

GOD AND THE PROBLEM OF BLAMELESS MORAL IGNORANCE

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A morally perfect God necessarily desires that all rational agents behave morally. An omnipotent and omniscient God has the power and knowledge to ensure that all rational agents have sufficient moral knowledge to do what morality requires. So, if God exists, there are no rational moral agents who lack sufficient moral knowledge to act morally. However, there has been a wide range of moral agents who, without blame, have lacked the moral knowledge to behave morally. Therefore, God does not exist. The preceding argument from non-blameable moral ignorance of our fundamental moral obligations is resistant to some of the standard theistic responses to the problem of evil and divine hiddenness. Moreover, some of the standard theistic responses to the traditional arguments for God's non-existence lend support to the argument from blameless moral ignorance.

1. Introduction

An omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly moral God could create rational agents with adequate moral knowledge to do what is moral. And, it seems such a God would do so as well. A god who creates rational agents who fail to fulfill their fundamental moral obligations because of a non-culpable lack of moral knowledge is not perfectly moral. There is no morally sufficient reason to create conditions in which moral agents strive to do what morality requires yet behave in seriously immoral ways through no fault of their own. Such agents do not become metaphysically freer, or gain in libertarian free-will, by acting immorally due to moral ignorance. While it is true that agents who are unsure of their moral obligations are freer in the sense of having more options in front of them, this is not a morally valuable type of freedom since it is morally uninformed.

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Nor is it the case that moral ignorance is a necessary precondition of moral knowledge. Thus, a perfectly moral God would create rational agents for whom moral knowledge is available unless they render such knowledge inaccessible to themselves through some moral or cognitive failing for which they, but not God, are responsible.

Nevertheless, non-culpable instances of moral ignorance do exist and are, in fact, common. There are two possible sources of authoritative moral knowledge: revelation and secular moral reason. However, both are unreliable. For example, secular moral thinkers, as well as those who appeal to revealed moral truths, hold or have held incompatible moral positions, on abortion, capital punishment, assisted suicide, torture, economic justice, slavery, monogamy, woman's suffrage, homosexuality, democracy, and religious freedom. It is implausible to attribute all of the differences of opinion to deficiencies of character or a culpable unwillingness to investigate the relevant factual, moral, or religious issues. Even those Christians united by a shared belief in the "great things of the Gospel" are divided by conflicting revelations on moral positions.¹ As we shall see, the history of those incompatible moral claims concerning what God has revealed to us makes it highly unlikely some Christians but not others are morally at fault for believing non-veridical revelations.²

An omniscient and omnipotent God could create rational agents who never stumble into evil as a result of a non-culpable lack of knowledge of what morality requires. A just God necessarily desires to create agents with an adequate understanding of what morality requires. Thus, if God exists, all rational agents not responsible for character or cognitive defects that prevent them from acquiring moral knowledge have such knowledge. Nevertheless, there exist some rational agents that non-culpably lack adequate moral knowledge. Thus, God does not exist.

2. An Initial Statement of the Problem of Blameless Moral Ignorance

People often do what they know to be wrong because they believe it is in their interest. It is also clear that at least some people have false beliefs about what fundamental moral obligations they have. What is contested is whether people

1. Plantinga (2000: 423) follows Johnathan Edwards in using the phrase "great things of the Gospel" to refer to the core beliefs of Christians, principally contained in "such propositions as *God created the world* and *Christ's suffering and death are an atonement for human sin* are true."

2. In this paper, I focus on secular moral disagreements and moral disagreements arising within the Christian tradition. While it would be ideal to show that the same holds for the Jewish and Islamic traditions, the argument is successful without demonstrating inconsistent moral revelations within those traditions as well.

are always responsible for having mistaken moral beliefs. If they are, then the great evils they do flow from those false beliefs culpably held. However, if people sometimes make “innocent” mistakes in what they believe—as they do in every other area of human life—then in those cases, those people are not blameable for the evil that they do. If they were conscientious moral enquirers, who, through no fault of their own, held false moral beliefs because of non-culpable moral ignorance, then they would have done what morality required if only they had known the truth. In these cases, who is responsible for the evil that they did—them or God? It cannot be them since they are not at fault for their mistaken moral beliefs. But it cannot be God since God is morally perfect.

The foregoing line of thought leads us to the following argument:

- (P1) If a perfectly moral God exists, then there is a perfectly moral God who wants all rational agents to be moral.
- (P2) If there is a perfectly moral God who wants all rational agents to be moral, then all non-blameable rational agents have sufficient moral knowledge to guide their actions regarding fundamental moral issues.
- (P3) If a perfectly moral God exists, then all non-blameable rational agents have sufficient moral knowledge to guide their actions regarding fundamental moral issues (from P1 and P2).
- (P4) It is not the case that all non-blameable rational agents have sufficient moral knowledge to guide their actions regarding fundamental moral issues.
- (C1) A perfectly moral God does not exist (from P3 and P4).³

Before beginning an extended defense of (P1), (P2), and (P4), it will be helpful to provide a preliminary justification of these three premises. In the preceding argument, (P1) is true since a God who does not desire that people do what is morally required is not a moral god. Any agent, finite or infinite, who desires to do what is moral also desires that others do what is moral, and not just her or himself. We ought to accept (P2) since intentionally doing what morality requires presupposes that we know what is morally right. However, we do not always know what our fundamental moral obligations are even if we assiduously seek them out. For example, the history of Christianity provides empirical grounds for thinking (P4) is true. It is not the case that all those who sincerely seek to know and do what morality requires always know what is morally good. For example, some Christians believe that God revealed in the Bible that slavery was always morally wrong (Stark 2003: 482–83). On the other hand, many

3. This argument parallels, and is indebted to, Schellenberg’s (2015) argument from Divine Hiddenness against theistic belief.

prominent figures in Christianity's history and development believed that slavery was sometimes morally permissible. These include St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Aquinas, several popes who owned slaves, as well as Protestant luminaries like Luther and Calvin.⁴ Presumably, all qualify as sincere Christians, but not all of them can be right in their position on slavery. Assuming that one is not morally or epistemically culpable for relying on the Bible in the first place, it is implausible to suppose that one group of Christians is guilty of motivated irrationality in light of the sincerity and character of those with opposing Biblical interpretations regarding the moral standing of slavery. The upshot is that if one is not morally at fault for believing that the Bible is the word of God (even if the belief is mistaken), then one is not at fault for getting slavery wrong based upon a reading of the Bible. (P4) is true even of those who rely on revelation as a guide to fundamental moral issues. And, as we will see in Section 5, there are many other examples of blameless moral ignorance both in Christianity and in secular moral thought.

3. A Defense of (P1)

If rational moral agents have a fundamental moral obligation to perform or refrain from performing an action X, then they ought to desire to do or refrain from doing X. However, if some version of moral objectivism is true, then since morality at least involves treating like cases alike, a rational moral agent desires that other free, rational agents also do what morality requires. But it follows that God desires all rational agents to be moral, since God is a perfectly rational moral agent.

Notice as well that an analysis of our moral obligations which finds their source in God's commands is also committed to the truth of (P1). It is a performative self-contradiction to simultaneously give someone a command with the intention of having them obey it and not want them to obey it.

Someone might grant that while God might generally desire that rational moral agents act morally, there are instances when God would not desire that a rational moral agent do what morality requires because doing so would be pointless. Molinists believe that it can both be the case that rational agents have libertarian free will and that God can foresee what they would choose to do in any set of circumstances before the choice is made. If Molinism is true, then it appears it could both be the case that an agent has a moral obligation and that God might not want them to fulfill it because he already knows that they will not do so under any circumstances. If the agent in question will freely choose to

4. See Cardinal Dulles (2005: para. 5).

violate an important moral obligation in the future no matter what happens, then on this view God will not now desire them to fulfill it since it is impossible for the desire to be fulfilled. According to this objection, (P₁) is false because Molinism is true, and God will not formulate desires that will inevitably be frustrated.

Molinism is controversial, and (P₁) might be defended by showing that Molinism is false. However, any adequate discussion of Molinism's truth is beyond the scope of this paper and would move far afield from the main line of argument presented here. But even if Molinism is true, it does not establish the falsity of (P₁). The difficulty with the argument from Molinism against (P₁) is that it hinges not just on the truth of Molinism but also on the claim that God does not have desires which cannot be fulfilled. In any case in which God judges that someone ought to have done what morality required in the past even though they did not, God desires that they acted other than they did. Such a desire is permanently frustrated since the past cannot be changed. Assume for the sake of argument that Molinism is true. Looking back, God can desire that a finite agent do other than what they did; similarly, looking forward, God can desire that a finite agent do other than what they inevitably (though freely) will. Cases where God desires that some agents fulfilled their moral obligations even though they did not parallel cases where God desires that some agents will do what they are morally obligated to do even while knowing they will not. Since God desires that immoral agents do other than they did, God also desires that the totally depraved do other than what they inevitably will. This Molinist objection fails.⁵

Nevertheless, someone might object to (P₁) on the grounds that God could have morally sufficient reasons for not wanting rational agents to always do what morality requires whether or not God can foresee all of their choices. Skeptical theists claim that God, if God exists, is likely to know of goods of which we are ignorant, which justify the existence of a variety of evils. For example, even though the suffering of children dying from cancer may seem gratuitous to us, a perfectly moral God could have some larger purpose for allowing such suffering, which is unknown to us. Similarly, someone might object that God would not have an all-things-considered desire that agents do what is moral in those cases in which some great good can be brought about only if they do what is immoral.

But this skeptical theist objection to (P₁) is not successful. The good in question is either a moral or a non-moral good. On the one hand, a god who wants finite rational agents to do what is immoral to achieve a non-moral good is not morally perfect. On the other hand, a state of affairs in which there is a morally sufficient good that justifies that a moral obligation not be fulfilled cannot occur. An example will help make this point clear. Suppose someone mistakenly

5. A second Molinist objection to (P₂) will be raised and responded to in Section 4.

believes that slavery is morally permissible in some particular circumstances. There cannot be a morally sufficient good that justifies slavery in this case since, if there were, slavery would be morally permissible, and the belief that it is morally permissible would be true. Either there is a morally sufficient good achieved by allowing slavery, and it is not morally impermissible, or it is morally impermissible, and there is no morally sufficient good achieved by allowing it to occur.

Other theists might raise a similar objection to (P₁) on the grounds that reason is an inadequate tool for knowing what an infinite Being would desire.⁶ Here the idea is that an infinite Being so transcends our experience and abilities to reason that while we can say, for example, that God loves us, we are wrong to think that we can know on our own what this implies. On this view, we should limit our understanding of what God desires of us to what is revealed in the Bible. Thus, we should reject any attempted defense of (P₁) which relies on reason alone to determine what God might or might not want.

The difficulty with this objection to (P₁) is that revelation provides us with adequate grounds for accepting (P₁). Consider the following verses:

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, "YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY." (1 Peter 1:15–16)

The Bible implies that God wants us not only to do what morality requires in general, but to be morally perfect. As we shall see in the next section, the Bible's assertion that God desires that we always act morally also indicates that (P₂) is true as well.

4. A Defense of (P₂)

We saw in Section 3 that God desires us to be moral. But the desire to be moral is thwarted if we do not know what morality requires. It would be contradictory for God both to have an all-things-considered desire that we do what is good and make it impossible for us to know what is good. It would also be irrational and unjust for God both to desire for us to fulfill our fundamental moral obligations at time T₁ and make it such that we do not know what those obligations are at T₁, even though we might come to know what morality requires of us at some later time T₂. A precondition of non-accidentally doing what is right is

6. See Michael Rea (2018: Chapter 4, Section 2, para. 5).

knowing what is right. The desire to have rational agents be moral is not simply the desire that a particular action is done; it is also the desire that the action is done because the agent performing the action is aiming at being moral. Thus, we have a preliminary reason for believing that (P2) is true.

However, (P2) is qualified to make it weaker than the requirement that all rational agents have sufficient moral knowledge to always do what is right. It only states that all rational agents have sufficient moral knowledge to do what is right in cases of fundamental moral importance. It is not obvious that it is morally important to know whether or not it is wrong to lie in every instance. Whether lying to one's elderly uncle about the attractiveness of his mismatched plaid golfing attire is morally permissible may not, for instance, be that morally important. Even if telling such a lie is morally wrong, it is probably not gravely so.⁷ Another qualification in (P2) requires defense. It may be the case that people are sometimes responsible for their moral ignorance. For example, they may ignore evidence available to them or fail to seek out evidence they have a strong reason for thinking exists. We need not decide here whether or not a just God would make *all* of our fundamental moral obligations blindingly obvious. It is enough to argue that a just God would make sufficient evidence for knowledge of fundamental moral issues like slavery, economic justice, abortion, and divorce readily available to those who sincerely seek to do what morality requires.

Someone might argue that (P2) is not true since it would preclude the good of spiritual development, which involves a transition from moral ignorance to moral knowledge. However, while it is morally good to transition from moral ignorance to moral knowledge, this does not imply that beginning from moral knowledge is not morally preferable to beginning from a state of moral ignorance. It is not an implication of deontological, consequentialist, or even teleological ethical theories that it is morally preferable for moral agents to begin moral reflection from a state of either partial or total moral ignorance. Nor do divine command theories imply that it is morally preferable for finite agents to begin in a non-blameworthy state of moral ignorance. Besides, a just agent would not impose great undeserved suffering on one person to advance the moral development of another. Thus, it is both the case that standard ethical theories do not imply that beginning from moral ignorance is morally preferable, and there is

7. The relevant distinction here is between those moral issues which are trivial enough that a perfectly moral God would reasonably leave us in non-culpable ignorance of the relevant moral truths and those that are not. To make this paper more readable, I have alternated between speaking of "moral knowledge of issues of fundamental moral importance," "fundamental moral obligations," and more imprecisely "doing what morality requires." However, my intention is to focus on moral knowledge of fundamental as opposed to trivial moral truths. The argument from blameless moral ignorance is not dependent upon how that distinction is drawn, but only that some such distinction is reasonable.

good reason to think a just God would create a world in which finite rational agents are aware of their fundamental moral obligations.

We saw in Section 3 that there are several Biblical verses which strongly imply that God wants us to be moral in all of our actions. But these verses also imply that we have complete moral knowledge of our fundamental moral obligations. We cannot aim at being perfectly good unless we know what it is to be moral in its entirety. Nor can we “be holy . . . in *all*” our behavior without complete moral knowledge. These passages strongly imply that (P2) is true since it does not require we know all moral truths. (P2) only requires that we have knowledge of our fundamental moral obligations rather than all of them. Thus, given the argument so far, taking the Bible to be the revealed word of God leads us to accept two of the three non-derived premises of an argument whose logical conclusion is that God does not exist.⁸

Some might object that (P2) is false because we are social creatures who acquire much of our knowledge, moral or otherwise, by relying on the testimony of others. Since people tend to believe what others around them believe, or what those in positions of authority tell them is true, many people may acquire false moral beliefs in a morally blameless way. The intuition behind this objection is that if we sometimes acquire false beliefs about the physical world, for example, in a morally and epistemically blameless way by relying on other people’s testimony, we could do so as well with regard to morality. For finite rational social agents, basing beliefs on the testimony of others is a highly efficient way of acquiring knowledge, even if it sometimes leads to people holding false beliefs.

This objection overlooks that God is not faced with a choice between ensuring that sincere, responsible, rational agents acquire knowledge of their fundamental moral obligations and eliminating all knowledge acquisition via testimony. For example, it seems possible that each diligent agent who wants to do what morality requires discovers what their fundamental moral obligations are by reasoning their way to the truth on their own. Having powers of reason about morality that could override others’ mistaken moral beliefs would not preclude relying on testimony in other areas of inquiry. In other words, reason might have been a sufficiently robust method of moral belief acquisition to allow sincere moral inquirers to overcome living in a morally corrupt social environment. Alternatively, God might have provided each sincere moral agent a faculty—for example, a conscience—which would provide each such moral agent with a non-inferential awareness of their fundamental moral obligations. Finally, God might provide knowledge of fundamental moral obligations resistant to the influence of living in a society where mistaken moral beliefs are widespread

8. The argument from blameless moral ignorance becomes a *reductio ad absurdum* when we begin with the assumption that God exists and that the Bible is the revealed word of God.

via revelation. Indeed, not only might God have provided each such agent with one or all of these means of acquiring moral knowledge without relying solely or primarily on the testimony of other finite agents, many Christians believe that God has done so. The question of whether all epistemically and morally responsible rational agents know their fundamental moral obligations is addressed in the defense of (P₄).

Before turning to an examination of (P₄), we need to consider Molinism once again. Some Molinists might object to (P₂) even granting that God desires that finite rational agents do what morality requires. On this objection, God might both want rational agents to do what is moral but fail to provide the requisite moral knowledge to them, knowing that they will choose to do what is immoral whether or not they are ignorant of their fundamental moral obligations. However, what this objection overlooks is that such agents are blameable for their moral ignorance under these circumstances. Since God is aware that they will do what is immoral no matter what they believe, they are responsible for their ignorance. Thus, even granting that Molinism is true and that God might choose to let the totally depraved live in moral ignorance does not show that God would deprive those who would do what is morally right if only they knew what that was from the requisite knowledge of good and evil. The thesis that there are some sincere seekers after moral knowledge who are both *not* responsible for their moral ignorance and who *would* fulfill their fundamental moral obligations if known by them is shown to be true in the defense of (P₄), to which we now turn.

5. A Defense of (P₄)

In the preliminary defense of (P₄) in Section 2 above we saw that it is reasonable to believe that a variety of Christian luminaries blamelessly held the false belief that slavery is sometimes morally permissible. However, there are other moral issues about which some Christians non-culpably hold mistaken moral beliefs. Over time, Christians citing the same revelation from God have differed about the moral status or seriousness of moral and political issues such as usury, divorce, heresy, apostasy, monarchies versus democracies, prohibition, woman's suffrage, and interracial marriage.⁹ Currently, Christians appeal to the same

9. Noonan (2005) discusses changes in Catholic moral doctrine on slavery, apostasy, usury, religious liberty as well as, to a more limited extent, divorce. In addition, his examination of the history of great moral thinkers of the Catholic tradition supports the claim made here that there is non-culpable moral ignorance. He lists twelve thinkers in that tradition each responsible for some major moral insight. Those twelve are St. Augustine, Vincent of Lerins, John Henry Newman, Erasmus, Jacques Maritain, John Courtney Murray, Isaac, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Sanchez, Gregory

Bible to justify conflicting moral stances on abortion, birth control, homosexuality, wealth distribution or economic justice, torture, assisted suicide, and capital punishment.¹⁰ We lack evidence that one group of believers is more charitable, loving, or closer to God in some non-question begging way.¹¹ Thus, we have no reason for thinking that what explains the difference in moral beliefs among those who appeal to the same revealed truth is due to the virtues of one group and the vices of another. Yet, someone must be wrong since their moral views are incompatible. Again, as with slavery, we are justified in believing that if Christians are not blameworthy in relying on the Bible as sufficient evidence for forming a wide range of moral beliefs, then (P₄) is true. At least some Christians are not responsible for the moral evil they do since that evil flows from mistaken moral beliefs that they formed in a non-culpable way.

However, some may object that all who form their moral beliefs by appeal to revelation are culpable since they lack sufficient evidence for thinking:

1. God exists.
2. God has communicated moral truths.
3. God has communicated moral truths in a sufficiently precise way to come to some conclusion on controversial moral issues.

However, it is implausible to suppose that given the complexity of the arguments for and against God's existence, and the general permissibility of knowledge acquisition via testimony, that basing one's moral beliefs on revelation is morally or epistemically culpable in all circumstances. Nevertheless, even if it is the case that no one should base any controversial moral beliefs on some putative revelation from God, it is still the case that some people have, on some occasions, arrived at false moral beliefs by appealing to secular reason in a non-culpable way. Consider slavery again. Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes,

of Nyssa, Bartolome de Las Casas, and Jean Bodin. However, in spite of their moral insights, he also finds their moral errors notable.

10. Gallup (2016) found disagreement within religious groups on abortion, doctor-assisted suicide, cloning animals, homosexuality, and having a child out of wedlock. See Brugger (2004) for a history of changing Catholic thinking on the morality of capital punishment. See Pew Research Center (2020) for what appears to be the lack of a full-commitment to democracy on the part of some Christians in the United States. An example of a group which defends socialism by appealing to the Bible is the Institute for Christian Socialism (n.d.). Hubner (2018) provides a conflicting libertarian reading of the Bible. King (2013) discusses Christian condemnations and justifications of the use of torture. Pew Research Center (2009) reports polling data on Christians in the U.S. who support and oppose the use of torture. Pew Research Center (2014) provides a table reporting the conflicting stances of U.S. adults who rely on scripture for their views on abortion.

11. For example, suppose that one were to try to show that all those who are more spiritual believed that abortion is morally wrong. In that context, it would question-begging to define being more spiritual by opposition to abortion.

John Locke, Voltaire, and Edmund Burke argued for slavery, while Diderot, Condorcet, and Samuel Johnson opposed it (Stark 2003: 488–89).

Moving beyond the issue of slavery, secular thinkers are divided on almost all of the moral issues mentioned earlier on which Christians cite competing revelations from the same source. Philosophers disagree on fundamental moral issues on purely secular grounds, including abortion, capital punishment, assisted suicide, torture, and economic justice. Moreover, as with differences among Christians, there is no non-question begging way of showing that one group of thinkers is guilty of some culpable moral failure in arriving at their conclusions. Professional philosophers are highly intelligent, well-trained, and not typically guilty of motivated irrationality. They spend their lives examining not only the best arguments for the views they hold but also for those they reject. Those who are mistaken are not always so because of short attention spans or any motivated ignorance. At least some error, whoever is mistaken, is non-culpable.¹²

The upshot is that both secular and religious moral thinkers who insist that all of their opponents only hold the views they do because of some defect of character or intelligence are mistaken. It is implausible for secular thinkers to think that all moral error is due to motivated irrationality since highly intelligent and sincere secular thinkers hold conflicting views on critical moral positions. It is similarly implausible for religious thinkers to maintain that all moral error is due to motivated irrationality. There are highly intelligent, spiritual, and otherwise moral people of faith who appeal to the same revelation but arrive at conflicting moral positions. Whatever one's stance on secular reason versus revelation as a source of moral knowledge, (P₄) holds.

6. Some Theistic Support for This Argument

This section will show that the argument from blameless moral ignorance for the conclusion that God does not exist is not subject to some common criticisms theists make to the “problem of evil” and the “divine hiddenness argument.” Moreover, those criticisms actually offer some support for the argument from blameless moral ignorance.

Some versions of the problem of evil rely on the belief that there is suffering in the world that leads to no greater good. Such evil is gratuitous. According to the defenders of the argument from evil, since an omnipotent and omniscient God could eliminate such suffering, and a perfectly loving God necessarily

12. For example, it is not as though the defenders of libertarianism and critics of welfare capitalism are always less intelligent or of more dubious character than the critics of libertarianism and defenders of welfare capitalism.

wants to eliminate gratuitous suffering, a world in which God exists is one in which gratuitous suffering does not. In response, theists argue that such suffering is not gratuitous because it is necessary either for some good or goods we can identify, or to achieve some goods unknown to us.

One standard response to the problem of evil is known as “the free-will defense.”¹³ On this view, moral evil or the evil that knowingly results from free agents’ choices could not be eliminated unless there were no free agents. However, since freedom is a great good, God could not eliminate moral evil without creating a less good world than this one.

Natural evil, which is not the result of human actions, might still be justified by appeal to what is necessary for free acts to have moral significance. The claim here is that if happiness were the outcome of every choice, then none of our choices would count from a moral point of view. It is readily apparent that the free-will defense has no application to the problem of blameless moral ignorance. Unambiguous knowledge of our moral obligations is consistent with libertarian free-will and a morally significant environment in which it can operate. For example, as we saw earlier, it could have been the case that all non-culpable rational agents were provided with a faculty of conscience giving them authoritative knowledge of fundamental moral truths. Such agents could still live in an environment where a meaningful choice between good and evil was necessary.

So the free-will defense, whether or not it is ultimately successful, bears on or is a response to the problem of evil. But it has no application to the argument from blameless moral ignorance. Besides, the free-will defense, if true, *supports* the argument from blameless moral ignorance. The free-will defense presupposes that the existence of moral value justifies suffering, which would be otherwise gratuitous. However, if moral value is of such great importance that its existence justifies a great deal of otherwise pointless suffering, then it is reasonable to think that a just God would want finite rational agents to have all of the means necessary to exercise free will in such a way as to bring moral value into existence. The free-will defense presupposes that a world with moral value and the suffering necessary to make it possible is more valuable than a world with no suffering and no moral value. It would be irrational to allow all of the suffering necessary for moral value and, at the same time, impede moral activity by making the knowledge necessary for moral activity challenging to obtain.

The problem of evil focuses on the presence of something in the world, which should not be there if God exists: instances of horrific, yet (apparently) gratuitous, suffering by the innocent. In contrast, the argument from divine hiddenness focuses on the absence of a good which one expects to be present if God

13. For example, Hick’s (2007) well-known “soul-making theodicy” depends upon the free-will defense.

exists: a belief in God on the part of all of those who sincerely want to believe. The central intuition of the argument from divine hiddenness is that a loving God would want to enter into a relationship with all those who desire it and are capable of it. However, since there are people who would both like to believe in God and enter into a relationship with Him but find themselves unable to believe, God does not exist. If God did exist, a loving, omniscient, and all-powerful God would remove all impediments to a loving relationship with finite moral agents capable and desirous of it. In short, if God exists, then there would be no non-resistant non-believers. But since there are such persons, God does not exist.¹⁴

In response to the argument from divine hiddenness, some theists have attempted to explain why God remains hidden from some who are open to belief in his existence, and entering into a relationship with him. Consider the following range of reasons offered for God's hiddenness by theists:

- a. We must be free to love God.
- b. It is necessary if we are to have control over the development of our character.
- c. It is necessary to prevent belief from having improper motives.
- d. It is necessary to expose human depravity.
- e. It is necessary to prevent us from responding presumptuously to knowledge of God.
- f. It is the product of the fall of human nature.¹⁵

Whether or not (a) through (f) above are adequate justifications for God to allow non-resistant non-belief, non-culpable moral ignorance is not required for us to love God, develop our character, avoid belief in God based on improper motives, expose human depravity, or respond presumptuously to the knowledge of God. Instead, several of these charges would either be enhanced by precise knowledge of fundamental moral truths or presuppose such knowledge. For example, to develop our character, we have to know what counts as having a good character. Being aware of human depravity presupposes knowledge of what morality requires. Finally, describing human nature as fallen presupposes that we know the moral standards we fail to meet. To make the point the other way around, the clearer and more extensive our knowledge of what morality requires, the greater the extent to which our failure to live up to those standards can be appropriately described as depravity, or human nature as fallen.

Notice that (a) through (f), if they were to apply to the argument from blameless moral ignorance, would apply to (P2). But there is a related claim that bears

14. The foregoing paragraph is a brief summary of the main line of argument of Schellenberg (2015)

15. These explanations of divine hiddenness were collected by McKim (2002). McKim reviewed the collection of essays edited by Howard-Snyder and Moser (2002).

against (P₄). If we have free will and explicit knowledge of fundamental principles of justice, given the human capacity for self-deception, it is likely that such knowledge could, on occasion, become obscure to us. Given “human depravity” and free will, there are instances when we do not apply moral principles to ourselves, which we are all too ready to employ against others. However, (P₄) does not assert that there are only cases of non-culpable moral ignorance, but merely that there are some. (P₄) is consistent with the claim that human beings are depraved both in the sense of doing what we clearly know is wrong and in the sense of preventing ourselves from being aware of morality requires when it is in our interests to do so. All that (P₄) requires is that there is some non-motivated moral ignorance, and we have already seen that we have good reason to suppose that there is.

7. Radical Skeptical Theism

In the defense of (P₁) and (P₂), we saw that skeptical theism does not apply to the argument for blameless moral ignorance for God’s non-existence. However, suppose a skeptical theist disagrees, and rejects (P₁) and (P₂). Where does that leave such a theist? We saw earlier that the Bible supports both (P₁) and (P₂). So a theist who rejects the argument from blameless moral ignorance for disbelief in God’s existence is committed to a non-literal reading of the Bible and the belief that the Bible does not provide reliable knowledge of our fundamental moral obligations. Such a skeptical theist is committed to a series of claims more radical than the thesis that God is likely to have morally sufficient reasons unknown to us for allowing suffering, which appears gratuitous. The skeptical theist is now committed to the following claims simultaneously: a perfectly moral God does not want all non-blameable rational agents to have sufficient moral knowledge to guide their actions regarding fundamental moral issues; the Bible does not provide reliable knowledge of our fundamental moral obligations, and we are often blamelessly mistaken about what our fundamental moral obligations are. The skeptical theist committed to the preceding claims is radicalized.

To see how radical this new skeptical theism has become, we need to examine its implications for our ability to worship and obey God. On the one hand, if it is sometimes appropriate to evaluate commands putatively from God by our moral beliefs, and those beliefs are mistaken, then we will on those occasions blamelessly believe that the commands in question are not given to us by God when they are.¹⁶ Thus, on these occasions, we will blamelessly disobey God. On the other hand, if we mistakenly believe that God has given us a command

16. The claim that religious believers need an adequate secular conception of justice prior to and independent of revelation is defended by MacIntyre (1986) in a different context and for different purposes.

when that is not the case, and our mistaken moral beliefs blamelessly held are in accordance with the command, then our moral ignorance will lead us to obey a false god. It follows that blameless moral ignorance puts us at risk of worshipping false gods since we worship the god we obey. The danger is proportional to the number and importance of mistaken fundamental moral beliefs we hold, and we have already seen in the defense of (P₄) that this danger is high. While we might worship the right God in spite of having some false moral beliefs, if we reject enough important commands, or adopt enough that are highly immoral, it is plausible to suppose that we are worshipping a false god.

On this new radical skeptical theism, the creator and sustainer of the universe allows us to unwittingly do grave evil while sincerely aiming at being moral *and* is worthy of worship while doing so. The conjunction of these claims places constraints on what a just God would do. A god who punishes disobedience or the worship of dark gods, which has its source in blameless moral ignorance, is neither just nor worthy of worship. Some theists will agree that a perfectly rational being is constrained by the “ought implies can” principle just as we are. If we do not know what we are supposed to do, through no fault of our own, then we cannot be held accountable for our failure to do what morality requires. Thus, the radical skeptical theist is committing to maintaining that God does not hold some rational agents responsible for worshipping false gods or disobedience. I suspect that many theists will not embrace this position. And a theist who does adopt this radical skepticism, as we have already seen, will require rational grounds for rejecting (P₁), (P₂), and the claim that the Bible provides reliable knowledge of our fundamental moral obligations.

It is important to emphasize that the danger of worshipping and obeying false gods is not only a problem for the radical skeptical theist. It arises from (P₄) in conjunction with the apparent necessity of, on some occasions, using our moral beliefs to discriminate between those commands given to us by God and those which are not.

8. Conclusion

Either theists accept premises (P₁) and (P₂) despite God’s transcendence, or our fundamental moral obligations are provided by revelation. For Christians, at least, this creates a substantial difficulty since part of Christianity’s core doctrine is that humanity is depraved, in need of redemption, and that man’s sins were atoned for by Christ’s death. It is that part of the core doctrine that makes it difficult to reject premises (P₁) and (P₂) if one accepts the Bible as God’s revealed word.

No evaluation of the problem of evil or the argument from divine hiddenness has been made here. However, we have seen that the problem of blameless moral ignorance is distinct from those other arguments for God's non-existence. The free will theodicy and the theistic justifications of God's hiddenness do nothing to address the problem of blameless moral ignorance. As has been previously discussed, they tend to support rather than weaken the argument from blameless moral ignorance. Also, skeptical theism does not address the problem of blameless moral ignorance for two reasons. First, there is the earlier defended claim that there cannot be a morally sufficient offsetting good for allowing blameless moral ignorance of fundamental moral obligations. Second, there is scriptural evidence that we have adequate knowledge of our fundamental moral obligations to aim at moral perfection. A non-scriptural and scriptural understanding of God's moral perfection implies that we always have the moral knowledge required to fulfill our fundamental moral obligations. But as we saw earlier, the facts suggest otherwise. The best explanation of at least some moral error is non-culpable ignorance rather than sin or a lack of diligence.

The problem of blameless moral ignorance may be a more pressing problem for theism than the problem of evil or divine hiddenness. If this is the case, it is worth asking why the former difficulties for belief have received less attention than the latter. Everyone is aware of suffering, which seems to serve no high purpose or is unnecessary for the achievement of some greater good. It is an entirely human response in the face of some horrific suffering to cry out in anguish, "How could God allow this?" The difficulty of reconciling belief in God's existence and suffering arises for believers in the course of life; it is the topic of one of the great books of the Bible: Job.

Similarly, the problem of divine hiddenness can arise in the spiritual lives of sincere believers as well as fairly directly for those who would like to believe but do not feel God's presence in their lives. It seems like a loving God would want to enter into a personal relationship with all people capable of it. However, it is a well-documented occurrence that even the most devout of believers sometimes feel that God is absent in their lives.¹⁷ The problem of God's hiddenness, like the problem of apparently unjustified suffering, seems to arise unbidden and without much reflection.

In contrast, the problem of blameless moral ignorance in part relies on an awareness of the extent and historical scope of moral disagreement, both within and without Christendom. It is also an argument against the somewhat natural inclination to attribute *all* false fundamental moral beliefs to motivated

17. The sense of God's absence is not, strictly speaking, the problem of divine hiddenness. The reason for this is that one could have that feeling while continuing to believe that God exists. The point here is that feeling could develop into non-resistant disbelief.

irrationality. It is common to think that others would see moral issues the way I do if only those others were not greedy, arrogant, full of pride, or subject to some other character failing. We have to become reflectively aware of the extent of moral disagreement and overcome a human tendency to attribute all differences in moral belief to motivated irrationality in order to become aware of the problem of blameless moral ignorance. However, as with all other human inquiry, at least some disagreement is rightly attributed to one party making an honest mistake and having less evidence or understanding than those with whom she or he disagrees. Something important is missing in this world that would necessarily exist in any world created by a perfectly moral God: complete knowledge of fundamental moral truths on the part of finite agents sincerely seeking to fulfill their fundamental moral obligations.

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