

Essay

# A Dilemma for Sterba

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

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



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## 1. Background

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 2. Some Basic Distinctions and Principles

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3. Moral Evil Prevention Requirements

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

#### 3.1. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I

Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, (a good to which we have a right) when, without violating anyone's rights, that can easily be done (Sterba 2019, pp. 126, 184).<sup>8</sup>

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

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

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

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

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

### 3.2. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II

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

Writing this requirement as a conditional, we get:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 3.3. Moral Evil Prevention Requirement III

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

Re-writing this as a conditional, we get:

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

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

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



#### 4. Skeptical Theism

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

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

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

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

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

## 5. A Reply to the Skeptical Theists

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Gewerbstrasse, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2019). Sterba's central arguments imply that God would not allow *any* horrendous evil consequences of immoral action. However, in (Sterba 2019, p. 65) he indicates that what is incompatible with God's existence is "the distribution and amount of moral evil that exists in the world." Of course, this would follow if God would not allow *any* horrendous evil consequences of immoral action, but it is not the conclusion he directly argues for. Hereafter, reference to Sterba's book will be made in the text as (Sterba 2019, p. xxx).
- <sup>2</sup> See (Sterba 2019, p. 2) for his initial statement of the Pauline Principle.
- <sup>3</sup> (van Inwagen 1996, pp. 234–35). There he responds to my (Russell 1996). I respond to his comments in (Russell 2018).
- <sup>4</sup> (Feldman 1978, p. 24) uses "dolor" to refer to a unit of pain. I use it to refer to a unit of suffering.
- <sup>5</sup> (Feldman 2003, Chpts. 2–3) employs this approach to the analyses of knowledge.
- <sup>6</sup> Sterba will say "not unworthy" because he thinks that if people were "worthy" of a God relationship, they would deserve it, and have a right to it, but he thinks that none of that is true. See Footnote 12, below.
- <sup>7</sup> (Sterba 2017) misunderstands my argument in his comments on my essay (Russell 2017). Given what I say about a defense offered by Peter van Inwagen, he thinks that I should reject Young Earthism for its implausible implications (Sterba 2017, p. 159). And I do! My criticism of Skeptical Theism is an argument about arguments: if Skeptical Theism is a good defense against the problem of evil, then the Young Earthers have a good defense of their view against standard science. However, the Young Earthers' defense is not a good one. So, by modus tollens, neither is the Skeptical Theists' defense a good defense against the problem of evil.
- <sup>8</sup> This is a slight re-wording of Sterba's statement of MEPR I that appears in the text of his book. There is no change in the meaning.
- <sup>9</sup> (Parfit 2017, pp. 347, 374–76) imagines two nuclear policies to end a war with Japan. The first involves dropping a bomb on Japanese civilians that will kill 100,000 innocent people in Tokyo. However, it will give the Japanese generals what they believe is an honorable way to admit defeat and surrender (Parfit 2017, p. 347). The other option is to drop the bomb on an uninhabited offshore island as a display of force that will also cause the Japanese Government to surrender for the same reason. However, in a couple of weeks winds will blow the radioactive fallout over Tokyo and that will eventually kill 200,000 innocent civilians. The Doctrine of the Double Effect (DDE) implies that we should adopt the second option. However, Parfit thinks that we should adopt the first option, and it violates the Pauline Principle, although Parfit's target is the Kantian principle against using people as mere means. On Sterba's account of the Pauline Principle, it says we should never do (or allow) immoral actions that result in horrendous evil that good may come of it (at least if the victims do not consent). I think this example shows that if an enormous amount of good can be produced, or bad prevented, only by violating the Pauline Principle, it should be violated. This is a serious objection to the Pauline Principle itself even if not to the specific MEPRs that Sterba offers. See, (Parfit 2017, pp. 374–76).
- <sup>10</sup> I am using "significant freedom" to include the ability to successfully perform immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences. Sterba has a different account of "significant freedom." For him, "significant freedoms are those freedoms a just political state would want to protect since they would fairly secure each person's fundamental interests" (Sterba 2019, p. 12). Presumably, a just political state would not want to protect the freedom to perform immoral actions that have horrendous evil consequences.

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

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