

Is God's Benevolence Impartial?

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In this paper I consider the intuitive idea that God is fair and does not play favorites. This belief appears to be held by many theists. I will call it the *Principle of Impartial Benevolence* (PIB) and put it as follows: *As much as possible, for all persons, God equally promotes the good and equally prevents the bad.*¹ I begin with the conviction that there is a prima facie tension between PIB and the disparity of human suffering. My aim in what follows is to clarify this tension and show that it runs deep. More specifically, I will argue that PIB imposes stringent demands—including a patient-centered theodicy—on the sorts of reasons that would justify God in permitting suffering, and, that the historical disparity of suffering indicates that these demands are not met. I conclude that theists should disavow PIB or at least consider it *sub judice*.

I begin with a clarification of PIB. First, I am considering PIB within the framework of what William Rowe calls *restricted theism*, the view that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being (2004, p. 4). The view is restricted in that it doesn't include any *unique* claims made only by specific versions of theism. However, I take restricted theism to *include* the commitment to a paradisaical afterlife in which (at least some) humans enjoy supremely valuable goods. This inclusion is tacitly implied by most discussions of restricted theism and will be important in what follows.² Second, the principle's "as much as possible" qualifies its entire claim: it applies to God's promotion of good and prevention of bad states, as well as God's promotion of equal enjoyment or possibility of enjoyment of good states. Moreover, by "possible" I mean *broadly logically possible*, viz. what is possible within the constraints of both logical and metaphysical possibility (the latter may be determined by counterfactuals of human freedom). Third, by "promoting the good" I mean God's actually bringing about the good and/or making possible the bringing about of the good.³ God "prevents" the bad by preventing the actualization of bad states and/or permitting those bad states which God could prevent only by permitting some state equally bad or worse. Finally, I will assume that different kinds of good (and bad) states can be sufficiently commensurable to be "equal."

I will now describe how PIB relates to a widely accepted view concerning the necessary conditions for God's permission of evil. William Rowe articulates this view as follows: God would prevent the occurrence

of any evil He could, unless He could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse (1996, p. 3). Furthermore, Rowe explicates this with a tripartite, disjunctive necessary condition for God failing to prevent any evil: Where E is an 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 G such that G is obtainable by God only if God permits either E or some evil equally bad or worse, or (iii) E is such that it is preventable by God only if God permits some evil equally bad or worse. Simply put, for every E, God must have a sufficient reason for its permission, a reason constituted by the bringing about of a good (G) where E is necessary for G and G is sufficiently (outweighingly) great to justify the permission of E.

It is clear that there must be a sufficient reason for every E, but *to whom* must this reason pertain? *Who*, exactly, must enjoy G if the permission of E is to be justified? This ambiguity corresponds to a distinction between two different approaches to theodicy. To help clarify this distinction, it will be useful to introduce and adopt some terminology. In what follows, locutions of the form “E_s” refer to a case in which person S suffers bad state E. Locutions of the form “G-for-E_s” refer to the good which justifies God’s permission of E_s (and, thus, for which E_s was necessary). Notice that it is an open question as to whether or not S *herself* enjoys G-for-E_s. Indeed, leaving this question open allows us to distinguish between two forms of theodicy.

On the one hand, according to a *patient-centered theodicy*, the person who suffers must *herself* enjoy the good that is sufficiently great to justify the permission of her suffering and for which her suffering is necessary.⁴ That is, where E_s is a case of person S suffering evil E, S must herself enjoy the G-for-E_s. On the other hand, according to a *non-patient-centered theodicy*, the person (or persons) who enjoys the good that justifies God’s permission of suffering needn’t be the one who suffers. That is, where E_s is a case of person S suffering evil E, some person(s), but not necessarily S, must enjoy the G-for-E_s.

In this way, a patient-centered theodicy puts a more stringent demand on the sorts of reasons that would justify God in permitting suffering. It should be clear, however, that PIB requires patient-centered justification for suffering, and thereby requires a more demanding theodicy. On PIB, God cannot promote the good of one person at the ultimate (all things considered) expense of another. If there is only a non-patient-centered justification for E_s, then God has either (i) promoted the good of someone other than S at the ultimate expense of S, or (ii) prevented the bad of someone other than S at the ultimate expense of S. Unsatisfied in either

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case, PIB thus requires a patient-centered justification for every instance of evil. Accordingly, on PIB, where E_S is a case of person S suffering evil E, S must herself enjoy the G-for- E_S .⁵

With the foregoing clarifications in place, I will now argue that PIB is hard to square with actual cases of suffering. I'll begin with a rough sketch of the argument and then present it in terms of a dilemma.

Here is a sketch of the problem. If theism is true, then it seems not only possible, but entirely likely that there are pairs of persons who, relative to each other, suffer greatly different amounts of evil and, yet, ultimately enjoy more or less the same amount of supremely worthwhile heavenly goods. But, since both persons ultimately enjoy the same kinds of goods, it is difficult to see why the one person's great(er) suffering was *necessary* for her enjoyment of those goods. Thus, if there *are* goods that are sufficiently great to justify her suffering and for which her suffering was necessary, those goods would have to be something other than (or in addition to) the goods she herself enjoys. That is, her suffering would *not* be justified merely in virtue of the fact that it brought about *her* enjoyment of certain goods. Although such a case seems entirely realistic, it does not meet PIB's demand for a patient-centered theodicy.

The problem can be put more precisely in terms of a dilemma stemming from the disparity of suffering between two fictional persons—Felicity and Dole—who, if theism is true, surely could have had historical counterparts. Dole suffers the Holocaust, spending many months in Auschwitz and ultimately dying at middle age in one of Mengele's cruel experiments. Felicity never suffers anything close to the Holocaust. In fact, she lives a largely secluded and comfortable life, and dies in her sleep at a ripe old age. Both Dole and Felicity go to heaven. As a provisional statement, the dilemma here is this: If PIB is true, then either (i) Dole's suffering the Holocaust was necessary to bring about some good G for Dole, a good which Felicity never enjoys—in which case God has ultimately promoted more good for Dole, or (ii) Felicity enjoys G by a means requiring less suffering—in which case God has prevented more bad for Felicity. To discuss this case, I will adopt the following abbreviations:

- " H_{Dole} " is an instance of " E_S " and represents *Dole's suffering the holocaust in the ways described above*.
- " $G\text{-for-}H_{Dole}$ " is an instance of " $G\text{-for-}E_S$ " and represents the greater good which justifies God's permission of H_{Dole} and for which H_{Dole} was necessary.⁶

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Given their respective careers, at the end of their earthly lives, Dole will have suffered more than Felicity. Thus, H_{Dole} (partly) constitutes the historical disparity between their sufferings.

As we've seen, on PIB, God must have a patient-centered justification for H_{Dole} and—as much as possible—equally promote the good and equally prevent the bad of Dole and Felicity. Thus, given the requirement of a patient-centered theodicy, if H_{Dole} (Dole suffers the Holocaust), then Dole enjoys G-for- H_{Dole} and H_{Dole} was a necessary condition for Dole's enjoyment of G-for- H_{Dole} . Because Dole died during the Holocaust, we may assume that it is only in heaven that Dole enjoys G-for- H_{Dole} . Felicity, however, did not suffer much at all, much less anything like the Holocaust; she ultimately suffers much less than Dole. This leaves us with three options concerning the heavenly goods enjoyed by Felicity:

- (A) Felicity enjoys G^* , a good of exactly the same type as G-for- H_{Dole} .
- (B) Felicity enjoys $G^=$, a good whose value is equal to or greater than the value of G-for- H_{Dole} .
- (C) Felicity enjoys neither G^* nor $G^=$.

In what follows, I will argue that none of these options sits well with PIB. In fact, they vex PIB with the following dilemma: Either *there is no patient-centered justification for H_{Dole}* or *God has not equally promoted the good for Dole and Felicity*.

Options (A) and (B) each entail the first horn of the dilemma, that no patient-centered justification is available for H_{Dole} . Concerning this horn, I will argue, first, that (A) is implausible, but, implausibility notwithstanding, if (A) obtains, then no patient-centered justification obtains for H_{Dole} . Second, I will argue that while (B) is more plausible than (A), it also implies that no patient-centered justification obtains for H_{Dole} . Finally, I will argue that (C) entails a second horn, namely, that God has done less than was possible to promote equally the good of Dole and Felicity.

On (A), Felicity's suffering the holocaust is not necessary for Felicity to enjoy a G^* , a good of exactly the same type as G-for- H_{Dole} . Trivially, G-for- H_{Dole} is a G^* . Thus, while suffering the Holocaust is necessary for *Dole* to enjoy a G^* , it is not necessary for *Felicity* to enjoy a G^* . In this case, because Dole and Felicity both enjoy a G^* , they both enjoy a token of the same type of good. But the fact that these goods are tokens of the same type would seem to require that they obtain under at least roughly similar conditions. In other words, it seems that for a G^* to obtain, it

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would require conditions sufficiently similar to those involved in suffering the holocaust. But, since Felicity did not suffer anything like the Holocaust, it seems dubious that she could enjoy a G*. Given that suffering the Holocaust was *necessary* condition for Dole to enjoy a G*, how *could* Felicity enjoy a G*?

Second, even supposing that (A) is possible, Felicity's enjoying a G* would suggest that H_{Dole} was not necessary for Dole to enjoy G-for- H_{Dole} . If Felicity can enjoy a G* without suffering anything like the Holocaust, then it is difficult to see why Dole couldn't have enjoyed G-for- H_{Dole} (a G*) without his suffering the Holocaust. In sum, if (A) obtains on PIB, then it must be the case that while it was possible for God to bring about Felicity's enjoyment of a G* without $H_{Felicity}$, it was not possible for God to bring about Dole's enjoyment of a G* without H_{Dole} . However, if God could bring about Felicity's enjoyment of a G* without $H_{Felicity}$, why could he not do so for Dole?

In reply, a defender of PIB might appeal to Dole's character, Dole's historical context, or counterfactuals of freedom true for Dole. A defender of PIB could claim that the character of Dole was such that H_{Dole} was necessary for Dole to enjoy a G*. In this case, however, the fact that Dole had such a character must not be up to God, otherwise, it would have been possible for God to create Dole with a character which did not require H_{Dole} for Dole to enjoy a G*. Rather, the relevant fact about Dole's character must be something which is determined either by Dole's context or by Dole himself. Consider the former case, where H_{Dole} is necessary for Dole's enjoyment of a G* in virtue of Dole having a certain sort of character, where this aspect of his character resulted from factors out of Dole's control (e.g., Dole's historical context). Here it would seem that H_{Dole} is not necessary merely for Dole's enjoyment of a G*, but for the actualization of a complex good including both (i) the good of Dole's enjoyment of a G* and (ii) the good of God's maintaining a general policy of non-intervention concerning human character development. However, the supposition that H_{Dole} is necessary for the actualization of the latter (complex) good is consistent with it *not* being the case that H_{Dole} is necessary for Dole's enjoyment of a G*. In effect, in this case the justifying reason for H_{Dole} is not a patient-centered reason but a non-patient centered reason, and thus H_{Dole} is not necessary for Dole's enjoyment of a G*. But since G-for- H_{Dole} is (trivially) a G*, H_{Dole} is not necessary for G-for- H_{Dole} and the demands of a patient-centered theodicy are not met.

Consider the alternative case, in which, due to factors under Dole's (free) control, H_{Dole} is necessary for Dole's enjoyment of a G*. Here, it must be the case that there were no other possible worlds God could have

actualized in which Dole's counterfactuals are such that Dole could freely develop a character which did not require H_{Dole} to bring about Dole's enjoyment of a G^* .⁷ This does not seem plausible.

The case against (A) may be summarized as follows. First, (A) strains credulity. Because suffering the Holocaust is necessary for Dole's enjoyment of a G^* , it seems dubious that Felicity, having not suffering anything like the Holocaust, could enjoy a G^* . Second, if Felicity *does* enjoy a G^* , then there would appear to be no patient-centered justification for H_{Dole} .

I'll now consider the second option, (B), on which Felicity enjoys a good, $G=$, which is of a different kind but at least equal in value to $G\text{-for-}H_{Dole}$ (the good for which H_{Dole} is necessary and which is sufficiently great to justify God's permission of H_{Dole}). Here, Felicity enjoys $G=$ even though she does not suffer the Holocaust. Thus, suffering the Holocaust is not necessary for the enjoyment of $G=$. That is, a person's suffering the Holocaust is not necessary for her enjoyment of a good at least equal in value to $G\text{-for-}H_{Dole}$. Thus, it would seem that *Dole's* suffering the Holocaust is not necessary for Dole's enjoyment of a good at least equal in value to $G\text{-for-}H_{Dole}$. However, on PIB, faced with the choice between two different but equally valuable goods, it seems that God would actualize the good whose necessary conditions involve the least amount of bad states. We may state this as a general principle. Where E is some evil and G_1 and G_2 are two equally valuable but different kinds of goods: If (i) S 's suffering E *isn't* necessary for S 's enjoyment of G_1 and S 's suffering E *is* necessary for S 's enjoyment of G_2 , then (ii) the bringing about of S 's enjoyment of G_2 would not be sufficient to justify S 's suffering E . That is, if God permitted S to suffer E , then God's justification would have to involve goods other than (and/or in addition to) S 's enjoyment of G_2 . The bearing of this result is as follows. As we've seen, under option (B), H_{Dole} *isn't* necessary for Dole's enjoyment of $G=$, though H_{Dole} *is* necessary for Dole's enjoyment of $G\text{-for-}H_{Dole}$. Thus, the bringing about of *Dole's* enjoyment of $G\text{-for-}H_{Dole}$ is *by itself* not sufficient to justify God's permitting H_{Dole} . Rather, God's permitting H_{Dole} must be justified in terms of goods other than (or in addition to) Dole's enjoyment of $G\text{-for-}H_{Dole}$. It must be that H_{Dole} is justified in virtue of it bringing about a good that is enjoyed by persons other than (or in addition to) Dole. In other words, on (B), there is no patient-centered justification for H_{Dole} .

Thus, on the first horn of the dilemma—on (A) or (B)—God's justification for permitting H_{Dole} is not patient-centered. The first horn is thereby at odds with PIB.

The second horn of the dilemma is entailed by our last option, (C), on which Felicity enjoys neither a G^* nor a $G=$. For (C) to contradict PIB,

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it must have been *possible* for God to bring about Felicity's enjoyment of either a G^* or a G^- , either by bringing it about that Felicity suffers something like the Holocaust (as the necessary condition for the enjoyment of a G^*) or by bringing about the necessary condition(s) for Felicity to enjoy a G^- . But both seem like real possibilities for God. It would seem that God would have the desire and means available to bring about Felicity's enjoyment of goods at least equal in value to those enjoyed by Dole, especially since it was not Felicity's fault that she failed to satisfy the necessary condition for enjoying a G^* . It would seem, then, that on (C), God has done less than was possible to promote equally the good of Dole and Felicity.

In conclusion, on either (A), (B), or (C), though it was possible for God to do so, God has not equally promoted the overall good and equally prevented the overall bad of Dole and Felicity. However, if theism is true, then it seems not only possible, but entirely likely that there be historical counterparts to Dole and Felicity. It seems, then, that PIB is untenable. If possible, theism should do without it.⁸

Notes

¹ Richard Swinburne seems to express PIB when he notes emphatically: "it must be the case that the perfectly good agent does all else that he can (compatible with allowing no further bad state to occur) to bring about the good" (1998, p. 12). Since it is a second-order good for persons to have an equal enjoyment of the good and/or an equal opportunity to enjoy the good, we may plausibly infer from Swinburne's claim that it must be the case that God does all that He can to promote equal enjoyment or equal opportunity for enjoyment of the good.

² It is tacitly implied in the following way. Restricted theism is typically discussed within the context of the problem of evil. In this context, a central question concerns whether God's permission of evil can be justified in terms of (sufficiently) outweighingly great goods for which such evil is necessary. To many, however, it seems extremely implausible that pre-paradisical goods are of a value and quantity to outweigh the enormity of suffering. The words of C. S. Lewis (2001, p. 148) are representative: "...a book on suffering which says nothing of heaven, is leaving out almost the whole of one side of the account. Scripture and tradition habitually put the joys of heaven into the scale against the sufferings of earth, and no solution of the problem of pain which does not do so can be called a Christian one." Thus, because "restricted theism" is supposed to represent general theistic resources for answering the problem of evil, we may take it to include the affirmation of a paradisaical afterlife in which humans enjoy supremely valuable goods.

³ An example of the former case would be God's rewarding a person with blissful immortality, and an example of the latter would be God's endowing a person with libertarian freedom concerning morally significant choices.

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⁴ Both before and during the conference, Randall Auxier (this paper's commentator) and I discussed his question of *who I am arguing against*. In discussion, I realized that in the (original) paper I neglected to mention Eleonore Stump, who holds to a patient-centered theodicy (see esp. her (1985)). Auxier agreed that this clarification helped.

⁵ William Alston (1996, p. 111) seems to imply a patient-centered requirement: God may have "as part of His reason for permitting a given case of suffering that it contributes to results that extend beyond the sufferer. So long as the sufferer is *amply taken care of*, I can't see that this violates any demands of divine justice, compassion, or love" (my emphasis). While the requirement for a patient-centered justification may not be necessarily predicated on PIB, it is doubtful that a motive for the requirement would be significantly different from PIB.

⁶ Recall that it is an open question as to whether or not Dole enjoys G-for-H_{Dole}.

⁷ Assuming, not uncontroversially, that counterfactuals of freedom have truth-value and that God has knowledge of such truth-values.

⁸ I leave for another day the question of whether or not the denial of PIB—the denial of *impartial* benevolence—is compatible with an affirmation of divine *omni*-benevolence.

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