

Article

Human Sovereignty and the Logical Problem of Evil

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Abstract: In this paper, I provide a defence of theism against James Sterba's version of the logical problem of evil, at least where the focus is on moral evil (I do not have much to say about natural evil in this paper). After giving my own account of the distinction between the logical and evidential problems of evil, I set out to argue that Sterba fails to prove atheism. The problem lies with this third premise. I think that there is a possible defence according to which the three 'Evil Prevention Requirements' that Sterba endorse are all true but do not support atheism.

Keywords: logical problem of evil; evidential problem of evil; Sterba; Free Will theodicy; Free Will defence; sovereignty

1. Introduction

James Sterba's (2019, 2020, 2021) attempt to revitalize the problem of evil, in its 'logical' form, as an argument against the existence of God has been the subject of an enormous amount of literature. There are those who have contributed to the literature in order to endorse Sterba's atheistic conclusion (Ekstrom 2021), those who have contributed to suggest that the concept of God needs a radical rethink (Burns 2021; Hall 2021; Wilmot 2021), those who defend the Thomist view that God is not morally good (Huffling 2021; Bishop 2021; Fesser 2021), those who think the evils of the world are really not that bad, at least in any objective sense (Hall 2021; Reichenbach 2021) or who think that they are rendered irrelevant by the great goods that are to come (Walls 2021; Beaty 2021), those who say that Sterba's arguments go wrong by making an analogy between God and a just state (Almeida 2020; Attfield 2021; Hasker 2020, 2021), and others still. With a field so crowded, it is a tough undertaking to say something new, and I think an impossible one to say something *wholly* new. I will try to do the former, but not the latter. As I simultaneously developed my own thinking on the topic and waded through the voluminous literature, I read Janusz Salamon's (2021) article defending the claim that humanity is itself a sovereign entity and that, therefore, a good God ought not (and hence, would not) systematically intervene in our world. Thus, I found that at least one other philosopher had already presented an objection to Sterba along the lines that seemed most promising to me. So, Salamon suggests that God does not intervene in the human world more often, because to do so would violate a right to self-determination. This is a possibility I shall defend as well, and therefore, I am taking an approach that is already represented in the published literature. Nevertheless, I have wholly new arguments for this view, and though our destinations are the same, my overall strategy for getting there has little in common with Salamon's. Salamon treats this as a theodicy and locates its origin in the work of Pico della Mirandola, as well as draws supplementary hypotheses from the work of Dostoyevsky. By contrast, I will treat the approach merely as a defence and, having never read Mirandola, will leave the history of philosophy to the experts. I will also set aside Dostoyevsky, because I think that Salamon's supplementary hypotheses are liabilities in this argument. I will, however, argue that this defence serves to rebut Sterba's argument for atheism.

In addition, partly to add a position to the debate that is perhaps not worth setting out in a paper of its own, and partly because it does play a role in the main dialectic, I will begin this paper by discussing another issue: whether Sterba's version of the problem of



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evil really is a 'logical' version or not. I shall argue, against Toby [Betenson \(2021\)](#), that the traditional distinction between 'logical' and 'evidential' versions of the problem is vague and, to the extent that anything definite can be said about the distinction at all, it is a matter of degree. I shall further argue that Sterba's version exists somewhere in the middle, in the grey zone between the two.

Having argued for these points in the first third of the paper, I will move on to the main dialectic, which focuses on moral evil (I will set aside the problem of natural evil for future research, a problem I have partially tackled elsewhere ([Molto 2021](#))). The thesis of this section, and the central claim of the whole paper, is that Sterba fails to establish his conclusion. I will argue that the third premise of Sterba's argument is false. As this premise involves a strict conditional, I will try to demonstrate its falsity by constructing a just-so story to serve as a countermodel. I will also consider a weaker alternative to Sterba's third premise and argue that it is unproven. I will consider and respond to objections before concluding that if Sterba's general approach is salvageable, it would involve pushing the argument further towards the evidential end of the spectrum.

2. Part I: What Is the Logical Problem of Evil?

So, what is the logical problem of evil? We are sometimes told that it is the argument that was given by Epicurus, David Hume, and JL Mackie, and it is contrasted with the more recent 'evidential' problem of evil.

What makes the arguments of Epicurus, Hume, and Mackie logical? In an earlier contribution appearing in this journal, Toby [Betenson \(2021\)](#) suggests that an argument is logical if and only if it is deductively valid. I disagree. An example of a deductively valid problem of evil argument would be this one:

Premise: There exist instances of intense suffering that an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Premise: An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Therefore,

Conclusion: There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

This latter argument may sound familiar. It is the one given by William [Rowe \(1979, p. 336\)](#) and is usually said to be the original evidential version of the problem of evil. It is recognized by [Betenson \(2021, p. 4 of 11\)](#) that this and other arguments that have historically been termed 'evidential' are presented deductively. He nevertheless argues that, traditional usage notwithstanding, these ought to be considered logical arguments. The difference between a logical problem of evil and an evidential one, [Betenson \(2021, p. 8 of 11\)](#) claims, is just that the former uses deductive reasoning, while the latter uses inductive. His argument for this position, heavily simplified, seems to be that the only apparent alternative account of the distinction between logical and evidential would be that problems of the former type are those that are wholly a priori, and that that distinction fails since no plausible problem of evil is wholly a priori. Betenson is certainly right that this alternative account of the distinction is a non-starter, but taken as an argument for his own account, this argument fails because it does not consider any further alternatives. Moreover, there are independently good reasons for rejecting Betenson's own account of the distinction.

Not only does Betenson's account of the distinction fly in the face of well-established usage, but it also fails to make enough room for any interesting difference between the logical and evidential problems. Any inductive argument can, rather trivially, be recast as a deductive argument.

Take some stipulatively good induction of the form

IN1

Premise: A_1 is F.

Premise: A_2 is F.

Premise: A_3 is F.

...

Premise: A_n is F.

Therefore,

Conclusion: All A_s are F.

The reasoning is of course defeasible, and the conclusion has only been established probabilistically. However, if the reasoning does involve a good induction, it is only because this argument is *deductively* valid.

DE1

Premise: If A_1 – A_n are each F, then probably all A_s are F.

Premise: A_1 – A_n are each F.

Therefore,

Conclusion: Probably all A_s are F.

To attack the inference of IN1 is just to attack the major premise of DE1.¹ The difference between the arguments is of interest to logicians (who study the nature of inferential relations), but not to philosophers of religion (who just want to know whether the conclusion is (probably) true). So, there is no necessary link between the content of the premises and conclusion of an argument and whether it is presented deductively or inductively.

As I have said, Betenson is clearly correct that the difference is not that the evidential arguments have empirical content, while the logical arguments do not, because all problem-of-evil arguments involve empirical content. However, we regiment Mackie's (1955) argument; he is clearly committed to the premise 'evil exists in the world', and this is an empirical claim. Nevertheless, what distinguishes Rowe's argument from Mackie's is the important addition of the relative clause '... which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse' (Rowe 1979, p. 336), with the result that the focus of debate is shifted from the major, conceptual premise (if there is evil, there is no God) to the minor, empirical premise (that there is evil of a certain kind). It seems to me, then, that if there is to be an interesting distinction, however vague, between the logical and evidential problems, it must have something to do with the relatively greater dependency on empirical content in evidential arguments, as compared with the greater dependency on a priori principles in the latter.

Sterba, in a brief response to Betenson, is on the right track when he characterizes evidential arguments as being such that 'the heart of <the> argument against God does not utilize logically necessary, normative, or metaphysical principles' (Sterba 2021, p. 17 of 21). However, it would be wrong to try to build a necessary and sufficient condition from this thought. The difference is not that the empirical content of evidential arguments is what is challenged by the theist in the case of evidential arguments while it remains unchallenged by the theist in the case of logical arguments. First, distinctions between classes of argument should never be drawn according to how people respond to them, human perversity being what it is. Moreover, even as seemingly unobjectionable an empirical claim as 'evil exists in our world' is disputed by those, such as Augustine, who hold that evil is an absence rather than an existence, while even the most trivial conceptual claim, for example, that God would not permit *needless* suffering, might be disputed by the Thomists, who hold that God is not subject to the moral law.

What we can say, though, is that we have a spectrum, on the evidential side of which we find those arguments for which the empirical content is greater and intended to be doing more of the heavy lifting. On the logical side of the spectrum, we find those arguments with more modest empirical claims, where the slack is picked up by a priori conceptual claims about what the world would be like if there was a God.

So, where do we find Sterba's argument on this spectrum? Well, first, we must present his argument, so here it is, in the simplest form in which he presents it (Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90):

Sterba's argument

1. There is an all-good, all-powerful God.
2. If there is an all-good, all-powerful God, then necessarily, he would be adhering to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III <more about these later>.
3. If God were adhering to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, then necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission.
4. Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain all around us.
5. Therefore, it is not the case that there is an all-good, all-powerful God.

Undoubtedly, this argument involves greater empirical content than is found in Mackie's. Mackie's argument is supposed to work (though, famously, it does not) with only the empirical claim that there is evil existing in the world. Sterba needs more, namely, that we are surrounded by evil is significant and horrendous and the consequence of immoral actions. So, although I do not have the resources to say determinately whether Sterba's argument is a logical or evidential argument, it is quite clear that it is considerably further to the evidential side of the spectrum than Mackie's argument. I will, near the end of the current paper, argue that if Sterba's argument is salvageable, it is only by bringing it further towards the evidential side of the spectrum. Before we can get to that, though, we must see what is wrong with the argument as it stands.

3. Part II: Contra Sterba's Premise 3

I intend to attack premise 3 of Sterba's argument, which, once again, says: 'If God were adhering to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, then necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission' (Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90).

Evil Prevention Requirements

- 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 easily be done.
- 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.
- 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 those goods (Sterba 2019, p. 184).

Sterba thinks that these follow from PP while respecting the exceptions to that more general principle.

Sterba also thinks that Evil Prevention Requirements I–III are sufficient to show that if there is horrendous evil in the world, then there is no God. This is where we disagree. I think that Evil Prevention Requirements II and III are true, but that they do not support Sterba's third premise. I also think that Evil Prevention Requirement I is either true or false depending on the range of the quantifier 'anyone'. If the range of that quantifier is interpreted widely enough to make Evil Prevention Requirement I true, then Evil Prevention Requirement I does not support premise 3, but if interpreted with a range suitably narrow to support premise 3, then Evil Prevention Requirement I is false. I will explain further shortly, but first, a bit more about my approach.

4. A Bit about the Approach

I accept the Pauline Principle, with caveats, just as Sterba does. Moreover, I think that we may justifiably reason as follows:

If facts about the world show that God would have violated the Pauline Principle (setting aside the exceptions to the principle granted by Sterba), then there is no God.

This puts me at odds with the Thomist-inspired response to the problem of evil (see [Davies 2006](#)). For the record, I agree with Aquinas and his defenders (and Sterba, for that matter) that all predications about God are made analogically. I also agree that God is the source of morality. Perhaps it is even right to follow the Thomists in saying that God is good, but not morally good; I am not sure. However, the question before us is whether a good (morally or otherwise) God would act in a way that violates the Pauline Principle. Just as that principle (agreed exceptions aside, of course) rings true to me as a constraint on moral human action, so it rings true to me as a constraint of the actions of a good (morally or otherwise) God. If I was wrong about that, I have a much worse conceptual grasp on how God would act than I thought I did. Of course, I might well have a much worse grasp on how God would act than I thought I did, but if this move is what underwrites the apparent efficacy of the 'Thomist' response to the problem of evil, then that response is really just sceptical theism under another name. The view that God is good but not morally good (because, as the source of morality, He is ineligible for moral evaluation) may be true and perhaps importantly so. However, as a response to the problem of evil, it adds little, because either it must leave our intuitions about how God would act unchanged or it would tell us that our intuitions are unreliable and would then face many of the same worries as sceptical theism (admirably brought out by Scott [Coley \(2021\)](#)).

I am not a sceptical theist, though I think there are considerable limitations on our ability to make inferences about God's likely patterns of behaviour and motivations (limitations are not the same thing as a complete absence), and so I believe the onus is still on the theist to propose possible reasons why God might permit evil. Happily, I believe that I can do this and thereby show that premise 3 is false and Sterba's argument therefore fails.

So, then, I accept the Pauline Principle (with exceptions), and I accept that God's actions would be consistent with it. I nevertheless think that there are possible reasons (for that matter, I think plausible reasons) why God would permit evil. How do we square these two claims? First of all, here is how I do not propose to square these claims: I will not point to greater goods for humans that God permits evil for the sake of, be they the same humans who experience the relevant evils or different humans. I am not appealing here to either the soul-making theodicy or free will. Given this, I can happily accept Evil Prevention Requirements II and III. Even without the benefit of great goods for humans, I propose that there is some other possible reason that God might have for permitting evil. For this reason, to be compatible with Evil Prevention Requirement I as well, it will, of course, have something to do with rights.

5. Rights and the State Analogy

Whereas a common line of response to Sterba's argument has been to challenge his analogy between God and a just state ([Almeida 2020](#); [Attfield 2021](#); [Hasker 2020, 2021](#)), my intuition is that the state analogy is, at least somewhat, appropriate. Thinking about right and wrong when it comes to states can tell us something about what would be right or wrong for God. Where Sterba goes wrong, in my opinion, is which relationship between a just state and individuals he takes to be the best analogue for the relationship between God and individuals. Whereas Sterba thinks the best analogue is the relationship between the just state and its own citizens, I think the best analogue is between a just state and the citizens of a foreign country, or (perhaps even better) the relationship between a just state and people living in an unincorporated territory outside its borders. I am not the first to make this point: Janusz [Salamon \(2021, p. 3 of 16\)](#) points out that the notion of sovereignty that is implied in Sterba's talk of 'the just state' is one according to which it is wrong for one sovereign state to intervene in the affairs of another.

Example: US police should not systematically act to prevent crime in Canada, even if these systematic interventions are guaranteed to succeed and it is guaranteed that no one else will get hurt.²

This would be so even if we stipulate that the US is a just state. A state cannot, in general, appeal to its own moral superiority to justify violations of the sovereignty of other states. The general rule is that sovereign entities should not intervene in the affairs of other sovereign entities. This rule may still be defeasible, of course, and indeed, in its application to God, the orthodox theist will no doubt have to say that it is defeasible, because according to orthodox theism, God does sometimes intervene in the world. Nevertheless, the defeasibility of this principle is plausible enough both for states and for God. The question we need to consider is whether this rule provides a possible explanation for the evil in the world.

It is a matter of such controversy when state interventions should take place that it would take it well beyond the scope of this paper to pass judgement on the issue; however, we do not need to answer that question in order to defeat Sterba's argument. As Sterba is intending to give a version of the logical problem of evil, he does not intend his argument to depend on the specifics of individual instances of horrendous evil. Rather, the fact that there is horrendous evil in the world (and the assumption is that no appeal to rights can explain why this horrendous evil is permitted) is supposed to be enough to show that there is no God. In fact, many of the cases Sterba uses through his book to illustrate horrendous evil are ones that would clearly not provide a suitable pretext for the intervention of one state into the affairs of another. States should not be intervening in the affairs of others to prevent murders, even horrific murders. So, this analogy between God and a foreign sovereign state does pose a threat to Sterba's argument.

Of course, Sterba might think that a just state would always intervene to prevent a genocide of the scope of the Holocaust or the Rwandan Genocide, especially if it could be guaranteed of doing so without causing any other harm. On this basis, Sterba might suggest that these events, at least, would have been prevented by a good God. However, for one thing, reliance on the details of specific examples would push Sterba's argument much further into evidential territory, to the point where in no way would we still be dealing with an example of the logical version of the problem (pace [Betenson 2021](#), who, as we saw, wishes to give a very different and, to my mind, very odd characterization of the difference). For another thing, the analogy between God and a foreign state is just an analogy, and it must be granted that it is *possible* that the defeasibility conditions for the non-intervention rule might be more stringent for God than they are for other states.

It should now be clear why, in the previous section, I identified an important ambiguity in the quantifier 'anyone' in Sterba's Evil Prevention Requirement I. If this quantifier is interpreted to range over both human and non-human rights-bearers, such as states and sovereign authorities, then I think this Requirement is true. If it is interpreted to range over only human rights-bearers, then I contend, with William [Hasker \(2020, 2021\)](#), that Evil Prevention Requirement I is false. God is not refusing to intervene in the world because *individuals* have a right to non-intervention, but because humanity collectively does, on this defence. So, the analogy I am providing between God and a foreign state can serve as a motivation for either the falsity of Evil Prevention Requirement I or for its failure to support Sterba's premise 3. In the interest of space, I will only discuss the second of these options, but it should be fairly obvious from what follows how my argument would go if I had pursued the first. Let us now take a closer look at the scenario that I am claiming undermines Sterba's premise 3.

6. The Just-So Story

Bear in mind, unlike Salamon's related line of attack against Sterba's argument, I do not aim to provide a theodicy, merely a defence. The difference is that a defence is only concerned with defeating a necessary conditional by pointing to a countermodel, a counter-

model just being a possible state of affairs. In order to demonstrate such a countermodel, I am proposing a just-so story:

- (1) God chooses to create an entity which is the sum of all humans (call this entity 'H').
- (2) H, by its nature, is a sovereign authority.
- (3) Being a sovereign authority implies having a right to the non-intervention in the lives of one's citizens by any foreign sovereign authority.
- (4) This latter right is defeasible in some circumstances, but it holds in general such that systematic intervention is always wrong.
- (5) God's violations of H's right to non-intervention in the lives of its citizens by any foreign sovereign authorities is optimal (there is no better and morally acceptable set of possible violations than the one God chooses to realize).
- (6) God adheres to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III.
- (7) Significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions obtain through God's permission.

The purpose of this just-so story is to demonstrate the falsity of premise 3 of Sterba's argument, once again: if God were adhering to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, then necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission (Sterba 2019, pp. 189–90). According to this just-so story, God does adhere to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, and yet significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain through His permission.³ If this just so-story is possible, then Sterba's third premise is false, not probably false, but actually false, and hence, his argument is unsound. That is because Sterba's third premise includes the modal operator 'necessarily'. On the widely accepted semantics for necessity claims, this premise is only true if it is the case that, in every possible world in which God adheres to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral action do not obtain through God's permission. If this just-so story is possible, then there is at least one possible world in which God adheres to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, and yet significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions obtain through His permission.

Sterba claims that his Evil Prevention requirements are acceptable to both deontologists and consequentialists, and I make the same claim for my just-so story. This is rather obvious in the case of deontologists. In the case of consequentialists, I simply add the stipulation that a state of widespread violations of the right to non-interventions by foreign sovereign authorities is itself a state with massive intrinsic disvalue. This disvalue, I stipulate, is greater than the combined positive value resulting from all possible positive interventions. In other words, on consequentialist grounds, it would, all things considered, be a very bad thing for God to engage in widespread violations of H's right to non-intervention and hence the wrong thing for God to do.⁴

Incidentally, my just-so story preserves what I take to be one of the most attractive features of the traditional Free Will theodicy, in that it offers a plausible explanation for the manifest fact (pace Leibniz) that we do not live in the best of all possible worlds. This is so even with the stipulation that the disvalue of widespread violations of the right to non-interventions by foreign sovereign authorities is greater than the combined positive value resulting from all possible positive interventions. This stipulation merely guarantees that all the worlds in which God respects the right to non-intervention are better than all the worlds in which God does not respect the right to non-intervention. But there are better worlds than ours, namely, the ones in which God does not intervene and we humans freely choose to behave better.

So, is this story consistent? I think so. Is it otherwise a priori false? I do not think so. If I am right in these answers, then I think the best explanation for this is that it is metaphysically possible, and that therefore, Sterba's third premise is false and his argument

fails. However, I do not expect everyone to be convinced so easily, and I will spend the rest of the paper considering objections.

7. Sterba's Objections

Because Salamon has already proposed something somewhat similar to the position I have set out above and received a response from Sterba, I have the advantage of advance warning of Sterba's line of attack. Sterba's central objection is this:

'So how morally plausible, then, is Salamon's theodicy? Not morally plausible at all, I think. Here is why. It is because good people would morally prefer that God would have prevented the especially horrendous evil consequences of moral wrongdoing from being inflicted on innocent victims to their receiving goods that logically depend on God's permitting those consequences to be inflicted on those victims. Even the perpetrators themselves, if they even repented their wrongful deeds, would have always morally preferred that God would have prevented especially the horrendous evil consequences of their immoral actions from being inflicted on their innocent victims' (Sterba 2021, p. 6 of 21).

Sterba, then, seems to assume that if H has sovereign status, it is because the individuals that constitute H exercise sovereignty collectively. Moreover, this collective exercise of sovereignty depends on people's preferences. Even if we can make sense of a collective exercise of sovereignty, the thought seems to go, then it would rely on people preferring to be sovereign rather than have God systematically intervene in their lives, something Sterba doubts that people do. How am I to respond to this?

The first thing to say is to repeat that Sterba is committed to a modal claim with his third premise: every world in which God adheres to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, is a world in which there is no significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions obtaining through what would have to be his permission. As such, it is not enough for Sterba to argue that it is unlikely that, in our world, people prefer for God to intervene rather than not to intervene. Sterba must argue that this is true in any world. If there is even one world in which God adheres to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III and yet there are significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions obtaining through God's permission *because* humans constitute a sovereign entity and prefer for God not to intervene, then the necessity clause of Sterba's premise 3 is false and the argument fails.

So, is there some world in which people prefer for God not to intervene? Of course there is. Talk of 'possible worlds' is intended to model bare metaphysical possibility. *Could* it happen that people have the preference for divine non-intervention? Of course it *could*. This is enough to demonstrate the falsehood of Sterba's third premise.

However, the eagle-eyed might have noticed that, although Sterba commits himself to a modal claim in his third premise, he need not have done so. The argument would still have been deductively valid if he had replaced this premise with the following non-modal version:

3'. If God were adhering to Evil Prevention Requirements I–III, then significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission.

Here, 3' can do the same work as 3, which might cause us to wonder why Sterba committed himself to the stronger version in the first place. The reason, I assume, is that Sterba thought of his third premise as a conceptual truth, in keeping with his claim that he is revitalizing the logical problem of evil. Insofar as his response to the sovereignty proposal depends on claims about what humans probably prefer, it should now be clear that it is not a conceptual truth. If true at all, it is an empirical truth, and consequently, whether the argument has any prospect of success depends on further empirical content than Sterba has anticipated, and this in turn moves the argument further towards the evidential side of the spectrum.

I am also not convinced that 3' is true at all, though. For one thing, I am very doubtful that, at any given point in time, most people have a settled preference in favour of divine intervention. Many people do not believe in God. Moreover, people engage in intentional evil action all the time, and it is part of what we mean by 'intentional' that they have a preference for their action to be effective, which means not being blocked by some divine intervention. So, it seems to me that, for all we know, there has never been a point in all of human history when the overall weight of human preferences has been in favour of divine intervention. I have another reason for doubting 3', though.

I grant that it is plausible enough that if H can be understood by analogy with a sovereign entity, and H is constituted by all humans, then there must be some connection between the circumstances in which H might waive one of its rights and the preferences of humans. So, it is plausible that a sovereign entity can waive its right to non-intervention in certain circumstances, and it is plausible that these circumstances would include cases where most of the citizens of the sovereign entity have a preference for doing so. I do not think, however, that majority preference is a sufficient condition. Imagine a case where the citizens of a relatively impoverished functioning sovereign democracy held a referendum on whether to request a wealthier neighbouring state to institute a protectorate. Even if exceptionally high-quality polling prior to the vote showed an overwhelming majority in favour of the request, it seems to me clear that it would still immorally violate the poorer country's right to non-intervention if the wealthier country were to proclaim and institute the protectorate on the basis of the polling (even if it was entirely accurate) without waiting for the referendum. What this example shows, I think, is that however we understand the rights of sovereign entities, they are unlikely to be reducible to the preferences of the population in a straightforward and synchronic way.

I do not know what sort of conditions would need to be met in order to move from the preferences of most people to the waiving of H's right to non-intervention. If H is something like a country, then a constitutionally mandated procedure may be required. If, as is more plausible, H is some less rule-governed entity, such as a culture, tribe or society (at least some of which, I think, have a right to non-intervention), then perhaps it is as simple as a public expression of majority preference. What might that look like? I do not know, but I doubt that we have very good reasons for thinking that these conditions have ever been met. I also doubt that we have any good reasons for thinking that, should they be met, God would refuse to intervene. For all I know, more people just need to pray for more miracles, and God shall make a protectorate of us. In the meantime, I think Sterba's premise 3 is provably false, and its non-modal replacement, 3', is unproven.

8. Other Objections

In the final section of the paper, I will consider a series of further possible objections to my just-so story and respond in turn.

Objection 1: It is implausible that there can be an entity which is the sum of all humans.

Response: That there is such an entity is a theorem of any mereological theory involving unrestricted composition, including the classical theories of [Leśniewski \(1916\)](#) and [Leonard and Goodman \(1940\)](#). Of course, unrestricted composition is very controversial and might be false. But it is a well-established view and, I think, has some claim to plausibility. Moreover, even if the existence of H is not justified by a mereological theory, it might still be true. After all, we have no difficulty in understanding terms such as 'humanity' and 'the human race', and these might well be taken to refer to the sum of all humans.

Objection 2: It is implausible that H is a rights-bearer, or that the right to non-intervention is among its rights.

Response: We talk about the rights of countries, and the right to non-intervention by foreign countries looks like a paradigm case. Admittedly, the analogy between

H and a country, like all analogies, breaks down when looked at closely, but many other arguably sovereign entities have a claim on a similar right, for example, the rights of no-contract tribes in the rainforests of South America. Consider also a science-fiction case, such as HG Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, in which a non-human species threatens all of humanity. In such a case, I think, we have no trouble in thinking about humanity as a whole as bearing the right to non-intervention.

Objection 3: It is implausible that H's right to non-intervention would weigh highly compared to other moral considerations.

Response: I think it may weigh very highly. Of course, political philosophy is difficult, and there will be very different opinions about this, but consider the no-contact tribe again. It is plausible, in my view, that such a tribe might bear a right to non-intervention even if the lives of the tribespeople are rendered far shorter and more painful than they might be if some state systematically intervened in their lives *against* their duly expressed preferences.

Objection 4: God cannot be like a foreign sovereign entity in relation to us, because He created us and sustains us.

Response: This does not follow. A state might recognize (and perhaps even should recognize) the sovereignty of another state even if it brought it into existence (Canada was created in 1867 by a piece of legislation in British parliament) or sustains it (wealthy nations that feed their poorer neighbours in times of starvation are still morally bound to recognize the latter's right to non-intervention).

Objection 5: If God brought H into existence, God did wrong.

Response: To whom did God do wrong? Not humans, I think. I do not think God can wrong humans by bringing them into existence, unless their existence is of overall disvalue. Moreover, it is a plausible principle of metaphysics that if we are human beings, we cannot have been anything other than human beings.⁵ My just-so story implicitly involves the claim that part of what it is to be a human being is to be part of an entity, H, which, by its nature, has the right to non-intervention. If I exist, therefore, it is only because God chose to realize H. If H has not waived its right to non-intervention, a good God will not systematically intervene in H. Note that this is not the claim that I am a thing that could not have existed with systematic interventions in my life by a divine being. That would be implausible. I am still a human being in those possible worlds in which God does systematically intervene in H. God being good does not actually systematically intervene in H, but it is possible for Him to do so (i.e., there are some possible worlds in which He does).

So, what about those humans whose existence is characterized by an overall disvalue to themselves? I think the theist can reject that there are any such humans. There might be humans whose *lives* are not worth living, but according to (most of) Abrahamic theism, the *existence* of such humans extends beyond the mortal realm and into the afterlife, where God may yet ensure that their existence is a net benefit to each and every one of them.⁶ Even such humans as these cannot fault God for the mere fact of bringing them into existence.

9. Conclusions

I am prepared to conclude that Sterba's argument, as it stands, fails to establish its conclusion. That does not mean, though, that the Pauline Principle poses no threat to rational theistic belief. There are several *prima facie* ways to attempt a salvage of Sterba's general line of thought. I believe they all involve dropping the modal content of the third premise and providing instead a positive empirical argument for 3'. Such an argument may take any one of several forms, though. It might, for example, be contended that the distribution of evils around us is not suggestive of an optimal set of violations to H's

right to non-intervention, contrary to my just-so story, and that, therefore, 3' is probably true. Alternatively, it might be contended that very specific evils in the world, such as certain instances of genocide, for example, are such that it would be morally wrong for God not to violate H's right to non-intervention in these cases. Yet another alternative would be to argue that H has probably lost any legitimacy as a sovereign entity, or that any reasonable condition on the waiving of H's right to non-intervention has probably been met. Doubtless, there are other options to these, but what I think they all have in common is that they require substantial empirical evidence. That is, each of these strategies depends on more information about the kinds and distribution of evil in the actual world or about how human history has played out, which suggests that this world is not one inhabited by a good God with morally creditable reasons for not intervening more often. Such further evidence would involve moving the argument further towards the evidential side of the spectrum, and given that the debate would then turn on how compelling this new empirical evidence is, I think we would have reached a point where we were no longer dealing with a version of the logical problem of evil.

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Notes

- ¹ One short passage of Betenson's (2021, p. 9 of 11) paper suggests that he does realize this; however, why he does not see this as a serious problem for his attempted drawing of the distinction is very unclear to me.
- ² We may feel different about an individual police officer stationed at the border who can shoot and kill a murderer across the border before he murders a family of five in cold blood, but that is because this scenario is moving back to the case of individual morality, not states. Although the boundary is vague when we consider specific cases, to keep our focus on states, we would need to imagine an officially sanctioned government operation to intervene in the affairs of a foreign sovereign entity.
- ³ Naturally, I understand 'permission' here in a way that is non-prejudicial to the claim that H has a right to God's non-intervention. For me, giving permission does not imply having a right to prevent something, merely having the ability to prevent it. So, horrendous evil happens by God's permission, in that God *could* have intervened, notwithstanding it would have been wrong for God to intervene.
- ⁴ This disvalue need not be understood as grounded in harms to individual humans, so I am not contradicting my earlier claim that my defence will not appeal to any greater goods for humans that God provides by His non-intervention. Even if this disvalue is understood as grounded in harms to individual humans, I would maintain that, in the just-so story, God is refusing to intervene *because* it is wrong, not *because* there is some greater good for individual humans.
- ⁵ I find David Wiggins's (1980, chp. 2) example compelling: God could not literally have turned Lot's wife into a pillar of sand. He might have replaced Lot's wife with a pillar of sand, but it is not possible for one and the same thing to be at one time a human and at another a pillar of sand, not even by divine intervention.
- ⁶ The author has some sympathy with the theological theory of universal reconciliation.

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