



The Anthropomorphic God of James Sterba

PATRIK HRMO

Katolícka univerzita v Ružomberku
Filozofická fakulta
Katedra filozofie

Abstract:

In this paper, the author tries to give his second and more precise response to the argument of James Sterba. According to Sterba's words, if a good God existed, he would prevent all the horrendous evil occurrences. This is because a good God, if existed, would be a rational agent and subject to moral requirements. Regarding the Thomistic notion of eternal law, Sterba says that God is not an abstract norm. Moreover, he says that, based on Thomism, God is exonerated from the responsibility for evil. As a result, wrongdoers are exonerated from such responsibility as well. The author of this paper argues that God, while being the eternal law, is still rational. It follows that God is the perfect moral agent. Finally, the actions of God and wrongdoers are logically incomparable. The author improves the contemporary interpretation of Thomas Aquinas on some points and, by that, responds to Sterba's objections.

Keywords: Horrendous evil, God, James Sterba, Morality, Problem of evil, Thomism.

Introduction

Two years ago, I argued that James Sterba's argument against the existence of theistic God does not work once some basic Thomistic concepts are applied.¹ Sterba says that theistic God does not exist because of the occurrence of horrendous evil in the world. If God existed, Sterba says, horrendous evil would not exist, because all-good and all-powerful God would act like an ideal state – he would not permit horrendous evil and its consequences to occur. Furthermore, God is obligated to follow certain moral requirements like us humans.² I argued that Sterba's argument had several defects. Firstly, Sterba's account of God is too anthropomorphic. There is a big difference between God and ideal state. If God was to act like an ideal state, he would surely not be as perfect as Sterba thinks.³ Secondly, in order to be good, theistic God is not required to intervene so that horrendous evil does not occur. God is not obligated to secure human negative freedom. Instead, God secures human positive freedom by being the cause of goodness in creatures.⁴

My paper was published as part of a special issue in *Religions* called *Do We Now Have a Logical Problem of Evil?* which was edited by Sterba himself. Lately, Sterba published his second reaction to the contributors to the special issue, including myself. Sterba faults my approach in two ways.⁵ Firstly, he claims that God is not the standard of goodness and that is why God is obligated to follow the ultimate norm like us humans. Secondly, he claims that my Thomistic approach exonerates God of responsibility for the evil in the world and, consequently, that it exonerates wrongdoers as well. My aim here is not to explain all the basic concepts. I only aim to explain Sterba's objections to my argument and address them. I am going to claim that Sterba's objections fail to address my argument because they are based on false presuppositions and on misinterpretation of the argument. I conclude that God is not required to oblige moral norms and that my previous conclusion does not lead into Sterba's conclusion that wrongdoers are exonerated of responsibility for horrendous evil consequences of their morally bad actions. I disagree that there is any meaningful analogy between God's action

¹ It was published two years ago in *Religions* as an online article and was then reprinted as part of a collective work falling under a special issue edited by Sterba himself called *Do We Now Have a Logical Argument From Evil?* That is why I use the reprinted version as a source. See Patrik HRMO, „Does the Analogy of an Ideal State Disprove God's Existence? James Sterba's Argument and a Thomistic Response,“ in *Do We Now Have a Logical Argument from Evil?*, ed. James Sterba, Basel: MDPI, 2024, pp. 297-310.

² See James STERBA, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05469-4>.

³ See HRMO, „Does the Analogy of an Ideal State Disprove God's Existence?“, pp. 302-304.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 305-306.

⁵ See James STERBA, „Forty Contributors: A Response,“ in *Do We Now Have a Logical Argument from Evil?*, ed. James Sterba, Basel: MDPI, 2024, pp. 1-35. <https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-03928-596-9>.

and the actions of wrongdoers. Sterba's argument has strong anthropomorphic assumptions and that is why it fails to object my previous conclusion.⁶

1. God's moral action

In the beginning of his response to my argument, Sterba states that we both agree that theistic God is (or would be) a moral agent.⁷ That is true. I argued that, according to Thomas Aquinas, God is the absolute goodness (*summum bonum*).⁸ That is why God only creates (is cause to) good things. Since evil is not good, God does not create evil. Consequently, he is not responsible for evil in the world. This is a common argument generally used by contemporary Thomists.⁹ However, there are some crucial points in their arguments I disagree with: Brian Huffling claims that God does not have moral properties because morality is a property of creation;¹⁰ Brian Davies claims that God, while being the absolute goodness, is not a person.¹¹ It follows that God is not a moral agent. However, in my response to Sterba, I argued that Huffling and Davies are not right at this point. God, while being the absolute goodness, is absolutely (perfectly) morally good as well.¹² Also, God is the source of our morality (*lex aeterna*) and is not subject to moral obligations.¹³

Now, in his response, Sterba takes my words into account and says:

“With regard to God's nature being the standard of goodness, I contend that the standard for goodness, especially the standard for moral goodness, must be a norm, a requirement that one ought to act or be in a certain way. In the case morality, the ultimate norm is something like treat all relevant

⁶ In my paper, I explained what I account for the proper philosophical language about God. It is necessary that such language is analogical in Thomistic terms. Sterba's way of speaking about God, however, does not meet this requirement. See HRMO, „Does the Analogy of an Ideal State Disprove God's Existence?“ p. 302.

⁷ See STERBA, „Forty Contributors,“ pp. 19-20.

⁸ See Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae, cura et studio Sac. Petri Caramello, cum textu ex recensione Leonina*, Turino: Marietti, 1948, I, q. 6, a. 2, c.

⁹ See Brian DAVIES, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 47-53; See Edward FESER, „The Thomistic Dissolution of the Logical Problem of Evil,“ in *Religions* 12, n. 4 [268] (2021): 1-17, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/4/268> [cit. 10. 5. 2024]; See Joseph Brian HUFFLING, „Is God Morally Obligated to Prevent Evil? A Response to James Sterba,“ in *Religions* 12, n. 5 [312] (2021): 1-13, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/5/312> [cit. 10. 5. 2024]. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050312>; See Herbert MCCABE, *God and Evil: In the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, London: Continuum, 2010, p. 106.

¹⁰ See HUFFLING, „Is God Morally Obligated to Prevent Evil?“ p. 5. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050312>.

¹¹ See HRMO, „Does the Analogy of an Ideal State Disprove God's Existence?“ pp. 300-302.

¹² Edward Feser gives a good explanation of why we cannot assume that God is responsible for evil. It is because God is not a part of the world of the natural law. See FESER, „The Thomistic Dissolution of the Logical Problem of Evil,“ p. 10.

¹³ See HRMO, „Does the Analogy of an Ideal State Disprove God's Existence?“ p. 301. *Lex aeterna* according to Thomas Aquinas: See Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae, De Rubeis, Billuart, P. Faucher O. P., cum textu ex recensione Leonina*, Turino: Marietti, 1948, II, q. 93.

interests fairly. By contrast, the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would be a concrete rational entity not an abstract norm. Such a rational entity, if he exists, like ourselves, would be subject to the requirements of morality just as he would be subject to the requirements of logic and cannot do what is logically impossible to do."¹⁴

Let us oppose Sterba's argument in two ways. Firstly, Thomistic God is not an abstract norm but the source of morality. As I said, God is the universal goodness (or the perfect goodness) and the source of goodness in his creatures. This means that all creatures have their natures that are good. Thomists say that there is a natural order and that we humans are capable of finding universal rational moral norms within the context of that natural order. In other words, a universal norm is what is good to us according to our nature.¹⁵ This natural order is caused by God. Saying that, now we can see in what sense God is the source of morality. God is not an abstract/universal norm, as Sterba says, but the source of all norms (*lex aeterna*).¹⁶ Secondly, the source of all norms (*lex aeterna*) is not an entity that is subject to moral obligations.¹⁷ As I argued, God is the source of morality. He is the first cause of everything, the universal being, the universal goodness, and he is absolutely simple.¹⁸

However, God is still rational. Aquinas holds that rationality is tied to immateriality. To know X is to know the immaterial form of X. Our intellect contains immaterial forms of existing things, so to know X is to contain the immaterial form of X in our intellect.¹⁹ Because God is immaterial, he knows all the forms of all the things perfectly.²⁰ Our knowledge is only possible because of our senses, but God's knowledge is not marked by materiality. Furthermore, God knows the forms of all the existing things by being their first cause.²¹ This is all to say that it is not true that Thomistic God is not rational.

¹⁴ STERBA, „Forty Contributors“, p. 19.

¹⁵ See Andrea BLAŠČÍKOVÁ, „Teória prirodzeného zákona podľa Tomáša Akvinského. Špecifikácia v perspektíve možnosti zachovania univerzality i diferencie“, in *Studia Aloisiana* 3, n. 4 (2012); See FESER, „The Thomistic Dissolution of the Logical Problem of Evil“, pp. 4-5. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040268>.

¹⁶ See AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, II, q. 93, a. 3, c.

¹⁷ Ibid., q. 93, a. 4, c.

¹⁸ For a concise explanation of the concepts: See John F. WIPPEL, „Metaphysical Themes in De Malo, I“, in *Aquinas's Disputed Questions on Evil: A Critical Guide*, ed. M. V. Dougherty, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 13-16. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107360167.002>. In general, entities are metaphysical composites if they have metaphysical parts (such as form and matter, or potentiality and actuality). But God is absolutely simple. It follows that he cannot be more actualized than he already is. Having moral obligations only makes sense if one can do better than he or she already does. This cannot apply to God.

¹⁹ For a more precise explanation of Thomistic theory of knowledge: See Tomáš MACHULA – Štěpán Martin FILIP, *Tomismus čtyřiaadvaceti tezí*, Praha: Krystal OP, 2010, pp. 175-189.

²⁰ See AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 14, a. 1.

²¹ Ibid., q. 14, a. 5, a. 6, a. 8.

Now, one can ask: How is it possible that God is the source of morality and is rational at the same time? Is it not a contradiction? In general, rational agents are subjects to moral obligations. If God is rational, therefore, he must be subject to moral obligations. This is why contemporary Thomists assert that God is not a moral agent. Hence my final step is to explain in what sense God is the perfect moral agent and that my point of view is not a Thomistic misinterpretation. And by doing that, I believe, my previous argument is improved and Sterba's objection will be answered.

A Thomist Herbert McCabe explains why, according to him, God is not a moral agent:

“We can say this [that God is morally good] only in the sense that he is the cause of moral goodness in creatures. Moral good and evil, we saw, belong to rational beings that achieve or fail to achieve perfection. And we saw that this perfection of rational beings could be nothing other than the possession of God, the *bonum universale* (universal good). It follows that there can be no sense in which God can be said to achieve or fail to achieve this perfection, and hence no sense in which he can be said to be morally good or bad.”²²

The first assumption McCabe makes is that morality has to do with achieving or failing to achieve the universal good. The second assumption is that the perfection of rational beings is the possession of God. Now, if the second assumption is true, it must be said that rational agents achieve this perfection (or God) according to the way their natures allow them to achieve it. It also must be said that there are different ways/modes of achieving perfections according to different modes of being.²³ If it is true that people can achieve God, is it not more true about God himself? According to Aquinas, God knows himself, the universal good, and he wills this universal good according to his (perfect) mode of being.²⁴ So God, having knowledge of himself, willing the goodness he himself is, and being perfectly actualized, achieves himself. So, in the sense of the second assumption of McCabe, we can conclude that God is moral.

However, God cannot fail in achieving himself. According to McCabe's first assumption, a moral agent has the possibility of failing to achieve the universal goodness. If we apply this criterion of morality on God, it seems that God is not a moral agent because he does not have the possibility of failing. It is true that God cannot fail. It is not true, however, that the impossibility of failure in God takes morality from him. The fact that our human morality requires the possibility

²² MCCABE, *God and Evil*, p. 106.

²³ See AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 6, a. 1, c.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, q. 6, a. 2, c.; q. 14, a. 3, c.; q. 19, a. 1, 2.

of failure does not imply that this *should* apply to God. This inference does not work. Human possibility of failure to achieve the universal good has to do with our imperfection and potentiality. The possibility of failure, however, is not the criterion of morality. Human actions are not good because humans do not fail to achieve the universal good. It is indeed the other way: Human actions are good *because of the way we achieve it*. Human actions are good when we recognize the good and when we act accordingly.²⁵ God always achieves the universal good – himself – which means that he can recognize it and act accordingly and perfectly. The fact that God cannot fail does not stop him from being a moral agent. It is quite the opposite: It renders him the perfect moral agent.

I improved my previous argument and showed why I think God is the perfect moral agent. Thomists in general fail to recognize this point. It is true that humans can achieve or fail to achieve the universal good by their action, I agree with Thomists on that. And sure, *in this sense*, God is not a moral agent. However, analogical language requires us to ascribe some properties of creation to God in a perfect sense. So why could not and should not we do that with the characteristics of moral actions I mentioned above (to do good is to recognize good and to act accordingly) and apply them to God analogically? Cannot we say that God is always capable of achieving the universal good? I think we can. Sure, God cannot choose evil and is not subject to moral obligations. He cannot fail in willing what is good, but that is exactly why he is the perfect moral agent. Furthermore, this is perfectly in accordance with the notion of the source of morality I elaborated on in the first part of this section; if God cannot fail, then there is no need to apply moral obligations to him because it makes no sense to apply obligations to someone who never fails to achieve the goal of such obligations, the universal good.²⁶ If I am right then Sterba's objection does not apply because there is nothing left to object to.

²⁵ For Thomistic theory of human free will: See MACHULA – FILIP, *Tomismus čtyřadvaceti tezí*, pp. 189-195. I think my interpretation is coherent with the fact that, according to Thomism, our will is free, not in a sense that we can choose the good or the bad, but in a sense that we always choose the general good. It is up to reason to recognize the adequate good. Accordingly, our actions are not evil based on the fact that we do not achieve the general good but in the fact that we achieve the inadequate good.

²⁶ I recently discovered that Eleonore Stump, a Thomist, would certainly agree that God is perfectly morally good. See: Eleonore STUMP, *Aquinas*, London: Routledge, 2003, p. 107, 128. There is, however, a significant difference between her explanation and my explanation of why. While Stump identifies God with the standard of goodness, it is an identification I disagree with. The reason is that, if what Stump holds was true, God would be identical with the natural law.

2. Analogy of God and wrongdoers

Sterba's second objection to my argument is following:

"Furthermore, Hrmo, in his attempt to defend God as a moral agent maintains, 'Permission of evil can be ascribed to God only accidentally because God does not will evil essentially (since he essentially wills the good not the privation of good).' But, if this exonerates God from responsibility for the evil in the world, then it exonerates wrongdoers as well. This is because we could also claim that the actions of wrongdoers are directed at something good, and that wrongdoing is just a privation of goodness in their acts which they do not essentially will. We can further maintain that this privation in the actions of wrongdoers is simply a byproduct or a means of achieving the good toward which their acts are directed. Given then that we can parallel both God's and wrongdoers' relationship to evil, we would have no reason for not exonerating both God and wrongdoers for the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions in the world, an outcome that would be morally unacceptable."²⁷

This is, however, misinterpretation of my words. Of course, I said that permission of evil is not an essential property of God. But Sterba's conclusion does not follow from what I said. It does not follow, indeed, that it (it being the fact that permission of evil is not an essential propriety of God) exonerates God of responsibility for the evil in the world, simply because there is no responsibility that God should be exonerated of. God cannot do anything wrong or bad. As I argued in the previous section, God is the perfect moral agent. Therefore, Sterba's inference to wrongdoers is not justified. This analogy would only work if it was true that God did or does something wrong or bad, which he did not and cannot do.

There are two more reasons of why Sterba's analogy does not work. First, let us have an example of a homicide. This might be a very basic and trivial one, but I think it works. A murderer does something seriously wrong by killing their victim. They intend to do it. So, at that very basic level, we cannot compare wrongdoers to God. God cannot intend anything wrong or bad, he only intends what is good because he cannot fail in knowing what is good.²⁸ However, what Sterba is trying to say is that the wrongdoer, even though doing something bad, might be intending something good. For example, the wrongdoer might think that the murder is good. And that leads us to my second objection. The wrongdoer, in

²⁷ STERBA, „Forty Contributors,“ p. 20.

²⁸ In my article, I argued that God always wills what is good. It might seem now that I misplace the words „will“ and „intention“. To see how these words can be understood in the same manner: Gaven KERR, „God's Causal Acts“, in *The Enduring Significance of Thomas Aquinas: Essays in Honor of Henk Schoot and Rudi de Velde*, ed. Harm Goris - Marcel Sarot, Leuven: Peeters, 2023, pp. 25-45. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.3919377.5>.

this case, simply does not recognize that their action is wrong. Or, in other words, they only do what they think is good which, in reality, is not. Their knowledge of a certain good is not accurate.²⁹ They confuse evil with good. This cannot happen to God because God's knowledge is perfect.³⁰

With all of this said, we can now put it through statements of necessity and possibility. Based on what I said before, it is necessary that God intends a good action – that he knows what is good and does it –, while it is not necessary that wrongdoers intend a good action because their judgement can be faulty. Hence two statements “God intends a good action” and “Wrongdoers intend a good action” are logically incomparable and Sterba's objection to my argument is not justified.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to contradict Sterba's reaction to my previous argument and, with that, to improve the argument and the Thomistic way of understanding the goodness of God. God is the perfect moral agent. This approach does not contradict what we know about morality in general. This approach, in fact, takes what is positive in human moral actions and applies it to God in a perfect sense. By saying that God is the perfect moral agent we do not intend to say that God is subject to moral obligations, nor that God can (perfectly) fail in doing what is good. He is not and nor he can. The concept of God as perfect moral agent, I believe, is a very good means to object Sterba's argument. Indeed, it is not true that God is required to prevent horrendous evil occurrences because he is not subject to human moral requirements. Nor can we say that God is responsible for evil in the world, or that the Thomistic point of view leads to exonerating God of responsibility for such evil.

LITERATURE

AQUINAS, Thomas, *Summa Theologiae, cura et studio Sac. Petri Caramello, cum textu ex recensione Leonina*, I, Turino: Marietti, 1948.

AQUINAS, Thomas, *Summa Theologiae, De Rubeis, Billuart, P. Fauchter O. P., cum textu ex recensione Leonina*, II, Turino: Marietti, 1948.

BLAŠČÍKOVÁ, Andrea, „Teória prirodzeného zákona podľa Tomáša Akvinského. Špecifikácia v perspektíve možnosti zachovania univerzality i diferencie,“ in *Studia Aloysiana* 3, n. 4 (2012), pp. 15-27.

²⁹ See Brian DAVIES, *Summa Contra Gentiles: A Guide and Commentary*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 211.

³⁰ See AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 14, a. 3, a. 5, a. 6.

DAVIES, Brian, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

DAVIES, Brian, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Contra Gentiles: A Guide and Commentary*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

FESER, Edward, „The Thomistic Dissolution of the Logical Problem of Evil,“ in *Religions* 12, n. 4 [268] (2021): 1-17, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/4/268>, [cit. 24. 5. 2024]. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12040268>.

HUFFLING, Joseph Brian, „Is God Morally Obligated to Prevent Evil? A Response to James Sterba,“ in *Religions* 12, n. 5 [312] (2021): 1-13, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/5/312>, [cit. 24. 5. 2024]. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050312>.

HRMO, Patrik, „Does the Analogy of an Ideal State Disprove God's Existence? James Sterba's Argument and a Thomistic Response,“ in *Do We Now Have a Logical Argument from Evil?*, ed. James Sterba, Basel: MDPI, 2024, pp. 297-310.

KERR, Gaven, „God's Causal Acts,“ in *The Enduring Significance of Thomas Aquinas: Essays in Honor of Henk Schoot and Rudi de Velde*, ed. Harm Goris – Marcel Sarot, Leuven: Peeters, 2023, pp. 25-45. <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.3919377.5>.

MACHULA Tomáš – FILIP Štěpán Martin, *Tomismus čtyřiaadvaceti tezí*, Praha: Krystal OP, 2010.

MCCABE, Herbert, *God and Evil: In the Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, London: Continuum, 2010.

STERBA, James, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05469-4>.

STERBA, James, „Forty Contributors: A Response,“ in *Do We Now Have a Logical Argument from Evil?*, ed. James Sterba, Basel: MDPI, 2024, pp. 1-35. <https://doi.org/10.3390/books978-3-03928-596-9>.

STUMP, Eleonore, *Aquinas*, London: Routledge, 2003.

WIPPEL, John F., „Metaphysical Themes in De Malo, I,“ in *Aquinas's Disputed Questions on Evil: A Critical Guide*, ed. M. V. Dougherty, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 12-33. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107360167.002>.

Mgr. Patrik Hrmo

Katedra filozofie

Filozofická fakulta

Katolícka univerzita v Ružomberku

Hrabovská cesta 1B

034 01 Ružomberok

patrikhrmo@outlook.com