

# ORDINARY MORALITY IMPLIES ATHEISM

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**Abstract.** I present a “moral argument” for the non-existence of God. Theism, I argue, can’t accommodate an ordinary and fundamental moral obligation acknowledged by many people, including many theists. My argument turns on a principle that a number of philosophers already accept as a constraint on God’s treatment of human beings. I defend the principle against objections from those inclined to reject it.

In his *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, James Rachels remarks that “it isn’t unusual for priests and ministers to be treated as moral experts.... Why [he asks] are clergymen regarded in this way? ... In popular thinking, morality and religion are inseparable: People commonly believe that morality can be understood only in the context of [theistic] religion.”<sup>1</sup> This popular association of morality with theism may explain why atheists showed up as the single most distrusted minority group in a recent opinion survey conducted in the United States, much to the surprise of those who conducted the survey.<sup>2</sup> Despite that popular association, I’ll argue that theism and ordinary morality are incompatible: theism can’t accommodate an ordinary and fundamental moral obligation acknowledged by many people, including many theists. My argument turns on a principle that a number of philosophers already accept as a constraint on any plausible theodicy. I’ll defend the principle against objections from those inclined

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<sup>1</sup> James Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 3d. ed., 1999), 53–54. Although Rachels gives the title “Does Morality Depend on Religion?” to the relevant chapter of his book, he restricts his discussion of religion to (Christian) theism: “In discussing the connection (or lack of connection) between morality and religion, I will focus on one religion in particular, Christianity” (55).

<sup>2</sup> Penny Edgell, *et al.*, “Atheists as ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society,” *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 211–34.

to reject it. I won't *define* "ordinary morality." Indeed, I don't think it has a sharp definition. But I will indicate from time to time some of the obligations that belong uncontroversially to it. There are hard cases of course, but here I'm referring to cases we typically regard as easy, such as the obligation we at least sometimes have to prevent easily preventable, horrific suffering by an innocent person. To allude to an actual case, if you can easily and at no risk to yourself prevent the total immolation of a small boy who is about to be set on fire by his abusive father,<sup>3</sup> you ought to prevent it. That obligation is the sort of thing I mean by "ordinary morality," and it implies atheism.

### THEODICAL INDIVIDUALISM

Ordinary morality conflicts with traditional theism when conjoined with a principle widely regarded as a constraint on any plausible theodicy. Jeff Jordan calls the principle "theodical individualism," which I'll use the initials "TI" to abbreviate. I formulate the principle as follows:

(TI) Necessarily, God permits undeserved, involuntary human suffering only if such suffering ultimately produces a net benefit for the sufferer.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In 1983, Charles Rothenberg lost a child-custody dispute with his ex-wife. In an attempt at revenge on her, Rothenberg then kidnapped their six-year-old son, David, and as the boy lay sleeping doused him with kerosene and set him on fire. David suffered third-degree burns covering ninety percent of his body and despite numerous surgeries remains terribly disfigured to this day. Had you been in a position easily, and at no risk to yourself, to prevent David's immolation, ordinary morality would have obligated you to prevent it.

<sup>4</sup> The modal operator "necessarily" signals the fact that TI isn't a merely contingent moral constraint on a perfect being. It also forestalls the objection posed by an anonymous referee that my argument jumps illicitly from the indicative conditional (a) "If we *don't* prevent undeserved, involuntary suffering, then that suffering will ultimately benefit the sufferer" to the subjunctive conditional (b) "If we *weren't* to prevent undeserved, involuntary suffering, then that suffering would ultimately benefit the sufferer." Granted that indicative conditionals don't in general imply subjunctive conditionals, that fact is irrelevant here: the necessity operator in TI implies that regardless of what we do (or were

TI contains the qualifier “undeserved” in order to satisfy retributivists who think people sometimes deserve to suffer; if you think people never deserve to suffer, simply ignore the qualifier. Jordan’s formulations of TI don’t explicitly exclude suffering willingly borne by human beings for altruistic or other reasons: for example, the pain of donating bone marrow to help an anonymous leukemia patient. With the qualifier “involuntary,” I exclude such suffering from the scope of TI because I see nothing wrong with the idea of God’s permitting undeserved suffering that people deliberately choose to endure for, say, the benefit of others without gaining for themselves a net benefit from it.<sup>5</sup>

As a constraint on theodicies, TI is meant to be read as neutral regarding the existence of God, and Jordan finds it endorsed by both theistic and anti-theistic philosophers of religion, including William L. Rowe, Marilyn McCord Adams, William P. Alston, Eleonore Stump, and Michael Tooley.<sup>6</sup> He regards Stump’s view as representative of the consensus: “if a good God allows evil, it can only be because the

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to do) any undeserved, involuntary suffering that God permits will (or would) ultimately produce a net benefit for the sufferer.

<sup>5</sup> If you disagree and think that a perfect God wouldn’t allow people willingly to sacrifice themselves for the sake of others but would instead intervene to make such sacrifice unnecessary, then you’re committed to a constraint even stronger than TI.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Jordan, “Divine Love and Human Suffering,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 56 (2004): 169–78; 172, 177 nn. 13, 23. The case of Alston is a bit complicated. His position seems to require that the sufferer, on due reflection, would from her own perspective “joyfully endorse” the claim that the goods obtained were *worth* the suffering on her part that was necessary for obtaining them, a position that appears to allow for the combination of *willingly borne* undeserved suffering and *adequately compensated* undeserved suffering; see William P. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 97–125; 112. Because the sufferer willingly bears her suffering (at least retrospectively), I don’t believe that Alston’s position conflicts with TI as formulated here. Peter van Inwagen offers a theodicy that might be thought to deprive TI of any *application*: on van Inwagen’s view, all human beings *deserve* the suffering they experience, by virtue of early humanity’s “primordial act of turning away from God,” which produced “ruin . . . in some way inherited by all of their descendants”; see “The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy,” in *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 96–122; 99–100. Although I won’t take time here to establish the claim, I believe that van Inwagen’s historical account, even if accepted, fails to show that no human suffering is ever undeserved: TI has work to do after all.

evil in question produces a benefit for the sufferer and one that God could not produce without the suffering.”<sup>7</sup> Like Stump’s use of it, TI’s use of the word “produces” is significant, because otherwise we allow that God’s mere compensation of the sufferer—say, in a blissful afterlife—can justify God’s permission of suffering even if the suffering bears no necessary connection to the good that compensates for it. Without such a connection, the good may *compensate for* the suffering but can’t *morally justify* God’s permission of it. Consider an analogy to our ordinary moral practice. My paying you money after harming you may compensate for my harming you, but it doesn’t justify my harming you. Only something like the necessity of my harming you in order to prevent your harming me or an innocent third party has a chance of justifying my behavior: some necessary connection must hold between the harm and the benefit.<sup>8</sup>

Because he sees the combination of TI and theism as potentially corrupting ordinary morality, Jordan advises theists to reject TI.<sup>9</sup> While I believe he’s correct that we can’t consistently accept theism, TI, and the demands of ordinary morality, it isn’t at all clear that TI is the guilty member of that triad, and Jordan never in fact shows that it is. On the contrary, I’ll argue, TI is just as plausible as it has been taken to be by the philosophers Jordan opposes, in which case we’re left with a contest between theism and ordinary morality.

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<sup>7</sup> Eleonore Stump, “The Problem of Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 392–423; 411–13, quoted in Jordan, “Divine Love and Human Suffering,” 172.

<sup>8</sup> Ordinary moral practice allows my innocence in *accidentally* harming you to *excuse* my harming you but not, I think, to justify my harming you. In any case, however, the notion of accidental harm has no place in the present discussion, since we may presume that an omnipotent and omniscient God’s permission of harm is never accidental.

<sup>9</sup> Others have offered the same advice, as Jordan acknowledges (“Divine Love and Human Suffering,” 177 n. 20). They include William Hasker, “The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992): 23–44. These philosophers recognize the inconsistency of the triad containing ordinary morality, theism, and TI. They try to resolve it by rejecting TI, but they fail to see that TI follows from the combination of omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection attributed to God by traditional theism.

## AN ARGUMENT FOR ATHEISM

Consider the following argument for atheism. We start with a premise that's plainly true given the content of TI:

- (1) If God exists and TI is true, then, necessarily, all undeserved, involuntary human suffering ultimately produces a net benefit for the sufferer.<sup>10</sup>

Next comes a conditional claim similar to one endorsed by Jordan:

- (2) If, necessarily, all undeserved, involuntary human suffering ultimately produces a net benefit for the sufferer, then (a) we never have a moral obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering or (b) our moral obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering derives entirely from God's commands.

As Jordan puts it, the antecedent of (2) in effect “guarantees the operation of a kind of fail-safe device that renders every instance of [undeserved, involuntary] human suffering an instrumental good for that sufferer.”<sup>11</sup> We know that some vaccines can cause serious side-effects, but suppose that an abundantly available vaccine were, despite the painfulness of receiving it, known to produce a net benefit (the painfulness included) for everyone who receives it. Suppose, further, that no less painful procedure produces the same benefit. Under those circumstances, how could we ever have a moral *obligation* to prevent vaccination? I can't see how we could.

The same goes for undeserved, involuntary human suffering if we assume both theism and TI: we never have an obligation to prevent it

<sup>10</sup> Where 'G' abbreviates 'God exists' and 'B' abbreviates 'All undeserved, involuntary human suffering ultimately produces a net benefit for the sufferer', the reader may notice that my inference from TI to (1) is a case of inferring 'G  $\supset$   $\Box$ B' from ' $\Box$ (G  $\supset$  B)'. While not in general valid, the inference is licensed in this case by the fact that G itself is a noncontingent statement: 'G' implies ' $\Box$ G'. In all standard modal logics, 'G  $\supset$   $\Box$ G' and ' $\Box$ (G  $\supset$  B)' jointly imply 'G  $\supset$   $\Box$ B'.

<sup>11</sup> Jordan, "Divine Love and Human Suffering," 174.

unless God's commands somehow give us such a duty. Consider the case (alluded to earlier) of David Rothenberg, the six-year-old boy set on fire by his abusive father. If God exists and TI is true, then necessarily David ultimately benefits whenever God allows him to experience undeserved, involuntary suffering of such an intense kind. Thus, even if we could easily prevent his suffering, our allowing it is *always* like allowing him a vaccination known to be for his own net good. Granted, it may be that God *wants* us to prevent the suffering, but if we fail to prevent it David will be better off as a result. I don't say that TI and theism give us either permission or an obligation to *cause* his undeserved, involuntary suffering—although a case can be made for that stronger claim—only that TI and theism relieve of us of any obligation to prevent it.

Some may object that our duty to respect the autonomy of persons sometimes gives us an all-things-considered obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering (even if we know it benefits the sufferer) precisely because the suffering is undeserved and involuntary. This objection fails, however. For suppose that David were unwilling to receive a vaccination of the kind I described above: abundantly available and known to produce a net benefit (painfulness included) for everyone who receives it. It is by no means clear that anyone has an ordinary moral obligation to *prevent* the vaccination, despite six-year-old David's unwillingness to receive it. Since we have an ordinary moral obligation to prevent David's immolation but no such obligation to prevent his vaccination, autonomy does no work here, for it's equally present (or absent) in both cases.

Others may object that ordinary morality imposes no "positive" duties at all, including a duty to intervene on David's behalf. While I think such a view seriously misrepresents ordinary morality, it poses no threat to my thesis in this essay, since if need be one can plausibly argue that TI and theism together give us permission, even perhaps a duty, to *cause* David's suffering—a result unacceptable even to those who admit only "negative" moral duties of non-interference.

One might suppose that disjunct (a) in the consequent of (2) holds only for those who *accept* the antecedent of (2): you lack an obligation to prevent suffering only if you *believe* that suffering always benefits

the sufferer. I won't try to settle here the complex issue of how our obligations depend on our beliefs. In any case, however, surely ordinary morality presupposes that our obligation to prevent suffering doesn't depend essentially on the *false* belief that suffering is often bad for the sufferer. On the contrary, we ordinarily recognize an obligation to prevent suffering at least partly *because* we presume that suffering often produces no net benefit for the sufferer, and thus ordinary morality *commits* its adherents to disbelieving the antecedent of (2). Hence, if theism implies the antecedent of (2), as I'll argue it does, then theism and ordinary morality conflict.

One might deny that theism implies the antecedent of (2) by arguing that theism accepts (i) our common presumption that suffering often produces no net benefit for the sufferer in *this* life but not (ii) the claim that suffering often produces no net benefit for the sufferer in *the next* life. But in the present context such a distinction marks no important difference: theistic views that posit an afterlife portray your afterlife as a stage in your entire existence, from which perspective it doesn't matter, as such, whether the benefit produced by suffering accrues to you here or hereafter; a benefit is no less yours because it accrues to you later rather than sooner. Positing an afterlife, then, won't weaken theism's commitment to the antecedent of (2).

Jordan's own version of (2) lacks disjunct (b), the disjunct deriving our moral obligation solely from God's commands. But for two reasons that difference doesn't matter. First, if his conditional is true, so is (2), since 'If P, then Q' implies 'If P, then (Q or R)'. Second, Jordan's conditional lacks (b) because he rightly regards that disjunct as false or at least inconsistent with ordinary morality:

[T]he proposal that one should prevent suffering [only] because one is commanded to do so ... comes at the high cost of recalibrating commonsense morality. The recalibration comes in part with the replacement of concern and sympathy and compassion with the obedience to commands. One alleviates suffering not out of compassion for the sufferer, but rather because one is told to do so.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 175–6.

Indeed, the proposal that Jordan criticizes—disjunct (b)—is at least as bad as he suggests. For accepting (b) would put any theists who accepted TI in the puzzling position of believing that God has commanded them to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering, at least when they easily can, even though such suffering always ultimately benefits the sufferer. One might reply that God has commanded *sympathy* by commanding us to love one another, and sympathy on its own obligates us to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering. But presumably God hasn't commanded *misguided* sympathy—for instance, sympathy that compels us to prevent even those vaccinations that greatly benefit their recipients. By the same token, then, God hasn't commanded equally misguided sympathy compelling us to prevent suffering that, if TI is true, always produces a net benefit for the sufferer.

In any case, however, Jordan is correct that ordinary morality sometimes expects us to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering and not *simply* because we're commanded to do so. The very basic commitments of what I'm calling "ordinary morality" are shared by theistic and non-theistic cultures alike. Ordinary morality doesn't presuppose the existence of divine commands because it doesn't presuppose the existence of God. Thus:

- (3) We sometimes have a moral obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering, an obligation that does *not* derive entirely from God's commands.

Two subconclusions follow from the three premises just established:

- (4) So: It isn't the case that, necessarily, all undeserved, involuntary human suffering ultimately produces a net benefit for the sufferer. [From (2), (3)]
- (5) So: God does not exist or TI is false. [From (1), (4)]

Now, as Jordan seems to concede, TI follows from what he describes as "the Kantian claim that it is wrong for anyone, deity included, to use



humans merely as means and [not] also as ends.”<sup>13</sup> If God causes or even permits your unwilling, undeserved suffering primarily for the benefit of someone or something else, it does look as if God is, at least indirectly, treating you merely as a means. Despite the presence of the word “benefit” in TI, the basis for TI is deontological rather than consequentialist: TI serves as an absolute *constraint* on God’s maximization of goodness or happiness. I don’t claim that ordinary morality itself implies theological principles such as TI. Ordinary morality, as the name suggests, concerns our dealings with fellow creatures rather than our dealings with God. Nevertheless, I’m arguing that TI is *true* even if not itself a tenet of ordinary morality and that TI and theism jointly destroy a type of obligation that does belong to ordinary morality.

Regarding TI, one may ask, in order to avoid treating you merely as a means must God confer on you a *net* benefit—in this life or the next—for any undeserved, involuntary suffering you endure? Jordan thinks so:

If Theodical Individualism is correct, then ... there is [an] *outweighing good for the sufferer*. The goodness of God requires, moreover, that this outweighing good isn’t only compensatory, but is also a “necessary means or the best possible means in the circumstances to keep the sufferer from incurring even greater harm.” God permits that suffering, in those circumstances, because that suffering provides the optimal benefit, in those particular circumstances, to the human sufferer.<sup>14</sup>

Again, as mentioned earlier, Jordan cites McCord Adams, Alston, and Stump among theistic philosophers who endorse TI, so construed.

But beyond its endorsement by some noted philosophers, the need for adequate divine compensation gains support from thought-experiments

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 172. Jordan’s actual formulation of the Kantian claim contains what must be, if we read him charitably, a typographical error: “it is wrong for anyone, deity included, to use humans merely as means and *never* also as ends” (172, emphasis added). The presence of “never” turns the Kantian claim into a much weaker requirement than one finds in Kant, since on the weaker claim we avoid wrongness even if we only sometimes treat human beings as ends. Surely it isn’t enough for Kant if we only sometimes treat human beings as he thinks we must always treat them.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., emphasis added, notes omitted. The embedded quotation is from Eleonore Stump, “Providence and the Problem of Evil,” in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas P. Flint (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 51–91.

such as the following. Suppose that God allows Jack to endure undeserved, prolonged, and unbearable pain because it's the only way to get Jack's crush, Jill, who has consistently ignored his affections, freely to send Jack a get-well card that he'll read just before he dies from his painful condition. Jack secures *some* benefit from the suffering—a freely sent get-well card from Jill—but suppose that his suffering is involuntary in that he wouldn't regard the benefit as remotely worth the suffering even if he knew that not even God could produce the benefit any other way. Surely God's conduct in that case falls short of moral perfection. It falls short even if we also suppose that Jack's suffering produces significant benefits for *others* obtainable no other way (perhaps news of his suffering triggers generous donations that his hospital wouldn't otherwise have received). It falls short of moral perfection because it's *unfair to Jack*, and this demand for fairness in the treatment of individual persons is what underwrites the Kantian claim. Jack gets some reward, but not enough: not enough because his reward fails, by any reasonable measure, to offset his undeserved, involuntary suffering.<sup>15</sup> The Kantian claim, in short, does imply TI, including TI's requirement of a net benefit for the sufferer:

- (6) If not even God may treat human beings merely as means, then TI is true.

Furthermore, whether God's merely using human beings would be *morally wrong* because it violates a duty that binds even God, or whether instead it is only in some *other* way inconsistent with God's moral perfection, it does look inconsistent with orthodox theism. To put it a bit differently, my argument presumes that a perfect being would never *sacrifice* an innocent person who didn't volunteer for it. In his attack on TI, Jordan never explicitly denies the Kantian claim, and indeed it's hard to see how

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<sup>15</sup> Must Jack receive a net benefit, or is it morally sufficient if God sees to it that Jack suffers *no net harm*? Jordan's formulation of his opponents' view ("outweighing good") and Stump's formulation of her own view ("keep the sufferer from incurring even *greater* harm") certainly seem to require a net benefit. But I don't see this issue as pivotal, since surely our ordinary moral obligation to prevent easily preventable suffering by innocent people would be threatened if it were the case that, necessarily, sufferers never realized a net harm from such suffering.

a being retaining all of God's perfections—in particular, omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness—*could* merely use a human being. We human beings sometimes exploit—that is, merely use—one another, and we thereby (but not only thereby) fall short of moral perfection. Some of the time, moreover, we merely use others at least partly because we lack the assets—the power and knowledge—necessary for avoiding such conduct. If, like God, we possessed limitless power and knowledge and nevertheless exploited others, our exploitative conduct would be even more blameworthy. Indeed, the superior assets at God's disposal only add to the support enjoyed by the next premise:

(7) Not even God may treat human beings merely as means.

It remains, then, only to draw the argument's final two inferences:

(8) So: TI is true. [From (6), (7)]

(9) So: God does not exist. [From (5), (8)]

## FURTHER OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

### *1. Consequences of TI and theism*

One might give the following deontological reason for denying my claim that TI and theism jointly undermine our moral obligations: "My knowing that another agent will more than make up for my failure to do my apparent duty doesn't always relieve me of my moral responsibility to do my apparent duty. For example, suppose I have promised to pay John \$1000 for some work that he did for me, but I learn that John's uncle is about to leave him \$1,000,000 on the condition that John doesn't have even \$1000 of his own. I inform John of this, but John, who hates his uncle and doesn't want to get anything from him, insists that I pay him as I promised to do. Many deontologists would insist that I have a moral obligation to pay him the \$1000, even if John would be better off if I reneged."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I owe this objection, verbatim, to an anonymous referee. Another referee claims that redistributive taxation of a wealthy but unwilling taxpayer is a justified imposition

This analogy misfires, however, for three reasons. First, the obligation owed to John arises from a promise and depends on the institution of promising, whereas the obligation referred to in premise (2) of my argument—our obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering in at least some cases—doesn't depend on our promising to do so. Second, if John detests his uncle to a sufficient degree, we can see how John might *not* be better-off accepting \$1,000,000 at the cost of his own self-respect (or how John might deserve to forego that money, as the cost of his spite), whereas, I assume, we can't begin to see how David Rothenberg might be better-off for having suffered immolation (or how he might deserve it). Third, and relatedly, John's case is irrelevant to the implications of TI because John *volunteers*, out of pride or spite, to accept the "suffering" that consists in his foregoing a net \$999,000, whereas, again, TI applies only to involuntary suffering. It would surprise me to see a case in which an apparent duty we owe to John survives our knowledge that honoring it will make him suffer in a way for which he didn't volunteer.

Some philosophers who defend principles like TI nevertheless try to fend off the threat to ordinary morality that I've said TI and theism imply. About her own solution to the problem of evil, Stump writes,

Someone might ... object here that this solution to the problem of evil prohibits us from any attempt to relieve human suffering and in fact suggests that we ought to promote it, as the means of man's salvation.... [But] God can see into the minds and hearts of human beings and determine what sort and amount of suffering is likely to produce the best results; we cannot.... Therefore, since all human suffering is *prima facie* evil, and since we do not know with any high degree of probability how much (if any) of it is likely to result in good for any particular sufferer on any particular occasion, it is reasonable for us to eliminate the suffering as much as we can. At any rate, the attempt to eliminate suffering is likely to be beneficial to our characters, and passivity in the face of others' suffering will have no such good effects.<sup>17</sup>

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of undeserved, involuntary suffering on that taxpayer, allegedly contrary to TI. But this example fails to touch TI. Even if we stretch things and describe the wealthy taxpayer as "suffering" by being taxed, those who regard redistributive taxation as justified typically regard it as fair, i.e., as something the wealthy deserve to face, rather than as undeserved. I should also emphasize, as I did earlier in the main text, that TI describes a morally perfect God, from which it doesn't follow that TI describes us.

<sup>17</sup> Stump, "The Problem of Evil," 412–13.

On further examination, however, Stump's response fails in two ways to address the objection to theism that I've raised. First, I've argued that theism and TI together *relieve us of a duty to prevent* certain kinds of human suffering,<sup>18</sup> whereas Stump's reply addresses only the stronger claim that theism and TI *give us a duty not to prevent* such suffering. Stump evidently wishes to preserve our moral *permission* to intervene even if theism and TI are true: note particularly her phrasing "it is reasonable for us." Yet ordinary morality regards it as not just reasonable but obligatory for us to intervene, at least on some occasions; ordinary morality imposes a *duty* to intervene, and preserving permission needn't preserve the duty. Indeed, Stump's more modest aim of preserving permission suggests that she may appreciate the oddity of a *duty* on our part to prevent suffering that we recognize we have no reason to think isn't for the sufferer's own net good.

Second, the final sentence of Stump's reply embodies two flaws. It allows that a respectable motivation for preventing suffering is the *benefit to one's own character*, regardless of whether the prevention deprives the sufferer of a net benefit. But such a motivation gets things exactly backward, giving the intervener's benefit higher priority than the sufferer's. More important, it simply begs the question against my view by presupposing that the suffering isn't a net good for the sufferer, since if it *is* a net good for the sufferer then entrenching in ourselves a disposition to prevent it won't count as good for our characters.

Although she doesn't manage to preserve (because she doesn't try to preserve) our ordinary moral duty to prevent the kinds of suffering at issue in TI, Stump does argue that such prevention is at least reasonable on our part. But whatever reasonableness it may have is constrained by the following perverse consequence: on theism and TI, the more extreme an innocent person's involuntary suffering, the more reason we have to believe that such suffering is for the sufferer's own net good, and thus the less reason we have to prevent it. Even if God needn't ensure that your last mild headache produced a net good for you, surely God guarantees that David's immolation produces a net good for David. Hence, on theism and

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<sup>18</sup> Stump refers to *relieving* rather than preventing human suffering, a difference that doesn't matter here, since to relieve suffering is to prevent *further* (or *worse*) suffering.

TI, even if it's reasonable for us to prevent some undeserved, involuntary human suffering, it becomes less reasonable as the suffering becomes more extreme, a consequence that plainly conflicts with ordinary morality. Hence, even if I'm mistaken and the combination of theism and TI does allow for a duty to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering in at least some cases, this inverse relationship between the degree of suffering and the reasonableness of our preventing it stands as an independent reason for rejecting that combination.

## 2. *Libertarian freedom*

One might suppose that step (7) of my argument ("Not even God may treat human beings merely as means") is in some way refuted by the *free will theodicy*: We human beings possess libertarian—or contracausal—freedom, a capacity so valuable that it justifies God's taking the risk that we'll misuse it to cause horrific suffering in innocent non-volunteers and also justifies God's choice not to interfere with such misuse on countless occasions. On this view, God may justly allow David to be burned alive merely as the price of his father's exercise of such freedom. Although philosophers have spilled plenty of ink already in attacking and defending this well-worn theodicy, it has come up so often as a specific objection to my argument<sup>19</sup> that I feel obligated to say something about why I think the objection fails in this case.

The free will theodicy encounters at least three serious problems. First, it assumes that libertarian freedom is a coherent concept and that only libertarian freedom makes possible the kind of moral agency we value as human beings. Both assumptions are highly controversial, to say the least, although I won't take time here to rehearse the controversy. Suffice it to say that many philosophers remain unconvinced that any responsible agent must possess libertarian freedom that not even God may ever curtail.

Second, it assumes that libertarian free choices, as such, have so much intrinsic positive *value* that God would rightly refrain from ever interfering

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<sup>19</sup> To cite just one example: appeals to libertarian freedom figured crucially in the comments on an earlier version of this essay that Charles Taliaferro delivered at the 2006 Eastern Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association, comments I gratefully acknowledge.

with them, an assumption that both overstates the intrinsic value of free choices and may also contradict the biblical account of God's conduct. It overstates the intrinsic value of free choices because, as Derk Pereboom notes, from the ordinary moral perspective "the evildoer's freedom is a weightless consideration, not merely an outweighed consideration."<sup>20</sup> In assessing Charles Rothenberg's monstrous abuse of his son, ordinary morality assigns no discernible positive value to Rothenberg's having acted freely. Further, in claiming that God would never interfere with human freedom, the free will theodicy isn't easily squared with the scriptural portrayal of God as having manipulated human decisions such as the Pharaoh's: "And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the children of Israel..." (Exodus 14:8a). Indeed, God may well have a regular *practice* of "hardening hearts" and thereby interfering with human free choice: "Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens" (Romans 9:18).<sup>21</sup> In any case, if God's hardening of hearts is consistent with the inviolable nature of human free will, then so too would be God's softening Rothenberg's heart so that he doesn't immolate his son.<sup>22</sup>

Third, because again our topic concerns the compatibility of theism and ordinary morality, we can ask what ordinary moral practice implies about the relationship between moral responsibility and contracausal

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<sup>20</sup> Derk Pereboom, "Free Will, Evil, and Divine Providence," in *God and the Ethics of Belief*, ed. Andrew Dole and Andrew Chignell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77–98; 84, citing and expanding on David Lewis, "Evil for Freedom's Sake?" *Philosophical Papers* 22 (1993): 149–72; 155.

<sup>21</sup> Now, one might argue that TI itself is unbiblical, and indeed it may be; the Bible does portray God as committing or ordering the sacrifice of human beings for what appears not to be their own net benefit. However, I think it is dialectically more acceptable for me to rely on an unbiblical doctrine than it is for my theistic opponent to do so; on my view, there is no God for the Bible to be portraying, whereas defenders of the libertarian free will theodicy must maintain that there is a God whom the Bible, for some reason, misleadingly portrays as interfering with free will—a mistake significant enough to cast doubt on the accuracy of the rest of the Bible.

<sup>22</sup> The view that God's hardening of hearts deprives human agents of libertarian freedom is accepted by Peter van Inwagen, "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," in *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 42–65. It is rejected by Eleonore Stump, "Sanctification, Hardening of the Heart, and Frankfurt's Concept of Free Will," *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 395–420.

freedom. If we can regard Anglo-American criminal jurisprudence as reflecting the aspects of ordinary morality that are relevant here—if, in other words, the criminal law doesn't war with ordinary morality on this issue—then it's far from clear that we *hold* agents morally responsible only after we satisfy ourselves that they possess contracausal freedom. On the contrary, juries routinely convict defendants without even asking, let alone ascertaining, whether the defendants' actions were causally determined by the prior state of the universe. Likewise judges never, as far as I know, instruct jurors to satisfy themselves of the defendant's libertarian freedom before they issue a verdict. One might explain this omission by insisting that the presupposition of libertarian freedom is too obvious to need saying, but this explanation rings hollow. Judges' instructions to juries often include platitudes so obvious that only a lawyer would make them explicit, such as the admonition that witnesses don't always tell the truth.<sup>23</sup> In such a context, the persistent failure to mention libertarian freedom would be inexplicable, especially since the libertarian holds that defendants are *blameless* if they lack such freedom when they commit the crimes of which they're accused. In short, to the extent to which the criminal law embodies it, ordinary morality doesn't presuppose libertarian freedom. For all its considerable popularity, then, the libertarian free will theodicy carries too much controversial baggage to pose a significant threat to step (7) of the argument.

### 3. *Compensation vs. justification*

According to a theodicy I'll call "Heaven Swamps Everything," (7) is false because compensation paid to an exploited human being somehow

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<sup>23</sup> Indeed, when the issue of causal determinism *does* come up in the criminal law, appellate courts are apt to remind trial courts that the issue isn't relevant to criminal responsibility. See, for instance, the much-cited holding in *State v. Sikora*, 44 N.J. 453, 210 A.2d 193 (1965), 202–3: "Criminal responsibility must be judged at the level of the conscious. If a person thinks, plans, and executes the plan at that level, the criminality of his act cannot be denied, wholly or partially, because, although he did not realize it, his conscious [mind] was influenced to think, to plan and to execute the plan by unconscious influences which were the product of his genes and his lifelong environment. [C]riminal guilt cannot be denied or confined ... because [the defendant] was unaware that his decisions and conduct were mechanistically directed by unconscious influences."



*becomes* justification for the exploitation if the compensation is big enough: God's allowing David to suffer immolation is justified by David's heavenly reward—eternal bliss—even if his suffering is in no way *necessary* for his attaining the reward. Again, however, such reasoning wars with ordinary morality because it *conflates* compensation and justification, and it may stem from imagining an ecstatic or forgiving state of mind on the part of the blissful: in heaven no one bears grudges, even the most horrific earthly suffering is as nothing compared to infinite bliss, all past wrongs are forgiven. But “are forgiven” doesn't mean “were justified”; the blissful person's disinclination to dwell on his or her earthly suffering doesn't imply that a perfect being was justified in permitting the suffering all along. By the same token, our ordinary moral practice recognizes a legitimate complaint about child abuse even if, as adults, its victims should happen to be on drugs that make them uninterested in complaining. Even if heaven swamps everything, it doesn't thereby justify everything.

Alternatively, one might suppose that, assuming everyone goes to heaven, everyone on due reflection eventually *consents* (after the fact) to any undeserved and otherwise involuntary suffering he or she experienced while on earth.<sup>24</sup> But this response does nothing to diminish the theistic threat to ordinary morality: our ordinary moral obligation to prevent at least some undeserved, involuntary human suffering disappears if (we believe) its victims will always on due reflection eventually consent to that suffering.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. *Open theism*

One might object that TI presupposes the falsity of “open theism,” a theological perspective claiming, among other things, that God lacks

<sup>24</sup> Compare Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil,” 112.

<sup>25</sup> Yet another view is that intense suffering is always a gift from God, a blessing, in part because it is an analogue of Christ's suffering. Christopher Hitchens attributes this view to Mother Teresa of Calcutta; see *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (London: Verso, 1995), 41. Even if we ignore the highly questionable features of this view, it fails to blunt the theistic threat to morality for which I argue here, since if intense suffering is always a blessing in disguise, we never have an ordinary moral obligation to prevent it.

knowledge of the future, or at least the part of the future that depends on the all-important libertarian free choices of creatures. A first response would be that libertarian freedom is morally less important and philosophically less defensible than open theism supposes, a response that develops the admittedly brief criticisms of libertarianism I gave earlier. I lack the space to offer that response here. A second response would be to concede the point: my argument is meant to show that ordinary morality is inconsistent with the traditional kind of theism that attributes comprehensive foreknowledge to God. Open theists themselves admit that their brand of theism is nontraditional in its denial of comprehensive divine foreknowledge.

But I don't think I need to concede the point. As far as I know, open theism retains the traditional claim that God is almighty and morally perfect. Moreover, even if God lacks comprehensive foreknowledge, as open theism asserts, God surely possesses *more* foreknowledge—or propositional attitudes more nearly *like* foreknowledge—than any other being, and vastly more than any human being. If, as I've argued, moral perfection precludes exploitation, then a God of even this more modest description would permit undeserved, involuntary human suffering only if it's at least highly *likely* to produce a net benefit for the sufferer. The guarantee contained in TI as I originally worded it isn't essential to my argument; God's best guess about the outcome of a given case of suffering is quite likely to be correct. Hence even a version of TI containing the qualifying phrase "highly likely," when combined with open theism, is enough to threaten the ordinary moral obligation referred to in step (3) of my argument.

### 5. *Answering the Regress Objection*

Finally, in this context it's worth noting that features of our ordinary moral practice help answer an objection to the atheist's "evidential" argument from suffering that can otherwise seem unanswerable. Whereas the so-called "logical" argument from suffering claims that the existence of suffering logically rules out the existence of God, one standard version of the evidential argument claims that the *amount* of suffering in our world reduces the likelihood that God exists but doesn't rule it out altogether.

According to what Theodore Drange calls the “Regress Objection,” however, the evidential atheist’s demands on God are arbitrary or unsatisfiable: “if God were to keep ... reducing suffering in the world in an effort to make its residents satisfied, then at what point would they say, ‘Stop, we’re maximally happy now?’”<sup>26</sup> The atheist, it seems, will accept nothing less than paradise, yet arguably any ideal law-governed universe containing beings like us will contain some degree of suffering that’s unavoidable if only because of natural regularities. So the complaint against God looks unreasonable.

But the principles motivating the Regress Objection break down when we apply them to everyday moral practice. According to the first of those principles, it’s illegitimate to complain that the created order isn’t paradise: you can’t properly complain about God’s permitting a case of horrific suffering unless there is *some nonzero amount* of suffering that you would regard as acceptable for God to permit. But consider the analogous principle in the context of human moral agents. Imagine someone so touchy that he complains, on moral grounds, about the slightest imposition; he regards it as unjust that other people dare to breathe the air around him. Even given the hypersensitivity shown by his unreasonable complaints, ordinary morality still allows him a perfectly proper moral complaint against anyone who tries to burn him alive. Hypersensitivity alone doesn’t deprive you of reasonable complaints. According to the second principle motivating the Regress Objection, you can’t properly complain about God’s permitting a case of horrific suffering unless you can specify a precise *cut-off* between suffering you regard as acceptable and suffering you regard as unacceptable. Applied to ordinary moral agents, however, this principle implies that you can’t properly complain about being burned alive unless you can precisely distinguish acceptable from unacceptable amounts of suffering. But we don’t hold ordinary moral complainers to that impossible standard before we regard their moral complaints as reasonable. Thus, our ordinary moral practice rejects the reasoning behind the Regress Objection; one can press the objection only

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<sup>26</sup> Theodore M. Drange, *Nonbelief & Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 288. A similar objection is discussed in van Inwagen, “The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil: A Theodicy,” 103–4, where van Inwagen appears to recognize the objection’s ill fit with ordinary moral reasoning.

by abandoning ordinary morality.<sup>27</sup> I don't say that this reply on its own refutes the Regress Objection, only that ordinary moral practice rejects the principles on which the Regress Objection seems to depend.

To conclude. Jordan argues only that accepting both theism and TI would corrupt morality, which of course leaves two ways of avoiding the corruption of morality, one of which is to reject theism. Something has to go from the triad containing theism, TI, and an obligation to prevent undeserved, involuntary human suffering. In virtue of (6) and (7), TI looks secure, which leaves theists to choose between retaining their theism and accepting a core obligation of ordinary morality.<sup>28</sup> On one quite popular view, as Rachels suggests, ordinary morality *depends* in some way on theism, a view that has fallen into disfavor among at least many philosophers. But those who reject the claim of dependence nevertheless often regard ordinary morality as at least *consistent* with theism. I've argued against even that weaker position.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Drange, *Nonbelief & Evil*, argues along similar lines, although he appeals to non-moral customs rather than to ordinary morality as such.

<sup>28</sup> One might note, either as an objection to my thesis or as an endorsement of it, that moral perfection imposes an awfully high standard on God: God must achieve the maximum total happiness that can be achieved without ever exploiting anyone. Nothing short of that ideal seems enough for genuine perfection, including a compromise position that allows God to achieve the best "balance" between maximizing total happiness and avoiding exploitation, since such a proposal respects neither the consequentialist nor the deontological intuition. Perhaps it is incoherent to demand that God be the perfect consequentialist *and* the perfect Kantian, but in that case perhaps the concept of a *perfect being* is incoherent. I leave open the possibility that ordinary morality as a whole reflects an incoherent mix of consequentialism and deontology, in which case *everything* would be inconsistent with ordinary morality: ordinary morality would imply atheism, theism, and everything else. This essay argues for the inconsistency of ordinary morality and theism, a point that I believe is noteworthy given widespread opinion to the contrary, regardless of the self-consistency of ordinary morality itself.

<sup>29</sup> For helpful comments, I thank Eric Chwang, Andrew Graham, Michael Murray, John Schellenberg, Charles Taliaferro, audiences at Dalhousie University and at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meetings, and anonymous referees who reviewed earlier versions of this essay.