

Locating the Problem of Evil

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Abstract: I argue that James Sterba's argument from evil involves a category mistake. He applies moral principles that pertain to ethical requirements that apply within creation to what may be called the ethics or axiology of creating and sustaining creation. The paper includes reflection on the relationship between justification and redemption, justice and mercy.

Keywords: theism; naturalism; redemption; mercy

Why care whether there is a supremely good, all-knowing, all-powerful creator and sustainer of our cosmos? One reason is that if there is such a being, this is an awesome value. Arguably, *ceteris paribus*, a world with a supremely good being, is better than a world without one.¹ Moreover, if there is reason to believe in the great goodness of this being, there is some reason to believe that the great evils of the cosmos may be defeated and (as I have argued elsewhere) there are greater prospects of redemption and transformation than available in secular naturalism, the closest competitor to theism (Taliaferro and Meister 2016). It is on these grounds that some non-theists have gone so far as to hope that there is such a God, even though they do not believe that theism is true. Has Professor Sterba given us compelling reason to believe that there is no such being? I do not think so.

I suggest that Sterba's atheistic argument regarding evil involves a category mistake: Applying principles of moral requirement that apply to *creatures within creation* and not to *the ethics that pertain to a Creator and sustainer of the cosmos*. You and I have obligations and expectations of one another and rights that are different in kind than the obligations and expectations of God as creator and sustainer of the cosmos. In my view, Sterba employs an anthropomorphic concept of God that likens God to one of us, perhaps likening God to a human magistrate in a liberal democracy (or to a powerful nation-state) or a human bystander. There is also what I propose a problematic use of the term "permit" in Sterba's formulation of his argument that suggests approval. This is a vexing, not merely verbal point, as it violates (or overshadows) an important distinction between *justification and redemption*. In the framework of Christian theism that I defend, horrendous evils that occur are not permitted by God in the sense that they are deemed good or justified or approved of by God. They are, instead, against God's nature and will, a violation of what God wills for the creation. The locution that some evil occurs *with God's permission* suggests (even if it does not entail) divine approval. Arguably, such a suggestion is antithetical to the God of Christian, who is holy and for whom evil is an aberration, a profound violation of the purpose of creation (Taliaferro 2020).

In my response to Sterba, I shall write from the standpoint of Christian theism in the Cambridge Platonist tradition. While not enthusiastic about being labeled an apologist (as opposed to a philosopher), I write this response expressing what I actually believe to be true and have defended at length elsewhere (Taliaferro 2012). I hasten to add that I adopt a version of fallibilism and do not claim to know with (apodictic) certainty that the positions I advocate are indubitable.

Sterba's atheistic argument about evil relies on a principle of preventability that obtains in our own case. I offer this paraphrase: We should prevent horrendous evil if we can do so without committing greater evils and without violating the rights of those involved.



Citation: Taliaferro, Charles Champe. 2023. Locating the Problem of Evil. *Religions* 14: 228. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020228>

Academic Editor: James Sterba

Received: 22 December 2022

Revised: 30 January 2023

Accepted: 3 February 2023

Published: 8 February 2023



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This obligation that we have is intensified if we may easily undertake this prevention. We are not relieved of this obligation on the grounds that allowing the suffering will bring about great goods, especially under conditions when we can bring about those great goods without allowing the horrendous evil. We should even prevent persons from willingly undergoing suffering to aid others if we can provide that aid without the suffering. For the sake of argument, I grant that, *ceteris paribus*, we have such obligations to each other, though I have some reservations, especially about the last precept that I set to one side in this article.

Here is how I believe the problem of evil should be re-formatted to properly focus on what may be called *the ethics of creation*, rather than a principle of preventability. Do we know that the following is not the case?

It is compatible with the omnipotent, omniscient, supremely good Triune God (the apex of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful) to create and sustain a contingent cosmos in which there are stable laws of nature in which there are over 200 billion galaxies and (virtually) countless stars and planets, at least one of which has produced biota and abiota of plants and animals, some of which are sentient and have powers of thought, memory, reason, emotion, and agency, including moral agency. Living agents engage in good, healthy relations as well as horrific, unhealthy, abhorrent relations. There are the goods of biological flourishing (respiration, reproduction, etc.) freedom, family, community, friendship, and grave harms such as murder, rape, oppression, slavery, tyranny. Murder, rape, oppression, slavery, and tyranny are contrary to the will and nature of God, the God who calls all persons to justice, mutual loving compassion, our duty to relieve famines, etc. God's being is not obvious to creatures, but there are widespread ostensible experiences of God, the appearance of prophets (culminating in the ethical monotheism of the later Hebrew prophets), the apparent incarnation of this God as Jesus of Nazareth who taught non-violence and the coming of God's Kingdom, ultimately by the birth, teaching, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, life after death in which there may be the redemption of wrong-doers who might find fulfillment in union with the Triune God of love. God miraculously acts to bring about some goods and prevent some evils (sometimes through human agents, sometimes God acts to relieve famine, sometimes not) in this world, but this is far from obvious and universal. The divine seeking of redemption and justice includes life beyond this life.

Let us call the above portrait the *Compatibility Image*. It may be filled out in various ways involving nonhuman animals, God's provident leading through saints, and the prospect of Christian universalism (in the spirit of Origen of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa).

In the Platonic tradition, I hold that bare being counts as good, but it does not trump all ills. For example, a creation in which all sentient creatures endure only intense suffering that serves no good at all would not count (in my view) as a good state of affairs. Notice, I do not specify that any creation by the God of Christian Platonism must be the best possible world (a notion that I believe is as incoherent as there being a greatest possible number) (Taliaferro 1998).

A crucial difference between the above God's eye point of view and Sterba's framework is that the claim of compatibility of God and evil does not rest on God acting under the same conditions as creatures. To be specific, the all-good God of Jesus conserves in existence a cosmos in which we are called to (and thus obligated to) prevent bad things like famine, while God is not evil in creating and sustaining a cosmos in which famine occurs. God is not obligated to only create and sustain a cosmos in which famine never occurs except when that famine is relieved by creatures or God acting miraculously. By placing the problem of evil in the place where it belongs (namely in the context of theism) versus in the context of human-to-human (or creature-to-creature) we avoid introducing inappropriate moral precepts. For example, a nation state may, or may not, have some obligation to promote physical and mental equality among its citizens, but there is no obvious sense in which an all-good God must create only creatures that have physical and mental equality. The

Christian Platonic tradition has historically developed a principle of plentitude that favors diversity over homogeneity. NB: Given universalism, the above portrait would include God's saving, omnipotent love, ultimately overcoming all sin and harms. The Compatibility Image is far more detailed and Christian than the image of God and creation advanced by Cleanthes in Hume's *Dialogues*. I submit that the Compatibility Image seems plausible. It appears coherent and involves no obvious ad hoc element. I know of no reason to deem it a false state of affairs (contingently false or necessarily false). The Compatibility Image relies on long-standing beliefs and practices shared by many Christian philosophers over the centuries. Christianity is the largest religion in the world (according to most sociologists of religion), and so demonstrating that it is false (even necessarily false) would be a significant philosophical accomplishment.

Here, I introduce some clarification of terms. On the difference between redemption and justification: When evils occur (deliberate famine, rape, murder, etc.), these are never justified, from the moral and the theistic point of view. These acts/events should not occur. I further hold that God has a reason to destroy/annihilate all agents of grave wrongdoing. While that retributive response is justified (in my view), I follow those Christians who claim that it is compatible with God's merciful goodness to not destroy/annihilate grave wrongdoers but to act (in this life and the next) to redeem them through their repentance, moral and spiritual transformation (Taliaferro 2022). On this point, I adopt a position some might label Shakespearean in which justice and mercy can conflict and that there are cases when it is good that matters of justice are subordinated by matters of merciful redemption. Consider Portia's famous speech on justice and mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*:

The quality of mercy is not strained.
 It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
 Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
 It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
 The thronèd monarch better than his crown.
 His scepter shows the force of temporal power,
 The attribute to awe and majesty
 Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
 But mercy is above this sceptered sway.
 It is enthronèd in the hearts of kings;
 It is an attribute to God Himself;
 And earthly power doth then show likest God's
 When mercy seasons justice. Therefore, Jew,
 Though justice be thy plea, consider this:
 That in the course of justice none of us
 Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy,
 And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
 The deeds of mercy. I have spoke thus much
 To mitigate the justice of thy plea,
 Which, if thou follow, this strict court of Venice
 Must needs give sentence 'gainst the merchant there. (Act 4, Scene 1)

Setting aside the (vexing) topic of anti-Semitism in the play (not fully resolved in the literature), the speech concedes that, as far as justice is concerned, the case against the accused is compelling. The seasoning power of mercy involves curtailing the demands of justice for some good, in this case, sparing the life of the one accused, seeking his redemption (healing) rather than seeking his justification (ruling that the charges against him were not in fact justified). In my view, in cases of redemption, great goods may emerge for persons who engage in vile wickedness, but their vile wickedness is never justified or properly deemed good. They are only permitted by God to do their acts of wickedness

insofar as God does not annihilate them prior to their acts, but there is a solid and robust sense in which these acts should not occur.

Consider four objections.

(A) Presumably, in Christian theology, God should do what God should do. However, if God should annihilate evil-doers, then your merciful God should do what God should not do, namely, spare them. Isn't your view at odds with the claim that God is just?

Reply: There is some substance to this objection. On the view I am commending, justice requires stringency. Mercy is not the same as justice and can even be at odds with justice. However, mercy is not necessarily at odds with goodness. The Compatibility Image is phrased in terms of whether evil is compatible with God's goodness, not justice. On the Compatibility Image, justice is not at all overshadowed, *evils are against God's will and nature (indeed, injustice may be analyzed as that which is disapproved of or abhorrent to God), and God works in creation and in life beyond this life to defeat injustice*. The Compatibility Image may be seen as being in accord with the Biblical account of the covenant with Noah (the Noahic Covenant) when God promises not to exact justice in this life by destroying all living things due to human evil (Genesis 8:21). Historically, Christian commentators have interpreted this as God's exercise of mercy in the course of postponing the divine judgment of evil-doers.

(B) Even if it be conceded that the ethics of a creator differ from the ethics of creatures, surely *a good creator should not* create a cosmos with grave evils when those are not essential (necessary) to achieve great goods, including the good of redemption.

In reply, I suggest that it is compatible with God's goodness when grave harms occur in creation that are not essential (necessary) to achieve great goods. I propose that the principle (or stricture) of divine goodness motivating this objection is not at all obvious. Built into the approach to evil I am proposing in this article (and elsewhere), no evils that occur are justified or in accord with God's will. They are, therefore, not justified because they lead to some greater good. Grave, horrendous wrongs should not occur. If we have reason to believe that *only horrendous evils occur and there is no good whatever*, we have reason to believe such a creation to be unworthy of a supremely good Creator. However, the truth, I suggest, is more in keeping with the Compatibility Image than a site of unqualified horror. The Compatibility Image includes abundant good, including the good of redemption.

(C) But then isn't your God more like a "pretty good god" rather than the God of perfect being theology? Don't we expect more from God in the Anselmian tradition?

In reply, I suggest that all that is essential in reply to Sterba's argument is that he has not shown that the Compatibility Image is false (implausible, known to be impossible or implausible, etc.). Different arguments can come into play to argue for the preferability of Anselmian theism to other forms of theism. Keep in mind that the Compatibility Image can be crafted to describe our created order without ruling out God's creating and sustaining other cosmic orders of different magnitudes of goods. Perhaps, there are other creations which God does not create through evolution but by special creation (a so-called literal understanding of Genesis) or without animal predation. Given these other possible created orders, all I am contending is that it is not incompatible with the God of Christian Platonism to use evolution and predation in our created order.

An objector is likely to persist: Surely only a horrendous god would sustain a cosmos in which there are horrendous evils. I grant that there is a succinct force to such a persistent objection until the thesis is put in the context of *a created order of goods as well as ills and in which God acts in and with creatures to defeat horrendous evil, even through the incarnate suffering and redemptive power of God as Jesus in this life and the next*, etc. Taking into account the prospects of redemptive mercy does not lessen horrendous evils, but it brings to light what may be hoped for healing, not as forms of compensation or salvaged goods (as when some good is saved from a tragedy as when friendship may survive divorce), but as transformation or transfiguration that we find in traditional Christian portraits of redemption (the writings of Julian Norwich or Evelyn Underhill, Dante's *Paradiso* or C.S. Lewis's *The Last Battle*).

(D) Back to the beginning, if Sterba is right, shouldn't we hope there is no God, or not the God of Christian theism? If Sterba is correct, then the God of Christian theism is unjust. Shouldn't we hope that there is not an unjust God?

Reply: As of now, I hope that there truly is a supremely good, omniscient, omnipotent creator and sustainer of the cosmos for the reasons noted at the outset. The Compatibility Image seems to me plausible, and I have developed a series of theistic arguments elsewhere to argue not just for the coherence of Christian theism, but for its truth (Taliaferro 2012). However, let us say those specific arguments fail. If this hope that Platonic theism is true is misplaced (it is either unreasonable or based on a false metaphysic) and there is reason to believe that the creator and sustainer of our cosmos is actually unjust, then we might entertain some kind of Promethean option. If some theistic arguments are compelling, for example, versions of the cosmological and teleological arguments that do not entail that God is just, atheism and agnosticism may not be viable (justified) options. Perhaps, the existence of an all-powerful Creator needs to be acknowledged but deemed unjust or not good or abhorrent or not as good as a human liberal democracy that seeks to respect the human rights of all people. In other words, Sterba's argument about evil may not support atheism. If placed in the context of a cogent case for a version of theism, Sterba's argument might rather support the (potentially frightening) view that the God who creates and sustains the cosmos is not good or is unjust.

Summary: In this article, I have claimed that the theistic problem of evil needs to be located in the context of the ethics of creation, not in terms of the ethical requirements and expectations of the ethics within creation. I have described an overarching image of the cosmos, with its mixture of good and evil, being compatible with God's goodness. I contend that this image seems coherent or, more modestly, it is not implausible or known to be incoherent. Along the way, I have sought to clarify the difference between redemption and justification (a wrong-doer may be redeemed without the wrong-doing justified) and the relationship between mercy and justice. Divine mercy may be in conflict with the strict demands of justice. I concluded with the suggestion that Sterba's argument may not support atheism. If there are plausible reasons to believe that some form of theism is true, then Sterba's argument (if successful) provides some reason for thinking that God is not good or is unjust. While I do not elaborate on the latter possibility, I suspect the ramification of such a philosophy of God may be troublesome.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to James Sterba for inviting my response to his work.

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

Note

¹ A reviewer requests I clarify "better." A full account of this would require another, different paper. All I am asserting here is what I believe to be a common sense viewpoint; I think most people would reply affirmatively if asked whether it would be better for there to be a supremely good being rather than there not be a supremely good being. I am not claiming here that this is a correct judgment. But for a defense of the view that it would be good if theism is true, see *Why Believe?* by John Cottingham (2009).

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