

‘Balancing out’ infant torture and death: a reply to Chignell

NATHAN NOBIS

*Philosophy Department, University of Rochester, Lattimore 532, River Campus,
Box 270078, Rochester NY 14627*

Abstract: In a recent article published in this journal, Andrew Chignell proposes some candidates for greater or ‘balancing out’ goods that could explain why God allows some infants to be tortured to death. I argue that each of Chignell’s proposals is either incoherent, metaphysically dubious, and/or morally objectionable. Thus, his proposals do not explain what might justify God in allowing infants to be tortured, and the existence of infant suffering remains a serious problem for traditional theism.

In ‘The Problem of Infant Suffering’,¹ Andrew Chignell considers the difficult question of why God sometimes allows infants to be brutally tortured to death. He notes that some might assume that (A) if God exists, then brutal infant torture and death is ‘redeemed’, ‘defeated’, or ‘outweighed’ in Marilyn Adams’s and Eleonore Stump’s technical senses of these terms (which all mean, basically, ‘is made meaningful for the sufferer and is seen by her as meaningful’). But he then shows that infant suffering is neither ‘redeemed’, ‘defeated’, nor ‘outweighed’, nor can it be, because, first and foremost, these concepts are simply incoherent when applied to infants. This is because, given infants’ psychological capacities, their lives cannot be, strictly speaking, meaningless and, thereby, cannot be made meaningful or seen as so (they might *eventually* have meaningful or meaningless lives, but as infants they necessarily lack these characteristics). So the consequent of the initial assumption (A) is a contradiction (roughly, ‘infant torture and death, which *cannot* be meaningless for them, is made *not meaningless* for them’) and thus, Chignell shows that infants’ sufferings are not candidates for ‘redemption’, ‘defeat’, or being ‘outweighed’ in the relevant senses of these terms.²

Chignell then argues from that, even apart from the logical and conceptual confusions of assumption (A), it does not follow from the impossibility of the ‘redemption’, ‘defeat’, or ‘outweighing’ of infant suffering that infant torture and

death provide any reason to doubt God's existence or goodness. This is because not all instances of innocent human suffering must be 'redeemed', 'defeated', or 'outweighed'. Some suffering can instead be 'balanced out', its intrinsic badness or evil partially or totally 'cancelled' or 'balanced out' in the whole by a greater good, a greater good that, according to Chignell, Adams, and Stump, benefits even the one who suffers. Chignell suggests that infant torture and death is a candidate for being 'balanced out', rather than 'redeemed', 'defeated', or 'outweighed'. He proposes some ways this 'balancing out' could occur for infants after their brutal deaths by torture (216):

- (1) Infants' sufferings could be 'balanced out (engulfed!) by the value of post-mortem intimacy with God'.
- (2) Infants could be 'simply taken out of existence'.
- (3) Infants could be 'reincarnated'.
- (4) Infants that would have eventually chosen to align their wills with God's will (a 'necessary condition for union with God') could go directly into 'blissful existence'.

I will argue that Chignell's proposals (1–4) are not plausible suggestions for understanding what goods could 'balance out' the sufferings of tortured infants for these infants, God, or even other human persons. (Like Chignell and Adams, I am assuming that a torturer's sadistic pleasures, and even, were he to do so, the goodness of his repentance, could not balance out the evils of the infant's torture and death.) Thus, Chignell's proposals do not defend traditional theism from arguments against it from the existence of seemingly gratuitous infant torture and death.

Some problems for Chignell's proposals

Briefly, proposals (1–4) are all subject to the moral objections that generate the problem of infant suffering in the first place; furthermore, proposal (1) suffers from the logical incoherence that Chignell criticizes in Adams' and Stump's proposals; proposal (2) offers no goods to balance out the evil in question and is thus not a coherent possibility (though, were it coherent, it would be subject to moral objections); and proposal (3) depends on undeveloped and undefended assumptions about reincarnation that are accepted by few in Chignell's target audience. Here are the details of these objections.

Regarding proposal (1), it is not stated what 'intimacy' consists in, but if infants lack the psychological capacities for their sufferings to be 'redeemed', 'defeated', or 'outweighed', it would seem that they also lack the psychological capacities to experience 'intimacy' with God, in any ordinary sense of the term (e.g. 'Michelle is intimate with, i.e. has an intimate relationship with, Christopher'). Chignell states that under the worst of torture infants experience 'blinding emotional pain'

and ‘raw physical pain’ (209). If infant capacities to experience pleasure are near the same level of quality and quantity as their capacities to experience pain, we should expect that in the presence of God, the greatest good, infants would experience, at best, ‘blinding emotional pleasure’ and ‘raw physical pleasure’. But this kind of pleasure is insufficient (and usually not necessary) for ‘intimacy’ in any ordinary sense. So it does not seem that infants could enjoy the ‘intimacy with God’ that is suggested to be the possible good that balances out their sufferings, and thus (1) is inadequate.

But if intimacy were possible in some, perhaps weaker, sense, it seems that the greater good for the infant would have been for it not to have been tortured, lived a good and full life, and *then* be ‘engulfed by the value of post-mortem intimacy with God’. It seems that it would have been better, all else being equal, to delay this intimacy for eighty years or so (otherwise, it would seem to be good for everyone to do what he can to be immediately ‘engulfed’ by the incommensurate value of post-mortem intimacy with God – i.e. commit suicide). If a normal life, in terms of length and goodness, was not possible, then it seems that God could have brought the infant into intimacy with him in a less painful way, perhaps painlessly in its sleep. This would involve no loss in post-mortem goods for the infant, and less pain for the parents, as it’s surely worse for them that their child be brutally tortured to death than it die peacefully. The problem here is trying to understand why it could ever be better for the infant (or anyone) for God not to intervene and allow it to be tortured to death, rather than allow it to live a normal life, or even die in a less painful manner.

Regarding proposal (2), simply put, a tortured infant’s post-mortem non-existence does no good for it. While nonexistence precludes the badness of further torture, it also precludes the infant from being the subject of any future, balancing-off goods. Thus it is incoherent to believe that this proposal is a possible way that infant suffering could be balanced out. It is also unclear what goods this scenario could bring about for anyone else either: a mother’s understanding that her child came briefly into the world to be tortured and then literally *cease to exist* would do her no good. It seems unlikely that God would get a great good out of this sequence of events, especially if we accept Adams’s assumption that God desires that all individual lives be made good and that no individuals be ultimately sacrificed in his pursuit of the greater overall good (i.e. that God is not a simple utilitarian) (206). So tortured infants’ ceasing to exist could not be a good that balances out their being tortured to death. But even if an infant’s nonexistence were somehow a necessary part of the greater good, it seems this could have easily been obtained without the brutal torture. The problem, again, is understanding why the death by torture is necessary and what makes God’s intervention in these cases impossible.

Regarding proposal (3), this proposal implies that a new life, a second chance, would be a good that would balance out an infant’s death by torture. While

Chignell gives no details here, let's assume that reincarnation is possible and that a coherent account of it could be developed, since, as far as we know, no-one has shown that these are impossible and/or incoherent (if this were the case then (3) would be immediately ruled out anyway).

Reincarnation seems to imply some kind of identity between, say, the formerly living and the currently living. Let's suppose that a normal, good, currently-living person is a reincarnation of tortured infant. For Chignell's proposal to succeed, we need to find a greater good that could 'balance out' the tortured infant's suffering and death (and, surprisingly, one that will benefit the tortured infant herself). It seems there could be a balancing-off good for the infant in this case only if the living person and, perhaps anyone close to her (e.g. family, friends, perhaps God) sufficiently benefits from the infant's death (as the infant supplies the soul or whatever material is necessary for the reincarnation) and the infant *herself* benefits from these events as well. Furthermore, the mere death and transfer of the soul (or whatever) must be insufficient for obtaining the greater good: the death by torture has to be a *necessary* component of the greater good, otherwise the torture is gratuitous.

But how is it possible for an infant to benefit from being tortured to death in her past life? We might imagine the tortured infant, in its post-mortem existence, 'watching' the living person's good life and the infant benefiting from knowing that her own death played an essential role in the new life. But this scenario seems to imply (apart from some very difficult metaphysical assumptions about personal identity) that the infant is not identical with the living person and, thus, that the infant was not reincarnated as this person (and, furthermore, if the infant can have these complex kinds of beliefs and feelings then it has, or has developed, the psychological capacities required for its sufferings to be 'redeemed', 'defeated', or 'outweighed', (i.e. 'made meaningful') in the manner that Chignell earlier showed to be impossible for infants and which generated the problem and his proposed solutions).

So this can't be right; the infant must be numerically identical with the reincarnated person such that if the reincarnated person knew the truth about what had happened to her, she would have to say something like,

I was tortured to death as an infant in my past life. I am currently being compensated for my horrible death and loss of life by my present good life. God allowed me to be tortured so that the greater good could be achieved for me in my current life.

There is nothing logically inconsistent here, and a response like this seems perhaps coherent in possible cases where a life is ended short and painlessly so that some future major harm is avoided and then the soul is reincarnated for a second and relatively harm-free life. Let's make the (perhaps unlikely) assumption that all cases of infant torture and death are cases where infants' lives are ended

short, and then reincarnated to avoid a very bad future. It seems that these reincarnated persons should then ask,

My current life is good for me and for others, but what would have been so bad about my past one? Even if my past one would have been very bad, was it *so bad* that the *least-bad* thing that could happen to me was my being tortured to death? Couldn't this very bad future that I was headed towards in my past life been diverted in a less painful way (for me and everyone involved, especially my parents), one that, at least, didn't require my being tortured, or, at most, didn't require my life ending at all? Why isn't one of these latter alternatives one that an all-good, loving, powerful, and knowing God would have brought about for me?

So, even on the assumptions that reincarnation is possible, can be rendered coherent, and that reincarnated persons can benefit from their past deaths, proposal (3) meets the same moral objections: it seems that the torture is not necessary and that God could have intervened to prevent it without losing any greater goods. Another objection, along Kantian lines, is that, upon reflection, it might seem to the reincarnated person that her infant past self was used as a 'mere means' by God to benefit her reincarnated self; she might then see her own life as founded on an act of injustice, which would make her believe her life is not so good after all or that it has been gained at too great a moral expense. Furthermore, Chignell's stated target audience, 'Christian theodocists and those interested in resolving this difficulty [of infant suffering] and better configur[ing] their beliefs about God and the nature of human suffering' (217), are unlikely to accept these assumptions about reincarnation, especially without strong arguments (which Chignell does not supply and for which it is an open question whether there are or could be any). This seriously diminishes proposal (3)'s explanatory and/or apologetic value.

Suggestion (4) is similar to (3) but more psychologically realistic in its language, as infants could go directly into 'blissful existence', rather than experiencing 'intimacy with God', which sounds more within the psychological capacities of infants. Proposal (4)'s reason that God permits infants to be tortured to death is so that they might be taken into a good, blissful existence, presumably with Him. The response to this proposal is similar to the response to (3): it seems it would have been better for the infants to enter 'blissful existence' with God after a full and good life. If a normal life was not possible, a less painful and violent death, perhaps painlessly in their sleep, would have been better for everyone, seemingly with no loss in post-mortem goods for the infant and less suffering for the parents.

Conclusion

Thus, in conclusion, proposal (2) is incoherent, proposal (3) is metaphysically dubious, and they are all subject to the very questions and objections that lead most of us to see infant suffering as a *prima facie* problem for traditional theism in the first place: What greater goods could be attained *only* by God allowing infants to be brutally tortured to death? What could possibly justify God in allowing great evils like these to happen? What goods would have been lost (and *necessarily* never found) if God had intervened in these cases? We have seen that Chignell's proposals do not identify goods that could plausibly be said to possibly 'balance out' the evils of infant torture or justify God in allowing infants to be tortured to death.

It is fallacious to argue from the fact that we have not yet conceived what these greater goods *could be* to the conclusion there *are* no greater goods that balance out infant suffering. But, until identifying more plausible candidates for possible balancing-out goods, the best response for a theodist to the problem of infant suffering may be that while she is confident that infant suffering will somehow be balanced out, she has no idea how this could happen in most cases of infant torture and death. The open question is whether this confidence is justified.³

Notes

1. Andrew Chignell 'The problem of infant suffering', *Religious Studies*, 34 (1998), 205–217.
2. In 'Infant suffering: a response to Chignell', *Religious Studies*, 35 (1999), 363–369, David Basinger argues that 'Chignell fails to show that the theodicy of either Adams or Stump is inadequate' and, furthermore, that Chignell's proposed solution to the problem of infant suffering is based 'on assumptions about God and evil held by very few' (363).
3. For helpful discussion of this paper, I am grateful especially to Gabriel Uzquiano. For discussion of the general topic and/or comments on an earlier version of the paper, I am grateful to David Basinger, John G. Bennett, the Editor of *Religious Studies*, Earl Conee, Daniel Dombrowski, Bill Tolhurst, and Michael Tooley.