ON VAGUE ESCHATOLOGY

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Ted Sider's *Proportionality of Justice* condition requires that any two moral agents instantiating nearly the same moral state be treated in nearly the same way. I provide a countermodel in supervaluation semantics to the proportionality of justice condition. It is possible that moral agents S and S' are in nearly the same moral state, S' is beyond all redemption and S is not. It is consistent with perfect justice then that moral agents that are not beyond redemption go determinately to heaven and moral agents that are beyond all redemption go determinately to hell. I conclude that moral agents that are in nearly the same moral state may be treated in very unequal ways.

Introduction

It's a familiar eschatological view that there are people in each possible state in the afterlife. Some people go determinately and eternally to heaven and some people go determinately and eternally to hell. And everyone that goes to purgatory will eventually go determinately and eternally to heaven. The familiar eschatological view rejects the doctrine of *universalism*. According to universalism all are ultimately redeemed to enjoy eternal communion with God. Universalism ensures that no human beings are beyond redemption; every human being (or perhaps every being that *can* go to heaven) does go to heaven.

Suppose that an essentially perfectly just being must select a principle of justice that will provide the basis for evaluating the lives of moral agents. The principle of justice will provide the moral justification for the distribution of punishments and rewards in the afterlife. Since we have assumed that universalism is false, an adequate principle of justice must provide a moral justification for distributing punishments and rewards in such a way that some people go determinately and eternally to heaven and some people go determinately and eternally to hell.

In section (2) I consider Ted Sider's *Degree of Goodness Argument*. The argument assumes that the goodness and badness of moral agents is a matter of degree. For each moral state that an agent might instantiate, there is another moral state he might instantiate that is nearly the same in value. The argument also advances a formal proportionality condition on principles of justice. The condition requires that any two moral agents instantiating nearly the same moral state be treated in nearly the same way. Call that the *proportionality of justice* condition.

Among other things the proportionality of justice condition demands that rewards and punishments in the afterlife be proportionate to the goodness or badness of moral agents. In particular any two moral agents instantiating nearly the same moral state should receive nearly the same punishment or reward. But, according to the *Degree of Goodness Argument*, no principle of justice that observes the proportionality of justice and the degrees of goodness among moral agents could distribute rewards and punishments in such a way that some people go determinately and eternally to heaven and some people go determinately and eternally to hell. We must therefore abandon the familiar eschatological view.[1]

In section (3) I generalize Sider's *Degree of Goodness Argument*. In section (4) I offer a countermodel in supervaluation semantics to the proportionality of justice condition. It is not a requirement of justice that moral agents that are in nearly the same moral states be treated in nearly the same way. It is *possible* that there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between moral agents instantiating nearly the same moral state. It is possible, for instance, that moral agents S and S' are in nearly the same moral state, S' is beyond redemption and S is not.[2] I conclude that moral agents in nearly the same moral state may be treated in very unequal ways.[3]

In (5) I consider the possibility that only those moral agents that reject God as their savior are beyond redemption. I offer the *Degree of Acceptance* argument against the proportionality of justice condition. In (6) I consider an objection from higher-order vagueness. I argue that we should reject the proportionality of justice condition in favor of the *Moral Difference Thesis* and the *Vague Depravity Thesis.* I offer some concluding remarks in (7).

The Degree of Goodness Argument

According to Ted Sider any adequate principle of justice must meet the proportionality of justice condition. Here is Sider.

> [J]ustice requires its judgments to be proportional to the [morally relevant] factors. If Sally's performance is better than Jimmy's then, other things being equal, it would of course be unjust to pay Jimmy more; but *if Sally's performance is only minutely better than Jimmy's, it would be unjust to pay Sally far more*. . . . What I am calling *the proportionality of justice prohibits very unequal treatment of persons who are very similar in relevant respects*.[4]

The proposed condition on principles of justice is a purely formal condition. Compare, for instance, the proportionality condition in (J).

J.   For any moral agents S and S', if S and S' are the exactly same in every morally relevant respect, then S and S' should be treated in the same way.

The condition in (J) demands that moral agents that share every property relevant to the distribution of benefits and burdens must be treated the same way. The condition in (J) is typically regarded as an uncontroversial constraint on every substantive principle of justice from utilitarian principles to libertarian principles to liberal egalitarian or Rawlsian principles.

The properties relevant to the proper distribution of benefits and burdens might include utility-maximization, need, effort, merit or simply choice. Moral agents that are exactly the same with respect to the relevant properties, whatever those properties happen to be, must be treated in morally equivalent ways.[5]

The proportionality of justice condition that Sider describes applies to moral agents that are *nearly the same* in morally relevant respects. Consider the conditions in (J').

J'. For any moral agents S and S', if S is not definitely morally worse than S', then S and S' should not be treated in very unequal ways.

(J') is also proposed as a perfectly general constraint on principles of justice. According to the condition in (J'), if S is not clearly morally worse than S', then S and S' should not be treated in very unequal ways.

In the *Degree of Goodness Argument*, the *moral states* of individual agents alone determine the proper distribution of punishments and rewards among those agents. A principle of justice meeting Sider's proportionality of justice condition must distribute punishments and rewards to moral agents in proportion to the degree of goodness or badness of their moral states.

The degree of goodness or badness of each moral state an agent might instantiate is determined by the number and kind of actions the agent performs. Suppose the degree of badness of each moral state is a simple matter of the number of minor offenses a moral agent has committed. Here is Sider's *Degree of Goodness Argument*.

> Suppose . . . that the divine criterion is based on how many obscenities one utters (the more the worse). Suppose further that there are no gaps in realized obscenity levels, in that for no n is it the case that someone utters n obscenities, someone utters some greater number of obscenities, and no one utters n+1 obscenities. . . . Now choose some arbitrarily damned person, who on Earth uttered some number n of obscenities, and begin going through the afterlife, finding persons that were less and less obscene. Initially these persons will all be in hell, but eventually we will arrive at one in heaven. In fact there must be a sharp cutoff point in this procedure . . . . This is a consequence of (i) the lack of gaps in realized obscenity levels (ii) the binary conception of the afterlife and (iii) . . . that obscenity is a moral matter of degree . . . . But such a cutoff would be monstrous, for it would blatantly violate the proportional nature of justice. . . . [N]o just God could give radically different treatment to a pair of persons who differed only by a single obscenity.[6]

The repugnant conclusion of the *Degree of Goodness Argument* is that the first moral agent S' to go determinately and eternally to hell will have uttered n+1 obscenities and the last moral agent S to go determinately and eternally to heaven will have uttered n obscenities.

It's obvious that S and S' are treated in very unequal ways. S is going determinately to heaven and S' is going determinately to hell. But S' has committed just one more minor offense than S, so S' is not definitely

worse than S. We have a clear violation of the proportionality of justice condition. If S' is not definitely worse than S, then no principle of justice can recommend that S' go determinately to hell and S go determinately to heaven.

It is worth noting that not having such a cutoff would be at least as monstrous. Assume for reductio ad absurdum that, for all moral agents S and S', if S utters n obscenities and S' utters n – 1 obscenities, then S goes determinately and eternally to hell only if S' goes determinately and eternally to hell. If the degree of badness of each moral state is a simple matter of the number of minor offenses a moral agent has committed and non-universalism is true, as we have assumed, then there is some number of obscenities n such that any agent that utters n obscenities goes determinately and eternally to hell. By hypothesis, for any n such that anyone who utters n obscenities goes determinately and eternally to hell only if anyone who utters n – 1 obscenities goes determinately and eternally to hell. By repeated applications of the hypothesis we can conclude that everyone goes determinately and eternally to hell. So having no cutoff is at least as monstrous as having some cutoff.

According to the *Degree of Goodness Argument* the predicates 'being in hell' and 'being in heaven' are not vague. It is not possible to be indeterminately in heaven or to be indeterminately in hell. But the argument also assumes that, for every possible moral state, some agent instantiates that moral state in the afterlife. If there are moral agents in heaven and hell, then there is very good reason to conclude that the proportionality condition in (J') has been violated.[7]

Degree of Goodness Argument Generalized

The *Degree of Goodness Argument* generalizes to any sequence of minor evil actions that determines the degree of goodness or badness of moral agents. The obscenity criterion is no more than a useful expository device. Sider observes that it's not central to the argument.

> No one would seriously propose obscenity as the divine criterion, but the argument generalizes to apply to more realistic proposals. Choose any moral matter of degree you like: number of charitable donations made, number of hungry fed, naked clothed or feet washed, number of random acts of kindness performed, or even some amalgam of several factors.[8]

Let k_0 be among the best moral states a human being might attain.[9] Let k be among the worst moral states a human being might attain. The argument urges that there is a sequence S of moral states k_n ($k_0 < k_n < k$) such that, for some increment in evil i ($i > 0$), no moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ is definitely worse than the preceding moral state k_{ni} and the moral state k is much worse than k_0.[10]

The *Degree of Goodness Argument* assumes that there are moral agents instantiating every moral state in the sequence.[11] Moral agents that instantiate the moral state k_0 go determinately and eternally to heaven and moral agents that instantiate the moral state k go determinately and eternally

to hell. If we let << symbolize '*much worse than*' and let ≈ symbolize '*not definitely worse than,*' the sequence S is described as follows.

$$S = k_i \approx k_0 \, , \, k_{2i} \approx k_i \, , \, k_{3i} \approx k_{2i} \, , \, . \, . \, , \, k \approx k_{ni} \, \& \, k \ll k_0$$

It is assumed that there are increments (or decrements) insignificant enough that the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ resulting from having committed n+1 minor evils is not definitely worse than the moral state k_{ni} resulting from having committed n minor evils. The assumption that there are insignificant evils is not intended to commit us to the controversial position that there are unnoticeable evils or imperceptible increments in pain or suffering. The assumption does commit us to the plausible position that there are minor evils.

According to the proportionality of justice condition in (J') any two moral agents S and S' in adjacent moral states $k_{(n+1)i}$ and k_{ni} must be treated in nearly the same way. We know that moral agents instantiating k go determinately and eternally to hell. But we also know that there is some first moral agent in the sequence that goes to heaven. As we move from k down the sequence toward the best moral state in k_0 there is some k_n ($k_0 < k_n < k$) such that moral agents instantiating the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ go determinately and eternally to hell and moral agents instantiating the moral state in k_{ni} go determinately and eternally to heaven.

But the recommendation that moral agents instantiating moral state k_{ni} go determinately to heaven and moral agents instantiating the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ go determinately to hell violates the proportionality of justice condition (J'). Contrary to (J'), there are two moral agents instantiating adjacent moral states $k_{(n+1)i}$ and k_{ni} that are treated in very unequal ways.

Irredeemable Evil and Supervaluationism

The *Degree of Goodness Argument* shows that any principle of justice available to God that respects degrees of goodness and badness among moral agents will violate the proportionality condition in (J'). But consider whether principles of justice are in general required to meet the condition in (J').

Suppose that an agent S instantiates an irredeemably evil moral state k_{ni} if and only if S is himself *irredeemably evil*.[12] And suppose a moral state k_{ni} is irredeemably evil if and only if k_{ni} is sufficiently bad that God *cannot* save any agent that instantiates k_{ni}.[13]

It is impossible, then, that S instantiates an irredeemably evil moral state and also goes determinately to heaven.[14] Given the binary conception of the afterlife—that every agent goes determinately to heaven or goes determinately to hell—a moral agent S is irredeemably evil only if S goes determinately and eternally to hell.[15] Let's stipulate finally that *only* those moral agents that are beyond redemption go determinately and eternally to hell. Every moral agent that is not irredeemably evil goes determinately and eternally to heaven.[16]

Suppose that some moral agent S' is not definitely worse than moral agent S. We can assume that S instantiates the moral state k_{ni} and S' instantiates the adjacent moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ in the sequence S. The open question is whether it is possible that S' is irredeemably evil and S is not irredeemably evil. The question is whether there might be an important

and non-arbitrary moral difference between moral agents that instantiate adjacent moral states.[17]

Notice that the predicates 'is morally worse than' and 'is irredeemably evil' do not sharply divide their positive and negative extensions. Given the assumption of non-universalism and the assumption that only those beyond redemption go determinately to hell, we know there is a moral state k_{ni} that is redeemably evil and another moral state k_{mi} that is irredeemably evil.[18] And since these predicates do not sharply divide their positive and negative extensions, there are many moral states in the sequence that are neither redeemably evil nor irredeemably evil. There are also moral states in the sequence k_{ni} and k_{mi} such that the moral state k_{mi} is clearly *morally worse than* the moral state k_{ni}. But there are many moral states such that k_{mi} is not clearly morally worse than k_{ni}.

On supervaluation semantics the truth-value of the proposition "the moral state k_{mi} is morally worse than the moral state k_{ni}" can be determined only if we sharpen the vague predicate 'is morally worse than.' But there is no unique and non-arbitrary way to make the predicate 'is morally worse than' precise. Supervaluationism therefore makes it true that the moral state k_{mi} is morally worse than the moral state k_{ni} if and only if that proposition is true on every admissible precisification of 'is morally worse than.' And supervaluationism makes it false that the moral state k_{mi} is morally worse than k_{ni} if and only if that proposition is false on every admissible precisification of that predicate. Otherwise the proposition is neither true nor false.

Supervaluation semantics places some important restrictions on admissible precisifications. The most important restrictions to consider here concern the penumbral connections holding between the predicates 'is irredeemably evil' and 'is morally worse than.' The penumbral connections in P and P', for instance, seem true.

P. For all *n*, *m* and for any *i*, k_{mi} is irredeemably evil and k_{ni} is redeemably evil only if k_{mi} is morally worse than k_{ni}.

P'. For all *n*, *m* and for any *i*, k_{mi} is irredeemably evil and k_{ni} is not irredeemably evil only if k_{ni} is not morally worse than k_{mi}.

So there are no admissible precisifications of these predicates on which the antecedents of these conditionals are true and the consequents are false. But the *Degree of Goodness Argument* assumes in addition that P'' is true.

P''. For all *n*, *m* and for any *i*, k_{mi} is irredeemably evil and k_{ni} is not irredeemably evil only if k_{mi} is definitely morally worse than k_{ni}.

If S is irredeemably evil and S' is not irredeemably evil then there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between S and S'. But if there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between moral agents S and S', then according to P'', S and S' cannot be in adjacent moral states $k_{(n+1)i}$ and k_{ni}. In other words, if there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between moral agents S and S', then S and S' cannot be in nearly the same moral state.

But the penumbral connection in P'' is mistaken. It is possible that moral agents S and S' are in adjacent moral states $k_{(n+1)i}$ and k_{ni}, and also that there

is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between S and S'. Suppose $k_{(n+1)i}$ is definitely irredeemably evil and k_{ni} is not definitely irredeemably evil. It might also be true that $k_{(n+1)i}$ is *not definitely morally worse than* k_{ni}. Consider figure (1) in which both predicates are depicted.

Not Morally Worse than k_{ni} Morally Worse than k_{ni}

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k_0 k_{ni} $k_{(n+1)i}$ k

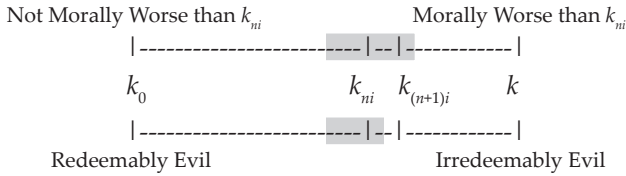| ------------------------ | -- | ------------ |

Redeemably Evil   Irredeemably Evil

Fig. 1

In figure (1) the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ is in the shaded area on the top line. Moral states to the left of the shaded area are definitely not morally worse than k_{ni} and moral states to the right of the shaded area are definitely morally worse than k_{ni}. Since the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ is in the shaded area on the top line, it is not definitely morally worse than k_{ni}. But on the bottom line the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ is not in the shaded area and the moral state k_{ni} is in the shaded area. So the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ is definitely irredeemably evil and k_{ni} is not definitely irredeemably evil.

Let's show that the situation depicted in figure (1) is possible. As we move incrementally up the sequence of moral states from k_0 to k there is some small increment i ($i > 0$) such that moral agents instantiating moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ are definitely irredeemably evil and moral agents instantiating k_{ni} are not definitely irredeemably evil. Moral agents instantiating k_{ni} are *borderline* irredeemably evil. And since we have assumed that moral agents might be in nearly the same moral states, it is possible to choose an increment i ($i > 0$) sufficiently small that the state $k_{(n+1)i}$ is not definitely morally worse than that state k_{ni}. Moral agents instantiating $k_{(n+1)i}$ are in nearly the same moral state as moral agents instantiating k_{ni}. But then for some increment i ($i > 0$) in the sequence S, $k_{(n+1)i}$ is definitely irredeemably evil and k_{ni} is borderline irredeemably evil, and $k_{(n+1)i}$ is not definitely worse than k_{ni}. This is the situation depicted in figure (1).

According to the *Degree of Goodness Argument* every moral state in sequence S is instantiated. There is therefore some moral agent S that instantiates the moral state in k_{ni} and some moral agent S' that instantiates the moral state in $k_{(n+1)i}$. The moral agent S' is definitely irredeemably evil and moral agent S is borderline irredeemably evil. Suppose an essentially perfectly just being applied the following principles of justice to S and S'.[19]

PJ1. Moral agents that are definitely irredeemably evil cannot be saved and so must go determinately and eternally to hell.

PJ2. Moral agents that are borderline irredeemably evil can be saved and so go determinately to heaven.

On the basis of principle PJ1, the agent S' goes determinately and eternally to hell and on the basis of PJ2 the agent S goes determinately and eternally to heaven.

It is true that S' is not definitely morally worse than S. But there is none-theless an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between S and S'. S' is definitely irredeemably evil and so S' cannot be saved. But S is *borderline* irredeemably evil and so S can be saved.

We should conclude that the proportionality of justice condition in J' is false. It does not in general violate the proportionality of justice not to treat S and S' in nearly the same way even when S' is not definitely worse than S. If S is borderline irredeemably evil and S' is definitely irredeemably evil, then S' is not definitely worse than S, but it is not possible to treat S and S' in nearly the same way. S' is definitely beyond redemption and cannot be saved; S is not definitely beyond redemption and can be saved.

What about Degrees of Acceptance?

Suppose it is true that no moral agent that does not reject God as his sav-ior—no matter how many obscenities he has uttered during his lifetime—is beyond redemption. The *Degree of Goodness Argument* assumes that there is some number of obscenities n such that anyone uttering n obscenities goes determinately and eternally to hell. We are assuming instead that only those moral agents that reject God as savior go determinately and eternally to hell.

Let's suppose that God provides every moral agent with a final op-portunity to accept or reject him as his savior. There are of course vari-ous more or less definite ways to reject God as savior. Perhaps Smith is asked whether he accepts God as his savior and Smith indefinitely shakes his head no, or Smith is asked whether he accepts God as his savior and he indefinitely utters 'no.' In order to simplify matters let's suppose that moral agents are provided with a sequence of cards on which there are various shades from *definitely red* to *definitely orange*. Suppose agents are instructed to hold up the card that is definitely red if they definitely reject God as their savior. Moral agents are instructed to hold up a card that is indefinitely red if they indefinitely reject God as savior.[20] In general moral agents are more indefinite in their rejection of God as the cards they hold up are less definitely red. Finally moral agents are instructed to hold up the definitely orange card to definitely accept God as their savior.

Now suppose an essentially perfectly just being applies the following principles of justice to S and S'.

PJ3. Every moral agent that definitely rejects God as his savior cannot be saved and so goes determinately and eternally to hell.

PJ4. Every moral agent that does not definitely reject God as his savior can be saved and so goes determinately and eternally to heaven.

Essentially perfectly just beings that apply PJ3 and PJ4 send moral agents determinately and eternally to hell only if they *definitely reject* God as their savior. Moral agents that do not definitely reject God as their savior are sent to heaven. We assume that everyone knows that only those moral agents that definitely reject God as their savior are sent determinately and eternally to hell. And everyone knows that every moral agent that does not definitely reject God as their savior is sent determinately and eternally to heaven.

Assume that for every card in the sequence there is some moral agent that holds up that card. There will be a card $k_{(n+1)i}$ that is definitely red and a card k_{ni} that is just a shade different and not definitely red. Every moral agent that holds up k_{ni} goes determinately and eternally to heaven and every moral agent that holds up card $k_{(n+1)i}$ goes determinately and eternally to hell. So there will be moral agents S and S' such that, S definitely rejects God as his savior and S' does not definitely reject God as his savior, and the card S holds up is not definitely more red than the card S' holds up.

S is sent determinately and eternally to hell because S definitely rejects God as his savior and cannot be saved. S' is not sent determinately and eternally to hell because S' does not definitely reject God as his savior and can be saved. The card S holds up is not definitely more red than the card S' holds up, so the attitude that S expresses is not definitely worse than the attitude that S' expresses. But there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between S and S'. The important moral difference is that S definitely rejects God as his savior and cannot be saved and S' is on the borderline of rejecting God as his savior and can be saved.

Degrees of Goodness and Higher-Order Vagueness

Let's consider an important objection from higher-order vagueness that there cannot be an important and non-arbitrary difference between moral agents instantiating adjacent moral states k_{ni} and $k_{(n+1)i}$. It is true that there is a borderline between the redeemably evil and the irredeemably evil. The borderline cases include all of the indefinitely irredeemably evil moral states. But there is yet another, second-order, borderline between the *definitely* irredeemably evil and the *indefinitely* irredeemably evil. The borderline cases include all of the *indefinitely* definitely irredeemably evil moral states. Figure (1) depicts the first-order borderline but fails to depict the second-order borderline.[21]

We have been supposing that there are very small increments in evil. But if increments in evil are sufficiently small and k_{ni} and $k_{(n+1)i}$ are adjacent moral states, then the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ would be on the second-order borderline of irredeemable evil. But if $k_{(n+1)i}$ is on the second-order borderline of irredeemable evil, then there is no important and non-arbitrary moral distinction between moral states k_{ni} and $k_{(n+1)i}$. Any two moral agents S and S' that instantiate the moral states k_{ni} and $k_{(n+1)i}$ are such that *both* agents are borderline irredeemable evil. S is on the first-order borderline and S' is on the second-order borderline. The difference between S and S', in short, is that S is *definitely*, indefinitely irredeemably evil and S' is *indefinitely*, definitely irredeemably evil.

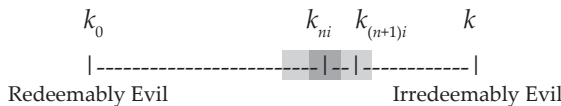The situation is depicted in figure (2) where we show both first-order and second-order borderlines.

$$k_0 \qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad k_{ni} \quad k_{(n+1)i} \qquad k$$

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Redeemably Evil   Irredeemably Evil

Fig. 2

The darker shaded region of figure (2) includes those moral states—including the moral state k_{ni}—that are definitely, indefinitely irredeemably evil. The lighter shaded region to the right includes those moral states—including the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$—that are indefinitely, definitely irredeemably evil. And the unshaded region to the further right are all of those moral states that are definitely, definitely irredeemably evil. Since both S and S' are borderline irredeemably evil, there is no important and non-arbitrary moral difference between them. But then, contrary to the argument so far, S and S' cannot be treated in very unequal ways. The proportionality of justice condition is therefore not falsified.

The right response to the objection from higher-order vagueness is to note that, by hypothesis, every moral state in the sequence is instantiated. So again there will be some moral agents S and S' such that S' is not definitely morally worse than S and such that there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between S and S'. Consider figure (3).
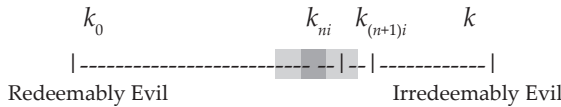
$$k_0 \qquad\qquad\qquad\qquad k_{ni} \quad k_{(n+1)i} \qquad k$$

| ---------------------- ▓▓ - | -- | ------------ |

Redeemably Evil   Irredeemably Evil

Fig. 3

Let S' instantiate the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ that is clearly in the unshaded region to the right. S' is not on any borderline—neither a first-order nor second order borderline—of irredeemable evil. S' is definitely, definitely irredeemably evil and so S' cannot be saved.[22]

Let S instantiate the moral state k_{ni}. S is on the *borderline*—in this case a second-order borderline—of irredeemable evil. Specifically S is *indefinitely*, definitely irredeemably evil. But S is nonetheless on the borderline of irredeemable evil and so he is not beyond the possibility of redemption. He is instead almost beyond the possibility of redemption.

So, we arrive again at our previous conclusion. S' is not definitely morally worse than S but there remains an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between S' and S that justifies treating S' and S in very unequal ways. S' is among the irredeemably evil and S is on the borderline of the irredeemably evil.

Of course the objection from second-order vagueness arises again at the third order of vagueness and so on upward. But the response to the problem of second-order vagueness can be generalized. Let's define *superdefinite irredeemable evil* in SE.

> SE. Moral agent S is superdefinitely irredeemably evil if and only if for every order of vagueness n, it is true that S is definitely$_n$ irredeemably evil.

A moral agent S is superdefinitely irredeemably evil, then, just in case S is irredeemably evil and S is not on *any borderline* of irredeemable evil. So, for a simpler formulation of (SE) consider the equivalent (SE').

> SE'. Moral agent S is superdefinitely irredeemably evil if and only if S is irredeemably evil and S is not borderline irredeemably evil.

In figures (1) and (3), for instance, the moral state $k_{(n+1)i}$ is not on any borderline of irredeemable evil and so $k_{(n+1)i}$ is not only definitely irredeemably evil but superdefinitely irredeemably evil as well. The important and non-arbitrary moral difference between agents S and S', then, is that S is on some borderline or other of irredeemable evil and S' is superdefinitely irredeemably evil.

The claim that there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between S and S' does not commit us to the position that there is a precise border between moral agents that are not irredeemably evil and moral agents that are irredeemably evil. The claim that there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between S and S' commits us instead to the *Vague Depravity Thesis* and the *Moral Difference Thesis*. Here is the *Vague Depravity Thesis*

> There is no moral state k_n, $(k > k_n > k_0)$ in S such that for every increment i $(i > 0)$ and *every* admissible precisification, k_{ni} is not irredeemably evil and $k_{(n+1)i \ i}$ is irredeemably evil.[23]

The *Vague Depravity Thesis* ensures that, for all moral states k_n and $k_{(n+1)}$, there is some i $(i > 0)$ and some admissible precisification such that a moral agent that instantiates $k_{(n+1)i}$ is irredeemably evil only if a moral agent that instantiates k_{ni} is also irredeemably evil. So there is no discrete transition from a moral state that is indefinitely irredeemably evil to a moral state that is definitely irredeemably evil. And in general there is also no discrete transition between a moral state that is indefinitely definitely$_n$ irredeemably evil to a moral state that is definitely$_{n+1}$ irredeemably evil.

The claim that there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between S and S' also commits us to the *Moral Difference Thesis*.

> If there is some moral state k_n, $(k > k_n > k_0)$ in S such that for some increment i $(i > 0)$, $k_{(n+1)i}$ is irredeemably evil on *every* admissible precisification and k_{ni} is not irredeemably evil on *some* admissible precisification, then it is not in general unjust that moral agents instantiating $k_{(n+1)i}$ are treated very differently from moral agents instantiating k_{ni}.

The *Moral Difference Thesis* asserts that there might be an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between moral agents that instantiate nearly the same moral state. It might be that every moral agent that is superdefinitely irredeemably evil cannot be saved and every moral agent on the borderline of irredeemable evil is not quite beyond redemption.

Finally the view that there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between S and S' commits us to the rejection of the proportionality of justice thesis. The proportionality of justice thesis entails that any two moral agents instantiating adjacent moral states must be treated in nearly the same way. The proportionality of justice thesis assumes that there cannot be an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between moral agents that instantiate nearly the same moral state. It assumes, for instance, that it's impossible that a moral agent instantiating $k_{(n+1)i}$ is irredeemably evil and cannot be saved and a moral agent instantiating k_{ni} is borderline irredeemably evil and so can be saved. But we have found that

this assumption is mistaken. We should conclude instead that the proportionality of justice thesis is false. It is not in general unjust to treat moral agents that instantiate nearly the same moral state in very unequal ways.

Conclusions

The *Degree of Goodness Argument* shows that any principle of justice that respects degree of goodness among moral agents will violate the proportionality condition in (J'). But the proportionality condition in (J') is false. There can be important and non-arbitrary moral differences between moral agents that instantiate nearly the same moral state. And those important moral differences can justify very unequal treatment.

The *Vague Depravity Thesis* ensures that there is no precise border between moral agents that are irredeemably evil and moral agents that are not irredeemably evil. There is no discrete transition, for instance, from a moral state that is definitely irredeemably evil to a moral state that is indefinitely irredeemably evil. A moral agent that instantiates a moral state that is irredeemably evil might not be much worse than a moral agent that instantiates a moral state that is not irredeemably evil.

According to the *Moral Difference Thesis* there can be an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between moral agents that instantiate nearly the same moral states. It might be, for instance, that all and only moral agents that are superdefinitely irredeemably evil cannot be saved. And it might also be that moral agents that are on some borderline of irredeemable evil are, fortunately, not quite beyond redemption. Together these theses entail that the proportionality of justice condition is false.

Suppose we find it reasonable to reject the proportionality of justice condition in (J').[24] The right eschatology might then entail that every moral agent is either sent determinately to heaven or sent determinately to hell. And a perfectly just being might respect the degrees of goodness among moral agents in the distribution of these rewards and punishments.[25]

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NOTES

1. We could abandon the degrees of goodness assumption instead, but it seems close to certain that moral states come in degrees.

2. A metaphor might help clarify this claim. Think of evil moral states in spatial terms, the worse the moral state the lower the spatial location. There might be two moral agents instantiating moral states that are at nearly the same spatial location, and one agent might be just out of God's reach while the other might be just within God's reach.

3. Let me emphasize that I'm not claiming that it's true that some agents are beyond redemption and others are not. I'm claiming rather that it is *possible* that some agents are beyond redemption in the sense described and others are not.

4. See Theodore Sider, "Hell and Vagueness," *Faith and Philosophy* 19 (2002), p. 59, my emphasis.

5.   It is worth noting in passing that principles of justice on which individual choice is relevant to determining the distribution of benefits and burdens already raise interesting and important worries for Sider's alleged violations of the proportionality of justice. Robert Nozick famously urged that any principle of justice sensitive to individual property rights would observe the maxim: to each as they are chosen and from each as they choose. If Sally plays only slightly better than Jimmy, then on Nozick's view, it does not violate the proportionality of justice if you *choose* to give Sally all of your multi-million dollar inheritance for her playing and choose to give Jimmy none. See Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1974) p. 160ff. Even setting aside libertarian conceptions of justice, most see no injustice in the fact that the winner of a 100 meter dash might be highly rewarded while the fourth place finisher receives next to nothing. And that does not seem unjust even if the fourth place finisher is just .002 seconds behind the winner.

6.   Theodore Sider, "Hell and Vagueness," pp. 59–60

7.   The *Degree of Goodness Argument* is not based on any epistemological assumptions. The repugnant conclusion is that any principle of justice that might be used to distribute rewards and punishments must violate some proportionality condition. A moral agent S uttering n obscenities goes determinately to heaven and a moral agent S' uttering n+1 obscenities goes determinately to hell. The injustice Sider notes is not that S' did not know that the punishment for uttering n+1 obscenities was eternal damnation. The injustice is not that moral agents do not know which principles of justice are being applied to them. To simplify matters let's assume that everyone knows that anyone that utters n+1 obscenities is eternally damned and anyone that utters n obscenities goes to heaven. To simplify further let's assume that every agent knows how many obscenities he has uttered.

8.   Theodore Sider, "Hell and Vagueness," p. 60. It is important that the problem Sider discussion generalizes to more realistic criteria. As one referee for this journal mentioned, the quantitative obscenity criterion is obviously implausible in view of typical non-quantitative models of sin.

9.   Of course there might be no best or worst moral state. If so then assume that moral state k_0 is so good that any moral agent that instantiates k_0 goes determinately and eternally to heaven and the moral state k is so bad that any moral agent that instantiates k goes determinately and eternally to hell.

10. In decision-theory the symbol ϵ is often used to represent some very small increment. I use instead the variable i to represent some small increment in evil; I use ni to represent $(n \times i)$ evils; and I use k_{ni} to represent the moral state resulting from having committed $(n \times i)$ evils. Assuming we can measure the size and number of small evils, n is some positive integer and i is some small real value.

11. Strictly, the *Degree of Goodness Argument* assumes that it is *possible* that moral agents instantiate every moral state in the sequence, not that moral agents *actually* instantiate every moral state in the sequence. Sider notes,

> Suppose further that there are no "gaps" in realized obscenity levels, in that for no *n* is it the case that someone utters *n* obscenities, someone utters some greater number of obscenities, but no one utters *n*+1 obscenities. (This assumption is arguably harmless, for we may focus our attention on some possible world in which it holds . . .). pp. 59–60

12. A referee urged that, for all we know, "God's unlimited grace would guarantee that no moral state k_{ni} is sufficiently bad that an agent instantiating k_{ni} is beyond redemption." Call that the redemption assumption. If the redemption assumption is both true and inconsistent with Sider's assumption

of non-universalism, then Sider's argument is unsound. I'm happy with that conclusion. But the redemption assumption might well be consistent with non-universalism. Suppose it is true that every moral agent that *does not reject* God as savior—no matter how bad her moral state—is thereby saved and no moral agent that *rejects* God as savior—no matter how good her moral state—can be saved. It is then true that no moral state k_{ni} is sufficiently bad that any agent that instantiates k_{ni} is beyond redemption and also true that moral agents that freely reject God as savior cannot be saved. I consider this possibility in section 5.

13. A referee suggested a definition of redeemable moral states along these lines.

> R. A moral state k_{ni} of an agent S is redeemable if and only if there is a world w and agent S' that instantiate k_{ni} in w and S' goes to heaven in w.

(R) raises interesting questions concerning whether agents that are redeemable relative to one divine criterion C consistent with God's perfect justice are also redeemable relative to any other criterion C' consistent with God's perfect justice. According to (R), an agent S instantiating k_{ni} is redeemable just in case there is some world w at which some criterion C consistent with God's perfect justice obtains, some agent S' instantiates k_{ni}, and S' goes to heaven. But suppose criterion C' actually obtains rather than C? I would (tentatively) advance an alternative analysis of redeemable evil that is relativized to a criterion C consistent with God's perfect justice.

> I. A moral state k_{ni} of an agent S is redeemable relative to a criterion C consistent with God's perfect justice if and only if there is some world w at which C obtains, an agent S' instantiates k_{ni} in w and S' goes to heaven.

14. There is a complex relationship between the possibility of middle knowledge and the possibility of irredeemably evil moral agents. As I understand suggestions from Clayton Littlejohn and Luke Gelinas (in discussion), they each urge that if T is the largest state of affairs that God can strongly actualize, then if (i) God knows that, were he to actualize T, I would freely harm someone and (ii) God actualizes T anyway, then (iii) God is at least partially blameworthy for the harm produced. One might urge further that I am not entirely to blame for my resulting moral state. I'm unpersuaded in either case. God does not seem blameworthy, for instance, if he could not have failed to actualize T without weakly actualizing a world that was less-than-the-best (weakly) actualizable. But I concede that a full discussion of this and related problems would require at least another paper.

15. There are theological concerns about when S instantiates an irredeemably evil moral state. If S instantiates an irredeemably evil moral state before the time of judgment, then perhaps S is not beyond the possibility of redemption. We are assuming that, possibly, there is a point at which any agent that instantiates an irredeemably evil moral state is beyond redemption.

16. A referee suggested that the assumption that God has divine control over the criterion of justice might be inconsistent with any moral agent being irredeemably evil. On divine control Sider notes,

> *Divine control*: God is in control of the institution of divine judgment, in control of the mechanism or *criterion* that determines who goes to Heaven and who goes to Hell. This is not to say that God is solely responsible for the fate of created beings, for the divinely mandated criterion might contain a role for free choices. Nor is it to say that God is vindictive. The requirement makes no assumptions about the nature of the criterion, beyond that it is in God's control. (p. 58)

And a little further down he adds,

> Divine control requires that God be in control of the criterion determining these populations [i.e., the populations of heaven and hell], and thus that God's choice of a criterion be consistent with his attributes. The criterion of judgment must therefore cohere with his perfect justice. (p. 58)

The assumption of divine control must be consistent with Sider's assumption of non-universalism and God's perfect justice. According to these assumptions, it is consistent with God's perfect justice that some moral agents are sent determinately and eternally to hell. We can make these assumptions consistent if those agents that are sent determinately and eternally to hell are those God cannot, consistent with his justice, save. These agents I call irredeemably evil. But if no agents are irredeemably evil, then given the assumption of non-universalism, some *redeemable* moral agents are nonetheless sent determinately and eternally to hell. Those agents must have some other property that makes them worthy of eternal damnation. I consider this possibility in section 5 on degrees of acceptance. Perhaps those redeemable agents freely choose to reject God as their savior or to reject his grace. As I show in section 5, the problem for the *Degree of Goodness Argument* re-arises.

17.   A referee suggested that the property of being irredeemably evil might not be vague. It might be true that there is some moral state k_{ni} such that agents instantiating k_{ni} are definitely redeemably evil and, for any i ($i > 0$), agents instantiating $k_{(n+1)i}$ are definitely irredeemably evil. If that is true then it constitutes a decisive objection against Sider's *Degree of Goodness Argument*. The objection entails that there is an important and non-arbitrary moral difference between agents that instantiate k_{ni} and agents that instantiate $k_{(n+1)i}$, for any i ($i > 0$), that justifies God in sending the former to heaven and the latter to hell. This would be a faster route to my conclusion. My assumption that the property of being irredeemably evil is vague concedes to Sider that uttering one minor obscenity cannot change an agent from being definitely redeemable to being definitely irredeemable. Consistent with Sider's assumption of degrees of goodness and badness, I assume there are borderline cases of being irredeemably evil in which it is not true that S is irredeemably evil and not false that S is irredeemably evil. I do urge that uttering one minor obscenity can change an agent from being on some borderline of irredeemably evil to being definitely irredeemably evil. I argue that this too makes an important and non-arbitrary moral difference for a perfect being that is able to save any agent that is borderline irredeemable.

18.   The assertion is intended to follow directly from the assumption that some moral states k_{ni} and k_{mi} in the sequence of moral states from k_0 to k are such that an agent that instantiates k_{ni} is redeemable and an agent that instantiates k_{mi} is irredeemable. Let $k_{ni} = k_0$. By hypothesis k_0 is a moral state such that an agent S instantiates k_0 only if S is redeemable, since moral agents that instantiate k_0 are among the very best relative to the obscenity criterion Sider adopts. Let $k_{mi} = k$. By hypothesis k is a moral state such that S instantiates k only if S is irredeemable, since moral agents that instantiate k are the worst relative to the obscenity criterion Sider adopts. It might be objected that, for all we know, every moral agent is redeemable. But, as I mention in note (3) above, I assume only that there might be irredeemable moral agents. It should be recalled that Sider also does not claim that all of his assumptions are true. He does not insist, for instance, that every moral state is instantiated but only that *possibly* every moral state is instantiated.

19.   I claim here that, possibly, a perfect being is governed by PJ1 and PJ2. I do not claim that, necessarily, a perfect being is governed by these principles

(nor, incidentally, do I deny it). We have supposed that an agent S instantiates an irredeemably evil moral state k_{ni} if and only if S is himself *irredeemably evil*. Further we have supposed that a moral state k_{ni} is irredeemably evil if and only if k_{ni} is sufficiently bad that God *cannot* save any agent that instantiates k_{ni}. It is impossible, then, that S instantiates an irredeemably evil moral state and also goes determinately to heaven. So we are claiming that *possibly* God *could not* save S. But aren't there worlds in which (i) God is not governed by PJ1 or PJ2 and (ii) S is borderline irredeemable and S' is definitely irredeemable and (iii) God sends S and S' determinately and eternally to hell? I'm inclined to doubt it, but even if such worlds were possible, they would not be feasible. I do not assume in this example that God chooses the principles of justice that govern his choices. I assume that possibly PJ1 and PJ2 are true and in those worlds they are the principles God applies. I could as well have urged that, for all we know, these principles hold in every world. Thanks to Tom Flint for pushing this point, though I suspect he won't find this brief response entirely satisfying.

20. To avoid additional sources of vagueness, we should add the simplifying assumption that no one indefinitely holds up his card.
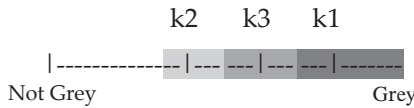
21. Sider offers a similar objection. See "Hell and Vagueness," op. cit. p. 59.

22. Higher-order vagueness is the result of borderline cases themselves having borderlines cases. This is perhaps easiest to see with the case of color properties.

Consider the sequence of grey below.

$$k2 \quad\quad k1$$
$$|\text{-------------- } |\text{--- } \boxed{\text{---}} |\text{-------}$$
$$\text{Not Grey} \quad\quad\quad\quad\quad \text{Grey}$$
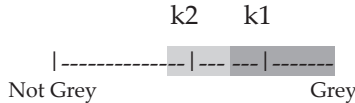
For first-order vagueness we have the area k1 that is definitely grey and a single borderline to the left, k2, that is indefinitely grey. But if we acknowledge that there are borderlines cases of our borderline cases, we need to add a borderline k3 area between k1 and k2. And the sequence becomes more complicated.

$$k2 \quad\quad k3 \quad\quad k1$$
$$|\text{-------------- } |\text{--- } \text{--- } |\text{--- } \boxed{\text{---}} |\text{-------}$$
$$\text{Not Grey} \quad\quad\quad\quad\quad\quad \text{Grey}$$

For second-order vagueness we have the area k1 that is definitely, definitely grey, the area k2 that is definitely, indefinitely grey, the area k3 that is indefinitely, definitely grey (if k3 is closer in color to k1 than it is to k2) and indefinitely, indefinitely grey (if k3 is closer in color to k2 than it is to k1). But it is reasonable to believe that every border has a border. If so, then orders of vagueness go infinitely upward. Suppose you're inclined to believe that higher orders of vagueness are unlimited for the predicate 'is irredeemably evil.' This presents no problem for the objection I am advancing against Sider's *Degree of Goodness Argument*, since the existence of higher orders of vagueness for 'is irredeemably evil' is consistent with there being some agents that are superdefinitely irredeemably evil. The superdefinitely irredeemably evil agents are just those agents that are irredeemably evil and on no borderline of irredeemable evil.

23. Recall the relation between *irredeemably evil moral states* and *irredeemably evil moral agents* discussed above (p. 10 ff.). S instantiates an irredeemably evil moral state k_{ni} if and only if S is himself *irredeemably evil*. And a moral state k_{ni} is irredeemably evil if and only if k_{ni} is sufficiently bad that God *cannot*

save any agent that instantiates k_{ni}. It is impossible, then, that S instantiates an irredeemably evil moral state and also goes determinately to heaven. Given the binary conception of the afterlife—that every agent goes determinately to heaven or goes determinately to hell—a moral agent S is irredeemably evil only if S goes determinately and eternally to hell.

24. It would be a mistake, I think, to abandon (J') altogether. The exception to (J') that we have discussed involves a case in which two moral agents instantiate almost the same moral state but *cannot* be treated in almost the same way. One of the agents is irredeemably evil and so, by hypothesis, cannot be saved. The other agent is borderline irredeemably evil and so, by hypothesis, is not quite beyond salvation. It might be worth considering whether (J') should be restricted to agents that are in nearly the same moral state and *can* be treated in nearly the same way.

25. My gratitude to two referees for this journal and Tom Flint for some interesting and challenging comments.