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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A superior non-identity theodicy

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Abstract

A non-identity theodicy is any attempt to explain why an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, and all-loving God might cause or permit the pain and suffering of his creatures that makes use of one or more claims about the identity conditions of those creatures. Most non-identity theodicies make use of one identity thesis in particular: origin essentialism, the thesis that the particular circumstances in which a person first comes into existence are essential to that person. In this paper, I argue that, despite some impressive upshots, origin essentialist non-identity theodicies fall short in at least two ways. I argue, furthermore, that both of these shortcomings can be rectified by building a non-identity theodicy on a stronger identity thesis: superessentialism, the thesis according to which every event in the life of a person, and not just the circumstances in which he or she first begins to exist, is essential to that person.

Keywords: non-identity; problem of evil; theodicy; origin essentialism; superessentialism

Introduction

A non-identity theodicy is any attempt to explain why an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, and all-loving God might cause or permit the pain and suffering of his creatures that makes use of one or more claims about the identity conditions of those creatures.[1] Most non-identity theodicies make use of one identity thesis in particular: origin essentialism, the thesis that the particular circumstances in which a person first comes into existence are essential to that person. So, for example, if God desires to create and be in loving union with some particular person, Jim, and the specific circumstances in which Jim comes into existence are essential to him, then God must arrange for those specific circumstances to occur. And, in order to arrange for the very specific circumstances in which Jim comes into existence to occur, it might be that all of the events leading up to those very specific circumstances must also occur in exactly the right way, including every instance of pain and suffering experienced by every prior creature. Hence, God's causing or allowing of the pain and suffering experienced by prior creatures might be explained by his desire to create and be in loving union with Jim. And God's causing or allowing of the pain and suffering that Jim experiences in his life might be explained by God's desire to create and be in loving union with particular future persons whose identities require that those particular painful events occur.

In this paper, I argue that, despite some impressive upshots, origin essentialist non-identity theodicies fall short in at least two ways. First, they violate the same subject

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condition for any successful theodicy, according to which any explanation or justification for the pain and suffering experienced by any person must make reference to some good available to that same person. Second, origin essentialist non-identity theodicies fail to account for the pain and suffering of any persons of the last generation. I argue that both of these shortcomings can be rectified by building a non-identity theodicy on a stronger identity thesis: superessentialism, the thesis according to which every event in the life of a person, and not just the circumstances in which he or she first begins to exist, is essential to that person.

Origin essentialist non-identity theodicies

Origin essentialism is the thesis that the particular circumstances in which a person first comes into existence are essential to that person.[2] There are stronger and weaker forms of origin essentialism. So, for example, one weaker form says that you could not have been born of different parents. Any child born of a different father or mother would not have been you. One stronger form says that you could not have come from a different sperm or egg. Any child resulting from the fusion of any other egg or any other sperm would have been a different child. And an even stronger form of origin essentialism says that had that same sperm and egg fused at any other time or in any other place or in any other way, then the result would not have been you. On the strongest forms of origin essentialism, then, the very specific circumstances in which you come to be are essential to you. Had anything about the first moments of your existence been even in the slightest way different, you would not have existed. Some other person would have existed instead, or no person at all.

It is plausible to suggest that the specific circumstances of the first moments of a person's existence are themselves extremely fragile. Had any of the events that led up to those circumstances been even in the slightest way different, then those specific circumstances would not have obtained and the relevant person never would have existed. Notice that this last conclusion might also follow on its own even from the more moderate form of origin essentialism described above, according to which you could not have been born of different parents or come from a different sperm or egg. Had any event in the lives of your parents been different, then it is almost certain that the particular egg and sperm from which you arose never would have fused, and you never would have existed. And had any event in the lives of your grandparents been different, then it is almost certain that the particular egg and sperm from which your parents arose would never have fused, and they would never have existed, and so on, and so forth, tracing back to at least the lives of the very first human beings, if not further.

If this last conclusion follows, then your existence is very fragile indeed. Had any of the events leading up to the very specific circumstances of the first moments of your existence been even in the slightest way different, then you never would have existed. Some other person would have existed instead, or no person at all.

Origin essentialism serves as the foundation for a particular variety of theodicy called a non-identity theodicy.[3] Why would an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good, and all-loving God cause or permit all of the pain and suffering that his creatures experience in their lives? The answer that the non-identity theodicy gives is this: because, for any particular person, had God not caused or allowed that pain or suffering in his or her life to occur, then none of the particular persons that came later would have existed. And God may have good reasons for ensuring that those later persons exist. For example, if God wants to create and be in loving union with some particular person, Jim, then all of the events leading up to the first moments of Jim's existence, including every instance of pain and suffering experienced by all prior persons, must occur. And if God wants to create and be in loving union with certain future persons, then all of the events in Jim's life, including every instance of pain

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and suffering that he experiences, must occur. In short, if God is committed to creating particular persons so that he may be in loving union with them, then he is also committed to causing or permitting the entire history of pain and suffering that their existence requires.

One virtue of a theodicy like this is that it does not rely on greater, impersonal goods to justify the existence of pain and suffering of particular persons. God does not cause or allow his creatures to experience pain and suffering for the sake of some great cosmic good (say the beauty, simplicity, or elegance of the universe as a whole). Nor does he cause or allow his creatures to experience pain and suffering for the sake of his own glory. The great good that God wants, on this theodicy, a good that not even God can obtain without allowing the evil that exists in our world, a good that is so great that it could plausibly outweigh (or otherwise justify) every bit of that evil, is the great good of loving, personal union. God desires, above all, to create and be in loving union with each of us in particular. And he is willing to allow a great deal of pain and suffering in order to make that happen. If something like the non-identity theodicy articulated above is correct, then this teaches us something important about the order of creation. When God is deciding which universe to create, he first decides which particular persons he would like to be in loving union with. He then creates those circumstances that are required to produce those particular persons. And the universe is born.

Another virtue of a non-identity theodicy like the one articulated above is that, unlike some other theodicies, such as the free will theodicy, this one is available to theological determinists just as much as it is to theological indeterminists.[4] In fact, it might *require* a certain kind of theological determinism, inasmuch as it seems to require that God exercise a very meticulous level of control over the events that take place so that they produce the very specific persons that he desires to create and be in loving union with.[5]

The most obvious question that arises for a theodicy of this sort is why God would desire to create and be in loving union with these specific persons. What makes these specific persons special? What makes them so special that they are worth all of the pain and suffering that their existence requires? Why wouldn't God desire to create and be in loving union with some other persons whose identity conditions require far less pain and suffering? Here I think that the best response a proponent of a non-identity theodicy can give is to say that there cannot in principle be any informative explanation for why God loves and desires to be in loving union with these particular persons and not others. And this is so because we are stipulating that God loves those particular persons in themselves or for their own sake. If God were to justify or explain his love of these persons in particular by citing particular features or qualities that they possess or particular roles that they play in some larger plan, then his love for those persons would reduce to a love of those particular features, qualities, or contributions and not the persons themselves.[6] If proponents of a non-identity theodicy like the one articulated above were to try to offer an explanation for why God desires to create and be in loving union with these particular persons and not others, then it seems that this explanation would have to make reference to some other, impersonal goods (that he wants a world with these types of qualities or features and not others, etc.). And, as I highlighted above, one of the virtues of a theodicy of this sort is that it does not rely on any impersonal goods to justify the pain and suffering of particular persons.

Two worries for origin essentialist non-identity theodicies

The same subject

Despite their impressive virtues, origin essentialist non-identity theodicies face two major worries. The first major worry pertains to the way in which each person's suffering is explained or justified on this theodicy. There are two standard conditions for any successful

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theodicy. First, the theodicy must identify some great good that God could plausibly want that not even he can obtain without allowing the evil in question. This is the necessity condition. Second, the theodicy must explain how this great good is so great that it could plausibly outweigh the evil that it requires. This is the outweighing condition. Several authors have argued that any successful theodicy must also meet a third condition. According to these authors, any successful explanation or justification of the pain and suffering of any particular person must make reference to some good or benefit gained or achieved through the person's pain and suffering *for that particular person*. There must be some great good that God wants that not even he can obtain without allowing that particular person to suffer in that way, this great good must be so great that it could plausibly outweigh the evil that it requires, and it must be a great good that can be enjoyed at least in part by the particular person who had to endure the relevant suffering in order for it to obtain. This third condition is sometimes called the rights condition, but here I will call it the same subject condition.[7]

Why insist on this third condition for any successful theodicy? Because otherwise God would be perfectly justified in causing or allowing great pain and suffering to one person solely as a means of achieving some greater good for some other person. For example, if we do not insist on the same subject condition, then the painful death of a small child from cancer could in principle be explained or justified by the great goods that it provides for her parents or for other children. And something about that seems very wrong. Whatever great good could possibly justify that child's suffering, it had better be some great good that the child herself can enjoy. Several people may benefit from her suffering, but one of those people had better be her. Another way to articulate the motivation for the same subject condition is that if the only explanation or justification for the pain and suffering of some particular person is the great good enjoyed by some other person, then the first person is being treated as a mere means to some other end, and not also as an end in herself. Those sympathetic to Kant's categorical imperative, then, and those who reject consequentialist justifications for God's permission of evil for other reasons, should insist on the same subject condition.[8]

Some proponents of the same subject condition insist on an even stronger requirement. According to these authors, any person who suffers must be the *primary* beneficiary of any good or benefit gained or achieved through that suffering.[9] On this stronger form of the same subject condition, it is not enough for there to be some good or benefit that is gained or received by the one who suffers. The person who suffers must be the one who stands to gain the most from her own suffering. The motivation for this stronger form of the same subject condition is that it seems unfair for a person to suffer greatly for the sake of some good or benefit that is primarily a good or benefit to others, even if she is compensated for her suffering in some other way. On this stronger form of the same subject condition, any compensation that the suffering person receives must be as good as or better than any good or benefit gained or received by any other party. If we do not insist on this stronger form of the same subject condition, then the third condition for successful theodicy can be satisfied by just about any theodicy, as long as it can point to at least some good or benefit gained or received by the person who suffers. Even a brief and inconsequential good or benefit to the sufferer would suffice as long as her pain and suffering is outweighed by some greater good elsewhere. And something about that seems very wrong. If the only good or benefit that a child who dies painfully of cancer receives from her pain and suffering is the opportunity to practice some minor virtue, then she has not been sufficiently compensated for her pain and suffering. Nor does it help to point out that her pain and suffering is ultimately outweighed by some great good gained or received by others. In order for the child to be sufficiently compensated for her pain and suffering, there must be some great good gained or achieved through that pain and suffering that cannot be gained or achieved

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in any other way and that can plausibly be seen to outweigh that pain and suffering *for her*.

Many origin essentialist non-identity theodicies straightforwardly violate the same subject condition for successful theodicies, even in its weaker form. Within these theodicies, each person's suffering is explained or justified by the role that it plays in producing the next person. Each person's suffering is not explained or justified by any good or benefit for the person who suffers, but a good or benefit for someone else. Each person is, thus, with respect to her pain and suffering, treated as a mere means and not also as an end in herself.

One way in which proponents of origin essentialist theodicies might respond to this worry is by emphasising that, on this theodicy, each and every person is desired by God. Each person is someone in particular whom God desires to create and be in loving union with. While the pain and suffering of each person is explained or justified by the role that it plays in producing specific future persons, the existence of each person is itself what explains or justifies the pain and suffering of all prior persons. And so, on this theodicy, each person is, with respect to his or her pain and suffering, both a means of producing future persons and also the intended end of the pain and suffering of all prior persons. Every person is both a means and an end, and so no one is being treated merely as a means.

However, even if, in the grand scheme of things, each person is treated as both a means and also an end in herself, it is still the case that each person's own pain and suffering is caused or permitted for the sake of some good not enjoyed by the person herself. The person is treated as an end on this account, but not with respect to her own pain and suffering. If we concentrate the same subject condition as requiring that, for every instance of pain and suffering experienced by some subject, the explanation or justification for that particular instance of pain and suffering must make reference to some good or benefit for that same subject, then origin essentialist non-identity theodicies still violate the same subject condition for successful theodicy.[10]

Proponents of origin essentialist non-identity theodicies have offered various responses to something like my same subject objection. Here I will first look at two responses from Robert Adams (1979) and then move on to discuss two more from Derek Christian Haderlie and Taylor-Grey Edward Miller (2025).

According to Adams's first response, any pain and suffering experienced by any particular person does indirectly provide some good or benefit for that person herself. In order to ensure that the particular future persons with whom he would like to be in loving union do in fact come to exist, God would have to follow a policy of not intervening to preserve prior persons from their pain and suffering when that pain and suffering is required for the existence of those future persons. For any particular person who suffers, his or her suffering is explained by God's commitment to this policy. He allows or permits that person's suffering because he has a general policy of not intervening to preserve prior persons from their pain and suffering when that pain and suffering is required for the existence of specific future persons that he desires to create and be in loving union with. Importantly, each person who experiences pain and suffering in his or her life enjoys a great good or benefit produced by the same principle that explains his or her pain and suffering. God's commitment to this policy is what allowed for that person to exist in the first place (Adams 1979, 59).

I see at least one major problem for this proposal. Even though God's general policy of not intervening to preserve prior persons from their pain and suffering when that pain and suffering is required for the existence of specific future persons that he desires to create and be in loving union with produces some good or benefit to anyone who suffers, it is not the person's pain or suffering itself that produces that good or benefit. It is the policy, and God's decision to continue to enforce that policy, that produces a good or benefit for

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that person. And the good or benefit that the person enjoys as a result of God's enforcement of this policy is a good or benefit that is realised before the person experiences any pain or suffering. For, it is God's enforcement of that policy prior to the person's existence that explains that person's existence. And so, any pain or suffering experienced by the person after that good or benefit is already received cannot also be the cause or reason or means by which that great good is produced. Adams's proposal seems plausible only because of its ambiguity. God's enforcement of a general policy is both what explains a person's pain and suffering and also how she came to enjoy the great good of her own existence. But here 'God's enforcement of a general policy' refers to two separate acts or two separate events. There is his enforcement of this policy leading up to the first moments of the person's existence, and there is his enforcement of this policy during the person's life. It is not the same act, event, or item that explains both the person's pain and suffering and also how she came to enjoy the great good of her own existence. And so, each action, event, or item requires its own explanation or justification. Why did God choose to enforce his policy of non-intervention prior to this person's existence? So that this particular person would exist and so that God could be in loving union with him or her. But why did God choose to enforce his policy of non-intervention during this person's life? So that some particular future persons would exist and so that God could be in loving union with them. Notice once again that the great good or benefit enjoyed by the person is not produced by means of his or her own pain and suffering. That great good or benefit is not even produced by means of the same divine act (or, if God's action is eternal and singular, then not by the same effect of that action in time). So, we can still ask: what great good or benefit did the person who experienced pain and suffering in his or her life enjoy as a result of those specific instances of pain and suffering? And it seems that the answer to this question is that the great good or benefit produced by those specific instances of pain and suffering is not in fact enjoyed by the sufferer herself. The great good that she enjoys is a product of God's earlier enforcement of the same policy that he continues to enforce during her life in order to produce out of her suffering some great good that is enjoyed by persons of future generations.

Adams's second response to something like my same subject objection to origin essentialist non-identity theodicies involves the notion of narrative self-interest. According to Adams, while it is true that I could have existed if the pain or suffering I have experienced had not occurred, the version of me that would have resulted from the absence of that pain or suffering would be so different from the version I am today that it would not contain the things that I care most about in my life. Had those episodes of pain and suffering that I have experienced been absent or different, then many of my current goals, interests, projects, values, choices, accomplishments, and relationships would be significantly different or altogether absent. According to Adams, in light of this fact, it is not clear that any of us would want to be those other versions of ourselves or live those other versions of our lives. And if that is true, then even if each of us could have existed without the pain and suffering that we have experienced in our lives, it is not clear that any of us would want to. In that sense, the pain and suffering that each person experiences in his or her life provides a good for the person himself or herself, a good that that person could not have achieved or received in any other way: the only sort of life that any of us would want (Adams 1979, 64).

I see two problems with this proposal. First, even if it were true that, had those episodes of pain and suffering that I have experienced been absent or different, then many of my current goals, interests, projects, values, choices, accomplishments, and relationships would have been significantly different or altogether absent, this fact will not fully explain or justify every bit of pain and suffering that I have experienced in my life. For it seems implausible to suggest that had one or two painful experiences in my life been absent or

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less severe, then all of the current goals, interests, projects, values, choices, accomplishments, and relationships that make my life meaningful would also be significantly different or altogether absent. This might be true of certain traumatic episodes in my life. But it certainly seems possible that many of the smaller instances of everyday suffering in my life could have been removed or lessened and the majority of what I care about in my life would have remained the same. And so those instances of pain and suffering remain unexplained or unjustified by my narrative self-interest.

Here is a second problem for this proposal. In his classic article, 'The Self and the Future', Bernard Williams asks his reader to imagine being kidnapped and forced to undergo a series of psychological manipulations followed by sessions of excruciating physical torture (Williams 1973). Each episode in the series involves a greater degree of psychological manipulation. The first involves amnesia, the second involves amnesia and significant changes to the person's character, the third involves amnesia, significant changes to the person's character, and the implantation of false or illusory memories of a life never lived, etc. Williams argues that in each successive scenario, if the kidnapper were to tell you, prior to any psychological manipulation, that afterward there would be a session of excruciating physical torture, fearing that incoming torture would be the appropriate response. He argues that fearing the incoming torture would be the appropriate response even though the result of psychological manipulation will be that you now have a radically different psychology than you do now. The person on the other end of the psychological manipulation will have radically different thoughts, memories, beliefs, goals, interests, and values. All the same, Williams thinks that the appropriate response to being told about the physical torture that will follow each of these scenarios is fear, and this is because the person on the other end, you are told, will still be you.

I think that a similar conclusion would follow if what came after each episode of psychological manipulation were something desirable, say a reward or the preservation of something deeply valued, such as one's relationship with one's closest loved one. In that case, if the reward or that which is preserved were valuable enough, then it seems to me that anticipation would be the appropriate response. If the reward or that which is preserved were valuable enough, then, in certain cases, one might even agree to undergo those psychological manipulations in order to get or receive what has been promised on the other side.

Now consider the case of a teenage boy who, over the course of several months, makes a series of bad decisions, gets caught up with the wrong crowd, starts to engage in dangerous or destructive behaviours, and abandons all of the virtues and values that his parents tried their best to instil in him over the years. In this case, it seems entirely rational for the parents of this teenage boy to hope or desire that their son might undergo a significant personal transformation. It seems entirely rational for them to hope or desire that their son might undergo a radical alteration in his thoughts, beliefs, goals, interests, and values, so that he might live a better life and so that they might be able to grow closer to him once more. The parents might desire that their son become more like the child that they once knew, or they might desire that he develop an entirely different sort of character altogether. Later on, if it begins to seem unlikely that their son will ever undergo any such transformation, they might still desire or wish that their son had undergone such a change and become a very different sort of person than the person he is today.

What I think that both of these cases teach us is that many of our practical concerns about ourselves and the ones we love run deeper than narrative self-interest. Many of our fears, expectations, desires, and interests track metaphysical identity rather than narrative identity. And if that is true, then, contrary to Adams's suggestion, it could be perfectly rational for a person to desire or wish that she had not experienced some of the pain and suffering that made her into the person she is today even if the result would be someone

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with radically different goals, interests, projects, values, choices, accomplishments, and relationships. For perhaps the goods or benefits gained through that transaction are significant enough to be worth the expense. If it turns out that these goals, interests, projects, values, choices, accomplishments, and relationships are not essential to who I am, such that I could still be me without them, then it could be perfectly rational to desire or wish that I had never experienced some of the pain and suffering that made me into the particular version of myself that I am today. And so, even if Adams is right that the particular life that I enjoy is a great good that I would not have enjoyed had the particular instances of pain and suffering in my life not occurred, it is a great good that I might freely have traded for a life with less suffering, were it offered to me.

Haderlie and Miller offer two responses of their own to something like my same subject objection to origin essentialist non-identity theodicies (Haderlie and Miller 2025). First, they suggest that there may be certain corporate or collective goods produced by a person's pain and suffering that, by virtue of belonging to the relevant group or association, the person herself is in a position to gain or receive, and that would otherwise not be available to her (or anyone) if not for her pain and suffering. For example, within the Christian tradition, the salvific work of Jesus Christ is a corporate or collective good insofar as Christ offers up his own life so that all may be saved. And it might be that, had any of the events leading up to the first moments of Christ's earthly existence been in any way different, then either Christ would never have been born or his passion, death, and resurrection would never have occurred, and thus his salvific work would never have been accomplished. If all of that is true, then the pain and suffering of any person who lived prior to the advent of Christ can be explained or justified by the essential role that it plays in helping to produce the conditions necessary for the introduction of the great corporate or collective good that is Christ's salvific work, a great good that each of those persons themselves, by virtue of belonging to the category of those who will someday be saved, can enjoy and would otherwise not be able to enjoy had the specific instances of pain and suffering that occurred in their lives not occurred (Haderlie and Miller 2025, 102).

I see two problems for this proposal, both of which concern the specific example offered by the authors. First, if there are any persons who are not ultimately saved, then there are some persons who experience instances of pain and suffering in their lives who do not receive the corporate or collective good of Christ's salvific work. Second, this solution will not apply to any suffering persons who come after Christ. For, in that case, the corporate or collective good of Christ's salvific work has already been accomplished, and their own pain and suffering plays no essential role in producing the conditions necessary for its introduction. The success of this proposal more generally will depend on whether there are any other corporate or collective goods that require every instance of pain and suffering experienced by every person and that are, at least in principle, available to every one of those persons.

Haderlie and Miller's second response is to suggest that if every instance of pain and suffering experienced by every person of every prior generation plays an essential role in producing the very specific future persons whom God desires to create and be in loving union with, then, as long as each prior person is able at some point (if not in this life, then in the next) to understand and appreciate the great goods that their pain and suffering helped to produce, then the satisfaction of understanding and appreciating the essential role that his or her own pain and suffering played in producing those great goods will in turn provide a good or benefit for that person (Haderlie and Miller 2025, 100).

In order for this proposal to work, it must be the case that every person who experiences pain and suffering is ultimately given the opportunity to understand and appreciate the great goods that their pain and suffering helped to produce. It requires that there be

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some kind of afterlife that all persons who suffer can enjoy, and it also requires that all persons in that afterlife be in a position to understand and appreciate all of the great goods that their pain and suffering helped to produce. As Haderlie and Miller point out, several leading accounts of the afterlife, including the Latter-Day Saint account that they discuss in their own paper, satisfy both requirements (Haderlie and Miller 2025, 100–102). But these requirements may not be satisfied by other conceptions of the afterlife.

The major problem for this proposal is that while it allows their origin essentialist non-identity theodicy to satisfy the same subject condition in its weaker form, it does not allow it to satisfy the same subject condition in its stronger form. Recall that, in its stronger form, the same subject condition says that, in order for any theodicy to be considered successful, the person who suffers must be the primary beneficiary of any good or benefit gained or achieved through that suffering. She herself must be in a position to gain the most from her own pain and suffering. On Haderlie and Miller's proposal, the person who suffers does gain or receive some good or benefit through her pain and suffering. She does receive some compensation for the hardships that she has had to endure. On their proposal, the person who suffers receives the satisfaction of knowing that her pain and suffering played an essential role in producing certain other persons whom God desired to create and be in loving union with. However, the good or benefit that the suffering person gains or receives on this proposal is not the primary good or benefit derived from her pain and suffering, and the person herself is not the primary beneficiary of that good. The primary beneficiaries of the primary goods or benefits produced by the person's pain and suffering are the future persons whose identity conditions require those instances of pain and suffering, not the sufferer herself. And the secondary compensation that the sufferer receives, the satisfaction of knowing that her pain and suffering played an essential role in helping to produce the very specific future persons whom God desired to create and be in loving union with, does not seem like sufficient compensation for the pain and suffering that she has had to endure. Think back to our example of the small child who dies painfully of cancer. Is the fact that she will someday have the opportunity to understand and appreciate the great goods that her pain and suffering helped to produce and that could not have been produced in any other way, namely, the existence of the very specific future persons whom God desired to create and be in loving union with, enough to say that God has sufficiently considered the child's own good in causing or permitting her to suffer in that way? Even if the great good of bringing those future persons into existence ultimately outweighs the pain and suffering that she has experienced in her own life, it does not seem that it will ever outweigh that pain and suffering *for her*. And thus, the same subject condition, in its stronger form, remains unsatisfied by Haderlie and Miller's proposal.[11]

The last of us

My second major worry for origin essentialist non-identity theodicies pertains to another group of persons that fall outside of the scope of the theodicy: the last generation of persons. If the pain and suffering of each generation of persons is explained or justified by the essential role that it plays in bringing about the very specific persons that God desires to exist in the next generation, then, if there is a last generation of persons and these persons experience any kind of pain and suffering, then that pain and suffering cannot be explained or justified by this theodicy. Their pain and suffering are not explained or justified by any role that they play in bringing about any future persons that God would like to exist, since, as the last generation, there are no such persons.

Vince Vitale proposes three solutions to this concern (Vitale 2020, 183–184). Vitale's first proposal is that perhaps the last generation of persons does not experience any pain or

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suffering in their lives. Perhaps God intervenes to ensure that no one in that last generation experiences any kind of pain or suffering at any point in their lives (Vitale 2020, 183).

The problem with this proposal is that it seems unfair. God did not intervene to prevent the pain and suffering of any persons in prior generations, so how could he in perfect fairness intervene to prevent every bit of the pain and suffering of the last? Are those persons somehow more worthy of God's care or more loved by him?

Perhaps the answer is simple. For each prior person, God has a sufficient reason not to intervene to prevent his or her pain and suffering: namely, so that certain very specific future persons, with whom he would like to be in loving union, may come to exist. And for each person of the last generation, God has a sufficient reason to intervene to prevent his or her pain and suffering: namely, his perfect love and compassion for those persons and the absence of any overriding reason not to prevent the pain and suffering of those whom he loves. However, from the perspective of any person of any prior generation, the fact that persons of the last generation are relieved of their pain and suffering still seems unfair. Through no fault of their own, they, the persons of prior generations, must suffer, whereas, through no merit of their own, the persons of the last generation need not. This solution puts all persons of prior generations in a position to regret that they are not among the fortunate last generation who are preserved, by special divine action, from any pain and suffering in their lives. Perhaps to maintain fairness, and to remove any such occasion for regret, God ought to ensure that there is never any last generation of persons, and so no persons who are uniquely exempt from the kinds of pain and suffering experienced by the persons or prior generations. And this brings us to Vitale's second proposal.

Vitale's second proposal is this: perhaps there is no last generation of persons. Perhaps for every generation of persons, there is some future generation of persons produced by the very specific events that occur in the prior generation. In that case, there will be no persons for whom their pain and suffering are not explained or justified by reference to some future generation of persons, the existence of which requires those specific instances of pain and suffering (Vitale 2020, 183–184).

I can think of three problems with this proposal. First, if there is no last generation of persons, only successive generations of persons continuing on into the future without end, then there is no point in time at which all human persons have completed their lives and a final, corporate judgement can proceed. Now, not all theists are committed to the actual occurrence of a final judgement, and even fewer are committed to the actual occurrence of a final corporate judgement. But it seems that orthodox Christians are.[12] And so, for orthodox Christian theists, Vitale's second proposal is off the table. A second problem for Vitale's second proposal is that if God possesses an antecedent desire that all persons be saved together (and not just that each person be saved in turn), then this antecedent desire is necessarily defeated, since there is no time at which all are saved together. For, on this proposal, for any number of persons who are saved, there are other persons who do not exist yet to be saved. Finally, if there is no last generation of persons, only successive generations of persons continuing on into the future without end, then it is impossible for the blessed themselves to all be united to one another in heaven. For, on this proposal, for any blessed persons who are united to one another in heaven, there are other potentially blessed persons who do not exist yet with whom they are not yet united. And if there is a desire in the blessed to someday be united to all other persons, then there is in the blessed a desire that can never be satisfied. And we might think that there can be no unsatisfied desires in heaven.

Vitale's third proposal is that perhaps there is a last generation of persons, and perhaps these persons do experience pain and suffering in their lives, but perhaps that pain and suffering is explained or justified by other means. So, for example, perhaps all of the pain and suffering experienced by the last generation of persons can be explained

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or justified by means of some particular version of the free will or soul-making theodicy (Vitale 2020, 184).

There is nothing in principle wrong with this solution. It is unreasonable to expect that any theodicy will offer an explanation or justification for every instance or even every kind of evil in the world. My reply is simply this: if there were a version of the non-identity theodicy that did not need to bring in any other theodicy to explain the pain and suffering of the last generation of persons, then, all else being equal, that theodicy would be superior to any origin essentialist non-identity theodicy. In the next section of the paper, I will introduce a version of the non-identity that fulfils this condition.

A superessentialist non-identity theodicy

Superessentialism is the view that every property possessed by a substance is an essential property of that substance. Importantly, it is not the view that every property that you possess right now is a property that you have always had and will always have. It is not the view that substances never undergo any sort of change in any of their properties. Rather, it is the view that, for any property that you possess at any time, it is essential to you that you possess that particular property at that particular time. If we understand an event as the possession of a property by a substance at a time, then we can state the thesis of superessentialism more clearly in terms of events: every event that occurs in the life of a person, everything that happens to her, every decision that she makes, and every action that she performs, is essential to that person, is constitutive of that person's identity. According to superessentialism, it is metaphysically impossible for a person to have lived a life that is in any way different from the one that she actually lived. And this is so because persons are defined by their life histories. For every possible difference in any person's life history, there is another person (possible or actual) whose life is essentially constituted in precisely that way. So, whenever we try to think about how our lives could have gone differently, whenever we seem to imagine ourselves making different choices or taking advantage of different opportunities or avoiding certain tragedies, we are not actually thinking about or imagining different versions of our own lives. We are thinking about or imagining the lives of other persons (possible or actual) who are similar to, but in fact numerically distinct from, ourselves.[13]

Several proponents of origin essentialist non-identity theodicies, including Adams and Vitale, consider but ultimately reject a superessentialist version of their non-identity theodicy, preferring instead the less demanding origin essentialist variety. Their reasons for rejecting a superessentialist version of their non-identity theodicy are a bit unclear, but there is no doubt that superessentialism is a demanding thesis. It requires that we accept that not a single thing about our lives could have been in any way different without sacrificing our numerical identities. It also seems to require that we accept that, for every decision that we make, there is no other choice that we could have made and still remained the particular persons that we are. In short, superessentialism would seem to entail that, for any decision that we make, there are no genuine alternative possibilities available to us at the moment of decision (at least not any that preserve our numerical identities). However, it is not clear to me that origin essentialist non-identity theodicies fare any better on this score. It is not clear to me that origin essentialist non-identity theodicies can make room for genuine alternative possibilities at the moment of decision either. As explained above, according to origin essentialist non-identity theodicies, if God desires to create and be in loving union with some particular person, Jim, and the specific circumstances in which Jim comes into existence are essential to him, then God must arrange for those specific circumstances to occur. And, in order to arrange for the very specific circumstances in which Jim

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comes into existence to occur, all of the events leading up to those very specific circumstances must also occur in exactly the right way, including every choice or decision made by every prior person. As a result, if God wants to ensure that some very specific person comes to be, he must also ensure that every choice or decision made by every prior person is made in exactly the way that that specific person's existence requires.[14]

Now let's turn to the benefits of a superessentialist non-identity theodicy. In short, supplementing a non-identity theodicy with a commitment to superessentialism gives proponents of that variety of theodicy the resources to successfully solve the two major worries discussed above.

First, a superessentialist non-identity theodicy is entirely consistent with even the stronger form of the same subject condition for successful theodicy articulated above, according to which, for every instance of pain and suffering experienced by some subject, the explanation or justification for that particular instance of pain and suffering must make reference to some good or benefit enjoyed primarily by that same subject. For, according to superessentialism, the pain and suffering that occur in Jim's life are not only required for the existence of those specific future persons whose identities are essentially tied to the very specific set of circumstances that that pain and suffering produce. It is also required for Jim's own existence. Had those instances of pain and suffering not occurred, then not only would those specific future persons never come to be, Jim himself would never have existed. Some other person who is numerically distinct from Jim would have existed instead, or no person at all.

A superessentialist non-identity theodicy, then, can explain or justify every instance of pain and suffering experienced by every person, and in two ways: every instance is explained or justified by the existence of those future persons whose identities are tied to that particular event's occurrence, and it is also explained or justified by the existence of that same person who experiences that pain and suffering. Without those specific instances of pain and suffering, neither the person who experiences them, nor any of the specific persons coming after whose identities are essentially tied to those events, would exist. And if God desires to create and be in loving union with those particular persons, then it explains why he might cause or allow that suffering to occur.

Superessentialism explains not only why there is general pain and suffering in the life of Jim but also why the specific instances of pain and suffering in Jim's life occur. And it explains it with reference to some great good achieved or received by Jim himself, namely his own existence. As long as Jim's life is, on the whole, good, or at least good enough to be worth living,[15] then there is some great good enjoyed by Jim himself that God desires and that not even God can achieve without causing or allowing every specific instance of pain and suffering in Jim's life. Jim is not treated merely as a means on this particular version of the non-identity theodicy, not even with respect to his own pain or suffering. His pain and suffering are the means by which Jim himself exists. And so, even with respect to his own pain and suffering, Jim himself, and not some future person, is the primary intended end. As a result, a superessentialist non-identity theodicy satisfies the same subject condition for successful theodicy in a very robust way, and it does so without being committed to any particular view of the afterlife or any particular view on the nature and scope of any particular corporate or collective goods.

Second, a superessentialist non-identity theodicy also has the resources to solve the problem of the last generation of persons. Because every instance of suffering experienced by any person is explained or justified in part by the great good of his or her own existence (for without that particular instance of suffering, he or she would not have existed, but someone else), even the pain and suffering of the persons in the last generation have a non-identity justification. A proponent of a superessentialist non-identity theodicy does not need to say that there is no last generation of persons, or that any persons in that generation

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will be preserved by God from any pain or suffering, or that the pain and suffering experienced by those persons is justified by some other theodicy. For, on a superessentialist non-identity theodicy, the pain and suffering experienced by persons of the last generation are justified in the same way that the pain and suffering of persons in every prior generation are justified: with reference to the great good of that person's own existence.

Conclusion

Superessentialism is a demanding thesis. It demands that we think of each person's existence as extremely fragile. Had even a single event in a person's life been even in the slightest way different, that particular person would not have existed but some other. A benefit of origin essentialist non-identity theodicies is that they are not committed to anything nearly that strong. They only require a commitment to a moderately strong version of origin essentialism. But, for all that, what I hope to have shown in this paper is there are great goods or benefits to be gained by supplementing a non-identity theodicy with a commitment to superessentialism, great goods or benefits that the proponent of such a view herself might enjoy, and that might explain or justify any instances of pain or suffering that might accompany a commitment to such a strong thesis about the identity conditions of human persons.

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Notes

1. See Adams (1979) (and also Adams 1972, 2006), Hasker (1981) (and also Hasker 2021), Mawson (1999) (and also Mawson 2022), Vitale (2017, 2020), Hill (2022, forthcoming), and Couenhoven (2022). Haderlie and Miller (2025) offer a non-identity argument for theological determinism and Broadhurst (2025) offers a non-identity solution to the problem of divine hiddenness. Non-identity theodicies are named after the more general non-identity problem, a notorious problem in population ethics (see Roberts 2024 for discussion). The *locus classicus* for contemporary discussions about the non-identity problem is Parfit (1984).
2. See Robertson et al. (2023) for discussion. The *locus classicus* for contemporary discussions about origin essentialism is Kripke (1980).
3. See citations in note 1 for some examples of non-identity theodicies.
4. For a helpful discussion of which theodicies are available to theological determinists, see Swenson (2022).
5. Vitale disagrees. See his discussion of this point in Vitale (2020), pp. 189–196.
6. See Quin (forthcoming) for a very nice discussion of this point.
7. For an overview of the first two conditions, and a helpful discussion of the third, see Murray (2011). Eleonore Stump is the most notable proponent of this third condition (see Stump 1985, 2010).
8. Hill argues that his non-identity theodicy is consistent with, but in no way requires, consequentialist justifications for God's decision to create particular persons and not others (see, for example, Hill 2022, pp. 779–780). Adams, Mawson, and Vitale all think that a successful non-identity theodicy must reject the plausibility of that line of justification.
9. This is, for example, the way in which Stump formulates the condition in her work. See citations in note 7 above.
10. This solution also will not work for any pain or suffering experienced by the first generation of human persons. For, in that case, there are no earlier instances of pain and suffering for which the existence of such persons can be the intended end. And so, if the pain and suffering of first-generation persons is explained or justified by the essential role that it plays in producing the next generation of persons, but there is no prior generation the pain and suffering of which justifies or explains their existence, then any first-generation persons are treated merely as

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means to other ends and not also as ends in themselves. But here I think we can say that God intends the existence of any first-generation persons directly, insofar as he creates them so that he can be in loving union with them before they experience any pain and suffering in their lives. The existence of any first-generation persons could also be the intended end of any pain and suffering of other creatures that predate the introduction of our species.

11. A better response might be to say that the great good that any sufferer enjoys, and otherwise would not have been able to enjoy had he or she not suffered in that particular way, is the great good of loving union in heaven with the very specific persons whose identity conditions require the occurrence of those specific instances of pain and suffering. But here again we might wonder whether even that great good is worth the cost. Had the person not suffered in that particular way, then there would have been other persons with whom he or she could have enjoyed loving union. And it is not clear that this result would have been any worse for her. Unlike God, created persons do not have the ability to antecedently select every person with whom they would like to enjoy loving union. And so, the irreducible love of persons reply featured above in my discussion of God's reasons for desiring certain persons and not others would not apply here. This solution would also require the existence of not only an afterlife but also a very specific kind of afterlife, namely one in which every person who suffers is ultimately able to enjoy loving union with all other persons.

12. A final judgement for all is mentioned several places in the Bible (see, for example, Matthew 25:31–46 and John 5:28–29). Orthodox Christian theists, then, appear to be committed to the actual occurrence of such an event.

13. We owe the name for this sort of view to the seminal work of Fabrizio Mondadori on Leibniz's theory of modality (see, for example, Mondadori 1985).

14. An exception here would be any persons of the last generation. Since there are no further persons whose identities depend on the particular choices or decisions they make, God could grant any persons of the last generation genuine alternative possibilities with respect to their actions. They would be free to make any choices or decisions they like without God intervening. On the other hand, if God were to grant persons of the last generation this sort of freedom, then persons of prior generations would have one more reason to complain about the unfairness of the situation.

15. And this might only be the case if, after his death, Jim eventually comes to enjoy everlasting happiness with God and other like-minded persons in heaven. In short, the theodicy offered here might require a commitment to a kind of universalism. But that will depend on whether the life of someone who does not make it to heaven can still be worth living, a great good for the person whose life it is.

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