

Normative Objections to Theism

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Theism faces objections of various kinds, including the logical and evidential objections discussed elsewhere in this volume (Chapters 12 and 13). I intend to show that theism also faces important normative objections – in particular, moral objections – that arise mainly from theistic attempts to solve the problem of suffering.

Theism and the Problem of Suffering

I begin by defining “theism.” I’ll define “the problem of suffering” later in this section.

As classically defined, theism asserts that there exists a person, God, whose essence includes perfection – that is, unsurpassable greatness – in knowledge, power, and goodness.¹ The classical definition sets the bar high in regard to the attributes that God must possess, but it seems to me that theism has no well-motivated alternative to doing so. As I’ll argue, if you believe in God at all, then it only makes sense to believe in a God who is essentially perfect. There’s insufficient motivation to believe in a God of any other kind.

Perhaps least importantly, without the assumption that God must be unsurpassably great, you sacrifice the only *a priori* basis for believing in God’s existence, namely the Ontological Argument in any of its various versions. Every version of the Ontological Argument relies on the assumption that any being deserving the title “God” must be as great as anything could possibly be. From this assumption, the most plausible form of the argument infers that any such being actually exists if it so much as possibly exists.² From the premise that such a being possibly exists, the argument then concludes that the being actually exists. Even the most plausible form of the argument certainly deserves to be challenged, but the argument doesn’t even get started without the assumption that God is unsurpassably great.

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More importantly, to imagine an imperfect God is to invite results that are theologically awkward, if not disastrous. Unlike a perfect God, an imperfect God need not be eternal or everlasting: such a God might be only finitely old, might be perishable, and might go out of existence just when we need him most! If God is imperfect, why think that God has the power to make the universe out of nothing, or even the power to make the universe out of pre-existing stuff? If God is imperfect, why trust that God has the power to achieve justice in the end, to vindicate all wrongs, or even to compensate for all wrongs? The affirmation “with God, all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26, KJV)³ is supposed to comfort believers, but if God is imperfect, what assurance do they have that all things *are* possible with God? In addition, the more limited and imperfect one imagines God to be, the more one makes God resemble the deities that polytheistic religions invoke to explain various aspects of the natural world: one god for the sun, another for the moon, another for fertility, and so on. But surely deities of that sort have been made superfluous by science’s ability to explain those aspects of the universe in purely naturalistic terms.

Finally, it’s theologically perilous to suppose that God could fall short of moral perfection in particular. It seems clear that we tend to judge those who are morally deficient much more harshly than we judge those who are deficient merely in power or knowledge. Imagine three men none of whom saves a toddler from drowning in a lake: one only because he can’t swim, a second only because he’s too oblivious to notice the toddler’s noisy flailing, and a third only because he likes to watch toddlers drown. Only the third agent deserves to be regarded as truly despicable. Any God who could behave anything like the third agent is, again, not worth believing in or worshipping.

For the aforementioned reasons, the only well-motivated options seem to be these: an essentially perfect God exists, or no God at all exists. Therefore, I’ll assume that God, if God exists, must be perfect in at least knowledge, power, and goodness.⁴ The following question, then, looms large: Why does a God answering to that description ever allow suffering that he could prevent?⁵ The problem of suffering arises as a challenge to theism because of the allegation that humans and other animals experience unwanted, undeserved suffering (often also called “evil”) that a perfect God, if one exists, morally ought to have prevented and therefore would have prevented.

Descriptions of suffering allegedly of that type abound in the philosophical literature. In order to have a specific example before us, consider the case of Dominick Calhoun, a four-year-old boy from Michigan who died after days of being beaten and burned by his mother’s boyfriend. “I’ve been doing this a long time, and this is the worst case of child abuse I’ve ever seen,” said the local police chief about Dominick’s case; “in all respects, he was tortured.” Dominick’s body was found covered with bruises and with all of his teeth knocked out. His grandmother reported that “burns covered his body” and that his brain was “bashed out of his skull.” A neighbor told police he heard Dominick screaming, over and over again, “Mommy, make him stop.”⁶ The allegation is that God, being perfect, would have prevented Dominick’s torture. So why did God allow it to occur? To answer that question is to give a *theodicy*. I’ll raise moral objections to three major theodicies: the free-will theodicy, the soul-making theodicy, and theodical individualism.

The Free-Will Theodicy

The most popular of all theodicies tries to justify God's permission of unwanted, undeserved suffering such as Dominick's on the grounds that God must never interfere with the free will of a human agent, not even to stop the agent from torturing a child, or at least that God's desire to respect the torturer's free will can justify God in allowing the torture. The obvious objection, however, is that God's allowing a child's torture *in order* not to interfere with the torturer's free will would be a clear case of exploiting the child for some other end, something no perfect being could do. Indeed, it's worse than imperfect; it's depraved.

If anything, this popular theistic refrain about the sacrosanct value of human free will shows just how alien theism is to our ordinary moral outlook.⁷ If you decide to play the role of spectator while a child is tortured, even though you could stop the torture at no cost or risk to yourself, the last thing ordinary morality will do is excuse your inaction on the grounds that you wanted to avoid restricting the torturer's freedom.⁸ It's hard to see why theists imagine that the very same excuse could exonerate a perfect God. According to ordinary morality, a bystander can indeed be obligated to intervene on behalf of a child who's being tortured, even if intervening means restricting the torturer's free will – especially, I would add, if the bystander is God, for whom alone intervention always comes at no personal cost or risk.⁹

One might object that if God restricts the free will of even a single child-torturer, then God has no principled reason to refrain from restricting free will *whenever* someone makes a choice likely to cause any amount of unwanted, undeserved suffering, and restricting free will on every such occasion would leave humans with only highly circumscribed freedom. But this familiar objection can be answered in two ways. According to the first answer, there exists a non-zero limit to the unwanted, undeserved suffering that a perfect God can allow *for the sake* of unfettered human free will, and therefore God can allow humans to exercise their free will up to but not beyond that limit. One recent author sympathetic to the free-will theodicy seems to concede as much:

First, and most obviously, God might permit an instance of suffering for the purpose of respecting the free action of one of his creatures Of course, respecting the freedom of creatures might not justify God's permission of just any evil (if the harm suffered by [Smith's victim] is bad enough, it would seem better for God to constrain Smith's free will than for Smith to have the ability to inflict that sort of harm on another). (Anderson 2012, p. 35)

If, as Anderson suggests, such a limit does exist, then even if we humans can't know precisely where it falls, the burden of proof rests with anyone who denies that Dominick's protracted, lethal torture went clearly beyond the limit.¹⁰

According to the second answer, there's *no* amount of unwanted, undeserved suffering that a perfect God can allow for the sake of unfettered human free will. Three arguments support this answer. First, on the *compatibilist* view of free will – which, it's worth noting, far more contemporary philosophers accept than reject¹¹ – we can choose freely even if natural laws determine that we never freely choose actions that cause unwanted, undeserved suffering. According to compatibilism, I can freely make

beneficial or innocuous choices even if the laws of nature determine that I'll always make such choices rather than harmful ones: what matters to the freedom of my beneficial or innocuous choices is their *actual* causal history – including my actual character and my prior deliberations – not the causal possibility of other histories in which I make harmful choices instead. On this view, God can institute laws of nature that determine that our choices are beneficial or innocuous without thereby making our choices unfree; therefore, God need not permit harmful actions in order to leave us with unfettered free will. Much less need God permit the Fall of all creation and the consequent entry of suffering into the world, as some major religions teach, in order to leave our free will unfettered.

Second, if God allows unwanted, undeserved suffering for the sake of unfettered human free will, then such suffering must be an *unavoidable* by-product of unfettered human free will; otherwise, God could simply allow the free will but prevent the suffering. If so, however, then a problem for the free-will theodicy arises from the theistic doctrine of heaven, or paradise, which says that our ideal state of existence contains no unwanted, undeserved suffering – indeed, no suffering of any kind. But if unwanted, undeserved suffering is an unavoidable by-product of unfettered human free will, then we must *lack* unfettered free will in that ideal state of existence. In that case, it's hard to see how unfettered human free will is at all *valuable*, let alone valuable enough to justify God's permission of suffering. The defender of the free-will theodicy therefore seems forced to declare that the theistic doctrine of heaven is internally inconsistent and hence not even possibly true.

Third, as both compatibilists and their libertarian opponents agree, free will is important because it enables us to make choices for which we're *morally responsible*. Those choices include the choice whether or not, as bystanders, to intervene to prevent unwanted, undeserved suffering when we encounter it. But here another problem arises. Theism implies that God, being perfectly knowing, plays at least the role of bystander to every event in the universe, including every case of unwanted, undeserved suffering. Theism also implies that God, being perfectly powerful, is far abler than any human bystander to prevent any case of unwanted, undeserved suffering and, unlike any human bystander, can always prevent it at no personal cost or risk. It follows that if either bystander, human or divine, is morally responsible for preventing the suffering, it's the divine bystander. In that case, it's hard to see how the human bystander could be morally responsible for preventing it, because in every case in which anyone is responsible the divine bystander is *already* responsible and vastly more capable of fulfilling that responsibility.

Theism, therefore, relieves any human bystander of moral responsibility for intervening to prevent unwanted, undeserved suffering, a result for which I'll give another argument in Section 4. So the free-will theodicy fails if it says that we humans possess free will at least partly in order to allow us to choose whether or not to fulfil that responsibility. This result also refutes the familiar apologetic proposal according to which "God ... withholds His intervention in order to give us the opportunity to do the right thing" (Hasker 2010, pp. 307–308), if doing "the right thing" means fulfilling our own responsibility to intervene. Furthermore, and independently of the foregoing argument, it's morally outrageous to propose that a perfect God could stand by and let a child ~~to~~ be tortured *in order to* give some fallible human bystander the chance to intervene.

Such conduct is the reprehensible exploitation of children. It bears noting, of course, that no one ended up rescuing Dominick, nor does anyone rescue any of the other children whom God, if God exists, allows to be tortured to death.

The Soul-Making Theodicy

According to the soul-making theodicy (Hick 1966), God permits suffering such as Dominick's in order to allow humans in general to develop such virtues as compassion, forbearance, and courage in response to that suffering. Toby Betenson (2016, p. 61) notes two important moral objections to this theodicy: (i) the more thoroughly we embrace the theodicy, the less likely we are to acquire the moral virtues our acquisition of which is supposed to be God's purpose in allowing suffering; (ii) the theodicy treats persons merely as means rather than as ends in themselves.

First, Betenson argues, the more we understand another person's suffering in the way that the soul-making theodicy understands it, *as a God-intended opportunity for us to respond virtuously*, the harder it is for us to respond *virtuously* to that other person's suffering. In order for us to respond virtuously to another person's suffering, we must respond to the suffering principally (if not exclusively) out of concern for that other person, rather than out of a concern that we not pass up the chance to exhibit our virtue. As D. Z. Phillips puts it, on the soul-making theodicy "the sufferings of others are treated as an opportunity for me to be shown at my best. Ironically, if I think of their sufferings in this way, I am shown at my worst" (quoted in Betenson 2016, p. 61).

Second, the soul-making theodicy portrays God as immorally exploiting sufferers, among them children, because it portrays God as allowing their suffering as a means to *other* people's moral development. According to Betenson, this ethical defect of the theodicy explains why its philosophical popularity has declined in recent decades:

It used to be supposed that the suffering of some might be redeemable by the benefits it afforded to others; for example, an earthquake in some distant part of the world affords us the opportunity to develop the virtue of charity, etc. This is now an unpopular position. As Eleonore Stump puts it, "There is something morally repulsive about supposing that the point of allowing a child to suffer is some abstract benefit for the race as a whole." She concludes that "the good which justifies a child's pain must be a benefit *for that child*." (Betenson 2016, p. 61)

However, this highly plausible "patient-centered" requirement – that only the sufferer's own benefit could justify a perfect God's permission of unwanted, undeserved suffering – generates another problem for theism, as I'll explain in Section 4.

The soul-making theodicy faces a third objection, one that I haven't seen any other commentator raise: it fails because it begs the question.¹² Soul-making is supposed to be positive when it instills or strengthens such qualities as compassion, forbearance, and courage, rather than their opposites. But compassion, forbearance, and courage have positive value – they're virtues – only because of the existence or threat of suffering that God, if he exists, has himself *chosen to allow*. In a world without the threat of suffering (as theists routinely imagine heaven to be), compassion, forbearance, and courage are

no more valuable than physical strength is in a world without the threat of something heavy.¹³ The value of those virtues *given* a dangerous world like ours can't, therefore, explain why God allows our world to be dangerous in the first place.

The same objection refutes a related theodicy proposed by William Hasker. According to Hasker, God allows intense suffering at least partly in order to imbue our world with moral seriousness: if God intervened to prevent all behavior that was "significantly harmful," writes Hasker, then "morality, assuming it existed at all, would lack much of the significance we ordinarily assume it to have" (1992, p. 29). This theodicy also begs the question, because the moral obligation to prevent significant harm is a *consequence* of the threat of significant harm, and no perfect God is forced to allow the threat of significant harm in the first place: the theistic notion of heaven, whose inhabitants experience joy but never the threat of significant harm, is at least logically coherent. Yes, without the threat of significant harm we wouldn't have significant morality, but the point is we wouldn't *need* it. Moral seriousness isn't an intrinsically good feature of a world but only a consequence of the kinds of danger that God allows *our* world to contain. The moral obligation to prevent significant harm isn't an end that's valuable for its own sake, much less an end valuable enough for its own sake to justify God's permission of suffering.

Theodical Individualism

Nevertheless, Hasker's theodicy does point to an important conflict between theism and ordinary morality. The conflict arises from the requirement that only the sufferer's *own* benefit could justify a perfect God's permission of unwanted, undeserved suffering. This requirement, now sometimes called "theodical individualism" (following Jordan 2004, p. 169), has been recently defended by Maitzen (2009; 2011; 2013). It has been criticized by Mawson (2011), but Mawson's criticism (2011, p. 154) relies entirely on the free-will theodicy that Section 2, above, showed to be gravely defective.

The aforementioned conflict arises this way. On one hand, ordinary morality says that if you can easily, and at no cost or risk to yourself, prevent the torture of a child such as Dominick, then you ought to prevent it. In particular, as I emphasized in Section 2, you don't come close to evading that moral obligation by pleading your desire to respect the torturer's free will. On the other hand, if theism and theodical individualism are true, then God permits unwanted, undeserved suffering only when that suffering is necessary (or else optimal) for the sufferer's own benefit. Eleonore Stump made this point decades ago: "if a good God allows evil," and by "evil" Stump means unwanted, undeserved suffering, "it can only be because the evil in question produces a net benefit for the sufferer and one that God could not produce without the suffering" (Stump 1985, pp. 411–412).

Stump's use of the verb "produces" is important, because without it we allow that God's *post hoc* compensation of the sufferer – in a blissful afterlife, perhaps – can justify God's permission of suffering even if the suffering is neither necessary for, nor the best way of, achieving the benefit that compensates for it. But in such a case the benefit serves as *mere* compensation rather as a justification; what justifies God's permission must, instead, be something necessary or optimal for *producing* the sufferer's net benefit.¹⁴

What, if anything, justifies parents in allowing their young child to be jabbed with painful needles by someone in a white coat? Not the lollipop that the child receives afterward for putting up with the vaccination; that's mere compensation. Rather, the justification consists in the child's acquiring immunity to a serious disease, which is a net benefit for the child (even factoring in the pain of the vaccination) and one that, given the state of medical science, can't be conferred on the child in any better way.

Therefore, if theism and theodical individualism are true, then unwanted, undeserved suffering is closely analogous to the pain that a child experiences during a vaccination – that is, an unavoidable feature of the only (or best) way to secure an essential benefit for the sufferer. Notice that we regard ourselves as under no moral obligation to prevent childhood vaccinations just because they hurt. On the contrary, preventing vaccinations for that reason would be a case of seriously misguided compassion.¹⁵ By the same token, then, theism and theodical individualism together relieve us of the moral obligation we thought we had to prevent unwanted, undeserved suffering, even if the suffering is horrendous and we can prevent it at no cost or risk to ourselves. If God exists, then Dominick's torture must have been necessary or optimal for his securing some net benefit, in which case we'd have been no more obligated to prevent his torture than to prevent his vaccination against measles.

Rob Lovering (2011) raises two objections to the foregoing argument. Unlike Mawson, he doesn't dispute theodical individualism, much less on the basis of the dubious free-will theodicy. Lovering's first objection is that we can be morally obligated to prevent Dominick's torture, especially if we can do so at no cost or risk to ourselves, *even if* the torture is necessary or optimal for Dominick's securing a net benefit. We can be obligated, according to Lovering, because the torture is *seriously immoral*. "All else being equal," he writes, "if an act A is seriously immoral, then one has a moral obligation to prevent A," a claim that he calls the Preventing Immorality Principle (2011, p. 85). Now, given how many seriously immoral acts are occurring on earth at this very moment, one might question whether such a strong principle is true on any reasonable interpretation of "all else being equal." Honoring the principle might keep me very busy indeed. Nevertheless, I'll accept it for the sake of argument. As Lovering (2011, p. 94) recognizes, the principle applies to a case like Dominick's only if the kind of treatment Dominick suffered is indeed seriously immoral. Lovering claims that it is, on the grounds that "ordinary morality is, in certain respects, deontological in nature":

[Because] ordinary morality forbids various types of acts even if the best consequences *overall* could be achieved only by performing such an act, ... surely it also forbids various types of acts even if the best consequences *solely for the individual on the receiving end of such acts* could be achieved only by performing such an act. (p. 95, emphases in original)

While Lovering is right that ordinary morality contains deontological commitments, his inference is invalid. Ordinary morality would regard it as seriously immoral to stab a young child's abdomen 21 times with a long, painful needle for the sole purpose of sparing the rest of humanity the inconvenience of a mild headache, even if the aggregate pain of those billions of mild headaches would exceed the child's own pain. Doing so would violate a deontological rule against exploitation. But ordinary morality would not regard that treatment as seriously immoral if done in order to spare the child herself

from rabies, the treatment that used to be medically required if a child was bitten by a rabid animal (Cosgrove 2013). In the latter case, the treatment was morally permissible precisely *because* the net benefit accrued to the child rather than merely to others. Lovering’s first objection therefore fails.

His second objection is that we humans can have an all-things-considered moral obligation to prevent (in the particular example he discusses) the immolation of a small boy even if God, who knows that the immolation is necessary for the boy’s own benefit, has no such obligation himself. But Lovering’s objection depends on his Preventing Immorality Principle, which, again, applies to the immolation only if the immolation is seriously immoral. He claims that it *is* seriously immoral, but his only argument for that claim is the same invalid inference I just identified, namely, “the boy’s immolation would be seriously immoral even if the immolation were [needed] to produce a net benefit for the boy (given, at any rate, *my* understanding of ordinary morality, as stated above)” (Lovering 2011, p. 97, emphasis in original). Because his understanding of ordinary morality is mistaken in the way I indicated, Lovering’s second objection fails as well.

Ryan Byerly (2018) also criticizes the argument that theism and ordinary morality conflict. He suggests that one can evade the argument if one rejects the following claim about God’s power: “[I]t is by virtue of God’s omnipotence that for any evils whatsoever, God can guarantee that those evils are required for promoting outweighing goods for those who suffer them” (pp. 9–10). Byerly regards the claim as doubtful because it “assigns to God control over modal facts – specifically, facts about what is *required* for what,” and “[t]he relationship between God and modal facts is ... hotly debated” (2018, n18, emphasis in original). But rejecting the claim does nothing to challenge the original argument. Let it be granted that God lacks the control over modal facts that he would need in order to make some potential instance of suffering, S, required for producing a net benefit for the sufferer. In that case, theodical individualism demands that God *prevent* S instead, something that God clearly has the power to do. Even if God can’t make it the case that S is required for producing a net benefit for the sufferer, God can surely *see* that it isn’t required in time to prevent it. The original argument thus escapes Byerly’s criticism.

A final objection to the argument takes issue with the precise wording of the principle of theodical individualism. Recall Stump’s formulation of the principle, quoted earlier: “if a good God allows evil [i.e., unwanted, undeserved suffering], it can only be because the evil in question produces a net benefit for the sufferer and one that God could not produce without the suffering” (1985, pp. 411–412). Some critics insist that God’s goodness implies, not that (i) the evil in question must produce a net benefit for the sufferer, but only that (ii) *God’s permission* of the evil in question must produce a net benefit for the sufferer (Howard-Snyder 2014, p. 295n3).¹⁶ But notice that if God’s goodness implies (ii) but not (i), then (iii) conceivably God can be morally blameless for allowing the evil whereas some human bystander has a moral obligation to prevent it. As we established in Section 2, God is a bystander to every case of unwanted, undeserved suffering and is always better equipped to prevent the suffering than any human bystander, a combination that falsifies (iii) and thereby falsifies the critics’ claim that (ii) doesn’t imply (i). The objection therefore fails.

In my judgment, then, the argument from theodical individualism to the incompatibility of theism and ordinary morality is cogent. But even if it isn’t – even if theism

leaves logical room for our moral duty to prevent at least some cases of unwanted, undeserved suffering – a similar conflict nonetheless emerges. If a perfect God exists, then the worse a person’s unwanted, undeserved suffering, the *more likely* it is that the suffering is necessary or optimal for producing a net benefit for the sufferer. Suppose that a child suffers a brief headache that’s both unwanted and undeserved, rather than (say) the result of ignoring a parent’s warning not to eat ice cream so fast. Even if God wasn’t morally obligated to prevent that brief headache unless it produced a net benefit for the child, it’s less plausible to say the same thing about Dominick’s horrific suffering. However likely it may be that the child’s headache was unconnected to the child’s net benefit – being, instead, something we might shrug off as “just the way the world works” – it’s less likely, given theism, that Dominick’s torture fits that description: the torture demands justification to a greater degree than the headache does.

So, given theism, the torture is more likely than the headache to have been necessary or optimal for producing the sufferer’s own net benefit, in which case we humans have more reason to prevent the headache than to prevent the torture. In general, we should prevent mild suffering first, extreme suffering later, quite contrary to our ordinary moral attitude. In a phrase, theism encourages *reverse triage*. This result shows that theism and ordinary morality conflict in this way even if they should turn out to be otherwise compatible.

Theism and the “Defeat of Evil”

Section 3 argued that Hasker’s theodicy, which invokes the moral seriousness of our world, can’t justify God’s choice to permit, in the first place, the danger that *makes* our world morally serious and which, according to the doctrine of heaven, we don’t face in our ideal state of existence anyway. Section 4 argued, in effect, that theism *precludes* the moral seriousness of our world by dissolving our basic moral obligation to prevent unwanted, undeserved suffering such as Dominick’s torture if we easily can. If we never have that fundamental moral obligation, then I can’t see how we could have the less fundamental obligations to refrain from theft, fraud, bigotry, or slander. If we lack a moral obligation to prevent even the worst suffering by children, then morality becomes, at best, frivolous because it no longer concerns the most serious kinds of harm. The arguments of those two sections are mutually consistent, even if they may seem incompatible. One can accept both arguments by holding, as I think one should, that our world *is* morally serious – hence theism is false – not because moral seriousness is intrinsically good but because of the kind of danger that our world happens to contain.

I’ll conclude by discussing one final normative objection to theism. It concerns a view that it seems many theists hold about the so-called “defeat of evil.” Roderick Chisholm (1968) defines the concept in roughly this way: an evil state of affairs, E, is defeated when some good state of affairs, G, requires E, and the combination of E and G is intrinsically better than the absence of both E and G would have been. According to Chisholm, “the theodicist ... can deal with the problem of evil *only* by saying that the evils in the world are defeated in the sense that I have tried to describe” (Chisholm 1968, p. 37, emphasis in original). If so, then theodicy is a morally hazardous occupation.

Alexander Pruss, a Christian philosopher at Baylor University, offers a particularly stunning example of the alleged defeat of evil: a state of affairs containing both (E*) the severe beating, rape, and strangulation to death of a five-year-old girl and (F) the girl's *post mortem* forgiveness of the perpetrator is "obviously better," he claims, than a state of affairs in which neither E* nor F occurs.¹⁷

I find such a view impossible to accept. First, it seems to misclassify forgiveness as an intrinsically good feature of a world – something valuable for its own sake alone – rather than as a virtuous response merely *in* a world that contains wrongdoing.¹⁸ Perhaps the sheer abundance of wrongdoing throughout our history has conditioned us to "make a virtue of necessity," to mistake forgiveness for an end in itself rather than to recognize it as merely necessitated by our contingent circumstances. In this sense, then, the view betrays a failure of imagination, an inability or refusal to acknowledge the possibilities for world-making that would be open to a perfect God. Second, the view seems to take the phrase "the defeat of evil" with childish literalness, as if evil were a cunning supervillain to be vanquished in a video game that would be much less thrilling without the fight. Third, and worst of all, it seems to shift the burden to the victim of wrongdoing: having been brutally raped, the victim can now defeat the evil by forgiving the rapist and thereby do her part to make the world "better" than it would have been had she never been raped in the first place.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

- 1 For a mainstream characterization of theism in these terms, see Plantinga (1983), p. 20.
- 2 The classic discussion is Plantinga (1974, Chapter 10). Plantinga's version of the argument requires the controversial modal principle "If possibly necessarily *p*, then *p*."
- 3 For similar biblical affirmations, see also Job 42:2, Jeremiah 32:17, and Luke 1:37, all cited in Leftow (2011), p. 106.
- 4 If you think that the "openness" of the future makes it impossible for any being to foreknow every truth about the future, then you should hold that perfect knowledge doesn't require foreknowing every truth about the future, the latter knowledge being impossible. However, the impossibility of such foreknowledge doesn't imply the impossibility of having *extremely well-justified beliefs* about the future, beliefs so well-justified that it would be immoral not to act on them merely because they don't count as knowledge. William Hasker, himself a defender of the openness of the future, emphasizes this point (Hasker 2010, p. 38). The point becomes crucial when we consider how God ought to respond, for example, if God believes that an innocent child is about to be tortured.
- 5 For economy in what follows, I'll refer explicitly to preventing suffering, rather than relieving it, but nothing of substance turns on this choice, because to relieve suffering is simply to prevent more, or worse, suffering.
- 6 As reported at <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/04/15/michigan.child.torture> and http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2010/04/dominick_calhoun_argentine_tow.html (accessed 13 September 2018).

- 7 I won't try to define "our ordinary moral outlook," because I don't think it has a non-trivial definition. Even so, we can identify some uncontroversial commitments of that outlook, among them the claim that we're at least sometimes morally obligated to prevent easily preventable, horrific suffering by a child.
- 8 As Derk Pereboom notes, from the ordinary moral perspective "the evildoer's freedom is a weightless consideration, not merely an outweighed consideration" (2005, p. 84, citing and expanding on Lewis 1993, p. 155).
- 9 For further criticisms of the free-will theodicy, see Maitzen (2009), pp. 120–122, and Maitzen (2014), pp. 278–279.
- 10 We needn't know precisely where the limit falls in order to know that something goes well beyond it. If a precise cutoff exists between bald men and men who aren't bald, we don't know where it falls. Nevertheless, Telly Savalas in *Kojak* clearly was bald and Jimi Hendrix at Monterey clearly wasn't.
- 11 At least according to the survey data reported by Bourget and Chalmers (2014), p. 492.
- 12 I make the same point in Maitzen (2017), p. 150.
- 13 Contrary to Roderick Chisholm, who suggests that "the exercise of courage...is a virtuous activity that is intrinsically good" (1968, p. 29). Even if courage is better than *cowardice*, at least in some circumstances and maybe in all circumstances, that doesn't imply that a world containing instances of courage is better, all else equal, than a world containing no real or perceived danger and hence neither instances of courage nor instances of cowardice.
- 14 For more on the crucial difference between justification and mere compensation, see Maitzen (2009), p. 110; (2010), pp. 194–196.
- 15 Not even "anti-vaxxers" oppose vaccinations because needles hurt but because, they allege, the ingredients in the vaccines themselves cause harm.
- 16 For a related objection, see Anderson (2012), pp. 31–33.
- 17 Alexander Pruss, online comment, 29 December 2011. Pruss's comment concerns an actual case that occurred in Flint, Michigan, as reported in the *Detroit Free Press*, 3 January 1986.
- 18 Moreover, it's unclear that forgiveness is always a virtuous response to wrongdoing. Perhaps some things ought not to be forgiven, as the Bible seems to teach (Matthew 12: 31; Mark 3:29).

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Further Reading

Some suggested further reading:

- Hubin, D. C. (2009) "Empty and ultimately meaningless gestures?" in R. Garcia and N. King (eds.) *Is Goodness without God Good Enough? A Debate on Faith, Secularism, and Ethics*. New York: Roman & Littlefield, pp. 131–150. A challenge to the notion that only if God exists can we make sense of moral value, obligation, and supererogation.
- Morrison, W. (2012) "God and the ontological foundation of morality." *Religious Studies* 48: 15–34. A persuasive argument that morality doesn't require a theistic foundation.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2009) *Morality Without God?* New York: Oxford University Press. A defense of ethics on a non-theistic foundation, aimed at a general readership.
- Wielenberg, E. (2005) *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*. New York: Cambridge University Press. A defence of the objectivity of morality, the possibility of virtue, and the meaningfulness of life in a universe containing nothing supernatural.