

## Reply to Sterba

*Stephen Maitzen*  
*Acadia University*

I thank James Sterba for his comments on my paper “Perfection, Evil, and Morality” and for the opportunity to respond. Sterba makes three claims to which I’d like to reply.

First, regarding my view that God (if God exists) has moral obligations and Marilyn McCord Adams’s view that God has no moral obligations, Sterba writes that “it is not clear that there really should be much practical difference between what their views imply. This means that the same correct practical conclusion about what God ought to do should be derivable from both their accounts of the goodness of God’s nature.” Perhaps it doesn’t count as a “practical difference” between Adams’s view and mine, but my view implies that there are things that God (if God exists) morally ought to do, whereas Adams’s view implies that there’s *nothing* that God morally ought to do. That is, I regard “ $x$  morally ought to  $\phi$ ” and “ $x$  has a moral obligation to  $\phi$ ” as equivalent expressions: thus, for Adams, there’s nothing that God morally ought to do. Granted, English contains many nonmoral uses of “ought,” such as the meteorologist’s “Given these conditions, it ought to rain today.” Perhaps Sterba is using “ought” in one of those nonmoral ways: perhaps by “God ought to” he means “God can be expected to or is likely to.” Even so, I’d argue that there’s an important difference – practical or not – between what God can be expected or is likely to do, on the one hand, and what God’s perfection entails that God *must* do, on the other.

Second, contrary to what I claimed, Sterba says that the apologetic proposal I attribute to Hasker and Howard-Snyder needn’t assume, implausibly, that God can unilaterally transfer his moral obligations to us. Instead, says Sterba, “It would suffice if God were understood to be the

actor of last resort, while we are understood to have the obligation to act first to prevent evil in the world.” But Sterba’s objection doesn’t tell us what *happened to* the moral obligation that, I argue, God had to prevent the lethal torture of four-year-old Dominick Calhoun. If God retained the obligation, then clearly he failed to meet it, which means he failed morally, something no perfect God can do. If God didn’t retain the obligation, then I can’t see how he could have rid himself of it *except* by transferring it to us. That’s why I surmised that the apologetic proposal requires the unilateral transfer of moral obligations.

Third, Sterba wonders if the value of human “soul-making” might relieve God of the moral obligation to prevent evil. God failed to prevent Dominick Calhoun’s torture. “But what else,” asks Sterba, “is God expected to do? Maitzen seems to suggest that God should prevent all such evil, as the theist assumes that God does in a heavenly afterlife.... But again, that would leave no room in this life for soul-making and the freedom that soul-making requires.” I’d reply as I did to Hasker’s claim that God’s preventing all “significant harmful” behavior would deprive morality of “much of the significance we ordinarily assume it to have”: the claim is true but question-begging. Soul-making is good 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.

In my paper, I conjectured that the sheer abundance of suffering throughout our history has conditioned many of us to treat the moral obligation to prevent suffering as an end in itself, as something intrinsically worth preserving, rather than as an unfortunate consequence of our

dangerous world. I conjecture that something similar explains many people's attitudes toward (positive) soul-making: they mistake it for an end in itself, and hence they view suffering as a prerequisite for achieving an intrinsically valuable end. Because that view of suffering is mistaken, the value of (positive) soul-making fails to justify God's permission of suffering in the first place.