THE DIVINE ETHIC AND THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

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While the argument from evil has been around since at least Epicurus, the evidential argument from evil makes its first appearance in Part XI of David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, (1779). Two hundred years after Hume an explosion of interest and philosophical innovation involving the evidential argument occurred, with two kinds of evidential arguments garnering much attention, whether sympathetic or critical. The most prominent of the evidential arguments has been due to William Rowe, who argued that the likelihood of there being pointless evil makes it unlikely that God exists. The other is a version of the argument voiced first by Philo in Hume's Part XI, and lately championed by Paul Draper and Michael Tooley, that contends that the cause (or causes) of the world being morally indifferent — neither benevolent nor malevolent — is comparatively more likely than the cause being benevolent, given the pain and pleasure we see about us.[1] Critical response to these evidential arguments has ranged from offering theodicies (think of Richard Swinburne), to seeking to refute particular premises featured in evidential arguments. William Hasker's argument that the class of pointless evil cannot be empty in a theistic world is an example of this second strategy. Most frequently, critics have denied the validity of the epistemic inferences employed in the evidential arguments (think of skeptical theism here). In Part XI of Hume's *Dialogues*, Cleanthes suggests a fourth way of evading an evidential argument: the deity is finitely perfect and not infinitely perfect. While it is not obvious what Cleanthes' proposal comes to, we might take it as a reconfiguration of an attribute typically ascribed to God. Although a minority strategy, there have been those who have followed Cleanthes by modifying various properties standardly attributed by theists to God. Examples here are process theism, or less dramatically, open theism. A fifth strategy affirms the absolute sovereignty of God, who, fettered by neither external law nor morality, owes humans nothing.[2]

Mark Murphy's book, *God's Own Ethic: norms of agency and the argument from evil*, is a hybrid of the fourth and fifth strategies, as it seeks to defang evidential arguments by arguing that the standard notion of the divine ethic, is faulty.[3] Murphy's project seeks to wean theists from the idea that our ethic is God's ethic — that God shares our reasons to prevent or mitigate suffering whenever doing so involves no loss of outweighing goods. Murphy contends that while God could never intend evil, God has no moral duty to prevent the evils plaguing humans. God may do so if he chooses, but he may also just as well refrain from doing so if he chooses. Either way, God is perfect, as God morally owes humans nothing. Murphy's project, in effect, appropriates Philo's fourth hypothesis voiced in Part XI of the *Dialogues* that the cause of the universe is morally indifferent, neither malevolent nor benevolent, yet seeks to embed Philo's hypothesis in a theistic context. God may be as morally indifferent as Philo's indifferent hypothesis, and yet absolutely perfect, Murphy contends. In what follows I argue that a perfect being, even if unencumbered by our ethic,

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1 For a powerful objection to Humean arguments from evil, see Richard Otte, "Evidential Arguments from Evil" *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 48 (2000): 1-10.

2 This fifth strategy is found, for example, in the Ash'arite school of Islamic thought, with its emphasis on divine autonomy and sovereignty. See Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

3 Mark C. Murphy, *God's Own Ethics: norms of divine agency and the argument from evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). All textual citations are to this work.

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would still have conclusive non-moral reasons to prevent the pointless suffering of sentient creatures, unless doing so results in an inferior world. Murphy's argument, in short, fails to get God off the hook for allowing pointless evil.

The ethic that best fits an Anselmian perfect being, Murphy claims, is different from an ethic concerned to prevent setbacks to the well-being of humans. Preventing such setbacks, many think, provide moral agents with a reason to act. Murphy however holds that there is an explanatory gap between:

(A) Something being fundamentally bad for a human.

And:

(B) Others having a reason to prevent it.

Attempts to bridge the gap between (A) and (B) "typically proceeded on the basis of considerations that are *specific to human beings* — to explaining why some *human being's* potentially being made worse off gives *other human beings* reasons to do something about it" (49). But that specificity to humans is a problem, according to Murphy, as "it would not be surprising if agents of fundamentally different types stood in different reason-relations" (58). Borrowing a distinction from Joshua Gert, Murphy claims that setbacks to human well-being provide justifying reasons for divine action, but not requiring reasons (59). God may seek to prevent or mitigate human suffering but God may also refrain from doing so. Indeed, God's refraining may be for no reason at all, Murphy thinks (105, 168).[4] The discretion afforded God flowing out of the distinction between justifying and requiring reasons contributes to the sovereignty of God, Murphy thinks (71-2, 75).

One might think that a God who loves humans would always seek to prevent or mitigate human suffering unless doing so result in the loss of some great good essential to God's plans for the world. In the second chapter of his book, Murphy accepts that love involves aiming at the good of the beloved and at unity with the beloved (35). He also indicates that love may take various forms including the love between spouses, or parents for children or even owners for their pets (197). The model one adopts — parents/children or, say, owners/pets — might well make a substantial difference. In any case, one might think that a perfect being would perfectly love. Interestingly, Murphy argues that God could not love creatures to a maximal degree (the fullest degree possible), or to an optimal degree (an appropriate but less than maximal degree). For one thing, human well-being has no intrinsic maximum as it can always increase (37). For another, God could always bring more creatures into existence to love (37-8). Finally, there is no relation between God and creatures necessitating divine love (43). Being loving is not a divine perfection, if Murphy is correct, as divine perfections must have an intrinsic limit or maximum (19).

Murphy holds that the Anselmic great-making properties conform to what he calls the "distributive assumption": for each property, p, exhibited by God as a perfection, God exhibits p to its intrinsic maximal level (12). There are no trade-offs allowed for a compossible set of great-making properties. The Anselmian should hold that God is perfect in the sense that no possible being could exhibit any divine perfection, considered individually, to a greater degree. Since God could always bring about more creatures to love, then love itself admits of no absolute maximum and loses its claim as a perfection by the distributive assumption. One might wonder about knowledge: since God could always bring about more creatures who freely act, why would that not mean that there could always be more for God to know? Alternatively, think of sovereignty: why would more and more creatures existing not mean an expansion of the sovereignty of God?

Let us return to the problem of evil. Murphy's employment of the Gert distinction plays an outsized role in his attempt to defuse evidential arguments from evil. In his first version of the evidential argument, Rowe featured a deer severely burnt in a forest fire, lingering in agony for days before dying.[5] To all appearances, this suffering seems pointless. Alluding to Rowe's deer, Murphy claims that:

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4   If S may disregard P's suffering, for no reason at all, then P's suffering must not be intrinsically bad. On page 108 Murphy seems to accept that pain is intrinsically bad, but Murphy reports that he rejects the idea that pain is intrinsically bad.

5   William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335-41.
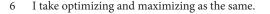
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> Consider some evil, say, the pointless suffering of a deer in a forest fire… The Anselmian being might fail to prevent this evil, for no reason at all, because acting so as to prevent that suffering provides the Anselmian being only justifying reasons for acting. (105)

Suppose however that the deer, trapped by a high fence, faces the approaching flames of the forest fire. Jones, seeing the trapped deer via a surveillance camera, can to no cost to herself or others simply flip a switch opening a gate in the high fence allowing the deer to escape. We will stipulate that Jones has no requiring moral reason to flip the switch: Jones has no moral duty to prevent the suffering of deer, and no moral duty to promote their interests. For no reason at all, Jones does not flip the switch. While Jones may not intend the suffering of the deer, she does foresee what will occur if she fails to flip. What would one conclude about Jones upon learning these facts? While it is true that Jones lacks any requiring moral reason to prevent the evil of the pointless suffering, the fact that she nonetheless did nothing to prevent the evil when it could have been prevented at no cost to Jones or others would lead one to conclude that Jones lacks something of importance. Such casual disregard of suffering, even that of a being of a different type indicates a lack of mercy.

Suppose Jones is about to toss a log into a bonfire, but she notices a slug on the log. Jones has no requiring reason to remove the slug and, clearly, Jones' ethic is not shared by mollusks. Nonetheless, Jones would have a justifying reason — why allow even an insignificant death if one can easily prevent it. In much the same way, while God may have no requiring moral reason to prevent the suffering of one of his creatures, it does not follow that failing to prevent that suffering is thereby cost-free. Arguably, a world in which God prevents pointless suffering is better than one in which he does not. While God is not morally perfect, God is perfectly rational, according to Murphy (64). What is perfect rationality? Murphy nowhere tells us, but we might stipulate that a perfectly rational being knows, at a minimum, which ends are worth pursuing, and how best to pursue them. While vague, our stipulation implies a perfectly rational being cannot knowingly bring about a state-of-affairs inferior to another that she could just as easily bring about, if both are compatible with divine ends or goals. If a perfectly rational being could bring about a better world by preventing pointless suffering, even though it lacks requiring moral reasons to do so, then we should expect a morally indifferent but perfectly rational being to bring about a world with no pointless evil. Perfect rationality seems to imply optimizing: for any rational individual who knows that she has at least two alternatives in her power, α and β, such that she can morally choose either, and she judges that α is better than β, she will choose α rather than β, if she chooses either.[6] Of course, there can be rational reasons to choose which do not make an outcome better. One may rationally choose between a domestic and an import when thirsty, since neither brings about a better outcome than the other. Choice among equals is compatible with optimizing. Still, could a perfectly rational being know that α is better than β and yet rationally choose β when she could choose either? The reason for choosing α is obvious — it is better than β. What reason could motivate one to opt for a known inferior? Clearly, rationality dictates choosing A1 if one has better reason for choosing it over A2, and the fact that A1 is better than A2 is a strong reason for choosing A1. Recall however that Murphy claims that God could allow evils for no reason at all: the evil need not contribute to any greater good, and its prevention would not decrease the value of the world, but rather increase it. Moral indifference may let God off the moral hook for allowing pointless evil, but not off the rational hook if allowing pointless evil results in a world inferior to a better world that God could just as easily have brought about. Consider (C):

(C) If God creates a world inferior to one God could have created, then it is possible that there be a being rationally superior to God.

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6   I take optimizing and maximizing as the same.

Could a world containing pointless evil be better than a world with no pointless evil? Yes, it could be.[7] Is it likely that a world containing pointless evil allowed by God for no reason at all is better than a world relevantly similar but God prevents those evil? No. That seems unlikely.

Does pointless evil make a difference to a world's standing among possible worlds? It seems as clear as anything that the amount, if any, of pointless evil affects a world's standing. One might be tempted to think if creaturely suffering is not itself intrinsically bad then allowing pointless evil makes no difference. One should resist that temptation as denying the evil of suffering and pain, while it seems to undercut the intuition driving the problem of evil, does so by placing itself beyond the limits of plausibility. The suffering of a person certainly matters to that person and, appropriately, to those who care about him.

One might respond to (C) by borrowing from Murphy's evaluation of the "no-best-world" argument championed by Rowe.[8] Murphy suggests that there is a distinction between the moral standards of an agent's actions, and evaluating the states of affairs resulting from the agent's action (39). That seems correct — at least from a non-consequentialist point of view. Perhaps fulfilling a duty results in there being less good overall. In that case, one's moral status would not diminish even though overall there is less good. Since principle (C) trades in maximal states of affairs, the distinction between evaluating actions and the resulting state of affairs evaporates. To circumvent this, Murphy adopts the idea of an "exclusionary" reason from Joseph Raz. An exclusionary reason is a second-order reason that "directs one not to treat a first-order reason as relevant in one's deliberation" (40). Suppose one is seeking to choose only the best available alternative. Suppose also that for every available alternative, there is an even better available. With these conditions in place, one will never make a choice. Consider Max the maximizer, who dies and finds himself in hell.[9] The devil offers Max a proposal — you may play a game of chance and if you win, you are out of hell and into heaven forever. If you lose, you are in hell forever. Today you have a 1/100 chance of winning. With each passing day, your chance of winning increases by a decreasing amount (tomorrow increases by 1/2, the day after 1/4, the following day 1/8, the next 1/16...). Max, being the good maximizer that he is, waits a further day to play as each passing day generates a better chance of escaping hell. This, of course, means that Max never leaves hell, as he never plays the game, always deciding to wait in order to maximize his chance of winning. An exclusionary reason applies the brakes to Max's confounding optimizing. An exclusionary reason for Max might be, roughly, disregard maximizing and instead satisfice by picking a day with odds that are good enough.

Of course, Max is not essentially a maximizer even if he always maximizes. Excluding confounding contingent reasons is one thing, but could an essentially perfect rational agent disregard (C) if it is true? Invoking the idea of an exclusionary reason tells us nothing about whether (C) is false. Being perfectly rational then, unlike Max, God could have no exclusionary reason available to release him from seeking the best if optimizing is constitutive of perfect rationality. Even if God's ethic allows minimizing the prevention of pointless suffering, God's rationality may require maximizing that prevention. Of course, if God were relatively perfect, rather than absolutely perfect, the lack of a best creatable world presents no problem.[10]

Murphy's proposal to reconfigure the theistic idea of God's ethic away from a concern with human well-being is bold and thought provoking, as he seeks, in the first part of his book, to show that God can be perfect even if God has no requiring moral reasons to prevent or mitigate the suffering of his creatures. Lacking any requiring moral reason to prevent creaturely suffering means that God's ethic is thin. That thinness is supposed to enable God to slip-by the problem of evil. I have argued however,

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7   Think here of William Hasker's argument that the class of pointless evils cannot be empty if morality is to be significant in God created world.

8   William Rowe, *Can God Be Free?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

9   I have adapted this from Edward J. Gracely's "Playing Games with Eternity: the Devil's Offer" *Analysis* 48/3 (June 1988): 113.

10   The distinction between relative-greatness and absolute-greatness might be drawn with the former as *being greater than any other possible being*, while the latter is *being greater than any possible being*. On pages 11 and 15, it looks like Murphy accepts relative-greatness, but that appearance is illusory.

that Murphy has neglected a salient feature that would impeach the claim that God could allow pointless evil and yet be absolutely perfect: the optimizing that flows out of perfect rationality. The prongs of the argument from evil are not just two-fold (perfect goodness and perfect love) but three-fold: perfect rationality along with perfect goodness and perfect love. Even if Murphy has blunted the argument from evil as regards perfect goodness and love, the atheologian is not without recourse as she can weaponize the claim that God is perfectly rational. If a world with pointless evil is worse than one relevantly similar but without, and if God must optimize, then the embers of the argument from evil are apt to flare-up again. Perfect rationality provides a base upon which the superstructure of the argument from evil can be erected, independent of any appeal to moral goodness or love.[11]

In the second part of the book, Murphy argues that the perfect being he has painted is worthy of worship and worthy of full allegiance. God could adopt, Murphy suggests, a contingent ethic and a contingent love that together would underwrite the full allegiance-worthiness of God: if God will love humans who freely subordinate their will to the divine will, and if God will ensure that every human who subordinates will have a life worth living, then God would act in a way worthy of allegiance (185-89, 195). This transactional ethic does not require that God prevent particular evils in one's life, just that one's life, as a whole, will be ultimately better than it would be if one fails to subordinate (185-6). The test that Murphy suggests for ranking possible lives is from the perspective of the agent who would self-interestedly prefer one possible life history to another (see note 2, page 185). Ironically, this test does not guarantee that one's life as a whole will be worth living, just that one will prefer it to an alternative. If faced with this choice:

F1: your money and your phone, or your life.

Or,

F2: your money, or your life.

I would choose F2, even though I would very much prefer neither. In Murphy's telling, a perfect being might present one with this choice:

G1: a life with little happiness and much pain if you subordinate your will to me.

Or,

G2: a life with no happiness and much pain if you do not.

From a self-interested perspective, with G1 and G2 as one's only options, one would prudentially select G1, even while ruefully noting that G1 might not be a life worth living. A partition of G1 and G2 fits Murphy's test, yet it seems a severely improvised partition from one who is sovereign, perfect and loving.

Consider again Murphy's ideas about God's love. God need not love any human, and God need not love every human even if God loves some, and it is up to God to decide the form of love appropriate to loving humans. God's love is conditional as God confers his love only if one subordinates his will to that of the divine. This picture of God portrays a being, who may love some of us, but who may also be indifferent to the well-being of all of us. A God who demands our worship, and yet, for all we know, stands idly by, doing nothing, even when faced with the most appalling and pointless suffering of those who have met God's demand and whom God loves. Suppose that Jones has accepted the transaction offered by God, and abides by the terms of the transaction. God would bring it about that Jones has a life that Jones would agree is a life worth living — call it L1. God could also bring it about that Jones has a life even

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11   The version of the evidential argument hinted at here does not assume or imply that there is no best of all possible worlds, or that there is. It aims at the idea of perfect rationality, by arguing that the actual world very likely contains pointless evil, and so is likely inferior to a world that a perfectly rational creator could and would have created. This then is likely not a world created by a perfectly rational creator. While not widely deployed, something like it is found in R.K. Perkins, Jr, "An Atheistic Argument from the Improvability of the Universe" *Noûs* 17/2 (1983): 239-50. Perkins however builds on the idea of God's desires and not on perfect rationality. In addition, something like it is discussed in K.J. Kraay, "Can God Satisfice?" *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2013): 399-410. Finally, something like it is critiqued in Nevin Climenhaga, "Infinite Value and the Best of All Possible Worlds" forthcoming in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

better than L1. Call that L2. The relevant difference between L1 and L2 is that the latter lacks the pointless suffering found in the former. All else is identical. Jones of course would prefer L2 to L1. Supplied with this information, we would find it surprising that Jones has suffered pointlessly — if God loves Jones, why allow Jones to suffer for no reason? Human parents, who knowingly allow their children to suffer needlessly when they could easily have prevented that suffering, we judge as deficient in love — what parent gives his child a stone when the child asks for bread? Once again, we have reason to think that God is not off the hook for allowing pointless evil even if God's ethic is not ours. In addition, we have reason for thinking that a divine love compatible with the thin ethic that Murphy allows God is too thin. A love so miserly that it lacks mercy is far from appealing. While an emaciated love might be better than no love, it is far from what one would expect in a Christian context, given the Christian teaching that God is graciously compassionate and properly addressed as "Abba, Father" by those who are Christians.

Whatever its appeal, Murphy has produced an original response to the problem of evil. A bold and sophisticated response. Anyone with an interest in the problem of evil needs to wrestle with Murphy's book.[12]