

Article

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

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

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

## 1. Introduction

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

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

## 2. An Overview of Sterba's Argument

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3. A Classical Theist Response to Sterba

Does “good” have to mean *morally good*, and what does it do to Sterba’s case if it does not mean that? Brian Davies and Herbert McCabe argue that, indeed, when we say that God is good, we do not mean that he is morally good in the way humans are.<sup>17</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

#### 4. Job as an Illustration

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

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

#### 5. Divine Perfection and Goodness

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

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

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

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

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

## 6. Moral Virtues and the Divine Essence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 7. Sterba's Objections and Responses

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Hitler sought his own good

Mother Theresa sought her own good

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

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

- (1) Natural goods that are taken to be goods as ends;
- (2) Natural evils that are taken to be good as means;
- (3) Moral goods that are taken to be good as ends;
- (4) Moral evils that are taken to be good as means.<sup>51</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 8. Conclusions

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

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## Notes

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

2 (Sterba 2019). Sterba argues from both moral and natural evil. Likewise, the argument this article makes applies to both moral and natural evil. Sterba does not define “evil” but uses the term in connection with harm and suffering. The term “evil” is used in the same general sense in this article; however, the author holds to the Augustinian notion of evil as being a privation or corruption of good, which is discussed below in the section on Divine Perfection and Goodness. For Augustine’s view (and Aquinas’), cf. note 35.

3 For Rowe’s, cf. (Rowe 1979).

4 Cf. (Plantinga [1974] 2001).

5 (Mackie 1955, p. 200).

6 (Mackie 1955, p. 200).

7 (Mackie 1955, pp. 200–1).

8 (Davies 2006).

9 (Sterba 2019), conclusion, section II, Kindle. These are also given in chapter 6, section IX.

10 (Sterba 2019), conclusion, section II.

11 (Mackie 1955, pp. 200–1).

12 (Mackie 1955, p. 201 (emphasis added)).

13 (Mackie 1955, p. 201).

14 (Swinburne 2016, p. 202).

15 (Swinburne 2016, p. 202).

16 Cf. Sterba’s chapter 4 on this topic.

17 Cf. (Davies 2011) as well as (McCabe 2010).

18 Cf. (Aristotle 2001a), especially Book IX. For an excellent treatment of act and potency see (Klubertanz 2005).

19 For various ways that both theists and atheists attempt to ground morality, cf. (Loftin 2012).

20 (Davies 2006, p. 91).

21 (Davies 2021, p. 8).

22 Cf. (Davies 2021, pp. 13–20) for a discussion of this and how it compares to classical theism.

23 (Sterba 2019, chp. 6, sct. III, Kindle).

24 (Sterba 2019, chpt. 6, sct. III, n9, Kindle).

25 For an excellent treatment on this view of analogy cf. (Rocca 2004). For a Thomistic view that argues more for a univocal view of predication between creatures and God, cf. (Mondin 1963).

26 Some protest at the idea of being agnostic about God’s nature; however, in order to avoid such agnosticism, one would have to admit to the preposterous notion that a finite being can have knowledge of the infinite in an infinite way, i.e., know everything about God. If one admits to not knowing everything about God, then at some point and level, he must agree to being agnostic. While many theists find this unsettling or even unwanted, the only other option is to say that he knows everything about God, which would make God not very great.

27 Angels are also rational beings that have a moral nature in a sense at least analogous to humans. Such is the case because they are created, finite beings.

28 There are numerous biblical examples for this, such as Romans 9.

29 (Aquinas 1921, I. q.14 for a discussion on God’s knowledge).

30 (Davies 2021, p. 250).

31 The translation used here is the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

32 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 4 a. 1).

33 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 5 a. 1).

34 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 6 a. 1).

35 Cf. (Augustine of Hippo 1887; Aquinas 2003, question 1).

36 (Aquinas 1924, 1.92).

37 (Aquinas 1924).

38 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 21 a. 1).

39 (Garrigou-Lagrange 2012, p. 608).

40 (Aquinas 1921, I q.19 a. 3).

41 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 21 a. 1 ad. 2).

42 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 13 a. 5). There is a debate among Thomists as to what he held regarding analogy. Besides the aforementioned works, cf. (Klubertanz 2009; McInerny 1968).

43 (Aquinas 1921, I q. 13 a. 2 (emphasis in original)).

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

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