Afterthoughts

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William Hasker

In my comment on Jim Sterba's book, I claimed that traditional theists would find his moral requirement on God, MEPR1, deeply repugnant and unacceptable. He maintains, on the contrary, that religious people will accept this principle. If they accept it, then they should agree that the Israelites, in my Deuteronomic satire, have a valid logical and ethical case against the Lord—but they won't agree to that. If they do in some way accept the principle, they will accept it as a *prima facie* obligation, a very different matter from accepting it as an exceptionless requirement, which is what Sterba needs them to do. In any case, if he is to show a logical incompatibility between God and evil, he needs to defeat the *best* theistic answer to his argument; it's not enough to defeat a weaker answer built on a (possibly unwise) initial concession by his opponents.

I suggested a couple of modifications for MEPR1, in the interest of making it a more plausible candidate for an exceptionless moral requirement. Sterba demurs. With regard to the exception for sufferers who were themselves the agents of the moral evil in question, consider this example: The dictator of a small nation starts a malicious war of aggression in order to extend his territory. The offensive fails, but results in huge amounts of suffering and death, and the dictator's palace is surrounded by an angry mob. On Sterba's unmodified principle, he has a *right* to be transported to a remote location where he can live out his life in luxury and safety; he has this right against anyone who is able easily to do this for him. As for future generations, I am far more confident that we have a responsibility to care for the earth than that future generations of people, who do not exist and may never exist, have rights over us here and now. And I think that in general it is implausible to suppose that all of our duties can be cashed out in terms of rights that individuals have over us. (Suppose there is something that is seriously needed by many of my neighbors—for instance, access to a secondary-level education. I can easily provide this for some few of them, but my resources are inadequate to provide it for all. It

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is plausible that I have an obligation to provide for as many as I reasonably can, but that no particular individual has a right over me to have me make such provision.)

Throughout his book Sterba appeals to the idea of an “ideally just and powerful state” as an analogy to help us see what we should morally expect of a good God. In his Replies¹ he infers that, since I did not refer to this idea in my comment, he has satisfied or neutralized my objections to the notion. This inference is badly mistaken. In fact, I view the notion as completely unusable; it plays no role at all in my thinking about these topics. It is obvious that no such state exists; nor, I should say, is there anything like an approximation to it.² Given what we know of human nature, I do not think anything of the sort is possible. And I should strongly oppose giving to *any* human government powers sufficient to make it a plausible analog for the divine governance of the world. (Readers of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* will recall that both Gandalf and Galadriel (beings of exalted status, far superior to humans in wisdom and goodness) refused the Ring of Power. The Ring would have enabled either of them to overcome great evils and accomplish much that was good. But in the end, it would overpower them and the result would be even greater evil.)

As has been noted, one objection against NEPR1 is that it would greatly impair the morally significant exercise of free will. To be sure, the principle does not require that the exercise of free will shall itself be controlled, only that the harmful consequences of such exercise will be prevented. But once it becomes generally known that such consequences will not be allowed to occur, it will become in effect impossible for anyone to act in the ways that would have such results. Furthermore, the motivation of humans to care for one another by preventing serious harms to others will be considerably lessened, once it is recognized that such harms will not be allowed to occur in any case.³

Sterba mentions, in his Replies, an additional feature of his view that is designed to avoid these disadvantages. In cases where human beings have failed in their duty of preventing the harmful consequences of moral evil, God will prevent *part* of the evil consequences, but will leave another part to occur. Thus it will not be so clear to those who intend harm to others that their harm cannot succeed, nor will persons of goodwill be deprived of motivation to prevent evils. Sterba pictures a situation in which a child is abducted, where a bystander has the opportunity, and therefore the obligation, to prevent the abduction before it occurs. If the bystander fails in this responsibility, God arranges for police officers to arrest the abductors before they have killed or physically harmed the child. This prevents the worst consequences of the abduction, but may well leave the child traumatized from the experience. So people who have the opportunity to save others from harm will still realize that things will be worse if they fail in their responsibility to act.

¹ James Sterba, “Replies,” in this issue.

² States that we recognize as especially well-governed (some will think of the Scandinavian democracies) are such, not because of unusually great power invested in their governors, but because their citizens have become accustomed to living in a decent society with widespread voluntary obedience to civilized laws and standards.

³ For this see my, “Can God Prevent ‘Just Enough’ Evil?” in *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), 80–94.

This strategy fails. The requirement is that an agent prevent “significant or horrendous” evils. This wording is vague, but in any particular case there will be a threshold, such that harm falling below that threshold is relatively unimportant and can be permitted, whereas harm above the threshold would violate the sufferer’s rights and must be prevented. Now, if a human intervenes in such a way as to keep the evil consequences below the threshold, well and good. If the human being fails in her responsibility to intervene, but God acts so as to prevent harm above the threshold, then once again there is no violation of the sufferer’s rights. But if God, as suggested by Sterba, prevents only part of the “excess harm,” leaving some harm above the threshold to occur, then the sufferer’s rights have been violated, and God has failed in his obligations, which is surely impossible. In the child abduction case, either the trauma that the child experiences from the thwarted abduction is “significant” or it is not. If it is not, then the bystander has not failed in his responsibility by failing to stop the abduction; it is probably sufficient if he notifies the police with a description of the abductors and their vehicle.⁴ But if the trauma is significant, the child’s rights have been violated, and God has failed in his obligation to prevent that harm to the child.

In my earlier comments I agreed with John Hick that, in the sort of world envisioned by Sterba, “nature would have to work by ‘special providences’ instead of running according to general laws.” Sterba holds that, whereas his sort of world would involve a great many divine interventions,⁵ there would still be regularities provided God intervenes in a rational, consistent way rather than capriciously. No doubt this is correct, but those regularities would be exceedingly complex: in addition to taking account of the physical antecedent conditions, they would include also a very complicated set of moral considerations. It is open to question how successful we could ever be in learning these regularities. Natural science is *hard*; of all the world’s great civilizations only modern Europe has made serious headway in understanding nature’s ways. But the effect on motivation might be even more striking. Would we ever have had agriculture, if shortages of food never threatened human life and well-being? But if no agriculture, then no cities, and if no cities, little progress in learning and the arts. And that is only the beginning. It is universally recognized that young humans, especially males, take outrageous risks because they feel themselves to be invulnerable. In a Sterba-world, they would be right! It is, I submit, very far from obvious that a world with these characteristics would be especially well-suited to fulfill divine purposes for the creation.

⁴ One might in any case wonder whether the abduction could “easily” have been prevented. Were the abductors armed? Were they physically threatening and dangerous? How much time elapsed between its becoming apparent that an abduction was in progress, and the abductors making their escape with the child?

⁵ The number of interventions will be greatly increased if we assume, as Sterba does, that God will intervene to prevent serious harm to sentient organisms other than human beings. See in this connection NEPRIV: “Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of natural evil from being inflicted on nonrational sentient beings, as needed, whenever the welfare of rational beings is not at stake and one can easily do so without causing greater or comparable harm to other non-rational sentient life” (165).

There is yet another question that may occur to us as we consider Sterba's proposal. We should notice that, in order to show a logical incompatibility between God and evil, the ethical principles appealed to must be *necessary truths*, and as such they will be inherent in the nature of a perfectly good God. But is it not a little surprising how closely the moral nature of God corresponds to the quite complex strategies Sterba would have God follow in avoiding harms to persons? This does seem surprising—but then again, perhaps not. This is, after all, a god admittedly invented by Sterba himself: a god who is not said to exist; rather the whole point of inventing him is to prove he cannot exist. But if this is the case, there is the suggestion of a different, somewhat more irenic, conclusion to this discussion. It may be that Sterba has been more successful than I have so far been inclined to admit. Perhaps he has indeed proved the non-existence of God—namely, of the god Sterba himself has invented for that very purpose! This conclusion, however, has little bearing—perhaps none at all—on the existence or non-existence of Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Father of Jesus Christ.

Ronald Hall

Success in the theistic project of reconciling the existence of natural evil (gratuitous horrendous suffering not due to human agency) with the existence of God, turns on the Image (picture) we have of the natural order and God's relation to it. Or as I might put this, the central question the theist must address is whether our picture of the course of natural events is or is not independent of God's will.

Sterba's picture of nature and God's relation to it, assumes that the course of natural events is not independent of God's will. Possessing this absolute power, Sterba thinks that God is free to prevent or not permit horrendous gratuitous suffering that is caused by natural events. And, being morally perfect, God ought to prevent such events, or ought not to permit them, at least if they generate horrendous suffering. Sense gratuitous horrendous suffering obviously exists, it is logically impossible for an all-powerful, perfectly good God to exist.

If we turn to the biblical narratives, we find mixed, and perhaps contradictory answers to the question of whether the natural course of events is or is not independent of God's will. Sterba's picture of a god in absolute control of natural events is well represented in these narratives. Biblical stories depict God as causing floods, parting seas, and empowering Jesus to calm them and to walk on them, not to mention, empowering Jesus to cure sickness, turn water to wine, and raise the dead. These stories make it hard to make the case that the biblical narratives support the picture of nature, according to which, the course of natural events is independent of God's will.

I want to suggest, however, that there are strands in these narratives that support a picture of the course of natural events that is independent of God's will.

Biblical faith is deeply historical. It emerged in mortal conflict with nature religions (Cain killed Able). Canaanite nature religion pictured the gods (Baal and his consort) as living in the ground. When stimulated by water, the gods become fertile and this determines the course of agricultural events. This is just how the natural

cycle works and has worked eternally. The cycle has no beginning and it has no end. In nature religions, the course of natural events is dependent at every turn on the will of the gods.

That biblical faith departs from this picture is clearly shown by the very fact that it sees nature as a creation. Moreover, this creation was accomplished in a historical span of 7 days, a time frame not derived from the natural cycles. As created, the course of natural events has a beginning and can clearly have an end. The very existence of the natural world is due to the action by a God who has no consort and whose words bring the natural world into existence.

If we look carefully at the picture of nature as a creation, we may notice other important contrasts with nature religions. Here the sun, the moon, and the stars are not gods, but merely lights. And there are intrinsic natural processes in this natural world not controlled by God. (“Let the earth sprout vegetation...fruit trees bearing fruit of its own kind.”) I see here an image of nature as independent of God’s will. Such a picture may well have paved the way for the rise of modern science, its blessings and curses.

In this historical faith, God is pictured as radically transcendent. This is the point of the prohibition against idolatry, of identifying God with any existing thing. As “no thing”, God is not *in* nature in the way nature gods are. But even though God is not contained *in* things, the creation itself can be seen, by those who have eyes to see, as pointing beyond itself, to its creator.

What I am suggesting here is that the God of historical faith, the creator, the radically transcendent God, can be pictured as having created a natural world that is not governed by his will but by intrinsic features that God designed nature to have. I would call these features chance, necessity and intrinsic natural teleology. These are the principles that govern the natural course of events, not God’s will. Even though the course of natural events has a life of its own, independent of God’s will, it has this life because God willed it so.

If the world was created in this way where the course of natural events is independent of God’s will, this entails that having set into motion a course of natural events governed by chance, necessity and intrinsic teleology, it is logically impossible for an omnipotent God to intervene.

God did not bring COVID-19 about, but by creating a world exposed to chance and necessity, God did bring about this possibility and sadly, this actuality. He could have prevented it only by having created a different kind of natural world. Should he have done better? Why didn’t God make a world in which the possibility and hence the actuality of horrendous suffering does not exist? Like Job, Sterba thinks God could have done better and takes this, as Job did not, to warrant the claim that God cannot exist. Perhaps Job was prevented from the atheism that Sterba embraces because he realized that his doubt was nothing less than an idolatrous presumption. “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?”.

So why did God create a natural world in which gratuitous horrendous suffering is not only possible but actual? The only answer that seems available to the theist is that God must have wisely chosen that this **kind** of natural world is the best possible **kind** of natural world, even though it has produced a less than best of all possible historical worlds. We can certainly want to make the world better, to curb the spread

of the virus, but this need not be to want to live in a different **kind** of natural order. Do we know better than God that a natural order dependent on his will is better than one that is independent? It is Sterba's presumption that God chose to make nature dependent on his will. Without this assumption, his argument collapses.

And what makes this kind of natural order a better kind of world than a world, not exposed, for example, to chance? Although it may be a hard sell, the virtue defense tells us that exposure to chance is the best **kind** of world for soul making, for developing virtue. These defenders might point out that our current natural catastrophe is opening the door to the development of courage, generosity, and neighbor love, virtues that would be less likely fully developed apart from facing horrendous suffering.

Can we open the door to possibility only partially? Could God have filtered out the horrendous ones? Well, why not get rid of all the bad ones while you are at it? Are some possibilities necessary for soul making? How wide does the door have to be open for this? Perhaps God thought it wise to open it all the way. Perhaps with God, **all** things are possible. Perhaps the door to the possibility of comedy cannot be opened unless the door to the possibility of tragedy is opened as well. Perhaps we cannot have the possibility of one without the possibility of the other. And this may be reason enough to praise God's wisdom in creating the world in just the way that he did; it may be just enough reason to inspire our gratitude for the world as the gift God intended it to be, warts and all.

Michael Tooley

Jim Sterba's replies to my comments were both friendly and very thoughtful—a model, and sadly one too rarely emulated, for how conversations between philosophers should be.

Sterba's first reply concerns my claim that an argument is needed that shows that the prevention of moral evils cannot be logically connected with the creation of other evils that are not *moral* evils, and there I referred to Peter van Inwagen's view that massive irregularity in a world—which would exist if God constantly intervened to prevent moral evils—would itself be a great evil. Sterba's response to Van Inwagen's view is interesting and promising: one should ask Van Inwagen whether he thinks that a world that contains massive irregularities, but no living things, would be “a defect at least as great as the defect of containing patterns of suffering mentally equivalent to those found in the actual world.”⁶

But although this is promising, it does not seem sufficiently broad in scope. Consider, for example, a view that assigns weight to the well-being of living things—or, more generally, of things that have a good of their own—but that also assigns weight to an aesthetic-like consideration, such as the presence of *a contrast* between beings having happy lives and beings having unhappy lives. To rule out such views, one needs an argument showing that the goodness of a world is a positive function of the

⁶ Peter van Inwagen (2006): *The Problem of Evil*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 114.

values of the lives of individuals who enjoy good lives and a negative function of the values of the lives of individuals who have bad lives, *and a function of nothing else*.

Sterba's second comment concerns my objection to his claim that, because of predation, God could not eliminate all horrendous natural evils, where I argued that "God could have created a world *ex nihilo* where all sentient non-persons were vegetarians, or he could have instituted natural laws preventing carnivores from arising via evolution." Sterba's response is that one needs to distinguish between "ethics before creation and ethics after creation," the idea being that before creation, God's "moral options are fairly wide open," a situation that he compares with how things are "for ourselves with respect to the procreation of our own children."

Now if, as is very plausible, there is no best of all possible worlds, only better and better worlds, then a perfectly good and omnipotent God would have infinitely many options concerning which possible world to actualize, and the fact that he could have created a better world would not be grounds for moral censure. But not anything goes. For compare human procreation, and consider examples that arise in connection with non-identity cases: Margret can either become pregnant now, and have a child with a life worth living, albeit one with significant handicaps, or she can wait 3 months to become pregnant, and have a perfectly normal child. The vast majority of philosophers who have thought about such cases have concluded that one should choose the second option.

Given an omnipotent and perfectly good deity, the conclusion, then, is that while one cannot be faulted for creating a given world simply because a better world could have been actualized, one can be faulted if one creates a world where there is an enormous amount of undeserved suffering—as has certainly been so for millions of years in our world for sentient animals that are not neo-Lockean persons. An omnipotent creator could have created a world without such suffering, either by not creating any predatory animals, or else by leaving things up to an evolutionary process, but then either choosing laws of nature that would not give rise to predators, or else intervening to block their emergence whenever necessary.

Sterba's third response focuses upon my contention that moral concern based upon the *intrinsic* nature of an entity should be restricted to *sentient* things, contrary to Sterba's view that non-sentient living things "have a good of their own which is distinct from being just instrumentally good for some purpose or other." Elsewhere, Sterba has offered an argument "for including non-sentient living beings in the moral calculus," but since he did not outline that argument here, I shall simply say why I find assigning intrinsic moral status to plants and microbes implausible—as do most people, albeit with Buddhists, who view all life as 'sacred', being a notable exception.

What is a living thing? One dictionary says, "The distinguishing manifestations of life are: growth through metabolism, reproduction, and the power of adaptation to the environment through changes originating internally."⁷ My first point, then, is that a *complete* account of what entities have intrinsic moral status cannot be formulated in terms of living things—in terms of biological organisms—since there could

⁷ *The American College Dictionary* (1958). C. L. Barnhardt (Ed.), New York: Random House, p. 704.

be—as many people believe—entities with intrinsic moral status that are not biological organisms, namely, nonembodied minds—deities, angels, devils, disembodied human souls, etc. Consequently, if one assigns intrinsic moral status to non-sentient living things, the result will be a disjunctive account: an entity has intrinsic moral status if and only if it either has a mind or is a biological organism. But isn't such a disjunctive account implausible? Doesn't one want to know what makes it the case that these two very different types of entities both have intrinsic moral status? The contrast here with the view that only beings possessing consciousness have intrinsic moral status is, I suggest, striking.

My second point is this. Someday it will be possible to construct machines that will be able to grow by taking in materials from their environment, which they then use to construct new parts, both to replace old parts, and to become larger and more complex, that will also be able to produce small machines of their own kind, and that will contain a program enabling them to change in order to adapt to their environment. Would such entities have intrinsic moral status? If not, what reason could be given for ascribing intrinsic moral status to biological entities that can grow, reproduce, and adapt, but not to mechanical/electronic entities that can grow, reproduce, and adapt?

Sterba's fourth comment is directed against suggestions I made concerning the advantages of formulating a logical incompatibility argument from evil based either upon natural evils, or else based on the suffering of sentient non-persons. Here Sterba's main point is this:

Arguably there may also be connections between moral good and evil and natural good and evil that require that both be taken into account. For example, permitting some natural evil to be inflicted on say Rowe's fawn may provide a soul-making opportunity for humans to achieve some moral good, and one would need to show that the natural evils that one was claiming God should have been preventing was not required for this purpose.

This point certainly deserves careful consideration—which I cannot undertake here. My initial reaction, however, is that if suffering is needed for human soul-making, then those who suffer should be those who will profit from the soul-making—namely humans—rather than those who will not profit—sentient non-persons.

Sterba's final response concerns my contention that he underestimated the power of evidential arguments from evil, in that, although there are unsatisfactory evidential arguments from evil, at least two types are inductively sound, namely, abductive arguments, such as Paul Draper's, and arguments based on equiprobability principles. In response to this, Sterba says,

... if theists were to claim that one possible reason for the permission of evil in the world is its positive connection to our entering the heavenly afterlife of friendship with God, it is hard to see how atheists could right off offer up another possible, and equally weighty, reason for the prevention of evil that was equiprobable as the reason I just proposed for the permission of evil, and that would seemingly undercut Tooley's equiprobability assumption.

My answer is that one needs to understand *the part* that evidential arguments from evil play in support of atheism. Unlike a sound logical incompatibility argument,

where the question of God's existence would be *settled once and for all*, given any evidential argument from evil, the door is necessarily open for counterarguments *supporting* the existence of God, and whose strength might outweigh the negative evidence provided by evils in the world. Consequently, any advocate of an evidential argument from evil has *much* more work to do: he or she must address such counterarguments, and show that they are unsound. This I do, albeit briefly, in my very short book, *The Problem of Evil*, where, first, I point out that almost all purely philosophical pro-theistic arguments provide no support for the existence of a morally *good* deity, and then, secondly, where I also indicate why arguments from miracles and religious experiences are unsound.⁸ The crucial point, then, is that contrary to what Sterba believes I am proposing, *this* part of the case for atheism, unlike the evidential argument from evil itself, is too complex to be carried out by appealing directly to fundamental equiprobability principles.

James Sterba

Many thanks for these challenging Afterthoughts. Here are my best replies.

On William Hasker's Afterthoughts

Bill Hasker begins by claiming that traditional theists would find my moral evil prevention requirements repugnant and unacceptable. But then he really does need to explain why in his own book, *Providence, Evil and the Openness to God*, he called a principle quite similar to my Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I and III one that constitutes “a general requirement on the moral government of the world by God as conceived by traditional theism.”⁹ He states that principle as follows:

An omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being (i.e. God) would of necessity prevent the occurrence of any evil state of affairs it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

You can see its clear similarities to my Moral Evil Prevention Requirements I and III provided in the summary of my argument found at the beginning of the author meets critics symposium on my book.

So why then is Hasker now so critical of my moral evil prevention requirements when earlier in his published work, he regarded at least two of those requirements as expressing a “a general requirement on the moral government of the world by God as conceived by traditional theism?” Could Hasker just have changed his mind about their common content? Well, that may be possible because Hasker does now give two particular reasons for rejecting my Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I.

⁸ Michael Tooley (2019), *The Problem of Evil*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 34–36.

⁹ See *Providence, Evil and the Openness to God*, (Routledge 2004), p.80.

First, in his Deuteronomic satire, Hasker says that the Israelites are entitled to respond to God's covenant by saying that while they are pleased to accept God's blessing, they think that Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I requires God to prevent any horrendous consequences that might otherwise be visited on them for breaking their covenant with God.

Yet this is just a misapplication of Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I. The requirement applies only to harmful consequences that we are entitled to have prevented. Hasker has the Israelites applying it to harmful consequences they are not entitled to have prevented because those consequences would be rightfully inflicted on them if they had broken their purported covenant with God. So Hasker gets unacceptable results here only by misapplying my requirement.

Second, in his dictator example, Hasker thinks my Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I entitles a dictator to be spared the harsh punishment that would otherwise be inflicted on him by those he had previously oppressed. Yet, in his example, the dictator has no right to be spared that punishment, and so Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I does not require its prevention. Thus, Hasker's second reason for rejecting my Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I, like his first, is just another misapplication of my requirement.

So Hasker has not provided us here with any reason to reject my moral evil prevention requirements that would overturn his own earlier assessment that the content of at least two of them expressed "a general requirement on the moral government of the world by God as conceived by traditional theism."

Now throughout my book, I employ the analogy of an ideally just and powerful state (more than 125 times) to support my argument that an all-good, all-powerful God is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world. Unfortunately, in his contribution to our symposium, Hasker had nothing to say against my use of this analogy. Now in his Afterthoughts, he does.

What he says is that no such ideally just and powerful state exists, which is true. But then he goes on to claim that there does not exist anything like an approximation of such a state, which is not true. In the discussion that followed our presentations at the recent SPR Meeting, I introduced the example of the Scandinavian states as the closest approximations we have to the ideal in our times. In his Afterthoughts, Hasker responds by claiming that the Scandinavian states do not have "unusually great power invested in their governors." But this ignores the unusual redistributive taxing power that Scandinavian states employ to ensure that the poor and the less well-off are not being denied their rights to equal opportunity and to basic educational, health and other social services. This in turn contributes to the much lower crime rates in these countries compared, for example, to the US. Thus, abstracting away from our particular culture and our personal relationships, it is not at all difficult for us to come to wish that we lived in a political state that more approximates an ideally just and powerful one.

As it turns out, this comparative moral judgment is just about all that is needed to ground the analogy of an ideally just and powerful state. Of course, the worry we have about trying to approximate such a state in real life is that the degree of power actually needed to ensure just outcomes could instead be misused to achieve unjust ones. However, this practical limitation with respect to our realizing the ideal does

not undercut its argumentative force because the limitation can be either eliminated imaginatively by utilizing superheroes who would be irrevocably committed to acting justly or eliminated theologically by envisioning an all-good, all-powerful God who would flawlessly be exercising his power to prevent significant and especially horrendous moral evil consequences, as needed, in accord with my three moral evil prevention requirements.

Yet is there really no good reason to object to God, like an ideally just and powerful state, adhering to my moral evil prevention requirements? Now while it may seem appropriate, even required, for God not to prevent significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in any particular case, once we generalize that behavior to all such cases might it be objected that morally unacceptable consequences would result?

In my book, to deal with this objection, I employ an extended example that I repeat with variations in Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 8, showing how God's prevention of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences on a backup basis should not keep good people from trying to prevent such evil consequences themselves. Unfortunately, Hasker never discusses this extended example in his comments for our symposium. But now in his Afterthoughts, he does.

So, imagine a world where when choosing to intervene to prevent significantly evil consequences of wrongdoers, you will either be completely successful or your intervention will fall short. When the latter is going to happen, imagine that God does something to make the intervention completely successful. Likewise, when you choose not to intervene to prevent significant evil consequences, imagine that God again intervenes but this time not in a fully successful way. In cases of this sort, there is a residue of evil consequences that the victims still do suffer. This residue is not really a significant evil in its own right, but it is harmful nonetheless, and it is something for which you are primarily responsible. You could have prevented those harmful consequences but you chose not to do so and that makes you responsible for them. Of course, God too could have prevented those harmful consequences from happening even if you had decided not to do what you could to prevent them yourself. It is just that in such cases God would have chosen not to fully intervene and completely prevent all the evil consequences in order to leave you with a constrained opportunity for soul-making. Moreover, I maintain that this is exactly what God would be morally required to do.

Now Hasker argues that this example fails to show how God can be generally involved in the prevention of significant or horrendous consequences of moral actions without producing undesirable results. He claims that in any particular case "there will be a threshold, such that harm falling below that threshold is relatively unimportant and can be permitted, whereas harm above the threshold would violate the sufferer's rights and must be prevented," which leaves nothing of importance for would-be preventers of evil consequences to do beyond what God's prevention alone would accomplish.

Now Hasker's mistake here is to assume that any harm that is not a rights violation is relatively unimportant and can be permitted, and hence, ignored by those who are concerned to prevent harmful consequences to others. What is so strange here is that earlier in his Afterthoughts, when Hasker was objecting to my view that future

generations have rights, he endorses just the opposite stance from the one we find him endorsing here. There Hasker contends “that it is implausible to suppose that all of our duties can be cashed out in terms of rights that individuals have over us.” Not surprisingly, I support the “earlier Hasker” over the “later one,” agreeing with the earlier Hasker that there are more harmful consequences to be prevented in our world than simply those that would violate people’s rights. Accordingly, in the various versions of my extended example, I describe just such harmful consequences as something for which we are responsible, and hence, should want to prevent, even if they do not violate anyone’s rights. Since the only way we can do this is by striving also to prevent the significant and especially the horrendous consequences of immoral actions that accompany them, we should be sufficiently motivated to do just that, even in a world where God would be functioning, as he should be on my view, as the preventer of last resort of significant and especially horrendous consequences of our immoral actions.

On Ronald Hall’s Afterthoughts

Ron Hall thinks my picture of God in absolute control of natural events and so ultimately responsible for the evil that results from them “is well-represented in [Biblical] narratives.” Nevertheless, he favors a different picture of nature as independent of God’s will, that is, independent of his intentional doings. As he has put this point elsewhere. “God as Creator of the world is the one who has shaped the situation in which human suffering is liable to happen and he is thus responsible in terms of being the Creator and not in terms of his intentional *doings*.”¹⁰

Continuing to develop this point, Hall calls this kind of responsibility status responsibility, and he gives the following example of it in a human context.

Suppose there is a little child who is hit by a car and killed, and suppose this was truly an accident. That is, suppose that the child was knocked into the road by a gust of wind, and the man that was driving was sober, the car was not speeding, no laws were being broken, etc. If this was ruled accidental then no crime was committed. The parents of the child may say that the driver was not at fault, that there was nothing that he could have done.¹¹

Here Hall thinks that the driver of the car is status responsible for killing the child but since he did not intent to kill the child nor was he in any way acting negligently, he is not blameworthy for his action.

Now Hall wants to conclude that God, like the driver, is status responsible for the natural evil in the world but not morally blameworthy. Yet what if the driver in Hall’s example knew that the wind was going to blow the child into road and could

¹⁰ See “Responsibility and Intention: Reflections on the Problem of God’s Will and Human Suffering,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, Vol. VI, No. 2, (summer, 1979) 142–1415. Ron has informed me that this article is still compatible with his current view.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.150.

have slowed down to prevent the accident? Then, of course, we would have found the driver morally blameworthy for failing to do so.

Yet, at this point, Hall no longer wants to press forward with his analogy. Even granting that God has the relevant knowledge of naturally evil consequences, Hall does not want to draw the analogous conclusion that God would be morally blameworthy for failing to prevent those consequences, and hence, not really the God of traditional theism after all. But how does Hall hope to escape this implication of his own analogy?

In this Afterthoughts, Hall suggests that the only way God could have chosen to prevent significant and horrendous natural evils from being inflicting on us is if he had chosen to create a different world. But isn't what we are considering here not whether God should have created a world where Vulcans replaced humans, but whether God should be intervening in our human world, as, according to the Abrahamic religions, he is said to have done time and time again in the past, but now could be doing on a regular basis that favors the well-being of the creatures he supposedly created?

Here the natural response, echoed in Hall's comments, is how do we know that God's acting to prevent significant and especially horrendous natural (and moral) evil consequences would be morally better? Well, I have argued in my book that, assuming that there is a God, his failure to prevent significant and horrendous evils, as a last resort, in accord with my natural and moral evil prevention requirements cannot be justified as either preventing a greater evil or achieving a greater good, and thus cannot be morally justified. As far as I can tell, Hall has not said anything yet to directly challenge that argument of my book. Maybe a challenge will be coming soon.

On Michael Tooley's Afterthoughts

Michael Tooley is against allowing aesthetic considerations to be weighed against the well-being of living things. However, I think I would prefer to integrate aesthetic considerations into an account of the well-being of living things, i.e., what is aesthetically good for those who can have such a good, and then weigh these aesthetic goods against other kinds of goods all from a moral perspective that is grounded in a nonquestion-begging conception of rationality. For some indication of how this account might go, see my *From Rationality to Equality*.¹²

Tooley also thinks that I have allowed God too much latitude in the choice of worlds he would be morally free to create. He presents the following ethical problem involving human reproduction:

Margret can either become pregnant now, and have a child with a life worth living, albeit one with significant handicaps, or she can wait three months to become pregnant, and have a perfectly normal child.

¹² See my *From Rationality to Equality* (Oxford, 2014).

Since Tooley rightly judges that we would favor the second option, he thinks that God should do something analogous when deciding whom to create. But I think God's situation is significantly different from ours. This is because God has countless options for eliminating and compensating for a child's handicaps after the child is born. So, if God did benefit a child in such ways after the child was born, then there would be no moral requirement to pass over bringing that child into existence in favor of another child with a more normal endowment.

As it turns out, I do agree with Tooley that "a complete account of what entities have intrinsic moral status cannot be formulated in terms of living things—in terms of biological organisms." That is why I proposed the criterion of having a good of one's own. Presumably, angels, devils, and disembodied human souls, if there are any, would have a good of their own. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, in the future, it may be possible to make machines that also have a good of their own, after which we would have to recognize them as having moral status.¹³

In my earlier response, I pointed to one problem with constructing an argument against the existence of God based simply on the natural evil in the world, namely, that there may be connections between moral good and evil and natural good and evil that require that both be taken into account. For example, I suggested that permitting some natural evil to be inflicted on say Rowe's fawn may provide a soul-making opportunity for humans to achieve some moral good, and one would need to show that the natural evils that one was claiming God should have been preventing were not useful for this purpose. My idea was that we ourselves may benefit nonhuman sentient beings and at the same time benefit ourselves through that soul-making activity. Now Tooley thinks that those who benefit from such soul-making should be the ones who also suffer. While I think that this is sometimes appropriate, I don't see a need to morally require that all those who prevent others from suffering significant and especially horrendous natural evil consequences by engaging in soul-making should themselves have to have suffered from significant and especially horrendous evil consequences.

In his final response, Tooley says,

...one needs to understand the part that evidential arguments from evil play in support of atheism.... any advocate of an evidential argument from evil has much more work to do: he or she must address such counterarguments, and show that they are unsound. This I do, albeit briefly, in my very short book, *The Problem of Evil*, where, first, I point out that almost all purely philosophical pro-theistic arguments provide no support for the existence of a morally good deity, and then, secondly, where I also indicate why arguments from miracles and religious experiences are unsound. The crucial point, then, is that contrary to what Sterba believes I am proposing, this part of the case for atheism, unlike the evidential argument from evil itself, is too complex to be carried out by appealing directly to the fundamental equiprobability principle."

¹³ See my *The Triumph of Practice of Theory in Ethics* (Oxford, 2005) p.79.

Now Tooley does not address here my claim “that allowing theists to include as a possible reason for the permission of evil in the world its positive connection to our entering the heavenly afterlife of friendship with God would seemingly undercut the atheist’s use of an equiprobability assumption to defeat the idea of an all-good all-powerful God.” He does say that “almost all purely philosophical pro-theistic arguments provide no support for the existence of a morally *good* deity.” But that would make them simply irrelevant to an evidential argument from evil, nothing that proponents of the argument need argue against. By contrast, arguments from miracles and religious experiences do seem to me to be relevant to any argument from evil. Such arguments, if allowed as evidence, might be seen to support the idea that God had good reasons for permitting evils in the world. In this respect, they are like the heavenly afterlife assumption that I am willing to allow theists for the sake of argument.

The difference, as I see it, is simply that theists do not generally insist on including such “evidence” in any philosophical argument for an all-good, all-powerful God. They tend to recognize that this evidence is disputable. Moreover, at they see it, such evidence is not really needed to support traditional theism. But the situation is different for the possibility of a heavenly afterlife of friendship with God. Here theists do think they need this assumption if they are going to have a fighting chance of turning back the argument from evil. Moreover, as I argued in my response, atheists should be willing, for the sake of argument, to grant theists this assumption because it really does not preclude their being successful in their argument against traditional theism.

So, it looks like the main difference between Tooley and myself here is one of strategy. Tooley wants to begin by arguing against a heavenly afterlife, miracles, and religious experiences before moving on to provide an argument from evil. I prefer to grant theists their assumption of a heavenly afterlife for the sake of argument and accept their willingness not to appeal to miracles and religious experiences when trying to defeat the argument from evil that I am presenting. Happily, I don’t think this difference goes very deep.

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