

# The Morally Difficult Notion of Heaven: A Critique of the Faith-Based Ethics of Avicenna and Aquinas

*Amir Saemi*

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*Abstract.* I will argue that Avicenna's and Aquinas's faith-based virtue ethics are crucially different from Aristotle's virtue ethics, in that their ethics hinges on the theological notion of heaven, which is constitutively independent of the ethical life of the agent. As a result, their faith-based virtue ethics is objectionable. Moreover, I will also argue that the notion of heaven that Avicenna and Aquinas deploy in their moral philosophy is problematic; for it can rationally permit believers to commit morally horrendous actions. Finally, I will present a Kantian notion of heaven which is immune to the aforementioned moral objection. The Kantian notion of heaven, nevertheless, cannot ground any view of ethics as it is constitutively dependent on the ethical life of the agent.

## I. Introduction

American physicist Steven Weinberg said that “with or without [religion] you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.”<sup>1</sup> I will argue that Weinberg's statement can be supported by a certain conception of heaven adopted by some religions. Heaven, in a religious context, depicts the highest good, or complete happiness which bestows a final point (or telos) to the acts of believers. However, there is a conception of heaven, prevalent in Christian and Islamic thought, which renders Weinberg's claim true: i.e., it implies that it would be rational for believers to do evil things. Nonetheless, I take it that no religion worth believing should allow its believers to do evil things, and thus any conception of heaven which has this implication is morally objectionable.

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<sup>1</sup>Steven Weinberg, in an address at the Conference on Cosmic Design, American Association for the Advancement of Science, Washington, D.C. (April, 1999).

To develop my argument, however, I take a historical turn to explore the role that the notion of heaven plays in medieval Islamic and Christian moral philosophy. That is, the argument of the paper will be reconstructed through a critical study of the moral theories of two main figures in Islamic and Christian thought: Avicenna and Aquinas. These two figures have, at least, two things in common. First, they were both heavily influenced by Aristotle and developed Aristotelian ideas in their works. Second, they were both religious and sought to make Aristotle religious; of course, one wanted to make him a Muslim, the other a Christian.

Aristotle's ethics has no special place for faith and God. However, Avicenna and Aquinas want to argue that there would be no genuine moral life without religious faith. Faith makes moral life possible. I will call a moral view which deems faith necessary for living a moral life a faith-based moral view. The way the Aristotelian theologians (i.e., Avicenna and Aquinas) integrate faith into their moral theory is through the concept of heaven. According to them, Aristotle's secular conception of happiness, contrary to the theological notion of heaven, does not depict the complete and final happiness. Final and true happiness would be only in heaven. As a result, they seek to restructure Aristotelian virtue ethics around the theological concept of heaven. Yet, as I will argue, the faith-based virtue ethics they develop remain crucially non-Aristotelian and susceptible to objections, precisely because their virtue ethics hinge upon the notion of heaven.

Not only can heaven not play the role of *telos* in a plausible virtue theory, but, as I will argue, heaven, in the way the Aristotelian theologians conceive it, is in general a morally problematic notion. For it implies, in line with Weinberg's worry, that morally horrendous actions can be performed rationally by believers. In this sense, the moral problem that the notion of heaven faces goes beyond faith-based virtue ethics. Weinberg's worry, however, is not inherent to the notion of heaven, as I will argue that there is a non-orthodox Kantian conception of heaven for which Weinberg's worry would not arise.

After this introduction, I structure the paper as follows. In section II, I overview Aristotelian virtue ethics and list some of its basic doctrines. With this brief presentation of Aristotle's view, we will be in a position to see why the faith based moral theory the Aristotelian theologians develop diverge from Aristotle's view in crucial respects. Before presenting the main objections to Avicenna's and Aquinas's view, I will briefly present their views in section III and IV, respectively. In section V, I will argue that basing a moral theory on the notion of heaven, in the way the Aristotelian theologians conceive it, can undermine the theory by misidentifying intuitively morally wrong actions as right. In Section VI, I will argue that the Aristotelian theologians' notion of heaven is in general problematic. The last section presents an alternative Kantian conception of heaven.

## II. Aristotelian Virtue Ethics

Aristotle begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE* henceforth) by noting that happiness is the final point, or the *telos*, of all rational actions.<sup>2</sup> We can understand Aristotle as saying that happiness provides a success norm for actions; that is, successful actions are conducive to happiness.<sup>3</sup> Aristotelian virtue ethics is teleological in this sense:

(A1) A right human action is that which is conducive to human happiness.

We should not be misled by (A1), however, into thinking that it provides us with an Archimedean point from which we can determine what one ought to do based on what is conducive to happiness; for it is an important aspect of Aristotle's view that human happiness, i.e., *eudaimonia*, cannot be characterized in a morally neutral way. The conclusion of the celebrated function argument, which Aristotle presents to specify the content of *eudaimonia*, is that *eudaimonia* consists in engaging in reason-involving activities in accordance with human virtues.<sup>4</sup> Let's state this upshot of the function argument in the following way:

(A2) Human happiness is constituted by morally virtuous activity.

(A3) The content of happiness cannot be specified without reference to the agent's moral life.<sup>5</sup>

Putting (A1) and (A2) together, one might think that we can define moral rightness in terms of moral virtues in Aristotle's view. That is:

(A4) The right action is what a morally virtuous person would do.

However, while (A4) may well be correct, it cannot be used to determine what one ought to do when one has an Aristotelian understanding of virtue. For on

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<sup>2</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1094a.

<sup>3</sup>For an elaborate defense of the idea, see Amir Saemi, "Aiming at the Good," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45 (2015): 197–219.

<sup>4</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098a.

<sup>5</sup>One might think that in the book X of *NE*, Aristotle characterizes happiness in terms of theoretical virtues. The view I attribute to Aristotle is primarily informed by *NE* I–IX, and to the extent that book X is inconsistent with the rest of *NE*, I disregard it. Nevertheless, one can interpret *NE*X in a way that it is not inconsistent with the rest of the book. For instance, on Gavin Lawrence's interpretation, while the contemplative life is the best life in an ideal condition, the best life we can lead given our non-ideal circumstance in the actual world is the life of ethically virtuous activity (we might be able occasionally to engage in contemplative life if the situation arises, e.g., when we have no moral obligation); see Gavin Lawrence, "Aristotle and the Ideal Life," *The Philosophical Review* 102 (1993): 1–34. On this interpretation of *NE* X, given that we live in a non-ideal condition in the actual world, (A2) and (A3) are still true in the actual world.

Aristotle's view, the notion of moral virtue is itself dependent on the notion of right action. Let me explain.

On Aristotle's view, moral virtues, which represent excellent conditions on the non-rational part of the soul are dependent on *phronesis* (i.e., practical wisdom).<sup>6</sup> *Phronesis*, roughly speaking, is the virtue of practical intellect which is responsible for making judgements about what one ought to do. Given the way that Aristotle defines moral virtues, there can be no moral virtue without *phronesis*. Aristotle defines virtue as follows: "Virtue is . . . a state involving rational choice, consisting in a mean . . . determined by reason—the reason, that is, by reference to which the practically wise person [*phronismos*] would determine it."<sup>7</sup> While it is clear that Aristotle thinks that one cannot exercise virtue without employing *phronesis*, it is less clear what role *phronesis* would play in one's exercising virtues, given that Aristotle says, "Virtue makes the aim right, and practical wisdom the things towards it."<sup>8</sup> On an influential interpretation, virtue provides one with an indeterminate goal which serves as the starting point of practical reasoning. The practically wise person then employs *phronesis* to make determinate the indeterminate goal with which he began. Practical reasoning is constitutive reasoning through which the agent determines what specific goals constitute the general end identified by virtue.<sup>9</sup> T. H. Irwin characterizes the role of *phronesis* as follows: "The practical intellect is not concerned with means as opposed to ends. Insofar as it is concerned with constituent 'means,' it is also concerned with ends."<sup>10</sup> Let's state the function of *phronesis* in the following way:

(A5) The virtuous agent employs *phronesis* to determine what particular action constitutes indefinite goals supplied by moral virtues.

Given (A5), it would be difficult to see how (A4) can be helpful in identifying the right action. So it is no surprise that Aristotelian virtue ethics faces the concern that it does not provide us with a general principle to identify right actions. Some people, e.g., McDowell and Wiggins,<sup>11</sup> have suggested that virtu-

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<sup>6</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a.

<sup>7</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a.

<sup>8</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a.

<sup>9</sup>Jessica Moss, "Virtue Makes the Goal Right": Virtue and Phronesis in Aristotle's Ethics," *Phronesis* 56 (2011): 204–61) has a detailed and plausible discussion of Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*. See also T. H. Irwin, "Aristotle on Reason, Desire and Virtue," *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 567–78; and John McDowell, "Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology," in *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 23–49.

<sup>10</sup>Irwin, "Aristotle on Reason," 571.

<sup>11</sup>John McDowell, "Some Issues in Aristotle's Moral Psychology"; and David Wiggins, "Deliberation and Practical Reason," in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 221–40.

ous agent has a kind of moral perception by which she can see what the right action is in each particular circumstance.

### III. Avicenna and the Intellectual Heaven

Influenced by Aristotle, Avicenna's philosophy, including his practical philosophy, is also teleological. He holds that all rational beings seek the good, which is basically their perfection.<sup>12</sup> So, providing that we understand human happiness as human perfection, we can say that Avicenna endorses (A1). When it comes to the content of happiness, though, Avicenna deviates from Aristotle. Avicenna and Aristotle both hold that the distinctive feature of human beings is our rational soul. Avicenna, however, is a substance dualist and identifies the true nature of human being with its immaterial substance. For him, the human body is a lower substance to which the immaterial soul is accidentally attached. As a result, he thinks that the theoretical intellect's activity, which is the proper activity of the immaterial substance, is human's most perfect activity:

The human soul . . . is a single substance which is related to two planes—the one higher, and the other lower than itself. It has special faculties which establish the relationship between itself and each plane: the practical faculty which the human soul possesses in relation to the lower plane, which is the body and its control and management; and the theoretical faculty in relation to the higher plane, from which it passively receives and acquires intelligibles. It is as if our soul has two faces: one toward the body, and it must not be influenced by any requirement of the bodily nature; and the other turned towards the higher principles, and it must always be ready to receive from what is there in the higher plane and to be influenced by it.<sup>13</sup>

As the passage shows, the human soul must use its theoretical reason to receive truths, and use practical faculty to manage the body so that it does not hinder the function of theoretical reason. We already observe that Avicenna departs from Aristotle by downplaying the role of practical activity in a good human life. Aiming to describe heaven, Avicenna characterizes the content of the human good exclusively in terms of the activity of the theoretical intellect: “[In the case of] the rational soul, the perfection proper to it consists in its becom-

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<sup>12</sup>“The good in general is that which everything desires, and that which everything desires is existence, or the perfection of the existence.” Avicenna, *Metaphysics of Healing*, trans. Michael Marmura (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 8.6.3, 284.

<sup>13</sup>Avicenna, “Kitab al-Najat (Book II, Chapter VI),” in *Avicenna's Psychology*, trans. Fazlur Rahman (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 2.6.4, 33.

ing an intellectual world in which there is impressed the form of the whole, the order in the whole that is intellectually apprehended.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Avicenna, a human’s intellectual capacity can be fully realized when the soul is separated from the body in the afterlife.<sup>15</sup> As is clear from his conception of human perfection, contrary to Aristotle, for Avicenna human happiness can be specified independent of the ethical life of the agent, and thus we can’t attribute (A3) to Avicenna.

Concerning moral virtues, Avicenna seems to hold that moral virtues are necessary for a person to achieve the good. As he says, “This true happiness is not fully achieved except by rectifying the practical part of the soul.”<sup>16</sup> Hence, given (A1), it would not be mistaken to say that Avicenna accepts (A4). Nevertheless, contrary to (A2), Avicenna believes that virtues do not play a constitutive role in final happiness; rather, they are instrumentally necessary for final happiness. This becomes clearer when we study Avicenna’s conception of virtue. Like Aristotle, Avicenna also thinks that moral virtues are dispositions that lie on a mean between two extremes. The mean, though, is not determined by practical wisdom through making determinate general goals supplied by virtues. Rather, the mean is determined with regard to the goal of transcending the body for engaging in intellectual activities; “[Aristotle] has commanded in the books on ethics that the mean between two opposing moral temperaments should be used. . . . As the disposition toward the mean it is intended that it transcend the conditions that tie [us to the body] and preserve the proper state of the rational soul, while so preparing [the rational soul] to go beyond and transcend [the body].”<sup>17</sup>

The practical faculty’s main task, then, is to manage the body in such a way that it does not hinder the theoretical intellect’s functioning and allows for “the soul’s purification” through “liberating the soul from the body untarnished.”<sup>18</sup> Hence, for Avicenna, *phronesis* or virtues do not play any role in determining the end, and so Avicenna is not committed to (A5).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, given that God and

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<sup>14</sup>Avicenna, *Metaphysics of Healing*, 9.7.15, 350.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 9.7.17, 352.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 9.7.20, 354.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 9.7.10, 22, 354.

<sup>18</sup>See also *ibid.*, 10.5.10, 35, 377.

<sup>19</sup>Avicenna uses the term “practical wisdom” in a very strange and non-Aristotelian way. (This casts doubt on whether he studied the *Nicomachean Ethics* carefully.) “Practical wisdom” for him is the disposition of having moderation in practical matters. Avicenna’s “practical wisdom” lies on a mean between excessively planning about one’s own survival, and ignoring one’s bodily needs (*Metaphysics of Healing*, 10.5.10, 11). However, given this characterization of “practical wisdom,” it would be natural to infer that in Avicennian ethics, practical wisdom, i.e., the intellectual virtue responsible for judgments about one what ought to do, plays just the instrumental role of finding out which action is necessary for the goal of soul’s purification. For the person who has “practical

the Prophet know better how to achieve the good, one should rely on religious teachings to know what one ought to do.

#### IV. Aquinas and the Vision of God

In contrast to Avicenna, who might just have a cursory knowledge of Aristotle's works on ethics, Aquinas carefully studied the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Nevertheless, when he wants to theologize Aristotelian ethics, his resulting theory remains very similar to Avicenna's in some important respects.

Aquinas espouses an Aristotelian teleological view of ethics (i.e., he holds that (A1) is true).<sup>20</sup> Similar to Avicenna, Aquinas identifies happiness as the "ultimate perfection of a rational or intellectual nature" (*ST* I.62.1), which cannot be attained in this life (*ST* I-II.5.3). Seeking to remain faithful to the Aristotelian account of happiness to the greatest extent possible, Aquinas makes a distinction between perfect and imperfect happiness (*ibid.*). He holds that there is a degree of happiness available in this life, which is imperfect and consists in virtuous activities.<sup>21</sup> Yet, "final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine essence," which cannot be attained in this life (*ST* I-II.3.8). On his view, the ultimate object of a rational being's desire is God, and perfect happiness consists in attainment, contemplation, or vision of God in the afterlife (*ST* I-II.3.1, 8). Therefore, it seems that, like Avicenna, Aquinas would reject (A2) or (A3), at least as long as we are concerned with final happiness.<sup>22</sup>

Aquinas accepts (A4). He defines virtues as dispositions that enable human to perform right actions, actions which lead to happiness (*ST* I-II.55). Cor-

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wisdom" in Avicennian sense is just the person one who take care of his body to the extent that it does not hinder one's intellectual goal.

<sup>20</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1920), I-II, q. 1, a. 1, 7; q. 5, a. 8.

<sup>21</sup>"Imperfect happiness that can be had in this life, can be acquired by man by his natural powers, in the same way as virtue, in whose operation it consists" (Aquinas, *ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 5).

<sup>22</sup>One might think that the afterlife presents the ideal condition for human beings, and so it is very much under the influence of *NEX* that Aquinas (or Avicenna) holds that perfect happiness is the contemplation of God in the afterlife. Nonetheless, there is an important difference between Aristotle and Aquinas. For Aristotle, our non-ideal condition is not a stage that temporally precedes the ideal condition. It is most likely that we can never live under the ideal circumstance, and given our non-ideal condition in the actual world, happiness is just a life of morally virtuous activity. For Aquinas (and Avicenna), however, the ideal condition, i.e., the afterlife, in which we can attain perfect happiness, will come. Aristotle's contemplative life is just a utopian ideal, while contemplation of God is a real possibility for us. As a result, as we will see, Aquinas thinks that we have to lead an ethical life on earth in order to be able to enjoy perfect happiness in the afterlife. Our earthly life is a step toward attainment of complete happiness which is a real option for humans in the actual world (if not necessarily), whereas Aristotle's contemplative life is just a utopian ideal which does not obtain in the actual world (see also n. 5).

responding to his two notions of happiness, Aquinas has also two notions of virtue: Acquired virtues are virtues that have the natural happiness as their ends. Infused virtues, which are true virtues and deserve to be called virtues simply, have perfect happiness as their ends.<sup>23</sup> Unbelievers can possess acquired virtues, and by exercising them, they can attain imperfect happiness. As far as acquired virtues are concerned, Aquinas's account of *phronesis* is close to Aristotle; moral virtues supply our end, while *phronesis* determines what constitutes the end.<sup>24</sup>

Aquinas holds that unbelievers' actions are ultimately evil and sinful.<sup>25</sup> Genuinely right actions are those that correspond to true virtues. An important difference between acquired virtues and infused virtues is due to the virtue of charity, or love of God. Charity is the form of other virtues without which no virtue exists (*ST II-II.23.7*). Charity is the form of other virtues in that it sets the goal of all virtues.<sup>26</sup> Given the role of charity in determining the goal, *phronesis* seems to play a more limited role in true virtues. True virtues have a specific goal: i.e., attainment of God, supplied by charity. As a result, there is nothing left for *phronesis* to do except to perform instrumental reasoning. Hence, as far as we are concerned with true virtues, *phronesis*'s role for Aquinas is similar to its role for Avicenna, which is different from what is specified in (A5).

In sum, despite some differences, Avicenna's and Aquinas's faith based virtue theories are similar in that both accept (A1) and (A4) and reject (A2), (A3), and (A5). Moreover, their specification of the content of happiness is similar. For Avicenna, it is to become an intellectual soul reflecting on eternal Truths, while for Aquinas it is the attainment, enjoyment, vision or contemplation of

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<sup>23</sup>"It is possible by means of human works to acquire moral virtues, in so far as they produce good works that are directed to an end not surpassing the natural power of man: and when they are acquired thus, they can be without charity. . . . But in so far as they produce good works in proportion to a supernatural last end, thus they have the character of virtue, truly and perfectly. . . . Such like moral virtues cannot be without charity. It is therefore clear from what has been said that only the infused virtues are perfect, and deserve to be called virtues simply: since they direct man well to the ultimate end" (Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 65, a. 2).

<sup>24</sup>Aquinas's account of *phronesis* is more complex in that he distinguishes between general and particular *phronesis*. General *phronesis* functions to identify indeterminate goals of virtue, while particular *phronesis* plays the same role that Aristotle attributes to *phronesis*. See T. H. Irwin, *The Development of Ethics, Volume 1: From Socrates to the Reformation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 320.

<sup>25</sup>"The act of one lacking charity may be of two kinds; one is in accordance with his lack of charity, as when he does something that is referred to that whereby he lacks charity. Such an act is always evil: thus Augustine says .. that the actions which an unbeliever performs as an unbeliever, are always sinful, even when he clothes the naked, or does any like thing, and directs it to his unbelief as end" (Aquinas, *ST II-II*, q. 23, a. 7, ad1).

<sup>26</sup>"[It] is charity which directs the acts of all other virtues to the last end . . . and it is precisely in this sense that charity is called the form of the virtues, for these are called virtues in relation to "informed" acts" (ibid., II-II, q. 23, a. 8).



God. Aquinas also holds that God satisfies the intellect as well as the will, since God is both the true and the good. We can roughly say that heaven for both is to become united with God. Let's call this conception of heaven "the orthodox view of heaven."

### V. Heaven as the Anchor of Ethics

On Aristotle's view, the notions of happiness, virtue, and right action are interdependent and form a large circle. As a result, it is very hard to have a first principle by which we can determine what we ought to do in each circumstance. Ultimately, the virtuous person uses *phronesis*, as a kind of moral perceptual power, to determine the right action in each particular case. But, on both Avicenna's and Aquinas's views, given the independence of the notion of final happiness from the notions of virtue and right action, no circle is formed. Theological happiness, i.e., heaven, anchors theological virtue ethics in terms of which we can determine virtues and right actions.

The *phronimos* person, i.e., the practically wise person, uses no moral perception to know the right action in each particular situation. Rather, *phronesis*, in theological virtue ethics, would be just the virtue of instrumental reasoning, the exercise of which, given the final goal of unity with God, at least on Avicenna's view, would often result in the judgment that one ought to do what divine laws have specified.

However, there is an immediate worry facing faith-based virtue ethics. If heaven is the final point of our actions, and if it is characterized independently of the agent's moral life, then there might be a possibility that intuitively wrong actions bring about the attainment of heaven, in which case intuitively wrong actions are deemed right by theological virtue ethics. In other words, if heaven is just contemplation of God or ultimate Truths, then it is possible that intuitively morally wrong actions help us to achieve the state of contemplating God. To formulate the objection, suppose  $\phi$  is an intuitively morally wrong action, say a failure to perform one's duty in an easy rescue case, e.g., not saving the little girl in the pond in Singer's famous pond example.<sup>27</sup> Now, we can state the problem as follows:

- (a) Right actions are those that bring about happiness. Wrong actions are those that hinder the attainment of happiness.
- (b) The attainment of heaven is theologially defined as the attainment of happiness.

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<sup>27</sup>Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229–43.

- (c) Doing  $\phi$  (i.e., failing to fulfil one's duty in an easy rescue case) can bring about, or at least not hinder, the attainment of heaven, provided that the orthodox view of heaven is correct.
- (d) Therefore, doing  $\phi$  can be right, or at least permissible, provided that the orthodox view of heaven is correct.

Yet, it is morally disturbing and most likely false to think that one's not saving the little girl in an easy rescue case is right or permissible. The argument also presents a moral objection to the orthodox notion of heaven. That is, according to the argument, heaven, understood as ultimate happiness, has a morally counterintuitive implication.

Premise (a) of the argument is the cornerstone of virtue ethics, and is clearly espoused by Aristotle, Avicenna, and Aquinas. Premise (b) is also true in virtue of the very definition of heaven. Premise (c) looks more controversial, though, as the Aristotelian theologians would certainly reject it. They hold that moral life is necessary for the attainment of heaven. As Aquinas says, "Right inclination of the will is required antecedently for happiness, just as the arrow must take a right course in order to strike the target" (*ST I-II.4.4.ad 2*). But the question is whether they are entitled to hold such a view, i.e., to reject (c). Why can't morally objectionable actions create a right course to strike the target?

Aquinas thinks God is the supreme good, and so his conception of heaven is value-laden. One might think that given this value-laden characterization of heaven, premise (c) cannot be true. From the fact that God is good, however, it does not follow that the attainment of God necessarily requires good deeds. For example, we can suppose that God is so merciful that He forgives all things we call sin and allows all people we deem sinful to achieve perfect happiness. This position is theologically coherent. It may well, then, characterize a genuine possibility. But if so, in that possible world, intuitively sinful acts (e.g., the failure to save the little girl in the pond) do not prevent one from the attainment of God, and intuitively morally good deeds (e.g., saving the little girl) are not necessary for attainment of happiness. If so, intuitively wrong action can be performed permissibly. This renders (c) true.

Perhaps, however, it is not possible to attain final theological happiness through intuitively morally objectionable actions. One might think that perfect happiness can be achieved only if we follow God's commands for the following reasons. First, charity is the love of God, and love of God requires obeying his commands. Second, we lack complete knowledge of the causal order of the world. We just don't know what kind of behavior will result in perfect happiness; after all, perfect happiness is not attained in this life, and so we had better follow God's commands if we want to get to heaven. On the other hand, God is morally good, so He would command us to do what is morally obligatory and avoid

morally objectionable actions. Therefore, by failing to save the little girl, we will fail to follow God's command which, in turn, hinders our attainment of perfect happiness. But then the question, again, is why we should think God makes it impossible for those who disobey his commands to see Him or be united with Him. He would not be morally less perfect if he forgives all sinners, and makes it possible for them to be united with Him. And if He does, providing that we define rightness in terms of perfect happiness (which is the vision of God, or being united with God), the problem returns.

## VI. Moral Objections to Heaven

For the sake of argument, let's just grant that morally right actions are necessary for the attainment of heaven. Nonetheless, even if morally right actions are necessarily coextensional with actions that are conducive to heaven, they can intensionally fall apart, and this possibility creates a moral objection to the orthodox notion of heaven.

Suppose  $\psi$  is a morally horrendous action, for instance, a terrorist act of aimlessly shooting children at a concert. But now by the following argument, it is possible that one does  $\psi$  rationally if one holds the orthodox view of heaven.

If one has necessarily the aim  $E$ , and rationally believes that the action  $A$  is necessary to achieve  $E$ , one would be rational to believe that one ought to  $A$ , and thus would be rational to  $A$ .

- (1) If heaven is not characterized in terms of one's moral life, then it is possible for one to rationally believe of a morally horrendous action such as  $\psi$  to be conducive to heaven, defined in an orthodox manner.
- (2) Therefore, it would be rational for one to perform a morally horrendous action such as  $\psi$ , provided that one has an orthodox view of heaven.
- (3) I assume that it is not rational for one to perform a morally horrendous action such as  $\psi$ . Any view that rationally permits one to perform  $\psi$  is morally objectionable.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the orthodox notion of heaven is morally objectionable.

Premise (1) of the argument is fairly intuitive. Note that to accept (1), one does not have to hold that the requirement of instrumental rationality is

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<sup>28</sup>I presuppose the view that moral considerations provide (often overriding) reasons for action, and so morally blameworthy impermissible actions can never be performed rationally, as long as the considerations are known. However, the moral objection to heaven can be expressed without this presupposition. For, regardless of whether morally blameworthy impermissible actions could be performed rationally, the argument shows that one's religious faith may rationally permit one to perform a morally horrendous action. Yet, no religion worth believing should allow its believers to perform morally horrendous actions. Thanks to Mohsen Zamani for making this point.

narrow-scope (i.e., one ought to do what one takes to be necessary to achieve one's end). After all, the narrow-scope requirement of instrumental rationality is controversial and there are famous counterexamples to it.<sup>29</sup> For instance, one should not kill one's competitor even if this is the only way to win the race one desires to win. Rather, one should not desire to win the race, if it requires killing another person. In other words, one might hold that it is not the case that one always ought to take the necessary means to one's end. Rather, if the end is very problematic, one ought to renounce the end. Premise (1), however, is about a case in which the end is rationally necessary (as is the case with regard to the end of perfect happiness). When the end is rationally necessary, renouncing the end is not an option. In such cases, the wide-scope and narrow-scope requirements of instrumental rationality coincide.

Let's get to the justification of premise (2). Notice that there are two readings of premise (2), and each creates a sound argument. On the first reading, the agent believes that while  $\psi$  is morally evil, it is conducive to heaven, understood in an orthodox manner. On the second reading, while the agent believes that  $\psi$  is conducive to heaven, understood in an orthodox manner, he does not believe that  $\psi$  is morally evil (he might even believe that  $\psi$  is morally right given that it is conducive to heaven). The first reading of the premise might be harder to defend if the agent also believes that God is all good. But this latter belief is not rationally required. If one reads enough Kierkegaard, one might be easily led to rationally believe that God is beyond good and evil and that He might ask us sometimes to perform evil actions to see Him. So, if one has a Kierkegaardian conception of God, one can rationally believe that one's way of getting to orthodox heaven sometimes passes through performing evil actions (perhaps as the trial of faith). On the second reading of the premise, one does not even need to conceive God as beyond good and evil. One can think that God is good, but, based on some literal reading of the scripture, or a radical sermon of a religious leader whom one trusts, be led to believe that  $\psi$  is one's way of getting to orthodox heaven. The examples of this phenomenon are, sadly, so common in our time that one hardly needs good imagination to conceive such a scenario.

One might object to premise (2) on the grounds that it would be never justified to believe of a morally objectionable action such as  $\psi$  that it is conducive to the attainment of orthodox heaven. For if one believes that God is good, when one has a strong intuition that an action is immoral, one would not be justified to believe that the action would lead one to orthodox heaven. However, this objection, if sound at all, would only undermine the second reading of premise (2); for, on the first reading, one conceives of God as beyond good

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<sup>29</sup>See John Broome, "Wide or Narrow Scope?," *Mind* 116 (2007): 359–70.

and evil, so one would not be surprised if God asks one to perform something that one knows is evil.

The objection does not undermine the second reading either, because the view presupposed by it is false. It is not true that one who has a belief that God is good can never be justified in thinking that doing  $\psi$  is conducive to orthodox heaven. We should, first, recall that God's being good is consistent with sinful people getting to heaven. By allowing sinful people to meet Him, God does not show any moral defect, or at least one can rationally believe this. Moreover, one might justifiably believe that if one performs an action from a sincere belief that the action is what God wants one to do, one would go to orthodox heaven. After all, as Aquinas said, "Of all virtuous acts, martyrdom is the greatest proof of the perfection of charity" (*ST* II-II.124.3). From those rational beliefs, one can rationally infer that one's  $\psi$ -ing is conducive to orthodox heaven if one does  $\psi$  from a sincere belief that God wants one to do  $\psi$ , no matter how strong one's moral intuitions are against  $\psi$ -ing, and no matter how unsure one is about the moral status of  $\psi$ -ing. In other words, an agent with the belief that God is good can justify  $\psi$ -ing in the following way: Either I am right that God asked me to  $\psi$ , in which case  $\psi$  would not be wrong, or if I am wrong, I perform what I sincerely take to be my religious duty, in which case I will also be rewarded.

One might object to my claim about the moral problem of the concept of heaven, on the grounds that my argument would easily over-generalize to any view that allows God to be a moral authority.<sup>30</sup> In other words, if God is good and all knowing, one should be able to use His words to acquire moral knowledge. Yet, we can easily have a tension between one's understanding of God's words and one's moral intuitions. But this surely does not create any moral objection to the notion of God. The charge of overgeneralization, though, is due to a misunderstanding of the argument. According to the argument, the orthodox view about heaven rationally permits actions that are morally horrendous. However, one can accept God as source of moral knowledge while denying that outrageous false moral claims can be justified on the basis of God's words. For example, Harman argues that we have strict liability concerning at least important moral claims: that is, we are always blameworthy if we are ignorant of some important moral claims.<sup>31</sup> While God can be a source of moral knowledge, He can't be used to justify outrageous moral beliefs. Our basic moral intuitions place a constraint on what we attribute to God. If a claim is morally outrageous, it cannot be attributed to God.

The response to the last objection can be helpful to show why another objection to the argument is not successful. The objection is this: For any moral

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<sup>30</sup>Thanks to Sajed Tayyebi for this objection.

<sup>31</sup>Elizabeth Harman, "Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate?," *Ratio* 24 (2011): 443–68.

theory, a person who holds the theory might make a normative mistake. That is, he may misidentify what the theory requires him to do. Normative mistakes are not peculiar to the followers of heaven. But we should have in mind that the moral objection to orthodox heaven arises from the fact that the person who believes in orthodox heaven can make a *rational* mistake in believing that a morally horrendous action is the right thing to do. But it seems plausible that no moral theory should allow us to make a rational mistake about a morally horrendous action. As Arpaly puts it, “An action is blameworthy just in case the action resulted from the agent’s caring inadequately about what is morally significant—where this is not a matter of *de dicto* caring about morality but *de re* caring about what is in fact morally significant.”<sup>32</sup> One who performs a morally horrendous action does not sufficiently care, in a *de re* manner, about what is morally significant and thus is not rational or blameless. If a theory has a blameworthy and irrational implication, the theory faces a problem.

I should emphasize that if we have a teleological account of ethics, i.e., the view which the Aristotelian theologians espouse and which is stated by (A1), the truth of moral claims depends on whether actions are conducive to heaven. In other words, actions in themselves have no intrinsic value; they acquire their value from their being conducive to heaven. But the moral objection to the orthodox notion of heaven does not depend on accepting (A1). Even if one holds that actions have intrinsic moral value, one may have strong, and perhaps overriding, reasons to perform actions that are intrinsically morally horrendous if one holds that those actions are conducive to final happiness. The orthodox view of heaven is problematic, regardless of whether actions have intrinsic moral value or not. One might, however, object that, for a view according to which actions have intrinsic moral value, heaven creates no more problem than prudential goods such as pleasure do. Suppose that a morally evil action leads to a great amount of pleasure. With a parallel reasoning, we can say that one has good reasons to perform the morally evil action. So heaven is morally objectionable in the same way that any non-moral good is. But we should notice that there is a significant difference between heaven and other practical goods: namely, heaven is necessarily desirable, while other practical goods such as pleasure might not be desirable under some circumstance. In other words, one should renounce the end of having pleasure if acquiring it requires one to perform morally evil actions, whereas one should never renounce the end of heaven, as heaven is perfect happiness for a believer.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>33</sup>Thanks to Mahmoud Morvarid for pressing me to clarify this point.

## VII. A Kantian Epilogue

The moral objections discussed in two last sections do not apply to the Aristotelian notion of happiness (i.e., *eudaimonia*), because *eudamonia* is defined ultimately in terms of right actions. That is, the Aristotelian notion of happiness is constitutively dependent on the notion of right action, contrary to the orthodox view of heaven, which is only instrumentally dependent on the notion of right action. If rights actions are only instrumentally necessary for the attainment of heaven, intuitively wrong actions, in some possible worlds, can lead to the attainment of heaven, in which case teleological ethics would be undermined. And even if they can't, one can rationally believe that morally horrendous actions are necessary for the attainment of heaven, which in turn leads to a rational permission to commit morally horrendous actions. This creates a moral objection to the orthodox view of heaven.

However, if the notion of heaven is constitutively dependent on the moral life of the agent, no objection of this sort arises. Kant precisely advocates such a view of heaven. While he understands "happiness" in terms of pleasure, he holds that happiness is not good *per se*; rather, it is good when it is combined with virtue. As he puts it, "Happiness is something that, although always agreeable to him who possesses it, is not by itself alone good absolutely and in every respect but always presupposes morally lawful conduct as [its] condition."<sup>34</sup> On Kant's view, the object of practical reason is the highest good which consists in "happiness distributed [to persons] quite exactly in proportion to [their] morality (as a person's worth and his worthiness to be happy)."<sup>35</sup> Kant's highest good corresponds to the notion of heaven, or the kingdom of God, as Kant puts it. While Kant's conception of the kingdom of God is immune to the moral objections presented in the paper, it cannot function as the ground of a teleological ethics. He explicitly acknowledges this point:

The Christian principle of morality is yet itself not theological (and hence heteronomy); rather, it is autonomy of pure practical reason by itself, because it makes the cognition of God and of his will the basis not of these laws but only of [one's] reaching the highest good under the condition of compliance with these laws, and because it posits even the proper incentive for compliance with them not in the wished-for consequences of this compliance but in the conception of duty alone;

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<sup>34</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company,, 2002), 111.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*

[for] the worthiness to acquire those consequences consists solely in the faithful observance of duty.<sup>36</sup>

Kant holds that God is the condition of the possibility of morality, as the object of morality, i.e., the highest good, would be impossible to will without God. However, that does not mean that the content of moral laws is determined by the highest good; rather, the content of highest good is constitutively dependent on the moral law. As a result, moral actions and actions conducive to heaven can neither extensionally nor intensionally fall apart. As far as I know, Kantian conception of heaven is a non-orthodox view in Christianity and Islam as evidenced by the fact that it is not the view espoused by two major figures of these traditions. But if I am right, we have good reasons to favor a Kantian conception of heaven over an Avicennian or Thomistic one, even if it comes at the cost of rejecting faith-based teleological ethics.<sup>37</sup>

*School of Analytic Philosophy, Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IPM)  
Tehran, Iran*

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 129.

<sup>37</sup>I am grateful to Scott Davison, Matthew Griffin, and Sarah Arnowitz for detailed and insightful comments on earlier drafts of the paper. I would like also to thank Mahmoud Morvarid, Mohsen Zamani, Arash Naraghi, Marilie Coetsee, and Sajed Tayyebi for helpful conversations about the paper.