

Article

The Sovereignty of Humanity and Social Responsibility for Evil Prevention

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Abstract: In this paper, I suggest that James Sterba's recent restatement of the logical problem of evil overlooks a plausible theistic interpretation of the divine–human relation, which allows for a theodicy impervious to his atheological argument, which boils down to God's failure to meet Sterba's "Evil Prevention Requirements". I argue that such requirements need not apply to God in a world under full human sovereignty, which presupposes that God never intervenes to change the natural course of events to prevent evils, as God has a decisive "greater good justification" for not intervening, namely respecting human sovereignty. This non-interventionist view of divine providence can be made tenable by the great good and dignity of the God-granted human God-like self-creativity implied by human sovereignty (a concept inspired by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola). The Mirandolian theodicy can both accommodate and complement Dostoyevsky's Russian Orthodox view of "beneficial suffering", predicated against the background of the conception of "collective selfhood", overlooked by Sterba despite "featuring" on the cover of his book, no doubt due to his libertarian–individualistic assumptions about human agency and human flourishing, which a proponent of a theistic theodicy may do well to resist.

Keywords: logical argument from evil; James Sterba; Mirandolian theodicy; the sovereignty of humanity; Dostoyevsky on evil; relational conceptions of selfhood



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"No fixed seat, no special look, nor any particular gift of your own have we given you, Adam, so that what seat, what look, what gifts you choose for yourself, those you may have and hold as you wish, according to your purpose. For others, a definite nature is confined within laws that we have prescribed. With no strictures confining you, you will determine that nature by your own choice, which is the authority under which I have put you. I have set you up as the center of the world so that you will be better placed to survey what the world contains. And we have made you neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal, so that on your own, as molder and maker, specially appointed to decide, you may shape yourself in the form that you prefer. You can sink back into lower forms that are beasts; from your own resolute spirit, you can be born again to higher forms that are divine. O the supreme generosity of God the Father! This is man's supreme and astonishing good fortune, to whom it is given to have what he chooses, to be what he wants". (Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, Copenhagen (2019), pp. 460–61))

1. James Sterba's Dostoyevsky Riddle

The cover of James Sterba's magisterial study of the problem of evil (Sterba 2019) confronts the reader with one of the most heart wrenching examples of gratuitous evil in all of the world's literature. In Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, the atheist brother, Ivan, tells a story of a little serf boy who in play threw a stone and unintentionally hurt the paw of the master's favorite hound. The next day, in front of his mother, the boy is, upon the order of the master, torn to pieces by the master's pack of dogs (cf. Dostoyevsky 1993, pp. 205–6). Sterba reports the story at the high point of his dispute

with sceptical theists (cf. Sterba 2019, pp. 72–3), contemporary philosophical defenders of God’s justice who argue that God has good reason for permitting every evil that actually occurs in the world, however, we are unable to discern it due to our epistemic limitations (cf. Bergmann 2011, pp. 375–99). Sterba, like Ivan Karamazov, considers cases of such horrendous evils—no doubt occurring daily throughout human (and animal) history—the ultimate test of the rationality of the belief in “a good God”. Having considered the wide range of candidates for the justification of God in the face of such evils, Sterba comes up with a new formulation of the logical problem of evil, which implies that theism—understood as a belief in the existence of God that is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful—is necessarily false, because God fails the test of moral goodness miserably (and not just perfect goodness, but even goodness that would be expected from every human agent). Yet, the cover of Sterba’s book points to a riddle and invites a question, “Why Dostoyevsky himself, by no means a man of easy faith, did not consider his charge against God, which he put in the mouth of Ivan Karamazov just months before his own death, a sufficient reason for abandoning his own Christian faith?”. “What theodicy (understood here as intellectual resources to make sense of apparently senseless evils, in the apparent absence of divine intervention to prevent them) allowed Dostoyevsky to overcome the problem of evil which haunted him throughout his life?”. When his first child, Sonya, died of pneumonia three months after her birth, Dostoyevsky’s wife has recorded that he “wept and sobbed like a woman in despair” (Kjetssa 1989, p. 219). Ten years later, his son, Alyosha, died before reaching the age of three. Seeing his anguish, his philosopher friend, Vladimir Solovyov, took him to the Optina Monastery where Dostoyevsky was consoled by the charismatic monk Ambrose, the prototype of Father Zosima, the holy monk in *Brothers Karamazov*.

I begin my engagement with Sterba’s *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*—which has every chance to become a classic of the philosophy of religion, even if my argument against him holds—by drawing attention to his omission of the theodicy implicit in *Brothers Karamazov*, because I sense this may be highly revealing of what kind of response to the problem of evil Sterba may have overlooked in his near comprehensive treatment of the recent philosophical attempts at theodicy. I will incorporate into my reply to Sterba, in particular, these ideas about the possibilities for the defeat of evil found in Dostoyevsky, which presuppose an anti-individualistic religious anthropology and, thus, remain in stark contrast to Sterba’s own account of selfhood, which is robustly libertarian. These individualistic assumptions underpin, in obvious ways, all Sterba’s arguments, even though they are not explicitly stated in one place (a libertarian–individualistic account of human agency is also taken for granted in his earlier major publications, Sterba (2014); Sterba (2020)). Thus, when Sterba regularly uses phrases like “the fundamental requirements of our morality” (Sterba 2019, p. 6), one is tempted to doubt whether the phrase “our morality” truly refers to the entire human race. In any case, I wish to draw the reader’s attention to the fact that disparate fundamental anthropological assumptions may have radically divergent implications for the analysis of the problem of evil.

Indeed, it is my conviction that Sterba’s cumulative atheological argument from evil is essentially valid, and if one grants Sterba his assumptions, one will be forced to accept that his new logical argument is also sound. For this reason, I wish to deconstruct his argument by challenging two of his assumptions (or two sets of assumptions), namely, one pertaining to the nature of human agency and human flourishing, the other pertaining to the nature of the human–divine relation. As it will be only in the last section of the paper that the implications of my knock-down argument against Sterba will be presented (and only then we will be able to integrate Dostoyevsky’s theodical insights into my “Mirandolian theodicy”), it may be good to sum up, at this stage, the crux of my response to Sterba.

I submit that throughout his work, Sterba takes for granted that theism entails that God, having created the world, retains full sovereignty over the Earth with all its inhabitants. If that assumption is granted, God must be treated as a moral agent in the world who must be held responsible, directly or indirectly, for everything that happens in the terrestrial realm. It is this conceptual concession that opens the door to Sterba’s application

to the analysis of the problem of evil of (a) his analogy between God and “ideally just and powerful state” (which prescribes the state intervention to limit the freedom of citizens to act out their evil intentions that would cause significant evil to the innocent would-be victims, thus limiting the victims’ more significant freedom), as well as of (b) his so-called “Pauline Principle” (i.e., St. Paul’s apparent rejection—in Romans 3:8—of the idea that it is acceptable to do evil, so that good could come out of it). Yet, it is the application of these two principles that generates the main support to Sterba’s conclusion that a good God is logically impossible. Therefore, I purport that the soundness of Sterba’s new logical argument from evil rests ultimately on a tacit assumption (no doubt tacitly presupposed by most participants in the debate about the problem of evil) of a feudal conception of divine sovereignty, as supposedly logically implied by theism, according to which God, as the only genuine sovereign, exercises his full sovereignty over his creation, while humanity is assigned the role of vassals or stewards, expected to obediently execute divine will, in all its details. However, Mirandola’s scenario of God giving up his sovereignty over humanity in the act of creation, and granting full sovereignty to humanity, makes enough sense to dispense with such feudal social imagery, and, as a consequence, block Sterba’s application of his evil prevention requirements to God. Not more needs to be said at this stage about the sovereignty of humanity, as the concept of full sovereignty (or “Westphalian sovereignty”) is self-explanatory, in that it excludes legitimate intervention by other sovereigns in the realm under someone’s sovereignty (cf. [Philpott 2020](#)).

However, apart from disarming Sterba’s argument, the Mirandolian theodicy affirms the possibilities of the defeat of undeserved evils (by identifying the great good of human sovereignty exercised by humans in common) in a way that makes it less vulnerable to Sterba’s criticism than Plantinga’s free will defence (precisely because the latter is predicated on the exercise of free will individually). Thus, in order to reveal the full potential of the Mirandolian theodicy to resist Sterba’s argument from evil, a social or relational conception of human agency and human flourishing has to be expounded, which I will do on the example of Dostoyevsky’s “Russian Orthodox view” of selfhood, although I presuppose that a range of such relational conceptions of selfhood, bearing a family resemblance, can be identified in the cultures, philosophies, and religions of the world.

Indeed, understanding the religiously defined goal of life in collective terms is something we are familiar with, not just from Christian theology (with the idea of the Church as the people of God whose spiritual interdependence extends even beyond “this world”), but also from the traditional Jewish view of God forging a covenant with the people of Israel (and forgiving on Yom Kippur the sins of “all the people of Israel”). Similar sentiments are expressed in the Buddhist idea of the possibility of sharing the karmic merits with others, captured especially powerfully in the “Bodhisattva vow” to liberate all sentient beings, which is taken by Mahayana Buddhists. [Corrigan \(2017\)](#) also stresses that while appropriated and shaped by Dostoyevsky’s highly original mind and the modern sensitivities of his time, these insights were drawn by the writer from diverse theological and philosophical sources (including Schopenhauer, who drew the attention of his contemporaries to Buddhism), the same sources that also made Tolstoy—who did not subscribe to any religious orthodoxy—emphatically reject modern individualism. Influenced in his youth by Rousseau’s vision of the primitive utopia, Tolstoy, well versed in the South Asian and East Asian philosophical and religious sources, attributed such non-individualistic ideals of selfhood to all great spiritual traditions of humanity, especially to simple people uncorrupted by the temptations of individualism generated by the competitive spirit of modernity. More recently, Craig Ihara applied Western ethical resources to explain why, in the Confucian ethics, the language of rights is out of place. A simple analogy that captures the logic of the Confucian ethics as using the language of duties, instead of the language of rights, is between an ethical community and a sport team, for which the only sure path to victory (i.e., achieving the good each of the players seeks) is cooperation, which makes claiming rights by team members against each other meaningless (cf. [Ihara 2004](#), pp. 11–30). Similar ideas have been explored by a group of Western scholars of East Asian studies in a

book bearing an apt title, *The Oneness Hypothesis: Beyond the Boundary of Self* (Ivanhoe et al. 2018). In the context of this paper, it is imperative to acknowledge the global popularity of this communitarian conceptualisation of the proper human relations as it is likely to yield an understanding of good and evil akin to that found in Dostoyevsky, rather than that presupposed by Sterba. Before moving into details, an explanation may be in place, why, given that my argumentative strategy pace Sterba involves two arguments, namely, (a) an argument from the divine non-intervention (“the Mirandola theme”) and (b) an argument from the plausibility of a non-individualistic account of human agency and human flourishing (“the Dostoyevsky theme”), the bulk of the paper will be devoted to the exposition of the latter, while the former is more central from the point of view of the refutation of Sterba’s argument from evil. There are two reasons warranting such a structure of the paper. Firstly, in this argumentative counterpoint—to use a musical metaphor—the more important argument (“the Mirandola theme”) presupposes the other argument (“the Dostoyevsky theme”) in such a way that, without establishing the plausibility of the latter (i.e., a non-individualistic view of “collective selfhood” and the related “social responsibility” for good and evil), the former (i.e., granting full sovereignty over the Earth to imperfect humanity) will be judged by Sterba to be morally impermissible, as it is bound to lead to violations of the individual autonomy of many victims of significant evil resulting from the immoral behavior of others, which God might have prevented by not granting humanity full sovereignty. In other words, without calling into question the indispensability of his libertarian–individualistic account of human agency and human flourishing, Sterba will be able to establish that God must not grant such sovereignty to humanity. However, it must be stressed that in order to undermine the conclusion of Sterba’s argument that a good God is logically impossible, a weaker version of my argument should suffice, that is, I am not under obligation to prove in this paper that God never intervenes in the human affairs to prevent evil or to produce good (how could one do such a thing?), nor do I have to prove that Dostoyevsky’s relational view of the self is necessarily the only plausible one on offer. It suffices for me to suggest that the accounts of selfhood and of the human–divine relation entailed by the Mirandolian theodicy are perfectly plausible (rather than necessarily true). However, I also need to show that these views are broadly compatible with at least some “traditional” interpretations of theism. That is why, apart from wanting to encourage James Sterba, as the author of *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, to see himself in the mirror of his cover, I move now to Dostoyevsky, whose views about evil emerge uncontroversially from Eastern Orthodox Christianity, an ancient religious tradition that has an undisputed claim to theistic orthodoxy, and has shaped the beliefs about good and evil of hundreds of millions of people over centuries. Indeed, there are volumes of work by mainstream contemporary Eastern Orthodox thinkers, such as Vladimir Lossky or John Zizoulas, who defend a radically communitarian vision of inter-personal, as well as divine–human, relations akin to that found in Dostoyevsky, and define them as central to the entire religious tradition, grounded in the Byzantine patristic sources.

2. Selfhood Integrated into Other Selves and Vicarious Suffering

Dostoyevsky clearly intended *Brothers Karamazov* to be his religious opus magnum, written under the impression of the above-mentioned visit to the Optina Monastery and the question of how evil might ultimately be defeated within the framework of the Christian worldview lies at its heart. While not suggesting that my preferred philosophical solution to the problem of evil aligns perfectly with what Dostoyevsky might have thought on the matter, I submit that the theodical intuitions scattered in his writings can be incorporated into my own Mirandolian theodicy, which I believe can resist Sterba’s impressive analytic onslaught. Two motives relevant to the discussion of the problem of evil emerge repeatedly throughout Dostoyevsky’s oeuvre. Both are well attested in the Russian Orthodox religious thought, which has inspired the writer. His first theodical idea links the experience of intense suffering to that suffering individual’s potential for metanoetic transformation (the term “metanoia”—literally “change of mind” in Greek—in the New Testament refers

regularly to “change of heart”, “turning to God”, and “true conversion”), which leads in the direction of the deification (*theosis*) of the person as the condition of her participation in the Divine life (*koinonia*). This transformation presupposes “a completion of one’s unfinished personality” through the realisation of the relational nature of one’s selfhood and the achievement of “selfhood integrated into other selves” (Corrigan 2017, p. 18). The second theodical idea to be found in Dostoyevsky links undeserved suffering to the concept of “vicarious suffering”—suffering for others or in place of others (cf. Terras 1987, pp. 58–64). In both cases, evil is seen as either directly beneficial, enabling suffering individuals to make progress on the path towards the completion of their personality, or as indirectly beneficial, being an unavoidable consequence of the communitarian nature of the human collective to which the following divine commandment applies: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2).

Following the Orthodox Christian tradition, Dostoyevsky takes for granted that innocent victims of evil will ultimately be rewarded by God and that their sacrifice is seen as contributing, on the model of Christ’s own sacrifice, to the good of “his body, that is, the church” (Colossians 1:24). Evil is, on such a picture, seen as either a manifestation of the ordinary human condition (of being an “unfinished personality”), or as an opportunity for metanoetic transformation and completion, or as an occasion to contribute to such transformation of other persons (with whom we are all intimately connected as members of “one body of Christ”), or as a result of the failure of some to integrate themselves into the selves of others, which makes them, willingly or unwillingly, able to inflict evil on others. For this reason, the consummate individualist, the Underground Man of Dostoyevsky’s early masterpiece *Notes from the Underground*, is also portrayed as the ultimate egoist, and is arguably the most negative human type in his entire oeuvre, more removed from the writer’s ideal of humanity than any in his long catalogue of dark characters (cf. Scanlan 2002, p. 81). One might also recall that Raskolnikov, at the beginning of *Crime and Punishment*, is portrayed as a totally isolated individual unable to forge any close human relationship, a consequence of his rampant rationalism, resulting from the negative influence of the contemporary Western currents. He is thus depicted as a victim of the “epidemic” of individualism imported to Russia from the West, which Dostoyevsky encountered during his visit to England and against which he wants to warn his compatriots and humanity at large. Raskolnikov will also, at the end of the novel, face the task of seeking purification through suffering in a penal colony. The second of our theodical motives is also present in *Crime and Punishment*, namely at the turning point of the whole story, when Sonya (no doubt bearing such a name to indicate connection with “sophia”, the Divine Wisdom of the Eastern Orthodox theology) instructs Raskolnikov that having committed murder he must first, even before beginning expiation through suffering, “stand at the cross-roads, bow down, first kiss the earth which you have defiled and then bow down to all the world and say to all men aloud, ‘I am a murderer!’ Then God will send you life again”. This is a remarkable idea that, one is tempted to say, could cross only a Russian writer’s mind, that evil cannot be redeemed without reconciliation with “all the world” and “all men”. Evil is not solely an issue between the perpetrator and God, who can offer pardon to the perpetrator; not even between the perpetrator, the victim, and God—evil is a social issue, indeed, a global issue, an issue that concerns humanity as a whole.

The impact of these two ideas on theodicy can be appreciated only when the reader suspends the tacit, ordinary, modern individualistic assumptions about human flourishing and considers how communitarian the anthropological orientation of some religious world-views may be. That such a strongly communitarian vision of human existence constitutes the core of Dostoyevsky’s message is made plain by Yuri Corrigan in his recent in-depth study of the philosophical presuppositions of Dostoyevsky’s work. He sums it up as follows: “As an enemy of individualism, Dostoevsky categorically rejected the concept of a self that was not inherently integrated into other selves. He conceived of the Christian ideal as the overcoming of the ‘I’, the development of an ability ‘to annihilate this I, to give it wholly to all and everyone, undividedly and selflessly’, and he persistently criticized

the European bourgeois conception of selfhood). ‘In Christianity’, he once remarked in his notebook, the attempt to ‘determine where your personality ends and another begins [...] is unthinkable.’” (Corrigan 2017, pp. 3–4).

Corrigan’s entire book is devoted to the explication of this anti-individualistic conception of “open-ended, relational self” (p. 28), which he also refers to as “extended self”, “collective self” (p. 18), “collective personality” (p. 30), and “intersubjective selfhood” (p. 18). All of these terms presuppose that “fullness of being exists only within human relationships” (p. 24). “The self is rooted in other worlds, (...) the worlds of other consciousnesses. Thus, the personality in Dostoevsky is thought of (...) as an activity, event, or point of view that constitutes itself outwardly through relationships” (pp. 17–18). As a result of the relational nature of personhood, Dostoyevsky’s “characters apprehend their depths outside of themselves, in the souls of others” (p. 17). This belief in the absolute need for the completion of the initially unfinished selfhood in relationship with the other is captured by Dostoyevsky in terms of “discovering a principle outside of the self—a transcendental anchor for selfhood” (p. 9). Corrigan already finds, in a short story, *A Weak Heart*, written by Dostoyevsky in his 20s, such “paradigm of the collective self” and description of “the conflation of self and other and the problem of collapsed interiority that will resonate throughout Dostoyevsky’s career” (p. 8). Human personality is, thus, in Dostoyevsky’s works, constituted by two aspects: “inward self” (or “indwelling self”) on the one hand, and “relational self” on the other (p. 14). Referring to these two modes of the existence of the self, Corrigan speaks about “tension between interiority and intersubjectivity” and about “the indwelling and relational models of selfhood”, the former designating the “unfinished personality”, and the latter the “collective personality” (p. 18).

It is my contention that such a conception of selfhood generates an entirely different set of questions and possible answers regarding undeserved and horrendous evils, than an account of the self as autonomous, self-sufficient, and atomistic, capable of self-realisation and flourishing alongside and without entering into communion with others who do not flourish. It seems to me that the heart of the matter lies in the possibility of formulating the goals of human life in diverse ways. Dostoyevsky does not presuppose that the goal of life is “having a good life” or “enjoying life”, which might be consistent with the Aristotelian vision of human flourishing as an actualisation of our *natural* (as opposed to supernatural) potentialities for good (let us call it a “welfarist” vision of human flourishing), which ideally would encompass moral and intellectual goods (virtues), as well as what Sterba calls “consumer goods, that is, experiences and activities that are intensely pleasurable, completely fulfilling, and all encompassing” (Sterba 2019, p. 37). Such an individualistic and welfarist perspective on the goals of life justifies Sterba’s rights-talk about “goods to which we are entitled” and “goods to which we have right”, which gives rise to his atheological argument, as one of the main problems with God’s inaction to prevent significant and horrendous evils is that it results in a violation of the rights of the victims, as is evident from the following formulation of the Evil Prevention Requirement III: “Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions [or of natural evils—]S] 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” (p. 84). Conversely, envisaging personal transformation from an atomistic personality to a personality integrated into other selves as the main goal of human life, which makes it, in an important sense, a collective goal, makes the language of rights (including the distinction between the goods to which we have a right and those to which we have no right) out of place in the analysis of the inter-personal relations, and by extension, in the analysis of evil, for at least three reasons. Firstly, the completion of personality as the goal of life takes place in the inter-personal space within which all of the relevant goods have the nature of a gift to which nobody has a right, as nobody can claim an inalienable right to the love, friendship, or cooperation of any particular person (such rights can be claimed only after being first established by way of a social contract or on the ground of solidarity governed by the logic of mutual

gift giving). Secondly, no particular moral, intellectual, or consumer goods to which we might have a right, other than our existence itself, are presupposed as a condition of the successful process of the completion of personality, as the metanoetic transformation is an inner transformation to which the language of entitlement does not apply, and which cannot be granted by someone or otherwise affected by use of any external goods. Thirdly, and more generally, the collectivist account of selfhood presupposes the agathological interdependence of individuals (from “to agathon” for “the good” in Attic Greek), therefore the analysis of good and evil must take place within the collective agathological drama and, strictly speaking, cannot at all be “analysed” (in the Greek sense of the term “analysis” originally denoting “a breaking up”; cf. Harper 2001–2012).

Thus, from the point of view occupied by Dostoyevsky, controversial as it might sound on the welfarist view of human flourishing, the relation between the life-chances to achieve the goal of life (defined in personalist terms) and the circumstances of life (which might be described in terms of the availability or deprivation of some goods), is essentially ambiguous (which explains why Dostoyevsky, knowing full well the conditions of life of the Russian peasantry, was not impressed by the material achievements of the Western civilisation he witnessed first-hand during his prolonged stays in Germany, England, France, and Italy). It is as if the main problem with evil, for Dostoyevsky, is that it is an expression and the proof of the failure of some individuals to undergo successfully metanoetic transformation, rather than that it deprives someone his rights. I cannot but think at this point about the remarkable unanimity between Dostoyevsky and Alexandr Solzhenitsyn about the potentially beneficial role of suffering. Having spent years in a Stalinist labour camp and working on a book intended as a tribute to the millions of victims of the Gulag, the Nobel Prize winning author was able to write the following words: “Bless you prison, bless you for being in my life. For there, lying upon the rotting prison straw, I came to realize that the object of life is not prosperity as we are made to believe, but the maturity of the human soul” (Solzhenitsyn 2007, pp. 312–13).

The account of the human good that is presupposed in such a non-welfarist and “participatory” model of life of the members of the community of persons within which goods, including goods brought about by way of intense suffering, are exchanged between persons, cannot be dismissed out of hand as a viable anthropological alternative. Yet, it also cannot be transposed onto an individualistic account of human flourishing. For this reason, Sterba is right when he dismisses John Hick’s soul-making theodicy to the extent Hick shares (which I presume he does) with Sterba a libertarian-individualistic conception of selfhood. As such a conception implies little or no connection between the soul-making of individual X (‘the assaulter’) and the soul-making of individual Y (‘the assaulted’), Sterba’s following argument, pace Hick, appears obviously plausible: “Could it be that God’s permitting all the evil in our world is justified by the opportunity for soul-making it provides? Not if having the opportunity for significant soul-making in our world is dependent on having significant freedom such that a net loss of significant freedom in our world would result in a net loss of the opportunity for significant soul-making as well. Unfortunately, this does seem to be the case. Moreover, whenever serious assaults occur, what happens is that the particular opportunity for soul-making of the assaulters, an opportunity for soul-making that no one ideally needs to have, is exercised badly at the expense of the opportunity for soul-making of their victims, an opportunity for soul-making that all would-be victims should have” (pp. 35–36). However, the whole point of my laborious exposition of Dostoyevsky’s “Russian Orthodox view” of collective, extended, relational selfhood is that it undermines the apparent obviousness of Sterba’s above argument and offers a more collectivist vision of soul-making immune to Sterba’s criticism. How so? Firstly, on the collectivist account of selfhood, soul-making is not an individualistic affair, but is, rather, intimately linked to soul-making of others, including the soul-making of one’s assaulters (Socrates’ ban on harming one’s enemies and Jesus’ call to love one’s enemies readily comes to mind as an indication that this thought is not senseless). Secondly, if instead of making a tacit assumption that the only way to conceive

of human flourishing is the Aristotelian one, we accept a more inclusive formula that human flourishing is about the actualisation of the human potentialities for producing good, then agathologically successful may be also a person who, in the course of her life, produces goods in the lives of others, without experiencing them (an idea parents, teachers, or physicians are familiar with). Indeed, such agathological interdependence of individual persons has a similar logic as welfare interdependence, which underlies socialist approaches to socio-economic policy, close to James Sterba's heart, as is evident from his numerous publications in political philosophy (cf. e.g., [Narveson and Sterba 2010](#); [Sterba 2010](#)). Against the background of such a relational view of a good life, the strict opposition between the soul-making of the assaulters and the soul-making of the assaulted, implied by Sterba in the above argument, becomes less obvious.

On the face of it, Hick's soul-making theodicy is capable of accommodating an "extended" or "relational" view of soul-making, as Hick sees soul-making as a God-granted opportunity for "human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort (...) in an environment whose primary and overriding purpose is not immediate pleasure but the realising of the most valuable potentialities of human personality" ([Hick \[1966\] 2007](#), pp. 256, 258). However, Sterba seems right by assuming (throughout Chapter 3 of his book) that speaking about "potentialities of human personality", Hick presupposes an individualistic account of selfhood, which makes his theodicy vulnerable to an obvious line of attack, implied in Sterba's above argument against Hick: what about the soul-making of the serf boy from Ivan Karamazov's story? If Hick would respond that God will simply grant the serf boy the fullness of eternal life, irrespective of the boy's failure to undergo the process of soul-making in "this life", one might remark that Hick's insistence on the great importance of soul-making, supposedly justifying even horrendous evils, does not square well with Hick's allowance for the possibility of achieving life's ultimate goal without significant progress in soul-making attained in this life. Furthermore, such a move would open the theodicy of soul-making to a charge, formulated by Marilyn Adams, quoted approvingly by Sterba, of the lack of unity between goods produced and evils experienced by a person in this life and the goods granted by God in the afterlife (cf. [Sterba 2019](#), p. 37). However, the collectivist corrective to the soul-making style of theodicy makes these charges less critical, as then the agathological success of the individual victims of evils is differently conceived (perhaps on the analogy of the contribution of the victims of the defensive war to the freedom and long-term flourishing of the nation). Needless to say, theistic traditions that presuppose such a collectivist account of selfhood may point to some form of divine reward for the victims as their solution to the problem of evil, but then, unlike Hick, they will be able to argue that the unity between what happens in this life and the next is preserved precisely because of the collectivist nature of their interpretation of something like the Hickian soul-making. In short, Sterba's arguments against the soul-making theodicy do not apply to the collectivist variation on it, a theodicy of metanoetic transformation of the selves under the relational account of selfhood, which I purport is implied by Dostoyevsky in *Brothers Karamazov* (and is presupposed by my Mirandolian theodicy).

Another theodicy that Sterba ([Sterba 2019](#), pp. 71–110) successfully challenges is "sceptical theism", defined earlier, a theodicy I also reject (cf. [Salamon 2017](#)). Here, the limitations of the theodicy implied by Dostoyevsky must be acknowledged (and therefore must be supplemented by the sovereignty component of the Mirandolian theodicy), as, to the extent Dostoyevsky, following the Russian Orthodox tradition, is likely to accept that God on occasion does intervene in the human affairs to produce good or prevent evil, he may be forced to retreat to some form of sceptical theism. Dostoyevsky may need to resort to sceptical theism in order to answer the question that Sterba might put to him in the following manner: what exactly might justify divine non-intervention to prevent, rather than permit, the horrendous evil consequence of the immoral action of the boyar resulting in the serf boy being torn to pieces by dogs in front of his mother, when that could easily be done by God (something that must be presumed, if one accepts that God does act on

occasion to prevent evils)? I am inclined to agree with Sterba that theists who accept that God does intervene on occasion in the human affairs to prevent evils have no good answer to that question (and, needless to say, the cruel murder of the serf boy may be substituted by any number of horrendous and cruel mass-murders and genocides). When Sterba's logical argument from evil is directed against theism of this kind, I think his argument is both valid and sound. Therefore, the only way to block Sterba's logical argument from evil is by dropping the assumption that God does intervene on occasion in human affairs to prevent evils, and providing a plausible justification for such a move. This is, in a nutshell, the motivation for the Mirandolian theodicy to be outlined in the coda of this work.

3. Kenosis as a Condition of Bearing Fruit in the Lives of Others

The two theodical motives about suffering and evil: a transformative suffering (potentially beneficial for the suffering person) and vicarious suffering (potentially beneficial for others) are present in the entire Dostoyevsky's oeuvre, but they culminate and interlace in Dmitry Karamazov's acceptance of the sentence to years of hard penal labour for the crime of patricide he has not committed. This makes Dmitry, rather than his atheist brother, Ivan, or the saintly ascetic brother, Alyosha, the main hero of *Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoyevsky presents Dmitry's katorga in Siberia (something the writer himself was subjected to) as an opportunity for Dmitry to undergo "purification through suffering", but at the same time as an opportunity to suffer vicariously for his father and brothers (including the actual murderer, half-brother, Smerdyakov) to expiate for their sins (Dostoyevsky 1993, pp. 648–49). Both forms of suffering are ultimately beneficial and thus are instances of evil defeated. The centrality of this idea of beneficial suffering in the overall design of the novel is signalled early on, in the second of the thirteen scenes of the book, when during the meeting of Karamazovs with Father Zosima, the holy monk having a premonition of Dmitry's future in a penal colony, kneels before him and kisses his feet as if acknowledging the sanctity of his future suffering (Dostoyevsky 1993, p. 62). Incidentally, the scene is clearly inspired by the Russian Orthodox idea of "sanctification of suffering", which is fundamental to the entire Russian spiritual tradition, going back to the first Russian martyrs, "innocent" princes Boris and Gleb murdered by their "evil" brother Sviatopolk. Both these motives about beneficial suffering are also alluded to in the motto put on the top of the first page of *Brothers Karamazov*, the quote from John's Gospel (12:24): "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." (Dostoyevsky 1993, p. 1) There can be little doubt that Dostoyevsky chose this quote to highlight the core message of *Brothers Karamazov*. However, here, again, the message becomes clear only when the fragment will be read against the background of the spiritual communitarianism presupposed by the Russian Orthodox tradition, which Dostoyevsky contrasts with the individualistic orientation of the Western liberal tradition, rooted in Protestantism which he designates 'Geneva idea'. He is highly critical of this tradition of thinking about human relations, since he is convinced that in it, "the vision of social harmony is sacrificed to "a principle of individualism, a principle of isolation, of intense self-preservation". In a social order in which each personality "fights for what it wants, ... demands its rights", and "desires to separate", social cohesion, insofar as it exists, is dependent on contracts between calculating individuals rather than on mutual love." (Ward 1986, p. 74).

Now, given such philosophical instincts of the author of *Brothers Karamazov*, it should be clear that the aforementioned employment of the biblical image of the seed that has to die in order not to stay alone, but instead bear much fruit, is intended to convey a certain ideal of human flourishing, according to which the appropriate way of "bearing much fruit" is by bearing it in the lives of others. So here, again, the central objection against Sterba's more individualistic approach to the analysis of the impact of evil on human flourishing suggests itself: the goods and evils that take place in the lives of various individuals may, in the horizon of a theistic worldview, be interconnected in such intricate ways within human communities (including trans-generational communities, such as nations or humanity as

a whole) that the evil experienced by some individuals may be “defeated” by the good experienced by other individuals. As controversial as moving in this direction may appear at first, there can be no doubt that Dostoyevsky’s favourite biblical quote about the grain of wheat that bears much fruit implies that “death” is a precondition of a fruitful life, and “death”—even if what is meant here is only the “death” of our ego, overcoming our self-centred existence—involves suffering, undoubtedly experienced at the time as evil, perhaps even significant or horrendous evil. There is just no other way to bear much fruit than by first dying, and this “mechanism” of bearing much fruit by paying a high price of suffering and self-denial (kenosis is the Greek biblical term used in Flp 2:7 to capture this dimension of Christ’s self-sacrifice) manifests itself not only in the life of finite creatures, but in the suffering and death of Christ, and is also revealed as characteristic of the Divine mode of existence.

An arguably even more challenging component of this biblical message embraced by Dostoyevsky as central to his Christian anthropology is the implicit warning that the worst of all possible options is “to remain alone”. How to understand this warning? Why is remaining alone the most negative state of affairs? Is not a lone individual always in the presence of God, as Luther saw it, and thus never alone? It is here, I submit, that a truly radical view of all good and evil as a reality that is social or relational, rather than individual, is implied. However, how can good and evil not be at its core individual in nature? Do not terms “good” and “evil” ultimately pertain to states of mind(s) of conscious individuals (human or animal) and only by extension to some states of affairs in the world, which causally contribute to the content of these mental states that are perceived by conscious creatures as good (desirable) or evil (undesirable)? I think they do, but still, the content of these mental states we call “good” or “evil” may be such that they are always intimately connected to the analogical mental states of other conscious creatures.

The question that is hanging in the air at this point, and which James Sterba might raise even earlier, on the first mention of “collective selfhood” or “spiritual communitarianism”, concerns the place of individual freedom, autonomy, self-ownership, and self-direction in the larger scheme of Dostoyevsky’s vision of human life. Dostoyevsky thought very hard about this issue, which he framed in terms of reconciliation of the “I” and the “all”. That he considered the preservation of freedom essential to a genuinely “Christian life” is clear from one of his most famous literary creations, namely the Grand Inquisitor Scene from *Brothers Karamazov*, the message of which boils down to denunciation of Catholic Christianity for the distortion of the ideal of humanity revealed by God in Christ, precisely by sacrificing human freedom on the altar of the provision of welfare (Ward 1986, p. 158). However, given everything said so far about Dostoyevsky’s view of selfhood, the freedom he has in mind cannot be a libertarian, “negative freedom”—perfect freedom from interference by others. Indeed, Dostoyevsky’s search for reconciliation of the “I” and the “all” must be restricted to some version of “positive freedom”, freedom to be able to realise human potentialities for producing good, “agathological freedom”, one might say. However, for Dostoyevsky, “bearing much fruit”—fruit of the good, and not just for oneself, but for others too—presupposes Christ-like consent “to die”. Otherwise, the seed will stay alone and barren of the good. Therefore, far from being a passive victim, resigned to whatever comes his way, Dostoyevsky envisages a suffering individual as potentially a co-redeemer of the imperfect humanity. So, Dostoyevsky searched for his conception of freedom in the vicinity of what he considered to be the essence of Christ’s freedom, who at once represents paradigm of the highest realisation of personal existence, and yet also “emptied himself” or “made himself nothing” (Philippians 2:7, in New International Version), “by taking a form of a servant”—a servant of the others’ good. Corrigan detects in Dostoyevsky a passionate effort to reconcile these two goals of personal development that seem opposed to each other, namely achieving ultimate selflessness and achieving the ultimate completion of one’s selfhood: “In the very same passages where Dostoyevsky espouses the annihilation of the ‘I’, he fervently advocates the necessity of ‘becoming a personality, even at a much more elevated level than that which has now been defined in

the West' (5:79). The 'annihilation' of the 'I', for Dostoevsky, depends, in fact, upon the 'very highest development of the personality', the "fullest realization of one's I" (20:172)." (Corrigan 2017, p. 4). In Dostoyevsky's own words, with "the appearance of Christ (...) it became as clear as day that the highest, final development of the individual (...) is to seemingly annihilate it, to give it wholly to each and every one whole-heartedly and selflessly. And this is the greatest happiness. In this way the law of Christ merges with the law of humanism, and in the merging both, both the 'I' and the 'all' (in appearance two extreme opposites) mutually annihilated for each other, at that same time each apart attains the highest goal of his individual development. This is indeed the paradise of Christ" (Dostoyevsky 1973, pp. 39, 96).

Do these "dialectical" investigations yield Dostoyevsky a conception of freedom that may address Sterba's legitimate concern with the consent of an individual victim of evil as an indispensable requirement of free acceptance of undeserved suffering and thus a condition of "bearing much fruit"? As Sterba puts it convincingly: "It should be pointed out that any greater moral good that would serve as a justification here [i.e., in the context of an attempt at a 'Greater Moral Good Defense' of God's permitting evil—JS] must also have freedom as one of its components because that is the way all moral goods are constituted for us" (p. 33). I think the only sensible option open to Dostoyevsky is to resort to a notion of "implied consent" or "tacit consent", which is used regularly in political philosophy, in the context of social contract theories. What such theories presuppose is a general acceptance by a citizen of the overall legal framework of the state, which provides beneficial, on the whole, conditions for human agathological development and human flourishing. So, on Dostoyevsky's picture, such general consent as a condition of freedom would have to amount to acceptance, en bloc and in advance (be it with inner strife), the necessity of suffering as divine will, on the model of Christ in Gethesemane: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." (Luke 22:42) However, is it plausible to assume that the serf boy torn into pieces by his master's dogs might have given such a tacit, en bloc consent to divine will to suffer and die? A positive answer would stretch credulity. However, again, Dostoyevsky's implicit theodicy fails on this point only if the writer presupposes (as I think he does) that there is no way to avoid a conclusion that God must have permitted this particular case of evil. Indeed, such a conclusion cannot be avoided, if one assumes that God does intervene on occasion to prevent some evils, as on such an interventionist interpretation of divine providence, God must decide when to intervene or not on case by case basis. That is why the non-intervention clause of the Mirandolian theodicy, which denies this premise is necessary to fix this problem inherent in Dostoyevsky's theodicy (and arguably in any other theodicy considered by Sterba in his book).

4. The Mirandolian Theodicy and Social Responsibility for Evil Prevention

The Mirandolian theodicy, while presupposing the relational conception of selfhood explored so far, provides an answer—absent in Dostoyevsky—to the question about human freedom and autonomy. On the Mirandolian picture of the divine–human relation, God does not interfere with human freedom at all. Humans are left to their own devices, to realise their potential for freedom, to expand their freedom, to discover new ways of being free in more meaningful ways. It is only that the social dimension of human existence and of human consciousness makes individuals inescapably dependent on each other in their understanding and exercise of freedom. Mutual interference in each other's freedom is the order of the day. Apparently, one may be free only with others, not free from others. However, debating the nature of freedom is not the main subject of this study. What is its subject, is the question whether Sterba is right that the facts about all the evils of the world testify that if God existed, he would be constantly violating human freedom by failing to prevent significant evils.

The Mirandolian theodicy denies that theism necessarily entails that God exercises absolute sovereignty over the Earth, and thus nothing can take place in the human realm

without God's permission. Instead, the Mirandolian theodicy presupposes that God granted humanity full sovereignty and thus human freedom that is restricted only by natural human limitations and by humans themselves. This sovereignty may be best understood on the Rousseauian model of "popular sovereignty" (i.e., the sovereignty of the populus, exercised by the people in common), according to which citizens are free only when they themselves shape their destiny by legislating in common and executing in common their own laws, which facilitate the production of good and the prevention of evil in the realm under their sovereignty (cf. [Philpott 2020](#)).

Some theists may worry that a denial of the possibility of God's intervention to prevent evils in the human world due to the non-intervention clause implied by the Mirandolian conception of human sovereignty leaves us with a God of deism rather than with God of "traditional theism". I beg to differ, as the only "traditional" theistic belief about God that the defender of the Mirandolian theodicy questions is that God intervenes in the natural course of events in the terrestrial realm to prevent evils and to produce goods, and one does not get from theism to deism just by denying that God acts in the world to prevent evils and produce goods. Unlike in the case of theism, there seems to be no scholarly consensus regarding what the minimal conceptual requirements are that a deistic God is supposed to satisfy, but two beliefs about God seem to be shared by deists, namely, (a) the denial of any form of religious revelation and (b) a view of an absentee God (cf. [Byrne 2013](#), pp. 52–78). Neither of these beliefs are entailed by the Mirandolian concept of human sovereignty, as plenty of scope is left for God to be present to human consciousness, and thus engage with and inspire human beings in the course of history (see, e.g., Bernard McGinn's multi-volume definitive account of the history of Christian mysticism; [McGinn \(1995\)](#)).

In the culminating point of a devastating criticism of Alvin Plantinga's classic "solution" to the logical problem of evil, namely his free-will defence, James Sterba states (p. 26): "Plantinga needs to provide a greater good justification, or possible justification, particularly for God's permitting significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of wrongdoing other than by simply appealing to the freedom of the wrongdoers, given that these are consequences that God, and you or I on occasion, could easily prevent. And Plantinga has not done this". I submit that a God-granted full sovereignty of humanity over the human affairs (indeed, over the Planet, with all its inhabitants, for whose well-being humanity incurs responsibility) provides such a possible "greater good justification" required by Sterba. Now, I must and can be brief in outlining the main advantages of the Mirandolian theodicy when compared with other theodicies that came under Sterba's scrutiny.

Firstly, on the Mirandolian view, the greatest dignity of humanity comes from the God-granted right and ability of human persons to be self-creators and thus co-creators with God (God providing a wide range of possibilities, some of which human beings realise by tracing this rather than that path of possible human development). Importantly, such a scenario is capable of accommodating global value pluralism, as it presupposes that God, out of the divine plenitude of the infinite good, "creates" the myriad of agathological possibilities (possibilities for realisation of various goods leading to creaturely flourishing), while various parts of humanity, in its history of evolution and progress, realise only some of these possibilities. This "multi-realizability of the good" (which has its ultimate source and ultimate fulfilment in God, whose very nature is to be the Infinite Good) makes the idea of the "best possible world" (and hence the Leibnizian theodicy of the best possible world) incoherent. Having granted full sovereignty to humanity, which includes freedom of human beings to develop their potential for good in the direction chosen by them, God cannot have one particular idea of the optimal realisation of the agathological potential of human nature, as this potential is, of its nature, pluralistic. Consequently, God may not intervene in human affairs, as an intervening God would forestall and preclude human choices regarding the direction of their agathological development (individual and social), more than one of which may be good (that is what is meant, in this context, by "value

pluralism"). It follows, therefore, that Sterba's justifiable criticism of "the best possible world" style of theodicy misses the target in the case of the Mirandolian theodicy, according to which the question why the state of affairs in the world is less than optimal cannot even arise.

Secondly, the Mirandolian theodicy is designated in such a way in recognition of Mirandola's suggestion that God could not be more magnanimous and generous towards his rational creatures than in lavishing upon them the sovereign right, that is full and "supreme authority" over every aspect of their life and everything that is happening "within the territory" they inhabit (Philpott 2020). However, the sovereignty of humanity, stretching in time for millennia and presupposing evolution, development and progress, cannot be conceived differently than as exercised in common, with all the consequences that such a non-individualistic vision of human agency entails, including the well-researched "problem of collective action", which illustrates the unavoidability of suboptimal outcomes (i.e., "evil"—in the vocabulary of this paper) (Reisman 1990). Indeed, the problem of collective action provides a serious challenge to Sterba's individualistic approach to the analysis of evils, as it makes precise attribution of responsibility for particular evils impossible (making all evil essentially social).

The idea of social nature of good and evil, which gives rise to social responsibility for evil prevention, is given credence by the increasing volume of research on deviant, destructive, and evil behaviour by empirical psychologists and cognitive scientists. Philip Zimbardo, in his classic *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (Zimbardo 2007), characterises with impressive lucidity the two hypotheses explaining evil behaviour as the "dispositional view" (the "bad apple" approach) and "situational view" (the "bad barrel" approach). Zimbardo, like many other psychologists, while not denying the influence of individual dispositions and choices on an individual's behaviour, ascribes much greater weight to the situational factors in shaping human behaviour (in short, bad barrels often turn good apples into bad apples). It does not require much philosophical imagination to notice the relevance of such a conclusion to our current debate. If evil behaviour of individuals is in a significant way causally related to a myriad of factors, events, and circumstances, each of which are not a result of a deliberate decision of the agent under consideration or even any particular agent, but rather an outcome of a cumulative impact of countless actions and events over time, there are only two coherent scenarios available to a theist trying to conceptualise how an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God relates to the realm of human action and human experience. One envisaged by Sterba and the other presupposed by the Mirandolian theodicy (the third one is brooding in the mists of sceptical theism which is the same as evading the question).

On Sterba's "traditional" account of the divine-human relation, a good God, if he existed, would be required, among other things, to prevent all significantly evil consequences of human actions. Sterba does not see a problem with God doing just that and also making space for the significant moral freedom of human agents. I suspect Sterba finds such a scenario coherent, only because he overlooked both the problem of collective action (which describes a situation when well-disposed individuals acting collectively produce unintentionally significant evil) and the impact of situational factors on evil behaviour. Sterba appears to ignore the fact that Dostoyevsky's boyar behaves as he does because he is a feudal lord, so, presumably, instead of just preventing the serf boy from feeling pain and dying when attacked by the boyar's dogs, God would do better by fixing the socio-economic system of the feudal Russia in which such human relations as the one between the boyar and the serf boy and his mother are thinkable. As disagreeable as it may sound, the boyar may be thought of as a victim of feudalism (Hegel's master-slave dialectics springs to mind), as, to take a hint from Socrates, by committing such a gross injustice, the boyar commits moral suicide and he presumably would not have done so, were he not born into a family of feudal lords (equally plausibly, Adolf Eichmann would not end up being complicit in the murder of 200,000 Hungarian Jews, if he would be born in 21st Century Denmark—even though, we would probably still prefer to avoid

his company). The point is that if Sterba would acknowledge the decisive impact of the situational factors on the behaviour of individuals, he would have to require God to make sure that all individual agents are placed in a “barrel” of circumstances that would have no negative impact on their behaviour. I suspect that would, in the end, mean no less than placing each individual agent in a perfect world, surrounded by perfect agents (and not just morally perfect agents, but cognitively perfect and perfect in just about every possible way, otherwise they are bound to create an environment conducive of evil behaviour—so we are back in a “bad barrel”). That would, to my mind, require God to create, right from the start, a species *homo deus* (to use Yuval Harari’s half-joking term) and to place it in paradise.

Conversely, the Mirandolian theodicy is capable of accommodating fully any deliverances of human sciences, including empirical psychology, as it has no problem with accepting the evolutionary and developmental nature of the human and animal world, with all its imperfections and limitations, as well as its potential for improvement and endless progress. The Mirandolian theodicy takes into consideration both the collective action problem and the decisive impact of situational factors on human behaviour. On the Mirandolian view of human condition and of the divine–human relation, evil is a natural consequence of the sovereignty exercised by imperfect humanity in common and, as such, does not need to be explained or justified by reference to human free will, which—as the case of Eichmann and countless other examples of “ordinary” people contributing to the causal chain resulting in unimaginable evils testify—is a very implausible candidate for accounting for the actual nature and distribution of evils in the world. In this way, the Mirandolian theodicy dispenses with the free-will defence, which fell easy prey to Sterba’s argumentative assault. The Mirandolian theodicy dispenses also with sceptical theism which, as mentioned earlier, was dismissed by Sterba as insufficient rebuttal to his logical argument from evil. I argued elsewhere (cf. [Salamon 2017](#)) against sceptical theists in somewhat different fashion than Sterba, suggesting that in the absence of the ability of affirming what divine goodness must minimally imply and what it may not imply, the human God-talk cannot take off the ground, as without being able to affirm divine goodness in a positive (or kataphatic) manner, we are left without any positive reason for acknowledging God as worthy of worship or as an anchor of human agathological hope for the fulfilment of human desire for the infinite good. Negative (or apophatic) theology may be appropriate when reporting mystical experiences or when referring to implications of divine omnipotence and divine omniscience, when divine goodness has already been affirmed. Without a minimal positive agathological component, the reference to a theistic God is not possible, as the object of one’s religious commitment might as well turned out to be an omniscient and omnipotent evil being, or an absolute without agathological attributes, thus irrelevant to the human agathological concerns, such as Spinoza’s *Deus sive Natura*. I call this combination of affirming minimal agathological implications of the concept of divine goodness, while at the same time affirming human inability to formulate similar implications in the case of divine omniscience and divine omnipotence, “theistic scepticism”. Theistic scepticism is an antithesis of “sceptical theism”, as it allows for affirming that God must not act in a manner that is entirely opposed to fundamental human agathological intuitions, while at the same time affirming that we may not know how God will bring about the realisation of an eschatological scenario within which the agathological promises of a given religious tradition regarding the achievability of the greatest good will be fulfilled. Such theistic scepticism is presupposed by my Mirandolian theodicy.

Lastly, the Mirandolian theodicy also has something interesting to say about the “natural evils”. Sterba does not define “natural evil”, but limits himself to pointing to some paradigmatic examples (cf. [Sterba 2019](#), p. 157): “They include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, diseases, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, lightning strikes, and floods”. Throughout the book he reiterates that “natural evils” should be clearly distinguished from “moral evils”. However, on the Mirandolian assumption of human sovereignty over the Earth, the distinction is blurred for two different reasons. Firstly, the above-mentioned empirical

research into the psychology of human behavior casts doubt on the clear-cut differentiation between “moral” and “non-moral” aspects of human agency (in addition to calling into question the clear-cut distinction between its individual and social dimensions). This problematizes Sterba’s analysis of evil behavior in purely individual and moral terms, at the cost of the social and natural/non-moral considerations. Secondly, and more importantly, with humanity’s extraordinary technological progress, humanity gradually incurs new moral obligations to prevent “natural evils”, such as deadly or painful diseases, as well as the natural disasters enumerated by Sterba. If ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, then ‘can’ often implies ‘ought’, and humanity’s growing capability of preventing “natural evils” and limiting human and animal suffering puts the responsibility for the occurrence of such evils increasingly on the shoulders of the sovereign humanity, thus transforming natural evils into moral evils.

Appreciation of the social and situational dimensions of evil behavior of individuals, as well as the acknowledgement of the growing responsibility of humanity for the prevention of all sorts of evils happening in the realm under human sovereignty, calls for solidarity in the face of all the evils of the world. The Latin etymological root of “solidarity”—the Roman legal term: *obligatio in solido*—captures the sentiment underlying the Mirandolian theodicy well: the obligation of humanity as a whole to cooperate in the work of evil prevention, as only in common—in *solido*—humanity will be able to fulfill God’s will to defeat evil.

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