

## Avoiding the afterlife: theodicy, victims of suffering, and the argument from usefulness

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ABSTRACT. Contemporary proponents of theodicy generally believe that a theodical reply to the evidential argument from evil must involve some appeal to the afterlife. In Richard Swinburne's writings on theodicy, however, we find two arguments that may be offered in opposition to this prevailing view. In this paper, these two arguments – the argument from usefulness and the argument from assumed consent – are explained and evaluated. It is suggested that both of these arguments are rendered ineffective by their failure to distinguish between the different ways in which persons may be of-use in the attainment of some good state of affairs.

### Introduction

Amongst contemporary theistic philosophers who regard theodicy<sup>1</sup> as a viable enterprise, it is usually accepted that any attempt at theodicy must incorporate some appeal to the afterlife. This need to appeal to the afterlife may be seen to arise for either of two reasons. On one hand – supposing we have a greater-goods type theodicy in which God permits earthly evils so that he can attain greater goods overall – proponents of theodicy may feel that any set of this-worldly

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<sup>1</sup> Here (and throughout this paper) I am using the term theodicy in a narrow (but not esoteric) sense to denote any theistic reply to the evidential argument from evil which seeks to refute the claim that there are gratuitous evils in our world, and which does so by describing – in either general or specific terms – what reasons a perfectly good God might have for permitting the different kinds and amounts of evil we observe in our world. On this usage of the term, a theodicy is distinguished from a defence by virtue of its being intended to be a *plausible* explanation of God's reasons for permitting the evils in our world, rather than a (merely) logical possible explanation of those reasons. In addition, my understanding of the theodical enterprise is that it eschews (or should eschew) those premises used in sceptical theistic responses to the evidential argument from evil which deny our capacity as human subjects to make reliable judgements about the existence or non-existence of morally significant goods in our world. In undertaking the task of theodicy, I think, one assumes that the human capacity to identify good and evil states of affairs, even highly complex ones, is not subject to any insuperable cognitive limitations.

goods that one might suggest would be insufficient to justify the immense quantity of evil we observe in our world. If there are goods great enough to justify the horrors of our world, the theodist might say, they must be goods (such as beatific union with God) whose realisation occurs in the hereafter. Alternatively, the need to appeal to an afterlife may arise out of consideration for those individuals in our world – especially young children – who suffer horrendous evils in this life. Even if there were greater goods in the long run, the theodist might say, a perfectly good God could not allow innocent beings to suffer terribly for the sake of those goods, except, perhaps, if the sufferers *themselves* benefited from their participation in this system, e.g. by being honoured and rewarded with overwhelmingly great goods in the afterlife.<sup>2</sup>

In trying to determine whether or not theodicy is, in fact, a viable enterprise overall, one of the questions we will need to address is whether the considerations noted above actually do force theodists to claim that there will be an afterlife, or whether the appeal to an afterlife can somehow be avoided. In this paper I hope to make a small contribution to this task by evaluating a pair of arguments that can be used to oppose the second of the two views I have described above, i.e. the view that consideration for the well-being of innocent sufferers in our world necessitates an appeal to the afterlife in theodicy. The arguments that I will be examining here come from the writing of Richard Swinburne, appearing first in his late 1970s work before undergoing gradual refinements up until their inclusion in his 1998 book *Providence and the Problem of Evil*.<sup>3</sup> In his earlier writings on the topic, Swinburne seemed to think that a successful theodicy could be given without any reference to life after death. So, while Swinburne claimed to “see very strong reasons why a God would... bring about life after death, including the reason of compensating for the evils of life on earth” (1979, p. 221), his theodicy in its earlier form did not actually rely on the claim that there would be an afterlife. To invoke this claim, Swinburne reasoned, would be to make theism a more complicated hypothesis with a lower prior probability and therefore a greater need for confirming evidence to raise its overall probability to (e.g.) more than 0.5 (1979, p. 222). Two decades on, in *Providence*, Swinburne’s main focus had shifted from the viability of theism *per se* to the viability of *Christian* theism, and in accordance with this shift his theodicy in its latter form appeals to claims about the afterlife at a number of points. If I understand Swinburne’s project correctly, though, this apparent revision was at least partly a consequence of the shift in context between his earlier and later works. An overtly Christian theodicy given as a response to the problem of evil will naturally incorporate some sort of appeal to the Christian doctrine of life after death. That Swinburne’s attempt to offer an overtly Christian theodicy in *Providence* proceeds along these lines need not be taken as an abandonment of his earlier view that a theodicy *in its barest form* can succeed without an appeal to the afterlife.

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<sup>2</sup> This view is sometimes encapsulated by saying that the goods described in a theodicy should be ‘agent-centred’. See for example Marilyn Adams’s discussion in *Horrendous evils and the goodness of God* (1999).

<sup>3</sup> The more important publications by Swinburne of the topic of theodicy over this period are listed in the references.

At any rate, the arguments from Swinburne I will be considering are the only serious attempt in the recent literature to resist the predominant view about the necessity of the afterlife in theodicy, and thus they remain worthy of examination even if Swinburne now thinks that an appeal to the afterlife is unavoidable.<sup>4</sup>

I will call the two arguments that I am assessing in this paper ‘the argument from usefulness’ and ‘the argument from assumed consent’. The former tries to show that God’s goodness towards innocent sufferers is not contingent upon his providing them with an afterlife, because innocent sufferers experience – in this life – the great good of ‘being-of-use’. The latter argument tries to show that God does no wrong by innocent sufferers, even if he does not gift them with an afterlife, because God can reasonably assume that his creatures would choose to suffer for the greater good of all if they were given (*per impossible*) the chance to make that noble choice. Now proponents of theodicy have an obvious motivation for developing arguments of this type, notwithstanding the central place that the doctrine of life after death occupies in Christianity. A theodicy is supposed to consist in a plausible explanation as to God’s reasons for permitting the evil in this world, but the claim that there will be an afterlife of any sort – let alone one which satisfies theodicy’s specific explanatory requirements – is highly controversial, even amongst religious believers. If the enterprise of theodicy can go ahead without any appeal to the afterlife, then a plausible theodicy will more likely be in the offing. In my view, however, even if we grant the viability of the general approach that theodacists like Swinburne favour, neither the argument from usefulness nor the argument from assumed consent can succeed in showing that the claim of an afterlife may be avoided in theodicy. Both arguments are hampered by a failure to distinguish between the different ways in which people can be of-use in bringing about good states of affairs. Proponents of theodicy, I will argue, have no choice but to accept the view that is currently prevalent amongst theodacists (i.e. the view that there can be ‘no theodicy without eschatology’<sup>5</sup>), even if this view raises problems for the theodical enterprise on other fronts.

### **The argument from usefulness**

Let’s begin by considering a paradigmatic example of an innocent sufferer. The example I will use here is one that has been the subject of much discussion in the recent literature on the problem of evil. It concerns a five-year-old girl (henceforth ‘Sue’) who was raped, beaten and

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<sup>4</sup> At no point in *Providence* does Swinburne say that theodicy must appeal to an afterlife to resolve the problem of innocent sufferers, but certain passages would seem to strongly suggest that he endorses an appeal to the afterlife for this purpose. E.g. “God only allows humans to suffer at each other’s hands or by natural processes for periods of up to eighty years or thereabouts. If the bad, particularly the suffering, endured by any individual during that period outweighs the good, God does have the power to compensate that individual in an afterlife”. (1998, p. 232)

<sup>5</sup> The slogan ‘no theodicy without eschatology’ has been used by John Hick to encapsulate his views about the need for an appeal to the afterlife in theodical replies to arguments from evil against theism. A brief summary of Hick’s soul-making theodicy along with Hick’s response to various criticisms of his account can be found in Hick (2001).

strangled to death by her mother's drunken boyfriend.<sup>6</sup> Sue's brutalisation and murder poses a serious challenge to the theodist. In the first place it seems highly dubious to say that there are goods whose existence logically depends on the occurrence of the horrendous evils Sue endures and which will be great enough to morally justify her suffering, a point which Rowe has persuasively argued.<sup>7</sup> But even if one thinks that a satisfactory theodical account could be provided to this end – even if very great goods *did* somehow depend on the evils Sue endures – it seems especially dubious (given Sue's age) to think that these will be goods *for Sue*. The various types of putative greater goods that theodists generally advert to – goods like being able to grow into spiritual maturity, having a deep and hard-earned appreciation of life, being able to freely determine one's destiny, bearing great moral responsibility for one another's welfare, and so on – are not goods of the kind that five-year-old children can experience in any morally significant degree. The problem, then, is that in a theodical view of things Sue suffers – terribly and without her consent – for the sake of goods enjoyed by others (or goods of an abstract, non-personal nature); and surely a perfectly good God would not allow trade-offs of this kind. Apart from cases like Sue's there will be other examples of innocent sufferers in our world which raise the same problems (e.g. children who suffer a slow and painful death due to illness, or those who suffer severe brain-damage due to acts of violence).

The argument from usefulness proposes that innocent sufferers like Sue *do* in fact experience goods logically connected to their suffering, despite the way things seem. On Swinburne's account, the good state of affairs which Sue and others experience is the good of *being-of-use*. Whenever "an evil *e* makes possible a good *g*" Swinburne says, "it also brings about... the good of being-of-use" (1995, p. 77). To be clear here, Swinburne's view is not that it is good for a person to be-of-use in the realisation of evils. Rather, his view is that where an evil makes possible greater goods, *g*, it is a good thing for the person who suffers that evil that they can be-of-use in the realisation of *g*. Swinburne would still say, primarily, that the evils which Sue endures are justified because they could not be prevented by God unless our world was deprived of certain countervailing goods, *g* (e.g. noble or edifying responses to Sue's suffering). But Swinburne also thinks that the evils experienced by Sue make possible another good, one of a particularly high value and one which is first and foremost a good *for Sue*, namely, the good of being-of-use in the attainment of *g*. "The supreme good of being-of-use" Swinburne says, "is

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<sup>6</sup> This real-life example was introduced to the literature (in greater detail than I have given here) by Bruce Russell in his article "The Persistent Problem of Evil". Most of the discussion of this example in the recent philosophical discourse on the problem of evil has focussed primarily on the status of the evils in question, rather than on the circumstances of Sue herself. For instance, Rowe (1988) uses Sue's death as one of his two paradigmatic examples of evil in our world which seems to be gratuitous. On Rowe's view, there exists no good state of affairs which is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting Sue's fate (1988, p. 120). Contra Rowe, Alston (who coined the alias 'Sue' for the victim in the case) holds that we cannot justifiably assert that God does not have a good reason for permitting Sue's fate, or other evils like it (1996, pp. 118-19).

<sup>7</sup> See Rowe (1988, pp. 126-30).

worth paying a lot to get” (1998, p. 103). If we can come to view things in this way, he thinks, then we will see that “most lives which seem... to be bad on balance are not really so” (1998, p. 235). Swinburne remains rather cagey when it comes to making a judgement about whether or not the lives of innocent sufferers like Sue are, on balance, good for the sufferers themselves. If *there are* any human lives that remain bad on balance despite the good of being-of-use, then, Swinburne concedes, “God would be under an obligation to provide a life after death for the individuals concerned in which they could be compensated for the bad states of this life, so that in this life and the next their lives overall would be good” (1998, p. 236). The impression Swinburne gives in his treatment of the matter, though, is that cases where God would incur an obligation of this type are rare or non-existent. The mere fact that ‘puny humans’ have a role to play in God’s plans and can be of-use to God himself, Swinburne implies, should be enough to ensure that every human life is good on balance for its possessor (1998, pp. 235-36).

In evaluating this account, one would undoubtedly query Swinburne’s views about (i) the extent to which evils like those endured by Sue actually do lead to greater goods, and (ii) the moral calibre of a quasi-utilitarian policy for the permission of evil like the one Swinburne describes.<sup>8</sup> My concern in this context, however, is just in whether the argument from usefulness could allow Swinburne to avoid an appeal to the afterlife, on the (generous) assumption that his overall theodical strategy is tenable.

Perhaps the simplest objection to the argument from usefulness would be that being-of-use is not as great a good as Swinburne claims. So, while it might arguably be a good thing for me if I am of-use in the fulfilment of a good project, like the construction of a new shed for my neighbour, it is not clear that it is any worse a thing *for me* – all else being equal – if the shed is built without my involvement while I pursue a pleasurable activity. Swinburne regards this kind of esteeming of pleasure as a by-product of our secular society’s mistakenly hedonistic view about what is involved in a good life, and he tries to challenge this view with the following thought experiment. Suppose someone has to decide whether to lead (i) a solitary life of mild pleasure in which she does no good for anyone else, or (ii) a life of considerable pain which benefits another person because that other person can grow in character through his free responses to the first person’s pain. “If we simply want to make the most of our lives” Swinburne suggests, “we would make the second choice” (1995, p. 83). Now this might be so, but it does not show that a type-b life is better than a type-a life for the person making the decision. A person might opt for a type-b life for reasons that have nothing to do with the putative good of being-of-use that she is thereby able to attain for herself; she might, for example, have altruistic reasons for choosing a type-b life. At any rate, Swinburne’s estimations of the goodness of being-of-use seem to me to be compromised by his failure to distinguish between the different ways in which a person might be-of-use in the attainment of some good. This non-

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<sup>8</sup> McNaughton (2002) provides a formidable critique of some utilitarian elements in Swinburne’s theodicy.

distinction is especially evident when Swinburne supports his argument with claims like “helping is an immense good for the helper” (1995, p. 79) and “greatness consists in service” (p. 82). One can accept such claims whilst remaining entirely dubious about the special goodness of being-of-use. For surely part of what makes the act of helping a good thing for the helper is that she actively works towards the goal of the person she assists. When the concept of ‘being-of-use’ refers to a child who suffers horrendous abuse, where that abuse is instrumental in bringing about greater goods that the child doesn’t even know about, claims about the goodness of helping or serving just seem irrelevant.

### **Distinguishing different kinds of usefulness**

Swinburne accepts that the goodness of being-of-use depends to at least some extent on the attitudes of the person who is of-use. “It is much better if the being-of-use is chosen voluntarily” he says, “but it is good even if it is not” (1998, pp. 103-04). It seems to me, though, that this distinction does not go far enough, and that if we are going to recognise being-of-use as a good at all, we need to recognise different categories of goods that arise when a person is of-use under different circumstances. Now if I understand Swinburne correctly, a person’s being-of-use *per se* simply means their having some kind of causal role to play in the attainment of a good state of affairs, *g*. The categories of goods that we need to distinguish, then, are differentiated on the basis of (i) whether or not a person who is of-use in the attainment of *g* is of-use voluntarily, and (ii) whether or not a person who is of-use in the attainment of *g* is crucially or irreplaceably of-use to that end. The importance of the first distinction has already been suggested, but the second will require some elaboration, and an example will be useful for this purpose.

Let’s imagine that a valuable painting – Van Gogh’s *Starry Night* – is under threat from an art-hating crime syndicate. An explosive device which will destroy the artwork if it is detonated has been planted next to the artwork by the syndicate, and it is set to explode. There are people nearby, but no-one is in the immediate vicinity of the artwork and thus no-one’s life is at stake. Except, that is, for Bob, who finds out about the bomb moments before it is due to detonate, and, in an act of heroism, throws himself over the explosive device to absorb the brunt of its blast. In so doing, Bob sacrifices his life but manages to save the artwork. Now, in a different version of the example, the syndicate has planted a device near *Starry Night* and set it to discharge a non-lethal gas that will dissolve the painting upon release. This time around, Lee – a bomb-disarmament expert specialising in gas-releasing devices – learns of the plot and aims to disarm the gas device. Let’s also say, though, that Lee does this despite knowing that even if she succeeds in preventing the gas discharge she will expose herself to lethal traces of the solvent in its liquid form. In this case, then, just like in the first case, Lee sacrifices her life but manages to save the artwork. Now, if we assume that the cases are similar in all other respects, should we see the differences between Bob’s case and Lee’s case as morally significant? Both cases involve (i)

the attainment of a good state of affairs,  $g_1$ , in the form of the painting being saved, and both cases obviously also involve (ii) the bringing about of a very bad state of affairs in the form of someone's death. If we follow Swinburne's reasoning we will also recognise (iii) the attainment of another good state of affairs,  $g_2$ , in the form of Bob or Lee's being-of-use in the attainment of  $g_1$ . But the goodness of  $g_2$  will not, I submit, be equivalent in both cases, and the difference lies in the extent to which Bob and Lee's being-of-use was dependent upon their traits as individuals. Bob had no special abilities to single him out as the person to save *Starry Night*. Had he been doing something else that day, another brave person could have smothered the bomb to save the painting. But in the second case, if Lee had not intervened to disarm the gas device, nobody else could have done so. Lee's special abilities meant that, not only was she of-use in the attainment of  $g_1$ , but she was *crucially* useful to that end. My suggestion, then, is that *if it is a good thing at all* for an individual that they can be-of-use in the attainment of a good state of affairs, then how much of a good thing it is for that person depends on how crucial their causal role is in the attainment of the state. The difference becomes more apparent when we consider a parallel example in which the person who is of-use does not act voluntarily. Suppose the first *Starry Night* scenario is repeated, except that this time the person who smothers the bomb to save the painting is not Bob acting heroically, but rather Sam: a bystander who knew nothing about the bomb, who was abducted and drugged by an art-lovers' syndicate that uncovered the bomb plot, and whose unconscious body was used against his will as a human bomb-shield. Perhaps at a stretch we could say that it is a good thing for Sam that he is of-use in the protection of the painting. But surely it is not much a good thing for him that things go the way they do. Surely it would have been a far, far better thing for Sam if the art-lovers' syndicate had used another innocent bystander as their shield, or better still, had happened upon a few sandbags that could do the job just as well as a human body. If we are applying the concept of being-of-use in a general fashion, then of course we can say that Bob, Lee and Sam are all of-use in the attainment of  $g_1$ , since they all play an important causal role in bringing  $g_1$  about. But when one is trying to show that being-of-use is a great good for the person who is of-use, one cannot just appeal to cases like Lee's in which the of-use person is both voluntarily and crucially of-use in the attainment of the good state. In doing so, and in failing to distinguish between this case and one like Sam's, one is likely to greatly overstate the greatness of the good which is under consideration.

Let's return now to our earlier real-life example. If we recognise the distinctions I have adverted to here, then, in relation to the being-of-use of innocent sufferers like Sue, Swinburne's views about how it is a good thing for someone that they can help or serve are categorically irrelevant. Even if the evils Sue experiences are logically necessary in the attainment of certain goods, it does not seem to be a significantly good thing for Sue that she is of-use in the attainment of those goods. Firstly, Sue is not voluntarily of use: she does not consent ahead of time to suffer for the sake of goods in which she has no share. Secondly, Sue is not crucially of-

use: the goods which (on a theodical view) her suffering is logically connected to do not depend on it being *Sue* that is abused and murdered, they merely depend on some child suffering this appalling fate.

It seems, then, that Swinburne has to do more than just show that being-of-use is a good *per se*. He must show (i) that being-of-use is a good of an especially high order, and (ii) that this is so even in cases when a person is of-use involuntarily and in a replaceable manner. Swinburne presents various examples that are intended to bear out his view on the matter, and he suggests that reflecting on relevant examples is the only way we can make reasonably sound judgements about the relative value of different states of affairs, including the state of being-of-use (1995, p. 83). But even this is right, the example-based methodology that Swinburne employs does not seem to serve his task very well, for most of his chosen examples concern cases of voluntary being-of-use, and are thus irrelevant. And when Swinburne presents examples which do concern the relevant notion of being-of-use (rather than helping or serving) these fail to establish his view that being-of-use is a much greater good than we usually suppose. For instance, Swinburne asks us to think of someone being injured or killed in an accident which leads to reforms that prevent the occurrence of similar accidents in the future. According to Swinburne

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... if his suffering or death served no useful purpose. (1995, p. 80)

But even if we accept the claim that A's misfortune is less if it indirectly benefits others than if it does not do so, it does not follow that A's being-of-use is an overwhelmingly valuable good (e.g. one great enough to ensure that, all else being equal, A's life is a good one on the whole). Rather, it follows only that A's being-of-use for the attainment of *g* is a good *of some standing*. And if the example supports only the former notion then it is more or less superfluous, for as Swinburne says (1995, p. 81) most of us recognise being-of-use as a good of some standing, we just don't regard it as a good of especially great value. To take another of Swinburne's examples, it may (arguably) be right to say that if B is starving, then it is good for B to be-of-use to a more wealthy person, C, by providing C with an opportunity to be compassionate or generous. At least that way – Swinburne would say – B does not starve in vain. But this is beside the point. What Swinburne has to show, particularly if he aims to avoid the need for an appeal to the afterlife to compensate innocent sufferers, is that B's being-of-use to C is a good of great enough magnitude to ensure that B's life is good thing for him on the whole, all else being equal. Swinburne may be right in saying that it is a good *for Sue* that her suffering leads to greater goods of this or that kind, but this is not nearly enough. What Swinburne would need to say, implausibly I think, is that the good of being-of-use is such a great good for Sue that it outweighs the suffering she endures in her earthly life (and compensates for any goods she is denied) so that overall her life is a good



one for her. Perhaps where being-of-use means volunteering one's abilities in a way that is crucial in the attainment of a good goal, the good of being-of-use may be great enough to tip the balance in the direction Swinburne desires. But in cases like Sue's, where a person is of-use replaceably and involuntarily, Swinburne's examples fail to substantiate his claim that our usual judgements about the balance of goodness are "wildly in error" (1998, p. 235).<sup>9</sup>

### **The argument from assumed consent**

Swinburne's argument from assumed consent initially emerges in his discussion of God's rights over human beings. Even though there are utilitarian undertones in his theodicy, Swinburne accepts the view (typical among philosophical theists) that the permissibility of divine actions are subject to certain deontological limitations. If a perfectly good God is to allow some of his creatures to suffer for the good of others, Swinburne thinks, some restrictions must be adhered to. One of these, suggested in the previous section at several points, is that on-balance God must be a benefactor to all persons by ensuring that each one has a life that is good overall (1995, p. 88). More simply, God must have the right to allow someone like Sue to suffer her fate for the good of others, in situations (like Sue's) where we clearly do not have rights of this kind. The reasons for the difference between God's rights in this respect and our own, Swinburne says, are threefold.<sup>10</sup> Firstly, humans are able to seek the consent of a person whom they might want to allow to be harmed for the benefit of others, whereas God is not. From the theodicy's points of view, God's choices concern what sort of world and beings to create. If God's plans require some creatures to suffer for the benefit of others, and God has no way to seek anyone's prior consent to this arrangement, then, according to Swinburne, he is justified in deciding on behalf of his creatures to proceed with the plan. Secondly, God's relationship to human beings is fundamentally parental in nature. For Swinburne, A's right to allow B to suffer for the benefit of C is based on the extent to which B and C rely on A for their survival, their welfare, and so on. Since all creatures rely on God's sustaining activity moment by moment, Swinburne reasons, God's rights in this respect must be great. Thirdly, God's greater rights derive from his knowing precisely how things will turn out in the long-run (e.g. how suffering will affect a person's life) when we humans do not.

Reflection on this explanation suggests that the issue of consent plays a central role in the viability of Swinburne's view. Consider the common example of the surgeon who can save the

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<sup>9</sup> Swinburne offers another argument to suggest that the balance of goodness in human lives is more often in the positive than we suppose. "Very few humans indeed commit suicide" he says, "although almost all of them could do so quite easily" (1998, p. 241). The ambiguity of the notions "very few" and "quite easily" invoked in this proposition make Swinburne's intended inference about the balance of goodness in lives dubious, even where fully competent adults are concerned. At any rate, this alternative argument is clearly no help to Swinburne in the problem cases involving young children and others rendered mentally incompetent, a point he acknowledges (1998, p. 234).

<sup>10</sup> The following summaries are based on Swinburne's discussion in *The Existence of God* (1979, pp. 216-17).

lives of five people by illicitly harvesting the organs of one healthy patient. In at least some cases it seems reasonable to say that the surgeon knows everything she needs to know about the likely outcome of her actions in order to make a decision. But as David McNaughton (2002, p. 280) suggests in his critique of Swinburne's view, it does not seem in those situations that a lack of authority is the only reason why the surgeon should refrain from killing the healthy patient. The consent of the victim, and whether it is or could be obtained, is surely an important consideration in such situations. Now if Swinburne's approach to theodicy in general is going to work, he has to posit that some people will suffer for the benefit of others some occasions. Swinburne's contention, then, is that God is within his rights having decided on behalf of his creatures to proceed with a world-system that accommodates such trade-offs. In other words

God without asking men... has to choose for them between kinds of world in which they can live... a world in which there is very little suffering, and correspondingly little creative opportunity; and a world in which there is suffering but there is also great benefit, and where the sufferers are not always those who benefit... it does not seem to me that God would be immoral to presume that if (*per impossible*) the agents were able to choose, they would make the heroic choice.<sup>11</sup> (1979, p. 218)

In a recent article, Alvin Plantinga gives a version of the argument from assumed consent which addresses some of the same concerns as Swinburne's version.<sup>12</sup> Plantinga sets the problem up quite neatly. God, he suggests, has enacted a plan with the goal of bringing about exceptionally great goods in the long run. However, he says, this plan

Requires suffering and evil on the part of his creatures, and apparently requires a good deal of innocent suffering and evil: is that fair, or right? More crucially, would this be consistent with God's loving these creatures? (2004, p. 21)

If one thinks that God can only allow someone to suffer for the sake of greater goods if the sufferer is a beneficiary of those goods, and if the good of being-of-use will not suffice to this end, then the obvious conclusion will be to say that God must resolve things in an afterlife. But perhaps, Plantinga suggests, this is not so. God does nothing wrong if he allows A to suffer for the good of B and C if A volunteers to do so. Likewise, Plantinga claims, God does nothing wrong by A if he allows her to suffer for the good of B and C, on the knowledge that A would volunteer to do so if she could. But what if God knows that A's unwillingness to volunteer as an

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<sup>11</sup> Swinburne's rhetorical appeal to someone making the 'heroic' choice in this scenario is arguably at odds with his implicit views about the self-interested reasons someone might have for wanting to be-of-use.

<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that Plantinga's understanding of the role of a theodicy in a religious response to the problem of evil is quite different to that of many of his peers. For Plantinga, a theodicy is not necessary in order to maintain the reasonableness of theistic belief against the atheist's objections. Rather, a theodicy's purpose is (or should be) to aid religious believers in their own attempts to make sense of God's goodness in relation to earthly evils.

innocent sufferer is purely a consequence of A's ignorance of certain relevant facts (e.g. the greatness of the goods at stake)? Under such circumstances, Plantinga thinks, God does not wrong A by allowing her to suffer. What if we take the counterfactual one step further; what if A's unwillingness to volunteer as an innocent sufferer is merely a consequence of A's having "disordered affections"? Again, Plantinga claims that a loving God can act as though A does consent to being an innocent sufferer under these circumstances. "In this case" Plantinga says, "God would be like a mother who insists that her eight-year-old child take piano lessons" (2004, p. 24).

The problem with these arguments is that they do not recognise the importance of the different ways in which a person's suffering might be of-use in the realisation of a greater good. If someone like Sue was given (*per impossible*) the chance to volunteer her self as an innocent sufferer, it would be pathologically un-self-interested of her to do so. Perhaps if she alone could play a role in bringing about the exceptionally great good that was at stake, she might heroically agree to do so. But in Sue's situation, the alleged goods which – on the theodist's view – are at stake do not depend in any way on it being this particular person who is abused or injured or killed. The alleged goods just depend on there being someone who suffers that fate, or, alternatively, on the possibility of there being someone to suffer that fate. In the absence of any special traits or abilities that single her out for the role, or the promise of post-mortem greater goods that were dependent upon her suffering in this way, Sue would have no reason to consent to her martyrdom, and God could not with propriety presume that the necessary counterfactual conditions for Sue's consent would be satisfied. Perhaps, Plantinga might say, Sue's non-voluntarism would betray disordered affections on her behalf. But to say this would be to suggest that even a modicum of interest in one's own welfare constitutes a distortion within one's system of values. Alternatively, it is would be to suggest, rather distastefully, that one ought to see one's own welfare the way that God (on a theodical view) sees it; that is, as a thing which is expendable if and when the stakes are sufficiently high.

## Conclusion

Consideration for the welfare of innocent sufferers, I suggested earlier, should compel proponents of theodicy to appeal to the afterlife in their accounts. I have argued here that neither the argument from usefulness nor the argument from assumed consent provides grounds for the theodist to revise that judgement. Of course, my discussion in this paper has only concerned the second of the two reasons that a theodist might have for thinking that an appeal to the afterlife is a necessary feature of theodical discourse. Even if I am mistaken, and successful arguments along the lines of those discussed here could be provided, the concern about the insufficiency of this-worldly goods to countervail against the scale of horrendous evil we observe in our world would remain.

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