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Does the Analogy of an Ideal State Disprove God's Existence? James Sterba's Argument and a Thomistic Response

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Abstract: This paper provides an analysis of James Sterba's argument from evil in the world and the author's Thomistic counterargument. Many authors of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion discuss the concept of "horrendous evils", which is a representative name for pointless evil and suffering in the world. Sterba claims that the existence of such evil is not logically compatible with the existence of the all-good theistic God. If such a God existed, according to Sterba, he would have intervened in time and prevented and not permitted horrendous evil consequences; in other words, he would have acted as an ideal state. The author of this paper argues that the analogy of an ideal state does not disprove the existence of God of theism. Furthermore, people would prefer if God was not like an ideal state. Applying the characteristics of an ideal state to a theistic God is not reasonable because it relies on anthropomorphism. Such anthropomorphism is incoherent with some basic theistic beliefs. The author of this paper applies Thomistic concepts to the problem of horrendous evils.

Keywords: divine goodness; horrendous evil; ideal state; James Sterba; problem of evil; theodicy; Thomas Aquinas; Thomism



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1. Introduction

In 2019, James Sterba published a monograph on the problem of horrendous evils called *Is a good God logically possible?*¹ In the book, he tries to bring to bear the "untapped resources of ethics on our understanding of the problem of evil" (Sterba 2019, p. 1). By untapped resources, he means the Double-Effect Principle (which he also calls the Pauline Principle).² He inquires whether the God of theism is good if he permits horrendous evils to happen.³ He explores whether "the Pauline Principle and the analogy of an ideally just and political state are compatible with God's widespread permission of significant and especially horrendous consequences of wrongful actions".⁴ According to Sterba, if God existed, he would act as an ideal state, which means that he would prevent all the terrible consequences of our moral wrongdoing. Sterba uses a logical form of the argument from evil.⁵

I argue that Sterba's analogy of an ideal state does not work (Section 9). The reason is that the analogy and the whole argument are too anthropomorphic. I support my conclusion in following steps. First, I analyze the analogy of an ideal state (Sections 3 and 4) and define Sterba's understanding of divine goodness as dependent on prevention of evil which is in contradiction according to theistic belief. Second, I present Thomas Aquinas's concept of divine goodness (Section 5). Then I compare the two concepts and explain how Sterba's concept contradicts some basic theistic beliefs (Section 6). In other words, it is better if God would not act as an ideal state. In Section 7, I elaborate on the previous conclusions by examining the nature of God's evil permission. Finally, I follow the discussion of Sterba with comments by some of his responders, and I modify their arguments based on my Thomistic research (Section 8).

2. The Problem of Horrendous Evils Briefly Explained

For the past decades, the philosophy of religion has been dealing with the problem of so-called horrendous evils, which is a contemporary modification of the classical problem of evil.⁶ The problem is not of logical inconsistency but is present in terms of “the prima-facie obstacle in consistently maintaining both:

1. God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, and
2. Evil exists” (Adams 1999, p. 8).

Since antiquity, many theodicies and defenses have been formed, and they seem to be quite successful in explaining how the previous two premises can be held together so that they are not a threat to theism.⁷ The classical metaphysical opinion on evil is that it is a privation of something good, a privation of (or in) substance.⁸ A privation cannot be something substantial; and since God only causes/creates substance, he⁹ does not cause/create nor is he responsible for the evil in the world.¹⁰ However, contemporary atheists/atheologists claim that there is a category of horrendous evils against which the existence of a theistic God cannot be consistently held. The problem of horrendous evils deals with singular, radical, gratuitous, or pointless evils that cause horrendous damage to the lives of individuals or groups.¹¹ Marilyn M. Adams calls them *horrors*: “Horrors are evil the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to believe that the participant’s life (given their inclusion in it) cannot be a great good to him/her on the whole” (Adams 1999, p. 26). She also describes horrors as life-ruining evils that prima facie destroy the positive meaning of one’s life and that are almost impossible to defeat or balance off (See Adams 1999, pp. 82, 205; Vitale 2020, p. 7). Such evil is understood as *quantity* or *certain types* of evil (See Adams 1999, p. 14). Various authors refer to this kind of evil using different names but denoting the same reality.

Sterba speaks of horrendous evils as “significant and especially horrendous consequences” of “wrongful actions” on would-be victims (Sterba 2019, p. 6). He also calls them “immoral consequences” of wrongful actions (Sterba 2019, p. 147). Sterba elaborates on them within the concept of a state, law, and policy. According to Sterba, an ideal state would always prevent horrendous evil consequences of wrongdoers, and if God existed, he would do the same.

3. Sterba’s Argument and the Analogy of an Ideal State

In this section, Sterba’s argument against the existence of an all-good God of theism is explained based on the analogy of an ideal state. The concept of an ideal state relies on a specific notion of freedom and on arguments from rights and moral preference.

3.1. Concept of Freedom

According to Sterba, people are holders of so-called *significant freedoms* that, by his definition, are “those freedoms a just political state would want to protect since that would fairly secure each person’s fundamental interests” (Sterba 2019, p. 12). The notion of fundamental interests is based on the idea that “each person should have the greatest amount of freedom morally commensurate with the greatest amount of freedom for everyone else” (Sterba 2019, p. 31). In other words, exercise of our significant freedoms is not to be interfered with by the significant freedoms of others (See Sterba 2019, pp. 29–30). Any kind of wrongdoing with significant and especially horrendous consequences should not be allowed, because it destroys significant freedoms of actual and would-be victims.

3.2. Argument from Rights and Moral Preference

To better demonstrate the notion of significant freedoms, Sterba speaks about specific goods to which we have or do not have a right: e.g., we do have a right to freedom from a brutal assault; we do not have a right to the opportunity to provide medical aid to someone who has been brutally assaulted, etc. (See Sterba 2019, pp. 186–88) Sterba tries to determine what is the amount of evil that should not be allowed in respect to our significant freedoms.

He sets the line accordingly with his interpretation of the Pauline Principle. As a result, Sterba formulates so-called Moral Evil Prevention Requirements (MEPR I–III):

- **MEPR-I:** “Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone’s rights (a good to which we have a right), as needed, when that can be easily done” (Sterba 2019, p. 184).
- **MEPR-II:** “Do not permit significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have” (Sterba 2019, p. 184).
- **MEPR-III:** “Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions on would-be victims (which would violate their rights) in order to provide them with goods to which they do not have a right, when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing these goods” (Sterba 2019, p. 184).

The main interest of these moral principles is that of maintaining significant freedoms—goods to which we have a right.

3.3. Ideal State

Sterba claims that “there is a great loss of significant freedom in our world due to all the evil that is not prevented in it” (Sterba 2019, p. 152). The function of a state, as Sterba describes it, is mostly moral evil prevention (prevention of wrongdoing). A state aims at securing a high level of justice for its members, for instance by setting laws against assault (Sterba 2019, p. 12).

States try to secure the exercise of significant freedoms of would-be victims but often fail. However, an ideal state would always be successful in securing such freedoms. It would prevent bad people from committing evil actions (Sterba 2019, p. 29). Sterba argues that, if people could decide, they would morally prefer that such wrongdoing and horrendous evil consequences would be prevented and not permitted. However, an ideal state would not prevent all wrongdoers’ immoral actions, only those with significant and especially horrendous consequences. Preventing lesser consequences of evil would tend to interfere with people’s significant freedoms. If all evil consequences were to be prevented, people would not have the opportunity for soul-making.¹²

3.4. Final Logical Argument from Horrendous Evils

Finally, Sterba argues, if God existed, he would act as an ideal state. He would prevent all significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions of wrongdoers on would-be victims. Sterba’s argument from moral evil is as follows:

1. (I): There is an all-good, all-powerful God.
2. (II): If there is an all-good, all-powerful God, then necessarily he would be adhering to MEPR I–III.
3. (III): If God were adhering to MEPR I–III, then necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtained through what would have to be his permission.
4. (IV): Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain all around us.
5. Conclusion (C): Therefore, it is not the case that there is an all-good, all-powerful God. (See Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90)

4. Further Analysis: Divine Goodness

As Sterba describes it, an ideal state is a state that prevents horrendous evil consequences of wrongdoers on would-be victims. Preventing such consequences is *the* way of securing the significant freedoms of individuals. Prevention of wrongdoing, in the ideal state, is temporarily and morally prioritized (See Sterba 2019, p. 147). The ideal state as described is libertarian. Sterba clarifies that he refers to political libertarianism. A political

libertarian values freedom above all (See Sterba 2019, p. 31). According to Bas van der Vossen, Sterba is the kind of libertarian who holds “that each person has a maximum right to equal negative liberty, which is understood as the absence of forcible interference from other agents”.¹³ This is where all the possibility of welfare and opportunity of happiness comes from. Sterba supports this opinion when he speaks about soul-making theodicy or redemptive suffering. According to him, soul-making should only exist within the context of not experiencing horrendous evils, as well as the best way of redemption would be the prevention of such evils.¹⁴ It is important to see that the notion of happiness and welfare is based on moral preference; people would morally prefer that horrendous evils would not exist.¹⁵

Further, Sterba argues, if an all-good God existed, he would act as an ideal state. He would prevent all the horrendous consequences of immoral actions. He would not, however, prevent “lesser evils”.¹⁶ God and a state can *justifiably violate* the Pauline Principle, but not MEPR I–III (See Sterba 2021, p. 12). It is important to note that God can violate a moral principle: according to Sterba, there are some things that are good for God to do and some that are bad for him to do (See Sterba 2021, p. 15). Since God has not been acting as an ideal state, he does not exist. God is not obligated to prevent “lesser evils” (which can lead to some greater goods according to the double-effect principle), but he is morally required to engage in preventing horrendous evil consequences and is acting wrongly when permitting these (See Sterba 2021, pp. 6–7). We can now see how Sterba understands divine goodness:

- (D): God is good *if and only if* he acts like an ideal state = insofar as he *prevents* and *does not permit* horrendous (moral) evil consequences.

We can see that Sterba’s understanding of divine goodness is somehow negative because is dependent on evil. Surely, it could be argued that the prevention and not permission of horrendous evils is something good. I will explain later why this is not a proper understanding of divine goodness.

Sterba describes God as someone who has moral obligations, as we do, and can act wrongly, as we can. God is a moral agent like humans. God is understood to be good like a human person is good, and he exists only if he is as good as an ideal state. When he acts wrongly, it is even worse than when humans do, and that would be another reason for God’s nonexistence. This personalistic (traditional) notion of God is different from what is called classical theism. Traditional theism considers God a moral agent like humans; classical theism considers God a personal or impersonal metaphysical cause of all being¹⁷. In classical theism, God’s morality is considered differently from human morality. The notion of divine goodness in terms of classical theism mostly draws from Thomas Aquinas. The following section elaborates on the classical theistic notion of divine goodness.

5. Divine Goodness according to Thomas Aquinas

“Goodness”, “good” or “being good” has been ascribed to God at least since Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite. We use “good” for many things: a good game, a good person, even a good scam; the word “good” can be attributed in many ways. Brian Davies says, however, that Aquinas does not attribute goodness to God in this way (See Davies 2014, p. 53). Ludger Honnefelder explains how Aquinas defines divine goodness:

“... (he) begins with Aristotle’s definition: something is “good” insofar as it is “desirable” (appetible). In a first step, Aquinas concludes (1) that every being desires its perfection, (2) that this perfection or form is a similitude of the agent that causes perfection by actualizing a thing’s form, and (3) that therefore the agent cause itself must be something desirable and therefore good as stated in the previous definition. The second premise follows from the axiom that any agent acts or produces something similar to itself. If God is the first efficient cause of all things (as demonstrated in ST I q.2), then the final conclusion follows: God is something desirable, that is, “good””. (Honnefelder 2012, p. 149)

The perfection that everything seeks comes from the first cause, which is God (or is called God). According to Aquinas, things are perfect when they do not lack anything that belongs to their mode of perfection (See [Aquinas 1948a](#), I q. 5 a. 3 c.). He uses the metaphysical categories of act and potency. Everything actualizes itself by being itself (e.g., material objects) or trying to be and succeeding at being itself (e.g., animals or humans). However, God is pure actuality (See [Aquinas 1948a](#), I q. 3 a. 2 c.). His perfection and goodness are essential, not accidental¹⁸. He cannot undergo any improvement (See [Davies 2014](#), p. 54). God is goodness itself (*summum bonum*) (See [Aquinas 1948a](#), I q. 6 a. 2 c.) God is always perfectly himself.

Now, the question is whether God is morally good. God desires his own perfection according to his nature. According to Davies, Aquinas “affirms that God exists and that God is good, but he does not try to defend God’s goodness on moral grounds” ([Davies 2011](#), p. 113). This, however, does not mean that moral goodness is not implied. Since God is the perfect being, he is pure actuality and cannot be more perfect (See [Aquinas 1948a](#), I q. 6 a. 1 c.). He cannot do anything to improve himself, even morally. However, since he desires his own perfection, too, and does not fail in actualizing it (because he cannot), he is the moral agent par excellence. Not only is he successful in being perfect but desires his perfection *in a perfect way* because the only goal of his desire is goodness itself (which he is himself). There is no room for God to desire otherwise than good and that is why he cannot desire or do moral evil. In this sense, God is not a moral agent *like us*.

However, if God is the perfect moral agent, is he morally obliged to do good? According to Joseph Brian Huffling, a moral agent is someone who has some (moral) obligation to fulfill—therefore, God is not a moral agent. Furthermore, morality is a property of creation, but God is uncreated (See [Huffling 2021](#), p. 3). But can we really consider God’s having moral obligations to be the condition of his moral agency? As I showed in the previous paragraph, God is to be considered the perfect moral agent. First, God’s goodness is essential, but ours is accidental which means that, for us to become morally good, actualization of our being is required (but God is pure actuality). Second, God cannot undergo further actualization because he is totally simple: there is no metaphysical distinction between act and potency of any kind in God (See [Aquinas 1948a](#), I q. 3). Finally, according to Aquinas, God is the eternal law (*lex aeterna*), the source of the natural law and moral obligations for us. God is not subject to some greater law because he *is* the eternal law (See [Aquinas 1948b](#), I–II q. 96 a. 1). In this sense, God is completely outside of moral obligation because he *is* the obligation. But this does not mean he is not “moral”. In fact, as I showed, God acts *completely in accordance with his own nature* which is the perfect goodness that he never ceases to be. His metaphysical goodness implies moral goodness, and that is why he is perfectly morally good even though he cannot be thought to have any moral obligations to fulfill.

Finally, it was said that God exists outside any genus or species and is totally transcendent. Thus, how can we say anything essential about him? How can we even know that he is good if our language is imperfect while God is perfection itself? If he is God, the subsisting being (*esse ipsum subsistens*) ([Aquinas 1948a](#), I q. 13 a. 11 c.), the goodness itself (*summum bonum*), the metaphysical and invisible (non-physical) first cause of all the being (See [Aquinas 1948a](#), I q. 2 a. 3), how can we even think about saying anything that we think to be true about him? Aquinas understands there is nothing we can understand comprehensibly of God’s essence.¹⁹ In the five ways, he observes that there must be some first metaphysical cause. When we want to properly speak of God, we need to start by examining what he is not.²⁰ Then we can use words of our language that reflect some perfections (e.g., good, just, perfect, wise, power, etc.) and ascribe them to God. After these perfections are ascribed to God, we classically call them *properties* or *attributes*. It is important to note that, for Aquinas, these attributes are not ascribed to God univocally or equivocally, but analogically.²¹ His language of God is based first on similarity with the universe and then he continues through negation to via *eminentiae*.²² This is the main

difference between Aquinas's and Sterba's analogies of God, and it is also the critical spot upon which Sterba's analogy fails, as will be explained below.

We can conclude that:

- (a): God is perfectly good, the goodness itself; his perfection and goodness are essential; and he cannot improve the goodness he himself is because it would contradict the perfection, he himself is.
- (b): God is the perfect moral agent in the sense that he desires (1) his own perfection, which is goodness itself, (2) he desires it in the perfect way, and (3) he never fails in acting in accordance with his nature which is *summum bonum*.
- (c): God is not a moral agent like humans because (1) he cannot fail in doing good, and (2) he does not fall upon any moral obligation because he is the eternal law himself.
- (d): the notion of the goodness of God is taken from an analogy that is not anthropomorphic because it starts with what God is not (and he is not a metaphysical composite, he is not physical).

This last point needs to be addressed. What is an anthropomorphic analogy? The answer has two steps. First, as Aquinas says, God is not metaphysically composed, unlike us humans. He is absolutely simple, and we are not. Second, in God, perfection and goodness are not metaphysically distinct, but humans are perfect only insofar as they are good. Imagine a bad person that perfects herself by learning to be good. God cannot do that because he is good only, and this is why he is already perfect. These thoughts are in accordance with the crucial Christian belief that God is completely different from everything he created, including humans. On the contrary, according to Christianity humans *reflect* his goodness and that is why we are somehow like him, not vice versa. A proper non-anthropomorphic analogy keeps this in mind. Furthermore, seeing God as "in the image of humans" leads to understanding God as someone who can change his decisions, and decide what is good or wrong under different circumstances and this is also a problem to the fundamental theistic beliefs.²³

My next step is to show the main differences between Sterba's and Aquinas's notion of divine goodness based on this anthropomorphic criterion and the consequences of Sterba's anthropomorphism.

6. Comparison of Sterba's and Thomistic Notion of Divine Goodness

Up to this point, Sterba's and Aquinas's ways of speaking about God have been presented. Sterba says that God is a moral agent capable of doing good or evil and acting correctly or wrongly, and claims that his existence is incompatible with the basic requirements of our morality (See Sterba 2019, p. 111). On the other hand, the Thomistic approach holds that God is goodness itself; he can only choose good; and he chooses it constantly and infallibly, eternally. Moreover, God is to be understood as *the* source of morality. Now, in the light of (a), (b), (c), and (d), the differences between Sterba's and the Thomistic notion of divine goodness can be observed:

1. An ideal state needs to do good in order to be good, but God is goodness itself.
2. An ideal state's goodness is accidental because even an ideal state has at least a logical possibility to act wrongly, but God's goodness is essential, and he cannot do evil.
3. An ideal state is not the source of goodness, but God is.
4. God is not morally obliged to do anything because he is goodness itself, the eternal law, and is not subordinated to anyone or anything; however, an ideal state would still be subject to moral obligations and international law.
5. Even in an ideal state, morals and laws are distinct, but in God, they are the same because there is no distinction in God.
6. An ideal state is established by people, somehow "created" and "run" by people; these people as individuals do not need to be morally good or perfect; and these individuals are not the state itself. However, God is uncreated; there is no metaphysical distinction in him; and he does not have parts that are either good or not good; he is the goodness himself.

The analogy of an ideal state starts with an observation of the existing world such as Aquinas does in his five ways (See [Aquinas 1948a](#), I q. 2). However, unlike Aquinas, Sterba does not make the crucial step; he *only* applies properties of this world to God while Aquinas moves further and, through negation and eminence, finds a better way of speaking of God because he goes beyond the world observation.²⁴ Sterba does not go beyond the physical. He only idealizes what there is physically, and he does not proceed to what there is not in God (as Aquinas does). This is what Huffling already pointed out and I will return to it later.

These metaphysical distinctions, nevertheless, have some more serious consequences. If Sterba's analogy works then God exists only insofar as he prevents others from interfering with our fundamental freedoms. However, theistic God in fact does much more. To him, the perfection of human nature does not depend on some external securing of freedoms. The freedom God provides us with is different from the significant freedoms Sterba's ideal state would provide. An ideal state would make sure that we are significantly free by externally destroying all the obstacles (negative freedom), while God inspires our freedom internally (positive freedom). This is only possible when our significant freedoms are identical to the perfection of our natures. This is the possibility that the Thomistic approach provides. From the Thomistic point of view, our perfection depends *metaphysically* on being and good that are *internal* to us and exist within us. However, from Sterba's point of view, our perfection depends *physically* on some political forces that are *external* to us. I think that if God acted as an ideal state, we would not be completely free. Of course, there is still a focus on individual freedom but its source is different considering both Thomism and the analogy of an ideal state. Sterba could argue that God is somehow different from us, just like an ideal state is different from us. However, an ideal state is not a metaphysical source of being of its people.

Further, an ideal state is not a people-free entity. It is established by people, not vice versa. An ideal state could emerge from any imperfect state. Imagine that a government in a state would gradually turn into an ideal government that would create an ideal state. This cannot be applied to God because it is not possible that he comes into existence gradually. It would contradict his eternal simplicity and perfection. Also, some people would die, and some others would be elected, but this cannot happen within God because he does not have any accidental parts (I will explain this later). He cannot lose or gain anything. Finally, the function of an ideal state is only that of securing our fundamental freedoms, not creating them. An ideal state can help exercise freedoms, but it's not the source of them.

Now, I think that the biggest flaw in the analogy of an ideal state lies in the fact that it is built on moral preference of people. Sterba often argues that people would morally prefer that God (like an ideal state) would prevent and not permit horrendous evil consequences and that this preference would mean they are morally good (See [Sterba 2019](#), pp. 63–64). Moral preference, however, differs from person to person, from time to time, nation to nation. Let's consider an example. Imagine there is a primitive tribe of X and an ideal state of Y. This primitive tribe could have its rules that function just as MEPR I–III in an ideal state. Significant freedoms in this primitive tribe indeed would be secured by its primitive "government". Consider now that, in this primitive tribe, there are ritual human sacrifices that an ideal state Y considers to be morally wrong. Suppose that the tribe X considers such sacrifices as good and that some people prepare themselves to be sacrificed because it is an honor for them. Now, we could have both X and Y acting accordingly with MEPR I–III. The only difference is that the interpretation would be different. What Y considers horrendous evil, X would not. This is a problem because while people's moral preference in both cases would be that horrendous evils do not happen, the definition of horrendous evils remains different. This is what happens when we build an argument on a moral system that derives from moral preference. Sterba may argue that the very system does not derive from moral preference, but that moral preference only proves that the system is right. However, if moral preference is the criterion of verification of the system, it means that it is the basic element without which the system could not work.

I think that all these examples show that Sterba's understanding of divine goodness, based on the analogy of an ideal state, is too anthropomorphic, based on the anthropomorphic criterion mentioned in the previous section. For such God, the definition of evil would differ from culture to culture. Other problem is that the definition D of divine goodness is based on prevention of evil, as I explained in Section 4. If the definition of divine goodness is based on prevention of evil, then it would mean that divine goodness could have various intensities and definitions based on various definitions of evil. This is a serious flaw. As a result, various concepts of divine goodness and God would emerge in the end. They all would come from *one* analogy of an ideal state but would be *different* because for each of them there would be different priorities in moral evil prevention. It is also possible that these priorities could be mutually exclusive or even contradictory.

Finally, as I said before, such anthropomorphism is not in accordance with some basic theistic beliefs. These include that God is the creator and that he is absolutely different from us, and that we are somehow similar to him, not vice versa. Of course, Sterba's analogy may have some inspiring parts. As Michael Douglas Beatty says, Christians accept the importance of such political structures, but they do not regard a government of a politically liberal democracy as a proper analogy for God. The reason is God's transcendence (See Beatty 2021, p. 5). Moreover, as Adams says, when someone wants to criticize theistic beliefs, they must do so in coherence with the belief system (See Adams 2007, p. 366). And Sterba fails to do this.

7. The Permission of Horrendous Evils

With what has been said so far, Sterba's argument for God's nonexistence (I–V, Section 3.4) can be disproven with Thomistic arguments in this way:

- Premise II presupposes that God has moral obligations, which has been shown not to be the case in (c).
- Premise III presupposes that God is a moral agent like us because, according to Sterba, God is good if and only if he acts like an ideal state. This has been shown not to be the case in (a), (b), and (c).
- Premise IV presupposes that evil in the world is God's fault, which has been shown not to be the case in (a), (b), and (c).
- Therefore, it is not the case that V (C) is valid.

The definition (D) in Section 4 speaks about God's permission for evil in the world—one thing that an ideal state would never allow. However, it is logically inconsistent to claim that God permits evil like we humans permit it because we are capable of willing evil. Sterba is aware of the Thomistic notion of divine goodness (explained in Section 5) and tries to contradict it,²⁵ but his comments are a result of misunderstanding Thomistic metaphysics. As Huffling puts it, Sterba simply understands the thoughts of Aquinas or contemporary Thomists in *physical* terms (See Huffling 2021, pp. 8–11). However, the Thomistic approach opens the metaphysical way: God is the perfect moral agent who wills and performs only good. Furthermore, unlike an ideal state, God is the first metaphysical principle which means that, in order to prevent evil, he does not need to secure our freedom externally, but he metaphysically inspires our freedom that derives from our being which reflects God's goodness and perfection. God inspires perfection of our natures internally, not by some external forces.

Speaking of permission of evil, some clarifications need to be addressed. Sterba understands God's permission of evil as an *intentional act*, and hence an evil act. God should *interfere* with wrongful actions. There may be some greater good coming from horrendous evil consequences, but they are irrelevant since God should adhere to MEPR I–III (See Sterba 2019, pp. 111–39). As I already explained, this is because Sterba confuses metaphysical and physical causation. According to Aquinas, God only wills good, and he *provides us* with this good (See Davies 2011, pp. 79–84). Providence is tied up with goodness on a metaphysical level. If God provides goodness only, he simply cannot provide evil. Evil does not have an essence—it is a *real privation* in essence. In this sense, evil is a *lack of*

good causation.²⁶ Permission of evil can be ascribed to God only *accidentally* because God does not will evil essentially (since he essentially wills good, not privation of good).²⁷

By “accidentally” I mean something that is contrary to “essentially”. I am not saying that God has accidental properties. In God, everything is essential. And since he essentially wills and causes good, there is no room for essentially willing or causing evil. Eleonore Stump offers an explanation of Aquinas on this matter. Since God wills goodness only, he wills himself essentially. He also wills all the created good that his eternal substance freely creates. God wills our good and that is the way that our goodness comes to existence and perfection (See [Stump 2003](#), pp. 106–9). Stump explains that God does not have accidental properties because he cannot change over time and he is not imperfect.²⁸ With this explanation I can elaborate more on the “accidental” claim. The effects of some good that exists can be of two types: essential and accidental. An essential effect is simply another good, and an accidental effect is something different from the original good. In this sense, evil is an accidental effect of a certain good. This is coherent with Aquinas’s point of view because he claims that evil does not exist without the original good (See [Davies 2016](#), pp. 203–8). A sickness is just a lack of a certain perfection, which is health in this case. A sickness has some physical manifestations that emerge from something existing and hence good. But that does not mean that the sick person ceases to be good or that the idea of health is no more meaningful. It also does not mean that sickness is something good. Furthermore, the sick person is not the essential author of the sickness just as God is not the author of evil. Analogically, God’s permission of evil can be ascribed to him only accidentally because it is only the lack of perfection that he inspires or wills to inspire in a certain substance. In other words, God cannot permit evil as an intentional act of his will focused on “evil” because his will is only intentionally focused on “good”. Also, there is to notice that I am not saying anything about God’s accidental permitting evil, but about ours ascribing this permission to him as an accidental permission. That is because God only wills good, he wills it essentially and there is nothing essential outside of it (or accidental within it).

Moreover, God’s willing good only is *the* way of preventing all possible moral evil. God *inspires* perfection that moral evil is the lack of. On the contrary, if God acted as an ideal state, he would inspire our freedom externally. God’s permission or not prevention would be hence understood as an intentional act, but based on Thomism, I showed that is not the case. If God acted as an ideal state, the permission or not prevention could be understood as imperfection, while according to Aquinas, there is no imperfection in God.

To conclude, God’s permission of evil is not in contradiction with MEPR I–III. MEPR I–III suggest that if God intentionally permits and does not prevent evil, he does not exist. But I showed that it is not the case. God does not fail to act accordingly with MEPR I–III because (1) there is no imperfection in God, (2) he only wills good, and (3) he inspires our perfection (significant freedoms) internally. Even though moral principles derive from God, in the Thomist view, he is not morally obliged to them, as I said before. Such principles are for those who need to perfect themselves by acting morally. God is, however, already perfect. Speaking of God not acting accordingly with MEPR I–III is just, I think, our incapacity to physically express that God observes these principles by metaphysically being and willing good and inspiring good only.

8. Some Final Considerations

In Section 5, I elaborated on the notion of divine goodness as explained by Aquinas. I mentioned Huffling who argues that God is not a moral agent simply because (1) he is not created and (2) he does not have any moral obligations to fulfill. Huffling argues against Sterba’s opinion that God is moral insofar as rational. According to Huffling, Sterba ascribes rationality univocally to God, and this is a mistake (See [Huffling 2021](#), p. 5). However, Sterba makes a good point in his reaction. He asks: if moral virtues can be analogically ascribed to God, why not rationality, too? This is the crucial point because Sterba can now claim that his argument is valid: since rationality can be analogically ascribed to God, he is

a moral agent who has moral obligations (See [Sterba 2021](#), p. 10). I think that Huffling's point is only partially sound. As I argued in Section 5, God is the *perfect* moral agent with no moral obligations. I think that what Huffling fails to see is that for God to be metaphysically perfectly good means to be perfectly morally good as well. With such a conclusion, Sterba's point of view can be successfully contradicted.

Huffling is, nevertheless, right in his observation that Sterba misplaces the physical and the metaphysical levels when speaking about God and evil. This leads to several implications. First, Sterba misplaces the responsibility of God and wrongdoers. If evil is a privation, then immoral consequences must also be seen as a privation. If effects are like their cause, then a privation leads to another privation. The horrendous consequences of our immoral actions are not the effects of God's causation. Sterba might say that God is the cause of immoral consequences because he is the metaphysical cause of the being of wrongdoers; but again, their immoral actions are not caused by God on the metaphysical level; and Sterba overlooks the physical and metaphysical distinction (See [Sterba 2019](#), pp. 117–19; [Huffling 2021](#), p. 9). Second, there is a serious incoherence in saying that God (as an ideal state) should permit and not prevent lesser evils. Consider a case where a lesser evil (e.g., a light trauma on a psychological level) is the cause of some horrendous evil (a man murders those who caused this trauma when he was a child). In this case, a state's non-interfering with lesser evil leads to some horrendous evil. In this case, it is not plausible to say that an ideal state is good, and there is no point in claiming that God should act the same because this clearly leads to a contradiction. Third, according to Sterba, God should be acting accordingly with our human moral requirements based on human moral preference. This, again, is too anthropomorphic. It is logically inconsistent to say that a (non-human) God should adhere to human moral preference, God is absolutely simple (and unchangeable), but our humane moral preference changes from time to time, age to age, and culture to culture. Certainly, people would morally prefer that horrendous evil consequences do not happen, but these consequences are not God's fault, as I showed already. Finally, according to Sterba, God should intentionally allow evil to some degree; he can justifiably violate Pauline Principle. But this can only happen when a state and morals are distinct. I showed that this is not the case because God is identical to morals. God can cause the good only, and he inspires positive freedom which is freedom to do the good.

Another objection to the analogy of an ideal state was raised by Toby Betenson. He claims that we should not ascribe the properties of an ideal state to God, because (1) an ideal state has its authority granted by the people, and (2) God's obligations are not the same as the obligations of an ideal state (See [Betenson 2021](#), p. 11). Sterba responds that what is common for both God and an ideal state (speaking analogically) is morality and its constraints (See [Sterba 2021](#), p. 17). However, based on Thomism, I can respond to both Betenson and Sterba that God does not have *any* moral obligations and that Sterba's analogy is too anthropomorphic, as I already showed.

9. Final Argument

My final argument against Sterba's analogy of an ideal state is as follows:

1. Sterba claims that the God of theism does not exist because, if he existed, he would have acted as an ideal state.
2. Acting as an ideal state is to fulfill moral obligations (MEPR I–III), which means to prevent and not permit horrendous evil consequences.
3. However, God is not a moral agent like us. He is the perfect moral agent, which means that he is *summum bonum* and *lex aeterna*, the source of every moral obligation and the ultimate performer of the good according to his nature.
4. God performs the good on the metaphysical level as the first cause of every good and it makes him essentially different from an ideal state.
5. There is no possibility that God would perform evil essentially by not preventing and permitting horrendous evil consequences.

6. God's permission and not prevention of horrendous evil consequences do not happen on the essential level of his divinity.
7. Because God is absolutely good, he does not in any sense violate MEPR I–III. Also, there is no point in asking whether he should logically adhere to these because (1) he is the source of morality and (2) MEPR I–III are based on human moral preference.
8. *Conclusion:* God's permission of horrendous evil consequences does not happen essentially. God does not have any accidental properties and that is why the permission of evil cannot be ascribed to him essentially. God is essentially good and wills good only. Unlike an ideal state, God performs good essentially (perfectly), which does not make him a moral agent like humans. The results of the analogy of an ideal state do not apply to the all-good God of theism, because the analogy is too anthropomorphic. It relies on an idealized physical approach of God. Furthermore, the analogy of an ideal state is non in accordance with some basic theistic beliefs. As a result, it is not a case that the analogy of an ideal state disproves the metaphysical existence of the all-good God of theism.

10. Conclusions

In this article, I inquired whether Sterba's analogy of an ideal state is successful in proving that the God of theism does not exist. I think it is not. First, I examined the problem of horrendous evils and explained Sterba's notion of significant freedoms and the analogy of an ideal state. I explained that Sterba understands divine goodness as dependent on prevention of evil. Second, I explained Aquinas's notion of divine goodness as essential and non-dependent on prevention of evil. Then I compared these two concepts. Applying the anthropomorphic criterion, I showed that Sterba's concept of divine goodness (in the image of an ideal state) is inappropriate of God. Such God would not be completely good or could change over time which would not be compatible with his absolute goodness. Such God is incompatible with some basic theistic beliefs. If Sterba claims that (1) God of theism should act as an ideal state, but at the same time (2) such a claim is not compatible with those basic theistic beliefs (including non-anthropomorphic analogy), then we have a contradiction. On the other hand, the Thomistic notion of divine goodness offers a way to show the compatibility of a good God of theism and moral horrendous evil in the world. Thomistic God is understood as goodness itself and as the cause of all the being/good and, as a result, he cannot be the cause of evil which is a privation of perfection or of a good effect. God's permission and not prevention of horrendous evils are not essential. In fact, God prevents evil by metaphysically causing good and inspiring our positive freedom internally, not externally as an ideal state would do. All things considered, I think that people would morally prefer that God of theism does not act as an ideal state.

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Notes

¹ Authors use either singular or plural form depending on the meaning. The plural form is usually used when speaking of the amount, degrees, and types of pointless and gratuitous evil or its horrendous consequences, e.g., assault and rape are two different horrendous *evils*, even though they can be metaphysically conceived together as horrendous *evil*. I will refer to *evil*, or *evils* depending on the meaning.

² (Sterba 2019, p. 11). "Never do evil that good may come from it". Sterba takes this statement from the Bible, Letter to Romans 3:8.

³ By theism, Sterba means traditional theism, where, according to Sterba, an all-good, all-powerful God is understood in a more anthropomorphic way; he can act either morally right or wrong and is subject to moral obligations cf. (Sterba 2019, p. 150). Another version of theism is classical where God is understood more as a personal or impersonal first metaphysical cause and the principle of all the created being; he is eternal and cannot change over time, cf. (Rojka 2018, pp. 34, 37). For the importance of an eternal God for the consistency of theism, cf. (Volek 2017, 2018). For another view on the eternity of God, where he is understood

as eternal before creation and temporal after creation, cf. (Craig 2001). For a more general approach to theism, cf. (Swinburne 2004, pp. 1–2, 93–96). Sterba argues against classical theism as well (e.g., against Brian Davies), cf. (Sterba 2019, pp. 110–39). In my argument, I will use the classical theist (Thomistic) position in a more moderate form (God as the perfect moral agent).

(Sterba 2019, p. 6). Hereafter, I will use “ideal state” instead of “ideally just and political state”.

Cf. (Spišiaková 2012, p. 81). Logical arguments from evil have a similar structure as those arguments that try to prove the consistency of the theistic statements about God and evil. Logical arguments from evil look for a proposition q which is necessarily true and its conjunction with some theistic proposition is a contradiction. The arguments in favor of theism look for a proposition p that is consistent with the statement “God exists” and its conjunction with this statement is consistent with the statement that “Evil exists”.

Cf. (Schmidt 2008, pp. 356–61). Why is there evil in the world if God exists?

For more, cf. (Calder 2018). The first one to make a distinction between theodicy and defense was Plantinga. A theodicy tries to explain the place of evil in a world made by God, while a defense tries to show that evil does not disprove the existence of God (See Davies 2011, p. 3). My argument is both a theodicy and a defense.

I will use “privation” instead of “absence”. Absence is tied up with degrees of the being—e.g., a dog cannot fly. It is, however, a positive absence because it positively determines the essence of the being (a dog is not a flying object like a bird). The term “privation” conveys that evil is some lack of the perfection that a specific being should have according to their essence (See Chignell 2021). Therefore, I will refer to evil as *privation*. Please note that some authors refer to evil as absence by technically meaning privation, e.g., cf. (Davies 2011, pp. 33–37).

Scholars debate whether we should refer to God in the masculine, cf. (Radford Ruether 2007). I will refer to God in the masculine for the reason of simplification.

This “privation theory of evil” was brought about by Neoplatonists and later by Augustine. Thomas Aquinas defines evil as some sort of negation in substance (See Davies 2016, pp. 202–8).

Here they do not speak of evil as absence but as horrendous consequences of evil/immoral actions.

(Sterba 2019, pp. 26, 147). Soul-making is the capacity of developing one’s personality and morality. Soul-making theodicy holds that evil is a necessary condition for one’s personal and moral growth, cf. (Spišiaková 2012, pp. 118–25).

(Van der Vossen 2019). Negative freedom or liberty is the absence of obstacles, barriers, or constraints. Positive freedom is the presence of control on the part of the agent, cf. (Carter 2021).

For Sterba’s approach on soul-making, cf. (Sterba 2019, pp. 35–45), and on redemptive suffering, cf. (Sterba 2019, pp. 141–53).

Sterba uses this argument from moral preference on various pages, e.g., cf. (Sterba 2019, p. 184). It is also included in MEPR I–III.

Cf. (Sterba 2019, p. 51). It is hard to say whether some evil can be “more” or “less” evil; it is simply “evil”. What Sterba means is that there are certain evils that do not have horrendous consequences. Hereafter, I will use “lesser evils” for such a category, having in mind that evil as a metaphysical privation of goodness does not have an amount.

Cf. (Rojka 2018, pp. 32–39, 121–22). There are different theistic notions of the person. Here I refer to the notion of person that is brought about by some contemporary theists such as Rojka, Swinburne, Plantinga, or Lucas. Their notion of person is different from the classical theistic notion of person.

See (Davies 2011, p. 114) For more, cf. (Davies 2002, p. 228).

More precisely, our intellect cannot “see” the essence of God like God “sees” it, because our intellect is not sufficient to essentially understand something that is more intelligible than us, cf. (Aquinas 1948a, I q. 12). The names that our language attributes to God (1) represent his essence but (2) imperfectly—which does not mean that God himself is imperfect, cf. (Aquinas 1948a, I q. 13 a. 1).

Aquinas holds that in God, there is no composition of (1) substance and accidents, (2) existence and essence, (3) matter and form, and therefore (4) he is pure actuality. These are the basic premises of the doctrine of divine simplicity. God is absolutely simple which means that there is no metaphysical composition in him. By examining what God is not, Aquinas finds a proper way of speaking of God. Cf. (Davies 2002; Aquinas 1948a, I q. 3).

Cf. (Davies 2002, p. 231). “New York is a city” and “Paris is a city” give us *univocal* uses of “city” and both statements are literally true. “Baseball players use bats” and “Bats have wings” give us *equivocal* uses of “bats” and both statements are literally true. “I have a good computer” and “God is good” give us *analogical* uses of “good” and both are literally true.

There are three steps in Aquinas’s notion of analogy: (1) via *positiva*—God is good, (2) via *negativa*—God is not good like us, (3) via *eminentiae*—God is the perfect goodness, the goodness itself, cf. (Rojka 2018, pp. 34–35; Aquinas 1948a, I q. 13).

In his article, Edward Feser agrees with Brian Davies that there is a very different and excessively anthropomorphic conception of God in the recent philosophy of religion, especially linked to the problem of evil. Feser uses the Thomistic concept, but not only. The Thomistic concept, however, is a very important part of the “mainstream” theistic position cf. (Feser 2021, p. 2). This mainstream position can be considered as opposite of anthropomorphic.

By “better” I mean less anthropomorphic, according to Wildman’s criteria, cf. (Diller 2021; Wildman 2017).

Cf. (Sterba 2019, pp. 134–35). Sterba argues against the Thomistic interpretation of divine goodness represented by Brian Davies.

Cf. (Aquinas 2017, p. 45). Aquinas does not think that evil is not real. Evil is a *real* privation, cf. (Davies 2011, p. 115).

- ²⁷ Cf. (Aquinas 2017, pp. 45–46). Aquinas deals with the problem in a way that evil is privation of some good that is causally connected to God. He solves it by stating that these evil effects are tied to God’s causation only accidentally.
- ²⁸ Cf. (Stump 2003, pp. 109–15). When speaking about various essential properties of God, Stump uses the terminology of Frege. Various properties are like various non-synonymous expressions of one thing they are referred to, such as “the morning star” and “the evening star”, cf. (Stump 2003, p. 100).

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