

The Non-Identity Theodicy

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Abstract

I defend a theodicy based on ideas discussed in the literature on the non-identity problem and the literature on origin essentialism. I then address a series of objections about the ethics of God's acts in my theodicy and about the metaphysics of origins on which my theodicy depends.

Introduction

Think about an animal in the evolutionary history of humans that, like Rowe's fawn, died in a forest fire. But imagine that this animal didn't just meet a bad end. Imagine its lot was far worse. Its whole earthly life was filled with undeserved suffering and was overall bad. Would God allow something so terrible?

I think God would. Given origin essentialism, no actual creature could have existed without its particular evolutionary history. If you change the origins of a creature, you don't get that creature. You get a different one. So God could not have made most of the creatures God actually made without also creating a world with the evolutionary history that the creatures of our world have. And He could not have made many such creatures without including the terrible earthly life of the animal that died in a fire.

Now suppose it is the Resurrection of the Dead, God has given the animal an enhanced body and mind and is chatting with it. The animal is grateful to God for eternal bliss and the enhancements it has received. But it has a question: "Why was my earthly life so horrific?" God's reply is that: "I couldn't have created humans without allowing you to suffer. So I chose to let you suffer. But I have also compensated you with an infinitely good life after the Resurrection. So I've done as good by you as is consistent with creating humanity. I think creating humanity was worth your suffering. By the way, I couldn't have created you without the suffering of animals earlier in your evolutionary history. I've also given them eternal bliss and various enhancements and done as good by them as is consistent with creating you. I think allowing their suffering was worth achieving your existence just as your suffering was worth achieving the existence of humans. A world at which I allow undeserved suffering, compensate it, and make beautiful creatures that I could not otherwise have made is good in a way that a world without such creatures is not. If I had adopted a policy that did not allow horrendous suffering, then I could not have made you or many of the other creatures I actually made. That would have been one permissible way to create. But the way I actually chose to create is also permissible. I adopted a policy that allows suffering, and in doing so made space for the existence of creatures like you. Finally, I put my own skin in the game. One of the reasons I became human and was completely broken on the Cross was so that I could make creatures with wonderful lives that otherwise could not have existed. I am glad you exist. And I am glad I adopted this policy."

In short, I claim that it is permissible for God to allow a creature to suffer horrendously if three conditions obtain: First, God compensates the creature with an infinitely good post-Resurrection existence. Second, God makes a bunch of creatures with infinitely good lives that God could not have made without allowing the creature to suffer horrendously. Third, God could not have created the suffering creature if God had not adopted a general policy of allowing horrendous suffering. I think that God satisfies all three

conditions. And so I think theism is able to plausibly explain almost all instances of horrendous suffering.

The Non-Identity Problem

Anyone who enjoys ethics or is a fan of Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* will recognize similarities between this theodicy and the cases that give rise to the non-identity problem. A natural thought is that since the agents in such examples act wrongly, God acts wrongly too. In light of this, it will be useful to consider the standard non-identity cases, the range of potential wrong-making features of the acts in those cases, and whether such features are present in God's case.

Disability: Anne wishes to have a child. She may select an embryo that will grow to develop a disability or a different embryo that will never have a disability. Either way the embryo will end up with a very good life. But the disabled embryo would suffer much more than the nondisabled one. Anne chooses the disabled embryo only because she desires the attention she would get from taking care of a disabled child.

There are a number of plausible wrong-making features of Anne's act in *Disability*. One possibility concerns Anne's intentions. She intends to use the child's disability and suffering as a means to attention. That is wrong. Another possibility is that Anne has limited resources. She could only pick one of the children. She picked the one that would suffer more. And in doing so precluded picking the child that would suffer less. Another possibility is that utilitarianism is true. Anne had an alternative with a higher utility than picking the disabled child. And she chose the alternative with a lower hedonic utility.

Contrast this with God's policy of allowing suffering in the theodicy. God is not using the creature's suffering as a means to get attention. His intention is instead to make room for creatures with wonderful lives that could not have otherwise existed. God does not have limited resources like the mother in *Disability*. Making a creature like the animal that suffers does not preclude making any number of other creatures that do not suffer. He can allow for suffering but still make as many non-suffering creatures as He pleases. On the other hand, God does fail to maximize utility. So if (simple) utilitarianism is true, then God acts wrongly. But the mother in *Disability* could have maximized utility and instead refrained. God, on the other hand, was unable to maximize utility. However many creatures God could have made with wonderful lives, He could have made even more. So the woman in *Disability*, could have acted rightly. But God, given simple utilitarianism, could not. Given ought-implies-can, this means we either have to modify simple utilitarianism to accommodate God's predicament or toss out utilitarianism all together. Either way, it seems hard to blame God for failing to maximize utility when, for any of His alternatives, He has a better one.

Depletion: If we pick Depletion, over the next five hundred years everyone will enjoy a slightly better life than they would if we had picked Conservation. But after five hundred years everyone will have a life that is just barely worth living. If we pick Conservation, then everyone will have a very good life indefinitely. No one who exists after five hundred years if we choose Depletion would have existed if we had chosen Conservation.

Our choice in *Depletion* has some of the same wrong-making features as Anne's choice in *Disability*. But in contrast to *Disability*, there is another possible wrong making feature. In

Disability, the mother gave her child a very good life. But in *Depletion*, we picked the alternative that would yield lives barely worth living when we could have instead picked an alternative that would yield lives of great value. God in this respect, is more like the mother in *Disability* than us in *Depletion*. For, given the assumptions of the theodicy, God didn't end up giving those who suffer undeservedly lives barely worth living. He gives them all lives of infinite welfare after the Resurrection existence is taken into account.

Deal: Ben and Claire make an unbreakable deal the terms of which require them to conceive a child and then give it to a billionaire as a slave. In exchange they get \$5000. The child's life as a slave will be very tough. But it will be slightly better than not existing at all. In the absence of such a contract, they would not have conceived the child.

Deal has some of the same wrong-making features as *Disability* and *Depletion*. An additional possible wrong-making feature of *Deal* is that Ben and Claire intend an evil. They intend that the child becomes a slave in exchange for money. This wrong-making feature is not present in the theodicy. God at no point intends the suffering of His creatures. He merely foresees and allows their suffering. Finally, the good that comes from their act, they get \$5000, does not outweigh the bad, their child becomes a slave. Contrast this with the consequences of the policy God adopts in the theodicy: An infinite number of creatures enjoy an infinitely good existence that they could not otherwise have enjoyed. And almost all of the creatures that suffer would not have existed if God had not adopted the relevant policy. These goods outweigh the bad of those creatures' horrendous suffering.

The Adams Family

My theodicy is influenced by some ideas from Marilyn Adams and Robert Adams. The idea about compensating undeserved suffering and identifying with Christ's suffering on the Cross comes from Marilyn Adams. The idea about employing non-identity style reasoning and incorporating discussion of examples like *Disability* comes from Robert Adams.

Objections and Replies

First Objection: It is true that God could not have created me, or any human, or most animals in our evolutionary history without allowing a bunch of suffering. But he could have created duplicates of all of us that wouldn't have suffered. Since He could have created such duplicates, it was wrong for Him to create us.

Reply: I grant that God could have created duplicates of us that do not suffer. But I do not see how this observation implies that it was wrong for God to create us. After all, He didn't wrong *us*. We couldn't have existed if He had adopted a policy that ruled out suffering. And He didn't wrong *our duplicates*. For if He didn't make them, then they don't exist and their interests don't count. And if He did make them, then creating us too doesn't wrong them in any way. Furthermore, He doesn't make *the world* any worse by creating us. After all, given the Resurrection of the Dead, He is just adding to the world a bunch of creatures with suffering up front but total existences of infinite value.

Second Objection: There are ways we should not allow people to be treated. Utilitarians would deny this. But so much the worse for utilitarianism. Think about letting a child die. That is absolutely impermissible. God (who is perfectly good and just and loves each one of us) would not allow it to happen.

Reply: Pick any deontological theory. It will have the implication that it is permissible to allow a child to die. Take Kantianism: Imagine I could spare a child's life by treating my waiter as a mere means to get beer. Kantianism would require that I let the child die. If it is permissible for me to allow a child to die so that I may avoid treating my waiter as a mere means to beer, then it is permissible for God to allow a child to die and then be raised to eternal bliss so that He can create an infinite number of people with wonderful lives that He could not otherwise have created. This is especially true given that the child could not have existed *at all* if God had adopted a different policy. Furthermore, commonsense morality implies that it is permissible to allow a child to die. I sometimes purchase beer. I could instead use that money to feed a starving child. According to commonsense morality this is permissible. If it is permissible for me to let a child die for the sake of a beer, then it is permissible for God to allow a child to die and then be raised to eternal bliss for the sake of an infinite number of people with infinitely good lives who would not otherwise have existed (especially given that that child would not have existed if God had adopted a different policy). Take Thomson's defense of abortion. According to her, it is permissible for Henry Fonda to allow a child to die so that he may avoid flying in from the West Coast and touching it. If it is permissible for Henry Fonda to allow a child to die so that he may avoid flying in from the West Coast and touching it, it is permissible for God to allow a child who could not otherwise have existed to die and be raised to eternal bliss so that God can create an infinite number of creatures with infinitely good lives that He could not otherwise have created. One might be a utilitarian like Peter Singer and deny that it is permissible for me to buy beer or refrain from treating my waiter as a mere means to beer or for Henry Fonda to stay on the West Coast. But it is not the allowing suffering that Singer objects to. It is the failing to maximize utility. And we have already seen that although Henry Fonda and I might be able to maximize utility, given God's power and His limitless resources, He is unable to do so.

Third Objection: This has the same problem that every theodicy has. It entails that it is permissible for us to sit back and never intervene to prevent suffering.

Reply: If God commands us to do something, then we are obligated to do it. God commanded us to intervene to help others. So we are obligated to intervene. There are different ways in which a world can be beautiful and good. One way is that it can be a world in which God takes undeserved suffering, compensates it, and uses it to make creatures God could not otherwise have made. Another way in which a world can be good is that it contains creatures that look out for each other and intervene to prevent one another's suffering. God wants a world with both goods and not just one. So He commanded us to intervene. It is true that if we fail to intervene God will nevertheless make something beautiful out of the evil that we allow and that He could not otherwise have made. But that doesn't get us off the hook. Given the variety of goods God wants us to enjoy, we are still obligated to intervene.

Fourth Objection: I am not considering horrendous evils sufficiently vividly: Imagine that a woman's child dies at two weeks, leaving her nearly insane with grief. A few years later she has two more children. After seven years her husband comes home from work and dies before her eyes of a heart attack. Once again she is nearly insane with grief. Then her young five-year-old daughter has a stroke due to an aneurism which leaves her unable to move or speak ever again. The woman puts her daughter in a nursing home and slowly manages to rally. She is then diagnosed with breast cancer. The surgery is too late, she is slowly dying. Entirely broken, the woman descends into madness and begins have sex with her remaining child, who is 11. She dies at 48 in agony and terror, cursing God. There is a

strong intuition that it would have been better for this woman never to have existed. Even if an eternity of the delights of heaven outweigh the badness of her earthly life, allowing her to be broken so horribly isn't compatible with the greatest love for her imaginable. That is wrong, regardless of the long-term good consequences for her. We might say either that her suffering cannot be compensated or that compensation doesn't make what happened to her permissible.

Reply: I am tormented by a mental disability. Although I have never "descended into madness", I think I have caught glimpses of what it would be like. It is indeed horrifying. Still, if I were given the choice to either have my mental disability utterly consume me like the woman in the objector's example and then be compensated with eternal bliss, or to have never existed, I would not hesitate to choose the woman's life and to be completely broken and then healed. I would rather God adopt a policy that allows for horrendous evil but makes room for me, my loved ones, and the woman in the objector's example than a policy that purges the world of such horrors but excludes us. This is true even though God could have created a bunch of people a lot like us but that wouldn't have suffered. Of course, after descending into madness I might change my mind. But I think my judgment about whether such a life is worth living while sane is more reliable than my judgment about whether it is worth living after I have been rendered completely insane. I find the idea that God would make room for beings like me that could only exist alongside a policy allowing for suffering to be very meaningful and beautiful. I bristle a bit at the assertion that those with lives containing horrors would have been better off not being created or that God's goodness would preclude their existence. It seems to me that if God compensates them for the horrors they suffer and if they couldn't have existed without God having a policy of allowing horrors, then creating them was a great good. It is not that I would be super excited about such a horrible earthly life. And it is not that I wouldn't dread it if I knew I was going to have to endure it. Nor is it that I want to downplay how horrific her life is. It is instead that I would pick her life plus an infinitely good Resurrection over non-existence without any hesitation. And I would deny that her suffering cannot be compensated or that it would be wrong to adopt a policy of creation that included her existence.

Fifth Objection: I am assuming that there is a distinction between doing and allowing and that while it might not be permissible for God to *directly cause* the relevant suffering it is permissible for Him to *allow* it. Someone might note that the distinction between doing and allowing is controversial. Others might suggest that although there is such a distinction, God is weird in certain ways that make the distinction morally irrelevant in His particular case.

Reply: My theodicy does not rely on the distinction between doing and allowing. It relies instead on this disjunction: Either there is a distinction between doing and allowing that is morally relevant to God's acts *or* God's permissible alternatives are expanded.

Think about euthanasia. When people debate whether there is a difference between doing and allowing in the context of euthanasia, they do not think that killing a sick patient is wrong so therefore allowing them to die is wrong too. What they think is that the lack of a distinction between doing and allowing expands one's permissible alternatives. They argue that since allowing a patient to die is permissible, killing them is permissible too. Similarly, if there is no distinction between doing and allowing (or if it is not morally relevant in God's case), then it is permissible for God to directly cause a creature to suffer in order to create other wonderful creatures that He could not have otherwise created and as long as He compensates the relevant creature. His permissible options are expanded and not restricted by the lack of a distinction between doing and allowing. Just as our permissible options are expanded in other contexts in which the distinction is deemed irrelevant.

Sixth Objection: This theodicy is not compatible with every variation of origin essentialism. For example, in some cases origin essentialism is glossed as the view that I could have originated from slightly different materials and at a slightly different time. But I could not have originated from materials that are too different or at a time that is too different. Such a view would not be sufficient to rule out cases such as:

Waiting: The fundamental particles that make up the sperm and egg combination that went on to form my actual zygote exist at the origin of the universe. Instead of getting those fundamental particles into sperm and egg form in the way He actually did, God leaves all of the particles just sitting there for billions of years until 1979 when He forms a duplicate of all of the world, including my particular sperm and egg combination, from the exact same materials that they are actually formed in 1979.

Given the gloss of origin essentialism in question, God creates me, and not a mere duplicate of me, in *Waiting*. For the time of my origin and the materials from which I originated are identical to my actual time and origin. Another case that would not be ruled out is:

Painless Evolution: Just like my actual evolutionary history with the exception that God miraculously intervenes so that no one in my evolutionary history ever feels pain. He also miraculously intervenes so that they behave just as the animals in my actual evolutionary history did even though they never feel pain and have no memories of pain.

Given the gloss of origin essentialism in question, God creates me, and not a mere duplicate, in *Painless Evolution*. For, again, the time and material of my origin are identical.

Reply: I accept a version of origin essentialism discussed in Robinson (1998), Hawthorne and Gendler (2000), Salmon (1986), and Forbes (1986). The formulation is this:

Assembly Origin Essentialism: If the materials from which a creature originated were assembled by a process that was too different, then that creature would not have existed.

Introducing a very big miracle, as in *Waiting*, or introducing a bunch of smaller miracles across billions of years, as in *Painless Evolution*, makes my origin too different. In these cases God doesn't create me. He creates a mere duplicate.

Seventh Objection: Not everyone would agree that *Assembly Origin Essentialism* rules out my existence in *Waiting* and *Painless Evolution*. Consider an example discussed by Forbes:

Suppose *z* is a human zygote that is formed by fusion of a sperm *s* with an egg *e*. Then one can conceive that scientists synthesize a zygote by building it nucleotide by nucleotide, and happen to use exactly the actual matter of *z* in exactly its actual *z*-configuration. In such a world, *s* and *e* do not exist, or so we can consistently postulate, but it is hard to deny that *z* exists. So *z* exists but does not originate from *s* and *e*, since they do not exist.

In this case, Forbes holds that if the materials from which I originate were assembled by artificial synthesis rather than the natural fusion of sperm and egg by which the relevant material was actually assembled it would still be me rather than a mere duplicate. Perhaps

Forbes would hold that if, right before my existence, God were to perform a tiny miracle assembling the relevant material into my zygote that that would also not rule out my existence. And perhaps Forbes would also hold that a bunch of tiny miracles such as the ones in *Painless Evolution* are not sufficient to rule out my existence.

Reply: I offer three arguments for thinking that if one accepts *Assembly Origin Essentialism*, then one should accept a strong enough version that rules out my existence in *Waiting* and *Painless Evolution*.

My first argument is that intervening in the world in the ways described in *Waiting* and *Painless Evolution* constitutes changes that are too big. At most a proponent of Assembly Origin Essentialism should allow a few minor changes to the process by which the materials from which I arose are assembled such as the one in Forbes' example. On the other hand, the miracles required in *Waiting* and *Painless Evolution* require big changes to the process. So my origin is not preserved in such cases.

My second argument is that accepting such a strong variant of origin essentialism yields a gain in explanatory power. If a hypothesis yields a gain in explanatory power, that is a reason to believe it. Take Lewis's (1986) modal realism, for example. No one has the intuition that there are concrete merely possible worlds. Indeed, many have the intuition that there are no such worlds. But positing them yields a gain in explanatory power. And that is commonly seen as a reason to believe in them. Similarly, adopting a version of origin essentialism that rules out *Waiting* and *Painless Evolution* forms part of a theodicy that explains why God allows evil. That is a significant gain in explanatory power for the theist. And that is a reason to believe in such a version of origin essentialism.

My third argument is that adopting such a strong version of origin essentialism eliminates vagueness. A mereological nihilist or universalist might hold that there is no principled line to draw between when a collection of objects form a new object other than never or always. So one should say that it is never or always. Something similar is true of the literature on events. Allowing that an event could have been different in any way at all leads to problems about how to say when the variation is too much for the event to be the same. So one standard view is that there can be no variation in events. What works for the metaphysics of mereology and events should work for the metaphysics of origins. There seems to be no principled way to say when an origin becomes so different that it fails to preserve the existence of an organism other than never or always. And if we are antecedently attracted to *Assembly Origin Essentialism*, it isn't plausible to hold that a change in origin never yields a different organism. So we should say that any change at all in the process by which the materials of my origin were assembled yields a different mere duplicate of me rather than me.

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