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The problem of infant suffering

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Abstract. The problem of infant suffering and death is one of the most difficult versions of the problem of evil, especially when we consider how God can be thought good *to* the infant victims *by* the infant victims. In the first portion of this paper, I examine two theodicies that aim to solve this problem but fail. In the final section, I argue that the problem can be better dealt with by maintaining not that God must redeem the suffering of such children, but that such children are not the sort of beings whose suffering God can or must redeem.

God is good, God is just, God is almighty: only a madman doubts this … Doubtless when their elders suffer these afflictions we are wont to say either that their goodness is being tested … or that their sins are being punished. But these are older people. Tell me what we are to answer about children!

St Augustine, in a letter to Jerome

The problem of infant suffering is one of the more intractable versions of the problem of evil. Since St Matthew wrote of Herod's massacre of the innocents, people in the Christian tradition have wondered how cases of extreme suffering, torture and death on the part of infants can exist in a world governed by an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God. The problem becomes knottier when we consider not how such a world can be good or well-governed on the whole, but how God can be considered good *to* the infant victims *by* the infant victims. In this paper, I examine two species of solution to this version of the problem: the Aesthetic solution and the Free Will solution. Augustine articulates both of these theodicies in rudimentary form; my focus here is on their best contemporary formulations by Marilyn McCord Adams and Eleonore Stump, respectively. I contend that neither approach handles the suffering death of infants in a way that is sufficient for theodicy – even on these theodicists' own definition of sufficiency. I conclude that the problem might be solved by arguing *not* that God must redeem the suffering of such children by making it meaningful for them, but rather that such children are not the sort of entities whose suffering God can or should redeem.

I

Much contemporary work on the problem of evil has been devoted to delineating the conditions under which a theodicy would successfully justify God's ways to humanity. Both Adams and Stump have fairly stringent criteria: both hold that a 'sufficient' theodicy must show (not *why* God allows

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evils but) *how* God can (1) redeem (2) horrendous evils by being (3) good to the individuals that suffer these evils in such a way that they (4) eventually deem their lives meaningful.

(1) Theodicists commonly make use of what G. E. Moore called 'The Principle of Organic Unity'. On this principle, the overall value of a whole does not consist in the sum of the values of its parts; on the contrary, even a negatively-valued part may increase the value of the whole. Where the whole in question is an Impressionist painting, for example, the particularly ugly smudges in the right-hand corner turn out to be essential to the overall beauty of the work. Where the whole is a maximal state of affairs, the intrinsically bad parts make the whole more valuable than it would have been had the bad part been replaced by its neutral negation.[1] In the contemporary literature, this sort of parts-to-whole relationship has been dubbed a *defeat relationship*; its dubber, Roderick Chisholm, convincingly argues that 'the theodicist *must* appeal to the concept of defeat – he can deal with the problem of evil *only* by saying that the evils in the world are defeated'.[2]

(2) and (3) Marilyn Adams contends that no 'abstract big-picture solution' to the problem of how

(P1) God exists, and is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good is logically compossible with
(P2) Evil exists

will suffice, even if it involves defeat relationships. Rather, it is 'God's *goodness to* [*individual*] *created persons*[—that] is the central issue in theodicy, and the existence of horrendous evils … is the principal challenge to it'.[3] The organic unities in the defeat relationships we examine must be individual lives, not total universes.

Adams calls 'horrendous' those evils that strike us as particularly gratuitous and thereby threaten our belief in the meaningfulness of the lives affected by them. She offers some 'paradigmatic' examples: the rape of a woman and the axing off of her arms, participation in the Nazi death camps, the explosion of nuclear bombs over populated areas, and the sort of brutal infanticide that Ivan Karamazov describes in Dostoyevsky's classic novel.[4] A

[1] See G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Rev. edition, ed. Thomas Baldwin. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.

[2] Roderick M. Chisholm, 'The Defeat of Good and Evil', revised and reprinted in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 53–68. This quotation is from pp. 68.

[3] P. 49, M. M. Adams, 'Aesthetic Goodness as a Solution to the Problem of Evil', in *God, Truth, and Reality: Essays in Honor of John Hick*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: St Martin's), 1993. 46–61.

[4] The full list can be found, among other places, on pages 211–12 in M. M. Adams, 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God', *The Problem of Evil*, 209–21. Adams also offers a formal definition of horrors: 'evils *e* the participation in which (as either victim or perpetrator) by a person *p* gives everyone *prima facie* reason to believe that *p*'s life cannot, given its inclusion of *e*, be a great good to *p* on the whole'. Cf. 'Aesthetic Goods as a Solution to the Problem of Evil', pp. 49.

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theodicy is only successful, says Adams, if for any person *p* it can offer a logically possible and theologically-sound scenario in which 'God ensures that *P*'s life is a great good to *P* on the whole, and any horrendous evils *P* participates in are made meaningful by being defeated, not merely within the context of the world as a whole, but within the scope of *P*'s individual life'.[5]

(4) This last move involves a change in perspective. It is not sufficient for theodicy that *God* deem *P*'s life meaningful. Rather, *P* must attribute positive value to her life from an 'internal point of view', where such an attribution involves *P herself* recognizing 'some patterns organizing some chunks of her experiences around goals, ideals, relationships that she stabilizes in valuing'.[6]

II

With these preliminary formulations in hand, we can now evaluate the two theodicies under consideration with respect to the horrendous suffering death of infants.

(*A*) *The aesthetic approach*

The first clear articulation of the aesthetic theme in theodicy is found in Augustine: 'For as the beauty of a picture is increased by well-managed shadows, so, to the eye that has skill to discern it, the universe is beautified even by sinners, though, considered by themselves, their deformity is a sad blemish'.[7] Augustine and his epigoni in this tradition hold that those who are troubled by (seeming) evil lack the proper point of view on the universe as a whole. Usually the proper point of view ends up being God's, or that of the saint in a state of eternal blessedness. This does not entail, however, that the aesthetic value of the state of affairs in question is unreal, or that it only exists *relative to* a certain point of view. Rather, the goods are 'perspectival' in the sense that while their *real* value is intrinsic to the state of affairs, it may only be perceptible from a certain vantage point.[8]

Marilyn Adams claims that aesthetic value in a human life that includes horrors 'could be sufficient for theodicy' under the sufficiency criteria outlined above.[9] This value cannot derive from earthly goods (sensory pleasures, human love, etc.), however. Says Adams,

[5] *Ibid.* pp. 49–50.

[6] *Ibid.* p. 55.

[7] Augustine. *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods, George Wilson and J. J. Smith (New York: Random House, Inc., 1950), XI.23

[8] Adams conducts her discussion within the framework of an 'unabashed realist' understanding of aesthetic value. This understanding entails, among other things, (1) that aesthetic goods are intrinsically valuable; (2) that there is an aesthetic way of appreciating aesthetic goods for their own sake; and (3) that this aesthetic appreciation of intrinsic goods is itself of intrinsic value (cf. 'Aesthetic Goodness as a Solution to the Problem of Evil', p. 49). I am inclined to work within this general value-theory framework in the present essay.

[9] Adams, 'Aesthetic Goodness as a Solution to the Problem of Evil', pp. 48.

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in the spirit of Ivan Karamazov, I am convinced that the depth of horrific evil cannot be accurately estimated without recognizing it to be incommensurate with any package of merely non-transcendent goods and so unable to be balanced off, much less defeated, thereby.[10]

Adams' contention is that a person's experience of horrendous evils could only be defeated by 'being made meaningful through integration into that person's, on the whole overwhelmingly felicitous, relationship with God'.[11] Beatific intimacy with the Divine is the only good, aesthetic or otherwise, that is (incommensurately) valuable enough to be a defeater-candidate for horrors in individual lives.

I have noted that Adams takes Ivan Karamazov's report about infants being tossed in the air and skewered on soldiers' bayonets to be one of her *paradigmatic* horrors. I want to look now at each of the 'aesthetic' scenarios that she offers for how such an evil might be defeated,[12] and argue that none of them is sufficient for theodicy.

(1) *The Divine Gratitude Scenario*: Adams introduces this scenario by reporting Julian of Norwich's vision of God saying to the beatified elect, 'Thank you for all your suffering, the suffering of your youth'. God's gratitude to each soul, says Adams, will be 'immeasurable, unmeritable by the whole sea of human pain and suffering' and will thus serve to make the suffering meaningful.[13] So the defeater-candidate offered here is something like: *God being gratified by the suffering of God's people*. (*a*) This scenario seems plausible if the victim was self-consciously undergoing the suffering for the sake of God or the Gospel; St Stephen's martyrdom is an archetype here.[14] However, this sort of self-conscious self-sacrifice is not an option for Ivan's infants.

(*b*) Alternatively, the Divine Gratitude Scenario could imply that God's gratification is caused by the fact that human suffering *simpliciter* is pleasing to God, even if it isn't undergone for God's sake. But there are deep difficulties lurking here. *God's* finding the infant's suffering valuable cannot alone serve to defeat the evil, since defeat must involve the 'internal point of view'. The *post-mortem* experience of God thanking the infant for the pleasure God got from their suffering will, of course, involve the 'internal point of view'. But *contra* Julian, it will probably aggravate the problem by calling into question the divine attribute of goodness in (P1). In order for this episode to be a theologically-sound defeater-candidate that doesn't undermine our premises,

[10] 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God', pp. 217.

[11] 'Aesthetic Goods as a Solution to the Problem of Evil', pp. 50.

[12] I will take the list from 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God' (pp. 218–20) because the scenarios are offered in more detail there. In 'Aesthetic Goods', Adams refers to most of these same scenarios, but in a more cursory fashion (pp. 59–60).

[13] Adams, 'Theodicy without Blame', 237. I am quoting from Adams' paper, but the relevant passages can be found in Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, ch. 17.

[14] Adams discusses the redemptive value of martyrdom 'Redemptive Suffering: A Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil', *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment* ed. Audi and Wainwright (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986), pp. 248–67.

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there must be an intelligible reason offered to the victim for *how* God could be thankful for their suffering.[15] The reason 'because you were (self-consciously) suffering for My sake' is perhaps the only viable one; unfortunately, it cannot be offered to Ivan's infants, or to infants generally.

(2) *The Vision of God Scenario*: Adams claims that temporal suffering may provide the victim with a 'vision into the inner life of God'. So if we allow that God is passible, then human suffering can afford a view of the actual suffering of the Divine. But even if God is impassible, says Adams, the human mode of envisioning God may involve the intense phenomenological experience that Otto dubbed *tremendum* – and that experience may consist in deep suffering. Either way, this *visio dei* is supposed to be of enough (incommensurate) aesthetic value to defeat its correlated horror.

I find this scenario inadequate with respect to our infant case on two accounts. (*a*) Infants will not be aware that their suffering affords them an insight into the divine life. They will simply feel the blinding emotional pain caused by separation from their mothers and the raw physical pain caused by the bayonets. So it seems that this is not at least a *prima facie* defeater-candidate for infants.

(*b*) Adams emends her description of this Scenario with a *post-mortem* clause: Even if the victims are not aware of the *visio dei* during their suffering, from the perspective of the beatific vision 'such sufferings will be seen for what they were, and retrospectively no one will wish away any intimate encounters with God from his/her life-history in this world'.[16] Elsewhere Adams calls this sort of 'encounter' an 'excruciatingly intimate *awareness* of the Beauty that s/he now overwhelmingly enjoys'.[17]

It seems doubtful, however, that the concept of 'awareness' – intimate or otherwise – can lack a self-conscious component. We speak of a person, $\mathcal{N}$, being 'aware' of another person Q*'s* presence, for instance, when $\mathcal{N}$ *self-consciously* judges or recognizes (i.e. $\mathcal{N}$ is aware that he is aware) that someone is present with him. Of course, $\mathcal{N}$ may be mistaken about the identity of that person: $\mathcal{N}$ may think that it is R rather than Q. All the same, $\mathcal{N}$*'s* awareness or experience of any object at all involves an act of judgment or recognition on $\mathcal{N}$*'s* part.[18] Put another way: The concept of awareness cannot be analysed into *de re* and *de dicto* components. 'Awareness' in the relevant aesthetic sense always involves some kind of (self-conscious) *de dicto* recognition, thus making the idea of a purely *de re* awareness nonsensical. The victim of a horror must

[15] It may be thought that I am confusing the 'hows' and the 'whys' here. This may be so, but I think Adams' 'how-reason' itself implies the following (partial) 'why-reason': *because God is somehow gratified by the suffering*. But this partial 'why' calls into question our (P1) notion of God's goodness. I submit that either a more substantial 'why' must be offered (i.e. Why then does God find suffering gratifying?) or else the 'how' that implies it must be abandoned.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] 'Aesthetic Goodness as a Solution to the Problem of Evil', pp. 59.

[18] These claims are bolstered at length by George Mavrodes in *Belief in God* (New York: Random House, 1970). Cf. pp. 61–2.

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judge or recognize that Something which transcends the suffering is being presented to them *while they are in the midst of the suffering*. Otherwise, the experience does not qualify as an 'awareness' of God in any significant sense.

If this is correct, then for those who were unaware of God during their suffering, the *post-mortem* 'recognition' can come in three varieties: (i) The victims will recognize that the vague, transcendent force of which they did have some (self-conscious) awareness during their suffering was, as a matter of fact, the Divine. They will, as Adams says, see the experiences 'for what they were'.[19] And they will feel that the sense of *tremendum* they had at the time was an aesthetic good which retrospectively makes their suffering meaningful. (ii) The victims will recognize that since they were well-functioning adults during the suffering, they *could have* or perhaps *should have* been aware of the transcendent or the divine at the time. (iii) The infant victim will recognize that *if they had been older* during the suffering, they may have had an awareness of the vague transcendent, or of the divine nature.

Now given Adams' criteria for defeat, a horror *may* be defeated on (i). To my mind, there is still some question as to whether a vague awareness of transcendence and a concomitant *tremendum* experience is enough to defeat horrors – even if one later realizes that the true object of that awareness was God. But what about (ii) and (iii)? Is the fact that the suffering afforded an *opportunity* to be aware of divine beauty enough to make it meaningful from a *post-mortem* point of view? And what if there was no such opportunity due to incapacities on the victim's part for which she was not responsible?

An illustration might make clear our intuitions about these cases: Roger takes a job in a strange city, and finds the transition very difficult. He misses his old friends, he isn't sure that he likes his job, and the people who live in the apartment above him are extremely noisy. On top of all of this, he one day finds himself in a fast-food restaurant that is being held up by vicious gunmen. Roger and a number of other patrons are herded into the walk-in freezer in the back room where they endure several hours in frigid agony and fear before the police rescue them. Roger is traumatized by this event and spends months in counseling. Things start to turn around for him, however, when he meets Susan at an office party. The two of them hit it off, and are soon married.

Retrospectively, Roger looks at the various 'minuses' he encountered upon arriving in the new city as made meaningful by the fact that being in that city was a necessary condition for the big 'plus' of meeting Susan. The

[19] I take this to be a claim about interpretation of past experience that need not rest on the *de re*/*de dicto* distinction. The Ottoian awareness of *tremendum* is an awareness in both the *de re* and the *de dicto* sense. The victim is *aware* of the vague transcendent, and judges that she is *aware* of the vague transcendent. The *post-mortem* episode simply involves the victim discovering new information about the object of that awareness – she now realizes that the object was divine. She is not at this point recognizing the awarenesses 'for what they were' – since she knew what they were all along. They were awarenesses of the transcendent. Rather, she is recognizing the Object of those awareness for what It was.

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episode in the fast-food restaurant, however, sticks out in his mind as a particularly pointless and irresolvable evil. One year into his marriage, he tells Susan about it – even though his therapist had instructed him to repress it (the therapist was paid by the fast-food chain). To Roger's amazement, he finds out that Susan had also been in the restaurant that day, and that she had been in the freezer with him!

Now it seems that even from a post-marital point of view, Roger could continue to find his participation in the fast-food evil pointless and irresolvable, despite the fact that the person he now loves and enjoys more than anything in the world was, without his knowledge, present with him throughout that experience. Roger would not, even upon this later recognition, find that suffering ultimately meaningful. After all, he was not (self-consciously) *aware* of Susan's presence in the freezer (even though he may have touched her!), and the episode was not the occasion for their meeting each other.

In the same way, from a *post-mortem* point of view the beatified saint could very well continue to find her experience of horrors in this world meaningless, even if she found out that the horror had provided an *opportunity* (which she didn't take) for her to gain insight into the divine nature. Now if the victim was (as in (ii)) a functional adult when the experience occurred, perhaps she *should* have had an intimate awareness of the Divine, and since it was her fault for missing the opportunity, she should not continue to see the horror as meaningless. I don't want to argue about this here. My main point is that the infants (of (iii)) are incapable of having an 'excruciating awareness' or an 'intimate encounter' with either the vague transcendent or God during their victimization. Certain advanced cognitive abilities are required to judge or recognize that one is experiencing *tremendum* or envisioning God; and these are abilities which infants lack. So the beatified infants might well look back on the episode and still find it meaningless. The Vision of God Scenario fails as a possible defeater-candidate in at least one case of paradigmatic horrors, and thus it is not sufficient for theodicy.

(3) *The Identification with Christ Scenario*: Here I quote Adams: '[H]uman experience of horrors can be a means of *identifying* with Christ, either through *sympathetic* identification (in which each person suffers his/her own pains, but their similarity enables each to know what it is like for the other) or through *mystical* identification (in which the created person is supposed literally to experience a share of Christ's pain)'.[20]

(*a*) Sympathetic identification requires the rather sophisticated capacity to 'know what it is like for the other', and thus fails as a defeater-candidate for Ivan's infants. (*b*) As for mystical identification: Let us suppose that in being stabbed with the bayonets, Ivan's infants are somehow experiencing a share of the pain that Christ experienced on the cross. There is, in other

[20] 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God', p. 219.

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words, a relation of ontological identity holding between the two experiences. (i) Now Christ's pain is technically a horror in and of itself,[21] and so an experience of it is certainly not a *prima facie* defeater-candidate for any other suffering.

(ii) It may be the case, however, that if someone is aware that the pain they are suffering *is literally* the pain of Christ, then they will count those horrors as meaningful for them. St Francis' stigmatization might be the archetype here. Of course this sort of sophisticated awareness is not available to Ivan's infants while they are undergoing their suffering. Moreover, if this is really something more than sympathetic identification, then St Francis' suffering may be both the type of this experience and one of the only tokens. What would it mean, after all, to say that one of Ivan's infants is undergoing the *same pain* as Christ? I imagine that the feeling of being impaled on a bayonet is quite different phenomenologically than that of being nailed to a cross. And even if the physical pain of the infants is somehow identical to Christ's pain, the overall experience of the pain must be different. For if there is an aspect of Christ's suffering that is positive, it is the accompanying understanding that the suffering is in accord with God's cosmic plan. Without this component, the experience is merely one of brute physical and emotional pain. But of course the infants are not capable of such understanding, and thus are only able to share in the negative aspect of Christ's pain. Retrospective recognition won't help here: the only thing that the beatified infant could recognize is that Christ's experience of brute pain was identical to theirs, *not* that His overall experience of suffering was identical with theirs.

(iii) At times, Adams can sound as though mystical identification is an ontological identification of the persons involved – as though the infants actually *are* Christ while they are being murdered. Now if an infant victim did in fact become Jesus Christ while experiencing the evils caused by the soldiers, it is plausible that from a *post-mortem* perspective the great aesthetic good that goes with being Christ would make the experience meaningful to her.

In support of this claim, Adams cites Mother Teresa's construal of Matthew 25: 31–46 to mean 'that the poorest and the least *are* Christ, and that their sufferings *are* Christ's'.[22] In the passage Mother Teresa refers to here, Jesus proclaims that anyone who in earthly life did a good deed to those who were suffering, 'did it unto me'. The Greek phrase is ἐμοὶ ἐποιήσατε: the dative form here can be translated 'did it unto me', or 'did it *as* unto me', or 'did it *for* me'. The latter pair of translations lead to an understanding of the passage that is, I think, more desirable insofar as it is less ontologically radical: the needy serve as *symbols* of the suffering Christ to those who are helping them. Mother Teresa and others who aid the destitute may

[21] cf. *Ibid.* p. 212.

[22] 'Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God', p. 219n.

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do so *for* or *as unto* the Lord. But this needn't mean that each person who is poor, sick, and imprisoned just *is* Christ. On the contrary, it is often apparent from their actions that such persons are not Jesus Christ.

(iv) Finally, the Identification with Christ Scenario might simply imply that the infant victims become *symbols* of the suffering Christ to some of those who witness their murders. Now from a *post-mortem* perspective, an infant victim may find some intrinsic value in having played this symbolic role for an onlooker. But this value, I argue, would not defeat the evil they suffered. For there is no reason to think that the symbolic role the infant played for the onlooker could not have been played by something or someone else. A crucifix, for instance, or a suffering animal. Or perhaps someone undergoing a less-than-horrendous evil. So on the whole, the aesthetic good involved in this version of the scenario is not properly interwoven with the horror – i.e. the good's existence in the whole does not require the existence of the horror in the whole – and thus it will not defeat the horror.

(*B*) *The free will approach*

The free will approach must be dealt with at less length. The idea motivating this theodicy is familiar: evils are directly or indirectly the result of voluntary actions on the part of free creatures; and the freedom which these voluntary actions presuppose is considered valuable enough to offset the negative value of the resultant evils. God's ultimate responsibility for these evils is then denied by employing distinctions between God's doing evils vs. God's allowing evils (Augustine), God directly creating evils vs. evils being a by-product of creating a certain set of natural kinds (Austin Farrar), and God's action vs. created agents' actions (Alvin Plantinga).

Many versions of the Free Will approach are not concerned with the problem of God's goodness to *individuals*. Augustine is content to have God throw the unregenerate into everlasting torture as long as the universe remains maximally perfect via the principles of retributive justice. Alvin Plantinga is less worried about how all horrors can be defeated in an individual's life than with how the maximal state of affairs that includes these horrors may be the best that can be actualized.[23]

Eleonore Stump, however, offers a Free Will approach in her paper 'The Problem of Evil' that *is* concerned with God's goodness to individuals. The God of (P1), she says,

> must govern the evil resulting from the misuse of that significant freedom 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*.[24]

It is not clear how Stump intends us to take the idea of 'outweighing' here

[23] Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's, 1974).
[24] Stump, 'The Problem of Evil', *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (Oct. 1985), 392–435. The quotation is from p. 411.

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– especially with respect to the Chisholmian scheme outlined earlier. I shall briefly argue, however, that in the case of Ivan's infants, the suffering is not even balanced out on Stump's scheme, much less defeated.

Stump says that she is 'committed to the claim that a child's suffering is outweighed by the good for the child which can result from that suffering'. Like Adams, Stump thinks the only good for persons which is (incommensurately) valuable enough to be a potential outweigher of horrendous evils is 'union with God'. Suffering is outweighed if it 'brings that person nearer to the ultimate good in a way he could not have been without the suffering'.[25]

Free Will philosophers usually follow Augustine in holding that human free will is operating appropriately when it is aligned with the will of God. Members of the contemporary incompatibilist strain of this tradition (including Stump) further claim that choosing to align one's will with God's is always a component of the greater good that the existence of free will (and its correlate evils) affords. Thus, Stump says that 'union with God should be understood to involve as a necessary (but not a sufficient) condition the state of freely willing only what is in accordance with the will of God'.

But now Stump seems to be involved in a contradiction. For it is obvious that Ivan's infants will not have met this 'necessary' condition for union with God. Infants are not yet the kind of agents that can freely choose God's will. Moreover, since Stump thinks humans inherit from Adam a 'disposition to will what they ought not to will', whatever willing the infants *are* capable of is likely to be contrary to God's will.[26] It seems that the suffering death of these children will not bring them into union with God after all, for they will not have met the necessary condition for such union. On Stump's own principles, infant suffering will be neither outweighed nor defeated.

III

Although the problem of Ivan's infants is not resolved on either of the proposals we have examined, I do not think we must be led to Ivan's atheistic conclusion. On the contrary, religious people can let this form of the problem goad them to delve more deeply into the logical relations between God, human persons, and suffering. Now both Adams and Stump utilize religious value theory in their theodicies: they both hold that ultimate human good is found in relationship to the divine. And yet both approaches founder on the rocks of infant suffering and death. In what follows I want to sketch one way in which these two varieties of theodicy might be reformulated in such

[25] *Ibid.* pp. 410–11.

[26] Augustine's reflections on human nature in the *Confessions* bring him to the same conclusion: 'I myself have seen and known a baby who was envious; it could not yet speak, but it turned pale and looked bitterly at another baby sharing its milk.' 1.2.7, Trans. Rex Warner (New American Library, Mentor-Omega Books, 1963).

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a way that the same general value theory is retained *and* the problem of infant suffering is resolved.

The set of sufficiency criteria for theodicy (in Section I) stipulates that God must somehow defeat the horrendous suffering of each person from that person's point of view. My idea is that the infants in Dostoyevsky's tale (and infants generally) are not the sort of individuals that are able either (1) to have their suffering defeated or (2) to undergo horrendous suffering in the technical sense of horrendous suffering used in this paper and which generates the specific problem for theodicy addressed by Adams and Stump.[27]

To appreciate these points, we must draw on some basic material from developmental psychology: Infants are generally considered to lack significant moral freedom or agency: they have no second-order desires;[28] they cannot posit ideals for themselves; they have no important values; and they do not preface their actions with moral deliberation. Infants lack the capacity for significant aesthetic appreciation; they cannot feel significantly degraded; they are not aware of the symbolic value that their experiences might have or lack. Infants are not competent language users – they cannot tell themselves or others a narrative about their lives. Children under the age of six months seem to have few concepts and very little sense of self-individuation.

Of course, it is not obvious in any particular life when these kind of sophisticated abilities develop. It is clear that a one-month old baby is not a moral agent and that a seven-year-old is; but when exactly does this change take place? That question must be left to the psychologists; for our purposes, it is simply important to note that the aesthetic or meaning-making capacities which an infant lacks are the *same ones* required for her to experience suffering as insight into something higher and more meaningful – something of transcendent value and beauty. Likewise, the agency and language abilities that an infant lacks are the *same ones* required for her to choose to ask God to change her will. So it follows on both Adams' and Stump's definition of 'defeat' that infants who lack these capacities cannot have their sufferings defeated.

Fortunately for the theodicist, the fact that infants lack the capacities in question also indicates that their sufferings, even those referred to in Dostoyevsky's story, cannot really be horrendous. Recall the definition of *horrendous* we are working with: Adams says that horrendous sufferings are those that make one question the meaningfulness of the lives of those involved in them – they have 'the power to degrade, i.e., to symbolize that one is sub-

[27] The extension of 'redeemed' here is meant to include both Adams' 'defeat', and Stump's 'outweighed'.

[28] Harry Frankfurt makes the case that an individual who lacks second-order desires is not a person in any significant sense – he calls them 'wantons'. My claim here does not hang on whether or not infants are persons – there are many other reasons to hold that they are. I simply mean to note that many of the sophisticated abilities that characterize older human persons are not possessed by infants. Cf. Frankfurt 'Freedom of the Will, and the Concept of a Person', *Journal of Philosophy* **68** (1971), pp. 5–20.

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human or worthless'.[29] Now although Adams includes the suffering of Ivan's infants in her list of paradigmatic horrors, it would be a mistake, it seems to me, to talk of infants who suffer in this way feeling degraded or construing their lives as worthless. Children of that age simply lack the requisite meaning-making capacities. Moreover, they have never experienced self-conscious agency, and so they cannot feel the degradation involved in having that agency taken away. The physical pain experienced by Ivan's infants is indeed very bad, but it cannot constitute a horrendous evil – paradigmatic or otherwise.[30]

I have argued that the suffering of infants is necessarily neither horrendous nor defeasible. It is worth noting here the fortuitous logical connection between these two claims. For it is the infants' lack of the *very same* willing and meaning-making capacities that leads us to draw both of these conclusions. Although we don't know *when* a given infant will acquire these capacities, we can hold that *whenever* they do, their subsequent suffering will have both the (unfortunate) potential to be horrendous, and the (happy) potential to be defeated. In other words, as soon as a child acquires the capacities requisite for experiencing degrading horrors, she will also be in position to have her sufferings defeated.

We can now amend both theodicies with these ideas in mind. Adams' account: We have seen that Ivan Karamazov is not describing a horrendous evil after all; and Adams 'assume[s] that small or medium-scale evils' need not be defeated in the Chisholmian sense but 'might simply be over-balanced in a good life'.[31] It is not difficult to imagine that the relatively short-lived physical pain that the infants experience will be balanced out (engulfed!) by the value of *post-mortem* intimacy with God.

Stump's account, on the other hand, can be altered to say that if Ivan's infants are not agents in the relevant sense and are thus not able to meet her necessary condition for union with God, then they do not achieve that union but are simply taken out of existence, or perhaps reincarnated. Alternatively, we could change the necessary condition for union with God such that only those individuals who *are at some time able to* choose to align their wills with God must do so. Stump seems implicitly to take the latter position, since she mentions in the same article that she thinks the infants in Ivan's story would go directly into 'blissful existence'. In that case, their non-horrendous suffering would be balanced out, though not defeated.

A final note: The suggestion I have advanced here may bear on the suffering of older people who also, for whatever reasons, lack the various capacities in question. An adult who is in a permanent coma, for instance,

[29] Adams, 'Symbolic Value and the Problem of Evil', *Interpretation in Religion*, ed. Shlomo Biderman and Ben-Ami Scharfstein (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992, 259–82). These quotations from pp. 277–8.

[30] It seems to me that the infants' mothers will have suffered in this experience more horrendously than their children. But, of course, they will have the requisite capacities to have this suffering defeated.

[31] Adams, 'Theodicy Without Blame', pp. 227n.

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would not be susceptible to horrendous suffering (though the events that brought him to that state may constitute a horrendous evil). So we needn't theorize as to how God might be able to defeat his current sufferings or any others that he may undergo after slipping into the coma; we can simply be confident that God will balance them out.[32]

By way of conclusion: The fact that innocent babies suffer violent deaths in this world is a component of what often seems the most difficult version of the problem of evil. Atheists cite such incidents as a logical or evidential barrier to theistic belief, and believers and non-believers alike struggle with the gravity and seeming waste that such incidents involve. As long as infant suffering and death is considered horrendous, there may not be a defeat-scenario that is sufficient for theodicy – where 'sufficiency' requires every horror to be defeated from the victim's point of view. However, this should not lead religious believers to doubt whether the (P1) God exists, but rather to doubt whether suffering on the part of infants is indeed horrendous and needful of defeat. I have argued that making the latter move is one way that Christian theodicists might resolve this difficulty and better configure their beliefs about God and the nature of human suffering.[33]

[32] The case of those who occupy some sort of intermediary position between having normal willing or meaning-making faculties and completely lacking them will be more difficult. On the Aesthetic theodicy at least, it seems that the *defeasibility* of sufferings might be thought to admit of degrees: to the degree to which a person with a debilitating mental disease is able to feel degraded and de-humanized by their sufferings, they will be able to have that suffering redeemed under one of the aesthetic scenarios. The all-or-nothing character of an act of the will makes me think that the Free Will theodicist may not be able to speak of degrees of horrendousness or defeasibility with respect to human sufferings.

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