

Essay

James Sterba's New Argument from Evil

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Abstract: This article addresses the main argument in James Sterba's book, an argument which claims that the existence of a good God is logically incompatible with the evil in the world. I claim to show that his main premise, MEPRI, is implausible and is not a secure foundation for such an argument.

Keywords: Sterba; problem of evil; John Hick; divine intervention; rights

My thanks to James Sterba, and to the editors, for inviting me to reply to his book¹ and to his novel argument from evil against the existence of God. Sterba deserves credit for having introduced a new and ingenious argument into a very heavily-worked sector of the philosophical landscape. I shall argue, all the same, that his argument does not succeed.²

My focus will be on what I take to be Sterba's main argument, an argument that the existence of a good God is logically incompatible with the existence of certain kinds of evils that are prevalent in the world in which we live. In particular, I will criticize the main premise of that argument, the *Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I*:

(MEPRI) Prevent rather than permit the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, (a good to which we have a right) when, without violating anyone's rights, that can easily be done. (p. 126)

Sterba maintains that (MEPRI) is an exceptionless moral principle, such that any deviation from it by any person would show that that person is not perfectly good. (There is a similar, parallel, principle dealing with natural evil; we shall return to this later.) He argues that there clearly are many instances in which a good God, if God existed, could prevent such consequences; it follows, then, that God does not exist.

The objective of an atheological argument from evil is to show that there is something rationally defective about the theist's belief in a good God who is the creator and governor of the world. In view of this, a successful argument from evil needs to proceed from premises which either are already accepted by the theist, or are such that it can be shown that she rationally ought to accept them. Now, Sterba maintains that theists generally will in fact accept his principle, though they will maintain that there are good reasons why God might not be able to satisfy the principle in certain sorts of cases. However, he also provides some positive reasons why we all ought to accept the principle. He claims that the principle is readily acceptable both by teleological and by deontological ethical systems. With regard to teleological systems this is evident: we are asked to prevent "the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences" of certain actions when this can "easily" be done—that is, when the costs of doing so are small. It might seem plausible that deontological theories also would accept the principle; respect for the persons who will suffer these consequences would plausibly require that the consequences be averted when the cost of doing so is slight. There are, however, possible reasons for questioning this, as we shall see.



Citation: Hasker, William. 2021.

James Sterba's New Argument from Evil. *Religions* 12: 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12010021>

Received: 3 December 2020

Accepted: 26 December 2020

Published: 29 December 2020

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¹ (Sterba 2019); page references in the text are to this volume.

² Previous discussions between Sterba and me have occurred at meetings of the Society for Philosophy of Religion, as well as in an issue of *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 87: 3 (June 2020) devoted to Sterba's book. I will not assume the reader's familiarity with that issue of *IJPR*; however, readers of the issue will find here some repetition, as well as considerable new material.

It seems relevant to note here a certain asymmetry in the application of (MEPRI) as between human agents and God. With regard to human agents, the principle is rather undemanding, because it is only rarely that we have it in our power *easily* to prevent significant or horrendous evil consequences. In most cases, preventing serious evils requires from us commitments of time, energy, and resources; it is just for this reason that the Good Samaritan is a powerful moral example. Sometimes, furthermore, preventing serious evils requires us to assume risks to ourselves. Where God is concerned, however, many things are “easy” for an omnipotent being, so the principle will come into effect far more frequently than is the case for human agents. This may lead us to suspect that, contrary to what has been implied, the principle has been specially devised as a weapon to be employed in an argument from evil, rather than being a principle of general ethics that is only subsequently applied in this atheological argument.

However this may be, Sterba does provide some additional arguments in support of his principle. He makes much of the claim that the principle accords with what we should expect of an “ideally just and powerful state”; if so, then should we expect less of a divine government? I believe this comparison is less forceful than Sterba takes it to be, because the analogy between human and divine government is weak. Their purposes need not entirely coincide: for example, we do not expect a secular state to have a major concern for bringing about the moral and spiritual development of its citizens. But the most striking disparity is the enormous difference in power between God and any human government. Furthermore, we should rightly be reluctant to allow to any human government a degree of power that would make it a plausible analog to divine government in this respect. (Readers of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* will recall that both Gandalf and Galadriel (beings of exalted status, far superior to humans in power and goodness) refused to accept the Ring of Power when it was offered to them. The Ring would enable either of them to do enormous good and to stamp out terrible evils—but eventually, they would themselves be overpowered by it, and even greater evil would be the result.)

To be sure, where divine government is concerned, we need not fear the corrupting influence of power. But this merely underscores the vast difference between the two sorts of governance. It means that the theorist is free to start out with his own conception of a relatively good and benign human government (Sterba is an admirer of the Scandinavian democracies), and then add variations as desired in order to arrive at a preferred version of divine governance. The analogy thus conceived may offer a congenial method for expounding the theorist’s own preferences, but it has little if any argumentative force.

In his reply to me Sterba offers another, *ad hominem*, argument for his principle. He cites a principle from a writing of mine, termed the *No Gratuitous Evil* principle:

(NGE) An omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being (i.e., God) would of necessity prevent the occurrence of any evil state of affairs it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.³

Sterba points out, reasonably enough, the similarities between NGE and his own moral requirements for divine governance: seemingly, one who affirms NGE has little room to dispute Sterba’s principles.

Unfortunately, Sterba seems to have stopped reading too soon in the source he has quoted. On the very next page I say, “It is my belief that NGE is false, and this entire discussion is on the wrong track. In this paper . . . I shall argue . . . that NGE should be rejected by theists, since it comes into conflict with other, better-entrenched elements of the theistic worldview”.⁴ That argument will not be repeated in full here, but parts of it will become relevant later in this discussion.

³ See (Hasker 2004, p. 80).

⁴ (Hasker 2004, p. 81).

Whatever may be the case concerning Sterba's arguments for (MEPRI), the principle deserves consideration in its own right. In thinking about this principle, it occurred to me that there are two main ways it might be amended, in the process arriving at a principle that might be more plausible as an exceptionless moral requirement than the original.⁵ One of these ways is captured by the following emended principle:

Prevent rather than permit the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions (a good to which we have a right), when, without failing to fulfill one's other responsibilities, that can easily be done.

The phrase, "without failing to fulfill one's other responsibilities," subsumes the original "without violating anyone's rights". If someone has a right against me, I have a responsibility to observe that right, but the converse does not necessarily hold. For instance, I think I have a responsibility to care for the earth so as to preserve it as a habitat for future generations of humans. But I doubt that those future generations, who do not now exist and who, for all I now know, may never exist, have rights against me in the present time.

Sterba, it turns out, thinks that those non-existent future generations do have rights against us now, and he thinks that, in general, all of our obligations can be cashed out in terms of rights. So he thinks the emendation is unnecessary. (At worst, however, it does no harm, since if Sterba is right the phrase substituted is equivalent to the original.) This disagreement turns out to be not very important in the present discussion, since Sterba accepts that God has the particular responsibilities I wish to call to our attention.

One such responsibility is *the responsibility to maintain an environment in which the morally significant exercise of free will is possible and required*. This is a responsibility human governments do not have, except for the need to avoid legislating in a way that would excessively constrain the ability of citizens to make choices of their own. And it appears plausible that it is inconsistent with the exceptionless prevention of significant and horrendous evils envisioned by Sterba; preventing such evils might well involve large constraints on the ability of the citizens to exercise free will. However, his account includes a feature which is designed to alleviate this inconsistency. (MEPRI) requires only that the *consequences* of immoral actions be prevented, not the actions themselves. So the immoral actor could make her choice and perform the action in question, but the evil consequences of the action would be prevented in some way she could not have anticipated. Such a strategy might indeed be successful in a particular case. But if *all* the significant evil consequences of *all* immoral actions were thus prevented, agents would surely become aware that actions that would seriously harm other persons would fail to accomplish their ends; exercise of that sort of free choice would then become impossible. And humans who become aware that God can be counted on to prevent evils as required by the principles, will suffer a serious loss of motivation to prevent the evils themselves.⁶

Sterba, however, introduces yet another complication which, he claims, prevents these results. In cases where human beings have failed to fulfil their duty of preventing the harmful consequences of moral evil, God will prevent *part* of the evil consequences, but will leave another part to occur. This will not be as much of a deterrent for malefactors who intend harm to others, nor will it deprive persons of goodwill of motivation to intervene to prevent evils. He illustrates this with an example featuring a child abduction, where a bystander has the opportunity, and therefore the obligation, to prevent the abduction before it occurs. If the bystander fails in this responsibility, God arranges for police officers to arrest the abductors before they have killed or physically harmed the child. This prevents the worst consequences of the abduction, but may well leave the child traumatized from the experience. So people who have the opportunity to save others from harm will still realize that, even allowing for divine intervention, things will be worse if they fail in their responsibility to act.

⁵ Note that I do *not* say that the principle as emended would in fact be an exceptionless moral requirement. That is a question for separate investigation. However, it seems to me that the principle without the amendments is not plausibly regarded as an exceptionless requirement.

⁶ On this see "Can God Prevent 'Just Enough' Evil?" in *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (Hasker 2004, pp. 80–94).

This example is problematic, I believe, especially in the stipulation that the bystander can “easily” have prevented the abduction. How much time, we might ask, elapses between the moment when it becomes clear that an abduction is under way, and the moment when the abduction has been completed? Well-planned abductions are likely to take place very swiftly. Are the abductors armed? Or are they physically menacing? In either case, intervening to prevent the abduction might involve very significant risks to the intervener, with no guarantee of success.

But accepting the example as proposed, there remains another problem. The requirement is that an agent prevent “significant or horrendous” evils. This wording is vague, but in any particular case there will be a threshold, such that harm falling below that threshold is relatively insignificant and can be permitted, whereas harm above the threshold would violate the sufferer’s rights and must be prevented. Now, if a human intervenes in such a way as to keep the evil consequences below the threshold, well and good. If the human being fails in her responsibility to intervene, but God acts so as to prevent harm above the threshold, then once again there is no violation of the sufferer’s rights. But if God, as suggested by Sterba, prevents only part of the “excess harm,” leaving some harm above the threshold to occur, then the sufferer’s rights have been violated, and God has failed in his obligations, which is surely impossible.

Sterba, however, demurs. “In cases of this sort [like that of the child abduction as described], there is a residue of evil consequences that the victims still do suffer. This residue is not really a significant evil in its own right, but it is harmful nevertheless, and it is something for which you are primarily responsible”. Once again, the example is problematic. Would the trauma inflicted on the child victim of a forcible abduction not be a “significant evil,” one that anyone able easily to prevent it would be obligated to do so? But leaving the example to one side, it is clear that the “residue of evil consequences” left in cases of the sort described by Sterba would be very much less severe than what would occur without the proposed divine intervention, and the motivation for bystanders to prevent the morally wrong actions would be correspondingly less.⁷ In this situation, God would be running a sort of moral kindergarten, allowing us to develop our characters by arguing over the Legos, but ready to intervene before anyone actually gets hurt. Actually, the comparison with a kindergarten may be too favorable. In an ordinary kindergarten children are being trained for later lives in which they will not be under constant supervision—but in Sterba’s world, this adult stage is never reached.

There is, I believe, a second sort of responsibility on God’s part that would in many situations keep God from preventing evils that, according to Sterba’s principles, he might otherwise be required to prevent. This is *the responsibility to maintain a natural order which is rule-governed and generally reliable*. This is necessary if free will is to be meaningfully exercised within the natural world; indeed, it is necessary in order for sentient creatures, both humans and other animals, to be able to act at all within nature to obtain their ends. The difficulty of this on Sterba’s scheme becomes apparent if we attend to another alleged moral requirement, as follows:

NEPRI Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of natural evil from being inflicted on rational beings (a good to which they have a right), as needed, when one can easily do so without causing greater or comparable harm to other rational beings. (p. 165)

(NEPRI) has so far been lurking in the background, but at this point it needs to be discussed. Preventing such evils in a Sterba-world would require even more instances of divine intervention than would be needed in ours: the greater unpredictability of natural processes in such a world would mean that humans and other animals would be much less able to anticipate potentially harmful events and avoid them. The number of interventions will be greatly multiplied if not only humans, but also sentient animals, are included among

⁷ This is precisely the point made in my essay, “Can God Prevent ‘Just Enough’ Evil?”

those entities who are to be spared the significant and horrendous consequences of natural evil. (This is required by another of Sterba's principles, (NEPRIV); see p. 165).

John Hick has eloquently described a similar world:

[N]o one could ever injure anyone else: the murderer's knife would turn to paper or the bullets to thin air . . . No one would ever be injured by accident: the mountain climber, steeplejack, or playing child falling from a height would float unharmed to the ground . . . To make possible this continual series of individual adjustments, nature would have to work by 'special providences' instead of running according to general laws that we must learn to respect on penalty of pain or death.⁸

Sterba maintains, however, that there would still be regularities in such a world, provided God intervenes in a rational, consistent way rather than capriciously. No doubt this is correct, but those regularities would be exceedingly complex: in addition to taking account of the physical antecedent conditions, they would also include in each case a very complicated set of moral considerations. It is open to question how successful we could ever be in learning these regularities and in applying them in practice. Natural science is *hard*; of all the world's great civilizations only modern Europe has made serious headway in understanding nature's ways. But the effect on motivation might be even more striking. Would we ever have had agriculture, if shortages of food never threatened human life and well-being? But if no agriculture, then no cities, and if no cities, little progress in learning and the arts. And that is only the beginning. It is universally recognized that young humans, especially males, take excessive risks because they feel themselves to be invulnerable. In a Sterba-world, they would be right! It is, I submit, very far from obvious that a world with these characteristics would be especially well-suited to fulfill divine purposes for the creation.

The second major qualification I think is needed for (MEPRI) is that the right to be spared the consequences of evil may not hold when the person threatened by those consequences is himself or herself the instigator of the evil in question. (This is the reason why I suggested that a deontological ethics might have reservations about accepting the principle.) So I propose:

MEPRI* Prevent rather than permit the significant and especially the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions to those who are not themselves the cause of those actions (a good to which we have a right), when, without failing to fulfill one's other responsibilities, that can easily be done.

Once again, Sterba demurs, holding that no such change is required. As an example of my point, I proposed a case in which the dictator of a small nation starts a malicious war of aggression in order to extend his territory. The offensive fails, but results in huge amounts of suffering and death, and the dictator's palace is surrounded by an angry mob. On Sterba's unmodified principle, he has a *right* to be transported to a remote location where he can live out his life in luxury and safety; he has this right against anyone who is able easily to do this for him. I believe that many of us will share the opinion that this dictator does not by any means have a right to be saved from the consequences of his own evil decisions.

It turns out that Sterba agrees with this; however, his reason why this is not a counterexample to his original principle is extremely interesting. He writes, "Hasker thinks my Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I entitles a dictator to be spared the harsh punishment that would otherwise be inflicted on him by those he had previously oppressed. Yet, in his example the dictator has no right to be spared that punishment, and so Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I does not require its prevention".⁹ Now, I have no doubt that almost all of us will agree with Sterba that, in my example, the dictator has no right to be

⁸ (Hick 1983, p. 47).

⁹ "Afterthoughts" (Sterba 2020, p. 238).

spared his punishment. But in making his point, Sterba has in effect *seriously compromised*, if not actually *undermined*, the force of the principle (MEPRI). As this principle was originally presented, we naturally understood the role of the phrase, “(a good to which we have a right)”, to be one of emphasis: it underscores the fact that, according to that principle, we have a *right* to be spared the consequences of morally evil actions.¹⁰ As applied by Sterba to the dictator’s case, however, that phrase takes on a different role altogether. Now it must be *independently established* that the prospective sufferer has a right to be spared this suffering, before the principle becomes applicable. Clearly, the prospect for establishing this in the case of the dictator is far from promising. But equally, there may be innumerable other cases in which the right in question can be challenged, so the overall application of the principle becomes extremely problematic. Sterba’s reinterpretation of the phrase in question does a lot to protect (MEPRI) from counterexamples. By the same token, however, it greatly reduces the utility of the principle in supporting an argument from evil against the existence of God.

Finally, we return to Sterba’s claim that theists in general will accept (MEPRI), holding only that in some cases it is impossible for God to comply with this requirement. Now, even if this is true, that does not secure (MEPRI) as a basis for Sterba’s atheological argument. His claim, remember, is that certain instances of evil are *logically incompatible* with God’s existence. But such a claim, if it is to succeed, must prove triumphant over the *best possible* theistic defense; it is not sufficient to win the argument by taking advantage of an unwise concession made by some opponents.¹¹ However, I do not believe the principle will in fact be widely conceded, at least not by theists who have their wits about them. At most, some may concede it as a *prima facie* moral requirement, but this is very different from accepting it as an exceptionless requirement, which is what Sterba needs. The reason I do not think they will accept it is that, when applied to a certain kind of situation, it produces a result that will be categorically unacceptable to all traditional theists, Christians included. To see this, consider the passage in Deuteronomy 30, where the Lord says to the Israelites, “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity”. The entire chapter rehearses the blessings that will come to them if they fulfill their covenant with God, as well as the calamities that will result if they are unfaithful. From Sterba’s perspective, the reasonable and appropriate response from the Israelites would have been along these lines: “Lord, it is nice that you are thinking of us, but we would like to renegotiate this covenant you are talking about. Of course we have no objection to the ‘life and prosperity’ you promise us if we keep your commandments. But if we do not keep them, we would morally prefer that you intervene to prevent any horrendous consequences that might ensue. In fact, if you consider the matter fairly, you will recognize that we have a *right* to be treated that way”.

Sterba does not side with the protesting Israelites in this situation. His reasons for this stance, however, are extremely interesting. He states that the requirement under (MEPRI) “applies only to harmful consequences we are entitled to have prevented. Hasker has the Israelites applying it to harmful consequences they are not entitled to have prevented because those consequences would be rightfully inflicted on them if they had broken their purported covenant with God”.¹² *Purported* covenant with God? Either the covenant is in effect already or it is not. If it is not, it has no effect on what the Israelites deserve from God. But even if it is in effect, the Israelites in my little satire are asking for the covenant to be renegotiated. Is it Sterba’s view that in this case (unlike, presumably, that of an ideal human government), the terms of the “social contract” are immutably fixed, not subject to revision?

¹⁰ This is certainly what is suggested by the grammatical placement of the phrase: the “good to which we have a right” can only be the prevention of evil consequences that is the main point of the principle.

¹¹ By the same token, I believe the NGE principle stated previously is a mistaken concession. Theists who grant the principle may have difficulty in their defenses of theism, but that does not imply the failure of the theistic position.

¹² (Sterba 2020, p. 238).

But the more important problem is sitting here in plain view. The requirement under (MEPRI) “*applies only to harmful consequences we are entitled to have prevented*”. This is, once again, the same fatal qualification we saw in the case of the dictator. The stated requirement is no longer an exceptionless requirement that applies to all persons in all situations. Instead, it applies only when it can be *independently established* that the prospective sufferer has a right to be spared this suffering. This protects the principle against counterexamples, but by the same token it weakens it to the point of near-uselessness.

We have seen that Sterba’s principle, (MEPRI), is subject to a number of serious objections. We can conclude that an argument based on this principle does not offer a promising foundation for an argument against theism. The God described in James Sterba’s book—the God who is bound by Sterba’s principles of Moral Evil Prevention and Natural Evil Prevention, and who follows the policies we might expect from an ideal human government—this God does not exist. That should not be a surprise; this God was devised precisely in order to show that he does not exist. This, however, has little or nothing to do with the existence of the God in whom Christians believe—Yahweh, the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

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

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