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# Skeptical theism and moral obligation

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**Abstract** Skeptical theism claims that the probability of a perfect God's existence isn't at all reduced by our failure to see how such a God could allow the horrific suffering that occurs in our world. Given our finite grasp of the realm of value, skeptical theists argue, it shouldn't surprise us that we fail to see the reasons that justify God in allowing such suffering, and thus our failure to see those reasons is no evidence against God's existence or perfection. Critics object that skeptical theism implies a degree of moral skepticism that even skeptical theists will find objectionable and that it undermines moral obligations that even skeptical theists will want to preserve. I discuss a version of the first objection and defend a version of the second.

**Keywords** Theism · God · Problem of evil · Skeptical theism · Moral skepticism · Moral obligation · Almeida, Michael · Bergmann, Michael · Oppy, Graham · Rea, Michael

## The evidential argument from evil

Consider the following vivid, but unfortunately not unique, example of horrific suffering. Having lost a child-custody dispute with his ex-wife in 1983, Charles Rothenberg, a waiter from New York, then kidnapped their six-year-old son, David, and as the boy lay sleeping doused him all over with kerosene and set him on fire. David suffered third-degree burns covering 90% of his body and despite numerous surgeries remains terribly disfigured to this day.

Examples such as David's are grist for the mill of the "evidential" or "empirical" argument from evil for the non-existence of God. How, the argument begins by

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asking, can there exist an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect God who stands by and allows young David to be so miserably mistreated? According to traditional theism, the answer must be that our universe is in some sense *better*, or at least *no worse*, if God permits David's immolation than it would be if God prevented it. In other words, God's permitting David to suffer must achieve some compensating good (or prevent some evil at least as bad) that not even God could achieve (or prevent) otherwise.[1] But, the argument continues, that answer isn't credible. The only goods we can think of seem, individually and collectively, to fall short of providing an adequate moral justification: either they look incapable of *compensating for* the disvalue of David's suffering, or else we can't see how an omnipotent God's achieving them would *require* the permission of David's suffering. Even after careful reflection, we can't see how God's permission of that suffering could be justified by (i) a six-year-old child's somehow deserving it, (ii) the value of Charles Rothenberg's or anyone else's libertarian free agency, (iii) David's remarkable courage in struggling to recover and the compassion his struggle elicited from others, or (iv) the notoriety his case briefly brought to the problem of child abuse. Justification (i), desert, looks preposterous, and (ii–iv) seem, at best, to violate David's autonomy by treating him merely as a means to some good end that even consequentialists must admit does not look good *enough*.

Even if we consider possible benefits of a less mundane kind, such as David's "experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God,"[2] we can't see how achieving those benefits would force an omnipotent God to permit David's suffering. Or consider instead the prevention of some horrific evil: suppose that David, had he not been terribly burned, would have grown up to commit countless brutal murders. Even on that wild supposition his suffering remains unjustified, since David's painless premature death would have prevented that future evil at less cost. Furthermore, such speculation about David's future brutality could provide the justification we seek only if we had some reason to believe it, and we don't. Again, our search for an adequate justification comes up empty.

According to recent versions of the empirical argument from evil, the best explanation of our inability to *find* an adequate moral justification for God's permitting David to suffer is that no such justification *exists*; we can't find what isn't there. But any action or permission of a perfect God must be morally justified; therefore, no such God exists. This partly abductive reasoning is the most popular argument for the non-existence of God to emerge in the last several decades. The most popular theistic rebuttal, and the focus of this essay, is the line of reasoning known as "skeptical theism," so called because it combines theism with the denial of human knowledge or justified belief in a particular domain.

I've claimed that traditional theism implies that our universe is better, or at least no worse, if God permits David's immolation than it would be if God prevented it. William Hasker has famously challenged this familiar claim, arguing that theism is compatible with the existence of gratuitous evil: evil that "*is not necessary for the creation of a greater good, or for the prevention of some equal or greater evil*" (Hasker

[1] For the classic expression of this requirement, see Rowe (1979, p. 336).

[2] The phrase is William L. Rowe's, applied in the context of a different case of horrific evil; see Rowe (1996, p. 277).

1992, p. 24, emphasis in original). In the present context, how should we respond to Hasker's challenge?

I think it's fair to describe Hasker as providing, in a broad sense, a theodicy—an attempt to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of the suffering we observe in our world. As I explain further below, skeptical theists say that, given our inescapably limited insight into God's purposes for permitting suffering, we shouldn't expect even the most brilliant humanly devised theodicy to work: we shouldn't expect to discover an explanation that reconciles God and suffering in a way that we human beings in general find intellectually and morally satisfying. On their view, we *might* discover such an explanation, but we shouldn't regard its discovery as likely. The skeptical reception that Hasker's theodicy has received[3] is therefore no surprise to skeptical theists. His theodicy, like the others I've already discussed, isn't generally regarded as having refuted the evidential argument from evil. For one thing, as Hasker himself notes, his argument presupposes that the "morally significant free choices" made by human beings must be libertarian free choices (1992, pp. 25–26). The claim that libertarian free choice is even a coherent notion is highly controversial, as is the claim that only libertarian, rather than compatibilist, free choices can be morally significant. A substantial number of philosophers reject each of those claims and for plausible reasons. It's therefore fair to conclude that Hasker's theodicy shares the fate of all the others: it fails to reconcile God and suffering in a way that we in general find intellectually and morally satisfying. Its failure in that regard forms part of the data that skeptical theism purports to explain.

## Skeptical theism

Skeptical theists grant that no explanation of the horrific suffering in our world—no theodicy—is recognized by us as providing a morally sufficient reason for God's permitting that suffering. Again, however, they stress that this disappointing situation is hardly surprising if theism is true: given the disparity between God's omniscience and our own limited knowledge, it shouldn't surprise us if we fail to grasp the reasons that actually do (indeed, must) justify God's permission of suffering.

Skeptical theists sometimes adopt the strong line that we should expect God's morally sufficient reasons to be inscrutable and sometimes the weaker line that we shouldn't expect those reasons to be scrutable. In either case, however, they aim to undercut what Wykstra (1996) calls the atheist's "noseeum" inference from our failure to *see* God-justifying reasons to the conclusion that no such reasons *exist*. After all, an omniscient God sees all the possible goods and evils there are, whereas presumably we don't, and an omniscient God sees all the ways in which achieving particular goods requires the permission of particular evils, whereas again we don't. Michael Bergmann, a prominent defender of skeptical theism, characterizes the position as combining traditional theism with the following additional claims that he thinks everyone should accept:

[3] See, for instance, Chrzan (1994; replied to in Hasker 1995) and O'Connor (1995).

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils. (2001, p. 279)

Bergmann summarizes ST1–ST3 by saying, "It just doesn't seem unlikely that our understanding of the realm of value falls miserably short of capturing all that is true about that realm" (ibid.).

If it works at all, the skeptical theist's reply works exceedingly well: it threatens to undercut any inference one might draw from the existence of any amount of evil, however horrific, to the non-existence of morally sufficient reasons for God's permitting that evil. Consider again the actual evil of David Rothenberg's suffering and the possible good represented by his "experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God." None of us can see how achieving that good must constrain God to permit the suffering, and at least some of us share the predicament of Ivan Karamazov: we can't see how achieving that good would *atone for* the suffering even if the suffering were *necessary* for achieving the good.[4] But, the skeptical theist replies, our epistemic disappointment isn't surprising on the assumption of ST1–ST3 and not surprising on the assumption that God exists. If we're miserably ignorant about the realm of value—and it wouldn't be surprising if we were—then we'll be miserably ignorant about the range of justifications at God's disposal, since of course God has access to the entire realm. Indeed, according to skeptical theism, we're never justified in believing that God's permission of suffering isn't necessary for the sufferer's own greater good.

## Skeptical theism and moral skepticism

Some critics of skeptical theism charge that it works *too* well, that its skeptical attitude toward value implies positions that theists and others would strongly reject. Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy argue that it implies moral skepticism about our obligation to intervene to prevent suffering and, independently of that particular worry, that it "undermines our ability to engage in perfectly ordinary kinds of moral reasoning" (2003, p. 511).

A theological basis for external-world skepticism goes back to Descartes, who in my view failed to neutralize it. In the First Meditation, Descartes briefly worries that God might be thoroughly deceiving him, but then he cites God's reputation for goodness in order to dismiss the worry and move on to consider, instead, the Evil Demon hypothesis. But if deception is ever good, all things considered—imagine deceiving a murderer about the location of a potential victim—then presumably a good God could deceive us, and if we're as clueless about God's true purposes as skeptical theism says

[4] See Dostoevsky (1880).

we may be, then for all we know radical deception on God's part represents the *height* of goodness. Descartes thinks he knows enough about the nature and implications of supreme goodness to rule out a radically deceptive God; in the Third Meditation, he writes that God "cannot be a deceiver, since it is a dictate of the natural light that all fraud and deception spring from some defect." However, while all fraud and deception no doubt spring from defective or imperfect *situations*—for example, ones in which a murderer seeks another victim—it by no means follows that fraud and deception are defective or imperfect *responses* to such situations, in which case, again, fraud and deception are activities consistent with God's perfection, and we can rule them out only by presuming that God can have no morally sufficient reasons for committing them. Skeptical theism denies us that presumption, and so it denies Descartes his confident dismissal of this particular skeptical worry. For all he or we know, radical divine deception *is* supremely good.

I should point out, moreover, that the argument I've just given—from skeptical theism to the impossibility of ruling out radical divine deception—doesn't itself depend on assuming skepticism about value. It requires only the assumption that (a) for all we know, deception can be good, all things considered, i.e., we don't know that deception is always bad, all things considered. Notice that (a) is consistent with the non-skeptical claim that (b) we *know* that deception can be good, all things considered, a claim that gains support from the example of the murderer who seeks another victim. I contend that each of (a) and (b) implies our inability to rule out radical divine deception unless we can know that God's purposes never justify deception. Hence, if skeptical theism is right that we can't know that God's purposes never justify deception, then Descartes's anti-skeptical strategy fails. My argument *from* skeptical theism to the failure of Descartes's strategy doesn't itself depend on assuming skepticism about anything.

Even if he dismisses too quickly the possibility of divine deception, Descartes at least recognizes his theistic belief as a potential source of radical doubt. No sane person believes in the existence of an Evil Demon whose job it is to deceive us about our surroundings, but plenty of people believe in the existence of God, a being powerful enough to bring off radical deception and not barred from it if we allow that deception can be good, all things considered. In a sense, then, theistic belief opens up—in a way in which naturalism arguably doesn't—the possibility of a vast and mysterious stretch of reality about which we're deeply mistaken.[5] A similar skeptical worry arises with respect to our *ethical* beliefs, given theism's potentially unflattering implications for our knowledge of the realm of value. Bergmann presents ST1–ST3 as independent of theism, as observations about our epistemic condition that *any* honest person should accept. Granted, ST1–ST3 don't *imply* theism; but they do, I think, become more *probable* on theism than on naturalism, because theism asserts the existence of a moral agent who may know vastly more about the moral realm than human beings could ever know. By contrast, naturalism accommodates more readily the claim that the very nature of morality is such that morality *can't* outstrip what human beings could ever know.

[5] Alvin Plantinga has famously argued that naturalism itself provides grounds for skepticism about the external world. His argument is trenchantly criticized by the contributors to Beilby (2002).

In this section and the next, I'll focus on the two particular criticisms of skeptical theism raised by Almeida and Oppy and will defend their second criticism against a reply recently offered by two skeptical theists, Bergmann and Michael Rea. I'll only mention here, without elaborating on it, another casualty of skeptical theism that theists in particular may regret: If worries about our poor grasp of value prevent us from *doubting* God's goodness on the basis of the suffering we experience or witness, they ought to prevent us from *affirming* God's goodness on the basis of the sudden cures, spontaneous recoveries, and averted disasters that we experience or witness.[6]

Let's start, then, with the charge of moral skepticism. According to Almeida and Oppy, skeptical theists commit themselves to the soundness of the following argument (reproduced from Almeida and Oppy 2005):

K1: We (human beings) are always (at least) morally permitted not to interfere with the purposes of God.
K2: For all we can tell, there are divine purposes in allowing certain evils.
K3: So: For all we know, we are morally permitted not to interfere with those evils. [From K1, K2]

"But," they comment, "of course [K3] is false. We *do* know that we are not morally permitted not to interfere with those evils" (2005, n. 1). Skeptical theism thus implies moral skepticism about, for instance, whether we're obligated to prevent David's suffering if we easily can, and according to Almeida and Oppy such skepticism is clearly false.

Skeptical theists will likely accept the second premise of Almeida and Oppy's argument but reject its first premise. Skeptical theism seems to me clearly committed to K2. True, maybe getting us to *try to prevent* some instance of horrific suffering is God's purpose in otherwise permitting that suffering to occur in our presence. But skeptical theism denies us any right to conclude that such *is* God's purpose, and in any case God permits many an instance of horrific suffering to continue long after it has become clear that no one will intervene. However, skeptical theists can deny K1, since K1 would be plausible only if it read "We (human beings) are always (at least) morally permitted not to interfere with *what we believe to be* the purposes of God."[7] For suppose that God has some specific purpose in letting Charles Rothenberg burn his son; it wouldn't follow that onlookers are morally permitted not to prevent the burning if they easily can prevent it. They might have no obligation to prevent the burning *qua* the fulfillment of God's purposes while still having an obligation to prevent the burning *qua* horrific case of suffering by a child. So theists can reject premise K1 on a *de re* reading of the phrase "the purposes of God": they can say that we can be morally obligated to try to frustrate what are in fact God's purposes, presumably as long as we don't *believe* that they're God's purposes. If Almeida and Oppy make K1

[6] See Swinburne (1998, p. 27; cited in Pereboom 2005a, p. 165).

[7] I thank an anonymous reviewer for helping me to formulate this objection more clearly. One might suppose that K1 is plausible only if the purposes it refers to are *known* by us to be God's purposes. But that requirement seems to me too strong. Moral permissions and obligations may arise even if all we have to go on is belief, rather than knowledge. I've tried to capture this weaker requirement in my claim that K1 is plausible only if restricted to what we *believe* to be the purposes of God.

plausible by restricting it so as to refer only to what we believe to be God's purposes, then their argument is no longer valid.

To be fair, there is something mysterious about a morality, instituted or at least condoned by God, in which we can be obligated to try to frustrate God's purposes: why would God set things up so that, on occasions that we can't identify anyway, we have an obligation to stand in God's way? But skeptical theists will likely answer that question with more skeptical theism: even if such a morality is mysterious, God must have good reasons for instituting or at least condoning it, reasons we shouldn't expect ourselves to see. The mysterious is just what skeptical theism is designed to defuse. Skeptical theists can consistently regard premise K1 as false, and Almeida and Oppy's argument from skeptical theism to moral skepticism therefore fails.

## Skeptical theism and moral obligation

Almeida and Oppy, however, also charge skeptical theism with a defect independent of moral skepticism as such: skeptical theism undermines our ordinary sense of moral obligation. Suppose we can easily prevent some horrific event (call it "E") such as the burning of David Rothenberg, and suppose we also endorse ST1–ST3. In those circumstances, according to Almeida and Oppy, even if we ourselves can see nothing that would justify allowing E to occur,

> we should insist that it is not unlikely that there is some good which, if we were smarter and better equipped, we could recognize as a reason for a perfect being's not intervening to stop E. Plainly, we should also concede—by parity of reason—that, merely on the basis of our acceptance of ST1–ST3, it is not unlikely that there is some good which, if we were smarter and better equipped, we could recognize as a reason for *our* not intervening to stop the event. That is, ... it is not unlikely that it is for the best, all things considered, if we do not intervene. But ... it would be *appalling* for us to allow this consideration to stop us from intervening. Yet, if we take [ST1–ST3] seriously, how can we also maintain that we are morally required to intervene? (2003, pp. 505–506, first emphasis added)

Without reference to moral knowledge as such, it appears that skeptical theism induces a kind of moral paralysis that theists and others would properly abhor.

Skeptical theists might reply to Almeida and Oppy's second charge in various ways.[8] First, they might object that framing the moral problem in terms of the production of good consequences and the prevention of bad ones simply assumes a consequentialist framework and threatens to ignore deontologically important ideas such as the rights and the autonomy of those who are allowed to suffer. Second, they might challenge the assumption that we're obligated to intervene *only if* we can reasonably assign low probability to the claim that E is for the best, all things considered; perhaps we have that obligation regardless of any such probabilities we can reasonably

[8] Bergmann and Rea (2005) respond to Almeida and Oppy (2003) in the second, third, and fourth ways listed here.

assign.[9] Third, they might challenge the closely related assumption that our obligation to intervene dissolves *because* we also believe it not unlikely that, were we smarter and better equipped, we would discern a good reason for us not to intervene; again, perhaps we have that obligation regardless of our attitude toward such a counterfactual conditional.[10]

The first reply, attacking the broadly consequentialist framework of the problem, has some force. It does seem that David Rothenberg's autonomy gets ignored in all this talk about the possible goods produced and possible evils prevented if we let him be burned to within an inch of his life; such talk threatens to treat him merely as a means to an end rather than as an end in himself. The problem, however, is that ST1–ST3 are *themselves* couched in broadly consequentialist terms, or at least they presuppose justifications couched in those terms. I know of no version of skeptical theism that claims that God might have a non-consequentialist (say, Kantian) duty to permit David's suffering, a duty that remains inscrutable to us for non-consequentialist reasons. Nor can I see how such a version could even go. Given skeptical theism's broadly consequentialist underpinnings, it becomes hard, then, to defend skeptical theism by rejecting consequentialism.

Indeed, the strongly consequentialist flavor of ST1–ST3 gives anti-consequentialists an independent reason to reject skeptical theism. Some people oppose consequentialism because they say it makes the moral status of our actions unknowable by us, given our inability to know the *total* consequences of our actions and given that the unforeseeable consequences swamp the foreseeable ones.[11] These people reason, plausibly, that it would *make no sense* if we could commit moral wrongs whose wrongness none of us could ever detect; their reasoning, then, may give them independent grounds for rejecting Bergmann's claim that we might lack access to all-important facts in the realm of value. In my view, skeptical theism's best answer to anti-consequentialist worries is one I hinted at when I concluded the section entitled "Skeptical theism": skeptical theists should keep their consequentialism and claim that, for all we know, David's suffering was necessary for his *own* greater good. In that case, the threat to his autonomy becomes less worrisome: we do sometimes force

[9] One might wonder how theists (skeptical or not) could assign anything but high probability to the claim that E is for the best, all things considered, since presumably whatever occurs, including E, is something that a perfect God permits to occur, and whatever a perfect God permits to occur must be for the best. Theists could reply by rejecting the assumption that (1) any event occurs only with God's permission or that (2) whatever God permits to occur must be for the best, but either reply seems to sacrifice an element of traditional theism: (1) seems entailed by the combination of divine omniscience and divine omnipotence, and (2) seems entailed by those properties together with God's moral perfection. Nevertheless, even if whatever occurs is for the best, theists could allow for human actions that are *wrong* in non-consequentialist terms: actions springing from malicious motives, for instance. This reply, however, may prove of limited use to *skeptical* theists whose skepticism is captured by ST1–ST3, since (as I suggest below) ST1–ST3 seem to presuppose consequentialism.

[10] Fourth, they might rely on some independent source of moral guidance about how to act in the imagined situation, a source that *withstands* the skeptical force of ST1–ST3. Bergmann and Rea (2005, p. 244) and Schnall (2007) rely on God's commands for precisely such a source of independent moral guidance; I criticize their position in Maitzen (2007).

[11] I take this worry about consequentialism to be one of the points of Lenman (2000).

children to undergo suffering against their will (think of a painful rabies vaccination) for what we take to be their own good, and we regard ourselves as justified in doing so.

Now let's consider the second and third replies to Almeida and Oppy, according to which we *are* obligated to prevent E even if we can't reasonably assign low probability to the all-things-considered goodness of E or to the existence beyond our ken of a compelling reason not to intervene. The following analogy, I believe, can help us to see that those replies don't work.[12] Imagine that a well-armed tribesman walks into a jungle field hospital and sees someone (known to us as the surgeon) about to cut open the abdomen of the tribesman's wife, who lies motionless on a table. It certainly looks to the tribesman like a deadly assault, and thus he sees plenty of reason to attack the surgeon and no reason not to. But suppose, further, that he has heard about modern medicine and occurrently believes this: *if cutting my wife were necessary to save her life, I'd be unable to see why*. The incision is about to happen, and clearly there's no time to investigate before acting. Given his beliefs, does it follow that he *ought* to attack the surgeon, i.e., that he would be wrong to refrain? I think not. At most what follows is that he *may* attack the surgeon, even at the cost of preventing his wife's life-saving appendectomy: we get at most permission rather than obligation. Skeptical theism asks us to admit that we occupy the same position with respect to the realm of value that the tribesman occupies with respect to modern medicine: we have good reason to think that we're out of our depth. Yet skeptical theists such as Bergmann and Rea claim to preserve, despite their skepticism, our ordinary moral *obligation* to intervene in such cases.[13] Their claim is correct only if the tribesman is obligated to attack the surgeon.

Again, however, the tribesman isn't obligated to attack: his legitimate self-doubt ought to give him pause, or at any rate it lets him off the hook if he decides not to intervene, for he recognizes a reason to think he may *bring about*, rather than prevent, his wife's death by acting as his instincts tell him to act. Skeptical theists persistently claim that only those goods you know of—rather than goods beyond your ken—can justify your inaction in the face of what seems to you to be an obligation to intervene.[14] But their claim ignores the fact that, in high-stakes circumstances, *recognition of your own ignorance* can also justify your inaction, a point conceded by two recent defenders of skeptical theism; they write that "recognition of [your] ignorance concerning the likelihood of there being unknown goods" can render you "unable to make an all-things-considered judgment as to whether to do [some action] A," in which case "you are entirely within your rights in choosing to do A—indeed, no one is in a position to criticise any choice you make in these circumstances" (Trakakis and Nagasawa 2004, n. 8). As before, we get *permission* to intervene rather than an obligation to intervene: choosing not to intervene wouldn't expose you to legitimate criticism.[15]

[12] Compare Piper (2007, p. 71) for a different analogy put to a purpose similar to mine.

[13] See Bergmann and Rea (2005, p. 247).

[14] See, e.g., Howard-Snyder (1996, pp. 292–293; cited in Pereboom 2005b, p. 89).

[15] On this point, compare Stump (1985, pp. 412–413): "God can see into the minds and hearts of human beings and determine what sort and amount of suffering is likely to produce the best results; we cannot. . .. Therefore, since all human suffering is *prima facie* evil, and since we do not know with any high degree of probability how much (if any) of it is likely to result in good for any particular sufferer on any particular

There is, in addition, a type of belief we can expect theists to possess and non-theists to lack that also undermines the moral obligation to intervene in cases of horrific evil: the belief that *someone exists who can guarantee that the suffering I am witnessing will turn out for the sufferer's best even if I don't intervene*. Given the badness of severe suffering, why don't we feel obligated to prevent children from ever undergoing painful rabies vaccinations? Because we're confident that sometimes severe suffering will turn out for the sufferer's best. Suppose we believe that someone exists who can *always* make suffering turn out for the sufferer's best; we ought, I submit, to feel less obligated to prevent and relieve suffering than we would feel if we didn't believe in such a potential guarantor of a good outcome.

Again, one might counter that God makes us witness current or imminent suffering because God *wants* us to reduce or prevent it, but skeptical theism denies us any confidence in drawing that conclusion, as a general rule of thumb and even more so with regard to a particular case of suffering. For suppose that the tribesman is a theist; even then he can't confidently conclude, given what *else* he believes about his own competency in that situation, that God would want him to attack the surgeon. What, then, can we conclude? That skeptical theism, at least as expressed by its leading proponents, isn't easily squared with our moral obligation to intervene in cases of horrific suffering.

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Footnote 15 continued
occasion, it is reasonable for us to eliminate the suffering as much as we can." Note Stump's use of the term "reasonable": she evidently wishes to preserve our moral *permission* to eliminate suffering. Yet ordinary morality regards it as not just reasonable but obligatory for us to intervene, at least on some occasions; ordinary morality imposes an obligation to intervene, and preserving permission need not preserve the obligation.

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