

THEISM, PRO-THEISM, HASKER, AND GRATUITOUS EVIL

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1. STAGE-SETTING

On the vertical axis of the table below are three familiar judgments concerning the claim that God exists: *theism* affirms it, *atheism* denies it, and *agnosticism*, of course, suspends judgment about it. On the horizontal axis are four judgments about the difference that God's existence would – or does – make to the value of the world and its inhabitants.¹ *Pro-theism* holds that God's existence would make the world *better* than it would otherwise be.² *Anti-theism*, on the other hand, claims that God's existence would make the world *worse* than it would otherwise be. *Indifferentism* is the position that God's existence would make the world neither better nor worse, and *agnosticism* suspends judgment about this axiological matter.³

		AXIOLOGICAL JUDGMENTS			
		Pro-Theism	Anti-Theism	Indifferentism	Agnosticism
EXISTENTIAL JUDGMENTS	Theism				
	Atheism				
	Agnosticism				

Each cell in the table represents a unique combination of existential and axiological judgments. Some of these (such as *theistic pro-theism* or *atheistic anti-theism*, for example) are fairly common combinations. Others are perhaps less familiar, but all of them are, I think, coherent possibilities, whether or not they have (m)any adherents.

The simplicity of this table masks the formidable complexity of the underlying issues. In order to fully assess the positions on the vertical axis, for example, one must be clear on what is (or should be) meant by 'God', and what it means (or should mean) for God to exist. These are notoriously controversial matters. These requirements pertain equally to the horizontal axis. Moreover, in order to have a fruitful debate about the positions on the horizontal axis, plausible accounts must be given of terms like 'world', 'better', and 'worse', and of the relevant counterfactual (or counterpossible⁴) judgments. These, too, will be highly

contentious. Still further, various versions of these axiological judgments can be identified. Kahane (2010), for example, distinguishes between *wide* and *narrow*, and between *personal* and *impersonal* forms of anti-theism, and these distinctions can also be applied to the other axiological positions.⁵ So a complete assessment of the axiological issues will also require careful attention to these distinctions.⁶

In this paper, I won't try to provide a comprehensive account of the terrain, nor will I try to defend any particular combination of existential and axiological positions. Instead, I will simply try to make a little a bit of headway by considering one particular claim:

- (1) If God exists, no gratuitous evil occurs.

This claim enjoys widespread assent in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion.⁷ It is also an important claim for both the axiological and the existential issues displayed in the table above. For one thing, it's plausible that (1) could be harnessed into an argument for pro-theism: it certainly looks like a reason for thinking that God's existence would make the world better than it would otherwise be, at least if there is an appropriate causal connection between the antecedent and the consequent. For another, (1) is also the first premise of a widely discussed argument for atheism that continues as follows:

- (2) Gratuitous evil occurs.

Therefore,

- (3) God does not exist.

In recent decades, much of the debate about this argument (and probabilistic variants of it) has concerned the claim expressed in premise (2). Critics of this claim have defended accounts of our epistemic circumstances and capacities according to which this premise cannot reasonably be asserted. This controversial position has become known as *skeptical theism*, and it has generated a large and very technical literature.⁸

A few authors, however, have attempted to resist (1). One such strategy is developed in a series of important publications by William Hasker (1992, 2004b, 2008).⁹ If Hasker's argument were to succeed, this would be an important result for the overall debate about whether God exists, since it would count against a prominent kind of argument for atheism. While Hasker does not explicitly consider the question of the axiological consequences of God's existence, his argument, if sound, would also be an important result for this debate, since it would count against one line of apparent support for pro-theism.¹⁰

In section 2, I discuss certain restrictions on God's permission of evil in order to illuminate claim (1), and in section 3, I set out Hasker's case against it. In section 4, I clarify an important point about Hasker's argument: I show that it does not require Hasker to maintain that God's plan for creation requires the actual occurrence of gratuitous evil. In section 5, I set out and evaluate four criticisms of Hasker's argument. Finally, in an Appendix, I consider the merits of a successor argument for atheism – one that is compatible with Hasker's view.

2. RESTRICTIONS ON GOD'S PERMISSION OF EVIL

Evidently, (1) intends to express a moral restriction on God's permission of evil. Before setting out and evaluating Hasker's argument, it will be helpful to clarify just what sort of restriction Hasker has in mind, and to distinguish it from other restrictions that have been, or might be, proposed.

There are many definitions of 'gratuitous evil' in the literature. In what follows, I will work with Hasker's most recent definition, which says that a token or type of evil is *gratuitous* if and only if God, if he exists, antecedently knows it to be certain or extremely probable that he could prevent it in a way that would make the world overall better (2010a, 308).¹¹ It is important to see that, given this definition, (1) expresses a very general constraint on the divine permission of evil. For contrast, here is a more specific constraint:

- (1*) If God exists, then for any human S, God permits S to suffer evil *e* only if S ultimately benefits from suffering *e*, and this benefit defeats¹² the harm involved in S's suffering *e*.

The requirements expressed by (1) and (1*) are logically independent: God might satisfy one but not the other. In one respect, (1) expresses a stricter requirement than (1*), since it ranges over animal suffering as well as human suffering. In another respect, (1*) is stricter than (1), since it requires that the human sufferer receive an evil-defeating benefit. Conjoining the requirements expressed by (1) and (1*) would, of course, yield a stricter requirement than either one expresses individually.

Restrictions on God's permission of evil that require the sufferer to benefit in some way from the evil are sometimes called *patient-centred restrictions*, and the view that some such restriction is needed to secure God's goodness has been called *theodical individualism*.¹³ Many patient-centred restrictions, varying widely in strength, have been proposed and defended by philosophers. In a few places, Hasker explicitly criticizes certain patient-centred restrictions.¹⁴ But he also clearly means to target the more general, non-patient-centred requirement expressed by (1).¹⁵ In what follows, I will confine myself to assessing Hasker's argument against the latter.¹⁶

Before turning to Hasker's argument, here is one more observation concerning restrictions on God's permission of evil. It seems that the existential and axiological debates are connected in the following interesting way: the stricter the requirements on God's permission of evil are held to be, the more plausible pro-theism becomes, but, equally, the more theism becomes vulnerable to arguments from evil that assert that these requirements are (probably) not satisfied. Consider, for example, this very strict requirement:

- (1**) If God exists, then (i) there is no gratuitous evil; and (ii) for any human S, God permits S to suffer evil *e* only if S ultimately benefits from *e* in a way that defeats the harm involved in S' suffering *e*; and (iii) this benefit renders S's life significantly overall better than it would otherwise be; and (iv) this benefit accrues to S within ten minutes of *e*'s occurrence;

and (v) and all those who witness *e*, including S, are conscious of this benefit and of exactly how it results from *e*.

Clearly, the truth of (1**) would support pro-theism (given an appropriate causal connection between the antecedent and consequent), but, equally clearly, this claim could also be harnessed into an argument for atheism, since it is obvious that the consequent is false.¹⁷

3. HASKER'S CASE AGAINST (1)

Hasker does not exactly argue that (1) is false. Instead, he maintains that given a certain account of God's nature and plan for humanity, (1) can reasonably be resisted.¹⁸ In this section, I set out and assess Hasker's innovative and important argument.

Hasker believes that if God were to prevent all gratuitous evil, we would come to know this. He offers two related reasons. First, he claims that one of God's chief purposes in creating rational beings is to bring them to knowledge of his nature. This knowledge, Hasker supposes, would surely include the proposition that God, due to his essential moral goodness, prevents all gratuitous evil (1992, 39; 1997, 391; 2004b, 92; 2008, 197). Second, Hasker claims that if God were to prevent humans from gaining this knowledge, this would amount to a "pervasive policy of deception" (1992, 37) or a "massive disinformation campaign" (1992, 39). Hasker takes this to be morally objectionable, and hence unworthy of God. Hasker's argument here turns on what we would come to *know* about God's nature and policies, given theism, but surely it could also be expressed – more modestly – in terms what we would come to *reasonably believe*.¹⁹

Hasker then imagines what would happen if we were to come to know (or, let's hereafter add, reasonably believe) that God prevents all gratuitous evil. In the vast literature on the problem of evil, a distinction is standardly drawn between *moral* evil and *natural* evil. Roughly, the former is wrongdoing perpetrated by moral agents, and the latter is pain and suffering not due to moral agents.²⁰ Hasker considers each in turn. If God were known or reasonably believed to prevent all gratuitous *moral* evil (hereafter GME), he argues, moral motivation would be undermined. This is because, according to Hasker, "an important part of what leads human beings to attribute great significance to morality is the perception that pointless harm and suffering very often result from morally objectionable behaviour" (2004b, 82). Absent that 'perception', human beings would be rather less likely to deem morality significant, and as a result, their motivation to act morally would be seriously impaired. After all, why refrain from performing or permitting moral evil when you are confident that God will ensure that any moral evil that occurs is non-gratuitous? Hasker next imagines what would happen if God were known or reasonably believed to prevent all gratuitous *natural* evil (hereafter GNE). Hasker thinks that our motivation to prevent or minimize natural evil would be compromised. Specifically, he claims that our motivation to respond to natural evil by acquiring or developing goods such as "knowledge, prudence, courage, foresight, cooperation, and compassion" would be reduced or eliminated (1992,

38-9; see also 2004, 88 and 2008, 193). This is because we would be confident that any natural evils that occur would also be non-gratuitous – so why bother trying to minimize or prevent them?²¹

Hasker believes that God deems it very important for human beings to place a high priority on fulfilling moral obligations, and, in particular, for them to assume major responsibility for the welfare of their fellow human beings (2004b, 82; 2008, 191). Hasker also thinks that God deems it very important that human beings respond to natural evil by acquiring and developing the various goods mentioned above. Let's say that God's 'plan for creation' involves these priorities. Hasker thinks that God's preventing all gratuitous evil would compromise his plan for creation, and, accordingly, that God will not prevent all gratuitous evil. Pulling all this together, Hasker's challenge to (1) can be expressed as follows:

- (a) If God prevents all gratuitous evil, this fact is known or reasonably believed by us.
- (b) If we know or reasonably believe that God prevents all GME, then our motivation to behave morally is undermined.
- (c) If we know or reasonably believe that God prevents all GNE, then our motivation to acquire or develop various goods ($g_1...g_n$) in response to natural evil is undermined.

Therefore,

- (d) If God prevents all gratuitous evil, then then the motivations mentioned in (b) and (c) are undermined.²²
- (e) God's plan for creation includes ensuring that the motivations mentioned in (b) and (c) are not undermined.

Therefore,

- (f) It's not the case that God prevents all gratuitous evil.²³

After clarifying an important point about this argument in section 4, I evaluate it in section 5.

4. MUST GRATUITOUS EVIL OCCUR, OR MUST IT MERELY BE PERMITTED?

Hasker's argument might be thought to suggest that the *actual occurrence* of gratuitous evil is required for God to bring about his plan for creation. And this, in turn, might seem theologically problematic. After all, someone might say, if God needs gratuitous evil to occur in order to execute his plan for creation, he should just come up with a different and better plan – perhaps even one in which he doesn't create free moral agents in the first place! Hasker, however, appears to deny that God's plan requires the actual occurrence of gratuitous evil. He says: "Clearly, God might be willing to permit evils, gratuitous or otherwise, without those evils actually occurring" (1992, 41, n.10; 1995, 423-4).²⁴ In order to clarify his overall argument, and to forestall misconceptions, it will be useful to explore this claim.

Let's begin with GME, and, for the moment, let's grant premises (a) and (b). If these claims are true, then God's preventing all GME suffices for the undesirable consequence identified in the consequent of (b): the undermining of moral motivation. So, in order to bring about his plan for creation, God should *not* prevent all GME. The contradictory of 'prevent' is 'permit', so God should permit GME. But God's permitting GME to occur does not entail that it actually occurs: libertarian-free creatures, for example, might be permitted by God to perform GME, but might nevertheless refrain from so doing. So: God's preventing all GME suffices to undermine moral motivation, given (a) and (b), but this does not entail that the actual occurrence of GME is necessary for moral motivation *not* to be undermined.

But now suppose there are libertarian-free creatures who in fact manage to refrain from performing any GME. In this case it is *they*, not God, who prevent all GME. If the prevention of all GME suffices to undermine moral motivation, then it seems we have reached a paradoxical result: these creatures' moral rectitude undermines moral motivation! That seems very strange, to say the least, and it is presumably a consequence that Hasker should resist. Luckily for Hasker, he has the resources to do so. Premise (a) says that if *God* prevents all GME, then this fact is known or reasonably believed by us. But Hasker could say that *our* preventing all GME has no such consequence. Here is the difference between the two cases. As we have seen, Hasker defends (a) by saying that God cannot deceive, and that God wants to bring us to knowledge of his nature, which, by hypothesis, involves preventing all GME. So there is an iron-clad divine guarantee that we would learn about God's prevention of GME. But, of course, there is no such guarantee for *creaturely* prevention of GME. If libertarian-free creatures prevent all GME, it needn't be the case that this fact is known or reasonably believed by them.

Why? Well, for example, it's highly plausible to think that there is at least one world (and probably very many) in which libertarian-free creatures prevent all GME, but in which they fail to learn this fact about themselves.²⁵ To know or reasonably believe that they have prevented all GME in a given world, its denizens would have to possess vast quantities of data about the moral status of all salient actions and omissions throughout the total history of their world, including enormously many facts about the relevant consequences, motivations, obligations, virtues, vices, and much else besides.²⁶ It's hard to believe that any individual creature could acquire all the relevant information, let alone that most or all would, in many or all of the relevant worlds. So, if it's the case that there is at least one world (and probably very many) in which libertarian-free creatures prevent all GME, but fail to learn this fact about themselves, then Hasker can consistently maintain that *God's* prevention of GME would undermine moral motivation, but that *our* prevention of GME would not do so.

Let's now turn to GNE, and grant premises (a) and (c). Given these claims, God's preventing all GNE suffices for the undesirable consequence identified in the consequent of (c): the reduction or elimination of our motivation to acquire and develop goods ($g_1...g_n$) So, in order to bring about his plan for creation, God should *not* prevent all GNE. The contradictory of 'prevent' is 'permit', so God should permit GNE. In the case of GME, as we just saw, Hasker can claim that God's permission of GME does not entail its occurrence. But it might seem that there is

no comparable way to open up space between the divine permission of GNE and its occurrence, in which case if God permits GNE, GNE occurs.

Here are two ways Hasker might reply. First, he could subsume natural evil under moral evil, perhaps by following Alvin Plantinga, who famously speculated that natural disasters and the like are really due to the misuse of libertarian freedom by Satan and his cohorts.²⁷ Second, Hasker could follow Peter van Inwagen in holding that God would allow *chance* to affect the relevant parts of creation such that GNE might (but needn't) ensue.²⁸ Presumably, these suggestions need to be more than mere logical possibilities for Hasker to employ them. Let's grant that one of these stories is indeed plausible enough for Hasker to adopt it without compromising his overall story.²⁹ If so, then God can be said to permit GNE without guaranteeing its occurrence.³⁰

The upshot of this section is that Hasker can reasonably insist that God's plan for creation does not require the actual occurrence of either GME or GNE, and so Hasker can thereby avoid whatever theological drawbacks there might be to denying this. Now, whether or not the actual occurrence of gratuitous evil is part of God's plan, Hasker is entirely convinced that it really does occur (1992, 2004a, 2010b). And, as we saw in section 3, Hasker aims to show that this fact in no way counts against theism. I now turn to some criticisms of Hasker's argument.

5. CRITICISMS OF HASKER'S ARGUMENT

(1) *The strategy is self-defeating.*

Hasker's strategy can appear paradoxical, even self-defeating. If God must permit gratuitous evil in order to prevent various motivations from being undermined, then it seems as though these evils are no longer gratuitous: they are permitted precisely for the sake of securing these outweighing goods!³¹ In reply to this objection, Hasker offers the following analogy (2004b, 89; 2008, 195). Suppose that a musical performance is rewarded with enthusiastic and sustained applause from the audience. Any individual audience member's clapping could surely be prevented without compromising the phenomenon of applause. But if someone were to prevent *every* member of the audience from clapping, there would be no applause at all. Equally, Hasker says, while God could surely prevent *any individual instance* of gratuitous evil without compromising his plan for creation, God could not prevent *every* such instance without compromising his plan. So each *instance* of such evil is, after all, gratuitous – but the *class* of permitted gratuitous evils serves an important function in God's plan for creation, and so it is not gratuitous.³² This reply seems decisive, and so I turn to another objection.

(2) *The account of God's plan for creation in (e) is mistaken.*

It is important to see that the theist who wishes to wield Hasker's strategy against arguments from gratuitous evil needn't claim to *know* that (e) is true: justified belief will do. A theist who justifiably believes (e), along with the other premises in Hasker's argument, would be justified in believing its conclusion, and hence would

be justified in resisting (1). Now, something like (e) is in fact generally accepted by theists, and it seems rather churlish to suppose that no theist can ever be justified in believing it. Moreover, non-theists can surely also be reasonable in believing that, given the truth of theism, (e) is plausible. All else equal, such individuals could then be justified in using Hasker's strategy (*mutatis mutandis*) for resisting (1). In the absence of a compelling reason to believe that nobody can be justified in asserting (e), I set this objection aside.³³

(3) *If God were to prevent all gratuitous evil, we would neither know nor reasonably believe that God had done so.*

This objection attacks premise (a). Here is William Rowe's expression of it:

If God really is in the paradoxical corner Hasker thinks He is in, then clearly the best course is not to make his presence and policy so decisively known that his very purposes for human life are undermined, if not defeated ... Surely, other things being equal, God will judge that our lack of decisive knowledge of His presence and policy is better than letting horrendous, gratuitous evils abound in the world (1991, 85).

Hasker might reply by flatly denying that it is metaphysically possible for God to deceive us or to prevent us from coming to know that he prevents all gratuitous evil. But this seems implausible. Perhaps, as many philosophers have held, it is metaphysically impossible for God to do *moral wrong*, but it is not clear that God's deception concerning (or shrouding of) this particular policy would be morally wrong – particularly if God does so precisely to secure the greater good of preventing the dire consequences mentioned in (b) and (c).³⁴ If this is so, then Hasker needs some other reason to think that it is metaphysically impossible for God to deceive us or shroud his policy from us. None seems on offer.

Alternatively, Hasker might reply by contesting Rowe's axiological intuitions, perhaps – ambitiously – by claiming that divine deception or shrouding really would be worse than God's preventing all gratuitous evil, or – modestly – by claiming that Rowe has not shown otherwise. It is difficult to know how to assess either reply. To do so properly, we would have to hold before our minds all the relevant states of affairs in which God prevents all gratuitous evil but ensures that we never discover this, thereby blocking us from knowledge of an important aspect of his nature, and we would then have to, somehow, compare these with all the relevant states of affairs in which God permits some gratuitous evil. This is a daunting prospect, to say the least.

Luckily for Hasker, there is a simpler reply he can make – one that Rowe himself anticipates (1991, 86). Hasker can point out that if his critic means to endorse the claim that, if God exists, God would ensure that we never discover his policy of preventing all gratuitous evil, this critic can no longer reasonably assert (1). To defend (1) by asserting something inconsistent with reasonably believing (1) is hardly sound philosophy: it's dialectical suicide. And so I set this objection aside as well.

(4) *Our moral motivations would not be undermined.*

This objection targets Hasker's (b), or his (c), or both. Let's suppose that God prevents all gratuitous evil, and let's further suppose, with Hasker, that God would ensure that we come to learn this important fact about his nature. One way to press this objection is to hold that God could – and would – simply block us from making whatever inferences are subsequently needed to undermine the motivations mentioned in (b) and (c).³⁵ By doing this, God would ensure that his plan for creation is not compromised.

How might Hasker respond? First, he might insist that God's interference in our ability to draw the relevant inferences constitutes morally objectionable mental meddling. But if, as Hasker supposes, it is a very important part of God's plan for creation that the relevant motivations *not* be undermined, his critic could surely retort that God's interference is here justified for the sake of executing that plan. Second, Hasker could say that God's interference would compromise some other very important divine goals, perhaps ones involving the unfettered (or at least non-supernaturally-fettered!) use of our intellectual capacities. To make this work, Hasker would have to offer a plausible account of these goals, and of the ways in which they would be compromised by God's interference, and he would have to claim that it would be overall better for God to achieve these goals than for him to intervene in this way to keep our moral motivations intact. This would be a highly complex response involving rather controversial large-scale value judgments.

Here is another way that Hasker might respond. In several places, Hasker points out that, lamentably, some theists have indeed allowed their belief that God prevents all gratuitous evil to undermine their moral motivation, and that this has led to very deleterious results (1992, 39; 1997, 392; 2004b, 87-9; 2008, 193-195). I think that Hasker is quite right that there have been, and are, such individuals. There being some such people does not, of course, establish (b) or (c), but can it defeat the version of the objection to these claims presently under consideration? Unfortunately, no. The existence of such people counts against the idea at issue (namely, that God would block us from forming the motivation-undermining inferences) only on the assumption that theism is *true* – and this assumption is, of course, illicit in the context of a debate about an argument for atheism.³⁶

Here is another way to object to (b) or (c). Several authors have held that the motivation to follow the dictates of a *deontological* moral system would not be compromised by the knowledge or reasonable belief that God prevents all gratuitous evil.³⁷ This challenge can be made vivid by appeal to actual theists, many of whom hold *both* that God prevents all gratuitous evil *and* that they are indeed subject to a deontological moral system.

In response, Hasker has granted that there are such theists, and has speculated that they simply fail to see the tension between these parts of their worldview (1997, 392). This response is unsatisfactory. Hasker's model predicts that theists who reasonably believe that God prevents all gratuitous evil will find their moral motivation undermined. I have granted that some actual theists exemplify this. But when Hasker's critics point to counter-examples, Hasker in effect dismisses them by rendering an a priori diagnosis of subconscious cognitive dissonance. But whether such individuals' worldview is incoherent is simply beside

the point. The existence of theists who simultaneously believe that God really prevents all gratuitous evil and that they are really subject to a deontological moral system (and whose moral motivation is really *not* undermined) does count against Hasker's (b) or (c), whether or not their worldview is consistent.

Here is a different response that Hasker might offer. He might say that the consequents of (b) and (c) should not be understood to assert that *all* or even *most* people would find their relevant motivations undermined.³⁸ If Hasker can show, more modestly, that *enough* people would find their moral motivation undermined (to a sufficient degree, perhaps), such as to compromise God's plan for creation, this would inoculate his argument against these counterexamples. At this point, of course, the burden of proof shifts back to Hasker. To make good this response, he would have to defend some account of (at least roughly) how many people's moral motivation needs to be undermined in order for God's plan for creation to be compromised, and to what degree. Then he would have to show that the reasonable belief that God prevents all gratuitous evil really would lead this many people's moral motivation to be undermined to this degree. Both steps seem rather daunting, to say the least. The former requires a more detailed account and defence of God's plan for creation than Hasker has given to date, and of course, such accounts are notoriously controversial. As for the latter step, this seems like a matter for experimental philosophy, and I suspect that it will be very difficult to formulate and execute an experiment to properly test Hasker's hypothesis.

Moreover, even if it were to turn out that enough people would find their relevant motivations sufficiently undermined after reflecting on (1), this would surely raise some new and vexing questions. If God cares about our moral motivations so much, why did he make them (or allow them to become) so easy to undermine? Why didn't he simply strengthen our moral motivation, rather than permitting gratuitous evil?³⁹

CONCLUSION

I have argued that Hasker's argument is not threatened by the first three objections in the previous section. The fourth objection, on the other hand, can be developed in ways that place considerable pressure on Hasker to give a rather more robust defence of (b) and (c) than he has offered to date. Perhaps this can be done. If not, however, there is one further strategy open to Hasker. In most of his writing on this topic, Hasker has generally concentrated on the psychological question of whether various motivations would be undermined by our knowledge (or, I have added, reasonable belief) that God prevents all gratuitous evil. In one place, however, he briefly claims that if (1) is true, *morality itself* would be undermined (1992, 29-30). Hasker's idea is that on either consequentialist or deontological moral systems, principles prohibiting the infliction of harm would be undermined by (1), rendering these systems philosophically inexplicable or incoherent.⁴⁰ Since this kind of undermining is philosophical, rather than psychological, Hasker could develop this version of his argument and thereby entirely sidestep the worries raised in the previous section about his claims concerning the undermining of various motivations. This is not the place for a complete evaluation of how such an argument could go, so I will simply report my sense that it has considerable

promise.⁴¹ But since Hasker has said so little about it to date, and since it is bound to be highly controversial, rather more needs to be said about how, exactly, the truth of (1) would undermine these moral systems.

My overall conclusion, then, is somewhat inconclusive. It seems to me that Hasker has developed a very important challenge to (1), but that more defence of his premises (b) and (c) is needed. Perhaps Hasker can provide this. If not, as I have just sketched, there is another – and more promising – way for him to challenge (1). The success of either argument would be an important result for the debate about the axiological consequences of God’s existence, insofar as it would undermine one line of apparent support for pro-theism. The success of either argument would also be an important result for the debate about whether God exists, insofar as it would seriously compromise arguments from evil that invoke (1).

APPENDIX: THE ARGUMENT FROM EXCESSIVE GRATUITOUS EVIL

Hasker claims that if his criticism of (1) is plausible, “the evidential problem of evil” can be rejected (2004b, 91; 2008, 197). But this is too bold. For one thing, as noted, the only people who can justifiably resist (1) are those who reasonably believe that God’s goals for creation are (or would be) as Hasker describes. Moreover, and more importantly, (1)-(3) is certainly not the only “evidential” argument from evil to atheism. Someone who is persuaded by Hasker to reject (1), but who nevertheless wishes to argue from evil to atheism, might well be tempted by the following argument:

(4) If God exists, it is false that gratuitous evil occurs *far in excess* of what must be permitted by God in order to achieve his goals.

(5) Gratuitous evil occurs *far in excess* of what must be permitted by God in order to achieve his goals

Therefore,

(6) God does not exist.

Rowe, as it happens, briefly suggests this move (1991, 88, note 20), as have several other philosophers, although none develop it in detail.⁴²

What should we make of this argument? Premise (4) is modest – significantly more modest than premise (1) in the original argument. Moreover, it is *prima facie* plausible, given God’s attributes. It seems that God would be irrational or morally blameworthy (or both) if he were to permit far more gratuitous evil than is needed to achieve his goals. At the very least, it’s difficult to see how such a being could be essentially unsurpassable in rationality and goodness. Furthermore, (4) is evidently invulnerable to Hasker’s original objection. Perhaps there are ways to attack it, but I suspect that those who wish to resist this argument will concentrate their fire on premise (5) instead.

Hasker ventures a few remarks suggesting that he would resist (5). Hasker appears committed to the view that one can justifiably assert (5) only if one is confident both that (i) there is a particular amount of gratuitous evil that God

needs to permit in order to achieve his goals, and that (ii) we can identify this amount fairly accurately (1992, 33-36, 43; 1995, 424-5). But he deems it very implausible that "...there is *some particular amount* of the kind of evil in question, such that if God permits *that* amount of such evil to exist morality is maintained, but if he permits any less then morality is undermined" (1992, 33).⁴³ Moreover, Hasker thinks that even if there were such a particular amount, it is very doubtful that we would be able to identify it accurately. So Hasker seems to think that (5) cannot reasonably be asserted.

I disagree about what is required to reasonably assert (5). One of Hasker's early interlocutors offered the following analogy: one can reasonably judge that certain amounts of mashed potatoes are far too much to serve at a dinner for four, without being able to judge what is precisely the right amount.⁴⁴ This seems exactly right, and I would add that we could reasonably believe that some amounts of mashed potatoes are too much *even if there is no such thing* as the exact right amount.⁴⁵ In short, this analogy shows that one can reasonably believe that some amount is 'too much', even while failing to know exactly how much is 'just right', and even if there is no amount that is 'just right'.

An analogy in the moral domain may help to drive the point home. Suppose, as seems plausible, that parents can sometimes be morally justified in permitting their children to experience some preventable pain, on the grounds that they will benefit more than they will be harmed by the pain. (Consider, for example, teaching your daughter to ride a bicycle: the expected benefit of mastering this important skill is generally thought to outweigh the harm incurred by the entirely predictable, entirely preventable skinned knees.) It also seems very plausible to hold, however, that parents would *not* be morally justified in permitting *far more* preventable pain than is necessary to attain the relevant benefit. And surely this is so even if parents cannot know how much pain is 'just right' in this context, and even if there is no such amount. So, whether or not Hasker is right to deem (i) and (ii) implausible, if these analogies are apt (as I think they are), they show that one can assert (5) without being committed to these claims. Accordingly, Hasker cannot resist (5) in this way.

The most obvious – and, I think, most plausible – way to resist (5) is to invoke some form of skeptical theism. In the contemporary literature on the problem of evil, it is a matter of considerable controversy whether the inscrutability of *any* instance of evil provides good reason to think that the evil in question is gratuitous. As noted earlier, skeptical theists typically reject (2) in the original argument from evil by alleging that the inscrutability of some evil fails to constitute adequate evidence for its gratuitousness. But (5) is rather more ambitious than (2): it alleges not just that (probably) some particular instance of evil is gratuitous, but that (probably) *enormously many* instances of evil are gratuitous. So, friends of skeptical theism will think themselves in a stronger position to resist (5).

But here's the rub: Hasker cannot himself employ this strategy, since he is a fierce critic of skeptical theism. Hasker thinks it highly plausible that a great deal of gratuitous evil in fact occurs, contra what the skeptical theist asserts (2004a, 53-4; 2010b, 18-19). Hasker thinks that skeptical theism ineluctably leads to an untenable skepticism about induction (2010b, 19-21), and to a repellent moral

skepticism (2004a, 51-52; 2010b, 21-27), and that it courts incoherence (2010b, 27-29). Now is not the time to rehearse and evaluate Hasker's arguments for these conclusions; the mere fact that he draws them suffices to show that he, at least, cannot rely on skeptical theism to resist (5).⁴⁶

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NOTES

¹ I say ‘would or does’ in order to be neutral concerning whether theism is true. Hereafter, I will omit the second disjunct for ease of exposition.

² The terms ‘pro-theism’ and ‘anti-theism’ are due to Guy Kahane (2011), although my definition here is slightly weaker than his, due to some pressure from Moser (2013). Kahane’s paper sparked the current literature on this topic, which now includes Mawson (2012), Luck and Ellerby (2012), Kraay and Dragos (2013), Kraay (2013), Moser (2013), Davis (2014), Davis and Franks (2015), Penner (2015), Penner and Loughheed (2015), McLean (2015), Dumsday (2016), Mugg (2016), Loughheed (2017), the papers collected in Kraay (2018), Azadegan (forthcoming), Linford and Megill (forthcoming), Loughheed (forthcoming-a), Loughheed (forthcoming-b), and Penner (forthcoming).

³ These positions are best construed as sharing a commitment to *axiological realism* – the view that there are objective facts about such axiological matters.

⁴ Among contemporary analytic philosophers of religion, theism is typically thought to be either necessarily true or necessarily false. If this is so, then these axiological positions involve counterpossible judgments. For more on this, see Kahane (2010), Kraay and Dragos (2013), Davis and Franks (2015), and Mugg (2016).

⁵ For more discussion of this, see Kraay and Dragos (2013).

⁶ For a more detailed overview of the relevant issues, see my “Invitation to the Axiology of Theism” in Kraay (2018).

⁷ David O’Connor calls it the “Establishment Position” (1998, 72, 74), and Jeff Jordan dubs it the “Standard Claim” (2003, 236). William Rowe has said that (1) “accords with basic moral principles ... shared by both theists and nontheists” (1979, 337). Stephen Wykstra, putting the point more strongly, has said that (1) is “a basic conceptual truth deserving assent by theists and nontheists alike (1984, 76). In more recent papers, Rowe has even deemed it a necessary truth (1996, 284), and has said that to deny it is “radical, if not revolutionary” (1991, 79). (Note, however, that there are some differences in how these authors understand the term ‘gratuitous evil’.)

⁸ For recent surveys of this vast terrain, see McBrayer (2010), Dougherty (2011), and especially Dougherty (2014).

⁹ Hasker also defends his view against critics in three other papers (Hasker 1995, 1997, and 2010a).

¹⁰ Indeed, as we will see, Hasker thinks that things would be rather *worse* in certain important respects (and perhaps even overall) if God were to prevent all gratuitous evil. So Hasker would presumably think that the apparent support (1) offers for pro-theism is, on careful reflection, illusory.

¹¹ I have replaced “could antecedently know” in Hasker’s formulation with “antecedently knows”, since if God could know *p*, God knows *p*. Hasker here means to refine a definition of gratuitous evil offered by Rhoda (2010, 287-289), which Rhoda, in turn, takes to be an improvement over William Rowe’s (1979) conception. Other critics of Rowe’s account of

gratuitousness include William Alston (1991, 33-34) and van Inwagen (1991, 164, note 11). Rhoda's definition appears to be inspired by certain remarks by van Inwagen (2001, 69; 2006, 97).

¹² In the sense explained by Chisholm (1968).

¹³ This term is due to Jeff Jordan (2004). While I'm mentioning terminology, I should note that the requirement expressed by (1) is termed *meticulous providence* by Peterson (1982).

¹⁴ See, for example Hasker (1992, 27-29; 2008, 89-191)

¹⁵ This is clear in the following places: Hasker (1992, 29-30; 2004; and 2008, 191)

¹⁶ Jordan (2004) offers an argument very similar to Hasker's, but focussed on theodical individualism. Other papers that discuss theodical individualism include Maitzen (2009, 2010), Gellman (2010), Mawson (2011), and Crummett (2017).

¹⁷ If this is right, then the *theistic pro-theist* needs to strike a careful balance: she needs to defend divine restrictions on the permission of evil that are strong enough to support pro-theism, while not being so strong as to support atheism. For more on this relationship between the existential and axiological debates, see Penner and Arbour (2018).

¹⁸ Hasker says that premise (1) "...should be rejected by theists, since it comes into conflict with other, better-entrenched elements of the theistic worldview" (2004b, 81; and see 2008, 189). It's worth adding that non-theists could also resist (1) on Haskerian grounds. Such individuals would hold that if theism were true, then these "better-entrenched elements of the theistic worldview" would be more plausible than (1), in which case, if (1) conflicts with them, (1) should be resisted.

¹⁹ Dustin Crummett has pointed out to me that on the more modest formulation, it will be more difficult for Hasker to argue that moral motivation is undermined if God prevents all gratuitous evil. I agree, but I suspect that Hasker would still think it abundantly clear that moral motivation would be significantly undermined, even if is not quite as clear as on the more ambitious formulation. Moreover, the advantage of the more modest claim, presumably, is that it is more plausible.

A related issue, pressed by an anonymous referee, concerns the scope of "we" in the claim that *if God prevents all gratuitous evil, we would come to know (or reasonably believe) this*. Hasker does not say exactly how many people would gain this knowledge or reasonable belief. I take it that Hasker needn't hold that *all* people would – and this, in any case, would be highly implausible. Nor does Hasker need to show that some specific proportion of people would gain this knowledge or reasonable belief. He does, however, need to hold that *enough* people would, such that the consequences for moral motivation would be sufficiently deleterious for God's plan for creation. I return to this issue in section 5(4), below.

²⁰ These definitions may be a bit too broad: perhaps it's not the case that *all* moral wrongdoing counts as evil, and perhaps it's not the case that *all* pain and suffering due to natural processes counts as evil. There's no need to hash this out here, though, since nothing turns on this for Hasker's purposes, or for mine.

²¹ So, while it may seem natural to suppose (as I mentioned earlier) that (1) supports protheism, Hasker evidently disagrees. In fact, he seems to think that, if God were to prevent all gratuitous evil, things would be rather worse than they would otherwise be in certain important respects.

²² Presumably Hasker thinks that premises (b) and (c) only apply to creatures: it's not the case that if *God* knows that he prevents all gratuitous evil, God's moral motivations are undermined!

²³ In his 1992 paper, Hasker explicitly argues for the weaker conclusion that "It is not the case that God is morally required to prevent gratuitous evil" (30). But this conclusion is too weak for his purposes, since it does not, by itself, count against (1). This is because even if God is not morally required to prevent gratuitous evil, he might do so anyway.

²⁴ Hasker also says that the title of his 1992 paper ("The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil") was "deliberately paradoxical and provocative" (1995, 423-4). He goes on to clarify that "the strictly correct title of this paper would be, 'The Necessity of the *Possibility* of Gratuitous Evil'" (1992, 41, n.10, emphasis added).

²⁵ More modestly: *if* there are any worlds in which libertarian-free creatures prevent all GME, it is likely that in very many of those worlds, most creatures neither know nor reasonably believe this fact about their world. Incidentally, there being no gratuitous moral evil in such a world does not entail that all its denizens are morally impeccable: they may well perform lots of morally evil actions, just not gratuitous ones. So my claim here needn't bother friends of the thesis that Plantinga (1974) terms *trans-world depravity*.

²⁶ Different moral theories will have different views about what exactly needs to be known or reasonably believed. But, presumably, to know or reasonably believe that their world lacks GME, its denizens would have to be pretty confident about which moral theory is correct. It's easy to imagine a world – indeed, lots of worlds – in which there is no widespread confidence about which moral theory is correct. And this provides further reason for thinking that there is at least one world (and probably very many) in which moral agents bring about no GME, but fail to learn this fact about themselves and their world.

²⁷ Plantinga thinks it possible that "...Satan rebelled against God and has since been wreaking whatever havoc he can. The result is natural evil. So the natural evil we find is due to free actions of non-human spirits" (1974, 192).

²⁸ Van Inwagen identifies two relevant sources of chance in the created order. The first is "natural indeterminism" and the second is "the initial state of things" (1988, 54-60).

²⁹ In order to be sufficiently plausible for Hasker's purposes, it would have to be reasonable to think (in the case of the first story) that God could be justified in permitting Satan to misuse his free will, and (in the case of the second story) that God could be justified in permitting chance to play such a role in creation.

³⁰ One might object that God would foreknow that Satan and his cohorts would misuse their freedom, so as to bring about natural evil, and, equally, that God would foreknow that chancy or indeterministic processes would issue in natural evil. Hasker, of course, needn't be troubled by this objection, given that he is a prominent defender of Open Theism, a view which denies that God has just this sort of foreknowledge. (See, for example, Hasker 1989).

³¹ Rowe (1991), Chrzan (1994), and Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder (1999) all press this criticism against Hasker.

³² This way of putting the point is due to Rowe 1988, and Hasker quotes it approvingly in Hasker (1992, 33; 2004b, 89; and 2008, 195).

³³ That said, this objection could be pressed in a specific way against a particular individual. If, for example, S wants to use Hasker's strategy against some argument from gratuitous evil, and if someone can show that S is herself not justified in asserting (e), then this would presumably preclude her from reasonably employing Hasker's strategy on that occasion.

³⁴ Gelinas (2009, 573, note 17) argues in a similar vein.

³⁵ Interestingly, when considering how it can be that many theists believe that God prevents all GME without having their moral motivation undermined, Hasker speculates that "Perhaps the Holy Spirit is actively at work in preventing God's people from carrying out in practice the implications of their mistaken beliefs" (1997, 392). The objection I am considering is importantly different from what Hasker suggests in this passage. Instead of blocking people from *performing morally wrong actions*, God would be blocking people from *making certain inferences*.

³⁶ I thank Philip Swenson and Dean Zimmerman for helping me to see this.

³⁷ See Keller (2007, 13), Rhoda (2010, 291), and Himma (2011, 132). There are other ways to argue that moral motivation would not be compromised. For example, Jada Twedt Strabbing has suggested to me that one might argue that theists could anchor their moral motivation in their love for God and their desire to love and desire what God loves and desires. Space does not permit an examination of this suggestion.

³⁸ Note that Hasker sets aside as irrelevant those individuals who "through lack of intelligence or opportunity, or simply because of sloth" fail to draw the relevant morality-undermining inferences (1992, 44, note 28).

³⁹ Dustin Crummett suggested this to me.

⁴⁰ Rowe (1991, 82-3) briefly engages this argument. He expresses some sympathy for Hasker's claims concerning consequentialist moral systems, but objects to Hasker's claim that deontological moral systems would be philosophically compromised by (1). Note also that Hasker seems to retreat a bit from this idea in his 2008, p.192. n.23.

⁴¹ Crummett (forthcoming) defends Hasker's claim that the truth of certain patient-centred restrictions on the permission of evil would undermine consequentialist and deontological moral systems. I think he is right about this, but my focus here is on the more general, non-patient centred requirement expressed by (1).

⁴² See Keller (1989, 163-6; 2007, 14-16); Chrzan (1994, 135); O'Connor (1995, 391; 1998, 69-70); and Reichenbach (2010, 214).

⁴³ Here Hasker refers only to GME, but his point could also be expressed, *mutatis mutandis*, with respect to GNE. Keller (1989, 163-4; 2007, 13) also expresses doubts about (i).

⁴⁴ Hasker cites John Glenn as offering this example in a 1990 conference commentary. Hasker rejects the analogy as inapt, by claiming that the amount of gratuitous evil God needs to achieve his goals is “fairly sharply” and “fairly clearly” defined, in contrast to the amount of potatoes needed to serve four (Hasker 1992, 43, note 27).

⁴⁵ Chrzan offers two further analogies (1995, 135), both of which, as Hasker rightly points out, are inapt, since they turn on (i) there being an exact right amount and (ii) this amount being easy to discover (1995, 425).

⁴⁶ Here is a more modest way of putting the point: if Hasker wishes to resist (5) by appeal to skeptical considerations, he will need to take care to not say anything inconsistent with his own criticisms of skeptical theism.

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