

Article

# Can Heaven Justify Horrendous Moral Evils? A Postmortem Autopsy

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**Abstract:** James Sterba has recently constructed a new and compelling logical problem of evil that rejects Plantinga’s free-will defense and employs the concept of significant freedom and the Pauline Principle to demonstrate an incompatibility between the existence of horrendous evil and the God of classical monotheism. In response, Jerry L. Walls, among others, has claimed that the doctrine of heaven can explain why God is justified in permitting horrendous evils in the world—an argument known as the afterlife theodicy. In this article, I explore this line of defense against Sterba’s logical problem of evil. I suggest that if the afterlife theodicy is to be effective, it must accept non-speciesist, strong universalism; deny or explicate divinely informed prior consent; reject an elective model of forgiveness; discard postmortem libertarian free will; and explain why God values libertarian free will in earthly life but not in the afterlife.

**Keywords:** problem of evil; James Sterba; doctrine of heaven; theodicy; free will

## 1. Introduction

In his book, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, James Sterba offers a novel formulation of the logical problem of evil. This formulation employs the concept of significant freedom and the Pauline Principle to identify a logical incompatibility between the existence of God and the permission of horrendous moral evil (HME). Sterba contends that if God exists, God would act in the manner of a just state, but this consequent does not cohere with the distribution and amount of evil in this world.

Among the many proposed refutations to Sterba’s argument is the afterlife theodicy. The afterlife theodicy attempts to solve the problem of evil by appealing to the doctrine of heaven and denying the Pauline Principle at a divine level. Essentially, it maintains that God compensates for HME by offering humans an infinite blissful state in heaven; therefore, the good reaped in heaven vindicates God of permitting HME. God would, under this account, permit HME and be justified in doing so.

In what follows, I examine how effectively the afterlife theodicy undermines Sterba’s logical problem of evil. Leaving aside the question of whether God should act in the manner of an ideal just state, which I leave for other discussions, I instead attempt to identify the conditions to which the afterlife theodicy must adhere in order to work effectively. To do so, I specify the parameters for an adequate afterlife theodicy, detailing what the theist is committed to when employing the doctrine of heaven to explain away earthly suffering.

As Jerry Walls (2021) recognizes, “we should not fail to bring all of [Christianity’s] resources to the table when we deal with the problem of evil” (ibid., p. 5). Walls is correct to stress that Christians may appeal to doctrine when tackling the problem of evil; yet the elements of doctrine to which theodicians appeal must also be examined for cohesion and reasonableness. In what follows, I argue that there is a potential conflict between non-universalist/weak universalist accounts of heaven and an adequate afterlife theodicy; thus, afterlife theodicians are beholden to a non-speciesist strong universalist account of heaven. Additionally, I aim to show that—to be effective—the afterlife model to which theodicians subscribe must deny postmortem libertarian free will, reject divinely informed



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consent, and adhere to a controversial non-elective model of forgiveness. It is only in combination with non-speciesist strong universalism, non-elective forgiveness, and the free will defense that the afterlife theodicy can hope to overpower the logical problem of evil.

## 2. Sterba's Logical Problem of Evil

Opposing Plantinga's famous free will defense, James Sterba asserts that some moral evils undermine individuals' 'significant freedom', which he defines as "the freedom a just state would want to protect since that would fairly secure each person's fundamental interests" (Sterba 2019, p. 12). According to Sterba, the HME that exists in the world reduces rather than increases the overall significant freedom in the world. If this is the case, he concludes, God has no good reason to permit any HME that undermines significant freedom. In any case, Sterba argues, God's permitting HME is tantamount to committing HME since God could prevent evil with ease.

Sterba employs the analogy of a perfectly just and powerful government to argue that, just as an ideal ruling body would adopt a "policy of limited intervention" (Sterba 2019, p. 62), so would God. According to Sterba, a policy of limited intervention involves the protection of basic freedoms (the 'significant freedom' defined earlier) while allowing the limited freedom necessary for character development and freedom of will. HME such as gratuitous torture would not be permitted in such a state, although less significant evils would be allowed. Sterba takes it as evident that the world does not mirror this model, demonstrating that God cannot exist.

Sterba then evokes what he calls the 'Pauline Principle', one of the conditions of the well-known ethical canon, the Doctrine of Double Effect. Sterba contends that if the Pauline Principle—that we should never do evil to bring about good—holds at the divine level, God would prevent the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. Offering several amendments to the principle, Sterba arrives at the definition that it is immoral to purposefully permit HME to attain good or prevent evil.<sup>1</sup> So, the question arises, if God exists, should God intentionally allow horrendous evil caused by immoral actions? Sterba responds in the negative. According to Sterba, even if HME is a necessary means to obtaining greater goods as ends, the latter can never be justified by the former at a divine level. If Sterba is correct, then it is logically impossible that God exists in the face of HME.

As part of his argument, Sterba creates a helpful parallel between superheroes and God. Just as superheroes are obligated to prevent evils by limiting the freedom of villains, God has an obligation to prevent HME from occurring by restricting the freedom of evildoers in our world. He writes, "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 2019, p. 20), the general idea being that an all-good and all-powerful God—equivalent to a sort of 'ultra-superhero'—would perform this and more for individuals in this world. Therefore, the world we live in does not match up to the distribution and amount of freedom humans possess. The key point here is that by allowing HME to occur, God is limiting the victims' significant freedom.

Ultimately Sterba proposes three moral principles (that he calls Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPRs)) to which God would adhere:

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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. (Sterba 2019, p. 184)

Employing the principles above as a template for God's moral nature, Sterba develops a novel logical problem of evil, which can be articulated like this:

1. God exists.
2. If God exists, then God would necessarily adhere to the MEPRs.
3. If God adhered to the MEPRs, then HME would not be permitted by God.
4. HME occurs, which God must permit.

Due to the contradiction between 3 and 4, Sterba concludes that God's existence is impossible.

Sterba acknowledges that many theodicies appeal to overriding goods to justify God's permission of HME. Clearly, permitting HME to attain the goods specified in theodicies (free will, character development, heaven, to name a few) illustrates God's allowance of evil in order to reap some benefit. For Sterba, though, this is logically incompatible with God's nature.

### 3. The Afterlife Theodicy

Attempts to refute Sterba's logical problem of evil have taken many different forms. Some philosophers have appealed to skeptical theism in an effort to undermine the idea that humans can understand the complex causal chains that result in HME and argue that HME could have some higher value or meaning that we cannot comprehend. Others have questioned whether classical monotheists are beholden to the Pauline Principle or Sterba's characterization of God as a sovereign ruler akin to an ideally just state. In this section, I examine one proposed method for overcoming Sterba's logical problem of evil: the afterlife theodicy. Joining many others who have wielded this eschatological doctrine to fend off various formulations of the problem of evil, Jerry Walls (2021)—a prominent philosopher and theologian—advocates this line of defense against Sterba's logical problem. Walls argues that there is one particular good that vindicates God from the permission of evil identified by Sterba. Specifically, he believes that the doctrine of heaven offers justification for God's permission of HME in the world by compensating for it postmortem. Walls' reasoning can be expressed as follows:

1. If HME exists, God permits it.
2. HME exists.
3. God permits HME (from 1 and 2).
4. God's permission of HME is justified if the reward (for victims of HME) is great enough.
5. Heaven is a great enough reward to justify God's permission of HME.
6. God's permission of HME is justified (from 4 and 5).
7. Hoping for heaven is axiologically demanded (from 5).

It is on premises 4, 5, 6, and 7 that this paper focuses.

Stephen Maitzen calls the afterlife theodicy the "heaven swamps everything" view (Maitzen 2009, p. 123). Tortured for no good reason in life? Heaven will compensate for it. Enduring excruciating pain though morally innocent? Heaven will offer total reparation. The idea is that God is so powerful that God can compensate for any evil suffered in earthly life by providing victims with an unsurpassable, incomparable good that renders all earthly evils suffered retrospectively insignificant. The afterlife theodicy maintains that justice will be achieved (and balance restored) after death because everyone will gain a good so valuable that any HME suffered fades into insignificance. Walls declares, "heaven provides resources to respond to even the worst of evils and to fully redeem them in such a way that the victims of those evils can fully affirm the goodness of their lives" (Walls 2021, p. 1). The afterlife theodicy includes a substantial assertion: no matter what horrendous suffering one endures in earthly life, it will pale in comparison to the benefits of being with God in heaven—so much so that the suffering itself no longer matters retrospectively. The goods of heaven are so immense in scope and scale that they easily trump any amount of horrendous suffering experienced during earthly life.

According to traditional Christian doctrine, then, heaven provides infinite bliss, so the horrendous suffering undergone in earthly life is entirely usurped by eternal joy. I will bear a moment of pain while being injected with a vaccine when it brings me a greater good by protecting me from disease. I will endure swallowing a bitter pill if it will rid me of a painful infection. I will suffer through a challenging work meeting willingly if a three-week vacation awaits afterwards. For the afterlife theodist, none of these analogies can capture the good of heaven, though, since heaven is infinitely good. As Walls states, “God is a good of such overwhelming value that he is incomparable with respect to any finite good, however extraordinary and attractive. Any attempted comparison would utterly fail to compute” (Walls 2021, p. 4). What is particularly interesting about Walls’ version of the afterlife theodicy, though, is that it includes an axiological element. He argues that individuals ought to *hope* that there is an afterlife to restore cosmic justice and that no one has reason to regret their existence. According to this line of argument, “if one is truly concerned for the suffering of innocent persons . . . one should at the very least strenuously hope that there is a God and an afterlife that will set things right rather than reject that hope” (ibid., p. 3). If Walls is correct, then the afterlife theodicy not only justifies HME but also leads to a normative claim that we should feel positive axiological sentiments in response to HME.

According to this version of the afterlife theodicy, then, heaven is an overriding good that exonerates God from the offense of permitting HME. The proper response to HME is hope for heaven’s existence. In response to Sterba’s question of whether God should intentionally permit HME, afterlife theodists answer a resounding ‘yes’, objecting to the Pauline Principle as it applies to God and denying Premise 2 of Sterba’s argument as formulated in the previous section.

It is important to mention at this point that there is not one united doctrine of the afterlife within classical monotheism or even within particular Abrahamic religions. Not all Christians, for example, hold the same eschatological beliefs about heaven, hell, and purgatory. With this in mind, I aim to outline precisely what conceptual model of heaven coheres with the afterlife theodicy if the latter is to effectively combat Sterba’s logical problem of evil. In other words, if classical monotheists appeal to the afterlife to overcome Sterba’s logical problem of evil, their afterlife model must conform to certain conditions to work. The following sections examine these conditions. To determine whether the eschatological aspect of classical monotheistic doctrine really does absolve God of permitting HME, I analyze several of Walls’ premises. First, I consider whether hoping for the afterlife in the way Walls suggests is coherent, examining Premise 7 of his argument. Then I take a closer look at Premise 5, considering whether heaven is a great enough good to justify HME. Next, I examine whether God’s permission of HME is justified despite the good of heaven. I then investigate the concepts of consent, postmortem forgiveness, transformation, and reconciliation upon which premises 4 and 6 rest. Finally, I consider a potential inconsistency for the afterlife theodicy based on the value placed on libertarian free will in earthly life and the afterlife.

#### 4. Is Hoping for Heaven Axiologically Demanded?

As previously mentioned, one of the most interesting and groundbreaking assertions Walls makes in his paper is Premise 7, the axiological claim that we ought to, or are even obligated to, feel glad about our earthly existence and hopeful about our postmortem existence. This section will consider the axiological discussion into which Walls enters when he makes claims about the value of our existence and God’s existence. Walls stresses his belief that postulating God’s existence is necessary to explain the horrendous suffering we observe in this world. His point is that we should not only *want* God to exist in the face of HME but that this desire is axiologically *demanded*. Considering a particularly brutal case of an innocent being tortured, Walls rhetorically questions:

Is it not reasonable to think God should put this boy’s life back together since he allowed it to be shattered in the first place? Is there something objectionable in

believing that God should shower upon him the sort of love that he never knew in this life since God allowed the general to commit such atrocities against him in this life? Is it really better that his tragic life should stand forever as a monument to heartless cruelty than that God should pick up the pieces of his broken life and put them back together as something of stunning beauty and positive meaning? (Walls 2021, p. 5)

Walls' point is intuitively compelling, at least at face value. Of course, we should desire that those undeserving of suffering should be compensated for being subjected to injustice (that is, if we cannot achieve the preferable effect of preventing the HME in the first place).

This innovative element of Walls' argument is concerned with what we ought to hope for and desire rather than what actually pertains. The discussion of the axiology of theism, which focuses not on whether God exists but instead whether we should want God to exist, is a fertile one in contemporary philosophy of religion. So, let us examine in more depth the axiological claim that we should want God to exist.

First off, it should be noted (although perhaps stating the obvious) that desiring that some state of affairs obtains is significantly different from demonstrating that this state of affairs actually obtains, or is even reasonable. Even if Walls is correct to say that the existence of God and heaven truly is the best possible state of affairs, and one that we ought to desire, that does not entail that heaven's existence is reasonable or even logically possible. We cannot confuse what is axiologically pleasing with what is logically conceivable and reasonable. Perhaps all humans should hope that God exists and can truly compensate for all suffering. Perhaps I desire that I win the lottery tomorrow. Perhaps I wish that my cat turns into a unicorn. My axiological desires have no bearing on whether the objects of my desires are actualized.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Sterba makes no claims about which worldview we should desire since his argument is concerned with whether God's existence is logically possible, not whether God's existence is desirable.<sup>3</sup> Sterba's position is coherent with desiring that God and heaven exist.

Walls offers a potential way to overcome this first concern by arguing that not only is heavenly compensation (i) axiologically pleasing, but it is also (ii) required for cosmic justice and (iii) rationally warranted.<sup>4</sup> He surmises:

Christians in fact believe that such hope is not only existentially demanded, but also rationally warranted, and that we are not in fact reduced to desperately clinging to the mere logical possibility that God exists. Rather, we have ample warrant to believe not only that God exists, but that his perfect love and goodness will be fully vindicated. (ibid., p. 4)

Let us accept the first arm of Walls' claim for the sake of this argument and instead consider the second arm, that heaven is required for cosmic justice (justice restored on a universal scale).

It is clear that cosmic justice is a fundamental reason why some might desire one afterlife rather than another.

Yet the Christian doctrine of heaven is not the only theological view compatible with cosmic justice. Several philosophers (see Eric Wielenberg 2018, for example) have argued that cosmic justice coheres with worldviews other than classical monotheism. Eschatological models from other belief systems (deism, polytheism, and pantheism, for example) are arguably compatible with cosmic justice as much—if not more—than the Christian model of heaven. Furthermore, although several philosophers have proposed pro-theistic arguments grounded in cosmic justice, Wielenberg (2018) has argued that cosmic justice is actually a pitfall of God's existence and a reason to desire God's non-existence. Even if Wielenberg's argument—which I unfortunately do not have the scope to explore here—fails, it is clear that cosmic justice is compatible with many worldviews, not just Christianity's doctrine of heaven. So, even if the afterlife theodicy cements heaven as compatible with cosmic justice (and I will argue subsequently that only a certain eschatological model

meets the requirements), we cannot assume that it is the best afterlife blueprint for which to hope, providing cosmic justice more effectively than, say, the process of reincarnation fundamental to several Eastern worldviews.

Walls' axiological claim—that we should be grateful for our existence and not regret it—is reminiscent of Yujin Nagasawa's (2018) recent work on the potential problem of evil for atheists. Nagasawa argues that theists and atheists alike tend to be existential optimists, which—specifically for atheists—is incompatible with recognizing the horrendous and undeserved evil that exists in the world. Nagasawa defines existential optimism as that claim that “the world is, overall, a good place and we should be grateful for our existence in it” (Nagasawa 2018, p. 151). Nagasawa poses the question of how an atheist can simultaneously be existentially optimistic and recognize that horrendous evil exists. He concludes that “the problem of evil, or at least the existential problem of systemic evil, provides a reason to give up atheism and a motivation to adopt theism” (ibid., p. 163). For Nagasawa, atheism is not compatible with existential optimism. How can one believe that the world is a good place, and we ought to be grateful to exist while acknowledging the horrendous evil endured by so many creatures?

The problem with Nagasawa's argument, however, is that he fails to distinguish between different types of optimism. As I have argued elsewhere (Lancaster-Thomas 2022), we can differentiate between personal existential optimism, which involves thinking one's own existence is good, and impersonal existential optimism, which consists in thinking that the world is an overall good place. There does not seem to be any logical incoherence in being grateful for *my* existence while simultaneously thinking that the world is not an *overall* good place (or vice versa!). As it applies to the afterlife theodicy, there is no inconsistency in thinking that I am grateful for my own life but not grateful for the state of the world as it is. It is also reasonable to distinguish between being grateful for the entirety of one's existence and being grateful for only certain parts.<sup>5</sup> Consider someone suffering from an excruciatingly painful terminal illness. In this situation, is it not reasonable that the individual might not feel grateful for their current mode of existence and instead desires to quicken their unification with God? That is not to say that they are not grateful for their existence as a whole (the combination of their earthly and postmortem existence viewed holistically), but only that they are not grateful for this current part of life. If a child has a terrible toothache, surely it is justifiable for the child to distinguish between feeling gratitude for their current situation (which they probably do not) and gratitude for the entirety of their existence. If this distinction is significant, then it might not be unreasonable to curse a particularly awful section of one's overall existence, such as being unfairly tortured, while still being appreciative of the entirety of one's existence.

I have contended in this section that (i) hoping for heaven is not enough to realize it—there must also be rational justification for belief in heaven; (ii) worldviews other than Christianity are compatible with cosmic justice; and (iii) one can be grateful for various elements of existence without being obligated to feel grateful for *all* elements of existence. Thus, even if heaven is a reasonable fate to desire, there may be other eschatological models that are equally or more desirable, and desiring heaven is not the same as offering rational argument to determine its logical probability. In the sections that follow, I address in more detail which models of the afterlife best combat the logical problem of evil.

### **5. Is Heaven a Great Enough Reward to Justify God's Permission of Horrendous Moral Evil?**

In this section I examine Premise 5 of Walls' argument. To do so, I consider whether heaven truly provides cosmic justice and propose that only one particular model of universalism is compatible with the afterlife theodicy.

One benefit of an all-powerful and all-good being's existence is that an entity of this nature would provide cosmic justice to the highest possible degree. Consequently, to overcome the problem of evil, the afterlife theodicy must give an account of postmortem existence that provides justice to all individuals created by God's hands and to whom

God's love extends. In this subsection, I question whether providing heavenly compensation to an individual is sufficient for cosmic justice. I then contend that for true cosmic justice to be attained, God must necessarily provide every sentient being with postmortem compensation for earthly suffering. I also maintain that there must be a logical necessity between the HME suffered and the ability of the victim to enter heaven.

If consciousness continues after death, one purpose of the afterlife is for individuals to be rewarded for good behavior, recompensed for suffering during life, or punished for previous bad behavior. For many individuals this function of the afterlife is crucial because it implies cosmic justice. Under the doctrine of heaven, if every single individual ends up in the presence of God for eternity, then arguably there is no meaning in the achievements and moral progress we make in earthly life. The reliance on postmortem compensation could also be seen to trivialize the torment undergone by individuals who suffered greatly and undeservingly in life, making earthly suffering superfluous. Consider the following situation to illustrate this line of thinking.

A group of young school children are being supervised by a teacher; an authority figure employed to protect them. The teacher leads the children into a garden overgrown with gympie gympie plants that—at the slightest touch—will sting anyone who comes into contact with them, causing excruciating sensations. The teacher knows that some of the children will inevitably be stung by the plants if she does not intervene and remove them, which (since she is wearing a sting-proof outfit from head to toe) she can accomplish easily and without harm to herself. The teacher observes as the children move toward and brush up against the gympie gympie plants, yet she does nothing to intervene. After several children begin to writhe around in almost unbearable pain, one child asks plaintively why the teacher does not help all the children. The teacher responds that she will take all the children for a big treat after this extremely unpleasant encounter. They will go to a theme park, be given ice cream, have a wonderful experience overall, and all their pain will disappear by that point. Would this appease those suffering children? Does this vindicate the teacher? Intuitively not.

The parable of the field workers, found in Matthew 20, offers a potential theological response to this line of reasoning. It runs as follows. A landowner hires field workers at a specific daily rate yet angers those who began early by paying the latecomers the same wage as those who started toiling at the day's beginning. The landowner responds by reminding the frustrated workers that they agreed to the daily salary when they signed up; their anger is not justified. The allegory demonstrates that God's grace allows all people to receive equal compensation, even though some have struggled more than others. There is nothing to stop God from showing more generosity to individuals who have not undergone as much hardship because God is not beholden to distributive justice.

Yet, there is an essential difference between the frustrated field workers and the people entering heaven: the field workers consented to the process. Contrastingly, the people of this Earth did not agree to the terms of unequal suffering leading to universal salvation. There is no signed contract or verbal agreement from humans agreeing to the terms of universal salvation. Distributive justice should be a feature of God's judicial responsibilities to keep things fair;<sup>6</sup> yet the afterlife theodicy's suffering-compensation model seems to undermine this feature.

Walls—drawing heavily on the work of Marilyn Adams (1999)—suggests that an intimate relationship with God in the afterlife is sufficient and necessary for deep and enduring happiness and contentment, so much so that all earthly suffering is totally swamped. He writes that “an intimate relationship with God is not only the greatest possible good for created beings but also the one essential thing for deep and lasting happiness and satisfaction” (Walls 2021, p. 4). Furthermore, “God also has the supreme power and creativity that will enable him to fashion of any of our lives something of extraordinary beauty regardless of the harm and damage we have experienced in this life” (ibid., p. 4). If this is the case, then evil in life is rendered superfluous in the grand scheme of justice. Heaven provides the highest good, which trumps earthly suffering; it is what

Stephen Maitzen (2009) refers to as a ‘net benefit’. If Walls is right, then it does not matter that some individuals unjustly suffer more than others; cosmic justice can still be achieved in the afterlife.

In order for cosmic justice to pertain in the afterlife, I suggest that there are (at least) two conditions that must be met. First, to ensure that the net benefit is achieved, all individuals who undergo undeserved suffering must necessarily enter heaven. This I refer to as ‘just universalism’. Second, some sort of logically necessary relationship must exist between the HME Person A suffers and the ability of Person A to reach heaven. The suffering that individuals undergo in earthly life must be necessitated by the overriding goods provided in the afterlife. This condition, endorsed by several philosophers (Maitzen 2009; Stump 1990), requires that any suffering (including suffering caused by HME) must not be gratuitous. Let us consider these claims separately, beginning with the claim that all individuals who undergo undeserved suffering will necessarily enter heaven.

Universalism is generally defined as the belief that everyone will be saved after death. As with the afterlife theodicy itself, though, universalism is an umbrella term, and this belief has various strains. What I call ‘weak universalism’ is the claim that every individual has the opportunity to enter heaven after death.<sup>7</sup> Under the weak universalist model (at its most basic level) good people go immediately to heaven after death, whilst evildoers go through a purification process until, when transformed, they may enter heaven to be in God’s presence. What I call ‘strong universalism’ is the claim that every sentient individual God creates will necessarily enter heaven. The version of strong universalism that I will soon describe is also non-speciesist; it does not discount non-human animals from going to heaven. Note that just universalism, weak universalism, and strong universalism are not mutually exclusive. Just universalism has interesting implications for the consideration of to which entities heaven is open, a consideration I will now address.

Whether cosmic justice truly pertains in the afterlife is contingent on which entities end up in heaven. Graves et al. (2017) offer a compelling defense of what they call ‘Animal Universalism’, arguing that if God is all-loving, all-powerful, and perfectly just, God would care about the well-being of all sentient animals. They define Animal Universalism as the view that “all sentient animals will be brought into heaven and remain there for eternity” (Graves et al. 2017, p. 161). In support of it, they propose that “Animal Universalism is the natural outflow of divine love and justice. It is an axiom of contemporary Western Christian theology that God is perfectly loving and just” (ibid., p. 162). Their reasoning is that God would not arbitrarily discriminate against non-human sentient animals, so every sentient creature must be given the chance to enjoy heaven after death. Let us consider a helpful analogy Graves et al. use to illustrate this point:

[C]onsider two all-powerful beings, Jack and Jill. Jill loves all sentient individuals. She cares deeply for their sakes, and is perfectly benevolent toward sentient individuals, both human and non-human, doing whatever she can to make them better off. On the other hand, Jack loves only humans. He cares deeply for their sakes, and is perfectly benevolent toward humans, doing whatever he can to make them better off. However, Jack does not care at all about what happens to animals. He is utterly indifferent to them. Jack never responds to their calls for help, and does not care if they are made worse off, even though he could easily benefit them without sacrificing anything at all. When we reflect on Jill and Jack, we find that one is more loving than the other. Jill’s love appears to be an improvement upon Jack’s love; Jill has a better love than Jack. What this tells us is that perfect love is universal. Perfect love is omni-sympathetic, sympathizing with and aiding any individual who has a “sake” that matters to them—any individual who can be subjectively better or worse off. Far from being perfectly loving, Jack’s indifference toward animal welfare appears strongly perverse. This provides evidence for the claim that animal suffering is an appropriate object of care and consideration—in a word, love. Since God’s character—far from



being perverse—is perfectly loving, God loves animals, desiring to promote their well-being. (ibid., p. 169)

Sentient non-human animals undergo extreme suffering not only at the hands of nature but also at the hands of moral agents; therefore, they ought to be provided with reparations. If the afterlife theodicy is to be effective, sentient non-human animals must be compensated for HME too.<sup>8</sup> Suppose Walls (along with Adams (1999) and Stump (1990)) correctly identifies heaven as an unsurpassable good, in all creatures' ultimate interests. In that case, this necessitates all sentient creatures' eschatological journeys to heaven after death.<sup>9</sup> Premise 3 of Walls' argument (that heaven is a great enough reward to justify God's permission of HME), is contingent on Animal Universalism being true. Yet accepting Animal Universalism could cause a significant problem for the afterlife theodicy because of its lack of coherence with several elements of the afterlife doctrine, namely the transformation, forgiveness, and reconciliation processes on which the theodicy relies. I will examine these issues in Section 7.<sup>10</sup>

### 6. Is God's Permission of Horrendous Moral Evil Justified Even If the Reward Is Great Enough?

Now let us consider the veracity of Premise 4 (and, accordingly, Premise 6) of the afterlife theodicy. Even if we grant that God permits HME for the overriding good of heaven, libertarian free will, or any other greater good,<sup>11</sup> we can still question whether compensation equals justification. If HME is necessary for the tremendous good that heaven brings, then certainly the compensation could *swamp* the evil experienced in life. But is this enough to fully justify God in permitting HME?

In his critique of the afterlife theodicy, Stephen Maitzen broaches the question of whether compensation necessitates justification, claiming that "even if heaven swamps everything, it doesn't thereby justify everything" (Maitzen 2009, p. 123). In other words, even if individuals are so highly compensated that the compensation overwhelms their earlier suffering, that does not mean their suffering is justified.

Maitzen uses a common example of compensation to push this point home, saying, "my paying you money after harming you may compensate for my harming you, but it doesn't justify my harming you. Only something like the necessity of my harming you in order to prevent your harming me or an innocent third party has a chance of justifying my behavior: some necessary connection must hold between the harm and the benefit" (ibid., p. 110). Maitzen's conclusion echoes Sterba's claim about the policy of limited intervention an all-good God should employ.<sup>12</sup> He argues,

[the afterlife theodicy] is false because compensation paid to an exploited human being somehow becomes justification for the exploitation if the compensation is big enough . . . such reasoning wars with ordinary morality because it conflates compensation and justification, and it may stem from imagining an ecstatic or forgiving state of mind on the part of the blissful: in heaven no one bears grudges, even the most horrific earthly suffering is as nothing compared to infinite bliss, all past wrongs are forgiven. But "are forgiven" does not mean "were justified"; the blissful person's disinclination to dwell on his or her earthly suffering does not imply that a perfect being was justified in permitting the suffering all along. (Maitzen 2009, pp. 122–23)

If Maitzen is correct, then HME is still unjustified even if heaven is the greatest good and fully compensates for it.

It might also be argued that there must be a logically necessary relationship between HME and achieving the ultimate good. This seems to be the only satisfactory answer to the question of why God neither overpowers HME earthly life nor endorses the divine Pauline Principle. Walls, postulating weak universalism, maintains that we ought not to regret our existence since postmortem compensation is available to all:

I do not think anyone has reason to refuse the joy of life, or worse, regret his very existence. This is not to deny that in this life there are many occasions to grieve and mourn, but the mourning of the believer in heaven is set in the larger context of hope for a day of redemption that will dry all tears and heal all hurts. This is the essential hope that relieves the perplexity and bewilderment of being glad of our existence even while recognizing that our existence is contingent on tragedies which would otherwise be unspeakable. (Walls 2021, p. 8)

Note Walls' acknowledgment that HME is necessary for our existence. This lines up with Stephen Maitzen (2009) and Eleanore Stump's (1990) thoughts on earthly suffering: it must be necessary in order to achieve heaven.

Jeff Jordan's (2004) concept of theodical individualism further highlights this concern. Theodical individualism asserts that God would only permit HME if "the sufferings of any particular person are outweighed by the good which the suffering produces for that person" (2004). Stephen Maitzen (2009) develops the principle to include an exemption: if a person requests to undergo suffering, it is reasonable to think that requested suffering and God's existence are not mutually exclusive. He states that there is "nothing wrong with the idea of God's permitting undeserved suffering that people deliberately choose to endure for, say, the benefit of others without gaining for themselves a net benefit from it" (Maitzen 2009, p. 108). One could consent to suffering for the good of another, for example a mother enduring a painful surgery to donate an organ to her child. Maitzen illustrates his point as follows:

My paying you money after harming you may compensate for my harming you, but it doesn't justify my harming you. Only something like the necessity of my harming you in order to prevent your harming me or an innocent third party has a chance of justifying my behavior: some necessary connection must hold between the harm and the benefit. (ibid., p. 110)

For the afterlife theodicy to hold weight, it must be acknowledged that the suffering undergone in earthly life is necessitated for humans to get the compensation of heaven. Yet this requires a considerable leap of faith, assuming that simply because individuals experience horrendous suffering, the suffering is a necessary condition for heaven. The afterlife theodicy, unless relying on faith alone, must provide a plausible explanation for why Fred and Rose West's innocent victims must be tortured in order to win an entry ticket to heaven. The answer leads back to another common theodicy: the free will defense. Before analyzing which concepts of freedom are compatible with the afterlife theodicy, though, let us take an interlude to examine consent.

Here I develop Maitzen's version of theodical individualism by focusing on what it might mean to "deliberately choose" to endure suffering. I argue that sentient individuals must consent in a very specific way to the process of earthly suffering and postmortem compensation God implements. To do so, I distinguish between different types of consent to assess (i) whether God ought to receive prior informed consent from individuals before permitting them to suffer and (ii) whether, after providing prior informed consent to God, the individual could later reject the terms.

The issue of consent is of particular importance in the realm of applied ethics. The difference between non-voluntary and involuntary actions emerges as a morally significant distinction. Involuntary euthanasia, for example, occurs when the individual euthanized does not consent to the process even though they would be able to provide consent; their wishes are ignored entirely. In cases of non-voluntary euthanasia, contrastingly, the individual euthanized is simply unable to give consent for one reason or another (perhaps, for instance, they are in an unresponsive state), so their wishes are unknown.

One common condition for experiential research to be deemed ethical is for researchers to have obtained prior, informed consent from participants. For similar reasons, involuntary euthanasia is considered morally wrong and non-voluntary euthanasia controversial. Another element of ethical research is that participants can opt out at any time if they

change their minds about consenting. So, ought we to think that God needs to obtain prior informed consent from sentient creatures in order to permit suffering, or—if they somehow can consent in this manner—that they could renege on the deal? Let us look to see whether the consent element of theodical individualism coheres with the afterlife theodicy.

When faced with the question of why God does not acquire informed prior consent for HME, theists may try to avoid the problem of consent by appealing to the impossibility of God receiving consent from every individual before any earthly suffering occurs. Yet, this response seems unsatisfactory. Surely God could acquire consent from an individual to suffer in earthly life while being promised a reward in the afterlife, then God could wipe the memories of these individuals, so they have no knowledge of their consent.<sup>13</sup> This, though, also fails to suffice because another element of ethical research is an opt out clause. If one consents to a procedure without fully understanding how painful it will be, there is often an opt out clause to protect individual freedom. Consider any experimental research that will potentially cause pain to participants. Even after having signed an informed consent form, that individual may still opt out of the research at any time by reneging on their consent. Why should this not be the case with consenting to horrendous suffering? It would be particularly difficult to acquire prior informed consent from an individual before they undergo horrendous suffering because the individual may not truly understand the extent and intensity of said suffering.

The afterlife theodicy may respond that since heaven swamps everything, the good of heaven is one that any rational being *would* consent to; thus, individuals undergoing suffering have indirectly agreed to undergo the suffering. Under this view, God *knows* that people would consent to suffer, so God does not need to acquire prior consent before permitting suffering. Yet this seems to undermine the earthly libertarian free will on which the afterlife theodicy is dependent to explain the permission of HME.

Perhaps God cannot offer consent because this means that anyone aware of the contract before suffering begins might also, knowing that they have the capacity for free will, decide that when faced with suffering, they will do whatever they can—moral or otherwise—to alleviate the suffering. Hungry? I'll steal food. Child growing up in poverty? I'll pillage to reduce their suffering. The sinning will not have a bearing on their ultimate fate because heaven is guaranteed. Awareness of the contract could cause greater evil. To put it bluntly, some individuals might wonder what the point is of being good at all when evil and good alike end up in the same postmortem blissful state.

T. J. Mawson (forthcoming) has recently explored 'Bartianism', a doctrine based on the philosophy of Bart Simpson that employs an attitude of 'sin now, repent later'. Mawson suggests that this could be a reasonable position to hold if God assures that premortem repentance grants any individual access to heaven, no matter what their sin. He states, "there are some sinful actions—possible for at least some of us on at least some occasions—which are such that they would produce greater net antemortem benefit for us than would any non-sinful actions available to us on those occasions" (Mawson, forthcoming). Mawson builds on this idea to argue that if universal forgiveness is on the cards—and individuals have full awareness of the system—then this could encourage more HME because many would adopt the Bartian 'sin now, repent later' canon. For God to be genuinely omnibenevolent, God must forgive everyone for their earthly sins; yet, if strong universalism is true, then the balance seems not fully restored. If we measure the overall suffering that individuals have undergone, those who suffered HME in life still end up at a disadvantage, even if they win big in heaven. This line of thinking has some merit and could help the afterlife theodicy explain why God cannot obtain consent.

Yet some individuals might refuse to consent, giving God (at least) two options: (i) eradicate them from existence<sup>14</sup> or (ii) refuse to let them into heaven. Both options reject strong universalism, which is necessary for a satisfactory afterlife theodicy. Since strong universalism must hold for the afterlife theodicy to be adequate, even Bartians would already know that they could sin now and still get to heaven later.<sup>15</sup>

If the afterlife theodist denies that consent is necessary, it seems to undermine earthly libertarian free will, which is an integral element of the theodicy for explaining why HME pertains. If the afterlife theodist agrees that consent is vital, then she must explain how the consent process works. Even if it is coherent to accept that God does not need consent and that the afterlife does allow for cosmic justice, there is another part of the process that must be examined: the process of forgiveness.

### 7. Is the Forgiveness Process Coherent?

Forgiveness is an integral element of the afterlife theodicy; so, for the afterlife theodist to be successful, she must elucidate a coherent model of forgiveness. Walls, drawing on Christian theology, proposes that perpetrators of moral evil will be morally transformed after death, resulting in an obligation for victims to forgive. Forgiveness and transformation occur because of Christ, Walls contends, since Christ is God and sacrificed his life for all human sin: “He has the right to forgive first and foremost because he is God, the one against whom all sins are ultimately committed” (Walls 2021, p. 5). The first potential concern with this approach stems from the question of why we must forgive simply because Christ does. Walls informs us that “since all of us need forgiveness, and Christ offers forgiveness to all, none of us are in position to withhold forgiveness from others” (ibid., pp. 5–6). This indicates a strange sort of contract between all parties. In order to be forgiven for our sins, we must forgive others for their sins, even if our sins are minor compared to theirs.

Under this version of the afterlife theodicy, which is necessary to retain cosmic justice, none of us can possibly reject forgiving another. Furthermore, salvation is not merely a matter of forgiveness, but also a matter of thorough transformation. In the afterlife, perpetrators of HME can be fully reconciled with their victims and heartily embraced by them. Evildoers will be transformed into good people after death, victims of evil must forgive them accordingly, and forgiven evildoers and their victims will be reconciled in the afterlife.<sup>16</sup>

Viewing forgiveness in this way—as a required or obligated process—stands as controversial because it undermines an ‘elective’ model of forgiveness. Walls’ model of the afterlife indicates at least that humans have an obligation or duty to forgive, at most that humans are coerced to forgive. There are (at least) two difficulties with the forced forgiveness process entailed by the afterlife theodicy. First, the conceptual problem that forgiveness is, by nature, elective. Second, that forced forgiveness seems to conflict with postmortem libertarian free will.<sup>17</sup>

Consider the two best friends, Edmond Dantes and Ferdinand Mondego, well-known characters from Alexander Dumas’ classic novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Mondego betrays Dantes, falsely accusing him of treason, leading to Dantes’ imprisonment in Château d’If for 14 years. During his imprisonment, Dantes endures HME caused by his ex-friend’s betrayal. Now, perhaps the ideal situation is for Dantes to forgive Mondego. Perhaps this exemplifies true moral fortitude. Yet it would be counterintuitive to maintain that Dantes is *required* to forgive Mondego. If Dantes is hypnotized to forgive Mondego, the ‘forgiveness’ does not appear to be entirely genuine.

Consider a different situation. A friend of Dantes encourages him to forgive Mondego, knowing that it will bring about a morally better state for both parties. While Dantes is years into his unbearably painful prison stay, this friend promises to remove Dantes from his oppressive prison cell, free him, and take him to paradise on the condition that he forgives Mondego. Would we not consider this offer of paradise a form of bribery and the ‘forgiveness’ mere pretense?

If Dantes decides not to forgive Mondego, perhaps he is not being as virtuous as we (or God) would hope, and perhaps he is doing something morally wrong, but he is not shirking a moral obligation unless a non-elective model of forgiveness is accepted. Lucy Allais (2013) has argued for an elective model of forgiveness, which means that individuals can make a choice to forgive or to withhold forgiveness. What Per-Erik Milam calls ‘essentially elective forgiveness’ is the claim that “it is necessarily morally and rationally permissible for one

either to forgive or not to forgive an offence" (Milam 2018, p. 572). Under the afterlife theodicy, forgiveness seems to be non-elective, because it is required.

Key to the distinction between elective and non-elective forgiveness is the difference between 'perfect' and 'imperfect' duties, the former being duties one must perform and the latter being duties over which one has agential discretion. If forgiveness is an imperfect duty, then individuals cannot be coerced into forgiving due to obligation. They have agential discretion. Coerced forgiveness entails that the forgiver could forgive for the wrong reasons (being forced by God or pretending to forgive in order to enter heaven) rather than going through a willful and meaningful process of emotional transfiguration.<sup>18</sup> This concern highlights a potential clash between elective forgiveness and strong universalism. So, either (a) strong universalism is false, and forgiveness is elective or (b) strong universalism is true, and forgiveness is not elective. If the elective account of forgiveness is accepted, then the afterlife theodicy is ineffective (as it relies on strong universalism); therefore, afterlife theodicians must instead adopt a non-elective account of forgiveness.<sup>19</sup>

Let us move on to the condition of transformation for the afterlife theodicy—that all evildoers will necessarily transform before entering heaven. According to the afterlife theodicy, perpetrators of horrendous moral evil will be called to account for their actions, and the balance of good and evil restored, with those who unfairly underwent suffering in their bodily existence being compensated and those who committed HME punished for their evil actions. Walls calls this "ultimate accountability", and it ensures that "the perpetrators of horrendous evil cannot escape and will be called to account for their actions" (Walls 2021, p. 1). The question then arises, how will the evildoers be called to account?

First of all, let us consider in which way evildoers change in the afterlife, according to Walls. Using the example of a man who committed a HME, Walls explains: "if he truly placed his faith in Christ, if he honestly faced the horror of his sin and sincerely repented of it, and underwent the sanctifying process that actually makes us like Christ, then there is an important sense in which he will not be the same man".<sup>20</sup> He continues, "he will be the same man numerically of course, but his character, his heart, his feelings etc. will be radically transformed" (ibid., p. 6). There are two relevant considerations here. The first relates to libertarian free will, and the other to personal identity.

This eschatological view denies libertarian free will, specifically the freedom not to transform. If evildoers have not chosen to transform, this process is, in actuality, God forcing transformation.<sup>21</sup> Forced transformation also seems to encounter a personal identity problem. How ought we interpret Walls' claim that an evildoer is "not the same man" and "his character, this heart, his feelings" will be radically transformed? If the evildoer has been forced to transform into someone else, then God provides rewards in heaven to an individual that is not the same individual who deserves the prize. This transformation process potentially undermines cosmic justice, then, because God rewards an entity different from the entity that underwent or perpetrated suffering.

Generally, within philosophies of forgiveness, it is taken as given that only the wronged victim can forgive. Others may pardon, but true forgiveness can only be provided by the victim of the evil. It ought to be considered too whether all perpetrators would desire forgiveness. Some may feel that since they only repented and transformed non-voluntarily, they ought not be forgiven at all. If all evildoers will necessarily be transformed by God (and there is no other option), then this brings into question whether they are truly deserving of forgiveness.

What can we say about the reconciliation process for which Walls advocates? This claim assumes a particular model of forgiveness that includes the victim not only emotionally moving past a prior moral transgression but also restoring a relationship with the wrongdoer. Walls states,

Heaven will no doubt be filled with not only persons who have wept many tears, but also with those who have caused those tears. If heaven is real, there will no doubt be many former thugs, racists, rapists, murderers, adulterers, terrorists, and schemers there along with their victims. (Walls 2021, p. 2)

Walls seems to take as given that reconciliation necessarily follows from forgiveness. Certainly, some models of forgiveness recognize the natural consequence of reconciliation after forgiveness has been granted, but several philosophers have suggested that reconciliation is not always an appropriate aftereffect of forgiveness. Reconciliation can even be morally unwise because doing so might expose one to additional psychological damage (Murphy and Hampton 1988). Perhaps reconciliation, like forgiveness, has an elective element too. If this is the case, then forced reconciliation is not genuine reconciliation. Walls argues that all sins are ultimately committed against Christ, but to say that the direct victims of evil do completely relinquish the freedom to withhold forgiveness, refuse transformation, and reject reconciliation entails an elimination of postmortem libertarian free will.

In response to this line of reasoning, I suspect that the afterlife theodist might evoke the vast conceptual gulf between humans and God, claiming that we are so deeply inferior to God that we are ignorant about what is best for us. Perhaps that is true, but that does not undermine the conclusion that forced forgiveness, transformation, and reconciliation denies libertarian free will and necessitates a non-elective model of forgiveness.

Finally, it should be mentioned that sentient non-human animals are frequently the victims of HME, but they arguably do not have the mental capacity to transform, forgive, and reconcile.<sup>22</sup> Can a mink forgive a human who keeps it in harsh, factory-farm conditions only to skin it for a fur coat? Can a cat forgive the evildoer who burned it alive?<sup>23</sup> If not, then God must allow the mink and cat to enter heaven, despite a lack of capacity for forgiveness. If animals are able to enter heaven without undergoing these processes, then why should not humans? If a mink or a cat can be with God without undergoing the forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation processes, why not a human? If the answer is solely 'free will', then why does free will lose its value in the afterlife?

## 8. A Consideration of Libertarian Free Will

One of the most common ways the theodist justify God's permission of HME involves appealing to free will. Walls, for example, observes the following:

In saying God "allows" horrific evils, I am assuming that creaturely free will is a good thing, although it has been abused, and that such freedom accounts for much of the evil in our world. This does not mean that those who abuse their freedom by committing such evils are justified, or that the evils themselves are justified. But it does mean that God's perfect goodness will be vindicated in the end and he will be seen as justified. (Walls 2021, p. 1)

Several concerns emerge out of this line of reasoning. First, it means that the afterlife theodicy is not individually sufficient to overcome the problem of evil; it works only in combination with the free will defense. This may not be a significant problem for Christian afterlife theodists, who accept the free will defense too; yet it does entail that the afterlife theodist must show that the free will defense—in addition to the afterlife theodicy—is coherent.

Second, the afterlife theodist must explain why total freedom is given in earthly life, rather than a more limited freedom. Citing the example of David Rothenberg—who was brutally tortured by his father after the latter lost the former in a custody dispute—to illustrate this problem with the afterlife theodicy, Maitzen states, "if you can easily and at no risk to yourself prevent the total immolation of a small boy who is about to be set on fire by his abusive father, you ought to prevent it" (Maitzen 2009, p. 108). Sterba's argument highlights a similar quandary concerning God's moral nature. Surely God ought to prevent HME, even if it means limiting the freedom of David's father.

Interestingly, Sterba's own argument, relying partially on the concepts of significant freedom and partial freedom, could provide the theodist with effective ammunition against this critique. Recall Sterba's proposition that God would allow significant freedom but not complete freedom in earthly life. If postmortem freedom follows the same model,

then perhaps humans have some level of freedom in the afterlife but not enough to condemn them to eternal suffering. This does impose another condition of the afterlife theodicy, though: it must reject postmortem libertarian free will despite necessitating it in earthly life.

This odd claim leads to the third concern. It is not clear why unlimited free will (rather than the significant free will and limited intervention that Sterba considers) is of such value in earthly life as to permit HME, but not so valuable in the afterlife. If God limits postmortem libertarian freedom (forcing individuals to forgive, transform, and reconcile) then why would God value libertarian freedom so much in *earthly* life? The theodicist needs to explain the asymmetry here. She must offer a reasonable account of why we ought not to view human's existence, both in earthly and postmortem life, holistically. If, as the afterlife theodicist has argued, HME suffered in earthly life is fully swamped by goods in the afterlife, then why is earthly freedom not fully swamped by the lack of freedom God permits after death? Why view the sum of good and evil an individual experiences holistically—as Walls suggests we should—but not view the capacity for freedom in a similar way? The crux of the argument is this:

1. If libertarian freedom in earthly life is granted by God and necessitates HME, then significant freedom in earthly life must be of great value.
2. Libertarian freedom in earthly life is granted by God and necessitates HME.
3. Libertarian freedom in earthly life is of great value.
4. If libertarian freedom is of great value in earthly life, it must also be of great value in the afterlife.
5. Therefore, libertarian freedom must be of great value in the afterlife.
6. If God forces forgiveness, transformation, and reconciliation in the afterlife, libertarian freedom is not of great value in the afterlife.
7. God forces forgiveness, transformation, and reconciliation in the afterlife.
8. Libertarian freedom is not of great value in the afterlife.

There is a clear contradiction between Premise 5 and Premise 8. The afterlife theodicist must deny one of the above premises in order for her defense to be effective. For the doctrine of heaven to be an adequate challenge to Sterba's problem of evil, there must be an explanation for why God values libertarian freedom so highly in life that God is willing to permit HME yet does not place a similar value on libertarian freedom in the afterlife. If libertarian freedom is so important in earthly life, why does it not hold the same status postmortem?

## 9. Conclusions

James Sterba's logical problem of evil maintains that God should employ a policy of limited intervention and not permit horrendous moral evil to bring about goods. In response, the afterlife theodicy proclaims that God gives victims of horrendous moral evil compensation in the form of everlasting heaven. I have argued that in order to be effective, the afterlife theodicy must adhere to certain conditions. Explicitly, it must assume a non-elective account of forgiveness; adopt a non-speciesist, strong universalist position; reject postmortem libertarian free will by forcing forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation; and deny individuals informed prior consent and an opt out clause for suffering. If the classical monotheist adopts the afterlife theodicy to overcome Sterba's logical problem of evil, she must be cognizant of and specific about the version of the afterlife she endorses.<sup>24</sup>

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sterba does concede that there are exceptions to the Pauline Principle. There may be cases in which permitting HME to befall innocents is justifiable as a means to preventing additional HME to other innocents; however, these exceptions do not hold at the divine level because God is all-powerful.

- 2 Although it is outside the scope of this article, the question of whether the object of our desires must be logically possible (referred to as the ‘counterpossible problem’) is an interesting one. See Joshua [Mugg \(2016\)](#) for a fascinating discussion of the issue.
- 3 This point is reminiscent of one main critique to Kant’s moral argument for the existence of God. Kant argued that all-good God must exist to ensure cosmic justice, but many accuse Kant of begging the question. Even if the God of classical monotheism is necessary for cosmic justice (and I argue to the contrary), this does not necessitate God’s existence unless one has proven that cosmic justice does indeed exist. In Walls’ argument, just like Kant’s, heaven is the summum bonum (ultimate good).
- 4 The third arm of Walls’ claim, that heaven is rationally warranted, can also be questioned. This is an endeavor I leave for subsequent sections.
- 5 An anonymous reviewer raises the interesting point that this approach assumes that the common good and individual good are distinct. It maintains that what is good for me personally might not be good for everyone, and vice versa. Of course, the good within my life affects the overall goodness in the world, but I do think that the distinction between personal goodness and overall goodness is significant.
- 6 One potential response to this line of argument is that the victims of HME might themselves give informed consent to God to permit their suffering, knowing that it is the only route to the ultimate good of heaven.
- 7 This is the type of universalism Walls endorses, stating, “all persons have not only a fair, but a full opportunity to freely receive the eternal life for which all persons were created” ([Walls 2021](#), p. 8).
- 8 Elsewhere, Walls has argued that “God would not give some persons many opportunities to repent and receive [God’s] grace while giving others only minimal opportunities, or even none at all” ([Walls 2002](#), p. 67). In line with this thinking, then, it seems God would extend the same grace to non-human sentient animals.
- 9 T.J. Mawson, in a brief footnote of his discussion of theological individualism, which I will examine a little later, seems to support Animal Universalism when he muses, “I presume that any Martians who, whilst not human are significantly similar to us in sentience, freedom, moral worth, and so on would, by Theodical Individualism, be exempt from suffering of this sort too. The same may not be true for non-human animals such as dogs” ([Mawson 2011](#), p. 142).
- 10 As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, we cannot ignore the relationship between the afterlife and earthly life when discussing the effectiveness of the afterlife theodicy. The metaphysical and ontological questions about the nature of the afterlife and existence in the afterlife will have a direct bearing on the outcome of this inquiry. Although I do not have the scope to examine the array of options within Christian eschatological theology, I do acknowledge that the success of the theodicy hinges on this relationship too.
- 11 Libertarian (or contra causal) free will refers to having the ability to do otherwise in a situation but choosing not to.
- 12 One response the afterlife theodicy might try involves maintaining that earthly existence is a necessary condition for free will and character development; therefore, individuals must undergo incarnate existence before being rewarded with the ultimate good. Yet, this seems to be incompatible with forced transformation. If God overrides libertarian free will to coerce transformation in order to bring about strong universalism, then how can incarnate existence be necessary? The doctrine of incarnation might also be employed to argue that existence in human form has an essential purpose; otherwise, God would not incarnate in the form of Christ to offer salvation to humankind. This response, though, begs the question. It assumes that there is a purpose for bodily existence simply because God must have a good reason to do it. For those not bound to this theological claim, there is no reason to accept the doctrine.
- 13 It is difficult to conceive how young children and sentient non-human animals could give informed consent.
- 14 We might also suppose that at least some individuals would not consent at all. Individuals who, like David [Benatar \(2006, 2015\)](#), argue that nonexistence is preferable to existence.
- 15 This process also seems to be asymmetrical. Why not have bliss first and then suffering? Indeed at least the individual should be allowed to decide upon this. If consent is to be truly informed, the nature of the process must be elucidated, conveyed, and understood by the consenting party. God must reveal the true nature of reality to individuals and explain that universalism is true. Individuals should then have the option to deny consent and either (i) not exist in the first place or (ii) be allowed to opt out at any time.
- 16 If God is willing to force transformation, forgiveness, and reconciliation postmortem, why wouldn’t God do this in earthly life? The tipping point of death seems arbitrary.
- 17 I am by no means arguing that forgiveness itself is morally bad. In fact, forgiveness is likely a good process to undergo. Yet, moral permissibility is distinct from moral obligation.
- 18 Walls also assumes what is known as a ‘thick’ concept of forgiveness in which forgiveness is always morally good. In contrast, a ‘thin’ concept of forgiveness asserts that forgiveness is only morally good if certain conditions pertain (if the wrongdoer feels no remorse for their immoral action, for example, or if the forgiveness obtains for inadequate reasons). Both Richard [Swinburne \(1989\)](#) and Jeffrie [Murphy \(2003\)](#) argue that in the case of horrendous moral evil, forgiveness can actually be *detrimental* if the wrongdoer has not sufficiently repented.
- 19 The afterlife theodicy must also subscribe to what [Garrard and McNaughton \(2003\)](#) call ‘unconditional forgiveness’, which is when forgiveness is not contingent upon the evildoer doing anything whatsoever to repent or atone.



- 20 At this point it is important to distinguish between natural human ability and divine grace. Christian doctrine establishes that victims of injustice may not have the natural ability to forgive; rather, this power is conveyed by God to humans. Combined with the theological notion that humans are naturally oriented toward God, the afterlife theologian may speculate that it is necessary for God to ‘step in’ and make happen what humans alone cannot.
- 21 Note that universal transformation must occur for strong universalism to pertain.
- 22 Although I do not have the scope to fully explore this claim here, fascinating research has been conducted on to what extent different non-human animal species are capable of forgiveness and reconciliation (see [Walters et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Cordoni and Norscia \(2014\)](#) for example).
- 23 Of course, it is questionable whether non-human animals have free will at all.
- 24 I would like to thank five anonymous reviews for providing thought-provoking and constructive feedback to an earlier version of this paper. Considerations of space entail that I have not been able to explore all of the exciting avenues of thought down which their feedback directed me.

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