Theodicy, our well-being, and God’s rights

RICHARD SWINBURNE
University of Oxford

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The evils of the world – the things intrinsically bad, such as pain and suffering and wrongdoing – seem to be such as an omnipotent and perfectly good God would not allow to occur. Theodicy is the enterprise of showing that appearances are misleading, that the existence of God (omnipotent, and perfectly good), is compatible with the occurrence of this world’s evils, and (more strongly) that their occurrence does not provide evidence against the existence of God.1 God is omnipotent, which is normally taken to mean that he can do anything logically possible. Fairly obviously, therefore, most recognise, he could prevent the evils of the world if he so chose. So the task of theodicy becomes the task of showing that it is compatible with his perfect goodness, that he allow them to occur. I suggest that God could allow evils to occur, compatibly with his perfect goodness, if four conditions are satisfied with respect to them. First, most obviously, if God is to allow an evil e, it must be that allowing e contributes to making possible some good g. More precisely, it must be logically impossible for God to bring about g in any other morally permissible way than by allowing e (or an evil equally bad) to occur. Note that I write ‘allowing e to occur’, not the stronger ‘bringing about e’. It may be that, as the traditional free will defence claims, free choice between good and evil is a great good. What that requires is allowing the agent the choice between bringing about good and bringing about evil, not his actually bringing about the evil. But it must be naturally possible for the agent to bring about the evil – i.e. it must be compatible with the prior state of things, both of the physical universe and of the direct action of God, that the agent bring about the evil. There are, I believe, other goods which God can make possible only by himself actually bringing about evils.

If God does allow e to occur for the sake of g, then he has to ensure that if e occurs, g will occur. Thus if he brings about pain in order to give us the opportunity of freely choosing whether to bear it courageously or not, he has also to have given us free will. Further, he has to have the right to allow
to occur (i.e. it must be morally permissible for him to do so). It is often the case that bringing about some evil – e.g. giving an unjust punishment to someone accused of a crime he did not commit – will promote a great good (e.g. deter others from committing a similar crime). But that does not justify bringing about the evil. So it is not enough that allowing some evil will promote a great good to justify God allowing the evil; he has to have the right to allow that evil. And finally, some sort of comparative condition must be satisfied. It cannot be as strong as the condition that $g$ be a good at least as good as $e$ is bad. For obviously we are often justified, in order to ensure the occurrence of a substantial good is risking the occurrence of a greater evil. But it must be that if God actually brings about $e$ for the sake of $g$, $g$ must be a good at least as good as $e$ is bad. And if God allows $e$ (e.g. by bringing it about that chance or some free agent determines whether $e$ occurs), then the more probable it is in these circumstances that $e$ will occur, the closer $e$ must be to bring an evil no worse than $g$ is good. A plausible more formal way of capturing this condition, is as follows: the expected negative value of $e$ must not exceed the positive good value of $g$.

It follows that if theodicy is to show the God is justified in allowing each of the actual evils of this world $e$ which occur, it needs to show that (1) in allowing $e$ (or an evil equally bad) to occur, God would bring about a logically necessary condition of some good state of affairs $g$ which could not be achieved in any other morally permissible way; (2) if $e$ occurs, $g$ is realised, (3) it is morally permissible that God allow $e$ to occur, (4) the comparative condition is satisfied. Now theodicy cannot be required to show this in respect of every actual evil in the world if it is to show that the appearance that evil counts against God’s existence is mistaken. It is surely enough to show that these conditions are satisfied in respect of typical members of the main classes of observable evils in the world; that would be grounds enough for supposing that these conditions are satisfied generally. By analogy, no scientist needs to show that every observable mechanical datum is as Newton’s theory predicts, if he is to be justified in believing Newton’s theory. He needs only to show that typical members of the main classes of observable mechanical data are as Newton’s theory predicts. And as for the scientist, so for the theodicist, ‘show’ means only ‘demonstrate that it is probable’.

The enterprise of theodicy becomes less necessary in so far as there are very strong positive reasons for believing that there is a God. For if there are, then, even if the evils of the world count against the existence of God, the positive reasons may still be stronger than the negative one. But for those of us who think that although there are strong positive reasons, they are not overwhelmingly strong positive reasons; and for those of us who wish to convince others of the rationality of theistic belief, when those
others are troubled (as they normally are) by the problem of evil, theodicy is an indispensable enterprise.

Many theists, including a number of modern philosophers of religion, have claimed that the enterprise is unnecessary because there may be great goods which are promoted by evils, of kinds of which we cannot know because of our finite and sinful nature. There may indeed be such goods. But the question still remains whether it is at all probable that our moral vision is clouded in just such a way as to prevent us seeing those goods which this world’s evils promote. For it belongs to the theist’s conception of God that he is perfectly good. There would be no content to the theist’s belief unless he had some grasp of what goodness consists in. And since – at first glance – it doesn’t look as if it consists in bringing about or allowing suffering, it needs either an argument to show that sometimes it does, because there are goods which suffering etc., promote; or an argument to show that while in general the theist understands what he is saying when he says that God is good, his moral vision gets clouded when it comes to understanding what are the goods which God promotes by allowing this world’s evils.

I believe that arguments can be given showing that the four conditions are satisfied with respect to typical members of the main classes of observable evils. The hardest thing to show is that the fourth, comparative, condition is satisfied. Opponents of theodicy often admit that evils make possible goods, but object that the goods are not great enough to justify God allowing the evils to occur. But here, I think, a back-up argument is possible to show that one such good is just the sort of good that our sinful nature will incline us to undervalue and thus fail to notice that it is the crucial element which leads to general satisfaction of the comparative condition. Theodicy is, I believe, a difficult but possible enterprise. The difficulty arises because of the variety of goods and evils (some of which we easily fail to notice, or – as just noted – are inclined to mis-value), and the complexity of the logical relations between them.

Because of the difficulty of the enterprise, this paper can only make a limited contribution towards it. I shall confine myself to doing three closely-connected things, which will – I hope – begin to make it plausible that if conditions (1) and (2) are satisfied, then conditions (3) and (4) are also satisfied. I will show first, that whenever condition (1) is satisfied for some evil, which I shall summarise by ‘an evil e makes possible a good g’, e also brings about another good g’, the good of being-of-use. I shall point out, secondly, that this is just the sort of good that our moral vision is likely to undervalue. In consequence my arguments will tend to show that for evils for which conditions (1) and (2) are satisfied, in virtue of the great value of the good of being-of-use, condition (4) will also be satisfied. I shall
go on to argue that it is also this good, conferred in allowing an evil to occur which tilts the balance in giving God the right to allow it to occur; and so condition (3) will also be satisfied.

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There are plausibly various ways in which allowing evil to occur brings about a logically necessary condition of good which could not be achieved in any other morally permissible way. As we have noted, the traditional free will defence points out that a free choice between good and evil can only be brought about by allowing the agent to bring about evil. It claims that having such a choice is a great good in itself, and also because all human choices are character forming – each good choice makes it easier to make the next choice a good one. The higher-order goods defence point put that certain kinds of especially valuable free choice are only possible as responses to evil. I can only show sympathy for your suffering and you can only show courage in the face of your suffering, if you are suffering. It has sometimes been urged that you do need actually to suffer, you only need to appear to be suffering for me to show sympathy. But for God generally to deceive us with respect to whether others are suffering would, I suggest, not be morally permissible. Again there are various kinds of desirable feelings, as opposed to actions, which can only be had in the face of evils (or apparent evils – but, as before, I urge that for God to produce a world in which humans are generally deceived about the feelings of others would not be morally permissible). I can only feel compassion for your suffering if you are suffering, grief at your death when still young if you die when still young – and so on. And, I have argued elsewhere, I can only have the knowledge of how to bring about good or evil, needed if I am to have that desirable free choice between good and evil, if I or others can derive it from an experience of a natural world in which evils (e.g. suffering) are produced by regular natural processes.

I do not seek to argue these claims now. I mention them only in order to provide examples of evils \( e \) with respect to which condition (1) (and let us assume also condition (2)) might be satisfied. I do so in order to point out that if conditions (1) and (2) were satisfied in these cases, and in any other cases where for some \( e \) and \( g \) they are satisfied, the further state of being-of-use will also be attained, and so – given that being of use is a good – a further good will be attained.

Take a simple case. Let \( e \) be human suffering and \( g \) be the state of humans having the opportunity freely to show sympathy towards other humans. Suppose that conditions (1) and (2) are satisfied with respect to this example...
that $g$ is indeed a good, that God can only bring about $g$ by allowing $e$ or some other equally bad evil to occur (e.g. by bringing it about), unless he does something morally impermissible (e.g. causes general deception with respect to the feelings of other humans), and that he does give humans free will to choose whether or not to show sympathy. In that case each sufferer, e.g. myself, has been of use to the other person, e.g. you, by making possible for the other person a choice of deep significance which he would not otherwise have had. That is a great good for the sufferer. My suffering might have been unnoticed by others. But I was fortunate; it was noticed by you and so made possible your having a serious choice. Of course even if my suffering is unnoticed by others it still gives me the opportunity freely to show courage in the face of it. So again there is a double benefit – that I have a choice, and that I am of use in that my suffering provides me with that choice. For after all I could have had an equally serious choice without any suffering of mine being the means whereby I had that choice. And clearly there could be suffering of equal intensity by creatures who were totally incapable of courage of any degree. So there is a double benefit to me – I have a choice (a character-forming choice), and I am of use to myself by my suffering providing that choice.

In the more complicated case where it is only the (natural) possibility of evil ($e$), not its actual occurrence, which makes possible the good $g$, the double benefit arises from the fact that the person who will suffer if the evil is done is of use by his being open to being harmed. His openness makes him of use whether or not harm is actually done. If God entrusts you to my care, and I have the opportunity freely to harm or benefit you, you are benefited by being vulnerable and thereby giving me that opportunity. What holds for these examples holds generally. Any evil or possible evil $e$ is a state of some animate being, and if it makes possible a good $g$, then there is realised a further good $g'$, in that that animate being – by its openness to evil or possible evil (normally suffering or the possibility thereof) is of use. And being-of-use is, I have assumed and now argue more fully, itself a very great good.

To help, to contribute is a privilege, especially if it is by a free intentional action, but also it is by a spontaneous and unfree action (as, I assume, are the all actions of animals) or even if it is just by being involuntarily in some state (e.g. suffering). Helping is an immense good for the helper. We don’t, most of us, think that most of the time. We think that our well-being consists in the things that we possess or the experiences we enjoy. Sometimes, true, all men and women find themselves in circumstances in which they ought to give – alas, the starving appear on our doorstep and we ought to give them some of our wealth, perhaps something large which will deprive us of future enjoyment. But that, the common thinking goes, is our misfor-
tune, good for the starving but bad for us. Life would have been better for us if they hadn’t turned up on the doorstep. But the common thinking is mistaken. Our life would be impoverished unless we could make some real differences for good or ill to others. We are lucky that the starving turned up on the doorstep. It would have been our misfortune if there had been no starving to whom to give; life would been worse for us.

Even twentieth century man can begin to see that – sometimes – when he seeks to help prisoners, not by giving them more comfortable quarters, but by letting them help the handicapped; or when he pities rather than envies the ‘poor little rich girl’ who has everything and does nothing for anyone else. And one phenomenon prevalent in end-of-century Britain draws this especially to our attention – the evil of unemployment. Because of our system of social security the unemployed on the whole have enough money to live without too much discomfort; certainly they are a lot better off than are many employed in Africa and Asia or Victorian Britain. What is evil about unemployment is not so much any resulting poverty but the uselessness of the unemployed. They often report feeling unvalued by society, of no use, ‘on the scrap heap’. They rightly think it would be a good for them to contribute; but they can’t.

It is not only intentional actions freely chosen, but also ones performed involuntarily, which have good consequences for others which constitute a good for those who do them. If the unemployed were compelled to work for some useful purpose, they would still – most of them – regard that as a good for them in comparison with being useless. And it is not only intentional actions but experiences undergone involuntarily (or involuntary curtailment of good experiences, as by death) which have good consequences – so long as those experiences are closely connected with their consequences – which constitute a good for him who has them (even if a lesser good than that of a free intentional action causing those consequences). Consider the conscript killed in a just and ultimately successful war in defence of his country against a tyrannous aggressor. Almost all peoples, apart from those of the Western world in our generation, have recognised that dying for one’s country is a great good for the one who dies, even if he was conscripted. Consider too someone hurt or killed in an accident, where the accident leads to some reform which prevents the occurrence of similar accidents in future (e.g. someone killed in a rail crash which leads to the installation of a new system of railway signalling which prevents similar accidents in future). The victim and his relatives often comment in such a situation that at any rate he did not suffer or die in vain. They would have regarded it as a greater misfortune for the victim (quite apart from the consequences for others) if his suffering or death served no useful purpose. It is a good for us if our experiences are not wasted but are used for the good of others, if they are the
means of a benefit which would not have come to others without them. It follows from this that those who involuntarily provide to others opportunity to be of use are themselves of use. The starving are of use to the wealthy on whose doorstep they appear, because – but for them – the wealthy would have no opportunity to be of use. They are the vehicle whereby alone the wealthy can be saved from self-indulgence and learn generosity. And, finally, to connect with one example much discussed in the literature, it is a good for the fawn caught in the thicket in the forest fire that his suffering provides knowledge for the deer and other animals who see it to avoid the fire and deter their other offspring from being caught in it.

Many of these examples are of course examples of evil states which are physically rather than logically necessary for goods; but I adduce them only to make the point that the extra good of being of use is a good for the victim. If the point is correct in cases where the necessary connection is physical, it will clearly hold in the stronger case where the necessary connection is logical.

Someone may object that the good for the victim is not (e.g.) dying in a railway crash when that leads to improved safety measures, but dying in a railway crash when you know that improved safety measures will result; and, more generally, that the good is the experience (the ‘feel good’) of being of use, not merely being of use. But that cannot be right. For what one is glad about when one learns that one’s suffering (or whatever) has had a good effect, is not that one learns it – but that it has in fact had a good effect. If one did not think that – whether one knows about it or not – it would be good that the suffering should have some effect, one would not be glad about it when one learnt that it did. To take an analogy – it is only because I think is a good thing that you pass your exams even if I don’t know about it, that I am glad when I come to know about it. And so generally. It is of course a further good that one has a true belief that one’s suffering has had a good effect; but that can only be because it’s a good in itself that it has had that effect. And if one thing which is good when one learns about it is that not merely have others benefited in some way, but that by one’s own suffering one has been of use in causing that effect, then that is good even if one does not learn about it.

Now this good of being of-use is one which most people will recognise as a good. But most of the more secularised people of our culture will not recognise it as a great good. And that is a consequence of the phenomenon that people who don’t stand back from their lives much or think much about how they can make their own lives good lives to have led, are apt to think of the worth of their lives as consisting in pleasurable experiences for themselves, and actions of theirs which achieve such experiences. They may of course recognise moral obligations to others, but they are apt to think that
their own good consists in the former things. But when someone tries to stand back from his present plans and experiences, and asks himself from a perspective outside his life (puts himself, say, in Rawls's 'original position'), different answers are likely to occur to him. In particular, he is likely to see the worth of his life as less centred on his own experiences (good, of course, though it is, that these be pleasurable), but rather on what that life contributes. But standing back is not easy; we are subject to such natural desires to forward our own pleasurable experiences that we are tempted (in order to prevent contrary inclinations getting hold of us) to underplay the worth of contributing, of being-of-use. In consequence one would expect someone who managed to free themselves totally from the cognitively perverting influence of the aforementioned natural desires, to estimate being-of-use even more highly than do those of us who struggle daily with these desires which must in consequence still in part pervert our judgements. It is just the sort of respect in which our moral vision is likely to get clouded, and so it becomes plausible suppose that the requisite evils which make our contributing possible are of more use then we are likely initially to recognise.

If God gives us a revelation, one of its purposes will be to force us to face up to those moral truths which too easily escape us. The great value of being of use is something very near the surface of the New Testament. An obvious text is the words of Christ as cited by St Paul in his farewell sermon to the Church at Ephesus when he urged them 'to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive'. Or again recall these words of Jesus: 'Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you: but whoever will become great among you shall be your minister: and whoseover would be first among you shall be servant of all. For verily the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many'. The passage classically connects greatness with service, and it is most plausibly read as saying that greatness consists in service. Then there are passages which tell us that those who suffer in consequence of their choice to confess the name of Christ are fortunate to be allowed to have such a significant role in the proclamation of the Gospel. The apostles beaten for preaching the Gospel rejoiced 'that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name'. St Paul's reward for preaching the Gospel is to preach the Gospel - without being paid for it. Conversely, the sentence (κρίσις) on those that did not believe 'on the name of the only begotten son of God', is, according to Jesus as St John reports him, 'that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil'. Good and evil actions are their own reward and punishment. Of course the Gospel also has another message which is bound to get mixed
up with this one: that God is only too anxious to give further rewards to those who do good, and will give other punishments to those who do bad. But, as biblical critics now appreciate, the Gospel has both a ‘realised eschatology’ and a yet-to-be-realised eschatology.

Judgements of comparative moral worth (e.g. that this consequence of an action is better than that one) as opposed to absolute moral worth (e.g. that that action is obligatory) are often very difficult to make. One needs to reflect a lot on many different examples of actions with different consequences done in different circumstances before one can get enough of a justified view about the relative worth of consequences to see whether the comparative condition is satisfied in a given case. There are no quick knock-down arguments available one way or the other. But I hope that the considerations which I have addressed give some plausibility to the suggestion that for many evils $e$, if conditions (1) and (2) are satisfied, condition (4) is also satisfied. One thought experiment which will help us to see how great is the good of being-of-use is to imagine ourselves having a choice before this world between two lives which one might live in it – either (a) a life of mild pleasure of no use to anyone at all, or (b) a life with considerable pain in it which makes possible for someone else the free choice of how to react to that pain (e.g. sympathetically or callously) in such a way as gradually to form his whole character. If we do not make that second choice, let us suppose, the other person will not exist, and so there is no question of a possible obligation to an already existing person. How would we choose if we simply want to make the most of our lives. I suggest that we would make the second choice. The great good of being of use is worth paying a lot to get.

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But does God have the right to allow us to suffer for the sake of greater goods? To allow someone to suffer for his own good or the good of someone else one has to stand in some kind of parental relationship towards him. I do not have the right to let some stranger, Joe Bloggs, suffer for his own good or that of Bill Snoggs, but I do have some right of this kind in respect of my own children. I may let the younger son suffer somewhat for his own good and that of his brother. I have this right because in small part I am responsible for the younger son’s existence, its beginning and continuance. The right arises, I suggest, from the parent being the source of much good for the child which entitles him to take some of it (or its equivalent) back if necessary (e.g. in the form of the life having bad aspects); and (given that) from the child not being competent to make an informed decision for himself. If the child could understand, he would understand that the parent
gives life, nourishment, and education, subject to possible retraction of some of the gift (and an obligation to perform some service in return). If the parent gives nothing to the child subsequent to birth, then his right to cause the child to suffer is, I suggest, very limited indeed, if not non-existent. If this is correct, then a fortiori a God who is, ex hypothesi, so much more the source of our being than are our parents, has so many more rights in this respect. For we depend on him totally from moment to moment, and the ability of parents and others to benefit us depends on him. But it must remain the case that God’s rights are limited by the condition that he must not over time take back more than he has given. He must remain on balance a benefactor – subject to a qualification to be made in the next paragraph.

Although a parent does not (objectively) have the right to take from the child more than he gives to it (however this is to be calculated), clearly the parent cannot always know for certain the effect of his actions on the child, e.g. what will be the effect of entrusting the child to a normally reliable child-minder. So what the parent is subjectivity justified in doing must be phrased in terms of what will probably (on the evidence available to him) happen in consequence of his actions. He is clearly justified in risking the child suffering a balance of evil over good, but only so long as the risk is not great and the risk that the child will suffer a significant such balance is very small indeed. Likewise, I suggest, on the assumption that God’s knowledge of the future is limited by the libertarian free will which he gives to humans, a similar qualification has to be put on the way in which we read condition (3). God’s rights are limited by the condition that he must not act in such a way as to make it probable that over time he will take back more than he gives, and the risk that a person will suffer a significant balance of evil over good must be extremely small. If there is a God, he has ensured the latter by limiting the power of creatures over each other. The primary limit is provided by the safety barrier of death. God only allows humans to harm each other for periods of up to eighty years or thereabouts.

The rights of parents over their children become less as the children acquire the competence to make decisions for themselves. The dependence of human children on their parents – especially in our times their financial dependence – continues long after children acquire significant competence to make decisions for themselves. Although continuing dependence gives parents continuing rights, clearly those rights become less as children become more competent to make their own decisions. To have brought into the world a free moral agent severely limits the decisions one can take for him.

Dependence for very existence on caring parents is the paradigm of human dependence. But most of us are dependent on others to a lesser extent in various ways, including the state and frequently our own children.
in the last years of our lives; and such dependence gives the one on whom we are dependent certain rights (and indeed duties) with respect to us. These rights too are greater with the extent of our dependence, and with the extent of our lack of competence to make our own decisions. Let us call the dependent one the beneficiary, and the one on whom he is dependent the benefactor. The benefactor may often entrust decisions about the beneficiary to those whom he regards as having the proper expertise to make them – e.g. doctors. These we will call the benefactor’s agents.

The principles which should guide benefactors and their agents in making decisions about the future of babies and young children, the senile and the mentally incompetent when they are in no position to do this for themselves have been the subject of a considerable literature in recent years. There is a full philosophically – orientated survey of the issues and viewpoints in Allen Buchanan and Don Brock Deciding for Others. The principles which begin to emerge here provide useful analogies for the principle which should guide God in his relations towards his creatures.

Buchanan and Brock acknowledge that in general of course people have a right to determine their own future – subject, I would add, to positive obligations to others (voluntarily incurred) or negative obligations not to harm others in various ways. But to the extent to which they are incompetent, the good of self-determination has to be weighted against other goods. To be competent, claim Buchanan and Brock, an individual needs to understand the alternatives and their consequences and to have a minimally consistent and stable set of values. Patients, for example, being presented with a choice between no treatment for some disease and one or two alternative treatments, need to understand the cost of the treatment, the possible dangers, the likely outcomes, and to have a view about which outcome they want and how much they want it – and a view which they do not change hourly. Buchanan and Brock also hint, though hesitate to say openly, that patients need to have values which are not obviously erroneous. They write of ‘mental illness’ ‘distorting’ a person’s ‘aims and values’. But it is an ethical judgement that illness has distorted as opposed to merely changed a person’s values, and implies that incompetence may involve moral blindness. And I think that that view is held by many, some of whom would hesitate to commit themselves to it explicitly. Most of us do hold that any autistic children who have no sense of right and wrong are to that extent incompetent.

Buchanan and Brock acknowledge that competence is a matter of degree – individuals may be more or less competent – and varies with the kind of task for which the competence is being assessed; although they hold that in practice the law must operate with a sharp competent/incompetent dichotomy. Competence is also, they acknowledge, relative to importance of
choice – if a choice is reversible (e.g. a choice to attend a certain school, or take a course of medication) before its consequences are fully realised, a less high level of competence in assessing consequences seems to be required. But if the choice is between one operation which may prove fatal and no operation, then a higher level of competence seems appropriate. Given his incompetence, Buchanan and Brock hold, the good of the beneficiary's self-determination (to the sub-threshold extent to which he is competent) has to be weighed against his well-being, as determined in other ways; he may be unable to choose at all or may need to be protected from the harmful consequences of his choice. Benefactors or their agents will need to make choices on behalf of beneficiaries. If the beneficiary was formerly competent, then one factor to be taken into account is any choice he made then – viz. an ‘advance directive’ that should he become incompetent, so-and-so should be done. Secondly, doctors and others will try to form a judgement about how the beneficiary would have chosen if he had been competent. This ‘substituted judgement’ criterion raises well-known problems about how the counter-factual is to be interpreted. But the basic idea seems to be that you suppose the beneficiary to be the same in his basic moral views (i.e. his views about the overall goodness of states of affairs) and the extent to which he acts on those views, but to be properly informed about the natural (i.e. non-moral) facts of the situation (what are his life prospects under different treatments etc.), and to argue rationally (i.e. in accord with objectivity correct deductive or inductive procedures) from those premisses. But even this clarification allows for spelling out in different ways e.g. ‘the same’ may be read as ‘the same as he was’ (when competent) or ‘the same as he would have been’ (if competent).

Buchanan and Brock point out that the (American) law puts a restriction on the application of this criterion. Benefactors may not choose on behalf of an incompetent beneficiary to be so generous as to serve the interests of others at the expense of the incompetent’s own ‘basic interest’, i.e. to be so generous as to deprive the incompetent of basic necessities – even if the incompetent would have been thus generous, if he had been competent. The reason they give for this restriction is an epistemic one – the difficulty of judging how the beneficiary would have acted, and so the risk of abuse by benefactors and their agents, unless the law incorporates an absolute prohibition. This reason for the law incorporating such a restriction would not of course provide a reason for an omniscient and perfectly rational benefactor not to apply the ‘substituted judgement’ criterion in all its fullness. But I suggest that there is a further reason for the restriction – unselfish decisions (i.e. ones which lessen an individual’s own well-being from what it would otherwise be) are not ones which others are entitled to take on behalf of someone else – they can only be made by him. The third criterion which
Buchanan and Brock discuss for reaching decisions about the future of beneficiaries is that of what is objectively in the individual’s best interest. There is a certain not too unnatural interpretation of the second criterion on which it collapses into the third. If we consider how the individual would have chosen if he was properly informed about the moral as well as the natural facts of the situation, argued rationally, and behaved rationally (i.e. was guided by his true moral views), and was concerned only for his own well-being, then the second criterion collapses into the third. But recall that our earlier discussion has given us a wide understanding of a person’s own well-being.

What does all this suggest about the criteria which ought to guide God in his surrogate decision making? God has to make decisions on behalf of humans and animals over a whole range of stages of their development, but I analyse only two decision situations – the situation before there are any humans and animals, and the situation when a given human on whose behalf a decision may need to be made is as fully competent as ever a human becomes. I shall suggest answers for these situations – clearly intermediate situations will call for intermediate answers. Let us begin with the all-important situation, the first one. God has to decide, to bodies of which kinds governed by which laws of nature to join souls. Shall he make bodies which will give to their owners only thrills of pleasure, or one which will also give pains and under which circumstances? This decision about our future I have pictured as being taken clearly in time, but clearly one can think of it as being taken at every moment of time (i.e. at each period before its effects, and so throughout all time) or timelessly. Since those on whose behalf this decision is taken do not yet exist, they are totally incompetent. God has a choice of what sort of people to make and in what kinds of situation to put them. There is no scope here for the ‘advanced directive’ criterion, nor for the ‘suspended judgement’ criterion except in the sense in which it collapses into the objective criterion. For there are as yet no persons with moral outlooks and patterns of behaviour; there is therefore no sense in how (in the more natural sense) such persons would have chosen if they had been able to choose. Only the objective criterion has application. God must choose to give us over life a balance of well-being. He has the right to give each of us (for the sake of some greater good) a life which includes bad elements, so long as on balance it is for the beneficiary an objectivity good package. The package is likely to consist not merely of many ordinary desires and their fulfilment, but also opportunities to make significant choices of good and evil, and above all of being-of-use.

It is because being of use is a good for him who is of use and increases his well-being, that when someone’s suffering is the means by which they are of use that the net negative weight of their suffering-and-being-of-use is
not nearly as great as it would otherwise be; and so our Creator, if he has given us many other good things has the right to use us to a limited extent for the sake of some good to others. Kant was surely correct to emphasise that one must treat individuals as moral ends in themselves and not use them for the good of others. But the latter phrase must be interrupted as ‘on balance’. It is, I suggest, permissible to use someone for the good of others if on balance you are their benefactor, and if they were in no position to make the choice for themselves.

But now consider God’s choice in respect of the well-being of creatures who are fully formed – e.g. humans such as ourselves as competent as humans typically are. In virtue of the fact that we are currently making (relatively) competent choices, the ‘advanced directive’ and ‘suspended judgement’ criterion again have no application; only the objective criterion ought to guide God’s surrogate decision making. But my arguments suggest that the right of benefactors to make decisions of behalf of beneficiaries gets very much less when, even though still dependent, the beneficiaries become competent. Ought not we to be able to decide whether we are to live in a web of interrelations in which our life is sometimes of use to others? Even if on balance our life is good, if it is not what we choose, we have some right to reject it – a limited right in view of our continued status as beneficiaries. That is surely so, and God must respect that right. And I hope my readers will forgive my alluding to a grim truth – we do all, when we become adult, unless prevented by other humans, have the natural possibility of not continuing to live the sort of life which God makes available to us. We can all commit suicide. If we don’t like our hand of cards, we can hand it back. Babies, animals, and young children may not be able to commit suicide; but of course they are not competent to decide whether to do so. The physically incapacitated find it much more difficult to commit suicide than do others, but they can always starve themselves – unless others prevent them.

True, we are all under a moral obligation not commit suicide. We may be under such an obligation to parents and children and others who love us, not to commit suicide. Such obligations exist either as a result of our own choice (we have chosen to have children) or as a result of factors outside out control (we have not chosen our parents). God cannot remove these obligations except by killing off those who love us or by making them love us no longer. Yet it seems implausible to suppose that he is under an obligation so to act in order to remove our obligation not to commit suicide. And, secondly, we are under an obligation to God himself not to commit suicide. Given that God ensures that the gift of life is on balance objectively a good gift, no human ought to throw it back in the face of the giver. God is under no obligation to remove that obligation, for logical reasons – for B cannot
be under an obligation to A, if A is obliged to let B off the obligation if B requests; for B’s obligation then amounts to nothing. So, I conclude, God is under no moral obligation to remove any of our moral obligations not to commit suicide. But we do have the power, if we so choose, to commit suicide, unless, that is, others prevent us.

Ought our God to have kept from humans the power to stop other humans committing suicide? But that would kept from humans the power to frustrate other humans (for a while) in doing themselves an ultimate harm. Having this power is a great good for the former humans. Since what the would-be suicide is about to do is a great wrong (to his creator and many others), and since the lengthening of life can be at most for a few years, and the would-be suicide might well change his mind about his decision later, I cannot see that God wrongs the would-be suicide if he does not stop others interfering in this way. For we humans recognise that we have the right to allow some humans to stop others from committing suicide for limited periods. And as always, God’s rights are greater in quantitative terms than ours, and may reasonably be supposed to extend to allowing some to prevent others from committing suicide for a limited number of years, i.e. until death. We note that God himself allows us (if others do not prevent it) to commit suicide much sooner.

The conclusion of this discussion of God’s rights to allow humans (and animals) to suffer, is that God does have this right so long as the package of life is overall good one for each of us. Evil aspects have to be compensated by good aspects. But the results of the earlier part of this paper, that being-of-use is a great good, suggest that our normal estimates of the worth of the package which do not take that into account are likely to be wildly in error, and that most lives which seem (unless we take that into account) bad to be on balance are not really so. If there are any lives which nevertheless are on balance bad, God would be under an obligation to provide life after death for the individuals concerned in which they could be compensated for the evils of this life, so that in this life and the next their lives overall would be good. Thereby my third condition for God allowing evils to occur would be satisfied.

Notes

1. Some writers have used ‘theodicy’ as the name of the enterprise of showing God’s actual reasons for allowing evil to occur, and have contrasted it with a ‘defence’ against the argument from evil to the non-existence of God, which merely shows that the argument doesn’t work (see, e.g., Alvin Plantinga, The Nature of Necessity, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, p. 192). Given this contrast, my concern is with ‘defence’ rather than with ‘theodicy’, a defence which consists is showing that there are available to God reasons
enough to justify him in allowing evils to occur and so that their occurrence does not count against his goodness and so his existence as defined. I am not, however, claiming that the reasons which I give are his actual reasons. I believe that my use of 'theodicy' is that normal to the tradition (before 1974) of discussion of these issues.

2. Alternatively, the comparative condition might include some 'maximin' element – that it be not possible that e exceed g by more than a certain amount, or that any individual suffer more than a certain amount of evil during his existence. I am not concerned for present purposes with the exact form of the condition. Anyone who thinks that there are no limits to God's knowledge of the (to us) future actions of free agents, can clearly omit the word 'expected'. If God knows for certain what will happen, his actions need not be guided by probabilities.


4. I plan eventually to write a full-length book on theodicy to be entitled *Providence*, which will include the results of several separate papers and book chapters which I have written on the subject. A few of the paragraphs of this paper are the same as those of another paper, being published at about the same time but covering aspects of theodicy – 'Some main strands of Theodicy', in D. Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Indiana University Press). This latter paper is concerned to show that for many typical members of main classes of observable evils, my conditions (1) and (2) are satisfied.


6. This good, others have recognised, exists as a this-worldly good, quite apart from any reward for patriotic behaviour which might accrue in the after-life. The hope of such reward was not a major motive among Romans and Greeks who died for their country. 'The doctrine of a future life was far too vague among the pagans to exercise any powerful general influence' (W.E.H Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, Longmans, Green and Co., 1899, Vol 2, p. 3), 'The Spartan and the Roman died for his country because he loved it. The martyr's ecstasy of hope had no place in his dying hour. He gave up all he had, he closed his eyes, as he believed for ever, and he asked for no reward in this world or in the next' (ibid, Vol 1, p. 178). The well-known lines of Horace *dulce et decorum pro patria mori* 'it is sweet and proper to die for one's country' (Odes 3.2.13), were written by a man whose belief in personal immortality was negligible – see the famous ode 3.30 in which he sees his 'immortality' as consisting in his subsequent reputation; and seems to convey the view that dying for one's country was a good for him who died. It was of course a Socratic view that doing *just* acts was a good for him who does them (see Plato, *Gorgias* 479).

7. The example was originally put forward by William Rowe in his 'The problem of evil and some varieties of Atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), pp. 335–41, as an example of an apparently pointless evil.

8. John Rawls developed this theory of justice by asking his readers which moral and legal principles they would see as the correct ones if they were planning a society in advance without knowing which people they would be in it and what role they would play in it. See his *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 17–22.
9. On this as one of the purposes of propositional revelation, see my Revelation (Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 71.
10. Acts 20.35
15. Of course if the assumption is false, the qualification becomes unnecessary.
18. They do claim (pp. 26ff.) that we should regard competence as a ‘threshold concept, not a comparative one’, i.e. people as either fully competent or not competent, not as competent to different degrees. But the context of their discussion makes clear that what they are saying is that human-made judge-operated law needs to make a sharp dichotomy, to treat people either as competent or incompetent, because it could not operate with a mere comparative classification. But that allows that an omniscient being could operate with such a classification.

Address for correspondence: Professor Richard G. Swinburne, Oriel College, University of Oxford, Oxford, OX1 4EW, England
Phone: (865) 276 589; Fax: (865) 791 823