

Article

Isaac Qatraya and the Logical Problem of Evil

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Abstract: Sterba has recently produced a searching and significant version of the argument from evil. Here, I set out aspects of the view of God, suffering, and the afterlife articulated by Isaac Qatraya (also known as Isaac of Nineveh and Isaac the Syrian), and argue both that Isaac's view is not undermined by this version of the argument from evil, and that it is not subject to at least some of the objections Sterba raises to soul-making or saint-making theodicies. I end with some remarks on the relevance of the discussion to 'sceptical theist' approaches to the problem of evil.

Keywords: Isaac Qatraya; Isaac of Nineveh; Isaac the Syrian; problem of evil; problem of suffering; soul-making; saint-making; theodicy; sceptical theism

1. Sterba's Argument from Evil

Sterba's (2019) argument from evil ranks amongst those of Mackie (1955), Draper (1989), Rowe (1979, 1991, 1996) and Tooley (Plantinga and Tooley 2008; Tooley 2012, 2015) as one of the most searching and significant formulations of the argument since the mid twentieth-century. Like Mackie—but unlike Draper, Rowe and Tooley—Sterba's presents a version of the *logical* argument from evil, so-called because it aims to show that the claim that there is evil, or the claim that specific kinds or distributions of evil, is *incompatible* with the claim that God exists. Evidential arguments from evil—so-called because they aim to demonstrate that the existence of evil, or the specific kinds and distributions of evil we find in our world, should *decrease our rational credence* that God exists—attempt to hold onto two ideas: (i) that it is *possible* that God has morally sufficient reasons to permit the kind of evils we see in this world, but (ii) that it is probable that God does not have morally sufficient reasons to permit the kind of evils we see in this world. Elsewhere (Collin 2020), I have criticised Tooley's sophisticated development of the evidential argument from evil on the grounds that one could only be warranted in holding the suppositions Tooley uses to motivate (ii) if one was already warranted in holding that there is no God. My suspicion was that the problem pointed to a more general problem with any attempt to affirm both (i) and (ii), and I recommended a different form of argument, one that, instead of affirming (i) and (ii), attempted to establish (i*) that it is probable that: it is not possible that God has morally sufficient reasons to permit the kinds of evils we see in this world. The way to do this, I suggested, would be to defend some substantive moral claims entailing that some actual prima facie evils would not be permissible by God under any circumstances whatsoever. One could then run the following kind of argument:

1. There are no circumstances whatsoever under which it would be permissible for a morally perfect and omnipotent being to allow X.
2. If there are no circumstances whatsoever under which it would be permissible for a morally perfect and omnipotent being to allow X then, if X took place, no morally perfect and omnipotent being existed when X took place.
3. If X took place, no morally perfect and omnipotent being existed when X took place. (1, 2, MP)
4. X took place.
5. No morally perfect and omnipotent being existed when X took place. (3, 4, MP)



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This is more or less the route taken by Sterba. Sterba's treatment of the topic is wide-ranging and multifaceted, and relates to a large range of issues raised in the recent literature (a few of which we will pick up on below). However, the cruxes of his argument from evil are three Moral Evil Prevention Requirements:

Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I

Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone's rights (a good to which we have a right) when that can easily be done.¹ (Sterba 2019, p. 126)

Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II

Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have. (Sterba 2019, p. 128)

Moral Evil Prevention Requirement III

Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions (which would violate someone's rights) in order to provide such goods when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods. (Sterba 2019, p. 128).

With these in hand, Sterba formulates a logical argument from evil:

1. If there is a God (understood as all-good and all-powerful) then necessarily God would be adhering to MEPRI-MEPRIII.
2. If God were adhering to MEPRI-MEPRIII, then necessarily significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would not obtain.
3. Significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions do obtain.
4. Therefore, it is not the case that there is a God. (modified from Sterba (2019, chp. 9))

2. Moral Principles and Cosmic Outlooks

Sterba's version of the argument from evil depends on being able to transmit warrant² from MEPRI-MEPRIII to the claim that there is no God (understood as all-good and all-powerful). If the warrant does *not* flow in this direction, then the argument could not undermine warrant for the claim that God exists, even if could demonstrate, in virtue of the deductive validity of the argument, that the claim that God exists is *incompatible* with MEPRI-MEPRIII. One could perhaps be warranted in holding both MEPRI-MEPRIII and the claim that God does not exist, but one would not be warranted in holding the claim that God does not exist *because* one is warranted in holding MEPRI-MEPRIII. The argument, in that case, would not be *transmissive*: one could not become rationally committed to the conclusion *by* gaining warrant for the premises.³

One way to respond to the argument then would be to attack MEPRI-MEPRIII—to provide arguments for their falsehood from premises that are acceptable to all concerned parties—or to attack the claim that God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII—to provide arguments for its falsehood from premises that are acceptable to all concerned parties. However, with the foregoing in mind, another way of responding to the argument would be to present a theological system or theistic cosmic outlook⁴ according to which either MEPRI-MEPRIII are false, or according to which God does not violate MEPRI-MEPRIII. Whether one has warrant for taking that theological system or cosmic outlook to obtain would, of course, be a substantive question in its own right. However, so long as warrant for holding both that MEPRI-MEPRIII are true and that God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII, *depends* on having a warrant for a cosmic outlook according to which MEPRI-MEPRIII are true and according to which God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII, then it would be impossible to appeal to MEPRI-MEPRIII and the claim that God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII in order to *undermine* entitlement to a theistic cosmic outlook in which either MEPRI-MEPRIII are false or God does not

violate MEPRI-MEPRIII. One would not, that is, be able to *transmit* warrant from MEPRI-MEPRIII to the conclusion that this theistic cosmic outlook is false, because warrant for the premises (if obtainable) would come *via* warrant for the conclusion. A theistic cosmic outlook like that would be immune to this kind of argument from evil.

Why would warrant for moral premises such as MEPRI-MEPRII depend on warrant for one's cosmic outlook? How one ought to treat a creature, I take it, depends on substantive facts about what kind of thing that creature is, what is constitutive of flourishing for that creature, under what conditions those things constitutive of its flourishing can be actualised, and so on. It is good for your goldfish that it be kept submerged in water, but not so your Pomeranian. Facts about what is good for a creature feature in *explanations* of why we *ought* to treat that creature thus and so, and, similarly, why we are obliged to *refrain* from treating that creature in other ways. It is *because* it is good for your goldfish that it be kept submerged in water that you *ought* to keep it submerged in water, and it is *because* the same treatment is bad for your Pomeranian that you *ought not* so to treat it. For this reason, substantive moral knowledge—the sort of knowledge required to know how one ought to treat a specific creature—I take it, is not gained a priori. One cannot *know* how one ought to treat some creature, without knowing what is constitutive of flourishing for that creature, and knowing under what conditions those things constitutive of its flourishing can be actualised.

This has immediate upshots for any argument from evil that appeals to substantive moral premises regarding how God ought to treat human agents. For one thing, these moral premises are not knowable a priori. We cannot gain warrant for moral premises a priori, in order to transmit that warrant to the conclusion the God does not exist. For another thing, neither are these moral premises epistemically more fundamental than claims about what is constitutive of flourishing for those human agents, or claims about the conditions under which human flourishing is to be achieved. Things, in fact, are the other way around. We must be warranted in taking human agents to be the sorts of creatures for whom such and such conditions are constitutive of flourishing, and warranted in regarding such and such conditions as necessary for that flourishing, *in order to be* warranted in holding claims about how God ought to treat human agents. However, what one takes *ultimate* human flourishing to consist in—or whether one thinks there *is* such a thing as ultimate human flourishing—and what one takes to be the means by which ultimate human flourishing can be obtained—or whether one takes there to be *any* such means—depends on one's cosmic outlook. The Vedantin, the Quinian naturalist, the Sufi and so on, all have very different conceptions of the possibilities concerning human flourishing, what the highest—and, for that matter, the more mundane—kinds of human flourishing are, and how they can be achieved. For an argument from evil to *defeat* entitlement to some theistic cosmic outlook by appealing to substantive moral premises then—for the argument to provide some *non-circular* objection to that theistic cosmic outlook—it will have to appeal to moral premises that are true *according to that theistic cosmic outlook*.

3. Isaac Qatraya

Keeping all this in mind, I will trace out something of the cosmic outlook of the seventh-century ascetic Isaac Qatraya (c.613–c.700). Isaac is often known by the names 'Isaac of Nineveh' or 'Isaac the Syrian', but he originated from Beth Qatraye, a region encompassing the north east coast of the Arabian peninsula, and spent the end of his life living as a monastic in Rabban Shabur, Iran. Today, he is venerated as a saint by the Eastern Orthodox Church, as well as by Miaphysite and Nestorian churches. The work of Isaac Qatraya, admittedly, is not exactly a leitmotiv of contemporary philosophy of religion. This neglect is not particularly surprising; only relatively recently have translations of Isaac's writings been widely available. It is no less regrettable for that. Though Isaac was not systematic with respect to literary style—his writing is aphoristic—his thought exhibits a unity and coherence that makes it of considerable philosophical interest. His outlook, though distinctive, has important similarities with those of Irenaeus of Smyrna

(c. 130–c. 202), Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–395), and Maximus the Confessor (c.580–662).⁵ It also offers a counterpoint to the mighty dead of the Western canon; Isaac treats many of the same philosophical issues as Augustine, Aquinas, Scotus—and more recent thinkers whose thought has been shaped (albeit sometimes unwittingly) by them—but from a different perspective, employing different arguments, methods and conceptual frameworks. Neglecting Isaac, and the tradition of thought he belongs to, comes with epistemic costs; there is danger both of acquiring a distorted or shrunken view of the philosophical terrain, and of disregarding some of the conceptual tools that could help us navigate it. This is true when it comes to the argument from evil, no less than other areas of the philosophy of religion, because Isaac articulates a position that avoids at least some of the objections Sterba raises to more familiar positions. In particular, he articulates a position according to which MEPRI-MEPRIII are either not true, or are not violated by God. One cannot appeal then to MEPRI-MEPRIII to produce a non-question-begging argument against it.

Isaac, like many Christian thinkers, takes it that, out of suffering, virtue can be educated.⁶ The theme is familiar enough, both in philosophical and religious literature, but also through reflection on one's own life: through trials, one can develop virtues. That is not to say that one always or inevitably responds in this way to suffering. It is possible too, to respond to suffering in a way that warps or truncates one's moral character. However, there are also ennobling responses to hardship, grief, wrongdoing, and the whole gamut of afflictions to which people are subject, responses that are constitutive of a virtuous life. There are relatively mundane (though not unimportant) examples, both in reality and fiction—Pierre Bezukhov's journey out of aimless dissolution, as a result of enduring the hardships of being a prisoner of war of the Napoleonic army, is a convincingly developed literary example. There are, too, wholly extraordinary ones—the acts of forgiveness, sacrifice, enemy-love, and so on, constitutive of a truly saintly character.

Isaac sees humility as playing a central role in the virtuous life, as enabling the development of other virtues. 'What salt is for any food', says Isaac, 'humility is for every virtue' (I 69 (338)⁷). Chief among the virtues is 'to be made perfect in love', that is for one to treat others with love regardless of how poorly they have treated oneself:⁸

such a person's soul gladly draws near to a luminous love of humanity, without distinguishing [between sinners and righteous]; he is never overcome by the weakness to be found in people, nor is he perturbed. He is just as the blessed Apostles were as well: people who in the midst of all the bad things they endured from the others were nonetheless utterly incapable of hating them or of being fed up with showing love for them. This was manifested in actual deed, for after all the other things they accepted even death so that these people might be retrieved. These were men who only a little bit earlier had begged Christ that fire might descend from heaven upon the Samaritans just because they had not received them into their village! But once they had received the gift and tasted the love of God, they were made perfect in love even for wicked men: enduring all kinds of evils in order to retrieve them, they could not possibly hate them. (II 10 (36))

Given these axiological views, it is no surprise that being subject to evil or suffering should be considered an opportunity to grow in virtue. To be laid low, in any way, is to be given a chance to advance in humility. To be maltreated is to have an opportunity to respond in a way constitutive of a character of 'luminous love of humanity'—the character that Isaac sees as the highest peak of human goodness. So there are, for Isaac, salutary effects of trials and suffering, at least when one responds to those trials in such a way as to develop humility, or to act lovingly, even (in fact especially) to those who have wronged or harmed one. This is the path to moral perfection:

The mind indeed with a little study of the Scriptures and a little labor in fasting and stillness forgets its former musing and is made pure, in that it becomes free from alien habits. It is also easily defiled. The heart, however, is purified with great sufferings and by being deprived of all mingling with the world, together

with complete mortification in everything. When it has been purified, however, its purity is not defiled by contact with inconsequential things.⁹ (OAL 3/11 (50))

Though we do not seek these out, if one falls into adversity, even torment, this should be seized as the means by which one can grow in goodness. With regards to trials of the body, one should:

make ready with all your strength and swim in them with every limb and muscle. Indeed apart from them it is not possible for you to draw near to God, for within them lies divine rest. (OAL 3/47 (56))

By growing in virtue, we ready ourselves for communion with God. This is to the good, for in the afterlife, we will experience God in a far fuller, more direct and unmediated way than is available in this life:

In the life beyond, indeed, we will receive the whole truth concerning God the creator – not about His Nature but about the order of His majesty, and of His divine glory and His great love for us. There, all the veils and titles and forms of the Economy, will be taken away from before the minds there, we will no longer receive His gifts in the name of our petition, nor the grace of knowledge in a measured way. (III 3/35 (309))

How one experiences the unveiled glory of God depends on her own character. One's measure of the beatitudes of the afterlife—the extent to which the afterlife is an experience of exaltation, bliss, joyfulness—depends on the measure of one's virtue:

In the future age . . . this order of things will be abolished. For then one will not receive from another the revelation of God's glory to the gladness and joy of his soul; but to each by himself the Master will give according to the measure of his excellence and his worthiness (I 28 (140)).

The heavenly afterlife then is not received in a uniform way. There is not some threshold of goodness beyond which persons are deemed worthy—or not too unworthy—to be uniformly gifted the goods of heaven. God, in fact, gives everyone the best they are capable of receiving. (For Isaac, to regard God as doing anything less is to underestimate the perfect goodness and mercy of God.) Instead, one's own goodness is what makes one so much as capable of receiving the beatitudes of the closer presence of God. The same sunlight both melts ice and hardens clay. What differs in the two cases is not the sunlight, but the ice and the clay. Their different outcomes—their different reactions to the sun—is to be explained by their different physical substructures. Analogously, how we will receive God in the afterlife, how we will experience the closer presence of God, has not to do with God's differential treatment of us as such, but by our differential reception of the same 'treatment'. Harmonious union with God requires sharing the perfect will of God, and so willing to bring about God's perfectly loving and merciful ends. Only to the extent that one's character is conformed to the perfect goodness of God, can one experience as bliss the close presence of God:

The Saviour calls the 'many mansions' of his Father's house the noetic levels of those who dwell in that land, that is, the distinctions of the gifts and the spiritual degrees which they noetically take delight in, as well as the diversity of the ranks of the gifts. But by this he did not mean that each person yonder will be confined in his existence by a separate spatial dwelling and by the manifest, distinguishing mark of the diverse placement of each man's abode. Rather, it resembles how each one of us derives a unique benefit from this visible sun though a single enjoyment of it common to all, each according to the clarity of his eyesight and the ability of his pupils to contain the sun's constant effusion of light. . . . In the same manner, those who at the appointed time will be deemed worthy of that realm will dwell in one abode which will not be divided into a multitude of separate parts. And according to the rank of his discipline each man draws

delight for himself from the one noetic Sun in one air, one place, one dwelling, one vision, and one outward appearance. (I 6 (56))

Moreover, what of hell? Those whose character is contorted by vice will experience the close presence of God as a torment:

I also maintain that those who are punished in gehenna are scourged by the scourge of love. Nay, what is so bitter and vehement as the torment of love? I mean that those who have become conscious that they have sinned against love suffer greater torment from this than from any fear of punishment. For the sorrow caused in the heart by sin against love is more poignant than any torment. It would be improper for a man to think that sinners in gehenna are deprived of the love of God. Love . . . is given to all. But the power of love works in two ways: it torments sinners, even as happens here when a friend suffers from a friend; but it becomes a source of joy for those who have observed its duties. Thus I say that this is the torment of gehenna: bitter regret. But love inebriates the souls of the sons of heaven by its delectability. (I 28 (141)).

However, this is not—at least not merely—retributive punishment; the ultimate purpose, and endpoint, of ‘being chastened by the goading of [God’s] love’ (III 6/62 (342)) is redemptive:

God chastises with love, not for the sake of revenge—far be it!—but in seeking to make whole his image. And he does not harbour wrath until such time as correction is no longer possible, for he does not seek vengeance for himself. This is the aim of love. Love’s chastisement is for correction, but does not aim at retribution. . . . The man who chooses to consider God as avenger, presuming that in this manner he bears witness to His justice, the same accuses Him of being bereft of goodness. Far be it that vengeance could ever be found in that Fountain of love and Ocean brimming with goodness!¹⁰ (I 48 (230))

Because the close presence of God is both corrective and experienced by all, all will, ultimately, be morally transformed so that they will experience God as a joy rather than a torment. Isaac endorses Apocatastasis: the view that there is, for all, (eventual) universal salvation, both from moral corruption and from suffering:

“The union of Christ in the divinity has indicated to us the mystery of the unity of all in Christ.” This is the mystery: that all creation *by means of one*, has been brought near to God in a mystery. Then it is transmitted to all. Thus all is united in Him as the members of a body; He however is the head of all. This action was performed for all of creation. There will, indeed, be a time when no part will fall short of the whole. For it is not just a matter of this great spiritual intelligence being transmitted only partially, but He will do something greater, once He has made <this> manifest and has indicated it here below.¹¹ (III 5/10 (322-3))

Isaac also endorses deification or *theosis*—the idea that one can, in some ways and in some senses, participate in God’s divinity:

O immeasurable love of God for His work <of creation>! Let us look at this mystery with wordless insight so as to know that He has united creation to His Essence, not because He needed to but to draw creation to Him that it might share in His riches, so as to give it what is His and to make known to it the eternal goodness of His Nature. He has conferred on it the magnificence and the glory of His divinity in order that instead of the invisible God, visible creation might be called “God” and in place of what is uncreated and above time, God crowned with the name of the Trinity the creature and what is subject to a beginning. On the work of His creation, in honor of its sacred character, He has set the glorious name which even the mouths of the angels are not pure enough to utter. (III 5/14 (324))

This kind of union, both with God and with other persons, is in fact the purpose of every human life. It is also the apotheosis of human flourishing: the ultimate source of value, the greatest good available to human beings, involving not only moral excellence and nobility, but also eternal beatitude or happiness, and freedom from anxiety, disappointment, pain—indeed all forms of mental or physical suffering. It is in theosis, and only in theosis, that moral excellence and unsurpassable happiness are ultimately united.

We have, in Isaac, a cosmic outlook according to which there is a non-contingent relationship between suffering, virtue, and theosis.¹² Suffering is necessary for creatures like us to develop the highest virtues, and the highest virtues are necessary for theosis. It is also a cosmic outlook according to which, firstly, the harms we suffer in this life, however dreadful, are *relatively* trivial, compared to the eternal beatific afterlife to which they pave the way, and, secondly, in which those harms will be repaired by God, in the long run. This is a cosmic outlook within which (again, in the long run) no-one will regret having passed through temporary trials, however dreadful, as these have been the necessary means by which they have perfected self-transcending love. Here, episodes of suffering are rungs on the ladder of divine ascent, by which one reaches the heights of theosis. We can think of the cosmic outlook of Isaac as providing at least some of the raw materials required to develop a saint-making theodicy—one, according to which, God was right to create an environment in which there is at least the risk of significant suffering, since it is only in such an environment that creatures like us can grow in saintliness and receive the greatest possible (and eternal) goods available to us (cf. Collin (2019, 2022)).

4. Saint-Making Environments

In the course of developing his argument from evil, Sterba raises a range of objections to saint-making theodicies. Having sketched Isaac's cosmic outlook, we are now positioned to ask whether those objections apply to a saint-making theodicy situated within that outlook.¹³ One of the elements underlying saint-making theodicies is the observation that, in order for creatures like us to develop a saintly character, we must inhabit an environment in which we suffer, or, at least, in which there is the risk of suffering. This is a theme of Adams (1999), Dougherty (2014), Hick (2010), Moser (2013), Stump (2010), and Swinburne (1998). Where there is no suffering or risk of suffering, developing a saintly character—the 'luminous love' Isaac speaks of—is not possible, as morally significant action is not possible. Both physical injury and psychological pain would be impossible, since God would intervene to prevent them. Similarly, if one attempted to cause others physical or psychological harm—or even acted in way that, in normal conditions, would *accidentally* bring about physical or psychological harm—God would again intervene to prevent it. One could go without sleeping, eating, exercising, working, attending to the psychological and physical needs of children and dependants, and so on, with no harms resulting, and with God intervening to ensure it. One could not so much as speak spitefully to another; perhaps God would intervene to make one temporarily dumbstruck, or to make one's interlocutor temporarily deaf. Quite generally, God would have to continually intervene in a series of 'special providences' (Hick 1973, p. 42), so that the world would not exhibit the kinds of regularities it actually does. Developed sciences would probably be impossible. Bad decisions would be impossible, with either the decision itself or its consequences instantly kiboshed by God. Mercy, wisdom, humility, enemy-love, and sacrificial love would be impossible:

One can at least begin to imagine such a world. It is evident that our present ethical concepts would have no meaning in it. If, for example, the notion of harming someone is an essential element in the concept of a wrong action, in our hedonistic paradise there could be no wrong actions—nor any right action in distinction from wrong. Courage and fortitude would have no point in an environment in which there is, by definition no danger or difficulty. Generosity, kindness and the agape aspect of love, prudence, unselfishness, and all other ethical notions which presuppose life in an objective environment could not even

be formed. Consequently such a world, however well it might promote pleasure, would be very ill adapted for the development of the moral qualities of human personality. In relation to this purpose it might be the worst of all possible worlds! (Hick 1973, pp. 41–42)

There is then a profound downside to God preventing all evil and suffering: it would lead to a bizarre Hick world, which—worst of all—would make impossible the development of a saintly character. Sterba is alive to this point. He holds, however, that there is another option open to God, an option, in fact, that God is morally obliged to select. God, Sterba holds, should prevent all the *significant* (including, of course, *terrible*) evil consequences of our actions, while allowing the less significant evil consequences of our actions to take place: a policy of ‘limited intervention’ (Sterba 2019, p. 60).

Here, I think, the moral significance of a policy of limited intervention—assuming for the time being that such a policy would not lead to a bizarre Hick world—is quite different given the cosmic outlook of Isaac than the kind of cosmic outlooks Sterba has in mind when criticising saint-making responses to the argument from evil. Sterba notes one downside to the policy of limited intervention:

[W]ouldn’t such a policy of limited intervention by God constrain good people from being supervirtuous at the same time that it constrains bad people from being the supervicious? If God is going to prevent the significantly evil consequences of our actions, then both good people and bad people are going to be restricted from inflicting significantly evil consequences on others. That means that good people will not be able to be as virtuous as they could otherwise be if they could freely refrain from inflicting significantly evil consequences on others. (Sterba 2019, p. 62)

In the quoted passage, Sterba mentions freely refraining from inflicting significantly evil consequences on others as an example of supervirtuousness, but there are many more examples of supervirtuousness, arising from the risk or actual occurrence of terrible evils. There are those who risk or sacrifice their own lives to save the lives of others, those who forgive others who have inflicted dreadful evils on them, those who sacrifice significant goods and freedoms in order to care for dependants with debilitating illnesses, those who are tortured or martyred for their faith, and many other forms of supervirtuousness besides these. In a world in which God invariably intervenes to prevent all terrible suffering the highest, most admirable, most exceptional forms of generosity, forgiveness, compassion, self-control, humility, integrity, courage, enemy-love, self-transcending and self-sacrificial love would not be possible. Sterba argues that this is a trade-off God should make:

But is this a problem? Who would object to God’s following such a policy? Of course, bad people might object because such a policy limits them in the exercise of their superviciousness. But there is no reason God or anyone else should listen to their objection in this regard. What about the good people? Would they object to such a policy? How could they? True, the policy does limit good people in the exercise of their supervirtuousness, but that is just what it takes to protect would-be victims from the significantly evil consequences of the actions of bad people. Surely, good people would find the prevention of the infliction of significantly evil consequences on would-be victims by the supervicious worth the constraint imposed on how supervirtuous they themselves could be. In fact, they should find such tradeoffs not only morally acceptable but also morally required (cf. Sterba (2019, p. 174)). (Sterba 2019, p. 62)

On the kind of theistic views Sterba is targeting, the heavenly afterlife involves the provision of what Sterba calls ‘consumer goods’—‘experiences and activities that are intensely pleasurable, completely fulfilling, and all encompassing’ (Sterba 2019, p. 36)—to those who have used soul-making opportunities ‘to do what we could be reasonably expected to do to make ourselves less unworthy of a heavenly afterlife’ (Sterba 2019, p. 53). In this kind of cosmic outlook, there is some threshold beyond which our actions become good enough

to be counted as manifesting what one could be reasonably expected to do, and for God to grant us the consumer goods of a heavenly afterlife. It may well be reasonable, given this kind of cosmic outlook, to regard the most exceptional kinds of virtuousness—the luminous love of Isaac—as too demanding to mark this threshold. However, this is all quite alien to the cosmic outlook of Isaac Qatraya. There, ultimate union with God requires harmony with the perfect will of God. Theosis—our ultimate end and the apotheosis of human flourishing—requires moral perfection,¹⁴ and one can only approximate this beatific state to the extent that one’s moral character has been perfected. This requires the highest, most saintlike virtues. The tradeoff in which we sacrifice supervirtuousness for insulation from temporary significant suffering is, within this outlook, a tradeoff in which we also sacrifice the greatest possible eternal good for all human beings for insulation from temporary significant suffering. Given the cosmic outlook of Isaac, it is, at the very least, less obvious that God should make this tradeoff.

Nor is it clear that a policy of limited intervention on the part of God—intervening to prevent all the significant evil consequences of people’s actions—would not lead to a similar kind of bizarre Hick world that a policy of total intervention—intervening to prevent all the evil consequences of people’s actions—leads to. Here, Sterba makes use of a thought experiment. It seems possible to conceive of a world governed by the regularities required for sciences, complex action and so on, as well as at least a limited scope for human moral development, in which such interventions take place:

Think of the fictional city of Metropolis in which Superman/ Clark Kent was imagined to live. Surely regularities did hold in that imaginary city. They were just different from the regularities that hold in our world because of the “to be expected” interventions of Superman that occurred in Metropolis. So if all the world were like Metropolis, we would still discover natural laws. We would just learn that the operation of those laws was subject to moral constraints because of the additional regular interventions of superheroes or God. The same would be true in an ideally just and powerful political state, where all murders, serious assaults, and so on would be prevented. There too natural law regularities governing human behavior would be constrained, so to speak, by the to-be-expected regular moral interventions of such a state. Of course, soul-making would still exist in Metropolis or in an ideally just and powerful state, as it does in our world. It is just that the opportunities for soul-making that would exist there would be limited to just those opportunities that morally good people would prefer to have. But clearly no one should be objecting to living under those regularities. (Sterba 2019, p. 64)

However, are God and Superman similar enough for the thought experiment to be convincing? In some contexts, there is a tendency to conceive of God as something of a Superman figure. However, there is a huge gulf between this conception of God and God as understood by Isaac Qatraya (and, for that matter, any thinker who could be understood as endorsing ‘classical theism’ of some kind). Here is one salient difference. If God (so understood) adopted the policy of preventing *all* terrible suffering, then no terrible suffering would take place. Superman (his superpowers notwithstanding) could not do anything comparable to this. He could not, for instance, prevent acts leading to terrible suffering simultaneously taking place both at the Daily Planet and LexCorp offices, let alone prevent acts leading to terrible suffering simultaneously taking place in Metropolis, Cape Town, Sanaa, Melbourne, San Francisco, John O’Groats, or wherever else such acts may be taking place. In this respect then, there is also a huge gulf between Kryptonian and Divine policies of limited intervention. Worlds in which God aims to enact this policy and worlds in which Superman aims to enact this policy are very different.

Would then a Divine policy of preventing all terrible suffering lead to a bizarre Hick world in much the same way as a Divine policy of preventing all suffering, both significant and insignificant? Notably, what leads to a bizarre Hick world, given a Divine policy of intervention, is the extent and frequency with which God is required to intervene in order

to uphold the policy. Now, if one came to learn, through repeated experience or by some oracle, that God will now enact a policy of total intervention with respect to suffering, one could engage in bilking attempts—acts in some sense directed at bringing about suffering, though perhaps in the knowledge that they are sure to fail—with each bilking attempt requiring God to suspend or alter in some way the laws governing or regularities obtaining in the world. There is, however, a huge number of close possible worlds in which one suffers oneself, or brings about the suffering of others. Suffering can very easily be brought about. Moreover, a very large number of people could engage in bilking attempts with respect to bringing about suffering. There are around 8 billion human beings, a large proportion of whom are cognitively and physically able to engage in bilking attempts, each one requiring an act of intervention, suspending or altering the laws governing or the regularities obtaining in the world. With a Divine policy of always intervening to prevent suffering in place, it would be quite easy for human beings to actualise a bizzaro Hick world.

Would the situation with a policy of limited intervention be relevantly different? That is, are there reasons to think that a Divine policy of intervening to always prevent terrible suffering would not have similar consequences? Given the foregoing, it is hard to see why. What is salient here, with respect to the possibility of actualising a bizzaro Hick world, is not the *seriousness* of the suffering or wrong, but the *ease* by which that suffering or wrong can be brought about. However, there is no law-like connection between the seriousness of a wrong and the difficulty in bringing about that wrong, such that more serious wrongs, or wrongs above some threshold of seriousness, are harder to bring about than less serious wrongs, or wrongs below some threshold of seriousness. It is as easy, in practical terms, for an adult to kill a child as it is for him to deliberately shut his own hand in a car door.¹⁵ The two acts, *normatively* speaking, are very different; one is dreadful, the other merely disagreeable. With regards to the practical difficulty involved in bringing them about, however, there is little to separate them.

Minor and significant evils are more or less as easy to bring about. The kind of interventions required on the part of God to prevent them are also quite similar. Being occasionally short-tempered with one's children, let us say, is a minor evil. Being neglectful of or callus towards one's children over a long period of time is a significant evil. How could God intervene to prevent the evil effects of short-tempered outbursts towards children? Perhaps the parent would be temporarily muted, while some simulacrum of the parent speaking kind words appeared in front of the children. Perhaps the child would be unable to form memories during the outburst, or the parent blocked from forming the thought that resulted in the outburst. How could God intervene to prevent the significant evil effects of being neglectful or callus? A similar set of tricks would be required.

So, there is a huge number of close possible worlds in which one suffers significantly oneself, or brings about the significant suffering of others. Significant suffering can very easily be brought about. Moreover, a very large number of people could engage in bilking attempts with respect to bringing about significant suffering. There are around 8 billion human beings, a large proportion of whom are cognitively and physically able to engage in bilking attempts, each one requiring an act of intervention, suspending or altering the laws governing or the regularities obtaining in the world. With a Divine policy of always intervening to prevent significant suffering in place, it would be quite easy for human beings to actualise a bizzaro Hick world. A policy of limited intervention on the part of God would not be so limited after all. It would, in fact, actualise, or at least risk, a bizzaro Hick world in which significant moral development is impossible.

5. Divine and Human Permission of Evil

Sterba raises another pair of objections to saint-making responses to the problem of evil, both having to do with an apparent disparity between how advocates of the response must regard the moral status of *God's* policy of not seeking to prevent all significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral acts where possible, and the moral status of a *human*

policy of not seeking to prevent all significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral acts where possible. In the first place, there are some events that we do not regard human agents as being justified in permitting, even if doing so presents an opportunity for saint-making:

Suppose parents you know were to permit their children to be brutally assaulted to make possible the soul-making of the person who would attempt to comfort their children after they have been assaulted or to make possible the soul-making that their children themselves could experience by coming to forgive their assailants. Would you think the parents were morally justified in so acting? Hardly. Here you surely would agree with [MEPRI-MEPRIII's] prohibition of such actions. Permitting one's children to be brutally assaulted is an action that is wrong in itself, and not something that could be permitted for the sake of whatever good consequences it might happen to have. That is why [MEPRI-MEPRIII] prohibits any appeal to good consequences to justify such actions in such cases.¹⁶ (Sterba 2019, p. 57)

The argument here is by *modus tollens*. If it is permissible for God to permit significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral actions, then it is permissible for human agents to permit significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral actions. However, it is not permissible for human agents to permit significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral actions. So it is not permissible for God to permit significant or terrible evil consequences of immoral actions. What would make us warranted in accepting the first conditional here? We would be warranted in accepting the first conditional if we were warranted in accepting the following *parity principle*:

For all acts of type ϕ , if it is not morally permissible for a human agent to ϕ , then it is not morally permissible for God to ϕ .

The first conditional is an instance of the contrapositive of the parity principle. So, are we warranted in accepting the parity principle? I have my doubts. It seems to me that a number of different factors should undermine our confidence in the parity principle. In the first place, the consequences of not permitting certain classes of events are very different in the Divine and human cases. For one thing, for God to adopt the policy *Where possible, prevent all significant or terrible suffering* would lead to, or at least risk, a bizarre Hick world in which saint-making was impossible. However, on the view countenanced here, this would amount to the prevention of the ultimate eternal flourishing of all human beings. This is a truly dreadful consequence: a worse consequence, in fact, than any human agent is so much as capable of bringing about. In contrast, for a human agent to adopt the policy *Where possible prevent all significant or terrible suffering* would not lead to a bizarre Hick world. The consequences of an act have a bearing on whether that act is permissible or obligatory, and here the consequences of God acting to prevent significant or terrible suffering are immeasurably worse than the consequences of a human agent acting to prevent significant or terrible suffering. As such, God's moral relationship to permitting significant or terrible suffering is very different from a human agent's moral relationship to permitting significant or terrible suffering. Moreover, in fact, this disparity itself appears to underwrite a counterexample to the parity principle. It is morally permissible (even morally obligatory) for God to permit some instances of significant or terrible suffering, when it is in God's power to prevent them, because the alternative would be far worse (including, ultimately, for those whose suffering has been temporarily permitted). In contrast, it is not morally permissible for a human agent to permit the same instances of significant or terrible suffering, because the alternative would *not* be far worse. Human agents frequently have reasons to intervene to prevent significant or terrible suffering, but *lack* God's weightier countervailing reasons to permit it.

In the second place, human agents are *epistemically* differently placed to God, in such a way as to make some acts permissible for God that are not permissible for human beings. Imagine, for instance, being given an opportunity to pull one of two levers, X and Y, where pulling one lever will lead to a person's death, while pulling the other lever will lead

to a £10,000 donation being given to a worthy charity. Imagine further that there is no way for a human agent in this situation to know which lever will do which. Clearly, it is impermissible for a human agent to pull one of the levers. An infallible agent however could be rationally certain which lever would result in the charity donation. Moreover, being rationally certain that, say, X would lead to the charity donation, it would be morally permissible for the infallible agent to pull lever X . We can generalise this picture. Letting O be a set of epistemically possible outcomes, $P_\phi(o)$ one's credence that an outcome $o \in O$ will take place given that one ϕ s, and $U(o)$ be the utility of an outcome $o \in O$, the 'expected utility' of ϕ ing ($EU(\phi)$) can be given by:

$$EU(\phi) = \sum_{o \in O} P_\phi(o)U(o)$$

For an infallible being, the value of $P_\phi(o)$ will always be either 1 or 0. For creatures like us, it typically will not. However, (and especially when the positive or negative value of $U(o)$ is very high) this will make an enormous difference to the value of $EU(\phi)$. There are some acts types ϕ that are *never* permissible for fallible creatures, because of the (perhaps small) subjective probability that ϕ ing will bring about some truly dreadful outcome, but which *are* permissible for an infallible being, because, for a being like that, the subjective probability that ϕ ing will bring about that dreadful outcome is 0. This is another counterexample to the parity principle, or, rather, a recipe for producing such counterexamples.¹⁷

In the third place, human agents are not in a position to *rectify* many of the harms one can suffer in this life, whereas God *is* (and, in Isaac's cosmic outlook, *will* invariably rectify those harms). However, if an agent is in a position to rectify a harm, that agent has a different moral relationship to the harm than an agent who is unable to rectify that harm, and, in particular, is differently placed, morally speaking, with respect to the permissibility of allowing that harm to take place. The gospel according to John contains the story of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead. Here, we are told that Christ travels out of Bethany, where his friend Lazarus is ill, knowingly allowing him to die, and returns to Bethany only after Lazarus has been dead for four days. At this point, Christ performs a sign, returning Lazarus to life. Now, how we evaluate Christ permitting Lazarus to die is conditioned by Christ's ability to rectify the harm at hand. Contrast the narrative of John's gospel with, for instance, one in which a medic, the only person placed perform a life-saving operation on a friend, chooses, in lieu of performing the operation, to go for a long weekend in the Pyrenees, and returns to find, as expected, his friend dead. Our differential judgements about the moral status of permitting the friend to die in each case, have, in large part, to do with the fact that Christ was, and the medic was not, able to rectify the harm, to make the harm temporary. However, since there are very many harms that human agents cannot rectify, and no harms that God cannot rectify, human agents and God will be differently placed, morally speaking, with respect to permitting a large range of harms. This is another counterexample to the parity principle, or, rather, a recipe for producing such counterexamples.

In the fourth place, if there is a collective duty bringing about or will to some good end, different actors will often have different obligations with respect to this collective duty. Some corporation, let us say, undertakes a commitment to produce a product for a client. Those working for the corporation will incur duties to perform tasks in aid of bringing about that end. *Which particular* duties different members of the corporation incur will, however, depend on their different roles within the corporation. Managers, engineers, factory workers, cleaners, HR personnel, and so on, will incur different obligations. Given Isaac Qatraya's cosmic outlook, one might hold that we—both human beings and God—have a collective duty to will to bring about the ultimate theosis of all people. Perhaps then it is the duty of human agents to forge saintly characters, and the duty of God to provide an environment in which we are able to do so. Here too, God and human agents are differently placed, morally speaking, with respect to permitting harms. The commonplace thought that different actors have different obligations depending on their roles, combined with the

thought that God has a relevantly different role (in the task of bringing about the theosis of all human agents) than any human agent, implies that the parity principle does not hold. Sterba presents another, closely related, argument:

[I]t would be morally inappropriate for our receiving a Godly opportunity for soul-making to be conditional on God's permitting significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. This is because it would give us the incentive to commit, and want others to commit, significant and even horrendous evil actions, virtually without limit, so that God would permit their consequences and thereby make possible our receiving a Godly opportunity for soul-making.¹⁸ (Sterba 2019, p. 84)

There are different ways in which one might develop a saint-making response to the problem of evil, and, depending on which kind one endorses, one will have a different response to objections of this sort. According to some advocates of saint-making theodicies, a saint-making environment requires the *risk* or *possibility* of significant or even horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions. As we saw earlier, this is necessary in order for us *not* to inhabit a bizarre Hick world, in which developing the highest, most admirable, most exceptional forms of generosity, forgiveness, compassion, self-control, humility, integrity, courage, enemy-love, self-transcending and self-sacrificial love would be impossible. In this picture then, God is incentivised to create a world in which there is the *risk* or *possibility* of these consequences. However, that is not at all the same thing as being incentivised to *actualise* those terrible possibilities. One can be incentivised to build roads and railways, knowing that, in doing so, there is a risk that the cars and trains running on that infrastructure will crash, resulting in significant or even terrible suffering. But that does not entail that one is thereby also incentivised to have those cars and trains crash.

What about saint-making theodicies according to which *actual* suffering is necessary for creatures like us to grow in the highest virtues? Here, as before, we ought to be alive to the ways in which there are disparities between what is permissible for God and what is permissible for human agents. Even if we accept that there is a sense in which human agents are "incentivised" to allow others to suffer badly, because it will provide an opportunity for soul-making, it does not follow that it is obligatory, or permissible, for human agents to do so. Possible good consequences, or even knowably good consequences, of ϕ ing can "incentivise" ϕ ing, in some sense, without making ϕ ing either obligatory or permissible. One might, for instance, be incentivised to commit election fraud in order to prevent a execrable candidate from obtaining a position of political power, yet still properly regard doing so as impermissible. Moreover, there are disparities between what God is morally incentivised to do and what human agents are morally incentivised to do. God has a special moral incentive not to constantly intervene when possible to prevent significant suffering that does not apply to human agents: doing so would undermine our saint-making environment by bringing about a bizarre Hick world. There is no similar catastrophic downside for human agents choosing to intervene where possible, and no similar moral incentive. It would also be a mistake to think that, in acting out of love to prevent the suffering of others, one would deprive them of saint-making opportunities. For in acting out of love to prevent the suffering of others, though one removes one kind of saint-making opportunity, one replaces it with another, and does so by acting as an *exemplar*. Being a moral exemplar to some other agent, provides that agent with an opportunity to form correct moral beliefs, to become motivated to act morally, and to learn how to become moral (Zagzebski 2017, chp. 5). Thus, in acting out of love to prevent the suffering of others, an agent both does something that makes *her* more fitted for union with God and with other persons—so advancing the ultimate good of corporate theosis—and provides others with a saint-making opportunity.¹⁹

6. The Moral Evil Prevention Requirements

Isaac Qatraya's cosmic outlook, I have argued, is not subject to at least some of the objections Sterba raises to other theistic views. What is the upshot though when it comes to Sterba's formulation of the argument from evil? Let's consider again MEPRI-MEPRIII, beginning with the first two:

Moral Evil Prevention Requirement I

Prevent, rather than permit, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions without violating anyone's rights (a good to which we have a right) when that can easily be conducted. (Sterba 2019, p. 126)

Moral Evil Prevention Requirement II

Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions simply to provide other rational beings with goods they would morally prefer not to have. (Sterba 2019, p. 128)

Whether God adheres to MEPRI, in the picture countenanced here, depends on whether we should regard a person's ultimate theosis as her right. According to Sterba, if something 'is absolutely required for our fundamental well-being, then we ... have a right to it analogous to the way we have a right to liberty or a right to welfare.' (Sterba 2019, p. 87) Is theosis absolutely required for one's fundamental well-being? In at least one understanding of that phrase, it is. Theosis is required for the continuance of a flourishing life; without it one's life either ceases, or persists but in the torments of Gehenna. It is also constitutive of *ultimate* well-being, both in the sense of the *greatest* well-being available to humans, and in the sense of being the *end* for which humans are created. If this is what is meant by fundamental well-being—and anything that is required for fundamental well-being is a right—then theosis is a right. However, suffering, even terrible suffering (or the risk of these), is required to forge a saintly moral character, and a saintly moral character is required for theosis. Thus, preventing suffering (or removing the risk of suffering) would violate our right to theosis. If this is the case, God is morally required to provide everyone an opportunity for theosis, and so to create an environment where this is possible. If theosis is a good to which we have a right, then God *does* adhere to MEPRI.

However, perhaps possessing 'fundamental well-being' is to be understood as something in the ballpark of 'possessing enough of whatever goods are required to make one's life worth living'. Here too, there is some ambiguity. If there is no afterlife, even these goods inevitably cease at the point of death. In that case, some kind of afterlife is required for the continuance of even these goods. If then our right to these goods is not time-bounded, does not run out after, say, threescore years and ten, then, on Sterba's view, we have a right to an afterlife. However, having an *afterlife* worth living requires theosis, for the alternative is to be in the close presence of God without having a saintly moral character, and that is to experience the torments of Gehenna. If these were not corrective, as in Isaac Qatraya's view, resulting in the eventual formation of a saintly character (and so theosis), then the afterlife would not be worth living. In this sense too, on Sterba's view, we have a right to theosis, because it is the only way to sustain the goods required of a life worth living.

Say though that 'fundamental well-being' is understood in some way so as to give the result that theosis is not a right. Perhaps 'fundamental well-being' could be understood as something in the ballpark of 'temporarily possessing enough of whatever goods are required to make one's life worth living' or 'possessing enough of whatever goods are required to make one's life worth living for *threescore years and ten*'. Assuming this understanding of 'fundamental well-being', theosis is not (at least not clearly) a right, but a gift to which we are not entitled. In that case, someone warranted in holding the eschatological views of Isaac Qatraya would lack warrant for MEPRI. Given those eschatological views (and given the assumption that the theosis is not a right), it is not plausible that MEPRI holds in every instance. For God to prevent significant and horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions would undermine saint-making, and so undermine the opportunity for theosis. However, to deprive human beings of that ultimate and eternal good—when that good

would otherwise be possible, and, in fact, eventually actualised—would be far worse for those human beings than to permit temporary sufferings, however terrible, in order for those human beings to ascend to eternal, beatific union with God and the rest of creation. God, for Isaac Qatraya, chooses what is ultimately best for us, rather than what is ultimately worse for us. Adhering to MEPRI in a wholly unrestricted way would mean choosing what is worse for human beings rather than what is best for human beings. God then is not morally required to adhere to MEPRI, and, in fact, unrestricted adherence to MEPRI is not what we would expect of a perfect Being. Similar considerations suggest that, in the cosmic outlook of Isaac, God does not violate MEPRII. From the point of view of eternal beatific union with God and creation, no human agent would judge that their life would have been better if they had never endured significant suffering as a necessary means to theosis. No rational agent would morally prefer not to have the good of theosis. Finally, there is Moral Evil Prevention Requirement III (MEPRIII):

Moral Evil Prevention Requirement III

Do not permit, rather than prevent, significant and especially horrendous evil consequences of immoral actions (which would violate someone's rights) in order to provide such goods when there are countless morally unobjectionable ways of providing those goods. (Sterba 2019, p. 128).

On the picture sketched here, there are not other ways of providing the good of theosis. Theosis, for creatures like us, requires growth into saintly virtues, growth into saintly virtues requires an environment in which there is the risk of significant suffering, and an environment in which there is the risk of significant suffering requires that God does not act to prevent all instances of significant suffering. MEPRIII is not violated. Moreover, because warrant for both the claim that MEPRI-MEPRIII are true and the claim that God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII could only be gained *via* warrant for the claim that Isaac's outlook is false, one cannot gain warrant for the claim that MEPRI-MEPRIII are true and the claim that God violates MEPRI-MEPRIII without *first* being warranted in rejecting Isaac's outlook. It is then a theistic cosmic outlook that is immune to this kind of argument from evil.

7. A Note on Sceptical Theism

Many evidential arguments from evil work by making an inductive inference from (something in the ballpark of):

No reasons I know of are such that they would justify God permitting some actual evil E.

to (something in the ballpark of):

Probably: there are no reasons that would justify God permitting some actual evil E.

A 'sceptical theist'²⁰ claims this is a poor inference, because, roughly speaking, he doubts he is entitled to hold that the reasons he is aware of are representative of the reasons God is aware of, so that the inference involves something akin to base rate neglect.²¹ Above, I did not mention sceptical theism, and, on the face of it, Sterba's argument from evil might appear insusceptible to sceptical theist responses. That is because Sterba argues that, for some actual evil, E, there *are reasons we know of that entail that God is not justified in permitting E*. If we were warranted in accepting *that*, then, because (classical) entailment is monotonic, the existence of other reasons of which we are not aware could do nothing to undermine that warrant. It would be too hasty though to conclude that there is no space for a sceptical theist treatment of the argument. Naturally enough, whether one can reasonably take oneself to hold that one knows of reasons that entail that God is not justified in permitting E, depends on both the moral claims one endorses and the moral epistemology one buys into. Moreover, both the moral claims one endorses and the moral epistemology one buys into will depend on the cosmic outlook one buys into. In fact then,

the moral premises of Sterba's argument depend on their own inductive step, something in the ballpark of:

No axiological features of our cosmos I know of are such as to render MEPRI-MEPRIII false, or not violated by God.

to

Probably: there are no axiological features of our cosmos such as to render MEPRI-MEPRIII false, or not violated by God.

Whether sceptical theism can itself be motivated is a large question. However, what we should observe here is that sceptical theist approaches are, perhaps contrary to first impressions, applicable *mutatis mutandis* to Sterba's argument.

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Notes

- ¹ Sterba elaborates: 'For example, if you can easily prevent a small child from going hungry or aid someone who has been brutally assaulted without violating anyone's rights then you should do so. This requirement is an exceptionless minimal component of the Pauline Principle discussed in previous chapters, which would be acceptable to consequentialists and nonconsequentialists, as well as theists and atheists alike.' (Sterba 2019, p. 126).
- ² Here I use *warrant* to pick out *rational good standing* in the disjunctive sense of involving either positive rational justification or the kind of default rational entitlement that does not require positive justification.
- ³ See Wright (2003) for a classic discussion of transmission.
- ⁴ McPherson (2020, p. 115) describes a cosmic outlook as 'an understanding of the world and one's place within it that forms the background to a person's thoughts, feelings, and actions, and, indeed, to his or her life as a whole.' McPherson emphasises—rightly, to my mind—the close interrelationship between one's cosmic outlook and one's ethical views.
- ⁵ In fact, Isaac's view of the afterlife has *some* affinities with the view of the afterlife Sterba (2020) argues is the most morally preferable.
- ⁶ Brady (2018) is recent and illuminating development of this thought.
- ⁷ References to 'I n', 'II n', and 'III m/n' refer, respectively to sections n of the 'First Part', 'Second Part', and 'Third Part' of Isaac's writings. Translations of the First Part are taken from Miller (1984), translations of the Second Part are taken from Brock (1995), and translations of the Third Part are taken from Hansbury (2021), which is part of the collection Kozah et al. (2021).
- ⁸ Moser (2013) is a relatively recent discussion of suffering and soul-making that places enemy-love at the centre of a virtuous life.
- ⁹ References to 'AOL m/n' refer to Isaac's homilies On Ascetical Life, and are taken from (Hansbury 1989).
- ¹⁰ See also the following passage: 'My Lord, You have not formed me like a clay vessel that when broken cannot be restored and when encrusted is not able to take on its former polish when new. But in Your wisdom, You have created me in the form of elements of gold and silver that when tarnished, in the refining sorrow of compunction, again imitates the color of the sun and shining is brought to its former condition by means of the crucible of repentance. You are the craftsman who polishing our nature makes it new. I have soiled the beauty of baptism and I am sullied, but in You I receive a more excellent beauty. In You is the beauty of creation: You have brought it back again to that beauty from which it was altered in paradise.' (III 7/35 (352)).
- ¹¹ See also the following passage: 'It is clear that [God] does not abandon them the moment they fall, and that demons will not remain in their demonic state, and sinners will not remain in their sins; rather, he is going to bring them to a single equal state of perfection in relationship to his own Being—to a state in which the holy angels now are, in perfection of love and a passionless mind. He is going to bring them into that excellency of will where it will be not as though they were curbed and not free or having stirrings from the Opponent then; rather, they will be in a state of excelling knowledge, with a mind made mature in the stirrings which partake of the divine outpouring which the blessed Creator is preparing in his grace; they will be perfected in love for him, with a perfect mind which is above any aberration in all its stirrings.' (II 40 (4)).
- ¹² There is here, to use Adams' (1999) term, an *organic unity* between the evils one endures in this life and the goods one receives in the afterlife.
- ¹³ Isaac does not himself develop a detailed theodicy, or explicitly anticipate the kinds of objections Sterba develops. The goal here is to interrogate whether a saint-making theodicy is susceptible to the kinds of objections Sterba develops—and, ultimately, the argument from evil Sterba develops—if one shares certain aspects of Isaac's cosmic outlook.
- ¹⁴ So we have Christ's injunction, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matt 5:48): no doubt a high bar to meet.

- 15 Of course, for those who are not sociopaths, or have not been acculturated into barbarism, it is *psychologically* much harder to deliberately harm a child, but we are imagining here, as Sterba does, a world in which we have come to realise that God will always intervene to prevent terrible suffering. (We also should not underestimate how frequently human beings have been acculturated into barbarism.)
- 16 Sterba continues: ‘Moreover, if there are no exceptions to [MEPRI-MEPRIII] for humans in such cases, then the same should also hold true for God. If it is always wrong for us to do actions of a certain sort, then it should always be wrong for God to do them as well. So for contexts where the issue is whether to permit a significant evil to achieve some additional good, God, like us, would never be justified in permitting evil in such cases.’ (Sterba 2019, p. 57).
- 17 Note that one does not have to buy into the idea that a rational or moral choice is always one that maximises expected utility (however that gets defined) to grasp the far more modest point I’m making here—i.e. that we sometimes are obliged not to act in certain ways because of the subjective probability that doing so will lead to dire consequences (and that infallible beings will have relevantly different subjective probabilities with respect to the obtention of those outcomes). This also has a direct bearing on the particular parity we’re scrutinizing. There is, for human beings, a non-zero subjective probability that there is no afterlife in which the harms incurred in this life will be undone, and where those who have advanced into saintliness by how they have repented to those harms will benefit from their saintly character. This makes our moral relationship towards permitting those harms different from that of a being who infallibly knows that there is an afterlife like this.
- 18 The objection has a second part: ‘It would also support perverse incentives for God as well. Assuming that God wanted to provide us with a Godly opportunity for soul-making, God would also have to perversely want us to commit significant and even horrendous morally evil actions, virtually without limit, so that God could then permit their consequences and thereby make possible our receiving a Godly opportunity for soul-making.’ (Sterba 2019, p. 84). But this part depends on a closure principle I don’t accept. *Wanting*, I say, is not closed under necessitation relations. One might want to be physically fit, but not want to exercise, even though it is necessarily the case that if one is physically fit one exercises. (The modality at play here concerns practical possibility and necessity.) And so for any number of good outcomes; one may want the good outcome, but not the means by which that outcome can be achieved. It is possible then to want saintliness, but not the trials required to achieve it.
- 19 Why doesn’t God act out of love to prevent the suffering of others? In Isaac’s cosmic outlook, that’s exactly what God *does* do. But it must be understood diachronically, as a process, where the prevention of suffering is (one aspect of) the culmination of that process. If God acts to prevent all significant suffering *immediately*, the process, as we saw, is undermined.
- 20 Dougherty (2022) and McBrayer (n.d.) provide overviews of sceptical theism.
- 21 Compare a chess novice playing against the chess engine Stockfish, who reasons from the premise *No reasons I know of are such that Stockfish is justified in permitting the distribution of chess pieces we find on our board* to the conclusion *Probably: there are no reasons such that Stockfish is justified in permitting the distribution of chess pieces we find on our board*. The badness of the inference can be explained, at least in part, by appealing to the many possible reasons for making a chess move that will not be cognitively available to a chess novice—there are an estimated 10^{40} legal moves in chess—and the relatively good grasp Stockfish has of the relevant class of possible reasons—running on the right hardware, Stockfish can evaluate thousands of millions of possible moves per second. The novice knows Stockfish’s end (to win the game), but, even given that knowledge, it would be a bad bet on the part of the novice to hold that, if he is *unaware of why* Stockfish’s move would advance that end, then it *does not in fact* advance that end. Say then we know that a perfect Being’s ultimate aims would include what is ultimately best for human agents. For analogous reasons it might seem like a bad bet to hold that, if one is *unaware of why* God permitting the kinds and distributions of evil we find in our world advances that end, then it *does not in fact* advance that end.

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