

# What Does God Aim at Maximizing?

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## **Abstract**

Standard treatments of the problem of evil assume that God aims at maximizing the surplus of good over evil. However, the God of the Bible loves particular creatures, not their sum. Hence, we must distinguish maximizing the good of each person from maximizing some sort of aggregate good. Given the incommensurability of the values involved, the very idea of maximizing the sum total of good is problematic. Moreover, given the deontic constraints involved in creation, there is no reason to believe that each beloved creature enjoys the best life possible for it, a fact relevant to our motivation for humane action.

## 1 A scope ambiguity

The standard atheological argument from evil goes something like this:

- (1) God would, if he existed, arrange the world in the best possible state he could.
- (2) The best possible state for the world that God could arrange would be one with little or no suffering or pain.
- (3) The actual state of the world includes a great deal of suffering and pain.

Therefore, God does not exist.

Most of the standard responses to the argument, including Plantinga's free will defense, have focused on premise (2). In this paper, I will be primarily challenging premise (1): questioning whether it makes any sense to suppose that God is aiming at maximizing anything on a global, as opposed to local, scale.

The maximizing assumption has generally taken the form of postulating that suffering and pain are, in and of themselves, bad things, and that a good God would be motivated to minimize the total quantity of bad things in the world, insofar as this can be done without an overriding loss of good things. Such an assumption is taken for granted by Plantinga, Swinburne, Stump, Rowe and Draper, for example.<sup>1</sup>

I believe this assumption to be in error. I am doubtful that pain, suffering and death are bad simpliciter, as opposed to bad *for* or *to* those who suffer

them. Aggregative, hedonistic utilitarianism is not even close to being the correct ethical theory. Hence, God has no special reason to aim at minimizing pain as such, or at maximizing the overall balance of pleasure over pain. All this is quite consistent with God's being perfectly loving and compassionate.

There's a scope ambiguity that is potentially confusing here:

(4) God has a reason to minimize (other things being equal) the total quantity of: bad things that happen to people.

(5) For each (actual) person  $y$ , God has a reason to minimize (other things being equal) the total quantity of bad things that happen to  $y$ .

I accept (5) but deny (4). I accept (5) even when  $y$  quantifies over sentient animals (although I think God's reasons are considerably weaker the farther down the evolutionary scale one goes). Among the other things that must be kept equal, in applying principle (5), is the actual existence of  $y$ . Principle (5) does not provide God with any reason for preventing the existence of any possible person. In order to attribute such a reason to God, we would have to assume something like (6):

(6) If  $H$  is an individual essence corresponding to the possible existence of a person, and if, in every world  $w$  actually feasible for God, the person bearing the essence  $H$  (if there is one) suffers more bad than good, then God has a reason to prevent the instantiation of  $H$  (other things being equal).

However, I have to admit that I don't find (6) compelling.

- Does God have a duty to  $H$ ?

- Can God be said to love *H*? (Remember, *H* is a mere property, corresponding to the possible existence of a particular person, not a flesh-and-blood person.)
- Is the existence of a life in which more bad is suffered than good an example of something bad simpliciter?

I don't find the Yes answers to any of these at all plausible.

## **2 An argument for the consistency of suffering with divine love**

Consider the following argument:

(7) God has good reason to bring into existence a natural world, consisting of real entities distinct from himself.

(8) It is metaphysically necessary for the existence of such a natural world that God's effective freedom of intervention in that world be severely limited.

(9) God's effective freedom of intervening in the natural world can be limited only by a binding resolution or commitment on God's part.

From (7)-(9), (10) follows:

(10) God has good reason to enter into a binding resolution that severely limits his effective freedom to intervene in the natural world.

Given (10), and given the fact that we know of no countervailing reasons why God should not enter into such binding resolution, we are in a position to assert:

(11) It is possible (epistemically speaking) that God has entered into binding resolutions that severely limit his effective freedom to intervene in the natural world.

Given our ignorance of the actual content of such prior divine resolutions, we can further conclude:

(12) It is possible (epistemically speaking), for every bad thing  $Y$  suffered by creature  $x$ , that God's prevention of  $Y$  in the circumstances would have violated a divine resolution not to intervene in the natural world in a particular way.

Thesis (12) presupposes that there is both an internal nature and a natural environment essential to each creature  $x$ , as Robert M. Adams has argued.[2] Further, I suppose that such internal natures and natural environments in many cases entail that  $x$  runs an objective risk of suffering bad things like  $Y$ . The combination of  $x$ 's internal nature,  $x$ 's natural environment, and God's non-intervention in the circumstances entails a finite probability of  $x$ 's suffering  $Y$ .

I also want to claim that (13), (14) and (15) are true:

(13) Necessarily, if God has entered into a binding resolution not to intervene in certain ways in the natural world and God had some good reason for intervening, then that resolution provides God with *overriding* moral reason not to do so.

(14) Necessarily, if person  $x$  has been created by God and God had already entered into a binding resolution not to intervene in the natural world in way  $Y$ , then God has entered into this binding resolution in any world  $w$  in which  $x$  exists.

(15) God cannot have compelling reasons for logically incompatible actions.

From (13)-(15), the following conclusion follows:

(16) Necessarily, God's love or compassion for a creature  $x$  does not provide a compelling reason for God to do anything that would violate a prior divine resolution not to intervene in the natural world in some particular way.

From (12) and (16), we can reach our ultimate conclusion:

(17) It is possible (epistemically speaking), for every bad thing  $Y$  suffered by creature  $x$ , that God's failure to prevent  $x$ 's suffering  $Y$  is consistent with God's perfect love for  $x$  (in the sense that God's love provides no compelling reason to prevent that suffering).

There is a possible line of rebuttal that needs to be considered. One could argue that God's love for his future, prospective creatures gave him compelling reason *not* to enter into binding resolutions of non-interference that would result in those creatures' suffering. This rebuttal constitutes an objection to premise (11), namely, that God had no overriding reason not to enter into such resolutions.

In response to this rebuttal, I would insist on the following principle:

(18) **The Principle of the Existential Presupposition of Love** If  $x$ 's action  $A$  is a logically necessary condition of  $y$ 's existence, then  $x$ 's doing  $A$  cannot count decisively against the claim that  $x$  loves  $y$ .

Since it is plausible that causally prior conditions are logically necessary for the existence of all actual creatures, the truth of the PEPL would guarantee that nothing causally prior to the existence of a creature could count as decisive evidence against God's love for that creature. Hence, God's love for future creatures cannot provide him with compelling reason not to enter into binding resolutions of non-interference.

Here is a simple argument for PEPL:

(19) For any compossible persons  $x$  and  $y$ , it is possible that  $x$  love  $y$

(20) Necessarily, if  $x$  loves  $y$ , then  $x$  and  $y$  both exist.

(21) If  $x$ 's doing  $A$  is a logically necessary condition of  $y$ 's existence, then  $x$  does  $y$  in any possible situation in which both  $x$  and  $y$  exist.

(22) Therefore, there is a possible situation in which  $x$  does  $A$  and  $x$  loves  $y$ .

## **2.1 Brief digression on the ethics of creation/procreation**

My position entails that God cannot show a lack of love for someone simply by failing to prevent his or her existence. That seems right to me: love presupposes its object. My action cannot be an act of love toward someone who doesn't exist. Consequently, I cannot love someone by preventing his existence. Thus, I cannot

*fail* to love by failing to prevent that existence. Similarly, one cannot fail in any duty toward a person simply by failing to prevent his existence.

Isn't there something wrong, nonetheless, with knowingly creating someone whose life (considered as a whole) is not worth living? I doubt that this supposition – namely, of a life that, taken as a whole, is not worth living – makes sense: it implies that someone could *be* better off by not existing. A non-existent thing (a thing that never did or will have existence) can't *be* anything, including better off. Either non-existence has a value utterly incommensurable to any form of existence, or it represents the absolute zero of value: the absolute privation of every value.

This is not a widely popular position (to say the least). Many take pain and suffering to represent a kind of negative value that, if great enough, would overbalance all the good enjoyed by a form of existence, bringing the total value of that form into the negative range.

This seems wrong to me: pain is a form of awareness, and awareness as such is good. Similarly for the other negative emotions, like grief and fear. They all presuppose some privation, but they are themselves of positive value.

It's impossible to harm someone *by* bringing about his existence. To harm  $x$ , one must do something that results in  $x$ 's suffering something bad. Existing is not, as such, something bad (it's at worst neutral). It is possible that one and the same action might have two distinct effects: causing  $x$  to exist, and causing  $x$  to have some accidental property  $Y$  (where  $Y$  is something bad to suffer).

However, one does not thereby harm  $x$  by causing  $x$  to exist.

I also concede that the following is possible: that for some  $x$ , it is impossible for  $x$  to exist except under circumstances  $C$ ,  $y$  causes both  $C$  and  $x$ 's existence, and  $C$  causes  $x$  to suffer something bad. In such a case,  $y$  has indeed harmed  $x$  – not by causing  $x$  to exist, but through something that was a necessary condition of  $x$ 's existence. Consequently, it is possible for God to be responsible (indirectly) for some harm to one of his creatures, even if it was metaphysically impossible for that creature to exist and not suffer that harm.

However, is it possible to wrong someone, or to act with less than perfect love toward someone, in such a way? No. In evaluating whether one has harmed or acted unlovingly toward someone, we have to refer to some kind of counterfactual baseline. (More precisely, to establish a wrong we need to show *both* that one has caused a harm *and* that one has thereby worsened the victim's condition, relative to the baseline.) If it is impossible for  $x$  to exist except under conditions  $C$ , then there is no possible baseline for  $x$  that excludes  $C$ . Thus, it is impossible to wrong someone, or to show less than exemplary love toward him, by causing conditions that are metaphysically necessary for his existence.

What about parents who knowingly procreate a child with a fatal and painful genetic malady? Let's suppose, as seems plausible, that that very child could not have existed except with the malady in question. I'm willing to bite the bullet: the parents do not wrong, and show no lack of love toward, the child by procreating him. The measure of the parents' love will lie in how much they

care for the child – how well they manage to maximize the child’s happiness. If the parents in question lived on an isolated island (so their child will not be a burden to anyone else, and so they have no obligations to third parties that might be short-changed by their care for their child), then they do nothing wrong in knowingly procreating in this way. Indeed, it might be a morally exemplary act. What makes doing so wrong in many cases is the effect (including indirect and negative effects) on third parties. The parents could have used their time, resources and energies to help already-existing people in need, and there is little prospect in such a case that the child they procreate will be able to make a net contribution to meeting those same needs.

## **2.2 Miracles and answered prayer**

Does the assumption that God has entered into binding resolutions of non-interference force us into a position of *deism*, i.e., the thesis that God has enacted inexorable and all-encompassing laws of nature that rule out the possibility of miracles or divine interventions? Do such prior resolutions rule out the possible efficacy of intercessory prayers? I would argue that the answer is No.

The creation of a real world of entities distinct from God requires that divine intervention in that world be the exception rather than the rule, but it does not require that all intervention be excluded. We can coherently imagine the following situation: God has entered, prior to the creation, into binding resolutions that prevent his intervening for the sake of the relief of pain and suf-

fering, unless certain special conditions are met. These special conditions might include the need to validate certain revelatory messengers (that is, prophets and apostles). The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ would almost certainly constitute a special condition, permitting a cluster of miracles to surround his life. Finally, intercessory prayers of certain kinds might meet a further special condition licensing divine intervention.

In other words, these binding resolutions of non-interference might include loopholes and codicils that permit a limited range of divine intervention. It is plausible, I think, that if such loopholes exist, God would not choose to reveal to us, in exhaustive detail, what are those special conditions that trigger intervention. To do so would be to abdicate a considerable degree of control over the world to his creatures, and it would probably be inconsistent with the sort of divine hiddenness that God is careful to maintain in the present age. Furthermore, by leaving us in ignorance about when and how such answers to prayer might be expected, God encourages us to intercede in all circumstances and to cultivate trust and patience in awaiting answers.

### **3 Creating the “best” possible world**

The argument from evil comes in two forms: the argument that the existence of suffering is inconsistent with God’s love for or duty toward the sufferer (addressed in the preceding section), and the argument that the existence of evil

of any kind is inconsistent with this being the “best” world God could actualize. This latter argument is not concerned so much with God’s morality as his rationality:

- A perfect creator would aim at the best creation and would be able to effect it.
- Since this is obviously not the best world God could make, there must be no God.

### **3.1 Infinite series**

A standard objection to this is given (probably for the first time) by Aquinas, who suggests that there may be no best world, only an infinite ascending series of better and better worlds. However, as J. Howard Sobel points out, this is still problematic for the theist.<sup>[9]</sup> One could argue, on Leibnizian grounds, that if there were no best possible world, this would provide good a priori grounds for supposing God’s existence to be impossible:

(23) If there is a perfect being, he would choose a best possible action.

(24) If there is no best possible action, then no one can choose a best possible action.

(25) Hence, there is no perfect being. I.e., God does not exist.

### 3.2 Infinite values

Suppose that all worlds have values that are mutually commensurable. Suppose further (as Aquinas proposed) that there are no best worlds – each world belongs to an infinite series of better and better worlds. Sobel explores an interesting possibility: could God be conceived as adopting the so-called “mixed strategies” of mathematical game theory? Instead of deciding to actualize one particular world, God could choose to actualize a probabilistic spread over an infinite set of worlds? Such a probabilistic strategy could have an infinite expected value. For example, suppose there were a series of possible worlds  $w_1, w_2, \dots$ , where each world is at least twice as valuable as its immediate predecessor. For such a series, the following “mixed strategy” would have an infinite expected value:

- With probability  $\frac{1}{2}$ , create world  $w_1$ .
- With probability  $\frac{1}{4}$ , create world  $w_2$ .
- With probability  $\frac{1}{8}$ , create world  $w_3$ .

In the general case:

- With probability  $\frac{1}{2^n}$ , create world  $w_n$ .

The value of each world  $n$  can be expressed as equal to at least  $2^n \times v$ . Hence, for each world  $n$ , the expected value of the mixed strategy limited just to the prospect of creating that world is  $\frac{1}{2^n} \times 2^n \times v$ , or simply  $v$ . Since there

are infinitely many worlds that may be created, the total expected value of the strategy is infinite.

However, as J. Howard Sobel has pointed out, this doesn't avoid the Leibnizian dilemma, since there are infinitely many such strategies, and some seem to be "better" than others. Indeed, each strategy can apparently be bettered, simply by shifting some of the probability from worse to better worlds.

This could perhaps be denied by denying that a rational agent would prefer one strategy to another, so long as both afford infinite expected value. We could argue by a kind of analogy from Cantorian set theory: just as two infinite sets can be of the same size, even when one is a proper subset of the other, so too two strategies with infinite expected value can have the same value, even if one consistently assigns higher probabilities to better worlds.

A similar issue arises if (contrary to the Aristotelian prohibition of actual infinities) we suppose that God could create an actually infinite universe. Should we say that any two universes are equally good, so long as each includes value of infinite quantity? There are considerations that press both directions. On the one hand, Savage's principle of dominance seems plausible: if world  $A$  contains every particular value contained in  $B$ , and  $A$  contains further values not contained in  $B$ , it seems very plausible to suppose that  $A$  should be preferred to  $B$ .<sup>[7]</sup> However, in such a case it might be possible to map the values in  $A$  one-to-one onto equivalent values in  $B$  (which could happen, given the infinity of the two sets of values), and so it seems plausible to suppose that  $A$  need not

be preferred to *B*.

The upshot of all these may be that any two worlds containing values of infinitely great quantity are of equal value, as are any two mixed creative strategies with infinite expected value. This would mean that “improving” such a world at this or that point would have absolutely no effect on the world’s total value. Hence, the apparent improvability of the actual world at this or that point would be no evidence for God’s irrationality or moral defectiveness in actualizing this world (given the possibility that this world contains infinitely many goods, or that this world’s creation might have been the result of an infinitary mixed strategy on God’s part).

### 3.3 Incommensurable values

The violation of Savage’s dominance principle argued for in the last section can be generalized by adopting a thesis proposed by Austin Farrer: viz., that the world does not exist.<sup>[4]</sup> At least, it does not exist as a substance or organic whole, as a bearer (in its own right) of value. God does not aim at actualizing a world: he simply creates things. A perfect being creates only good things – things created for good purposes. However, it is simply a mistake to think that any value whatsoever can be assigned to the *totality* of things God does (even if such a mereological sum were to exist, in some sense). There is no reason to think that this totality corresponds to a single intentional object: that this world, as a whole, was in any sense chosen or intended by God.

Each individual action of God is improvable, in the sense that a better action could have been performed in its place. The atheologian might try to employ Sobel's Leibnizian argument here: a perfect being would perform only best possible actions, there are no best possible actions, and therefore no perfect being can exist.

This isn't an irresistible argument, but it does seem to have some force. The best response would seem to be to argue that many divine actions count as "best", due to the widespread phenomenon of the *incommensurability of value* (a thesis ably defended years ago by Isaiah Berlin [3]). Even if, in some sense, humans are ontologically superior to earthworms, and archangels to humans, the acts of creating an earthworm, a human or an archangel could involve incommensurable values. There are always some respects in which the earthworm is greater than the human, or the human greater than the archangel.

Incommensurability entails that the relation of 'better than' is only a partial ordering – transitive and irreflexive, but not connected. It is not a linear ordering. This means that if  $A$  and  $B$  are both "best" actions, and  $B$  is better than  $C$ , it does not follow that  $A$  is better than  $C$ .  $A$  and  $C$ , like  $A$  and  $B$ , may be incommensurable.

Each world God actualizes consists in a vast number (perhaps even an infinite number) of such "best" actions – each action incommensurable in value to its relevant alternatives. Consequently, two worlds consisting entirely of such "best" actions will be incommensurable as well. If worlds were substances or

organic wholes, this argument would be guilty of the fallacy of composition. Composition is no fallacy when applied to mere aggregates. In other words, I claim that something like the following are plausible:

(26) The values of divine actions are often mutually incommensurable, and the value ranking of such actions is at best a partial ordering.

(27) The individual divine actions of creating and sustaining the substances of our world are all plausibly "best" divine actions (in light of (26)).

(28) An aggregate of best divine actions is a best aggregate of divine actions (given the non-existence of the world as an organic unity).

(29) Hence, the actual world constitutes a best creation.

Of these, thesis (27) is most subject to plausible challenge. One might argue that the divine actions sustaining states of pain and suffering are obviously not *best actions*. In some such cases (especially involving the suffering of children), it might seem obvious that the divine action sustaining the event could be replaced by an action better in some respects and at least as good in all respects: simply replace the actual created state with one lacking the privation corresponding to pain and suffering. However, there are at least two reasons why this pair of actions could be incommensurable:

(a) The substitution of wholeness for suffering would involve the violation of some law of nature (i.e., would involve some creature acting or reacting in a way contrary to its essence), and there is an intrinsic value to the maintenance of a simple and regular natural order in things.

(b) As I argued in section 1 above, the substitution might involve the abrogation of a divine commitment to maintaining the natural order in all but a few, special kinds of circumstances.

Suppose the relevant laws of nature (and principles of significant moral freedom) are essentially probabilistic in nature, in such a way that each substitution would, taken by itself, not involve any violation of law. Would this make a difference? I think not. First, for God to bring about a pain-free state with certainty in circumstances demanding the finite probability of pain is to violate the relevant law of nature. Probabilistic laws of nature require God to respect the single-case probabilities, just as deterministic laws require God to avoid deviations from the determined result. Second, God's commitment to non-intervention provides a value to all the states permitted by the probabilistic law, a value that renders the value of the acts of sustaining each of those states mutually incommensurable.

### **3.4 Why create mortal and vulnerable creatures?**

It's undeniable that God knowingly brought into being creatures who are mortal and vulnerable to suffering and harm (both physical and emotional). No doubt this could have been prevented: God could have tweaked the initial conditions in such a way that the only sentient creatures who eventuated were immortal and absolutely invulnerable. Such creatures would be, in some respects, more desirable or worthy of existence than are human beings, since they would be

incapable of certain kinds of privation. However, there are other real values that would of necessity be lacking in such a world: what J. L. Mackie called the “second-order values” of kindness, mercy, forbearance, courage, self-sacrifice, patience and fortitude. Consequently, we cannot say that there is anything irrational or wrong about God’s bringing vulnerable creatures like us into existence.

What about *specific forms* of vulnerability? Wouldn’t the world be a better place if there were no tornados or smallpox virus? Surely God could have prevented these things from occurring (once again, by suitable tweaking of the initial conditions). Would the world clearly have been, in every relevant respect, a better world without these possibilities? There is no way of knowing. Given that there is reason for some kind of vulnerability, why not these? Moreover, I think it is quite plausible that the *we* could not have existed in a world in which tornados and smallpox were impossible. This is so if we accept the possibility of Kripkean origins essentialism.[6] Had the world been so structured to make such things as tornados impossible, then it would have been significantly different at the time of my conception. Hence, any person who would have been conceived in such a world couldn’t have been me. Thus, God showed no lack of love for me in failing to prevent these specific vulnerabilities.

Note that I’m not saying that tornados or smallpox are good things: that without them the world would be a poorer place. I’m only saying that (for all we know) the world would not be a better place without the *real possibility* of

such things. This sort of theodicy avoids the disastrous consequence of many greater-good theodicies: it doesn't entail that what appear to be evils are really indispensable parts of a larger and greater good. Such theodicies generate the sort of dilemma faced by the priest in Camus's *The Plague*: how can one fight specific evils without intending to impoverish the world of the corresponding good? In fact, some theodicies (I think Marilyn Adams's and Eleonore Stump's approach this – [1] and [10]) imply that every bad thing that happens to any person is really an indispensable part of a greater good for that very person. This would mean that our obligation to relieve suffering is totally divorced from our obligation to care about the total welfare of others. This just seems wrong: I want to relieve someone's suffering precisely because I care about their welfare, and I believe the suffering to be a net minus for the sufferer's well-being.

I am happy to concede (as the apostle Paul puts it in the 8th chapter of Romans) that God will bring some good (for every beloved person) out of every evil. This does not entail that every evil occurs *for the best* of the person involved: that preventing the evil would have worsened the person's condition, all things considered.

### **3.5 Incommensurable value and the humanitarian impulse**

This raises an interesting problem about value in general, one of importance beyond this special context. Robert M. Adams has discussed the case of Helen Keller, who came to value features of her life that presupposed her blindness

and deafness, in such a way that she could not regret that she had not been cured as a child.[2] Suppose I have a blind and deaf child, and the opportunity to heal her immediately. Should I hesitate to do so, on the grounds that, if I do not, the child will grow to appreciate good things in her life for which her continued handicap would be a necessary condition?

My own reaction would be to say No, and yet I don't think that Helen Keller was simply wrong to find great value in the way of life she led, value that would have been unavailable in a seeing and hearing life. The thesis of the existence of incommensurable values would seem relevant here. Helen Keller's adult life is neither determinately better nor determinately worse nor determinately exactly as good as the life of a seeing and hearing person. Her life contained goods that were incommensurable with many of those in a normal life.

In making decisions about people we love (including ourselves) it seems to me that we give a certain priority to short-term advantages: a kind of pure time preference (as the economists put it). At the same time, I don't want to deny that it would be irrational to sacrifice a long-term advantage for a smaller short-term gain. However, if the possible long-term consequences involve sets of mutually incommensurable values, then it seems to me that we allow short-term dominance to trump long-term incommensurability. Here's my suggestion:

(29) Action  $x$  is rationally compulsory for  $y$  (from the perspective of prudence) iff there is some time  $t$  of such a kind that:

- the expected value of  $x$  for  $y$  relative to  $t$  is strictly better than the ex-

pected value, relative to  $t$ , of any alternative to  $x$ , and:

- there is no later time  $t'$  of such a kind that the expected value for  $y$ , relative to  $t'$ , of some alternative to  $x$  is as good as (commensurable with and not worse than) the expected value relative to  $t'$  of  $x$  itself.

I'm supposing that, in the short term, the seeing and hearing life clearly dominates the blind and deaf life, and that, in the long term, the two lives are incommensurable (that there is no time at which the blind and deaf life is commensurate with and as good as the life without handicaps). Consequently, love for the child dictates seeking a cure, even though the handicapped adult can legitimately deny that the handicap-free life would have been objectively preferable to her own.

If there are such incommensurable long-term consequences, what would be the relevance of this fact to the problem of evil? We have to consider two questions:

- A. Can a loving God permit his beloved creatures to suffer?
- B. Can a morally good and rational God create a world for which the expectation of the existence of suffering is quite high?

The incommensurability thesis would, on my view, be of little help in answering question A, since the short-term consequences of suffering are determinately bad for the sufferer, and this fact should trump any incommensurable long-term consequences. So, we would still need some further justification for God's

non-intervention. However, the incommensurability thesis seems very relevant to question B, since this is a question about the total, infinite-long-run value of the creation as a whole. Given the incommensurable values involved, we simply cannot say that it would be wrong or immoral for God to create a world involving suffering and affliction.

Let's return, then, to the question of God's love for individual creatures. If we are to avoid the paralysis of humanitarianism, it would seem that we must deny the epistemic possibility of goods (either for the sufferer himself or for the totality of persons) that would trump the badness of the continued suffering. It must be, at least in general, better both for the sufferer and for the world as whole, that the suffering should be relieved as quickly as possible. How, then, to explain God's inaction? The possible values involved must be agent-centered values: that is, they must concern the value of God's acting or not acting to relieve the suffering in question, not the value of the consequences themselves.

I've already floated a hypothesis according to which God's inaction in the face of suffering is to be understood as a consequence of prior, binding commitments of some kind. Alvin Plantinga would take the view, I think, that such a thing is indeed possible, although not the only epistemic possibility. It may be that God's action is constrained by some agent-centered value or norm of which we have little or no conception. I'll concede that, although the fact that the values or norms must be agent-centered, rather than result-centered, means that we are somewhere in the neighborhood of a deontic constraint. Given God's

sovereignty as first cause, it is hard to imagine any such deontic constraint except as somehow self-imposed.

## 4 Which ethical theory?

If hedonistic utilitarianism were the true ethical theory, then we would have conclusive reason to deny God's moral goodness. It would be hopeless to claim that an omnipotent being couldn't arrange a better surplus of pleasure over pain than is realized in the actual world. Defenders of God's goodness will, invariably, reject hedonistic utilitarianism.

It's ironic that, despite the fact that utilitarianism and other forms of maximizing consequentialism have been subjected to withering critique (by Bernard Williams, virtue ethicists, neo-Kantians and others), the discussions within philosophy of religion (including the recent book on *The Evidential Argument from Evil* [5]) continue to take the truth of this sort of theory for granted.

Which ethical theory should be relied upon in constructing an argument for evil? If the argument of evil is a deductive argument charging a particular theology with inconsistency, then the ethical premises of that argument must be drawn from that theology itself. Alternatively, if the argument from evil is part of the enterprise of natural theology, then we should rely on whatever we take to be the correct ethical theory.

In the first case, there is nothing ad hoc about the rejection of the rejection

of the ethic of maximization on the part of Christians, Jews or Muslims. Such an ethic has never been part of these traditions. The ethics of Western theism tend to be deontic, with the possible addition of a concern for the purity of intention and a person-centered ethic of love. None of these translates directly into a divine obligation to minimize suffering, or to maximize the sum total of happiness. Such ethics of maximization are fundamentally impersonal in character (as Bernard Williams has forcefully argued): they treat individual human beings as mere containers of the stuff that really matters (namely, pleasure and pain, desire-satisfaction and frustration, etc.). This is a profoundly unbiblical perspective, having more to do with classical economics and Benthamite psychology than moral theology.

Within the enterprise of natural theology, there is no reason to give priority either to ethical or to metaphysical theory. If a theory of metaphysics implies that God is good in a way that clearly contradicts a clear and definite datum of morality, then we should reject that metaphysical theory. However, if the metaphysical theory contradicts some tenet of our favored ethical theory (including some principle of maximization), then we face a choice between revising two theories, and this decision should be based upon which theory has the strongest base of support, all things considered. In some cases, this might be the metaphysical theory.

## 5 Maximization and rationality

What, then, does God aim at maximizing? At the global level, I think the answer is, Nothing. As a lover of individual creatures, God aims at maximizing their (near-term) welfare, but this aim is constrained by the necessary conditions of the existence of those creatures, and God's aim of maximizing the welfare of each creature is restrained by his aim of maximizing the welfare of others. This make sense, since maximization is possible only where there is restraint. As the omnipotent creator of the world, God encounters no constraints and so cannot be thought of as maximizing anything.

Why have so many philosophers simply assumed that God must have some aim of global maximization? My answer is a highly speculative one, but I think it has something to do with the development of maximization of expected return as the model of rationality during the emergence of capitalistic organization in the early modern era. With the development of double-entry bookkeeping and the rationalization of investment, a certain conception of rationality took hold. Just as the rational investor is aiming at the maximization of total return on his investment, so all rational agents must be aiming at the maximization of their total expected utility.

As a matter of fact, this maximizing model is of limited application to human agents, as Herbert Simon has convincingly argued. [8] Because human rationality and time are necessarily limited, seeking the optimal solution to each problem is impractical. Instead, agents with bounded rationality reasonably

seek *satisficing*, good-enough solutions to their problems.

A similar conclusion can be reached in God's case, not because God's rationality is limited, but because his power is unlimited. Ab initio, God aims at maximizing nothing, but simply at creating and sustaining good things. This he has clearly done. It makes no sense to demand more.

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, their essays in the collection *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. [5]

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