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GOD, HORRORS, AND OUR DEEPEST GOOD

Bruce Langtry

J.L. Schellenberg argues that since God, if God exists, possesses both full knowledge by acquaintance of horrific suffering and also infinite compassion, the occurrence of horrific suffering is metaphysically incompatible with the existence of God. In this paper I begin by raising doubts about Schellenberg's assumptions about divine knowledge by acquaintance and infinite compassion. I then focus on Schellenberg's claim that necessarily, if God exists and the deepest good of finite persons is unsurpassably great and can be achieved without horrific suffering, then no instances of horrific suffering bring about an improvement great enough to outweigh their great disvalue. I argue that there is no good reason, all things considered, to believe this claim. Thus Schellenberg's argument from horrors fails.

Introduction

Theodicians face various problems, including the following two:

- There will always be specific kinds of evil whose permission by God is not adequately explained by the theodicy.¹ For example, benefits said to flow from God's permitting there to be mental illness in general might not explain why God permits mental illness in childhood. Sooner or later, theists will run out of theodicies for highly specific kinds of evil.
- Even if a theodicy successfully establishes that God's permitting evil of some kind K is compatible with divine justice and benevolence towards created persons broadly speaking, divine perfect goodness might require divine *goodness to victims* of this evil; yet the theodicy might fall far short of establishing that God's permitting evil of kind K is compatible with divine goodness to victims of evil of kind K—goodness *all-things-considered* to these victims, that is.

J.L. Schellenberg, in Chapter 7 of his book *The Wisdom to Doubt*, makes an impressive contribution to discussion of both problems in the course of arguing that since divine perfect goodness entails infinite divine empathy, the occurrence of horrific suffering is metaphysically incompatible with

¹For brevity's sake, I will depart from the approach I adopted in Langtry, *God, the Best, and Evil*, 7–9 and will treat "God" as laden with the proposition that if God exists then God is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. This practice is common in the philosophical literature, except when process theology is in view.



the existence of God, and therefore God does not exist.² (Schellenberg identifies empathy with full knowledge by acquaintance of suffering, conjoined with infinite compassion.) The aim of this paper is modest: to show that Schellenberg's Argument from Horrors fails.

1. *The core, and the case for its most important premise*

Schellenberg's central, motivating idea is that if God exists and is perfectly good then God is infinitely compassionate, and an infinitely compassionate being would recoil from the prospect of created persons' undergoing horrific suffering. His chapter provides a core argument embedded in lines of thought directly supporting its premises and defending it from likely objections.³ Here it is:

- (1) Necessarily, if God exists, finite persons who ever more fully experience the reality of God realize their deepest good. [premise]
- (2) Necessarily, if God exists, the prevention of horrific suffering does not prevent there being finite persons who ever more fully experience the reality of God. [premise]
- (3) Necessarily, if God exists, the prevention of horrific suffering does not prevent there being finite persons who realize their deepest good. [from 1, 2]
- (4) Necessarily, if God exists, there is horrific suffering only if its prevention *would* prevent there being finite persons who realize their deepest good. [premise]
- (5) Necessarily, if God exists, there is no horrific suffering. [from 3, 4] (6) There is horrific suffering. [premise]
- (6) There is horrific suffering. [premise]
- (7) God does not exist. [from 5, 6]

I will grant the truth of premises (1)–(3) and will inquire whether there is good reason to accept premise (4).

Considering the many remarks that Schellenberg makes in support of (4), it is fair to represent him as advancing the following subsidiary argument, nested within the main one, for this premise. Although there may be other viable ways of structuring his line of thought, his defence of (4) will succeed if and only if this argument is sound:

- (a) Necessarily, if God exists then God has maximally full knowledge by acquaintance of each possible instance of horrific suffering.^{4,5} [premise]

²Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*. In his "Replies to My Colleagues," Schellenberg explains that his main aim in advancing the Argument from Horrors was "not to show any such argument to succeed as a standalone proof of atheism, or even as one part of a proof of atheism, but instead to weave various atheistic arguments into a defeater of theistic attempts to defeat my more general religious scepticism." Nevertheless, he adds, he is willing to consider the argument's force independently of its original context.

³Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 253–254. I will assume that premise (1) is intended to be understood as equivalent to *Necessarily, if God exists and there are finite persons who ever more fully experience the reality of God, then those finite persons realize their deepest good*.

⁴Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 243, 245, 247.

⁵I interpret (a) as saying: Necessarily, if God exists *and there is horrific suffering* then God has maximally full knowledge by acquaintance of each possible instance of horrific suffering. Surely there is no world *W* in which God is directly, fully, and clearly aware of human experiences *that do not occur in W* in virtue merely of the fact that in *W* God somehow "inspects" occurrences in *other* worlds of those experiences. So in worlds in which there is no horrific

- (b) Necessarily, if God exists then God is infinitely compassionate.⁶ [premise]
- (c) In general, the strength of an agent's opposition to horrific suffering increases with their degree of proximity to it, and with their degree of compassion.⁷ [premise]
- (d) Necessarily, if God exists and no instances of horrific suffering can bring about an improvement great enough to outweigh their great disvalue, then God is maximally opposed to horrific suffering.⁸ [from (a)–(c)]
- (e) Necessarily, if God exists and if the deepest good of finite persons is unsurpassably great and can be achieved without horrific suffering, then no instances of horrific suffering can bring about an improvement great enough to outweigh their great disvalue.⁹ [premise]
- (f) Necessarily, if God exists and the deepest good of finite persons is unsurpassably great and can be achieved without horrific suffering then God is maximally opposed to horrific suffering. [from (e), (d)]
- (g) Necessarily, if God is maximally opposed to the existence of horrific suffering then there is no horrific suffering. [premise]
- (4) Therefore, it is necessary that if God exists, there is horrific suffering only if its prevention would prevent there being finite persons who realize their deepest good. [from (f), (g)]

2. "Horrific suffering"

What does Schellenberg count as "horrific suffering"? It is not difficult to think of examples; Schellenberg himself provides some in Quote 2 below. Nevertheless he introduces the meaning of "horrific" not by referring to examples but in the following way:

[Quote 1] Let us think of horrific suffering—or horrendous suffering, as it is sometimes called—as that most awe-full form of suffering that gives the victim and/or the perpetrator a prima facie reason to think that his life is not worth living.¹⁰

Two questions of interpretation arise. First, does Schellenberg have in mind suffering which gives the sufferer a prima facie reason to believe that her life, considered as a temporal whole extending from birth to death, will have been not worth living; or does the relevant reason concern the period between the suffering's onset and the sufferer's future death? I will assume that Schellenberg has in mind the latter alternative. Second, does the prima facie reason solely concern whether living will be in the

suffering God does not possess knowledge by acquaintance of horrific suffering. (I use "world" to denote a metaphysically possible, all-inclusive *state of affairs*; amongst the worlds is the actual world.)

⁶Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 244, 246–247.

⁷Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 246.

⁸Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 247–248. This proposition is not explicitly stated in Schellenberg's chapter, but he is plainly committed to its truth.

⁹Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*. Quote 8 below.

¹⁰Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 243–244. Here Schellenberg cites Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, 26–29. Adams says that her definition opens the possibility that genuine horrors might be defeated by God's giving the evil positive meaning through organic unity with a great enough good within the context of the sufferer's life (31).

sufferer's *self-interest*, or might it also reflect her other-regarding attachments and values, and accordingly prospective benefits to other people of her continuing to live during and after the horrific suffering? I will assume that Schellenberg has in mind the former alternative: that is, that horrific suffering gives the sufferer a *prima facie* reason to believe that it would be best *for her* that she die now rather than later.

Quote 1 does little by itself to elucidate the target concept. For whether someone has a *prima facie* reason to think that her life is not worth living depends on what we choose as her relevant evidence base: for presumably someone currently experiencing a nasty migraine headache has, relative to *just that particular experience*, a *prima facie* reason to think that her life is not worth living, but relative to a larger body of knowledge about her own past experience and about how migraines affect other people's lives she might not. Presumably some people currently undergoing intense suffering know of recoveries of well-being by people who have had similar bad experiences. Relative to this knowledge, what do these sufferers have *prima facie* reason to believe?

Schellenberg's full account of the target concept should be seen as provided jointly by Quote 1 and the following remarks:

[Quote 2] We are talking here about the very *worst* sort of suffering, suffering that engulfs its victims and all that they hold dear. Think of being brutally raped and repeatedly tortured, having your limbs chopped off with an ax, and being driven into a tormented and permanent insanity as a result. Such things happen. . . . [Horrific suffering] blows the fragile, developing person all to smithereens, causing unspeakable damage to physical, psychological, and (because of the interrelatedness of the various aspects of personal life) also spiritual aspects of her being . . . [and] it involves the ruin of his earthly life (and perhaps much of any life that may follow—who knows how long the destructive effects of horrific suffering might last?).¹¹

The question at the end of Quote 2 accommodates at least the *conceptual coherence* of supposing that in some cases horrific suffering is followed by a high degree of recovery (even if recovery occurs only in an afterlife). Indeed, there is little doubt that Schellenberg recognizes the actual occurrence of recovery. For he tells us that those few people who have experienced horrific suffering for themselves, *have returned to active life*, and are compassionate, usually become strongly and unalterably opposed to its occurrence in other people's lives.¹² He identifies Elie Wiesel, a Holocaust survivor, as having suffered horrifically. Wiesel recovered sufficiently to write many books, to teach, and to engage in human rights advocacy for which he was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize.

Given that Quotes 1 and 2 jointly provide Schellenberg's main account of horrific suffering, perhaps he should retract the remarks to which I have just referred, on the grounds that if people who have suffered intensely and yet, like Wiesel, returned to active life then they have not undergone

¹¹Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 249, 250.

¹²Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 246–247.

the “very worst” sort of suffering — the kind of suffering that provides the strongest basis for an argument from horrors against theism. I will not in the rest of this paper count cases of great suffering from which the individual recovers as cases of “horrific” suffering.

3. *Evaluating premise (a) of the argument (a)–(4).*

Premise (a) is: *Necessarily, if God exists then God has maximally full knowledge by acquaintance of each possible instance of horrific suffering.* Schellenberg explains and supports (a) as follows:

[Quote 3] But here it is overlooked that perfect creator must have, to a maximally great degree, every sort of knowledge it is good to possess, and that knowledge by acquaintance of horrific suffering belongs in that category. . . . [A God] unable to experience with possible creatures their suffering would be unacquainted with their inner lives, could never know what it feels like from the inside to be one of those creatures. Such a God might know *that* there was suffering in a possible world inspected by the Divine mind and know *that* this was very bad. Perhaps she would be able to project herself, through imagination, into some faint likeness of the mental state of sufferers, which is of course what human empathizers do. But she would not possess the maximally rich and penetrating and meaningful understanding of suffering that we must surely associate with divine perfection. If a deeper acquaintance is possible—if, let us say, it is possible for God to have experiences qualitatively indistinguishable from experiences undergone by sufferers, whether actual or possible, which reveal to God what it is like to *be* those sufferers—it therefore follows that such knowledge must be possessed by a personal God. It seems evident that the deeper acquaintance *is* possible.¹³

[Quote 4] But God would, if existent, be maximally empathetic (maximally compassionate and maximally well acquainted from every vantage point, and in particular from the inside, with every instance of the horrific suffering going on somewhere in our world at virtually every moment).¹⁴

[Quote 5] Think, in particular, of what would result from an infinitely compassionate being experiencing so fully all the horrific suffering of our world, held before the Divine mind as a candidate for creation.¹⁵

I will raise two difficulties concerning premise (a), understood in the light of Quotes 3–5. Here is the first. Suppose that someone—call her Sarah—has been badly mauled and disabled by a tiger. She is alone, defenseless, is in great pain, and is terrified that she will be eaten by the tiger. She is suffering. Her terror and her suffering are neither caused nor constituted merely by intrinsic non-representational properties of her current feelings. Both *what it is like* to be terrified in the way Sarah is terrified, and also *what it is like* to be suffering in the way that Sarah is suffering, include being highly agitated, wanting desperately to escape somehow, believing

¹³Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 245.

¹⁴Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 247.

¹⁵Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 246.

that one is in danger of being eaten, and being on the verge of completely losing one's self-control. Sarah's being terrified that she will be eaten by the tiger is not merely an accompaniment of or a causal contributor to her suffering, it is *partly constitutive* of her suffering.

There is such a thing as free-floating, objectless terror. Nevertheless, *this particular instance* of terror could not (metaphysically speaking) have been free-floating: it does not merely *happen* to have an intentional object, and *happen* to have *My being eaten by the tiger* as its intentional object. Furthermore, for Sarah what it is like for her to be terrified that she will be eaten by this tiger is very different from what, for Sarah, it would have been like to be terrified that her child would be drowned.

Suppose that the tiger is distracted and disappears, but Sarah believes that it is very likely to return to finish her off. In fact, some minutes later, this is what the tiger does. Surely Sarah's suffering counts as "horrific" according to the criteria provided by Quotes 1 and 2: it is intense, it engulfs her, she is badly damaged, and she does not in any respect recover. No doubt there are worse cases of suffering than Sarah's, but surely hers should not, merely on this ground, be classified as non-horrific. After all, a case similar to the one in Quote 2 except that the victim's limbs are not severed should still count as horrific.

Given the suppositions I have made concerning Sarah, premise (a) and Quote 4 together imply that God has maximally full knowledge-by-acquaintance of this particular instance of suffering and of this particular instance of terror—knowledge derived from these very instances. As Quotes 3 and 4 together indicate, Schellenberg thinks that God's knowledge involves both God's *having experiences qualitatively indistinguishable from Sarah's*, and also God's *experiencing with Sarah her suffering*.¹⁶ For this to be so, it is not enough for God to have feelings that match Sarah's feelings with respect to their intrinsic non-representational properties. God's experiences must duplicate what for, Sarah, it is like to be suffering horrifically in the way she is suffering, and therefore must duplicate, amongst other things, what, for Sarah, it is like to be terrified that she is about to be eaten by a tiger. For reasons provided above, if this is to occur then God will have to be highly agitated, to want desperately to escape somehow, to be on the verge of completely losing his self-control, and to believe that he is in danger of being eaten by a tiger.

But these things are impossible. God, who lacks a body, and who knows that he is omnipotent and omniscient, and who is not in any way irrational, cannot be in such states.¹⁷ So Schellenberg's case in favour of premise (a) fails, and (a) itself, understood in the way Schellenberg understands it, is false.

¹⁶Why does Schellenberg go this far? Why doesn't he adopt a less adventurous view, for example one merely involving divine direct observation of the "inside" of human minds and of the phenomenal properties instantiated there? Probably because he thinks his actual view yields a much better explanation how God's awareness of horrific suffering both engages divine compassion and also enables God to recognize the suffering's reason-giving weight.

¹⁷I ignore complications arising from the Christian doctrine of the incarnation.

The second difficulty for (a) involves the assumption, which Schellenberg himself makes, that if God exists then God is in time. Divine experiences qualitatively indistinguishable from experiences undergone by sufferers would have intrinsically temporal phenomenology, and therefore would not consist merely of frozen snapshots whose temporal order could be represented in a variety of ways.

Let S1 be the set of worlds in which God exists and there is no horrific suffering, and let S2 be the set of worlds in which God exists and there is horrific suffering. Suppose that in some world W_1 there was a time t when God was deliberating about whether to create a member of S1 or instead a member of S2, and that he decided to create a member of S2.¹⁸ In that case, W_1 is a member of S2. Nevertheless it is hard to see how in W_1 God, when undertaking this deliberation, could have already known of future instances of horrific suffering by having been acquainted with future instances of it. For if in W_1 God were to have known before time t that there would later be horrific suffering, then he would not at t have faced any relevant practical question that required resolution by his coming to a decision one way or the other.

It might be replied that in the decision-situation in W_1 at time t God would have “bracketed” his knowledge by acquaintance of future horrific suffering, considered his remaining reasons for and against creating some member of S2, and acted on the basis of his overall evaluation of those reasons. But if so then, in the context of the bracketing, God’s reasons against creating a member of S2 would not involve knowledge by acquaintance of horrific suffering, knowledge that contributes to reasons for action in ways on which Schellenberg relies when arguing to lemma (d). So Schellenberg would still be in difficulty.¹⁹

¹⁸God’s *creating* a world involves his actualizing every contingent state of affairs in it (except his own existence, if this is contingent, and also the true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, if there are any). Given this account of divine world-creation, Open Theists believe that God has not created the actual world, though he has brought the universe into existence and has actualized many states of affairs in its history. I discussed the concept of world-creation in *God, the Best, and Evil*, 27–29.

¹⁹A referee suggested, in effect, that Schellenberg might reply by affirming: (C) *Necessarily, if God deliberates about whether to allow finite persons to suffer horrifically, then God has earlier obtained acquaintance with finite persons’ horrific suffering by causing himself to suffer in ways that are qualitatively indistinguishable from the horrific suffering, actual or possible, that finite persons experience.* One problem with adopting C is that the conjunction of C with the proposition *Necessarily, if God exists and there are finite persons then God decides whether to allow there to be finite persons who suffer horrifically* implies that, in all worlds in which God exists and there are finite persons, including those worlds in which none of the finite persons suffer at all, God causes himself horrific suffering—surely a very problematic view requiring its own support. God, I conjecture, could decide whether or not to allow there to be finite persons to suffer horrifically without causing himself horrific suffering. After all, many human adults who have never themselves suffered horrifically or witnessed another person’s horrific suffering, are well aware that there are morally weighty considerations in favour of preventing it when they can. So why should we suppose that C is true?

4. Premise (b)

It is curious that Schellenberg does not, in his Argument from Horrors, explain and support premise (b), *Necessarily, if God exists then God is infinitely compassionate*. Nor does he refer readers to support provided elsewhere. Yet its truth is far from obvious. After all, while Deist thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries affirmed God's benevolence, they said little or nothing about divine compassion. It might be thought that divine moral perfection entails divine infinite compassion, but even if "infinite" in this context were supplied with a clear meaning, the claim would require careful supporting argument.²⁰

Christianity is one of several religions affirming that God is compassionate, yet Christian theologians have developed more than one way of understanding God's compassion. In the *Proslogion*, Anselm (addressing God) says:

For when thou beholdest us in our wretchedness, we experience the effect of compassion, but thou dost not experience the feeling. Therefore, thou art both compassionate, because thou dost save the wretched, and spare those who sin against thee, and not compassionate, because thou art affected by no sympathy for wretchedness.²¹

Anselm's account excludes the thought that divine compassion and divine knowledge of suffering *work together to motivate God to act*—a belief that undergirds Schellenberg's reasons for inferring (d) from (a), (b), and (c). He says that "horrific suffering has the effects it does have in those who are empathetic not because of their limited psychological capacities to bear its awfulness but because of its *recognized importance*."²² Presumably he means the horrific suffering's axiological and moral importance, and therefore reason-giving importance—importance which God recognizes as a result of empathy, but which is not constituted by it. Anselm, however, would deny that divine compassion plays a role in God's recognizing God's reasons for action.

Moreover, since Anselm thinks that God does not "spare" *all* sinners, it is doubtful that Anselm would affirm that God's compassion is in every respect unlimited.²³

Many theists will agree that God is compassionate, and that God knows what it is like for humans to suffer horrifically, and that accordingly God has a very strong though defeasible motive for preventing the horrific suffering occurring in the actual world. This more modest premise, however, could not fulfil (b)'s intended role in the argument for (4). Furthermore, it

²⁰Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 199, says that if God is a perfect personal creator and creates finite persons then God has relational-personal love for them. He has earlier said that the perfections of moral character include compassion (196), though this remark is not focused on God. These statements do not amount to a strong argument for (b).

²¹St Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 8, 59–60.

²²Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 247.

²³Anselm, *Proslogion*, ch. 11.

is not clear how Schellenberg could formulate an alternative modest premise which both serves his purposes and avoids puzzles about whether, and in exactly what sense, God's compassion is "infinite."

5. Premise (e).

Premise (e) is the proposition *Necessarily, if God exists and the deepest good of finite persons is unsurpassably great and can be achieved without horrific suffering, then no instances of horrific suffering bring about an improvement great enough to outweigh their great disvalue.* To assess what Schellenberg is claiming here, we have to understand it. Here is a candidate interpretation that seems to fit in well with all or most of the quotes in Section 5.1 below:

(e1) Necessarily, if God exists and the deepest good of finite persons is unsurpassably great and can be achieved without horrific suffering then no instance x of horrific suffering brings about an outcome y which is so much better than the outcome z which would otherwise obtain that the increment in value obtained via y (over and above the value offered by z) outweighs the disvalue of x.

5.1. Schellenberg's case for (e)

The case emerges gradually and informally. The following remarks are central to it:

[Quote 6] The deepest good of finite personal beings in any world created by God is known to us: it is quite evidently an ever-increasing knowledge by acquaintance of God. If indeed God is to be construed as perfection personified, then what could be better for finite creatures than to enter ever more fully into the maximally great riches and beauty and glory of God? . . . [T]here must be an infinite number of ways of developing a relationship with God—an infinite number of possible journeyings into self, the world, and God that realize the ultimate in meaning and goodness for finite created persons.²⁴

[Quote 7] The goodness of God's nature embraces *all* goodness in such a way as to make the distinction between our deepest good and another, competing good that we have been working with somewhat artificial, at least from an ultimate (all-things-considered) perspective. . . . [I]f every good apart from God is a dim reflection of good *in* God, then it is, ironically, through a deeper acquaintance with God that the value of the apparently competing good in question can best be known and experienced.²⁵

[Quote 8] We encounter the problem of giving sense to the idea of a significant improvement in our overall condition—a significant enough improvement to match the dreadful deficit represented by horrific suffering—being possible when the deepest good of creatures in continual relationship with God is *unsurpassably great* and can *otherwise* be achieved. How can a life graced by the continuing experience of such a good be significantly improved?²⁶

²⁴Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 244.

²⁵Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 251.

²⁶Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 252.

[Quote 9] [In order to argue that there might be a good distinct from the deepest and necessary for the deepest to be as deep as possible that requires the permission of horrific suffering,] the critic needs to be able to show how one form of [everlasting journey into the heart of God in which ever fuller and richer experience and knowledge is obtained] might be a deeper or greater good for finite creatures than another, . . . and it seems evident that, given the greatness of God, no such distinction can be made.²⁷

Let *G* be the good *Entering ever more fully into the maximally great riches and beauty and glory of God*. Assume, with Schellenberg, that *G* is “the greatest and deepest good any personal being can experience given the existence of God.” There are many different possible life-histories that would count as including *G*. Indeed, we can go further. Let us say that a set σ of good states of affairs is *minimal* with respect to a good state of affairs γ if and only if γ itself is not a member of σ , and σ 's members are jointly sufficient for γ , and no proper subset of σ is such that the subset's members are jointly sufficient for γ . Then for any finite person *h* there are many alternative sets of good states of affairs that are both minimal with respect to *h*'s possessing *G*, and also such that *h*'s life-history's including all the members of one of these sets would *constitute* *h*'s life-history's instantiating *G*. In this sense, there are many different possible *ways of realizing G*.

Quotes 6 and 9 suggest that the deepest good consists of having one's whole life-history (or, after some life-stage, the rest of one's life-history) involve a process of entering ever more fully into the maximally great riches and beauty and glory of God. There is a sense in which during each stage of the process one may said to already have *G* in virtue partly of what happens in later stages.

5.2. Two questions prompted by Quotes 6 and 7

To evaluate Schellenberg's case for (e1), we need to consider two questions about the relations between the deepest good *G* and other goods:

- (q1) Is every good for created persons “embraced” by *G*—that is, part of some possible way or other of realizing *G*, in the foregoing sense?
- (q2) If two created persons both possess *G*, might one person's life still go significantly better than the other's, all-things-considered?

Expertise in mathematics and *skill in gymnastics* are presumably “deeper” goods than *skill in sharpening pencils*, since they are richer and typically more important features of the lives of people who possess them. Let us concede (for the sake of argument) that

- both of them dimly reflect some good in God, and
- it is through a deeper acquaintance with God that the value of having and exercising them can best be known and experienced, and
- some of the infinitely many “possible journeyings into self, the world, and God” which contain *G* contain *expertise in mathematics* or *skill in gymnastics*—that is,

²⁷Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 255.

there are many different possible life-histories containing one or both of these goods that would also count as including G.

Nevertheless the propositions conceded do not entail, and we should not believe, that every created person who possesses G also possesses expertise in mathematics or skill in gymnastics. Nor they entail that for some created person *x*, if *x* possesses both G and expertise in mathematics or skill in gymnastics then *x*'s doing so is part of *x*'s way of realizing G (in the sense specified near the end of Section 5.1). Accordingly, Quote 7 does not supply a good reason for supposing that the answer to (q1) is *Yes*. I do not see what other reason Schellenberg might advance.

Preparing to consider (q2), let us focus on whether every state of affairs in which G is instantiated is of equal value. There is a distinction between the greatness of a good and the degree of goodness of a state of affairs in which the good occurs. Intelligence is a great good, but it can be a constituent of processes and outcomes having many different values. G is no exception to the general truth. After all, Schellenberg would have to agree that when someone is entering ever more fully into G then *later stages* are even better than *earlier stages*. Furthermore, if every state of affairs in which G is instantiated were of equal value, then an agent could not choose between alternative courses of action on the basis of the expected value of their outcomes in cases in which every affected person had already entered into G. So how would the agent choose between candidate actions, in relevant cases?

Let us now directly address (q2). Could there be two created persons Alice and Beryl such that although both possess G throughout their entire lifespans, Alice's life goes significantly better than Beryl's with respect to goods other than those forming part of their respective ways of realizing G, and taking both G and all other relevant goods (and any evils) into account, Alice's life goes significantly better than Beryl's all things considered?

Schellenberg would deny that there could be two such persons. My reasoning concerning (q1) shows that Quotes 7–9 do little or nothing to support such a denial. Elsewhere in his chapter, he asserts that G is "unsurpassably great" and that any life-history in which G is instantiated is one in which "the greatest possible heights of goodness" are instantiated.²⁸ Schellenberg would infer that if G is instantiated in a created person's life-history then any goods she receives that are not part of G—not part of her way of realizing G—do not make her life-history *as an infinitely long whole* better than it would be if she lacked them. Given that the answer to (q1) is *No*, this last proposition is too doubtful to defeat the *prima facie* plausibility of a *Yes* answer to the question I asked concerning Alice and Beryl.

²⁸Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 248, 252. The contexts involve discussion of "greater good" theodicies, including the claim that "there may be heights of goodness that a creature cannot reach without suffering being permitted." For Schellenberg, G has a temporal, dynamic character, embodying spiritual growth.

Some ally of Schellenberg might try to uphold the doubtful proposition by saying that every person who possesses G throughout her life-history leads a life that is infinitely valuable.²⁹ But what would “infinitely valuable” mean here?

On the one hand, if the ally means “has a degree of value than which none greater is possible” then the ally assumes that every person who possesses G throughout her lifetime has a life-history than which none greater is possible. So the ally begs the question against the claim that although Beryl possesses G throughout her lifetime, Alice’s life-history is even better, all things considered.

On the other hand, it is hard to see how the ally can provide “infinitely valuable” with a *quantitative* meaning in this context; and even given some quantitative meaning, the ally would be faced with the following difficulty. Suppose that finite persons Cathy and Diana come into existence simultaneously, and immediately begin to enter into G and that each continues to do so ever more fully; and suppose also that at every time after the initial time Cathy is making much faster progress than Diana, so that there is an ever-increasing gap between the finite quantitative values of their respective life-histories so far. Surely the ally would find it hard to deny that *at each relevant time t*, Cathy’s life has *up to time t* gone better than Diana’s. In that case, even if one concedes that each of Cathy’s and Diana’s respective life-histories has, as a whole, quantitatively infinite value, surely there is both conceptual space and reason to say that nevertheless Cathy’s life history as an infinitely long whole goes better than Diana’s.

Let us now reflect on value-comparisons of created people with respect to the whole of their lives, in cases in which each has an initial life-stage from which G is absent and a subsequent infinitely long life-stage throughout which G is present. Even if we were to concede that goods in addition to G cannot increase the overall quantitative goodness of the second stage, Schellenberg would face a problem concerning ordinal rankings of *the whole life-histories* with respect to value.

Consider two finite persons Edith and Fiona, both of whom eventually come into permanent possession of G having previously undergone very little evil; and suppose that before Edith receives G, Edith has had a life much richer in goods than Fiona’s did before Fiona attained G. Even if the respective “G-segments” of Edith’s and Fiona’s lives are to be ranked equally, it is reasonable to regard the value-relevant difference in the pre-G parts of Edith’s and Fiona’s respective life-histories as yielding a difference in the whole-of-lifetime value-ranking of their lives. If a benevolent, rational agent has a choice whether their newborn granddaughter’s life-history is to fulfill the description of Edith’s entire life-history, or instead Fiona’s, and other things are equal, should the agent select the first alternative rather than the second? If so, then there is a strong reason to say that differences in the distribution of goods and evils across the main temporal parts of the respective life-histories are affecting not only

²⁹Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 255, implies, though he does not assert, that G involves “infinite richness.”

what the agent should do, but also the value-ranking of the two alternative life-histories.

There is an additional reason for answering *Yes* to (q2). Schellenberg mostly avoids anthropocentrism when formulating his main arguments. So how can he justify ruling out (as he is committed to doing by Quote 9) there being actual or merely possible finite persons of some nonhuman species such that their deepest good is deeper than ours, even though both theirs and ours involve G? Perhaps their ways of realizing G involve a much broader range of goods than ours, and involve entering into those goods more deeply than humans can, even though there is no finite limit to the depth achievable by humans. Furthermore, there might be persons of some species whose cognitive and emotional capacities were more limited than ours, and whose deepest good involved a narrower range of goods than is open to humans. So there are a number of ways in which typically persons of one species might typically lead lives that go better than persons of another species, all things considered, even if members both species attained G.

It is hard to see that Schellenberg has provided a strong countervailing argument to the foregoing considerations. I conclude that Schellenberg is not entitled to answer *No* to (q2).

5.3. *Do Quotes 8 and 9 provide strong support for premise (e), understood as equivalent to (e1)?*

Either Quotes 8 and 9 depend entirely on the claims made in Quotes 6 and 7, or else they also have some additional source of credibility. In the former case, Quotes 8 and 9 are undermined by the arguments already presented. For example, the critic mentioned in Quote 9 need not maintain that one way of realizing G might be better than another. What the critic needs to be able to show is that *some lives including possession of G* might go significantly better if the person were also to obtain various additional goods—goods such that possessing them is not part of this person's actual way of realizing G—even when some of the goods in question are obtainable only if God allows horrific suffering. I dealt with this matter in my preceding section.

Does Schellenberg's chapter contain some other source of credibility for Quotes 8 and 9? Let us consider some points that Schellenberg makes in his reply to the following objection:

[Quote 10] [I]f there really *were* a good that was (in some way unimaginable by us) great enough to outweigh the awfulness of horrific suffering and could not otherwise be obtained, a reasonable person might very well be willing to undergo horrific suffering for the sake of that good, *even* if he saw that his deepest good given the existence of God was obtainable either way; and so God would only be respecting what we would on reflection and full awareness of the facts want for ourselves by permitting horrific suffering to occur.³⁰

³⁰Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 249.

Schellenberg's reply is expressed by the following passages:

[Quote 11] Why would a rational person be willing to undergo—or to permit—horrific suffering for the sake of an outweighing good that is itself outweighed by a good she is quite capable of realizing—or bringing about—without such awful suffering?³¹

[Quote 12] Why would someone who recognized what was waiting for her in relationship with God wish to do anything other than move into it ever more deeply? Why take time off to suffer horrifically in service of a good that, no matter how great, will inevitably be transcended as she continues her journey into God? . . . To gain the wonderful outweighing good in question, the individual we are imagining would have to countenance the *ruin* of his earthly life (and perhaps much of any life that may follow—who knows how long the destructive effects of horrific suffering might last?), and all this while recognizing that what is *most* desirable (a good immeasurably more wonderful still) does not depend on his doing so, and that his entering into it is in fact being put off by undergoing horrific suffering.³²

In relation to *self-interested* suffering, Schellenberg's responses in defence of (e) can be seen as expressing the following line of thought:

(T) Given that I, the agent, will obtain G anyway (and retain it for an infinite period of time), the value of the prospective additional benefit relative to the value of my entire life-history (including its post-mortem stage) will turn out to be very small. Horrific suffering would be a huge price to pay. Therefore I would be knowingly acting against my self-interest if I were voluntarily to obtain the prospective additional benefit at the cost of horrific suffering.

If the first sentence of T is to be plainly true, then the prospective benefit will have to be of finite value; so let us assume that it is. In that case, the foregoing line of thought must involve a fallacy. For similar reasoning would purport, implausibly, to show that *in all cases* if an agent—call him "Alan"—knows that he will obtain G anyway, he would be knowingly acting against his self-interest if he were to undergo a short period of *non-horrific* suffering to obtain a large but finite good which he would enjoy long before G arrives.

To see that this is so, let us represent the upshot of T in the following way. Suppose that Alan has the option of obtaining additional benefit B, with high positive intrinsic value $V(B)$, by undergoing horrific suffering HS with intrinsic disvalue $V(HS)$ (represented by a negative number); and suppose that, whether or not Alan takes this option, his life-history will embody both G and a mixture of other goods and evils O. (The composition of O might partly depend on whether Alan takes the option we are considering.) $V(B)$ is large enough to outweigh $V(HS)$ —though not by a vast amount—so $V(B) + V(HS) > 0$. If Alan takes the option then for current purposes his life-history can be divided into two segments, the first including a period in which Alan undergoes HS (and therefore lacks the deepest good G), and the second an infinitely long period involving

³¹Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 249.

³²Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 250

G. The value of Alan's whole life-history, $V(G\&B\&HS\&O)$, will be very large because of the very great value of Alan's possessing G for an infinite period of time—it is surely vastly greater than the disvalue of Alan's undergoing HS (whether for ten minutes or ten weeks).

Schellenberg does not try to argue that there could not be cases in which $V(B) + V(HS) > 0$, or cases in which $V(G\&B\&HS\&O)$ is not very large. I infer that he should be regarded as in effect (i) focussing on the value of B relative to the value of Alan's entire life-history if he takes the option, i.e., on $V(B) / V(G\&B\&HS\&O)$, which is very small because $V(G\&B\&HS\&O)$ is very high, and then (ii) maintaining that Alan should decline the option, in view of this fact. But the same reasoning would apply in a situation in which obtaining B could be obtained by undergoing non-horrific suffering NS not already included in O. Because the disvalue of NS is less than the disvalue of HS, $V(NS) > V(HS)$, and so other things being equal $V(G\&B\&NS\&O) > V(G\&B\&HS\&O)$.³³ Hence $V(B) / V(G\&B\&NS\&O)$ will still be very small—smaller even than $V(B) / V(G\&B\&HS\&O)$. Hence the reasoning in T is mistaken.

Similar considerations apply in cases in which the agent acts altruistically, i.e., in order that someone else will receive the additional benefit.

I conclude that Quotes 8, 9, 11 and 12 do not provide a good argument for (e1).³⁴

5.4. *An objection to (e), if (e) is interpreted as (e1)*

(e1) looks implausible. Self-sacrifice involving horrific suffering has been frequent in human history—e.g., amongst cases of soldiers's acting for the sake of their comrades or their country, and amongst cases of parents' acting for the sake of their children. In many of the relevant situations, the agent has judged that preserving the life and well-being of the comrades or

³³"Other things being equal" flags an expository simplification. The referents of "O" and of "B" might differ between cases in which Alan suffers horrifically for some period and cases in which instead he suffers non-horrifically. Alan's merely non-horrific suffering might, without causing anyone else to suffer horrifically, cause most people to be a lot worse off than they would have been if Alan had not undergone horrific suffering. In some of the latter cases, perhaps, $V(G\&B\&NS\&O) < V(G\&B\&HS\&O)$. In that case, $V(B) / V(G\&B\&NS\&O)$ will be larger than it otherwise would be.

³⁴Perhaps Schellenberg could have and should have advanced the following thought responding to Quote 10 and partially supporting (e)—only partially, because it does not address relevant examples of altruistic self-sacrifice. We should employ a larger conception of practical wisdom than is reflected in the Quote 10. On narrow understanding of self-interest, some agent might indeed regard it as in her self-interest to accept horrific suffering in order to obtain the additional outweighing good, even though she believes that she would obtain G anyway. But surely practical wisdom enjoins moderation in this situation: the deepest good ought to be enough for anyone. Surely the agent is being greedy. God, who in general would recoil from the prospect of horrific suffering, would regard her attitude as manifesting a character defect, and not a stance that God should respect. This line of thought would have to address, amongst other problems, issues to do with timing: what if the agent knows that the additional outweighing good would arrive a very long time before the agent would begin to enter into G?

the children would be worth undergoing horrific suffering—worth it relative to altruistic considerations rather than merely self-interested ones.³⁵ (e1), however, implies that, necessarily, if God exists and the sufferer's life (whether before death or in a postmortem stage) subsequently embodies, or merely *could have* subsequently embodied, the deepest good of finite persons then the agent's judgment is mistaken. It is hard to see why.³⁶

Schellenberg downplays altruistic self-sacrifice. His defence of (e) implausibly ascribes huge error in practical reasoning to all those theists who have both believed that individuals for whose sake they are acting will eventually attain the deepest good G and have nevertheless undergone horrific suffering in order to save the beneficiaries from serious evils.

Furthermore, Quotes 6–9, 11–12 miss the mark unless Schellenberg is prepared to assert that if God exists then in the relevant cases the individuals for whose sake the agent acts and who obtain the additional finite benefit actually obtain the deepest good as well. But why should we believe this? In the absence of such reasons, consider a world W_a in which the antecedent of (e1) is true and in which there is someone whose horrific suffering produces great benefits for many other people all of whom permanently cease to exist in old age, after having had very much better lives than they would otherwise have had. In W_a , the antecedent of (e1) is true and the consequent is false. Since W_a is possible, (e1) is false.³⁷

³⁵I am here assuming, as I said in §2 above, that the sufferer's prima facie reason for belief concerns the period between the onset of the horrific suffering and her death.

³⁶A referee suggested that, since when someone is suffering horrifically she cannot during that period possess her deepest good, the relevant disvalue includes not merely the *intrinsic* disvalue of the horrific suffering itself but also the disvalue of the absence of her deepest good for the relevant period, or the disvalue of the prevention of her deepest good (by the suffering) for a time. If the foregoing suggestion were correct, and if the disvalue of the absence were measured by a number $-n$ that matches (or nearly matches) the positive value n that possessing the deepest good for the relevant period would have had, then (e1) might be true.

Now the first disjunct in the suggestion is hard to understand. Obviously, it cannot plausibly be taken to imply that the mere absence of G from a life-stage always or typically has intrinsic disvalue that mirrors the great value of G, measured by the number $-n$. By how much does it diminish the intrinsic value of the relevant life-stage? So let's shift our attention to the second disjunct. Perhaps the referee's idea is that when some state of affairs S, such as horrific suffering, prevents a person's having G during some time period, S has *extrinsic* disvalue $-n$ (or close to it). But if God exists then a person's being an atheist throughout the post-childhood segment of her first 50 years would prevent her entering into G during that segment; and that fact seems an unsatisfactory reason for ascribing great net disvalue to the segment (although it is a reason for thinking that the person is thereby disadvantaged by her atheism).

³⁷An ally of Schellenberg might deny that W_a is possible, on one or both of following grounds. First, the ally might claim that the proposition (D) *Necessarily, if God exists and God creates finite persons then God gives all of them the deepest good of finite persons* is true, and that together D and the account of the deepest good provided in Quotes 6, 9 and elsewhere entail that necessarily, if God exists and God creates finite persons then God gives all of them everlasting life-spans. But Schellenberg himself does not in fact commit himself to the truth of D in his chapter, and its truth is far from obvious. Second, the ally might claim that W_a is

I conclude that (e), interpreted as equivalent to (e1), is very insecure.

5.5. An alternative to premise (e)

It might be maintained that that if God exists then, whatever benefit horrific suffering might be supposed to produce, God always has some option which is better than allowing the horrific suffering and thereby securing the relevant benefit.

So consider the following candidate *replacement* for (e), where “O(G)” denotes some (context-varying) state of affairs of the kind *All relevant individuals’ obtaining G*:

- (e*) Necessarily, if God exists and there are finite persons and the deepest good of finite persons is unsurpassably great and God can bring it about that every finite person obtains the deepest good without anyone’s undergoing horrific suffering, then there is no instance of horrific suffering x such that both
- (i) x produces, or is a necessary condition of, some good state of affairs y such that $x \ \& \ y \ \& \ O(G)$ is better than $non-x \ \& \ non-y \ \& \ O(G)$, and
 - (ii) God can produce a good state of affairs z which includes O(G), does not entail that there is horrific suffering, and is better than $x \ \& \ y \ \& \ O(G)$.³⁸

Employing (e*) instead of (e) would not improve Schellenberg’s case for proposition (4) of his main argument. For the considerations Schellenberg advances in favor of (e)—where (e) is interpreted as (e1)—provide little support for (e*). Quote 9, for example, states a falsehood. In Section 5.3 above, I pointed out that to argue that there might be a good distinct from G whose attainment would require that God permit horrific suffering, one need not maintain that one way of realizing G could be better for finite persons than another. It suffices to argue, as I did in earlier sections, that there are goods for created persons such that having them is compatible with having G though not part of some possible way of realizing it, and that if two finite persons both possess G, one person’s life-history might go significantly better than the other’s, all-things-considered. Because Quote 9 is false, it fails to establish, or to be of use in establishing, that there cannot be cases in which (e*)’s antecedent is true and its consequent is false.

An ally might support Schellenberg by observing that many theodicians would agree that God in fact arranges that every instance of horrific evil x fulfills clause (i) in (e*), and that these theodicians would also agree that God could have produce some alternative good state of affairs z of the

not possible, since necessarily, if God were to exist then God would ensure that no situation ever arose in which someone’s life *would be* greatly improved by great goods necessarily connected to someone’s horrific suffering, or by the avoidance of other great evils where the avoidance depended necessarily on someone else’s horrific suffering. This last claim, however, would require detailed support—support which, on pain of circularity, must not rest on any covert assumption equivalent to either to (e1) or to (4). The required support is not provided in Schellenberg’s chapter, for reasons I have already given.

³⁸Anyone proposing the change from (e1) to (e*) would also have to favour corresponding changes to Schellenberg’s premise (d) and lemma (f), and consequent changes to (4).

kind described in clause (ii). But even if these theodiscists are correct, they are not thereby committed to the truth of (e*). For it might also be true, for all that the ally has said, that God can produce a state of affairs z^* which entails that there is horrific suffering and is better than $x \ \& \ y \ \& \ z \ \& \ O(G)$. Indeed, for all that the ally has said, there might be either (a) an infinite series consisting of better and better states of affairs exhibiting the following pattern: z-type, z^* -type, z-type, . . . and so on, or else (b) a finite series whose final member is z-type, or else (c) a finite series whose final member is z^* -type. What the ally needs to do is either exclude the epistemic possibility of (c), or argue convincingly that if (a) obtains then God would, necessarily, choose to produce z-type state of affairs, despite the fact that for any one he chose he could have produced a better, z^* -type state of affairs.

Hence (e*) would a very risky premise to use in place of (e) in an argument for (4).

5.6. Another alternative to (e)&(d), in support of (f)?

In Section 1 above, lemma (f) was derived from the conjunction of (e) and (d). Could Schellenberg instead have supported (f) by more directly invoking divine empathy? In considering this question, we should remember that Schellenberg does not believe that sometimes divine empathy overrides what God has most reason to do. As I pointed out in §4, he holds that the role of divine empathy in relation to horrific suffering is to promote divine *recognition* of the suffering's axiological, moral, and reason-giving importance.³⁹

It would be uncharitable, however, to suppose that Schellenberg believes that in determining which of many of states-of-affairs is best all-things-considered, horrific suffering has negative *axiological* weight that prevails over all other goods and the avoidance of all other evils. This would commit him to a very implausible view: that of any two worlds $W3$ and $W4$, such that neither contains God, and contains a single case of horrific suffering for 30 minutes along with very great goods, and little or no evil, for the rest of the (large) population, while $W4$ contains only a few people and all of their lives are free from horrific suffering yet are on balance neither good nor bad as wholes, $W4$ is better all-things-considered than $W3$.

Does horrific suffering have some kind of overriding *deontological* weight? This thought, if developed, would lead to an argument quite distinct from Schellenberg's.

In sum, it is doubtful that Schellenberg would want to argue from divine empathy to (f) by some route that bypassed (e) and (d).

6. Conclusion

No doubt if God exists then he could have acted in a way that would have resulted in a world that lacked horrific suffering and yet was at least

³⁹Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt*, 247.

as good as the actual world. If God exists, why hasn't he done so? The tasks of theodicy include answering this question. In the absence of a satisfactory answer, can it be rational for a philosopher to believe that God exists? Yes, if the philosopher does not face strong, rigorous objections to the existence of God based on the occurrence of horrific suffering.

Schellenberg's argument from horrors purports to show that God does not exist. Granting the truth of premises (1)–(3) of his main argument, my paper has focused on his subsidiary argument for the most controversial premise, (4). I have raised three difficulties for premise (a) of the latter argument, and pointed out that only some versions of theism affirm premise (b), especially if God's compassion, in the light of God's knowledge, is to be treated as motivating God to act.

The most seriously problematic premise, however, is (e). Sections 4.1–4.5 explain in detail why Schellenberg's eloquent defence of (e) does not succeed in rendering (e) credible. Thus his Argument From Horrors does not constitute a strong objection to theism.⁴⁰

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