

## Article

# God, Evil, and Meticulous Providence

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**Abstract:** James Sterba has constructed a powerful argument for there being a conflict between the presence of evil in the world and the existence of God. I contend that Sterba's argument depends on a crucial assumption, namely, that God has an obligation to act according to the principle of meticulous providence. I suggest that two of his analogies confirm his dependence on this requirement. Of course, his argument does not rest on either of these analogies, but they are illustrative of the role that meticulous providence plays in his argument. I then investigate the ethical principles Sterba invokes in his use of meticulous providence and suggest that not only do we often not predicate goodness of human persons based on these principles of obligation, but that these principles are much too stringent to function to determine moral obligations and moral goodness. From there, I contend that to think that God has a similar obligation regarding meticulous providence in order to be good encounters several serious problems, especially with respect to the soul-building Sterba wants to preserve. I conclude by considering Sterba's reply in terms of a limited application of meticulous providence.

**Keywords:** free will defense; providence; problem of evil; James Sterba



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## 1. Meticulous Providence

Although James Sterba does not use the term “meticulous providence,” the concept lies behind his critique of attempts to reconcile the existence of a good and powerful God with the presence of significant evil and suffering. As applied to God, meticulous providence (MP) presupposes that God as omniscient knows what will happen at all times, as omnipotent can bring about whatever events God desires so long as they are logically consistent, and as good would and should want to prevent or eliminate all cases of (significant) evil or suffering. Alan Rhoda notes that with MP, “God ordains [and, we might add, permits] all events. By ‘ordaining’ an event, I mean that God either strongly or weakly actualizes it. To ‘strongly actualize’ an event is to be an ultimate sufficient cause of it. To ‘weakly actualize’ an event is to strongly actualize conditions knowing for certain that they will lead to the event, despite the fact that those conditions are not causally sufficient for it” (Rhoda 2010, p. 283).

The thesis of meticulous providence is not new. It underlies Epicurus's statement of the dilemma: “Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?” (Hume 1980, p. 63). David Hume affirms it: “Might not the Deity exterminate all ill, wherever it were to be found; and produce all good, without any preparation, or long progress of causes and effects?” (Hume 1980, p. 70). J. L. Mackie writes, “These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do. From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely” (Mackie 1955, p. 200). Finally, H. J. McCloskey echoes this: “Surely a good, omnipotent being would have made a world that is free of evil of any kind . . . . God could modify or change the laws when evil could thereby be prevented or reduced . . . . It would be the height of presumption to suggest that . . . God could do no better. The possibility of

miracles . . . makes nonsense of this contention . . . . It is generally conceded, as it must be, that an omnipotent God can work miracles" (McCloskey 1974, pp. 3, 95, 96).

Sterba's anti-theistic argument invokes the applicability and necessity of divine meticulous providence. "It is far more plausible to see an all-good, all-powerful God as also interacting with us continually over time, always having the option of either interfering or not interfering with our actions, and especially with the consequences of our actions" (Sterba 2019a, p. 27). Consequently, given the above properties, God can and should be decreasing "the moral evil in the world by justifiably restricting the freedoms of some to promote significant freedoms for others" and "be involved in preventing significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of natural evil upon ourselves and other living beings" (Sterba 2019a, pp. 30, 159). To address these "shoulds" regarding moral and natural evil, God must invoke meticulous providence.

## 2. Sterba's Two Analogies

That Sterba believes that the theist is committed to using MP to address evil can be seen from his employment of two analogies. The first is the analogy of superheroes. Superheroes use their superhuman powers to intervene in events "to prevent significant evils from occurring," while simultaneously preserving the "significant freedom for those who would otherwise suffer those evils" (Sterba 2019a, p. 19). In fact, not only do superhuman heroes exercise these superhuman powers, they also have an obligation to do so. "Among superheroes, the idea that they should limit the freedom of would-be villains to protect would-be victims is just taken for granted" (Sterba 2019a, p. 20). He notes that, with respect to Spider-Man, he is pressed by his uncle with the fact that with great power comes great responsibility.

Sterba goes on to liken God to the superheroes, asking "why, in the actual world, could not God, like the superheroes in our fictional world, be more involved in preventing evils that result in the loss of significant freedom for their victims?" (Sterba 2019a, p. 20). He introduces the tragic case of Matthew Shepard, who was murdered presumably because of his sexual orientation. "Surely God could have intervened in this case" to have prevented this terrible murder. Among the scenarios by which God could have intervened, Sterba suggests that God could have caused the car Shepard was in "to have a flat tire while it was being driven out of the bar's parking lot," providing incentive for him to walk to his dorm rather than riding with strangers (Sterba 2019a, p. 21). God presumably would have known the terrible outcome of that ride and both could have and thus should have intervened to prevent it. At the same time, God could have done so without affecting the significant freedom of the killers to plan the murderous attack while limiting their freedom to carry it out, a freedom to which they were not entitled in any case. Thus, Sterba invokes the moral necessity that God act with MP.

Sterba considers an objection: suppose that God had known that had Shepard lived, he would have become violent against those who were anti-gay; in this case, should not God have allowed the significant evil of his death? Again, Sterba invokes meticulous divine providence, suggesting that in such a case, God would prevent Shepard's murder but could subsequently intervene to prevent Shepard from assaulting others. In these and any other possible scenarios that involve significant evil, God, in line with MP, could and should step in and prevent or mitigate such an occurrence, and as omnipotent do it in such a way that any significant and justly held freedom of all the parties would be preserved.<sup>1</sup> The point here is that Sterba's analogy comparing God with superhumans invokes the contention that theists are and should be committed to MP, a claim that we will consider below.

Sterba's second analogy is with the just state. Sterba enquires regarding what interventions the just state would and should take regarding eliminating or preventing evil. His concern is primarily with the state's intervention in the freedom of its citizens. Just political states, he contends, aim at securing a high level of freedom for their citizens. The freedoms are both freedoms for and freedoms from. The freedoms from, however, are not freedoms from all restrictions or government intervention, but freedom from others who

would seriously restrict that citizen's significant, justly held freedoms and are consistent with promoting the significant freedoms of others in the community. It is freedom, for example, from assault, from unjust tyranny, from evils caused by free persons, or even from social structures that prevent a just distribution of wealth and freedom in a society.

It is not that the just state would eliminate all evils, for this would lead to unjustifiable restrictions on individuals, for example, with respect to their choices involving soul-building. But the ideal just state would attempt to eliminate all significant evils, even if those actions of elimination restricted freedom and soul-building.

Similarly, God "should be focused on preventing (not permitting) just the consequences of significant and especially horrendous moral evils which impact on people's lives, thus leaving wrongdoers the freedom to imagine, intend, and even to take initial steps toward carrying out their wrongdoing in such cases" (Sterba 2019a, p. 51). It is not that God has to eliminate all evils, for that would encroach unnecessarily on human freedom (Sterba 2019a, p. 55). If that were to happen, then the freedom we would be left with would hardly be worthy of the name" (Sterba 2019a, p. 52), but God ought to eliminate all significant evils, especially since God can foresee the actions and their consequences. What Sterba asks for, then, is for divine meticulous providence in cases that involve significant evils. "There are too many ways that political states and human individuals could have increased the amount of significant freedom by restricting lesser freedoms of would-be wrongdoers" (Sterba 2019a, p. 29). Likewise, God could and should have done much more to promote freedom by restricting some freedoms, but God has not intervened.

In both the just state and divine actions, Sterba recommends intervention. God allows some evil to occur so that humans can engage in soul-building. However, ultimately, God rectifies evil, for when we fail to act to prevent and mitigate significant evil, God intervenes, though evil consequences of a minor sort may still result. Since we chose not to intervene, we are responsible for those minor evil consequences (Sterba 2019a, p. 61).<sup>2</sup> But even limited intervention invokes the requirement that the just state and God operate according to MP. God "would always be in a position with respect to moral evils to prevent significant and especially horrendous consequences of all such evils that are causally related," by "sufficiently restricting the external freedom of the evil doer in each case," and "this is just what God morally should do" (Sterba 2019a, pp. 94, 96).

It might be objected that if God is all good, almighty, and omniscient, then the ante for the extent of God's intervention would be raised, for he would not be subject to the limitations that face the superhero or just state.<sup>3</sup> God could prevent all evil, significant or not. Sterba responds that this scenario creates the problem that "the freedom that we would be left with would hardly be worthy of the name" (Sterba 2019a, p. 52). God must leave some freedom for wrongdoing and hence for soul-building. However, he notes, those freedoms must be limited to events with trivial, easily repairable effects, where the consequences of the actions are not significantly evil (Sterba 2019a, pp. 49, 55). "Hence, all of these imaginings, intendings, taking initial steps, and actually realizing the consequences of one's actions [on the part of the evil doers] should provide ample training ground for soul-making" of the victim (Sterba 2019a, p. 55). Yet despite this, "God is always in a position to prevent such significant evil from happening" (Sterba 2019a, p. 56). And by parallel, God is always able to promote or produce significant good. The obligations of meticulous providence, then, go both to prevent and mitigate significant evil and to promote and produce significant good.

What Sterba presupposes, then, is that divine MP is required in cases that involve significant evils. "There are too many ways that political states and human individuals could have increased the amount of significant freedom by restricting lesser freedoms of would-be wrongdoers. Likewise, there is much that God could have done to promote freedom by restricting freedom that simply has not been done" (Sterba 2019a, p. 29). Thus, from these analogies, it is clear that Sterba believes theists hold and should hold that God should act according to MP. That is, if God exists, he would be obligated to use MP to prevent significant evil and produce significant good.<sup>4</sup> However, Sterba contends, there is

good reason to think that God does not exist because there is significant evil and lack of good in the world.

### 3. Would We Want Meticulous Providence?

Sterba's second analogy presumes that the citizens of the state would want the state to meticulously intervene to prevent significant evil, even if this means imposing restrictions on the freedoms of both the just and the unjust (Sterba 2019a, p. 60). And by parallel, it presumes that humans would want God's meticulous providence in the world, whereby God ordains or permits what is to happen, at least to prevent significant evils. "Who would object?" Sterba queries (Sterba 2019a, p. 62). In limiting freedom, the supervirtuous "should find such tradeoffs not only morally acceptable but also morally required . . . . They will surely welcome those restrictions regarding them as morally required" (Sterba 2019a, pp. 62–63).

Before we evaluate this claim, it is important to note that however one answers it, the question whether humans would want a state or world governed by MP differs from whether acting according to MP is obligatory for a person to be considered good. Here I turn to the first question, addressing the second in the next section.

There is good reason to suggest that, contrary to Sterba, humans would not necessarily welcome the restrictions that may be imposed by MP, whether imposed by a state or God. Evidence for this is to be found in the widespread anti-parentalist emphasis on freedom. For example, in the recent COVID-19 epidemic, edicts specifying mask wearing, shutting down public settings like hospitality, sports, and arts, and requiring a prophylactic to work in government or industry were promulgated for both personal and community protection. The public reaction to these restrictions on freedom was mixed. While many citizens cooperated, various states and companies took the government to court on the grounds that the edicts unconstitutionally restricted citizen freedom. People resisted not only vaccination mandates, such as ordered for health care workers, but even voluntarily obtaining vaccination. Citizens claimed that they did not want the government, through edict or legislation, controlling or dictating their behavior, even if their refusal endangered their life and that of others. Resistance to government mandates, invoking freedom, played out not only in the United States but in Europe as well. For example, over 100,000 protesters took to the streets in Paris carrying placards that read "Freedom" and "Non au pass vaccinal" (Anti-Vaccine Protesters 2022). As Steven Tipton put it: "It's an act of defiance. 'You can't make me. And I will enact my own freedom even if it kills me and others around me who (sic) I love'" (Wagner 2021).

It is true that those who resisted the vaccine may have had multiple reasons, good and bad, for their resistance. They may have combined their advocacy of freedom of choice with other reasons to resist government intervention. "Immunization resistance is complex. Concerns over the safety of vaccines may be understandable . . . [It may be] predicated on questionable notions: a mistrust of science, discredited work in vaccinology, suspicion of government, flawed anecdotes, the notion of 'individual self-management' and even conspiracy theories" (Palimaru and Dillistone 2020). Our point is *not* to evaluate the reasons, but to note that the affirmation of freedom of choice in the face of authority, even if the authority intends to benefit the governed, looms large. "If we cannot be free to make informed, voluntary decisions about which pharmaceutical products we are willing to risk our lives for, then we are not free in any sense of the word . . . . What do we want? Freedom" (Fisher 2022).<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not one thinks that the reasoning behind resistance to the dictates of authority is sound or specious, based on or ignores science, is egoistic and ignores social obligations or expresses justified individualism, understands or irrationally fails to appreciate the risks to themselves or others, comes from a supervirtuous or ordinary person, anti-parentalism and libertarianism are prevalent in Western society. Thus, it is reasonable to question Sterba's general claim that people would welcome MP as morally required.

Of course, that people manifest anti-parentalism or libertarianism and do not want those in power to exercise MP and restrict their freedom does *not* mean those in power should not exercise parentalism, for what is the case does not necessarily determine what ought to be the case. But it does give one pause regarding Sterba's claim "Who would object?" and to inquire whether MP is a requirement for being good. And it puts in question Sterba's appeal to analogies such as superheroes and the powerful just state. To the question whether acting according to MP is an acceptable moral requirement we now turn.

#### 4. Humans and the Requirement of Meticulous Providence

We have seen that Sterba invokes a version of MP. "God could always prevent the significantly evil consequences of any immoral action that is being performed without permitting the significantly evil consequences of any other immoral action that would also be performed" (Sterba 2019a, p. 78). And by extension it is easy to see that God could prevent not only significant evil consequences, but all consequences of moral evil, though, as Sterba argues, God is not obligated to do so since God would want humans to have significant freedom to allow soul-building. The fact that God can always prevent significant evil leads Sterba to claim that "it is morally required for God to do so" (Sterba 2019a, p. 80).

This leaves us with the question whether using MP to prevent (significant) evil and provide (significant) good is a reasonable and acceptable moral requirement applicable to humans and to God. Are persons or moral agents, to be morally good, required to use MP to eliminate or prevent all cases of (significant) evil or suffering and bring about (significant) good as far as possible?

Sterba provides examples where we encounter persons in significant need and for whom we could do something to meet those needs. We need not look far for such opportunities; they come to us from the suffering of millions of refugees fleeing wars in Ukraine, Syria, and Ethiopia; from the famines in countries of East Africa, where fourteen million people in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Kenya are on the verge of starvation in 2022 (International Rescue Committee 2022); from Afghanistan, where according to the UN nearly twenty million people are facing acute hunger; from the U.S. where it is estimated that twelve million children do not know where their next meal is coming from (Facts about Hunger in America 2022). These situations report significant evil and suffering, to whose alleviation we can easily providentially contribute. So, what obligations do we have in response to the deprivation of resources these people face? More generally, how should we invoke MP to satisfy these obligations?

To see how Sterba invokes MP to address these situations, we need to look at the ethical principles of obligation he promulgates. Sterba introduces his Principle of Disproportionality (PD): "Actions that meet non-basic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of individual animals and plants or even of whole species or ecosystems" (Sterba 2019a, p. 158).

For our purposes, we are not interested in the basic needs of non-humans but of humans. Thus, we can ask whether we can substitute "humans" for "individual animals and plants and ecosystems" in the PD. For Sterba, we can do so, for "even if we hold that all living beings should count morally, we can justify a preference for humans on the grounds of preservation" (Sterba 2019b, p. 205). This is borne out in Sterba's Principle of Human Preservation (PHP): "Actions that are necessary for meeting one's basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings is permissible even when they require aggressing against the basic needs of individual animal and plants, or even of whole species of ecosystems" (Sterba 2019b, p. 206). I have critiqued Sterba's PHP and his utilitarian argument for that principle elsewhere (Reichenbach 2021, pp. 11–12). Here I am not interested in the truth of PHP, but in the fact that Sterba invokes it. Combining the Principle of Disproportionality with the Principle of Human Preservation, we can advance what we can call the Principle of Human Disproportionality (PHD): Actions that meet non-basic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of individual humans. It is clear that Sterba himself sanctions PHD, for he notes that the Principle of Disproportionality "is

strictly analogous to the principle in human ethics that similarly prohibits meeting some people's non-basic or luxury needs by aggressing against the basic needs of other people" (Sterba 2019b, p. 506). "We are," he asserts, "only entitled to the goods and resources required to meet our basic needs for a decent life—no more. Otherwise, we would be violating the rights of distant peoples and future generations" (Sterba 2014, p. 159).<sup>6</sup>

Aggress is a broad concept. It can be used negatively to refer to one person actively and voluntarily depriving other persons of their freedom, goods, opportunities, or life. But it can also refer to actions that could be but are not done to promote meeting the basic needs of others. As Sterba states, "if you can easily prevent a small child from going hungry . . . without violating anyone's rights (or failing to meet one's basic needs), then you should do so" (Sterba 2019a, pp. 16, 126). By withholding contributions for basic needs, you have aggressed against the child. That is, aggression involves acts both of commission and omission (Sterba 2014, p. 144).

Sterba treats meeting the basic needs of others as an obligation. Thus, according to his Principle of Human Disproportionality, our obligations extend beyond merely voluntarily helping to feed these and other threatened people. Actions that fail to meet others' basic needs (which do not involve compromising one's own basic needs and rights of people) are *prohibited*. This means that the obligation is most stringent: whatever we can do to meet the basic needs of others, as long as we meet our own basic needs and do not violate anyone's rights, is obligatory. This, I take it, involves both commission and omission. The upshot of this Principle of Human Disproportionality, then, is that we are morally required to give up and use our non-basic resources to meet the basic needs of others; contrary action is prohibited.<sup>7</sup> Failing to meet the basic needs of others when it can be easily done would be aggressing against them by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.<sup>8</sup> This gives a very expansive notion to MP as a requirement for moral goodness.

Sterba provides evidence for this position in his "Ideal Transformation." According to him, were his "rationality-to-equality argument" accepted, workers who provide for the basic needs of others would allocate their own resources to meet their own basic needs; what lies beyond meeting their own needs is paid as taxes or donated to meeting the basic needs of others. And those with investments and pensions will need "to redirect their investments and donations to support the provision of a basic needs minimum for all . . . and ensure that they are getting that same basic needs minimum themselves, but no more" (Sterba 2019b, p. 138).

So much, then, for the expansive obligation of MP in regard to human behavior. We need to ask at this point whether PHD really is a human obligation. That is, is PHD, as an expression of MP, a reasonable and acceptable moral obligation and hence a criterion for goodness? For one thing, if we look at human behavior, it is obvious that human beings do not act as if the requirement expressed in PHD governs their actions. Many of us are often in the position of being able to help relieve significant suffering through contributing to any number of governmental and nonprofit organizations. Compared to the two billion in the world who make less than \$3 a day and suffer food insecurity, most readers of this article are very wealthy, possessing significant amounts of disposable income. We easily could donate our income that exceeds satisfying our basic needs to meet the basic needs of and alleviate significant ills facing the disadvantaged in our neighborhood, country, and around the world. While many of us do contribute to the needs of others, what we donate is often insignificant in comparison to our disposable income spent on non-basic things and the human needs to be met. And surely, we do not satisfy PHD by contributing everything we possess beyond what meets our basic needs. We could easily give up many things in our lives, things that are not basic needs such as a morning stop at Starbucks, a dessert at lunch, a night out at the bar, a vacation trip to England or Disney World. We contribute, but not in a way that satisfies the Principle of Human Disproportionality.

In short, few of us who have disposable income satisfy the Principle of Human Disproportionality in order to be good. We fail to distribute all or even a significant portion of our non-basic goods or wealth to satisfy the basic needs of others or to prevent others

from experiencing serious situations like hunger, malnutrition, disease, and violence, even when so doing would not deprive us of meeting our own basic needs and could be easily done. Yet—and here is the point—even though we fail to satisfy PHD by means of MP, we still consider ourselves and others who act in similar or comparable ways good when we and they contribute something to relieve suffering. In short, we do not consider PHD, as a manifestation of MP, to be a criterion of moral goodness.

It might be objected that though we do not use this Principle of Human Disproportionality to determine human goodness, this does not mean that we should not use it. It may still be such a criterion for human goodness. But why think it is a criterion of goodness? Sterba suggests a utilitarian justification for his principles: they are beneficial (Sterba 2014, p. 145). But is invoking the obligation found in PHD beneficial or, more to the point, realistic?

Sterba's demand on humans and society to use PHD to prevent (significant) evil and produce (significant) good presents an extremely high, indeed, unrealistic if not unreasonable standard. And as Sterba notes, we "cannot impose moral requirements on humans that it would be unreasonable for them to accept" (Sterba 2014, p. 146). Not even the Western religious traditions, which affirm God's existence, speak of such an obligation as PHD. Rather, they speak of limited contributions. In a communitarian society we have an obligation to contribute to the basic needs of others. The Jewish tradition commands a ten percent tithe (Lev 27:30), Christians are to be generous (1 Tim 6:18), and the Muslim tradition requires the zakāt of two and a half percent of total wealth beyond basic needs. But a principle like PHD that prohibits actions that would not contribute to the basic needs of others while not interfering with our basic needs imposes an unreasonable and probably an unkeepable requirement for being good.<sup>9</sup> That is, contributing all our disposable income and resources to meet the basic needs of others is not an obligation but a supererogatory (and extraordinarily rare) act.

In sum, Sterba claims that we should hold to the Principles of Proportionality. His defense of these ideals is a utilitarian one that alleges it would make our life better. But he presents no evidence that requiring these principles would improve our life. Rather, they set a standard for human moral obligation that we do not use in everyday life, that is not confirmed by the religious traditions that believe in the existence of God, and that presents an unrealistic, unreasonable, and, invoking the vagueness of "decent life," vague ethical ideal. Our goodness does not rest on such a radical view of moral obligations, and as such does not require us to use MP to satisfy the Principle of Human Disproportionality to be morally good.

## 5. God and the Requirement of Meticulous Providence

If Sterba's principles underlying MP present an unrealistic demand for human goodness, what about for God? For God to be good, must God engage in MP to prevent evil and produce good? The contention that God must engage in MP to prevent evil and produce good begins with the belief that God has abilities and powers that surpass those of mortals. As omniscient, God knows everything that happens, and if God has foreknowledge, he knows the future as well. As almighty, God can do whatever he chooses. And as perfectly good, God has moral obligations regarding promoting good and preventing or alleviating evil. Thus, the question arises whether possession of these super properties alter the circumstances, such that God is obliged to engage in MP to prevent evil and produce good.

Broadly, the theist can argue that defenders of the view that God is so obliged have presupposed a particular view of the relation between God and the world, and more specifically, of sovereignty and providence. This view is hinted at by Sterba's appeal to the analogy of the just state. A theist may reject the notion that the sovereign takes all matters into the sovereign's control (MP) on the grounds that this is inconsistent with meaningful sovereignty.

Invocation of MP would, as we noted above with McCloskey and others, require God to run or operate the universe by divine intervention (miracles). This view misconstrues

divine sovereignty. Sovereignty involves the relationship between the governor, who has both authority and power, and the governed. To be sovereign does not mean that everything that occurs accords with the will or design of the sovereign or that sovereigns can bring about anything they want. The ability of sovereigns to determine the outcomes depends, in part, on the type and amount of freedom granted to the governed. If the subjects possess or the sovereign grants significant freedom, then sovereigns are limited in what they can do (by virtue of the freedom granted). The more freedom sovereigns award their subjects, the less sovereigns can control their subjects' behavior without withdrawing or circumscribing the very freedom granted, and the less they are justified in intervening. The key point is that sovereignty makes no sense unless the governed have a degree of significant freedom, and that freedom imposes significant limits on the sovereign (even if self-imposed). If one invokes MP, God is not sovereign over creatures who can freely respond to him, for with MP God directly or indirectly brings about all events. Thus, the governed cannot but choose or act in a given fashion since God directly or indirectly caused their motives, intentions, thought patterns, and the desires from which they act. The goodness of the sovereign, therefore, must be seen within the limits of freedom granted and the intentions of the sovereign in granting significant freedom. (I lay this argument out much more fully in [Reichenbach 2016](#), chapter 1).

One can see the consequences of MP intervention with respect to natural evil. If God consistently intervened in the operation of natural laws, the world would become, from a human perspective, a chaos in which human rational and moral action would be impossible.<sup>10</sup> Without regularity and order, humans could not rationally plan or calculate what actions to take to achieve particular goals. Suppose we see a person thrashing about in the middle of a river and calling for help. If God is going to control the situation through miracle, how should we act? Maybe the water will not drown the person, maybe the person will be able to get up and walk on the water out of the river, or perhaps the person will simply float to safety like a cork. How we act depends on how we can act, and how we can act depends on the way the world is and on our knowledge of the natural properties the world. Without this type of knowledge our own activity as rational beings becomes impossible, for we would not know which actions would be possible.<sup>11</sup> As C. S. Lewis writes, "Not even Omnipotence could create a society of free souls without at the same time creating a relatively independent and 'inexorable' Nature" ([Lewis 1962](#), p. 29). If divine intervention is minimal, then the regularity observed would provide the basis for rational action. But if the amount of evil is significant, as seems to be the case in nature ([Sterba 2019a](#), p. 11), then a view of sovereignty invoking MP yields this unacceptable situation.<sup>12</sup>

But how can God be considered good in this context? What are the mitigating factors? One way of addressing this is to inquire what purpose God might have for allowing suffering-experiencing human beings to exist and for not invoking MP. If there are reasons for divine inaction, they must be exculpatory. A possible reason, I suggest, is to make possible that there be moral agents choosing between good and evil and thereby developing their moral character.<sup>13</sup> That is, a world containing significantly free persons making choices between moral good and evil and choosing a significant amount of moral good is superior to a world lacking significantly free persons and moral good and evil. God is not obligated to operate according to MP because God desires to be in relation to moral agents who freely choose a significant amount of good ([Sterba 2019a](#), pp. 84, 160). Since having morally significant agents presupposes the possibility of freely choosing between moral good and moral evil, giving up divine MP allows for humans to exercise morally significant freedom. As Alvin Plantinga noted, for a person to be a moral agent, the person must be at many times significantly free, and "a person is *significantly* free, on a given occasion," if that person is then free either to perform or to refrain from performing an action that is morally significant for that person ([Plantinga 1974](#), p. 166). As such, human freedom is a great good, not in itself and not per se the highest good, since, as Sterba often points out, it can be justly restricted to bring about greater goods or prevent greater evils, but because human



freedom in general is necessary for the greater good of there being moral agents who can choose between doing good and evil.

From this it follows that it is good that humans have the ability and freedom to choose between good and evil and choose to relate to God, and although it is possible that all humans always choose to do the good (understood consequentially or deontologically), experience shows that humans do choose to do evil. That is, although there are specific evils that arise from human choices, what is necessary is that human beings be able to make choices, for without morally significant freedom they cease to be moral agents who relate to God and others. While specific evils may, but often do not, lead to a specific greater good, what is important for our purposes is that their *possibility* results from the freedom that is necessary for human agents to achieve the greater good of becoming moral beings and relating to God. The evil choices made and the evil that results are not desired, either by God or by many humans. However, their *possibility* is necessary to realize the greater good of there being moral agents and the moral good that they realize. To prevent the actuality of evil would be to prevent their possibility, which would limit human ability to choose between moral good and evil. A world run by beneficent MP would prevent such possibility.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, a world functioning on MP has serious negative consequences. If God meticulously operates the world by his actions to prevent evil actions or to bring about only good results or the results he desires, there is no reason for us to act to produce the good. As we noted above, Sterba wants to leave room for significant soul-building (Sterba 2019a, pp. 83–84, 91). However, given God's knowledge and almightiness, God can do a much better job at any task than we can. Ultimately, if God is expected to run the world by miraculous divine intervention thereby to eliminate evils and bring about good, humans would have no incentive to act, since by MP God determines what can and cannot and will or will not be done. God would prevent the evil and promote the good. Even if humans do not act, God as perfectly good will intervene, according to MP, to eliminate gratuitous evil and meet all basic needs, if not do more. And where humans do act, God would be there to guarantee that no evil or greater evil results. Relying on God to rectify all situations would remove meaningful choice for humans to act immorally or to bring about evil; God would be expected to prevent all unjustified evil acts and deleterious consequences, so that only good could be accomplished. Consequently, there is little or no significant opportunity for moral agents to engage in significant moral decision making, to develop their moral character, or to engage in soul-building, since there are no or few morally significant situations that would present themselves. The freedom to significantly choose between doing good and doing evil is removed. It would be pointless and fruitless to plan or intend evil if the ability to carry out the plans is rendered impossible. What soul-building choices there are would be present on nonsignificant instances of evil and would occur with the knowledge, or at least belief, that a good and powerful God would intervene to save or rectify the situation regardless of what we do. Moreover, if intentions have moral values, they too would be affected; it is difficult to see how with MP God would even allow planning of significant evil even when its implementation is restricted.

## 6. Limited Use of Meticulous Providence

Sterba's thoughtful response to this is two-fold. On the one hand, although freedom is a great good, it is not the highest or ultimate good. As such, there are times when individual human freedom can and ought to be overridden to protect the good and freedom of others. God can select those times when human freedom would result in significant evil, but the rest of the time we would be free to act on our desires. These times, however, would be such that significant evil would ultimately be prevented and significant good would be produced by God. Second, on Sterba's doctrine of limited intervention, not all evil actions need be prevented. If God prevented the most egregious evils by restricting the freedom of the evil doer, or if the bad consequences of the most horrendous immoral actions were averted, enough opportunities would remain for moral agents to make morally significant

choices. The person could make the choices, but God would intervene in some way or ways to prevent or ameliorate the evil action. He gives the example of someone attempting to abduct a small child (Sterba 2019a, p. 61). In such a case, God can allow the kidnapping plan to be conceived and to unfold, but at some point God would intervene either to prevent or to bring to a halt the kidnapping (while at the same time allowing bystanders opportunity to develop their moral character by intervening). Divine meticulous providence would be involved in such cases, but its use by God would be limited to curtailing the consequences of freedom-depriving or significant immoral action.

Whether this limited intervention would still allow for significant moral soul building is debated (Hasker 2021; Lim 2022). Significant decisions would be at the behest of divine action, such that we would soon learn that God would only allow good acts of significant import. Actions that involve insignificant evils would be left to us. But why should we act in such cases? For one thing, if the evil is insignificant, so why should I risk any action? For another, God has superior wisdom and power, so that even these instances would be better left for God. To use one of Sterba's examples, why should I risk anything to prevent the kidnapping or avoid stepping on another's foot if God can do it more easily and successfully than I. I might be injured in the intervention or badly twist my ankle in the process (though, by a stroke of irony, if these effects were significant, God would prevent these as well). Our intellectual and moral virtue would be protected, for we have done the wise thing in turning every decision and action over to God, realizing the strong sense of MP.

Further, whether limited but significant intervention would allow enough significant moral freedom may be debated. Part of the answer depends on the amount of evil in the world. On the one hand, if the amount of (significant) gratuitous evil is not great, then Sterba's response poses no real threat to the theist, who can hold that when God either intervenes or does not intervene some purpose lies behind it. On the other hand, if the amount of (significant) evil in the world is so great and the quality so intense as to put in question God's existence, limited meticulous providence would have to be applied to such an extent that humans could no longer function as meaningful moral agents. They could plan, but allowable actions would have to be sanctioned by God. Moreover, those who plan to commit significant evil would soon discover that their actions would be fruitless. They may have freedom of choice but not freedom of action in the sense that what they desire to happen and work to achieve cannot and will not be realized. Their implementation would depend on being sanctioned by God, who would only sanction significant good. In effect, they are not really free, for although they can plan they cannot implement their plans.<sup>15</sup> Planning would be a useless endeavor for the planners of evil, for they will soon discover that such evil plans never are accomplished.<sup>16</sup>

The theist who allows for miracles would concur with Sterba that God may engage in limited intervention. The difference between the theist and Sterba's critique is in the degree of intervention and in the contention that it is required. Whereas Sterba contends that if God existed, God would be obligated to use MP to eliminate all significant evils, the theist will allow that God may intervene in a limited way, so long as significant freedom, rationality, and calculable order are preserved. It might be objected that this leaves us with no reason why God intervenes here and not there, this time and not another, in this rather than another way. The theist need not pretend to know the reasons for God intervening or failing to do so in each case of suffering, as in a similar fashion, we do not know the reasons behind many human actions. The theist is not attempting to explain individual cases where suffering occurs and God does or does not act, but addresses the general problem of suffering.

Morality involves not only consequences but, from a deontological perspective, duties and obligations incumbent upon us and our intentions. The evil intent of the attempted kidnapers still lurks, as does their failed obligation to bring about the good. One would think that God should intervene to prevent these evil intentions and desires as well, since they degrade human character and in Sterba's example, lead to some temporary if not

longer lasting dis-ease (how seriously will the attempted abduction, even if ultimately prevented, affect the child?). Finally, and significantly for Sterba's presentation, if God allows the abduction of the child even to begin to provide bystanders with an opportunity to intervene and thus develop their character, it violates Sterba's Pauline principle that evil should not be used to bring about good, in this case, soul-building.

## 7. Conclusions

Sterba's counter to a free will theodicy invokes a version of the doctrine of meticulous providence, coupled with the Principle of Human Disproportionality. We have seen that this requirement not only is not used in determining human goodness but is unattainable. When the requirement is applied to God, we would get a very different picture of divine sovereignty than that espoused by some theists. In particular, it would have significant detrimental effects to human freedom and moral action; in particular, soul building of a significant sort would not occur, for there would be no reason for the inferior party to act if the superior party has all in hand by MP. Sterba's turn to a limited application of MP is more difficult to assess, given that we lack a clear understanding of the amount of gratuitous evil that would have to be addressed. This ambiguity is sufficient to defang the evidential objection to God's existence from evil, though it is unlikely to be strong enough to convince those provoking a defense, given the persuasive power of invoking particular cases of suffering and limited intervention.<sup>17</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For Sterba, not all freedom is justly held. Shepard's killers justly had the freedom to plan the attack, but the freedom to kill was not justly held.
- <sup>2</sup> One might argue that persons might refuse to intervene in cases where they are aware of significant (or even of insignificant) evils because not intervening gives God the opportunity to manifest God's goodness. For example, inaction allows God to rescue a kidnapped child or to prevent the kidnapping, and humans are justified in not acting because God is much more proficient at these tasks than we are, especially since with his knowledge and power he can avoid serious and even non-serious side-consequences. In such cases, God, not the human who responsibly deferred to a more competent being to resolve the problem, is responsible for the resulting evil, since God as all powerful and knowing could have intervened in a way that would have prevented such consequences. Sterba rejects this analysis.
- <sup>3</sup> Underlying Sterba's invocation of MP is his belief that "God is not subject to any such limitation of power. Thus, God can negotiate crowded subways without harming anyone in the slightest. God can also prevent a temporarily depressed person from committing suicide without lying to them, and God can save all twenty civilian hostages without having to execute any one of them" (Sterba 2019a, p. 50).
- <sup>4</sup> It is important to note that the term "significant" is a person-relative term, and hence what constitutes significant evil and significant good is relative to persons and thus ambiguous. We will return to this later (see Reichenbach 2021, p. 8, for additional discussion).
- <sup>5</sup> Though widespread in American society, anti-parentalism is less apparent in totalitarian societies, probably due to the structure of those societies. It was endemic in the anti-Prohibition behavior responding to the 18th Amendment in the 1920s. In the abortion debate, prochoice advocates protest that women, not the government, should control what they do with their body in reproduction; woman have the right to bodily autonomy (Key Facts on Abortion 2022). Motorcyclists in the United States have successfully lobbied state governments to roll back laws requiring them to wear helmets, even when riders have a previous history of accidents (Faryabi et al. 2014). Although the reasons motorcyclists give may be many (The Legal Examiner 2022), one organization leader calls it a "small zone of personal autonomy" (Chapman 2010). Anti-paternalism also plays out when U.S. gun owners invoke the Second Amendment to successfully lobby not only against restrictions on possessing and carrying weapons, but even for the type of weapons they may own and carry. One can list numerous activities, such as edificeering or urban climbing, of those who willingly risk personal danger, often in the face of contrary legislation.

- 6 “Decent life” is itself a very ambiguous term, for what constitutes a decent life for one person or for one culture will vary greatly from what constitutes such for another person or another culture. This means that the interpretation of basic needs, insofar as it depends on what one conceives of as a decent life, will vary greatly as well, with those who possess means having a more robust notion of decent life and hence of their basic needs. To see this, one might ask whose concept of a decent life should be adopted as a standard when basic needs are considered to determine obligatory and prohibited actions.
- 7 In fact, Sterba goes even further to hold that “in general, we don’t have a principle that allows us to aggress against (though an act of commission) the basic needs of some people in order to meet our own basic needs or the basic needs of other people to whom we are committed or happen to care about” (Sterba 2014, p. 144). However, Sterba restricts aggression in cases of meeting our own basic needs or those of whom we care for to acts of commission rather than omission.
- 8 Sterba’s treatment of “the freedom of the poor not to be interfered with in taking from the surplus possessions of the rich what is necessary to satisfy their basic needs” further illustrates his commitment to this requirement (Sterba 2019a, p. 16).
- 9 In fact, although Sterba preferences nonviolent actions, he suggests that we are justified in using force against “rich people [who] are unwilling to make the necessary transfers of resources so that poor people” can meet their basic needs (Sterba 2014, pp. 137, 150).
- 10 Sterba (2019a, p. 166) denies this result. I do not have space here to undertake the discussion; I address his response in detail in Reichenbach (2021, p. 15).
- 11 Reichenbach (2016, pp. 9–10). This does not mean that God cannot act directly in nature. But it does mean that if we are to be morally responsive beings, God cannot act in such a way that would result in the destruction of the natural order and in our own inability to act rationally, prudently, and morally. Operating the world by miracle to eliminate all (significant) evil to humans and nature would require this type of intervention.
- 12 This is a very truncated summary of the detailed argument I give elsewhere (Reichenbach 2021, pp. 10–15). I refer the reader to that discussion of Sterba’s position.
- 13 As Alvin Plantinga (1974, p. 165) has pointed out, for a successful defense one need not show that this is God’s actual reason; only that it might possibly constitute God’s reason.
- 14 This emphasis on human freedom and God’s respecting it in his desire to be in relation to humans should not be understood in the sense of there being absolute, non-interfered with freedom. Our view does not advocate or necessitate a deism where God is not involved in the affairs of the world. It is not, as one critic contended, that “free will is that important, and that fragile, [that] it can suffer no violations.” It is the degree of violations that concerns the requirement to apply MP. What theism does maintain is that a world that is fully or significantly operated by MP, where God ordains all or most events, seriously compromises the possibility of the freedom necessary for moral decision making. Of course, giving humans a say in how the world and people operate and make decisions means that God cannot guarantee how the future will turn out, for human decisions and actions are part of the mix. God’s relation to the world is more complex than MP makes out in envisioning a world run by divine intervention.
- 15 Hasker (2021, p. 21). It should be noted that Sterba opts for a different view of significant freedom, namely, that “significant freedoms are those freedoms a just political state would want to protect since that would fairly secure each person’s fundamental interests” (Sterba 2019a, p. 12). For him, the kidnappers are free in the sense that they can plan, but a just political state would restrict their implementing their kidnapping plan.
- 16 What further complicates determination of the amount of gratuitous, significant evil to be addressed is the ambiguity of the term “significant.” As we noted above, significance is person-relative, such that what is significant to one person might not be significant to another, and vice versa. This particularly comes into play when one considers quality of life situations, as over against life and death situations (quantity of life). There is no objective standard to determine the amount of significant evil in the world requiring significant intervention.
- 17 Thanks to anonymous referees for their helpful comments and critique.

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