

Infant suffering revisited

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Abstract: In two recent articles in this journal, David Basinger and Nathan Nobis raise objections to my characterization of infant suffering and the problem that it presents to theism. My main theses were that infant suffering to death is not ‘horrendous’ in the technical sense defined, and that a good God need only balance off rather than ‘defeat’ such suffering. Basinger, on the other hand, claims that some infant suffering should be considered horrendous, while Nobis suggests that such suffering must be defeated by God rather than merely balanced off. In this response I will briefly summarize my view and then respond to Basinger and Nobis.

Background

In two recent articles in this journal, David Basinger and Nathan Nobis raise objections to my characterization of infant suffering and the problem that it presents to theism.¹ In this response I briefly summarize my view and then respond to what I take to be the most significant objections raised by Basinger and Nobis.

There are, notoriously, many versions of the problem of evil. The version that is of interest to me here is (1) logical, (2) concrete, and (3) particularist. In other words, the problem involves (1) the question of whether certain instances of evil are compossible (in the broadly *logical* sense) with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good deity. The problem takes as its focus (2) *concrete* instances of evil, rather than the existence of evil in general. More specifically, the focus is on concrete evils of the ‘horrendous’ sort, by which I mean ‘evils the participation in which constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole’.² I assume that horrendous evils – defined in this way – occur in the actual world, and thus that the concrete problem of horrendous evils is a pressing one for actual theists.

Finally, this version of the problem of evil deals with (3) how such a God could be considered good to a *particular* participant in an evil *by* that participant.³ This particularist condition blocks global solutions to the logical problem of evil which appeal to the possibility that God has actualized a *world* which is on balance a

good one. That is because the condition requires that every *individual participant* in evil be able (justifiably) to judge that his/her existence has been a good and meaningful one, despite the suffering. A world which is on balance a good one may still contain individuals whose horrendous suffering gives them *prima facie* reason to doubt whether their existence is good and meaningful.

The participants I have in mind here are infants who suffer and then die while still in their infancy. This narrow focus is worthwhile, I submit, insofar as the sufferings of innocents – especially infant children – are sometimes thought to pose the most difficult challenge to theistic belief (consider, for example, Ivan Karamazov's challenge to Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*).

One of my working hypotheses in the earlier paper – unargued here – is that horrendous evils are so bad that they must be 'defeated' rather than merely 'balanced off' within the context of the participant's existence in order for a God to be considered good to the participant by the participant. Borrowing definitions from Roderick Chisholm, let it be the case that an evil is *balanced off* only if it is part of a larger whole which includes an equal or greater amount of good. An evil is *defeated* only if it is part of a larger (organic) whole whose value is greater than it would be if the evil were replaced by its neutral negation.⁴

In sum, then, we can say that a theodicy is *sufficient* to cope with the version of the problem of evil in question if and only if it shows how God's existence can plausibly be taken to be compossible (in the broadly logical sense) with the existence of every concrete evil. Given what I have said above, this means that a sufficient theodicy will describe what the theodicyist plausibly takes to be a logically possible and theologically viable⁵ state of affairs that includes⁶ each of the following states of affairs:

- (1) God exists.
- (2) Every horrendous evil is defeated.
- (3) Every horrendous evil is justifiably believed to be defeated by its participants.
- (4) Every non-horrendous evil is balanced off.

Clearly this is not the only way to set up the problem of evil and the project of theodicy. For one thing, this sort of theodicy does *not* aim to answer the question of *why* God allows a particular evil, horrendous or otherwise. (Such an answer, assuming there is one, seems likely to be outside the purview of creaturely minds.) Still, I think that this way of construing the problem and what it would be to solve it is both philosophically defensible and religiously viable.⁷

How bad is infant suffering?

With this background in place, it should be clear that there are two main ways of going about the project of constructing a sufficient theodicy with respect

to a particular putatively horrendous evil. First, a theodist can describe what she (plausibly) takes to be a logically possible and theologically viable state of affairs that includes God's existence, the evil in question, the defeat of the evil in question, and the justified judgment by the participants in the evil that the evil has been defeated. Alternately, she can provide reasons to think that the putatively horrendous evil isn't *really* horrendous, and thus that it doesn't need to be defeated. It needs only to be balanced off in order for God to be considered good to its participants by its participants.

Marilyn McCord Adams and Eleonore Stump are two theodists who take the first route with respect to cases of infant suffering to death. Adams explicitly claims that some infant suffering to death is horrendous, and she suggests that horrendous evils can be defeated by being included in one or more of the following states of affairs: (a) God expresses gratitude to the beatified victim for his/her *ante-mortem* suffering; (b) participation in the evil provides the victim with an extremely valuable 'experience of God', or (c) participation in the evil enables the victim to 'identify with Christ' in some important way.⁸ Stump, on the other hand, suggests that evils are defeated when (d) participation in these evils is essential to the process by which the victims choose to align their wills with God's. This process is worth participation in any evil, according to Stump, because making such a choice is itself a necessary condition for achieving the greatest good for human persons – namely, 'union with God'.⁹

Despite their differences, then, Adams and Stump agree that some sort of experience of or union/identity with God is the greatest good for human beings, and that defeat-scenarios for horrendous evils will have to include the achievement of such a relation to God on the part of the participants.

In my original paper, I argued that none of (a) through (d) is applicable to infants who suffer and then die in their infancy, even if appeals to *post-mortem* retrospective awareness of the value of the suffering are allowed. I will refrain from repeating the details of those arguments here – my general claim is that each of the scenarios requires the exercise of some cognitive or volitional capacity on the part of the *ante-mortem* sufferer, and that such capacities are not possessed by infants. Thus, if (a)–(d) are the only available scenarios in which evils can be defeated, the evil of infant suffering to death threatens to be undefeatable.

My friendly suggestion to Adams and Stump was that they should take the alternative route described above with respect to infant suffering to death. Given the technical sense of 'horrendous' that we are using, it is clear that infant suffering to death is not and, indeed, *cannot be* horrendous. This is because the capacity to suffer horrendously (in the technical sense) also involves certain sophisticated cognitive abilities – abilities to see oneself as degraded, as reduced to one's biology, as living a meaningless life, as being treated like something sub-personal, and so forth. Infants lack such sophisticated abilities; thus, I pointed out, the

suffering of infants (who die in their suffering) cannot be horrendous in the technical sense, and so (given our working assumption about which evils need to be defeated) the sufferings of such infants need not be defeated.

I went on to point out that the capacity to suffer horrendously (in the technical sense) and the capacity to have one's suffering defeated come as a package: both capacities involve the sophisticated meaning-making abilities that infants lack. If a victim of suffering lacks these abilities, then (sadly) her suffering *cannot* be defeated, but (happily) it also *cannot* be horrendous. As soon as the victim is old enough for her sufferings to be horrendous, these sufferings will also be susceptible to defeat. My further suggestion to Adams and Stump was thus that they should deal with infant suffering to death by employing a version of the 'ought implies can' principle. Because such suffering *cannot* be defeated, even an omniscient, omnipotent, all-good being would have no obligation to defeat it (surely one cannot expect God to do the impossible!). The most that one could reasonably expect of God is that such infant suffering would be balanced off. And given the religious value theory that both Adams and Stump utilize, it is clear that infant suffering to death can be balanced off if it is part of an existence that involves *post-mortem* 'experience of' or 'union with' the divine.

Basinger and Nobis offer a number of criticisms of my proposal. Here I will respond to what I take to be the most interesting and important of the bunch.

Basinger's view

(A) Basinger takes issue with my claim that infant suffering, torture, and death cannot be horrendous. He suggests two general rules for determining the degree of an act's badness.

- (1) 'The more defenceless the victim, the greater the degradation and thus horrific nature of the act' (368).
- (2) 'The more "evil" the motive, the more horrendous the act' (369).

On the basis of these rules, Basinger claims that some infant suffering *is* horrendous, and that 'the horrific nature of suffering is ... primarily a function of the context in which the suffering took place, not a function of the psychological state of the sufferer'.

Here, I think we need to distinguish between two kinds of horrendous evil: horrendous *acts* and horrendous *suffering*. My focus is and was on horrendous suffering, rather than on horrendous acts. Moreover, I take it that 'suffering' refers by its very meaning to psychological states (conscious or perhaps subconscious) of a subject. Basinger's focus, on the other hand, is primarily on horrendous acts, although he sometimes shifts between talk of acts and talk of sufferings without noting the shift. Basinger may not think of this as an illegitimate shiftiness on his

part, since he seems to assume that an horrendous act always involves horrendous suffering on the part of the victim. But Basinger doesn't provide an argument for this assumption, and I think there is reason to reject it.

Suppose we grant Basinger the claim that *acts* committed against the defenceless and acts committed with an evil motive are very bad, and that they may at times be horrendous in the technical sense.¹⁰ Even so, this implies nothing about the nature of the *suffering* that their objects undergo. A totally defenceless but nearly brain-dead person who is brutally attacked by someone with a very bad motive is a victim of a horrendous act under Basinger's two rules. But surely she does not (and cannot) suffer horrendously, for she is hardly aware of what is going on.

The case of an infant who suffers to death, I submit, is not relevantly different. The infant is presumably aware of the brute physical pain involved, but she does not have the capacities required to suffer horrendously (in the technical sense). As far as I can see, then, Basinger's inference – from his 'general rules' about horrendous *acts* to the claim that horrendous *suffering* is 'primarily a function of the context in which the suffering took place, not a function of the psychological state of the sufferer' – is unmotivated. And indeed it seems plainly false.

(B) Basinger also objects to my other main thesis: the thesis that infant suffering to death cannot be defeated. He does so by suggesting that we conceive of such suffering on the model of a painful surgical operation. Although a child who is operated upon cannot self-consciously experience value in their suffering at the time, Basinger writes, it may be that 'this person can come to realize as an older child or adult that this suffering did in fact contribute significant positive value to her life'. Likewise, infants who suffer can 'come to realize later in life or in a *post-mortem* existence that [their] suffering had meaning and value for their lives' (366).

Unfortunately, Basinger doesn't cash out this surgery metaphor. In particular, he does not provide a suggestion regarding precisely *what* meaning or value a *post-mortem*¹¹ infant might find in her *ante-mortem* suffering. My assumption, however, is that it is incumbent on theodocists to make at least some suggestions regarding *how* this might occur, without presuming to know exactly *why* God allowed the evils. These suggestions will likely amount to descriptions of what the theodocist plausibly takes to be logically possible and theologically viable scenarios in which God ensures that a particular horrendous evil is defeated. As noted above, Adams and Stump offer exactly this sort of thing. But, in the context of doing so, they both assume that the victim would possess certain meaning-making or volitional capacities *at the time of their suffering* in order for that suffering to be defeated, even though the fact that it was defeated may not be fully recognized until the *post-mortem*. My point is simply that infants lack these capacities, and thus that their sufferings are not susceptible to defeat in the ways that Adams and Stump suggest.¹² I do not see how Basinger's surgery metaphor could be cashed out in a way that avoids this problem.

Nobis on balancing off suffering

At the end of my original article, I made some brief suggestions regarding the manner in which Adams and Stump might amend their accounts so as to reflect the fact that infant suffering to death is not susceptible to defeat on any of the scenarios that they offer. My suggestions were intended to be consistent with the religious value theory which both of them assume, a value theory according to which experience of or union/identity with God is the greatest good for human creatures. Because Adams herself thinks that non-horrendous evils need only be balanced off rather than defeated, I suggested that her account could be amended to say that

- (1) infant suffering to death is simply balanced off by the great good of experience of or identity with God in the *post-mortem*.

Stump, on the other hand, seems to require that an *ante-mortem* choice to align one's will with God's be made by each person before s/he can achieve union with God. Because infants are not capable of making such a choice before they die, I suggested that Stump should amend her view to say that:

- (2) such infants are simply taken out of existence;
- (3) such infants are somehow reincarnated so as to have another chance to align their will with God's; or
- (4) such infants go directly into union with God after death, without choosing to align their wills with God's.

Nathan Nobis argues that each one of my four friendly amendments is 'either incoherent, highly dubious, and/or morally objectionable'. I will consider his criticism of each amendment in turn.

(1) According to Nobis, my suggestion that infant suffering can be balanced off by the good of experience of the divine is 'logically incoherent', because such experience requires sophisticated cognitive capacities that infants do not possess (104). But here Nobis misses the point. I did not mean to suggest that infants in the *post-mortem* remain at the cognitive level of infants. On the contrary, I assume that the traditional (though admittedly speculative) view in many religious teachings on the afterlife is that *post-mortem* people are much more cognitively sophisticated than your average *ante-mortem* adult.¹³ Even if there are some who would differ on this, the claim that *post-mortem* beatification involves a sizeable cognitive upgrade (while retaining psychological continuity or, perhaps, soul-identity with the *ante-mortem* infant) certainly seems to be logically possible. And a scenario that seems to be logically possible (and theologically viable) is all that I meant to be offering. I submit that the *post-mortem* experience of God scenario is just such a scenario, and thus that it is not incoherent to suppose that this is one way in which infant suffering might be balanced off.

(2) Nobis also criticizes my friendly amendments to Stump's account. He claims that (2) does not ensure that the suffering of infants is balanced off, because the nonexistence of an infant 'precludes the infant from being the subject of any future, balancing-off goods' (105). In fact I did not explicitly claim that infant suffering would be balanced off on this scenario. Rather, I suggested that this is one way that Stump might think about what happens to infants who suffer and die without choosing to align their wills with God's. However, on reflection, I think Nobis is right to claim that (2) would not be palatable to Stump. For Stump makes the particularist claim that a good God would govern evil 'in such a way that the sufferings of any particular person are outweighed by the good which the suffering produces *for that person*; otherwise, we might justifiably expect a good God somehow to prevent that *particular* suffering'.¹⁴ And it does seem that total annihilation of the person in question would preclude them from experiencing a good that outweighs that suffering, regardless of whether we interpret Stump's 'outweigh' here to mean 'defeat' or 'balance off' on the Chisholmian scheme outlined above. Thus, with thanks to Nobis, I withdraw (2) as a suggestion for how Stump's policy on infants might be amended.

(3) Nobis goes on to claim that my suggestion that infant victims of non-horrendous suffering to death might be reincarnated such that they could choose in a later life to align their wills with God's is not a viable account of how God might balance off infant suffering. His reasons are that (A) reincarnation itself is metaphysically sketchy doctrine, (B) reincarnation is not a part of the Christian teaching on the afterlife, and (C) it is not clear how the reincarnated infant's torture and murder in a previous life can be integral to an existence that is on the whole good.

Regarding (A): I agree that reincarnation is a sketchy doctrine, and I did not intend my mention of it to be taken as a metaphysical vote of confidence. I do think, however, that it is broadly logically possible that, for instance, substance dualism is true and that a criterion for soul-identity can be worked out such that it would make sense to speak of a person being united with a new body upon the organic demise of her old body.¹⁵ There are, of course, arguments in the literature according to which substance dualism is not even broadly logically *possible*. These arguments are quite controversial, however, and I think that most materialists and idealists would be willing to allow that dualism and/or reincarnation is at least possible. In any case, Nobis does not offer an argument for reincarnation's logical *impossibility*. Since I meant to be presenting a merely possible scenario, it seems that Nobis would need to offer a reason to think reincarnation is impossible in order for his objection to have much probative force.

Regarding (B): it may be that reincarnation is not theologically palatable to some theists. If that is so, then they should not employ this amendment to Stump's scenario. My suggestion was that those to whom it *is* palatable have the option of using this amended version of Stump's theodicy. There are quite a few people,

even in the Christian tradition, for whom some variety of reincarnation is a palatable and attractive theoretical option.¹⁶

Regarding (C): Nobis's claim, again, is that it is hard to see how the reincarnated infant's previous suffering can be essential to the production of a greater good as it would have to be if it were to be defeated. There are two things to note here by way of rejoinder. First, I claim merely that it seems *possible* that sufferings undergone by an individual, including those in any past lives, are required (at a conscious or even a subconscious level) for their ultimately choosing to align their will with God's. This suggestion is very much in the spirit of Stump's account, to which it was proposed as an amendment.

Second, God's actualizing such a scenario would go beyond the call of duty insofar as it would involve the *defeat* of the suffering involved. The assumption throughout, however, has been that God needs only to *balance off* non-horrendous suffering.

(4) Finally, Nobis criticizes my suggestion that Stump's theodicy might be amended to say that infants who suffer to death need not choose to align their wills with God's in order to achieve union with God. Nobis's claim is that this is a morally objectionable suggestion, since in such a case the good of union with God could presumably have been achieved without the infant's suffering and early death.

But, here again, my suggestion was explicitly one according to which the infant suffering would be balanced off, though not defeated. Infants who die in their suffering, on this scenario, would go directly into what Stump calls 'union with God', and thereby have their suffering balanced off. That's all that is required for a sufficient theodicy as defined above. Nobis's criticism is based on the assumption that in a sufficient theodicy every instance of suffering must be *defeated* – i.e. that it must be included in a state of affairs whose overall value would be worse if that suffering weren't included in it. Otherwise, Nobis assumes, a good God would have prevented it.¹⁷ My response to this charge is to plead guilty; indeed, this scenario does not involve the defeat of the infant's suffering. But I never suggested that it did, and I see no compelling reason to accept the assumption that it must.

Conclusion

In general, my sense is that Nobis (and possibly Basinger) believes that a sufficient theodicy must offer a plausible account of how every evil – horrendous or not – can be *defeated*, even though his paper nominally aims to discuss whether non-horrendous infant suffering can be balanced off. My working hypothesis, however, is that only horrendous evils need to be defeated. A good God would be justified in allowing small or medium-scale evils to befall us, for whatever reason

(or, I am tempted to say, perhaps for *no* reason), as long as these evils are balanced off in the context of existences that are meaningful and good on the whole.

If I am right about this, then the fundamental disagreement between Nobis and myself is one that is too complicated to be dealt with adequately here. But by way of conclusion, let me offer a brief consideration in support of my view.

Surely we can agree that it is possible for someone to live a very good and meaningful life even though she occasionally experiences illness and minor disappointment. The manifold ‘pluses’ of her life as a whole balance off the minor ‘minuses’, and this is true despite the fact that her life would have been *even better* without those minuses (the illnesses and disappointments were not, let us suppose, in any way essential to her enjoying a very good life). Retrospectively, she sees her life as a very rich and meaningful one – one that she could in good conscience wish on her friends – despite the fact that there were minor illnesses and disappointments included.

Analogously, the small and medium-scale evils that a person suffers in the *ante-mortem* would be quite minor in comparison with the ‘infinitely’ great good that, according to many religious traditions, awaits her in the *post-mortem*. If the experience of time in the afterlife is similar to that in this life (no small assumption, I realize), then the small and medium-scale sufferings in question will seem remote and inconsequential indeed after a few millennia of ‘beatitude’, just as a few illnesses and disappointments would seem remote and inconsequential at the end of an otherwise fruitful and meaningful earthly career. A person who has such an existence would rightly consider it a very good and meaningful one, one that she is glad to have had and that she could in good conscience wish on her friends. And this is true even if the person’s existence would have been slightly better without those small and medium-scale evils.

My suggestion, then, is that theists are within their rights to assume that a good, all-powerful, all-knowing God might allow such small or medium-scale evils, even if these evils are not defeated. As long as there is a plausible scenario on which these evils can be balanced off in the context of an existence that is very good and meaningful, their occurrence does not provide the basis for a logical challenge to belief in the existence of God. And if, as I have argued, the suffering to death of infants is not a horrendous evil, then theists can claim that it, too, is compatible with the existence of God, as long as it can be balanced off.¹⁸

Notes

1. Andrew Chignell ‘The problem of infant suffering’, *Religious Studies*, 34 (1998), 205–217; David Basinger ‘Infant suffering: a response to Chignell’ *Religious Studies*, 35 (1999), 363–369; Nathan Nobis ‘Balancing out infant torture and death: a reply to Chignell’, *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001), 103–108.
2. This is Marilyn McCord Adams’s definition. See Marilyn McCord Adams *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 26.
3. Of course, this is not to say that it isn’t important for others, apart from the victim herself, to think that God has been good to the victim. But my sense is that the perspective of the victim should be of

- primary importance for theodocists. For more on the distinctions between different problems of evil and reasons for focusing on the concrete, particularist logical problem, see Adams *Horrendous Evils*, chs 1–2.
4. The balance off/defeat distinction originates in Roderick Chisholm 'The defeat of good and evil', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 42 (1969), 21–38. Chisholm is relying on something like G. E. Moore's Principle of Organic Unity, according to which the overall value of a whole does not necessarily consist in the sum of the values of its parts. Thus, even a negatively-valued part, when put in the right 'organic' relations with other parts, may increase the value of the whole. See also G. E. Moore *Principia Ethica*, Thomas Baldwin (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
 5. By 'theologically viable' I mean consistent with the theological assumptions of the theodocist.
 6. A state of affairs X is 'included' in another state of affairs Y iff necessarily, if X obtains, then Y obtains.
 7. Basinger suggests that this way of construing the project of theodicy is only relevant for 'those who affirm a very specific understanding of God's moral obligation to those who suffer' – i.e. the obligation to defeat horrendous suffering and balance off non-horrendous suffering (367). This may be true, and I affirm that others may want to pursue other types of theodical projects.
 8. See Adams *Horrendous Evils*, ch. 8.
 9. Eleonore Stump 'The problem of evil', *Faith and Philosophy*, 2 (1985), 392–435.
 10. For more on how even the *perpetrator* of a horrendous evil may deserve to have his participation in that evil defeated for him see Adams *Horrendous Evils*, 26f.
 11. I set aside Basinger's suggestion that this recognition could come later in life, since I am only concerned with infant suffering that ends in death. I agree with him that infants who *survive* their suffering may come to see it, later, as balanced off.
 12. In her book (which was not published at the time of my original article), Adams briefly discusses the question of children and infants. She notes that children of every age are (except for the severely brain-damaged) 'potential meaning-makers'. Thus, we should 'count them among participants in horrors because childhood traumas significantly damage the individual's powers to make positive sense of his/her existence later on' (28). But what of an infant who dies in her suffering? Does the 'later on' here apply to the *post-mortem* as well? My suggestion, again, is that such an infant is not a participant in horrors, and that this is fortunate since none of Adams's defeat-scenarios could apply to the infant's *ante-mortem* suffering to death.
 13. For example, Augustine: 'When the last day of his life overtakes someone ... he will be received by the holy angels to be led into the presence of the God he has worshipped and to be perfected by him and so to get his body back again at the end of the world, not for punishment but for glory. For only when it comes to the perfect vision of God will this image bear God's perfect likeness'; Augustine *The Trinity*, E. Hill (transl.) (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), book 14, ch. 5.
 14. Stump 'The problem of evil', 411.
 15. I do not mean to suggest that a metaphysics of reincarnation can *only* be worked out in conjunction with a commitment to substance dualism.
 16. See e.g., John Hick *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Macmillan, 1976); Peter Geach *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge, 1969); Joseph Prabhu 'The idea of reincarnation', in S. T. Davis (ed.) *Death and Afterlife* (New York NY: St Martin's Press, 1989), 65–80; Peter Preuss *Reincarnation: A Philosophical and Practical Analysis* (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989); Leslie Weatherhead *The Case for Reincarnation* (London: City Temple Co., 1957); Geddes MacGregor *Reincarnation in Christianity* (Wheaton IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978); and *idem Reincarnation as a Christian Hope* (London and New York NY: Barnes & Noble, 1983).
 17. Nobis writes: 'it seems it would have been better for the infants to enter a blissful existence with God after a full and good life with no loss in *post-mortem* goods for the infant and less suffering for the parents' (107).
 18. Thanks to Nathan Nobis, David Basinger, and B. D. Ackerman for helpful comments on earlier drafts.