



## Is a good god logically possible? James P. Sterba, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, XI and 209 pp, \$29.99 (paper)

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Received: 15 December 2019 / Accepted: 15 February 2020  
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Sterba's *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* is concerned with the question of whether an all-good and all-powerful God is logically possible, given the degree and amount of actual evil (1). The question is familiar, though Sterba's formulation is peculiar. It seems certain that God's existence is logically possible no matter how much evil there is. All that's required for logical possibility is that God's existence is not ruled out by some logical theorem. And that seems true on any logic you might choose. The good news is that the main aims of the book are unaffected by the assumption that it is the absolute possibility of God that we are concerned with.

It is a central aim of the book to show that Plantinga's free will defense—and the free will approach to theodicy generally—fails to provide reasons why an all-good, all-powerful God *might* permit the degree and amount of evil that we actually find. Concerning Plantinga's well-known response to the logical problem of evil Sterba writes,

... [a]ccepting Plantinga's defense, both theists and atheists have been willing to grant that it may be logically impossible for God to actually create a world with free agents, like ourselves, that does not also have at least some moral evil in it (2).

It's important that, according to Plantinga, there are many worlds in which God creates libertarian free agents that never go wrong. Morally perfect worlds are necessarily possible, though there are worlds in which those morally perfect worlds are *infeasible*. So, it is necessarily true that, possibly, God actualizes a morally perfect world, but not necessarily true that, feasibly, God does so. It is correct to say that Plantinga aimed to show that there is a world—not necessarily the actual world—in which God has good reasons to create morally imperfect, significantly free agents. These reasons arise from the overall moral value of doing so. The value in significant freedom is in enabling moral agents to freely choose moral lives and, even more importantly, to freely avoid immoral lives. On

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virtually any moral view, the duties of justice—negative duties often summed up in the duty not to harm others—are (far) more stringent than the duties of beneficence—positive duties summed up in the duty to benefit others. The moral value in significant freedom is derived largely in the fulfillment of negative duties.

But Sterba takes significant freedom to be the freedoms that would be protected by a just state. He has in mind, presumably, the extensive set of basic rights and liberties typically protected in liberal democracies. Significant freedom, on Sterba's account, includes, among other political freedoms, a freedom to sufficient goods to secure an acceptable standard of living. In a sufficiently just society everyone would enjoy a certain level of welfare (17–18).

There are two immediate concerns for Sterba's account of significant freedom. First, we seem to have a conflation of political freedoms with metaphysical freedom. The free will defense is concerned with the latter and not the former. There are no logical relations between these two sorts of freedoms. To be significantly free is have a sort metaphysically freedom—libertarian freedom—of choice in moral situations. We can have significant freedom and possess no political freedoms at all. Further we can possess every political freedom and totally lack metaphysical freedom. Second, it is part of Sterba's project to bring moral theory to bear on the problem of evil. Sterba sees the absence of moral theorizing as a more or less embarrassing lacuna in the discussion. But Sterba's moral assumptions raise some concerns for his project. Why conceive of freedoms as morally protected rights to certain goods and opportunities? Why believe that we have a right to a certain level of welfare? Why take the doctrine of double effect or the Pauline principle seriously? There are numerous competing theories of justice on which these principles are simply rejected. This is the main reason why discussion of the problem of evil has largely avoided moral commitments other than to uncontroversial moral theses: e.g., pointless suffering is bad, consequences do matter, we do have some duties of beneficence, and we do have duties of justice.

Sterba sums up the failure of Plantinga's free will defense to provide sufficient reasons for permitting actual moral evil.

Because Plantinga failed to see that God ... can promote more significant freedom over time by sometimes interfering with our free actions, he failed to see that the problem of the compatibility of God and the degree and amount of moral evil that actually exists in the world is not settled by just noting God's act of creation and placing us in an initial situation where we are free. We have to further take into account the extent to which God has promoted freedom by restricting the far less significant freedom of some of us in order to secure the far more significant freedom of others (27).

It would not be very surprising if the Plantingan free will defense (FWD) failed to provide reasons for permitting all actual evil. That was surely not the aim of the FWD, which was primarily directed against John Mackie's strong atheological conclusions. But Plantinga's account can offer reasons for God's non-interference with those terrible evils that Sterba describes.

Sterba's general line of reasoning here recurs several times throughout the book, so it might be worth considering it closely. How might God initiate a policy of preventing evils of certain sorts? Presumably, God would create natural laws that preclude certain kinds of actions and events, rather than meticulously intervening to prevent each evil action. But a divine policy of preventing moral agents from committing the worst sorts of evils would actually diminish the overall moral value of the world. On very widely shared views on the stringency of negative duties, most of the moral value of the world is derived from what most moral agents freely *refrain from doing*. It derives from moral agents constraining their behavior within the limits of justice. Most of us, most of the time, freely refrain from doing what would harm—even severely harm—others. Most of us, most of the time, fulfill our most stringent duties and that is a great source of moral value in the world. A divine policy of precluding certain kinds of evils would of course prevent some serious harms, since moral agents would be rendered unable to perform them. (Divine policies differ from just state policies in precisely this respect. The policies of a just state cannot render us *all* unable to perform seriously wrong actions, but divine policies do exactly that. Just states should initiate policies to prevent such evils, since, unlike divine policies, doing so would not seriously diminish the moral value of the world.) But it would thereby also devalue the otherwise most morally significant actions of most moral agents. What gives the fulfillment of the duties of justice their great significance is the fact that moral agents are able to go very, very wrong, but freely choose not to do so. That is indeed what the vast majority of moral agents are doing most of the time.

Nevertheless Sterba concludes that the Plantingan defense fails and proposes a soul-making theodicy.

Could it be that God's permitting all the evil in our world is justified by the opportunity for soul-making it provides? Not if having the opportunity for significant soul-making in our world is dependent on having significant freedom such that a net loss in significant freedom in our world would result in a net loss of the opportunity for significant soul-making as well. Unfortunately, this does seem to be the case (35).

The Irenaean soul-making theodicy is of course most closely associated with John Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*. On Sterba's view, permitting the evil we find in the actual world reduces significant freedom in the world and thereby reduces the opportunities for 'significant soul-making'. The criticism is not easy to follow, since it is precisely those people who suffer evils that have the greatest opportunity for soul-making. Even if we construe significant freedom as political freedom, as Sterba seems to do, it remains true that suffering the loss of political freedoms occasions the opportunity for soul-making. It does not diminish that opportunity. In the background to soul-making theodicies is the Irenaean view that humans are in a process of development from morally immature beings to morally perfected ones. The evil and suffering in the world—the vale of soul-making—provide the opportunities for moral development into the likeness of God. Evil and suffering provides the occasion for exercising and cultivating the

virtues of forgiveness, understanding, and acceptance. It provides the opportunity for our spiritual development in accepting the will of God over our own, acquiescing in and abandoning to divine providence. Soul-making occurs in our response to evils, including the evils Sterba describes as losses in freedom. These are the best moral responses we can produce in the face of injustice.

The famous Pauline principle (Romans 3:8) also comes in for discussion in relation to the problem of evil. Permitting evil for the sake of greater goods seems to violate the principle according to which we may never do evil that good may come of it. The Pauline principle is no doubt desperately in need of refinement. Does the principle prohibit me from bringing about an evil that is a logical consequence of producing a good? Does the principle prohibit me from bringing about an evil that is a conceptual consequence of producing a good? It's difficult to tell. It seems no violation of the principle, for instance, that God allows moral agents to freely bring about evils that he does not intend for them to bring about. This seems to be what is occurring in the soul-making case. Sterba believes that God cannot foresee events that he does not intend, but it is difficult to see why (51). When it comes to the exercise of libertarian free will, God can prevent certain kinds of evil, but at a serious cost in value (as noted above). It is really no different from standing at the switch in the trolley cases. We can prevent the evil of one death, but at a large moral cost. In each case, permitting the evil involves no obvious violation of the Pauline principle.

Sterba considers whether the approach to the problem of evil offered by skeptical theism might provide us with a reason to believe that, for all we know, there are goods that justify the evils that God permits. Sterba argues that God could not permit evils to be inflicted unless consent had been given.

... there is still the need to justify to the victims what would have to be God's permission of the infliction on them of at least the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of the actions of wrongdoers. This arises from the very nature of morality which only justifies impositions that are reasonably acceptable to all those affected (73).

Sterba argues again from our obligations to God's obligations. The inference is not in general a good one. One good example is that God is not under the same obligations to prevent evil that we are. Let's agree, as Sterba argues, that there are almost certainly instances of pointless evil, and let's agree that we are under an obligation to prevent pointless evil. Now, suppose God, too, were under an obligation to relieve pointless suffering. Since God exists in every possible world, we could quickly derive the conclusion that God has an obligation to *do the impossible*. God is under an obligation to prevent all pointless evil and suffering in every world in which God exists, but it is not possible to prevent all pointless evil in every world. Since pointless evil is possible, it is necessarily possible. Necessarily, pointless evil exists in some possible world or other. Not even an omnipotent being could eliminate pointless evil—that is, *any* pointless evil at all—from metaphysical space. But then, unlike human beings, God cannot be under an obligation to prevent all pointless evil. We cannot in general argue from human obligations to divine obligations, and this presents an important obstacle to Sterba's project of applying specific moral principles to the problem of evil.

Sterba goes on to reject the Thomistic possibility that God isn't a moral agent and consider the possibility that God redeems the totality of actual evil. Sterba asserts that the redemptive picture is mistaken since, on the traditional conception, God cannot be wronged. But it is again hard to see why. If an offense is serious enough, it can certainly constitute a harm, and there is no reason why the traditional God could not be seriously offended. We might have expected an argument from God's impassibility, but even that wouldn't show that God cannot be offended. You can be offended, and even harmed, without suffering at all.

The closing chapter concerns natural evil, and the focus is almost entirely on the evolutionary problem of evil. Sterba considers two attempts to manage the evolutionary problem—one from Murray and the other from Dougherty—and finds them seriously wanting. It is crucial to any solution to the problem of natural evil that such evil is necessarily possible. God simply could not be under an obligation to prevent it all in worlds where he coexists with it. God cannot make those evils impossible.

Sterba does offer a sustained argument against many contemporary theodicies, especially those that appeal to the value of soul-making and free will. And the argumentation is certainly innovative, bringing to bear conclusions from contemporary ethical and political theory. As with any interesting philosophical work, Sterba's approach invites serious disagreement, but it is a valuable contribution to the literature on the problem of evil.

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