



God and gratuitous evil: Between the rock and the hard place

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Abstract

To most of us – believers and non-believers alike – the possibility of a perfect God co-existing with the kinds of evil that we see calls out for explanation. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the belief *that God must have justifying reasons for allowing all the evil that we see* has been a perennial feature of theistic thought. Recently, however, a growing number of authors have argued that the existence of a perfect God is compatible with the existence of gratuitous evil. Given powerful, millenia-long sensibilities about power and love and justice, it isn't hard to find that suggestion simply incredible. Nonetheless, in this paper I will argue that the most prominent theistic alternatives to what has seemed incredible to most of us throughout most of history are themselves patently unacceptable *for the theist* as well. On any of the most widely accepted accounts of how God could have justifying reasons for permitting some evils, God's existence means that we have justifying reasons for perpetrating and allowing every evil that we see. That's hard to swallow too. If I'm right about all of this, then two competing outcomes seem to present themselves as a possible result. On the one hand, for the theist, the apparently outrageous suggestion that the existence of a perfect God is compatible with gratuitous evil no longer looks like it faces a formidable, hard-to-resist alternative. On the other hand, some like me might think that my arguments go no distance at all towards dispelling the incredibility of the gratuitous evil *nouvelle vague*. On this line, theism may seem now to be between the rock and the hard place: it seems hard to make sense of the existence of a perfect God whether or not He has justifying reasons for allowing all the evil that we see.

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To most of us – believers and non-believers alike – the possibility of a perfect God co-existing with the kinds of evil that we see calls out for explanation (where a *perfect* God is at least an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being, one that loves and personally cares for each and every one of the creatures made in his image, and one that does so in ways that are not unintelligibly different from the ways in which we ourselves care for the ones we love). This is for two related reasons. First, worlds with much more of the possible goods, and much less of the actual evils, seem not only clearly better than our world but also easily actualizable by God instead. (We certainly seem to have no problem imagining what some of these possible worlds could look like: think of a horrible event during your lifetime; imagine a world similar to ours except for it; *voilà*.) Second, as most theistic traditions emphasize, God is providential in a way that befits His perfection: God foresees each event well before it happens and has within His complete control whether to allow it or not. As the answer to the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) puts it, God “watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head *without the will* of my Father in heaven” (my emphasis).¹ This seems to make God both causally and morally responsible for everything that happens to us, including all of the evils that befall us. But the suggestion that a perfect God could be responsible in both these ways for what looks like easily preventable evil seems outrageous, perhaps even unintelligible.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the belief *that God must have justifying reasons for allowing all the evil that we see* has been a perennial feature of theistic thought. Saint Augustine (1955, III § 11), for example, tells us that “the Omnipotent God... would not allow any evil in His works, unless in His omnipotence and goodness, as the Supreme Good, He is able to bring forth good out of evil.” More than fifteen hundred years later, Wykstra (1984, 76) goes as far as calling a conditional version of that same belief – *if God exists, then...* – “a basic conceptual truth deserving assent by theists and nontheists alike.” Indeed, this conditional claim has been the very fulcrum of the millennia-long debate over the problem of evil. The possibility of a perfect God co-existing with the kinds of evil that we see calls out for explanation; theists explain this in terms of God’s actual or possible justifying reasons; non-theists challenge the cogency or the assuaging power of these explanations; theists undercut or undermine these challenges; lather, rinse, repeat.

I propose we formulate this widely accepted centerpiece behind the problem of evil more precisely in the following way:

(Reasons): If God exists, then for all actual instances of evil e , God has justifying moral reasons for allowing e .²

¹ This is what Flint (2010, 329–30) calls “the traditional notion of providence” and ascribes to various Biblical passages and theologians such as “Philo, Justin Martyr, Origen, Augustine, Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Francisco Suarez, and Gottfried Leibniz.” This notion will be reconsidered in Sect. 5 below.

² I assume here that moral reasons are *minimally objective*: whether someone has a certain moral reason depends merely on whether a certain relation obtains, and not on whether that someone is aware of that relation obtaining or has a belief specifically about that matter. This is the sense of reasons we need in hand when we translate traditional moral theories into *reasons talk*. This kind of minimal moral objectivity, notice, is also compatible with *perspectival* theories, where the reasons that someone has depend on

The question of how to properly individuate instances of evil – as e_1, e_2, e_3 , etc. – is, of course, somewhat vexed. (I sheepishly ignore it here.) But what is important in presuming the possibility of some such precise individuation is that it keeps us honest about the need for a connection between God’s justifying reasons and the concreteness of the evil in the world. No matter how broadly or abstractly we choose to describe it, every evil is a personal matter for the relevant victim, a matter which God, in His perfect goodness, love, and care, presumably would not ignore. If God loves me and cares for me in particular (as opposed to caring only for certain collective properties of His creation, such as average individual well-being or the progressive development of humanity as a whole) and has the power and knowledge to prevent my suffering on any particular occasion, then it seems he would not allow some evil to befall me unless he had correctly identified, in his omniscience, justifying reasons for doing so. To many of us – myself included – this seems like a minimal requirement on God’s goodness, a minimal requirement for counting as someone who loves me and cares for me (assuming, once again, that we here mean something that is not unintelligibly different from the ways in which we care for the ones we love).³ Think about it. A parent who allows their child to suffer through a painful episode which they (a) knew was coming, (b) knew how to prevent, and (c) had no justifying reason to allow, is certainly not caring for their child in that moment. All the more so for a God of unlimited resources.

Let me emphasize just how minimal of a requirement (Reasons) really is. (Reasons) does not say that each particular instance of evil must somehow benefit the victim or that each instance of evil must itself serve some beneficial purpose (cf., Stump, 1990, 65–8; Adams, 1999, 29–31; Alston, 1996, 112; Pittard, 2021, 318). Nor does (Reasons) presume that God, unlike us, is free to flaunt the Pauline Principle enjoining us to “never do evil that good may come of it” (cf., Sterba, 2019, 49). All these suggestions impose a particular view on what can and cannot justify God’s permission of evil, and (Reasons) is entirely neutral on that score. (Reasons) is also compatible with recent work suggesting that God is permitted to not actualize the best possible world (cf., Rubio 2020), and/or permitted to engage in “motivated submaximization,” where one “aims at as much of the good as one can get but then chooses a suboptimal option because one has a countervailing consideration” (Tucker, 2016, 128). None of this important and exciting work presents a challenge to (Reasons). (Reasons) simply says that the existence of a perfect God is incompatible with the unjustified permission of evil, *whatever it is that does or does not give God reasons in the first place*. Only those committed to claiming that there are instances of evil for which God could say to the relevant victim, without displaying any kind of imperfection, “I love and care for you personally, but there is nothing that justifies my permis-

the information that is available from their perspective. Traditional expected utilitarianism, for example, is a minimally objective perspectival moral theory: what you have reason to do depends on a relation between your information state and possible actions, a relation captured formally by the utility calculus, and which obtains whether or not you have true or false beliefs about it.

³“But that’s the point,” some might say, “God is good precisely in ways that are unintelligibly different from our own understanding of goodness!” Alright. I then reply: “Perhaps. But now, by your own admission, the content of your claim that God is perfectly good is unintelligible to you and me. *Neither of us* can infer anything from that.”

sion of this particular evil you have suffered; I knew of it, I could have prevented it, I had no justifying reason not to prevent it, and I still did nothing about it” are truly in a position to deny (Reasons). It isn’t hard to find that suggestion simply incredible.

Nonetheless, what one philosopher finds incredible, another philosopher defends with careful and incisive argument. That’s philosophy for you. Indeed, a growing number of authors have recently argued that the existence of a perfect God is compatible with the existence of gratuitous evil (e.g., Hasker, 1992, van Inwagen, 2006, McCann, 2012, Murphy, 2017, and Rubio, 2019). Dialectically, these philosophers have the weight of thousands of years of bi-partisan agreement on (Reasons) pressing against their views. Have they not read the previous paragraphs? How strong and water-tight must an argument really be before we can forgo the powerful considerations outlined just above? How much confidence must we build up in the philosophical machinery behind these arguments before we undergo the gestalt shift required to make sense of a perfect God permitting unjustified suffering on the ones He loves? As I mentioned just above, it is tempting to find this suggestion simply incredible. Nonetheless, in this paper I will argue that the most prominent theistic alternatives to what has seemed incredible to most of us throughout most of history are themselves patently unacceptable *for the theist* as well. If (Reasons) and any of the most widely accepted accounts of how God could have justifying reasons for permitting some evils are both true, then God’s existence means that we have justifying reasons for perpetrating and allowing every evil that we see. That’s hard to swallow too.

Here is how I proceed. I begin, in Sect. 1, by providing a guiding overview of what I call “the symmetry challenge”. I then proceed, in Sects. 2, 3, and 4, to consider three different accounts of what it would take for God to have justifying reasons, each drawn from traditional work on the problem of evil. I argue that all three fail to successfully address the symmetry challenge. Next, in Sect. 5, I argue that a less meticulous view of God’s providence is unlikely to help. Finally, in Sect. 6, I argue that an apparently victorious reply to the symmetry challenge is nothing of the sort. If successful, my argument in this paper does not show, notice, that *no* account of how God could have justifying reasons for permitting some evils can succeed against the symmetry challenge, when paired with (Reasons). What the argument shows is more modest than that: theistic responses to the problem of evil must be more attentive to the unexpected and undesirable consequence that afflicts their most widely endorsed and repeated exemplars.

If I’m right about all of this, then two competing outcomes seem to present themselves as a possible result. On the one hand, *for the theist*, the apparently outrageous suggestion that the existence of a perfect God is compatible with gratuitous evil no longer looks like it faces a formidable, hard-to-resist alternative. Whatever dialectical pressure (Reasons) seemed to impose, after all, now seems gone. This, some might think, is a kind of good news. On the other hand, some like me might think that my arguments go no distance at all towards dispelling the offending waft of incoherence that accompanies the gratuitous evil *nouvelle vague*. My arguments, after all, are not against (Reasons) *per se*, but against the combination of (Reasons) and prominent theistic responses to the problem of evil. On this line, theism may seem now to be between the rock and the hard place: it seems hard to make sense of the existence of a perfect God *whether or not* (Reasons) is true.

The threat of symmetry

It has been well-noted before that accepting the consequent of (Reasons) threatens a generalized kind of moral skepticism. Russell (1996, 198), speaking of a particularly gruesome case, is forceful on this point:

If we are not justified in believing that no reason would justify God in allowing the brutal rape and murder, then we are not justified in believing that no reason would justify the onlooker in allowing that same act. The reason beyond our ken that would justify God in allowing it *could be* the same reason which would justify the onlooker. (My emphasis)

Accepting that God has justifying moral reasons for allowing every instance of evil, that is, seems to require accepting that our own moral sensibilities are a terribly poor guide to the reasons that exist for or against any possible action. Even in the light of our fullest and coolest reflection, we cannot come close to imagining the reasons that justified God in allowing most actual cases of brutal rape and murder. How can we go on trusting our moral sense, in other cases, once we realize that they are so badly calibrated to the objective moral facts? Call this the *skeptical challenge* to combining theism with (Reasons) and put it to the side.⁴ I want to focus here on a different and underappreciated threat.

We can get a sense of a bigger worry, as a first and imprecise pass, by asking the following questions: if all evil does in fact exist for a good reason – if it all fits into a plan – then how could we ourselves have good reasons to prevent any of it – reasons to interfere with that plan? If God, in his omniscience, has recognized that permitting some particular evil is justified, then how come we aren't justified in permitting that particular evil as well? Skepticism is not the (still inchoate) threat here. The threat is rather the existence of a certain kind of symmetry between God's justification for allowing some instance of evil and ours. The threat, in other words, is the patently unacceptable conclusion that we ourselves have good reasons for allowing all and any evil that God has good reasons to allow as well. We can call this the *symmetry challenge* to the combination of theism and (Reasons). Developing this challenge in greater detail will be my focus in this paper.

Meeting the symmetry challenge requires defending the following claim:

(Asymmetry) For many actual instances of evil e , God has justifying moral reasons for allowing e , while we do not have justifying moral reasons for allowing e .

We can see this defense as *phase 2* of the traditional strategy against the problem of evil – where *phase 1* is the task of identifying God's actual or possible reasons for allowing e , either in outline or in detail. In this paper, I will examine three explana-

⁴See Almeida and Oppy (2003), Street (2004), Jordan (2006), Rancourt (2013), Maitzen (2014), Rutledge (2017), and Pruss (2017) for developments of this challenge; see Bergmann and Rea (2005), and Howard-Snyder (2009, 2014), for replies.

tions of how God could have reasons for allowing evil, explanations that draw on traditional theistic work on the problem of evil – some of a broadly consequentialist character and some of a broadly deontological character – and I will argue that, surprisingly, they all fail to support (Asymmetry).⁵

I will not, of course, consider every possible explanation or every possible retort. This is, I think, as it should be. My overall goal is to offer a careful and wide-ranging invitation into what has been a neglected issue, and not to pretend to have the final word. But what's at stake in this exercise must be made clear. If (Asymmetry) is false, then a surprising argument comes into view:

The symmetry argument

1. If God exists, then for all actual instances of evil e , God has justifying moral reasons for allowing e . (Reasons)
 2. If God has justifying moral reasons for allowing e , then we have justifying moral reasons for allowing e as well. (Symmetry)
- C. So, if God exists, then for all actual instances of evil e , we have justifying moral reasons for allowing e .⁶

In a disturbing mirror image of the old Dostoevskian adage, we can re-phrase this conclusion as an equally ominous slogan: if God exists, then everything is permitted.

For the reasons given in the introduction, I find it hard to deny (Reasons). For the reasons given in the rest of the paper below, I am inclined to accept (Symmetry) as well. Since I don't think we have justifying moral reasons for allowing all actual instances of evil, I am inclined to see the Symmetry Argument as a serious challenge to belief in the existence of a perfect God. This is not, however, my only point. I am also interested in the resulting situation *for the theist*. In order to resist concluding that we have justifying moral reasons for allowing all actual instances of evil, the theist must deny one of the two premises in this argument. My aim is to show that denying premise 2 is harder than it looks – indeed, maybe just as hard as denying the beloved premise 1.

⁵My argument is related to (but distinct from) Hasker's (1992, 27–30) claim that certain solutions to the problem of evil “undermine the seriousness of morality”, and Maitzen's (2009, 108) claim that ordinary morality entails atheism.

⁶I am using ‘allowing’ here in a broad sense, one that includes both actions and omissions: if you choose not to prevent some foreseen and easily preventable evil, you've allowed some evil to occur; if you choose to perform an evil-causing action, you've allowed some evil to occur as well. I assume here that the kind of justification that is needed for both actions and omissions is the same.

Necessary evil

One common way of explaining how God could have reasons for allowing evil begins with accepting that some evils are simply necessary. Though common, this explanation is rarely outlined in sufficient detail. In this section, I argue that this explanation is incompatible with (Asymmetry), once its details are made plain.

Take a *necessary evil* to be an instance of evil that is necessary for bringing about some particular greater good, or necessary for preventing some particular greater evil. For whatever reason, this particular greater good could not come about without this lesser evil, or this particular greater evil could not be prevented had this lesser evil not occurred. By themselves, these are merely logical-axiological stipulations: a distinction between evils that are entailed by certain greater goods or evils, and evils that are not.⁷ To arrive at the explanation I have in mind, we must add to these stipulations the normative claim that, for at least the actual instances of evil that we see around us, the necessary connection between their occurrence and the relevant further goods and evils *truly justifies* their allowance. This need not entail any simple-minded kind of consequentialism, where one is permitted – or perhaps obligated – to bring about any state of affairs that is even just marginally better than its alternatives. All we need here is the sober view that, sometimes, consequentialist considerations are overriding.⁸ To mark the particular occasions where they are, let us speak of *worthwhile* greater goods and *unacceptable* greater evils: greater goods and evils whose occurrence doesn't just axiologically outweigh but in fact normatively justifies the permission of their necessary lesser evils. The common explanation I have in mind, then, suggests that God allows only those evils that are necessary for the attainment of worthwhile greater goods or for the prevention of unacceptable greater evils. Call this *the necessary evil explanation*.

Here are two representative endorsements of this kind of explanation, old and new:

God permits sin only because he wills to produce a kind of virtue that stands in internal relation to the sin; virtue that is exercised in opposition to the sin or for the redemption of the sinner, and thus logically could not exist if the sin did not. (Geach 1977, 66)

God is justified in creating a world with the different kinds of evil we find because only then could all three types of evil-transformative connections exist [i.e. one person sacrificially aiding another in times of suffering, one person helping another out of moral and spiritual darkness, forgiving and being forgiven]. (Collins 2013, 227)

These suggestions are explicit about their axiological component (the relevant necessary connection) and implicit about their normative component (the justifying power

⁷ See Chisholm (1990) and Pittard (2021) for a discussion of this relationship under the notion of “defeat”.

⁸ Some complain that consequentialist considerations could *never* justify particularly horrendous evils (cf., e.g., Dougherty, 2008; Gellman, 2017; Mooney, 2017). In Sects. 4 and 6 below, I will examine explanations that highlight the role of non-consequentialist considerations in constraining the requirement to pursue of the greater good.

of that connection). And there is something quite natural about them too. It is easy, in fact, to multiply possible goods whose existence seems necessarily connected to instances of evil. The virtues of mercy and forgiveness, for example, seem out of place in a perfect world, as does the emotion of sympathy and the attitude of sincere faith – not to mention, more controversially, the accomplishments of “defeating moral evil” (cf. McCann, 2012, 125) and the “magnificent bearing of pain” (cf. Plantinga 1967, 125). More poignantly, John Hick’s (1966, 255) well-known Irenean soul-making theodicy draws on these and other goods to argue that “human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process.” Perhaps some of these various goods are worthwhile in the justifying sense suggested just above.⁹

Yet our description of the necessary evil explanation is still incomplete. On the traditional notion of providence, an instance of evil being necessary for bringing about a worthwhile greater good, or for preventing an unacceptable greater evil, is simply not enough to justify God in allowing it. On the traditional notion, recall, God has perfect providential knowledge of the future. As such, He can foresee those cases where allowing an instance of a necessary evil will not, as a matter of fact, lead to the relevant worthwhile greater good – the greater good whose *actual occurrence* outweighs and truly justifies the evil. After all, the evil is *necessary* for the occurrence of the justifying good, but not necessarily *sufficient*; other necessary conditions may fail to be in place. (It is necessary to be sick, if one is to be healed; but being sick does not entail being healed.) But if God can foresee that the relevant good will not obtain, in some particular case, then there is a different but equally morally relevant sense in which this instance of evil is not “necessary” at all: though it is a necessary condition for the occurrence of some worthwhile greater good, that good will as a matter of fact not occur, and the evil itself will have occurred in vain. Since God, in his omniscient foreknowledge, knows this in advance, He is not justified *by that good* in allowing this instance of evil to occur, even though the evil is necessary, in the typically suggested axiological sense, for the occurrence of a greater good that would indeed, if it occurred, justify it. This kind of reasoning is very much in line with the Augustinian idea of a God who would not allow any evil unless He is able to bring forth good out of it, though it adds a much-needed success condition to Augustine’s ability requirement.

So suppose we accept this traditional notion of providence. We can then say that a *pointless evil* is any instance of evil that is either not necessary – as we defined it – or is necessary but will not, in fact, lead to its otherwise justifying consequences – a further fact which God, and typically only God, can know. We can then state the necessary evil explanation more carefully in the following way:

Necessary Evil (NE): For all actual instances of evil *e*, *the fact that e’s occurrence is not pointless* gives God justifying reasons for allowing it: (i) *e* is necessary for bringing about some worthwhile greater good *G* or for preventing some

⁹Hill (2022) for the suggestion that the relevant worthwhile good behind God’s permission of evil is the existence of creatures with an infinitely good afterlife.

unacceptable greater evil E, and (ii) if e occurs, then either G in fact occurs or E in fact does not.

Notice that (NE) carries no pretense to prideful access to God's reasons for his ways: for any e, one can accept (NE) and remain humbly silent on what the relevant Gs and Es could really be. But something very much like (NE) must be true, if soul-making styled explanations are to work at all.¹⁰

Now suppose (NE) is true. If that's the case, then we must reject (Asymmetry). Recall that, according to (NE), no actual evil is ever pointless. There may well be *apparently* pointless evil in the world, cases where we are unable to see what so great is promoted or so awful is prevented, but here appearances are always deceiving. And yet if no actual evil is ever pointless, then we ourselves seem to have justifying reasons for allowing it too – namely, the *justifying* consequences that are *guaranteed* to occur. Even though consequentialist considerations are not always enough to outweigh and justify the allowance of some evil, it turns out that every actual instance of evil, if (NE) is true, is a case where God has recognized that they do. If (NE) is true, then, as a matter of fact, any possible instance of evil either *will not* occur or occurs *for a good reason*, depending on its necessary connection, or lack thereof, to worthwhile greater goods or unacceptable greater evils that are actually going to occur. Neither option, however, morally calls out for anyone's intervention.¹¹

This bit of reasoning is certainly sound if we take our moral theory without any perspectival sweetener, where what determines what is permissible or impermissible are the objective consequences of my actions (and the objective justifying power of those consequences) and not what is available to me from my typically impoverished point of view. On these traditional views, what matters morally is that *there are* good reasons for f-ing, and not whether *I have* good reasons for f-ing (in a perspectival sense of "having"). Traditional consequentialist views are of this kind. But it is tempting to think that permissibility is in fact perspective-relative and that, therefore, the justifying facts are different from God's perspective than they are from ours – Him knowing all the facts, of course, and us not knowing much at all. God *knows in advance* of each particular possible evil whether it is pointless, while we of course do not.¹² In general, this is a familiar maneuver in moral theory and it amounts to the elevation of the reasons that I have for f-ing as what matters morally and the demotion or elimination of the significance of the reasons that there are instead. Perhaps

¹⁰What if, as Open Theism claims, God does not have omniscient foreknowledge and, for many human-related events, merely has knowledge of the chances of these events occurring (cf. Hasker, 1989, 2004)? That would make no difference to the substance of my arguments, but I postpone my discussion of this issue until Sect. 5 below.

¹¹My claim here is not that we would never have a *reason* to refrain from or prevent evil, if (NE) is true; my claim is rather that we would never have an *obligation* to do it, such that doing or allowing evil would always be *permissible*. This is because we have built into the explanation of God's permission of it that the actual consequences are truly justifying.

¹²This seems to be what Stump (1985, 412-3) has in mind when she says: "God can see into the minds and hearts of human beings and determine what sort and amount of suffering is likely to produce the best results; we cannot.... Therefore, since all human suffering is *prima facie* evil, and since we do not know with any high degree of probability how much (if any) of it is likely to result in good for any particular sufferer on any particular occasion, it is reasonable for us to eliminate the suffering as much as we can."

we can retain (Asymmetry), then, by combining (NE) with this kind of perspectivalism about moral reasons.

But this is a bit too quick. We get the same result as above – from pairing the *truth* of (NE) with objectivism about moral reasons – if we pair a *justified belief* in (NE) with perspectivalism instead. If I have a justified belief in (NE), after all, then it follows from the reasonable information I have within my perspective that any *actual* evil – past, present, or future – cannot be pointless. From my perspective, even though I cannot tell *in advance* whether a possible instance of evil *e* is pointless, I can nonetheless tell two related things about it: (a) if I succeed in causing or allowing *e*, then *e* was not pointless (since, according to (NE) God would not Himself have allowed it otherwise), and (b) if *e* is pointless, then I will not succeed in causing or allowing *e* even if I try (since, according to (NE), God Himself would then prevent it). Pointless evil, recall, *never* happens, if (NE) is true. So while it is true that I cannot tell in advance whether a certain possible instance of evil is pointless, I can nonetheless tell that I will *never succeed* in allowing or causing it if it is. In this way, the addition of a justified belief in (NE) to perspectivalism about moral reasons completely removes the morally relevant risks previously imposed by my impoverished perspective, and thereby eliminates my obligation to prevent apparently pointless possible evils.

The key premise in the argument just above is this: the fact that I don't know whether a possible instance of evil *e* is pointless is not morally relevant – i.e., it does not give me decisive reasons for attempting to prevent it – *if I am justified in believing that I cannot mistakenly cause or allow it if it is*. Notice how the moral weight of Frank Jackson's (1991) Dr. Jill case and Derek Parfit's (1988) Miner's case – the twin pillars behind perspectivalism – simply goes away if we stipulate that we have good reasons to believe that, irrespective of our choice, what happens will be instrumental for bringing about the relevant worthwhile greater good (cure, rescue) or for preventing the relevant unacceptable greater evil (death, deaths). The morally relevant risk of pointless evil, evil that *should* have been prevented, and *would* have been prevented by someone better informed, is at the very foundation of the move to perspectivalism about reasons and permissibility. But a justified belief in (NE) eliminates that risk. If I justifiably believe that (NE) is true, then even from my limited perspective I can tell that there is nothing of normative importance that will be accomplished by my actions (prevention or allowance of pointless evil) that would not be accomplished without them – a realization which is perhaps equal parts relieving and disappointing. In fact, the stronger one's justification for believing in (NE), the stronger one's permission to cause and allow apparently pointless evil. That's an interestingly strange result.¹³

We can call the supplementary argument I've been discussing *the combination argument* against the relevance of perspectivalism to the symmetry problem of evil: once we combine a justified belief in our preferred explanation of God's reasons for allowing evil with perspectivalism, the morally relevant aspect of our perspective

¹³Of course, a theist may not have a justified belief in (NE). Indeed, a theist may have no belief at all about such matters. This is true but irrelevant. We are here identifying a problem *for those endorsing* (NE) – namely, that they are then committed to something unacceptable. My argument is that if you accept (NE) in response to the problem of evil, then you face this result whether objectivism or perspectivalism is true. The fact that many theists have never thought of (NE) can't be a defense of (NE) from these charges.

that could ground asymmetrical obligations – the epistemic risk of causing or allowing pointless evil – simply goes away. We will encounter this argument twice over in the discussion below. The different theistic explanations are all problematic, and perspectivalism just won't help.¹⁴

Consider an example. Suppose Hick is correct in claiming that every instance of evil in our world plays a necessary soul-making role. Suppose Hick is correct in presuming that this fact justifies their occurrence. This means that, for every actual instance of evil, God, in His omniscience, has recognized that *it* occurring, in particular, is necessary for the attainment of some worthwhile aspect of His plan, and He has ensured that this aspect of the plan will indeed come to fruition. Since he is paying particular attention to the nature of God's providence, Flint (2013, 259) is clear on this very point:

Why did God allow Elfreth to get into that car crash? Because... he knew (either because of his all-determining decrees or due to his middle knowledge) that this specific evil would *in fact* engender the variety of actual outweighing goods (e.g., regarding Elfreth's freely accepting a newfound seriousness of purpose) that have resulted from it. (My emphasis)

Yet it seems to me that those attracted to the necessary evil explanation do not appreciate the full consequences of holding such a view. How could these necessary connections, together with God's foreknowledge and the minimal normative assumptions that we have made – perhaps together with a justified belief in these background conditions, if we think our perspectives matter after all – fail to give us justifying moral reasons for allowing any evil too? I don't see how they could. If (NE) is true, that is, then while we can perhaps explain how God has justifying reasons for allowing any actual instance of evil that we see, we seem forced to say that we have justifying reasons for allowing them as well. In other words, If (NE) is true, (Asymmetry) is false.¹⁵

¹⁴Suppose the purpose of some particular instance of evil *e* is precisely creating the opportunity for me, in particular, to prevent it. This seems to be what Howard-Snyder (2009, 43–4) has in mind when he says: “suppose we are *instructed theists*, that is suppose we reasonably think God has instructed humankind to prevent suffering in general and that God permits a lot of it precisely because he intends for us to try to prevent it” (his emphasis). (See also Hill, 2022, 776.) This can certainly be the case. Nonetheless, given (NE), it is *still* never the case that I can succeed in allowing an evil whose justifying greater good – the reason God allowed it – was my preventing it. Here's why: if (a) the greater good justifying that evil were my preventing it, and (b) I failed to prevent it, then that evil would have been pointless: though it was necessarily connected to a worthwhile greater good, the greater good never actually came about. Knowing in advance that this instance of evil would be pointless, however, God would never allow it in the first place. And since I myself can justifiably infer all of this, were I to be justified in believing (NE), I can also justifiably believe that no evil that I allow is ever pointless, and therefore that no evil that I allow is such that its point was my preventing it. A similar bit of reasoning applies to the suggestion that the greater good could be *the opportunity itself* (not my actual prevention of some evil, if given the opportunity). If *the opportunity for prevention* is the greater good that justifies God's permission of some evil *e* – in the sense articulated by (NE) – then *e*'s occurrence is not pointless no matter what I do. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for comments leading to these clarifications.

¹⁵Suppose that God is justified in permitting some evil *e* since two conditions hold: (a) *e* is necessary for a worthwhile greater good *G* that will occur if *e* occurs, and (b) if a human prevents *e*, then an even

Necessary permission

Defending (Asymmetry) requires denying (NE): sometimes pointless evil does occur. But if the evil is pointless, then how could God himself have justifying reasons for allowing it? One common way to get out of this knot is to accept that, sometimes, God's *permission* of pointless evils – not the evil itself – is necessary. This suggestion is also rarely stated in sufficient detail. In this section I once again argue that, once we see what is involved in making it plausible, we see that it is incompatible with (Asymmetry) as well.

Take a *necessary permission of evil* to be an act of permission that is necessary for bringing about some particular greater good, or necessary for preventing some particular greater evil. For whatever reason, this particular greater good could not come about without the allowance (though not necessarily the occurrence) of this lesser evil, or this particular greater evil could not be prevented had this lesser evil not been allowed. Once again, we need not conjoin these axiological claims with a hardheaded kind of consequentialism; all we need is the minimal normative claim that, for at least the actual instances of evil that we see around us, the necessary connection between their allowance and the relevant further greater goods and evils doesn't just outweigh but in fact justifies the allowance itself. (I will continue to use the terms 'worthwhile' and 'unacceptable' to denote the justifying power of these consequences, noting here that they sometimes justify permissions as well as the evils themselves.) Moreover, we once again need to be careful to note that the justifying power of this necessary connection, given God's omniscient foreknowledge, depends on the actual occurrence of the relevant greater good or the actual non-occurrence of the relevant greater evil. With both these points in mind, and following my earlier terminology, let us speak of *pointless permissions* of evil: cases where either the permission is not necessary or the justifying consequences will actually not come to pass. The alternative explanation I have in mind, then, suggests that God allows only those evils whose permission is necessary for bringing about some particular greater good which will in fact occur, or is necessary for preventing some particular greater evil which in fact will not. No evil, however pointless, is ever pointlessly permitted. Call this *the necessary permission explanation*.

Rowe (1979, 336) is sensitive to (most of) these points as he characterizes the conditions under which God could have reasons for allowing a certain instance of evil:

Either (i) there is some greater good, G, such that G is obtainable by [God] only if [God] *permits* [e], or (ii) there is some greater good, G, such that G is obtainable by [God] only if [God] *permits* either [e] or some evil equally bad or

greater good than G occurs (e.g., a free prevention of evil). Isn't this a case where God has a justifying moral reason to allow e, but humans do not? Not if (NE) is true. If (NE) is true, then this is a case where I am permitted to *either* permit or prevent the relevant evil. This is because, if (NE) is true, option (a) is one where G not only outweighs the relevant evil but truly justifies it. So it simply cannot be the case that allowing it, instead of preventing it, is unjustified (and *mutatis mutandis* for the perspectivalist move). It is certainly possible for there to be even greater goods than G, but this mere axiological fact cannot have an impact on the justifiedness of allowing the lesser good G in the cases where God has recognized G as by itself *worthwhile*. I am grateful to Scott Hill for comments leading to these clarifications.

worse, or (iii) [e] is such that it is preventable by [God] only if [God] *permits* some evil equally bad or worse. (My emphasis)¹⁶

For every instance of evil in our world, that is, while it may not have been necessary for bringing about some worthwhile greater good or for preventing some unacceptable greater evil, God permitting it was; while the bit of evil occurring may have been pointless, God permitting it was not. Just as earlier suggestions, Rowe is here explicit about its axiological component (the relevant necessary connection), implicit about its normative component (the justifying power of that connection), but missing some of the foreknowledge-related qualifications that we have addressed.

We can state the necessary permission explanation more carefully in the following way:

Necessary Permission (NP): For all actual instances of evil *e*, *the fact that permitting e is not pointless* gives God justifying reasons for allowing it: (i) permitting *e* is necessary for bringing about some worthwhile greater good *G* or for preventing some unacceptable greater evil *E*, and (ii) if *e* is permitted, then either *G* in fact occurs or *E* in fact does not.

(NP) avoids the problem we faced with (NE). The self-conscious move from (NE) to (NP), in fact, often has precisely this result in mind. Consider Wykstra's (1984, 75–76) characteristic nuance in recognizing this point:

God's prevention of all such suffering would not make the world a better place, for it would eliminate the good of moral freedom. But this does not mean that the suffering itself contributes, in the long run, to the world's being a good place: the world might well have been better if all this suffering had been prevented—not by God, but by those agents who through their choices caused it. Odd as it first seems, theists can (and I think should) insist that for some suffering, it is within our power but not within God's to prevent it without the loss of an outweighing good.

Wykstra is here identifying the greater good that most who are attracted to (NP) have in mind: our moral freedom. It is hard, in fact, to think of a different greater good that permitting *pointless evil* could ever bring about. God has justifying reasons for permitting evil, that is, because evil is the result of our free actions and because interfering with our actions, in the particular times when He does not, would sacrifice the outweighing and justifying greater good of our actual exercise of our free will. But the evil itself is pointless, such that nothing of greater value would be sacrificed if we ourselves freely decided not to bring it about, or freely decided to prevent it.¹⁷ Wyk-

¹⁶ I have substituted Rowe's terms for evil ('*s₁*') and God ('OG') for clarity.

¹⁷ Thus Alston (1996, 112): "This is why God permits such horrors as the rape, beating, and murder of Sue. He does it not because that particular wicked choice is itself necessary for the realization of some great good, but because the permission of such horrors is bound up with the decision to give human beings free choice in many areas."

stra is leaving it implicit, once again, that the necessary connection between God's permission of evil and my exercise of my free will, at least in the cases of the actual evils that we see, is truly justifying. Let's suppose it is.¹⁸

Now suppose (NP) is true. We must then reject (Asymmetry) once again, at least if we conjoin (NP) with the natural view that moral freedom is here the relevant worthwhile greater good. The key here is noticing that God's act of permission, strictly speaking, matters morally only as a means to *not interfering* with my free action, only as a means to *the actual occurrence* of my act. What has axiological value here, in other words, is my free choice *actually being carried out* on this occasion as I intend it; that's the freedom-related greater good that, at least in the cases of actual instances of evil, can truly justify allowing it. Plantinga (1974, 30) puts it:

To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so.

In fact, it is not hard to see that this must be the case, if (NP) is to work as an explanation in the first place. If what had justifying value, instead, was merely the freedom in my *desire*, or the freedom in my *decision*, or the freedom in my *attempt* to bring about some evil, then God's permission of pointless evil wouldn't be necessary at all for achieving the relevant value: He could let me want and will and try, but ensure I always fail; he could have His necessary "permission," and get the value of "free will," without allowing any pointless evil to occur. (NP) would fail miserably as an explanation of actual evil, in other words, unless what we take to have justifying value is my exercise of what Plantinga (1974, 30) called *significant freedom* and Reitan (2014, 185) more recently called *efficacious freedom*:

To make possible this valuable state of affairs in which creatures like us exercise efficacious freedom, He must permit us not only to decide to do evil, but also to succeed once the decision is made – that is, to achieve the evil results we have in mind.

The worthwhile greater good which is necessarily connected to God's permission of evil, and which justifies it, is only achieved, therefore, if I actually carry out my plan without interference.¹⁹

But if this is the case, then it doesn't matter for my valuable efficacious freedom if it is God or someone else who gets in my way: there is no greater good in fact occurring if God refrains from interfering with my evil-causing free action but *you* don't. Of course, in that case there is also no subsequent evil either, the evil that would be justified by the free action if both occurred. But the point is that cases where "God

¹⁸For challenges to the justifying power of freedom, see Lewis (1993), Schellenberg (2004), Himma (2009), Schlossberger (2015), Sterba (2019), and Ekstrom (2021).

¹⁹See Pittard (2018, 92) for the related suggestion that what justifies God's permission of pointless evils is our having *difference-making responsibility*, where (e.g.) "for Lola to have difference-making responsibility for averting *E*, it must be the case that had she chosen *B*, *E* would have occurred" (my emphasis).

permits” but “we interfere” are not cases where the greater good of efficacious freedom occurs without the evil, such that there is a surplus of value in the world, something better than if the evil had occurred without my interference. These are cases where there is neither the greater good nor the lesser evil. So “not interfering with my evil-causing free action,” in general, is what is really necessary for bringing about the particular greater good (my exercising efficacious freedom) or for preventing the particular greater evil (my not exercising efficacious freedom) whose actual occurrence or non-occurrence truly justifies the consequent pointless evil. There is nothing special about *God’s* permission of my free action that, by itself, achieves some greater good, even if you come around and prevent it anyway. Strictly speaking, then, it is not *the fact that permitting e is not pointless* which gives God justifying reasons for allowing it, but rather *the fact that not interfering with e is not pointless* instead (the former being necessary but not sufficient for the latter).

However, this means that, for every actual instance of evil, not interfering with the relevant evil-causing free action that produced it was not pointless: not interfering with it was necessary for bringing about some worthwhile greater good which in fact occurred (that particular exercise of efficacious freedom). This is true even if the evil-causing but worthwhile free action is mine. Even though consequentialist considerations are not always enough to justify not interfering with evil-causing free actions, it turns out that every actual instance of evil, if (NP) is true, is a case where God, in His omniscient foreknowledge, has recognized that such consequentialist considerations are in fact truly justifying. Any possible evil-causing free action either *will be prevented* (by us or God) or *there are good reasons for not preventing it*, depending on the necessary connection, or lack thereof, between non-interference and truly justifying greater goods or evils (in this case, the very free performance of the evil act itself). And neither option, once again, morally calls out for intervention, by anyone. Moreover, the same perspectival considerations adduced above, *mutatis mutandis*, apply here: even though I cannot know in advance whether or not interfering with some particular possible evil-causing free action would be pointless, it follows from within my perspective, given a justified belief in (NP), that nothing of normative importance hangs on what I choose to do: pointless non-interference with evil-causing free actions never occurs, after all, if (NP) is true. Despite my perspectival limitations, I can justifiably believe that every free action that in fact causes some evil is itself a worthwhile greater good, and I can be responsibly confident that there is no moral risk in my inaction. Once again, the morally relevant aspect of our limited perspective that could ground asymmetrical reasons – the epistemic risk of pointless non-interference with evil-causing free actions – simply goes away. This is another version of the combination argument.²⁰

²⁰ Cases of choosing not to perform an evil-causing free action seem importantly different from cases of interfering with someone else’s attempt at an evil-causing free action. This is because in the former case, but not in the latter, the refraining is itself a free choice. This suggests that things would be better, in fact, if I freely chose to refrain from evil instead of freely causing it, at least if the relevant greater good that would justify permitting my evil is the free action (*qua* free action) itself. But this is not enough to show that my freely performing a free action is wrong (impermissible). This is because these axiological facts are eclipsed by the normative fact which follows from (NP): the greater good of free-will is worthwhile in itself *either way*, if God allows my action, such that the evil consequences are outweighed and justified.

Consider an example. Suppose Plantinga is correct in claiming that God's permission of every actual instance of evil in our world is (possibly) necessary and worthwhile for bringing about the best possible world that God could have created with significantly free creatures. This means that, for every actual instance of evil, God, in His omniscience, has recognized that not interfering with it, in particular, is necessary for the attainment of His efficacious-freedom-respecting goals. Russell and Wykstra (1988, 141) put this as a matter of *freedom thresholds*:

It might be right for God (if he existed) sometimes to prevent a person's evil actions, but after a certain number of interventions, a threshold may be reached where further interventions would have very bad effects—say, the person feeling that he lacks real freedom of action. As that “freedom threshold” is reached, it might not be right for God to intervene once more.

Yet once again it seems to me that those attracted to the necessary permission explanation do not appreciate the full consequences of holding such a view. How could these necessary connections, together with God's foreknowledge and the minimal normative assumptions that we have made – and perhaps together with a justified belief in these background conditions – fail to give us justifying moral reasons for allowing evil too? I don't see how they could. If (NP) is true, that is, then while we can explain how God has justifying reasons to allow any actual instance of evil that we see, we seem forced to say that we have justifying reasons to allow it as well. In other words, If (NP) is true, (Asymmetry) is false.

Divine right

I have argued so far that two common ways of explaining how God could have justifying reasons for allowing evil force us to accept that we ourselves have justifying reasons for allowing it too. The necessary connection between some instance of evil and worthwhile greater goods or unacceptable greater evils – the fact that *e*'s occurrence is not pointless – gives God and us justifying reasons to allow it. This means that while soul-making theodicies may well succeed against the traditional problem of evil, they do so by becoming vulnerable to the symmetry challenge instead – they may succeed at *phase 1*, but they fail at *phase 2*. Similarly, the necessary connection between not interfering with some instance of evil and greater goods and evils – the fact that permitting *e* is not pointless – gives God and us justifying reasons to allow it too. This means that while free will theodicies and defenses may well succeed against the traditional problem of evil (phase 1), they too do so by becoming vulnerable to the symmetry challenge as well (phase 2). In fact, in both these cases, our justifying reasons are precisely the same as God's.

But our discussion is not over. One thing it has revealed is that defending (Asymmetry) requires appealing to the distinction between *agent-neutral reasons* (reasons

This means that *even if* the world would be better if I didn't, I'm still permitted to perform it. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for comments leading to these clarifications.

that are shared by everyone) and *agent-relative reasons* (reasons that we have by virtue of standing in the particular relations to each other that we do). Another thing it reveals is that the common explanations of God's reasons for allowing evil – those that make bare instrumental appeals to soul-making or free will – fail this requirement.²¹ What we need, then, is an explanation of how God's reasons for allowing evil are also partly grounded on the details of the particular relations to each sufferer that He stands in. So long as we ourselves don't stand in similar relations, and so long as such standing is a partial requirement for having reasons to allow evil, we ourselves won't have them.

Swinburne (2004, 237-8) has precisely such agent-relativity in mind when he says that:

It [is] plausible to suppose that a perfectly good God may allow an evil E to occur or bring it about if it is not logically possible or morally permissible to bring about some good G except by allowing E (or an evil equally bad) to occur or by bringing it about... [But] God must not wrong the sufferer by causing or permitting the evil. He must have the right to make or permit that individual to suffer.

Swinburne is here explicit about his acceptance of the axiological component of the previous explanations (the necessary connection between permissions of evil and greater goods and evils – either because the permission or the evil itself is necessary), and he is explicit about his acceptance of a non-consequentialist, agent-relative, normative constraint as well (the requirement of *having a right* to sacrifice someone's wellbeing for greater goods). If we add the foreknowledge-related qualifications we have noted twice above, we can then say that a certain permission of evil is *wrongful* when either the permission is itself pointless (in the consequentialist sense we have defined above) or instead a violation of someone's rights.²²

With all of this in mind, let us call Swinburne's suggestion *the divine right explanation*, and let us state it more carefully in the following way:

Divine Right (DR): For all actual instances of evil *e*, *the fact that God's permission of e is not wrongful* gives God justifying reasons for allowing it: (i) permitting *e* is necessary for bringing about some greater good *G* or for preventing some greater evil *E*, (ii) if *e* is permitted, then either *G* in fact occurs or *E* in fact does not, and (iii) God stands in relation *R* to the perpetrators and victims

²¹As I mentioned in fn. 9, some think that instrumental reasons, in principle, are not good explanations for God's permission of evil. These arguments, however, are very different from mine as they appeal to the moral insufficiency of instrumental reasons *in general*. My argument has no qualms with the ends, at least sometimes, justifying the means. My argument merely points out that a bare appeal to instrumental reasons is in tension with (Asymmetry).

²²In other well-known work, of course, Swinburne (2016, 189) rejects "the strong Christian tradition that God is omniscient in the strong sense" that is behind the notion of providence I've been assuming so far. I am ignoring this incongruity for simplicity; see my discussion in the next section for why this makes no difference to my argument.

of *e*, such that, by virtue of *R*, God has a right to sacrifice their wellbeing for greater goods.

The relevant justifying fact here depends on a combination of both consequentialist and non-consequentialist considerations. It would be wrongful for God to allow some instance of evil, that is, if either the consequentialist or the non-consequentialist considerations failed to be the case. On a common way of thinking about the mechanics of this combination, we can say that the necessary connections identified by previous explanations (and the fact of their actual occurrence or nonoccurrence) give God (and us) *prima facie* reasons to permit some instance of evil *e*, but are not enough by themselves to justify that course of action. This is because these consequentialist *prima facie* reasons can be overridden by non-consequentialist, agent relative, *prima facie* reasons against permitting *e*: reasons typically grounded on familiar facts about human dignity and autonomy that stand against the use of individuals as mere means to the achievement of greater goods.²³ And it seems quite clear, to most of us anyway, that there are many actual cases where the non-consequentialist *prima facie* reasons that we have against permitting evil indeed override whatever consequentialist *prima facie* reason we may have for permitting it – that’s the source of our common opposition to allowing the sacrifice of one for the sake of five. According to (DR), however, the same is not the case for God. Either these non-consequentialist *prima facie* reasons do not at all apply to Him, or they are not as powerful in the particular cases of actual instances of evil, such that, in those cases, the balance of His reasons tilts towards the pursuit of greater goods instead. Either way, it turns out that every actual instance of evil is one where God has a right to allow it, while we do not. This is one way to appeal to deontological considerations in our explanations of God’s reasons for allowing evil. I suspect that, on full reflection, this might be the most popular view around – that many appeals to necessary evils and permissions come with an enthymematic rider about God’s differentiated rights. So be it. Let’s suppose (DR) is true.

I have the same refrain: we must reject (Asymmetry) if that’s the case. First, recall that, since there are no wrongfully permitted instances of evil, every actual instance of evil is such that someone with a right to sacrifice some wellbeing for greater goods has decided to do so. There may well be cases of *apparently* wrongful evil, on those occasions in which we are unable to see what so great is being promoted or prevented by the allowance of that evil, or unable to see how one could rightfully allow it anyway. But appearances are always deceiving in these cases. Second, notice that when someone with a *right* to sacrifice some wellbeing for greater goods decides to do so, those of us without that right thereby have decisive reasons to allow that sacrifice as well. For one thing, we already had consequentialist, agent-neutral, *prima facie* reasons for pursuing those same greater goods in that same way, even if we also had, in this case, non-consequentialist, agent-relative, *prima facie* reasons against sacrificing someone’s wellbeing for it. But when someone who does not have that constraint decides to allow it, our own *prima facie* reason against allowing it is defeated.

²³ I am here drawing on a moral framework that is familiar from Ross (1930). See Mooney (2022), however, for a discussion of the relevance of “side-constraints” to the problem of evil.

Even more, when someone with a right to sacrifice some wellbeing for greater goods decides to do so, a further non-consequentialist, agent-relative reason for allowing that sacrifice falls into place: one that is grounded in respecting the rightful decisions of others. Call this the moral principle of *authority*:

(Authority) If x is necessary for some greater good or for the prevention of some greater evil, and A, but not B, has a moral right to allow x , then B does not have a moral right to interfere with A's allowing x .

We now have both consequentialist and non-consequentialist *prima facie* reasons for allowing the sacrifice of someone's wellbeing for greater goods. This is precisely the dynamic that is in place when we allow a doctor to cut us open for surgery – our rightful decision to sacrifice some of our own wellbeing for greater goods is a prime example of how someone else's *prima facie* reasons against pursuing those greater goods at our expense can be defeated by reasons in its favor whose source is our authoritative decision.²⁴

But now consider the implications of these points for our reasons for allowing evil. Take the combined suggestion that God's permission of every actual instance of evil in our world is necessary for, and successfully brings about, the best possible world that God could have created with efficaciously free, soul-made creatures. No actual evil is ever pointless or ever pointlessly permitted. Now add the suggestion that God, but not us, stands in the required relation to the perpetrators and victims of evil-causing free actions, such that His decision to sacrifice some of their wellbeing for actually occurring greater goods is not wrongful. This means that, for every actual instance of evil, God, in His omniscience, has recognized that not interfering with it, in particular, is necessary for the attainment of His worthwhile goals, that those goals will indeed be achieved with them, and has recognized that He is well within His rights to make that trade. So, given (Authority), it follows that, for every actual instance of evil that we cause or allow, we not only had consequentialist, agent-neutral reasons for causing or allowing it – the evils (or our free performance of it) are in fact necessary for greater goods that will occur – we in fact did not have a moral right to *not* cause or interfere with it. Our interference, in each case, would be akin to interfering with a parent's *rightful* disciplining of their child for the sake of *actual* greater goods.

Importantly, the same perspectival considerations already mentioned twice above, *mutatis mutandis*, apply here: even though I cannot know in advance whether some possible instance of evil is such that someone with a right to sacrifice some wellbeing for greater goods has decided to do so (thereby giving me decisive reasons to permit it too), it nonetheless follows from within my perspective, given a justified belief in

²⁴We must be careful, however, to distinguish between *protected rights* and *mere permissions* (or, in Thomson's (1990) terminology, between "claims" and "privileges"). I have a right to sit on a certain public bench in front of my house, but this is a mere permission (privilege) and not a protected right (claim): you are not required to allow me to sit on that bench by not sitting on it yourself. The kind of right that we have to sacrifice some bit of our wellbeing for greater goods, however, is very much a protected right: you are required to not-interfere with my choices (provided, *per assumption*, that those choices are truly within my rights). I am grateful to Brendan de Kenessey for comments leading to these clarifications.

(DR), that nothing of normative importance hangs on what I choose to do: wrongful evil never occurs, after all, if (DR) is true. Despite my perspectival limitations, I can justifiably believe that every free action that in fact causes some evil has not been wrongfully permitted, and I can be responsibly confident that there is no moral risk in my inaction. Once again, the morally relevant aspect of our limited perspective that could ground asymmetrical reasons – the epistemic risk of wrongful evil – simply goes away. This is yet another version of the combination argument presented above.

Consider an example. Drawing on the traditional picture of God as a father, Swinburne (2004, 257) finds the central elements of this divine right explanation at play even in ordinary life:

God as the author of our being would have rights over us that we do not have over our fellow humans. To allow someone to suffer for his own good or the good of someone else, one has to stand in some kind of parental relationship towards him. I do not have the right to force some stranger, Joe Bloggs, to suffer for the good of his soul or of the soul of Bill Snoggs, but I have some right of this kind in respect of my own children. I may let the younger son suffer somewhat for the good of his and his brother's soul. I have this right because in small part I am responsible for the younger son's existence, its beginning, and continuance.

Yet Swinburne (or someone who accepts (DR) and the tradition notion of providence) fails to see the full consequences of this picture. If he truly has a right to allow his son to suffer on some occasion for greater goods (and let us assume here that he does), and moreover chooses to allow it, then I am morally obligated to stand aside and allow it too. I already had *prima facie* reasons to allow that suffering, and I have no right to interfere with his rightful decision anyway. Yet the same is true for all the actual instances of evil that God allows. In fact, my reasons for respecting the rightful decisions of others are especially strong when that “other” is God, as are my reasons for pursuing greater goods when they are guaranteed by God's foreknowledge to actually come about. So how could the relevant necessary connections between evil and greater goods, together with God's rightful decision to pursue these goods, and the guarantee His foreknowledge gives us that these goods will in fact occur, in light of our subordinate relation to Him – and perhaps together with a justified belief in these background conditions – fail to give us *decisive* moral reasons for not interfering with any evil he allows? I don't see how they could. Not because we ourselves have a right to pursue greater goods at the expense of any particular victim, of course, but rather because someone who does have a right has decided to do so. Even though this explanation grounds God's reasons on something that is uniquely true of Him (*the fact that God's permission of e is not wrongful*), that fact entails something else, which in turn grounds our own reasons for doing much the same (*the fact that someone with a right to sacrifice some wellbeing for actual and worthwhile greater goods has decided to do so*). If (DR) is true, that is, then while we can explain how God has justifying reasons to allow any actual instance of evil that we see, we seem forced to say that we have justifying reasons to allow it as well – having decisive reasons, after

all, being a particularly strong way of having justifying reasons. In other words, If (DR) is true, (Asymmetry) is false.²⁵

Open theism to the rescue?

As mentioned earlier (on fn. 11), my discussion of all of these explanations presupposes the traditional notion of providence, and indeed that notion played a central role in all my arguments against them as well. It might be tempting, therefore, to think that this notion of providence is the common culprit, the guilty element responsible for the appearance of a problem, such that abandoning it would quickly and easily remove any of the aforementioned difficulties. In fact, some may see my discussion as revealing yet another theoretical advantage of Open Theism. I now want to argue that this kind of triumphant reaction is seriously premature.

There are two foreknowledge-related issues that matter for the problem of evil. The first issue pertains to God's knowledge of future free human actions *at the time of creation*. Open Theism's stance on this issue, however, is ultimately irrelevant to our search for explanations of God's permission of particular instances of evil. Of course, according to Open Theism, God could not have known, at the time of creation, that actualizing possible world A would have led to S freely deciding to f at some much later time t – where f-ing either is or causes some instance of evil *e*. But this does not mean that God could not have known of the occurrence of *e* at *any point* before it happened. According to Open Theism, God has maximal probabilistic and dynamic knowledge of counterfactual possibilities involving free agents – meaning that he knows as much as possible about what they are likely to do in every possible scenario and that this knowledge gets updated as much as possible when new information is acquired in due time. But in this way God could easily know whether or not an instance of evil *e* will occur before it does. God may not have this knowledge at the

²⁵ Suppose God is justified in permitting some evil *e* on account of the necessary connection between that permission and a very different kind of greater good which he has a right to pursue in this way: the creation of an opportunity for the morally valuable exercise of someone's efficacious freedom in preventing *e*. Isn't this a case where my prevention of *e* is not in violation of (Authority)? After all, whether or not I prevent *e*, God's permission of it is not wrongful; and, if I do prevent it, I am not thereby interfering with God's rightful decision to trade *e* for a justifying greater good – my preventing *e* is compatible with and, in fact, constitutive of, the trade-off being successful. But this is a misunderstanding of the constraints imposed by (DR), in particular of its consequentialist component. The key is to recall how God's providential foreknowledge affects the case. God is not in our epistemically limited position, creating opportunities in the mere hope that we will take them up. For any opportunity for evil prevention that He creates, God knows whether or not I will in fact prevent it. So suppose I will not prevent evil *e* if given an opportunity O to prevent it. This is something that God knows in advance. In this case, the suggestion that O is a greater good that justifies God in permitting *e* seems outrageous. The plausibility of this suggestion comes from the ordinary sense in which, for us, creating such opportunities are cases where there is a "chance" that is worth the "risk". But here there is no chance and no risk from God's perspective. So there's no sense in which O is a justifying good and no sense in which its permission is not wrongful. And all of this is something that follows from our perspective as well: there are never actual evils whose outweighing and justifying good was an opportunity to prevent it that I missed; for all actual evils, their outweighing and justifying good is something other than someone's missed opportunity; so no actual evil is such that my having prevented it was compatible with and constitutive of the trade-off being successful. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for comments leading to these clarifications.

very outset of creation, but this gives us no reason to think that he won't have knowledge of it one decade, one year, one month, one week, one day, one hour, one minute, or one second before it happens. And what this means, in turn, is that even on Open Theism God always has enough prior knowledge of any particular evil causing free action to have to actually *decide* whether or not to prevent it.²⁶ In other words, Open Theism's stance on God's knowledge at the time of creation does not by itself explain why God is justified in permitting some particular evil, and it does not provide a way for escaping that explanatory burden I mentioned at the very outset of this paper.

This leads us to the second foreknowledge-related issue that matters for the problem of evil, namely, God's knowledge of the *future consequences* of permitting or preventing any imminent instance of evil. According to Open Theism, God's knowledge is here at once technically limited and unimaginably vast. If the open theist is to appeal to (NE), (NP), or (DR) in their explanation of God's decision to permit some evil, therefore, the relevant worthwhile goods must be goods that fall within the scope of His knowledge at that time. There is nothing incompatible or implausible here, of course: personal growth, opportunities for free human actions, and so on, are precisely the kinds of things God can, at times, be certain will or will not occur. The problem, instead, is that here the open theist faces the same arguments raised earlier in the paper. Open Theism, by appealing to (NE), (NP), or (DR) in this way, would offer no respite against the symmetry challenge.

The alternative, of course, is to appeal to a different kind of explanation altogether. As Hasker (2017, 61) sees it, the open theist's best shot is to appeal to some kind of *general-policy theodicy*, to suggest that God's justification for various evils is their "being the consequence of a general policy" that a perfect God would adopt – such as allowing for an overall climate system that is "conducive to the flourishing of all kinds of living creatures, including human beings". Indeed, Hasker (2004) provides us with a rich discussion of possible policies that might do the trick.

What is crucial to note, however, is that an appeal to general policies of this kind could only justify the permission of some particular evil if "breaking the policy" on the relevant occasion to prevent the evil truly thwarted the goods achieved by adopting the policy in the first place. The policy *qua* policy, of course, does not have any authority over God – as a law or moral rule can have authority over us – such that God would have an independent obligation to follow the policy even when there are costless benefits to breaking it. God is not a slave to rules. Neither are we. Suppose, for example, that my justification for not eating pizza on many nights is my general policy of having a salad as one of my meals on every day; having this policy in place secures a variety of important goods and forestalls a variety of annoying evils; yet it is not the case that the goods secured by this policy are lost by my not following its prescriptions on some occasion. What this means, then, is that my justification for accepting some consequence of this policy *cannot simply be* that this policy ensures various goods. My justification must involve some reference to the precise relation between *this particular instance* of following or flouting its prescriptions

²⁶ However causally *undetermined* one thinks our free actions are by prior states, they are nonetheless causally *implemented* through our physical embodiment, providing God with an opportunity to intervene in any of the links of this complex chain.

and the goods achieved by having the general policy in place. The same applies to the open theist's appeal to God's general policies as justifying the permission of various instances of evil. Outlining the policies is not enough; we also need a fuller explanation of why, in the case of the actual evils that we see, breaking with the policy on those occasions in order to prevent those evils would compromise the relevant goods secured by the policy in the first place.²⁷ Perhaps the actual evils are all themselves necessary for attaining the goods secured by following the general policy; or perhaps God's permission of all the actual evils is similarly necessary. Either way, the open theist is once again right back in the business of choosing between (NE), (NP), or (DR), and therefore facing the symmetry challenge once again.

I thus see no reason to be confident that Open Theism can help the theist support (Asymmetry) in any straightforward way, despite having stated my arguments explicitly in terms of the traditional notion of providence.²⁸

Divine duty to the rescue?

We have seen one way in which deontological considerations can play a role in an explanation of how God could have justifying reasons for allowing evil: while consequentialist considerations give us all some reason to pursue greater goods by allowing some instances of evil, deontological considerations determine who may allow this evil without wrong. This suggestion, I've argued, does not allow us to retain (Asymmetry). But there is another way. Suppose that neither the evil nor its allowance is necessarily connected to some greater good or evil. The evil itself, and the allowing of that evil, are both pointless (in the consequentialist sense we have defined above). As far as overall value is concerned, *preventing* this instance of evil is what pursuing the greater good demands, not *allowing* it. Can we reconcile (Reasons) with this assumption? Could God be justified in pointlessly allowing a pointless instance of evil to befall me? From a deontological perspective, in fact, it is possible that He could. While some deontological considerations can show us that only God *has a right* to pursue greater goods at my expense, different deontological considerations can show us that only God *has a duty* not to interfere with my pointless suffering. The explanation for the co-existence of God and evil, in this case, has nothing at all to do with greater goods and greater evils – not even in the popular hybrid manner of (DR). The explanation here is purely deontological: despite the pointlessness of evil and its permission, God nonetheless has a duty to allow it.

Reitan (2000, 312) is working towards precisely this point when he notes that:

²⁷ It is not enough, in other words, to simply say that “frequent and routine intervention by God to prevent the misuse of freedom by his creatures and/or to repair the harm done by this misuse would undermine the structure of human life and community intended in the plan of creation” (Hasker, 2017, 74).

²⁸ My argument in this section is that the combination of Open Theism and (Reasons) does not help the theist defend (Asymmetry). As mentioned earlier, however, Hasker (1992) is sympathetic to the compatibility of a perfect God and gratuitous evil, and so sympathetic to the denial of (Reasons) anyway. I have no problem with that. Part of my overall point in this paper, as mentioned above as well, is that the seemingly absurd denial of (Reasons) might not look so bad to the theist once the unwelcomed consequences of accepting (Reasons) are made plain.

To embrace a deontological moral perspective is to hold that, at least sometimes, an action possesses what I am calling an intrinsic moral character, and that this intrinsic character overrides any consequentialist considerations which might be offered for or against performing the action. Thus, if an action is intrinsically immoral, it is immoral no matter how much good it does (or how much evil it eliminates).

This is a familiar Kantian suggestion. We have a duty not to perform certain *types* of action, irrespective of which other considerations we can adduce for performing it. Kant (1797) famously suggested that we have a duty not to lie, even when lying is required to prevent a murderer from finding and killing our friend, for “to be truthful (honest) in all declarations is therefore a sacred command of reason prescribing unconditionally, one not to be restricted by any conveniences” (8: 427). According to the explanation for the co-existence of God and evil that we are exploring, then, God’s preventing of the evil that we see would require the performance of an action of such a type: an intrinsically immoral action, an action He is unconditionally required to refrain from performing, no matter which other considerations He could adduce in its favor. Call this *the divine duty explanation*.

We can state this explanation more carefully in the following way:

Divine Duty (DD): For all actual instances of evil *e*, *the fact that God has a duty to allow e* gives God justifying reasons for allowing it: For all actual instances of evil *e*, God’s prevention of *e* requires the performance of an action of type *T*, and, by virtue of the intrinsic moral character of *T*, God has decisive agent-relative reasons not to perform it.²⁹

We are here miles away from Augustine’s picture of a God who is required to “bring forth good out of evil.” And not because God has no obligations whatsoever – as McCann (2012, 135) and Murphy (2017, ch. 5) suggest – but precisely because of the particular ones he has. God has a moral obligation to leave us alone, an obligation that supervenes on the intrinsic character of the action that He would have to otherwise perform. Since our interference with evil (presumably) doesn’t require some such action, we don’t have a similar obligation to permit evil. And since (DD) allows that many instances of evil, together with their permission, are pointless, we don’t even have consequentialist, agent-neutral reasons to allow it – or, more exactly, we are no longer in a position to be sure that we have such reasons in advance. In most cases, we very likely have decisive reasons to interfere.

As far as I can tell, (DD) could indeed support (Asymmetry). There is some victory in that. But it would do so at what seems to me an unbearable cost in plausibility. While the previous proposals fail most obviously at what I have called *phase 2* of responding to the problem of evil – they provide an adequate explanation of God’s possible justification for the evils that we see but one that is incompatible with

²⁹ Strictly speaking, Reitan (2014, 183) endorses a combined version of (DR) and (DD), each identifying sufficient conditions for justifying reasons which can act independently of one another. Given the problems already raised for (DR), I am treating (DD) separately.

(Asymmetry) – the present proposal instead fails most obviously at *phase 1* – it is compatible with (Asymmetry), but it does not provide an adequate explanation of God’s possible justification for the evils that we see. I will here highlight three commitments that seriously burden the acceptance of (DD).

First, accepting (DD) requires abandoning pretty much everything that has so far been suggested on behalf of God, in the face of evil, by theistic traditions. The evils in our world, it turns out, are not the means for soul-making in God’s eternal plan, or, at any rate, our soul-making is not what I have called a worthwhile greater good (a good that not only outweighs the evil it requires as a means but that thereby justifies its permission as well). What John Hick called the *Irenaean type of theodicy* must be entirely set to flames. Our free will, moreover, is also not a greater good, or, at any rate, not the worthwhile greater good that justifies the horrors of human history. What Hick called the *Augustinian type of theodicy*, culminating in Alvin Plantinga’s celebrated contemporary work, must be set ablaze as well. Even worse: even if soul-making and free will were the worthwhile greater goods that the Irenaean and the Augustinian traditions take them to be, it turns out that – contra Swinburne’s view – God has no right to pursue them anyway. If (DD) is true, in other words, almost every philosophical and theological effort against the problem of evil is nothing but a misguided cul-de-sac. Accepting (DD), therefore, requires substantial revisions in almost everyone’s philosophical theology.

Second, accepting (DD) requires accepting Kant’s claim that there are certain types of action that are simply forbidden, no matter what else can be said in favor of their performance on that particular occasion. This, I think, is more or less absurd. Just as the simplistic consequentialist suggestion that *any* surplus of overall value favoring *x* over *y* morally requires performing *x* instead of *y*, the simplistic deontological suggestion that *no* surplus of value could ever morally override some unconditional duty to perform *x* instead of *y* is too rigid to be a plausible moral fact. This is far from being a matter of favoring a consequentialist moral framework over a deontological framework. One can accept that deontological considerations cannot be *consequentialized* – that respecting or flaunting them cannot be counted as just one more of the consequences of my actions – and still be sensitive to the fact that these considerations are merely conditional constraints. Some consequences are just too irredeemable, some evils just too “horrendous” (cf. Adams, 1989, 299), for a concern about types of action to override their justified prevention. Accepting (DD), therefore, requires an unwavering commitment to a radical kind of Kantian absolutism.³⁰

Third, accepting (DD) requires accepting the particular application of Kant’s absolutism to this case. Why is it that God’s prevention of evil is a forbidden type of action, after all? Because, for all instances of evil *e*, God’s prevention of *e* (but not ours) violates a pair of duties. The first duty is what Reitan (2014, 196) calls the *principle of efficacious freedom*:

³⁰ Reitan offers his views as a deontological alternative to consequentialist thinking about the problem of evil. But Reitan (2014, 182) is mistaken in claiming that Swinburne’s view “is not going to be acceptable to deontologists about ethics.” Reitan’s views embody a particularly radical version of deontology, while Swinburne’s embody a perfectly acceptable modest version. One can resist consequentialist excesses without succumbing to deontological excesses as well.

(PEF) It is strictly morally impermissible to act towards human agents in such a way that they come to exist in a state in which they possess no efficacious freedom with respect to a range of human activity in which their capacities and the limitations of physical law would otherwise afford some measure of efficacious freedom.

The rationale behind (PEF) is that systematically preventing evil-causing free actions would require the constant surveillance of our behavior on the part of God in a way that violates our humanity and dignity.³¹ The second duty is what Reitan (2014, 197) calls the *non-arbitrariness principle*:

(NAP) It is morally impermissible to fail to treat like cases alike.

The problem, as Reitan sees it, is that (NAP) requires that, if God intervenes against one evil-causing free action, that he must intervene against them all, thus violating (PEF). So, together, (NAP) and (PEF) entail that God has a duty to not intervene at all. This duty, recall, is unconditional: it holds for God no matter what else can be said in favor of preventing evil in some particular occasion. This duty does not hold for us, of course, since our limitations do not make preventing every evil-causing free action a real possibility.

It is telling that Reitan (2014, 200) himself seems to waver in his estimation of these principles, calling them “hopefully plausible”. I myself am not at all moved to accept them, nor moved to accept the first two commitments outlined above. So while (DD) does seem to support (Asymmetry), I suggest that endorsing it comes at too high a cost. Only the most unwavering Kantian absolutist, armed with a surprisingly unorthodox philosophical theology, living in peace with controversial commitments about the conditions for true humanity, dignity, and moral behavior, can find solace in this Pyrrhic victory. That’s not for me.³²

Conclusion

I have examined four explanations of how God could have reasons for allowing evil, drawn from traditional theistic work on the problem of evil, of both consequentialist and deontological character, and I have argued that while the first three fail to support (Asymmetry), the fourth is simply too implausible to take on board – a kind of failure, no doubt, but failure of a different kind. My arguments against the first three, in particular, have consisted in a defense of three key claims:

³¹ Thus Reitan (2014, 195): “As soon as we start to imagine a dystopian police state in which the government has eliminated murder from society by making sure no one can carry it out, we begin to see why something like that [i.e. God’s constant surveillance] could reasonably be viewed as a violation of our humanity. Even for those not inclined to stray outside the established boundaries, the choice to stay within the boundaries is paternalistically taken out of their hands, such that it is no longer by their choice that they avoid such egregious crimes. That removal of choice may strike many of us as an affront to their dignity as persons.”

³² I recognize that some might be perfectly satisfied with (DD), these burdens notwithstanding. This is an opportunity for reasonable, perhaps merciful, disagreement.

- (a) If it is *the fact that e's occurrence is not pointless* that gives God justifying reasons for allowing every actual instance of evil, then that same fact (or our justified belief in that fact) gives us justifying reasons for allowing it too.
- (b) If it is *the fact that permitting e is not pointless* that gives God justifying reasons for allowing every actual instance of evil, then that same fact (or our justified belief in that fact) gives us justifying reasons for allowing it too.
- (c) If it is *the fact that God's permission of e is not wrongful* that gives God justifying reasons for allowing every actual instance of evil, then *the fact that someone with a right to sacrifice some wellbeing for greater goods has decided to do so* (or our justified belief in that fact) gives us justifying reasons for allowing it too.

I have argued that the most prominent theodicies and defenses in the problem of evil literature are committed to the antecedent of at least one of these three key claims, and that, partly due to what I have called *the combination argument*, are vulnerable to the truth of the consequent. As such, while they may explain how God could have reasons for allowing evil – either by themselves or in some combination – they do so by entailing that we have reasons for allowing all the evil that we see as well.³³

We are now back to the business of deciding what to do with *the symmetry argument*. Some, as I've mentioned above, might take this argument as enhancing the prospects of the recent theistic trend of denying (Reasons). What's so crazy, after all, about a theist denying (Reasons) if the alternative is accepting that we have justifying moral reasons for allowing every evil that we see? Others, as I've mentioned above as well, might think that the symmetry argument puts the theist between a rock and a hard place: it now seems hard to make sense of the existence of a perfect God *whether or not* (Reasons) is true. I lean towards the latter, but the result is interesting either way.

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³³ Once again, I do not want to feign completeness or conclusiveness of any kind here. In general, there is much more to be said and much more to be explored. (Here are two excellent and challenging examples: Pittard's (2018) decision-theoretic defense of responsibility theodicies and Mooney's (2019) sophisticated development of the deontological approach.) Alas, this paper is already too long as it is. One broad lesson for future work, however, is that attempts to identify the kinds of things that could potentially be God's justifying reasons for allowing evil must pay more careful attention to (a) what exactly is *the particular evil* in question, (b) what exactly is *the fact that justifies* God's permission of that particular evil, (c) what are the exact *logical, axiological, and normative* relations that ground that fact's justifying power, and (d) what view of *God's providential foreknowledge* is being assumed. My arguments in this paper have exploited the fact that not enough attention has been paid to all of these details in traditional discussions of the problem of evil.

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