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Is There a Duty-Generating Special Relationship of Creator to Creature?

ABSTRACT: Mark Murphy has argued that the relationship between a creator and their creatures is not a special relationship that generates new moral obligations for the creator. Murphy’s position is grounded, in part, on his claim that there are no good arguments to the contrary and that the creator-creature relationship (at least in the case of God) is not a relationship between equals. I argue that there are good reasons to think that a creator and creature being equals is not required for such an obligation. I offer an argument for such an obligation based on the moral significance of thrusting upon sentient or rational beings significant, unsought, and wholly new circumstances. More specifically, I argue that it is reasonable to conclude that a creator enters into a duty-generating special relationship with their creatures to promote their creatures’ well-being, when (1) the creator is the voluntary source of the creatures’ wholly new and unconsented to circumstances from which to flourish or languish and (2) it would cost the creator virtually nothing to promote the creatures’ welfare.

Is the creator-creature relationship—i.e. the relationship of X being the creator of Y—a special relationship that provides the creator with duties to promote the welfare of the created?

Mark Murphy has recently argued that it is not.¹ In this paper, I argue that it is. This paper has two sections. In the first, I examine and respond to Murphy’s arguments against the existence of a duty-generating special relationship between a creator and their creatures. In the second, I offer a positive argument for the conclusion that there is such a duty-generating relationship.

Section 1: Murphy’s Arguments

This section critiques Murphy’s arguments, so it is worth quoting him at some length.

Murphy writes that,

“But some want to say that there are new ways of the Anselmian being’s acting defectively that are logically posterior to creation, so that, for example, logically prior to creation there is no more than justifying reason to create, logically posterior to creation, there are requiring reasons to promote the good of the beings thus created. That I have denied.

I deny this because we do not have any good arguments for thinking that by creation the Anselmian being makes it the case that new ways of acting will count as defective. The contrast between cases like that of rational willing and entering into a social

¹ Murphy, Mark C. (2017.) *God’s Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency & the Argument from Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 32-34, 177.

practice on one hand and that of creation on the other is pretty dramatic. There is an obvious rational relationship that one bears to further actions by intending something, or by participating in a norm-governed social practice. But the only thing that happens in creation is causal. There are no constitutive norms of creation, like constitutive norms of promise-making or shoemaking, that the Anselmian being subjects itself to by deciding, with discretion, to create.”²

Murphy’s arguments are situated within his discussion of the ethics of the “Anselmian being” (e.g. God). Murphy and I agree that a creator like the Anselmian being has “requiring decisive reasons not to intend creaturely evil.”³ For Murphy, this requirement exists prior to any act of creation. Creation only instantiates entities for which creaturely evil should not be intended, but this is not by virtue of a special relationship.⁴ This makes sense given that we normally do not think that someone must be in a special relationship with another in order to have decisive reason not to intend evil toward them.

Where Murphy and I disagree is over whether “there are requiring reasons to promote the good of the beings thus created.”⁵ He denies this. I affirm it. I’ll begin by making a couple of points about the passage quoted above. Then I’ll turn to examining other considerations that play a role in generating Murphy’s conclusion that creators don’t have requiring reasons to promote the good of their creatures.

First, Murphy claims that “we do not have any good arguments for thinking that by creation the Anselmian being makes it the case that new ways of acting will count as defective.”⁶ In the next section, I address Murphy’s negative conclusion by supplying arguments; although given some of Murphy’s other commitments, these arguments likely won’t persuade Murphy.

² Murphy 2017, 177.

³ Murphy 2017, 177.

⁴ Murphy 2017, 177.

⁵ Murphy 2017, 177.

⁶ Murphy 2017, 177.

Second, Murphy’s conclusion that there are no good arguments is predicated upon purported disanalogies between the act of creation and circumstances that we generally take to generate obligations via special relationships. This undergirds the relevance of Murphy’s claim that the only thing that happens in creation is causal. Murphy brings up this same point when addressing a related question: whether the creator-creature relationship is a special relationship that provides the creator with requiring reason *to love* the created. Murphy’s discussion of this latter question illuminates his perspective on the matter at hand. In arguing that the Anselmian being does not have a duty to love her creatures, Murphy writes that “[w]hat we have here is, as so far characterized, merely a *causal* relationship. It is not a *social* relationship. And it is not a relationship of *equals*.”⁷

The primary special relationship that Murphy addresses is the parent-child relationship. Murphy notes that the parent-child relationship is a relationship between equals “in virtue of their common humanity,” but that this is not the case for the creator-creature relationship.⁸ I agree that the creator-creature relationship is not one of equals when the creator is an Anselmian being. But it is unclear that the equality of parents and children is relevant to why the parent-child relationship generates special obligations. If equality is not required for that special relationship to obtain, then a lack of equality does not suffice to remove the potential relevance of the parent-child special relationship in considering the special relationship between creator and creature. In the following section, I seek to ground the creator-creature special relationship on moral consideration that obtain regardless of the equality of the creator and creatures.

Murphy also provides the following argument for his conclusion:

“Suppose I am an artist, and produce a work of art, which we will stipulate to be the bearer of a certain value, and requiring a response from others on account of that value. Is the fact that I am the artist who brought it into existence a reason that requires

⁷ Murphy 2017, 33.

⁸ Murphy 2017, 33.

a further response, beyond that which the work of art itself calls for? This seems false to me: it seems that we recognize a variety of sorts of responses from makers of works of art to those works, from treating them with special attention to treating them as no more or no less important than works produced by other artists to treating them as less important.”⁹

One could reasonably challenge Murphy on whether this get things right when it comes to art, but I take there to be a more fundamental issue with the analogy. Let us stipulate that ‘creation’ refers to anything brought into being by a creator, but that ‘creature’ refers only to those things brought into being by a creator who are sentient or rational (or both). It seems eminently plausible to me that a creator’s obligations to her creatures differ from her obligations to other things she has created by virtue of the moral significance of sentience and rationality. Our intuitions about creators’ obligations to her non-creaturely creation is a poor guide to truth about a creator’s obligations to her creatures.

Before proceeding, I want to make clear the limited aim of this paper. My aim is not to convince Murphy that there is a duty-generating special relationship of creators to creatures. Murphy denies that God is bound by what he calls “familiar welfare-oriented moral goodness” and Murphy denies that creatures have intrinsic value.¹⁰ For Murphy, welfare-oriented moral goodness is “human morality” which “treats setbacks to the well-being of rational and other sentient beings as to-be-prevented” and intrinsic value is non-relational value; that is to say, “[a]ny value that a creature has that it might lack were it to stand (perhaps counterpossibly) in different relations to other beings is not intrinsic value.”¹¹ These are controversial positions, and Murphy’s arguments for them are detailed and complex. The arguments I offer here push back against these positions but aren’t meant as refutations of them.¹²

⁹ Murphy 2017, 33

¹⁰ Murphy 2017, 24, 76.

¹¹ Murphy 2017, 24-25, 76 (see also 60-62).

¹² For an interesting discussion about whether human beings have intrinsic value and the potential significance of such intrinsic value for the obligations of a creator, see Wielenberg 2017 and Murphy 2017b.

This paper has the more circumscribed aim of providing good arguments for the position that the creator-creature relationship is a special relationship whereby the creator incurs additional duties; a position for which Murphy has claimed we lack any good arguments. By a good argument I don't mean (and presumably Murphy doesn't mean) an argument that would convince everybody nor do I mean an argument that is compatible with all starting assumptions. Rather, by a good argument I mean, roughly, an argument whose conclusion is appropriately supported by the reasons given and that would be persuasive for individuals reasoning well from certain rational starting points. I aim to offer good arguments using starting assumptions that differ from but are no more controversial than Murphy's own.

A final point about Murphy's argument is worth noting before turning to the next section. Murphy claims that the idea of parents creating children is misleading, citing Thomas Aquinas' arguments that it "belongs to God alone to create."¹³ In a paper like this one that offers an argument that a merely causal relationship is sufficient to generate a special relationship with accompanying moral obligations, the literature on procreative and parental ethics may seem like a natural place to focus. However, I follow Murphy's lead in setting aside the literature on procreation ethics here. I do so not only because Murphy doesn't consider procreation to be a true act of creation, but also because the literature on procreation ethics typically focuses on concrete particulars of human procreation, ethics, and relationships. As such, it is not obvious how the insight in that literature translates to acts of creation by an Anselmian being. That said, it is worth noting that within the literature on procreation ethics and parental responsibility, some philosophers have argued that

¹³ Murphy 2017, 33 (citing Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia 45, 5).

procreation’s causal element of bringing about existence is sufficient on its own to generate a duty-incurring special relationship of parents to their children.¹⁴

Section 2: Causality and Unsought Opportunities

In *God’s Own Ethics*, Murphy suggests that duty-generating special relationships only arise between equals. But it is not obvious why this is so. In this section, I seek a different way of conceptualizing the circumstances under which a duty-generating special relationship may arise. My focus stems from the following observation: *in creating, creators bestow upon creatures a wholly new and entirely unsought set of circumstances that provides the conditions under which those creatures will flourish or languish.* I argue here that, even if such an act of creation is only causal, the mere act of thrusting a creature into a wholly new and unsought environment that provides the conditions under which that creature will flourish or languish generates *pro tanto* obligations for the creator to promote that creature’s welfare.

In order to consider how this line of reasoning works, let’s move away for a moment from thinking about the specific act of creation to the more general situation of putting a creature into a completely new environment that the creature did not seek out and that provides the conditions under which that creature will either flourish or languish. The goal of taking this step back is to try to get at our intuitions about the relationship between 1) bestowing upon creatures a wholly new environment which they did not seek out and which dictates the circumstances under which they will flourish or languish, and 2) the obligation to promote the welfare of those creatures. By providing the following thought experiment, I aim to activate the moral intuition that someone who

¹⁴ Both Jamie Lindemann Nelson and Jeffrey Blustein have argued for this. See Nelson 1991; Blustein 1997. More recently David Archard provided a limited defense of this position, wherein he argues that “a causal theory of parental obligation—that those who cause children to exist thereby incur an obligation to ensure that they are adequately cared for—can be defended independently of a theory of parental rights, and has much to commend it.” Archard 2010.

puts creatures in such a position acquires a *pro tanto* obligation to promote the welfare of those creatures.

Before turning to the thought experiment, I should say something about what I mean by “promoting the welfare” of a creature. Promotion of another’s welfare comes in degrees. I can promote your welfare to a greater or lesser extent depending on how much I invest and how much welfare you gain. It is difficult to specify a precise level of required welfare promotion here because creatures who are free agents can potentially thwart the welfare promoting acts of a creator. As a result, in saying that a creator counts as promoting the welfare of his creatures, I mean that the creator has furnished the creature with circumstances that will result in the creature’s life being on balance worth living, perhaps excepting circumstances where the creature makes free choices that result in a life not on balance worth living.¹⁵

If someone takes a strong stance on existence itself as a good, this criterion becomes hollow. By “strong stance on existence itself as a good” I mean the position that the inherent good of existence can never be outweighed by any level of misery, languishing, or failure. I reject the position because of the practical recognition that there are circumstances under which it would be rational for a creature to prefer non-existence to living certain kinds of lives dominated by misery or evil.

Let’s now turn to a thought experiment meant to generate intuitions that one who foists upon a sentient or rational being a wholly new set of circumstances unsought by that being has an obligation to promote that being’s welfare, at least to the extent that doing so costs the provider virtually nothing.

Game Master: Imagine you live in a world in which all human lives are pretty good lives and clearly on balance worth living (with the possible exception of those who are in “the Game”).

¹⁵ I am drawn to an even stronger position that creators who are sufficiently powerful, like an omniscient and omnipotent deity, have an obligation to make the lives of their creatures on balance worth living full stop, but I adopt the weaker position here.

Imagine you apply for and receive the job of Game Master. The Game (of which you are now “the Master”) is a several-years-long affair in which contestants must come live in the Game World (a large structure created on earth, the design and maintenance of which you oversee). No one knows about the Game’s existence unless they work for the Game or are involuntarily selected for the Game. The rules and objectives of the Game are completely up to you, as are the rewards and punishments. There need not be winners or losers, but you are free to structure the Game to have winners and losers if you wish. Players retain their free will, but you have complete control over the circumstances they will encounter during their years in the Game, and you are free to tempt them however you would like.

You have a fixed, finite number of contestants that you must choose to be in the Game. You can choose anyone whom you are more than three degrees removed from in order to fill the slots. The Game has default parameters with a variety of stumbling blocks and hardships built in. Some of these stumbling blocks and hardships are apt to help those in the Game build character, but many are simply gratuitous and unlikely to lead to any good for the players who encounter them. You can change or remove any default parameters you would like. Changing the default parameters takes virtually no effort and would be an extremely small part of your work designing and updating protocols for the Game. There are no performance-based rewards for you based on how you structure the Game (e.g. no financial bonuses or lessening of work burdens based on what you choose to do). You never interact directly with the players in the Game and are banned from interacting with them after they leave the Game.

Question: What obligations do you have to the players? One obligation you have is not to riddle the players’ paths with gratuitous hardships and tragedies, even though protocol permits this. This obligation coincides with Murphy’s position that God has an obligation not to intend our destruction.

However, it seems like you also have an obligation to promote the welfare of the players to some extent because you’ve placed them in a wholly new situation that they didn’t seek out and in which you control how good their circumstances are going to be. By placing the players into these circumstances without their consent, you owe them something. You may not owe them maximal welfare, but you do owe them enough goodness to make it worth their while to be spending these years inside the Game, especially since doing so costs you almost nothing.

I suggest the above intuition is motivated by a more general principle along the following lines, where A is an actor and B is a sentient or rational being.

Welfare Promotion Principle (WPP): *A incurs an obligation to promote the welfare of B when 1) A voluntarily places B in a wholly new set of circumstances without B's consent and 2) A is able to promote B's welfare with virtually no cost to A.*

This principle is motivated by the assumptions that (a) sentient and rational beings have moral value, (b) a being's circumstances structure its opportunities to flourish or languish, and (c) the flourishing rather than the languishing of sentient and rational beings is morally desirable, both for the beings and generally. These seem to me to be relatively uncontroversial starting points.

Given the moral significance of the flourishing and languishing of creatures there is a gravitas in creating such circumstances for creatures. But creating such circumstances on its own doesn't generate moral obligation. Let's suppose that the Game was something that people opted into because of the potential for great gain despite the potential for great loss. If instead of selecting people for the Game without their consent, you granted petitions to enter the Game, things would be different. You would retain the obligation not to riddle players' paths with gratuitous hardships and tragedies because that is generally impermissible. But you may not have the same obligation to provide circumstances that the players would consider positive on balance. This is because the players, knowing the risks, have made a choice. But in the *Game Master* scenario, *you* made the choice for them. They didn't ask to be in the Game. They didn't even know the Game existed. You forced it upon them. As such you have a *pro tanto* obligation to provide these unwitting players with circumstances that lend themselves to the promotion of their well-being. Similarly, when a creator chooses to create creatures, the creator forces circumstances upon those creatures by creating them. Such creatures had no knowledge of the circumstances beforehand because they didn't exist and therefore could not consent to being put in such circumstances.

I say that these obligations are *pro tanto* because, under some circumstances, if the provision of welfare promotion came at a high enough cost to the provider perhaps the obligation could be overridden. Imagine the following altered scenario.

Game Master 2: This scenario is just like the original *Game Master* scenario, except every time you do something to promote the welfare of a player in the Game you experience such great pain that if you were to provide a sufficient number of welfare-promoting things to all the players in the Game so that each player in the Game had an experience that was on balance worthwhile, you would spend your entire tenure as Game Master in extreme agony.

In such circumstances, you arguably no longer have a moral responsibility to promote the welfare of the players. How costly the provision of such opportunities must be before you lose your obligation need not be specified when applying the principle to a creator like the Anselmian being. This is because the Anselmian being is omnipotent. As such, providing for the welfare of their creatures costs the Anselmian being nothing.

The *Game Master* scenario is not about a creator and creatures. But all cases of creaturely creation are instances where A (the creator) is the voluntary source of the B's (the creature's) wholly new and unconsented to circumstances from which to flourish or languish. In the remainder of the paper I will consider and respond to several objections to *WPP*.

Objection 1: In the Game Master hypothetical, given that both you and the players in the Game are humans, you are equals. But Murphy's position is that part of why creators like the Anselmian being aren't in a special relationship with creatures is because they are not equals. The Game Master example indicates only that creators who are (perhaps counterpossibly) in some sense equal to their creatures have an obligation to promote the welfare of their creatures.

It is true that in *Game Master* you and the players are in some sense equals, but this feature can be changed while preserving the general intuition. Consider the following.

Game Master 3: Just like the original *Game Master* scenario except you are an immortal non-human being of great but limited power. You've never met a human or been to Earth.

It seems to me that your obligations do not change by virtue of these changes in who you are.

Suppose that you're an exceptionally powerful and knowledgeable immortal and immaterial being. It is hard to envision how the addition of those properties undercuts the obligation. This is because the starting place in *Game Master* is the moral worth of creatures, which is unaltered across the scenarios. What drives the obligation in *WPP* is the value of the creatures and the relationship in which one

stands to the creatures by providing them with a wholly new set of circumstances without their consent.

WPP is not devoid of considerations of the provider's nature. If the provider is unable to promote the welfare of her creatures, she is not required to do so. Furthermore, the provider doesn't have an obligation to promote the welfare of her creatures at immense cost to herself. But neither such limitation is relevant in *Game Master 3* or when an Anselmian being creates.

Objection 2: The individuals selected to participate in the Game exist prior to being selected. Thus, their entry into the Game constitutes something akin to conscription whereby they are forced to leave the lives they already had to be in the Game instead. In the case of creation, there is no conscription and no separation from the already existing circumstances of one's life. These disanalogies undercut the relevance of the hypothetical.

The fact that those in the Game are involuntarily removed from the lives they were already living is morally relevant, and there is no analog to this with the creation of creatures. However, this aspect of *Game Master* isn't required for the Game Master to acquire obligations to promote the welfare of those in the Game. Consider the following scenario.

Game Master 4: Just like *Game Master 3* except instead of choosing existing persons to be placed into the Game you choose human prototypes from a catalog to have instantiated. A team of genetic engineers then bring into existence fully formed adult persons matching the prototypes you chose. The default parameters of the Game, which were chosen by your predecessor, are such that most people will quickly contract debilitating diseases that will keep them alive but weak and in agony. In addition, tornados frequently appear in the Game and destroy anything that the participants try to build including homes, art, places of worship, etc. No benefit accrues from the prevalence of such disease or the tornados. It would take virtually no effort for you to change these parameters.

Because you have not set the disease or tornado parameters yourself, you do not count as intentionally willing the destruction of the participants in the Game if you simply cannot be bothered to change them. And because no one exists prior to being put into the Game, no one is conscripted or taken away involuntarily from the lives they were already leading. Yet it seems clear that you still have additional obligations to these people to promote their welfare. At the very least

you have an obligation to make their lives on balance worth living and thus to remove their gratuitous hardships like the diseases and tornados.

Objection 3: Suppose you are the sovereign ruler of a prosperous country. You rescue a stranger, S, who is shipwrecked at sea and unconscious. You bring S back to your country where he regains consciousness. Prior to the rescue, S had never been to your country. By bringing S to your country while he was unconscious, you have placed him in a wholly new set of circumstances without his consent. Suppose you could further promote S's welfare at minimal cost to yourself—perhaps through employing him, finding him accommodation, or taking him back home. It seems that on WPP you have an obligation to provide S with these kinds of additional welfare. But it is not clear that you have such obligations, especially if S states that he would rather not accept any additional help from you. Thus, WPP appears too broad.

I do not think this scenario shows that WPP is too broad for three reasons. First, WPP only applies when welfare promotion comes at virtually no cost to the promoter. In order to generate the conclusion that WPP would require you to further promote the welfare of S in this scenario, we would need to specify that doing so would cost you virtually nothing.

Second, as discussed earlier, in WPP the level of welfare promotion required is up to the point that B's life is on balance worth living, absent self-destructive choices from B. Thus, WPP specifies that you have an obligation to further promote S's welfare only if the wholly new circumstances you've provided S by bringing him to your country aren't good enough circumstances to provide S with a life that's on balance worth living. It seems to me that if we specify that further promoting S's welfare would cost you virtually nothing and that S's life in your country would not be on balance worth living unless you further promote S's welfare, then you have an obligation to further promote S's welfare.

Third, you would only have this additional obligation if S doesn't object to your further promoting S's welfare. WPP should be treated as something from which the beneficiary can release the obligor. If S, with sufficient knowledge of the circumstances, declines to accept additional help from you, you are released from any further obligation. But this does not mean that you do not have a default obligation. If one felt it would improve the clarity of WPP, one could add the clause "so

long as B does not object” to the end of *WPP*. I do not do so because I take it to be an implied default rule of obligations generated by special relationships that the beneficiary can release the obligor by declining the benefit under circumstances in which the beneficiary has a sufficient understanding of what they are doing. It is an interesting question whether an Anselmian being’s creatures could ever have the requisite understanding to be able to release the Anselmian being of obligation, but that question need not be answered here.

The above considerations highlight that *WPP* is a weak principle. I consider it likely that there are stronger principles that could be adopted to express the obligations a creator has to his creatures by virtue of the relationship of being their creator. But I adopt and defend this weaker *WPP* principle because it is sufficient to entail that the creator-creature relationship generates meaningful obligations upon a creator to one’s creatures.

Objection 4: WPP doesn’t account for circumstances under which the diminishment of the welfare of some may be required in order to obtain other greater goods. Surely WPP doesn’t apply in instances where a creator creates a vast and complex creation in which failing to promote the welfare of some is necessary for an overall good world.

This objection likely resonates with those who believe that God is permitted to cause individuals to experience uncompensated harm even to an extent that one’s life is on balance not worth living so long as such personally uncompensated harm is necessary to obtain other great goods. I think this position is morally misguided. That said, I also think *WPP*’s essence is compatible with such a position. Thus, I offer two responses to this objection. First, I argue that God is not permitted to allow creatures (at least when those creatures are persons) to suffer to such an extent that their lives are not worth living in order to achieve other great goods that don’t compensate the sufferer. Second, I offer a modified version of *WPP* that accommodates the opposing position but preserves the core significance of *WPP*.

As an entry point for my first response, consider Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” In this story, a narrator tells of a thriving city whose thriving depends upon the perpetual involuntary suffering of a single child. Most of the citizens of Omelas know about the relationship between their well-being and the child’s suffering. While no one in Omelas seems to revel in this, most eventually accept it. Only a few choose to leave.

Most of us think that the Omelas situation is morally bad. That is why we consider those who walk away from Omelas virtuous and are uneasy that so many choose to stay. Regardless of whether one thinks it is morally permissible for people to remain in Omelas while knowing that their well-being is the product of a child’s continuous suffering, it seems clear that a state where the well-being of some depends upon the perpetual suffering of an innocent other is a bad state of affairs.

Because the citizens of Omelas are unable to prevent the child from suffering, they face a terrible dilemma: either benefit from the child’s suffering or leave. Things are different with God. Assuming God is not required to create, then God need not ever put persons in a position where their well-being is predicated upon the involuntary and undeserved suffering of others.

If the only situation under which one can create flourishing creatures is by creating other creatures whose lives are dominated by involuntary, significant, and uncompensated suffering, then one ought not create at all. If you have the intuition that it would be better that Omelas not exist than to exist in a state where its well-being requires the constant involuntary suffering of the child, such a conviction likely flows from the sort of principle I’ve just articulated. The moral badness of some beings flourishing at the expense of others who perpetually suffer is so great that if those are the only circumstances under which those beings could flourish, it is better for those beings not to be created.

I specify suffering *significantly* because it seems that if the suffering required in order to allow for the existence of other flourishing and happy creatures is mild enough, then it becomes morally permissible. If your having a mildly unpleasant papercut is required for the well-being of millions, that is a morally permissible trade-off. But there is an absolute limit to how badly you can suffer before it is morally impermissible no matter how much is at stake. Or at least this is the intuition I have when considering Omelas.

Furthermore, the moral impermissibility of an Omelas scenario does not seem contingent on the number of people benefitting from the child's perpetual suffering. No increase in the number of citizens of Omelas seems to turn the morally impermissible structure of the city's flourishing into a permissible one. Such a position aligns well with a deontological principle whereby we can never use another as a mere means. This position also aligns with a virtue ethics principles whereby a virtuous person does not accept an opportunity for her own happiness or well-being if it comes at the cost of the involuntary, significant, and uncompensated suffering of another.

Thus, I think a creator acts wrongly in creating creatures whose lives are not on balance worth living *for them* even if doing so is necessary to create other flourishing beings. This is because in so doing the creator both undervalues the life of the suffering creatures and puts the flourishing creatures into a morally bad position whereby their flourishing depends upon the involuntary suffering of others. Such a creator puts their creatures into an Omelas situation. Just as it is morally better to walk away from Omelas than to stay, so too it is better not to exist than for one's flourishing to depend upon the significant and involuntary suffering of others. A just creator will not put their creatures into an Omelas situation.

But for those unconvinced that it is morally impermissible to allow persons to experience involuntary, significant, and uncompensated suffering for the sake of the greater good, we can modify *WPP* as follows.

Modified-WPP: *A incurs an obligation to promote the welfare of B when 1) A voluntarily places B in a wholly new set of circumstances without B's consent, 2) A is able to promote B's welfare with virtually no cost to A, and 3) A's failure to promote the welfare of B isn't required to achieve other great goods.*

Even with this additional restriction, *Modified-WPP* provides a *pro tanto* obligation for A to promote B's welfare when A places B, without B's consent, in wholly new circumstances from which to flourish or languish. We can observe this by examining how Murphy describes the difference between his position and skeptical theism. Murphy writes that,

“I take the skeptical theists to endorse the view that God acts in accordance with familiar welfare-oriented moral goodness. They affirm that God acts to prevent setbacks to creaturely well-being unless there are sufficient considerations to the contrary. What they say, though, is that we have good reason to believe that we have only the most meager insight into what are those other considerations to the contrary that God might have.”¹⁶

As Murphy rightly goes on to point out, skeptical theism “is built on an *epistemological* thesis” about our limited understanding of goods and evils and the connections between them, while his own view “is built on a set of theses of *ethics*, not epistemology.”¹⁷ Murphy describes his position as both more and less radical than skeptical theism. It is less radical in that Murphy affirmatively claims that “God’s nature precludes God’s intending evil,” while many skeptical theists remain agnostic on this point. But it is more radical in that his position “denies that God is necessarily bound by familiar welfare-oriented moral goodness” while “skeptical theists have generally taken for granted the standard view that God is governed by welfare-oriented moral goodness.”¹⁸ A skeptical theist could accept *Modified-WPP* and rely heavily on its third condition. A skeptical theist could also accept *WPP*

¹⁶ Murphy 2017, 110.

¹⁷ Murphy 2017, 111.

¹⁸ Murphy 2017, 111.

and argue that we have a limited understanding of how the evil, languishing, and suffering we experience in our own lives might ultimately contribute to our own welfare.

Objection 5: If WPP is correct, then the act of creation would limit God's sovereignty because the existence of creatures would put limits on God. Thus, at the very least WPP doesn't apply to God by virtue of God's supreme sovereignty.¹⁹

It strikes me that when God freely chooses to create, the obligations God incurs to promote the welfare of his creatures as a result are not a limitation on God imposed *by God's creatures*. Rather, it is God who has freely limited himself in choosing to create. Can God break his promises? If you think he cannot, the move here is analogous. In freely choosing to make a promise, God's is required to fulfill that promise. Yet it is not a diminishment of God's sovereignty that the promisee has a claim on God for God to honor his promise. Rather God, in his sovereignty, freely made a choice to limit himself. Similarly, that creatures have a claim on God for God to promote their welfare by virtue of being his creatures doesn't diminish God's sovereignty because God freely choose to create, knowing that this would limit him.

Conclusion

I've sought to provide reasons to think that the relationship of creator to creature is a special relationship that places obligations upon the creator to promote their creature's welfare. I've done this by offering an argument for the duty-generating special relationship of creator to creature based on the moral significance of placing a creature in wholly new circumstances from which to flourish or languish without the creature's consent. I've further argued that this significance doesn't depend on the provider and the provided being equals. Murphy's conclusions in *God's Own Ethics* stem from his thick conception of divine sovereignty and his focus on the greatness of God. But I think it is

¹⁹ Murphy makes an argument along these lines in Murphy 2017, 79.

misguided to elevate divine sovereignty such that divine moral goodness no longer requires promotion of the welfare of creatures.

It is important to guard against arrogance in assessing the significance of our limited sentience and bounded rationality, but I don't think it is arrogant to accord some level of objective moral value to beings with such properties; those capable of joy and sadness, pain and pleasure, success and failure, virtue and vice. In freely choosing to create beings like us, an all-powerful creator owes us some level of care beyond not intentionally riddling our paths with gratuitous hardships and suffering. A maximally good being, like God, will never feel their obligations to their creatures as obligations. Rather, the pure goodness of God will result in God freely choosing to promote the well-being of their creatures. But such free action is in keeping with, not over and above, God's moral obligations.

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