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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

How reincarnations can resolve moral issues for non-sufferer-focused theodicies

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Abstract

Theodicies attempt to explain why evil and suffering might exist in a world governed by an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God. Some theodicies focus on pointing out benefits that suffering seems necessary for, though in many cases the benefits are primarily for someone other than the sufferer. Some philosophers find it morally objectionable for God to let one person suffer in order to benefit someone else, and this is thought to be a weakness of some otherwise promising theodicies. I discuss two moral concerns in this context: a mere-means-to-an-end concern and a concern about horrendous evils remaining undefeated. I argue that incorporating a doctrine of reincarnation may help some theodicies resolve both of these moral concerns, giving theodicists reason to turn towards such doctrines.

Keywords: theodicy; reincarnation; divine justice; mere means to an end; defeat of horrendous evil

Introduction

Doctrines of reincarnation posit that after one dies, they may begin a new life in a new body, possibly multiple times. Philosophers of religion have noted a few ways in which the truth of such a doctrine may be helpful for the project of theodicy – explaining why evil, suffering, and apparent injustice might exist in a world governed by an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good God. Most famously, a doctrine of reincarnation allows one to explain seemingly undeserved suffering and seemingly unfair disadvantages in life as punishments for people's sins in previous lives (Filice 2006, 49–50; Di Muzio 2013, 172; Goldschmidt and Seacord 2013, 397–400). God can also utilize reincarnations to provide people with opportunities they were deprived of in previous lives, or opportunities they misused (Filice 2006, 50; Gellman 2012, 110–111; Di Muzio 2013, 170–171; Goldschmidt and Seacord 2013, 413–416). Additionally, reincarnations enable people to pursue projects that take more than one whole lifetime to complete (Filice 2006, 50–51; Gellman 2012, 110–111; Goldschmidt and Seacord 2013, 414–416), and they give people repeated – possibly infinite – chances to avoid eternal damnation (Di Muzio 2013, 171–173; Gupta and Gallagher 2023).

In this paper, I will show another way in which doctrines of reincarnation should be attractive to theodicists. Theodicists often try to justify the existence of suffering by pointing out outweighing benefits that suffering is necessary for. Some theodicies focus on benefits for the sufferer themselves (e.g. Stump 2010, 394–402; Harris 2017; Ekstrom 2021,

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73–95), but many theodicies feature benefits for someone other than the sufferer. Some philosophers find it morally objectionable for God to let one person suffer to benefit someone else, and this is thought to be a weakness of some otherwise promising theodicies. In the following, after providing some examples of such theodicies, I discuss two moral concerns that have been raised in this context: a mere-means-to-an-end concern and a concern about horrendous evils remaining undefeated. I argue that incorporating a doctrine of reincarnation may help some theodicies resolve both of these moral concerns, giving theodicists reason to turn towards such doctrines.[1]

Non-sufferer-focused theodicies

Let us call the theodicies that focus on benefits for the sufferer themselves 'sufferer-focused theodicies'. We may accordingly call theodicies that primarily feature benefits that may be for someone other than the sufferer 'non-sufferer-focused theodicies'. These are the theodicies which concern this paper. In this section, I will provide a few examples of non-sufferer-focused theodicies, dividing them into two groups: free-will theodicies and opportunity theodicies.

Free-will theodicies argue that a lot of the suffering in our world is a result of God giving creatures the gift of free will. Richard Swinburne describes this as a gift because having the freedom to harm or benefit others gives one responsibility for the well-being of their fellow creatures (Swinburne 1998, 94, 153). Other theodicists view free will as necessary for obtaining perfect happiness (Goetz 2008, 144), for being morally good (Plantinga 2013, 205), or for having the most valuable form of relationship with God (Lewis 1952, 38; Journet 1963, 154, 252; Brümmer 1987, 96; Boyd 2001, 51–57; van Inwagen 1988, 163) or with fellow creatures (Bishop 1993, 116). All of these theodicies blame much of the world's evil on the free actions of free creatures, so the gift of free will is paid for by the victims of these actions, rather than by whoever performs them. Thus, the benefits tied to particular instances of evil are reaped by people other than those who suffer from them. This seems especially problematic when one considers sufferers who lack the physical or cognitive capacities necessary for exercising free will in a meaningful way, or sufferers whose life is cut short before they get significant opportunities to do so.

Another group of theodicies may be categorized as 'opportunity theodicies'. These theodicies argue that the existence of evils that harm some people can benefit other people with valuable opportunities. For example, opportunities to show compassion towards sufferers (Swinburne 1998, 167–173), opportunities to practise tolerance and self-restraint in response to worldly evils, rather than turning to hate and violence (Duhan-Kaplan 2004, 53–54), opportunities for 'soul-making' by cultivating moral growth when faced with hardship (Hick 2010, 257), or opportunities for people to manifest themselves as godlike mini creators by contributing to fixing the world and removing worldly evils (Ron manuscript). Someone's own suffering can provide them with some of these opportunities, but in many instances it is someone else's suffering that benefits someone according to these theodicies. This again seems especially problematic when one considers sufferers who lack the physical or cognitive capacities necessary for seizing these opportunities, or sufferers whose life is cut short before significant opportunities come up for them.

Some of these theodicies are considerably popular among theists, but many philosophers, theists and atheists alike, find non-sufferer-focused theodicies morally objectionable (Rowe 1986, 244; Stump 1990, 66; Tooley 1991, 113; McNaughton 1994, 342–343; Adams 1999, 29–31; Davies 2006, 130–131; Simpson 2008, 221; Maitzen 2009, 116–117; Reichenbach 2022, 7; Ekstrom 2023, 46). The objection can be articulated in two main ways, which I will present in turn.

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Moral concern #1: Treating people merely as means to an end

If God causes one person to undergo involuntary and undeserved suffering in order to benefit someone else, it seems that God takes advantage of the sufferer and treats them merely as a means to an end. Thus, God violates Kant's categorical imperative. Some philosophers argue that God is not a moral subject and is therefore not bound by Kantian ethics (e.g. Murphy 2019, 96–101), but even they can agree that this behaviour seems unbecoming of a wholly good God. Thus, Brian Davies, who himself argues that God is not a moral subject (Davies 2006, ch. 4), writes:

> But to try to justify God [with a non-sufferer-focused theodicy] would amount to saying that he is prepared to make people tools when it comes to the well-being of others, and one might surely wonder about the moral propriety of treating people in this way, treating them as means to an end, treating them as *instruments* (Davies 2006, 130–131, emphasis in original).

Treating people merely as means to an end in this context appears to objectify them, denying their dignity as human beings, and this seems far from how a wholly good and loving God would treat his creatures.[2] This isn't a problem if it turns out that God always treats sufferers also as ends in themselves, and not merely as means to ends, and Swinburne argues that when someone's suffering is useful to someone else, this usefulness itself is highly valuable for the sufferer (Swinburne 1998, 107–111), possibly justifying the thought that God treats the sufferer as an end too by giving them an opportunity to be useful. Nevertheless, Swinburne's idea about the sufferer's usefulness being good for them is highly contentious (see e.g. Draper 2001, 470–472; Simpson 2008, 222–223).

Some philosophers argue that there are special conditions under which it is okay for God to cause one person to undergo involuntary and undeserved suffering in order to benefit someone else. For example, if God makes sure the sufferer has a good life overall (Swinburne 1998, 239), or if God obtains some form of retroactive consent (Alston 1991, 48) or counterfactual consent (Teeninga 2019, 338). Some have also argued that it may be okay as long as there is no way to bring about the benefits with less suffering and the sufferer is compensated (Teeninga 2019, 337–338; Mousavirad 2025, 67–68), or even uncompensated (Mawson 2011, 149). One may also draw on Sam Lebens and Tyron Goldschmidt (Lebens and Goldschmidt 2017) and argue that it is okay provided that God alters the past such that the suffering never occurred. Alternatively, one may speculate that apparently involuntary suffering was actually consented to in a pre-birth state (Spiegel 2024, 52–53). I will argue that by incorporating a doctrine of reincarnation into a theodicy, one needn't argue for any of these special conditions. Instead, even a non-sufferer-focused theodicy can fully satisfy the moral concern at hand here and argue that God does not treat anyone merely as a means to an end. But before that, there is a second moral concern to consider as well.

Moral concern #2: Undefeated horrendous evils

Sufferer-focused theodicies have a built-in mechanism for ensuring that no-one ends up with more bad than good in their life. This is because according to those theodicies every instance of suffering is accompanied by an outweighing benefit for the sufferer. Non-sufferer-focused theodicies lack this built-in mechanism, and to make up for that they often argue that one's undeserved suffering is always vastly outweighed by the good they enjoy in an everlasting afterlife (e.g. Hick 2010, 339–340; Swinburne 1998, 238; Mousavirad 2022). Nevertheless, some philosophers argue that it is not enough for a theodicy to show that God outweighs evils with goods. According to these philosophers, a theodicy must also show

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that some of the goods defeat the evils, or at least certain important evils. The relevant notion of defeat was first introduced and rigorously defined by Roderick Chisholm (1968), and it has since been explained in a number of ways. Put in simple terms:

> To say that [someone's] suffering was defeated for her is to say that there was a benefit from her suffering, that that benefit came primarily to her, that it would not have come without her suffering, and that it significantly outweighed her suffering (Stump 2022, 5).

To defeat someone's suffering, it is not enough for God to compensate them with some unrelated good. The good must be tightly connected to the suffering such that it wouldn't have come about without the suffering.[3]

While it is clear to Chisholm that theodicies need to argue that every worldly evil is defeated by goods (Chisholm 1968, 37), Marilyn McCord Adams plausibly argues that at least horrendous evils need to be defeated if God is to value each individual as a person (Adams 1999, 31). By horrendous evils, Adams means evils like violent rape and certain forms of psycho-physical torture and child abuse, evils which seem to degrade people to subhuman status and cast a doubt whether their life could be a great good for them overall (Adams 1999, 26–27). Adams argues that for God to be good to every person and value their personhood, God cannot let such evils remain undefeated. Instead, according to Adams, God must make sure to give horrendous evils a positive meaning for sufferers through their connection to sufficiently valuable benefits for the sufferer, thus justifying the thought that their life is a great good for them overall (Adams 1999, 31).

Non-sufferer-focused theodicies generally allow for God to let horrendous evils remain undefeated because non-sufferer-focused theodicies allow for God to cause one person to undergo involuntary and undeserved suffering without any good coming out of it for them, let alone defeating goods. If Chisholm and Adams are correct, this is a problem for non-sufferer-focused theodicies. Non-sufferer-focused theodicies imply a characterization of God as one who does not care about each of his creatures individually and making their lives a great good for them overall.

Adams herself has a theory as to how horrendous evils may be defeated. Adams argues that one's suffering from horrendous evils enhances their intimacy with God in the afterlife (Adams 1999, 162), so every horrendous evil leads to a significantly outweighing benefit for the sufferer that would not have come about without it. However, others have objected that Adams's theory is, at best, applicable only to a limited subgroup of the world's sufferers (Chignell 1998, 208–213; Gleeson 2012, 51–54) and that Adams's arguments don't convincingly show that suffering from horrendous evil always enhances one's postmortem intimacy with God (Earl 2011, 19–21). I will argue that incorporating a doctrine of reincarnation can help many non-sufferer-focused theodicies explain how God ensures the defeat of all horrendous evils, even without appealing to Adams's theory about postmortem intimacy with God.

The creation button and why it won't help

Before diving into the solution I offer for non-sufferer-focused theodicies, it is worth pausing to consider a suggestion that Justin Mooney offers in response to similar moral concerns. Examining where this suggestion falls short for our needs will help illustrate why the reincarnation solution is called for.

Mooney is interested in showing how God does not violate moral 'side constraints' when producing benefits for people through people's suffering; for example, showing that God does not kill or torture people in the process. Mooney's main point in this regard is that

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simply creating the world and beginning all of the causal chains that will eventually lead to everything that happens in the world does not amount to killing or torturing whoever ends up dying or suffering in it. The reason for this, Mooney argues, has to do with the way that the causal connections between God's actions and the eventual deaths and suffering are mediated (Mooney 2022, 3604–3606).

Mooney's suggestion may work for his own goals, and I will not debate that. However, note that the moral concerns Mooney aims to resolve are general deontological moral concerns that do not single out non-sufferer-focused theodicies. On a close look, while Mooney's suggestion may helpfully resolve these concerns for theodicies in general, including non-sufferer-focused theodicies, it cannot help with the two specific moral concerns for non-sufferer-focused theodicies which I discussed above. I will demonstrate this regarding the two moral concerns one by one.

Firstly, it may be that God does not actually kill or torture anybody, but God might nonetheless treat some people merely as means to an end. Mooney motivates his arguments with thought experiments about people creating different types of worlds by pressing different 'creation buttons' that each bring about an entire world and all of its circumstances. Mooney argues that merely pressing a creation button doesn't kill or torture anyone who dies or suffers in the world created, and I am not arguing against this. However, it is important to have in mind that when God creates a world, God doesn't only do something analogous to pressing a creation button, God also has the power to choose what kind of world to create. This is analogous to programming exactly what the creation button will do, or, for those who like to think in terms of possible worlds, it is analogous to choosing one button to press from an infinite set of existing buttons.

According to non-sufferer-focused theodicies, our world contains many events where one person undergoes involuntary and undeserved suffering to benefit someone else. Let us focus on one such event, one where Noam suffers and provides Benaya with one of the suffering-related benefits mentioned in a non-sufferer-focused theodicy. God could have easily created a world almost exactly like our actual world but without this specific event.[4]

Even if pressing a button that creates the actual world doesn't amount to torturing Noam, a deliberate choice to press that button rather than another button that would create a world almost exactly like our actual world but without the relevant event certainly treats Noam merely as a means to an end.[5] Thus, even if Mooney's creation-button arguments serve Mooney's own purposes well, they cannot help a non-sufferer-focused theodicy resolve the first moral concern and show how God does not treat people merely as means to an end. This is what I aim for the reincarnation solution to do.

As for the second moral concern, regarding undefeated horrendous evils, Mooney's creation-button arguments may support the conclusion that God does not commit horrendous evils, and Mooney offers additional arguments that may support the conclusion that God is not morally obligated to ensure that horrendous evils are defeated (see Mooney 2022, 3609–3612). Nevertheless, even if these arguments are successful, they do not justify the thought that God not only fulfils his moral obligations but also values each individual as a person. This arguably requires showing that God ensures the defeat of horrendous evils, obligatory or not.[6] I aim for the reincarnation to do just this.

The reincarnation solution

Earlier I wrote that several philosophers argue that there are special conditions under which it is okay for God to cause one person to undergo involuntary and undeserved suffering in order to benefit someone else, thus treating them merely as means to an end. Unlike these philosophers, my aim for the reincarnation solution is not for it to show that it is permissible for God to treat someone merely as a means to an end, but to meet the objector on

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their own terms and show that God does not treat anyone merely as a means to an end. Likewise, the reincarnation solution aims to show how a non-sufferer-focused theodicy can argue that God ensures the defeat of all horrendous evils, even without appealing to suffering-related goods that a given non-sufferer-focused theodicy doesn't already appeal to.

The reincarnation solution begins with a suggestion from Dustin Crummett. Crummett argues that even if there are specific instances where people seem mistreated by God in the way God submits them to suffering, the relevant moral concerns may be resolved in the bigger picture if the existence of suffering in the world ends up being worthwhile for each person overall. That is, even if a sufferer would be better off if some specific instance where they suffered never occurred, their gain from the suffering-related benefits that theodicies describe make God's general policy of enabling suffering to exist a policy that benefits them overall (Crummett 2017, 91–95). Intuitively, if God's general policy of enabling suffering to exist benefits each person overall, God does not wrong anyone by enabling suffering to exist. Crummett himself mostly writes in terms of creatures approving of God's policy, thus resolving concerns about God being cruel, but in the section following this one, I will show how the two moral concerns for non-sufferer-focused theodicies may be resolved in this manner. But first, I will show why reincarnations must play a part in this solution.

It is possible for God to make sure that overall, each person gains from the suffering of others more than they end up suffering themselves. This is possible because the suffering of one person may provide several people with suffering-related benefits, and also because the suffering-related benefits featured in theodicies are supposed to outweigh the badness of the particular instances of suffering they are tied to. On the face of it, there doesn't seem to be any barrier preventing God from implementing Crummett's suggestion and enacting a policy where everyone benefits from the existence of suffering throughout their lifetime overall. Nonetheless, it seems evident that God did not enact such a policy. There are plenty of people who lack the physical or cognitive capacities necessary for exercising free will in a meaningful way, or for seizing the suffering-related opportunities featured in non-sufferer-focused theodicies, and there are plenty of people whose life is cut short before they get significant opportunities to do so. Aside from them, there are also many people who suffer from horrendous evils that are terrible enough to render their entire lives not worth living, even if they do enjoy some suffering-related benefits throughout their lives. Setting aside radical scepticism and speculations about God somehow altering the past, to argue that God makes sure that these kinds of wretched people benefit from the existence of evil overall, one must look beyond the scope of one Earthly life.

If the aim is only to show that God benefits wretched people overall, it would be enough to argue that they enjoy a blissful afterlife that does more than compensate them for their suffering. Nevertheless, the goal is to show that God's policy of enabling suffering to exist is a policy that benefits each person overall, and an afterlife cannot help with this since the bliss of the afterlife is not dependent on anyone's suffering (except according to a theory like Adams's). To argue that even wretched people end up benefiting overall from the existence of suffering, one must posit that beyond their wretched Earthly life, the wretched people spend more time in a world where suffering exists, and in that additional time they ultimately benefit from the existence of suffering. This adds up to a claim that people live multiple lives in this world or in other worlds where evil exists – a doctrine of reincarnation.

My suggestion is for non-sufferer-focused theodicies to argue that people live multiple lives in this world or in other worlds where evil exists. Sometimes one gets to enjoy the benefits described in theodicies, sometimes one suffers and pays the price for those benefits enabling others to enjoy them. It may be that in a particular life someone mostly suffers, but God maintains divine justice by ensuring that suffering-related benefits and undeserved suffering are distributed justly between people once all of one's lives are taken

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into consideration.[7] This just distribution may be an equal distribution of suffering-related benefits and undeserved suffering across all creatures (as called for in Mizrahi 2014), or it may be that God makes sure that each creature ends up with the same satisfactory ratio of suffering-related benefits to undeserved suffering, even if the total amounts aren't equal between creatures.[8] We humans do not always know how to weigh one instance of suffering against another and whether many small instances of suffering can add up to be equivalent to one really terrible instance of suffering, but an omniscient God who knows the hearts of his creatures can navigate this distributive task in the best way possible. As to why goods and undeserved suffering are not distributed justly between people within one lifetime, non-sufferer-focused theodicies can follow John Hick and argue that the appearance of an unsupervised distribution of goods and suffering may be crucial for our moral motivation to prevent suffering (Hick 2010, 333–335).

God can maintain these types of distributions by actively coordinating each person's chain of reincarnations, or, as Gianluca Di Muzio suggests, it may be that even if chains of reincarnations are determined by a 'blind' natural process, if each person reincarnates enough times, the sheer numbers will make the total amounts of benefits and undeserved suffering even out between people (Di Muzio 2013, 171). The chains of reincarnations can continue endlessly, or until the world reaches some final utopian state where no-one dies anymore, but one may also imagine that some chains of reincarnation might end at some earlier time. All that matters is that God does not let someone's chain of reincarnations end before they experience the right amount of suffering-related benefits and undeserved suffering, and God might bring someone back into this world for a short period of time to give them one more good experience or opportunity, or to submit them to one more instance of suffering if a need arises.

Nonhuman animals can be included in this plan as well. Although some have pointed out that the moral concerns for non-sufferer-focused theodicies are normally thought to apply only to humans (Cutter and Swenson, forthcoming), if someone takes them to apply to animals as well, the moral concerns can be resolved for animals too if humans can reincarnate as animals and animals as humans.[9] Even if someone mostly suffers for the benefit of others when they incarnate as an animal, their suffering-related benefits when they incarnate as a human may make the existence of suffering worthwhile for them overall. This can equally apply to animals that predate human existence, provided that a theodicy can explain how their suffering is tied to suffering-related benefits for someone.

The main challenge that accounting for animals introduces is that animals greatly outnumber humans in our world, and accounting for animals seems to add a lot of suffering into to the pool of suffering to be distributed between everyone, but not so many suffering-related benefits, considering the type of benefits featured in most non-sufferer-focused theodicies. However, this might not seem like a big challenge for someone who thinks that animals usually live mostly pleasant lives or that animals can enjoy their own animal form of some of the suffering-related benefits featured in non-sufferer-focused theodicies. Additionally, one may speculate that at some future time, humans and other rational beings will outnumber the animals, skewing the ratio of benefits to suffering in a more favourable way.[10] Either way, the challenge can also be overcome simply if the suffering-related benefits that one can enjoy when they incarnate as a human are so valuable that they can make up for a few lifetimes of suffering as an animal.

Why the reincarnation solution works

I began with Crummett's suggestion that even if there are specific instances where people seem mistreated by God in the way God submits them to suffering, the relevant moral

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concerns may be resolved in the bigger picture if God's general policy of enabling suffering to exist ends up benefiting them overall. I showed that employing this idea to resolve the moral concerns for non-sufferer-focused theodicies calls for a doctrine of reincarnation because many people in our world live wretched lives, and the way that God's general policy of enabling suffering to exist can benefit them overall is if they benefit from the existence of suffering in another life.

It is now time to explain how a reality where God's general policy of enabling suffering to exist benefits each creature overall can resolve the two moral concerns for non-sufferer-focused theodicies. At this point, one may object that even if God's general policy benefits someone overall, this does not change the fact that God may have treated them merely as a means to an end along the way. Like a doctor who cures someone from a deadly disease and then steals their wallet, God may benefit people overall yet still act wrongly against them. A similar objection may be made regarding undefeated horrendous evils. For someone's suffering from horrendous evils to be defeated by a benefit, the benefit needs to be such that it would not have come about with the suffering, but it seems possible for God to let someone benefit from the existence of suffering overall without undergoing any suffering themselves, so the benefits one enjoys seem unqualified to defeat their suffering. The patient's benefit when the doctor cures their deadly disease cannot defeat the badness of their wallet being stolen if the doctor could have easily cured the disease without stealing their wallet.

The response to these objections lies in the idea that one's suffering and one's benefits from the suffering of others are part of an inseparable 'package deal'. One way in which these can seem like a package deal is if they result from the same divine action, perhaps pressing one of Mooney's creation buttons, but this is a package deal only in a superficial sense. A doctor who cures a disease and steals a wallet in the same action (perhaps by pressing some single button) seems just as bad as a doctor who does so in two separate actions if the doctor could have just as easily cured the patient without stealing the wallet. If so, we need a better reason to view one's suffering and one's suffering-related benefits as a package deal.

I believe that that better reason lies in God's nature. Due to God's (maybe necessary) commitment to justice and fairness, God will not allow for a person to be a 'freeloader' and reap suffering-related benefits at the expense of others without participating in the suffering themselves and benefitting others too. Thus, to reap suffering-related benefits, it is necessary for one to carry a proportionate part of the burden and undergo some suffering themselves. If so, God submits people to suffering and benefits others so that the sufferer may benefit overall when they enjoy suffering-related benefits from the suffering of others. Unlike the wallet-stealing doctor, God is more like a doctor who cures a patient and charges a standardized minimal fee to cover the costs and thus enable the hospital to continue treating patients. Regarding the first moral concern for non-sufferer-focused theodicies, no-one is treated merely as a means to an end when they suffer and benefit others because one's suffering in such circumstances benefits the sufferer themselves overall by helping to cover their treatment fee and make it possible for them to reap suffering-related benefits from the suffering of others. As for the second moral concern, one's suffering-related benefits can defeat their suffering from horrendous evils since one wouldn't have been able to gain the benefits without having participated in a proportionate share of the world's suffering. If so, a reality where God's general policy of enabling suffering to exist benefits each creature overall can resolve both moral concerns for non-sufferer-focused theodicies. As I have shown earlier, it can only be plausible that such a reality obtains in our world if creatures live multiple lives, enabling better lives to make up for the wretched lives. This makes doctrines of reincarnation very attractive to theodicists and to theists who endorse non-sufferer-focused theodicies.

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Conclusion

I argued that incorporating a doctrine of reincarnation can help non-sufferer-focused theodicies resolve two moral concerns: the concern that God treats some people merely as means to an end when God enables them to suffer to benefit others, and the concern that God does not value each individual as a person because God allows people to suffer from horrendous evils with them being defeated. I suggested the idea that God ensures that throughout each person's chain of reincarnations, each person gets to reap the benefits related to the existence of suffering and each person pays the price for those benefits and suffers themselves, and God ensures that suffering-related benefits and undeserved suffering are distributed justly between people once all of one's lives are taken into consideration, and each person is significantly benefitted overall. Since a wholly good God would not allow for some people to be freeloaders and reap suffering-related benefits at the expense of others but never suffer themselves and benefit others, one's own suffering is necessary for their benefits. This makes it so no-one is treated merely as a means to an end since one ultimately benefits from their own suffering, even when it only provides others with suffering-related benefits. Additionally, it enables one's suffering-related benefits to defeat their suffering from horrendous evils.

The availability of the reincarnation solution I proposed in this paper should increase the viability of the non-sufferer-focused theodicies it may be applied to, as it resolves two moral issues that were previously seen as weaknesses of some otherwise promising theodicies. It also highlights a good reason for those who endorse non-sufferer-focused theodicies to consider adopting a doctrine of reincarnation.

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Notes

1. Since I am advertising doctrines of reincarnation as a product to be 'purchased' by theodicists, I should note that such doctrines are not as theoretically costly as one might think. Aside from being well supported in many religious and non-religious traditions (see Burley (2016, 15–17) for a thorough list), doctrines of reincarnation are compatible with a variety of metaphysical views in the mind–body debate, both dualist and materialist (see Mooney, forthcoming).
2. This moral concern is expressed explicitly in terms of means and ends also in McNaughton (1994, 333), Stump (2010, 221), Reichenbach (2022, 7), and Ekstrom (2023, 46). Jeff Jordan identifies the moral concern in these terms too (Jordan 2004, 172), but his arguments endorse dismissing it.
3. The definitions in Chisholm (1968, 30–31) and Adams (1999, 28–29) are put in different terms and might be somewhat different in their extensions, but the main idea is the same. In contrast, Joshua Sijuwade introduces a different notion of defeat which focuses on wrongs being set right when the perpetrator of a horrendous evil atones and reconciles with their victims in the afterlife (Sijuwade 2024, 206). Sijuwade names this 'defeat-R', naming the other notion of defeat 'defeat-I' (Sijuwade 2024, 200). In this paper, I focus on defeat-I because defeat-R seems best fit to supplement defeat-I, not to replace it. For God to value each individual as a person, it seems that God should enable someone to suffer from horrendous evils only when it is tied to an outweighing good for the sufferer (defeat-I), even if the sufferer is reconciled with their perpetrator in the afterlife (defeat-R).
4. One may push back against the argument I am beginning here and argue that there is no possible world that only differs from the actual world in this kind of manner (and other insignificant manners), because this kind of event always has a ripple effect that leads to other significant differences between the two worlds. These other differences may make the comparison between the worlds murkier, undermining my claim that God choosing one world rather than another may clearly exemplify God treating someone merely as a means to an end, rather than

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exemplifying God making an executive decision where there are multiple conflicting considerations. However, the claim that there is no possible world that only differs from the actual world in this kind of manner (and other insignificant manners) is a very strong, implausible modal claim that would make any theory much weaker if it relied on it.

5. My thought here is that God treats Noam merely as a means of benefitting Benaya, or as a means of increasing the good in the world in general. One may reject this and argue that God does not treat Noam merely as a means to an end because God chooses to press one button rather than another arbitrarily. I don't deny that God may ultimately need to choose between some possible worlds arbitrarily, but if God is to value every individual as a person, God cannot simply ignore the difference between the actual world and the world described. God treating the two worlds as equivalent would imply an acceptance of the trade-off of Noam's suffering for Benaya's benefit (or for increasing the good in the world) and this itself treats Noam as merely means to an end and doesn't value Noam as a person.

6. In one of the creation-button thought experiments Mooney stipulates that each sentient creature's life is good overall (Mooney 2022, 3604), which may imply that all horrendous evils are defeated in that thought experiment, but Mooney does nothing to show that this might be the case in the actual world too.

7. Notice that this should not undermine our moral motivation to prevent suffering. God's commitment to a just distribution does not entail that when an instance of potential suffering is prevented, it will be replaced by equivalent suffering to maintain the desired distribution. If a lot of instances of suffering are prevented throughout history, this may decrease the final level of suffering for each person to reach throughout their lives, so preventing suffering can potentially be very helpful.

8. I omit the option of some creatures enjoying a better ratio than others because it seems that those who get a worse ratio would be treated merely as means to an end in suffering to give others a better ratio than they themselves get.

9. To be exact, it is enough for it to be possible either for humans to reincarnate as animals or for animals to reincarnate as humans, since either of these makes it possible for someone to live some lives as an animal and some lives as a human. However, the reincarnation solution can work the smoothest if both types of species can reincarnate as one another because it puts less constraints on God in his work of maintaining a just distribution of benefits and suffering between everyone.

10. This creative suggestion was made to me by Avraham Sommer.

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