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Infant suffering: a response to Chignell

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Abstract. In a recent article in this journal Andrew Chignell assesses attempts by Marilyn McCord Adams and Eleonore Stump to resolve the problem that infant suffering poses for theistic belief, concluding that while the theodicy of each is inadequate in its current form, both can be satisfactorily amended. I argue that (1) Chignell fails to show that the theodicy of either Adams or Stump is inadequate and that (2) since Chignell's revisions are based on assumptions about God and evil held by few, such revisions are of little value as responses to the actual challenge infant suffering poses for theistic belief.

I

In a recent article in this journal, Andrew Chignell discusses what he sees as a particularly thorny version of the problem of infant suffering: the question of 'how God can be considered good to the infant victims by the infant victims' (205).[1] Specifically, he assesses attempts by Marilyn McCord Adams and Eleonore Stump to resolve this problem, concluding that while the proposed theodicy of neither can succeed in its present state, it is possible to amend these theodicies in a way that will allow them to function as adequate theistic responses to the challenge posed by infant suffering. I shall argue that while Chignell does make some interesting and important distinctions, (i) he fails to demonstrate that the relevant theodicies presented by Adams and Stump are inadequate and (ii) his belief that the version of the problem of infant suffering discussed is actually a significant problem for theists and non-theists alike is based on assumptions about the nature of God and evil held by few and that we, therefore, gain little from his discussion with respect to the actual challenge infant suffering poses for theistic belief.

II

Chignell's problem with Adams's response to infant suffering stems from the manner in which she defines the key concepts. According to Chignell, Adams defines horrendous evil as 'those evils that strike us as particularly gratuitous and thereby threaten our belief in the meaningfulness of the lives affected by them' (206). They are evils that have 'the power to degrade, i.e., to symbolize that one is subhuman or worthless' (215–216). But she then goes on to claim, we are told, that a theodicy for horrendous evils can be successful only if 'any horrendous evils [a person] participates in are made meaningful by

[1] Andrew Chignell 'Infant suffering', *Religious Studies*, **34** (1998), 205–217.

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being defeated, not merely within the context of the world as a whole, but within the scope of [that person's] individual life' (207). Moreover, it is not sufficient for a theodicy that God deem this person's life meaningful. Rather the person must attribute positive value to her life from an internal point of view, where this means that she herself recognizes 'some patterns organizing some chunks of her experiences around goals, ideals, relationships that she stabilizes in valuing' (207).

Chignell grants that, given these criteria, Adams may be able to construct an adequate theodicy for the horrendous suffering of those who are capable of recognizing meaning or value in what they are experiencing. Specifically, Chignell grants Adams that recognition of God's gratitude or recognition of the symbolic nature of what is occurring or insight into the divine life could all furnish the type of meaning that would defeat horrendous suffering for those victims of horrendous suffering who are capable of finding such meaning or value at the time of their suffering. But infants, he points out, do not have this capacity. They simply do not yet possess the cognitive ability to form the requisite self-conscious beliefs – the requisite point of view – about what they are experiencing.

Furthermore, Chignell argues, Adams cannot claim that infants will in a post-mortem existence acquire this requisite point of view – will come to see the meaning or value in their suffering. He does not deny that this requisite meaning or value could be found for some victims of horrendous suffering in a post-mortem life. But this is so only because they will at this point finally be able to properly understand (value) that which they were self-consciously experiencing 'while they are undergoing their suffering' (212). And infants cannot have this type of self-conscious experience 'during their victimization' (211).

Accordingly, concludes Chignell, since for Adams such self-conscious experiences are a necessary condition for an adequate response to horrendous evil, it is impossible for her to produce an adequate theodicy for horrendous infant suffering.

Stump's attempt to respond to infant suffering, we are told, fares no better. Stump believes that God 'must govern the evil resulting from the misuse of … 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' (213). Specifically, with respect to infants, 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' (214).

However, Stump also believes that the only good valuable enough in this case is union with God and 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' (214).

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But now we have an inconsistency, concludes Chignell. Since infants aren't capable of 'freely willing only what is in accordance with the will of God', infants can't have union with God, and thus their suffering can't be outweighed, given Stump's analysis.

III

Chignell then offers what he sees as a way to salvage these theodicies. Chignell, as we have seen, believes that Adams's proposed theodicy for horrendous infant suffering fails because infants cannot meet one of her own requirements for an adequate response to horrendous evil: that the victim have self-conscious experiences of the suffering at the time of the suffering. But her key problem here, we are told, is not her assumption that the defeat of horrendous evil requires such self-conscious beliefs. Her key problem, rather, is her assumption that infant suffering can be considered horrendous. Since Adams defines horrendous suffering as suffering that has the 'power to degrade', to make us feel 'subhuman or worthless', and infants clearly do not possess the psychological capacity to experience suffering in this manner, infants simply cannot, given her own definition, experience horrendous evil.

This fact, however, is actually good news for Adams, Chignell continues. Adams categorizes suffering that is not horrendous as small or medium-scale evil, evil that can be defeated by a life that is on balance good. And it is not hard to imagine that any relatively short-lived physical pain experienced by infants will be balanced out by the value of post-mortem intimacy with God. Thus, once we realize that infant suffering cannot, for Adams, actually be horrendous – that such suffering is rather only a small or medium-scale evil – we see that Adams's theological system does indeed have within it the means to defeat such suffering.

Stump's problem, Chignell maintains, can be remedied in a similar fashion. Stump assumes that terrible suffering can be outweighed only by union with God, a union that necessitates freely choosing what is in accordance with God's will. However, once we explicitly acknowledge that infants do not have the psychological capacity to freely choose anything and thus do not have the capacity to enter into union with God, we can postulate different theodicies for infant and non-infant suffering. We can continue to maintain that non-infant suffering can be overcome only by union with God. But we can alter Stump's account for infants. We might say that, since infants do not have the capacity to enter into union with God, they are 'simply taken out of existence, or perhaps reincarnated'. Or we might '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' (216). And either would be an adequate response to infant suffering, given Stump's theological system.

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Furthermore, Chignell points out in closing, the fact that infants cannot consciously experience suffering not only allows us to salvage the theodicies of Adams and Stump. To recast the status of infants in this manner – to argue that 'children are not the sort of entities whose suffering God can or should redeem' in the same manner such suffering is redeemed for adults (205) – is one way for Christian theodicists in general to resolve the problem of infant suffering.

IV

While I believe Chignell has offered us a unique, thoughtful assessment of infant suffering, I find a number of aspects of his discussion to be problematic.

First, I do not believe that Chignell has demonstrated the original theodicies of Adams or Stump to be inadequate. Chignell does not challenge Adams's claim that horrendous suffering must be defeated from the victim's point of view. Specifically, he does not deny that horrendous evil can be defeated for those individuals who recognize at the time of their suffering or later that the evil they experienced had meaning or value for their lives as a whole. His claim rather is the following: Adams cannot offer an adequate response for horrendous infant suffering because such suffering can be defeated only if the victims have self-conscious experiences of their suffering at the time this suffering actually takes place and infants do not possess the psychological capacity to have such experiences.

It is, of course, true that infants cannot be self-consciously aware of what they are suffering at the time such suffering actually takes place. But Chignell's contention that having self-conscious experiences (being aware of what one is experiencing) while one is suffering is a necessary condition for ever finding meaning or value in such suffering strikes me as dubious. Consider, for instance, an infant or small child who must undergo an excruciatingly painful set of operations to correct a serious medical problem. Although this infant cannot self-consciously experience such suffering at the time of the operations, it seems to me perfectly reasonable to maintain 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.

Moreover, and more importantly, I find nothing in Chignell's presentation of Adams's perspective that suggests that she believes the victims of infant suffering must be have self-conscious experiences at the time of the suffering for such evil to be defeated. Accordingly, it seems to me that Adams is perfectly free to claim that the victims of infant suffering can come to realize later in life or in a post-mortem existence that such suffering had meaning and value for their lives. And if this is so, then the application of Adams's theodicy to horrendous infant suffering is clearly immune from Chignell's challenge.

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Chignell's critique of Stump is problematic for an analogous reason. Chignell does not challenge Stump's claim that suffering can be outweighed by union with God. Nor does he argue that infants cannot enter union with God at some time. In fact he acknowledges, for the sake of argument, that infants can enter directly into a blissful existence with God when they die. Chignell's critique of Stump is based on two assumptions: (1) that a person's suffering can be defeated only if this person is aware of the fact that her suffering is outweighed at the time of the suffering and (2) that this can occur only if that person is able to enter into union with God at that moment.

But it is not clear to me that Stump has ever committed herself to the claim that a person must be aware that the suffering she is undergoing is outweighed within her life before it can be considered defeated. As I have always read Stump, what is required is only that the suffering is actually outweighed, not that the person consciously recognize that this is so. Furthermore, even if we read Stump as saying that a person must we aware of the fact that the evil is she is experiencing is outweighed before it can be defeated, I do not see that Stump has committed herself to the claim that this awareness must occur at the time of the suffering. It is perfectly compatible with her view, especially as outlined by Chignell, to maintain that an infant can come to this awareness either later in life or, if not in this life, upon union with God in the afterlife. So Stump's theodicy also seems immune from Chignell's challenge.[2]

I have, though, more basic concerns with Chignell's discussion. While I agree completely with his contention that the savage, brutal (horrendous) treatment of infants is a component of the most difficult version of the problem of evil, I disagree with Chignell's contention that he has, in his revision of Adams's and Stump's theodicies, offered Christian theists a useful response to the problem of infant suffering.

First, I question Chignell's contention that the specific version of the problem of infant suffering around which his discussion is based – a version that centres on the question of 'how God can be considered good to the infant victims by the infant victims' – is a thorny, knotty problem for many theists and non-theists alike. This version is a serious problem only for those who affirm a very specific understanding of God's moral obligation to those who suffer: namely, that a good God is obligated to ensure, in Stump's words, 'that the sufferings of any particular person are outweighed by the good which the suffering produces for that person'. But I am aware of no atheist – no critic of theism – who assumes this to be the relevant moral obligation. Nor am I aware of any theist apart from Stump and Adams who does so.

[2] I am also troubled by Chignell's assumption that 'choosing to align one's will with God's is always a component of the greater good that the existence of the free will (and its correlate evils) affords' for contemporary incompatibilist free will theists (214). I am such a theist and have done considerable work in this area, and am aware of no contemporary free will theist (other than perhaps Stump) who has suggested that this act of will is a requirement for union with God.

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Most critics and defenders of theism maintain, rather, either that (i) a good God is obligated to do everything within legitimate constraints to maximize the quality of life for every person, or that (ii) a good God is obligated to ensure that each person's life is on the whole worth living, or that (iii) a good God is obligated at the very least to ensure that this world contains no suffering that God could have removed without negatively impacting God's creative goals. And Chignell's proposed solution to the problem of infant suffering – to deny that infants possess the capacity to suffer horrendous evil or enter into union with God while suffering – is not relevant to the challenge that infant suffering poses for theism, given any of these common understandings of God's moral obligation.[3]

I have, moreover, a more serious general concern with Chignell's discussion, a concern based on what I see as a misguided understanding of what makes infant suffering horrendous. For an evil to be horrendous, given the definition with which Adams and Chignell are working, it is necessary that the person experiencing the evil be self-consciously aware of the degradation involved.[4] But while Adams and Chignell are free to define 'horrendous' as they wish, I question whether they are using the term as it is normally applied to the suffering of infants.

The death of an infant is sad, and possibly even tragic, no matter what the cause. But, for most, the peaceful death of a sick baby in the arms of her parents is not considered horrific while the bayoneting of infants by the Nazis or a slow death from exposure in the aftermath of a typhoon or a gruesome death as a result of an attack by a pit bull terrior almost always is, even though in none of these cases is the infant self-consciously aware of what is occurring. This is so, I believe, because for most of us, factors other than 'psychological awareness' determine whether the suffering experienced by someone is horrendous.

Compare, for instance, the brutal rape of a six-month-old baby with the brutal rape of an adult. While the latter can rightly be considered horrific, and possibly in part because the sufferer is consciously aware of the humiliation and degradation she or he is experiencing, most of us, I believe, would consider the rape of the infant to be just as horrific, if not more so, even though the infant is not self-consciously aware of what is occurring. This is true, I believe, primarily because the infant is so defenceless. In fact, I believe that as a general rule, the more defenceless the victim, the greater the degradation and thus horrific nature of the act, regardless of the degree to which the victim is aware of what is happening.

Or let us compare the death of an infant from AIDS with the death of an infant from a fire deliberately set off by a parent (which recently occurred in

[3] For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see my book *The Case For Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) ch. 3.

[4] Stump does not commit herself to this or any other definition for horrendous evil.

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my area). Although the suffering may be equal in both cases, and in neither case is the infant self-consciously aware of the nature of the suffering, most will view the latter as more horrific, primarily because of the intent behind this act. In fact, it seems to me that, as a general rule, the more 'evil' the motive, the more horrendous the act.

Also, the duration of suffering can become relevant. The slow painful death of a person, infant or adult, is often considered more horrendous than a quick death, all other things being equal.

In short, to generalize, the horrific nature of suffering, as I see it, is for most primarily a function of the context in which the suffering took place, not a function of the psychological state of the sufferer. And if this is so, then the theodicy for infant suffering Chignell proposes – to deny that infants can experience horrific evil – is clearly not relevant to the actual problem with which most grapple.

Or, to state this important point yet another way, infant suffering, especially horrendous infant suffering, is indeed a serious challenge to theism. But this problem cannot be defined away, as Chignell implies. Given what constitutes horrendous suffering for most theists and non-theists alike, more, much more, is needed.

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