

Perfection, Evil, and Morality

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Abstract

First, I argue that the only well-motivated way to believe in the existence of God is to believe in the existence of a God whose essence includes perfect knowledge, power, and goodness – a conception of God that is compatible with “open theism” and with certain challenges to the traditional divine attributes. Second, I describe a horrific actual case of child suffering that, arguably, any God fitting that conception morally ought to have prevented. Third, I examine two lines of argument *denying* that God morally ought to have prevented it: one line of argument denies that God has any moral obligations at all; the other line allows that God has moral obligations but denies that God violated any of them if God allowed the suffering in order to give us human beings the opportunity, and hence the obligation, to prevent it ourselves. I conclude that both lines of argument are seriously defective.

1. God and the Problem of Evil

Many people believe in the existence of God as described by classical monotheism, a personal agent whose essence includes perfection – that is, unsurpassable greatness – in knowledge, power, and goodness.¹ Or, to put the point more cautiously, many people *say* they believe in the existence of such a being. A number of recent writers have warned against taking people’s say-so on this topic as reliable evidence of what they genuinely believe.² Nevertheless, I will ignore those warnings and take people at their word who say they believe in God.

These believers have no real choice but to set the bar high in regard to the attributes that God must possess. If you believe in God at all, then it only makes sense to believe in an essentially perfect God: there is insufficient motivation to believe in a God of any other kind. First, and perhaps least importantly, if you reject the idea that God must be unsurpassably great, then you sacrifice the most plausible *a priori* basis for believing in God’s existence, namely the Ontological Argument in any of its various versions. As far as I know, every version of the Ontological Argument relies on the assumption that any being deserving the title “God” must be as great as anything could possibly be. From this assumption, the most plausible form of the argument infers that any

¹ For a characterization of classical monotheism in these terms, see Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 20.

² See, e.g., Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006); Georges Rey, “Meta-Atheism: Religious Avowal as Self-Deception,” in *Philosophers Without Gods*, ed. Louise M. Antony (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 243–65; and Adèle Mercier, “Religious Belief and Self-Deception,” in *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists*, ed. Russell Blackford and Udo Schüklenk (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 41–47.

such being actually exists if it so much as possibly exists.³ From the premise that such a being possibly exists, the argument then concludes that the being actually exists. Now, even the most plausible form of the argument certainly deserves to be challenged, but the argument does not even get started without the assumption that God is unsurpassably great.

Second, and more importantly, imagining an imperfect God produces results that are theologically awkward or worse. Unlike a perfect God, an imperfect God need not be eternal or everlasting: such a God might be only finitely old, perishable, and might go out of existence just when we need him most! If God is imperfect, why think that God has the power to make the universe out of nothing, or even the power to make the universe out of preexisting stuff? If God is imperfect, why trust that God has the power to achieve justice in the end, to vindicate all wrongs, or even to compensate for all wrongs?⁴ The affirmation “with God, all things are possible”⁵ is supposed to comfort believers, but if God is imperfect, what assurance do they have that all things *are* possible with God? Furthermore, the more limited and imperfect one imagines God to be, the more one makes God resemble the deities that polytheistic religions invoke to explain various aspects of the natural world: one god for the sun, a second for the moon, a third for fertility, and so on. But surely deities of that sort have been outmoded by science’s ability to explain those aspects of the universe in purely naturalistic terms.

Now, one might worry about some of the attributes that an unsurpassably great God must possess. For example, some argue that omniscience – the property of knowing all the truths there are – falls prey to paradoxes such as the Knower Paradox or Cantorian paradoxes from set theory.⁶ If they are right, then omniscience is impossible. In that case, believers in God should construe God’s perfect knowledge as God’s knowing every proposition it is *possible* to know and, therefore, as God’s having propositional knowledge that is perfect in the sense of being impossible to improve or increase. Similarly, if believers think that the “openness” of the future makes it impossible for any being to foreknow every truth about the future,⁷ then they should hold that perfect knowledge does not require foreknowing every truth about the future, the latter knowledge being impossible. I hasten to add, however, that the impossibility of such foreknowledge does not imply the impossibility of having *extremely well-justified beliefs* about the future, beliefs so well-justified that it would be immoral not to act on them merely because they do not count as knowledge.⁸

³ The classic discussion is Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Chapter 10. Plantinga’s version of the argument requires the controversial modal principle “If possibly necessarily *p*, then *p*.”

⁴ On the difference between vindication (i.e., justification) and mere compensation, see Stephen Maitzen, “Ordinary Morality Implies Atheism,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 1 (2009): 110; and Stephen Maitzen, “On Gellman’s Attempted Rescue,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 2 (2010): 194–96.

⁵ Matt. 19:26 (AV); for similar biblical affirmations, see also Job 42:2, Jer. 32:17, and Luke 1:37, all cited in Brian Leftow, “Why Perfect Being Theology?” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69 (2011): 106.

⁶ See Patrick Grim, “The Being that Knew Too Much,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47 (2000): 141–54.

⁷ See, e.g., William Hasker, *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁸ As William Hasker, himself a defender of the openness of the future, emphasizes in William Hasker, “Defining ‘Gratuitous Evil’: A Response to Alan R. Rhoda,” *Religious Studies* 46 (2010): 308. The point becomes crucial when we consider how God ought to respond, for example, if God believes that an innocent child is about to be tortured.

Finally, if believers think that the openness of the future implies that no future-contingent propositions are even true in the first place, then they can allow that perfect knowledge *does* require foreknowing every truth about the future, but the range of such truths will be much narrower than we might otherwise have thought.

If omnipotence, construed as the power to do anything at all, falls prey to this or that paradox, then omnipotence construed that way is impossible: no being could have the power to φ on just any way of replacing “ φ .” In that case, believers should hold that perfect power – power that is impossible to improve or increase – amounts to something different from omnipotence in the loose sense just described.

Finally, one might suppose that God exists in every possible world without possessing essential moral perfection – that is, without being morally perfect in every possible world – on the grounds that God could encounter a moral dilemma: a disjunction of alternatives that forces God to do something wrong no matter what he does. But this supposition is implausible for three reasons. First, because moral dilemmas would seem to violate the widely accepted principle that “ought” implies “can,” it is controversial that even finite agents like us could ever encounter them.⁹ But if we could encounter moral dilemmas, then it would be on account of physical, technological, or epistemic limitations that there is no reason to think could possibly constrain the God described by classical monotheism.¹⁰ Second, if God could face a moral dilemma, then there is no reason he could not face many of them, and therefore we’d have no guarantee that God could achieve even a slim balance of justice over injustice in the end. Why bother believing in or worshipping a God who cannot provide even the latter guarantee?

Third, it is theologically perilous to suppose that God might fall short of moral perfection in particular. For whatever reason, we tend to judge those who are morally deficient much more harshly than we judge those who are deficient merely in power or knowledge. Imagine three men none of whom saves a toddler from drowning in a lake: one only because he cannot swim, a second only because he is too oblivious to notice the toddler’s noisy flailing, and a third only because he likes to watch toddlers drown. Only the third agent merits the description “truly despicable.” Any God who could come at all close to meriting that description is, again, not worth believing in or worshipping.

For the aforementioned reasons, the only well-motivated options seem to be these: a perfect God exists, or no God at all exists. Therefore let us assume that God, if God exists, must be perfect in at least knowledge, power, and goodness. The following question, then, looms large: why does a God answering to that description ever allow evil that he could prevent? The problem of evil, as I see it, arises as a philosophical challenge to theism because of the allegation that humans and other animals experience suffering that a perfect God, if one exists, morally ought to have prevented and therefore would have prevented. Descriptions of suffering allegedly of that type abound in the philosophical literature. In order to have a specific example before us, consider the case of Dominick Calhoun, a four-year-old boy from Michigan who died after days of being beaten and

9. See Terrance McConnell, “Moral Dilemmas,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-dilemmas>.

10. See Maitzen, “On Gellman’s Attempted Rescue,” 196–98.

burned by his mother's boyfriend.¹¹ "I've been doing this a long time, and this is the worst case of child abuse I've ever seen," said the local police chief about Dominick's case; "in all respects, he was tortured." Dominick's body was found covered with bruises and with all of his teeth knocked out. His grandmother reported that "burns covered his body" and that his brain was "bashed out of his skull." A neighbor told police he heard Dominick screaming, over and over again, "Mommy, make him stop."¹² The allegation is that God, being perfect, would have prevented Dominick's torture. Yet the torture occurred. So God does not exist.

2. Might God Lack Moral Obligations?

Defenders of theism might respond to the allegation by insisting that God has no moral obligations at all, or perhaps no moral obligations to humans or other animals, or perhaps no moral obligation to prevent suffering on the part of humans or other animals. Some contemporary theistic philosophers do indeed respond that way. For example, Marilyn McCord Adams follows various medieval theologians in concluding that "God has no obligations to anything else and so ... does not stand in need of *moral* justification."¹³ She offers two main reasons for this conclusion. First, "agents have obligations [only] to those on whom they depend for their existence," and God depends on no one else for his existence. Second, on the medieval view that she accepts, God operates according to

patron-client (or ruler-subject) relations that are structured by the Honor Code.... Patrons have no obligation to take on or service clients. Rather it would be a shame not to [take on clients] and a shame not to see to the well-being of clients after they have been taken on: a shame in the sense that it would send the message that there is less to the patron (s/he was not really so well resourced and powerful) than had been supposed.¹⁴

According to this second reason, God's allowing Dominick to be tortured to death cannot possibly violate a moral obligation that God owes to Dominick. At worst, it threatens to undermine God's nonmoral reputation.

¹¹ See Stephen Maitzen, "Atheism and the Basis of Morality," in *What Makes Us Moral?* ed. A. W. Musschenga and Anton van Harskamp (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), 257–69; and Stephen Maitzen, "The Moral Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 444–57.

¹² As reported at <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/04/15/michigan.child.torture>, at http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2010/04/dominick_calhoun_argentine_tow.html, and at <http://abclocal.go.com/story?section=news/local&id=7441716> (accessed 6 August 2014).

¹³ Marilyn McCord Adams, "Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation, and the Problem of Evil," *Sophia* 52 (2013): 16, emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Marilyn McCord Adams, "Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation," 17.

Adams admits that her view “startles and confuses contemporary philosophers of religion.”¹⁵ In oral remarks defending the view, she emphasized two points: (1) “Right reason” requires God to love *himself* “above all,” on the grounds that God alone possesses infinite metaphysical goodness. But – evidently – right reason does not require God to love a finitely good creature such as Dominick, not even enough to prevent Dominick’s death by torture. (2) God *owns* the universe and everything in it, so God can do, or not do, as he pleases with any human inhabitant, a point that, admittedly, Adams offered more diffidently than the previous one.¹⁶

I see nothing attractive in the view Adams defends. It really does sound medieval, in the pejorative sense of the term. Nor do I see anything persuasive about her points (1) and (2). First, it seems totally alien to our ordinary moral outlook to hold that we have moral obligations only to those on whom we depend for our existence. If anything, the reverse is true: we regard our strongest moral obligations as owed to those who most depend on *us* for *their* existence, including infants, young children, and dependent adults. Second, I cannot see how it counts as anything but a huge step backward to abandon a model of divine justice in favor of a model in which God instead adheres to a feudal honor code. Indeed, many girls and women in countries around the world today desire nothing more than to escape the influence of honor codes that, for example, regard violent death as appropriate treatment for a *victim* of rape. Substituting an honor code for an ethic of justice is atavistic and regressive in at least two ways: (a) It regards the suffering inflicted on a victim as first and foremost an injury to the victim’s patron rather than to the victim himself or, far more often, herself. (b) It values the patron’s reputation over securing justice for the victim and regards the latter as strictly speaking irrelevant to the former; indeed, “restoring” the patron’s honor is often used as an excuse for subjecting the victim to even more injustice. Third, we routinely believe that we can have moral obligations even to those whom we do not love “above all” else. Even if we dislike the neighbor’s dog, we have a moral obligation (to the dog, primarily) not to torture it for our own gratification. Fourth, ownership of a sentient being simply does not imply that the owner can do no wrong regardless of what he or she does to such a being. On the contrary, we commonly think that dog owners, for instance, have positive obligations to feed and care for their dogs, above and beyond the negative obligation not to torture their dogs for entertainment: all else equal, it is wrong, and not merely bad, to let one’s dog die of starvation. Hence Adams’s argument that God owns the universe and hence can do what he pleases with it gains no support from enlightened moral practice.

A second way in which theists might deny that God has moral obligations is by embracing theological voluntarism, more popularly known as “divine-command theory.” On the standard contemporary versions of theological voluntarism, all moral obligations depend on God’s will or God’s commands. As Mark C. Murphy puts it in explicating Robert Merrihew Adams’s highly influential version of the view, “the morally obligatory and the divinely commanded are *identified*, in the way that water is to be identified with H₂O.... [T]he complete immediate explanation of [any] moral obligation is in terms of God’s commands.”¹⁷ On such a view, it becomes clear that

¹⁵ Adams, “Ignorance, Instrumentality, Compensation,” 16.

¹⁶ Adams, “*Caveat Emptor!* Moral Theory and Problems of Evil” (presentation, Center for Philosophy of Religion, University of Notre Dame, November 15, 2013). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4rsQmM1cx4>, at 1:07:47.

¹⁷ Mark C. Murphy, “Restricted Theological Voluntarism,” *Philosophy Compass* 7 (2012): 681, emphasis in original.

God cannot have any moral obligations. With regard to willing, an agent's willingness to do something cannot be a necessary condition for the agent's being morally obligated to do it: it is a conceptual truth that no moral obligation depends for its existence on the obligated agent's wanting to fulfill it. But if God's obligation depended on his own will, then God's obligation *would* depend if God's wanting (i.e., willing) to fulfill it. With regard to commanding, it simply makes no sense to imagine that God could "command himself" to do something: the concept of commanding is essentially second-person, or at least other-directed. If any agent has moral obligations only because of God's will or God's commands, and if God cannot have moral obligations in either of those ways, then God cannot have any moral obligations, including a moral obligation to prevent Dominick's torture.

However, theological voluntarism turns out to be a doubtful basis for trying to eliminate God's moral obligations. Indeed, in my view it is an untenable basis, for reasons I have offered elsewhere¹⁸ and for reasons offered by other critics.¹⁹ In addition, theological voluntarism faces a problem arising from this question: Do we have a moral obligation not only (for example) to refrain from stealing because God has commanded us to refrain, but also a moral obligation to obey God's commands as such, which is to say a moral obligation to obey God's commands simply because they are God's commands?

Presumably theological voluntarism says that we do: it would be odd for theological voluntarism to say that we have no such obligation or that the obligation in question is nonmoral (e.g., merely prudential). But if all moral obligations depend on God's commands, then we have a moral obligation to obey God's commands, *qua* God's commands, only if God has commanded us to do so by issuing a command to this effect: (C) "Obey all of my commands!" But notice that the message of C is unavoidably self-referential: "Obey all of my commands, including *this* command!" Therein lies the problem. The self-referential string of words "Obey this command!" is unintelligible: obey *which* command? Any command, such as C, containing an unintelligible element is itself unintelligible. In order to avoid this problem, God's overarching command needs to be, not C, but instead C*: "Obey all of my *other* commands!" In that case, however, our moral obligation to obey C* requires a further divine command, C**": "Obey all of my other commands (including C*)!" And so on without end. Our moral obligation to obey God's commands, as such, therefore requires God to issue infinitely many prior commands; even if God has the power to issue that many commands, we surely do not have the power to grasp them all. We avoid this vicious regress only if we reject the claim that all moral obligations (assuming any exist) depend on God's commands.

If the command-based version of theological subjectivism fails, then the will-based version also fails. If God's willing that we φ were enough by itself for our being morally obligated to φ , then we could be morally obligated to φ even though we have no clue that we are and even if we could not possibly discover this element of God's will on our own.²⁰ But under such circumstances

¹⁸ Stephen Maitzen, "A Semantic Attack on Divine-Command Metaethics," *Sophia* 43 (2004): 15–28; and Stephen Maitzen, "Skeptical Theism and God's Commands," *Sophia* 46 (2007): 235–41.

¹⁹ For example, Wes Morriston, "God and the Ontological Foundation of Morality," *Religious Studies* 48 (2012): 15–34; and Murphy, "Restricted Theological Voluntarism."

²⁰ A further worry arises: If God's willing that we φ were by itself enough to obligate us to φ , then God could obligate us to φ even though we cannot in fact φ , in violation of the principle that "ought" implies "can." Interestingly,

surely we could not be morally obligated to φ . In order, then, for us to become morally obligated to φ *whenever* God wills that we φ , God must *communicate* to us that element of his will by way of an assertion: we're morally obligated to φ only if God says to us that he wants us to φ . But then the following problems arise.

Unlike commands, assertions are truth-valued. There is no conceptual gap between commanding and truly commanding: it makes no sense to think that God or anyone else might command us to φ without truly commanding us to φ . (We might mistake something else *for* a command, or we might misunderstand or ignore a command, but if it is a command then it is truly a command.) By contrast, there is a conceptual gap between asserting and asserting the *truth*: it does make sense to suppose that God might say to us that he wants us to φ without truly wanting us to φ . One might try to close the gap by presuming that God could not possibly deceive us, at least not concerning what he wants us to do. But that presumption is highly questionable: it requires presuming that God could not ever have a morally sufficient reason for deception.²¹ If one tries to close the conceptual gap by ruling out divine deception *despite* the implausibility of the aforesaid presumption, then one gives God's assertions the *performative* quality of commands: just as there is no conceptual gap between commanding and truly commanding, there would be no conceptual gap between God's saying to us that he wants us to φ and his wanting us to φ . In that case, the will-based version collapses into the command-based version, already criticized.

Here's a related further problem. Let D be the generic action-type "do whatever God tells us he wants us to do." Are we morally obligated to D? Presumably the will-based version says that we are: it would be odd for the will-based version to say that we have no such obligation or that the obligation in question is nonmoral. In that case, as I argued above, God must *tell* us that he wants us to D, which amounts to the self-referential assertion (E) "I want you to do whatever I tell you I want you to do, including *this*." Therein lies the problem. The self-referential string of words "I want you to do *this*" is unintelligible – do *what?* – making E itself unintelligible. God's assertion must instead be E*: "I want you to do everything *else* I tell you I want you to do." We then have a moral obligation to do what God tells us via E* to do only if God *tells* us he wants us to do that, which requires a further assertion, E**, and so on without end.

One might object that God need not tell us that he wants us to D, because it is obvious that he wants us to D, and God can expect us to infer what is obvious. But if it is obvious that God wants us to D, then it is obvious that (F) God cannot possibly tell us a falsehood about what he wants us to do. But, again, F is *not* obvious; on the contrary, F is at least questionable. So we cannot simply infer that God wants us to D on the grounds that it is obvious. Instead, God must tell us that he wants us to D, which launches an infinite regress analogous to the regress faced by the command-based version. One might reply that wholesale skepticism about God's assertions follows if we do not regard F as obvious: if F is not obvious, then why believe anything that God says just because he says it? Such skepticism may in fact be the correct attitude toward the assertions of a being as extraordinary, mysterious, and inscrutable as God.²² The will-based version,

the Bible may in fact portray God (in the person of Jesus) as wanting us to achieve something that we cannot achieve: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48, AV).

²¹ For detailed discussion of this presumption and its implausibility, see Erik J. Wielenberg, "Sceptical Theism and Divine Lies," *Religious Studies* 46 (2010): 516–18; and Maitzen, "The Moral Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism," 446–47.

²² See also Wielenberg, "Sceptical Theism and Divine Lies," *passim*.

however, must reject it: if, for all we know, God wants us to φ when he tells us he wants us *not* to φ , then his wanting us to φ cannot be relevant to our moral obligations. The will-based version therefore faces pressure to close the conceptual gap between God's assertions and their truth, that is, to make God's telling us (sincerely or not) that he wants us to φ sufficient by itself for our being morally obligated to φ . In that case, it again collapses into the command-based version, already criticized. Neither the command-based nor the will-based version, therefore, is plausible.

Kant's metaethical theory offers a third, and for my purposes final, way of denying that God has moral obligations. According to Kant, moral obligation essentially involves constraint, and God's will, already being perfect, is not strictly speaking constrained by morality; rather, God's will necessarily and of its own accord conforms, or corresponds, to the requirements of morality. Because God cannot possibly fail to fulfill the requirements of morality, God has no obligation to fulfill them.²³

I do not find Kant's argument at all compelling. I do not see how the concept of moral obligation implies that the agent whose obligation it is might fail to fulfill it. Again, the principle that "ought" implies "can" is widely accepted in metaethics, although some philosophers do dispute it. But Kant insists on a rather less plausible principle: "ought" implies "might not." Presumably Kant agrees that part of the concept of an agent's being morally obligated to φ is that, at least presumptively, the agent's failing to φ would be morally wrong (rather than simply bad). Call that the "core concept" of moral obligation. The core concept takes no stand on whether the agent might fail to fulfill the obligation. To the core concept, Kant proposes to add the principle that "ought" implies "might not." The burden rests with whoever claims that the concept implies that further principle. Kant's argument, as far as I can tell, does not meet that burden.

From here on, therefore, let us presume that God – like agents in general – *can* have moral obligations, because we have seen no good reason to think otherwise. Nevertheless, those who remain unconvinced by my critiques in this section and who continue to hold that God has no moral obligations can treat the remainder of my analysis hypothetically: suppose that God could have moral obligations; then what?

3. Can God Pass the Buck?

To return to the question at the heart of the problem of evil: How is it that God never violates any of his moral obligations when he permits suffering that he could prevent? In answer to that question, one often encounters an apologetic proposal that I take to be captured by these representative quotations:

(WH) God...withholds His intervention in order to give us the opportunity to do the right thing.... [I]n very many cases...God refrains from preventing an evil in order to give humans the opportunity to do so....²⁴

²³ See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Ak 4:414). I thank Paul Abela for the citation.

²⁴ Hasker, "Defining 'Gratuitous Evil'," 307–08.

(DHS) [Theists may reasonably believe] that God permits a lot of [suffering] precisely because he intends for us to try to prevent it.²⁵

Apparently this proposal strikes some people as so obviously unproblematic as to need no further elaboration or defense: in making the proposal, neither of the two quoted authors pauses to consider what might be said against it.

Leave aside the fact that the proposal does not cover the enormous amount of suffering that no human being is (or was) realistically in a position to prevent, such as the suffering experienced by nonhuman animals in the wild and the suffering endured by humans for the 99 percent (at least) of human history prior to the discovery of effective medical treatments. Leave aside also the fact that God, if he exists, allows many an instance of horrific suffering, such as Dominick Calhoun's, to continue long after he must have realized that no human being will intervene on behalf of the sufferer. I will argue that the proposal fails no matter how narrowly it ranges.

The proposal fairly clearly implies that we human beings end up with a moral obligation to try to prevent the suffering in question. The William Hasker quotation, WH, explicitly refers to our doing "the right thing" by intervening: in other words, our failing to intervene would be wrong of us. I presume that the Daniel Howard-Snyder quotation, DHS, implicitly refers to God's intending that we do the morally required thing in trying to prevent the suffering in question, not that we perform some merely neutral action in those circumstances. Without that presumption, WH and DHS become weak even as *attempted* justifications of God's non-intervention. That is, I interpret both quotations as assuming that intervention on our part is at least sometimes morally obligatory rather than merely permissible, which might explain why God intends that we intervene.

But if God exists, how could *we* acquire the moral obligation to intervene? Consider the following scenario. You are at the lake on a sunny summer day, intending to swim. You are alone there except for an unsupervised toddler whom you see fall into one-meter-deep water near the shore and start to drown. You are a reigning world-champion swimmer and dressed for swimming: you know you could wade in and save the child at essentially no cost to yourself. Just then, you see me arrive at the lake. You know I am a novice swimmer who bears no special responsibility for the child, and you see that I am not dressed for swimming. I take it that the following fact is obvious: you have no moral permission to stand by *in order to* give me the chance to intervene. That is, if you would otherwise be obligated to intervene, you do not escape that obligation by intending that I intervene instead. By analogy, God is the champion swimmer dressed for swimming, compared to whom any human agent is the novice swimmer not dressed for swimming. Therefore, God likewise has no moral permission to stand by in order to give less capable agents the chance to intervene. Furthermore, according to standard theism, God stands in a parent-like relation to each human being, while not every human being stands in that relation to every other human being. So the analogy is even closer if we suppose that you are also the toddler's parent and I am not. But if you are the toddler's parent and I am not, then it is even clearer that you lack moral permission to stand by so that I can intervene: the proposal under examination fails even more obviously.

²⁵ Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism," *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 2 (2009): 43–44. This point is apparently endorsed by Graham Oppy, "Rowe's Evidential Arguments from Evil," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, 63. Importantly, Howard-Snyder's claim occurs in an essay whose central example is a case of child suffering comparable to Dominick Calhoun's in its brutality (Howard-Snyder, "Epistemic Humility," 18).

One might reply that God lacks a moral obligation to intervene because God lacks any moral obligations at all, but we have already considered and rejected that reply. Or one might reply that God lacks a moral obligation to intervene if intervening would interfere with human free will, but that reply also fails, despite its rampant popularity. If a taboo against interfering with human free will sufficed to defeat the moral obligation to intervene, then none of us would have been obligated to intervene on behalf of Dominick Calhoun, no matter how easy and risk-free intervention might have been, if it meant interfering with the free will of his torturer. No morally sane person accepts that result.²⁶

Or one might reply, as Hasker has, that if God intervened to prevent all behavior that was “significantly harmful,” then “morality, assuming it existed at all, would lack much of the significance we ordinarily assume it to have.”²⁷ But Hasker’s reply simply begs the question, because the moral obligation to prevent significant harm is a *consequence* of the existence (or threat) of significant harm, and no perfect God is forced to allow significant harm in the first place: the theistic notion of heaven, an exalted state of existence in which agents experience joy but never significant harm, is at least logically coherent. Yes, without the threat of significant harm we would not have significant morality, but the point is that we would not need it. The moral obligation to prevent significant harm is not an end that is valuable for its own sake, let alone an end valuable enough for its own sake to justify God’s permission of suffering.

Similarly, one might claim that if God prevented all human suffering, humans would have no room for soul-making of the kind extolled by such writers as John Hick.²⁸ But I’d reply to this claim just as I did to Hasker’s: the claim is true but question-begging. Soul-making is supposed to be positive when it instills or strengthens such qualities as compassion, forbearance, and courage, rather than their opposites. But compassion, forbearance, and courage have positive value – they are virtues – only because of the existence or threat of suffering that God (if he exists) has himself *chosen to allow*. In a world without the threat of suffering (as theists routinely imagine heaven to be), compassion, forbearance, and courage are no more valuable than physical strength is in a world without the threat of something heavy.

If I may be permitted a psychological conjecture: the sheer abundance of suffering throughout our history has conditioned many of us to “make a virtue of necessity,” that is, to mistake significant morality for an end in itself rather than to recognize it as merely necessitated by our contingent circumstances. We have come to regard significant morality as something intrinsically worth preserving, rather than as a consequence of living in our dangerous world. I conjecture that something similar explains many people’s attitudes toward (positive) soul-making: they mistake it for an end in itself, and hence they view suffering as a prerequisite for achieving an intrinsically valuable end. Because that view of suffering is mistaken, the value of (positive) soul-making fails to justify God’s permission of suffering in the first place.

²⁶ For further criticism of the unaccountably popular “free will” reply to the problem of evil, see Maitzen, “Ordinary Morality Implies Atheism,” 120–22; and Stephen Maitzen, “Agnosticism, Skeptical Theism, and Moral Obligation,” in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, ed. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 277–79.

²⁷ William Hasker, “The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 29.

²⁸ John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2d. ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

To return, then, to the question under discussion: How can we human beings have a moral obligation to prevent suffering, at least if we easily can and at little or no personal risk, when God – for whom it is always easier and less personally risky – has no such moral obligation himself? How can the far weaker bystander be morally obligated to intervene when the far stronger bystander is not? Perhaps the proposal under examination means to say that God *would* be morally obligated to intervene except for the fact that, having seen that we're in a position to intervene successfully, he has unilaterally transferred that obligation to us. In such cases the moral obligation to intervene that God would otherwise have had becomes our obligation instead. But the proposal fares no better on this interpretation. Again, leave aside the fact that it does not cover the suffering that we humans are (or were) in no realistic position to prevent, and leave aside the obvious fact that we do not prevent a tremendous amount of suffering that we *are* in a realistic position to prevent. The proposal fails because it presumes that one bystander can unilaterally transfer his or her moral obligation to another bystander whenever the latter has a realistic chance of successfully intervening.

Nothing in our moral theory or practice lends any credence to that presumption. Not even legal obligations work that way – despite the fact that legal obligations, unlike moral obligations, are things we routinely exchange, for example, by way of contracts. Jill cannot offload her legal obligation onto Jack simply because Jack becomes able to do what the law already requires Jill to do. The commonplace practice of delegating responsibilities may make it appear that one bystander can unilaterally transfer a moral obligation to another bystander, but the appearance is illusory. Those with special responsibilities arising from their office or their role can delegate some of those responsibilities to subordinates: the general can delegate to the colonel his or her responsibility to capture an enemy stronghold; the fire captain can delegate to the lieutenant the responsibility to rescue someone trapped in a burning building. But these scenarios differ from the case of the drowning toddler in at least two relevant ways. First, in the case of the drowning toddler, at least one of the agents – the novice swimmer – has no special responsibility to the toddler, whereas in the delegation scenarios all the agents have special responsibilities arising from their roles: none of them are mere bystanders. Second, in the case of the drowning toddler, the agent intending to delegate the responsibility is vastly more capable than the other agent of fulfilling it, which is not true in the delegation scenarios.

In addition, it is not clear that the responsibilities in the delegation scenarios are *moral* obligations to begin with. The fire lieutenant who refuses to enter the burning building after being ordered to by his or her superior is guilty of professional misconduct and dereliction of professional duty. But it is not clear that he or she is guilty of immoral conduct. To see why, stipulate that you, a mere bystander, are (for whatever reason) exactly as capable and exactly as equipped as the lieutenant to rescue the victim in the burning building. You do nothing immoral by refusing to enter the building. Your entering the building would be morally supererogatory, not obligatory: entering a burning building is a far cry from a champion swimmer's wading into one-meter-deep water! By stipulation, the only relevant difference between the fire lieutenant and you is the lieutenant's professional role, which suggests that the lieutenant's refusal is wrong – perhaps even reprehensible – professionally rather than morally. If so, then a crucial difference emerges between the delegation scenarios and the case of the drowning toddler: in the former scenarios, the relevant obligations are nonmoral.

In sum, we have seen no good reason to think that God can unilaterally transfer his moral obligation to another bystander, contrary to what the apologetic proposal reflected in the WH and

DHS quotations apparently presumes. No plausible moral theory allows the unilateral transfer of moral obligations. Not even God – indeed, *especially* not God – can pass the buck that way. Furthermore, let’s not lose sight of the morally outrageous character of the apologetic proposal itself. If God exists, he did not intervene to prevent Dominick Calhoun’s torture. According to the proposal, God refrained from intervening in order to give one or more human beings the chance to do “the right thing.” Well, the plan backfired, and Dominick bore the cost. The mother’s boyfriend did not refrain from torturing Dominick, and neither the mother nor the neighbors phoned the police.²⁹ But the attitude that the proposal ascribes to God is morally reprehensible even if some human being *had* rescued Dominick. No being who merits the label “perfect” could permit, or even risk, a child’s horrible suffering precisely *so that someone else* can try to prevent it from occurring or from continuing. No being who deserves to be called even “decent” could do that. Any human agent who acted that way would have to be deprived or deranged. Such treatment of a child can only be regarded as morally intolerable exploitation, even if it is exploitation on the part of the child’s creator. Any being who exploits innocent children falls short of perfection in at least one of power, knowledge, or goodness – and hence cannot be God.³⁰

I will close by briefly addressing a reaction that I sometimes get when I put such claims as bluntly as I just did. Living in a society still dominated by an inherited theistic outlook, atheists like me are not infrequently accused of being “angry at God” and venting our anger in the form of arguments such as those I have offered here. The accusation is patronizing, question-begging, and false. Any atheist who can think straight knows that anger at God makes no sense. I am no more “angry at God” than I am angry at Santa Claus for failing to relieve me of the burden of Christmas shopping. If I am angry at anyone, it is at those of my fellow human beings who (to extend the metaphor) would say morally outrageous things in order to defend the Santa Claus story as true and to excuse Santa Claus for repeatedly failing to do what the story makes it clear he ought to do.³¹

²⁹ “Mom, Boyfriend Sentenced in Dominick Calhoun’s Fatal Beating,” WMEN.COM, last modified 2012, accessed August 6, 2014, <http://www.wnem.com/story/17026690/hayes-baker-to-learn-fates-in-dominick-calhouns-torture-death>. See also note 12, above.

³⁰ For defense of these claims, see Maitzen, “Ordinary Morality Implies Atheism,” and Stephen Maitzen, “Does God Destroy Our Duty of Compassion?” *Free Inquiry* 30 (2010): 52–53.

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