

STRUCTURES OF GREATER GOOD
THEODICIES: THE OBJECTION FROM
ALTERNATIVE GOODS*



990605661

BRUCE LANGTRY

*Department of Philosophy
University of Melbourne, Australia*

The National Library supplies copies of this article under licence from the Copyright Agency Limited (CAL). Further reproductions of this article can only be made under licence.

INTRODUCING THE ISSUE

Greater good theodicies explain God's being justified in actualising or permitting evil states of affairs in terms of greater goods for which the evils, or God's permitting them, are logically necessary.¹ Such theodicies face a range of well-known challenges, including:

- Agents have moral duties to refrain from some actions, however great the goods to be gained, or the harms to be prevented, by those actions
- The goods mentioned in the theodicy are often not worth the evils we actually find
- Many of goods would have had little or no value in a world without evil, so it would have been pointless to introduce evil, or permit the introduction of evil, for their sake

The aim of this paper is to refute another candidate for inclusion on this list, the objection from alternative goods.

* Address delivered at the Society for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology (publishers of *Sophia*), annual meeting, February 1998, in the University of Melbourne.

Here is an illustration. Suppose that you can save the life of either Alice or Beth, but not both. You can save Alice only if you cause her quite a lot of pain for a few minutes, but Beth is unconscious, and so will not feel any pain. Surely Alice would say, 'The good of my continued life would make the pain worthwhile'. Now the only candidate justification for your causing Alice pain, let us suppose, is in terms of the good of her continued life. But instead of saving Alice, you could save Beth. Beth's continued life would be at least as great a good as Alice's. So the candidate justification fails. So it would be morally wrong of you to cause Alice pain.

SOME VARIETIES OF GREATER GOOD THEODICIES

To make progress in assessing the objection, we need a clear grasp of just how greater good theodicies are supposed to work. Here we need to take into account an important distinction between *external* and *internal* theodicies. The former aim to defend the truth of theism from objections based on evil, and any account they offer of what good reasons God has, or might have, for allowing evil is composed with this aim in mind. Internal theodicies are based on the assumption that God exists, and seek to explain how given this assumption it can also be true that the world contains the evils it does. Because internal theodicies are not designed for use in debate between theists and atheists, they can properly employ theological premises whose use would otherwise be question-begging. In the rest of this paper I will ignore internal theodicies, and discuss only external theodicies.

Cutting across the external/internal division, there is another – between what I will call *good-specific* and *good-nonspecific* theodicies. The very idea of a good-specific theodicy requires the identification of the goods for which God's causing or permitting evil is necessary. It is such-and-such a good, rather than the achievement of a certain *level* of good-

ness, which justifies such-and-such an evil. In contrast, what counts in good-nonspecific theodicies is simply whether worlds in which God causes or permits evil are better than worlds without evil; any suggestions as to just what goods might be involved are subordinate to this. In this paper I will discuss both kinds.

Good-nonspecific theodicies assert that, firstly, if an omnipotent, omniscient being does not have the power to actualize any world which is both at least as good as the actual world and also contains less evil than the actual world then that being is morally justified in permitting as much evil as the actual world contains, and secondly that for all we know if there is an omnipotent, omniscient being then it (he, she) does not have this power.²

Maybe there is some strong a priori argument for the view that necessarily if God exists then he cannot actualize any world V which is both at least as good as whichever world W happens to be actual and also contains less evil than W. Such an argument would not suffice to fulfil the theodist's task. What must be argued is that, independently of any assumption as to whether God exists, it is not highly implausible to suppose that the particular world which happens to be actual is such that God could not actualize at least as good a world with less evil.

How is the good-nonspecific theodist to do this? One way of arguing this involves giving wide-ranging examples of how certain evils, which at first seemed quite unrelated to any suitable goods, in fact can be seen on further reflection to be necessary for various itemized 'greater' goods (or else God's permitting the evils is necessary for the goods). Success with a considerable number and variety of evils would support the hypothesis that each evil in the world is suitably related to some greater good. This intermediate hypothesis in turn would render plausible the main claim, which concerns a comparison of worlds in terms of the overall relation *better than*.

With good-specific theodicies, it is the particular goods cited, rather than the achievement of a certain (cardinal or ordinal) *level* of goodness, which justify the particular evils cited. Thus the idea of a greater good is essential to such theodicies. A greater good is so-called because it outweighs the relevant evil. Here is one way of thinking about outweighing: a good G outweighs an evil E if and only if G possesses more goodness than E possesses badness. Here is another way: G outweighs E if and only if the compound state of affairs G&E is good. I will adopt the latter conception, but the difference between the two does not matter much for present purposes.

Suppose that for some actual evil E there is some actual good G such that G outweighs E and E is logically necessary for G. Does it follow that if I caused E, or permitted E to occur, in order to bring about G or contribute to the bringing about of G, then I acted rightly? No. One problem was noted in the first paragraph of this paper: we need to exclude the possibility that in securing G at the cost of E, I have violated some independently specifiable moral duty. For example, I may have violated some nondefeasible right of human beings, such as someone's right not to be tortured, or I may have failed to fulfil some requirement of treating people as ends in themselves rather than merely as means, or I may have exceeded my authority. Secondly, there is a technical problem to be rectified. Consider an evil E and a good G which outweighs E but which is entirely unconnected to E. Then there is a good, namely G&E, which outweighs E and for which E is logically necessary. But the existence of G&E obviously does not justify my having caused or allowed E. Thirdly, even though G outweighs E, it might be the case that if E occurs then some other evil E* will also occur, where there is no good which outweighs E&E* and which will obtain only if E&E* obtains.

In the light of the foregoing points, the following princi-

ple GGT1 seems to capture what many good-specific theodiscists would regard as a sufficient (but not necessary) condition for certain goods' morally justifying God's actions and omissions regarding evil.

(GGT1) Its being the case that for each actual evil E there is some actual good G such that

- (i) G outweighs E, and
- (ii) either E is logically necessary for G or God's permitting E is logically necessary for G, and
- (iii) G does not entail the occurrence of any other contingent good G* such that G* outweighs E and neither E nor God's permitting E is logically necessary for G*, and
- (iv) the conjunction of all the contingent goods not entailed by the existence of God outweighs the conjunction of all the evils and
- (v) God in actualising E or G, or in permitting E or G, does not violate some independently specifiable moral duty,

morally justifies God's actualising or permitting the conjunction of the evils.³

This sentence expressing GGT1 can be agreed to by both good-specific and good-nonspecific theodiscists, but they will view it slightly differently. The good-specific theorist holds that what justifies God's policies is *the particular goods* which fulfil the justificans in GGT1, given that they do fulfil it. The good-nonspecific theorist holds that what justifies God's policies is *the fact that there are some goods or other* which fulfil the justificans GGT1. (Of course a person who advances a good-nonspecific greater good theodicy can simultaneously advance another type of theodicy. Thus it might be better to characterize good-nonspecific theodicies as saying: If there are *some goods or other* which fulfil the justificans in GGT1 then this fact by itself suffices to justify God's policies; and it is not highly implausible to suppose that there are such goods.)

Why is GGT1 true? That is, why is God's actualising or permitting the evils in this world supposed to be justified by the obtaining of suitable greater goods? Some theodicians (whether or not they hold the general moral theory of maximising act-consequentialism) believe that:

- (1) God is morally justified in performing an action if and only if it maximizes net goodness.

Others may believe:

- (2) God is morally justified in performing an action if and only if it violates no independently specifiable moral duty and, of the alternatives open to God which violate no independently specifiable moral duty, it maximizes net goodness.

Greater good theodicians who hold either (1) or (2) will observe that other things being equal evil depresses net goodness. Some explanation is therefore required of why God, if he is morally good and therefore concerned to maximize net goodness, would ever permit evil. The explanation offered is that either the evil itself or God's permitting the evil may be a necessary condition of some greater good, so that permitting the evil makes possible the maximisation of goodness. This explanation constitutes a justification of the God's policy. So God's actualising or permitting the evils of this world is justified because his doing so has the best consequences (while not violating any independently specifiable moral duty).⁴ Notice that theodicies which take this line are good-nonspecific. *What* goods are involved does not really matter for the purposes of the theodicy, as long as God could not bring about a better world without the evils. However not all good-nonspecific theodicians are committed to either (1) or (2).

What views do good-specific theorists hold about why God's actualising or permitting the evils in this world is justified by the obtaining of suitable greater goods? Here is one answer. The following principle is a valid side-constraint on action:

(3) Other things being equal, do not actualize or permit evil.

The idea behind (3) might be that the very nature of evil gives us strong moral reasons not to actualize or permit it. In a concrete situation, the moral presumption against actualising or permitting evil can be overridden. Potential defeaters include:

- preventing this particular evil in these particular circumstances would be contrary to duty – eg., a duty not to interfere in someone else's private life against their will
- all the harm is rationally consented to by the person harmed in order to fulfil some significant and morally legitimate personal goal
- someone else who is more competent to assess the situation and deal with it ought to be left to do so
- preventing the evil would require a disproportionate effort from the agent.

People who hold (3) have reason to inquire whether there are defeaters which override the moral presumption against God's actualising or permitting the manifold evils we find around us, and, if there are, to identify them. Good-specific theodiscists, holding (3) but neither (1) nor (2), will appeal to the following defeater:

- such-and-such particular goods obtain, and fulfil the justificans in GGT1

CLARIFYING THE ALTERNATIVE GOODS OBJECTION

How does the objection from alternative goods arise for good-nonspecific theodiscists? Their main claim is that it is not highly implausible to suppose that the particular world which happens to be actual is such that God cannot actualize at least as good a world without as much evil. One way of arguing this involves giving wide-ranging examples of how various evils turn out to be necessary (or such that God's permitting them is necessary) for various itemized goods (or else God's

permitting the evils is necessary for the goods). Any such argument encounters an objection: surely even if the examples offered are genuinely what they purport to be, God could have actualized other goods, at least as great, for which evil, and God's permitting evil, were not logically necessary? if so, then the examples do not help defend the main claim.

By contrast, a good-specific theodicy would not be refuted if someone showed that God could have secured a world at least as good as our actual world without causing or permitting as much evil as the actual world contains. According to such a theodicy, what suffices to justify a particular evil is a particular good (fulfilling certain conditions). Good-specific theodicians are likely to say that what suffices to render morally permissible your causing pain to Alice is Alice's continued life. This good outweighs the evil of the pain, and could not be secured without that evil. The fact that Beth would benefit in an equally valuable way if you were to save her instead is no doubt something that a conscientious agent would take into account in deciding what to do, but it does not render it morally impermissible for you to save Alice. Good-specific theodicians can agree that a greater good moral justification of someone's causing or permitting evil is sometimes overturned by the fact that she would be acting in a morally better way if she did something else, involving her bringing about an alternative good. What they are committed to denying is that such a justification is sometimes defeated by the mere fact that the agent could have brought about an alternative good instead.

People who reject GGT1, including objectors from alternative goods, may hold a related principle specifying a sufficient condition for justification, formed from GGT1 by adding in a clause (vi) ruling out alternative goods. An objector who was in principle unwilling to accept any such revised principle would have in mind some other, additional challenge to greater good theodicies.

Here, then, is a principle which both greater good theod-
icists and objectors from alternative goods may agree to be
true:

(GGT2) Its being the case that for each actual evil E
there is some actual good G such that

- (i) G outweighs E, and
- (ii) either E is logically necessary for G or God's permitting E
is logically necessary for G, and
- (iii) G does not entail the occurrence of any other contingent
good G* such that G* outweighs E and neither E nor
God's permitting E is logically necessary for G*, and
- (iv) the conjunction of all the contingent goods not entailed
by the existence of God outweighs the conjunction of all
the evils, and
- (v) God in actualising E or G, or in permitting E or G, does
not violate some independently specifiable moral duty
- (vi) it is not the case that God could have prevented E and
actualized instead of G some good state of affairs H such
that (a) neither E nor any other equally great evil is logi-
cally necessary for H, and (b) neither God's permitting E
nor God's permitting any other equally great evil is logi-
cally necessary for H, and (c) H is at least as good as G,
and (d) God in actualising H would not have violated
some independently specifiable moral duty,

morally justifies God's actualising or permitting the conjunc-
tion of the evils

Objectors from alternative goods who accept GGT2 will
say: it is highly unlikely that for all actual evils clause (vi) is
fulfilled; so greater good theodicies fail. (That is, they do not
succeed in accounting for all evils. But of course they might
still be contributing significantly to a broader effort in theod-
icy which as a whole succeeds.)

It might be suggested that sub-clause (c) in clause (vi)
above should be replaced by the following:

(c') if God had prevented E and actualized H instead of G then total net goodness would have been at least as great as it actually is.

However the original clause (vi) has the advantage of remaining close to the terms in which greater good theodicies and the objection from alternative goods have normally been stated. To see this, Consider an example of a greater good partial theodicy, in bare outline. It makes the following assumptions: if God creates many free creatures existing in community for a long period of time then God can strongly but not weakly actualize the non-existence of sin; free will with respect to sin logically requires that God does not strongly actualize the non-existence of sin; there being people who possess free will with respect to sin is a good which outweighs there being some sin. The theodicy now says: human freewill, and goods bound up with it, morally justify God's not actualising the non-existence of sin. Here is the most plausible version I can state of the objection: Surely God could create people who lack free will with respect to sin, and who never in fact sin, but who are happier, more intelligent, more generous and more courageous than we human beings are. The attractive lives of these people would be at least as great a good as the existence of free human beings. Since God had the option of actualising these other people, the goodness of human freewill does not suffice to justify God's not actualising the non-existence of sin. Formulated in this way, the objection depends on the a priori judgment that H is at least as good as G, rather than the more problematic a posteriori judgment that if H had obtained instead of G then the level of total net goodness that *would have* causally resulted would have been at least as high as the actual level. So the objector will normally be happier with the original clause (vi), and defenders of the theodicy will be in a better dialectical position if they address the objection in these terms.

In the rest of this paper I present an argument against the

objection from alternative goods which does not depend on moral intuitions about the Alice-Beth case and similar examples. The argument overlaps one that I offered in an earlier paper, which was restricted to a special subclass of greater good theodicies, what I called greater good internal theodicies for classical theism.⁵

AN ATTACK ON THE OBJECTION FROM ALTERNATIVE GOODS

Let 'Ans' abbreviate or denote the purported justificans in (GGT1), ie. 'its being the case that for each actual evil E there is some actual good G such that conditions (i) – (v) are fulfilled'. Let 'Dum' abbreviate or denote the justificandum in (GGT1), ie. 'God's actualising or permitting the conjunction of actual evils'. Let 'S' abbreviate or denote the following statement, derived from clause (vi) of GGT2:

It is not the case that for each evil E God could have actualized any good state of affairs H such that (a) neither E nor any other equally great evil is logically necessary for H, and (b) neither God's permitting E nor God's permitting any other equally great evil is logically necessary for H, and (c*) if there is some actual good state of affairs G which fulfils conditions (i) – (iii) and (v) of GGT1 then H is at least as good as G, and (d) God in actualising H would not have violated some independently specifiable moral duty.

My argument appeals to the truth of the following thesis:

- (4) It is possible that God exists and there is evil which does not satisfy S; that is, it is possible that God exists and there is evil such that God could have actualized goods H_i fulfilling conditions (a) – (d) of S.

Notice that the alternative goods objection as I stated it above did not by itself involve commitment to not-(4) – that is, to the claim that necessarily, if God exists and there is evil

then that evil satisfies S. It involved only the weaker thesis that the approach to theodicy represented by (GGT1) will work only if S is added to Ans. An alternative goods objector is free to hold that there are other possible states of affairs, involving neither Ans nor S, whose obtaining would morally justify God's actualising or permitting the totality of evil in the world.

Notice also that good-nonspecific theodicians, even if they happen to hold (1) or (2), are not committed to not-(4). To see this, suppose that S is false, ie. suppose that for some evil E God could have actualized some good H fulfilling clauses (a) – (d) above. It does not follow that God's actualising H instead of G would have resulted in a better world. For maybe if God had actualized H instead of G then as a matter of contingent fact the resulting world would have been different in other ways – eg., rational creatures would have decided and acted differently – so as to render it inferior to the actual world.

I have no proof of (4), but in the light of its consistency even with (1) and (2), it looks fairly plausible. Moreover each of the following two lines of thought adds to its credibility. Firstly, suppose that there is some evil state of affairs E such that if God exists then he could have actualized some good state of affairs H which fulfils clauses (a) – (d) above and suppose in addition that there is some other actual state of affairs J not fulfilling all of (a) – (d), better than H, such that if God had actualized H then J could not have obtained. There is no good reason for saying that God should have prevented E and actualized H instead of G.

Secondly, just as being a great many metres high is logically necessary for being a mountain but there is no minimum number of metres that is logically necessary, so maybe there being some fairly severe evil or other of a certain kind is logically necessary for some good G¹ but no minimum degree of severity is logically necessary. Suppose that this is the case,

and also that there is some nonactual good H which God could have actualized without violating any independently specifiable moral duty, and for which neither the existence of evil, nor God's permitting evil, is logically necessary. Notice that H satisfies conditions (a) – (d) irrespective of how small a good H is; H might be utterly trivial in comparison with G¹ yet subclause (c*) hold vacuously since there is no good fulfilling clauses (i) – (iii) and (v) of GGT1. Consider now some specific severe evil state of affairs E, of the kind in question. Surely the existence of H does not preclude God's being morally justified in (actualising or) permitting E.⁶

The alternative goods objector is committed to the following claim:

- (5) Ans does not suffice to morally justify Dum; to turn the account involving Ans into a moral justification for Dum we need to add that S obtains.

One way of construing (5) is as follows:

- (6) For any state of affairs T such that Ans&T morally justifies Dum, T entails S.

But if we assume (4), then we must reject (6) For assuming (4) commits one to saying that possibly God is justified in actualising or in permitting evil states of affairs even when it is not the case that these evils fulfil S. This in turn entails that there is some (possible) state of affairs which morally justifies Dum but which does not entail S. Let U be such a justifying state of affairs. Then a counter-example to (6) is provided by letting T be U. Ans&U morally justifies Dum, but ex hypothesi U does not entail S.

The alternative goods objector may reply that (6) is a defective rendering of (5). The principle behind the objection is rather

- (7) For any state of affairs T such that Ans&T morally justifies Dum though T by itself does not morally justify Dum, T entails S.

However a counter-example to (7) is provided by letting T be 'Either not-Ans or U'. For Ans&(Either not-Ans or U) morally justifies Dum.⁷ And surely (Either not-Ans or U) will not by itself morally justify Dum. Yet (Either not-Ans or U) does not entail S.

The alternative goods objector may reply that the very fact that (7) encounters the foregoing counter-example shows that (7) is a defective construal of (5). Let us say that P is a *minimal justifier* of Q if P morally justifies Q and there is no R such that P entails R and R does not entail P and R morally justifies Q. Then the principle behind the alternative goods objection can be stated as follows:

(8) For any state of affairs T such that Ans&T is a minimal justifier of Dum though T by itself does not morally justify Dum, T entails S.

Now (8) succeeds in avoiding the counter-examples which refuted (6) and (7). Notice that Ans & (Either not-Ans or U) is not a minimal justifier of Dum, because it entails U without being entailed by U and U by itself justifies Dum. But (8) does not constitute a satisfactory version of the alternative goods objection. For (8) is quite compatible with (GGT1). Proponents of (GGT1) need not reject (8), because they are not committed to saying that there is some T such that Ans&T is a minimal justifier of Dum. For example, why should they rule out the possibility of a logically weaker justification of Dum, similar to Ans except for the addition of some extra disjuncts in clause (ii)? Indeed, why should they or anyone else suppose that Dum has a minimal justifier at all?

Thus the greater goods objection to the truth of GGT1 fails.

CONCLUSION

The main issue in this paper has been whether appeal to greater goods can explain why God, if he exists, is justified in

refraining from ensuring that there is little or no evil. I have argued that in principle it can. I have not defended the plausibility of the view that there actually are greater goods for whose sake God's actions are planned; nor have I attempted to identify candidate goods performing the role envisaged. However those tasks form part of my larger project. Well beyond my reach is an item on my idle wish list: an explanation of why, assuming that God could have strongly actualized suitable alternative goods with less evil, he did not in fact do so.

NOTES

- 1 By 'God' I mean a being who is essentially omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good. By 'a good' I mean a state of affairs that is good for its own sake.
- 2 I want a notion of God's actualising a world which is neutral between compatibilism and libertarianism, and between Molinism and non-Molinist libertarianism. Here is what I have in mind. Let us say that God *strongly actualizes* a state of affairs if and only if he causally determines that it is actual. God *weakly actualizes* a state of affairs if he performs some action such that if he were to perform it then the state of affairs would be actual. God *fully actualizes* a world if and only if he strongly or weakly actualizes every contingent state of affairs included in it. God *Molina-actualizes* a world if and only if he strongly or weakly actualizes every contingent state of affairs in the world except the obtaining of whatever counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are true in it. Finally, God *actualizes* a world if and only if he either fully actualizes it or Molina-actualizes it. If you think that Molinism is logically impossible, simply ignore the talk of Molina-actualising. (Alvin Plantinga distinguished between strong and weak actualisation in *The Nature of Necessity*, Clarendon Press 1974, p.173, while for Molinism see Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, ed. A. Freddoso, Cornell University Press 1988.)

The text gives only a first approximation characterisation of good-nonspecific theodices. Qualifications are introduced below.

- 3 In GGT1 and elsewhere the phrase 'permit a state of affairs' abbreviates 'refrain from actualising the nonoccurrence of the state of affairs'.

Keith Yandell (1974), p.4, offers an alternative to GGT1. He defines the expressions 'counterbalance' and 'overbalance', as follows:

A good G counterbalances an evil E if and only if G *exists* entails E *exists* and if an agent who creates or permits E for the sake of G performs a morally neutral action (is neither praiseworthy or blameworthy). A good G overbalances an evil E if and only if G *exists* entails E *exists* and if an agent who creates or permits E for the sake of G is thereby morally praiseworthy.

He then declares that 'the greater good defence' can be expressed in this way:

Every evil is logically necessary to some good which either counterbalances or overbalances it, and some evil is overbalanced by the good to which it is logically necessary.

Yandell's way of formulating his greater good claim has some serious disadvantages, in comparison with statements couched in terms of one of the concepts of *outweighing* defined above. Suppose that we agree about some specific pair of actual states of affairs (E,G) that E is outweighed by G, and E is logically necessary to G. No-one thinks that these facts suffice to justify causing or permitting E. There is a substantial philosophical task of discovering what must be added to get a nontrivial sufficient condition. One part of this task is investigating whether a sufficient condition must rule out the possibility of alternative goods which do not require causing or permitting E. But Yandell's terminology makes it far more difficult to state and discuss the justification of causing or permitting evil. For we are in a position to assert that G overbalances E only after we have established that God in causing or permitting E for the sake of G is morally praiseworthy, and therefore only after we have disposed of worries about alternative goods. Therefore in this paper I will set aside Yandell's terminology.

- 4 What is the relationship between being an action's being morally permissible and an action's being morally justified? In this paper I will take a narrow view of justification, and pro-

ceed on the assumption that being morally permissible and being morally justified are equivalent.

- 5 'Some Internal Theodicies and the Objection From Alternative Goods', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 34 (1993), 29-39
- 6 Perhaps the justification is that permitting E makes possible the actualisation of G. It might be objected that God could have made possible G by permitting some lesser evil, and that therefore his permitting E remains unjustified. No. Other things being equal, one should minimize one's costs in achieving one's ends. But in the circumstances supposed, God must either not minimize costs involved in achieving his end or else abandon the end.

The correct conclusion is not that God should abandon hope of G.

- 7 This step might be queried. So at this point I should stipulate that all along I have been employing a notion of moral justification which is non-defeasible. Sometimes people do say that the moral justification that reason R provided, or would have provided, for action A was undermined by consideration C. I regard R as insufficient for the moral justification of A, though perhaps some other item, such as R&(not-C), would have been sufficient. Thus if p morally justifies q and r is consistent with p and with q then (p & r) morally justifies q. Moreover if p morally justifies q and r is logically equivalent to p then r morally justifies q. Ex hypothesi, U justifies Dum. Therefore Ans&U justifies Dum. Ans & (Either not-Ans or U) is logically equivalent to Ans&U. Therefore Ans & (Either not-Ans or U) justifies Dum.