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Article

Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil and the God Who Walks Away from Omelas

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Abstract: The logical argument from evil, generally thought to have been defused by Alvin Plantinga's free will defense, has been reinvigorated by James Sterba's exposition and defense of a new version of the argument that draws on recent work in moral philosophy. Whereas J.L. Mackie's argument uses what can now be seen to be overly simplistic principles to try to establish a logical incompatibility between the existence of God and any evil at all, Sterba's argument uses more sophisticated moral principles and seeks to establish a logical incompatibility between the existence of God (specifically, the God of Perfect Being Theology) and specific sorts of evil that our world contains. Here, I provide a brief exposition of Sterba's argument and then sketch one possible theistic response to the argument. On the basis of that discussion, I conclude that Sterba's argument is not decisive as it stands. However, I then develop a revised version of Sterba's argument and argue that the Perfect Being Theist faces the following dilemma: she can answer the revised version of Sterba's argument only by accepting a position that is deeply at odds with commonsense morality. Therefore, although Sterba's argument does not quite succeed, it points us in the direction of a serious problem for Perfect Being Theism.

Keywords: evil; God; Sterba; Plantinga; Mackie; Pauline Principle; theodical individualism; Omelas



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1. Introduction

The logical argument from evil, generally thought to have been debunked by Alvin Plantinga's (1974) free will defense, has been reinvigorated by James Sterba's (2019) exposition and defense of a new version of the argument that draws on recent work in moral philosophy. Whereas J.L. Mackie's (1955) argument uses what can now be seen to be overly simplistic principles to try to establish a logical incompatibility between the existence of God and any evil at all, Sterba's argument uses more sophisticated moral principles and seeks to establish a logical incompatibility between the existence of God and specific sorts of evil that our world contains.¹ Throughout this discussion, I understand God as the one and only essentially omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, necessarily existing ultimate creator and sustainer of the universe. This is the God of so-called "Perfect Being Theology"; while hardly the only conception of God found in the Christian tradition, it is the one that is assumed by Sterba (2019, p. 1), as well as Plantinga and Mackie. Accordingly, I will focus here on *Perfect Being Theism* (or *PB-theism*), understood as the claim that the God of Perfect Being Theology exists.

In what follows I provide a brief exposition of Sterba's argument and then sketch one possible theistic response to the argument. On the basis of that discussion, I conclude that Sterba's argument is not decisive as it stands. However, I then develop a revised version of Sterba's argument and argue that the PB-theist faces the following dilemma: she can answer the revised version of Sterba's argument only by accepting a position that is deeply at odds with commonsense morality. Therefore, although Sterba's argument does not quite succeed, it points us in the direction of a serious problem for PB-theism.

2. Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil

The central elements of Sterba's argument can be stated as follows:

Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then God does not intentionally permit horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
2. Necessarily, if God exists and there are horrendous evils caused by immoral actions, then God intentionally permits horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
3. So: necessarily, if God exists, then there are no horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
4. However, there are horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.
5. Therefore, God does not exist.²

Sterba's defense of (1) rests on a moral principle that Sterba labels the "Pauline Principle". He initially states the principle this way: "Never do evil that good may come of it" (Sterba 2019, p. 2). He notes that there are various exceptions to the principle, one of which is that doing evil in order to achieve good can be permissible if the evil is trivial. As an example of such a case, Sterba offers "stepping on someone's foot to get out of a crowded subway" (Sterba 2019, p. 2). Sterba also explains that the principle is restricted to cases in which the agent *intentionally* does evil. So a better statement of the principle is:

It is immoral to intentionally engage in non-trivial evil so that good may come of it.

Other remarks by Sterba suggest additional tweaks to the principle. Sterba asserts that "good can come of evil in two ways. It can come by way of *preventing evil* or it can come by way of *providing some new good*" (Sterba 2019, p. 56). That yields:

It is immoral to intentionally engage in non-trivial evil in order to attain some good or to prevent some evil.

Sterba is of course particularly interested in the Pauline Principle as applied to God. Sterba focuses on God's permission of immoral human actions that cause *horrendous* evils. Following Marilyn Adams (1999, pp. 26–28), Sterba understands horrendous evils as those that constitute a prima facie reason for doubting that the lives of those who participate in such evils could be a great good to them on the whole (Sterba 2019, p. 14). Sterba further claims that "when the evil is significant and one can easily prevent it, then permitting evil can become morally equivalent to doing it" (Sterba 2019, p. 51; Hasker 2017, p. 155). Since God can easily prevent any evil, in God's case permitting horrendous evil is morally equivalent to doing it. Incorporating all of these elements yields the following principle:

Pauline Principle: It is immoral for God to intentionally permit horrendous evil caused by immoral actions in order to attain some good or to prevent some evil.

Presumably, if God, a morally perfect being, were to permit horrendous evil caused by immoral acts at all, He would do so only in order to attain some good or to prevent some evil. That assumption together with the Pauline Principle entails the first premise of Sterba's Logical Argument from Evil. The second premise, which I will assume to be true for the sake of argument (and in any case I find to be plausible), is based on the idea that because God is omnipotent and omniscient, then any horrendous evils caused by immoral actions that occur, as it were, on His watch, are ones that He intentionally permits.

In Sterba's view, if God existed, He would run the world similar to the way that an ideally just and powerful government would run society: He would adopt a "policy of limited intervention" (Sterba 2019, p. 62; Tooley 1980, pp. 374–75) aimed at protecting people's basic rights and freedoms while preventing significant moral evils. Some evil would be allowed, in order to preserve a significant degree of freedom, allow for some soul-making, and give people's choices some moral weight, but the many horrendous evils of our world, such as genocide and slavery, simply would not be permitted. Since our world is obviously not governed by such a policy of limited intervention, God does not exist.

3. A Weakness in Sterba's Argument

A weakness in Sterba's argument emerges when we consider the following question: what about a case in which the good produced or the evil prevented *vastly outweighs* the

horrendous evil? Sterba acknowledges that cases in which a much greater evil can be prevented only by intentionally engaging in evil may be exceptions to the Pauline Principle (Sterba 2019, p. 50). What about a case in which a good that vastly outweighs the evil can be attained only by intentionally engaging in the evil? The “trivial evil” exception itself suggests that such cases may also constitute exceptions to the Pauline Principle. After all, the evil of having one’s foot stepped on is trivial only in comparison with the much greater good of getting out of a crowded subway. Accordingly, we may distinguish stronger and weaker versions of the Pauline Principle. The stronger version is the one stated above; the weaker version is:

Weakened Pauline Principle: It is immoral for God to intentionally permit horrendous evil caused by immoral acts in order to attain some good (unless that good vastly outweighs the horrendous evil and can be attained in no other way) or to prevent some evil (unless that evil vastly outweighs the horrendous evil and can be prevented in no other way).

As part of his defense of the Pauline Principle, Sterba writes:

Suppose parents you know were to permit their children to be brutally assaulted to make possible the soul-making of the person who would attempt to comfort their children after they have been assaulted or to make possible the soul-making that their children themselves could experience by coming to forgive their assailants. Would you think the parents were morally justified in so acting? Hardly. Here you surely would agree with the Pauline Principle’s prohibition of such actions. (Sterba 2019, p. 57)

I agree with Sterba’s perspective on this case; however, a key feature of the example is that the good produced by the horrendous evil in this example (soul-making) does not vastly outweigh the horrendous evil of the brutal assault. A PB-theist might plausibly argue that while the Weakened Pauline Principle may be true, the Pauline Principle is false. That opens up the following strategy for the PB-theist: making the case that it is possible that there is a tremendous good (or tremendous evil) that God can attain (or prevent) only by intentionally permitting horrendous evil caused by immoral acts. Indeed, a claim often advanced by Christian theists is that a certain sort of union with God is a tremendous good. Here, is how Jerry Walls explains this idea in a recent response to Sterba’s argument:

[I]ntimate relationship to God is an incommensurable good . . . A loving relationship with God is the greatest possible good and the loss of this relationship is the worst possible evil . . . this supreme good is incommensurate not only with other goods, but also with evils. There is simply no way to compare or measure the joy of this supreme good with finite goods or evils. The beauty and goodness of God as experienced “up close” is of such incomparable value that it will utterly swamp any evils we might have experienced. (Walls 2021, p. 4).³

If that is plausible, it provides the PB-theist with an incommensurable good they can use to respond to Sterba’s argument. However, another important element is required: the PB-theist must make the case that it is possible that God can provide (at least some of) us with this great good only by intentionally permitting some horrendous evils caused by immoral acts. Indeed, it is precisely here that Sterba objects to Walls’s reply to his argument: “Friendship with God . . . is not logically dependent upon God’s permission of the horrendous evil consequences . . . God could always offer us his friendship whether or not we have suffered from those consequences” (Walls 2021, p. 7).

However, another common theistic claim is that the great incommensurable good that God seeks has the appropriate exercise of (libertarian) human free will as one of its components. For example, C.S. Lewis identifies the great good for human beings as *freely* loving God. In *The Screwtape Letters*, Lewis has the devil Screwtape explain the idea as follows:

[God] really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself—creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His

own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His . . . But you now see that the Irresistible and the Indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of His scheme forbids Him to use. Merely to override a human will . . . would be for Him useless. (Lewis 1996, p. 4)

Peter Van Inwagen offers a response to the argument from evil that is similar in some ways to Lewis's response. Van Inwagen proposes that it is a very real possibility that humanity has become separated from God and that God has initiated a "rescue operation" with the goal of bringing it about that "human beings once more love God" (Van Inwagen 2006, p. 87). Like Lewis, Van Inwagen proposes that this requires that human beings *freely* love God, and so the rescue operation requires the free cooperation of the humans that God is trying to rescue. Furthermore:

For human beings to cooperate with God in this rescue operation, they must know that they need to be rescued. They must know what it means to be separated from him. And what it means to be separated from God is to live in a world of horrors. If God simply "canceled" all the horrors of this world by an endless series of miracles, he would thereby frustrate his own plan of reconciliation. If he did that, we should be content with our lot and should see no reason to cooperate with him. (Van Inwagen 2006, p. 88)

There is some empirical evidence for van Inwagen's contention here. For example, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart provide extensive evidence for this claim:

[P]eople who experience ego-tropic risks during their formative years (posing direct threats to themselves and their families) or socio-tropic risks (threatening their community) tend to be far more religious than those who grow up under safe, comfortable, and predictable conditions. (Norris and Inglehart 2004, p. 5)

That suggests at least that a world without any horrendous evils would be a less religious world than the actual world. Modifying van Inwagen's proposal slightly yields the thought that, for all we know, there are some people who will cooperate with the divine rescue operation—and who will (eventually) freely love God—if and only if God permits some horrendous evils that result from immoral action.

Suppose, then, that the PB-theist claims that it is possible that (i) freely loving God and, through one's free choices, attaining eternal loving union with God in the afterlife is an incommensurable good that swamps all earthly goods and evils and (ii) there are some people for whom God can attain this great good only if He intentionally permits some horrendous evils caused by immoral actions.

In connection with claim (ii), a defender of Sterba's argument might well ask: how can that be, given that there is no logical entailment between a person's freely loving God and God's permitting horrendous evils? That question takes us back to one of the central lessons of Alvin Plantinga's version of the free will defense, namely: given the truth of Molinism, there are some worlds that are logically possible and nevertheless cannot be actualized by God (Plantinga 1974, pp. 180–84; Flint 1998, pp. 51–54). To elaborate: Imagine a person who, in honor of Tolstoy's character Ivan Ilyich, we may call "Ivan". And suppose that Ivan is what we may call a *hard case*, which can be defined thusly:

Creature C is a *hard case* = df. For any possible world in which C exists, C freely loves God if and only if the world contains some horrendous evil caused by immoral acts.⁴

That Ivan is a hard case is not a necessary truth; rather, it is a contingent truth—but a contingent truth that is not up to God or under His control. That will be the case if the various counterfactuals of freedom about Ivan—all the claims about what Ivan would freely do, were he placed in various circumstances and able to act freely—have certain truth values. Under Molinism (and Plantinga's free will defense), such counterfactuals of freedom are *prevolitional* truths, meaning that their truth value is not up to God (Flint 1998, pp. 42–43). God is dealt a certain hand of true counterfactuals of freedom, as it were,

and must work within the constraints imposed by those true counterfactuals (Craig 2017, pp. 38–39).⁵

To sum up: the PB-theist can maintain that it is possible that there are some hard cases and, in order to provide such hard cases with ultimate happiness, the greatest good, God intentionally permits some horrendous evils caused by immoral actions. This action on the part of God violates the implausibly strong Pauline Principle but does not violate the more plausible Weakened Pauline Principle.

In a discussion with van Inwagen regarding this sort of argument, Sterba argues that by intentionally permitting horrendous evils caused by immoral actions, God would motivate people to turn away from Him rather than become friends with Him. As Sterba puts it, if “harm is being inflicted on innocent people and evil people are doing well, then neither will be motivated to become friends with God” (Sterba et al. 2022). There are two weaknesses in this reply. The first is simply that to defeat Sterba’s ambitious argument, it need only be the case that it is *logically possible* that there be some hard cases, as it surely is. Second, and more significantly, there is evidence that Sterba is mistaken about how actual people in the actual world respond in the face of horrendous evils caused by immoral actions. Sterba is certainly right that *some* people will be reluctant to be “friends with God” in the face of horrendous evil, but the claim that *all* people will be reluctant in that way is false. Popular thought has it that people sometimes turn to God in the face of suffering (e.g., “there are no atheists in foxholes”), and there is systematic research that supports this idea as well. In a recent paper, psychologists Rosemary de Castella and Janette Graetz Simmonds document spiritual and religious growth in ten female survivors of trauma. One of their subjects, “Caroline”, was a victim of rape (which surely qualifies as a horrendous evil resulting from immoral action) that resulted in pregnancy and birth of a daughter. The authors report that Caroline “had lapsed in her religious practice before the rape but subsequently rediscovered her Catholic faith and has developed a deep spiritual life” (de Castella and Simmonds 2013, p. 539). Reflecting on her experience, Caroline explains: “I do believe that suffering is for a reason and that we suffer to reap the reward later...I never would have contemplated or understood life as it is to me now” (de Castella and Simmonds 2013, p. 546) and that her life “is now about being a disciple here on earth” (de Castella and Simmonds 2013, p. 550). Additionally, a recent study of evangelical Christian cancer patients found that two-thirds of these patients reported not experiencing a “spiritual struggle” or conflict between their cancer diagnosis and their beliefs about God. In fact, according to the authors of the study:

For those who did not experience spiritual struggles, a strengthening rather than a diminishing of the beliefs that typically give rise to theodical attempts seemed to occur. Rather than challenging God’s love, suffering led these participants to experience increased confidence in God’s goodness. Rather than challenging God’s power, their suffering led them to a greater understanding of God’s control. Rather than challenging God’s omniscience, their suffering caused them to express intellectual humility in the face of God’s knowing. (Hall et al. 2019, p. 272)

Still another recent study found that “traumatic events can lead to both increases as well as decreases in religious beliefs and activities” (ter Kuile and Ehring 2014, p. 359). Human responses to horrendous evil are complex, but the empirical evidence supports the popular view that at least sometimes, confrontation with horrendous evil leads people to turn toward God rather than away from Him.

In the famous exchange between J.L. Mackie and Plantinga, Plantinga sought to refute Mackie’s claim that there is no logically possible world in which both God and evil exist by providing a possible model in which God and evil do co-exist. It seems to me that this basic strategy can be used to defeat Sterba’s newer logical argument from evil as well. What I have offered above is a possible model in which God exists and intentionally permits horrendous evils caused by immoral actions. If this model is logically possible, then the first premise of Sterba’s argument is false, for that premise asserts that God’s existence

is logically incompatible with God intentionally permitting horrendous evils caused by immoral actions. Thus, Steria's new logical argument from evil succumbs to a modified version of Plantinga's old free will defense. However, I think that Sterba's application of the Pauline Principle nevertheless advances the debate between PB-theists and atheists, as Sterba's argument can be modified to present a dilemma for the PB-theist. That dilemma is the topic of the next section.

4. God and Omelas

In characterizing horrendous evils, Adams offers the following list of examples of such evils:

[T]he rape of a woman and axing off of her arms, psycho-physical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, betrayal of one's deepest loyalties, child abuse of the sort described by Ivan Karamazov, child pornography, parental incest, slow death by starvation, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas. (Adams 1999, p. 26)

As I noted above, Adams says that such evils threaten to prevent the lives of those involved in them from being great goods. However, she also writes that such evils "constitute reason to doubt whether the participants' life can be worth living" and "seem *prima facie*, not only to balance off but to engulf any positive value in the participant's life with which they are not organically connected" (Adams 1999, p. 26). Those remarks are at least suggestive of a conception of horrendous evils according to which they are *prima facie* life-ruining—that is, they are so bad that unless they are outweighed or defeated by some vastly better good, they render the lives of those who participate in them worse than no life at all. I point this out not to raise an interpretive question about how Adams understands horrendous evils but rather because in this section I wish to focus on evils that are *prima facie* life-ruining (*pf-life-ruining* for short). I think it's quite plausible that our world contains some evils of this sort. Adams suggests that "the individual's own estimate is a major piece of evidence as to whether his/her life has been a great good for him/her on the whole" (Adams 1999, p. 27), and certainly in the course of human history many people have sincerely believed that their lives have been worse for them than not existing at all.

Suppose, then, that God faces the following dilemma: He can actualize a world in which a great many free creatures attain the great good of eternal loving union with Him only if He permits there to be one free creature that undergoes *pf-life-ruining* evil *and* that this creature not attain eternal loving union with God (or any other good that vastly outweighs the *pf-life-ruining* evil).⁶ In this imagined scenario, God faces what we may call an *Omelas situation* after Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (Le Guin 1991). Le Guin describes a city, Omelas, in which all the citizens save one live incredibly happy and joyous lives. However, their happiness and joy depend entirely (for reasons never fully explained) on the suffering of a single, feeble-minded child locked away in a small chamber somewhere beneath the city. Toward the end of the story, Le Guin explains that a tiny minority of Omelasians, upon coming to understand the conditions of happiness in Omelas, decide to leave Omelas altogether. Le Guin's idea seems to be that these "ones who walk away from Omelas" correctly recognize the injustice of Omelas and their walking away symbolizes their rejection of the unjust arrangement. For present purposes, we may define an *Omelas situation* this way:

God faces an *Omelas situation* = df. in every world that God could create that includes some free creatures who freely love God, there exists at least one free creature that experiences *pf-life-ruining* evil and does not acquire a good that vastly outweighs that *pf-life-ruining* evil.

What would a morally perfect God do if faced with an *Omelas situation*? It seems to me that a morally perfect God would refrain from creating any free creatures at all. He would, as it were, walk away from Omelas. Why? Because to actualize such a world would be to consign one creature to an existence that is a great evil to it overall in order to attain

ultimate happiness for a great many others, and that is deeply unfair. In acting in this way, God would be treating the sacrificed creature as a mere means, using it like a pawn in chess (Freelin 2008, p. 71; Maitzen 2009, pp. 116–17; Maitzen 2013, pp. 259–60).⁷ Divine justice is incompatible with God sacrificing some creatures in order to attain salvation for other creatures (Tooley 1991, pp. 111–13). As Shoshana Knapp puts it, “[t]he architect of Omelas . . . is supremely guilty” (Knapp 1985, p. 79). Further, according to Marilyn Adams, “God could be said . . . to love individual human persons in particular, only if God were good to each and every human person God created” (Adams 1999, p. 31). Assuming that God’s moral perfection includes love for every individual human being, then, even if it (somehow) is morally permissible for God to sacrifice some for the sake of others, doing so seems to be incompatible with God’s moral perfection, which requires more than merely not acting immorally.

The morality of Omelas would perhaps be different if the suffering child would eventually share in the incredible joy and happiness of the other Omelasians. It is perhaps telling that in his exchange with Sterba, van Inwagen says:

If terrible things had happened to me in this life . . . and in a future life of peace, and love, and joy that was beyond anything I could have imagined, [and] I can see that but for God’s allowing terrible things to have happened to humanity as a whole, distributed by chance . . . that *me and all my friends here* wouldn’t possibly be in this life of peace and love and joy without God’s having done that, if that was the only way to do it, I would say “thank you, God, for having made that choice”. (Sterba et al. 2022, emphasis added)

The Pauline Principle tells us not to do evil that good may come of it. In the previous section I argued that, roughly, the principle should be modified to say: do not do evil that good may come of it—unless that good is *really* good. Reflections on the case of Omelas suggest that the principle should be modified further still: do not do evil to a person that good may come of it—unless that good is *really* good *and* accrues to the person to whom you do the evil. More precisely:

Agent-Relative Pauline Principle: It is incompatible with God’s moral perfection for God to intentionally permit person P to experience pf-life-ruining evil in order to attain some good—unless that good vastly outweighs the pf-life-ruining evil, can be attained in no other way, and accrues to P.

Assuming that God is morally perfect and that if He intentionally permits P to experience pf-life-ruining evil at all He does so in order to attain some good, it follows that:

Limited Theodical Individualism (LTI): If God intentionally permits person P to experience pf-life-ruining evil, then P acquires a great good that vastly outweighs the pf-life-ruining evil.⁸

Drawing on LTI, we can advance the following revised version of Sterba’s argument, where an *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evil is one that is not followed by a vastly greater good within the existence of the person who undergoes it:

Sterba’s Revised Logical Argument from Evil

1. Necessarily, if God exists, then God does not intentionally permit *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evils.
2. Necessarily, if God exists and there are *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evils, then God intentionally permits *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evils.
3. So: necessarily, if God exists, then there are no *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evils.
4. However, there are *unredeemed* pf-life-ruining evils.
5. Therefore, God does not exist.

The controversial premise here seems to be (4). Obviously, our world contains pf-life-ruining evils not redeemed *in this world*, but the theist is likely to reply that such evils may be redeemed in the afterlife. After all, even if some pf-life-ruining evils appear to us to

be unredeemed, it may be that all such evils are redeemed in some way beyond our ken. Adams explains her perspective this way:

[M]any horror participants die defeated, without believing in God, without recognizing divine solidarity with them in horror participation and without appropriating any positive significance that this confers . . . full recovery from horror participation usually takes place post mortem . . . God keeps us alive, heals our meaning-making capacities, wins our trust, and teaches us how to make positive sense of our lives. (Adams 2013, p. 21)

Suppose, then, that (4) is false. In that case another problem for the PB-theist arises: if (4) is false and God exists, then it seems that we all have powerful reasons to inflict pf-life-ruining evils on others, for by doing so we guarantee that they will attain a vastly greater good. As Jeff Jordan puts it, the falsity of (4) in a theistic universe “guarantees the operation of a kind of fail-safe device that renders every instance of [pf-life-ruining evils] an instrumental good for [the] sufferer” (Jordan 2004, p. 174). In short, the PB-theist faces a dilemma: if (4) is true, then Sterba’s revised argument establishes that there is no God, but if (4) is false, then God’s existence makes a hash of common-sense morality. For if (4) is false, then inflicting pf-life-ruining evil on another person is an effective way of forcing God’s hand and guaranteeing that the other person will receive a tremendous good that swamps all the goods and evils of this life—including the pf-life-ruining evil that you inflict upon them. Thus we have a powerful reason to inflict pf-life-ruining evil on others. That does not mean that we have a grasp of God’s reason(s) for permitting such evils. Our reason for inflicting pf-life-ruining evils is that doing so guarantees a great good for the person upon whom we inflict the evil—a good so great that the goods and evils of this world are insignificant in comparison.

In defending a somewhat similar argument, Stephen Maitzen employs the following analogy:

[S]uppose that an abundantly available vaccine were, despite the painfulness of receiving it, known to produce a net benefit (the painfulness included) for everyone who receives it. Suppose, further, that no less painful procedure produces the same benefit. Under those circumstances, how could we ever have a *moral* obligation to prevent vaccination? (Maitzen 2009, p. 111)

Indeed, in Maitzen’s scenario, it seems that we would have a powerful moral reason for vaccinating others. Similarly, if we know that God exists and (4) is false, then we can “vaccinate” others against missing out on ultimate goods by inflicting pf-life-ruining evil on them. A highly effective way of carrying out such a program would be to focus on children, who are particularly vulnerable and innocent: inflict pf-life-ruining evil on a child, kill the child, and you have guaranteed a great good for the child, a good in comparison with which your evil acts are insignificant. Christian philosopher William Lane Craig suggests that God allows some babies to suffer and die for the moral development of their parents and that such babies receive “a compensation so incomprehensibly great that it is incommensurable with the suffering” (Moreland and Craig 2003, p. 116). In “Rebellion”, the famous chapter from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov describes various horrifying acts of violence inflicted upon children. It seems that if anything is morally wrong, these acts of violence are. However, if God exists, (4) is false, and (LTI) is true, then these horrible actions result in tremendous goods for their victims and so in fact turn out to be acts of great beneficence. This result turns commonsense morality on its head and is wildly implausible. Since (LTI) follows from the plausible Agent-Relative Pauline Principle, the PB-theist must either accept (4) and give up PB-theism or deny (4) and abandon commonsense morality. Therefore, while Sterba’s original argument is not decisive, it ultimately points us in the direction of a serious problem for Perfect Being Theism.

5. Conclusions

Perfect Being Theism has a moral problem. A great many people in our world experience horrors that threaten to make their overall existence worse than not existing at all. A just and loving God would not permit some to have an existence worse than not existing at all in order to achieve tremendous goods for some others. So if our universe is one in which some people undergo horrors that give them an overall existence that is worse than not existing at all, then there is no God. Accordingly, if God does exist, then all horrendous evils in each person's life are ultimately redeemed, swamped by incommensurably greater goods within that person's life. Furthermore, if that is the case, then inflicting horrendous, potentially life-ruining evil on another person is the best thing you can do for them, and we should all try to do this to others. However, that is crazy. So PB-theism entails either that God is unjust or unloving or that a crazy moral view is true. Either way, Perfect Being Theism is false.

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Notes

- ¹ The primary moral principle to which Mackie appeals is that “a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can” (Mackie 1955, p. 201). As I explain below, Sterba instead appeals to the more plausible “Pauline Principle”.
- ² See Sterba (2019, pp. 189–90) for a similar formulation of the argument.
- ³ Variations on this basic theme include: Adams (1999, pp. 82–83); Moreland and Craig (2003, pp. 544–48); Stump (2010, pp. 386–88); Tracy (1992, p. 311).
- ⁴ This concept is similar to Plantinga's concept of *transworld depravity*; see Plantinga (1974, pp. 186–88).
- ⁵ Here I deviate from Van Inwagen, as he denies that there are any true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (Van Inwagen 2006, p. 80). Plantinga's free will defense seems to entail that God is unlucky when it comes to the truth values of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (Windt 1973); the current proposal entails that God is *really* unlucky in that regard.
- ⁶ This scenario is, of course, inspired by Ivan Karamazov's famous “rebellion” in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*; see also James (1891, p. 333).
- ⁷ Question: why should God not instead be seen as akin to a person who flips the switch to divert the runaway trolley to a side-track so that it kills one person rather than five, or as a platoon leader who sacrifices one soldier to save the rest of the platoon? (see Mawson 2011). Answer: God, as creator of the universe, can avoid all such scenarios by not creating them in the first place. So, God would be more akin to someone who sets up the trolley situation in the first place, and then flips the switch (see Boorse and Sorensen 1988, p. 118).
- ⁸ Marilyn Adams endorses an even stronger requirement—that the life-ruining evil be *defeated* (Adams 2013, pp. 19–20). That stronger requirement is compatible with my argument but not required by it. John Zeis (2015) argues for a similar conclusion on the grounds that God's permission of evil in the world must satisfy a *proportionality* requirement. Zeis writes: “God's will is unthwartable, and since He wants the good for everyone, He would bring it about that the evil which every person suffers is defeated. So, the proportionality condition is met by God when the evil state of affairs is ultimately defeated” (Zeis 2015, p. 137).

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