

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 9 | Issue 3

Article 2

7-1-1992

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Thomas F. Tracy

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Recommended Citation

Tracy, Thomas F. (1992) "Victimization and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Ivan Karamazov," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol9/iss3/2>

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VICTIMIZATION AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL: A RESPONSE TO IVAN KARAMAZOV

Thomas F. Tracy

Ivan Karamazov raises a powerful moral objection to defenses of God's goodness that sanction the sacrifice of the innocent to secure a general good. This anti-consequentialist critique has considerable force against some of the most familiar responses to the problem of evil, notably Plantinga's free will defense. In this paper I examine Ivan's objection and consider several lines of argument in reply. I contend that there are conditions under which it is morally permissible, even on deontological grounds, for God to create a world in which persons sometimes suffer as victims of natural or moral evils.

Imagine that it is you yourself who are erecting the edifice of human destiny with the aim of making men happy in the end, of giving them peace and contentment at last, but that to do that it is absolutely necessary, and indeed quite inevitable, to torture to death only one tiny creature . . . , would you consent to be the architect on those conditions?¹

1. *Ivan's Objection: The Sacrifice of the Innocent*

In a famous chapter from *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan's voices a powerful moral objection to defenses of God's goodness that appeal strictly to the overall balance of good and evil in the world. Ivan's bitter speech to Alyosha recounts a series of arresting and vivid stories about the suffering of children at the hands of malicious adults, and within this context he presses his distinctive challenge to his brother's Christianity: can any morally sensitive person, any lover of humanity, embrace the view that these sufferings are to be accepted as part of the price paid for some good end? Ivan's speech is calculated to evoke in Alyosha and in us the moral intuition that *no* end is worth having at this price, not even an "eternal harmony." More precisely, though the good eventually attained may outweigh in value all the evils suffered in attaining it, the wrong done to these innocents remains a morally decisive indictment of the entire process.

In considering this challenge, it is important to note at the outset two ambiguities in Ivan's passionate statement of the problem. First, it is not clear whether Ivan thinks that the suffering and death of the innocent is a) a *means* to the achievement of the eternal harmony, or b) something that must necessarily be *permitted* if the eternal harmony is to be realized. The differences



between these alternatives should not be obscured, since free will defenses trade upon this distinction. In either case, however, Ivan will press his objection; indeed, his rebellion seems to be motivated in part by the thought that these children are victims not only of their human tormentors, but also of the god who turns those tormentors loose to vent their vicious wills upon such easy prey. Second, it is not clear whether Ivan imagines that the children he describes will themselves participate in the eternal harmony made possible in part by their suffering. He suggests at one point that a child who was mauled to death by dogs, the child's mother, and the general who vengefully set his hunting dogs upon the child might embrace in a universal reconciliation of each person with every other and all with God's justice.² In this case, the sufferer shares in the good for the sake of which such suffering was permitted (and this good is constituted in part in response to this evil). Even under these circumstances Ivan would repudiate this higher harmony on the grounds that it is purchased at a morally unacceptable price in innocent suffering. But, as we will see, the moral logic of this situation differs significantly from one in which innocent lives are simply expended along the way to a good that is enjoyed by others.

Ivan's moral challenge to defenders of God's goodness takes precisely the form of one standard objection to utilitarianism. If we determine the morally right course of action by calculating which of the options before us will generate the greatest good for the greatest number, it looks as though we will justify actions that harm individuals or groups in order to secure broadly distributed benefits for others, and this (the objector contends) is a morally unacceptable result. I will return below to questions about the moral assessment of actions that sacrifice the interests of some for the good of many. I want first to note just how powerfully Ivan's objection can be deployed against familiar defenses of God's goodness that appeal to human freedom.

2. *The Free Will Defense*

We can take as our model Alvin Plantinga's elegantly developed version of the free will defense.³ The task of Plantinga's defense is to respond to the problem of evil in its *logical* form, i.e., to the claim that the propositions

(1) God is omniscient, omnipotent, and wholly good

and

(2) There is evil in the world

cannot both be true. In order to show that these propositions are logically consistent, one must formulate some proposition *R* stating a reason for God's permission of evil, and *R* must a) be logically possible, b) be consistent with (1), and c) entail (2) either by itself or jointly with (1). The first of these

conditions makes clear the limited goals of a defense; the defender does not claim that *R* is God's reason for permitting evil, but only that it could be. The second condition also significantly limits the commitments of a defense. *R* must be consistent with God's perfect goodness, i.e., there must be a possible world in which *R* is true and God is perfectly good. But this requirement can be met even if *R* does not state morally sufficient conditions for creating a world that contains evil; it may be that certain additional conditions must be satisfied, beyond those explicitly stated in *R*. As Plantinga has pointed out, a free will defense need not spell out these conditions.⁴ The defense will succeed, however, only if it is clear that there is at least one world *W* such that a) a perfectly good being would be morally justified in creating *W* and b) *W* satisfies *R*. This may not, in fact, be clear. Indeed, if the defense is to relevant to the *actual* world, then a case must be made not only that *R* is possibly true, but also that ours is a world that God could be morally justified in creating. And this is precisely what Ivan contests.

Abstracted from the machinery of his argument, Plantinga's proposal for *R* can be stated in the following way.

- R*: 1) the existence of morally free creatures who perform morally good actions is an intrinsic good, and
- 2) God actualizes a world such that:
- a) *W* contains morally free creatures who freely do moral evil;
 - b) There is a net balance of moral good over moral evil in *W*;
 - c) It is not within God's power to actualize a world that contains as much moral good and less moral evil than that found in *W*;
 - d) All the evils in *W* are moral evils brought about by the free choices of creaturely moral agents.

The first clause in *R* identifies the good for the sake of which evil is permitted; namely, that there be creatures with incompatibilist freedom who perform morally good actions.⁵ The second clause then specifies a set of logically possible conditions under which God might, for the sake of this good, create a world containing evil. The third sub-condition, (c), reflects Plantinga's response to the objection (from Mackie and others) that God ought to actualize a world in which free creatures never choose to do moral evil or, at least, in which the balance of moral good and evil is more favorable. Plantinga argues that although there are possible worlds with a better balance of moral good over moral evil than that found in *W*, it is possible that an omniscient and omnipotent being cannot create any of them.⁶ The fourth condition addresses the problem of natural evil. Plantinga suggests that it is enough, for the purposes of a defense, to say that natural evils result from the malicious actions of non-human free creatures—we can attribute it all to the nefarious activity of Satan, Beelzebub, Moloch, Mammon, and associates.⁷

Plantinga devotes most of his attention to showing that (c) is compatible with God's omniscience and omnipotence, and he says notably little about the consistency of *R* with God's goodness. Having initially argued for the consistency of (1) with the existence of *some* evil, Plantinga goes on, in constructing condition (c), to extend his argument to accommodate the *amount* of evil (whatever it may be) found in the actual world. But this strategy of argument cannot provide an answer to Ivan's objection. For Ivan would insist that there are morally relevant features of the world God creates other than the total amount of moral good and evil within it. A world might achieve this overall good in a way that is morally problematic. If the good can be won only by permitting the sacrifice of the innocent against their wills, then Ivan will insist that this good ought not to be pursued.

The force of this objection is heightened by the limited range of goods that Plantinga invokes in the first clause of *R*. Plantinga refers only to the immanent goods of moral life. But when the wrong choices of adults bring misery and death to children, it certainly appears that these children do not share to any significant degree in the good for the sake of which they are permitted to suffer. Rather, they become the victims of other persons' moral freedom before they have the opportunity to enter very fully into moral life themselves, and so their interests are sacrificed for a good that is achieved by and for others.

This objection arises even more pointedly for Plantinga's appeal to angelic free choices in accounting for natural evils. Suppose we grant that a world which includes free angels who fall is better overall than a world that does not. Because these superhuman beings possess enormous power, they can inflict upon God's vulnerable human children miseries of deprivation, disease, and injury that exceed even the human moral evils Ivan recounts. Clearly, the good of *angelic* moral life is purchased at an enormous price in *human* misery.

3. Natural Suffering Without Satan

We might hope to ease the problem of victimization by giving an account of natural evils that leaves Satan and friends out of the account. Consider, for example, the following suggestion:

- (d') *W* contains no gratuitous evils, i.e., no evils that God can eliminate without thereby producing an equal or greater evil or eliminating a greater good.

Gratuitous evils can be properly eliminated by God.⁸ Elimination of a non-gratuitous evil, however, would either be pointless (if it results in the substitution of equivalently great evil) or counter-productive. The gratuitousness of evils is determined relative to the good God seeks for creatures. Given Plantinga's appeal (in *R*) to the good of moral freedom and moral life, (d')

specifies that God will eliminate i) evils the absence of which will improve the balance of moral good and moral evil in *W*, and ii) evils that are not linked to the generation of moral goods and moral evils.⁹

Note three further features of this condition. First, it does not rule out the possibility that *W* might contain any number of evils the elimination of which *would* result in a better balance of moral good and moral evil in *W*. It denies only that these evils could advantageously be eliminated *by God* rather than by creatures (e.g., through creatures' free choices that blunt the effects of certain natural or moral evils). Second, this exclusion of gratuitous evils does not rule out all "dysteleological evils," i.e., evils that are neither necessary for nor the best means to God's ends. Many moral evils may be dysteleological in this sense, but not gratuitous. For the good God intends could be achieved without the occurrence of these moral evils, but not without permitting the choices that generate them. Third, to deny that an evil is gratuitous is not to say that God has a reason for permitting this *specific* evil to occur. It may be, for example, that *some* member(s) of a class of evils must be permitted, but that there is no reason why *this* member of the class is permitted; e.g., there may simply be no reason why God permits this or that particular natural evil.

This formulation of the fourth conditions suggests that we think of natural suffering (or the liability to such suffering) as a logically necessary condition for moral life.¹⁰ There are at least two ways in which this claim is commonly defended, and both raise the problem of victimization. First, we might contend that one of the logically necessary conditions for the exercise by creatures of a capacity to act intentionally and to learn from experience is that they be located in a relatively stable and consistent environment. But if there are uniformly operating laws of nature, then we are bound to find that those laws and our interests sometimes collide: the winter wind cannot be a both our backs when we walk in opposite directions. Second, we might argue that natural misfortune and suffering are among the necessary conditions for human responses of mutual support, compassion, courage, fortitude, and so on. If each person were always to receive from nature exactly what she needed, there would be no occasion to concern ourselves with one another's well-being and to act out of compassion or generosity or self-sacrificial regard for the other's need. Only if persons are sometimes wounded by the world can we develop a rich range of moral dispositions and practices.

The problem of victimization arises for these arguments insofar as some individuals suffer disproportionately while sharing very little in the goods made possible by the natural world, e.g., as when a child is born to a short and painful life with severe physical and mental impairments. The first argument contends that the possibility of such evils is necessarily built into a natural order that makes possible the benefits of moral freedom for the rest

of humanity. Natural evil, here, is not a *means* by which God seeks the good for human beings but rather is an inevitable result of establishing the structures necessary to achieve that good. However, in contrast to positions that explain natural evil as arising from moral evil, it is not possible on this account to say simply that God *permits* these evils. Rather, God will be the (or a) *cause* of natural evil, for God establishes the natural order in which human lives are lived, and within that order it is inevitable that we suffer and die. It is also true, of course, that our free actions (wittingly and unwittingly) affect the frequency, duration, and intensity of our suffering. But this cannot be a factor in considering the child who dies after a short and miserable life; here the sufferer neither contributes to bringing about his own suffering nor shares significantly in the higher good for the sake of which that suffering is permitted.

According to the second argument, natural evils *do* serve as a means to the development of certain aspects of moral life, e.g., courage in the sufferer and compassionate action in the witness. Human suffering, of course, is morally destructive as well as creative, and there seems to be no guarantee that any particular instance of natural evil will generate counter-balancing moral goods either for the sufferer or for others. This is at least in part because the emergence of these traits of moral character depends upon persons' free responses to their own and others' suffering. The problem of victimization arises, however, when it is impossible or unreasonable to expect that an individual's suffering could contribute to a proportionate good for that individual; in such a case, the individual's anguish serves at most as a means to the moral growth of others.

It is worth noting an additional feature of the second argument, viz., it appears to entail that natural evils cannot be distributed according to any morally meaningful principle that *we* can formulate. Suppose, for example, that natural evils were distributed according to a principle of retributive justice and that we knew how this principle worked, e.g., we knew that cheating on your income tax was followed by some physical affliction that would abate as soon as you recognized the error of your ways and made amends (with interest and penalties). In such a world, each person would receive exactly the suffering he deserves, he would have the power to bring that suffering to an end, and he would suffer for his own good (insofar as his miseries direct him back to right behavior). It certainly appears that at least some traits of moral character either could not emerge or would be differently valued in this disciplinarian universe. This would be true of most of the dispositions associated with acting to relieve the suffering of others.¹¹ In fact, to act in this way could have a bad effect on the sufferer's character and on your own, for you would be siding with him in his moral intransigence (and you might well incur some penalty yourself). Efforts to ease his pain would, in any case, be bound to fail; the sufferer would be the only one who could

address the source of his suffering. Further, it appears that Kantian moral goodness (willing the good for its own sake) would be very difficult to achieve in a world that so conscientiously provides external inducements. But we need not pursue this thought experiment further in order to see where it leads, *viz.*, to the conclusion that there must be *undeserved suffering* if certain moral goods are to be realized. This point is helpful in responding to an important objection to God's goodness in the governance of our world—but it clearly reinforces the problem of victimization.

In sum, whichever of the strategies (d) or (d') we take up in responding to natural suffering, the problem of victimization arises, just as it does in defending God's permission of human moral freedom. Indeed, Ivan's challenge is bound to arise as long as we formulate the moral justification for God's permission or production of evils exclusively in terms of the overall level and balance of intrinsic goods and evils realized in the world as a whole. For this overlooks the putative moral wrong done to individuals whose lives are diminished and destroyed in the process of generating this general good. Ivan insists that a world which contains evils of the kind he recounts cannot be one that a morally perfect being would create, and this will be true even if the world satisfies all the conditions in *R*. As we noted, Plantinga need not claim that *R* is morally sufficient as it stands. But in its present form, *R* explicitly includes only consequentialist considerations. Anyone who is troubled by deontological objections to consequentialism has reason to take Ivan's objection seriously and to conclude that this formulation of the free will defense falls short of establishing the consistency of evil and God's goodness, however clever it may be in handling God's omniscience and omnipotence.

4. *Suffering For Your Own Good*

In responding to Ivan, two general strategies are available. We can grant the moral aptness of his objection and try to formulate a defense that meets it. Or we can challenge the moral soundness of his objection. I want to begin by briefly considering a recent proposal that pursues the first strategy.

In an intriguing essay on the problem of evil, Eleonore Stump contends that it is morally permissible for God to allow a person to suffer involuntarily only if that suffering is for the person's own good.

I am trying to avoid constructing the sort of explanation for evil which requires telling the sufferer that God lets him suffer just for the sake of some abstract general good for mankind. . . . It seems to me . . . that a perfectly good entity who was also omniscient and omnipotent must govern the evil resulting from the misuse of [creaturely] freedom in such a way that the sufferings of any particular person are outweighed by the good which the suffering produces *for that person*.¹²

In order to explain how this condition could be met, Stump suggests that the suffering that results from natural and moral evils has a pedagogical purpose; it is permitted or brought about by God in order "to make men recognize their own evils, become dissatisfied with things of this world, and turn to God."¹³ This is necessary because human beings have fallen into sin and now suffer from a defect in free will which inclines us toward evil. On Stump's account, then, God permits or causes each particular instance of suffering from natural and moral evils because that is the *best means* under the circumstances to induce this individual to turn to God for help in repairing her will.

This position generates the result that every individual receives just the suffering she *needs*. This should be distinguished from saying that each individual *deserves* to suffer as she does; Stump does not hold that all suffering is retributive, though some may be. But it is true on her view that God practices the pedagogy of pain on a grand scale. God so arranges the world that each act of moral evil or each instance of natural misfortune brings suffering to those persons who can best be helped toward repentance in just this way.¹⁴ A person may not in fact learn anything from some instance of suffering, but this hardship or loss was given to this person because it offered the best prospect of teaching her what she most needs to know, viz., that the very ground of all her choices is distorted and that she cannot remedy this situation on her own. On this account, therefore, no one becomes a victim of evil in the sense that troubled Ivan, i.e., no one undergoes suffering that she would have been better off without.

Stump is well aware that her position invites a flurry of criticism, and she puts it forward "with considerable diffidence."¹⁵ Objections are bound to be triggered, first, by the stunning counter-intuitiveness of suggesting that the interests of, e.g., the children in Ivan's story are best served by being beaten to death or torn apart by the dogs, and second, by theological puzzlement over the claim that a God of perfect goodness, power, and knowledge should rely so heavily on so harsh a pedagogy of pain. Perhaps these initial intuitions can be disarmed and other similar objections be answered. But for the purposes of my argument the important point concerns the moral principle that lies at the root of her position. Stump arrives at this view, in part, because she takes so seriously the kind of objection Ivan raises to standard approaches to the problem of evil. Ivan insists (though not in quite these words) that we must not turn God into a utilitarian. Stump agrees, and sets out to devise a theodicy in which no one's suffering is explained exclusively in terms of the general conditions (e.g., human freedom, the natural order) that make certain goods available in the world. But this means that each instance of suffering must be explained and justified by reference to its role in fostering that individual's own good. And so we arrive at the conclusion that each person suffers to further the cause of her own salvation.

None of this need be said if Ivan's objection can be rebutted rather than adopted. It is to that task that I now turn.

5. Answering Ivan

The second strategy of response, which challenges the moral underpinnings of Ivan's objection, can itself take at least two forms. First, over against Ivan's typically deontological critique, we might offer a consequentialist reply which would claim that the free will defense as expressed by *R* is morally sufficient as it stands. The fundamental effort here must be to undercut deontological objections to sacrificing the interests of some persons in order to secure a better overall state of affairs.¹⁶ The theological consequentialist benefits from the fact that this familiar dispute in normative ethics is modified in important ways when the agent in question is God. Unlike human beings, God can carry out the consequentialist program perfectly, infallibly making all of the necessary judgments about relative goods and evils and about the total outcomes of every alternative action. Furthermore, the choice that is under consideration in this case is unique to God alone; it is the choice of which possible world to actualize. Given the terms of the free will defense, the alternatives among which God chooses are structured in a highly unusual way. Conditions (c) and (d) or (d') entail that God can avoid permitting persons to suffer as victims of evil only by not actualizing free creatures at all. The good, which must be weighed against the evil of sacrificing the interests of some individuals, is not just an incremental benefit to certain other persons. Rather, it includes the good of finite personal existence itself, the condition for enjoying any good or suffering any evil whatsoever. It may be difficult to know how to assess the relative moral status of these peculiarly constituted alternatives. But it is at least not obvious that Ivan's objection constitutes a sufficient moral reason under these circumstances not to create finite free persons at all.

Rather than developing a consequentialist reply of this sort, however, I want to pursue a second line of response that addresses Ivan's concerns more directly. If we remain unconvinced by purely consequentialist moral reasoning, we can grant that the pursuit of the general good must be limited by principles of regard for individual persons, but then argue that *even on deontological grounds* it is justifiable for God to permit creatures to suffer some sacrifice of their individual interests for the sake of the common good. This approach acknowledges that *R* is not morally sufficient as it stands, but argues that it can be made sufficient with appropriate additions.

What would these additions be? One of the characteristic marks of deontological moral theories is their insistence upon what Samuel Scheffler has called "agent-centered restrictions."¹⁷ Agent-centered restrictions place limits on how we may treat individuals in promoting the good of all; specifically,

they stipulate that it is at least sometimes morally impermissible to perform some action *A* (e.g., harming an innocent person) even if circumstances arise in which doing *A* will secure a greater overall good or avoid a greater overall evil. For the deontologist, these principles of regard for persons take precedence over concern to maximize the good, impersonally considered. Ivan's objections, then, can be understood as claiming that there are morally binding agent-centered restrictions that God violates by permitting persons to suffer as victims of natural and moral evils. If we are to answer Ivan on his own terms, we need to ask what these restrictions might be and whether they are stringent enough to warrant Ivan's judgment against God's moral goodness.¹⁸

If God is to actualize a world containing free creatures, then (given the conditions Plantinga describes in *R*) God must permit at least some persons to suffer as victims of natural and moral evils. Does actualizing these persons violate any agent-centered restriction? It would be odd (at the very least) to claim that merely logically possible creatures possess actual rights, e.g., a right either to be or not to be made actual. But it does make sense to ask what moral claims a creature makes once it (and its world) has been created by God, and these claims might include certain counterfactuals, e.g., not to have been actualized with such awful prospects in so brutal a world. Perhaps, then, God's choice among possible worlds must be guided by the following agent-centered restriction:

- (r1) God must not actualize a world that contains persons whose lives, through no fault of their own, are on balance an evil (i.e., an intrinsic disvalue) for them rather than a good.

Formulating this restriction poses some problems,¹⁹ but for our immediate purposes this simple statement of it should be sufficient to indicate the principle at work. God will not bring into being persons who are so profoundly and permanently victimized by others' moral wrongdoing or by nature's hardships that it would have been better for them never to have existed at all. Given the good of existing as a free moral agent, a considerable level of undeserved suffering might occur in a life that is nonetheless well worth living. But if a person's life were so "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" that she had insufficient opportunity to share in the goods made possible by moral freedom, then her very existence would be an indictment of God's goodness—she would have grounds for the moral equivalent of a suit for wrongful life.

Ivan might immediately insist that precisely this is often the case in the world in which we live: can the lives of the children he describes plausibly be counted as a net good for the children themselves? There are two points to note in this connection. First, the response that I have attributed to Ivan does not dispute the moral soundness of the principle stated in (r1), rather it questions whether (r1) is satisfied in the actual world. This moves beyond

the bounds of a defense and poses a question for theodicy. My concern here, however, is whether the claim that God is morally good entails that God will act according to certain principles of regard for persons; I am not arguing that these moral norms *are* satisfied in the actual world.²⁰ Second, in considering the good realized in the life of a free creature, the theistic religious traditions are concerned not simply with the good of moral life, but also (and preeminently) with the good of relationship to God. As we have seen, Plantinga's formulation of the free will defense explicitly mentions only moral life itself (in the first clause of *R*). But neither Plantinga's defense nor my moral argument need (or *should*) be limited in this way. On the contrary, theists who affirm the value of human freedom characteristically do so because the capacity for moral life is a prerequisite for a certain kind and quality of relationship with God. It is for the sake of this good—namely, the perfect fulfillment of finite persons in loving relation to God—that God creates persons and their world.

This feature of theism has two important consequences for our consideration of (r1). First, because relationship with God extends beyond death, victims of evil need not be excluded from sharing in the highest good for the sake of which moral freedom, and consequently their suffering, has been permitted. Rather, God can guarantee that each person has the opportunity to participate in this good, notwithstanding what that person may suffer. Victimization, then, will never constitute the final or decisive word on a person's life. Second, the good God intends for finite persons vastly exceeds the requirements of (r1). Fulfillment in loving relationship with God is so great a good that it overwhelmingly outweighs the evils suffered by creatures on the way to this end. On the theist's view, therefore, the good God seeks in creation is not simply that the lives of persons be good for them on balance, as (r1) requires, but that each life be consummated in a particular realization of the qualitatively highest good possible for persons.²¹ Even if it could be argued that (r1) does not set a high enough standard of regard for persons, it could hardly be maintained that *this* degree of goodness to persons is morally required of God.

Perhaps (r1) alone is not enough, however. We might well think that God is morally required not only to assure that the life of each free creature can be, on balance, a good for it, but also to minimize the number and intensity of evils that free creatures suffer. This "economy of evils" principle is suggested by (d') above. The conditions listed in *R*, however, had a permissive rather than a prescriptive force; Plantinga claims only that these conditions are consistent with God's perfect goodness, but not that they are either necessary or sufficient to vindicate it. Now, however, we want to consider the principle at work in (d') as a putative moral constraint upon God's pursuit of the good for creatures. There are at least two forms that this economy of evils requirement might take. The weaker form stipulates that evils suffered by

individuals must be minimized relative to the good achieved in the *world as a whole*. The stronger form demands that evils suffered by individuals be minimized relative to the good of *that individual*.

We can express the weaker version of the economy of evils requirement in the following form:

- (r2) God must not actualize a world in which a person suffers some evil *E* if the elimination of *E* by God would result in a better balance *overall* of the goods God intends for persons and the evils God permits.

This version of the economy of evils requirement is not in fact an agent-centered restriction; it requires only that God eliminate gratuitous evils. As a result, this requirement may itself be subject to limitations of its application by agent-centered restrictions, e.g., by (r1). But even (r1) and (r2) together provide no assurance that persons will not suffer as victims of evil involuntarily and without proportionate benefit to themselves. If it is morally objectionable to allow such suffering, then we must invoke the second and stronger form of the economy of evils requirement. We can express this requirement in the following way.

- (r3) God must not actualize a world in which a person suffers some evil *E* if the elimination of *E* by God would result in a better balance *for this individual* of the goods God intends for persons and the evils God permits.

This specifies that God must limit the moral and natural evils suffered by each individual to those which will serve the individual's good in the most efficient way God can (given, once again, the constraints imposed by the individual's own free choices and the necessary conditions for her moral and physical life).

Should we regard (r3) as a morally binding agent-centered restriction on how God seeks the good for creatures? I think not. There are at least two plausible analyses of the moral requirements that must be satisfied if God's creative action is to be called morally good, and neither generates the conclusion that God is obligated to satisfy (r3). We can bring these analyses into view by considering whether any moral requirement would be violated if God were to actualize a world *W'* in which (r1) is satisfied, but (r2) and (r3) are not. There will be creatures in a world *W'* that suffer more than they would have suffered in world *W*, in which (r2) is satisfied. Has God wronged these creatures?²²

The first account of the requirements of moral goodness will give a negative answer to this question. Creatures receive their lives from God as a gift that God is under no obligation to give; as we noted above, God's actualization of a world is not a matter of fulfilling a duty to possible persons. Since the creaturely recipient has no claim upon God to be given this gift at all, he also

has no moral basis for claiming that this good gift ought to be better, much less that it ought to be optimally good. Two qualifications are needed here, however. First, it would be hard to argue with the suggestion that one ought *not* to give a gift that the recipient would be better off without. This consideration is captured by (r1), which *does* constitute an agent-centered restriction upon God's creative activity. If this condition is met, however, there are no grounds for any further demand upon God as the giver of this good. Second, the analogy of gift giving is, of course, imperfect. Ordinarily, the recipient of a gift has the option to refuse what is offered. In this case, what is given is the very existence of the recipient, and so there is no one to refuse the gift until it is given; in calling us and our world into actuality, God makes an offer we cannot refuse. This does not change the moral logic of the situation, however. As long as one's life is an intrinsic good overall, it is not clear what moral ground one could claim for insisting that this good be still greater.

It follows from this, of course, that neither (r2) nor (r3) represents a moral requirement for God; we can say that God's act of actualizing a world is morally good even if that act satisfies neither (r2) nor (r3). Theists, however, typically say a good deal more than that God avoids moral wrongdoing in his actions toward creatures. God's perfect goodness is expressed in a supererogatory regard for the well-being of creatures. This seems to entail that God will reduce the evils suffered by creatures to whatever extent he can short of diminishing the good available to them; God's inexhaustible benevolence will be expressed in an economy of evils in creation. But *which* economy of evils principle expresses the content of God's good-will toward creatures? If, as the conditions in *R* provide, (r2) and (r3) cannot both be satisfied, then the balance of moral considerations requires, I believe, that (r2) take precedence.

In order to see how this is so, consider a world *W* that contains free creatures and in which (r1) and (r2) are satisfied, but (r3) is not. Of any individual whose interests are sacrificed in *W* it will be true that:

- 1) he receives his life as a gift that is good overall;
- 2) he will suffer no gratuitous evils;
- 3) he will suffer certain evils that he would not have suffered in that world in which his good is achieved in the most efficient way that God can.

If, on behalf of this victim of evil, we object to this third state of affairs and insist that this person ought not to be treated this way *by God*, then we are demanding that God distribute the good to favor this individual at the expense of the rest of humankind. But since (r3) is not a moral duty for God, there is no reason to choose the good of this individual over the good of all. As the giver of a gift, God specifies that the good received by each shall be limited by a concern to optimize the distribution of the good to all. This concern for optimal distribution does not entail any

general commitment to a consequentialist criterion of moral rightness; the agent-centered restriction, (r1), remains in force. Rather, in this case (r2) expresses the logic of generosity.

It might be argued, however, that God's conditional obligations extend beyond assuring that each individual's life can be a net good for the one who lives it (i.e., beyond (r1)). Perhaps we should say that if God actualizes free creatures, then God is morally required to minimize the evils they suffer along the way to the goods he chooses to make available to them. On this second view, both (r2) and (r3) might be regarded as *prima facie* duties for God. But, *ex hypothesi*, these positive duties cannot both be satisfied. Which takes precedence? Once again, if we insist on the moral precedence of (r3), then we are claiming that God is morally bound to distribute the good in a way that favors the few at the expense of the many whenever God cannot maximize the good of both. But it is not clear what moral rationale could be given for insisting that a creature, who has no claim to possess this gift at all, can demand, once he is given the good of life as a child of God, that his good take precedence over concern to optimize the distribution of the good to all.²³

There is good reason, therefore, to think that (r3) is neither a morally binding agent-centered restriction nor an entailment of God's perfect goodness to creatures. This conclusion can be reinforced from another direction if we shift from the moral analysis of God's relation to creatures and consider instead the moral significance of the creature's relation to God. An individual who suffers more in world *W*, which satisfies (r2), than she would in *W'*, which satisfies (r3), does not voluntarily undertake this sacrifice of her interests. But it may be that the risk of such sacrifice, and even some portion of one's additional suffering from the evils in *W* (as compared to *W'*), represents a morally obligatory burden placed upon the individual for the common good. There are at least two ways this claim might be defended. First, one might argue that i) persons have certain duties toward one another, e.g., an appropriately qualified duty to promote the good of others even at some cost to oneself, and ii) at least some of the additional suffering we undergo in *W* reflects a similar moral demand expressed in the form of a moral condition upon our existence rather than as a duty which we discharge in action. Second, one might argue that i) it is at least sometimes morally justifiable to demand of persons that they sacrifice certain of their interests for the common good because they have benefitted from communal life, and ii) similar moral considerations require that free creatures, as the beneficiaries of God's generosity, sacrifice certain of their interests if this is required for the optimal distribution of the good God intends for creatures.²⁴

If these lines of argument were worked out in detail, I expect that they would include important limits on the individual's moral liability to sacrifice his interests for the common good. Any such liability will also be limited by

(r1) and (r2); these two restrictions assure that persons will in fact be beneficiaries, rather than ultimately victims, of God's creative activity. But having argued that God does not wrong us by permitting us to undergo such sacrifices, it is helpful to make the further point that at least some of this sacrifice of individual interests might be morally demanded of us.

The result of these considerations is that we can, even from a deontological moral perspective, make *R* morally sufficient by amending it in the appropriate ways. The crucial change is the addition of a further condition:

- (e) None of the free creatures in *W* have lives that, through no fault of their own, are on balance an evil for them rather than a good.

This, of course, is simply a reformulation of (r1). We do not need to add the weaker form of the economy of evils requirement, (r2), since it is already satisfied by conditions (c) and (d) or (d'). The addition of the agent-centered restriction (e), however, requires a modification in the formulation of (c) so that this limitation is made explicit.

- (c') It is not within God's power to create a world that satisfies condition (e) and that contains as much moral good and less moral evil than that found in *W*.

This change reflects the possibility that a world might satisfy condition (c) but fail to satisfy (e); given (c'), it may be that God *could* actualized a world with a better balance of moral good over moral evil than that found in *W*, but any such world will fail to satisfy condition (e). As I argued above, we could and should go on to modify the first clause, (1), in *R* so that it reflects a theologically richer conception of the good for the sake of which God permits evil. But even these limited changes are enough to generate a formulation of *R* that, on plausible deontological grounds, is morally sufficient.

6. *Victimization and God's Goodness to Persons*

If my analysis of the relevant moral issues is correct, then we can both affirm God's moral goodness and acknowledge that persons sometimes are victimized by moral and natural evils in the world that God has made. Ivan's moral objection need not drive us to adopt the problematic principle that all suffering is in the sufferer's best interest. Persons may suffer more than is either i) necessary to secure their own good or ii) required as part of the best (i.e., most direct) means to that good. Such suffering will represent a real loss for the sufferer, a genuine sacrifice of his interests. Furthermore, when these evils are the result of other persons' free decisions, there may be no need for them to occur at all (i.e., God's purposes could be achieved just as well without them). Here genuine and tragic harm is done to persons; we cannot say that such events really are always for the sufferer's own good, rather we

must grieve that they occur at all. We can say, however, that such moral evils are not gratuitous; it is for the best that God permits them, but *not* that they are done.

Ivan contended that God morally wrongs the victims of the world's evils. In replying to Ivan on his own terms, I have argued that God is not morally required to do more for us in our victimization than to guarantee us the opportunity to share in the goods for the sake of which these evils are permitted; victimization must never be the last word on the creature's life. This clarifies what might be morally required of God, but it gives only a truncated account of what Christians typically say about God's relation to the world. Christianity affirms not simply that God fastidiously observes the minimum conditions of moral rectitude, as though God were to be praised for achieving a spotless moral record, but rather that God relates to creature with an inexhaustible and self-giving love. We noted earlier that the good God intends for persons is not simply that their lives be, on balance, a benefit to them. Beyond this, God intends that they be fulfilled in loving relation to God, which is a good that vastly overbalances the evils they have suffered. We now should note as well that this affirmation of God's generosity has direct bearing upon the problem of our suffering as victims of evil. If, as I have argued, some of our suffering constitutes a genuine sacrifice of our interests, then there is no purpose for us in this suffering; it is not given or permitted by God for our own good. But God may nonetheless draw good for us out of this evil, giving it a positive and intelligible place in the relational good God fashions between creature and creator. Although this suffering may not be a sorrow that we need, and perhaps not even one that the world needs, God may nonetheless refuse to leave it as a mere loss, an unredeemed diminishment of the overall good realized in our lives. Instead, it may be incorporated into our relationship with God and made meaningful. Precisely this lies at the heart of Christianity, which tells the story of an individual who becomes a victim of the world's moral evils, who neither deserves his suffering nor suffers for his own good, and yet whose death marks not a defeat of his life with God but rather the affirmation of God's life with us in and beyond all victimization. Here God's perfect goodness shows itself as a love that spares nothing in seeking the good of the creatures God has brought into being.²⁵

Bates College

NOTES

1. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by David Magarshack (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), Part Two, Book Five, Ch. 4, p. 287.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

3. See *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 164-195, and *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 7-64.

4. See the correspondence with Plantinga that Marilyn Adams quotes in "Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 130-132.

5. "A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all," *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 30.

6. *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 34-57.

7. *God, Freedom, and Evil*, pp. 57-59.

8. Cf. Plantinga's discussion in *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 20.

9. This treats natural goods as instrumental to moral goods. I think it would be important, in a developed theodicy, to incorporate in *R* a recognition that although natural goods are subordinate to moral and spiritual goods, they have an intrinsic value, i.e., they are of value not simply as a means.

10. Note that (d') also disarms an important objection to the free will defense, viz., that the goods associated with free will may justify God in permitting creatures to choose between good and evil but they do not justify God in permitting evil choices to be carried out with harmful consequences to others. If it is logically possible that (d') is true of a world (like the actual world) in which persons suffer as a result of others' wrong choices, then this objection is blocked.

11. See Arthur Flemming, "Omnibenevolence and Evil" (*Ethics*, 96, p. 279), for a version of this argument which stresses the connection between moral virtues and the communal goods of friendship and neighbor love.

12. "The Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 411.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 409.

14. This view, as Stump acknowledges in "Providence and Evil" (in *Christian Philosophy*, ed., Thomas Flint [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990]), is incomplete in an important respect, viz., it does not account for the suffering of those who have already repented and turned to God for help in healing the defect in their wills. She therefore makes the supplementary point that beyond its corrective functions, suffering can develop nobility and depth of character. God is justified in permitting suffering for this purpose, however, only when an individual freely consents to suffer for this greater good. Corrective suffering, on the other hand, is justifiable without one's consent when it is the best means of sparing that person the greater evil of hell.

This view seems to entail that there can be no involuntary suffering among the truly repentant; if one suffers without consent, one does so because his repentance and turning toward God must somehow be incomplete. Job's comforters, it would seem, are *right* in telling him that he suffers for his sins, though they misunderstand why he must do so, viz., not because he deserves punishment but because he needs this painful therapy. In either case the prescription is the same: "Repent and turn to God, for no one suffers unjustly."

15. "The Problem of Evil," p. 410.

16. The notion of “sacrificing an individual’s interests” is complex. Since interests are defined in relation to goods and goods can be differentiated, an individual’s interest in one good may be sacrificed to her interest in another. The goods that concern us in discussing the problem of evil are those for the sake of which God permits evil to occur at all. With this proviso, we can say that God allows a person’s interests to be sacrificed when that person suffers from the world’s natural and moral evils in excess of what must be permitted for her own good.

17. *The Rejection of Consequentialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Chs. 1 and 4.

18. In the discussion that follows, I will speak of God’s duties or obligations to actual creatures. This locution faces a number of objections, of which I want to note two. First, Kant suggests that the term “duty” can be used only of agents who are capable of experiencing a tension between what the moral law requires and what the agent is inclined to do; it follows, therefore, that an agent who is good by nature cannot be said to have duties *in this sense*. God’s will is not constrained by the moral law but rather is identified with it. My discussion of God’s duties could be restated in these terms, i.e., as an analysis of what God’s goodness (God’s “holy will”) entails for God’s relation to creatures.

Second, one might make (what at least appears to be) a stronger claim, e.g., that “God owes nothing to creatures and will not be unjust to any creature no matter what He does,” (Marilyn Adams, “Duns Scotus on the Goodness of God,” *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 4, no. 4, p. 489). This denies that creatures make moral claims of any sort upon God. But it may be that while there is nothing about *creatures* that obligates God, there is something about *God* (i.e., his own goodness) that specifies in a principled way the character of divine action toward creatures. I will not take up these subtle issues here, however. My purpose, rather, is to see whether, *given* certain deontological ethical assumptions, we can *nonetheless* say that God is morally justified in permitting some creatures to suffer for the general good.

19. A person may falsely judge his own life to be a net disvalue, using a wrongheaded or partial scheme of values. Furthermore, one may find one’s life to be a net good for the wrong reasons: Milton’s Satan celebrates his life as the autonomous sovereign of hell—“Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n” (Bk. I, ln. 263). God’s judgment about the net value realized in a free creature’s life is the relevant one. This judgment, however, concerns the intrinsic good realized in this life, *not* whether it is better for others or for the universe as a whole that this individual exist.

20. For the debate over this issue see, e.g., William Rowe, “The Empirical Argument from Evil,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Audi Robert and William Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); Stephen Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance’,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 16, no. 2; William P. Alston, “The Inductive Argument From Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,” *Philosophical Perspective*, 5, 1991, ed. by James E. Tomberlin.

21. Marilyn McCord Adams has pursued this theme and has suggested that it can do the whole job of vindicating God’s goodness: “It is not necessary to know (even in a general way) *why* God permits child torture or the ravages of cancer, if we can see *how* (at least in a general way) God can be *good enough* to the individual sufferers nonetheless” (“Problems of Evil,” p. 136). This remains open to the objection that even if God fulfills

each person's life in the end, God ought not to submit his creatures to more suffering along the way than is needed (i.e., is either necessary or best) in order to achieve the greatest good for all. I will discuss the moral logic of this claim in considering (r2) below. If we grant its force, then we must still grapple with the question of why (in general) God permits the terrible evils that occur in our world.

22. On this point compare Robert Adams' fascinating argument in "Must God Create the Best?" reprinted in *The Virtue of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

23. One might go on to argue that there should be, beyond (r1) and (r2), some additional principle(s) governing the distribution of goods and evils; a principle, say, that further constrains how much any individual shall sacrifice for the good of all or how much greater a good must be realized thereby. Given the moral considerations introduced above, however, it is reasonable to conclude that these principles will fall short of (r3).

24. This is not, of course, to say that we are under any general moral obligation to be the victims of other persons' moral evil or that we are not morally wronged by such actions. These actions ought not to be performed at all. It is to claim that I have some (limited) obligation to undergo a sacrifice of my interests if that sacrifice is required in a world *W* that satisfies (r2) but not (r3). It may be that the burden of suffering I bear in *W*, as compared to *W'* (in which (r3) is satisfied), is more than I can plausibly be held to have any *obligation* to take on. I have contended, however, that as long as (r1) and (r2) are satisfied by *W*, then I will not have been *wronged* by God. I have no positive duty to make this sacrifice, but neither does God have a negative duty to spare me from making it.

25. Special thanks are due David Cummiskey and Marilyn Adams, who offered detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am grateful as well for help received from Robert Adams, William Alston, George Hunsinger, Larry Lacy, Ladd Sessions, and Linda Zagzebski.