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A reply to Schlesinger's theodicy

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Abstract: In *Religion and Scientific Method*, George Schlesinger presented a strikingly original theodicy. In this paper, I explain the strategy underlying Schlesinger's argument. I then present a parallel argument to indicate the weakness of Schlesinger's theodicy. Finally, I show that Schlesinger's theodicy assumes a false principle, and therefore fails.

In *Religion and Scientific Method*,[1] George Schlesinger presented a strikingly original theodicy and replied to a number of objections. Though it has received a withering barrage of attacks, Schlesinger's theodicy, in the opinion of some, including the present author, has not received a decisive refutation. The purpose of this paper is to attempt to give such a refutation.

Let us begin by outlining Schlesinger's theodicy. Schlesinger denies 'that the most general kind of obligation I have toward another is to make him … as happy as I can'.[2] He considers the case of a happy child of very low intelligence who simply stares into the air all day. The child could be made much more intelligent by undergoing an operation. In these circumstances, most parents would decide to have the operation performed, even though doing so would mean that the child would suffer greater disappointments in life. The decrease in happiness of the child would be more than compensated for by the increase in potential and intelligence.

Based on this child-operation example, Schlesinger introduces the concept of 'the degree of desirability of a state (DDS)', a two-valued function that depends on both an individual's potential [Potential] and the degree to which that person's needs are being taken care of [Happiness].[3] Schlesinger claims that no rule of ethics requires us to increase Happiness for any particular person, but instead to increase that person's DDS by as much as possible.[4]

Schlesinger then argues that 'there is no limit to the degree which the [DDS] may reach', since Potential is limitless, for 'there is the possibility of super-super-Socrates and so on *ad infinitum*'.[5] So God cannot fulfil the ethical rule to

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maximize DDS, but His failure to do so implies no moral shortcoming, because it is logically impossible for God to maximize DDS. In particular, God is not obligated to maximize Happiness, and the presence of evil is consistent with the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God.

To help clarify Schlesinger's strategy, let me introduce some terminology. If an obligation can reach a maximum level, let us call it 'maximizable'. If an obligation cannot reach a maximum level, let us call it 'unmaximizable'. Happiness is a maximizable obligation, as all of a person's needs can be met. Also notice that if Happiness were, contrary to fact, unmaximizable, then Schlesinger would have had no reason to introduce DDS. He could have simply run his argument on Happiness. That is, Schlesinger could have noted that Happiness is unmaximizable, thus impossible for God to maximize, and so God would show no moral failure by not maximizing Happiness.[6] In contrast to Happiness, Potential is an unmaximizable obligation, for 'there is the possibility of super-super-Socrates and so on *ad infinitum*'.[7]

Happiness is maximizable, yet the presence of evil indicates that God has not maximized Happiness. Schlesinger's argument uses the child-operation example to link Happiness, a maximizable obligation, with Potential, an unmaximizable obligation, thereby resulting in the two-valued function DDS that is unmaximizable. Schlesinger argues that we are required to increase DDS, not Happiness. DDS is unmaximizable, so God is logically unable to maximize DDS, and therefore shows no moral failure by not maximizing Happiness.

In order to see the weakness in this argument, consider the following parallel argument. Imagine a hotel run by God called the Celestial Hotel. One day you check in to a room at the Celestial Hotel, only to find that it is very dirty. You complain to God that you have a dirty room. Following the structure of Schlesinger's argument, God may respond as follows: 'My obligation to Cleanliness (a maximizable obligation) is not my most general obligation. Size of room (an unmaximizable obligation) matters as well. For most people prefer a slightly dirty,[8] palatial room to one that is perfectly clean, but quite small. Thus, my obligation is not to maximize Cleanliness, but rather to maximize the more general two-valued function based on both Cleanliness and Size. I call this obligation DCS (degree of Cleanliness and Size). However, DCS has no maximum, since Size has no maximum, and so I am unable to fulfil my obligation to maximize DCS. I thus show no moral failure by not maximizing Cleanliness and renting you a dirty room.'

The argument presented above is Schlesinger's argument, with Cleanliness, Size, and DCS substituted for Happiness, Potential, and DDS. Now, in the Celestial Hotel example, it seems false that God is under no obligation to maximize Cleanliness. More importantly, even if God need not rent clean rooms, we are given no reason as to why this is so. The argument that God need not rent clean rooms cannot hinge on a consideration of the Size of the rooms. Similarly,

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in Schlesinger's argument, it seems false that God is under no obligation to maximize Happiness. More importantly, even if God need not maximize Happiness, we are given absolutely no reason as to why this is so. The argument that God need not maximize Happiness cannot hinge on an appeal to Potential.

Schlesinger's argument and the Celestial Hotel argument are parallel. The strategy in each is to tack on an unmaximizable obligation to a maximizable one, in order to argue that God need not maximize the maximizable obligation. However, both arguments are flawed. The flaw is assuming that the two-valued function is always the obligation, as opposed to the maximizable obligation. Thus specifically, the flaw in Schlesinger's argument is his claim that DDS is always the obligation, as opposed to Happiness.

Schlesinger is led into this error by only considering a very specific type of example. DDS is the obligation only when there are exactly two obligations under consideration, Happiness and Potential, and they 'depend on one another', i.e. when a change in one cannot be brought about without a change in the other. In Schlesinger's child-operation example, Happiness and Potential are the obligations under consideration. Furthermore, Potential cannot be increased without decreasing Happiness, as the increase in Potential of the child subjects the child to disappointments in life. Thus Happiness and Potential depend on one another, and DDS is the obligation. The dependence forces us to consider a multi-variable function, as we are weighing a tradeoff, in this case between Happiness and Potential.

Schlesinger presents another example where we imagine attaching a person to a machine that will induce pleasure. Schlesinger writes, 'The great increase in the factor of [H]appiness is insufficient to make up for the great loss in the second factor [Potential]'.[9] Again DDS is the obligation, because Happiness and Potential are the relevant obligations, and they depend on one another. Happiness cannot be increased without decreasing Potential.

Schlesinger considers these two examples where DDS is our obligation, but it does not follow that DDS is always our obligation. In fact, we can easily see that DDS cannot always be our obligation. At one point Schlesinger considers the obligation of Truth.[10] Let us imagine a case that involves Happiness and Truth.[11] Perhaps a spouse asks how he or she looks, while wearing an unflattering outfit. An innocuous lie (a decrease in Truth) must be told to increase Happiness. DDS cannot be the obligation, because DDS does not take account of Truth. Thus DDS is not always our obligation.

Our obligation varies with the specific situation. In the spouse example just considered, the obligation is the two-valued function based on Truth and Happiness. Notice that Truth and Happiness are the obligations under consideration, and they depend on one another, as a lie must be told (a decrease of Truth) to increase Happiness. In general, it is the dependence of obligations that is our signal to combine obligations into a multi-variable function. In situations

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where obligations do not depend on one another, it simply does not make sense to combine them into a multi-variable function.

Even in a situation that involves Happiness and Potential, if these obligations do not depend on one another, then Happiness and Potential are each individually an obligation, as opposed to DDS. Schlesinger never considers a case where Happiness and Potential do not depend on one another, and so misses this point. But consider the case where a doctor is performing an operation that will solely increase the Potential of a person. Happiness will not be affected by the operation. However, imagine that while performing the operation, the doctor simply decides to pummel the patient, thus lowering Happiness. DDS may increase. However, it does not make sense to consider DDS in this case, as Happiness and Potential do not depend on one another. There is no connection between Happiness and Potential. The action is wrong because the doctor has decreased Happiness, not because the doctor has not maximized DDS. DDS simply is not a relevant consideration in the absence of the dependence of Happiness and Potential.

These are subtle, yet crucial considerations, and so let me summarize the previous several paragraphs. DDS cannot always be our obligation, as certain situations demand that we consider other obligations, e.g. Truth and Happiness. Our obligation varies with the situation. Often, our obligation will be to whatever individual obligations are involved in a situation. However, sometimes we must combine obligations into a multi-variable function. How do we know when to combine two (or more) obligations into a multi-variable function? When obligations depend on one another, we are forced to consider a tradeoff, and thus must consider a multi-variable function. In Schlesinger's examples, Happiness and Potential are the relevant obligations, and they depend on one another. Thus DDS is the obligation. Absent dependence, our obligations are to individual obligations, e.g. Happiness. It makes no sense for a doctor who has pummelled a patient to appeal to DDS.

Then the crucial question is: For God, do Happiness and Potential depend on one another? The answer is No. For God, Happiness and Potential do not depend on one another. Despite his dependent examples, Schlesinger not only never states that God must decrease a person's Happiness to increase that person's Potential, he explicitly rejects the idea:

> It may even be that … suffering turns out to have been merely an unpleasant way of bringing about a greater benefit …. None of this affects our problem in the least … [I]n the context of an omnipotent being such considerations carry no weight for we are entitled to expect absolute perfection and the slightest distress, even if it eventually leads to great improvements, is intolerable …. In a perfect world, it seems that nobody should be allowed to suffer at all, and an Omnipotent Being should be able to bring about everything that is desirable in a way that does not inconvenience anyone.[12]

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Schlesinger has indicated that, for God, Happiness is maximizable and need not be sacrificed to achieve any greater good, including Potential. Thus, Schlesinger's example of the child operation, where Happiness and Potential depend on one another, is misleading. The parent must accept a decrease in the child's Happiness to attain an increase in Potential. For God, there is no such tradeoff. Rather, God is acting like the doctor who pummels the patient. Since the obligations do not depend on one another, God has an obligation to Happiness and an obligation to Potential. Potential is unmaximizable, and so God need not maximize Potential. However, Happiness is maximizable, and so God must discharge this duty.

Dependence also plays a crucial role in making Schlesinger's argument seem more convincing than the Celestial Hotel argument. Schlesinger gives dependent examples to motivate his claim that DDS is the obligation, as opposed to Happiness. No such example was given with the Celestial Hotel to motivate the claim that DCS is the obligation, as opposed to Cleanliness. Let us add an example. Imagine that workers are able greatly to increase the size of a tiny hotel room, but must leave a few specks of dust that will not be able to be cleaned up prior to a guest's check-in. Most people would choose the dirtier, larger room over the cleaner, smaller room. Thus the two-valued function DCS is the obligation, and not Cleanliness. Giving an example where Cleanliness and Size depend on one another (Size cannot be increased without a decrease in Cleanliness) makes the Celestial Hotel argument more convincing, and more closely parallel to Schlesinger's argument, by motivating the claim that DCS is the obligation as opposed to Cleanliness. Again however, both arguments are flawed. It is true that DCS is the obligation in the example just considered. However, for God, Cleanliness and Size do not depend on one another, and so God must maximize Cleanliness. The parallel to Schlesinger's argument is that DDS is the obligation in Schlesinger's examples. However, for God, Happiness and Potential do not depend on one another, and so God must maximize Happiness.

The presence of evil shows that God has not maximized Happiness. Schlesinger's theodicy argues that God shows no moral failure by not maximizing Happiness, as the obligation is to maximize DDS, an impossibility. The Celestial Hotel indicated the weakness in Schlesinger's argument. Simply put, the consideration of Potential cannot be used to argue that God need not maximize Happiness. Schlesinger's argument ultimately fails by assuming the false principle that the two-valued function DDS overrides the individual obligation Happiness. However, whether or not a two-valued function is the obligation is determined by whether or not the two obligations under consideration in a specific situation depend on one another. Schlesinger is misled by only considering examples where Happiness and Potential do depend on one another. However, Happiness and Potential do not depend on one another for God. Thus God has an obligation with respect to Happiness, and Schlesinger's theodicy fails.[13]

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Notes

1. George Schlesinger *Religion and Scientific Method* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1977), chs 9–10. References in the text are to this work. An earlier version of Schlesinger's argument appeared in *idem* 'The problem of evil and the problem of suffering', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **1** (1964), 244–247. Subsequent to *Religion and Scientific Method*, Schlesinger's theodicy was published in *idem A New Perspective on Old-Time Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 53–76; and *idem* 'Is God obliged to make us happy?', in Steven M. Cahn and David Shatz (eds) *Questions About God: Today's Philosophers Ponder the Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 37–46.
2. Schlesinger *Religion and Scientific Method*, 59.
3. *Ibid*., 60. Schlesinger explicitly identifies the state where all of one's needs are taken care of with the state of maximum happiness.
4. *Ibid*., 62.
5. *Ibid*.
6. In a slightly different context below, we return to this point that Happiness is maximizable. There I present a quote of Schlesinger's that also indicates that Happiness is maximizable.
7. Schlesinger *Religion and Scientific Method*, 62.
8. 'Slightly dirty' is contrasted with, and means, 'not perfectly clean'. That is, one piece of dust renders a room 'slightly dirty'.
9. Schlesinger *Religion and Scientific Method*, 61.
10. *Ibid*., 75–76.
11. Truth and Happiness are both maximizable obligations, which presents no problems, as I am no longer trying to mirror Schlesinger's argument involving one maximizable and one unmaximizable obligation. The question we are investigating is: when are obligations combined into multi-variable functions?
12. Schlesinger *Religion and Scientific Method*, 15. Schlesinger again rejects the idea that God must decrease Happiness to achieve greater good when he considers the soul-making theodicy. Schlesinger writes, 'This solution is based on the claim that there are certain very valuable human qualities, the possibility of which God could not have ensured without permitting suffering …. God, wanting a better world, had to allow suffering'; *ibid*., 43. Schlesinger goes on to reject this view; *ibid*., chs 6–8.
13. I wish to thank Professor Steven Cahn for his invaluable guidance and encouragement.

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