

## Article

# God, Moral Requirements, and the Limits of Freedom

Laura W. Ekstrom

Department of Philosophy, William &amp; Mary, Williamsburg, VA 23187, USA; lwekst@wm.edu

**Abstract:** This article addresses James Sterba's recent argument for the conclusion that God's existence is incompatible with the degree and amount of evil in the world. I raise a number of questions concerning the moral principles that Sterba suggests God would be required to follow, as well as with respect to the analogy he draws between the obligations of a just state and the obligations of God. Against Sterba's proposed justified divine policy of constraint on human freedom, I ask: What would motivate a perfect being to create human beings who imagine, intend, and freely begin to carry out horrific actions that bring harm to other human beings, to nonhuman animals, and to the environment? I argue that the rationale is lacking behind the thought that God would only interfere with the completion of the process of human beings' bringing to fruition their horrifically harmful intended outcomes, rather than creating beings with different psychologies and abilities altogether. I end by giving some friendly proposals that help to support Sterba's view that God, by nature, would be perfectly morally good.

**Keywords:** problem of evil; James Sterba; divine obligations; Richard Swinburne; free will



**Citation:** Ekstrom, Laura W. 2021. God, Moral Requirements, and the Limits of Freedom. *Religions* 12: 285. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050285>

Academic Editor:  
Antonio Muñoz-García

Received: 2 February 2021  
Accepted: 19 April 2021  
Published: 21 April 2021

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Is the God of traditional theism logically compatible with all the evil in the world? That is our question. One might suggest that, at least on initial reflection, it seems consistently imaginable that God exists, and yet, the facts about evil in our world are as they are; it may seem *logically possible* that God has justifying reasons for permitting every instance of evil in the world and that there are God-justifying reasons for the facts about evil in our world, including its intensity, amount, and apparently unfair distribution.

James Sterba (2019), however, has recently presented a new argument for the contention that God is not logically compatible with the “significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions” and that God is not logically compatible with the world’s natural evils, either. Sterba expresses the question on which he focuses as whether or not God “is compatible with the degree and amount of evil that actually exists in our world” (Sterba 2019, p. 1). Later in the book, he expresses his position as the view that “the existence of God is logically incompatible with fundamental requirements of our morality” (Sterba 2019, p. 111)—though what he means is that God’s existence is incompatible with the moral requirements that Sterba identifies along with observed facts about evil in our world.

Sterba supports this position by appealing to the analogy of a just state and to the following moral principle: “Pauline Principle—Never do evil that good may come of it” (Sterba 2019, p. 2). Sterba maintains that this principle is true, while noting that “there clearly are exceptions to it” (Sterba 2019, p. 2), such as when the evil in question is “trivial,” “easily reparable,” and “the only way to prevent far greater harm to innocent people” (Sterba 2019, pp. 2–3, 49–50). Through his discussion, we see that Sterba interprets the phrase “do evil” in the Pauline Principle as “intentionally do evil” (Sterba 2019, p. 8, n. 5). Other interpretive matters are somewhat less straightforward, including the question of which evils are trivial and which are nontrivial, what counts as being “easily reparable,” and what qualifies as far greater harm to innocent people. Crucially, there is also the matter of interpreting the term “that” in the principle. At one point in the book, Sterba writes:

In both traditional and contemporary ethics, there is a moral principle that seems to be in direct conflict with God's permitting evil and then making up for it later. That moral principle . . . is frequently referred to as the Pauline Principle, because it is endorsed by St. Paul (*Romans* 3:8). The principle holds that we should never do evil that good may come of it. (Sterba 2019, p. 44)

Notice the phrase “and then making up for it later” in this passage, which is characterizing the Pauline Principle. The principle that we should “never do evil that good may come of it” seems not to be directed at cases—at least, not only at cases—in which we intentionally commit an evil action merely with the plan of making up for it later, as in the case of a man who violently strikes his wife (or allows another man to strike her without attempting to intervene) with the plan of giving her a fancy piece of jewelry the following day. Rather, the principle seems centrally to be enjoining us to refrain from performing evil actions *in order that* good may come from them; that is, we should not perform evil acts with the aim of, through those acts, bringing about goods, unless those evils are trivial, easy to repair, and necessary to the greater good of preventing greater harm. Although Sterba says that the Pauline Principle “has been virtually ignored by contemporary philosophers of religion despite its relevance to the problem of evil” (Sterba 2019, p. 2), when we attempt to interpret the principle, it seems closely related to the idea, and to me seems most plausibly construed as the idea, that one should not intentionally cause or allow evil (even in order to bring about good) unless that evil is necessary to bringing about a greater good, which could include preventing a worse evil. However, this principle is widely discussed in contemporary debates over William Rowe's influential arguments from evil for atheism.

### 1. Sterba's Proposed Moral Requirements

Sterba works to make more precise the moral requirements he thinks would apply to God by delineating the following three particular moral principles (Sterba 2019, p. 184).

Sterba's Moral 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.

With these proposed moral requirements in hand, the following is Sterba's logical argument from evil, suggested as a correction to J. L. Mackie's argument (Mackie 1955):

- 1. If God were to exist, then necessarily God would be adhering to the moral evil prevention requirements I–III because these are “exceptionless, minimal components of the Pauline Principle that are acceptable to consequentialists and nonconsequentialists and are, or should be, acceptable to theists and atheists as well” (Sterba 2019, p. 189).
- 2. If God were adhering to these evil prevention requirements, 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).
- 3. Such consequences do obtain all around us.
- 4. Therefore, God does not exist.

Sterba also has a sixteen-step way of setting out his argument from moral evil (Sterba 2019, pp. 185–88).

One might find it difficult to determine whether or not Sterba's argument demonstrates the logical incompatibility between the proposition that God exists and the proposition that the degrees and amount of evil in our world are as they are, because one might find

it difficult to interpret his proposed moral evil prevention requirements. If one finds it difficult to interpret Sterba's proposed moral requirements, then it will be difficult to assess the claim that, if God were to exist, God would be obeying the proposed moral evil prevention requirements and also difficult to assess the claim that our observations of the world are such that we see clearly that the prevention requirements are not being obeyed or adhered to.

Here are some questions we might have concerning the principle that one should "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". Do we have a right to the prevention of significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, including immoral actions of our own? Whether the right to the prevention of such consequences is said to apply to our own immoral actions or instead only to the immoral actions of others, what is the case for the existence of this right? What does "as needed" refer to, and why is it there in the principle? (Sterba notes that this phrase is there "to indicate that whether God acts in this regard and the degree to which he does act depends on what we do" (Sterba 2019, p. 192, n. 2). This refers to Sterba's views regarding the appropriate policy of constraint on others' freedom, which I address in Section 2 below. In that context, we see that the phrase "as needed" means something similar to "when, to one's best estimate, one sees that no one else will succeed in preventing the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of the immoral actions in question". It seems it could be difficult for us, and for God, depending on one's views about divine omniscience, to know when to step in, in attempting to act in accordance with this principle.) Further questions include these: How do we assess the relative ease or difficulty of preventing significant evil consequences without violating anyone's rights? Does "anyone" (in "without violating anyone's rights") include a freely acting wrongdoer—does the wrongdoer have a right to God's noninterference in his execution of his intentions, no matter how nefarious those intentions? Does the proposed moral requirement imply that no one would go to hell as a consequence of their immoral actions? It may seem to (depending on how we interpret the range of the right to prevention), because eternal suffering may be thought to be a horrendous evil consequence of immoral actions. However, would a murderer's annihilation or placement in heaven, rather than hell, violate the rights of the murdered person or the victim's loved ones? Importantly, which evil consequences are significant, and which are too insignificant to warrant prevention? It seems that any evil caused by immoral actions—pain, suffering, loss, premature death, disability, injury—could be significant to the victim and to those who care about her. (Notice that the pain from a paper cut accidentally caused by a coworker's handing you a piece of paper does not count as an evil consequence of an immoral action. For the cut to count as such, it would have to be the result of her deliberately trying to cut you—which seems to give it significance.) Perhaps, on Sterba's view, God's existence is logically compatible with the existence of the pain of discovering that one has been betrayed by someone one trusted but not with the traumas of sexual assault and genocide. However, the former still hurts, and we might sensibly inquire about whether or not there was a God-justifying reason to allow it to occur.

With respect to the second principle, that one should "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", we might ask: What does "morally prefer" mean? Questions arise, too, concerning the third principle that one should "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". To which goods, if any, do we have a right? What grounds our right to any goods to which we have a right? How do we assess the moral objectionability and moral non-objectionability of various ways of

providing goods? How many ways are required for countlessness? Can we tell when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing certain goods?

Sterba works in his book to clarify the meaning of the proposed principles by the discussion of examples designed to answer some of these questions—for instance, he thinks we have a right to freedom from assault and a right to enough resources to satisfy our basic needs (though there is not a case in the (Sterba 2019) book grounding the existence of these rights and corresponding obligations on God’s part), and he holds that the trauma a child suffers from being grabbed by kidnappers is not significant and especially horrendous, though his being killed by the kidnappers is—but one might nonetheless be left puzzled, unable to discern conclusively whether or not the principles are true and accomplish the work intended.

I agree with Sterba that God’s existence is not compatible with all the evil in the world—that is, with the facts about evil in our world including its amount, intensity, and distribution. In the remainder of this paper, I will take up certain aspects of Sterba’s discussion in his thought-provoking book, matters that I think are worthy of further exploration, critique, or defense. In particular, I want to inquire further into some issues concerning human freedom, including its nature and its value. I will also make some suggestions about why God might be thought to have moral obligations towards us. As Sterba is, of course, aware, his argument depends on the premise that God is essentially a morally good agent so that the moral requirements he identifies, if correct, would apply to God. As part of his defense, Sterba argues against Brian Davies’ case for thinking that God is good but not morally good. Sterba might wish to go on in further work to rebut at length Mark Murphy’s recent extended arguments (Murphy 2017, 2019) for the view that an absolutely perfect being need not be morally good. In Section 3 below, I will offer some friendly proposals for grounding the claim that God is essentially morally good.

## 2. The Nature and Limits of Human Freedom

One of the most interesting aspects of Sterba’s book is his view on God’s proper role in granting and constraining the freedom of created beings. On this matter, Sterba writes:

A world where everyone has unlimited freedom is not an ideal world by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, such a world could easily become a war of all against all, or a war of the thugs against the rest. By contrast, what would be ideal from the perspective of freedom is a world where everyone’s freedom is appropriately constrained . . . But when are constraints on freedom too much and when are they appropriate? (Sterba 2019, p. 53)

Notice that “unlimited freedom” is quite strong language—one might wonder if it suggests that the hypothetical created beings have freedom with respect to all logically possible actions, such that they would be able to turn water into wine without adding chemicals and could part the Red Sea on their own power and could jump over buildings in a single bound unaided. One might legitimately ask why God would not create beings with such powers. I think Sterba is concerned, given the context of the passage, with freedom concerning actions that are, in fact, physically possible for us human beings and that range across a moral spectrum from amazingly good to horrifically evil. He is concerned with the question of when God would interfere with a created being’s exercise of free will with respect to the badness or wrongness of the potential act. The question is an important one concerning which limits are appropriate on the moral range of options we can carry out.

Sterba suggests that on a “justified policy of constraint” (Sterba 2019, p. 53), God “would be allowing evildoers to bring about the evil consequences of their actions for a broad range of cases where the consequences, especially for others, are not significantly evil” (Sterba 2019, p. 55). In addition, he says, “God would be allowing would-be wrongdoers to imagine, intend, or even take the initial steps toward carrying out their seriously wrongful actions, and just stopping wrongdoers from bringing about significantly and especially horrendously evil consequences of those actions” (Sterba 2019, p. 55).

Sterba clearly values freedom and sees it as something that God would give to created beings. He observes that a just state interferes with one person's freedom to assault another person—more precisely, intervenes when possible to prevent the execution of one person's intention to assault another person—in order to protect the other person's freedom from assault (or the other person's right to live and move about without being assaulted). On analogy to the constraints put on a person's freedom by a just state, Sterba argues that God would put constraints on the range of actions created persons are free (or able) to carry out.

Sterba's view on this matter contrasts with that of Richard Swinburne, whose treatment of the problem of evil includes the contention that our being able to do really terrible things is a good thing. In order to have free will of especially high value, Swinburne argues, the range of actions with respect to which we are free must be broad, including not only somewhat-good and somewhat-bad actions, but also actions that are very bad, even acts that are dreadfully wrong. If we are free to perform wrong actions, then we have what Swinburne calls "very serious free will", and that, he contends, is better than our having mere (nonserious) free will (Swinburne 1998, p. 84). Swinburne holds that our having very serious free will requires that wrong actions be live options for us, so he also thinks that in giving us very serious free will, God would also need to give us bad desires.

For Swinburne, central to a successful theodicy is appeal to the good of libertarian free will—that is, free will understood in such a way that its possession by us is incompatible with the truth of causal determinism—but there must be other elements, as well, among which is the value of "being of use". We can appreciate the need for this additional proposed value by reflecting on some instances of freely chosen wrongdoing while taking into account the situation of the victim of the wrong act. In cases of betrayal and violence, for instance, the free will of the person who betrays another and the free will of the person who acts violently toward another are meant to justify God in allowing the betrayal and the violence to take place. However, the victims of the betrayal and of the violence do not, in those instances, acquire something of high value themselves. Rather, they suffer the deep pain of being betrayed and treated violently. One might attempt to defend the claim that in such cases, the overall situation is still good, given the presence of the very serious libertarian free will enjoyed by the perpetrators, and one might allege that we need not be concerned with respect to theodicy beyond that. Or one might suggest that the victims themselves do experience, whether they realize it or not, the value of being of use. Swinburne suggests that it is *good for a person* to contribute to the wider good "even by being used as the vehicle of a good purpose" (Swinburne 1998, p. 101). A person might *be of use* in his suffering for the general (allegedly greater) good of the existence of libertarian free will in created beings. Or he might be of use in suffering for the benefit of the opportunity for character growth or for connection with God on the part of others. However, these thoughts of Swinburne's concerning "being of use", when we apply them, for instance, to persons who are tortured and to victims of sexual abuse and slavery, are to my mind morally abhorrent.

Sterba, I think, would agree, because suffering torture, sexual abuse, and slavery are horrendous evil consequences of immoral choices that God, if God were to exist, should have prevented.

Now, the question I want to pose is this: Why would God create persons with the power of libertarian free will and allow them freely to imagine, intend, and take initial steps toward carrying out seriously wrongful actions (intervening only to prevent significant and especially horrendous consequences)? What would be good about granting people such power? I am not sure it is good. Recall that Sterba's case for the obligations of God is made by reference to the analogy of the obligations of a just state. Notice, however, that a just state has to deal with people as they are, with the characteristics and tendencies, the physical and psychological abilities, of human beings already largely fixed. However, God gets to do the "fixing" at the start. God does not have to manage and govern human beings as God finds them (as the state has to do). Rather, God gets to create whatever beings there



are, however God chooses to create them, with whatever physical and psychological traits and abilities he wants for them to have.

In other words, the political state comes in after the facts about creation are settled. It gets human beings as they are. God, though, establishes what beings there are and what physical traits and proclivities, inclinations, urges, drives, and powers they have. What would motivate a perfect being to create human beings who imagine, intend, and freely begin to carry out horrific actions that bring harm to other human beings, to nonhuman animals, and to the environment? What is the rationale behind the thought that God would only interfere with the completion of the process of human beings' bringing to fruition their horrifically harmful intended outcomes rather than creating beings with different psychologies and abilities altogether?

In short, this is the question on which I think it is important for us to reflect: On what grounds should one think that free will is a good worth giving us and a good worth respecting (by noninterference) in some cases and to some degrees? That is, why would a perfect being grant and respect the power of free action to and in created beings *at all*?

One suggestion is that God's creation of beings with free will enables there to be moral goodness in the world, and the existence of moral goodness is the God-justifying reason for permitting evils in the world that result from the creaturely misuse of the power of free will. A problem for this suggestion arises when we consider Alvin Plantinga's influential definition of moral goodness: Moral goodness is goodness brought about by an agent with significant freedom, where significant freedom is defined as the power to act freely with respect to actions that matter morally, that is, which are either right or wrong for the agent (Plantinga 1974, p. 30). Plantinga's understanding of free will is as follows: "If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it" (Plantinga 1974, p. 29).

Libertarian free will, though, is not required in order for *goodness* to exist. There can be kindness, and knowledge, and mutual understanding, and meaning in life, and creativity, and love, and beauty in the world without any kind acts, or acts of acquiring and disseminating knowledge, or creative acts, or loving acts being acts that are performed with free will as Plantinga and other libertarians conceive of it (Ekstrom 2016, 2021). Libertarian free will is required for moral goodness as Plantinga defines moral goodness, but that is only because by the term "moral goodness", he *means* goodness brought about by beings with libertarian free will. An appeal to the value of "moral goodness" as a proposed (or possible and for all we know true) God-justifying reason for the existence of evil (or for the facts about evil) thus involves an appeal to the alleged value of libertarian free will, a value that is sufficiently high to make it worth its costs. By way of examining various proposals concerning the alleged intrinsic value and extrinsic value of libertarian free will, I argue that it is not at all clear that libertarian free will is sufficiently valuable (Ekstrom 2016, 2021). On Daniel Howard-Snyder's proposed success condition for a defense against the logical problem of evil, a defense succeeds only if it is not reasonable to refrain from believing the propositions that constitute it (Howard-Snyder 2013, p. 24). I argue that it is reasonable to refrain from believing that libertarian free will is worth the costs of the evil it brings into the world. Thus, I think that the free will defense is not successful.

Sterba thinks that human freedom is good but that our having the freedom to carry out seriously evil actions (or to bring about seriously evil consequences by way of our actions) is not good. In support of the idea that human freedom is good, he points to its enabling character development that makes us fit (less unfit) for a heavenly afterlife with God (Sterba 2019, pp. 52, 61–62). Sterba does not give attention to varying libertarian and compatibilist conceptions of free will. (He refers to libertarian free will as "contra-causal freedom", but there are many libertarian accounts of free will that are not contra-causal, including event-causal indeterminist accounts) (Ekstrom 2000, 2019a).

However, I think it is crucial in addressing the problem of evil that we attend to different libertarian and compatibilist accounts of free will, because it is through doing so that we can see that various goods we may have thought we needed libertarian free will to achieve in fact require only compatibilist free will. For instance, we could form and maintain friendships—and grow in knowledge of and love for our friends, as well as grow in knowledge of and love for strangers, and in this sense, develop our characters through time—with only compatibilist free will, and God could set the parameters of the way our psychology works and the way the physical world works so that such development would be enabled without the need for our having libertarian free will and without the facts about evil in our world being what they are. So, the human ability to imagine, intend, and undertake horrifically harmful actions is not justified by its being needed for friendship, love, knowledge, and growth in our relationships and personalities. Moreover, it is not clear that temporally extended moral character development by way of libertarian free choices in a world full of evils is a good in the first place, and it is not clear that we should need to make ourselves “fit for” a heavenly (after)life with God. Why would God make beings that are “unfit” to be in the presence of and in harmony with God? If they need to have certain sorts of characters in order to be in the presence of and in harmony with God, then why not create them with characters that are sufficiently fit to enjoy friendship with God to begin with?

What I have asked is why God would create beings who are free to form inclinations to subject others to torture, sexual abuse, and slavery, and why God would enable those beings to begin to carry out those inclinations, intervening only to prevent the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of those inclinations and choices. I do not think that the case Sterba has provided is sufficient to defend the moral goodness of God’s so acting.

### 3. Divine Requirements

In addition to the three moral evil prevention requirements enumerated above, Sterba also proposes nine “natural evil prevention requirements”. He sets out his argument from the natural evil in the world as follows:

1. Natural Evil Prevention Requirements I–IX would have to be met by God, if he exists. (See [Sterba 2019](#), pp. 184–85).
2. Accordingly, the significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of natural evil that exists in the world would be logically incompatible with God’s existence ([Sterba 2019](#), p. 188).

Here, we might ask this question: What is the basis for Sterba’s contention that God would prevent the horrendously painful consequences of natural forces (such as hurricanes and diseases) on human beings? What positive case could we give in favor of the position that God, by nature, would do so? Likewise, why should we think that we have a right not to be assaulted that is correlative with a duty on God’s part to protect us from assault? Why think that God has an obligation to us to intervene in the execution of other persons’ evil intentions to harm us in serious ways?

Here are two arguments I defend (in [Ekstrom 2019b, 2021](#)) for the view that God, by the nature of God, would promote our welfare and prevent pointless setbacks to our welfare, whether those pointless setbacks derive from natural forces or from an agent’s actions. These are arguments in support of the position that a perfect being would be essentially morally good. Let us call a setback to an agent’s welfare or an instance of suffering (or the risk of the setback or suffering) “pointless,” following Rowe, just in case that setback or suffering (or risk of the setback or suffering) is not logically necessary for bringing about a greater good or preventing an evil as bad or worse.

The argument from the intrinsic value of persons is as follows. First, persons have intrinsic value. Second, any agent who knows of some being that it has intrinsic value and also knows of herself that she is capable of promoting that being’s welfare and preventing pointless setbacks to the welfare of that being has a pro tanto requiring reason to promote

that being's welfare and to prevent pointless setbacks to the welfare of that being. Third, God is an agent. Fourth, God, as an omniscient being, knows which beings have intrinsic value and knows what God is capable of doing. Fifth, God, as an omnipotent being, is capable of promoting the welfare of, and preventing pointless setbacks to the welfare of, any persons in existence. Therefore, for any person in existence, God has a pro tanto requiring reason to promote that person's welfare and to prevent pointless setbacks to that person's welfare.

Suppose the argument from intrinsic value just given were to fail because it is not the case that persons have intrinsic value, either in the sense of nonderivative value or in the sense of non-instrumental, final value. Still, I think we could provide a successful argument for the conclusion that a perfect being would have a requiring reason to prevent our pointless suffering. The second argument is as follows. First, any rational agent who intentionally brings into existence a sentient being—or allows that being to evolve when that agent could have instead prevented its existence—has a pro tanto requiring reason to prevent that sentient being from suffering pointlessly, so far as that agent is able to do so. Second, God is essentially omnipotent and hence is able to prevent the pointless suffering of sentient beings. Third, God is essentially a rational agent. Therefore, if God were intentionally to bring into existence a sentient being—or allow that being to evolve when he could have instead prevented its existence—then God would have a pro tanto requiring reason to prevent that sentient being from suffering pointlessly.

#### 4. Argument from the Facts about Evil

Here is an argument related to Sterba's, one that I find more it a more straightforward matter to contemplate:

(1) If God were to exist, then God would have justifying reasons for allowing the facts about evil in our world to obtain. (2) If God were to have justifying reasons for allowing the facts about evil in our world to obtain, then we would be able to discern those reasons. (3) Despite collectively trying very hard, we do not discern God-justifying reasons for all the facts about evil in our world. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that (4) There are not God-justifying reasons for the facts about evil in our world. Therefore, (5) God does not exist.

Some theorists, Mark Murphy, for one, deny the first premise. Murphy alleges that God may allow some facts about evil in our world, including facts about human suffering and death, to obtain for no reason at all, because God has no requiring reason to prevent them (Murphy 2017, 2019). Skeptical theists, such as Michael Rea and Michael Bergmann, deny the second premise. They emphasize the chasm in knowledge and understanding between human beings and God, alleging that we are not justified in believing of any fact about evil (or instance of evil) that there is no God-justifying reason for it to obtain, even given our failure to discern such reasons. Theodacists, including John Hick and Richard Swinburne, deny the third premise. They present reasons for which God is justified in allowing the facts about evil in our world. "Defenders", such as Peter van Inwagen (2006), suggest God-justifying reasons that are possible and for all we know true.

I argue against all of these theorists and in defense of the argument from the facts about evil in my recent book (Ekstrom 2021).

Sterba (2019) book can be read as a partial defense, according to which some evils—those that are not significant and especially not horrendous consequences of immoral actions or of natural forces—are such that it would be justified for God to permit them, if there were a God, because those evils are necessary for the greater goods of human freedom and for the process of moral character development ("soul-making") allegedly needed to make humans beings less unworthy of a heavenly afterlife with God. In other words, God's existence is logically compatible, on Sterba's view, with evils that are not significant and especially not horrendous. I have questioned the success of this partial defense. However, Sterba's case remains for the incompatibility of God's existence and the degree and amount of evil in the world. On the matter of that incompatibility, we agree, although we make the case in different ways.



**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study did not involve humans or animals.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Ekstrom, Laura. 2000. *Free Will: A Philosophical Study*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Ekstrom, Laura. 2016. The Cost of Freedom. In *Free Will and Theism: Connections, Contingencies, and Concerns*. Edited by Kevin Timpe and Daniel Speak. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 62–78.
- Ekstrom, Laura. 2019a. Toward a Plausible Event-Causal Indeterminist Account of Free Will. *Synthese* 196: 127–44. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ekstrom, Laura. 2019b. The Practical Life of God. In *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Religion*. Edited by Paul Draper. New York: Routledge, pp. 109–26.
- Ekstrom, Laura. 2021. *God, Suffering, and the Value of Free Will*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel. 2013. The Logical Problem of Evil: Mackie and Plantinga. In *The Blackwell Companion to The Problem of Evil*. Edited by Justin McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 19–33.
- Mackie, John Leslie. 1955. Evil and Omnipotence. *Mind* 64: 200–12. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Murphy, Mark. 2017. *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Murphy, Mark. 2019. Is an Absolutely Perfect Being Morally Perfect? In *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Religion*. Edited by Paul Draper. New York: Routledge, pp. 93–108.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 1974. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Sterba, James. 2019. *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Swinburne, Richard. 1998. *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 2006. *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.