Introduction to the symposium

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The problem of evil is perhaps the most perennial of all arguments against belief in God. From Epicurus among the ancient Greeks to contemporary philosophers like William Rowe and “new atheists” like Richard Dawkins, the problem of evil has been a favored weapon in the atheist arsenal. It has received a variety of formulations, most notable among which may be the arguments that have a deductive logical structure, like H. J. McCloskey’s argument in his article “On Being an Atheist” (McCloskey 1968), and formulations having an inductive structure, like that of William Rowe in his article “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism” (Rowe 1979). Reflective theists have considered such arguments and have pointed out various weaknesses. One result of this exchange is that while many atheists still see the POE as a major problem for theism, many also grant that theism can nonetheless be a rational position.

James Sterba, a professor of ethics and political theory at the University of Notre Dame, has opened the latest round in this protracted philosophical contest. In 2013–2014 Sterba received a grant from the John Templeton Foundation to conduct research into the intersection of contemporary moral theory and the problem of evil. This research eventually led Sterba to develop a new version of the POE, one that is deductive but which, he believes, cannot be repudiated using the arguments that were successfully employed against earlier deductive versions of the POE. Sterba presented his new argument at the 2017 meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion (SPR) and at the 2018 meeting of the SPR he presented a revised and strengthened version. In 2019 he published a book devoted to the new argument with the title *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Sterba 2019).

The 2020 SPR conference featured an author-meets-critics panel discussion of Sterba’s book. In addition to Sterba, the panel was comprised of leading scholars in philosophy of religion: Ronald Hall (Stetson University), William Hasker (Huntington University), and Michael Tooley (University of Colorado). The panel was moderated by Michael S. Jones (Liberty University), who was the respondent to Sterba’s 2017 SPR presentation. The format had Sterba open with a 15-min presentation of his book and its central argument. This was followed by 15-min critical appraisals

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by each of the other panelists. Then Sterba was allowed 30 min to respond to his critics. Finally, 30 min were allocated for a question and answer session. The latter turned out to be especially lively.

While the panelists expressed appreciation for Sterba's writing, all also voiced criticisms of his central argument, and each of these criticisms came from a different angle. The articles that follow are based on the texts presented in this panel discussion. They contain Sterba's argument, the replies of his critics, and his self-defense. They are being published in the belief that they make a useful contribution to the ongoing discussion of the Problem of Evil.

References

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