religions

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Opinion

Why God Cannot Do What Sterba Wants

Stephen T. Davis

Department of Philosophy, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA 91711, USA; stephen.davis@cmc.edu

Abstract: Sterba argues that if God existed, God would allow lower-level evils and suffering but should and would prevent all significant and horrendous evils. Since such serious evils do exist, God does not exist. In reply, I argue that in creating a Sterba world, God would be violating one of God's central purposes for the world, viz., that human beings be rationally free to deny God's existence and presence. Given the total absence of horrendous evils in Sterba worlds, despite human intentions to inflict them, it would be obvious that God exists and is at work. There might still be atheists, but atheism would be irrational.

Keywords: evil; horrendous evil; god; epistemic distance; freedom

James Sterba's book, Is a Good God Logically Possible?, is an important work.[1] It encapsulates and expands on points that he has been working on for years. It is well argued and well written. It is also full of fascinating arguments. Its central conclusion is that the logical problem of evil (in Sterba's version of it) shows that God is not logically possible, where God is both all-powerful and perfectly good. In other words, the question asked in the book's title is answered with a decisive no.

I will argue against this claim. In my opinion, Plantinga's conclusion against Mackie—that the logical problem of evil does not show that the existence of God is impossible—still stands[2]. There is much that I could say about various parts of the book, but in this brief paper I will concentrate almost exclusively on Chapter 4, "The Pauline Principle and the Just Political State".

But before discussing Chapter 4, I must first briefly sketch out my own approach to the problem of evil.[3] This is necessary properly to explain my critique.

Let me begin with this question: What were God's aims in creating the universe? I think there were four main ones. (1) God wanted to create a regular and coherent world. Such a world would be largely rational and predictable. This would make it possible for human being to navigate the world well. Human learning and science would be possible. We could survive and even at times thrive.

(2) God wanted to create a world that contained the greatest possible balance of moral and natural good over moral and natural evil. For my purposes, I will define "evil" as "undeserved human suffering".[4]

(3) God wanted a world in which human beings were free, in a libertarian sense, to do good or evil, to obey God or disobey God, to love God or hate God.[5] That is, God did not want to coerce either belief in the existence of God or obedience to God's commands. God wanted people to formulate that belief and make that decision freely and rationally. Of course, God could have made the world such that God's existence and desires for us were obvious. But had God done so, the result would not be a world in which people were rationally free to go wrong. Obviously, in a world of intellectual and moral freedom, there would exist the risk that humans might go wrong. Thus, the balance of good and evil in such a world would be to a certain extent up to us rather than God.

(4) God wanted a world in which as many human beings as possible would freely and for good reasons decide to love and obey God. Now Sterba understandably insists that the problem of evil concerns not any amount of evil in the world but the amount and intensity

Citation: Davis, Stephen T. 2022. Why God Cannot Do What Sterba Wants. *Religions* 13: 943. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13100943

Academic Editors: James Sterba and Philip Goodchild

Received: 2 August 2022
Accepted: 29 September 2022
Published: 10 October 2022

of evil that actually exists in the world. Despite that point, I say that God's policy decision to interfere only rarely (i.e., to prevent suffering) will turn out wise. That is, in the end a better world will ensue than would result from any other policy God might have chosen to follow, including the policy Sterba recommends of divine interference with all suffering due to significant or horrendous evil.

How do we know that our four assumptions about the world that God wanted to create are true? Well, they are indeed assumptions; my argument depends on them. If Sterba, or anybody else, can successfully argue against them, then my argument is in trouble. However, I believe they do constitute beliefs about God that the vast majority of Jews and Christians accept; you might say that they are aspects of "the biblical view of God". Moreover, this is the view of God that Sterba is opposing.

We know that God wanted to create a largely regular and coherent world because that is the sort of world that God did create. Of course, it was entirely possible for God to have created an incoherent, random, unpredictable world, a world in which the discipline of mathematics is not helpful in understanding reality and in which science is not possible. But God did not do that.

We know that God wanted to create an overall good world because the first creation story in Genesis affirms that the world, as originally created, was good. And scripture also affirms the idea that despite evil, pain, and suffering in the world, God is working toward a transcendently good outcome.

We know that God wanted humans to have a degree of libertarian freedom because that is an assumption of scripture throughout. Granted, the biblical writers were not analytic philosophers; they did not make a distinction between libertarian freedom and other forms of freedom. But it seems to me that at least on many occasions, we are free to choose—to opt for good or evil, to love God or hate Gd. God could have created a world in which it was perfectly obvious that God existed and had certain desires for us. God could have created a world in which we were caused or compelled to obey God's commands. But God did not do that—precisely, so I think, to give us freedom to choose.

We know that God wanted human beings, despite our freedom to reject God, to come to love, obey, and honor God again because that is a grand assumption of the Judeo-Christian view of God. We believe that this is what God is working toward.

Natural evil—which is undeserved human suffering not caused by human beings—results from the kind of world God created, given its regularities and natural laws. So far as I know, God rarely intervenes to prevent suffering caused by natural events. But God promises to be with us in our suffering and to bring good out of it in the end. If God did regularly intervene to prevent suffering caused by earthquakes, pandemics, famines, etc., natural events would be highly irregular and unpredictable.[6]

Given God's four desires for creation, the world had to have certain characteristics. First, it had to constitute an environment in which God's existence and desires for us, as well as the short-term and especially long-term consequences of the moral and religious choices that human beings would make, would not be obvious to us. God must be slightly hidden; there must be (to borrow John Hick's term) a certain "epistemic distance" between human beings and God. Second, it had to be a world in which rewards do not immediately follow from behaving in ways approved of by God and punishments do not immediately follow from behaving in ways disapproved of by God. Third, it had to be a world in which God's grace is at least potentially available (to accept or reject) to all people.

Despite human suffering, which does indeed amount to horrendous evil for human beings on some occasions, we are asked us to trust our lives to God, who offers us the gift of grace and forgiveness, and promises us a supremely good future in the eschaton. As Marilyn Adams rightly insists, intimate fellowship with God is the highest good for human beings (Adams 1999, p. 12). The significant evil that we experience will be (as Sterba puts it) "wiped away" (p. 58). I also suspect and hope that God will provide an afterlife in which people who reject God or know nothing of God or Christianity are given a second chance to respond to God with love and obedience. Sterba calls this a "second inning afterlife", but I

deny his claim that this will necessitate a third inning and an nth-inning afterlife (p. 58). What people who do not know God will need is a genuine and informed opportunity, which God can provide in only one extra inning.

One area where we are asked to trust is the assurance that God has answers to questions than now appear unanswerable. This would include questions like, Why did God allow African slavery to exist? or, Why did God allow the Nazi holocaust to occur? Given the transcendent nature of God, the fact that there are mysteries in the area of theodicy and truths beyond our ken is not a last-ditch attempt to save Cristian theology from criticism. It is, on the other hand, exactly what that theology should lead us to expect.

I do not claim that the moral freedom that God gave us, which is a great good, is such a great good as by itself to outweigh all the evil it will make possible. Of course not. What justifies God's policy is the transcendent good that God promises in the outcome, i.e., the kingdom of God.

In the end, some evil will be used by God to produce great good (either great earthly goods or the omni-good of the kingdom of God), and all evil will be overcome and transcended in the eschaton. For the redeemed in the kingdom of God, all tears will be wiped away, all diseases will be healed, all crimes will be repented of and forgiven, all injustice will be made right, all relationships will be restored, and all suffering will be redeemed.

Sterba argues that a perfectly good and all-powerful being must prevent rather than allow the consequences of all significant and especially horrendous evils. Indeed, he says, it would be morally wrong for such a being not to do so. In order to buttress his case, he frequently uses the analogy of an ideal and powerful political state. He also appeals to the Pauline Principle (Never do evil that good may come of it [Romans 3:8]). He arrives at what he calls Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, which I do not propose to discuss because on this occasion, I am not going to object to them.

Sterba admits that if God were to prevent <u>all</u> the consequences of evil, the result would be "toy freedom" (Richard Swinburne) or "playpen freedom" (David Lewis); this would greatly diminish our status as moral agents. He sees that we must have genuine freedom if we are to develop the moral virtues essential to soul-making. But we do not need unlimited freedom for that. What is needed, he says, is "a world where everyone's freedom is appropriately constrained" (p. 53).

Accordingly, God must limit the significant freedom of would-be wrongdoers in order to secure the significant freedom of their would-be victims. They would still—Sterba adds—"have the freedom to imagine, intend, and even take initial steps toward carrying out their wrongdoing" (p. 53). But they would be prevented by God from actually doing the intended deeds or achieving the intended consequences. As Sterba points out, there would still be moral evil in such a world, both the moral evil of the bad intentions that potential evil-doers would formulate and the bad but not horrendously bad consequences of those evil actions that God would allow. But the upshot is that since God obviously does not follow Sterba's recommended policy, Sterba embraces atheism. The argument is:

If God exists, God must do x;

God does not do x;

Therefore, God does not exist.

Although this next point does not amount to a criticism of Sterba, we must first recognize that God cannot be expected to have created a world in which human beings do not suffer at all. It is easy to see why such a world would be inimical to God's purposes. Let's imagine a world of no pain—that is, a world in which human experience is only pleasurable, the world is entirely plastic to our wishes, and we are at, all times, blissfully happy. Let's call this a "valium world".

Such a world would be disastrous from God's viewpoint. There would be little or no sense of morality, of some things being good and others evil. There would be little sense that our decisions and actions have consequences. There would be no compassion for others or occasion to help others. There would be no courage or heroism. There would be

no reason for moral growth or improving one's soul. There would be no longing for moral excellence or for a better world. There would be little felt reason to love and obey God. There would be no growth through suffering. Acordingly, it seems that there are certain great goods that God can only or best achieve by allowing human suffering via moral or natural evil. In a valium world, God's desires for the world would be thwarted.

But here is where we do arrive at a criticism of Sterba. Suppose that God had indeed followed a policy of interfering with the consequences of every event that would otherwise produce significant or horrendous evil. Clearly, it would not take human beings long to figure out the fact that this is indeed the world's or God's operative policy. Some humans might toy with the idea that the total absence of significant suffering in their lives is not due to God but is simply a law of nature, the way the world regularly works. But surely that idea will not wash, or last long. How could an impersonal law of nature, like gravity or thermodynamics, work that way? (We will return to this point below).

So the idea is that every time evil-doers intend to do a significantly evil act, it somehow turns out that they cannot do it, or at least that the consequences turn out to be relatively innocuous. Sterba recognizes the point that "people would just stop imagining, intending, or even taking the initial steps toward carrying out such actions" (p. 53). But he replies that potential evil-doers will not give up on their villainy. Notice, he says, that evil-doers can succeed in doing evil that causes lower-level suffering to others. So, they will "strive to find some other occasion, or some other set of circumstances, where they can still succeed at their villainy" (p. 55). No doubt they would do so. But surely, they would eventually realize that there are no other occasions where they can succeed in producing significant evil.

Sterba recognizes this point as well. He says, "So in this hypothetical world, you begin to detect a pattern in God's interventions". Suppose we behave morally and try to intervene to prevent some significant evil but are only partially successful. Then, he says, "God does something to make the prevention completely successful" (p. 61).

I have two worries about Sterba's proposal, the first less serious than the second. First, what exactly is the boundary between those lesser evils that malefactors can successfully inflict on others and those significant and horrendous evils that they cannot? Let's call lesser evils "Evils" and serious ones "EVILS". Surely the boundaries, or the criteria for placing evils in the correct category, will have to be or at least appear loose, flexible, and unclear. From our point of view (either the perpetrators or the victims) the placement of evils will doubtless seem ambiguous and even subjective. Sterba is clear that murder and serious assault, for example, count as EVILS. And presumably the experience of having a hangnail or an annoying fit of hick-ups would count as Evils. But what about the infinite number of other evil acts that could be intended?

Here is one reason that I argued earlier that a "law of nature" explanation of why suffering will work as Sterba intends will not do. It seems that there is going to have to be a personal being (i.e., God) who makes the crucial decisions. Such questions will have to be considered as: How intense will be the pain of this particular intended evil act? How long will the pain last? How many people will experience it? How terrible will be the lasting effects of the experience? Notice also that one experience of evil (e.g., being a prisoner of war) might be horrendous for one person and not for another. How can God decide? Will God be able to avoid controversies and complaints?

I do not claim that this problem of making correct and just decisions cannot be solved, especially when the person making the decisions is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good. But at the very least, I believe Sterba should say much more about it.

My second and more serious worry is that such a world as Sterba recommends—which we can call (with no offense whatsoever intended) a "Sterba world"—would also be inimical to God's purposes. Recall that God, given God's aims, wanted to create a world in which it is rationally possible to reject God. That would not be possible in a Sterba world. Belief in God would be rationally coercive. No doubt there could still be atheists, but they would be rejecting something—the controlling presence of God in the human experience of suffering—that would eventually be perfectly obvious. In a Sterba world, atheism would be irrational. It would be

obvious that no desire or intention to commit, say, murder or serious assault could ever succeed. So, if a Sterba world would be inimical to God's aims, God can hardly be blamed for God's failure to create such a world. Accordingly, Sterba's argument for atheism fails.

Of course, we are not meant to imagine that God will prevent all EVILS by miraculous and noticeable means. God will presumably work in ordinary but hidden ways to prevent significant suffering, e.g., by so arranging the world that EVILS do not occur as intended. This is perhaps not unlike the Grandfather paradox in time travel stories. We can imagine a man who loathes his grandfather, builds a time machine, and intends to travel to the past in order to kill his grandfather as a youth. Of course, he cannot succeed—if the grandfather dies as a youth, there is no grandson. This is why, in coherent time travel stories, something ordinary occurs to prevent the murder: the gun misfires, a flat tire prevents the grandson from arriving at the intended site, or whatever. So, to return to Sterba, God so arranges things that some mundane coincidence always occurs to prevent all EVILS. Thus—so we are imagining—God's actions are undetectable.

Still, it seems to me that eventually people would make the easy deduction that some unseen personal force is preventing intended and initially acted on EVILS from occurring. Certainly, God could go further than this, e.g., arrange things so that people will never smack themselves in the head and shout, "Wait a minute: God must be doing this!" That is, God could prevent such an idea from ever entering anybody's brain. But then we would not be free. We would then be back to Plantinga and Mackie. God could prevent all EVILS without making theism obvious only at the cost of our intellectual freedom.

In other words, I hold that God intended to create a world in which God is epistemically distant from us. That is, God wanted it to be rationally possible for people to doubt or even deny God's existence. That, I say, would not be possible in Sterba worlds. There still might be atheists, but atheism would be irrational. Ergo, creating the kind of world that Sterba thinks God should have created, had God existed, would be contrary to God's purposes.

Three final points: first, Sterba claims (p. 148) that in a just and powerful political state the task of mitigating suffering due to horrendous evils would take priority over the task of redeeming people; ergo, that should be true of God as well. I accept the premise of the argument because just and powerful political states, like actual states, have almost nothing to do with redeeming people from sin. (They may have a little to do with rehabilitating criminals). But the conclusion does not follow from the premise. I grant that in his book Sterba frequently makes helpful use of the ideal political state. But here, the argument, "A just and powerful political state would do X; ergo, God must do X" is invalid. God is concerned with redeeming people.

Second: is heaven a valium world? I naturally know little about heaven, but I accept that there will be no place for compassion for others or chances to help others or occasions to display heroism or courage. But heaven will not count as a valium world because there will be a strong continuity with the present, non-valium world. All the denizens of the kingdom of God will have experienced the present world with its Evils and EVILS. Suffering must be undergone by redeemed people at some temporal point, but not at all times.

Third, at the conclusion of Chapter 4, Sterba says, "It would be morally inappropriate to receive a heavenly afterlife, even after having suffered significant evils that were unchosen and unaccepted, without first having gone through a soul-making where one did what could be reasonably expected to do to make oneself less unworthy of such a heavenly afterlife" (pp. 65–66).

This sentiment sounds noble. But here, Sterba seems to me to eschew the philosophy of religion in favor of doing a bit of theology. Are atheists allowed to do theology? Well, perhaps. But I just want to point out that: (1) I do not believe that I am capable of doing anything to make myself less unworthy of a heavenly reward; and (2) it is up to God and not up to us (whether we are atheists, agnostics, or theists) to decide who may appropriately receive a heavenly afterlife.[7]

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Page references to this work are in parentheses in the text of the present essay.

2 See Alvin Plantinga, God, Freedom, and Evil (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

3 See, for example, Davis (2001, chp. 3) and Davis (2016, chp. 8).

4 For several reasons, this is not an entirely satisfactory definition of "evil", but it will do for my purposes.

5 Sterba apparently agrees with this. He says, " . . . what God presumably wants for us is that we have the choice to love him freely or not" (p. 146).

6 Earthquake scientists, for example, might find themselves saying things like, "In the next ten years there is a 50% chance that the San Andreas fault will break and there could be catastrophic damage in the Los Angeles area, unless God intervenes".

7 I would like to thank Colin Ruloff and Eric Yang for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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