




ARTICLE

# God and Purported Logical Arguments from Evil and Suffering

James P. Sterba 

Department of Philosophy, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN, USA

Email: [James.P.Sterba.1@nd.edu](mailto:James.P.Sterba.1@nd.edu)

(Received 3 July 2024; accepted 5 September 2024)

## Abstract

Logical arguments from evil against the existence of God are the strongest form of arguments from evil. They maintain that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with the evil in the world. Given that the most well-known logical argument from evil remains the argument put forward by John Mackie over fifty years ago, I begin by setting out Mackie's argument in detail as well as Alvin Plantinga's well-regarded critique of it. I then discuss Mackie's not well-known confusing response to Plantinga's critique along with attempts by Hugh LaFollette and Quentin Smith to support Mackie's argument, which fail to take into account Mackie's own concession to Plantinga's critique. I then discuss my own attempt in 2019 to provide a Mackie-style logical argument from evil and the reception it has received. I end by suggesting that further discussion might best be pursued by taking up the related question of whether an objective ethics can be adequately supported without appealing to the existence of the God of traditional theism.

**Keywords:** Alvin Plantinga; an objective ethics; Hugh LaFollette; James Sterba; John Mackie; Quentin Smith

## 1. Introduction

Logical arguments from evil against the existence of God are the strongest form of arguments from evil. They maintain that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with the evil in the world. In recent times, the most well-known logical argument from evil was put forward by John Mackie over fifty years ago. Mackie formulated his argument as follows:

God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions: the theologian, it seems, at once must and cannot consistently adhere to all three.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>John Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence', *Mind*, 64 (1955), 200–12.

Accordingly, the three main propositions of Mackie's argument are

- (1) God is omnipotent.
- (2) God is wholly good.
- (3) Evil exists.

However, the contradiction between these propositions does not arise immediately. Mackie needed to add something else to the argument in order to explicitly derive a contradiction. The premises Mackie added were:

- (4) A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can;  
and
- (5) There are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.

Now if these additional premises had been necessarily true, a contradiction would have been derivable. It would have then followed that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism, if he exists, would have eliminated all the evil from the world. However, Alvin Plantinga argued, that neither premise (4) nor (5) is true, let alone necessarily true, as is required given that these premises needed to hold of God in all possible worlds in order for the argument to work.

In rejecting (4), Plantinga argued is that even beings, like ourselves, when we are good, we do not always eliminate evil as far as we can, especially when not doing so would lead to a greater good, and that contradicts premise (4).<sup>2</sup>

In rejecting (5), Plantinga had to assume that determinism was false, but given that assumption, he then argued that it may not be within the power of the God of traditional theism to bring about a world containing moral good but no moral evil, thus contradicting premise (5).

In this way, Plantinga argued that Mackie failed to provide the premises that were needed in order to make his argument work.

## 2. The Apparent Consensus

As it turned out, Plantinga's critique of Mackie's argument was a pivotal event in the contemporary discussion of the problem of evil. When Mackie failed to derive a contradiction by joining together (4) and (5) with the assumption that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism exists, and the generally acceptable empirical premise that evil exists (without which there would be no problem of evil), it was not as if philosophers working on the problem of evil at that time or since who wanted to support atheism had other suitable necessary normative or metaphysical premises waiting in the wings ready to deploy. After Mackie lost his debate with Plantinga, it was not clear how anyone inclined to defend atheism could continue to approach the problem of evil as Mackie had done. This helps explain why philosophers who still wanted to defend atheism turned their attention to a new strategy – that of developing what came to be called evidential arguments for atheism. All this meant was that atheists were no longer trying, as Mackie had, to add necessary premises to their arguments in

<sup>2</sup>Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967).

support of atheism. A consensus had formed that 'logical' formulations of the problem of evil were untenable.

Moreover, in his response to Plantinga, Mackie conceded 'that the problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another'.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, this concession by Mackie further helped support the consensus that 'logical' formulations of the problem of evil were untenable.

Yet what was totally ignored regarding Mackie's response to Plantinga is that after making his concession, Mackie immediately went on to say that whether what he has conceded 'offers a real solution to the problem is another question'.<sup>4</sup> And Mackie's own answer to this other question is that it does not. To provide a real solution to the problem of evil, Mackie contended, the defender of theism would have to show why the God of traditional theism, if he exists, would not have brought about a world in which its free creatures only do what is right, given that such a world is logically possible.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, in his earliest response to Mackie, Plantinga did attempt to show why the God of traditional theism would not have brought about a world where free creatures only do what is right, just what Mackie claims that the theist needs to show. Yet what no one appears to have noticed is that the grounds for Mackie's own concession precludes him from raising his further challenge to the defender of theism. This is because, Mackie tells us that the reason he had for making his concession is that he recognized that evils can be outweighed by goods to which they are logically connected. Of such evils, he writes:

... some bit of suffering which is actually the object of kindness or sympathy whose goodness outweighs the badness of that suffering itself will be an absorbed evil, as will be miseries or injustices that are in fact progressively overcome by a struggle whose nobility is a higher good which outweighs the evils without which it could not have occurred. What this defense shows then is that the existence of completely absorbed evils is compatible with the existence of an omnipotent and wholly good god.<sup>6</sup>

Yet consider: if completely absorbed evils in the world are compatible with the existence of the God of traditional theism, as Mackie allows, that would rule out God's creating a world all of whose free creatures only do what is right. This is because if the God of traditional theism is justified in permitting completely absorbed evils, as Mackie allows, then he must also be justified in not creating a world where all free creatures only do what is right. Hence, there is no need for Mackie to raise the question of why wouldn't God create a world all of whose free creatures only do what is right. He has already given an answer to that question; he has allowed that the God of traditional theism is compatible with, and so justified in allowing, completing absorbed evils in the world.

<sup>3</sup>John Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 154.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., pp. 154–55.

Of course, there remains the question of whether all the evils in the world are completely absorbed evils, but raising that question is quite different from the challenge Mackie originally raised with his logical argument from evil. Mackie originally maintained that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with any evil in the world. In responding to Plantinga, Mackie withdrew his original challenge and allowed that completely absorbed evils are compatible with the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism. As a consequence of Mackie's recognition of completely absorbed evils, there was no longer any need to use Plantinga's defense to show why the God of traditional theism would not have brought about a world in which free creatures only what is right. The reason behind Mackie's concession provides a more direct argument for that conclusion: it follows from the justified existence of completely absorbed evils.

### 3. What Really Happened

Furthermore, Plantinga's defense, by itself, does not suffice to show that the God of traditional theism is logically compatible even with even some evil in the world when that evil is taken to be, as it may well be, the horrendous evil consequences inflicted on innocent victims of immoral actions. This is because when Plantinga attempts to use his defense to show that the existence of God is logically compatible with the evil in the world, he imagines God creating us and placing us in a situation where we are free, and where the amount of moral evil that exists in the world is simply the result of how we exercise that freedom. Plantinga assumes that God cannot act otherwise without reducing the freedom in the world and thereby also reducing the moral good that comes from exercising that freedom.

Yet Plantinga fails to take into account that there are two ways that God can promote freedom in the world. He recognizes that God can promote freedom by not interfering with our free actions. However, he fails to recognize that God can also promote freedom, in fact, promote far greater significant freedom, by actually interfering with the freedom of some of our free actions at certain times. God's relevant activity for Plantinga appears to be limited to simply creating us and making us free. For Plantinga, what happens after that, particularly the evil consequences that result from our actions, is our responsibility, not God's. Yet it is far more plausible to see an all-good, all-powerful God as also interacting with us continually over time, always having the option of either interfering or not interfering with our actions, and especially with the consequences of our actions. Thus, because Plantinga failed to see that God, in particular, can promote more significant freedom over time by sometimes interfering with our free actions, he failed to see that the problem of the compatibility of God and the degree and amount of moral evil that actually exists in the world is not settled by just noting God's act of creation and placing us in an initial situation where we are free. We have to further consider whether the God of traditional theism, if he exists, should have promoted freedom by restricting the far less significant freedom of some of us in order to secure the far more significant freedom of others.

In addition, Mackie, following his response to Plantinga's critique, faced a challenge not unrelated to the challenge faced by Plantinga. Mackie, having allowed that the existence of completely absorbed evils is compatible with the existence of the God of traditional theism, needed to determine whether there are any unabsorbed evils in the

world and whether their existence is logically incompatible with the existence of the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism. Sadly, he did not even try to do this, but instead raised the question of whether the God of traditional theism should have created a world in which free creatures only do what is right, a question to which his concession to Plantinga already implies a negative answer.

Hence, both Mackie's and Plantinga's views faced comparable challenges. On the one hand, Mackie needed to show whether there are unabsorbed evils in the world that are incompatible with the existence of the God of traditional theism. On the other hand, Plantinga needed to determine whether the freedoms of the perpetrators of the horrendous evil consequences morally outweigh the freedoms of the victims of those consequences so as to determine whether what would have to be, if he exists, the God of traditional theism's permission of those consequences is morally justified.

#### 4. Mackie's Would-be Defenders

Now Mackie's argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism has had its defenders. In his 'Plantinga and the Free Will Defense', Hugh LaFollette, in support of Mackie, argues that the Free-Will Defender:

... needs to show that there are no possible worlds which contain moral good but no moral evil - at least not worlds which God could actualize. For if there is one such possible world, then either God is reprehensible for failing to actualize it, or else he doesn't exist.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, LaFollette did not take into account Mackie's concession, discussed above, in which Mackie allows that 'the existence of completely absorbed evils is compatible with the existence of an omnipotent and wholly good god'.<sup>8</sup> Hence, LaFollette defended a thesis that Mackie came to regard as indefensible.<sup>9</sup> The same is true of Quentin Smith in his 'A Sound Logical Argument From Evil'. Smith also defends the thesis that God should have made free creatures who always do what is right, a thesis that Mackie came to regard as indefensible.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, Richard La Croix in his 'Unjustified Evil and God's Choice' presents a different logical argument from evil from Mackie's.<sup>11</sup> La Croix begins by noting that it is usually assumed that the God of traditional theism, if he exists, 'had only two choices

<sup>7</sup>Hugh La Follette, 'Plantinga on the Free-Will Defense', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 21 (1980), 123–32.

<sup>8</sup>Of course, it was not La Follette's fault that he did not take into account this development in Mackie's view because Mackie published *The Miracle of Theism* in 1982 while La Follette published his article in 1980. As it turned out, soon after Mackie published his logical argument from evil against the existence of the God of traditional theism, H. J. McCloskey and Henry Aiken published very similar logical arguments from evil. Yet, unlike Mackie, neither McCloskey nor Aiken later published any significant modification of their arguments. See H. J. McCloskey, 'God and Evil', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 10 (1960), 97–114 and Henry Aiken, 'God and Evil: A Study of Some Relations Between Religion and Morals', *Ethics*, 68 (1957–1958), 77–97.

<sup>9</sup>Quentin Smith, *Ethical and Religious Thought in Analytic Philosophy of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 148–56.

<sup>10</sup>Unlike La Follette, Smith could have taken into account this development in Mackie's view since he did not publish his argument until 1997.

<sup>11</sup>Richard La Croix, 'Unjustified Evil and God's Choice', *Sophia*, 13 (1974), 20–28.

with respect to creation: either to create a world with evil or to create a world without evil'. Here, La Croix maintains, the opponent of theism 'usually assumes that the theist has a problem just in case God could have created a world without evil'. The theist is then said to counter 'that there is no problem because, after all, God could not have created a world without the evil or at least the possibility of evil which as a matter of fact became actualized [in our world]'.<sup>12</sup> Here, La Croix contends that there was a third, and what he regards as the morally preferable option of not creating at all.<sup>13</sup> La Croix argues 'that orthodox theism entails both that God need not have created and that if God had not created then there would be no evil at all'.<sup>14</sup> Thus, given this account of orthodox or traditional theism, La Croix wants us to conclude that if the God of traditional theism exists, he would have avoided bringing evil into the world by not creating at all. Thus, for La Croix, it follows that the existing world we inhabit is logically incompatible with the existence of the God of traditional theism.<sup>15</sup>

Yet what if all the evils we find in the world, particularly the horrendous consequences of those evils, were logically absorbed into greater goods? Then the evil in our world would not be telling against the existence of the God of traditional theism. This means that in order for La Croix to have a successful logical argument from evil, he would have to have shown that the horrendous consequences of those evils are not logically absorbed into greater goods, and clearly La Croix has not done that.

Thus, the consensus that logical argument from evil were untenable that began with Plantinga's defeat of Mackie's logical argument from evil continued to hold sway among theists and atheists alike despite the efforts of LaFollette and Smith to support Mackie's line of argument and despite the efforts of La Croix himself to offer a somewhat different logical argument from evil.

During this time, Graham Oppy was one of the few philosophers to even partly dissent from the consensus that 'logical' formulations of the problem of evil were untenable. In 2017, Oppy wrote in the conclusion of his essay 'Logical Arguments from Evil and Free-Will Defenses':

For what it's worth, my own view ... is that, while we currently have no good reason for thinking that there are logical arguments ... on either side of the dispute between naturalists and theists, we also currently have no good reason for thinking that it is impossible that we will someday come into possession of successful logical arguments ...<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>After assessing La Croix's argument in her book, *Suffering Belief* (New York, 1999) Andrea Weinberger writes 'contrary to popular theistic opinion, the logical form of the argument from evil is still alive and beating'. p. 39. However, when she gives her final assessment of arguments against the existence of the God at the end of her book, she writes: 'None of this [horrendous evil suffering in the world] is to imply that it is logically impossible for the theist to come up with some possible solution which ties up all [the] loose ends and satisfies the critic ...' p. 234.

<sup>16</sup>Graham Oppy, 'Logical Arguments from Evil and Free-Will Defenses', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. by Chad Meister and Paul Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 63.

Yet, it was just two years later in an endorsement for my book *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* that Oppy wrote: ‘This book marks the most significant advance in defenses of logical arguments from evil since the seminal works of Mackie and Rowe’.<sup>17</sup>

It is to that purported logical argument from evil that I initially presented in 2019 in *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* that I now present here in a more developed form that we now turn.

## 5. My Logical Argument from Evil

My argument begins by noting that all the goods that God could provide to us are either goods to which we have a right or goods to which we do not have a right. Each of these types can be further divided into goods that are logically dependent on God’s permission of horrendous evil consequences and goods that are not logically dependent on God permission of horrendous evil consequences. This gives us a fourfold classification of all the goods with which God could provide us.

I then set out three necessary moral requirements that apply to all the goods that God could provide to us. These requirements are exceptionless minimal components of the Pauline Principle never to do evil that good may come of it

Here is the first requirement:

### Moral Evil Prevention Requirement A (MEPR A)

Prevent horrendous evil consequences when one can easily do so without violating anyone’s rights and no other goods are at stake.

What is there not to like about the requirement? Surely, it is an exceptionless, necessary moral requirement.

The next requirement is:

### Moral Evil Prevention Requirement B (MEPR B)

Don’t secure a good using morally objectionable means when you can easily secure the same good by using morally unobjectionable means.

Again, what is there not to like about this requirement? Is it not an exceptionless, necessary moral requirement, just like MEPR A?

The last requirement is:

### Moral Evil Prevention Requirement C (MEPR C)

Do not permit especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions to be inflicted on would-be victims when a greater good would result from preventing them.

That greater good would consist in an equal opportunity for soul-making, the right to a decent welfare minimum, and the avoidance of the irreparable harm of horrendous evil consequences, where harm is irreparable when there are no goods that God could

<sup>17</sup>See *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* (Palgrave: New York, 2019).

provide to compensate those on whom the harm is inflicted that could not have been better provided without permitting those horrendous evil consequences in the first place.<sup>18</sup>

This good is much greater than the good that logically results from God's permitting such consequences which consists in an unequal opportunity for soul-making, an inadequate welfare minimum for some, as well as goods we don't need and can easily do without. In addition, the greatest good of the opportunity to be friends with God is in no way logically dependent on God's permission of horrendous evil consequences. Hence, it can be enjoyed in conjunction with the greater goods that logically result from God's prevention of such consequences.

Is MEPR C then not on a par with MEPR A and B, and as such an exceptionless necessary moral requirement? In the case of MEPR C, preventing the horrendous evil consequences does not provide the only good that is at stake for the would-be beneficiaries, as is the case for MEPR A. Nor is it the case for MEPR C that its would-be beneficiaries could get whatever good is at issue without permitting horrendous evil consequences as holds for MEPR B. Rather, for MEPR C, the goods that would-be beneficiaries could receive if God were to prevent the horrendous evil consequences at issue, are just much greater than the goods that they could receive if God permitted those horrendous evil consequences, and this holds especially for those on whom the horrendous evil consequences would have been irreparably inflicted if God permitted them.

Hence, there is no way the moral argument for MEPR C could be any stronger. It has to be on a par with MEPR A and B, and as such an exceptionless necessary moral requirement.

In sum, all goods that could be provided to us are either goods to which we have a right or goods to which we do not have a right. Each of these types further divides into first-order goods that do not logically depend on moral wrongdoing and second-order goods that do logically depend on moral wrongdoing. With respect then to first-order goods to which we have a right and first-order goods to which we do not have a right, Moral Evil Prevention Requirement A and B respectively morally constrain the pursuit of greater good justifications for both God and ourselves. And with respect to second-order goods to which we have a right and second-order goods to which we do not have a right, according to Moral Evil Prevention Requirement C, a much greater good would be secured though God's preventing horrendous evil consequences from being inflicted on innocent victims than would be secured from God's permitting of such consequences.

Still, it might be objected that if God were ever to start acting as preventer of last resort of horrendous evil consequences, good people would no longer have the motivation to prevent such evil consequences themselves. Now I have argued that when we choose to intervene to prevent especially horrendously evil consequences of immoral actions, either we will be completely successful in preventing those consequences or our intervention will fall short. When the latter is going to happen, I claim, God should do something to make the prevention completely successful. Likewise, when we choose

---

<sup>18</sup> Good people are more virtuous and a greater good thereby results when, with God's help as needed, good people willingly and bad people unwillingly are collectively prevented from imposing horrendous evil consequences on innocent victims than it is case when each good person, acting alone, attempts to prevent the same.



not to intervene to prevent such consequences, I claim, God should again intervene but not in a way that is fully successful. Here there is a residue of evil consequences that the victim still does suffer. This residue is not a horrendous evil, but it is a significant one, and it is something for which we are primarily responsible. We could have prevented those consequences, but we chose not to do so and that makes us responsible for them. Of course, God too could prevent those harmful consequences from happening even if we don't. It is just that in such cases, God should choose not to intervene so as to completely prevent both the significant as well as the horrendous evil consequences of wrongful actions in order to leave us with an ample opportunity for soul-making. I argue that if God were to prevent just the horrendous evil consequences of such actions in this way, it would clearly make the world much, much better than the world we currently inhabit. It definitely would not turn the world into a moral kindergarten since we would be able to prevent both the significant and the horrendous consequences of immoral actions, sometimes with God's help, when we chose to do so, and when we chose not to do so, we would be responsible for the significant evil consequences of those actions which we are imagining God would choose not to prevent in such cases in order to give us an ample opportunity for soul-making. Instead of being a moral kindergarten, it would be a world that morally good people would prefer to inhabit. It would just not be our world in which the horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions abound, consequences that an all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism, if he existed, would not have permitted.

We can also restate my argument to approximate the form that John Mackie should have used to succeed in his famous exchange with Alvin Plantinga as follows:

- (1) There is an all-good, all-powerful God. (This is assumed for the sake of argument by both Mackie and Plantinga.)
- (2) If there is an all-good, all-powerful God then necessarily he would be adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements A–C.
- (3) If God were adhering to Moral Evil Prevention Requirements A–C, then necessarily especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not be obtaining through what would have to be his permission.
- (4) Horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain all around us, which, if God exists, would have to be through his permission. (This is assumed by both Mackie and Plantinga.)
- (5) Therefore, it is not the case that there is an all-good, all-powerful God, which contradicts (1).

It is important to realize that my case against God with respect to moral evil has nothing to do with speculation as to whether God could have created a different world with different beings in it that suffer less than us or are happier than us or any such comparison. Before God creates, he is not under any obligation to anyone. Nor would it benefit anyone, not even himself, to create, or not to create one particular world rather than any other. Moreover, provided that the creatures in the world that God creates are better off existing than not existing given their natural capacities, no one would be harmed by God's creating that particular world rather than any other. After creation, however, God would have an obligation to benefit and protect those he did create, but that obligation is grounded in the needs of the creatures he actually brought

into existence. So, it is only after creation that God's options become constrained by what is for the good of the beings he created. Hence, given that creatures that exist in this world are almost all, as far as we can tell, better off existing than not existing, there is no argument against the existence of God that can be based on creation. That is why my argument is based on what God would have to be doing after creation because only then would God through his actions be benefiting or harming the creatures he presumptively has made. Notice that something like this obtains for ourselves with respect to the procreation of our own children.

Yet might it not help to avoid the conclusion of my argument against the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God to hypothesize a limited god? This has been an option favoured by, among others, Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, such a god would have to be either extremely immoral or extremely weak. Such a god would either have to be extremely immoral, more immoral than all of our historical villains taken together, because he would have permitted all the horrendous evil consequences of those villains when he could easily have prevented them without permitting a greater evil or failing to provide us with some greater good. Alternatively, such a god, while morally good, would have to be extremely weak either because he is logically incapable of preventing the evil consequences that we are only causally incapable of preventing or because he is logically incapable of providing us with goods to which we are not entitled without permitting us to suffer especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions, something that we ourselves are only sometimes causally incapable of doing. Surely then no useful purpose would be served by hypothesizing such a limited god who would either *be so much more evil* than all our greatest villains or, while moral, would *be so much less powerful* than ourselves.

Summing up, here are the most fundamental elements of my argument:

- (1) All goods that could be provided to us are either goods to which we have a right or goods to which we do not have a right.
- (2) Each of these types further divides into first-order goods that do not logically depend on moral wrongdoing and second-order goods that do logically depend on moral wrongdoing.
- (3) With respect to first-order goods to which we have a right and first-order goods to which we do not have a right, Moral Evil Prevention Requirement A and Moral Evil Prevention Requirement B respectively morally constrain the pursuit of greater-good justifications for both God and ourselves.
- (4) And with respect to second-order goods to which we have a right and second-order goods to which we do not have a right, according to Moral Evil Prevention Requirement C, the greater good that would result from preventing rather than permitting horrendous evil consequences would require God and ourselves to prevent rather than to permit those consequences on which the very existence of the second-order goods depend.
- (5) Morally good people would not object to God's universal imposition of Moral Evil Prevention Requirements A-C, as needed. Morally bad people would object,

---

<sup>19</sup>Charles Hartshorne, *A Natural Theology for Our Time* (Open Court, 1967); Alfred Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Chicago: Macmillan, 1926).

but no one would be morally required to take their objections into account in this regard.

- (6) These evil preventions have not generally occurred in our world which is logically incompatible with the existence of the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism.

Thus, it was only in 2019 with significant assistance from an earlier Templeton grant that I was able to draw on yet untapped resources from moral and political philosophy to come up with minimal, but logically necessary, moral requirements of the Pauline Principle to formulate the Mackie-style logical argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism that I have just set out here in its most developed form to date.

## 6. The On-Going Debate

Now debate over the argument of my book has been ongoing since its publication. In 2020, there was an Author Meets Critics session on the book at the annual meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion. The papers from that meeting and my responses to them together with another follow-up set of critiques (Afterthoughts) with my responses were fast-tracked for publication in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* in 2020. One of my contributions to this Author Meets Critics session was the most read article in the journal for 2020. There was also a Zoom debate over the argument of my book at Princeton University and two in-person debates in Charlotte, North Carolina, the last one at the annual meeting of the Southern Evangelical Seminary (SES) Conference before an audience of over 800, quite a number of whom offered up challenging questions both during and after the debate. Most recently, there was an in-person debate with Adam Johnson at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln sponsored by Ratio Christi.<sup>20</sup> Both of these debates can be viewed online.

Nevertheless, the most important development for the purposes of determining the soundness and validity of my logical argument from evil are two special issues of *Religions* that I was asked to guest-edit, both of which, although differently titled, were focused on my argument. The first one was published in 2021. It contained an unprecedented 16 critiques of my argument. Most of the philosophers who contributed papers to this special issue were from the US and the UK, but New Zealand and the Czech Republic were also represented. Even more diverse were the critiques these philosophers themselves raised to my logical argument from evil. Happily, I was given a chance to briefly respond to each paper. My responses were then collected together and included as the lead essay for the special issue.

As it turned out, the editors of *Religions* were so pleased with the contributions to the first special issue I guest-edited, that they asked me to guest-edit another special issue. I accepted their offer and picked a topic closely connected to the topic of the first special issue. Since the argument of my book purports to be a logical argument from evil, one that shows that the God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world, I proposed as the topic for this new special issue 'Do we now have a logical argument from evil?'

<sup>20</sup>Adam Johnson, *Divine Love Theory* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2023).

Contributions to this second special issue were even more diverse than to the first. Although, as in the case of the first special issue, the majority of contributors are from the US and the UK, this special issue also included contributors from, Turkey, China, Italy, Austria, Israel, Finland, New Zealand, Australia, Spain, Slovakia, and Germany. Altogether 40 philosophers, a totally unprecedented number, published in this second special issue providing a diverse array of critiques of my God argument. Happily, as with the first special issue, I was given a chance to briefly respond to each contribution.

When I thought it would be useful, I sent a draft of my response to particular contributors asking them to evaluate them for accuracy and cogency. Frequently, this produced a flurry of e-mails back and forth, and sometimes a Zoom meeting or, in one case, two such meetings, which led to improved or better understood responses. A debate book with Ricard Swinburne in which I defend my logical argument just published with OUP was also the result of number of back and forth exchanges between Swinburne and myself.<sup>21</sup>

Now responding to all these critics did lead me to make a number of important changes in the argument I have presented here. Nevertheless, the main conclusion of my argument has remained unchanged. I still hold that the all-good, all-powerful God of traditional theism is logically incompatible with all the evil in the world.

Moreover, the contrast with the Plantinga/Mackie exchange of more than fifty years ago could not be starker. Plantinga was essentially able to drive a philosophical truck through Mackie's argument. Later, critics frequently just reused Plantinga's argument against Mackie, seeing no reason to do more. And eventually, even Mackie admitted in print that his purported logical argument failed. Yet nothing even remotely like that has happened with regard to my Mackie-style logically argument from evil against the existence of the God of traditional theism.

Now there were a few contributors to the special issues of *Religions* who after I had responded to them have taken advantage of opportunities that were provided to critique my argument again. However, in these cases, the critics did not simply repeat the objections that they raised earlier to which I had responded. Rather, they responded with new objections or with new arguments in support of the objections that they had raised earlier to which I had responded. The one exception to this pattern was the exchange I have had with William Hasker. Hasker had raised a particular objection to my God argument as one of the critics in the Author Meets Critics session at the annual meeting of the Society for Philosophy of Religion in 2020. After I responded to it, Hasker again raised essentially the same objection in the Afterthoughts to which I then responded in essentially the same way as I had before. Both the Author Meets Critics and the Afterthoughts were subsequently published in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* in 2020. I then invited Hasker to contribute to the first special issue of *Religions* that I was guest-editing at the time. When in his contribution, Hasker again raised essentially the same objection he had raised twice before, I took stock. I figured out that if I limited the evil consequences that I said God should prevent as a last resort to just 'especially horrendous evil consequences' rather than 'significant and especially horrendous evil consequences', I could thereby increase the

---

<sup>21</sup>See James Sterba and Richard Swinburne, *Could a Good God Permit So Much Suffering? A Debate* (Oxford: Oxford, 2024).

scope of evil consequences that we humans would still have full responsibility to prevent thereby ensuring that the moral evil prevention requirements I derived from the Pauline Principle did not leave us in a moral kindergarten, as Hasker had claimed. After making this important change in my argument, I invited Hasker to contribute to the second special issue, and when he decided not to do so, in my judgment, at least partly because given the change I had now made in my argument, it was quite clear that a kindergarten objection could no longer be thought to apply to it.

In the future, I intend to explore the question of whether without the God of traditional theism there can be an objective ethics. If there cannot be an objective ethics without the God of traditional theism to ground that ethics, this might be thought to be sufficient reason to reject my logical argument from evil. As it turns out, there are theists and atheists on both sides of the question. Thus, some theists maintain that an objective ethics can only be grounded either in God's commands or in his nature. These same theists, along with some atheists, maintain, that an objective ethics without God is not possible. In contrast, other theists maintain, along with still other atheists, that an objective ethics must be grounded in a standard that does not depend for its justification on the existence of the God of traditional theism. For these theists, along with like-minded atheists, an objective ethics without God is definitely possible. To better understand how this question relates to the logical argument from evil that I defend, I will be guest-editing a special issue of *Religions* on the topic of 'Is an Ethics Without God Possible?' I can think of no better way to continue my work on the topic of this essay.