

Article

Brief Remarks on Sterba's Moral Argument from Evil

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Abstract: We pose two challenges to Sterba's position. First, we show that Sterba fails to consider alternative historical positions such as Leibniz's (who argues that God knows that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds) or Kant's (who suggests that God does not necessarily know what free agents would choose or would have chosen, had God not intervened), both of which bear direct relevance to some major aspects of Sterba's argument. Second, we show that Sterba neither rules out the possibility that God has always intervened in history when his not intervening would have led to significant and horrendous evils, nor the possibility that every immoral action (and its consequences) might have led to significant and horrendous evils.

Keywords: problem of evil; divine freedom; Leibniz; Kant; counterfactuals; possible worlds

1. Introduction

At the end of his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, Sterba writes:

In this book, I have drawn on untapped resources in ethics that have proved useful in resolving the problem of evil that has long troubled theists and atheists alike. Those resources cluster around the Pauline Principle that is at the heart of the Doctrine of Double Effect. (Sterba 2019, p. 181)

Earlier in his book, he explains:

In both traditional and contemporary ethics we find an ethical principle that seems to be in direct conflict with God's permitting evil and then making up for it later. The ethical principle is embedded in the Doctrine of Double Effect and frequently referred to as the Pauline Principle because it was endorsed by St. Paul (Romans 3:8). The principle holds that we should never do evil that good may come of it. (Sterba 2019, p. 49)

Sterba explains:

Now the Pauline Principle prohibits doing evil that good may come of it. But good can come of evil in two ways. It can come by way of *preventing evil* or it can come by way of *providing some new good*. (Sterba 2019, p. 56)

The Pauline Principle can, accordingly, be stated as follows:

(PP) We should never *do* evil as a means to prevent evil or as a means to provide good.

Sterba acknowledges important breakthroughs in the debate about the problem of evil:

In recent years, discussion of the problem of evil in the world has been advanced by utilizing resources of contemporary metaphysics and epistemology, for example, Alvin Plantinga's application of modal logic to the logical problem of evil and William Rowe, Stephen Wykstra and Paul Draper's application of probabilistic epistemology to the evidential problem of evil. (Sterba 2019, p. 2)

Sterba is confident that a discussion of PP might lead to an even more important breakthrough in the debate:



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I think that we can expect a similar advance once we do bring to bear yet untapped resources of ethics on our understanding of the problem of evil. But I also think that this advance will be even more important than the other advances that have come from modal logic and probabilistic epistemology. [...] Bringing untapped resources of ethics to bear on the problem [...] should actually help us reach a solution to the problem of evil. (Sterba 2019, p. 5)

While discussing PP, Sterba anticipates the objection that God does not violate PP (given that God does only *permit* evil):

Now it might be objected here that while God cannot do evil that good may come of it, God could permit evil that good may come of it. Of course, moral philosophers do recognize a distinction between doing and permitting evil. Doing evil is normally worse than permitting evil. But when the evil is significant and one can easily prevent it, then permitting evil can become morally equivalent to doing it. The same kind of moral blame attaches to both actions [...] Likewise, God's permitting significantly evil consequences when those consequences can easily be prevented is morally equivalent to God's doing something that is seriously wrong. (Sterba 2019, p. 51)

At the end of his chapter about PP, Sterba concludes that

the Pauline Principle [...] shows that it would be impermissible for God to permit the significantly evil consequences of our immoral actions either as a means to prevent greater evil (given that God could prevent the greater evil without permitting the lesser evil) or as a means to securing a good to which we are not entitled (given that we humans are always prohibited from doing just that). Hence, there is a logical contradiction between the existence of God, our moral requirements, and what would have to be God's widespread failure to prevent the loss of significant freedoms in our world resulting from immoral actions. (Sterba 2019, p. 66)

We pose two challenges to Sterba's position: The first concerns alternatives from the history of philosophy which Sterba fails to consider (Leibniz's and Kant's); the second rests on an analytical examination of Sterba's argument.

2. Historical Digression: Leibniz, Kant and the Pauline Principle

It is somewhat surprising that Sterba fails to mention Leibniz' famous discussion of the Pauline Principle in the *Theodicy* (see, e.g., *Theodicy* § 11, § 25).¹ This is surprising for three reasons: First, Leibniz' discussion of the Pauline Principle shows that the Pauline Principle has already been applied to the problem of evil. Second, Leibniz explicitly argues that God does not violate the Pauline Principle. Third, Leibniz challenges Sterba's claim that "God could prevent the greater evil without permitting the lesser evil." For, according to Leibniz, the actual world—the world in which God permits the lesser evil—is the best of all possible worlds and, given that, God can prevent the greater evil of a worse possible world only by permitting the lesser evil of the actual world.

To elaborate on Leibniz's stance, Leibniz explicitly refers to the view that God does not violate PP, because God never *does* evil (see § 11). Sterba also admits that "[d]oing evil is normally worse than permitting evil." He hastens to add, however, that "when the evil is significant and one can easily prevent it, then permitting evil can become morally equivalent to doing it." Therefore, Sterba *appears* to appeal to an extended version of PP:

(EPP) We should never *do or permit significant* evil as a means to prevent evil or as a means to provide good, *if we can easily prevent it*

As it turns out, Leibniz not only discusses a version of PP (see § 11) but also a version of EPP (see § 25). Leibniz writes in *Theodicy* § 25:

The rule which states, *non esse facienda mala, ut eveniant bona*, and which even forbids the permission of a moral evil with the end of obtaining a physical

good, far from being violated, is here proved, and its source and its reason are demonstrated.

So, Leibniz explicitly thinks that God does not violate an extended version of the Pauline Principle (a version that not only applies to what we *do* but also to what we *permit*). To better grasp this position, let us examine some of Leibniz's main considerations.

Leibniz famously distinguishes between three kinds of evil—metaphysical (mere imperfection, i.e., finitude), physical (suffering) and moral (sin). The first kind constitutes per definition *every* possible world, the two other kinds do not (e.g., a concept of a world which entails no suffering at all is perfectly intelligible according to Leibniz; we will discuss this point in due course). Now the actual world entails physical as well as moral evil (Leibniz never doubts this), so one asks whether a morally perfect God had rational grounds to single out this world rather than a possibly different world (or not to single out a world at all—this, after all, is also considered a possibility for God). However, a different world is not a better world according to Leibniz, since God, given his decision to create, singles out the best *by definition*, as a perfect moral being. Notice that the concept of 'the best' is objective in the sense that it is independent of God's will (it is not the best because God singled it out; to the contrary, God singled it out because it is the best).²

What matters is that Leibniz distinguishes between physical and moral evil (see § 21). When it comes to moral evil, Leibniz's view is that God does not violate EPP because God never permits moral evil as a means to an end (see § 25). In Theodicy § 25, Leibniz writes:

God wills all good [...] *antecedently*, [...] wills the best *consequently* as an end [or 'intention'], [...] wills what is indifferent, and physical evil, sometimes as a *means*. But he wills moral evil only as the *sine quo non* or as a hypothetical necessity, for he is bound to singling out the best.

According to Leibniz, moral evil is not a means to attain the best, it is only impossible for God to attain the best without permitting moral evil (moral evil is a "*sine qua non*" for the best). Compare: the pain and suffering that comes with a medical surgery is not a means to save the life of the patient; it is only impossible for the surgeon to save the life of the patient without permitting that pain and suffering (and it is, in fact, not always morally impermissible for the surgeon to permit that pain and suffering even though the surgeon can easily prevent that pain and suffering, e.g., by denying medical surgery to the patient in the first place).

When it comes to physical evil, Leibniz appears to admit, however, that God violates EPP. For Leibniz admits that God "wills [...] physical evil, sometimes as a *means*" (§ 25). He explains:

One may say of physical evil, that God wills it often as a penalty owing to guilt, and often also as a means to an end, that is, to prevent greater evils or to obtain greater good. The penalty serves also for amendment and example. Evil often serves to make us savour good the more; sometimes too it contributes to a greater perfection in him who suffers it [...]. (§ 23)

What is worse, Leibniz also suggests that God might have created a possible world without physical evil (see § 9) and, accordingly, that God might have easily prevented physical evil.

Upon reflection, the fact that God violates EPP is in no way problematic, for it is clear that EPP is false. Suppose, for example, that a crazy trolley driver is trying to run a truck workman down. Suppose you can throw a switch, thereby turning the trolley onto a different spur of track (and suppose that it is obvious that this is the only way to prevent the crazy trolley driver from killing the truck workman). Unfortunately, there are five truck workmen on that different spur of track. Suppose that it is obvious that by refraining from throwing the switch (and thereby permitting the crazy trolley driver to kill the truck workman) the crazy trolley driver would succeed in killing the one truck workman, and suppose, further, that it is obvious that by throwing the switch (and thereby preventing the crazy trolley driver from killing the truck workman) you would kill the five workmen. It

is, then, clearly morally permissible for you to permit the killing of the truck workman (a significant evil) as a means to avoid the killing of the five workmen (as a means to prevent an evil) even though you can easily throw the switch.

In fact, Leibniz appears to reject EPP and to accept, instead, a restricted version of EPP. At least with respect to moral evil, Leibniz holds that evil

must only be admitted or *permitted* in so far as it is considered to be a certain consequence of an indispensable duty: as for instance if a man who was determined not to permit another's sin were to fail of his own duty, or as if an officer on guard at an important post were to leave it, especially in time of danger, in order to prevent a quarrel in the town between two soldiers of the garrison who wanted to kill each other. (§ 24)

Leibniz concludes: "It is indeed beyond question that we must refrain from preventing the sin of others when we cannot prevent their sin without sinning ourselves." (§ 27). Hence, Leibniz—if anything—appears to accept a restricted version of EPP:

(REPP-Leibniz) We should never do or permit significant evil as a means to prevent evil or as a means to provide good, if we can easily prevent the significant evil without violating our duties.

The point, however, is this: If the actual world is the best of all possible worlds, then it is impossible—even for God—to create the best of all possible worlds without permitting the evils of the actual world. In other words: God cannot prevent the evils of the actual world without refraining from creating the best of all possible worlds. However, according to Leibniz, God would not fulfill "what he owes to his wisdom, his goodness, his perfection, if he [...] chose not that which is absolutely the best" (§ 25). Thus, God cannot prevent the evils of the actual world without violating his duties. Therefore, God does not violate REPP-Leibniz.

It is clear that Sterba only *appears* to appeal to EPP. In fact, as cited at the outset of this paper, Sterba claims that "when the evil is significant and one can easily prevent it, then permitting evil *can* become morally equivalent to doing it." He does not claim that, in such a situation, permitting evil *must* become morally equivalent to doing it. In fact, as already noted, Sterba concludes "that the Pauline Principle [...] shows that it would be impermissible for God to permit the significantly evil consequences of our immoral actions either as a means to prevent greater evil (given that God could prevent the greater evil without permitting the lesser evil) or as a means to securing a good to which we are not entitled (given that we humans are always prohibited from doing just that)." Thus, Sterba—if anything—also appears to suggest a restricted version of EPP:

(REPP-Sterba) We should never do or permit a lesser significant evil as a means to prevent a greater significant evil, if we can easily prevent the greater evil without permitting the lesser evil.

The point, however, is this: If the actual world is the best of all possible worlds (Leibniz's thesis, which rests on other considerations, on which we cannot dwell here),³ then it is impossible—even for God—to create the best of all possible worlds without permitting the evils of the actual world. In other words: God cannot prevent the greater evil of not creating the best of all possible worlds without permitting the lesser evils of the actual world. Therefore, God does not violate REPP-Sterba.

To be sure, Sterba might find it implausible to assume that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds. Sterba might insist there is a possible world in which God always prevents the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions. In Theodicy § 9, Leibniz anticipates a similar objection—the objection that there is a possible world without moral and physical evil:

Some adversary not being able to answer this argument will perchance answer the conclusion by a counter-argument, saying that the world could have been without sin and without sufferings; but I deny that then it would have been *better*.

In Theodicy § 10, he goes on:

It is true that one may imagine possible worlds without sin and without unhappiness [...]: but these same worlds again would be very inferior to ours in goodness. I cannot show you this in detail. For can I know and can I present infinities to you and compare them together? But you must judge with me *ab effectu*, since God has chosen this world as it is.

Leibniz does not deny that there is a possible world without moral and physical evil. Leibniz might, perhaps, also not deny that there is a possible world in which God always prevents the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions. Leibniz would deny, however, that these possible worlds are *better* than the actual world. For we are, on the one hand, not in a position to compare different possible worlds *in every little detail* given that possible worlds are *infinitely detailed*, and we are, on the other hand, in a position to understand that “supreme wisdom, united to a goodness that is no less infinite, cannot but have chosen the best” (§ 8) and that “if there were not the best (*optimum*) among all possible worlds, God would not have produced any” (§ 8). Therefore, all a finite cognition can know according to Leibniz is *that* the principle of singling out the best world guides God’s action, and not *how* this principle can be applied.

The most important point, however, is this: given Sterba’s aim to show that “there is a *logical contradiction* between the existence of God, our moral requirements, and what would have to be God’s widespread failure to prevent the loss of significant freedoms in our world resulting from immoral actions” (own emphasis), Sterba would not only have to show that it is *implausible* that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds, he would have to show that it is *logically contradictory* that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds. However, Leibniz’s account, be it plausible or not, does not seem to entail any logical contradiction.⁴

Before delving into further details of Sterba’s argument, we wish to examine a less known attitude: Kant’s⁵ (less known, for at first glance it seems that Kant argues that theodicy is essentially impossible). We do not intend to put forward a detailed scholarly discussion on this issue, but rather to concisely present an outline for a possible reading, which directly pertains to the issue at stake.

The Pauline Principle (“we should never do evil that good may come of it”) seems to capture the spirit of Kant’s moral theory, since it is well known that according to Kant the categorical imperative commands us to do the good, and by no means to do evil—no matter what good may come out of it (e.g., it is absolutely forbidden to lie, no matter the consequences; see Kant’s celebrated essay *Über ein vermeintes Recht aus Menschenliebe zu lügen*—even lying for the sake of rescuing the life of an innocent person is forbidden).

In the theological context, however, things are more complicated. Kant holds that “morality leads inevitably to religion” (RGV, AA VI: 6; see also KpV, AA V: 129), i.e., to the realm in which the concept of God plays a constitutive role. Without getting into the question of how Kant justifies this claim,⁶ which calls for an explanation given that the validity of morality as well as its legislative ground are independent of the idea of God, one asks how the relation between God and human freedom is thought of in Kant’s conceptual framework. Given that Kant’s religion is grounded in morality, and that his morality affirms the Pauline Principle, it seems clear that Kant’s conception of God ought not to violate the Pauline Principle.

In short: Kant thinks that the possibility of morality (its applicability to finite rational beings) can be secured only if the ‘Highest-Good’—a perfectly moral world, in which, e.g., there is a proportion between virtue and happiness—is possible (“if the Highest-Good [...] is not possible, then the moral law must be [...] on itself false [an sich falsch sein]”; KpV, AA V: 114). So, the difference between Kant and Leibniz which is relevant for the current discussion is the following: Leibniz argues that the actual world *is* the best possible, whereas Kant holds that the actual world *can become* (through the free action of finite agents) the best possible. Now the Highest-Good is not possible without the postulation of a (moral) God (see, e.g., KpV, AA V: 129). So, for the sake of morality, there is a systematic

need to postulate the possibility of the Highest-Good, and there is a further systematic need to postulate God's existence for the sake of the possibility of the Highest-Good.

Be that as it may, it follows that the concept of God is subordinated according to Kant *ab ovo* to a practical (moral) precedent requirement of the finite agent (God's conception cannot be given an *objective* sense, for this would amount to trespassing the limits of finite cognition). In light of this, one can easily grasp the way Kant ascribes attributes to God. Kant writes:

In relation to the *Highest-Good* possible under his rule alone, namely the existence of rational beings under moral laws, we will conceive of this original being as omniscient, so that even what is inmost in their dispositions (which is what constitutes the real moral value of the actions of rational beings in the world) is not hidden from him; as *omnipotent*, so that he can make the whole of nature suitable for this highest end; as *omnibenevolent* and at the same time just, because these two properties (united as wisdom) constitute the conditions of the causality of a supreme cause of the world as a Highest-Good under moral laws; and likewise all of the remaining transcendental properties, such as *eternity*, *omnipresence*, etc. (for goodness and justice are moral properties), which must be presupposed in relation to such a final end, must also be thought in such a being. (KU, AA V: 444)

In the present context, the divine attribute of 'omniscience' is crucial. According to Kant, this refers mainly to God's knowing the real incentive of the action, and not necessarily to God's knowing what a free agent *would choose or would have chosen, had God not intervened*.⁷ This is directly relevant for Sterba's moral argument from evil. For Sterba claims that it "would be the best way to bring about a morally defensible distribution of freedom" if God intervened to "restrict a not very important freedom of would-be wrongdoers in order to secure significant freedoms for those who would otherwise be victims" (Sterba 2019, p. 56). However, if God is not in a position to know what a free agent would choose or would have chosen, had God not intervened, then God is not in a position to identify "would-be wrongdoers" and it is then, arguably, not a trivial task to stop would-be wrongdoers—and only would-be wrongdoers—from carrying out immoral plans and intentions.

This Kantian stance is similar to Leibniz's position in this sense: Kant, as Leibniz, thinks that we obtain an a priori conception of a moral God (this conception is not inferred from experience, but is grounded in an a priori moral demand), i.e., that we can tell a priori *that* God is moral, and that we nevertheless cannot know *how* this principle can be applied to *every* single occasion of evil we bump into in experience (the second cannot invalidate the first).⁸ In light of such a (possible) metaphysical background, Sterba's claim that there is a logical contradiction between God's existence as an ultimate moral being and God's not preventing the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions is at the very least problematic. Here, as well, Sterba would not only have to show that it is *implausible* to conceptualize God in this spirit; he would also have to show that it is *logically contradictory*.

3. Further Thoughts on Sterba's Moral Argument from Evil

Be that as it may, Sterba's moral argument from evil appeals to three moral principles that, in his view, "are exceptionless minimal components of the Pauline Principle never to do evil that good may come of it which are acceptable to consequentialists and nonconsequentialists and are, or should be, acceptable to theists and atheists alike" (Sterba 2019, p. 183). The three moral principles are (see Sterba 2019, p. 184):

Moral evil prevention requirement I

Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone's rights (a good to which we have a right), as needed, when that can easily be done.

Moral evil prevention requirement II

Do not permit significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have.

Moral evil prevention requirement III

Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions on would-be victims (which would violate their rights) in order to provide them with goods to which they do not have a right, when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods.

He then, basically, argues as follows (see [Sterba 2019](#), pp. 189–90):

1. There is an all-good, all-powerful God. [...]
2. If there is an all-good, all-powerful God, then necessarily he would be adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III.
3. If God were adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, then necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission.
4. Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain all around us, which, if God exists, would have to be through his permission. [...]
5. Therefore, it is not the case that there is an all-good, all-powerful God.

Notice that unlike, e.g., Mackie, Sterba does not argue that God has an obligation to prevent *every* evil: “Now no one doubts that there would be a problem if God always intervened to prevent evil. If that were to happen, then the freedom we would be left with would hardly be worthy of the name” ([Sterba 2019](#), p. 52). Sterba only argues that God has an obligation to prevent the significant and horrendous consequences of immoral actions:

By contrast, what would be ideal from the perspective of freedom is a world where everyone’s freedom is appropriately constrained [...]. Accordingly, I contend that if we want to appropriately constrain freedom, we should have a policy that constrains the less significant freedoms of would-be wrongdoers in order to secure the more significant freedom of their would-be victims. Surely, that would be a justified policy of constraint. In addition, it would not deprive would-be wrongdoers of their status as moral agents nor would it leave with only a toy or a playpen freedom. Thus, even when serious wrongdoers are prevented from carrying out the final steps of their evil actions with significant and especially horrendous consequences for their victims, they would still have the freedom to imagine, intend, and even take initial steps toward carrying out their wrongdoing. ([Sterba 2019](#), p. 53)

Sterba explains further:

[...] we are not imagining that God is always preventing the evil consequences of wrongful actions. Rather, we are assuming that God would be allowing evildoers to bring about the evil consequences of their actions for a broad range of cases where the consequences, especially for others, are not significantly evil. We are also assuming that God would be allowing would-be wrongdoers to imagine, intend, or even take the initial steps toward carrying out their seriously wrongful actions, and just stopping wrongdoers from bringing about significantly and especially horrendously evil consequences of those actions. ([Sterba 2019](#), p. 56)

There is, however, still reason to doubt that Sterba is right about God’s obligations. It is, of course, impossible to prevent the significant and horrendous consequences of an immoral action that *has (or will have)* significant and horrendous consequences. For if the significant and horrendous consequences of an immoral action that *has (or will have)* significant and horrendous consequences are prevented, then this immoral action has not (or will not have) significant and horrendous consequences (given that these consequences are prevented). It follows that one and the same immoral action *both has and has not (or both will and will not have)* significant and horrendous consequences (which is impossible). Sterba, therefore, does

surely not claim that God ought to prevent the significant and horrendous consequences of an immoral action that *has (or will have)* significant and horrendous consequences. What Sterba has in mind, presumably, is that God ought to intervene when an immoral action *would have significant and horrendous consequences if God didn't intervene* (this explains Sterba's talk of "would-be wrongdoers" and "would-be victims").

Things are not so easy, however. Consider van Inwagen's famous example of a bomb connected with a Geiger counter: "We might, for example, build a time bomb incorporating a radioactive source, a Geiger counter, and a firing mechanism designed to take a Geiger counter's 'output'—clicks or whatever—as 'input'. Such a bomb might be designed to explode if the counter, for example, clicked five times within any ten-second interval" (van Inwagen 1983, p. 192). Now add two assumptions: First, an explosion of the bomb would lead to significant and horrendous evils (such as the extinction of two thirds of the human population). Second, it is always the case that, if God did not intervene, the bomb *might* not explode (and it is, therefore, never the case that, if God did not intervene, the bomb *would* explode).

Facing this example, Sterba might want to claim that God ought to intervene (i.e., that God ought to prevent us from building such a bomb) even though it is never the case that our building that bomb *would* have significant and horrendous consequences if God did not intervene (it is only always the case that our building that bomb *might* have significant and horrendous consequences, if God did not intervene).

Now this immediately raises the question which immoral actions God ought to prevent, i.e., whether God ought to prevent only the immoral actions that *would* have or also the immoral actions that *might* have significant and horrendous consequences. It is useful to distinguish here three kinds of immoral actions:

1. Say that an immoral action is *tendentially harmful* if and only if it is true that, if God did not intervene, it *would* (eventually) lead to significant and horrendous evils.
2. Say that an immoral action is *potentially harmful* if and only if it is true that, if God did not intervene, it *might* (eventually) lead to significant and horrendous evils.⁹
3. Say that an immoral action is *tendentially harmless* if and only if it is true that, if God did not intervene, it *would not* (eventually) lead to significant and horrendous evils.

Sterba appears to admit that God has no obligation to prevent tendentially harmless immoral actions. The question is, however, whether (i) God has only an obligation to prevent every tendentially harmful action, or whether (ii) God has also an obligation to prevent every potentially harmful action.

Suppose, on the one hand, that (i) God has only an obligation to prevent every tendentially harmful action. It is, then, not at all clear that God has violated any obligation. The reason is this: For all we know, God *has* prevented every tendentially harmful action (for all we know, every immoral action that has in fact led to significant and horrendous evils was only potentially harmful).¹⁰ Thus, for all we know, God has not violated any obligation.¹¹ There is, then, no reason to doubt that God is perfectly morally good.

Suppose, on the other hand, that (ii) God has also an obligation to prevent every potentially harmful action. There is, then, reason to doubt that Sterba is right about God's obligations. The reason is this: For all we know, *every* immoral thought, intention, action, etc., is potentially harmful (e.g., for all we know, every immoral thought, intention, action, etc., *might* eventually lead to the eternal separation from God). If Sterba is right about God's obligations, it would follow that God has an obligation to prevent *every* immoral thought, intention, action, etc. However, God has certainly not an obligation to prevent *every* immoral thought, intention, action, etc., for in that case, to use Sterba's own words, "the freedom we would be left with would hardly be worthy of the name." There is, therefore, reason to doubt that Sterba is right about God's obligations.

Now Sterba might, of course, appeal to the law of Conditional Excluded Middle (CEM):

(CEM) It is either true that (if it were true that p, it would be true that q), or it is true that (if it were true that p, it would *not* be true that q).

By an appeal to CEM, he might argue that every immoral action that is potentially harmful is also tendentially harmful.¹² He might, then, claim that God has not prevented every potentially harmful immoral action and, therefore, not prevented every tendentially harmful immoral action. It would seem, then, that—even if God has only the obligation to prevent every tendentially harmful immoral action—God has still violated his obligations. However, CEM is notoriously controversial.¹³ Although there are attempts to defend CEM, the majority of participants of the debate appears to reject (or, at any rate, doubt) CEM. Unless Sterba is able to come up with a novel and convincing justification of CEM, there would still be strong doubts about Sterba's argument.

Sterba might, therefore, prefer to appeal to the law of Conjunction Conditionalization (CC):

(CC) If it is true that p and it is true that q, then it is true that (if it were true that p, then it would be true that q).

With the help of CC, he might argue that every immoral action that God has not prevented and that has led to significant and horrendous evils is tendentially harmful.¹⁴ He might, then, conclude that God has not prevented every tendentially harmful immoral action (and, therefore, conclude that—even if God has only the obligation to prevent every tendentially harmful immoral action—God has still violated his obligations). However, although CC is not as controversial as CEM, there is nonetheless an ongoing debate about CC.¹⁵ Many participants of the debate appear to reject CC (or appear to have reservations about CC). Unless Sterba is able to come up with a novel and convincing justification of CC, there would still be strong doubts about Sterba's argument.

For this reason, Sterba might prefer to claim that God has an obligation to prevent every potentially harmful action and that it is implausible that *every* immoral thought, intention, action, etc., is potentially harmful. There are two reasons why this reply would be problematic: First, given Sterba's aim, Sterba would not only have to show that it is *implausible* but also that it is *logically contradictory* that every immoral thought, intention, action, etc., is potentially harmful. Second, it follows from the law of Counterfactual Modus Ponens (CMP) that every immoral thought, intention, action, etc., that God has in fact not prevented and that has in fact led to significant and horrendous evils is a potentially harmful immoral action.¹⁶ It would, therefore, still follow that God has an obligation to prevent every immoral action that God has in fact not prevented and that has in fact led to significant and horrendous evils. This, however, is highly implausible. To see this, note that among the uncountably many events that have led to climate change (which, in turn, has led to many significant and horrendous evils) are uncountably many immoral actions (such as throwing a chewing gum package in a forest or letting one's basil plant die). Even Sterba, who appears to suppose that God has an obligation to prevent *some* of these immoral actions, is certainly not going to suppose that God has an obligation to prevent *all* of these immoral actions.

Our best guess is that, for these reasons, Sterba would want to claim that God has an obligation to prevent *all* tendentially harmful actions and that, besides that, God has an obligation to prevent *some* (but not all) potentially harmful actions. There would, however, still remain reasonable doubts about Sterba's argument for two reasons: First, it would, then, not at all be clear *why* God ought to have prevented some (but not all) potentially harmful actions (and, therefore, not at all be clear *which* potentially harmful actions God ought to have prevented). Second, it would, consequently, not at all be clear *that God has not* prevented every potentially harmful action he ought to have prevented (and it would, therefore, not at all be clear that God has violated his obligations).

4. Conclusions

According to Sterba's moral argument from evil, there is no all-good and all-powerful God. For if there were an all-good and all-powerful God, God would necessarily be adher-

ing to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III (= Sterba’s second premise). Moreover, if he were adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, then it follows that necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission (= Sterba’s third premise).

The aim of the paper was to uncover two “blind spots” in Sterba’s moral argument from evil. First, Sterba fails to consider alternative historical positions such as Leibniz’s (who argues that God knows that the actual world is the best of all possible worlds) or Kant’s (who suggests that God does not necessarily know what free agents would choose or would have chosen, had God not intervened). Second, Sterba neither rules out the possibility that God *has* always intervened in history when his not intervening *would* have led to significant and horrendous evils, nor the possibility that *every* immoral action (and its consequences) *might* have led to significant and horrendous evils.

It seems to us that Sterba’s failure to consider these alternative possibilities casts serious doubt on the third premise of Sterba’s moral argument from evil (that significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be God’s permission, if God were adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III). For what these alternative possibilities suggest is that the task of preventing the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions might well be a task that cannot easily be accomplished (at least not in a morally unobjectionable way)—even by an all-powerful God.

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Notes

- ¹ All citations from Leibniz’s work are based on the following translation: (Leibniz 2009).
- ² One might think that in that case God is *determined* to single out the best of all possible worlds; thus, it cannot be considered as a free act (for it seems that God could have not done otherwise). Leibniz’s argument is here more complicated; however, we cannot dwell on this issue here. For an interpretation according to which Leibniz cannot avoid such a conclusion see (Adams 1994), pp. 40–42; for a different position see, e.g., (Rateau 2014), pp. 105–9.
- ³ Among other things, Leibniz thinks that *not creating at all* is (i) a possibility of God as well, and that (ii) this possibility is nevertheless not the best.
- ⁴ Sterba might insist that, given any possible world, God—as an infinitely powerful being—would always be able to create a better possible world (compare, e.g., Aquinas’s treatment of the topic in s. th. I q. 25 art. 6). He might conclude that it is logically contradictory to assume both that God exists and that there is a best of all possible worlds. However, the argument from above works even without assuming both that God exists and that there is a best of all possible worlds. Suppose, for example, that God exists and that every possible world in which God prevents the evils of the actual world is worse than the actual world (compare, e.g., Aquinas’s suggestions in s. th. I q. 22 art. 2). It follows that God cannot prevent the greater evil of a worse world without permitting the evils of the actual world. Arguably, there is no *logical contradiction* in both assuming that God exists and that every possible world in which God prevents the evils of the actual world is worse than the actual world. The passages of Aquinas’s work can be found in Thomas Aquinas, “Summa Theologiae”, in (Aquinas 1888–1906).
- ⁵ We will use the following abbreviations: RGV, AA VI = *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*; KpV, AA V = *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*; KU, AA V = *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. All citations are taken from Kant’s *Akademieausgabe* (=AA) (Kant 1900a, 1900b, 1900c).
- ⁶ For a detailed analysis of Kant’s argument see (Kravitz 2022).
- ⁷ There are two (intimately connected) debates in contemporary philosophy of religion that turn out to be relevant in this regard: First, the debate about whether counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (e.g., counterfactuals about what a free agent would have chosen, had God not intervened) are possibly *true*. Second, the debate about whether counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, if possibly true, are possibly *foreknown by God*. See, for example, (Hasker 1989; van Inwagen 1997, 2006; Flint 1998). In view of these debates, it is far from clear whether God—as an omniscient being—would have to foreknow what a free agent would have chosen, had God not intervened.
- ⁸ In a way, Kant seems to suggest a ‘philosophical defence of theism’, contrary to a ‘theodicean argument’. Roughly: To argue that the presence of evil in the world is compatible with God’s attributes amounts to advocating a philosophical defence of

theism; to suggest a further account of God's *possible reasons* for issuing (permitting) evil constitutes a theodicean argument. For interpretation in this spirit see, e.g., (Dieringer 2009). This analogy, however, does not capture Kant's precise intent, but this issue lies beyond the scope of this paper. For details see (Kravitz 2020).

- 9 Say that it is true that (if it were true that p, then it *might* be true that q) if and only if it is *not* true that (if it were true that p, it *would not* be true that q). For the interdefinability of 'might' and 'would', see (Lewis 1973, pp. 2, 80–81; van Inwagen 1997, p. 232). See also (Bennett 2003, pp. 189–92; Stalnaker 1978; DeRose 1994; Leitgeb 2012, p. 111).
- 10 The claim is not that *we know* that God has prevented every tendentially harmful action; the claim is that arguing that God has prevented every tendentially harmful action *is compatible with what we know*. But, again, it is enough to assume that it is *not logically contradictory* that God has prevented every tendentially harmful immoral action.
- 11 Sterba might insist, of course, that God would still have violated his obligation to prevent the significant and horrendously evil consequences of immoral actions. This, however, would not solve but only postpone the problem. The reason is that one might distinguish between tendentially and potentially harmful consequences of immoral actions and still maintain that God *has* always intervened in the course of events that have resulted from immoral actions when his not intervening *would* have led to significant and horrendous evils (and that he has not intervened, by contrast, when his not intervening *only might* have led to significant and horrendous evils).
- 12 Proof: Take any immoral action that is potentially harmful. It follows that, if God did not intervene, it might lead to significant and horrendous evils. It follows, further, that it is *not* true that, if God did not intervene, it *would not* lead to significant and horrendous evils (because of the interdefinability of 'might' and 'would'). By CEM, it is true that, if God did not intervene, it *would* lead to significant and horrendous evils. This potentially harmful immoral action is, therefore, not only potentially harmful but also tendentially harmful.
- 13 For a discussion of CEM, see (Stalnaker 1978; Lewis 1973, pp. 79–83; Bennett 2003, pp. 183–93; Cross 2009; Williams 2010; Leitgeb 2012, pp. 88–90).
- 14 Proof: Take any immoral action that God has not prevented and that has led to significant and horrendous evils. It follows, by CC, that, if God did not prevent it, it would have led to significant and horrendous evils. This immoral action, therefore, is tendentially harmful.
- 15 For a discussion of CC, see (Stalnaker 1978; Lewis 1973, pp. 26–31; Walters 2009; Ahmed 2011; Leitgeb 2012, pp. 86–93; Walters and Williams 2013).
- 16 The law of Counterfactual Modus Ponens (CMP) is the law that, if it is true that p and it is true that (if it were true that p, it would be true that q), then it is true that q. Take now any immoral thought, intention, action, etc., that God has in fact not prevented and that has in fact led to significant and horrendous evils. If this immoral thought, intention, action, etc., were *not* potentially harmful, it would not be true that (if God did not prevent it, it *might* have led to significant and horrendous evils). It would follow (from the interdefinability of 'might' and 'would') that it is true that (if God did not prevent it, it *would not* have led to significant and horrendous evils). It would follow, by CMP (given that God has not prevented it), that it has not led to significant and horrendous evils (contrary to the assumptions). This immoral thought, intention, action, etc., therefore, is potentially harmful.

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