

Editorial

Sixteen Contributors: A Response

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

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

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

1. William Hasker

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Now there are two different types of consequences of the dictator’s action here. One type is the consequence that he directly and intentionally brought about. These are the type of consequences that would call into play my MEPR I. The other types of consequences are those that, in the example, were imposed on the dictator by his abused citizenry. These latter consequences, unlike the former, are not consequences the dictator directly or intentionally brought about, and he clearly does not want them. Nevertheless, they are morally justified and so they do not call into play my MEPR I. I am not sure how these two uses of consequences got confused in our discussion, but once these two are distinguished, there is no reason to confuse them again, with the result that Hasker’s challenge to my view here is answered in a way that even Hasker finds acceptable¹.

2. Laura Ekstrom

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Janusz Salamon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Jerry Walls

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

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

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

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

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

5. Cheryl Chen

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

6. Brian Huffling

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

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

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

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

Second Premise: Morality is a property of creation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. Michael Beaty

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

8. Bruce Reichenbach

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

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

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

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

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

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

9. Elizabeth Burns

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

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

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

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

10. Ronald Hall

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

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

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

11. John Bishop

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

12. Brett Wilmot

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

13. Toby Betenson

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

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

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

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

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

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

14. Edward Feser

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

15. Robin Attfield

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

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

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

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

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

16. Scott Coley

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

17. The End

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

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Notes

¹ Confirmed through e-mail exchange.

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

³ See (Ekstrom 2021).

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

- 5 I owe this even more troublesome counterexample to Cheryl Chen.
- 6 “God is Not a Moral Being,” p. 45.
- 7 See “Solving Darwin’s Problem of Natural Evil” Sophia (2019) and “Eliminating the Problem of Hell.” *Religious Studies* (2018).
- 8 See further discussion, see my (Sterba 2013, chp. 6).
- 9 It is interesting to note that some early forms of deism were most concerned to defend a God whose existence and nature was established by reason rather than by revelation and authority. For these early deists, that did not preclude thinking of God as benevolent. See BBC <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000n47b> (accessed on Day Month Year).
- 10 See (Russell 2017, pp. 90–107).
- 11 See (Tooley 2015).

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