

## Article

# The Problem of Evil and God's Moral Standing: A Rejoinder to James Sterba

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**Abstract:** This article is a rejoinder to James Sterba's response to my previous article on the topic of his book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* Sterba argues that a good God is not logically possible given the amount of horrendous evil in the world. If God did exist, Sterba asserts, then he would be able to prevent such evils from happening while not losing any goods. My original article was a response to the notion that God is morally obligated to prevent such evil. The main points considered here are whether there really is a logical problem of evil and how God can have moral virtues ascribed to him while not being morally obligated in the sense that Sterba's position requires.

**Keywords:** God; evil; moral; theism; Aquinas; Sterba

## 1. Introduction

James Sterba was kind enough to respond to an article I wrote critiquing his book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*<sup>1</sup> Sterba argues in his book that if the God of traditional theism exists, then we should not expect to see horrendous evil. Since we do, then no such God exists. Sterba examines various theodicies and defenses that are typically used to rebuff his approach to the problem of evil. In chapter 6 of his book, he critiques a position that I have attempted to use and develop: the approach championed by Brian Davies that argues God is not a moral being and thus cannot be judged as one. Further, since God is a wholly distinct being from what is experienced in this natural world, we do not understand exactly what God is. In Davies' view (similar to Herbert McCabe 2010), if it can be proven that we do not have a grasp of God's essence (other than mostly apophatic), and if we can say that God is not a moral being with obligations, then the problem of evil fails.<sup>2</sup>

My previous article was a defense of such a view. (Since I have already written on this, I will not rehearse that argument here. The interested reader can peruse that work.) Sterba offered a response to my article and this present work will serve as a rejoinder. I will provide Sterba's objections followed by a response.

## 2. Sterba's Objections and My Responses

### 2.1. Traditional Theism vs. Classical Theism

Sterba's first point seems merely explanatory. He states that I believe his book "works against the existence of God (*sic*) of traditional theism but not against the existence of the God of classical theism."<sup>3</sup> This was not exactly a point that I set out to make in my article. In fact, the word 'traditional' does not appear in it. Perhaps what Sterba meant is that since I admit most theists hold that God is a moral agent, then that line of thinking is held by "traditional" theists, as opposed to stricter classical theists. It is agreed that most theists (whether we use the term 'traditional' or 'classical') believe that God is a moral agent.

### 2.2. Rationality as a Sufficient Condition for Morality

One of my objections to Sterba's book is that he did not explain why being a rational agent is a sufficient condition for being a moral agent. If theists agree that God is a rational agent in the sense that Sterba maintains, and it could be demonstrated that being a rational



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agent suffices for being a moral agent, then it would follow that God is a moral agent. However, what is it about being rational that guarantees that the being in question is moral in nature? This is not clear in Sterba's book and he notes as much in his response to me. This of course, does not mean his position is inaccurate, but it seems to be an assumption in the book. Sterba's response is that he has noted this connection elsewhere:

I did not present any argument for that conclusion in my recent book on the problem of evil. Fortunately, in my earlier work in moral and political philosophy, I have been able to show how a non-question-begging notion of rationality requires a commitment to morality. This is just the sort of argument that is needed here to establish that God's commitment to rationality supports a commitment to morality as well. Thus, the gap that Huffling found in my argument can be remedied in this way.

However, Sterba did not cite where this material is found, so the reader is left to discover that himself. Since he did not provide that reasoning and I do not know where he made the argument, I cannot respond to it. Of course, my position is that God can be 'rational' in a sense while not being moral. This point will be better explained in the next subsection.

### 2.3. *God and Properties of Creation*

One of the central disagreements between me and Sterba concerns whether God necessarily has "properties" or qualities of creation. My argument is that properties which are inherently proper to creatures cannot be said to properly "exist" in God. Sterba writes:

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

First premise: If God is the creator of the universe then he does not have the property of creation.<sup>4</sup>

Second Premise: Morality is a property of creation.

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

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

As Sterba notes, he wants to substitute "intelligence" for "morality." He then states that I "would not want to draw the conclusion that God does not have the property of intelligence." As a follower of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas' metaphysics, I would argue that God does not have any properties. This probably seems like a rather innocuous point; however, I will argue that it is at the heart of the argument that Davies and I are making. It is not exactly clear to me how Sterba is using the term 'property'; however, he seems to have the notion of something that is "shared" or "possessed" by God and man. This would further seem to require a rather univocal notion of any terms used for such properties.<sup>5</sup> Having said that, since that is the word I used in my previous argument and it is the word Sterba uses, I will retain it with the caveat that I do not mean something like an abstract object or that God has any properties that modifies his being as properties certainly modify ours.

So, can the term 'intelligent' be used for God? Yes, but maybe not in the exact way some people mean it. From a classical theistic point of view, one can make many statements about God from one's experience and sometimes those statements, or predicates, can be applied to God in a proper sense and sometimes those terms are applied to God in a more

improper sense, such as metaphor. It is proper to say that God is intelligent. However, what most people mean by intelligent is a human kind of intelligence. Further, when people, atheist or theist, use terms for God, they often give the term a univocal meaning. An example given in this context is the term 'good'. When one says that a man is good and that God is good, the term 'good' is often taken to have the same, or at least very similar, meaning. Since man is morally good, the idea is that God, if he is good, must also be morally good. The argument that I made above, cited by Sterba, says that properties of creation cannot properly be said of God. Since I argue that morality is a property of creation, then such a property cannot be ascribed to God. However, what about intelligence, since it is generally, if not always, agreed that the God of classical theism is intelligent? Since creatures and God are intelligent, then it would seem that God does in fact possess a property of creation.

As Aquinas maintains, God is intelligent (Aquinas 1924, 1:44). He thinks this because God is an immaterial being, and also because his effects are intelligent, so he must be intelligent as well since all perfections pre-exist in God. However, what it means for God to be intelligent is radically different than what it means for humans to be intelligent. For example, in *Summa Theologiae* question 14, Aquinas explains what it means for God to have knowledge. In article 4 he says that God's intellect *is his substance*. This is not the case with humans. This is because, per the doctrine of simplicity, which Aquinas established in question 3 and which informs question 14 article 4, "in God, intellect, and the object understood, and the intelligible species, and His act of understanding are entirely one and the same. Hence, when God is said to be understanding, no kind of multiplicity is attached to His substance" (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 14 a. 4). While being rational is generally considered to be part of the definition of being human, the difference is that all of God's knowledge, per Aquinas, is essential to him, while knowledge is accidental to humans in terms of the content of their knowledge. It is essential to have knowledge, but not essential to have all of one's knowledge as identical with his being.

In article 7 of question 14, Aquinas rejects the notion that God's knowledge is discursive. Such is in keeping with the medieval and classical notion of divine eternity, following Boethius, that God does not exist in a sequence of temporal moments but enjoys all of his life simultaneously without any succession at all (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 10 a. 1; Boethius 1999, Book v chap. 6). Further, in article 8 he argues that God's knowledge is causal. He states: "Now it is manifest that God causes things by His intellect, since His being is His act of understanding; and hence His knowledge must be the cause of things, in so far as His will is joined to it" (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 14 a. 8). This last point is radically different from creatures since humans know things passively, at least in terms of the use of the senses.

To summarize, God's knowledge is arguably identical with his essence, not discursive, and is causal. On the other hand, man's knowledge is not identical with his essence, is discursive, and is passive (at least in knowing the world around him and other beings).

While it is noted that such a description of God is controversial, even among theists, my argument of God's knowledge and intelligence attempts to demonstrate that what it means for God to be intelligent is radically different than what it means for man to be intelligent. The kind of intelligence man has is indeed a "property" of a created thing, or necessary for a created thing. That is, a created thing must have knowledge contingently, while a necessary being has it necessarily. Created things learn in a discursive, passive way. The Creator on the other hand, as an eternal and necessary being, does not learn via a discursive and passive way. To be sure, given classical theism and what was argued in my last article, God is simply not the kind of being that creatures are. Divine being and created beings are literally and infinitely distinct. I maintain, then, that the kind of intelligence man possesses is inherently and necessarily a consequent, effect, and property of being a created thing. The kind of intelligence God has (is), is necessarily distinct from creation and is *sui generis* to being the Creator. So, it is proper to say that God is intelligent, but the kind of intelligence is only analogous to ours and is unique to his being. Thus, I argue that Sterba's counterexample and attempt to show I am engaging in special pleading fails.

#### 2.4. Ascribing Moral Virtue to God

Sterba's next point is to show that it is inconsistent of me to claim that we can ascribe moral virtues to God while also claiming that he is not morally good. He states:

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

It is understandable that one would allege a contradiction or at least inconsistency here. It seems that what is being said is that God is both moral and not moral. However, I do not think that is actually the case, and I think Sterba is moving too quickly over my point regarding the way in which God can be said to have moral virtues and the ways he cannot.

Sterba rightly notes that the way in which I have argued for God having moral virtues is analogical; however, he does not seem to see that distinction in his objection. In other words, the point that I (following [Davies 2006, 2011](#)) maintain is the way in which God is said to have moral virtues is radically different from what it means for humans to have moral virtues. It seems that what Aquinas means when ascribing, for instance, justice to God, is that God is just because he *like a just person* gives to people (and things) what are due to them. We have a notion of justice that we experience in our everyday dealings and then we in turn say that God has something similar because he gives to people what is due to them. However, as Aquinas and Davies have pointed out, terms like 'justice' cannot be used univocally between God and creatures, and there are ways justice cannot be ascribed to God at all.

The issue of morality would be analogous (no pun intended) to the property of intelligence. Classical theists, such as Aquinas and Davies, state there are certain ways in which God can be thought to have certain moral virtues. In question 21 of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas argues that there are specific moral virtues that cannot be ascribed to God since they deal with passions, which God does not have. Examples would include temperance and courage ([Aquinas 1921](#), Ia. q. 21 a. 1 ad 1). These can be ascribed to God metaphorically, but not properly. However, there are moral virtues that Aquinas says God can exhibit, such as justice and liberality, since these virtues are not tied to the appetite but to the will. However, while there are two kinds of justice, says Aquinas, commutative and distributive, God can only properly be said to exhibit the latter since the former requires a debt and God does not owe anyone a debt. Distributive justice occurs when, according to Aquinas, "a ruler or steward gives to each what his rank deserves. As then the proper order displayed in ruling a family or any kind of multitude evinces justice of this kind in the ruler, so the order of the universe, which is seen both in effects of nature and in effects of will, shows forth the justice of God" ([Aquinas 1921](#), Ia. q. 21 a. 1). The kind of justice that Aquinas has in mind here has to do with giving one what is due in accordance with his creative act, which is based in his will. However, one should not see an obligation here in the sense that there is some overarching, transcendent morality that rules over all rational beings (which also makes God a being among other beings instead of the *sui generis* Creator), as Sterba's view requires.

It seems that Sterba and others take such notions of justice to mean that God is under some obligation to perform certain actions and to refrain from others. This does not seem to be what Aquinas has in mind. The Book of Job is an excellent biblical example of this that I discussed in my previous work.

Aquinas argues that “no name belongs to God in the same sense that it belongs to creatures; for instance, wisdom in creatures is a quality, but not in God” (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 13 a. 5). So, whatever is meant by ‘justice’ or ‘moral virtue’ cannot for Aquinas mean the same thing when those terms are applied to humankind. Further, since Aquinas rejects the notion that commutative justice resides in God because he does not owe man anything, on Aquinas’ account God cannot be said to have obligations. However, this is exactly and necessarily what Sterba’s position requires: that God owes it to man to prevent horrendous evils. This is not at all the kind of justice that Aquinas says God has. The kind of justice that God has according to Aquinas only concerns following through with God’s creative order.

A distinction here may clarify. Aquinas maintains that there are two ways a thing can be necessary: absolutely and suppositionally (or conditionally). Something is absolutely necessary if it is definitionally true or simply must be true according to its nature, such as God willing his goodness. However, something is only suppositionally necessary if God wills it. God does not have to will the universe to be; however, supposing he does, then it is necessary that he does. However, the necessity is not one of an absolute nature, but only on the condition that he actually wills it. This is because, as Aquinas says, “supposing that He wills a thing, then He is unable not to will it, as His will cannot change” (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 19 a. 3).

This seems to be the way in which Aquinas thinks of God’s justice. Namely, that if God wills to create, then he is just to give those things what their natures require in order to be what they are. There is no moral obligation; but there is a necessity of sorts, *supposing God wills to create*. In other words, to echo Aquinas, God cannot will to create x and not will to create x.

What is missing in the discussion with Aquinas, and what may be at least implicitly rejected in his denial of God having commutative justice, is the notion of obligation. This (obligation) is the *sine qua non* of Sterba’s position and is the very thing that Aquinas seems to reject, or at least leave out. Moral virtues are not moral obligations for God as humans have obligations. Such divine moral virtues are analogical at best. To say that God is just is not to say that he is keeping some law that should not be broken. It is to say that he acts in a way analogously to how we see and think of just people: that they give to their subjects what is due. This is clear from what Aquinas says in the same article on justice:

Since good as perceived by intellect is the object of the will, it is impossible for God to will anything but what His wisdom approves. This is, as it were, His law of justice, in accordance with which His will is right and just. Hence, what He does according to His will He does justly: as we do justly what we do according to law. But whereas law comes to us from some higher power God is a law unto Himself. (Aquinas 1921, Ia. q. 21 a. 1 ad 2)

God is just simply by the act of his willing, not by being obligated by some higher standard. Such is the case with the other moral virtues that Aquinas says can be ascribed to God. So, I would argue that there is a sense in which one can ascribe moral virtues to God, but they do not mean exactly the same thing for him and do not put God under any moral obligation. Since obligation is paramount for Sterba’s position, I maintain that since God is not under an obligation, the arguments from evil (logical and evidential) do not (and cannot) demonstrate that he does not exist.

In conclusion to this point, the kind of morality (and intelligence) that humans have is indeed a property unique to created beings. The way of talking about moral virtues that Aquinas and classical theists say can be ascribed to God is unique to the Creator. Thus, I believe that the above argument about God not having properties of creation, one of which is a certain kind of morality, is sound. The human kind involves aspects of morality that the divine kind does not, such as obligation.

## 2.5. Can God Perform Immoral Actions?

Sterba next argues:

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

Here, Huffling says:

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

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

From what I can tell, Sterba is saying that I appear to make moral assertions or evaluations about God and in doing so I am being inconsistent with my position. I think there may be a miscommunication here. I was not trying to apply moral evaluations to God; actually, I was trying to do the opposite. My point was that when people try to argue that God is immoral, they often seem to fail to understand that God is not the kind of being that can do the kinds of things that would make him immoral. For example, God is simply not the kind of being that can murder or steal, for the reasons given in Sterba's quote. When one calls God immoral, it needs to be remembered the kind of being God is and is not. My argument is that God cannot do the kinds of things that many people charge him with. This is because they often fail to make a Creator/creature distinction and put God in the class of all other beings. An example may help.

One philosopher argues this way: God cannot be simultaneously omniscient and wholly (morally) good (Atterton 2019). If he were omniscient, then he would know what it is like to lust. If he knew what it was like to lust, then he would not be wholly good (since he must have committed the sin of lust). Thus, no such God exists.

The assumption made here is that God knows in the same manner as humans do, viz., through experience. However, if Aquinas is right about God's knowledge, then God as an eternal, immutable, impassible being *cannot* know via experience. As Aquinas maintains, God's knowledge is causal and active (since God is Pure Act). Thus, God not only does not know in the way that humans do, but he cannot commit lust since such would require passions, time, change, and imperfection (of the metaphysical sort) that God's being does not have.

Humans can do things like commit murder, steal, and lust, but that is because of the kind of being humans are. Following natural law theory, I argue that humans have an objective essence or nature and that the good of that nature can either be promoted or prohibited via certain actions. It is wrong for a human to kill another human in cold blood, but it is not wrong in the moral sense for a lion to kill a human. Most people would not say (except for maybe analogously or metaphorically) that the lion murdered the human. It is generally accepted, I believe, that lions and other animals of that sort are not moral in the sense that humans are. The assumption that is often made is that God is also under some sort of moral law, but that just does not follow. To say that humans are under a moral law and that God is too needs an argument, and I believe asserting that rationality is a sufficient condition for such morality is not enough since as argued here God is not rational (intelligent) in the same way humans are. Thus, to use rationality as a sufficient condition for morality would require an argument for the kind of rationality that God would be said to have, not merely human rationality. In short, my point with the examples above was simply that God is not the kind of being to be immoral. I was not attempting to evaluate his morality in any way; rather, I was denying such moral assessments are possible.

### 2.6. Another Inconsistency in Connection with Swinburne and Traditional Theism

Sterba's last critique of my article regards another alleged inconsistency that he says is in line with Richard Swinburne as it relates to the previous section regarding God not being able to do things like murder and steal:

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

I did not call Swinburne a traditional theist in my previous article. Again, the word 'traditional' is not to be found in that article. I do state there, however, and maybe this is why Sterba thinks I consider Swinburne a traditional theist, that Swinburne takes God to be a moral being. However, this position is not unique to traditional theists since others, such as open theists<sup>6</sup> and those who have been termed by Davies as 'theistic personalists' generally also take God to be moral. Davies includes Swinburne as a theistic personalist.<sup>7</sup> Swinburne maintains that "there is an omnipotent person" that he refers to as God, which is a common way of characterizing God, along with treating God like other persons (Swinburne 2016, p. 228). As such, Swinburne would not be classified by all as a traditional theist.

Swinburne does seem to make the same points that I have made above as quoted by Sterba; viz., that God as the sovereign Creator of life has the right to end a person's earthly life. However, he seems to go further than I would with God having obligations and generally being moral like humans. For example, he says that God is under an obligation to give someone a good afterlife if he did not have a good earthly life. Regarding such obligations, he makes the distinction between absolute and suppositional necessity made by Aquinas (although not in those words).<sup>8</sup> In other words, God only has such obligations if he chooses to create humans.

I think all this proves is that God is neither morally indicted on Swinburne's view or my view. I do not believe there is an inconsistency here on my part as I am not claiming that God is morally justified, but that God simply cannot be immoral in these ways. Sterba thinks that Swinburne's view fails, however, my overall position is very different from Swinburne's.

### 3. Another Possible Objection

Another objection that is sometimes raised against the position maintained here is that it results in a sort of agnosticism regarding God's nature. In other words, given what has been said, one may object that we are not left with a knowledge of what God is—only what he is not. I do think that there are some positive aspects that one can maintain about God's nature, such as he is being, good, and the like. Having said that, we do not have a full grasp of what these terms mean regarding the divine nature. We can say, positively, that God is being and that God is good. However, the full meaning and understanding of such terms are not grasped by us due to the limitation of our own nature. Finite beings simply cannot grasp infinite being. Thus, there is a real sense in which we are left with a certain level of agnosticism, not about God's existence, but what he truly is in his infinite being and nature. Such does not mean we cannot make true statements about God, but it does mean that he cannot be fully grasped by our understanding.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

I appreciate Sterba taking the time and effort to interact with my article. I also appreciate his moral realism and his view that morality is objective and important. I have greatly enjoyed our interactions on this topic.

I do understand the apparent inconsistency that he and others see in saying that God can have moral virtues ascribed to him while at the same time saying that he is not under moral obligations. However, I think a strong view of analogy (especially in the vein of Gregory Rocca<sup>10</sup>, who has influenced my view of analogy) helps to clarify how God can be said to have a “property” but not have that property in the sense or mode that humans do. I hope that this article has helped to clarify my position, which is founded on Davies’ position.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> (Sterba 2019); (Huffling 2021); for his response cf. (Sterba 2021).

<sup>2</sup> The view I am espousing has some similarities with skeptical theism. For example, according to Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wykstra, there are two main points of skeptical theism. One is that supposing a theistic God exists, we should “not expect to grasp the divine purposes and reckonings behind God’s allowing these evils.” The second is that given the first point, many (if not most) arguments from evil fail. (Perrine and Wykstra 2017, p. 86). One apparent difference between what I am arguing for and skeptical theism is that the latter still appears to take God as a moral being even though we cannot understand him or his purposes.

<sup>3</sup> (Sterba 2021). All quotations from Sterba will be from this source.

<sup>4</sup> My article says “properties of creation.” In other words, any properties that are proper to the effects of creation or in creatures, rather than a single property of creation.

<sup>5</sup> In our most recent debate, that is currently unpublished, Sterba stated that he can allow for an analogical view of such terms; however, it seems that we are using the term ‘analogical’ in different ways.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. (Pinnock et al. 1994), for a discussion and overview of open theism.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. (Davies 2021, pp. 9–17), for both a discussion of theistic personalism and why he thinks Swinburne is among them.

<sup>8</sup> (Swinburne 2016, pp. 220–21). For Swinburne’s discussion on God’s general morality, cf. pp. 200–27.

<sup>9</sup> For a good discussion on this, cf. (Rocca 2004).

<sup>10</sup> (Rocca 2004). His view can be seen in my discussion of the various uses of the term ‘good’ in my previous article.

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