

Article

Sterba's Problem of Evil and a Penal Colony Theodicy

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Abstract: Sterba argues that God would be ethically bound to implement a set of exceptionless evil prevention requirements. However, he argues that the world as we know it is not as it would be if God were applying them. Sterba concludes that God does not exist. In this paper, I offer a penal colony theodicy that will show how the world as we know it is entirely compatible with God's implementation of such evil prevention requirements.

Keywords: evil; omnipotence; omnibenevolence; theodicy; desert

1. Introduction

In his book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* James Sterba outlines a list of supposedly exceptionless evil prevention requirements that God—an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person—would be logically bound to implement if she existed. They are these:

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)

Sterba argues that the world is not as it would be if God was applying the above and so concludes that God does not exist.

I am sympathetic to much of what Sterba argues in *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* I think Sterba's case constitutes a formidable challenge to traditional theistic views that hold that God created us and the world we live in. However, I am not a traditional theist (and never have been), and I do not believe Sterba's case successfully demonstrates the non-existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God. In what follows, I will show how it is possible for there to exist a world such as this, containing its degree and quantity of evil, consistent with there also existing an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God. I will do this while conceding to Sterba as much as possible, including the truth of the evil prevention requirements and a God who, were she to exist, would invariably abide by them.

2. In the Beginning

A dialectical point of order. Sterba is running a logical problem of evil. The target of his argument is made clear at the outset. It is "an all-good God who is also presumed to be all powerful" (Sterba 2019, p. 1). Therefore, to refute Sterba, all I need to do is show it is logically possible for a God of that sort—an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person—to exist, consistent with there also existing a world such as ours, with its degree and quantity of



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evils. That is the job of work. I stress this because most traditional theists believe all manner of things about God beyond just that God is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. They often believe that God created everything (Aquinas 1964, 1. A. 2, 3); that God is a necessary being or the essentially self-subsisting being (Aquinas 1964, I, q. 44, a. 1); that God is a person worthy of worship; that God is a being who is maximally great (Plantinga 1974); that God loves us and wants us freely to love God, and so on. There may be good reasons to believe these things about God. But the issue is strictly whether *God—an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person*—is compatible with this world and our situation in it. It is no boundary condition on a successful counterexample to Sterba's logical problem of evil that it describe a situation that traditional theists think has ever obtained. I am not a traditional theist, and this paper is not addressed to traditional theists. It is addressed to Sterba and anyone who agrees with his case.

Bearing that in mind, is there any contradiction involved in supposing that 'in the beginning' so to speak, there was God and also billions of uncreated, immorally disposed souls such as ourselves, and—existing separately—an uncreated sensible world such as this one? I do not think so, and I will explain why. But note that the question is not whether it is plausible that this was the situation in the beginning. One could accept everything I am about to say in this section consistent with believing there is an excellent case for thinking that God alone existed in the beginning and is responsible for all else. All I need is logical possibility, not plausibility.

Starting with omnipotence: an omnipotent being does not have to create anything. After all, an omnipotent person who has to create things lacks the ability to refrain from creating anything and so is not truly omnipotent at all. Nevertheless, perhaps if anything else exists besides an omnipotent person, then the omnipotent person must be the creator of those other things else not qualify as omnipotent. I do not see why, however. I have certain powers in respect of the mug in front of me. I could hurl it out of the window, let it sit where it is, balance it on my head, and so on. Yet, the powers I have in respect of it seem entirely unaffected by whether or not I created it. If there were two mugs side by side, one of which I created and the other I did not, I would be as powerful in respect of one as I am the other, all else being equal. By the same token, an omnipotent being who exists alongside all manner of other things that she did not create seems just as powerful as an omnipotent being who is in an otherwise identical situation, save that she created all the things around her. In their respective situations, both can take out of existence anything that is in it, change anything that exists in any way they see fit, and add to what exists in any way they wish.

Perhaps it will be objected that a God who did not create the things around her is less powerful because she lacks the power to make it true that she was the creator of all the things around her. But for that to be a real lack of power—which is questionable—then omnipotence would involve having the power to alter the past. But if omnipotence involves having the power to alter the past, then by hypothesis this is a power this God has. Thus, despite not actually being responsible for anything else that exists, she has the power to make herself so. This objection therefore does not provide grounds for thinking that the God who did not create the other things around her is less powerful than an otherwise identical God who did create all the other things around her.

It seems, then, that there is no contradiction involved in supposing there to exist an uncreated omnipotent person, billions of other uncreated persons and, separately, an uncreated world such as this, and for the omnipotent person not to have been responsible for any of it.

What about omniscience? Strictly speaking, Sterba does not list omniscience as one of the divine attributes. The target of his argument is "an all-good God who is also presumed to be all powerful" (p. 1). I take it that omniscience may sometimes go unmentioned—Epicurus himself made no mention of it in the original problem of evil—because if a person is all-powerful, then they have the power to know anything. They do not seem to need to have exercised that power to qualify as God. But I will assume that

God is omniscient in some sense of the word just for good measure. If God does not have to be omniscient to qualify as God, then the following paragraph can be ignored.

Does possessing omniscience somehow essentially involve having created everything else that exists? Not so far as I can see. It is sufficient to be omniscient that one is in possession of all items of knowledge. One does not have to have created any of the things one knows about. It seems logically possible, therefore, for there to exist, in the beginning, an omnipotent, omniscient person, and billions of uncreated, immorally disposed persons such as ourselves, and a separately existing sensible world such as this one, and for the omnipotent omniscient person not to have been responsible for any of it.

Does anything change if we add omnibenevolence to the mix? No, on the contrary. I am with Sterba on this. I think an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person positively would not create a world such as this and billions of immorally disposed persons such as ourselves to populate it. To do so would contravene the evil prevention requirements. But even if that is mistaken and God would create such things, this would not threaten to render illogical the scenario I have described. For it would not show that there is anything contradictory in the idea of God existing and there already existing a world of the kind God would have created had there not already been, and billions of persons of a kind that God would have created had they not already existed.

Perhaps there is something incoherent in the idea of there being uncreated things. I do not think so—and I think most atheists will not think so either, as they often believe the universe as a whole or its basic ingredients exist uncreated (see [Wright and Hale 1992](#), p. 128)—but it would not affect my case if there was. For if everything that exists has to have come into a being, then it is logically possible that God and billions of immorally disposed souls such as ourselves along with a sensible world such as this one could have come into being, without God having been responsible for it. It may not be a reasonable supposition, but all I need is logical possibility. As Bertrand Russell famously noted, “there is no logical impossibility in the hypothesis that the world sprang into being five minutes ago” ([Russell 1921](#), pp. 159–60; see also [Smith 1993](#), p. 135; [Mackie 1982](#), p. 94).

Perhaps some will object that nothing can come from nothing, yet also maintain that everything has been caused, and thus propose—as Dennett seems to—that some things (in Dennett’s case, the entire universe) have created themselves ([Dennett 2006](#), p. 244 and see [Craig 2008](#), p. 151 for discussion). But if that is possible—and of course, it is widely thought not to be (a “rape and perversion of logic” as [Nietzsche \(1966\)](#), p. 21), then there would be nothing logically impossible in supposing everything in the scenario I just described did precisely that simultaneously. In such a case God would be responsible for her own existence, but still not responsible for anything else’s existence, and that is all I need.

Perhaps it will be objected that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person is not the sort of thing that can come into being, yet everything that exists has to have come into being. I do not think any of that is true, but it does not matter if it is, for if it is true that God is a being of a sort that cannot come into being, and also true that everything has to have come into being, then God’s non-existence is already established by these facts alone and Sterba’s logical problem of evil is surplus to requirements. But Sterba is an atheist solely on the basis of his logical problem of evil and so clearly does not believe it to be surplus to requirements.

I think, then, that my target audience should accept that it is logically possible for the scenario I described to obtain. If there can be uncreated things, it is logically possible for the things I described to exist uncreated, including God. If everything that exists has to have come into being, then it is logically possible for the things I described to have come into being, including God. Either way, there seems no contradiction involved in supposing that in the beginning God existed and billions of other immorally disposed souls existed, and a sensible world similar to this one existed as well, and God was not responsible for any of it.

3. After the Beginning

Imagining that the logically possible scenario above obtains, what would God subsequently do? Would she destroy the sensible world, for instance? No, of course not. It may be inferior to a world God could create. But that is no reason to destroy it. To do such a thing would be a gross act of vandalism. It would plausibly be an evil of the kind the evil prevention requirements forbid, despite it not befalling a person.

Maybe she would change it, but there is no necessity to this. The world in question should be understood to be devoid of sentient life at this point. And so, it is doing no one any harm. There is no contradiction involved in supposing, then, that God will simply leave it well alone.

What about the billions of other souls that exist—would God destroy them? Again, obviously not. That would be a clear violation of the evil prevention requirements. These are innocent souls, for we are at the beginning and so no one has done anything yet. Innocent persons deserve respect and good will. And so, that is what God will give them in the beginning.

But what if, as time passes, some of these immorally disposed persons go on to form immoral intentions and freely attempt to act on them? Will God know of this and intervene to prevent it from happening? No, I do not think so. She is giving these innocent persons the respect and good will they deserve. And innocent persons have a right to privacy. If I have in front of me your personal diary, then though I have the power to read its contents, it would clearly be immoral for me to do so, other things being equal. And the brute possibility that I might, by reading your diary, find out that you plan on doing something tremendously immoral is clearly not sufficient justification to take a look inside. After all, a good person is morally required to default think well of others, not ill. I am not entitled—not at the outset—to assume you might be hatching evil plans. God is in a relevantly analogous situation in the beginning. It seems logically possible and morally highly plausible that God would not peer into the minds of those around her, out of respect for others' right to privacy. And this does not just apply to the contents of the minds around her either, but also to the private interactions that they may take part in.

It will no doubt be objected that God is omniscient and so would already have all the information she needs without having to violate anyone's rights to acquire it. However, we have seen that the God Sterba is arguing does not exist is not essentially omniscient. So even if it is true that an omniscient person would already have all this information—and I do not think it is—it would likely be beside the point. I only need to show that an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person is compatible with our world and our situation in it; not an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent person. Still, it would be as well to show how such ignorance is compatible with being an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent person, for then my case will work for those who believe omniscience is also one of the divine attributes (and those, such as myself, who believe that the God who exists is indeed omniscient).

'Omniscience', taken literally, means 'all knowledge'. Yet, a person can be in possession of all items of knowledge and be ignorant of any number of true beliefs. To see this, we can note that knowledge has at least two core components: true belief and justification. It is in this respect akin to a pizza. Pizzas have two core components: a bread base and a topping. And an omnipizzarian is someone who is in possession of all pizzas. Does it follow that an omnipizzarian is in possession of all bread bases? No, for it is possible that there are any number of topping-less bases that this person does not own without their status as omnipizzarian being in any jeopardy. Likewise, then, if there are truths that lack justification, then those truths do not qualify as items of knowledge. An omniscient person may not be in possession of those true beliefs consistent with being omniscient, just as an omnipizzarian may not be in possession of all bread bases consistent with being omnipizzarian. If God is the arbiter of all justifications (as I believe to be the case) and does not wish to know the private thoughts of those innocent others in her company, then true propositions about those private thoughts will thereby lack justification and so not

qualify as items of knowledge. Thus God, so understood, can keep herself as ignorant as she likes, and be no less omniscient for that. God has that power. Thus, if omniscience is understood to involve being in possession of all knowledge, it is logically possible for God to be all knowing and at the same time to keep herself ignorant of the private thoughts and intentions and activities of the other innocent souls in existence.

What if omniscience is understood to mean being in possession of all true beliefs and no false ones? I do not think it will make a substantial difference, for it still does not follow that a person who is omniscient in this sense has to be *consciously* aware of all that she knows. And thus, God, who does not wish to invade the privacy of others by making herself consciously aware of the activities and mental contents of other persons, will keep her true beliefs about other people's private thoughts and activities subliminal, at least at first. In effect, the private thoughts and plans and interactions of others are in a private diary in her own mind; that it is in her own mind does not make her act of opening it any less an infringement of the privacy of others, and so she will not open it. This all seems logically possible, anyway.

What if some of those who have formed evil intentions begin to act on them? Well, as noted above, out of respect God would not just be keeping herself ignorant of the content of other people's minds, but also ignorant of their private interactions. And so, it certainly seems logically possible that some of the evil persons in her midst will be able to complete their evil deeds and visit the horrendously evil consequences of their actions on some others. Furthermore, God is going to be extending to those around her good will and trust. She will be assuming the best of all she encounters, not the worst. And so, nothing stops horrendously evil consequences being visited on her. After all, it would not occur to her, not at this point in proceedings, that some may be intending to do the evil things they are intending to do, even—plausibly—if they start giving some outward appearance of intending to do them. She will trust, not distrust. And so, it seems plausible—and logically possible—that the first evidence God will ever have that some in her midst are evilly disposed towards her and others, is the actual visitation of horrendously evil consequences on herself and others. And even that may not be enough to convince her that real evil is being committed, as—again—she is so good-willed towards others that she may, at first, attribute other motives to the actors. A perfectly good God is likely, at first, not to recognize the evidence of evil in her midst. Her goodness makes her vulnerable and ignorant. She is a sheep among wolves, albeit an omnipotent sheep. But that omnipotence leaves her helpless at first. As such it seems logically possible for a first wave of significant and horrendous evil consequences to occur—and perhaps a wave or two more, given God's tendency to think the best of others—consistent with God existing. And it seems logically possible, and in fact quite likely, that God herself will be on the receiving end of some of those evil deeds. Indeed, it is logically possible that she could be on the receiving end of all of them. Every single innocent person in her company can, in principle, do at least one wicked thing, but probably more, to God herself. Sterba thinks God cannot be harmed (pp. 145–46). It is clear I disagree. God is extraordinarily vulnerable to being harmed by the wickedly disposed in her company.

In summary, it is logically possible for God to exist, and for any number of immorally disposed innocent persons to exist, and a sensible world such as this one to exist and for God not to have been responsible for any of it. And it is logically possible for some of those persons—in fact, any number of them, and so all of them—to form wicked intentions and to be able to visit on innocent others the horrendously evil consequences of those intentions, including on God herself. Indeed, it is logically possible for all of those billions of immorally disposed persons to visit horrendously evil consequences on God herself. For she will trust and respect and extend good will towards each and every single one of them, to her own detriment.

4. Moral Limits

There are limits to what morality demands in terms of positive sacrifice for others, even when the sacrifice is required to save an innocent from harm. Imagine you are beside a pond and a child falls in. Clearly you are morally required to hoick the child out. It is easy enough to do, costs you barely anything, and prevents horrible harm from occurring. But what if another child falls in? And another? And another? How long ought you stay by the pond, rescuing drowning children? They are innocent and have a right to life. But, plausibly, a right to life does not entitle them to anything they need from others in order to stay alive. Even if you find that you do not need sleep and never tire and never grow hungry, and turn out to be immortal, will the evil prevention requirements mean that you must now devote the rest of eternity to saving drowning children if they keep plopping into the pond? Is that a life that duty can fate a good person to lead? Plausibly not. Leading such a life seems far beyond the call of duty by any reasonable assessment. As Thomson put it “having a right to life does not guarantee having either a right to be given the use of or a right to be allowed continued use of another person’s body—even if one needs it for life itself” (p. 46). There will come a point where you may walk away from the pond and start pursuing your own projects without thereby being any less good for having done so. Some sacrifice is demanded, perhaps even a lot. But there are limits. And you are not responsible for the fact children keep falling into this pond, after all (matters may be very different if you are, of course). And you are an innocent person yourself with a right *not* to have to dedicate every waking moment to preventing others from coming to harm, even those who are innocent. This applies even if you have great powers. As Sterba notes, Spiderman’s main problem given his power to prevent terrible deeds from occurring “becomes how to do so while still maintaining some kind of personal life” (p. 19). Spiderman, no less than anyone else, is entitled to have some kind of personal life. That applies to God too.

If there are limits to what a good person is obliged to sacrifice for the sake of protecting innocent persons from harm, then those limits are going to be considerably lower—potentially non-existent—when it comes to what a good person owes, at least in terms of substantial sacrifice, to those who have freely done evil things. And they will be lower still—and even more likely non-existent—if the evil things in question have been done to the good person themselves. How much sacrifice does a rape victim owe to their rapist, for example? Even if we acknowledge that those who have freely done atrocious things may still deserve some base level of respect, dignity and to have their basic needs met, it is not plausible that their victims are obliged to make any substantial prolonged sacrifice to provide them with these things.

It is worth stressing that to deserve something is not equivalent to others being obliged to provide you with it. It is plausible that any evil one freely and intentionally visits on another, one deserves to have visited on oneself (as expressed by the *Lex talionis* and by [Kant 1965](#), p. 101, among many others). But it would often be seriously immoral to visit such an evil on another. Morality constrains what a good person is permitted or obliged to do in the way of giving another what they deserve. That works in both directions: there are harms that a person may deserve that no good person ought to give to a person, and there are benefits that a person may deserve that a good person may not be obliged to give to a person.

It is plausible that God owes those who have done her terribly wrongs nothing or next to nothing in terms of sacrifice. They are not her children; she did not create them. She is not responsible for them. They are not part of some vanity project of hers. They just existed alongside her and decided, freely, to abuse her. She does not owe them good will and trust anymore and she does not owe it to them to make any substantial sustained sacrifice of her own welfare for their sake. This is not to deny that wicked people still deserve some dignity and to have their basic needs met ([Nathanson 2002](#), p. 138). The point is that God is no longer obliged to make any sacrifices to provide these things. Indeed, it is plausible that any obligations God now has are to herself and other innocents in her company. Though even here, I reiterate, there is a limit to what level of sacrifice she is obliged to make, as the

drowning children case illustrated. These points are sufficient, I believe, to show how God would be justified in doing what I describe in Section 5 below. But I want to consider some alternative courses of action first.

Perhaps, for instance, to protect herself and other innocents from the evil doers who have now made their existence known, God could simply destroy the evil doers. However, to do such a thing is itself plausibly evil and so not something God would do (and it could be evil, note, consistent with them deserving to be destroyed). It is certainly logically possible that God would not destroy them.

Perhaps God could reach into the minds of the depraved and rid them of their evil dispositions and thoughts, replacing them with something more pleasant and wholesome instead. But that too would plausibly be wrong. It has already been acknowledged that even the depraved deserve a basic level of dignity. And it is plausible that to interfere with their autonomy in this way would be to deprive them of such dignity. Note, my point here is not that having the possibility of doing atrocious things is a valuable kind of freedom worth having (I am with Sterba on these matters). It is that finagling with someone's mind to remove evil dispositions and thoughts disrespects that person's autonomy and is inconsistent with respecting that person's dignity. It would plausibly be wrong, especially if there is some alternative that achieves the same end without positively depriving the wicked of their dignity. It seems logically possible, then, that God would not take this course of action.

Perhaps God might, at first anyway, take to monitoring those who have done wicked things, intervening when necessary to prevent any future evil acts from visiting horrendous consequences on others, but not otherwise. But consider what a harrowing task that would be for God and what a considerable sacrifice it would constitute. In police departments, there are those who have to expose themselves to grotesque people and material both for monitoring purposes and to establish whether a crime has been committed. What a foul and extraordinarily upsetting task for a good and innocent person to have to do for any period. Investigator Patricia Rust had to watch hours of horrific videos by serial killer David Ray of him torturing his victims. She also had to draw detailed pictures of his torture equipment. Within days, she had committed suicide. Patricia Rust's ghastly tasks will be part of God's self-imposed task if God adopts the monitoring policy. And it is the minds of her attackers that she will be monitoring too, which is going to make a psychologically harrowing task even worse. She will have to expose herself to the most depraved and vile thoughts. And note, she will also have to do this, at least in her imagination, if instead she delegates the task to a device (something, note, that respect for the dignity of the depraved may prevent her from doing). For she will have to conceive of the types of action that the device will interfere with. Either way, monitoring the wicked will be traumatizing for her. She can, of course, bear the suffering that this will cause in her, as she can bear any amount of suffering, but that does not mean it is not the suffering that it is. It just means that she can bear it. And as an omnipotent person she has the power to make herself enjoy her task or be indifferent to it. She can escape the suffering easily enough, then. But a good person would not exercise such a power. That is, a good person, if my conception of one is anything to go by, does not want to be such that they are anything other than appalled by encountering or conceiving of such material. Good people do not want to be such that they are not caused suffering by being exposed to certain things or by certain thoughts. One *ought* to find such things harrowing. It was not to Patricia Rust's discredit that she found her task so upsetting. If that is correct, then God would not want to be such that she is anything other than profoundly harrowed by the monitoring task that she has given herself.

The trauma does not end there either. For in addition to the horrific task of monitoring the minds of the wicked, there's the task of intervening itself. Will she enjoy intervening or be happy that it is occurring? Again, surely not. The good are not megalomaniacs who relish exercising control over others. Not if my conception of a good person is anything to go by. God is all powerful, but she is not all powerful as result of actively seeking power;

she simply *is* all powerful. It seems to be the nature of a good person positively to dislike having power over others and having to exercise it, and to dislike that others are being controlled by persons other than themselves. As an omnipotent person God could, of course, divest herself of her power (she would cease to qualify as God if she did so, but that is beside the point—she is *able* to do it). Yet, as a good person she would retain it precisely because she could use it for good. Nevertheless, it remains plausible that God, as a good person, will loathe the task of controlling the wicked, and hate that there are persons who are subject to such control. And again, she has the power to make herself enjoy exercising such control and enjoy the fact some are being controlled, as she is omnipotent. But once more, it is the nature of a good person not to want to enjoy such things; good people do not want to be such that they enjoy exercising power over others, or enjoy others having power exercised over them, even when this is occurring to prevent innocents befalling the horrendous evil consequences of the acts of others. It will be—because it ought to be—a burdensome task for her and a distressing situation.

In summary, if God undertakes to monitor those who have done wicked things to her and others, then this will involve her making a very considerable sacrifice. It is a task that will torment her and a situation that will distress her. For how long does she have to subject herself to such torment? I do not need an answer to that question, for it is sufficient that there will come a time when she is no longer obliged to do so (if she is obliged to do it at all, that is).

What will God do when that point is reached? Just let the evil have free reign again? No, for she has another option, one the taking of which would protect the innocent—including herself—from horrendous evil and would not violate anyone's rights. She can exile the wicked to the sensible world and concern herself with them no longer. That would cost her nothing, or next to nothing. And she owes it to herself and the other innocents in her company to do it.

5. Penal Colony Earth

Empodocles wrote:

Whenever one of the daemons, whose portion is length of days, has sinfully polluted his hands with blood, or followed strife and forsworn himself, he must wander thrice ten thousand years from the abodes of the blessed, being born throughout time in all manners of mortal forms, changing one toilsome path of life for another. For the mighty air drives him into the Sea, and the Sea spews him forth upon the dry Earth; Earth tosses him into the beams of the blazing Sun, and he flings him back to the eddies of Air. One takes him from the other, and all reject him. One of these I now am, an exile and wanderer from the gods, for that I put my trust in an insensate strife. (Quoted in [Russell 1946](#), p. 74)

I have argued that it is logically possible for evil people to visit horrendous consequences on innocent others, consistent with God existing, and logically possible that God herself could be the victim of such acts. And above I argued that God owes those who have done her and others wrong little to nothing in terms of positive sacrifice. She owes herself and the other innocents in her company some sacrifice in the interests of preventing further horrendous consequences occurring, though even here there will be limits. And I showed how quickly those limits would be reached were God to tolerate the continued presence of the wicked. But what if there is an existing place that God can exile the wicked to – another world, such as this? It seems to me that doing this would efficiently protect herself and the other innocents in her company from such monsters, without violating anyone's rights, including her own, in the process. It seems to me the evil prevention requirements would positively require her to do it. The wicked will now be elsewhere and among their own kind. She would be doing them no wrong, for she owes them no further concern (at least for a time). And in the scenario I described, there is such a place: the world that resembles this one and that God is not responsible for. Thus, it is logically possible that in the scenario

I described, God will exile to the place that resembles this one those who, as Empodocles put it above, have sinfully polluted their hands with blood.

Perhaps these persons deserve better. Perhaps they deserve to have their basic needs met and so placed in a world that is guaranteed to provide for them. Perhaps they deserve to have their dignity preserved and so put in a world that is guaranteed not to humiliate them. Perhaps they deserve to know why they are where they are and deserve to know much more about the world in which they have been placed, so that they can navigate it safely. But as already noted, that a person deserves something does not mean that others are obliged to provide them with it. And in the case of those who have done wicked things to God and other innocents, then by hypothesis they do not deserve to have God make any further sacrifices on their behalf. So, deserve those things though they may, God is not obliged to provide them, and so not obliged to make sure the sensible world will. The sensible world may well provide some of those whom she exiles there with less than they deserve and others with more. It resembles this place and this place is, as so many like to point out, an unfair place. But God does not owe it to the wicked she sends there the sacrifice needed on her part to make it less unfair. And note, making it less unfair would involve sacrifice, for she would have to conceive of all the different ways in which those whom she exiles to the world may come to harm or visit harm on each other.

The situation of these exiles is one that is now indistinguishable from our own. We are, as atheists like to point out, in an apparently godless world. Well, the scenario I have described above is one in which the world is godless to all intents and purposes. Our reason tells us to treat each other well; indeed, to treat each other as if we are innocent and to uphold the evil prevention requirements. And we can suppose that, as a parting gift, the God in my scenario might give to those whom she exiles to the world a rudimentary instruction manual—a faculty of reason—that tells them, among other things, to treat each other as default innocent and to uphold the evil prevention requirements. And in my scenario as here, it is left down to the evil exiles whether or not they do as they are bid. Our reason tells us to behave in some ways and not others. But we are not made to do so. We are not monitored. We are at each other's mercy and at the mercy of the world. So too are the exiles in my scenario. And look at the company we are keeping: are there any truly good people among us? Is not everyone here immorally disposed to some degree or another? We all seem to fall short of doing and being all that we morally ought to do and be. It is certainly logically possible that we are all persons who have freely done terrible things to God and other innocents, and that is all I need.

That completes my counterexample. I have described a logically possible situation indistinguishable from the one in which we seem to find ourselves. It is a situation in which God exists and is applying the evil prevention requirements. And so, the world we are living in with its degree and quantity of evil is consistent with God existing and abiding by the evil prevention requirements. For it is logically possible that we are the evil the evil prevention requirements are being employed against. It is logically possible that were God not to have exiled us here and instead continued to suffer our company—and suffer other innocents to suffer it—she would be violating the moral evil prevention requirements, for then others (including herself) would be being deprived of a good, the good of our absence, to which they are entitled. And it is logically possible that were she to monitor us while here, intervening when necessary to prevent us befalling this or that horrendous evil—whether natural or moral—she would not have freed herself from the horrible task of monitoring us and intervening in our behaviour, a task she is entitled to free herself from (or perhaps entitled not to have to undertake at all). It seems logically possible then, that we are here to give God and other good innocent people a rest from us. And logically possible that, while we are away, we alone are charged with preventing evil from befalling one another. That is a task we are not especially good at, but then that is to be expected given who we are.

6. Conclusions

Sterba believes that if an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person exists, then she would be ethically bound to behave in accordance with the evil prevention requirements and that this would entail a world very different from the one we find ourselves in. On this basis, Sterba concludes that no such person exists.

Above, I have tried to construct a counterexample to Sterba's claim, while at the same time conceding to Sterba as much as I can. I have not denied the ethical credibility of the evil prevention requirements or that God, being all good, would apply them. But I think that Sterba's case does not demonstrate the non-existence of God, for nothing in the idea of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent person precludes the possibility of God existing alongside a world, such as this, that God did not create. And nothing precludes the possibility of there also existing billions of immorally disposed, free-will-possessing persons that God did not create. I have then shown how it is possible for a situation indistinguishable from our own to evolve, entirely consistent with God applying the evil prevention requirements. For it is logically possible that we have done terrible things to God and to other innocents. And it is logically possible that we do not deserve God's care and concern, at least for a time. And it is logically possible that God owes it to herself and others to exile us to a place such as this, so that she and innocent others may enjoy the good of our absence.

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