

Article

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

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

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



Citation: Burns, Elizabeth. 2021. Evil and Divine Power: A Response to James Sterba's Argument from Evil. *Religions* 12: 442. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060442>

Academic Editor: James Sterba

Received: 22 March 2021

Accepted: 7 June 2021

Published: 15 June 2021

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1. Introduction

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

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

2. Sterba's Argument from Evil

2.1. *The Argument from Moral Evil*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2. Sterba's Responses to Three Possible Objections

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

2.2.1. Skeptical Theism

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

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

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

2.2.2. God Is Not a Moral Agent

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

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

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

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

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

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

2.2.3. Divine Redemption

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

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

2.3. *The Argument from Natural Evil*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. The Fatal Flaw?

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. The Nature of Divine Power

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank two anonymous referees for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

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

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