in this way?—By proving to him that there must be a first cause—a Something—and that this Something is more powerful (whatever this means) than anything else: so that you would not have been conceived or born at all but for the operation of Something, and Something might wipe out the existence of everything at any time? Would this give him any sense of the wonder and glory of God? Would he not be justified if he answered, ‘What a horrible idea! Like a Frankenstein without limits, so that you cannot escape it. The most ghastly nightmare!’ (Rhees 1997, p. 36)

The power of God is not worldly power. It is not the power of a dictator or the devil, but God’s power *is* the power of love. As Phillips argues, “God does not have two separate attributes, power and love, but that the only power God has or is, is the power of love” (Phillips 2004b, p. 199). The way one uses the words “love” and “power” in religious language differs from the way they are used in mundane contexts. This is also related to Rhees’ and Phillips’ general idea of the special kind of logic of religious language. The logic of ordinary descriptive language which we use in speaking about physical objects and human beings is different from the logic of the spiritual language which we use in speaking about God. In describing a human person, we can make a distinction between a person and his contingent properties; a person may or may not be loving or red-haired, etc. However, the ordinary subject–predicate distinction does not apply in this way to God. God’s “goodness” and “love” do not work similar to descriptive predicates, but they are God’s “grammatical predicates”, which are not “related contingently to ‘God’ but are instances of what the word ‘God’ means” (Phillips 2004b, p. 188). As Rush Rhees points out, “Winston Churchill may be Prime Minister and a company director, but I might come to know him without knowing this. But I could not know God without knowing that he was the Creator and Father of all things” (Rhees 1997, p. 48). Similarly, one cannot know God without knowing that God is love. Phillips suggests that “the point could be put by saying that, in certain contexts, ‘creator’, ‘grace’ and ‘love’ are synonyms for ‘God’” (Phillips 2004b, p. 190).

Thus, in Phillips’ views, it is a conceptual confusion to start the discussion of the problem of evil in Christian theology by assuming the abstract idea of God as a limitlessly powerful Being who may cause or bring about any logically possible state of affairs. Instead, the key concept for an understanding of God’s power is love. Phillips uses the Christian story of the Suffering Servant and the Passion of the Christ as explanations for what this means:

The Crucified Christ is not resurrected with healed wounds. Those who taunt him on the Cross, urging to him to save himself and thereby prove that he is the Son of God, fail to understand the only omnipotence God has is the omnipotence of love. It is from such a love that the prayer for forgiveness for the oppressors comes from the Cross. ‘Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.’ But the price of such love is that it can be broken, sacrificed. And it is that sacrifice which is raised up, exalted for all, eternity. (Phillips 2004b, p. 272)

## 7. Philosophy and Theology

Phillips’ approach to the problem of evil goes in a completely different direction than the mainstream of philosophy of religion. In his view, philosophical discussion of the problem of evil suffers from conceptual confusions and his criticism also includes ethical and religious aspects. His criticism of consequentialism in theodicies is infused with a strong moral tone. He argues that “friends of religions”, i.e., apologist philosophers, have caused great damage to religion (Phillips 2004a). His own personal spiritual and moral sensibilities are strongly present in these criticisms. Some have seen this as a problem with his “contemplative” conception of philosophy of religion (Phillips 1999, 2001). Namely, following Wittgenstein, Phillips considers that philosophy only describes the actual use of language and “leaves everything as it is” (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 124). Phillips

contrasts his contemplative approach to philosophy with normative traditions in the philosophy of religion. The task of the Wittgensteinian contemplative philosopher is not to defend religious and moral views in the name of philosophy. In Phillips' view, these kinds of efforts are grounded on a misleading conception of the task and limits of philosophical enquiry. Philosophy is neither a judge nor an arbiter of truth and rationality in religious and ethical matters. Thus, Phillips makes a sharp distinction between theology and philosophy. Theologians are "guardians of religious pictures"; their job is to take a stand on the truth of religious beliefs (Phillips 2004a, p. 87). A philosopher, in turn, is interested in the sense and intelligibility of religious language and beliefs. Therefore, as a philosopher he is only offering a clarification of religion and not prescribing a certain form of Christianity. The task of the philosophy is to do justice to the variety of religious beliefs in human life.

It has been argued, however, that Phillips is not practising what he preaches; according to several writers, Phillips' criticism of theodicies and metaphysical theism and his own account of religious beliefs is an expression of one particular form of religious belief (Moore 2005; Swinburne 2001; Wolterstorff 2001). It has been argued that his account is not a description of the religious faith but a prescription of one form of faith, and analytic philosophers represent an alternative form of Christianity. There has also been discussion about how Phillips' account of a neglected tradition in Christianity (an account strongly influenced by Simone Weil and Kierkegaard) is related to different doctrines and schools of thought in Christian theology (Thomas 2001; Kurtén 2007; Phillips 2007a, 2007b; Von der Ruhr 2007; Davies 2007, 2008; Schönbaumsfeld 2007; Koistinen 2017, 2018). I consider these questions relevant in evaluating Phillips' views, but I cannot go deeper into such issues now. I will, however, refer to a few important points in order to clarify his position.

Here one must pay special attention to the idea of grammatical/conceptual investigation. According to the Wittgensteinian view, the ultimate appeal in conceptual inquiry is not philosophical theories but the ordinary or common uses of religious language. The task of philosophy is to look at how language is used in its ordinary contexts. This does not mean that a philosopher seeks to find the meaning of the religious beliefs and language by Gallup poll. In describing meaning one cannot proceed simply by asking religious people or theologians what they are saying. The conceptual investigation does not leave a confusion as it is. Thus, what believers (and philosophers who are believers) say when they try to give an account of their beliefs is not automatically warranted. Similarly, it would be absurd to give a philosophical account of 'thinking' simply by asking ordinary people what they mean by the term. In clarifying what religious beliefs amount to, reference is not made to the account believers would give if asked. Instead, reference is made to the role the words play in believers' lives (Phillips 2004a, p. 7). In other words, there is a distinction between (a) simply describing what believers say when they try to explain the content of their faith, (b) describing "the logic of language" in the Wittgensteinian sense in order to look at the meaning of words and sentences from the contexts and practices in which the words and sentences play a role.

Philosophical debates differ from scientific debates, where interlocutors agree on the content of hypotheses or theories and disagree about their truth value according to the common measure of meaning. The starting point for philosophical discussion, in turn, is a situation where we are confused about the meaning of expressions. As Wittgenstein says, "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language" (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 109). In battling against bewitchment, a contemplative philosopher of religion does not, as sociologists of religion may do, appeal to new scientific information or, similar to many philosophers and theologians have accomplished, appeal to ultimate metaphysical principles and categories. The criteria of meaningful and unmeaningful is found in the actual religious uses of language. "Yet", as Phillips points out, "although it is our language that bewitches us, the remedy lies in reflection on that same language" (Phillips 2004a, p. 7). The clarificatory work is not carried out from "outside" religious language, for religious language games and forms of life are the given contexts in which the sense of religious beliefs is found. Philosophy offers no "deeper"

explanatory theories that explain the meaning of religious beliefs or why people actually hold such beliefs.

Clarifying religious beliefs requires some understanding and sensitivity to religious forms of life. For his part, Phillips thinks that to understand religious faith is not to confess that faith and appropriate it personally. In this regard there seems to be a tension in Phillips' thinking. This has to do with the possibility of transcending one's own personal perspective when engaging in philosophical study. A philosopher is a human being whose own personal religious/non-religious perspectives and the particular cultural (religious) context in which he lives limit his understanding in many ways. Phillips was aware of this problem, but it is somewhat unclear whether Phillips had a satisfactory solution to the problem (Phillips 2001, pp. 318–19; Edelman 2009; Amesbury 2007; Koistinen 2012). Be this as it may, Phillips made it clear that he did not deny genuine differences between various forms of religious beliefs. Contemplative philosophers leave genuine religious differences and disagreement as they are; they do not try to solve these issues, but they do try to do them justice. Phillips, however, believes that contemporary debates on the problem of evil need other kinds of attention. He holds that contemporary philosophers of religion deal with the problem of evil in a way that distorts the meaning of moral and religious beliefs. In trying to show this, he appeals to examples intended to illuminate some actual features in religious and moral life that he assumes the interlocutor will recognize.

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Article

# Sterba's Problem of Evil and a Penal Colony Theodicy

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**Abstract:** Sterba argues that God would be ethically bound to implement a set of exceptionless evil prevention requirements. However, he argues that the world as we know it is not as it would be if God were applying them. Sterba concludes that God does not exist. In this paper, I offer a penal colony theodicy that will show how the world as we know it is entirely compatible with God's implementation of such evil prevention requirements.

**Keywords:** evil; omnipotence; omnibenevolence; theodicy; desert

## 1. Introduction

In his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* James Sterba outlines a list of supposedly exceptionless evil prevention requirements that God—an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person—would be logically bound to implement if she existed. They are these:

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. (Sterba 2019, p. 184)

Sterba argues that the world is not as it would be if God was applying the above and so concludes that God does not exist.

I am sympathetic to much of what Sterba argues in *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* I think Sterba's case constitutes a formidable challenge to traditional theistic views that hold that God created us and the world we live in. However, I am not a traditional theist (and never have been), and I do not believe Sterba's case successfully demonstrates the non-existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God. In what follows, I will show how it is possible for there to exist a world such as this, containing its degree and quantity of evil, consistent with there also existing an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God. I will do this while conceding to Sterba as much as possible, including the truth of the evil prevention requirements and a God who, were she to exist, would invariably abide by them.

## 2. In the Beginning

A dialectical point of order. Sterba is running a logical problem of evil. The target of his argument is made clear at the outset. It is "an all-good God who is also presumed to be all powerful" (Sterba 2019, p. 1). Therefore, to refute Sterba, all I need to do is show it is logically possible for a God of that sort—an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person—to exist, consistent with there also existing a world such as ours, with its degree and quantity of

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evils. That is the job of work. I stress this because most traditional theists believe all manner of things about God beyond just that God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. They often believe that God created everything (Aquinas 1964, 1. A. 2, 3); that God is a necessary being or the essentially self-subsisting being (Aquinas 1964, I, q. 44, a. 1); that God is a person worthy of worship; that God is a being who is maximally great (Plantinga 1974); that God loves us and wants us freely to love God, and so on. There may be good reasons to believe these things about God. But the issue is strictly whether *God—an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person*—is compatible with this world and our situation in it. It is no boundary condition on a successful counterexample to Sterba’s logical problem of evil that it describe a situation that traditional theists think has ever obtained. I am not a traditional theist, and this paper is not addressed to traditional theists. It is addressed to Sterba and anyone who agrees with his case.

Bearing that in mind, is there any contradiction involved in supposing that ‘in the beginning’ so to speak, there was God and also billions of uncreated, immorally disposed souls such as ourselves, and—existing separately—an uncreated sensible world such as this one? I do not think so, and I will explain why. But note that the question is not whether it is plausible that this was the situation in the beginning. One could accept everything I am about to say in this section consistent with believing there is an excellent case for thinking that God alone existed in the beginning and is responsible for all else. All I need is logical possibility, not plausibility.

Starting with omnipotence: an omnipotent being does not have to create anything. After all, an omnipotent person who has to create things lacks the ability to refrain from creating anything and so is not truly omnipotent at all. Nevertheless, perhaps if anything else exists besides an omnipotent person, then the omnipotent person must be the creator of those other things else not qualify as omnipotent. I do not see why, however. I have certain powers in respect of the mug in front of me. I could hurl it out of the window, let it sit where it is, balance it on my head, and so on. Yet, the powers I have in respect of it seem entirely unaffected by whether or not I created it. If there were two mugs side by side, one of which I created and the other I did not, I would be as powerful in respect of one as I am the other, all else being equal. By the same token, an omnipotent being who exists alongside all manner of other things that she did not create seems just as powerful as an omnipotent being who is in an otherwise identical situation, save that she created all the things around her. In their respective situations, both can take out of existence anything that is in it, change anything that exists in any way they see fit, and add to what exists in any way they wish.

Perhaps it will be objected that a God who did not create the things around her is less powerful because she lacks the power to make it true that she was the creator of all the things around her. But for that to be a real lack of power—which is questionable—then omnipotence would involve having the power to alter the past. But if omnipotence involves having the power to alter the past, then by hypothesis this is a power this God has. Thus, despite not actually being responsible for anything else that exists, she has the power to make herself so. This objection therefore does not provide grounds for thinking that the God who did not create the other things around her is less powerful than an otherwise identical God who did create all the other things around her.

It seems, then, that there is no contradiction involved in supposing there to exist an uncreated omnipotent person, billions of other uncreated persons and, separately, an uncreated world such as this, and for the omnipotent person not to have been responsible for any of it.

What about omniscience? Strictly speaking, Sterba does not list omniscience as one of the divine attributes. The target of his argument is “an all-good God who is also presumed to be all powerful” (p. 1). I take it that omniscience may sometimes go unmentioned—Epicurus himself made no mention of it in the original problem of evil—because if a person is all-powerful, then they have the power to know anything. They do not seem to need to have exercised that power to qualify as God. But I will assume that

God is omniscient in some sense of the word just for good measure. If God does not have to be omniscient to qualify as God, then the following paragraph can be ignored.

Does possessing omniscience somehow essentially involve having created everything else that exists? Not so far as I can see. It is sufficient to be omniscient that one is in possession of all items of knowledge. One does not have to have created any of the things one knows about. It seems logically possible, therefore, for there to exist, in the beginning, an omnipotent, omniscient person, and billions of uncreated, immorally disposed persons such as ourselves, and a separately existing sensible world such as this one, and for the omnipotent omniscient person not to have been responsible for any of it.

Does anything change if we add omnibenevolence to the mix? No, on the contrary. I am with Sterba on this. I think an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person positively would not create a world such as this and billions of immorally disposed persons such as ourselves to populate it. To do so would contravene the evil prevention requirements. But even if that is mistaken and God would create such things, this would not threaten to render illogical the scenario I have described. For it would not show that there is anything contradictory in the idea of God existing and there already existing a world of the kind God would have created had there not already been, and billions of persons of a kind that God would have created had they not already existed.

Perhaps there is something incoherent in the idea of there being uncreated things. I do not think so—and I think most atheists will not think so either, as they often believe the universe as a whole or its basic ingredients exist uncreated (see Wright and Hale 1992, p. 128)—but it would not affect my case if there was. For if everything that exists has to have come into a being, then it is logically possible that God and billions of immorally disposed souls such as ourselves along with a sensible world such as this one could have come into being, without God having been responsible for it. It may not be a reasonable supposition, but all I need is logical possibility. As Bertrand Russell famously noted, “there is no logical impossibility in the hypothesis that the world sprang into being five minutes ago” (Russell 1921, pp. 159–60; see also Smith 1993, p. 135; Mackie 1982, p. 94).

Perhaps some will object that nothing can come from nothing, yet also maintain that everything has been caused, and thus propose—as Dennett seems to—that some things (in Dennett’s case, the entire universe) have created themselves (Dennett 2006, p. 244 and see Craig 2008, p. 151 for discussion). But if that is possible—and of course, it is widely thought not to be (a “rape and perversion of logic” as Nietzsche (1966, p. 21), then there would be nothing logically impossible in supposing everything in the scenario I just described did precisely that simultaneously. In such a case God would be responsible for her own existence, but still not responsible for anything else’s existence, and that is all I need.

Perhaps it will be objected that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person is not the sort of thing that can come into being, yet everything that exists has to have come into being. I do not think any of that is true, but it does not matter if it is, for if it is true that God is a being of a sort that cannot come into being, and also true that everything has to have come into being, then God’s non-existence is already established by these facts alone and Sterba’s logical problem of evil is surplus to requirements. But Sterba is an atheist solely on the basis of his logical problem of evil and so clearly does not believe it to be surplus to requirements.

I think, then, that my target audience should accept that it is logically possible for the scenario I described to obtain. If there can be uncreated things, it is logically possible for the things I described to exist uncreated, including God. If everything that exists has to have come into being, then it is logically possible for the things I described to have come into being, including God. Either way, there seems no contradiction involved in supposing that in the beginning God existed and billions of other immorally disposed souls existed, and a sensible world similar to this one existed as well, and God was not responsible for any of it.



### 3. After the Beginning

Imagining that the logically possible scenario above obtains, what would God subsequently do? Would she destroy the sensible world, for instance? No, of course not. It may be inferior to a world God could create. But that is no reason to destroy it. To do such a thing would be a gross act of vandalism. It would plausibly be an evil of the kind the evil prevention requirements forbid, despite it not befalling a person.

Maybe she would change it, but there is no necessity to this. The world in question should be understood to be devoid of sentient life at this point. And so, it is doing no one any harm. There is no contradiction involved in supposing, then, that God will simply leave it well alone.

What about the billions of other souls that exist—would God destroy them? Again, obviously not. That would be a clear violation of the evil prevention requirements. These are innocent souls, for we are at the beginning and so no one has done anything yet. Innocent persons deserve respect and good will. And so, that is what God will give them in the beginning.

But what if, as time passes, some of these immorally disposed persons go on to form immoral intentions and freely attempt to act on them? Will God know of this and intervene to prevent it from happening? No, I do not think so. She is giving these innocent persons the respect and good will they deserve. And innocent persons have a right to privacy. If I have in front of me your personal diary, then though I have the power to read its contents, it would clearly be immoral for me to do so, other things being equal. And the brute possibility that I might, by reading your diary, find out that you plan on doing something tremendously immoral is clearly not sufficient justification to take a look inside. After all, a good person is morally required to default think well of others, not ill. I am not entitled—not at the outset—to assume you might be hatching evil plans. God is in a relevantly analogous situation in the beginning. It seems logically possible and morally highly plausible that God would not peer into the minds of those around her, out of respect for others' right to privacy. And this does not just apply to the contents of the minds around her either, but also to the private interactions that they may take part in.

It will no doubt be objected that God is omniscient and so would already have all the information she needs without having to violate anyone's rights to acquire it. However, we have seen that the God Sterba is arguing does not exist is not essentially omniscient. So even if it is true that an omniscient person would already have all this information—and I do not think it is—it would likely be beside the point. I only need to show that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person is compatible with our world and our situation in it; not an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent person. Still, it would be as well to show how such ignorance is compatible with being an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent person, for then my case will work for those who believe omniscience is also one of the divine attributes (and those, such as myself, who believe that the God who exists is indeed omniscient).

'Omniscience', taken literally, means 'all knowledge'. Yet, a person can be in possession of all items of knowledge and be ignorant of any number of true beliefs. To see this, we can note that knowledge has at least two core components: true belief and justification. It is in this respect akin to a pizza. Pizzas have two core components: a bread base and a topping. And an omnipizzarian is someone who is in possession of all pizzas. Does it follow that an omnipizzarian is in possession of all bread bases? No, for it is possible that there are any number of topping-less bases that this person does not own without their status as omnipizzarian being in any jeopardy. Likewise, then, if there are truths that lack justification, then those truths do not qualify as items of knowledge. An omniscient person may not be in possession of those true beliefs consistent with being omniscient, just as an omnipizzarian may not be in possession of all bread bases consistent with being omnipizzarian. If God is the arbiter of all justifications (as I believe to be the case) and does not wish to know the private thoughts of those innocent others in her company, then true propositions about those private thoughts will thereby lack justification and so not

qualify as items of knowledge. Thus God, so understood, can keep herself as ignorant as she likes, and be no less omniscient for that. God has that power. Thus, if omniscience is understood to involve being in possession of all knowledge, it is logically possible for God to be all knowing and at the same time to keep herself ignorant of the private thoughts and intentions and activities of the other innocent souls in existence.

What if omniscience is understood to mean being in possession of all true beliefs and no false ones? I do not think it will make a substantial difference, for it still does not follow that a person who is omniscient in this sense has to be *consciously* aware of all that she knows. And thus, God, who does not wish to invade the privacy of others by making herself consciously aware of the activities and mental contents of other persons, will keep her true beliefs about other people's private thoughts and activities subliminal, at least at first. In effect, the private thoughts and plans and interactions of others are in a private diary in her own mind; that it is in her own mind does not make her act of opening it any less an infringement of the privacy of others, and so she will not open it. This all seems logically possible, anyway.

What if some of those who have formed evil intentions begin to act on them? Well, as noted above, out of respect God would not just be keeping herself ignorant of the content of other people's minds, but also ignorant of their private interactions. And so, it certainly seems logically possible that some of the evil persons in her midst will be able to complete their evil deeds and visit the horrendously evil consequences of their actions on some others. Furthermore, God is going to be extending to those around her good will and trust. She will be assuming the best of all she encounters, not the worst. And so, nothing stops horrendously evil consequences being visited on her. After all, it would not occur to her, not at this point in proceedings, that some may be intending to do the evil things they are intending to do, even—plausibly—if they start giving some outward appearance of intending to do them. She will trust, not distrust. And so, it seems plausible—and logically possible—that the first evidence God will ever have that some in her midst are evilly disposed towards her and others, is the actual visitation of horrendously evil consequences on herself and others. And even that may not be enough to convince her that real evil is being committed, as—again—she is so good-willed towards others that she may, at first, attribute other motives to the actors. A perfectly good God is likely, at first, not to recognize the evidence of evil in her midst. Her goodness makes her vulnerable and ignorant. She is a sheep among wolves, albeit an omnipotent sheep. But that omnipotence leaves her helpless at first. As such it seems logically possible for a first wave of significant and horrendous evil consequences to occur—and perhaps a wave or two more, given God's tendency to think the best of others—consistent with God existing. And it seems logically possible, and in fact quite likely, that God herself will be on the receiving end of some of those evil deeds. Indeed, it is logically possible that she could be on the receiving end of all of them. Every single innocent person in her company can, in principle, do at least one wicked thing, but probably more, to God herself. Sterba thinks God cannot be harmed (pp. 145–46). It is clear I disagree. God is extraordinarily vulnerable to being harmed by the wickedly disposed in her company.

In summary, it is logically possible for God to exist, and for any number of immorally disposed innocent persons to exist, and a sensible world such as this one to exist and for God not to have been responsible for any of it. And it is logically possible for some of those persons—in fact, any number of them, and so all of them—to form wicked intentions and to be able to visit on innocent others the horrendously evil consequences of those intentions, including on God herself. Indeed, it is logically possible for all of those billions of immorally disposed persons to visit horrendously evil consequences on God herself. For she will trust and respect and extend good will towards each and every single one of them, to her own detriment.

#### 4. Moral Limits

There are limits to what morality demands in terms of positive sacrifice for others, even when the sacrifice is required to save an innocent from harm. Imagine you are beside a pond and a child falls in. Clearly you are morally required to hoick the child out. It is easy enough to do, costs you barely anything, and prevents horrible harm from occurring. But what if another child falls in? And another? And another? How long ought you stay by the pond, rescuing drowning children? They are innocent and have a right to life. But, plausibly, a right to life does not entitle them to anything they need from others in order to stay alive. Even if you find that you do not need sleep and never tire and never grow hungry, and turn out to be immortal, will the evil prevention requirements mean that you must now devote the rest of eternity to saving drowning children if they keep plopping into the pond? Is that a life that duty can fate a good person to lead? Plausibly not. Leading such a life seems far beyond the call of duty by any reasonable assessment. As Thomson put it “having a right to life does not guarantee having either a right to be given the use of or a right to be allowed continued use of another person’s body—even if one needs it for life itself” (p. 46). There will come a point where you may walk away from the pond and start pursuing your own projects without thereby being any less good for having done so. Some sacrifice is demanded, perhaps even a lot. But there are limits. And you are not responsible for the fact children keep falling into this pond, after all (matters may be very different if you are, of course). And you are an innocent person yourself with a right *not* to have to dedicate every waking moment to preventing others from coming to harm, even those who are innocent. This applies even if you have great powers. As Sterba notes, Spiderman’s main problem given his power to prevent terrible deeds from occurring “becomes how to do so while still maintaining some kind of personal life” (p. 19). Spiderman, no less than anyone else, is entitled to have some kind of personal life. That applies to God too.

If there are limits to what a good person is obliged to sacrifice for the sake of protecting innocent persons from harm, then those limits are going to be considerably lower—potentially non-existent—when it comes to what a good person owes, at least in terms of substantial sacrifice, to those who have freely done evil things. And they will be lower still—and even more likely non-existent—if the evil things in question have been done to the good person themselves. How much sacrifice does a rape victim owe to their rapist, for example? Even if we acknowledge that those who have freely done atrocious things may still deserve some base level of respect, dignity and to have their basic needs met, it is not plausible that their victims are obliged to make any substantial prolonged sacrifice to provide them with these things.

It is worth stressing that to deserve something is not equivalent to others being obliged to provide you with it. It is plausible that any evil one freely and intentionally visits on another, one deserves to have visited on oneself (as expressed by the *Lex talionis* and by Kant 1965, p. 101, among many others). But it would often be seriously immoral to visit such an evil on another. Morality constrains what a good person is permitted or obliged to do in the way of giving another what they deserve. That works in both directions: there are harms that a person may deserve that no good person ought to give to a person, and there are benefits that a person may deserve that a good person may not be obliged to give to a person.

It is plausible that God owes those who have done her terribly wrongs nothing or next to nothing in terms of sacrifice. They are not her children; she did not create them. She is not responsible for them. They are not part of some vanity project of hers. They just existed alongside her and decided, freely, to abuse her. She does not owe them good will and trust anymore and she does not owe it to them to make any substantial sustained sacrifice of her own welfare for their sake. This is not to deny that wicked people still deserve some dignity and to have their basic needs met (Nathanson 2002, p. 138). The point is that God is no longer obliged to make any sacrifices to provide these things. Indeed, it is plausible that any obligations God now has are to herself and other innocents in her company. Though even here, I reiterate, there is a limit to what level of sacrifice she is obliged to make, as the

drowning children case illustrated. These points are sufficient, I believe, to show how God would be justified in doing what I describe in Section 5 below. But I want to consider some alternative courses of action first.

Perhaps, for instance, to protect herself and other innocents from the evil doers who have now made their existence known, God could simply destroy the evil doers. However, to do such a thing is itself plausibly evil and so not something God would do (and it could be evil, note, consistent with them deserving to be destroyed). It is certainly logically possible that God would not destroy them.

Perhaps God could reach into the minds of the depraved and rid them of their evil dispositions and thoughts, replacing them with something more pleasant and wholesome instead. But that too would plausibly be wrong. It has already been acknowledged that even the depraved deserve a basic level of dignity. And it is plausible that to interfere with their autonomy in this way would be to deprive them of such dignity. Note, my point here is not that having the possibility of doing atrocious things is a valuable kind of freedom worth having (I am with Sterba on these matters). It is that finagling with someone's mind to remove evil dispositions and thoughts disrespects that person's autonomy and is inconsistent with respecting that person's dignity. It would plausibly be wrong, especially if there is some alternative that achieves the same end without positively depriving the wicked of their dignity. It seems logically possible, then, that God would not take this course of action.

Perhaps God might, at first anyway, take to monitoring those who have done wicked things, intervening when necessary to prevent any future evil acts from visiting horrendous consequences on others, but not otherwise. But consider what a harrowing task that would be for God and what a considerable sacrifice it would constitute. In police departments, there are those who have to expose themselves to grotesque people and material both for monitoring purposes and to establish whether a crime has been committed. What a foul and extraordinarily upsetting task for a good and innocent person to have to do for any period. Investigator Patricia Rust had to watch hours of horrific videos by serial killer David Ray of him torturing his victims. She also had to draw detailed pictures of his torture equipment. Within days, she had committed suicide. Patricia Rust's ghastly tasks will be part of God's self-imposed task if God adopts the monitoring policy. And it is the minds of her attackers that she will be monitoring too, which is going to make a psychologically harrowing task even worse. She will have to expose herself to the most depraved and vile thoughts. And note, she will also have to do this, at least in her imagination, if instead she delegates the task to a device (something, note, that respect for the dignity of the depraved may prevent her from doing). For she will have to conceive of the types of action that the device will interfere with. Either way, monitoring the wicked will be traumatizing for her. She can, of course, bear the suffering that this will cause in her, as she can bear any amount of suffering, but that does not mean it is not the suffering that it is. It just means that she can bear it. And as an omnipotent person she has the power to make herself enjoy her task or be indifferent to it. She can escape the suffering easily enough, then. But a good person would not exercise such a power. That is, a good person, if my conception of one is anything to go by, does not want to be such that they are anything other than appalled by encountering or conceiving of such material. Good people do not want to be such that they are not caused suffering by being exposed to certain things or by certain thoughts. One *ought* to find such things harrowing. It was not to Patricia Rust's discredit that she found her task so upsetting. If that is correct, then God would not want to be such that she is anything other than profoundly harrowed by the monitoring task that she has given herself.

The trauma does not end there either. For in addition to the horrific task of monitoring the minds of the wicked, there's the task of intervening itself. Will she enjoy intervening or be happy that it is occurring? Again, surely not. The good are not megalomaniacs who relish exercising control over others. Not if my conception of a good person is anything to go by. God is all powerful, but she is not all powerful as result of actively seeking power;

she simply *is* all powerful. It seems to be the nature of a good person positively to dislike having power over others and having to exercise it, and to dislike that others are being controlled by persons other than themselves. As an omnipotent person God could, of course, divest herself of her power (she would cease to qualify as God if she did so, but that is beside the point—she is *able* to do it). Yet, as a good person she would retain it precisely because she could use it for good. Nevertheless, it remains plausible that God, as a good person, will loathe the task of controlling the wicked, and hate that there are persons who are subject to such control. And again, she has the power to make herself enjoy exercising such control and enjoy the fact some are being controlled, as she is omnipotent. But once more, it is the nature of a good person not to want to enjoy such things; good people do not want to be such that they enjoy exercising power over others, or enjoy others having power exercised over them, even when this is occurring to prevent innocents befalling the horrendous evil consequences of the acts of others. It will be—because it ought to be—a burdensome task for her and a distressing situation.

In summary, if God undertakes to monitor those who have done wicked things to her and others, then this will involve her making a very considerable sacrifice. It is a task that will torment her and a situation that will distress her. For how long does she have to subject herself to such torment? I do not need an answer to that question, for it is sufficient that there will come a time when she is no longer obliged to do so (if she is obliged to do it at all, that is).

What will God do when that point is reached? Just let the evil have free reign again? No, for she has another option, one the taking of which would protect the innocent—including herself—from horrendous evil and would not violate anyone's rights. She can exile the wicked to the sensible world and concern herself with them no longer. That would cost her nothing, or next to nothing. And she owes it to herself and the other innocents in her company to do it.

## 5. Penal Colony Earth

Empodocles wrote:

Whenever one of the daemons, whose portion is length of days, has sinfully polluted his hands with blood, or followed strife and forsworn himself, he must wander thrice ten thousand years from the abodes of the blessed, being born throughout time in all manners of mortal forms, changing one toilsome path of life for another. For the mighty air drives him into the Sea, and the Sea spews him forth upon the dry Earth; Earth tosses him into the beams of the blazing Sun, and he flings him back to the eddies of Air. One takes him from the other, and all reject him. One of these I now am, an exile and wanderer from the gods, for that I put my trust in an insensate strife. (Quoted in Russell 1946, p. 74)

I have argued that it is logically possible for evil people to visit horrendous consequences on innocent others, consistent with God existing, and logically possible that God herself could be the victim of such acts. And above I argued that God owes those who have done her and others wrong little to nothing in terms of positive sacrifice. She owes herself and the other innocents in her company some sacrifice in the interests of preventing further horrendous consequences occurring, though even here there will be limits. And I showed how quickly those limits would be reached were God to tolerate the continued presence of the wicked. But what if there is an existing place that God can exile the wicked to – another world, such as this? It seems to me that doing this would efficiently protect herself and the other innocents in her company from such monsters, without violating anyone's rights, including her own, in the process. It seems to me the evil prevention requirements would positively require her to do it. The wicked will now be elsewhere and among their own kind. She would be doing them no wrong, for she owes them no further concern (at least for a time). And in the scenario I described, there is such a place: the world that resembles this one and that God is not responsible for. Thus, it is logically possible that in the scenario

I described, God will exile to the place that resembles this one those who, as Empodocles put it above, have sinfully polluted their hands with blood.

Perhaps these persons deserve better. Perhaps they deserve to have their basic needs met and so placed in a world that is guaranteed to provide for them. Perhaps they deserve to have their dignity preserved and so put in a world that is guaranteed not to humiliate them. Perhaps they deserve to know why they are where they are and deserve to know much more about the world in which they have been placed, so that they can navigate it safely. But as already noted, that a person deserves something does not mean that others are obliged to provide them with it. And in the case of those who have done wicked things to God and other innocents, then by hypothesis they do not deserve to have God make any further sacrifices on their behalf. So, deserve those things though they may, God is not obliged to provide them, and so not obliged to make sure the sensible world will. The sensible world may well provide some of those whom she exiles there with less than they deserve and others with more. It resembles this place and this place is, as so many like to point out, an unfair place. But God does not owe it to the wicked she sends there the sacrifice needed on her part to make it less unfair. And note, making it less unfair would involve sacrifice, for she would have to conceive of all the different ways in which those whom she exiles to the world may come to harm or visit harm on each other.

The situation of these exiles is one that is now indistinguishable from our own. We are, as atheists like to point out, in an apparently godless world. Well, the scenario I have described above is one in which the world is godless to all intents and purposes. Our reason tells us to treat each other well; indeed, to treat each other as if we are innocent and to uphold the evil prevention requirements. And we can suppose that, as a parting gift, the God in my scenario might give to those whom she exiles to the world a rudimentary instruction manual—a faculty of reason—that tells them, among other things, to treat each other as default innocent and to uphold the evil prevention requirements. And in my scenario as here, it is left down to the evil exiles whether or not they do as they are bid. Our reason tells us to behave in some ways and not others. But we are not made to do so. We are not monitored. We are at each other's mercy and at the mercy of the world. So too are the exiles in my scenario. And look at the company we are keeping: are there any truly good people among us? Is not everyone here immorally disposed to some degree or another? We all seem to fall short of doing and being all that we morally ought to do and be. It is certainly logically possible that we are all persons who have freely done terrible things to God and other innocents, and that is all I need.

That completes my counterexample. I have described a logically possible situation indistinguishable from the one in which we seem to find ourselves. It is a situation in which God exists and is applying the evil prevention requirements. And so, the world we are living in with its degree and quantity of evil is consistent with God existing and abiding by the evil prevention requirements. For it is logically possible that we are the evil the evil prevention requirements are being employed against. It is logically possible that were God not to have exiled us here and instead continued to suffer our company—and suffer other innocents to suffer it—she would be violating the moral evil prevention requirements, for then others (including herself) would be being deprived of a good, the good of our absence, to which they are entitled. And it is logically possible that were she to monitor us while here, intervening when necessary to prevent us befalling this or that horrendous evil—whether natural or moral—she would not have freed herself from the horrible task of monitoring us and intervening in our behaviour, a task she is entitled to free herself from (or perhaps entitled not to have to undertake at all). It seems logically possible then, that we are here to give God and other good innocent people a rest from us. And logically possible that, while we are away, we alone are charged with preventing evil from befalling one another. That is a task we are not especially good at, but then that is to be expected given who we are.

## 6. Conclusions

Sterba believes that if an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person exists, then she would be ethically bound to behave in accordance with the evil prevention requirements and that this would entail a world very different from the one we find ourselves in. On this basis, Sterba concludes that no such person exists.

Above, I have tried to construct a counterexample to Sterba's claim, while at the same time conceding to Sterba as much as I can. I have not denied the ethical credibility of the evil prevention requirements or that God, being all good, would apply them. But I think that Sterba's case does not demonstrate the non-existence of God, for nothing in the idea of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person precludes the possibility of God existing alongside a world, such as this, that God did not create. And nothing precludes the possibility of there also existing billions of immorally disposed, free-will-possessing persons that God did not create. I have then shown how it is possible for a situation indistinguishable from our own to evolve, entirely consistent with God applying the evil prevention requirements. For it is logically possible that we have done terrible things to God and to other innocents. And it is logically possible that we do not deserve God's care and concern, at least for a time. And it is logically possible that God owes it to herself and others to exile us to a place such as this, so that she and innocent others may enjoy the good of our absence.

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Article

# Defending the Free Will Defense: A Reply to Sterba

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**Abstract:** James Sterba has recently argued that the free will defense fails to explain the compossibility of a perfect God and the amount and degree of moral evil that we see. I think he is mistaken about this. I thus find myself in the awkward and unexpected position, as a non-theist myself, of defending the free will defense. In this paper, I will try to show that once we take care to focus on what the free will defense is trying to accomplish, and by what means it tries to do so, we will see that Sterba's criticism of it misses the mark.

**Keywords:** logical problem of evil; free will defense; James Sterba; Alvin Plantinga

## 1. Introduction

James Sterba (2019, chapter 2) has recently argued that the free will defense fails to explain the compossibility of a perfect God and the amount and degree of moral evil that we see. I think he is mistaken about this. I thus find myself in the awkward and unexpected position, as a non-theist myself, of defending the free will defense. In this paper, I will try to show that once we take care to focus on what the free will defense is trying to accomplish, and by what means it tries to do so, we will see that Sterba's criticism of it misses the mark.

I begin by outlining and explaining Sterba's argument (Section 2). Next, I outline and explain the dialectic between the logical problem of evil and the free will defense (Section 3). I then argue that Sterba's argument relies on a false premise (Section 4). I conclude with a brief discussion of how I think the considerations raised by Sterba help advance the problem of evil in other ways.

## 2. Sterba's Argument against the Free Will Defense

Sterba's argument depends on three central claims. (The claims I describe below are not explicitly articulated by Sterba in the same way I do.) The first claim is this:

**Zero-Sum Freedom Cases:** Some decisions regarding whether or not to interfere with someone's attempt to  $\Phi$  are zero-sum decisions between whether to protect one of their freedoms or a freedom of someone else's.

On zero-sum freedom cases, there are no available courses of action that are not subsumed under "deciding to interfere" or "deciding not to interfere", and there are no available courses of action that do not constitute a sacrifice of someone's freedom. There are both familiar and surprising instances of zero-sum freedom cases.

Here is a familiar instance. Political states must balance which freedoms to secure and which freedoms to interfere with. Most of us would agree, for example, that a "just" political state would contain policies and procedures that protect, even if they do not guarantee, someone's *freedom from assault*—namely, by creating both the relevant incentives and the relevant institutions. On certain occasions, however, this protection manifests itself as the forceful violation of someone's *freedom from interference by the state* in their private affairs. This is a physical freedom that a just political state should generally care to protect as well. Unfortunately, there are many dilemmatic occasions where a just political state is in a zero-sum freedom case with respect to these two important freedoms: their agents must choose to protect either someone's freedom from assault or someone's freedom from interference, and they just do not have the option to protect both.

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A more surprising example is the tension between the freedoms of the rich and the needs of the poor. According to Sterba (2019, p. 16), political libertarians—those whose views on public policy tend to prioritize the protection of our freedoms—misunderstand this tension by not seeing it as a zero-sum freedom case as well:

“When the conflict between the rich and the poor is viewed as a conflict of freedoms, we can either say that the rich should have the *freedom not to be interfered with* in using their surplus resources for luxury purposes, or we can say that the poor should have the *freedom not to be interfered with* in taking from the rich what they require to meet their basic needs. If we choose one freedom, we must reject the other.” (My emphasis)

Unfortunately, there are many dilemmatic occasions where a just political state is in a zero-sum freedom case of this kind as well: their agents must choose to protect either the poor’s freedom from interference or the rich’s freedom from interference, and they just do not have the option to protect both.

The second claim behind Sterba’s argument is the following:

**Morally Loaded Cases:** On certain zero-sum freedom cases, it is necessarily true that one of the relevant freedoms is morally more significant than the other(s).

Not every zero-sum freedom case is clear cut. There is certainly a role for uncodifiable practical wisdom in our individual and collective pursuit of justice. But some cases, on the other hand, are such that the greater moral significance of one of the relevant freedoms is clearly engraved in our intuitions and ideals. On these cases, again, whatever you decide constitutes a choice of which freedoms to protect (so you cannot escape making a freedom-related choice). What is peculiar to them, however, is that *if we focus exclusively on the moral value of the relevant freedoms*, there is necessarily only one right thing to do.

Looking at these kinds of scenarios, Sterba (2019, pp. 13–14) thinks our sense of justice identifies what he calls “morally unacceptable distributions of freedoms”:

“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 that everyone should have.”

“The practice of constraining the freedom of would-be assaulters in favor of the freedom of their would-be victims is characteristic of societies that are strongly concerned to be just.”

Assault, however, is just an example. Sterba has also argued that careful attention to our moral sense reveals that a just political state would favor the freedom of the poor over the freedom of the rich, in the kinds of dilemmatic cases described above. The poor’s freedom not to be interfered with in taking from the rich what they require to meet their basic needs is morally more significant than the rich’s freedom not to be interfered with in using their surplus resources for luxury purposes (c.f., Sterba 2014).<sup>1</sup>

The third and final pillar supporting Sterba’s argument is the following:

**Lesser Freedom Cases:** Many instances of evil in the history of the world are direct and indirect consequences of the morally less significant freedom prevailing in morally loaded zero-sum freedom cases: cases where someone’s morally less significant *freedom to perpetrate* some relevant evil prevailed over someone’s morally more significant *freedom from* suffering that evil.

Referring us to the morally loaded zero-sum cases discussed above, Sterba (2019, p. 18) defends this third claim by noting that “we have not yet achieved a morally acceptable distribution of significant freedom in most societies around the world” and that “this has been true throughout most of human history.” He has a controversial argument for this claim, but that matters very little for his overall point.<sup>2</sup> The claim is independently plausible. Brief reflection on the historical ubiquity of slavery, for example, reveals a pattern of morally unacceptable distributions of freedoms that has characterized human societies throughout time. Certainly, the morally less significant freedom has prevailed in nearly all

those cases. What is worse, Sterba (2019, p. 18) is no doubt right that the vast majority of humans have either perpetrated such injustices, benefitted from them, or simply not done their part to correct them.

We now have all the ingredients we need to see the force of Sterba's argument against the free will defense. Let us assume that God exists and is all-powerful and all-knowing, and therefore that it is appropriate to say He has foreseen and has permitted all of the evils of history. If Sterba's three claims are all true, then it seems we cannot justify God's protecting the morally less significant freedom, in the many morally loaded freedom cases productive of the evils in our history, by appeals to the moral significance of *freedom* itself, as the free will defense purports to do (c.f., Sterba 2019, pp. 23–24). There may well be other ways to justify God's permission of those evils—e.g., with non-freedom-related considerations that outweigh the reasons provided by the comparative moral significance of the relevant freedoms in each case (although the rest of Sterba's book is devoted to challenging this claim as well)—but appealing to any such non-freedom-related considerations is tantamount to giving up on the free will defense. Once we understand the nature of far too many of the evils in our world, in other words, we see that *freedom*, logically speaking, cannot do the God-justifying work the free will defense needs it to do. As Sterba (2019, pp. 29–30) summarizes:

“We cannot say that God's justification for permitting the moral evil in the world is the freedom that is in it because God could have reduced the moral evil in the world by increasing the significant freedom in the world, and that has not been done. Hence, there is no Free-Will Defense of the degree and amount of moral evil in the world.”

Deciding to interfere with someone's morally less significant *freedom to perpetrate* evil on morally loaded zero-sum cases, after all, would amount to protecting someone's morally more significant *freedom from* suffering that evil, thereby increasing the amount of morally significant freedom in the world, and reducing the amount of evil as well.

This is a compelling argument. I think it is mistaken, nonetheless. In the next section, I clarify what the original free will defense was trying to accomplish and distinguish it from what I call the “extended” free will defense, which is Sterba's proper target. In the final section, I explain where I think the argument above goes wrong.

### 3. The Free Will Defense (and Its Expansion)

According to J.L. Mackie (1955, p. 200), classical theism is in a tight spot: it must accept, definitionally, that God is omnipotent, wholly good, and that evil exists, but it cannot accept these three claims consistently. This alleged problem for classical theism is *internal*. As Mackie (1962, pp. 153–54) clarified a few years after his canonical exposition:

“The question is whether God's being what the *theist* calls wholly good, and omnipotent, is compatible with the existence, which *he* recognises, of what *he* calls evil.” (emphasis original)

Call the difficulty of demonstrating that classical theism is internally consistent, in this sense, as the *logical problem of evil*.<sup>3</sup>

Mackie's attempt to articulate this difficulty in more detail, of course, was fraught with its own set of well-known challenges. Indeed, one of the many lessons from Alvin Plantinga's (1977, p. 22) famous reply to Mackie is that the logical problem of evil has no bite unless something like the following ambitious claim is true:

**Mackie's Key:** Necessarily, if God is omnipotent, then God can prevent *any evil* without bringing about an even greater evil or eliminating some even greater good.

This is not a wholly unintuitive claim. Yet Mackie's original discussion of the issue did not show it to be the case. In this sense, the logical problem of evil is, perhaps, unmotivated or incomplete. The aim of Plantinga's free will defense, however, is to move *beyond* this merely defensive maneuver. Instead of merely claiming that the theist is under no rational

pressure from the logical problem of evil until presented with an argument for Mackie's Key, Plantinga aimed to show that Mackie's Key is demonstrably false.<sup>4</sup>

The *primary* goal of the free will defense, then, is demonstrating that the following is true:

**Plantinga's Lock:** Possibly, God is omnipotent, and God cannot prevent *every evil* without bringing about an even greater evil or eliminating some even greater good.

Although there are many other evil-related problems in the vicinity that are left unaddressed (more on this below), if Plantinga's Lock is true, then Mackie's version of the logical problem of evil, at least, is done for good.<sup>5</sup>

Plantinga's defense of Plantinga's Lock—i.e., his version of the free will defense—begins with a version of libertarianism about what I will call *individual freedom*—the kind of freedom that is a necessary condition for genuine desert and moral responsibility:

**P<sub>1</sub>:** S is *individually free*, at a certain time t and with respect to a certain action A, only if, at t, there are no antecedence conditions and/or causal laws that determine that S will or will not perform A. (c.f., Plantinga's 1977, pp. 29–30)

This is Plantinga's attempt to capture what is required for it to be "within our power" to both A and not A, at that time, such that genuine desert and moral responsibility could be appropriate on account of our A-ing or not A-ing. It is possible, however, to have individual freedom and yet exist in a world in which we are never in a position to freely choose between doing what is *right* and what is *wrong*. This would be a world where we would be individually free—we would have the relevant powers of choice and would exercise them on various trivial occasions—but where we would not be what Plantinga (1977, p. 30) calls *significantly free*: "[individually] free with respect to a morally significant action." The second element of Plantinga's free will defense, then, is a claim about the value of there being creatures with significant freedom in this technical sense—i.e., creatures with individual freedom *and* the opportunity to exercise it with respect to morally significant actions:

**P<sub>2</sub>:** It is possible that a world with creatures who are *significantly free* and some evil is more valuable than a world without any evil and without creatures who are *significantly free*.

This is a comparative claim. Although individual freedom is a necessary condition for desert and moral responsibility, we only get to enjoy the things of extreme moral significance that are connected to desert and moral responsibility if we are actually placed in situations that constitute genuine opportunities to deserve praise and blame for our choices—situations where it is within our power to do what is right or wrong. Indeed, it is not an egregious stretch to suggest that, *possibly*, eliminating evil at the cost of *all* significant freedom, in this sense, would produce a less valuable world than ours. That would be a world, after all, where no one ever deserves praise or blame for anything, where no one is ever morally responsible for anything, and where none of the attitudes and relations that gravitate around these properties exist as well—e.g., admiration, honor, dignity, courage, loyalty, etc. The third and final element in Plantinga's free will defense, then, is a claim about the impact of these considerations on God's powers:

**P<sub>3</sub>:** It is possible that God could not have actualized a world with creatures who are significantly free and without some evil.<sup>6</sup>

Plantinga's reasons for accepting P<sub>3</sub> are a combination of his endorsement of libertarianism about individual freedom, his endorsement of *Molinism*—the view according to which God's creative activity is constrained by the truth-values of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom<sup>7</sup>—and his endorsement of an essences-based metaphysics of necessity that is most fully developed in Plantinga (1974). In short, Plantinga's view is that whether or not God can actualize worlds with significantly free creatures that never do wrong depends on the interconnected branching pattern of truth values of the counterfactuals of

creaturely freedom—which are both contingent and independent of God’s will, if we are to be truly free—and it is at least *possible* that this pattern makes all possible worlds with significantly free creatures that never do wrong unactualizable by God.<sup>8</sup>

These three claims are not, of course, obviously true.<sup>9</sup> If they are true, however, then so is Plantinga’s Lock. Mackie’s version of the logical problem of evil, in that case, is dead. But Mackie’s version of the logical problem of evil is the boldest possible formulation of that particular problem. Consequently, it is the least difficult version to overcome (where “least difficult” does not imply “not difficult”). One can, naturally, grant Plantinga’s Lock and nonetheless insist that what is logically incoherent is rather the existence of the perfect God of classical theism and the amount and distribution of evil that we see in the actual world. This is a concessive articulation of the original problem, in a sense, but it packs a stronger punch in turn. What the free will defender needs to show now, after all, is not simply that the great value of individual freedom justifies God in permitting *some* evil, but rather, as Anthony Flew (1973, p. 232) put it, that all the actual exercises of free will we see in history are “items in that sum of actual alleged higher values to which the Free Will Defender appeals in hopes of offsetting, with plenty to spare, the sum of all actual evils in what is supposed to be the creation of his God.” Call this *the expanded logical problem of evil*. This is the version of the logical problem of evil that Sterba finds compelling.

Borrowing from our discussion just above, we can say that the burden of the proponent of this expanded version is showing that the following is true:

**Mackie’s Expanded Key:** Necessarily, if God is omnipotent, then God could have prevented *many of the actual evils* without bringing about an even greater evil or eliminating some even greater good.

Similarly, we can say that the burden of the theist who wants to move, with Plantinga, beyond a merely defensive maneuver—beyond challenging the proponent of this version of the problem of evil to show that Mackie’s Expanded Key is true—is demonstrating that the following is true instead:

**Plantinga’s Expanded Lock:** Possibly, God is omnipotent, and God could not have prevented *any of the actual evils* without bringing about an even greater evil or eliminating some even greater good.

This is certainly an ambitious claim. Providing a free will defense for it, in turn, requires modifying the second and third of Plantinga’s original claims into the following:

**P<sub>2</sub>\*:** It is possible that a world with the amount of significant freedom that we see and the amount of evil that we see is more valuable than worlds with much less evil but much less significant freedom too.

**P<sub>3</sub>\*:** It is possible that God could not have actualized a world with *any less* evil without also actualizing a world with much less significant freedom.

Call the combination of P<sub>1</sub> and these two new claims *the expanded free will defense*. This is the version of the free will defense Sterba thinks is hopeless.

Plantinga (1977, pp. 55–57) himself was willing to explicitly endorse P<sub>3</sub>\*. In so doing, I assume he was implicitly endorsing something like P<sub>2</sub>\* as well. His argument, moreover, is the same as the argument for the original free will defense above: whether or not God can actualize any given possible world depends on the interconnected branching pattern of truth values of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom—which are both contingent and independent of God’s will, if we are to be truly free—and it is at least *possible* that this pattern makes all possible worlds with a valuable enough amount of significant freedom but less evil than ours, unactualizable by God. If one is willing to grant this argument for Plantinga’s Lock, it seems one should be just as willing to grant it for Plantinga’s Expanded Lock as well. Has Sterba’s argument from Section 2, at any rate, given us any reason to think otherwise?

#### 4. Particular vs. Global Judgments of Comparative Value

Let us recall and restate Sterba's argument more carefully, in the following way:

##### Sterba's Argument Against the Free Will Defense.

**S<sub>1</sub>.** If a perfect God exists, then many of His decisions regarding whether or not to interfere with someone's attempt to  $\Phi$  were *freedom-problematic decisions*, decisions such that:

- (i) They were necessarily decisions between whether (a) to protect someone's freedom to do evil or (b) to protect someone's freedom from suffering an evil (i.e., God was in a *zero-sum freedom case*);
- (ii) They were cases where it was necessarily true that the freedom from suffering an evil was morally more significant than the freedom to do evil (i.e., God was in a *morally loaded case*);
- (iii) They were cases where God decided to protect the morally less significant freedom to perpetrate an evil instead of protecting the morally more significant freedom from suffering that evil instead (i.e., God brought about a *lesser freedom case*).

**S<sub>2</sub>.** If many of God's decisions were freedom-problematic decisions, then it is not possible that, on those occasions, God was justified in permitting the relevant evil *on account of* considerations pertaining to the moral significance of freedom.

**S<sub>3</sub>.** If it is not possible that, on those occasions, God was justified in permitting the relevant evil *on account of* considerations pertaining to the moral significance of freedom, then the free will defense fails to justify God's permission of many instances of evil.

**C.** So if a perfect God exists, then the free will defense fails to justify God's permission of many instances of evil.

Notice how Sterba's  $S_2$  seems to imply that *if  $S_1$  is true, then  $P_{3^*}$  is false*:

**$P_{3^*}$ :** It is possible that God could not have actualized a world with *any less* evil without also actualizing a world with much less significant freedom.

As we noted at the end of Section 2, this is because deciding to interfere with someone's morally less significant *freedom to perpetrate* evil on morally loaded zero-sum cases would necessarily amount to protecting someone's morally more significant *freedom from* suffering that evil, thereby increasing the amount of significant freedom in the world and reducing the amount of evil as well.

This is a tempting but, as far as I can tell, mistaken interpretation of the dialectical import of Sterba's points. To see this, we must first clear up some obfuscating terminology.

When Sterba talks about "significant freedom" in his  $S_1$  he is talking about something very different from the kind of "significant freedom" Plantinga is talking about in his  $P_{3^*}$ . If we are going to suggest that the truth of  $S_1$  is to have any implications for the truth of  $P_{3^*}$ , therefore, we first need to clarify how these two different notions—annoyingly picked out by the same expression—are supposed to be related. Sterba (2019, p. 12) is well aware of this, of course, and he is careful enough to tell us both what he means by "significant freedom" and how he understands the relation between his use and Plantinga's:

"For me, significant freedoms are those freedoms a just political state would want to protect since that would fairly secure each person's fundamental interests . . . significant freedoms for me are like the freedom from assault, whereas Plantinga's significant freedoms include those freedoms and also include freedoms like the freedom of not having someone cut in front of us in the line for the movies. Clearly it is God's failure to secure significant freedoms in my sense and not God's failure to secure the additional freedoms captured by Plantinga's more expansive notion of significant freedom that gives rise to the problem of evil."

According to Sterba, in other words, the kind of “significant freedom” he cares about—i.e., the kind “a just political state would want to protect”—is a subset of the kind of “significant freedom” Plantinga cares about. Plantinga is thinking of things such as “freedom from assault” and things such as “the freedom of not having someone cut in front of us in the line for the movies,” whereas Sterba is only thinking of things such as the former.

This, however, is a mistake. As we have seen above, Plantinga (1977, pp. 29–30) takes “significant freedom” to consist in the combined existence of individual freedom—the kind of fundamental freedom required for desert and moral responsibility—and the existence of a genuine opportunity to exercise it with respect to morally right and wrong actions. Neither “freedom from assault” nor “the freedom of not having someone cut in front of us in the line for the movies” are examples of the kind of thing Plantinga is talking about. The state of being *free from some harm H*, in general, is not the same kind of thing as having a certain *power and opportunity*. Despite what Sterba tells us in this passage, therefore, set-and-subset is not the proper understanding of the relationship between their shared term. It is rather unclear, in fact, what Sterba ultimately means by his  $S_2$ , such that it could indicate some tension with  $P_3^*$ .

Taking our cue from a later passage, however, one where Sterba (2019, p. 27) gives us the heart of his concerns, it seems to me more accurate to think of their different uses of the same term as different selections of non-overlapping subsets of the broader set of *morally valuable freedoms*:

“Plantinga fails to take into account that there are two ways that God can promote freedom in the world. He recognizes that God can promote freedom by not interfering with our free actions. However, he fails to recognize that God can also promote freedom, in fact, promote far greater significant freedom, by actually interfering with the freedom of some of our free actions at certain times.”

The idea here would be that while what Plantinga calls “significant freedom” is certainly a morally valuable kind of freedom, given its role as a necessary condition for desert and moral responsibility, what Sterba calls “significant freedom” is a morally valuable kind of freedom as well, given its role as a necessary condition for, or reliable means to, securing each person’s fundamental interests. In what follows, I will assess Sterba’s argument, at any rate, with this interpretation in mind. But clear thinking calls for the use of different terms when talking about different things, especially in cases where their difference matters to the argument. And since Plantinga’s usage is older and more established, in what follows I will use “significant freedom” to refer exclusively to the property he has in mind, reserving “political freedom” (a term used by Sterba himself) for the different properties Sterba has in mind. I will refer to both as “morally valuable”, indicating that they both matter morally and that God has *prima facie* reasons to promote both.

Now that we are clear on the differences between significant freedom and political freedom, we need to clarify the content of  $S_2$ —the bridge premise connecting Sterba’s  $S_1$  to Plantinga’s free will defense. Indeed, built into  $S_1$ , notice, is an evaluative claim suggesting that, at least on some noteworthy occasions—though not necessarily always—protecting political freedoms is more morally valuable than protecting significant freedoms. Those are what I have labeled *morally loaded cases*. With this in mind, we can re-phrase  $S_2$  as the following claim:

$S_2^*$ . If many of God’s decisions were freedom-problematic decisions, then it is not possible that, on those occasions, God was justified in permitting the relevant evil on account of considerations pertaining to *the moral value of significant freedom*.

In other words,  $S_2^*$  is telling us that we cannot appeal to the moral value of significant freedom to justify God’s failure to protect a political freedom which, on this occasion, had *even more* moral value. Interestingly, however, we can now see that, properly disambiguated, Sterba’s  $S_2^*$  is not the claim that *if  $S_1$  is true, then  $P_3^*$  is false*.  $P_3^*$ , after all, is just a claim about the possible relationship between the amount of evil in our world and the amount of

one kind of morally valuable freedom, namely significant freedom.  $S_2^*$  is not the claim that this relationship does not hold; it is instead the claim that this relationship does not have the normative power to justify God's actions, since other more morally valuable freedoms—political freedoms—must be placed in the balance as well. On this interpretation, that is,  $S_2^*$  is implying that *if  $S_1$  is true, then  $P_2^*$  is false*:

**$P_2^*$ :** It is possible that a world with the amount of significant freedom that we see and the amount of evil that we see is more valuable than worlds with much less evil but much less significant freedom too.

When we take  $S_1$  as a claim about occasions when protecting political freedoms would have been more morally valuable than protecting significant freedoms, we see that worlds with much less evil but much less significant freedom can nonetheless be worlds with *a lot more morally valuable freedom* than worlds with the amount of significant freedom that we see and the amount of evil that we see. Even though Sterba talks as if he is challenging Plantinga's claims about how significant freedom constrains God's powers to actualize various valuable worlds, disambiguating the relevant terms leads us to understand his argument as rather the claim that those constraints, possible as they may be, cannot do the normative work Plantinga needs them to do in the end.<sup>10</sup>

We are now finally in a position to see where Sterba's argument goes wrong:  $S_2^*$  is false. The mistake it makes, in fact, is a common misunderstanding of the mechanics behind the free will defense.

First, notice how Sterba has simply re-labeled something that  $P_2^*$  was already taking into account: namely, the relation between significant freedom and the kind of evil that consists in not being free, on some occasion, from some kind of harm (e.g., assault). Freedom from harm at any time, after all, is a *good*, and the lack of that kind of freedom at any time, of course, is an *evil*. So, when Plantinga makes a positive comparative assessment of our world, given worlds with less evils and less significant freedom, he is already including in that comparison worlds with less significant freedom but more freedom from assault. This is not to say that Plantinga's assessment here is right, but rather to say that Sterba is not identifying anything new in the balance of considerations. What he has done, instead, is simply increase our intuitive sense of what is more valuable than what, as if to ask: how did the free will defender trick us into thinking that my significant freedom to assault you was more morally valuable than the evil that is your lacking the freedom from assault? And the implied answer to this question seems to be: maybe by referring indiscriminately to the lack of the latter freedom as just another non-descript generic "evil".

Maybe. But once we realize that Sterba has merely re-labeled the terms in a paradigmatic comparison that was part of the dialectic all along, we see that there is nothing new in his suggestion, or in the proper reply to it. Indeed, recall David Lewis' (1993, pp. 154–55) description of what God's answer to a prayer from the Gulag would look like if Plantinga's claims were right:

"No, I will not deliver you. For I resolved not to; and I was right so to resolve, for otherwise your fate would not have been in Stalin's hands; and then Stalin's freedom to choose between good and evil would have been less significant."

The implication here seems to be that Plantinga's free will defense depends on, or entails, the claim that the justification for every evil that we see is the comparative moral value of the particular exercise of significant freedom, like Stalin's, that brought it about. If this were not the case, after all, then God could have easily actualized a world with a little less significant freedom and a lot less evil by simply staying Stalin's hand. Lewis' suggestion, in other words, is that Plantinga's (a) global assessment of the value of the different worlds that would ensue from interference or non-interference in a certain case depends on a misguided (b) comparative assessment of the moral values of a particular instance of significant freedom that brought about a particular instance of evil. Sterba is making the same move. He is suggesting that Plantinga's free will defense depends on, or entails, the claim that every *lesser freedom case* is a case where the justification

for allowing someone to not be free from assault was the comparative moral value of someone's significant freedom to assault. If this were not the case, after all, then God could have easily actualized a world with a little less significant freedom and a lot less evil by simply preventing the attack. Like Lewis, Sterba is suggesting that Plantinga's (a) global assessment of the value of the different worlds that would ensue from interference or non-interference in *lesser freedom cases* depends on a misguided (b) comparative assessment of the moral values of a particular instance of significant freedom and a particular instance of evil (lacking a certain kind of freedom).

But Plantinga's extended free will defense does not depend on, and does not entail, the claim that the justification for every evil that we see is the comparative moral value of the particular exercise of significant freedom that brought it about. To join Lewis and Sterba in thinking otherwise is to lose sight of the interconnected and structural nature of the puzzle God is *possibly* confronted with at the point of creation. What the free will defender disputes—and rightly so—is the claim that, *necessarily*, interfering with someone's significant freedom at time  $t$ , and thereby eliminating certain instances of evil, would lead to a better world overall than not interfering. *Possibly*, this is not so. This is not, however, because of a comparative assessment of the moral values of a particular instance of significant freedom and a particular instance of evil. Rather, this is because such interference would have a wide-ranging impact on which *other* significant freedoms and evils exist—by an ever-expanding ripple effect on the situations other individuals would then be in—and because it is *possible* that this impact, given the contingent and independent truth values of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, would produce a world that is much worse overall. Sterba (2019, p. 26) is twice mistaken when he tells us that “Plantinga by appealing simply to the freedom of the wrongdoer alone as a justification, or possible justification, has not achieved this [i.e., provided us with a possible justification for God's non-interference]. Something else would be needed that Plantinga does not provide.” As I have detailed in Section 3, Plantinga makes no such narrow appeal in his free will defense, and he does indeed provide us with the something else that is much needed.

Of course, many wince at attempts to spell out some of these ripple effects with the intension of identifying consequences that justify horrendous evils. Responding to an attempt by Swinburne (1998, p. 245), Laura Ekstrom (2021, p. 50) says:

“I find such comments—that it was “a great good for those who themselves suffered as slaves that their lives were not useless” since “their vulnerability to suffering made possible many free choices”—to be morally repugnant.”

I agree. But what is morally repugnant about them is the moral hubris involved in pretending to be able to even gesture at a collection of consequences that, together, could justify God's permission of something like slavery, coupled with the moral myopia required to believe that the half-baked suggestions one has produced could truly justify such horrendous evil. By contrast, it is not morally repugnant to simply make the point that it is *logically possible* that this world, with all its horrors, is the least bad world compatible with a valuable amount of significant freedom, given the pattern of truth values for the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom God possibly had to work with at the point of creation. To be clear, this is not a claim about what we have most reason to expect would have happened if God had interfered to prevent the many exercises of significant freedom that were responsible for the unspeakable evils constitutive of, and ensuing from, slavery. What the free will defender wants us to see is simply that there is no *logical guarantee* that the possible world that would ensue from some such interference is overall better than the one ensuing from non-interference. In general, God's choice of interfering or not interfering with anyone's evil-producing exercise of significant freedom on any occasion, *possibly*, was a choice between our world (with all its horrors) and a much worse world instead.

If this is right, then  $S_{2^*}$  is false:

$S_{2^*}$ . If many of God's decisions were freedom-problematic decisions, then it is not possible that, on those occasions, God was justified in permitting the relevant evil on account of considerations pertaining to *the moral value of significant freedom*.



To think that this is true is to mistake the fabulously complex global comparison of which of two inevitably ensuing worlds would have more value for the narrow comparison of which of two particular freedoms have more moral value. Sterba at times seems confident in his powers to make the former comparison (see his discussion of the various possible consequences of God preventing the horrendous murder of Matthew Shepard, on pp. 21–24). But apart from making suggestive comparisons between the moral values of particular instances of significant freedom and the particular instances of evil that were brought about by them, Sterba gives us no reason to believe that it is *logically impossible* that interfering as he suggests would not, eventually, given the interconnected branching pattern of truth values of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, deliver us to a much worse world. Sterba’s attempt to provide support for Mackie’s Expanded Key, therefore, falls short.

Perhaps the most important thing to highlight from the considerations above—and I have indeed been trying to highlight it throughout—is modest nature of the epistemic demands made by Plantinga’s claims. As a reply to the expanded logical problem of evil, the expanded free will defense does not require that we have good reasons to believe that “a world with the amount of significant freedom that we see and the amount of evil that we see is more valuable than worlds with much less evil but much less significant freedom too,” or that “God could not have actualized a world with any less evil without also actualizing a world with much less significant freedom.” It does not even require that we have good reasons to believe the theoretical scaffolding behind Plantinga’s claims: libertarianism about individual freedom, Molinism, transworld depravity, etc. In fact, I myself believe that Plantinga’s three central claims, as well as their scaffolding, are all *actually false*. I also believe, in fact, that the amount of evil in our world does indeed give us good reason to doubt the existence of a perfect God. But the expanded free will defense is only insisting that these claims are *possibly true*. And this much I think we must concede. I certainly do not think there is anything new in Sterba that challenges this modest, but of course powerful, defense.

## 5. Conclusions

The free will defense is one of the hallmark achievements of the 20th century analytic philosophy of religion. I am not a theist of any kind, but I believe it nonetheless succeeds in hitting its narrow target: showing that the existence of the perfect God of classical theism is *logically compatible* with the existence of evil, including all the evil that we see. The fact that some of these evils are unacceptable distributions of political freedoms—or ensuing consequences thereof—raises no extra burdens for the success of this traditional argument. But this is not to say that Sterba’s book-long discussion of the difficulties of adequately justifying God’s permission of unacceptable distributions of freedoms fails to advance our understanding of the force of the problem of evil. I want to conclude by briefly explaining how this is so.

The problem of evil is strongest, to my mind, when presented in non-cumulative evidential form (c.f., Oliveira 2020). Since we are epistemically and morally fallible, we can expect to not see the moral justification for any particular instance of evil. This is why particular instances of evil, if skeptical theists are correct, do not give us any evidence whatsoever against the existence of God, and why the collective evidential force of the amount of evil that we see cannot be a function of the accumulated evidential power of each instance. We are not, however, *hopelessly* fallible in our beliefs and morals—at least we cannot consistently think so and still count on the strength of our arguments and moral sense, and cannot consistently think so and still justifiably believe in the goodness of God. Consequently, we can indeed expect to see the moral justification for a very large and varied collection of evils. Although our ability to correctly identify unjustified evil is fallible, our “chance of getting something right increases . . . with the repeated opportunities for that unlikely success” (c.f., Oliveira 2020, p. 327). In this way, the collective evidential force of the amount of evil that we see is non-cumulative: it is not a function

of the accumulated evidential power of each instance, but rather a function of what they become as a collection instead. Importantly, that force increases whenever we increase our awareness and understanding of the difficulties of adequately justifying the ever more varied evils in this world. To *this* project, I think Sterba (2019) has indeed provided a great contribution.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to Sterba (2019, p. 20), the moral content of our moral intuitions is also revealed through the stories that reflect our ideals. As he puts it: “in the world of comic book and cinematic superheroes, much is done to bring about a more just distribution of significant freedoms in society, and we, who also imaginatively live in that world, generally think this is the way it should be.”
- <sup>2</sup> As Sterba (2019, p. 18) puts it: “now my argument is that the libertarian ideal of freedom leads to a right to welfare which, of course, welfare liberals endorse, and that this right to welfare extended to distant peoples and future generations leads to the equality that socialists endorse. Assuming that my argument is correct, it shows how far we are from a morally defensible distribution of significant freedom in most societies across the world, and that this has been true throughout most of human history.”
- <sup>3</sup> Mackie’s argument is too often misconstrued as a *modus tolens* on the existence of the perfect God, premised on the *fact* of evil. See, e.g., Howard-Snyder (2013, p. 20). Aside from the textual evidence presented just above, it pays to recall that Mackie was an error-theorist about morality and did not believe, *as the theist does*, in the existence of *evil*. His argument must therefore be construed as a *reductio* of claims the theist, not Mackie himself, endorses, lest we uncharitably interpret Mackie as basing his rejection of God on the endorsement of a premise he thinks is false. See Flew (1973, pp. 231–32) on the internal nature of the logical problem of evil as well.
- <sup>4</sup> DeRose (1991, p. 501) distinguishes these as “Stage I” and “Stage II” of Plantinga’s attack on the logical problem of evil. Stage II is the free will defense.
- <sup>5</sup> There are of course other versions of the problem of evil. One can ask whether, despite its logical compatibility, it is reasonable to believe that God exists given evil (c.f., Rowe 1979). Or one can ask whether the hypothesis that God exists is more probable than the hypothesis that God does not exist, given the existence of evil (c.f., Draper 1989).
- <sup>6</sup> To *actualize* a world is to make it the case that a possible world is the actual world. This is an important notion for Plantinga for the following reason. Given  $P_1$ , our significant freedom requires that it be genuinely possible that we do what is right and genuinely possible that we do what is wrong. But since there are (contingent) facts about what we would freely do, if put in various counterfactual situations, there are possible worlds—those where we do the opposite of what we would actually do in that situation—that cannot be made actual: to make them actual would require bringing about the situation where I do the opposite of what their actuality requires. Plantinga (1977, p. 44) calls the mistaken belief that God’s omnipotence allows him to actualize any possible world *Leibniz’s lapse*.
- <sup>7</sup> See Flint (1998) for discussion and defense. See Plantinga (1985) for a defense of  $P_3$  that does not presuppose Molinism.
- <sup>8</sup> This is where Plantinga’s (1977, p. 48) beleaguered notion of *transworld depravity* plays a starring role. For versions of the free will defense that avoid reliance on transworld depravity, see Otte (2009) and Pruss (2012)
- <sup>9</sup> For critical discussions of Plantinga’s argument for  $P_3$ , see DeRose (1991), Howard-Snyder and O’Leary-Hawthorne (1998), Otte (2009), Pruss (2012), and Meslar (2015). For critical discussions of  $P_2$ , see Himma (2009) and Ekstrom (2021). For the suggestion that no one would be free if both Molinism and libertarianism were true—thus undermining any free will defense that presupposes both—see Climenhaga and Rubio (2022).
- <sup>10</sup> If Sterba actually intended to issue a challenge to  $P_3^*$ , then I am at a loss for how that challenge could escape the charge of equivocation.

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Article

# Can Heaven Justify Horrendous Moral Evils? A Postmortem Autopsy

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**Abstract:** James Sterba has recently constructed a new and compelling logical problem of evil that rejects Plantinga’s free-will defense and employs the concept of significant freedom and the Pauline Principle to demonstrate an incompatibility between the existence of horrendous evil and the God of classical monotheism. In response, Jerry L. Walls, among others, has claimed that the doctrine of heaven can explain why God is justified in permitting horrendous evils in the world—an argument known as the afterlife theodicy. In this article, I explore this line of defense against Sterba’s logical problem of evil. I suggest that if the afterlife theodicy is to be effective, it must accept non-speciesist, strong universalism; deny or explicate divinely informed prior consent; reject an elective model of forgiveness; discard postmortem libertarian free will; and explain why God values libertarian free will in earthly life but not in the afterlife.

**Keywords:** problem of evil; James Sterba; doctrine of heaven; theodicy; free will

## 1. Introduction

In his book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba offers a novel formulation of the logical problem of evil. This formulation employs the concept of significant freedom and the Pauline Principle to identify a logical incompatibility between the existence of God and the permission of horrendous moral evil (HME). Sterba contends that if God exists, God would act in the manner of a just state, but this consequent does not cohere with the distribution and amount of evil in this world.

Among the many proposed refutations to Sterba’s argument is the afterlife theodicy. The afterlife theodicy attempts to solve the problem of evil by appealing to the doctrine of heaven and denying the Pauline Principle at a divine level. Essentially, it maintains that God compensates for HME by offering humans an infinite blissful state in heaven; therefore, the good reaped in heaven vindicates God of permitting HME. God would, under this account, permit HME and be justified in doing so.

In what follows, I examine how effectively the afterlife theodicy undermines Sterba’s logical problem of evil. Leaving aside the question of whether God should act in the manner of an ideal just state, which I leave for other discussions, I instead attempt to identify the conditions to which the afterlife theodicy must adhere in order to work effectively. To do so, I specify the parameters for an adequate afterlife theodicy, detailing what the theist is committed to when employing the doctrine of heaven to explain away earthly suffering.

As Jerry Walls (2021) recognizes, “we should not fail to bring all of [Christianity’s] resources to the table when we deal with the problem of evil” (*ibid.*, p. 5). Walls is correct to stress that Christians may appeal to doctrine when tackling the problem of evil; yet the elements of doctrine to which theodicians appeal must also be examined for cohesion and reasonableness. In what follows, I argue that there is a potential conflict between non-universalist/weak universalist accounts of heaven and an adequate afterlife theodicy; thus, afterlife theodicians are beholden to a non-speciesist strong universalist account of heaven. Additionally, I aim to show that—to be effective—the afterlife model to which theodicians subscribe must deny postmortem libertarian free will, reject divinely informed

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consent, and adhere to a controversial non-elective model of forgiveness. It is only in combination with non-speciesist strong universalism, non-elective forgiveness, and the free will defense that the afterlife theodicy can hope to overpower the logical problem of evil.

## 2. Sterba's Logical Problem of Evil

Opposing Plantinga's famous free will defense, James Sterba asserts that some moral evils undermine individuals' 'significant freedom', which he defines as "the freedom a just state would want to protect since that would fairly secure each person's fundamental interests" (Sterba 2019, p. 12). According to Sterba, the HME that exists in the world reduces rather than increases the overall significant freedom in the world. If this is the case, he concludes, God has no good reason to permit any HME that undermines significant freedom. In any case, Sterba argues, God's permitting HME is tantamount to committing HME since God could prevent evil with ease.

Sterba employs the analogy of a perfectly just and powerful government to argue that, just as an ideal ruling body would adopt a "policy of limited intervention" (Sterba 2019, p. 62), so would God. According to Sterba, a policy of limited intervention involves the protection of basic freedoms (the 'significant freedom' defined earlier) while allowing the limited freedom necessary for character development and freedom of will. HME such as gratuitous torture would not be permitted in such a state, although less significant evils would be allowed. Sterba takes it as evident that the world does not mirror this model, demonstrating that God cannot exist.

Sterba then evokes what he calls the 'Pauline Principle', one of the conditions of the well-known ethical canon, the Doctrine of Double Effect. Sterba contends that if the Pauline Principle—that we should never do evil to bring about good—holds at the divine level, God would prevent the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Offering several amendments to the principle, Sterba arrives at the definition that it is immoral to purposefully permit HME to attain good or prevent evil.<sup>1</sup> So, the question arises, if God exists, should God intentionally allow horrendous evil caused by immoral actions? Sterba responds in the negative. According to Sterba, even if HME is a necessary means to obtaining greater goods as ends, the latter can never be justified by the former at a divine level. If Sterba is correct, then it is logically impossible that God exists in the face of HME.

As part of his argument, Sterba creates a helpful parallel between superheroes and God. Just as superheroes are obligated to prevent evils by limiting the freedom of villains, God has an obligation to prevent HME from occurring by restricting the freedom of evildoers in our world. He writes, "among superheroes, the idea that they should limit the freedom of would-be villains to protect would-be victims is just taken for granted" (Sterba 2019, p. 20), the general idea being that an all-good and all-powerful God—equivalent to a sort of 'ultra-superhero'—would perform this and more for individuals in this world. Therefore, the world we live in does not match up to the distribution and amount of freedom humans possess. The key point here is that by allowing HME to occur, God is limiting the victims' significant freedom.

Ultimately Sterba proposes three moral principles (that he calls Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs)) to which God would adhere:

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. (Sterba 2019, p. 184)

Employing the principles above as a template for God’s moral nature, Sterba develops a novel logical problem of evil, which can be articulated like this:

1. God exists.
2. If God exists, then God would necessarily adhere to the MEPRs.
3. If God adhered to the MEPRs, then HME would not be permitted by God.
4. HME occurs, which God must permit.

Due to the contradiction between 3 and 4, Sterba concludes that God’s existence is impossible.

Sterba acknowledges that many theodicies appeal to overriding goods to justify God’s permission of HME. Clearly, permitting HME to attain the goods specified in theodicies (free will, character development, heaven, to name a few) illustrates God’s allowance of evil in order to reap some benefit. For Sterba, though, this is logically incompatible with God’s nature.

### 3. The Afterlife Theodicy

Attempts to refute Sterba’s logical problem of evil have taken many different forms. Some philosophers have appealed to skeptical theism in an effort to undermine the idea that humans can understand the complex causal chains that result in HME and argue that HME could have some higher value or meaning that we cannot comprehend. Others have questioned whether classical monotheists are beholden to the Pauline Principle or Sterba’s characterization of God as a sovereign ruler akin to an ideally just state. In this section, I examine one proposed method for overcoming Sterba’s logical problem of evil: the afterlife theodicy. Joining many others who have wielded this eschatological doctrine to fend off various formulations of the problem of evil, Jerry Walls (2021)—a prominent philosopher and theologian—advocates this line of defense against Sterba’s logical problem. Walls argues that there is one particular good that vindicates God from the permission of evil identified by Sterba. Specifically, he believes that the doctrine of heaven offers justification for God’s permission of HME in the world by compensating for it postmortem. Walls’ reasoning can be expressed as follows:

1. If HME exists, God permits it.
2. HME exists.
3. God permits HME (from 1 and 2).
4. God’s permission of HME is justified if the reward (for victims of HME) is great enough.
5. Heaven is a great enough reward to justify God’s permission of HME.
6. God’s permission of HME is justified (from 4 and 5).
7. Hoping for heaven is axiologically demanded (from 5).

It is on premises 4, 5, 6, and 7 that this paper focuses.

Stephen Maitzen calls the afterlife theodicy the “heaven swamps everything” view (Maitzen 2009, p. 123). Tortured for no good reason in life? Heaven will compensate for it. Enduring excruciating pain though morally innocent? Heaven will offer total reparation. The idea is that God is so powerful that God can compensate for any evil suffered in earthly life by providing victims with an unsurpassable, incomparable good that renders all earthly evils suffered retrospectively insignificant. The afterlife theodicy maintains that justice will be achieved (and balance restored) after death because everyone will gain a good so valuable that any HME suffered fades into insignificance. Walls declares, “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” (Walls 2021, p. 1). The afterlife theodicy includes a substantial assertion: no matter what horrendous suffering one endures in earthly life, it will pale in comparison to the benefits of being with God in heaven—so much so that the suffering itself no longer matters retrospectively. The goods of heaven are so immense in scope and scale that they easily trump any amount of horrendous suffering experienced during earthly life.

According to traditional Christian doctrine, then, heaven provides infinite bliss, so the horrendous suffering undergone in earthly life is entirely usurped by eternal joy. I will bear a moment of pain while being injected with a vaccine when it brings me a greater good by protecting me from disease. I will endure swallowing a bitter pill if it will rid me of a painful infection. I will suffer through a challenging work meeting willingly if a three-week vacation awaits afterwards. For the afterlife theodist, none of these analogies can capture the good of heaven, though, since heaven is infinitely good. As Walls states, “God is a good of such overwhelming value that he is incomparable with respect to any finite good, however extraordinary and attractive. Any attempted comparison would utterly fail to compute” (Walls 2021, p. 4). What is particularly interesting about Walls’ version of the afterlife theodicy, though, is that it includes an axiological element. He argues that individuals ought to *hope* that there is an afterlife to restore cosmic justice and that no one has reason to regret their existence. According to this line of argument, “if one is truly concerned for the suffering of innocent persons . . . 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” (ibid., p. 3). If Walls is correct, then the afterlife theodicy not only justifies HME but also leads to a normative claim that we should feel positive axiological sentiments in response to HME.

According to this version of the afterlife theodicy, then, heaven is an overriding good that exonerates God from the offense of permitting HME. The proper response to HME is hope for heaven’s existence. In response to Sterba’s question of whether God should intentionally permit HME, afterlife theodists answer a resounding ‘yes’, objecting to the Pauline Principle as it applies to God and denying Premise 2 of Sterba’s argument as formulated in the previous section.

It is important to mention at this point that there is not one united doctrine of the afterlife within classical monotheism or even within particular Abrahamic religions. Not all Christians, for example, hold the same eschatological beliefs about heaven, hell, and purgatory. With this in mind, I aim to outline precisely what conceptual model of heaven coheres with the afterlife theodicy if the latter is to effectively combat Sterba’s logical problem of evil. In other words, if classical monotheists appeal to the afterlife to overcome Sterba’s logical problem of evil, their afterlife model must conform to certain conditions to work. The following sections examine these conditions. To determine whether the eschatological aspect of classical monotheistic doctrine really does absolve God of permitting HME, I analyze several of Walls’ premises. First, I consider whether hoping for the afterlife in the way Walls suggests is coherent, examining Premise 7 of his argument. Then I take a closer look at Premise 5, considering whether heaven is a great enough good to justify HME. Next, I examine whether God’s permission of HME is justified despite the good of heaven. I then investigate the concepts of consent, postmortem forgiveness, transformation, and reconciliation upon which premises 4 and 6 rest. Finally, I consider a potential inconsistency for the afterlife theodicy based on the value placed on libertarian free will in earthly life and the afterlife.

#### 4. Is Hoping for Heaven Axiologically Demanded?

As previously mentioned, one of the most interesting and groundbreaking assertions Walls makes in his paper is Premise 7, the axiological claim that we ought to, or are even obligated to, feel glad about our earthly existence and hopeful about our postmortem existence. This section will consider the axiological discussion into which Walls enters when he makes claims about the value of our existence and God’s existence. Walls stresses his belief that postulating God’s existence is necessary to explain the horrendous suffering we observe in this world. His point is that we should not only *want* God to exist in the face of HME but that this desire is axiologically *demand*ed. Considering a particularly brutal case of an innocent being tortured, Walls rhetorically questions:

Is it not reasonable 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? (Walls 2021, p. 5)

Walls' point is intuitively compelling, at least at face value. Of course, we should desire that those undeserving of suffering should be compensated for being subjected to injustice (that is, if we cannot achieve the preferable effect of preventing the HME in the first place).

This innovative element of Walls' argument is concerned with what we ought to hope for and desire rather than what actually pertains. The discussion of the axiology of theism, which focuses not on whether God exists but instead whether we should want God to exist, is a fertile one in contemporary philosophy of religion. So, let us examine in more depth the axiological claim that we should want God to exist.

First off, it should be noted (although perhaps stating the obvious) that desiring that some state of affairs obtains is significantly different from demonstrating that this state of affairs actually obtains, or is even reasonable. Even if Walls is correct to say that the existence of God and heaven truly is the best possible state of affairs, and one that we ought to desire, that does not entail that heaven's existence is reasonable or even logically possible. We cannot confuse what is axiologically pleasing with what is logically conceivable and reasonable. Perhaps all humans should hope that God exists and can truly compensate for all suffering. Perhaps I desire that I win the lottery tomorrow. Perhaps I wish that my cat turns into a unicorn. My axiological desires have no bearing on whether the objects of my desires are actualized.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Sterba makes no claims about which worldview we should desire since his argument is concerned with whether God's existence is logically possible, not whether God's existence is desirable.<sup>3</sup> Sterba's position is coherent with desiring that God and heaven exist.

Walls offers a potential way to overcome this first concern by arguing that not only is heavenly compensation (i) axiologically pleasing, but it is also (ii) required for cosmic justice and (iii) rationally warranted.<sup>4</sup> He surmises:

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. (*ibid.*, p. 4)

Let us accept the first arm of Walls' claim for the sake of this argument and instead consider the second arm, that heaven is required for cosmic justice (justice restored on a universal scale).

It is clear that cosmic justice is a fundamental reason why some might desire one afterlife rather than another.

Yet the Christian doctrine of heaven is not the only theological view compatible with cosmic justice. Several philosophers (see Eric Wielenberg 2018, for example) have argued that cosmic justice coheres with worldviews other than classical monotheism. Eschatological models from other belief systems (deism, polytheism, and pantheism, for example) are arguably compatible with cosmic justice as much—if not more—than the Christian model of heaven. Furthermore, although several philosophers have proposed pro-theistic arguments grounded in cosmic justice, Wielenberg (2018) has argued that cosmic justice is actually a pitfall of God's existence and a reason to desire God's non-existence. Even if Wielenberg's argument—which I unfortunately do not have the scope to explore here—fails, it is clear that cosmic justice is compatible with many worldviews, not just Christianity's doctrine of heaven. So, even if the afterlife theodicy cements heaven as compatible with cosmic justice (and I will argue subsequently that only a certain eschatological model



meets the requirements), we cannot assume that it is the best afterlife blueprint for which to hope, providing cosmic justice more effectively than, say, the process of reincarnation fundamental to several Eastern worldviews.

Walls' axiological claim—that we should be grateful for our existence and not regret it—is reminiscent of Yujin Nagasawa's (2018) recent work on the potential problem of evil for atheists. Nagasawa argues that theists and atheists alike tend to be existential optimists, which—specifically for atheists—is incompatible with recognizing the horrendous and undeserved evil that exists in the world. Nagasawa defines existential optimism as that claim that “the world is, overall, a good place and we should be grateful for our existence in it” (Nagasawa 2018, p. 151). Nagasawa poses the question of how an atheist can simultaneously be existentially optimistic and recognize that horrendous evil exists. He concludes that “the problem of evil, or at least the existential problem of systemic evil, provides a reason to give up atheism and a motivation to adopt theism” (ibid., p. 163). For Nagasawa, atheism is not compatible with existential optimism. How can one believe that the world is a good place, and we ought to be grateful to exist while acknowledging the horrendous evil endured by so many creatures?

The problem with Nagasawa's argument, however, is that he fails to distinguish between different types of optimism. As I have argued elsewhere (Lancaster-Thomas 2022), we can differentiate between personal existential optimism, which involves thinking one's own existence is good, and impersonal existential optimism, which consists in thinking that the world is an overall good place. There does not seem to be any logical incoherence in being grateful for *my* existence while simultaneously thinking that the world is not an *overall* good place (or vice versa!). As it applies to the afterlife theodicy, there is no inconsistency in thinking that I am grateful for my own life but not grateful for the state of the world as it is. It is also reasonable to distinguish between being grateful for the entirety of one's existence and being grateful for only certain parts.<sup>5</sup> Consider someone suffering from an excruciatingly painful terminal illness. In this situation, is it not reasonable that the individual might not feel grateful for their current mode of existence and instead desires to quicken their unification with God? That is not to say that they are not grateful for their existence as a whole (the combination of their earthly and postmortem existence viewed holistically), but only that they are not grateful for this current part of life. If a child has a terrible toothache, surely it is justifiable for the child to distinguish between feeling gratitude for their current situation (which they probably do not) and gratitude for the entirety of their existence. If this distinction is significant, then it might not be unreasonable to curse a particularly awful section of one's overall existence, such as being unfairly tortured, while still being appreciative of the entirety of one's existence.

I have contended in this section that (i) hoping for heaven is not enough to realize it—there must also be rational justification for belief in heaven; (ii) worldviews other than Christianity are compatible with cosmic justice; and (iii) one can be grateful for various elements of existence without being obligated to feel grateful for *all* elements of existence. Thus, even if heaven is a reasonable fate to desire, there may be other eschatological models that are equally or more desirable, and desiring heaven is not the same as offering rational argument to determine its logical probability. In the sections that follow, I address in more detail which models of the afterlife best combat the logical problem of evil.

## 5. Is Heaven a Great Enough Reward to Justify God's Permission of Horrendous Moral Evil?

In this section I examine Premise 5 of Walls' argument. To do so, I consider whether heaven truly provides cosmic justice and propose that only one particular model of universalism is compatible with the afterlife theodicy.

One benefit of an all-powerful and all-good being's existence is that an entity of this nature would provide cosmic justice to the highest possible degree. Consequently, to overcome the problem of evil, the afterlife theodicy must give an account of postmortem existence that provides justice to all individuals created by God's hands and to whom

God's love extends. In this subsection, I question whether providing heavenly compensation to an individual is sufficient for cosmic justice. I then contend that for true cosmic justice to be attained, God must necessarily provide every sentient being with postmortem compensation for earthly suffering. I also maintain that there must be a logical necessity between the HME suffered and the ability of the victim to enter heaven.

If consciousness continues after death, one purpose of the afterlife is for individuals to be rewarded for good behavior, recompensed for suffering during life, or punished for previous bad behavior. For many individuals this function of the afterlife is crucial because it implies cosmic justice. Under the doctrine of heaven, if every single individual ends up in the presence of God for eternity, then arguably there is no meaning in the achievements and moral progress we make in earthly life. The reliance on postmortem compensation could also be seen to trivialize the torment undergone by individuals who suffered greatly and undeservingly in life, making earthly suffering superfluous. Consider the following situation to illustrate this line of thinking.

A group of young school children are being supervised by a teacher; an authority figure employed to protect them. The teacher leads the children into a garden overgrown with gympie gympie plants that—at the slightest touch—will sting anyone who comes into contact with them, causing excruciating sensations. The teacher knows that some of the children will inevitably be stung by the plants if she does not intervene and remove them, which (since she is wearing a sting-proof outfit from head to toe) she can accomplish easily and without harm to herself. The teacher observes as the children move toward and brush up against the gympie gympie plants, yet she does nothing to intervene. After several children begin to writhe around in almost unbearable pain, one child asks plaintively why the teacher does not help all the children. The teacher responds that she will take all the children for a big treat after this extremely unpleasant encounter. They will go to a theme park, be given ice cream, have a wonderful experience overall, and all their pain will disappear by that point. Would this appease those suffering children? Does this vindicate the teacher? Intuitively not.

The parable of the field workers, found in Matthew 20, offers a potential theological response to this line of reasoning. It runs as follows. A landowner hires field workers at a specific daily rate yet angers those who began early by paying the latecomers the same wage as those who started toiling at the day's beginning. The landowner responds by reminding the frustrated workers that they agreed to the daily salary when they signed up; their anger is not justified. The allegory demonstrates that God's grace allows all people to receive equal compensation, even though some have struggled more than others. There is nothing to stop God from showing more generosity to individuals who have not undergone as much hardship because God is not beholden to distributive justice.

Yet, there is an essential difference between the frustrated field workers and the people entering heaven: the field workers consented to the process. Contrastingly, the people of this Earth did not agree to the terms of unequal suffering leading to universal salvation. There is no signed contract or verbal agreement from humans agreeing to the terms of universal salvation. Distributive justice should be a feature of God's judicial responsibilities to keep things fair;<sup>6</sup> yet the afterlife theodicy's suffering-compensation model seems to undermine this feature.

Walls—drawing heavily on the work of Marilyn Adams (1999)—suggests that an intimate relationship with God in the afterlife is sufficient and necessary for deep and enduring happiness and contentment, so much so that all earthly suffering is totally swamped. He writes that “an intimate relationship with God is not only the greatest possible good for created beings but also the one essential thing for deep and lasting happiness and satisfaction” (Walls 2021, p. 4). Furthermore, “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” (ibid., p. 4). If this is the case, then evil in life is rendered superfluous in the grand scheme of justice. Heaven provides the highest good, which trumps earthly suffering; it is what

Stephen Maitzen (2009) refers to as a ‘net benefit’. If Walls is right, then it does not matter that some individuals unjustly suffer more than others; cosmic justice can still be achieved in the afterlife.

In order for cosmic justice to pertain in the afterlife, I suggest that there are (at least) two conditions that must be met. First, to ensure that the net benefit is achieved, all individuals who undergo undeserved suffering must necessarily enter heaven. This I refer to as ‘just universalism’. Second, some sort of logically necessary relationship must exist between the HME Person A suffers and the ability of Person A to reach heaven. The suffering that individuals undergo in earthly life must be necessitated by the overriding goods provided in the afterlife. This condition, endorsed by several philosophers (Maitzen 2009; Stump 1990), requires that any suffering (including suffering caused by HME) must not be gratuitous. Let us consider these claims separately, beginning with the claim that all individuals who undergo undeserved suffering will necessarily enter heaven.

Universalism is generally defined as the belief that everyone will be saved after death. As with the afterlife theodicy itself, though, universalism is an umbrella term, and this belief has various strains. What I call ‘weak universalism’ is the claim that every individual has the opportunity to enter heaven after death.<sup>7</sup> Under the weak universalist model (at its most basic level) good people go immediately to heaven after death, whilst evildoers go through a purification process until, when transformed, they may enter heaven to be in God’s presence. What I call ‘strong universalism’ is the claim that every sentient individual God creates will necessarily enter heaven. The version of strong universalism that I will soon describe is also non-speciesist; it does not discount non-human animals from going to heaven. Note that just universalism, weak universalism, and strong universalism are not mutually exclusive. Just universalism has interesting implications for the consideration of to which entities heaven is open, a consideration I will now address.

Whether cosmic justice truly pertains in the afterlife is contingent on which entities end up in heaven. Graves et al. (2017) offer a compelling defense of what they call ‘Animal Universalism’, arguing that if God is all-loving, all-powerful, and perfectly just, God would care about the well-being of all sentient animals. They define Animal Universalism as the view that “all sentient animals will be brought into heaven and remain there for eternity” (Graves et al. 2017, p. 161). In support of it, they propose that “Animal Universalism is the natural outflow of divine love and justice. It is an axiom of contemporary Western Christian theology that God is perfectly loving and just” (ibid., p. 162). Their reasoning is that God would not arbitrarily discriminate against non-human sentient animals, so every sentient creature must be given the chance to enjoy heaven after death. Let us consider a helpful analogy Graves et al. use to illustrate this point:

[C]onsider two all-powerful beings, Jack and Jill. Jill loves all sentient individuals. She cares deeply for their sakes, and is perfectly benevolent toward sentient individuals, both human and non-human, doing whatever she can to make them better off. On the other hand, Jack loves only humans. He cares deeply for their sakes, and is perfectly benevolent toward humans, doing whatever he can to make them better off. However, Jack does not care at all about what happens to animals. He is utterly indifferent to them. Jack never responds to their calls for help, and does not care if they are made worse off, even though he could easily benefit them without sacrificing anything at all. When we reflect on Jill and Jack, we find that one is more loving than the other. Jill’s love appears to be an improvement upon Jack’s love; Jill has a better love than Jack. What this tells us is that perfect love is universal. Perfect love is *omni-sympathetic*, sympathizing with and aiding any individual who has a “sake” that matters to them—any individual who can be subjectively better or worse off. Far from being perfectly loving, Jack’s indifference toward animal welfare appears strongly perverse. This provides evidence for the claim that animal suffering is an appropriate object of care and consideration—in a word, love. Since God’s character—far from

being perverse—is perfectly loving, God loves animals, desiring to promote their well-being. (ibid., p. 169)

Sentient non-human animals undergo extreme suffering not only at the hands of nature but also at the hands of moral agents; therefore, they ought to be provided with reparations. If the afterlife theodicy is to be effective, sentient non-human animals must be compensated for HME too.<sup>8</sup> Suppose Walls (along with Adams (1999) and Stump (1990)) correctly identifies heaven as an unsurpassable good, in all creatures' ultimate interests. In that case, this necessitates all sentient creatures' eschatological journeys to heaven after death<sup>9</sup> Premise 3 of Walls' argument (that heaven is a great enough reward to justify God's permission of HME), is contingent on Animal Universalism being true. Yet accepting Animal Universalism could cause a significant problem for the afterlife theodicy because of its lack of coherence with several elements of the afterlife doctrine, namely the transformation, forgiveness, and reconciliation processes on which the theodicy relies. I will examine these issues in Section 7.<sup>10</sup>

## 6. Is God's Permission of Horrendous Moral Evil Justified Even If the Reward Is Great Enough?

Now let us consider the veracity of Premise 4 (and, accordingly, Premise 6) of the afterlife theodicy. Even if we grant that God permits HME for the overriding good of heaven, libertarian free will, or any other greater good,<sup>11</sup> we can still question whether compensation equals justification. If HME is necessary for the tremendous good that heaven brings, then certainly the compensation could *swamp* the evil experienced in life. But is this enough to fully justify God in permitting HME?

In his critique of the afterlife theodicy, Stephen Maitzen broaches the question of whether compensation necessitates justification, claiming that "even if heaven swamps everything, it doesn't thereby justify everything" (Maitzen 2009, p. 123). In other words, even if individuals are so highly compensated that the compensation overwhelms their earlier suffering, that does not mean their suffering is justified.

Maitzen uses a common example of compensation to push this point home, saying, "my paying you money after harming you may compensate for my harming you, but it doesn't justify my harming you. Only something like the necessity of my harming you in order to prevent your harming me or an innocent third party has a chance of justifying my behavior: some necessary connection must hold between the harm and the benefit" (ibid., p. 110). Maitzen's conclusion echoes Sterba's claim about the policy of limited intervention an all-good God should employ.<sup>12</sup> He argues,

[the afterlife theodicy] is false because compensation paid to an exploited human being somehow becomes justification for the exploitation if the compensation is big enough . . . such reasoning wars with ordinary morality because it conflates compensation and justification, and it may stem from imagining an ecstatic or forgiving state of mind on the part of the blissful: in heaven no one bears grudges, even the most horrific earthly suffering is as nothing compared to infinite bliss, all past wrongs are forgiven. But "are forgiven" does not mean "were justified"; the blissful person's disinclination to dwell on his or her earthly suffering does not imply that a perfect being was justified in permitting the suffering all along. (Maitzen 2009, pp. 122–23)

If Maitzen is correct, then HME is still unjustified even if heaven is the greatest good and fully compensates for it.

It might also be argued that there must be a logically necessary relationship between HME and achieving the ultimate good. This seems to be the only satisfactory answer to the question of why God neither overpowers HME earthly life nor endorses the divine Pauline Principle. Walls, postulating weak universalism, maintains that we ought not to regret our existence since postmortem compensation is available to all:

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. (Walls 2021, p. 8)

Note Walls' acknowledgment that HME is necessary for our existence. This lines up with Stephen Maitzen (2009) and Eleanore Stump's (1990) thoughts on earthly suffering: it must be necessary in order to achieve heaven.

Jeff Jordan's (2004) concept of theodical individualism further highlights this concern. Theodical individualism asserts that God would only permit HME if "the sufferings of any particular person are outweighed by the good which the suffering produces for that person" (2004). Stephen Maitzen (2009) develops the principle to include an exemption: if a person requests to undergo suffering, it is reasonable to think that requested suffering and God's existence are not mutually exclusive. He states that there is "nothing wrong with the idea of God's permitting undeserved suffering that people deliberately choose to endure for, say, the benefit of others without gaining for themselves a net benefit from it" (Maitzen 2009, p. 108). One could consent to suffering for the good of another, for example a mother enduring a painful surgery to donate an organ to her child. Maitzen illustrates his point as follows:

My paying you money after harming you may compensate for my harming you, but it doesn't justify my harming you. Only something like the necessity of my harming you in order to prevent your harming me or an innocent third party has a chance of justifying my behavior: some necessary connection must hold between the harm and the benefit. (ibid., p. 110)

For the afterlife theodicy to hold weight, it must be acknowledged that the suffering undergone in earthly life is necessitated for humans to get the compensation of heaven. Yet this requires a considerable leap of faith, assuming that simply because individuals experience horrendous suffering, the suffering is a necessary condition for heaven. The afterlife theodicy, unless relying on faith alone, must provide a plausible explanation for why Fred and Rose West's innocent victims must be tortured in order to win an entry ticket to heaven. The answer leads back to another common theodicy: the free will defense. Before analyzing which concepts of freedom are compatible with the afterlife theodicy, though, let us take an interlude to examine consent.

Here I develop Maitzen's version of theodical individualism by focusing on what it might mean to "deliberately choose" to endure suffering. I argue that sentient individuals must consent in a very specific way to the process of earthly suffering and postmortem compensation God implements. To do so, I distinguish between different types of consent to assess (i) whether God ought to receive prior informed consent from individuals before permitting them to suffer and (ii) whether, after providing prior informed consent to God, the individual could later reject the terms.

The issue of consent is of particular importance in the realm of applied ethics. The difference between non-voluntary and involuntary actions emerges as a morally significant distinction. Involuntary euthanasia, for example, occurs when the individual euthanized does not consent to the process even though they would be able to provide consent; their wishes are ignored entirely. In cases of non-voluntary euthanasia, contrastingly, the individual euthanized is simply unable to give consent for one reason or another (perhaps, for instance, they are in an unresponsive state), so their wishes are unknown.

One common condition for experiential research to be deemed ethical is for researchers to have obtained prior, informed consent from participants. For similar reasons, involuntary euthanasia is considered morally wrong and non-voluntary euthanasia controversial. Another element of ethical research is that participants can opt out at any time if they

change their minds about consenting. So, ought we to think that God needs to obtain prior informed consent from sentient creatures in order to permit suffering, or—if they somehow can consent in this manner—that they could renege on the deal? Let us look to see whether the consent element of theodical individualism coheres with the afterlife theodicy.

When faced with the question of why God does not acquire informed prior consent for HME, theists may try to avoid the problem of consent by appealing to the impossibility of God receiving consent from every individual before any earthly suffering occurs. Yet, this response seems unsatisfactory. Surely God could acquire consent from an individual to suffer in earthly life while being promised a reward in the afterlife, then God could wipe the memories of these individuals, so they have no knowledge of their consent.<sup>13</sup> This, though, also fails to suffice because another element of ethical research is an opt out clause. If one consents to a procedure without fully understanding how painful it will be, there is often an opt out clause to protect individual freedom. Consider any experimental research that will potentially cause pain to participants. Even after having signed an informed consent form, that individual may still opt out of the research at any time by reneging on their consent. Why should this not be the case with consenting to horrendous suffering? It would be particularly difficult to acquire prior informed consent from an individual before they undergo horrendous suffering because the individual may not truly understand the extent and intensity of said suffering.

The afterlife theodicy may respond that since heaven swamps everything, the good of heaven is one that any rational being *would* consent to; thus, individuals undergoing suffering have indirectly agreed to undergo the suffering. Under this view, God *knows* that people would consent to suffer, so God does not need to acquire prior consent before permitting suffering. Yet this seems to undermine the earthly libertarian free will on which the afterlife theodicy is dependent to explain the permission of HME.

Perhaps God cannot offer consent because this means that anyone aware of the contract before suffering begins might also, knowing that they have the capacity for free will, decide that when faced with suffering, they will do whatever they can—moral or otherwise—to alleviate the suffering. Hungry? I'll steal food. Child growing up in poverty? I'll pillage to reduce their suffering. The sinning will not have a bearing on their ultimate fate because heaven is guaranteed. Awareness of the contract could cause greater evil. To put it bluntly, some individuals might wonder what the point is of being good at all when evil and good alike end up in the same postmortem blissful state.

T. J. Mawson (forthcoming) has recently explored 'Bartianism', a doctrine based on the philosophy of Bart Simpson that employs an attitude of 'sin now, repent later'. Mawson suggests that this could be a reasonable position to hold if God assures that premortem repentance grants any individual access to heaven, no matter what their sin. He states, "there are some sinful actions—possible for at least some of us on at least some occasions—which are such that they would produce greater net antemortem benefit for us than would any non-sinful actions available to us on those occasions" (Mawson, forthcoming). Mawson builds on this idea to argue that if universal forgiveness is on the cards—and individuals have full awareness of the system—then this could encourage more HME because many would adopt the Bartian 'sin now, repent later' canon. For God to be genuinely omnibenevolent, God must forgive everyone for their earthly sins; yet, if strong universalism is true, then the balance seems not fully restored. If we measure the overall suffering that individuals have undergone, those who suffered HME in life still end up at a disadvantage, even if they win big in heaven. This line of thinking has some merit and could help the afterlife theodicy explain why God cannot obtain consent.

Yet some individuals might refuse to consent, giving God (at least) two options: (i) eradicate them from existence<sup>14</sup> or (ii) refuse to let them into heaven. Both options reject strong universalism, which is necessary for a satisfactory afterlife theodicy. Since strong universalism must hold for the afterlife theodicy to be adequate, even Bartians would already know that they could sin now and still get to heaven later.<sup>15</sup>

If the afterlife theodist denies that consent is necessary, it seems to undermine earthly libertarian free will, which is an integral element of the theodicy for explaining why HME pertains. If the afterlife theodist agrees that consent is vital, then she must explain how the consent process works. Even if it is coherent to accept that God does not need consent and that the afterlife does allow for cosmic justice, there is another part of the process that must be examined: the process of forgiveness.

### 7. Is the Forgiveness Process Coherent?

Forgiveness is an integral element of the afterlife theodicy; so, for the afterlife theodist to be successful, she must elucidate a coherent model of forgiveness. Walls, drawing on Christian theology, proposes that perpetrators of moral evil will be morally transformed after death, resulting in an obligation for victims to forgive. Forgiveness and transformation occur because of Christ, Walls contends, since Christ is God and sacrificed his life for all human sin: "He has the right to forgive first and foremost because he is God, the one against whom all sins are ultimately committed" (Walls 2021, p. 5). The first potential concern with this approach stems from the question of why we must forgive simply because Christ does. Walls informs us that "since all of us need forgiveness, and Christ offers forgiveness to all, none of us are in position to withhold forgiveness from others" (*ibid.*, pp. 5–6). This indicates a strange sort of contract between all parties. In order to be forgiven for our sins, we must forgive others for their sins, even if our sins are minor compared to theirs.

Under this version of the afterlife theodicy, which is necessary to retain cosmic justice, none of us can possibly reject forgiving another. Furthermore, salvation is not merely a matter of forgiveness, but also a matter of thorough transformation. In the afterlife, perpetrators of HME can be fully reconciled with their victims and heartily embraced by them. Evildoers will be transformed into good people after death, victims of evil must forgive them accordingly, and forgiven evildoers and their victims will be reconciled in the afterlife.<sup>16</sup>

Viewing forgiveness in this way—as a required or obligated process—stands as controversial because it undermines an 'elective' model of forgiveness. Walls' model of the afterlife indicates at least that humans have an obligation or duty to forgive, at most that humans are coerced to forgive. There are (at least) two difficulties with the forced forgiveness process entailed by the afterlife theodicy. First, the conceptual problem that forgiveness is, by nature, elective. Second, that forced forgiveness seems to conflict with postmortem libertarian free will.<sup>17</sup>

Consider the two best friends, Edmond Dantes and Ferdinand Mondego, well-known characters from Alexander Dumas' classic novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Mondego betrays Dantes, falsely accusing him of treason, leading to Dantes' imprisonment in Château d'If for 14 years. During his imprisonment, Dantes endures HME caused by his ex-friend's betrayal. Now, perhaps the ideal situation is for Dantes to forgive Mondego. Perhaps this exemplifies true moral fortitude. Yet it would be counterintuitive to maintain that Dantes is *required* to forgive Mondego. If Dantes is hypnotized to forgive Mondego, the 'forgiveness' does not appear to be entirely genuine.

Consider a different situation. A friend of Dantes encourages him to forgive Mondego, knowing that it will bring about a morally better state for both parties. While Dantes is years into his unbearably painful prison stay, this friend promises to remove Dantes from his oppressive prison cell, free him, and take him to paradise on the condition that he forgives Mondego. Would we not consider this offer of paradise a form of bribery and the 'forgiveness' mere pretense?

If Dantes decides not to forgive Mondego, perhaps he is not being as virtuous as we (or God) would hope, and perhaps he is doing something morally wrong, but he is not shirking a moral obligation unless a non-elective model of forgiveness is accepted. Lucy Allais (2013) has argued for an elective model of forgiveness, which means that individuals can make a choice to forgive or to withhold forgiveness. What Per-Erik Milam calls 'essentially elective forgiveness' is the claim that "it is necessarily morally and rationally permissible for one

either to forgive or not to forgive an offence” (Milam 2018, p. 572). Under the afterlife theodicy, forgiveness seems to be non-elective, because it is required.

Key to the distinction between elective and non-elective forgiveness is the difference between ‘perfect’ and ‘imperfect’ duties, the former being duties one must perform and the latter being duties over which one has agential discretion. If forgiveness is an imperfect duty, then individuals cannot be coerced into forgiving due to obligation. They have agential discretion. Coerced forgiveness entails that the forgiver could forgive for the wrong reasons (being forced by God or pretending to forgive in order to enter heaven) rather than going through a willful and meaningful process of emotional transfiguration.<sup>18</sup> This concern highlights a potential clash between elective forgiveness and strong universalism. So, either (a) strong universalism is false, and forgiveness is elective or (b) strong universalism is true, and forgiveness is not elective. If the elective account of forgiveness is accepted, then the afterlife theodicy is ineffective (as it relies on strong universalism); therefore, afterlife theodicians must instead adopt a non-elective account of forgiveness.<sup>19</sup>

Let us move on to the condition of transformation for the afterlife theodicy—that all evildoers will necessarily transform before entering heaven. According to the afterlife theodicy, perpetrators of horrendous moral evil will be called to account for their actions, and the balance of good and evil restored, with those who unfairly underwent suffering in their bodily existence being compensated and those who committed HME punished for their evil actions. Walls calls this “ultimate accountability”, and it ensures that “the perpetrators of horrendous evil cannot escape and will be called to account for their actions” (Walls 2021, p. 1). The question then arises, how will the evildoers be called to account?

First of all, let us consider in which way evildoers change in the afterlife, according to Walls. Using the example of a man who committed a HME, Walls explains: “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”.<sup>20</sup> He continues, “he will be the same man numerically of course, but his character, his heart, his feelings etc. will be radically transformed” (ibid., p. 6). There are two relevant considerations here. The first relates to libertarian free will, and the other to personal identity.

This eschatological view denies libertarian free will, specifically the freedom not to transform. If evildoers have not chosen to transform, this process is, in actuality, God forcing transformation.<sup>21</sup> Forced transformation also seems to encounter a personal identity problem. How ought we interpret Walls’ claim that an evildoer is “not the same man” and “his character, his heart, his feelings” will be radically transformed? If the evildoer has been forced to transform into someone else, then God provides rewards in heaven to an individual that is not the same individual who deserves the prize. This transformation process potentially undermines cosmic justice, then, because God rewards an entity different from the entity that underwent or perpetrated suffering.

Generally, within philosophies of forgiveness, it is taken as given that only the wronged victim can forgive. Others may pardon, but true forgiveness can only be provided by the victim of the evil. It ought to be considered too whether all perpetrators would desire forgiveness. Some may feel that since they only repented and transformed non-voluntarily, they ought not be forgiven at all. If all evildoers will necessarily be transformed by God (and there is no other option), then this brings into question whether they are truly deserving of forgiveness.

What can we say about the reconciliation process for which Walls advocates? This claim assumes a particular model of forgiveness that includes the victim not only emotionally moving past a prior moral transgression but also restoring a relationship with the wrongdoer. Walls states,

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. (Walls 2021, p. 2)



Walls seems to take as given that reconciliation necessarily follows from forgiveness. Certainly, some models of forgiveness recognize the natural consequence of reconciliation after forgiveness has been granted, but several philosophers have suggested that reconciliation is not always an appropriate aftereffect of forgiveness. Reconciliation can even be morally unwise because doing so might expose one to additional psychological damage (Murphy and Hampton 1988). Perhaps reconciliation, like forgiveness, has an elective element too. If this is the case, then forced reconciliation is not genuine reconciliation. Walls argues that all sins are ultimately committed against Christ, but to say that the direct victims of evil-doing completely relinquish the freedom to withhold forgiveness, refuse transformation, and reject reconciliation entails an elimination of postmortem libertarian free will.

In response to this line of reasoning, I suspect that the afterlife theodist might evoke the vast conceptual gulf between humans and God, claiming that we are so deeply inferior to God that we are ignorant about what is best for us. Perhaps that is true, but that does not undermine the conclusion that forced forgiveness, transformation, and reconciliation denies libertarian free will and necessitates a non-elective model of forgiveness.

Finally, it should be mentioned that sentient non-human animals are frequently the victims of HME, but they arguably do not have the mental capacity to transform, forgive, and reconcile.<sup>22</sup> Can a mink forgive a human who keeps it in harsh, factory-farm conditions only to skin it for a fur coat? Can a cat forgive the evildoer who burned it alive?<sup>23</sup> If not, then God must allow the mink and cat to enter heaven, despite a lack of capacity for forgiveness. If animals are able to enter heaven without undergoing these processes, then why should not humans? If a mink or a cat can be with God without undergoing the forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation processes, why not a human? If the answer is solely 'free will', then why does free will lose its value in the afterlife?

## 8. A Consideration of Libertarian Free Will

One of the most common ways the theodist justify God's permission of HME involves appealing to free will. Walls, for example, observes the following:

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. (Walls 2021, p. 1)

Several concerns emerge out of this line of reasoning. First, it means that the afterlife theodicy is not individually sufficient to overcome the problem of evil; it works only in combination with the free will defense. This may not be a significant problem for Christian afterlife theodists, who accept the free will defense too; yet it does entail that the afterlife theodist must show that the free will defense—in addition to the afterlife theodicy—is coherent.

Second, the afterlife theodist must explain why total freedom is given in earthly life, rather than a more limited freedom. Citing the example of David Rothenberg—who was brutally tortured by his father after the latter lost the former in a custody dispute—to illustrate this problem with the afterlife theodicy, Maitzen states, "if you can easily and at no risk to yourself prevent the total immolation of a small boy who is about to be set on fire by his abusive father, you ought to prevent it" (Maitzen 2009, p. 108). Sterba's argument highlights a similar quandary concerning God's moral nature. Surely God ought to prevent HME, even if it means limiting the freedom of David's father.

Interestingly, Sterba's own argument, relying partially on the concepts of significant freedom and partial freedom, could provide the theodist with effective ammunition against this critique. Recall Sterba's proposition that God would allow significant freedom but not complete freedom in earthly life. If postmortem freedom follows the same model,

then perhaps humans have some level of freedom in the afterlife but not enough to condemn them to eternal suffering. This does impose another condition of the afterlife theodicy, though: it must reject postmortem libertarian free will despite necessitating it in earthly life.

This odd claim leads to the third concern. It is not clear why unlimited free will (rather than the significant free will and limited intervention that Sterba considers) is of such value in earthly life as to permit HME, but not so valuable in the afterlife. If God limits postmortem libertarian freedom (forcing individuals to forgive, transform, and reconcile) then why would God value libertarian freedom so much in *earthly* life? The theodicy needs to explain the asymmetry here. She must offer a reasonable account of why we ought not to view human's existence, both in earthly and postmortem life, holistically. If, as the afterlife theodicy has argued, HME suffered in earthly life is fully swamped by goods in the afterlife, then why is earthly freedom not fully swamped by the lack of freedom God permits after death? Why view the sum of good and evil an individual experiences holistically—as Walls suggests we should—but not view the capacity for freedom in a similar way? The crux of the argument is this:

1. If libertarian freedom in earthly life is granted by God and necessitates HME, then significant freedom in earthly life must be of great value.
2. Libertarian freedom in earthly life is granted by God and necessitates HME.
3. Libertarian freedom in earthly life is of great value.
4. If libertarian freedom is of great value in earthly life, it must also be of great value in the afterlife.
5. Therefore, libertarian freedom must be of great value in the afterlife.
6. If God forces forgiveness, transformation, and reconciliation in the afterlife, libertarian freedom is not of great value in the afterlife.
7. God forces forgiveness, transformation, and reconciliation in the afterlife.
8. Libertarian freedom is not of great value in the afterlife.

There is a clear contradiction between Premise 5 and Premise 8. The afterlife theodicy must deny one of the above premises in order for her defense to be effective. For the doctrine of heaven to be an adequate challenge to Sterba's problem of evil, there must be an explanation for why God values libertarian freedom so highly in life that God is willing to permit HME yet does not place a similar value on libertarian freedom in the afterlife. If libertarian freedom is so important in earthly life, why does it not hold the same status postmortem?

## 9. Conclusions

James Sterba's logical problem of evil maintains that God should employ a policy of limited intervention and not permit horrendous moral evil to bring about goods. In response, the afterlife theodicy proclaims that God gives victims of horrendous moral evil compensation in the form of everlasting heaven. I have argued that in order to be effective, the afterlife theodicy must adhere to certain conditions. Explicitly, it must assume a non-elective account of forgiveness; adopt a non-speciesist, strong universalist position; reject postmortem libertarian free will by forcing forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation; and deny individuals informed prior consent and an opt out clause for suffering. If the classical monotheist adopts the afterlife theodicy to overcome Sterba's logical problem of evil, she must be cognizant of and specific about the version of the afterlife she endorses.<sup>24</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sterba does concede that there are exceptions to the Pauline Principle. There may be cases in which permitting HME to befall innocents is justifiable as a means to preventing additional HME to other innocents; however, these exceptions do not hold at the divine level because God is all-powerful.

- 2 Although it is outside the scope of this article, the question of whether the object of our desires must be logically possible (referred to as the ‘counterpossible problem’) is an interesting one. See Joshua Mugg (2016) for a fascinating discussion of the issue.
- 3 This point is reminiscent of one main critique to Kant’s moral argument for the existence of God. Kant argued that all-good God must exist to ensure cosmic justice, but many accuse Kant of begging the question. Even if the God of classical monotheism is necessary for cosmic justice (and I argue to the contrary), this does not necessitate God’s existence unless one has proven that cosmic justice does indeed exist. In Walls’ argument, just like Kant’s, heaven is the summum bonum (ultimate good).
- 4 The third arm of Walls’ claim, that heaven is rationally warranted, can also be questioned. This is an endeavor I leave for subsequent sections.
- 5 An anonymous reviewer raises the interesting point that this approach assumes that the common good and individual good are distinct. It maintains that what is good for me personally might not be good for everyone, and vice versa. Of course, the good within my life affects the overall goodness in the world, but I do think that the distinction between personal goodness and overall goodness is significant.
- 6 One potential response to this line of argument is that the victims of HME might themselves give informed consent to God to permit their suffering, knowing that it is the only route to the ultimate good of heaven.
- 7 This is the type of universalism Walls endorses, stating, “all persons have not only a fair, but a full opportunity to freely receive the eternal life for which all persons were created” (Walls 2021, p. 8).
- 8 Elsewhere, Walls has argued that “God would not give some persons many opportunities to repent and receive [God’s] grace while giving others only minimal opportunities, or even none at all” (Walls 2002, p. 67). In line with this thinking, then, it seems God would extend the same grace to non-human sentient animals.
- 9 T.J Mawson, in a brief footnote of his discussion of theological individualism, which I will examine a little later, seems to support Animal Universalism when he muses, “I presume that any Martians who, whilst not human are significantly similar to us in sentience, freedom, moral worth, and so on would, by Theodical Individualism, be exempt from suffering of this sort too. The same may not be true for non-human animals such as dogs” (Mawson 2011, p. 142).
- 10 As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, we cannot ignore the relationship between the afterlife and earthly life when discussing the effectiveness of the afterlife theodicy. The metaphysical and ontological questions about the nature of the afterlife and existence in the afterlife will have a direct bearing on the outcome of this inquiry. Although I do not have the scope to examine the array of options within Christian eschatological theology, I do acknowledge that the success of the theodicy hinges on this relationship too.
- 11 Libertarian (or contra causal) free will refers to having the ability to do otherwise in a situation but choosing not to.
- 12 One response the afterlife theodicy might try involves maintaining that earthly existence is a necessary condition for free will and character development; therefore, individuals must undergo incarnate existence before being rewarded with the ultimate good. Yet, this seems to be incompatible with forced transformation. If God overrides libertarian free will to coerce transformation in order to bring about strong universalism, then how can incarnate existence be necessary? The doctrine of incarnation might also be employed to argue that existence in human form has an essential purpose; otherwise, God would not incarnate in the form of Christ to offer salvation to humankind. This response, though, begs the question. It assumes that there is a purpose for bodily existence simply because God must have a good reason to do it. For those not bound to this theological claim, there is no reason to accept the doctrine.
- 13 It is difficult to conceive how young children and sentient non-human animals could give informed consent.
- 14 We might also suppose that at least some individuals would not consent at all. Individuals who, like David Benatar (2006, 2015), argue that nonexistence is preferable to existence.
- 15 This process also seems to be asymmetrical. Why not have bliss first and then suffering? Indeed at least the individual should be allowed to decide upon this. If consent is to be truly informed, the nature of the process must be elucidated, conveyed, and understood by the consenting party. God must reveal the true nature of reality to individuals and explain that universalism is true. Individuals should then have the option to deny consent and either (i) not exist in the first place or (ii) be allowed to opt out at any time.
- 16 If God is willing to force transformation, forgiveness, and reconciliation postmortem, why wouldn’t God do this in earthly life? The tipping point of death seems arbitrary.
- 17 I am by no means arguing that forgiveness itself is morally bad. In fact, forgiveness is likely a good process to undergo. Yet, moral permissibility is distinct from moral obligation.
- 18 Walls also assumes what is known as a ‘thick’ concept of forgiveness in which forgiveness is always morally good. In contrast, a ‘thin’ concept of forgiveness asserts that forgiveness is only morally good if certain conditions pertain (if the wrongdoer feels no remorse for their immoral action, for example, or if the forgiveness obtains for inadequate reasons). Both Richard Swinburne (1989) and Jeffrie Murphy (2003) argue that in the case of horrendous moral evil, forgiveness can actually be *detrimental* if the wrongdoer has not sufficiently repented.
- 19 The afterlife theodicy must also subscribe to what Garrard and McNaughton (2003) call ‘unconditional forgiveness’, which is when forgiveness is not contingent upon the evildoer doing anything whatsoever to repent or atone.

- 20 At this point it is important to distinguish between natural human ability and divine grace. Christian doctrine establishes that victims of injustice may not have the natural ability to forgive; rather, this power is conveyed by God to humans. Combined with the theological notion that humans are naturally oriented toward God, the afterlife theologian may speculate that it is necessary for God to ‘step in’ and make happen what humans alone cannot.
- 21 Note that universal transformation must occur for strong universalism to pertain.
- 22 Although I do not have the scope to fully explore this claim here, fascinating research has been conducted on to what extent different non-human animal species are capable of forgiveness and reconciliation (see Walters et al. (2020) and Cordoni and Norscia (2014) for example).
- 23 Of course, it is questionable whether non-human animals have free will at all.
- 24 I would like to thank five anonymous reviews for providing thought-provoking and constructive feedback to an earlier version of this paper. Considerations of space entail that I have not been able to explore all of the exciting avenues of thought down which their feedback directed me.

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# Isaac Qatraya and the Logical Problem of Evil

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**Abstract:** Sterba has recently produced a searching and significant version of the argument from evil. Here, I set out aspects of the view of God, suffering, and the afterlife articulated by Isaac Qatraya (also known as Isaac of Nineveh and Isaac the Syrian), and argue both that Isaac's view is not undermined by this version of the argument from evil, and that it is not subject to at least some of the objections Sterba raises to soul-making or saint-making theodicies. I end with some remarks on the relevance of the discussion to 'sceptical theist' approaches to the problem of evil.

**Keywords:** Isaac Qatraya; Isaac of Nineveh; Isaac the Syrian; problem of evil; problem of suffering; soul-making; saint-making; theodicy; sceptical theism

## 1. Sterba's Argument from Evil

Sterba's (2019) argument from evil ranks amongst those of Mackie (1955), Draper (1989), Rowe (1979, 1991, 1996) and Tooley (Plantinga and Tooley 2008; Tooley 2012, 2015) as one of the most searching and significant formulations of the argument since the mid twentieth-century. Like Mackie—but unlike Draper, Rowe and Tooley—Sterba's presents a version of the *logical* argument from evil, so-called because it aims to show that the claim that there is evil, or the claim that specific kinds or distributions of evil, is *incompatible* with the claim that God exists. Evidential arguments from evil—so-called because they aim to demonstrate that the existence of evil, or the specific kinds and distributions of evil we find in our world, should *decrease our rational credence* that God exists—attempt to hold onto two ideas: (i) that it is *possible* that God has morally sufficient reasons to permit the kind of evils we see in this world, but (ii) that it is probable that God does not have morally sufficient reasons to permit the kind of evils we see in this world. Elsewhere (Collin 2020), I have criticised Tooley's sophisticated development of the evidential argument from evil on the grounds that one could only be warranted in holding the suppositions Tooley uses to motivate (ii) if one was already warranted in holding that there is no God. My suspicion was that the problem pointed to a more general problem with any attempt to affirm both (i) and (ii), and I recommended a different form of argument, one that, instead of affirming (i) and (ii), attempted to establish (i\*) that it is probable that: it is not possible that God has morally sufficient reasons to permit the kinds of evils we see in this world. The way to do this, I suggested, would be to defend some substantive moral claims entailing that some actual *prima facie* evils would not be permissible by God under any circumstances whatsoever. One could then run the following kind of argument:

1. There are no circumstances whatsoever under which it would be permissible for a morally perfect and omnipotent being to allow X.
2. If there are no circumstances whatsoever under which it would be permissible for a morally perfect and omnipotent being to allow X then, if X took place, no morally perfect and omnipotent being existed when X took place.
3. If X took place, no morally perfect and omnipotent being existed when X took place. (1, 2, MP)
4. X took place.
5. No morally perfect and omnipotent being existed when X took place. (3, 4, MP)

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This is more or less the route taken by Sterba. Sterba's treatment of the topic is wide-ranging and multifaceted, and relates to a large range of issues raised in the recent literature (a few of which we will pick up on below). However, the cruxes of his argument from evil are three Moral Evil Prevention Requirements:

**Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 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.<sup>1</sup> (Sterba 2019, p. 126)

**Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 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)

**Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 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).

With these in hand, Sterba formulates a logical argument from evil:

1. If there is a God (understood as all-good and all-powerful) then necessarily God would be adhering to MEPRI-MEPRIII.
2. If God were adhering to MEPRI-MEPRIII, then necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not obtain.
3. Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain.
4. Therefore, it is not the case that there is a God. (modified from Sterba (2019, chp. 9))

## 2. Moral Principles and Cosmic Outlooks

Sterba's version of the argument from evil depends on being able to transmit warrant<sup>2</sup> from MEPRI-MEPRIII to the claim that there is no God (understood as all-good and all-powerful). If the warrant does *not* flow in this direction, then the argument could not undermine warrant for the claim that God exists, even if could demonstrate, in virtue of the deductive validity of the argument, that the claim that God exists is *incompatible* with MEPRI-MEPRIII. One could perhaps be warranted in holding both MEPRI-MEPRIII and the claim that God does not exist, but one would not be warranted in holding the claim that God does not exist *because* one is warranted in holding MEPRI-MEPRIII. The argument, in that case, would not be *transmissive*: one could not become rationally committed to the conclusion *by* gaining warrant for the premises.<sup>3</sup>

One way to respond to the argument then would be to attack MEPRI-MEPRIII—to provide arguments for their falsehood from premises that are acceptable to all concerned parties—or to attack the claim that God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII—to provide arguments for its falsehood from premises that are acceptable to all concerned parties. However, with the foregoing in mind, another way of responding to the argument would be to present a theological system or theistic cosmic outlook<sup>4</sup> according to which either MEPRI-MEPRIII are false, or according to which God does not violate MEPRI-MEPRIII. Whether one has warrant for taking that theological system or cosmic outlook to obtain would, of course, be a substantive question in its own right. However, so long as warrant for holding both that MEPRI-MEPRIII are true and that God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII, *depends* on having a warrant for a cosmic outlook according to which MEPRI-MEPRIII are true and according to which God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII, then it would be impossible to appeal to MEPRI-MEPRIII and the claim that God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII in order to *undermine* entitlement to a theistic cosmic outlook in which either MEPRI-MEPRIII are false or God does not

violate MEPRI-MEPRIII. One would not, that is, be able to *transmit* warrant from MEPRI-MEPRIII to the conclusion that this theistic cosmic outlook is false, because warrant for the premises (if obtainable) would come *via* warrant for the conclusion. A theistic cosmic outlook like that would be immune to this kind of argument from evil.

Why would warrant for moral premises such as MEPRI-MEPRII depend on warrant for one's cosmic outlook? How one ought to treat a creature, I take it, depends on substantive facts about what kind of thing that creature is, what is constitutive of flourishing for that creature, under what conditions those things constitutive of its flourishing can be actualised, and so on. It is good for your goldfish that it be kept submerged in water, but not so your Pomeranian. Facts about what is good for a creature feature in *explanations* of why we *ought* to treat that creature thus and so, and, similarly, why we are obliged to *refrain* from treating that creature in other ways. It is *because* it is good for your goldfish that it be kept submerged in water that you *ought* to keep it submerged in water, and it is *because* the same treatment is bad for your Pomeranian that you *ought not* so to treat it. For this reason, substantive moral knowledge—the sort of knowledge required to know how one ought to treat a specific creature—I take it, is not gained a priori. One cannot *know* how one ought to treat some creature, without knowing what is constitutive of flourishing for that creature, and knowing under what conditions those things constitutive of its flourishing can be actualised.

This has immediate upshots for any argument from evil that appeals to substantive moral premises regarding how God ought to treat human agents. For one thing, these moral premises are not knowable a priori. We cannot gain warrant for moral premises a priori, in order to transmit that warrant to the conclusion the God does not exist. For another thing, neither are these moral premises epistemically more fundamental than claims about what is constitutive of flourishing for those human agents, or claims about the conditions under which human flourishing is to be achieved. Things, in fact, are the other way around. We must be warranted in taking human agents to be the sorts of creatures for whom such and such conditions are constitutive of flourishing, and warranted in regarding such and such conditions as necessary for that flourishing, *in order to be* warranted in holding claims about how God ought to treat human agents. However, what one takes *ultimate* human flourishing to consist in—or whether one thinks there *is* such a thing as ultimate human flourishing—and what one takes to be the means by which ultimate human flourishing can be obtained—or whether one takes there to be *any* such means—depends on one's cosmic outlook. The Vedantin, the Quinian naturalist, the Sufi and so on, all have very different conceptions of the possibilities concerning human flourishing, what the highest—and, for that matter, the more mundane—kinds of human flourishing are, and how they can be achieved. For an argument from evil to *defeat* entitlement to some theistic cosmic outlook by appealing to substantive moral premises then—for the argument to provide some *non-circular* objection to that theistic cosmic outlook—it will have to appeal to moral premises that are true *according to that theistic cosmic outlook*.

### 3. Isaac Qatraya

Keeping all this in mind, I will trace out something of the cosmic outlook of the seventh-century ascetic Isaac Qatraya (c.613–c.700). Isaac is often known by the names 'Isaac of Nineveh' or 'Isaac the Syrian', but he originated from Beth Qatraye, a region encompassing the north east coast of the Arabian peninsula, and spent the end of his life living as a monastic in Rabban Shabur, Iran. Today, he is venerated as a saint by the Eastern Orthodox Church, as well as by Miaphysite and Nestorian churches. The work of Isaac Qatraya, admittedly, is not exactly a leitmotiv of contemporary philosophy of religion. This neglect is not particularly surprising; only relatively recently have translations of Isaac's writings been widely available. It is no less regrettable for that. Though Isaac was not systematic with respect to literary style—his writing is aphoristic—his thought exhibits a unity and coherence that makes it of considerable philosophical interest. His outlook, though distinctive, has important similarities with those of Irenaeus of Smyrna



(c. 130–c. 202), Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–395), and Maximus the Confessor (c.580–662).<sup>5</sup> It also offers a counterpoint to the mighty dead of the Western canon; Isaac treats many of the same philosophical issues as Augustine, Aquinas, Scotus—and more recent thinkers whose thought has been shaped (albeit sometimes unwittingly) by them—but from a different perspective, employing different arguments, methods and conceptual frameworks. Neglecting Isaac, and the tradition of thought he belongs to, comes with epistemic costs; there is danger both of acquiring a distorted or shrunken view of the philosophical terrain, and of disregarding some of the conceptual tools that could help us navigate it. This is true when it comes to the argument from evil, no less than other areas of the philosophy of religion, because Isaac articulates a position that avoids at least some of the objections Sterba raises to more familiar positions. In particular, he articulates a position according to which MEPRI-MEPRIII are either not true, or are not violated by God. One cannot appeal then to MEPRI-MEPRIII to produce a non-question-begging argument against it.

Isaac, like many Christian thinkers, takes it that, out of suffering, virtue can be educated.<sup>6</sup> The theme is familiar enough, both in philosophical and religious literature, but also through reflection on one's own life: through trials, one can develop virtues. That is not to say that one always or inevitably responds in this way to suffering. It is possible too, to respond to suffering in a way that warps or truncates one's moral character. However, there are also ennobling responses to hardship, grief, wrongdoing, and the whole gamut of afflictions to which people are subject, responses that are constitutive of a virtuous life. There are relatively mundane (though not unimportant) examples, both in reality and fiction—Pierre Bezukhov's journey out of aimless dissolution, as a result of enduring the hardships of being a prisoner of war of the Napoleonic army, is a convincingly developed literary example. There are, too, wholly extraordinary ones—the acts of forgiveness, sacrifice, enemy-love, and so on, constitutive of a truly saintly character.

Isaac sees humility as playing a central role in the virtuous life, as enabling the development of other virtues. 'What salt is for any food', says Isaac, 'humility is for every virtue' (I 69 (338)<sup>7</sup>). Chief among the virtues is 'to be made perfect in love', that is for one to treat others with love regardless of how poorly they have treated oneself:<sup>8</sup>

such a person's soul gladly draws near to a luminous love of humanity, without distinguishing [between sinners and righteous]; he is never overcome by the weakness to be found in people, nor is he perturbed. He is just as the blessed Apostles were as well: people who in the midst of all the bad things they endured from the others were nonetheless utterly incapable of hating them or of being fed up with showing love for them. This was manifested in actual deed, for after all the other things they accepted even death so that these people might be retrieved. These were men who only a little bit earlier had begged Christ that fire might descend from heaven upon the Samaritans just because they had not received them into their village! But once they had received the gift and tasted the love of God, they were made perfect in love even for wicked men: enduring all kinds of evils in order to retrieve them, they could not possibly hate them. (II 10 (36))

Given these axiological views, it is no surprise that being subject to evil or suffering should be considered an opportunity to grow in virtue. To be laid low, in any way, is to be given a chance to advance in humility. To be maltreated is to have an opportunity to respond in a way constitutive of a character of 'luminous love of humanity'—the character that Isaac sees as the highest peak of human goodness. So there are, for Isaac, salutary effects of trials and suffering, at least when one responds to those trials in such a way as to develop humility, or to act lovingly, even (in fact especially) to those who have wronged or harmed one. This is the path to moral perfection:

The mind indeed with a little study of the Scriptures and a little labor in fasting and stillness forgets its formal musing and is made pure, in that it becomes free from alien habits. It is also easily defiled. The heart, however, is purified with great sufferings and by being deprived of all mingling with the world, together

with complete mortification in everything. When it has been purified, however, its purity is not defiled by contact with inconsequential things.<sup>9</sup> (OAL 3/11 (50))

Though we do not seek these out, if one falls into adversity, even torment, this should be seized as the means by which one can grow in goodness. With regards to trials of the body, one should:

make ready with all your strength and swim in them with every limb and muscle. Indeed apart from them it is not possible for you to draw near to God, for within them lies divine rest. (OAL 3/47 (56))

By growing in virtue, we ready ourselves for communion with God. This is to the good, for in the afterlife, we will experience God in a far fuller, more direct and unmediated way than is available in this life:

In the life beyond, indeed, we will receive the whole truth concerning God the creator – not about His Nature but about the order of His majesty, and of His divine glory and His great love for us. There, all the veils and titles and forms of the Economy, will be taken away from before the minds there, we will no longer receive His gifts in the name of our petition, nor the grace of knowledge in a measured way. (III 3/35 (309))

How one experiences the unveiled glory of God depends on her own character. One's measure of the beatitudes of the afterlife—the extent to which the afterlife is an experience of exaltation, bliss, joyfulness—depends on the measure of one's virtue:

In the future age . . . this order of things will be abolished. For then one will not receive from another the revelation of God's glory to the gladness and joy of his soul; but to each by himself the Master will give according to the measure of his excellence and his worthiness (I 28 (140)).

The heavenly afterlife then is not received in a uniform way. There is not some threshold of goodness beyond which persons are deemed worthy—or not too unworthy—to be uniformly gifted the goods of heaven. God, in fact, gives everyone the best they are capable of receiving. (For Isaac, to regard God as doing anything less is to underestimate the perfect goodness and mercy of God.) Instead, one's own goodness is what makes one so much as capable of receiving the beatitudes of the closer presence of God. The same sunlight both melts ice and hardens clay. What differs in the two cases is not the sunlight, but the ice and the clay. Their different outcomes—their different reactions to the sun—is to be explained by their different physical substructures. Analogously, how we will receive God in the afterlife, how we will experience the closer presence of God, has not to do with God's differential treatment of us as such, but by our differential reception of the same 'treatment'. Harmonious union with God requires sharing the perfect will of God, and so willing to bring about God's perfectly loving and merciful ends. Only to the extent that one's character is conformed to the perfect goodness of God, can one experience as bliss the close presence of God:

The Saviour calls the 'many mansions' of his Father's house the noetic levels of those who dwell in that land, that is, the distinctions of the gifts and the spiritual degrees which they noetically take delight in, as well as the diversity of the ranks of the gifts. But by this he did not mean that each person yonder will be confined in his existence by a separate spatial dwelling and by the manifest, distinguishing mark of the diverse placement of each man's abode. Rather, it resembles how each one of us derives a unique benefit from this visible sun though a single enjoyment of it common to all, each according to the clarity of his eyesight and the ability of his pupils to contain the sun's constant effusion of light. . . . In the same manner, those who at the appointed time will be deemed worthy of that realm will dwell in one abode which will not be divided into a multitude of separate parts. And according to the rank of his discipline each man draws

delight for himself from the one noetic Sun in one air, one place, one dwelling, one vision, and one outward appearance. (I 6 (56))

Moreover, what of hell? Those whose character is contorted by vice will experience the close presence of God as a torment:

I also maintain that those who are punished in gehenna are scourged by the scourge of love. Nay, what is so bitter and vehement as the torment of love? I mean that those who have become conscious that they have sinned against love suffer greater torment from this than from any fear of punishment. For the sorrow caused in the heart by sin against love is more poignant than any torment. It would be improper for a man to think that sinners in gehenna are deprived of the love of God. Love . . . is given to all. But the power of love works in two ways: it torments sinners, even as happens here when a friend suffers from a friend; but it becomes a source of joy for those who have observed its duties. Thus I say that this is the torment of gehenna: bitter regret. But love inebriates the souls of the sons of heaven by its delectability. (I 28 (141)).

However, this is not—at least not merely—retributive punishment; the ultimate purpose, and endpoint, of ‘being chastened by the goading of [God’s] love’ (III 6/62 (342)) is redemptive:

God chastises with love, not for the sake of revenge—far be it!—but in seeking to make whole his image. And he does not harbour wrath until such time as correction is no longer possible, for he does not seek vengeance for himself. This is the aim of love. Love’s chastisement is for correction, but does not aim at retribution. . . . The man who chooses to consider God as avenger, presuming that in this manner he bears witness to His justice, the same accuses Him of being bereft of goodness. Far be it that vengeance could ever be found in that Fountain of love and Ocean brimming with goodness!<sup>10</sup> (I 48 (230))

Because the close presence of God is both corrective and experienced by all, all will, ultimately, be morally transformed so that they will experience God as a joy rather than a torment. Isaac endorses Apocatastasis: the view that there is, for all, (eventual) universal salvation, both from moral corruption and from suffering:

“The union of Christ in the divinity has indicated to us the mystery of the unity of all in Christ.” This is the mystery: that all creation *by means of one*, has been brought near to God in a mystery. Then it is transmitted to all. Thus all is united in Him as the members of a body; He however is the head of all. This action was performed for all of creation. There will, indeed, be a time when no part will fall short of the whole. For it is not just a matter of this great spiritual intelligence being transmitted only partially, but He will do something greater, once He has made <this> manifest and has indicated it here below.<sup>11</sup> (III 5/10 (322-3))

Isaac also endorses deification or *theosis*—the idea that one can, in some ways and in some senses, participate in God’s divinity:

O immeasurable love of God for His work <of creation>! Let us look at this mystery with wordless insight so as to know that He has united creation to His Essence, not because He needed to but to draw creation to Him that it might share in His riches, so as to give it what is His and to make known to it the eternal goodness of His Nature. He has conferred on it the magnificence and the glory of His divinity in order that instead of the invisible God, visible creation might be called “God” and in place of what is uncreated and above time, God crowned with the name of the Trinity the creature and what is subject to a beginning. On the work of His creation, in honor of its sacred character, He has set the glorious name which even the mouths of the angels are not pure enough to utter. (III 5/14 (324))

This kind of union, both with God and with other persons, is in fact the purpose of every human life. It is also the apotheosis of human flourishing: the ultimate source of value, the greatest good available to human beings, involving not only moral excellence and nobility, but also eternal beatitude or happiness, and freedom from anxiety, disappointment, pain—indeed all forms of mental or physical suffering. It is in theosis, and only in theosis, that moral excellence and unsurpassable happiness are ultimately united.

We have, in Isaac, a cosmic outlook according to which there is a non-contingent relationship between suffering, virtue, and theosis.<sup>12</sup> Suffering is necessary for creatures like us to develop the highest virtues, and the highest virtues are necessary for theosis. It is also a cosmic outlook according to which, firstly, the harms we suffer in this life, however dreadful, are *relatively* trivial, compared to the eternal beatific afterlife to which they pave the way, and, secondly, in which those harms will be repaired by God, in the long run. This is a cosmic outlook within which (again, in the long run) no-one will regret having passed through temporary trials, however dreadful, as these have been the necessary means by which they have perfected self-transcending love. Here, episodes of suffering are rungs on the ladder of divine ascent, by which one reaches the heights of theosis. We can think of the cosmic outlook of Isaac as providing at least some of the raw materials required to develop a saint-making theodicy—one, according to which, God was right to create an environment in which there is at least the risk of significant suffering, since it is only in such an environment that creatures like us can grow in saintliness and receive the greatest possible (and eternal) goods available to us (cf. Collin (2019, 2022)).

#### 4. Saint-Making Environments

In the course of developing his argument from evil, Sterba raises a range of objections to saint-making theodicies. Having sketched Isaac's cosmic outlook, we are now positioned to ask whether those objections apply to a saint-making theodicy situated within that outlook.<sup>13</sup> One of the elements underlying saint-making theodicies is the observation that, in order for creatures like us to develop a saintly character, we must inhabit an environment in which we suffer, or, at least, in which there is the risk of suffering. This is a theme of Adams (1999), Dougherty (2014), Hick (2010), Moser (2013), Stump (2010), and Swinburne (1998). Where there is no suffering or risk of suffering, developing a saintly character—the 'luminous love' Isaac speaks of—is not possible, as morally significant action is not possible. Both physical injury and psychological pain would be impossible, since God would intervene to prevent them. Similarly, if one attempted to cause others physical or psychological harm—or even acted in way that, in normal conditions, would *accidentally* bring about physical or psychological harm—God would again intervene to prevent it. One could go without sleeping, eating, exercising, working, attending to the psychological and physical needs of children and dependants, and so on, with no harms resulting, and with God intervening to ensure it. One could not so much as speak spitefully to another; perhaps God would intervene to make one temporarily dumbstruck, or to make one's interlocutor temporarily deaf. Quite generally, God would have to continually intervene in a series of 'special providences' (Hick 1973, p. 42), so that the world would not exhibit the kinds of regularities it actually does. Developed sciences would probably be impossible. Bad decisions would be impossible, with either the decision itself or its consequences instantly kiboshed by God. Mercy, wisdom, humility, enemy-love, and sacrificial love would be impossible:

One can at least begin to imagine such a world. It is evident that our present ethical concepts would have no meaning in it. If, for example, the notion of harming someone is an essential element in the concept of a wrong action, in our hedonistic paradise there could be no wrong actions—nor any right action in distinction from wrong. Courage and fortitude would have no point in an environment in which there is, by definition no danger or difficulty. Generosity, kindness and the agape aspect of love, prudence, unselfishness, and all other ethical notions which presuppose life in an objective environment could not even

be formed. Consequently such a world, however well it might promote pleasure, would be very ill adapted for the development of the moral qualities of human personality. In relation to this purpose it might be the worst of all possible worlds! (Hick 1973, pp. 41–42)

There is then a profound downside to God preventing all evil and suffering: it would lead to a bizarre Hick world, which—worst of all—would make impossible the development of a saintly character. Sterba is alive to this point. He holds, however, that there is another option open to God, an option, in fact, that God is morally obliged to select. God, Sterba holds, should prevent all the *significant* (including, of course, *terrible*) evil consequences of our actions, while allowing the less significant evil consequences of our actions to take place: a policy of ‘limited intervention’ (Sterba 2019, p. 60).

Here, I think, the moral significance of a policy of limited intervention—assuming for the time being that such a policy would not lead to a bizarre Hick world—is quite different given the cosmic outlook of Isaac than the kind of cosmic outlooks Sterba has in mind when criticising saint-making responses to the argument from evil. Sterba notes one downside to the policy of limited intervention:

[W]ouldn’t such a policy of limited intervention by God constrain good people from being supervirtuous at the same time that it constrains bad people from being the supervicious? If God is going to prevent the significantly evil consequences of our actions, then both good people and bad people are going to be restricted from inflicting significantly evil consequences on others. That means that good people will not be able to be as virtuous as they could otherwise be if they could freely refrain from inflicting significantly evil consequences on others. (Sterba 2019, p. 62)

In the quoted passage, Sterba mentions freely refraining from inflicting significantly evil consequences on others as an example of supervirtuousness, but there are many more examples of supervirtuousness, arising from the risk or actual occurrence of terrible evils. There are those who risk or sacrifice their own lives to save the lives of others, those who forgive others who have inflicted dreadful evils on them, those who sacrifice significant goods and freedoms in order to care for dependants with debilitating illnesses, those who are tortured or martyred for their faith, and many other forms of supervirtuousness besides these. In a world in which God invariably intervenes to prevent all terrible suffering the highest, most admirable, most exceptional forms of generosity, forgiveness, compassion, self-control, humility, integrity, courage, enemy-love, self-transcending and self-sacrificial love would not be possible. Sterba argues that this is a trade-off God should make:

But is this a problem? Who would object to God’s following such a policy? Of course, bad people might object because such a policy limits them in the exercise of their superviciousness. But there is no reason God or anyone else should listen to their objection in this regard. What about the good people? Would they object to such a policy? How could they? True, the policy does limit good people in the exercise of their supervirtuousness, but that is just what it takes to protect would-be victims from the significantly evil consequences of the actions of bad people. Surely, good people would find the prevention of the infliction of significantly evil consequences on would-be victims by the supervicious worth the constraint imposed on how supervirtuous they themselves could be. In fact, they should find such tradeoffs not only morally acceptable but also morally required. (cf. Sterba 2019, pp. 62, 174)

On the kind of theistic views Sterba is targeting, the heavenly afterlife involves the provision of what Sterba calls ‘consumer goods’—‘experiences and activities that are intensely pleasurable, completely fulfilling, and all encompassing’ (Sterba 2019, p. 36)—to those who have used soul-making opportunities ‘to do what we could be reasonably expected to do to make ourselves less unworthy of a heavenly afterlife’ (Sterba 2019, p. 53). In this kind of cosmic outlook, there is some threshold beyond which our actions become good enough

to be counted as manifesting what one could be reasonably expected to do, and for God to grant us the consumer goods of a heavenly afterlife. It may well be reasonable, given this kind of cosmic outlook, to regard the most exceptional kinds of virtuousness—the luminous love of Isaac—as too demanding to mark this threshold. However, this is all quite alien to the cosmic outlook of Isaac Qatraya. There, ultimate union with God requires harmony with the perfect will of God. Theosis—our ultimate end and the apotheosis of human flourishing—requires moral perfection,<sup>14</sup> and one can only approximate this beatific state to the extent that one’s moral character has been perfected. This requires the highest, most saintlike virtues. The tradeoff in which we sacrifice supervirtuousness for insulation from temporary significant suffering is, within this outlook, a tradeoff in which we also sacrifice the greatest possible eternal good for all human beings for insulation from temporary significant suffering. Given the cosmic outlook of Isaac, it is, at the very least, less obvious that God should make this tradeoff.

Nor is it clear that a policy of limited intervention on the part of God—intervening to prevent all the significant evil consequences of people’s actions—would not lead to a similar kind of bizarre Hick world that a policy of total intervention—intervening to prevent all the evil consequences of people’s actions—leads to. Here, Sterba makes use of a thought experiment. It seems possible to conceive of a world governed by the regularities required for sciences, complex action and so on, as well as at least a limited scope for human moral development, in which such interventions take place:

Think of the fictional city of Metropolis in which Superman/ Clark Kent was imagined to live. Surely regularities did hold in that imaginary city. They were just different from the regularities that hold in our world because of the “to be expected” interventions of Superman that occurred in Metropolis. So if all the world were like Metropolis, we would still discover natural laws. We would just learn that the operation of those laws was subject to moral constraints because of the additional regular interventions of superheroes or God. The same would be true in an ideally just and powerful political state, where all murders, serious assaults, and so on would be prevented. There too natural law regularities governing human behavior would be constrained, so to speak, by the to-be-expected regular moral interventions of such a state. Of course, soul-making would still exist in Metropolis or in an ideally just and powerful state, as it does in our world. It is just that the opportunities for soul-making that would exist there would be limited to just those opportunities that morally good people would prefer to have. But clearly no one should be objecting to living under those regularities. (Sterba 2019, p. 64)

However, are God and Superman similar enough for the thought experiment to be convincing? In some contexts, there is a tendency to conceive of God as something of a Superman figure. However, there is a huge gulf between this conception of God and God as understood by Isaac Qatraya (and, for that matter, any thinker who could be understood as endorsing ‘classical theism’ of some kind). Here is one salient difference. If God (so understood) adopted the policy of preventing *all* terrible suffering, then no terrible suffering would take place. Superman (his superpowers notwithstanding) could not do anything comparable to this. He could not, for instance, prevent acts leading to terrible suffering simultaneously taking place both at the Daily Planet and LexCorp offices, let alone prevent acts leading to terrible suffering simultaneously taking place in Metropolis, Cape Town, Sanaa, Melbourne, San Francisco, John O’Groats, or wherever else such acts may be taking place. In this respect then, there is also a huge gulf between Kryptonian and Divine policies of limited intervention. Worlds in which God aims to enact this policy and worlds in which Superman aims to enact this policy are very different.

Would then a Divine policy of preventing all terrible suffering lead to a bizarre Hick world in much the same way as a Divine policy of preventing all suffering, both significant and insignificant? Notably, what leads to a bizarre Hick world, given a Divine policy of intervention, is the extent and frequency with which God is required to intervene in order

to uphold the policy. Now, if one came to learn, through repeated experience or by some oracle, that God will now enact a policy of total intervention with respect to suffering, one could engage in bilking attempts—acts in some sense directed at bringing about suffering, though perhaps in the knowledge that they are sure to fail—with each bilking attempt requiring God to suspend or alter in some way the laws governing or regularities obtaining in the world. There is, however, a huge number of close possible worlds in which one suffers oneself, or brings about the suffering of others. Suffering can very easily be brought about. Moreover, a very large number of people could engage in bilking attempts with respect to bringing about suffering. There are around 8 billion human beings, a large proportion of whom are cognitively and physically able to engage in bilking attempts, each one requiring an act of intervention, suspending or altering the laws governing or the regularities obtaining in the world. With a Divine policy of always intervening to prevent suffering in place, it would be quite easy for human beings to actualise a bizzaro Hick world.

Would the situation with a policy of limited intervention be relevantly different? That is, are there reasons to think that a Divine policy of intervening to always prevent terrible suffering would not have similar consequences? Given the foregoing, it is hard to see why. What is salient here, with respect to the possibility of actualising a bizzaro Hick world, is not the *seriousness* of the suffering or wrong, but the *ease* by which that suffering or wrong can be brought about. However, there is no law-like connection between the seriousness of a wrong and the difficulty in bringing about that wrong, such that more serious wrongs, or wrongs above some threshold of seriousness, are harder to bring about than less serious wrongs, or wrongs below some threshold of seriousness. It is as easy, in practical terms, for an adult to kill a child as it is for him to deliberately shut his own hand in a car door.<sup>15</sup> The two acts, *normatively* speaking, are very different; one is dreadful, the other merely disagreeable. With regards to the practical difficulty involved in bringing them about, however, there is little to separate them.

Minor and significant evils are more or less as easy to bring about. The kind of interventions required on the part of God to prevent them are also quite similar. Being occasionally short-tempered with one's children, let us say, is a minor evil. Being neglectful or callous towards one's children over a long period of time is a significant evil. How could God intervene to prevent the evil effects of short-tempered outbursts towards children? Perhaps the parent would be temporarily muted, while some simulacrum of the parent speaking kind words appeared in front of the children. Perhaps the child would be unable to form memories during the outburst, or the parent blocked from forming the thought that resulted in the outburst. How could God intervene to prevent the significant evil effects of being neglectful or callous? A similar set of tricks would be required.

So, there is a huge number of close possible worlds in which one suffers significantly oneself, or brings about the significant suffering of others. Significant suffering can very easily be brought about. Moreover, a very large number of people could engage in bilking attempts with respect to bringing about significant suffering. There are around 8 billion human beings, a large proportion of whom are cognitively and physically able to engage in bilking attempts, each one requiring an act of intervention, suspending or altering the laws governing or the regularities obtaining in the world. With a Divine policy of always intervening to prevent significant suffering in place, it would be quite easy for human beings to actualise a bizzaro Hick world. A policy of limited intervention on the part of God would not be so limited after all. It would, in fact, actualise, or at least risk, a bizzaro Hick world in which significant moral development is impossible.

## 5. Divine and Human Permission of Evil

Sterba raises another pair of objections to saint-making responses to the problem of evil, both having to do with an apparent disparity between how advocates of the response must regard the moral status of *God's* policy of not seeking to prevent all significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral acts where possible, and the moral status of a *human*

policy of not seeking to prevent all significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral acts where possible. In the first place, there are some events that we do not regard human agents as being justified in permitting, even if doing so presents an opportunity for saint-making:

Suppose parents you know were to permit their children to be brutally assaulted to make possible the soul-making of the person who would attempt to comfort their children after they have been assaulted or to make possible the soul-making that their children themselves could experience by coming to forgive their assailants. Would you think the parents were morally justified in so acting? Hardly. Here you surely would agree with [MEPRI-MEPRIII's] prohibition of such actions. Permitting one's children to be brutally assaulted is an action that is wrong in itself, and not something that could be permitted for the sake of whatever good consequences it might happen to have. That is why [MEPRI-MEPRIII] prohibits any appeal to good consequences to justify such actions in such cases.<sup>16</sup> (Sterba 2019, p. 57)

The argument here is by *modus tollens*. If it is permissible for God to permit significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral actions, then it is permissible for human agents to permit significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral actions. However, it is not permissible for human agents to permit significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral actions. So it is not permissible for God to permit significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral actions. What would make us warranted in accepting the first conditional here? We would be warranted in accepting the first conditional if we were warranted in accepting the following *parity principle*:

For all acts of type  $\phi$ , if it is not morally permissible for a human agent to  $\phi$ , then it is not morally permissible for God to  $\phi$ .

The first conditional is an instance of the contrapositive of the parity principle. So, are we warranted in accepting the parity principle? I have my doubts. It seems to me that a number of different factors should undermine our confidence in the parity principle. In the first place, the consequences of not permitting certain classes of events are very different in the Divine and human cases. For one thing, for God to adopt the policy *Where possible, prevent all significant or terrible suffering* would lead to, or at least risk, a bizarre Hick world in which saint-making was impossible. However, on the view countenanced here, this would amount to the prevention of the ultimate eternal flourishing of all human beings. This is a truly dreadful consequence: a worse consequence, in fact, than any human agent is so much as capable of bringing about. In contrast, for a human agent to adopt the policy *Where possible prevent all significant or terrible suffering* would not lead to a bizarre Hick world. The consequences of an act have a bearing on whether that act is permissible or obligatory, and here the consequences of God acting to prevent significant or terrible suffering are immeasurably worse than the consequences of a human agent acting to prevent significant or terrible suffering. As such, God's moral relationship to permitting significant or terrible suffering is very different from a human agent's moral relationship to permitting significant or terrible suffering. Moreover, in fact, this disparity itself appears to underwrite a counterexample to the parity principle. It is morally permissible (even morally obligatory) for God to permit some instances of significant or terrible suffering, when it is in God's power to prevent them, because the alternative would be far worse (including, ultimately, for those whose suffering has been temporarily permitted). In contrast, it is not morally permissible for a human agent to permit the same instances of significant or terrible suffering, because the alternative would *not* be far worse. Human agents frequently have reasons to intervene to prevent significant or terrible suffering, but *lack* God's weightier countervailing reasons to permit it.

In the second place, human agents are *epistemically* differently placed to God, in such a way as to make some acts permissible for God that are not permissible for human beings. Imagine, for instance, being given an opportunity to pull one of two levers, X and Y, where pulling one lever will lead to a person's death, while pulling the other lever will lead



to a £10,000 donation being given to a worthy charity. Imagine further that there is no way for a human agent in this situation to know which lever will do which. Clearly, it is impermissible for a human agent to pull one of the levers. An infallible agent however could be rationally certain which lever would result in the charity donation. Moreover, being rationally certain that, say, X would lead to the charity donation, it would be morally permissible for the infallible agent to pull lever X. We can generalise this picture. Letting  $O$  be a set of epistemically possible outcomes,  $P_\phi(o)$  one's credence that an outcome  $o \in O$  will take place given that one  $\phi$ s, and  $U(o)$  be the utility of an outcome  $o \in O$ , the 'expected utility' of  $\phi$ ing ( $EU(\phi)$ ) can be given by:

$$EU(\phi) = \sum_{o \in O} P_\phi(o)U(o)$$

For an infallible being, the value of  $P_\phi(o)$  will always be either 1 or 0. For creatures like us, it typically will not. However, (and especially when the positive or negative value of  $U(o)$  is very high) this will make an enormous difference to the value of  $EU(\phi)$ . There are some acts types  $\phi$  that are *never* permissible for fallible creatures, because of the (perhaps small) subjective probability that  $\phi$ ing will bring about some truly dreadful outcome, but which *are* permissible for an infallible being, because, for a being like that, the subjective probability that  $\phi$ ing will bring about that dreadful outcome is 0. This is another counterexample to the parity principle, or, rather, a recipe for producing such counterexamples.<sup>17</sup>

In the third place, human agents are not in a position to *rectify* many of the harms one can suffer in this life, whereas God *is* (and, in Isaac's cosmic outlook, *will* invariably rectify those harms). However, if an agent is in a position to rectify a harm, that agent has a different moral relationship to the harm than an agent who is unable to rectify that harm, and, in particular, is differently placed, morally speaking, with respect to the permissibility of allowing that harm to take place. The gospel according to John contains the story of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead. Here, we are told that Christ travels out of Bethany, where his friend Lazarus is ill, knowingly allowing him to die, and returns to Bethany only after Lazarus has been dead for four days. At this point, Christ performs a sign, returning Lazarus to life. Now, how we evaluate Christ permitting Lazarus to die is conditioned by Christ's ability to rectify the harm at hand. Contrast the narrative of John's gospel with, for instance, one in which a medic, the only person placed perform a life-saving operation on a friend, chooses, in lieu of performing the operation, to go for a long weekend in the Pyrenees, and returns to find, as expected, his friend dead. Our differential judgements about the moral status of permitting the friend to die in each case, have, in large part, to do with the fact that Christ was, and the medic was not, able to rectify the harm, to make the harm temporary. However, since there are very many harms that human agents cannot rectify, and no harms that God cannot rectify, human agents and God will be differently placed, morally speaking, with respect to permitting a large range of harms. This is another counterexample to the parity principle, or, rather, a recipe for producing such counterexamples.

In the fourth place, if there is a collective duty bringing about or will to some good end, different actors will often have different obligations with respect to this collective duty. Some corporation, let us say, undertakes a commitment to produce a product for a client. Those working for the corporation will incur duties to perform tasks in aid of bringing about that end. *Which particular* duties different members of the corporation incur will, however, depend on their different roles within the corporation. Managers, engineers, factory workers, cleaners, HR personnel, and so on, will incur different obligations. Given Isaac Qatraya's cosmic outlook, one might hold that we—both human beings and God—have a collective duty to will to bring about the ultimate thesis of all people. Perhaps then it is the duty of human agents to forge saintly characters, and the duty of God to provide an environment in which we are able to do so. Here too, God and human agents are differently placed, morally speaking, with respect to permitting harms. The commonplace thought that different actors have different obligations depending on their roles, combined with the

thought that God has a relevantly different role (in the task of bringing about the theosis of all human agents) than any human agent, implies that the parity principle does not hold. Sterba presents another, closely related, argument:

[I]t would be morally inappropriate for our receiving a Godly opportunity for soul-making to be conditional on God's permitting significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. This is because it would give us the incentive to commit, and want others to commit, significant and even horrendous evil actions, virtually without limit, so that God would permit their consequences and thereby make possible our receiving a Godly opportunity for soul-making.<sup>18</sup> (Sterba 2019, p. 84)

There are different ways in which one might develop a saint-making response to the problem of evil, and, depending on which kind one endorses, one will have a different response to objections of this sort. According to some advocates of saint-making theodicies, a saint-making environment requires the *risk* or *possibility* of significant or even horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. As we saw earlier, this is necessary in order for us *not* to inhabit a bizarre Hick world, in which developing the highest, most admirable, most exceptional forms of generosity, forgiveness, compassion, self-control, humility, integrity, courage, enemy-love, self-transcending and self-sacrificial love would be impossible. In this picture then, God is incentivised to create a world in which there is the *risk* or *possibility* of these consequences. However, that is not at all the same thing as being incentivised to *actualise* those terrible possibilities. One can be incentivised to build roads and railways, knowing that, in doing so, there is a risk that the cars and trains running on that infrastructure will crash, resulting in significant or even terrible suffering. But that does not entail that one is thereby also incentivised to have those cars and trains crash.

What about saint-making theodicies according to which *actual* suffering is necessary for creatures like us to grow in the highest virtues? Here, as before, we ought to be alive to the ways in which there are disparities between what is permissible for God and what is permissible for human agents. Even if we accept that there is a sense in which human agents are "incentivised" to allow others to suffer badly, because it will provide an opportunity for soul-making, it does not follow that it is obligatory, or permissible, for human agents to do so. Possible good consequences, or even knowingly good consequences, of *ϕ*ing can "incentivise" *ϕ*ing, in some sense, without making *ϕ*ing either obligatory or permissible. One might, for instance, be incentivised to commit election fraud in order to prevent a execrable candidate from obtaining a position of political power, yet still properly regard doing so as impermissible. Moreover, there are disparities between what God is morally incentivised to do and what human agents are morally incentivised to do. God has a special moral incentive not to constantly intervene when possible to prevent significant suffering that does not apply to human agents: doing so would undermine our saint-making environment by bringing about a bizarre Hick world. There is no similar catastrophic downside for human agents choosing to intervene where possible, and no similar moral incentive. It would also be a mistake to think that, in acting out of love to prevent the suffering of others, one would deprive them of saint-making opportunities. For in acting out of love to prevent the suffering of others, though one removes one kind of saint-making opportunity, one replaces it with another, and does so by acting as an *exemplar*. Being a moral exemplar to some other agent, provides that agent with an opportunity to form correct moral beliefs, to become motivated to act morally, and to learn how to become moral (Zagzebski 2017, chp. 5). Thus, in acting out of love to prevent the suffering of others, an agent both does something that makes *her* more fitted for for union with God and with other persons—so advancing the ultimate good of corporate theosis—and provides others with a saint-making opportunity.<sup>19</sup>

## 6. The Moral Evil Prevention Requirements

Isaac Qatraya's cosmic outlook, I have argued, is not subject to at least some of the objections Sterba raises to other theistic views. What is the upshot though when it comes to Sterba's formulation of the argument from evil? Let's consider again MEPRI-MEPRIII, beginning with the first two:

### Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 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 conducted. (Sterba 2019, p. 126)

### Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 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)

Whether God adheres to MEPRI, in the picture countenanced here, depends on whether we should regard a person's ultimate theosis as her right. According to Sterba, if something 'is absolutely required for our fundamental well-being, then we . . . have a right to it analogous to the way we have a right to liberty or a right to welfare.' (Sterba 2019, p. 87) Is theosis absolutely required for one's fundamental well-being? In at least one understanding of that phrase, it is. Theosis is required for the continuance of a flourishing life; without it one's life either ceases, or persists but in the torments of Gehenna. It is also constitutive of *ultimate* well-being, both in the sense of the *greatest* well-being available to humans, and in the sense of being the *end* for which humans are created. If this is what is meant by fundamental well-being—and anything that is required for fundamental well-being is a right—then theosis is a right. However, suffering, even terrible suffering (or the risk of these), is required to forge a saintly moral character, and a saintly moral character is required for theosis. Thus, preventing suffering (or removing the risk of suffering) would violate our right to theosis. If this is the case, God is morally required to provide everyone an opportunity for theosis, and so to create an environment where this is possible. If theosis is a good to which we have a right, then God *does* adhere to MEPRI.

However, perhaps possessing 'fundamental well-being' is to be understood as something in the ballpark of 'possessing enough of whatever goods are required to make one's life worth living'. Here too, there is some ambiguity. If there is no afterlife, even these goods inevitably cease at the point of death. In that case, some kind of afterlife is required for the continuance of even these goods. If then our right to these goods is not time-bounded, does not run out after, say, threescore years and ten, then, on Sterba's view, we have a right to an afterlife. However, having an *afterlife* worth living requires theosis, for the alternative is to be in the close presence of God without having a saintly moral character, and that is to experience the torments of Gehenna. If these were not corrective, as in Isaac Qatraya's view, resulting in the eventual formation of a saintly character (and so theosis), then the afterlife would not be worth living. In this sense too, on Sterba's view, we have a right to theosis, because it is the only way to sustain the goods required of a life worth living.

Say though that 'fundamental well-being' is understood in some way so as to give the result that theosis is not a right. Perhaps 'fundamental well-being' could be understood as something in the ballpark of '*temporarily* possessing enough of whatever goods are required to make one's life worth living' or 'possessing enough of whatever goods are required to make one's life worth living *for threescore years and ten*'. Assuming this understanding of 'fundamental well-being', theosis is not (at least not clearly) a right, but a gift to which we are not entitled. In that case, someone warranted in holding the eschatological views of Isaac Qatraya would lack warrant for MEPRI. Given those eschatological views (and given the assumption that the theosis is not a right), it is not plausible that MEPRI holds in every instance. For God to prevent significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would undermine saint-making, and so undermine the opportunity for theosis. However, to deprive human beings of that ultimate and eternal good—when that good

would otherwise be possible, and, in fact, eventually actualised—would be far worse for those human beings than to permit temporary sufferings, however terrible, in order for those human beings to ascend to eternal, beatific union with God and the rest of creation. God, for Isaac Qatraya, chooses what is ultimately best for us, rather than what is ultimately worse for us. Adhering to MEPRI in a wholly unrestricted way would mean choosing what is worse for human beings rather than what is best for human beings. God then is not morally required to adhere to MEPRI, and, in fact, unrestricted adherence to MEPRI is not what we would expect of a perfect Being. Similar considerations suggest that, in the cosmic outlook of Isaac, God does not violate MEPRII. From the point of view of eternal beatific union with God and creation, no human agent would judge that their life would have been better if they had never endured significant suffering as a necessary means to theosis. No rational agent would morally prefer not to have the good of theosis. Finally, there is Moral Evil Prevention Requirement III (MEPRIII):

**Moral Evil Prevention Requirement 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).

On the picture sketched here, there are not other ways of providing the good of theosis. Theosis, for creatures like us, requires growth into saintly virtues, growth into saintly virtues requires an environment in which there is the risk of significant suffering, and an environment in which there is the risk of significant suffering requires that God does not act to prevent all instances of significant suffering. MEPRIII is not violated. Moreover, because warrant for both the claim that MEPRI-MEPRIII are true and the claim that God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII could only be gained *via* warrant for the claim that Isaac’s outlook is false, one cannot gain warrant for the claim that MEPRI-MEPRIII are true and the claim that God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII without *first* being warranted in rejecting Isaac’s outlook. It is then a theistic cosmic outlook that is immune to this kind of argument from evil.

**7. A Note on Sceptical Theism**

Many evidential arguments from evil work by making an inductive inference from (something in the ballpark of):

No reasons I know of are such that they would justify God permitting some actual evil E.

to (something in the ballpark of):

Probably: there are no reasons that would justify God permitting some actual evil E.

A ‘sceptical theist’<sup>20</sup> claims this is a poor inference, because, roughly speaking, he doubts he is entitled to hold that the reasons he is aware of are representative of the reasons God is aware of, so that the inference involves something akin to base rate neglect.<sup>21</sup> Above, I did not mention sceptical theism, and, on the face of it, Sterba’s argument from evil might appear insusceptible to sceptical theist responses. That is because Sterba argues that, for some actual evil, E, there *are reasons we know of* that entail that God is not justified in permitting E. If we were warranted in accepting *that*, then, because (classical) entailment is monotonic, the existence of other reasons of which we are not aware could do nothing to undermine that warrant. It would be too hasty though to conclude that there is no space for a sceptical theist treatment of the argument. Naturally enough, whether one can reasonably take oneself to hold that one knows of reasons that entail that God is not justified in permitting E, depends on both the moral claims one endorses and the moral epistemology one buys into. Moreover, both the moral claims one endorses and the moral epistemology one buys into will depend on the cosmic outlook one buys into. In fact then,

the moral premises of Sterba's argument depend on their own inductive step, something in the ballpark of:

No axiological features of our cosmos I know of are such as to render MEPRI-MEPRIII false, or not violated by God.

to

Probably: there are no axiological features of our cosmos such as to render MEPRI-MEPRIII false, or not violated by God.

Whether sceptical theism can itself be motivated is a large question. However, what we should observe here is that sceptical theist approaches are, perhaps contrary to first impressions, applicable *mutatis mutandis* to Sterba's argument.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sterba elaborates: 'For example, if you can easily prevent a small child from going hungry or aid someone who has been brutally assaulted without violating anyone's rights then you should do so. This requirement is an exceptionless minimal component of the Pauline Principle discussed in previous chapters, which would be acceptable to consequentialists and nonconsequentialists, as well as theists and atheists alike.' (Sterba 2019, p. 126).
- <sup>2</sup> Here I use *warrant* to pick out *rational good standing* in the disjunctive sense of involving either positive rational justification or the kind of default rational entitlement that does not require positive justification.
- <sup>3</sup> See Wright (2003) for a classic discussion of transmission.
- <sup>4</sup> McPherson (2020, p. 115) describes a cosmic outlook as 'an understanding of the world and one's place within it that forms the background to a person's thoughts, feelings, and actions, and, indeed, to his or her life as a whole.' McPherson emphasises—rightly, to my mind—the close interrelationship between one's cosmic outlook and one's ethical views.
- <sup>5</sup> In fact, Isaac's view of the afterlife has *some* affinities with the view of the afterlife Sterba (2020) argues is the most morally preferable.
- <sup>6</sup> Brady (2018) is recent and illuminating development of this thought.
- <sup>7</sup> References to 'I n', 'II n', and 'III m/n' refer, respectively to sections n of the 'First Part', 'Second Part', and 'Third Part' of Isaac's writings. Translations of the First Part are taken from Miller (1984), translations of the Second Part are taken from Brock (1995), and translations of the Third Part are taken from Hansbury (2021), which is part of the collection Kozah et al. (2021).
- <sup>8</sup> Moser (2013) is a relatively recent discussion of suffering and soul-making that places enemy-love at the centre of a virtuous life.
- <sup>9</sup> References to 'AOL m/n' refer to Isaac's homilies On Ascetical Life, and are taken from (Hansbury 1989).
- <sup>10</sup> See also the following passage: 'My Lord, You have not formed me like a clay vessel that when broken cannot be restored and when encrusted is not able to take on its former polish when new. But in Your wisdom, You have created me in the form of elements of gold and silver that when tarnished, in the refining sorrow of compunction, again imitates the color of the sun and shining is brought to its former condition by means of the crucible of repentance. You are the craftsman who polishing our nature makes it new. I have soiled the beauty of baptism and I am sullied, but in You I receive a more excellent beauty. In You is the beauty of creation: You have brought it back again to that beauty from which it was altered in paradise.' (III 7/35 (352)).
- <sup>11</sup> See also the following passage: 'It is clear that [God] does not abandon them the moment they fall, and that demons will not remain in their demonic state, and sinners will not remain in their sins; rather, he is going to bring them to a single equal state of perfection in relationship to his own Being—to a state in which the holy angels now are, in perfection of love and a passionless mind. He is going to bring them into that excellency of will where it will be not as though they were curbed and not free or having stirrings from the Opponent then; rather, they will be in a state of excelling knowledge, with a mind made mature in the stirrings which partake of the divine outpouring which the blessed Creator is preparing in his grace; they will be perfected in love for him, with a perfect mind which is above any aberration in all its stirrings.' (II 40 (4)).
- <sup>12</sup> There is here, to use Adams' (1999) term, an *organic unity* between the evils one endures in this life and the goods one receives in the afterlife.
- <sup>13</sup> Isaac does not himself develop a detailed theodicy, or explicitly anticipate the kinds of objections Sterba develops. The goal here is to interrogate whether a saint-making theodicy is susceptible to the kinds of objections Sterba develops—and, ultimately, the argument from evil Sterba develops—if one shares certain aspects of Isaac's cosmic outlook.
- <sup>14</sup> So we have Christ's injunction, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt 5:48): no doubt a high bar to meet.

- 15 Of course, for those who are not sociopaths, or have not been acculturated into barbarism, it is *psychologically* much harder to deliberately harm a child, but we are imagining here, as Sterba does, a world in which we have come to realise that God will always intervene to prevent terrible suffering. (We also should not underestimate how frequently human beings have been acculturated into barbarism.)
- 16 Sterba continues: ‘Moreover, if there are no exceptions to [MEPRI-MEPRIII] for humans in such cases, then the same should also hold true for God. 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. So for contexts where the issue is whether to permit a significant evil to achieve some additional good, God, like us, would never be justified in permitting evil in such cases.’ (Sterba 2019, p. 57).
- 17 Note that one does not have to buy into the idea that a rational or moral choice is always one that maximises expected utility (however that gets defined) to grasp the far more modest point I’m making here—i.e. that we sometimes are obliged not to act in certain ways because of the subjective probability that doing so will lead to dire consequences (and that infallible beings will have relevantly different subjective probabilities with respect to the obtention of those outcomes). This also has a direct bearing on the particular parity we’re scrutinizing. There is, for human beings, a non-zero subjective probability that there is no afterlife in which the harms incurred in this life will be undone, and where those who have advanced into saintliness by how they have repented to those harms will benefit from their saintly character. This makes our moral relationship towards permitting those harms different from that of a being who infallibly knows that there is an afterlife like this.
- 18 The objection has a second part: ‘It would also support perverse incentives for God as well. Assuming that God wanted to provide us with a Godly opportunity for soul-making, God would also have to perversely want us to commit significant and even horrendous morally evil actions, virtually without limit, so that God could then permit their consequences and thereby make possible our receiving a Godly opportunity for soul-making.’ (Sterba 2019, p. 84). But this part depends on a closure principle I don’t accept. *Wanting*, I say, is not closed under necessitation relations. One might want to be physically fit, but not want to exercise, even though it is necessarily the case that if one is physically fit one exercises. (The modality at play here concerns practical possibility and necessity.) And so for any number of good outcomes; one may want the good outcome, but not the means by which that outcome can be achieved. It is possible then to want saintliness, but not the trials required to achieve it.
- 19 Why doesn’t God act out of love to prevent the suffering of others? In Isaac’s cosmic outlook, that’s exactly what God *does* do. But it must be understood diachronically, as a process, where the prevention of suffering is (one aspect of) the culmination of that process. If God acts to prevent all significant suffering *immediately*, the process, as we saw, is undermined.
- 20 Dougherty (2022) and McBrayer (n.d.) provide overviews of sceptical theism.
- 21 Compare a chess novice playing against the chess engine Stockfish, who reasons from the premise *No reasons I know of are such that Stockfish is justified in permitting the distribution of chess pieces we find on our board to the conclusion Probably: there are no reasons such that Stockfish is justified in permitting the distribution of chess pieces we find on our board*. The badness of the inference can be explained, at least in part, by appealing to the many possible reasons for making a chess move that will not be cognitively available to a chess novice—there are an estimated 10<sup>40</sup> legal moves in chess—and the relatively good grasp Stockfish has of the relevant class of possible reasons—running on the right hardware, Stockfish can evaluate thousands of millions of possible moves per second. The novice knows Stockfish’s end (to win the game), but, even given that knowledge, it would be a bad bet on the part of the novice to hold that, if he is *unaware of why* Stockfish’s move would advance that end, then it *does not in fact* advance that end. Say then we know that a perfect Being’s ultimate aims would include what is ultimately best for human agents. For analogous reasons it might seem like a bad bet to hold that, if one is *unaware of why* God permitting the kinds and distributions of evil we find in our world advances that end, then it *does not in fact* advance that end.

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