

A Christian Theodicy¹

Richard Swinburne

I. THE GOOD THINGS MADE POSSIBLE BY GOD PERMITTING EVILS

I believe that in the modern world, very many people do not believe that there is a God (of the kind assumed in Christian theology), because they believe that God would not permit humans and animals to suffer and do wrong nearly as much as they do; and I believe that very many religious believers have only a very tentative belief because they suspect that God would not permit that. I shall call all events that are intrinsically bad, including suffering of all kinds and wrongdoing of all kinds, “evils”; and hence the name for the problem which concerns us is “the problem of evil.” Christians, like Muslims and Jews, believe God to be morally perfectly good and also omnipotent (that is, able to do anything logically possible, anything whose doing does not entail a contradiction). To provide an account of why such a God might be expected to permit the world’s actual evils to occur is to provide a theodicy. A theodicy requires a demonstration that it is not logically possible for an omnipotent being to provide some very good things without causing or permitting others to cause the world’s actual evils or evils equally bad, and that God has the right to cause or permit these evils in order to provide those goods, and that he does provide the goods. In this lecture, I will articulate my theodicy. It is a Christian theodicy, because it makes assumptions that three Christian doctrines and also certain moral intuitions are true. The moral intuitions are ones held by most Christians, shared with many others, and can be justified by independent reasons which there is no time to discuss in this paper. Also, for reasons of space, I shall discuss only evils suffered by humans, and not ones suffered by animals.

1. The material of this paper will be used as part of my contribution to a “debate book” jointly authored by myself and James Sterba, *Could a Good God Permit So Much Suffering?*, which will be published by Oxford University Press, probably in 2024.

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© ⓘ FORUM PHILOSOPHICUM 27 (2022) no. 1, 9–25
ISSN 1426-1898 E-ISSN 2353-7043

SUBM. 30 October 2022 Acc. 3 April 2023
DOI:10.35765/forphil.2023.2801.01

So let us begin by asking what sort of a life a perfectly good God would seek to provide for creatures such as humans, rational embodied beings who have moral beliefs and some freedom to choose whether or not to do what they believe to be morally good. It is good to have pleasurable sensations and good health, to eat well and live in a comfortable house in a good environment; and to be able to enjoy together with others some of the innumerable harmless pleasures which so many humans enjoy, such as singing, dancing, running, playing football or chess, and watching TV; and also learning important truths about the world. God could provide all this for us without permitting any evil to occur. But a good life contains more and greater goods; and these greater goods cannot be had without the possibility unprevented-by-God of evils, both ones caused intentionally or by negligence by humans (instances of which are called “moral evils”) and suffering caused by the operation of laws of nature (instances of which are called “natural evils”).

It is very important for our well-being that many of the good things necessary for it, such as those listed above, are provided for us by others, including parents who are responsible for us during the early part of our lives and freely choose to exercise that responsibility in a loving way. And it is equally important for us that as adults we have others, including a spouse and children, for whom we are responsible during a significant part of their lives, and freely choose to exercise that responsibility in a loving way. But others can only be truly responsible for us, and we can only be truly responsible for others, if we and they have sometimes the free choice of whether to benefit or harm them or us in significant ways. If humans were programmed so as only to benefit and not to harm each other, our choices of how to show love would not be nearly so valuable; we and our children want a care which comes, not by the chance operation of some impersonal force or some unknown manipulator which causes them and us to act, but by their and our free choice. For this purpose we need “libertarian free will.” That is freedom to choose, independently of all the causes influencing us to make one choice rather than the other. I read the normal Christian view that we have free will as the view that we have free will of this kind: and that we have free will of this kind is my first Christian assumption.² Clearly it is not logically possible for God to give us free choices and at the same time to cause us to make the good choice. In order to exercise such free will, we

2. See my *Mind, Brain, and Free Will* (2013, chapter 7) for arguments in defence of the view that it is most improbable that science will ever be able to show that we do or do not have libertarian free will.

also need the natural evil of having competing desires to do bad actions. This is because of the nature of what it is to be a good action: that it is logically necessary that if we believe some action to be good, we will have some inclination to do it if we are in circumstances where it is possible for us to do it.³ So it is logically necessary that in order to have a free choice between good and bad, we need also bad desires which influence us in the other direction, and then we can choose between good and bad. So although most of us have a natural love for our children, we also sometimes have competing desires which we are tempted to pursue at the expense of our children. We show our love in these circumstances by freely choosing to resist the competing desires. Most humans become parents; and so, however poor and ill educated they are, they have awesome choices between taking considerable trouble to make their children happy and showing them how to live, and of neglecting to do so. It is a great good for all of us that we can freely choose to show love when it is difficult but needed, and a further great good if in fact we choose to do so. And it is a yet further great good if we have opportunities, as most of us do, freely to influence many humans other than our children in good or bad ways.

If we use all these opportunities to make the good choices, and thereby improve the world, we become an ultimate source of significant good in the world. Under God our Creator, we are “mini-creators.” If God gives us these choices, he thereby permits the possibility of us causing much moral evil; and so, given the large number of humans and the large number of free choices they make, it is very probable that there will be much moral evil in the world. It is not logically possible for God to give us great responsibilities for our own lives and the lives of others without giving us the libertarian free will to choose between good and evil and the bad desires needed for the exercise of that choice, and so the uncaused-by-God possibility that we will misuse our freedom and cause much evil. But the intuition that the worth of a human life depends more on what we do for others than on what happens

3. Throughout this paper, in using evaluative words such as “good” or “ought,” I am discussing moral issues, and so moral goodness and moral obligation. I am here assuming the thesis of moral internalism, that there is this internal tie between having a moral belief and having at least some inclination to act on it. If someone claims to believe that it would be “morally good” if they did a certain action, or—more strongly—that they “morally ought” to do a certain action, and also has not the slightest inclination to do that action, one can only suppose that they are lying about their beliefs, or that they are using the words “good” or “ought” or “moral” in an “inverted comma” sense, meaning by “good” or “ought” or “moral” “what other people call ‘good’” or “what other people call ‘ought’” or “what other people call ‘moral.’” For an analysis of the debate between moral internalism and its rival theory, moral externalism, see, for example, (Smith 1994).

to us is a Christian moral intuition encapsulated in the words of Christ, as quoted by St Paul (Acts 20:13): "it is more blessed to give than to receive."

It is good that most of us do not too often have very many desires deliberately to hurt other humans—humans would be nasty people, if we did. Hence, we can only have the opportunity to make important moral choices, and so deep responsibility for others (and ourselves), if the normal alternative to doing good to others is negligence—doing nothing, when doing nothing involves permitting others to suffer as a result of natural processes. Hence the need for the natural evils of suffering caused by disease, accident, and old age, to which humans can react freely in ways good or bad. It is especially good for us that sometimes we should be able freely to choose to help those who are seriously ill or deprived, for providing help at their time of greatest need is an act of deep significance.

God provides choices for humans which do not merely affect the immediate well-being of ourselves and others, but also have longer term and greater ranges of influence—hence the great good of greater responsibilities for which the possibility of the world's actual evils (or evils equally bad) is logically necessary. As well as being able to make a difference to other humans, it is a further enormous good for us that by doing so we form our own character, determine what sort of person we are to be. Our character is a matter of the kinds of desires and beliefs, and their strengths, which we have—whether we are naturally generous, kind, considerate, friendly; whether we are well-informed about the needs of others and so about which actions of ours would have what kind of influence on them; and whether we care about the nature of reality, including about the existence of God. Or whether we are naturally selfish, angry, envious and callous, and without adequate understanding of the needs of other humans and without any ambition to understand reality. Humans are so made that making choices on each occasion to do a good action of some kind strengthens our desire to do a similar good action in the future; and making choices to do a bad action of some kind strengthens our desire to do a similar bad action in the future. We can thus gradually change our desires, so that we naturally desire to help others, and are not merely driven to do so by a nagging conscience. In order that we should have the choice of forming a strong, very good character, we need to have opportunities (occasionally) to do actions which involve resisting great temptations (strong bad desires), because thereby we manifest our total commitment to the good and put us on the way to being by nature very good people. Or, alas, by repressing the nagging conscience, we may allow ourselves to become very bad people; and thus God permits us to reject his ideal for us.

It is because our choices affect our character that those who suffer from the bad actions of others, or from natural processes, themselves have significant opportunities for crucial choices as to whether to bear their suffering with patience and cheerfulness or allow themselves to become bitter about it. It is good for us that we should form our characters over a considerable period of time by choosing whether to investigate what makes for moral goodness or not bother to do so, combined with many opportunities to make choices between what we discover to be good and bad actions. This ensures that our choice of a good character was one thoroughly thought out and worked through. And it is manifestly a good for us if we cannot come to have a bad character by a quick spontaneous action, but only by allowing ourselves to make many bad choices over a considerable time, despite our consciences continually prodding us to do the opposite.

It is good, too, that among the choices available to humans should be the choice not merely of whether or not to help others to cope with natural evils such as diseases which afflict them personally, but also of whether or not to try to reduce the number of such natural evils in the future, and so prevent future diseases. But to have this choice, we need to know what causes these evils. The normal way in which we (and in today's world that often means the scientists among us, supported by money from the rest of us) try to discover such things is the inductive way. That is, we seek to discover the natural processes (bacteria, viruses, etc.) which bring about diseases, and then construct and further test theories of the mechanisms involved. But scientists can only do that if there are regular processes producing the diseases, and they can only learn what these are by studying many populations and studying under which circumstances some disease is transmitted and under which circumstances it is not transmitted. So for the great good of having this choice of investigating (or, alternatively, not bothering to investigate), there is required the necessary evil of the actual disease. God could have caused us all to be born with the knowledge of how to cure diseases, but he has given us the great gift of rationality, and it is very good that we should be able to exercise it (or choose not to bother to exercise it) by working this out for ourselves. But if humans are to have the great opportunity of devoting their lives to scientific research to cure actual evils such as disease, there have to be humans suffering from disease; and hence an additional good, provided by the natural evil of the suffering.

Another reason why it is good that the human race should sometimes be in an initial situation of considerable ignorance about the causes and effects of our actions, is that we have to make our moral decisions on the basis of how probable it is that our actions will have various outcomes—how

probable it is that you will get cancer if you continue to smoke (when you would not otherwise get cancer), or that someone will starve if you do not give money to some charity (when they would not starve otherwise). These decisions under uncertainty are not merely the normal moral decisions; they are also the hard ones. Since probabilities are so hard to assess, it is all too easy to persuade ourselves that it is worth taking the chance that no harm will result from the less demanding decision (the decision which we have a strong desire to make). And even if we face up to a correct assessment of the probabilities, true dedication to the good is shown by performing the act which, although it is probably the best action, may have no good consequences at all. These normal situations provide us with opportunities to take the more demanding decision, and so to make ourselves better people.

It is not only freely chosen morally good intentional actions of various kinds involving reactions to natural evils which constitute a good for their agents; morally good actions performed involuntarily also do so, although these constitute a much lesser good. If prisoners were compelled to clean sewers, they would surely be right to regard that as a good for them in comparison with being useless, because they would be contributing to the well-being of the community. There is also a further benefit for the sufferer, which lessens the evil of their suffering, if their suffering provides the opportunity for others to do morally good actions additional to helping the sufferer. "Being of use to others" by what we suffer involuntarily is often a significant benefit for the person who is of use. Consider someone badly injured in an accident, where the accident causes many people freely to choose to campaign with eventual success for the institution of some reform which prevents the occurrence of similar accidents in the future—for example, someone injured in a rail crash which leads to the installation of a new system of railway signalling which prevents similar accidents in the future. The victim and their relatives often comment in such a situation that at any rate he or she did not suffer in vain. Although they still rightly regard the suffering as on balance an evil, they would have regarded it as a greater misfortune for the victim (quite apart from the consequences for others) if his or her suffering served no useful purpose.

It follows from one's being-of-use to someone else, either by what one does (voluntarily or involuntarily) or by what happens to one, that at least two humans are benefited thereby. That is, whenever God permits some natural evil to occur to B, and in particular causes B to suffer in order to provide some good for A (for example, the free choice of how to react to this suffering), B is benefited as well—B's life is not wasted, she is of use (by enduring the evil). She is of use to A, but she is also of use to God;

she plays a role in God's plan for A. And to be of use to the good source of being in the redemption of His creation is an enormous good. That it is a good for the sufferer if their suffering is a means of good to others is a Christian moral intuition. The apostles flogged on the orders of the Jewish Sanhedrin "rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name [of Jesus]" (Acts 5:47); and many subsequent martyrs and confessors have rejoiced for the same reason of the privilege of paying such honour to God.

I have now described many good features of our lives which make them good to live, but which of logical necessity involve the probability unprevented-by-God of many moral evils and the actual occurrence of many natural evils. There can only be moral goods, i.e. agents freely choosing to do the good rather than the bad, if there is this probability of many moral evils. The harder it is to make the good choice, the greater the value of the good choice if it is made—the child of dishonest parents who forces himself not to lie to save himself from being convicted of theft has performed an act of greater moral value than the child of honest parents who does not have to try so hard to tell the truth in similar circumstances. Every natural evil is such that the sufferer has the free choice of whether to react to it well or badly (unless the sufferer is too young or mentally disabled to be able to make that choice—in which case those who care or ought to be caring for him or her have that choice.) All free choices in the face of moral or natural evil are character-forming. It is also the case that most of these evils provide some good for someone else as well as the sufferer, as when someone's suffering provides an opportunity for others to choose freely to react to it in right ways, and to develop medical treatments to avoid it in future. These evils provide the framework for the exercise of human love for each other, when it is most needed and most valued.

II. GOD'S RIGHT TO PERMIT THE EVILS

What I claim to have shown so far is that it is logically necessary that many of the kinds of great good which humans actually have require much actual evil, or the unprevented-by-God possibility of such evil. But what gives God the right to cause us to suffer even for our own benefit, let alone for the benefit of others? The two great human benefactors of each of us are our parents (if they are nurturing as well as biological parents) and the state (if it provides us with security and a reasonably just legal system). Parents have a major role in causing our existence, nourishing and caring for us and helping us to grow into adulthood. The state ensures that parents can fulfil that role and all of us can live securely by preventing other citizens

and other states from harming us. Their role as benefactors, beginning from a time long before we would have been able to choose whether or not to accept these benefits, gives the state and our parents limited rights to impose suffering on us, their citizens and children, which are for our own benefit. States have the right to prevent people from committing suicide, and to incarcerate mentally disturbed people in secure accommodation, for the benefit of these people. Parents have the right to force children to undergo surgical operations and to attend school, even if they find these experiences very unpleasant, for the benefit of these children. But while the state and parents are our principal human benefactors, God is a far greater benefactor—because he causes the existence of each of us; parents can at most cause only the existence of *a* child, but they cannot determine who that child will be. And all the powers which the state and parents have are given to them, and sustained in them, by God. And because God is so much greater a benefactor than are parents or the state, it follows that he must have a right to cause us far greater suffering for our own greater benefit.

But what gives God the right to impose suffering on some of us for the benefit of others? The status of parents and the state as our great human benefactors also gives them a limited right to impose suffering on children and citizens for the benefit of others. For example, parents have the right to require a child to attend a neighbourhood school, which the child would not enjoy, rather than a more distant school which she would enjoy—for the benefit of the neighbourhood community; and the state has the right to impose taxes on the rich for the benefit of the poor. And to take a more extreme example, when the state is attacked by a tyrannous aggressor, it has the right to conscript young adults into the army and send them to the front line where they are in severe danger of being seriously wounded or killed. The state does not do this for the benefit of those conscripted (who, unless conscripted, could normally easily leave the country), but for the benefit of other citizens who, as a result of the conscription of the young adults, may not suffer at all. So again, since God is so much greater a benefactor than are our parents and the state, God must have a right to impose far greater suffering on some of us for the greater benefit of others. It follows that there are plenty of exceptions to Kant's great principle that you should "act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but at the same time as an end" (Kant, *Groundwork of the metaphysic of morals*, 429).

There are however, I suggest, two crucial restrictions on the moral rights of benefactors to impose suffering, both of which need to be satisfied before

benefactors are justified in imposing suffering. The first restriction is that the good made possible by imposing suffering on someone, whether it is a good for the sufferer or for someone else, is itself a comparable good; and it is not possible for that good to be achieved without that suffering. What I mean by a “comparable good” is—loosely—an outcome which the benefactor can reasonably predict will be at least as good as the evil is bad.⁴ Hence no parent is justified in forcing a child to undergo a serious operation, unless the parent can reasonably predict that the operation will be successful, and that without the operation the child will suffer from some serious evil. (And of course the parent cannot make a reasonable prediction about this without taking the advice of a surgeon.) The possibility in this case is the “practical possibility” of what available doctors are able to do. A state ought only to impose on conscripts the exposure to being wounded or killed if the benefit to other citizens (for example, that they will not be subject to a tyrannous dictatorship) is a comparable good, and if it is not practically possible for politicians and others to secure the benefit in a way involving less suffering. Hence, one condition for a war being a just war is that there is a reasonable prospect of it being successful. It follows that since God, being omnipotent, is able to do anything logically possible, he is only justified in imposing suffering on someone if it is not logically possible to bring about some comparable good in a way involving less suffering. Hence, given my claims in the earlier part of this paper that permitting various

4. More precisely, I mean by an agent’s action of causing or helping to cause an evil making possible “a comparable good” that the expected utility of their action is not negative. The expected utility of an action which may cause either an evil state or a good state is (the probability that the action will be one causing the good state multiplied by the goodness of the good state) minus (the probability that action will be one causing the evil state multiplied by the badness of the evil state). This definition assumes that we can indicate in a very rough way how good is the good state relative to how bad is the evil state by means of arbitrary numbers; and so, for example, if the good state is twice as good as the evil state is bad, we can indicate that by measuring the goodness of the good state as “2,” and the badness of the evil state as “1.” The more probable it is (the nearer to 1 is the probability) that the good state will occur, the more the badness of the bad state may exceed the goodness of the good state, while the expected value remains non-negative. So when God permits a free agent to cause either a good state or a bad state, and the strength of their desires for each state measures the probability that they will cause that state, the stronger the desires influencing the agent to cause the good state, and the weaker the desires influencing them to cause the bad state, the more the badness of the bad state can exceed the goodness of the good state, while the expected value remains non-negative. So if God brings about a life in which this condition is satisfied, he brings about a “comparably good” life. The loose description in the text of an action causing or helping to cause an evil which makes possible a “comparable good” as causing or helping to cause “an outcome which the agent can reasonably predict would be at least as good as the evil is bad” should be regarded as shorthand for the above more precise definition.

kinds of suffering is logically necessary for various kinds of good, it follows that God would only be justified in causing or permitting them if the goods made possible by any evil form together a comparable good, which could not be brought about in any less evil way (that is, in a way involving less suffering). I stress “together.” That is, although the evil of someone suffering from cancer makes possible the good of a certain sort of scientific enquiry, I am not claiming that that on its own is a comparable good; I am claiming only that it, together with all other goods made possible by that suffering, and in particular the choices made available to the sufferer as to how to cope with it, forms a comparable good. If the reader accepts the points which I have made in the earlier part of the paper about the great value of these goods, they will accept that in bringing them about God does not violate this first restriction on his right to do so.

The second restriction is that if a benefactor imposes evil on some person which has the consequence that that person’s life is no longer on balance a good life, he must guarantee to provide for that person a life which is a “comparably” good life, that is one of which he can reasonably predict that there will be at least as much good as bad. Maybe, normally, immediately after the benefactor imposes the evil, the sufferer’s life is still one in which there has been more good than bad. But the benefactor may need to provide the good as a subsequent compensation for the bad. And if he can guarantee to do this, i.e. guarantee that he can reasonably predict that the sufferer’s life will be good rather than bad, he is justified in imposing the evil. We can see this from the following example. Suppose that in a war zone where there are no anaesthetics, a mother gives birth to twin babies, one of whom will die unless he receives a bone marrow transplant from the other one. For this purpose the healthy baby would need to undergo a painful operation, the consequence of which, if that was all the life that the healthy baby would ever have, would be that he would have had a life not worth living. But—I suggest—good parents could agree to the operation, if they can guarantee that they will provide a comparably good life, in the sense of one which they can reasonably predict would be a good life overall for that baby. It follows that if God imposes suffering on some human, whether for their own benefit or that of someone else, God must provide for that human a comparable life. An omnipotent God could of course guarantee with certainty that he would provide such a life, if he so chose; and being perfectly good, he would so choose. Nevertheless there do seem to be some earthly lives of some humans about which we are inclined to say that it would have been better for those humans if they had never lived, since the later parts of those earthly lives were not good enough to

compensate for any earlier sufferings. But an omnipotent God is able to provide for any such human a life after death in which there is so much good that overall that human's life (before and after death) is a good one. This is because the amount of evil suffered by anyone on Earth is of a short finite length and of a kind that others suffer, even if it is of a greater degree than those others suffer. That there is life after death for all of us is my second Christian doctrinal assumption: it is not a Christian doctrine that only those who have done good on Earth (or perhaps been baptised) will have a good life after death. See for example Jesus's parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 19:31), where the kind of life Lazarus has after death is a compensation for his miserable life on earth, without the parable suggesting that Lazarus was in any way a particularly good person.

III. HORRENDOUS EVILS

However, many readers may feel that no creator responsible for the world's evils would satisfy this second restriction in the case of many evils, often called "horrendous evils," which are so bad that a good God would never be justified in permitting them to occur, however much good they made possible. An occurrence may be called a "horrendous" evil because it involves the occurrence of a similar significant evil in a large number of humans: for example, in a pandemic, or as a result of a deliberate policy of killing a whole population in a way involving much suffering. But surely, if God is justified in permitting any one individual human to suffer in a pandemic for many months in order to provide the opportunity for significant choices both to the sufferer and to their friends as to how to deal with this suffering, then God is justified in permitting many humans to suffer at the same time for reasons of the same kind. And, if God is justified in permitting the painful extermination of each of a population, for the same reason he is justified in permitting the painful extermination of the whole population. In fact, if a large number of people suffer simultaneously, that normally produces considerable compassion and help from a much wider group of humans who are not directly affected by themselves or their loved ones suffering, and serious action by states to help and prevent such pandemics and exterminations in the future. The mere number of sufferers cannot affect the cogency of a justification of God permitting some evil.

What is much more worrying is when the horrendous character of an evil consists in the great suffering of one or more individual humans, in a long and painful illness, or—the most horrendous evils of all—by cruel torture of a kind to which a considerable number of people have been subjected by sadists and by political and religious zealots in the course of

human history. I can well understand an audience, especially an audience in *this* country (i.e. Poland) in which so many humans have endured so much horrible suffering at the hands of foreigners, thinking me callous for even attempting to justify God permitting these things to happen. I hope that I am not callous. One can only react with weeping to some accounts of what humans have done to other humans; but I do urge you, if you can stand back from an immediate involvement in such events, to consider that there may be a point in God permitting these things to happen.

It is important, first, to bear in mind that there is always a limit to the amount any human can suffer. No human on Earth can suffer for more than their earthly life, i.e. for more than a hundred years or so, and that is a very short time in comparison with the time after death in which God, if he so chooses, can easily satisfy the second restriction by giving to sufferers a very long good life, the goodness of which will outweigh the badness of their suffering. Also, anyone subjected to intense torture for more than a few days is likely to die at that stage. Death is God's safety barrier.

The hard problem for theodicy is whether God can satisfy the first restriction. So what comparable goods are made possible by God ever permitting evils such as the horrendous evils of torture or of suffering from some very painful disease to be endured by anyone? I suggest that in permitting these evils, God gives to humans two kinds of final choice of what sort of being they are to be, what character they will have for ever in the future. First, God permits those who suffer these evils to freely choose to do acts which will make them saints—a choice that those who are already very good people are more likely to make than are others. I have been arguing that it is good for God to allow humans important choices between doing good and yielding to some bad desire, among other reasons because of the effects which our choices have in forming our character. Good parents want their children to live good lives, and so to have good characters, and will encourage them to do so by word and example. God is so much more the author of our existence than are our parents, so much more knowledgeable about the effects of actions than are our parents, and so much more able to compensate sufferers for any suffering we would endure, that he has an enormously greater right than do our parents to allow us to suffer, among other reasons for the sake of our moral well-being and that of others connected to us. Being perfectly good, God would rightly be very ambitious for the humans whom he has created. He would not be content with humans being moderately good people enjoying a fairly worthwhile life. He would want us to be saints. Here I mean, by "a saint," a person who has a resolute overriding desire not to yield to lesser desires to do what is morally bad,

who is totally committed to undertaking actions exhibiting great love for others and for truth, and who—because he or she has such a strong desire to execute such actions—enjoys performing such actions, above all if they are successful in making others happy and good and propagating true views. God would want us all to be saints, but he might prefer not to force sanctity on us against our will; so he might want to give us the free choice of making ourselves saints. If we make good choices very often, we shall become good people, but we may still be subject to bad desires, and there may be a limit to our willingness to resist them. For some of us, it may need a final choice of carrying out the good action under very difficult circumstances in order finally to cement our commitment to the good. “Greater love has no human than this, than to lay down their life for their friends” (John 15:13) said Jesus. He laid down his life by allowing himself to be crucified. A similar love may be shown in many different ways, both by those who are already very good people and by those who are not, by religious persons and by non-religious persons. They may show this love, for example, by allowing themselves to be tortured without revealing the whereabouts of their friends whom tyrannous authorities wish to kill, or refusing to deny a belief which seems to them to have enormous importance for the world. Or they may show this love for their friends and carers, as well as for their creator, by bearing the suffering of some terrible disease with patience and cheerfulness.

While some people may become saints without performing these marvelous acts under very painful circumstances, becoming a saint necessarily involves acquiring a readiness to carry out such acts under such circumstances. Someone may acquire this readiness by living a life totally full of service to others, and with no care for their own well-being, without enduring such suffering. But those who live such a life may be ready to serve others only if it is not too painful to do so. Thus, in order to acquire this readiness, they must actually make the choice of undertaking marvelous acts under very painful circumstances.

God would surely think those who freely make that ultimate commitment worthy of an endless life in a heaven where they could have perfect free will to choose between innumerable good alternatives, but would at last be spared having any bad desires and so any suffering necessary on Earth for them to choose what sort of person they are to be. That good life would involve understanding ever more about God and worshipping him ever better, growing in ability to understand everything else, and helping more and more other people (including people still on this earth or other earths) to be in this situation and to carry out these actions. It is a third

Christian doctrinal assumption that the Blessed in Heaven (including the martyrs and confessors to whom I referred earlier) are in this situation and perform these actions, being finally free from suffering and temptation (Swinburne 2017). Only those whose desires are solely to live in this way would be permanently happy in Heaven; others who still have nagging self-centred desires would not be eternally happy living that life.

So, I suggest, the evil of the suffering involved in horrendous natural evils and many horrendous moral evils is compensated for by the great opportunity for many through their own free choice finally to become saints and capable of enjoying Heaven, when this is taken together with the other goods made possible by the suffering listed in the first part of this essay. These goods include the resulting opportunities to help the sufferers cope with their suffering, finding out about the causes of such horrendous evils and trying hard to prevent their occurrence in the future, and also, importantly, the examples, provided by those who endure such suffering bravely, to many others to do heroic acts. To quote the famous remark of Tertulian, “The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church.”

Furthermore, even if there are moral evils for which all the good things which I have listed do not together constitute a comparable good, there is—I believe—one further good which, together with the good already listed, makes them also a comparable good. This is that by permitting the possible occurrence of horrendous moral evils God permits very bad humans either finally to refuse to cause such evils, and thereby to take a step back from their downward path, or to cause them, and thereby to become totally evil. As I am arguing, a perfectly good God would want to give us a final choice about the sort of character we will have (the sort of person we are to be), and so he would permit us totally and finally to reject goodness itself, to reject everything that he stands for. Clearly he would not permit this without allowing us many different opportunities to halt our downward slide. A good God would be desperate to save cruel dictators, vicious torturers, and totally self-indulgent cheats. But if God did not permit us finally to reject God himself, he would not give us the ultimate free choice. It is good that a rejected suitor should try many times to persuade a beloved one to accept a proposal of marriage, but it is not good that a rejected suitor should try an endless number of times to secure this result—it constitutes a failure to recognise the beloved as someone who has the right to decide their own future. Even God, I suggest, should be willing in the end to take no for an answer.

If that is correct, then God will provide for many humans on the downward path to a worse and worse character the opportunity to do very evil acts, in the hope that they will not do them. But if they have already acquired

a very bad character by doing such acts, God will provide a final occasion when such an evil human, by doing a very evil act, finally eliminates the nagging of conscience, and so loses any concept of moral goodness. Since this final act, and those immediately preceding it, would involve choosing between doing or not doing some very evil act, it would involve the possible occurrence of a horrendous evil. But, when faced with that choice, ordinary evil people may finally face up to the horror of evil, and by making at last a good choice (at least by repenting what they are doing, and so becoming committed to trying to avoid undertaking any such action in future), rather than the very evil choice (of carrying out the evil act without regret), begin to climb back from the abyss. And yet, of course, if any humans make very evil choices, others will suffer horrendously. However, those others, albeit not through their own choice, will be in a position to bear their suffering in such a way that they can choose to make themselves saints.

Many of us may not feel much sympathy for cruel dictators, vicious torturers, and totally self-indulgent cheats, and so may not think that the good of giving them a final choice of destiny is much of a good. But God, as their heavenly Father, is likely to be even more desperate to save them than we are to save our children if they take a downward path. Recall the words of Jesus: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep, and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ... When he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, 'rejoice with me for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance" (Luke 15:4-7). This saying is followed immediately by the parable of The Prodigal Son. We may not feel much sympathy for these wicked people, but we are surely right to believe that God is right to ask a lot from us in order to save them.

In his chapter on the Soviet police interrogators in *The Gulag Archipelago*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn comments on the awful possible final effects of very evil choices: "Evil has a threshold magnitude. Yes, a human being hesitates and bobs back and forth between good and evil all his life ... But just so long as the threshold of evil-doing is not crossed, the possibility of returning remains, and he himself is still within the reach of our hope. But when, through the density of evil actions, the result either of their extreme degree or of the absoluteness of his power, he suddenly crosses that threshold, he has left humanity behind, and without, perhaps, the possibility of return" (Solzhenitsyn 1974, 175). Solzhenitsyn seems to suggest that some of the Soviet KGB interrogators whom he encountered had crossed that threshold.

By contrast, Simon Wiesenthal, in his book *The Sunflower*, tells us about one SS man who was content to obey orders to treat people of occupied Poland in various cruel ways until he was commanded to set light to a house into which many Jews had been crowded. He obeyed the command; but, as he heard the screams of the burning Jews, he did not suppress his horror at what he was doing and was moved to a deep genuine repentance, and so began a journey on the road to sanctity (see Wiesenthal 1970, 88).⁵ But these choices would not have been open to the KGB interrogators or the SS soldiers without the possibility of horrendous evils.

It would be good that God should give us a free choice while on Earth about whether or not to aspire to the life of Heaven. But we can only do that freely in a world where there is great opportunity for total self-sacrifice. This is not the place to discuss at length how God might deal with people who die in an intermediate condition, as most of us probably do—of having some dedication to the good, and some considerable weakness of will, as a result of which we sometimes do what is evil. As a result of weakness of will some humans will collapse mentally under their horrendous or lesser suffering, and lose the ability to make any serious choices. Others of us are moderately good or bad people, who have never had the opportunity to make big serious choices. God might put those who die in any intermediate condition into a situation in the next world where they had the ability and opportunity to make big serious choices, or he might make the good choice for them, and give to those who have not in any serious way rejected the good that total dedication to it which they have not fully chosen for themselves. Catholic Christianity, with its doctrine of Purgatory, holds that many of us have still to purge ourselves from our sinful character before we are admitted to Heaven; and Orthodox Christianity seems to allow for the possibility that our eventual destiny is not always permanently settled at our earthly death, but only at the Last Judgement. My point, though, is that it is a great good for us if our future depends on us, on our own free choices, and that if some people are to have the great good of it depending on them, as well as by their example providing a uniquely great stimulus for ordinary people to live better lives (and the other goods that I have mentioned above), then there has to be the possibility of horrendous evils which they can choose willingly to endure out of love for God and other humans.

As I reflect on the argument of this paper, it seems to me correct. But I then reflect on just how awful some of the horrendous suffering which

5. Thanks to Eleanore Stump for this reference.

God hopes we will cope with it and say to him “You do expect a lot from humans!” And yet I then add “But of course you do—you wouldn’t be God if you didn’t.”

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