



# Why a Christian God would permit so much human suffering<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Our earthly benefactors (parents and the state) have the right to impose suffering on their beneficiaries, subject to two restrictions- the suffering does not outweigh actual benefits received and reasonably expected, and the suffering is the only way in which the benefactor can make possible some comparable good. One great good which humans have is libertarian free will to benefit or harm others, and thereby form our own character. In allowing humans to cause or suffer horrendous evils, God gives us the great good of having the opportunity to make ourselves saints or become totally evil. If we do not have this opportunity in our earthly life, it is compatible with Orthodox views of the afterlife, and with the Roman Catholic view, given an amended doctrine of Purgatory, that we shall have this opportunity after our death.

**Keywords** Problem of evil · Perfectly good God · Horrendous evil · After-life: · Purgatory · Sanctity · Damnation

## The rights of our greatest earthly benefactors

To what extent does a benefactor have the right to impose suffering on their beneficiaries, where the beneficiaries have not agreed to accept the benefaction on this condition? Our greatest earthly benefactors are our parents and the State.<sup>1</sup>Our parents (that

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<sup>1</sup> The sections “[The rights of our greatest earthly benefactors](#)”, “[The right and goodness of God in allowing human suffering](#)”, and “[The right and goodness of God in allowing horrendous evil](#)” of this paper largely summarise parts of my contribution to the “debate book”, jointly authored by myself and James Sterba, *Could a good God permit so much suffering?*, Oxford University Press, 2024; and is virtually the same as a paper which I presented at a meeting of the Society for the Philosophy of Religion in New Orleans in

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is, parents who are nurturing as well as biological parents) have given us our existence, and spent much time, energy, and money caring for us and helping us to grow up over many years. For most of our life the State (which I assume to be a relatively just State) has provided us with security, and sometimes with hospital care, and often also for many years with education. It is well recognised that, in virtue of their role as benefactors, responsible for our existence and flourishing over many years when we were too young to agree to accept their benefaction, both our parents and the State have certain rights to impose on their children and citizens suffering of different kinds for the sake of some good purpose. Parents have the right to compel their children to undergo medical treatments, some of which may be painful; and to attend a school which they do not like attending; and to help their parents in various ways. The State has the right to impose taxes on citizens and to punish them if they break the law. But, I suggest, there are restrictions of two kinds, which impose significant limits on the amount of suffering which parents and the State can impose.

First, they do not have the right to make us suffer to such an extent that the suffering outweighs the benefits they have provided for us and can reasonably be expected to provide in future.<sup>2</sup> Parents who totally neglect their children have no right to impose suffering on them; and a State which imposes large taxes; and uses them not to benefit its citizens, but merely to benefit important officials, has no right to the allegiance of its citizens. The second restriction on the amount of suffering which a benefactor has the right to impose is that the suffering is the only way in which the benefactor can cause or make possible some comparable good.<sup>3</sup> I suggest that that condition permits parents to send a child to a school which she will not enjoy, if that is the only accessible school which provides a good education. And I suggest that it justifies parents, caught in a war zone in which anaesthetics are not available with a baby whose life can be saved only by an immediate painful operation, in allowing the baby to suffer in this way. And the State is justified in imposing taxes if that is

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March 2025. The section “[The objection that God is “unfair” in his allocation of choices](#)” is new material, resulting from thinking further about the objection made by Sterba on pp. 104–5 of that book, that my theodicy represented God as “unfair”.

<sup>2</sup>This limit does not apply in cases where the beneficiary freely does an action which has the suffering as its foreseeable consequence—because in such cases, the choice is ultimately that of the beneficiary. Hence, the state is justified in imposing a long-term of imprisonment on someone who has committed a crime which has the long imprisonment as its foreseeable consequence.

<sup>3</sup>I mean by an agent’s action of causing or helping to cause an evil making possible “a comparable good”, that the expected utility of their action is not negative. The expected utility of an action which may cause either an evil state or a good state is {the probability that the action will be one causing the good state multiplied by the goodness of the good state} minus {the probability that action will be one causing the evil state multiplied by the badness of the evil state}. This definition assumes that we can indicate in a very rough way how good is the good state relative to how bad is the evil state by means of arbitrary numbers; and so, for example, if the good state is twice as good as the evil state is bad, we can indicate that by measuring the goodness of the good state as ‘2’, and the badness of the evil state as ‘1’. The more probable it is (the nearer to 1 is the probability) that the good state will occur, the more the badness of the bad state may exceed the goodness of the good state, while the expected value remains non-negative. So when God permits a free agent to cause either a good state or a bad state, and the strength of their desires for each state measures the probability that they will cause that state, the stronger the desires influencing the agent to cause the good state, and the weaker the desires influencing them to cause the bad state, the more the badness of the bad state can exceed the goodness of the good state, while the expected value remains non-negative.

the only way to provide health care for the population. But it is not necessary that the good made possible by the suffering is a good for the sufferer. Thus parents may be justified in sending a child to a neighbourhood school which she will not enjoy, in order to secure good relations in the neighbourhood (for example, sending a white child to a school, mainly used by black children of the neighbourhood), although it will not do as much good to the child as sending the child to a school which she will enjoy. And consider the case of parents having twin babies, caught in a war zone, when the life of one of them can only be saved by a bone marrow transplant from the other baby, which would cause the latter to suffer very considerably. It is plausible that the good is good enough to give the parents the right to allow the transplant. And the State is generally supposed to have the right to conscript young adults to serve in an army defending the State against a cruel oppressor, not for the sake of the young adults who could easily leave the country, but for the sake of the rest of the population. And this is so even when conscription involves the possibility of the conscript suffering serious injury or death.

### **The right and goodness of God in allowing human suffering**

Now—on the assumption of theism, that there is a God in the sense of a being who is essentially eternally omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, that God is by far our greatest benefactor. Our parents can only help to cause our existence and provide benefits for us, if God conserves the laws of nature which allow them to do so. And our parents can only *help* to cause the existence of us—they can only cause the existence of *a* child, but they must take the one that God gives them. The State can only provide us with security and all the other benefits it gives us in virtue of God conserving the laws of nature, which allow it to do so. It follows that God, being so much greater a benefactor than parents or the State, has a far greater right to impose suffering than they do. And God's right to impose suffering is far greater than that of parents and the State for a second reason—that since God is omnipotent, he can provide for us far greater benefits in future. The most obvious such benefit is that he can provide a life after death, and so if he imposes suffering on us in this life, he can always compensate us for this by providing a long good life after death. (This is on the assumption to which I will come in due course, that there is no suffering which God in fact causes to us, worse than any logically possible good which he could provide for us.) Although the two restrictions limit God's right to impose suffering far less than they limit the right of parents or the State to impose suffering, God's right to impose it is, I suggest, subject to the same two restrictions.

Bearing these points in mind, I now turn to consider the kinds of suffering which God does impose on humans. (In this short paper I do not discuss the suffering of animals.) I shall argue that all the actual evils known to us, suffered by humans, do not infringe the two restrictions which must be observed even by God. (I do this by appealing to various moral intuitions, which I suggest to be correct on non-religious grounds. Sometimes I also point out that these intuitions correspond to claims made, according to the New Testament, by Jesus or implied by his apostles, but I am not arguing in this paper that those intuitions are correct for this reason.) I shall be argu-

ing not merely that God has the right to impose these kinds of suffering, but that it is good that he should do so. The evils of suffering are traditionally divided into moral evils and natural evils. The sufferings which are moral evils are sufferings caused intentionally by humans or negligently permitted by them to occur. The sufferings which are natural evils are sufferings not caused by humans and not negligently permitted by them to occur. There can only be sufferings negligently permitted by humans, if there are natural processes which humans can prevent but negligently fail to do. Natural evils are sufferings caused by the operation of natural processes which humans cannot yet prevent—such as earthquakes, droughts, and diseases so far unpreventable by humans. I argue that God does not transgress the two restrictions, by drawing attention to the most obvious good which the possibility of evils makes possible, the good of making significant differences to ourselves, each other, and the world as a whole.

I now make the assumption, which I cannot discuss in a short paper devoted to a different topic—that in their choices to do either bad actions causing suffering to others, or good actions benefiting others, humans exercise libertarian free will. To have libertarian free will is to have the ability to make choices which may be influenced by, but are not predetermined by, factors outside our control.<sup>4</sup> If we use these opportunities to make the good choices, and thereby improve the world, we become an ultimate source of significant good in the world.<sup>5</sup> Under God our Creator, we are “mini-creators”. Yet if God gives us these choices, he thereby permits the possibility of us causing much moral evil; and so, given the large number of humans and the large number of free choices they make, it is very probable that there will be much moral evil in the world.

In order to exercise such free will, we need the natural evil of having desires to do bad actions. This is because if we recognise some action as good, that automatically gives us an inclination to do it. So in order to have a free choice between good and bad, we need also bad desires which influence us in the other direction, and then we can choose between good and bad. Most humans become parents; and so, however poor and ill educated they are, they have awesome choices between taking considerable trouble to make their children happy and showing them how to live, or of neglecting to do so. So although most of us have a natural love for our children, we also sometimes have competing desires which we are tempted to pursue at the expense of our children. We show our love in these circumstances by freely choosing to resist the competing desires. It is a great good for all of us that we can freely choose to show love when it is difficult but needed, and a further great good if in fact we choose to do so. And most humans have opportunities to benefit their aged parents, and to benefit many other humans with whom they have no close biological or mari-

<sup>4</sup>See my *Mind, Brain, and Free Will*, Oxford University Press, 2013, chapter 7, for arguments in defence of the view that it is most improbable that science will ever be able to show conclusively that we do or do not have libertarian free will, and that on balance the currently available evidence supports the claim that we do have such free will.

<sup>5</sup>This is not inconsistent with the Christian view that we cannot do good without the grace (that is, kind help) of God. But it is not either the Roman Catholic or Orthodox view, or – I suspect – the view of most Protestants, that that necessarily those who receive that grace do what is good; it sometimes needs some input from us if we are to do good. Grace is necessary, but not sufficient for good action.

tal connection. While there might be an equally good world in which everyone loves each other naturally, I suggest that it would not be more obviously a better world than one in which everyone has a choice of whether to improve themselves and the world, or to make themselves and the world worse. In making this claim, I rely on the moral intuition that the worth of a human life depends more on what we do for others than of what happens to us, an intuition encapsulated in the words of Jesus, as quoted by St Paul (Acts 20:13) “it is more blessed to give than to receive”. Those who suffer at the hands of others, or are caused to do so by natural processes, also have significant choices, choices of whether to bear their suffering with patience and cheerfulness, and not to resent any lack of care provided for them; or to allow themselves to feel bitter about their suffering and any lack of consideration for that suffering shown by their relatives, friends or the State.

As well as being able to make a difference to other humans, it is a further enormous good for us that by doing so, we form our own character, determine what sort of person we are to be. Our character is a matter of the kinds of desires and beliefs and their strengths, which we have—whether we are naturally generous, kind, considerate, friendly; and well-informed about the needs of others and so about which actions of ours would have what kind of influence on them, and whether we care about the nature of reality, including about the existence of God. Or whether we are naturally selfish, angry, envious, and callous and without adequate understanding of the needs of other humans and without any ambition to understand reality. Humans are so made that making a choice on one occasion to do a good action of some kind strengthens our desire to do a similar good action in future; and making a choice on one occasion to do a bad action of some kind strengthens our desire to do a similar bad action in future. We can thus gradually change our desires, so that we naturally desire to help others, and are not merely driven to do so by a nagging conscience. In order that we should have the choice of forming a strong very good character, we need to have opportunities (occasionally) to do actions which involve resisting great temptations (strong bad desires), because thereby we manifest our total commitment to the good and put us on the way to being by nature very good people. Or alas by repressing the nagging conscience, we may allow ourselves to become very bad people; God allows us to reject his ideal for us. Similarly those who suffer from the bad actions of others or from natural processes, form their character by their crucial choices of how to cope with their suffering, making themselves either patient, cheerful and sympathetic to others, or bitter people, interested only in their own feelings.

## **The right and goodness of God in allowing horrendous evil**

But, many people object, there are evils so bad that no amount of good, resulting from allowing them to occur, could outweigh any good which they may make possible. Such evils are often called “horrendous evils”. An occurrence is often called a “horrendous” evil, because it involves the occurrence of a similar significant evil in a large number of humans, for example in a pandemic or as a result of a deliberate policy of killing a whole population. But surely if God was justified in permitting any one individual human to suffer in the covid pandemic for many months in order to

provide the opportunity for significant choices both to the sufferer and to their friends of how to deal with this suffering, then God would have been justified in permitting many humans to suffer at the same time for reasons of the same kind. In fact, if a large number of people suffer simultaneously, that normally produces considerable compassion and help from the wider population who are not directly affected by themselves or their loved ones suffering; and also serious action by the State to help and prevent such pandemics in future. The mere number of sufferers cannot affect the cogency of a justification of God allowing some particular kind of evil.

What is much more worrying is when the horrendous character of an evil consists in the great suffering of one or more individual humans, in a long and painful illness, physical or mental, or—the most horrendous evils of all—by cruel torture of a kind to which a considerable number of people have been subjected by sadists and by political and religious zealots in the course of human history. I can well understand people thinking me callous for even attempting to justify God permitting these things to happen. I hope that I am not callous. One can only react with weeping to some accounts of what humans have done to other humans; but I do urge my readers, if you can stand back from any immediate involvement in such events, to consider that there is a point in God permitting these things to happen.

It is important first to bear in mind that there is always a limit to the amount any human can suffer. No human can suffer for more than their earthly life, and that means for more than a hundred or so years; and that is a very short time in comparison with the time after death. Since any acute suffering differs from non-acute suffering only in the degree and length of the suffering, God, if he so chooses, can give to sufferers a life after death, consisting of events longer and better than their sufferings on earth, the goodness of which outweighs the badness of their sufferings. Also, anyone subjected to intense torture for more than a few days, is likely to die at that stage. Death is God's safety barrier.

But what comparable goods are made possible by God ever permitting evils such as the horrendous evils of torture or of suffering from some very painful disease to be endured by anyone? I suggest that in permitting these evils, God is allowing two kinds of human a final choice of what sort of being they are to be, what character they will have for ever in future. Being perfectly good, God would rightly be very ambitious for the humans whom he has created. He would not be content with humans being moderately good people enjoying a fairly worthwhile life. He would want us to be saints. I mean by "a saint", a person who has a resolute overriding desire not to yield to lesser desires to do what is morally bad, is totally committed to doing actions exhibiting great love for others and for truth and—because he or she has such a strong desire to do such actions—enjoys doing such actions, above all if they are successful in making others happy and good, and propagating true views. (The apostles flogged on the orders of the Jewish Sanhedrin "*rejoiced* that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name [of Jesus]" (Acts of the Apostles 5:47). God would want us all to be saints, but he might prefer not to force sanctity on us against our will; and so he might want to give us the free choice of making ourselves saints. If we make the good choices very often, we shall become good people; but we may still be subject to bad desires and there may be a limit to our willingness to resist them. A

final choice of doing the good action under very difficult circumstances would finally cement our commitment to the good.

“Greater love has no human than this, than to lay down their life for their friends” (John 15:13) said Jesus. He laid down his life by allowing himself to be crucified. A similar love may be shown in many different ways, both by religious persons and by non-religious persons, for example, allowing themselves to be tortured without revealing the whereabouts of their friends whom tyrannous authorities wish to kill, or refusing to deny a belief which seems to them to have enormous importance for the world. Or their sanctity may be shown by bearing the suffering of some terrible disease with patience and cheerfulness. If someone does freely make that ultimate commitment to the good in the face of severe suffering, God would surely think them well suited for an endless life in a heaven where they could have free will to choose between innumerable good alternatives, but would at last be spared having any bad desires and any pains or other suffering necessary on earth for them to choose what sort of person they are to be. That good life would involve understanding ever more about God and worshipping him ever better, growing in ability to understand everything else, and helping more and more other people (including people still on this earth or other earths) to be in this situation and to do these actions, at least by interceding before God on their behalf.<sup>6</sup> Only those whose desires are solely to live in this way would be permanently happy in Heaven; others who still have nagging self-centred desires would not be eternally happy, living that life. While Christian tradition normally maintains that God takes to Heaven, not only those who have made these serious choices, but also many, such as young children, who die before they have the capacity to make serious choices, it is nevertheless a great benefit for us that we should be able to make the choice for ourselves of whether or not to become a saint. My subsequent discussion will concern only those who have the capacity to make serious moral choices.

Also, by permitting the occurrence of horrendous evils, God allows very bad humans to become totally evil. A perfectly good God would want to give us a final choice about the sort of character we will have, the sort of person we are to be, and so God would permit us totally and finally to reject goodness itself. That would involve causing a horrendous evil without the slightest regret. A person who has made himself totally immune to the suffering of others and lost any desire to help them in any way, has lost his moral sense; he no longer thinks of actions as “morally good” or “morally bad”, but merely as actions which other people call “morally good” or “morally bad”; and so he has rejected everything that God loves. Clearly God would not permit this to happen to a human without allowing him or her many different opportunities to halt their downward slide. A good God would be desperate to save cruel dictators, vicious torturers, and totally self-indulgent cheats. (Jesus pictured God as a good shepherd who leaves ninety nine sheep on the mountain and goes in search of the one who went astray; “and if he finds it... he rejoices over it more than over the ninety nine that never went astray.” Matthew 18: 12–13.) But if God did not allow us finally

<sup>6</sup>For my account of how all of this is involved in biblical and patristic descriptions of the nature of Heaven see my “Why the life of heaven is supremely worth living” in (ed.) T.R. Byerly and E.J. Silverman, *Paradise understood*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

to reject moral goodness, and so God himself, he would not give us the ultimate free choice. It is good that a rejected suitor should try many times to persuade a beloved one to accept a proposal of marriage, but it is not good that a rejected suitor should try an endless number of times to secure this result—it constitutes a failure to recognise the beloved as someone who has the right to decide their own future. Even God, I suggest, should be willing in the end to take no for an answer.

### **The objection that God is “unfair” in his allocation of choices**

There remain however three respects in which it may seem that God is less than perfectly good to some humans, because of the “unfairness” in the different choices which he gives to them. The first respect is that only some humans have to suffer horrendous evils, whereas others do not. The second respect concerns those humans who through “moral bad luck”, perhaps in the form of an unhappy childhood and being subject to very bad influences, find themselves, not entirely by their own fault, on the road to losing their moral sense. God is surely less than perfectly good if he does not give them extra opportunities for climbing back on the road to sanctity. There is no reason to suppose that he gives these extra choices to all such humans during their earthly life. The third respect in which God would seem less than perfectly good, is that, if, as often seems to be assumed, God takes to Heaven some humans who have done on earth many ordinary good actions and few bad actions, but whose earthly life does not contain any experience of any horrendous evils, God would need to impose on these humans a saintly character which they had not chosen for themselves. In that case it wouldn't seem to matter for their eternal destiny whether they have been serious about wanting the one which God gives to them. Yet others have freely chosen to make some very serious painful choice, in order to make them well suited for Heaven.

Just how far all this is so, depends on what sort of afterlife, God gives to different groups of humans. While my discussion so far concerned the goodness of the God worshipped by different theistic religions, since different theistic religions have different views about the afterlife, I need now to assume a particular religion, and I assume a Christian view of the afterlife. All Christians agree that God gives to those who have totally rejected goodness, permanent “damnation”, that is, “the loss of God” in “Hell”, which may or may not be understood to include sensory punishment; and to those who have made themselves saints, permanent “eternal blessedness” in “Heaven”. But Christians disagree among themselves about how God would deal with people who die in an intermediate condition, as most of us probably do—of having some dedication to the good, and some considerable weakness of will as a result of which we sometimes do what is wrong. Traditional Protestants claim that at death God immediately allocates all humans permanently either to Heaven or Hell. This clearly does not deal with any of the three respects in which God might seem to act with less than perfect goodness. Many contemporary liberal Protestants are “universalists”, holding that necessarily everyone will eventually go to heaven. That view, as well as being totally out of line with Christian tradition, does not deal with the first respect in which God seems “unfair”, and in my view makes it very difficult

to construct a theodicy at all. Other liberal Protestants hold different views, including one of the two main Christian views described below.

The Roman Catholic church holds that God sends to Heaven “those who die in God’s grace and friendship and are perfectly purified” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1994, # 1023). He sends to Hell those who “die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love” (*Catechism*, # 1033) He sends to a third place, Purgatory, those who die in an intermediate condition, which it understands as those “who die in God’s grace and friendship”, but are “imperfectly purified” (*Catechism*, #1030) All those in Purgatory eventually go to Heaven; but they have to be purged of their earthly sins before they are allowed to get there; this purging may involve horrendous evil, and may take a long time. Although the purging is generally regarded as a purging of guilt for the past, it seems natural to understand it also as giving to those being purged opportunities freely to make serious painful choices to do the good in difficult circumstances, and so to put themselves in the same situation as those who have made themselves saints by their free choices of how to cope with horrendous evils on earth. It might also allow that God could at that stage impose on those who make serious but unsuccessful attempts to cope with horrendous evil, that saintly character which they have not yet reached, but have tried hard to reach. It is compatible with this, to suppose that the longer inhabitants take before making at least some fairly serious moral choices, the longer they stay in Purgatory. This deals with the first respect in which God might seem to be less than perfectly good, since it ensures that all those who have not suffered horrendous evils on earth, do so after their death. The Roman Catholic view can deal also with the third respect if it counts all who have not responded to horrendous evils on earth in the right way as “imperfectly purified”; and so reject the popular assumption that God takes to Heaven some humans whose earthly life has not contained any experience of horrendous evils. But the Roman Catholic definition of those who go to Hell seems to include among them anyone who dies soon after committing one murder (which may not be a horrendous evil), and is not repentant for doing so. But someone committing a murder may not have lost very much of their moral sense; they may have and be moved by moral views on many matters. Hence it seems not to deal with the second respect, since it does not provide the need for extra opportunities to do good for those who suffer from “bad moral luck.”

The Orthodox Church claims that we do not know much about what will happen to those who die in the intermediate condition<sup>7</sup>; but it urges us to pray for them -which presupposes that our prayers may make a difference to them. It is compatible with the Orthodox position to hold that the final allocation of destiny does not occur at death, but only later at the Last Judgement. That view allows that those who die in an intermediate condition after death may still have to make some very serious choices which affect, not merely the time they take to get to Heaven, but whether or not they ever get to Heaven. It might also, in the way I suggested the Roman Catholic tradition might allow, also allow that God could at that stage impose on those who have made serious but unsuccessful attempts to cope with horrendous evil, that saintly character

<sup>7</sup> See J. Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom*, University of Chicago Press, 1977, pp.279–80 and 293.

which they have tried to reach. So, like the Roman Catholic view, the Orthodox view deals with the first and third respects in which God might seem to act without being perfectly good. And, unlike the Roman Catholic view, it can deal with the second respect, since it allows the possibility that who suffer from “bad moral luck”, have extra opportunities for doing good. I conclude that by its doctrine of the afterlife the Orthodox tradition can rebut the claim that God is “unfair” in his allocation of choices which he gives to humans”.

My response to the “unfairness” objection has the hard consequence that we all have to manifest our free total commitment to goodness by coping (or perhaps at least trying hard to cope) with some horrendous evil in the right way, if we are to enjoy the Heaven which God seeks to provide for us. But it contains the consolation that we will be given many opportunities to manifest that commitment.

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