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# SAADIA GAON ON THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Eleonore Stump

Considerable effort has been expended on constructing theodicies which try to reconcile the suffering of unwilling innocents, such as Job, with the existence and nature of God as understood in Christian theology. There is, of course, abundant reflection on the problem of evil and the story of Job in the history of Jewish thought, but this material has not been discussed much in contemporary philosophical literature. I want to take a step towards remedying this defect by examining the interpretation of the story of Job and the solution to the problem of evil given by one important and influential Jewish thinker, Saadia Gaon.

The problem of evil is raised by the combination of traditional theistic beliefs and the acknowledgement that there is evil in the world. If there is a perfectly good, omnipotent, omniscient God who creates and governs the world, how can the world he created and governs have suffering in it? This question, of course, needs to be made more precise. It is widely accepted that human beings have free will and are able to misuse that free will in immoral ways. Some punishment of the wicked doesn't seem incompatible with God's existence. As far as that goes, some people freely choose to subject themselves to suffering. Odysseus chooses to join the expedition to Troy although he knows that doing so will result in all the sufferings of war. Such suffering, freely brought on himself by the sufferer, also doesn't seem incompatible with the existence of a God with the traditional attributes. So when the existence of evil in the world looks difficult to reconcile with the existence of God, the evil in question must be the suffering of unwilling innocents, those whose suffering is neither chosen nor deserved by them.

Job is the classic case in literature of an unwilling innocent whose suffering is, on the face of it, incompatible with the existence of God. It is an explicit and much emphasized part of the story that Job is entirely innocent, that his suffering in no way constitutes punishment for wrongdoing. It is equally obvious that his suffering isn't anything that he has chosen; it is simply inflicted on him, by marauding evildoers, by nature, and, in some sense, by God. For many contemporary thinkers, suffering such as that endured by Job is evidence against the existence of God. For committed theists, such as Job himself in the story, what is called in question by such suffering is not God's existence but one or more of the attributes traditionally assigned to him. Job himself, with some passion, questions God's



goodness. How a commentator on the story of Job deals with the apparent incompatibility of Job's suffering with the existence or traditional attributes of God thus reveals his attitude towards the problem of evil.

In philosophy of religion recently, considerable effort has been expended on constructing (or reconstructing) Christian theodicies, which try to find ways consonant with Christian belief to reconcile the suffering of unwilling innocents, such as Job, with the existence and nature of God as understood in Christian theology. Theodicies of this sort make use of such Christian doctrines as original sin, incarnation, and atonement.<sup>1</sup> But, of course, the story of Job is part of the Hebrew Bible, and there is abundant reflection on the story of Job in Jewish philosophical theology. This material, however, has not been discussed much in contemporary philosophical literature on the problem of evil. In this paper, I want to take a step towards remedying this defect by examining the interpretation of the story of Job and the solution to the problem of evil given by one important and influential Jewish thinker, Saadia Gaon.<sup>2</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, the sort of approach to the problem of evil of which Saadia's theodicy is one example can be defended against many of the main objections it invites.<sup>3</sup> But in this paper, my aim will be largely to investigate and clarify what Saadia's theodicy is, not to defend it.

Since Saadia is not as well known as some other medieval philosophers, it may also be helpful at the outset to say something very briefly about his life.

Saadia ben Josef al-Fayyumi was born in Fayyum in Egypt in 892.<sup>4</sup> Even in his youth, he was involved in intellectual and religious controversy. He was an active opponent of the Karaites, who rejected the importance of the Talmud and Midrash and argued for a solely literal interpretation of biblical texts. He was also an outspoken and effective participant in a controversy between Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis over the religious calendar. Saadia was on the side of the Babylonians and was thought to have refuted the Palestinian rabbis. In 921/2, in recognition of his success in this controversy, he was made a member of the famous and influential Academy of Sura. In 928 he was appointed Gaon or Head of the Academy, a position of considerable eminence in the medieval Jewish world.

After a brief period in office, he quarreled with the Exiliarch, the political leader of the Jewish community in Babylon, and the quarrel became so fierce that it led to Saadia's removal from the Gaonate. Saadia was in retirement for the next five years, a time which proved to be very productive for him; his main philosophical work was written in this period. Eventually, he was reconciled with the Exiliarch and restored to his position as Gaon, but he did not remain Gaon long. He died in 942, only five years after resuming his position.<sup>5</sup>

He was an influential thinker and a prolific author, writing on topics as diverse as chronology and psychology; but his magnum opus, which contains a considerable discussion of the problem of evil, is *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*.<sup>6</sup> He also wrote a lengthy commentary on the book of Job.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I will be considering Saadia's views of the problem of evil as they are presented in these two works.

In order to show the nature of Saadia's theodicy and his interpretation of the story of Job, I think it is helpful to have a medieval Christian analogue

for comparison. Because medieval Jews and Christians share many philosophical and theological views, one way to elucidate a medieval Jewish theodicy such as Saadia's is to overlay Saadia's theodicy with that of a typical medieval Christian and to look for the differences between them. So I will first give a brief summary of Aquinas's reading of the story of Job, and then I will present Saadia's, as Saadia is commonly understood. I will then argue that this common understanding of Saadia's views is inaccurate and simplistic. If we look carefully at Saadia's theodicy in *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, which, according to contemporary scholars, contains generally the same view of the problem of evil as his commentary on Job does, we can see that his theodicy is subtler and more defensible than has been generally supposed. Finally, I will argue that, interpreted in the way I am arguing for, Saadia's theodicy is much closer to Aquinas's than at first appears. Seeing why their positions are as close as they are gives us some insight, I think, into the issues at stake in considerations of the problem of evil.

#### *Aquinas on Job*

Aquinas approaches the book of Job with the conviction that God's existence is not in doubt, either for the characters in the story of Job or for the readers of that story.<sup>8</sup> On his view, those who go astray in contemplating sufferings such as Job's do so because, like Job's comforters, they mistakenly suppose that happiness and unhappiness are functions just of things in this life. Aquinas, on the other hand, takes the book of Job to be trying to instill in us the conviction that there is another life after this one, that our ultimate happiness lies there rather than here, and that we attain to that happiness only through suffering.<sup>9</sup>

On Aquinas's view, all human beings have a terminal cancer of soul, a proneness to evil which invariably eventuates in sin and which in the right circumstances blows up into monstrosity. On his view, even "our senses and our thoughts are prone to evil."<sup>10</sup> The pure and innocent among human beings are no exception to this claim. When the biblical text says that Job was righteous, Aquinas takes the text to mean that Job was pure by human standards. By the objective, uncurved standards of God, even Job was infected with the radical human tendencies toward evil.<sup>11</sup> No human being who remains uncured of this disease can see God. On Aquinas's view, then, the primary obstacle to union with God, in which true and ultimate human happiness consists, is the sinful character of human beings.

Aquinas thinks that pain and suffering of all sorts are God's medicine for this spiritual cancer,<sup>12</sup> and he emphasizes this view repeatedly.<sup>13</sup> Arguing that temporal goods such as those Job lost are given and taken away according to God's will, Aquinas says

"someone's suffering adversity would not be pleasing to God except for the sake of some good coming from the adversity. And so although adversity is in itself bitter and gives rise to sadness, it should nonetheless be agreeable [to us] when we consider its usefulness, on account of which it is pleasing to God. . . . For in his reason a

person rejoices over the taking of bitter medicine because of the hope of health, even though in his senses he is troubled."<sup>14</sup>

For Aquinas, then, what justifies the suffering of an unwilling innocent is that the suffering acts as a spiritual chemotherapeutic agent, keeping the spiritual cancer of the soul from killing the patient.

Aquinas thus sets fairly strenuous standards for theodicy. The morally sufficient reason for God's allowing unwilling innocents to suffer consists in a benefit which comes, largely or primarily, to the sufferer and which consists in warding off a greater evil for the sufferer. So, for example, commenting on a line in Job containing the complaint that God sometimes doesn't hear a needy person's prayers, Aquinas says,

"Now it sometimes happens that God hearkens not to a person's pleas but rather to his advantage. A doctor does not hearken to the pleas of the sick person who requests that the bitter medicine be taken away (supposing that the doctor doesn't take it away because he knows that it contributes to health); instead he hearkens to [the patient's] advantage, because by doing so he produces health, which the sick person wants most of all. In the same way, God does not remove tribulations from the person stuck in them, even though he prays earnestly for God to do so, because God knows these tribulations help him forward to final salvation. And so although God truly does hearken, the person stuck in afflictions believes that God hasn't hearkened to him."<sup>15</sup>

In fact, on Aquinas's view, the better the person, the more likely it is that he will experience suffering. In explicating two metaphors of Job's,<sup>16</sup> comparing human beings in this life to soldiers on a military campaign and to servants, Aquinas makes the point in this way:

"It is plain that the general of an army does not spare [his] more active soldiers dangers or exertions, but as the plan of battle requires, he sometimes lays them open to greater dangers and greater exertions. But after the attainment of victory, he bestows greater honor on the more active soldiers. So also the head of a household assigns greater exertions to his better servants, but when it is time to reward them, he lavishes greater gifts on them. And so neither is it characteristic of divine providence that it should exempt good people more from the adversities and exertions of the present life, but rather that it reward them more at the end."<sup>17</sup>

Underlying these remarks of Aquinas's is the thought that, just as there are degrees of bodily health, so there are also various gradations of spiritual health. Those persons who are morally or spiritually stronger are given more suffering so that they might be more thoroughly cured of their own evil and brought to a more robust state of spiritual wellbeing. Someone might suppose here that on Aquinas's views he ought to say not that better people suffer more but rather that worse people, who need more suffering,

suffer more. But an analogy with chemotherapy is helpful here. Sometimes the most effective kinds of chemotherapy can't be used on those who need it most because their systems are too weak to bear the treatments, and so the strongest kinds of treatment tend to be reserved for those who aren't too old or too advanced in the disease or too riddled with secondary complications — in other words, for those who are (apart from their cancer) strong and healthy.

So, on Aquinas's view, Job has more suffering than ordinary people not because he is morally worse than ordinary, as the comforters assume, but just because he is better. Because he is a better soldier in the war against his own evil and a better servant of God's, God can give him more to bear here. Even the dreadful suffering Job experiences at the death of his good and virtuous children becomes transformed on this account from the unbearable awfulness of total loss to the bitter but temporary agony of separation, since in being united to God in love in heaven, a person is also united with others. The ultimate good of union with God, like any great good, is by nature shareable.

Aquinas recognizes that his position will seem counter-intuitive or worse to some people, and he takes this difference in attitude to stem from a more general difference in philosophical and theological worldview. "If there were no resurrection of the dead," he says, "people wouldn't think it was a power and a glory to abandon all that can give pleasure and to bear the pains of death and dishonor; instead they would think it was stupid."<sup>18</sup> His theodicy seems as reasonable as it does to him because it is set in a whole web of Christian beliefs not only about God's existence and attributes but also about the nature of human beings in this world, the existence and nature of the afterlife, and the means by which human beings are brought to happiness in it.

#### *Saadia's account of Job*

Saadia accepts the same basic account of the story of Job as Aquinas and most other readers of the story do. He agrees that Job is morally innocent, that he suffers horribly, and that his suffering is in no way deserved, contrary to the position of the ill-named Comforters. Like Aquinas, he also supposes that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. Furthermore, by 'goodness' here he means goodness by some objective standard, and not just goodness constituted by whatever God wills. As one scholar commenting on Saadia's position puts it:

"Princes too can be guilty of injustice, and it is not by right of ownership that God is just, as was argued by the Ash'arites, whose slogan was, "There is no injustice to a chattle." On the contrary, Saadiah argues...that one cannot ascribe to God actions which would be unjust by human standards. Saadiah rejects the theistic subjectivism of his Ash'arite contemporaries...."<sup>19</sup>

Given these views of Saadia's, it is obvious that from his point of view the story of Job, which stands as representative for all the suffering of unwill-

ing innocents, requires some theodicy.

Like Aquinas, Saadia has strenuous requirements for theodicy. He says, "God's creating suffering, sickness, and injury in the world is also an act of beneficence and in the interest of humanity.... What is true of sufferings felt without affecting the body is true also of those that do affect it — the Creator does not so afflict His servant except in his [the servant's] own interest and for his own good."<sup>20</sup> So Saadia, like Aquinas, thinks that the benefits which justify God in permitting suffering must go primarily to the sufferer.

There are three ways in which this can occur, on Saadia's view.

First, there is the sort of suffering which constitutes training and character-building. Saadia says,

"Although these may be painful for human beings, hard, wearying, and troubling of mind, all this is for our own good. Of this the prophet says, *the chastening of the Lord, my son, despise not....* we know from our own experience that one who is wise does burden himself with late hours and hard work, reading books, taxing his mental powers and discernment, to understand. But this is no injustice and not wrong in the least on his part."<sup>21</sup>

Here the idea seems to be that just as it is not wrong for the scholar to afflict himself for the sake of excellence in scholarship, so it is not wrong for God to afflict a person for the sake of the excellence of that person's character.

Second, there is "purgation and punishment". If the first case can be thought of as making a basically good person better, this second case can be thought of as keeping a person who has done something bad from getting worse and rectifying his accounts so that he is not in moral debt any more. In explaining the nature of purgative punishments, Saadia says,

"if a servant [of God's] does commit an offense deserving punishment, part of the goodness of the All-Merciful ... is in His causing some form of suffering to clear the transgressor's guilt wholly or in part. In such a case that suffering is called purgative: although it is a punishment, its object is that of grace, for it deters the transgressor from repeating his offenses and purifies him of those already committed."<sup>22</sup>

Those familiar with John Hick's theodicy might suppose that these two categories of Saadia's would be enough to construct a theodicy. The second case could account for all those sufferers who aren't innocent, and the first case could then be made to accommodate the suffering of unwilling innocents such as Job. But, on Saadia's view, to explain such suffering as Job's we need yet a third category:

"The third case is that of trial and testing. An upright servant, whose Lord knows that he will bear sufferings loosed upon him and hold steadfast in his uprightness, is subjected to certain sufferings, so that

when he steadfastly bears them, his Lord may reward and bless him. This too is a kind of bounty and beneficence, for it brings the servant to everlasting blessedness."<sup>23</sup>

That is why, Saadia maintains, one kind of goodness that God shows his creatures is

"recompense for tribulations with which He has afflicted us and which we have borne with fortitude. ... For the tribulations are not on account of some past sin on the servant's part. They are spontaneously initiated by God. Their purpose, therefore, lies in the future.... The Allwise knows that when we are visited with sufferings they are abhorrent to our natures and harrowing to us in our struggle to surmount them. So He records all to our account in His books. If we were to read these ledgers, we would find all we have suffered made good, and we would be confirmed in our acceptance of His decree."<sup>24</sup>

According to Saadia, then, God permits suffering to come to an unwilling innocent, but apparently just for the sake of rewarding him in the afterlife for his having endured such suffering. The sufferings of Job, in Saadia's view, fall into this third sort of case, and what Job calls into question with his complaints is only God's recompense for the sufferings of the righteous. Supporting Elihu's side in the dispute among Job and his comforters, Saadia says, "Elihu denies...Job's claim that God has caused him to suffer ... without affording him any recompense in the hereafter."<sup>25</sup>

It is not entirely clear how Saadia's first and third cases differ from each other, since one might suppose that in the third case the righteous person's character was in fact strengthened by his enduring afflictions with fortitude and in the first case the sufferer whose character is being strengthened will ultimately reap some reward in the afterlife for having developed a better character through suffering. Saadia himself sometimes seems to conflate the first and third cases. So, for example, he says,

"when sufferings and calamities befall us, ... they must be of one of two classes: either they occur on account of prior sins of ours, in which case they are to be called punishments.... Or they are a trial from the Allwise, which we must bear steadfastly, after which He will reward us."<sup>26</sup>

When he does make some remarks aimed at distinguishing these two cases, he tends to say things of this sort:

"Job held it admissible that the Allwise might cause suffering to His servant despite that servant's being guilty of no sin. By our account, such sufferings would be called chastisements — unless they were for the sake of future recompense, in which case they would be called trials."<sup>27</sup>

Here the idea seems to be that the first and third cases are distinguished by



the purpose for which God allows the suffering of the righteous. If it is largely for the sake of building character now, we have the first case; but if it is primarily for the sake of a reward later, in the afterlife, we have the third case.

Sometimes it seems as if Saadia postulates the third case just because it is needed to cover the sorts of suffering of unwilling innocents which would be difficult to construe as character-building. So, for example, in describing the various species of suffering that are included in the third case, Saadia says,

“there are three kinds of trial: by way of property, by way of body, and by way of soul. Two of these ... are called tests. But the third, by way of the soul, is not called a test, because when suffered to the full it results in death. Rather it is called immolation.... This too God may inflict upon the righteous without any prior offense but with subsequent recompense — as He did with the infants at the flood, the infants of the seven (Canaanite) nations, Job’s children, and others.”<sup>28</sup>

Punishing infants for sin seems morally absurd, and it is not much more plausible to suppose that infants who die in their sufferings are allowed to suffer for the sake of developing their character. So Saadia is right to suppose that the suffering of infants would be hard to assimilate to either of his first two cases. That he needs some additional explanation of the suffering of unwilling innocents is therefore clear. It is not nearly as clear, however, that his third case provides the needed explanation.

#### *Objections to Saadia’s theory of suffering as trial*

Although Saadia’s third case covers instances of innocent suffering which his position would otherwise be hard-pressed to account for, there is nonetheless something morally distressing about this case, as it is commonly understood. If one of the purposes of theodicy is to show that the evil in the world is compatible with the existence of a God who is good, it isn’t at all clear that Saadia’s theodicy succeeds in this regard. Maimonides, for example, rejects it with vehemence. He reads Saadia’s interpretation of Job into the views of one of Job’s comforters, Bildad the Shuhite.<sup>29</sup> According to Maimonides, Bildad’s line to Job comes to this:

“If you are innocent and have not sinned, the reason for these great events [Job’s sufferings] is to make great your reward. You will receive the finest of compensations. All this is good for you, so that the good that you will obtain [will] in the end be increased.”<sup>30</sup>

Maimonides thinks that this view is common, vulgar, stupid, and impious. He says,

“What is generally accepted among people regarding the subject of *trial* is this: God sends down calamities upon an individual without their having been preceded by a sin, in order that his reward be

increased. However, this principle is not at all mentioned in the *Torah* in an explicit text. ... The principle of the Law that runs counter to this opinion, is that contained in His dictum, may He be exalted: *A God of faithfulness and without iniquity*. Nor do all the *Sages* profess this opinion of the multitude, for they say sometimes: *There is no death without sin and no sufferings without transgression*. And this [the quoted view of the *Sages*] is the opinion that ought to be believed by every adherent of the Law who is endowed with intellect, for he should not ascribe injustice to God, may He be exalted above this, so that he believes that *Zayd* is innocent of sin and is perfect and that he does not deserve what befell him."<sup>31</sup>

It should perhaps be said that Maimonides's own account of suffering, if it is represented accurately in this passage, seems considerably less palatable than the view of Saadia's which he is attacking. It is not always easy to know what Maimonides's own opinions are, however, given the commitment to caution and secrecy evinced in the *Guide*, and perhaps Maimonides here means to be presenting only religious views suitable for the unlearned. But there are certainly passages in which Maimonides appears to be arguing explicitly for the view that every sufferer deserves exactly what he suffers. So, for example, he says,

"It is likewise one of the fundamental principles of the Law of *Moses our Master* that [1] it is in no way possible that He, may He be exalted, should be unjust, and that [2] all the calamities that befall men and the good things that come to men, be it a single individual or a group, are all of them determined according to the deserts of the men concerned through equitable judgment in which there is no injustice whatever. Thus if some individual were wounded in the hand by a thorn, which he would take out immediately, this would be a punishment for him, and if he received the slightest pleasure, this would be a reward for him — all this being according to his deserts. Thus He, may He be exalted, says: *For all His ways are judgment....*"<sup>32</sup>

And as a palliative for what seems to be the manifest mistakenness of his position, Maimonides adds that human judgments of the moral state of others is often wrong: "But we are ignorant of the various modes of deserts."<sup>33</sup>

Even those commentators who think Maimonides's own account of suffering needs some detailed, explanatory apologetic are inclined to accept his evaluation of Saadia's position. So, for example, Oliver Leaman says,

"It is not just that Saadia represents God as rather like a judge, a very human judge, but also that as a judge he seems to be particularly unpleasant. He makes it all right in the end, but seems to torment people for no other reason than to test them, or for no reason at all, with the ultimate promise that compensation will be available. ... Is this how we should view the deity?"<sup>34</sup>

What gives rise to the sort of complaint made by both Maimonides and Leaman is an important difference between Aquinas's theodicy and Saadia's, if Leaman and Maimonides understand Saadia correctly here.

Aquinas and Saadia clearly share certain theological as well as ethical views. Both of them assume, for example, that God knows and cares about individual human beings, unlike the fourteenth-century Jewish philosopher Gersonides, for example, who seems to think that God's providence doesn't extend to all individual human beings.<sup>35</sup> Unlike the Ash'arites Saadia opposed, who apparently thought that God's will constitutes morality, both Aquinas and Saadia also assume that God's goodness isn't simply constituted by his will; it isn't the case, in their view, that whatever God wills is good just because he wills it. Finally, both of them suppose that God is justified in allowing some unwilling innocent to suffer only in case the benefit that justifies the suffering goes primarily to the sufferer. In trying to explain how it is that God is justified in allowing Job to suffer, both of them look only for benefits that accrue solely or primarily to Job; neither of them entertains the possibility that God might be just in allowing Job to suffer because of benefits which come to, say, Elihu or others who might learn from what happens to Job.

But as Saadia is understood by Maimonides and contemporary scholars such as Leaman, Saadia and Aquinas differ on one important issue. On Aquinas's view, suffering is medicinal for the cancer of the will innate in all post-Fall human beings. Unless that cancer is cured, human beings cannot be united to God in the afterlife, and not being ultimately united to God is the worst evil that can befall a human being. Undeserved suffering, then, is allowed by God in order to help ward off a greater evil. On Saadia's view, however, the situation is different, at least on the interpretation being considered here. For Saadia, undeserved suffering is allowed by God for the sake of a greater good for the sufferer — the compensation God will give to the innocent sufferer in the afterlife — and not to ward off a greater evil.

If Maimonides and Leaman are right about the nature of Saadia's position, then, there are two problems with Saadia's theodicy.

First, it isn't clear that, on Saadia's view, the benefit and the suffering are connected in the right sort of way. Aquinas supposes that suffering can have an effect on the will and that without the sort of change in the will which suffering is designed to help bring about, a human being will not be in the right state to be united to God in heaven. Furthermore, even an omnipotent God cannot produce such a change in the will directly, by an exercise of his power, because human wills are free. So suffering may be the best available means in the circumstances, even for omnipotent God, to keep human beings from the state in which they can't be united to him in the afterlife. But there doesn't seem to be any such essential connection between suffering and the benefit it yields on Saadia's view. If God compensates a person for undeserved suffering by giving that person some gift in the afterlife, why couldn't God simply choose to give that person such a gift even without the suffering? And if God could give the benefit without the suffering, is it morally right of him to allow the suffering just for the sake of the benefit? If nothing about the sufferer's circumstances or choices

means that the benefit can't come to him without the suffering, isn't the suffering entirely gratuitous? And is God good if he allows entirely gratuitous suffering?

Secondly, even if there were the requisite sort of connection between the suffering and the benefit, it isn't clear that it is, in general, morally right to bring it about (or allow it to occur when one could readily prevent it) that an innocent person suffers unwillingly for the sake of some greater good for that person. It is, of course, not always easy to make a distinction between acting to produce a greater good and acting to ward off a greater evil.<sup>36</sup> But we do often make a rough and intuitive distinction of this sort, and we are generally much more willing to conscience suffering induced or allowed to ward off a greater evil than suffering induced or allowed just for the sake of a greater good.

Consider, for example, this case. For the sake of argument, suppose that a person who is deprived of all sensory stimulation for a long period in childhood and subjected to severe bodily hardships will in after years always react with great pleasure to things other people take for granted — sunlight, fresh air, even minimal food, the presence of other human beings, and so on. And suppose also that on some reasonably plausible scale of hedonistic value, the pleasure produced as a result of a period of such hardship and deprivation is enormously greater than the pain associated with it. Even if we granted these assumptions, we certainly would not suppose that the desire to produce such subsequent pleasure for a child rendered good a person who kept a three-year old isolated and half-starved in a dark and airless closet for a year or two. And our negative evaluation of the child's tormenter wouldn't be lessened by discovering that she had some special rights with regard to the child, that her relationship to the child gave her a special responsibility for his well-being. A mother who did such things would surely lose her child to social services (or so one would hope).

On the other hand, a mother who subjected her child to such misery for the sake of warding off from the child some greater evil wouldn't meet with similar moral disapproval. If it turned out that sensory deprivation and restricted food intake for a period of a year or two kept the child from a lingering and painful death, we would approve of such treatment for the child. In fact, a mother who couldn't bring herself to consent to such treatment of her child, who preferred her child's slow and wretched death, would strike us as culpably weak, or worse.

So we do make a rough distinction between acquiring a greater good and warding off a greater evil, and it makes a difference to our moral evaluation whether an agent who could prevent suffering of an unwilling innocent allows it to occur for the sake of a greater good for the sufferer or to ward off a greater harm. We are not in general inclined to suppose that it is morally acceptable to allow suffering just for the sake of a greater good for the sufferer. When it is also the case that the greater good can be obtained without the suffering, as it apparently can in Saadia's case, then we are even less likely to suppose that the benefit justifies the suffering.

So the difference between Aquinas's account of suffering and Saadia's only highlights the inadequacies of Saadia's theodicy.

*Saadia's theodicy reconsidered*

This negative evaluation of Saadia is based, of course, on the assumption that interpreters such as Maimonides and Leaman have understood Saadia's position correctly.<sup>37</sup> And here, I think, there is room for dispute.

To see why this is so, it is important to set Saadia's theodicy within the context of his broader philosophical and theological views.

To begin with, he supposes that a human being consists of a body and a soul and that these can be separated. At death, the body rots, but the soul persists. After a certain time, the soul and the body are reunited, and the resurrected individual lives forever. Not only does Saadia hold this belief, but, in his view, so does every Jew. He says,

"as far as the resurrection of the dead is concerned... it is a matter upon which our nation is in complete agreement. The basis of this conclusion is a premise mentioned previously in the first treatises of this book: namely, that man is the goal of all creation. The reason why he has been distinguished above all other creatures is that he might serve God, and the reward for this service is life eternal in the world of recompense. Prior to this event, whenever He sees fit to do so, God separates man's spirit from his body until the time when the number of souls meant to be created has been fulfilled, whereupon God brings about the union of all bodies and souls again.... We ... do not know of any Jew who would disagree with this belief."<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, in the afterlife, human beings will be divided into two groups, those receiving reward and those receiving punishment. Rewards and punishments will be meted out to resurrected individuals, and they will be perpetual. Nonetheless, these perpetual punishments or rewards will not all be maximal or infinite in quality. Rather, they will be graded and proportional to a person's good or bad deeds:

"even though the reward and the punishment... will be everlasting, their extent will vary according to the act. Thus, for example, the nature of a person's reward will be dependent upon whether he presents one or ten or one hundred or one thousand good deeds, except that it will be eternal in duration. .... Likewise will the extent of a person's punishment vary according to whether he presents one or ten or a hundred or a thousand evil deeds, except that, whatever the intensity of the punishment may be, it will be everlasting."<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, there is no change from one state to another in the afterlife; an individual remains forever in whatever state he was in when he entered the afterlife.<sup>40</sup>

Saadia recognizes, of course, that some people will wonder whether a good God shouldn't simply have created people perfectly, unalterably good from the beginning, so that they would go directly from creation into the state of happiness in the afterlife. Since some people will end up in that

condition, unable to do evil any more, why not just create them in that state in the first place and thus avoid all the suffering in this life and the next?

Saadia's response is twofold. First, he gives a familiar answer to the question, namely, that God can't do so because doing so would require determining human wills, and human wills can't be determined if (as Saadia supposes) they are free. Furthermore, he thinks that free will is of great value, so that it doesn't occur to him to suppose human beings would be better off if God took away freedom in the interests of removing suffering; on the contrary, he explicitly values suffering as an aid to the rectitude of free will.<sup>41</sup> Secondly, he argues that God's not creating human beings in the state of bliss and sinlessness the righteous will have in the afterlife is for the good of human beings for another reason:

"according to the judgment of reason the person who achieves some good by means of the effort that he has expended for its attainment obtains double the advantage gained by him who achieves this good without any effort but merely as a result of the kindness shown him by God."<sup>42</sup>

The afterlife bestowed as a result of human choices and human effort will be more precious, Saadia thinks, than it would be if (*per impossibile*) people were simply born into it as a result of God's decree.

Next, although he thinks that the afterlife admits of gradations of reward and punishment, Saadia recognizes only two groups in the afterlife, those who are unendingly rewarded and those who are unendingly punished. He has a less stern notion of the requirements for being in the group of the righteous, however. The *completely* righteous person is someone who has always fulfilled all the commandments. About this sort of person, Saadia says,

"even though in the opinion of men the probability of the existence of such a person who is blameless in every respect appears to be extremely remote, I yet consider it possible. For were it not so, the All-Wise would not have prescribed such a goal."<sup>43</sup>

Saadia, in other words, feels he has to argue for *the possibility* of there being a completely righteous person, on the theoretical grounds that God's commandments would otherwise be futile; but he seems to join what he presents as the general consensus in supposing that the chances of there *actually* being such a person is "extremely remote." The group of the righteous in the afterlife is therefore not populated, largely or entirely, by people from this category.

Instead, the righteous in the afterlife will consist of sinners who have repented their sins. By repentance, Saadia explains he means "(a) the renunciation of sin, (b) remorse, (c) the quest of forgiveness, and (d) the assumption of the obligation not to relapse into sin."<sup>44</sup> In Saadia's view, most Jews fall into this category, or are very close to it:

"Now I have no fears, so far as the majority of our people are concerned, in regard to their being remiss in their fulfillment of any of the conditions of repentance except this fourth category — I mean that of lapsing back into sin. For I believe that at the time when they fast and pray, they sincerely mean to abandon their sinful way and experience remorse and seek God's pardon."<sup>45</sup>

On Saadia's view, however, real repentance is not canceled by subsequent sin:

"if the resolve on the part of a servant of God not to lapse into sin again is sincere, his repentance is accepted, so that if, as a result of temptation, he falls once more, his repentance is not thereby forfeited. What happens is rather that the iniquities he committed before his repentance are canceled, only those committed by him thereafter being charged against him. The same would apply even if this were to occur several times; namely, that he repent and lapse back into sin. Only the wrongs perpetrated by him after his repentance would count against him, that is, provided he has been sincere each time in his resolve not to relapse."<sup>46</sup>

So the group of the righteous who are unendingly rewarded in the afterlife will consist largely of ordinary people who have repented their sins.

What happens, however, if someone has repented most of his sins but not all, perhaps because he has forgotten some or perhaps because some of them are so rooted in his character that repentance for them isn't psychologically possible for him? Saadia supposes that no one can be a member of both the rewarded and the punished in the afterlife. Will the person who hasn't repented all his sins forgo his reward in the afterlife?

Saadia's answer to this question is that individuals of this sort receive punishment for such sins in this life precisely so that those unrepented sins don't imperil their otherworldly reward. By the same token, unrepentant sinners who do some good receive the reward of their good acts in this life, so that their otherworldly punishment doesn't keep them from reaping whatever little reward is due them for their few good acts.<sup>47</sup>

Saadia's position here will seem to some philosophers to raise serious questions about his conception of God's justice, since one might wonder whether it is fair of God to assign perpetual reward or punishment for temporally limited actions. But I bring up this feature of Saadia's position here only to point out how much more complicated his views about suffering are than they initially appeared to be. When one of the righteous suffers in this world in order that his few unrepented sins might not imperil his salvation, in which category of suffering does his pain fall?

On the face of it, his pain falls into the second of Saadia's three categories, suffering as punishment for sin. But, on the other hand, the point of the suffering is not so much backward-looking — as we might have expected in the case of suffering in Saadia's second category — as forward-looking: the point of the suffering is that God can then with justice give the unrepentant sinner eternal reward. And so this sort of suffering shares

some features of the third category of suffering, namely, that the point of God's allowing the suffering is the sufferer's reward in the afterlife. On the other hand, in explaining why it is appropriate for God to punish in this life people who are generally righteous, Saadia gives an explanation which makes it look as if the suffering belongs in the first category, the category of sufferings allowed in order to build the character of the sufferer. So, for example, he says,

"Should someone ask, however, on what ground they [the righteous person's unrepented evils] are pardoned, seeing that no repentance of them has taken place, we would answer: ...when a person follows such a [generally righteous] course and most of his actions are good, retribution for these relatively minor misdeeds is exacted from him in this world, so that he departs from it cleared of all blemish..."<sup>48</sup>

So even the relatively simple second category of suffering, punishment for sin, is in fact much more complicated in Saadia's developed philosophical theology than at first appears. Part of the reason for the confusion is, no doubt, that we tend to think of punishment simply as retributive, but, for Saadia, punishment at least in this life is medicinal and therefore, like all successful medicine, carries with it both improvement and the rewards that improvement brings with it. That is why his second category of suffering contains some elements of the other categories as well, namely, the betterment of the sinner and the consequent reward of the morally healthy righteous.

In explaining his third category of suffering, the trial of a righteous person, Saadia makes a point which at first glance looks only lamentably ridiculous. He says,

"the sufferings to which the virtuous are subjected in this world fall into two categories. One of these constitutes the penalties for slight [unrepented] failings, as I have explained previously. The second consists of incipient trials with which God tests them, when He knows that they are able to endure them, only in order to compensate them for these trials later on with good."<sup>49</sup>

There is something apparently absurd and unjust about God's testing an individual only when he is sure of the outcome of the test and only for the sake of compensating the wretched and innocent victim of the test afterwards. Maimonides's diatribe against this view seems entirely warranted. But if we look more closely, Saadia's third category of suffering, like his second category, becomes more complicated and more interesting.

The group of the righteous, according to Saadia, consists largely in those who are repentant for their sins. But sins leave a stain on the soul, on his views.<sup>50</sup> So, he says,

"obedience [to God's commandments] increases the luminosity of the soul's substance, whereas sin renders its substance turbid and black."<sup>51</sup>



I'm not sure to what extent Saadia means this point literally or metaphorically, but his general idea is not hard to grasp. Any instance of moral wrongdoing carries with it two problems for the wrongdoer, one as regards the future and one as regards the past. Doing a wrong act has some influence on character; it increases the likelihood that one will do such a wrong act again in the future. The solution for this future-oriented problem lies in repentance, which to some extent unravels the twist in the character produced by doing the wrong act. But there remains a problem for the wrongdoer as regards the past: he is still a person who has done such a wrong act. If Goebbels, for example, truly repented and entirely regretted the evil he did, there would still be a problem because of what occurred in the past. What he has already done has turned him into something from which other people want to shy away; and this remains the case even if people were to know that Goebbels regretted his past evils. Because of the evil he has perpetrated, Goebbels, even in a repentant state, is turbid, as Saadia says — stained or polluted, in Saadia's idiom; in our health-oriented idiom, psychologically sick.

Someone might suppose that repentance itself is enough to remove what Saadia thinks of as the stain on the soul, but this seems to me a mistaken view. Consider the effects of wrongdoing on the body, rather than the mind. Consider, for example, someone who for many years has indulged in excessive eating and has also avoided exercise. On the day on which such a person truly repents of that behavior and enters on a new life of exercise and right eating, his repentance by itself won't be enough to give him a healthy and athletic body. The effects of his previous acts will obviously remain, and it will take a long time of dieting and exercising before those effects are no longer evident. Why suppose things are any better as regards the mind? Why suppose that all the bad mental effects of previous wrongdoing can be wiped away in a moment with an act of repentance? It seems clear, for example, that even earnest and sincere repentance can co-exist with many of the old attitudes and habits laid down by previous wrongdoing. An act of repentance by itself won't be enough to undo those old dispositions or to make a person internally integrated and unified around the good newly willed. Repentance is thus psychologically compatible with many of the dispositions laid down by the previous wrongdoing.<sup>52</sup> A repentant agent in such a condition will, of course, be internally divided or even irrational, but these are not uncommon human conditions. Whole-heartedness and rationality may be as hard to come by, for a newly repentant person, as a healthy and athletic body is for a person with a newly reformed lifestyle.<sup>53</sup> I do not want to claim that dispositions and attitudes left by wrongdoing exhaust all that Saadia has in mind with his notion of the stain on the soul, but they are enough, I think, to show that the backwards-looking problem of moral wrongdoing isn't likely to be solved by repentance alone.

The solution to this backwards-looking problem of moral wrongdoing, in Saadia's view, is suffering on the part of the wrongdoer.

This way of thinking about Saadia's third category of suffering also helps explain his distinction between this category and the first one, where

the suffering is for the sake of character-building. Saadia thinks of the righteous as comprised mainly of those who are struggling with their own moral wrong-doing: sinning, repenting, and then sinning again. Building character, as suffering in the first category is said to do, will be a matter of strengthening a person in this struggle, so that the suffering brings him to repentance or confirms him in his repentant resolve not to sin again in *that* way. Suffering that builds character thus helps to overcome the future-oriented problem of a person's wrong-doing. But the backwards-looking problem remains. When suffering helps solve *this* problem, the suffering serves not so much to build character for the future as to purge the polluted state of soul the sinner has already acquired.

Using suffering as an antidote to pollution takes God's omniscient providence, since only God can see the heart and can understand what pollution is there and how suffering can cure it. So Saadia says,

"Now He that subjects the soul to its trials is none other than the Master of the universe, who is, of course, acquainted with all its doings. This testing of the soul has been compared to the assaying by means of fire of [lumps of metal] that have been referred to as gold or silver. It is thereby that the true nature of their composition is clearly established. For the original gold and silver remain, while the alloys that have been mingled with them are partly burned and partly take flight....The pure, clear souls that have been refined are thereupon exalted and ennobled."<sup>54</sup>

That is why God allows suffering as test only for those people he knows can endure it. If those tested lacked strength for the test, then in the process of testing they would succumb to further sin, and the test would make them worse, rather than purging the stains from the soul. Like Aquinas, then, Saadia thinks that those like Job who experience perplexing, agonizing suffering which they do not deserve do so just because they are better servants of God and more able to sustain the rigors of therapy than God's weaker, smaller servants.

For the same reason, Saadia says,

"if the pain to which the servant of God is subjected constitutes punishment and he asks his Master to enlighten him thereon [and explain to him why he is suffering], it is a rule with Him to do so. ... On the other hand, if the pain to which the servant of God is subjected serves as a form of trial and he asks his Master to inform him why He has brought this trial upon him, it is a rule with Him not to inform him.... when Job asked: *Make me know wherefore Thou contendest with me...*, no explanation was offered to him."<sup>55</sup>

If it was clear to the sufferer that the suffering was for cleansing of the soul and its subsequent rewards, then, in Saadia's view, the suffering would lose some of its therapeutic value, since then one might endure the suffering simply for the sake of the reward.

So, examined more closely, Saadia's third category of suffering looks

very different from the way it is presented by some of its interpreters. In the first place, the righteous who are suffering are, in general, not those who are entirely without moral wrongdoing, but rather are those who have repented their wrongdoings, or most of them. Furthermore, the suffering isn't gratuitous or only accidentally related to the benefit. On Saadia's view, the suffering is in some way instrumental in bringing about the benefit. The stain on the soul brought about by wrongdoing is removed by suffering, and nothing in Saadia's account suggests he supposes that the stain could be removed just as well in some other way, for example, by omnipotent God's acting directly to remove it.

Finally, the feature that initially seemed to render Saadia's theodicy philosophically more problematic than Aquinas's is now called into question. It is no longer so clear that, for Saadia, the benefit which justifies God in allowing the suffering of unwilling innocents is a greater good for the sufferer, as distinct from the warding off of a greater evil. On Saadia's account, the perpetual rewards in the afterlife are distributed in accordance with an individual's state of soul. A righteous individual who enters the afterlife with certain stains on the soul will forever lose part of the reward he might have had if he had purged those stains. For all time to come, he will be less or have less than he might otherwise have been or had. Perhaps, because the afterlife is supposed to be a state of bliss, the righteous person in this diminished state won't mind it, as the souls in Dante's *Paradiso* explain to him that they don't mind not being in the top rank of those in heaven. A loss can be a loss, however, even if one doesn't mind it. The cancer patient not accepted for bone marrow transplant, which holds out the only hope of a cure, might well not mind, considering the difficulty of the therapy and the suffering it occasions. But he would have lost something anyway. All the more so, then, if what is at issue is not some temporary state of physical health but a permanent state of spiritual wellbeing. On this way of interpreting Saadia's account, then, the benefit which justifies the suffering in the third category, of tests and trials, is not the acquisition of a greater good for the sufferer but the warding off of a greater evil.

One might suppose that there is one group of human beings whose sufferings Saadia assigns to the third category but for whom my revised interpretation of this category is bound to fail. This is the group of those children who die in their suffering. Saadia says, for example,

"we are confronted by the fact that God, the just, ordered the killing of the young children of the *Midianites* and the extermination of the young children of the *generation of the deluge*. We note also how He continually causes pain and even death to little babes. Logical necessity, therefore, demands that there exist after death a state in which they would obtain compensation for the pain suffered..."<sup>56</sup>

Here, one would suppose, Saadia must adopt the line attributed to him by Maimonides.

But, in fact, when Saadia elaborates on the suffering of children, he makes remarks of this sort:

"I will go still further and say that it is even possible for a completely guiltless individual to be subjected to trials in order to be compensated for them afterwards, for I find that children are made to suffer pain, and I have no doubt about their eventual compensation for these sufferings. The sorrows brought upon them by the All-Wise might, therefore, be compared to the discipline that their father might administer to them in the form of flogging or detention in order to keep them from harm, or to the repulsive, bitter medicines that he might make them drink in order to put an end to their illness."<sup>57</sup>

Here the two examples given to illustrate God's purpose in allowing the suffering of children are both examples in which a father causes suffering to his children in order to ward off greater evil — "harm", in the first example, and continuing illness, in the second. It is far from clear that Saadia's position here is consistent. The children in the example are apparently already in trouble, since medicine is administered to those who are sick and "flogging" to those who are being punished for some wrong, and yet the point of these examples is to provide some explanation of the way in which God deals with children whom Saadia himself takes to be perfectly innocent. But what is important for my purposes here is just the fact that when Saadia considers the suffering of children in any detail, he supposes that allowing their suffering is justified in virtue of the fact that their suffering prevents a greater harm to them.

Looked at in this way, then, Saadia's theodicy appears very different from the way it has been taken by some of its interpreters. In fact, although Saadia and Aquinas are separated by a great gulf of religion, time, and culture, and although Saadia certainly repudiates Christianity with vehemence approaching scorn,<sup>58</sup> Saadia's account of the suffering of unwilling innocents looks very close to that of Aquinas, for all their other differences in theological doctrine.<sup>59</sup>

#### *Saadia's Judaism and Leaman's Objection*

I suggested near the outset that approaching Saadia's theodicy with that of Aquinas in mind would help us see what is paradigmatically Jewish about Saadia's, but my revised interpretation seems to imply that there is nothing of that sort to see. This is a mistaken impression, however. The main difference between Aquinas and Saadia comes not so much in the way they justify God's allowing suffering as in the nature of the suffering they consider. Aquinas thinks largely or exclusively of the sufferings of individuals. Saadia is concerned as well with a higher level of organization; he focuses also on communal suffering, the afflictions and tribulations of a whole people.

Everyone knows, Saadia says, that when there is some disaster that overtakes a whole people, the suffering of that disaster can plausibly be construed as punishment only for some of those involved; for the others, it is a trial, that is, suffering in the third category:

"This is, as it is well known, a rule that applies to every universal cat-

astrophe occurring at different times, such as famine, war, and pestilence. These serve as punishment for some and as a trial for others."<sup>60</sup>

This is true also of the sufferings of the Jews, according to Saadia:

"God is just, doing no injustice, and He has already subjected this nation to a great and long-protracted trial, which undoubtedly serves partly as punishment and partly as a test for us... [such operations] cannot proceed endlessly. Once, then, the end has been reached, there must needs be a cessation of the [this-worldly] punishment of those punishable and compensation for those subjected to trial."

In fact, on Saadia's view, the Jews have had a larger share of suffering than other peoples. Just as Job, who was one of God's better, stronger servants and so better able to endure the rigors of the spiritual therapy of suffering, experienced much more suffering than most ordinary individuals, so the Jews have had more to bear in the way of trials than other peoples. For this reason, the resurrection of the dead will begin with the Jews, at the time of the Messianic redemption, and only subsequently will other peoples be resurrected as well. Saadia says,

"Now let me ask this general question: "Do not we, the congregation of monotheists, acknowledge that the Creator, magnified be His Majesty, will resurrect all the dead in the world to come for the occasion of their retribution?" But what is there in this that would contradict the view that this nation [the Jews] would enjoy an advantage in being granted an additional period during which our dead would be resurrected by God prior to the world to come, that new life of theirs being extended by Him up to the time of the life of the world to come? ... why should it not be considered as a mere act of justice whereby whoever has been tried receives compensation in proportion to his trials, since this nation of ours has been subjected by God to great trials, as Scripture says: *For Thou, O God, hast tried us; Thou hast refined us?* ... It is most fitting, therefore, that He should grant to it this additional period prior to the world to come so that it might have an advantage over all those [others] who have conducted themselves well in this world, just as its patience and its trials have exceeded those of the others."<sup>61</sup>

And in another place he says,

"God has made us great and liberal promises of the well-being and bliss and greatness and might and glory that He will grant us twofold...for the humiliation and misery that have been our lot. ... what has befallen us has been likened by Scripture to a brief twinkling of the eye, whereas the compensation God will give us in return therefor has been referred to as His great mercy. For it says: *For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great compassion will I gather thee.*"<sup>62</sup>

If Saadia's views on the suffering of children leave him open to moral

vituperation, his views of the communal suffering of his people and its reward render him vulnerable to ridicule, and he knows it. He says, in his own defense,

"[you will find the Jews] patiently awaiting what God has promised us, not entertaining any doubts concerning it, nor worrying or despairing. On the contrary, our courage and tenacity increase constantly, as is expressed in Scripture: *Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all ye that wait for the Lord....* Now whoever sees us behaving in this fashion may be surprised at us or regard us as fools for the simple reason that he has not experienced what we have nor believed as we have believed. He resembles a person who has never seen how wheat is sown, wherefore, when he sees someone throw it into the cracks of the earth in order to let it grow, he thinks that that individual is a fool. It is at the time of the threshing, when every measure yields twenty or thirty measures, that he first realizes that it is *he* who has been the fool."<sup>63</sup>

It is instructive to compare Saadia's position here with that of someone taking what Saadia considers the *real* fool's position. So, for example, Leaman says,

"It is a shame that the innocent suffer..., but it is a fact in the sort of world which we inhabit. The Book of Job represents the terrible things which happen to people as brute facts, things which just happen and which we can often do nothing to prevent. Saadya cannot accept this at face value... he thinks of the events of the world falling under an objective standard of justice which must regulate the balance between innocent pains and pleasures. If the innocent do suffer, then they must eventually be compensated for their suffering. If they are not thus compensated, then the situation is unjust. Of course, he has great difficulty fitting such a theory of justice onto the Book of Job, since it is precisely the message of the Book that that theory of justice is vacuous. There is no evidence of such justice in this world, and little reason to hope for it in another life."<sup>64</sup>

According to Leaman, our evidence and our reason are against Saadia's position, that the world is ruled by a just God. Leaman begins with a fact that Saadia also grants, namely, that in this world the innocent suffer. For Leaman, to accept this fact at face value is to reject the claim that the suffering of the innocent is somehow justified or rectified. So Leaman begins with the fact of innocent suffering in the world, adds the belief that there is no morally sufficient reason which justifies such suffering, and concludes that the world is not ruled justly or by a just God.

By contrast, Saadia's position constitutes what William Rowe has labeled a 'G.E.Moore shift' on the sort of argument represented by this quotation from Leaman. Saadia turns Leaman's sort of argument on its head; he begins with a firm belief that the world is ruled justly by a just God and concludes that there must be a morally sufficient reason for God to allow innocent suffering. His theodicy is an attempt to figure out, by

reason, revelation, and religious tradition, what sort of benefit might plausibly constitute such a morally sufficient reason.

This is no doubt why, contrary to expectations, his theodicy and Aquinas's are so much alike in their general outlines, despite the vast differences in philosophy and theology which separate the Jewish from the Christian thinker. They each begin with a commitment to belief in a God who is omniscient and omnipotent, who is the creator of the world, who knows and cares about all his creatures, and who is good by objective standards, where by 'good' we mean at least roughly what we mean when we call any person 'good'. Since neither Aquinas nor Saadia is willing to sustain belief in such a God by denying (as Maimonides in some passages appears to do) the plain fact of innocent suffering in the world, they conclude that there must be a morally sufficient reason for God to allow such suffering. There are also common moral intuitions, widely shared even across cultures and times, about what would justify any person in allowing innocent suffering when he could readily prevent it: the suffering must be necessary, or the best means available in the circumstances, for producing a benefit that goes primarily or largely to the sufferer; and, generally, the benefit must be a matter of warding off a greater evil, rather than producing a greater good. Because, however much Judaism and Christianity differ otherwise, Saadia and Aquinas share these moral intuitions and the relevant traditional theistic beliefs, their theodicies take shape in the same way.<sup>65</sup>

On Leaman's view, of course, both Saadia and Aquinas are grossly mistaken, refusing to take facts "at face value" because of their religious commitment. But why should Leaman suppose that his version of the argument from evil is superior to or more rational than theirs? How does Leaman know that there is no morally sufficient reason for innocent suffering? Given the complexity of the ways in which Saadia thinks suffering can lead to a benefit for the sufferer, one couldn't just look at the world and see that no such benefit obtained.

Questions of this sort and the epistemological issues surrounding them have been the subject of sophisticated philosophical scrutiny in recent years, and it is no part of my aim here to survey that discussion or add to it.<sup>66</sup> I bring it up just in order to point out one feature of Saadia's approach which seems to me significant for the discussion. How would someone come to know or be justified in believing the claim with which Saadia starts, namely, that there is a just God with the standard divine attributes who governs the earth? Answers that have been given include reason, as when a person takes himself to have a proof for God's existence, and religious experience, as when someone supposes that her experiences have given her the religious analogue of perception of God. Saadia, too, points to reason and religious experience. The person who mocks as stupid and foolish Jewish expectations of everlasting glory garnered through generations of purgative, refining suffering takes this foolish attitude, in Saadia's view, because he differs from Jews in reason and experience.

But it is worth noticing that the reason and experience Saadia points to are communal, not individual. It is the failure of his opponent to experience what "we" have experienced or to believe what "we" have believed that makes "the fool" run the argument from evil in the way he does. The

experiences Saadia discusses in this connection are not his own religious experiences but the community's experience of God's parting the sea for the Jews in the exodus from Egypt; and the reasoned beliefs on which Saadia relies, here and throughout his whole treatise, are those which, as he says in one phrase or another, "our nation is in complete agreement [about]."<sup>67</sup> So Saadia supposes that epistemological excellence or virtue can be vested in a community, as well as in an individual. Justification for a belief can come, at least in part, from the experiences and epistemic commitments of a whole people. In weighing reasons and evidence for one belief or another, on Saadia's view, it is permissible or even imperative to avail oneself of that communal experience and expertise. This is an attitude with which we are familiar from the practice of science,<sup>68</sup> but it hasn't been the subject of much reflection in philosophy of religion. Saadia's continual consciousness of belonging to a people whose life over many generations has shaped a common set of religious commitments is, in my view, a salutary corrective to the individualism typically found in contemporary discussions of the problem of evil.<sup>69</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. To take just two examples, see, for example, my "Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job", in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp.328-357, and Marilyn Adams, "Redemptive Suffering: A Christian Solution to the Problem of Evil", in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William Wainwright, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp.248-267.

2. According to *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, he is the first to bear this name, which is a Hebraicized version of the Arabic name 'Sai'id'. His name is also transliterated as 'Saadya' or 'Saadiyah'.

3. "The Problem of Evil", *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985) 392-424; "Suffering for Redemption: A Reply to Smith", *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985) 430-435; "Dante's Hell, Aquinas's Theory of Morality, and the Love of God", *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 16 (1986) 181-198; "Providence and the Problem of Evil", in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Flint, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp.51-91; and "Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job", in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp.328-357.

4. Although the date is commonly given as 892, it is listed as 882 in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* in the entry under his name and in Colette Sirat's *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, reprinted 1990), p.18.

5. The major work on Saadia's life is Henry Malter's *Life and Works of Saadia Gaon*, (New York: Hermon Press, 1926; reprinted 1969).

6. There is a complete translation of Saadia's *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* by Samuel Rosenblatt, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), and an abridged translation by Alexander Altmann in *Three Jewish Philosophers*, (New York: Meridian Books, 1960).

7. Saadia's commentary on Job has also been translated: *The Book of Theodicy: Translation and Commentary on the Book of Job*, tr. Len Goodman (New



Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

8. Aquinas's commentary, *Expositio super Job ad litteram*, is available in the Leonine edition of Aquinas's works, vol. 26, and in an English translation: *Thomas Aquinas, The Literal Exposition on Job: A Scriptural Commentary Concerning Providence*, trans. Anthony Damico and Martin Yaffe, The American Academy of Religion. Classics in Religious Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989). (I will give references to this work both to the Latin and to the Damico and Yaffe translation.) The commentary was probably written while Aquinas was at Orvieto, in the period 1261/2-1264. See James Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works*, 2d ed. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1983), p. 153; see also *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings*, ed. Simon Tugwell, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1988), p.223.

9. See, for example, *Expositio super Job*, chap. 7, sec. 1, Damico and Yaffe, p.145; and chap. 19:23-29, Damico and Yaffe, pp.268-71, where Aquinas makes these points clear and maintains that Job was already among the redeemed awaiting the resurrection and union with God. Someone might wonder whether it is possible to maintain this approach to suffering when the suffering consists in madness, mental retardation, or some form of dementia. This doubt is based on the unreflective assumption that those suffering from these afflictions have lost all the mental faculties needed for moral or spiritual development. For some suggestions to the contrary, see the sensitive and insightful discussion of retarded and autistic patients in Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Summit books, 1985).

10. Thomas Aquinas, *Super ad Hebraeos*, chap. 12, lec. 2.

11. Aquinas, *Expositio super Job*, chap. 9, secs. 24-30; Damico and Yaffe, p.179.

12. I have explored and defended Aquinas's approach to the problem of evil in different ways in the papers listed in footnote 3. (This section on Aquinas is largely taken from "Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job".) In those papers I discuss and defend Aquinas's claims that a good God would create a world in which human beings have such a cancer of the soul, that suffering is the best available means to cure the cancer in the soul, and that God can justifiably allow suffering even though it sometimes eventuates in the opposite of moral goodness or love of God.

13. One shouldn't misunderstand this claim and suppose Aquinas to be claiming that human beings can earn their way to heaven by the merit badges of suffering. Aquinas is quite explicit that salvation is through Christ only. His claim here is not about what causes salvation but only about what is efficacious in the process of salvation. It would take us too far afield here to consider Aquinas's view of the relation between Christ's work of redemption and the role of human suffering in that process. What is important for my purposes is just to see that on Aquinas's account suffering is an indispensable element in the course of human salvation, initiated and merited by Christ.

14. Thomas Aquinas, *Super ad Hebraeos*, chap. 12, lec. 2.

15. Aquinas, *Expositio super Job*, chap. 9, secs. 15-21; Damico and Yaffe, p.174.

16. Only one of the two metaphors is in the Revised Standard Version, the King James, and the Anchor Bible.

17. Aquinas, *Expositio super Job*, chap. 7 sec. 1; Damico and Yaffe, p.146. The mention of reward may lead someone to suppose that what is at issue for Aquinas is God's providing a greater good to justify the evil suffered. But this is a mistaken supposition, as I explain below in connection with a similarly mistaken interpretation of Saadia's theodicy.

18. *Super I ad Corinthios*, chap. 15, lec. 2.
19. Goodman 1988, pp.103-104.
20. Goodman 1988, pp.124-125.
21. Goodman 1988, p.125.
22. Goodman 1988, p.125.
23. Goodman 1988, pp.125-126.
24. Goodman 1988, p.127.
25. Goodman 1988, p.357.
26. Goodman 1988, p.130. See also p.332: "Sufferings... are of two kinds: either they are on account of some past act and are called punishments, or they are unprovoked and are called trials when God's servant endures them."
27. Goodman 1988, p.128.
28. Goodman 1988, pp.161-62. Why Job's children are in this list is not easy to say, since they were adults, or at least old enough to be capable of serious sin, at the time of their death.
29. Although Maimonides doesn't explicitly associate this view with Saadia, it is clear that he is aware of Saadia's philosophical and theological positions, and he is generally taken to be opposing Saadia here and also elsewhere. See, for example, Oliver Leaman, *Evil and Suffering in Jewish Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Cambridge Studies in Religious Traditions, vol. 6, p.77; and Sirat 1985, p.175 and p.211.
30. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. Shlomo Pines, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963; reprinted 1974), III.23, p.493.
31. *Ibid.*, III.24, pp.497-498.
32. *Ibid.*, III.17, p.469.
33. *Ibid.*, III.17, p.469. David Shatz has pointed out to me the need for caution with regard to Maimonides's position on deserts. It is complicated by his unusual account of providence, which ties divine providential protection to an individual's intellectual development.
34. Leaman 1995, p.78.
35. See, for example, Levi ben Gershom, *The Wars of the Lord*, tr. Seymour Feldman, (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1987), Book Four, chapter iv, p.174: "it is evident that individual providence must operate in some people but not in others.... It is evident that what is more noble and closer to the perfection of the Agent Intellect receives the divine providence to a greater degree and is given by God the proper means for its preservation. ... Since man exhibits different levels of proximity to and remoteness from the Agent Intellect by virtue of his individual character, those that are more strongly attached to it receive divine providence individually. And since some men never go beyond the disposition with which they are endowed as members of the human species... such people are obviously not within the scope of divine providence except in a general way as members of the human species, for they have no individual [perfections] that warrant [individual] providence. Accordingly, divine providence operates individually in some men... and in others it does not appear at all."
36. There is also some difference in our moral intuitions between cases of inflicting suffering and cases of allowing suffering which arises from elsewhere. In what follows, for the sake of brevity, I will give examples just concerning inflicting suffering.
37. See also, for example, Isaac Husik, *A History of Mediaeval Jewish Philosophy*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1944), pp.42-43.
38. *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, tr. Samuel Rosenblatt, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), p.264.

39. Rosenblatt 1948, pp.347-348.
40. Rosenblatt 1948, p.247.
41. Rosenblatt 1948, p.181 and pp.184-185. For some explanation of how such an answer can be consistent with the position that those in heaven never do evil, see my "Intellect, Will, and the Principle of Alternate Possibilities", in *Christian Theism and the Problems of Philosophy*, ed. Michael Beaty, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), pp.234-285; reprinted in *Moral Responsibility*, ed. John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp.237-262; and my "Persons: Freedom and Identification", *Philosophical Topics*, forthcoming.
42. Rosenblatt 1948, p.138.
43. Rosenblatt 1948, pp.217-218.
44. Rosenblatt 1948, p.220.
45. Rosenblatt 1948, pp.221-222.
46. Rosenblatt 1948, p.223.
47. Rosenblatt 1948, pp.210-211.
48. Rosenblatt 1848, p.351.
49. Rosenblatt 1948, p.213.
50. Rosenblatt 1948, p.205-207.
51. Rosenblatt 1948, p.246.
52. A good example of a person in such a condition is Albert Speer; see Gitta Sereny, *Albert Speer: His Battle with Truth* (Albert Knopf: New York, 1995).
53. I am grateful to Christopher Hughes, whose persistent questions pushed me to think through this point.
54. Rosenblatt 1948, pp.246-247.
55. Rosenblatt 1948, pp.213-214.
56. Rosenblatt 1948, p.330.
57. Rosenblatt 1948, p.214.
58. In discussing the Christian view that the Mosaic law was divinely abrogated by the advent of Christianity, Saadia considers the claim made by some Christian of Saadia's acquaintance that the miracles associated with the spread of Christianity confirm its divine origin and its claim to be the successor to the Mosaic law. In response, Saadia says, "our reply to him [Saadia's Christian acquaintance] should be the same as that of all of us would be to anyone who would show us miracles and marvels for the purpose of making us give up such rational convictions as that the truth is good and lying reprehensible and the like. [After hearing this reply, the Christian was] ... compelled to take refuge in the theory that the disapproval of lying and the approval of the truth were not prompted by reason but were the result of the commandments and the prohibitions of Scripture, and the same was true for the rejection of murder, adultery, and stealing. When he had come to that, however, I felt that I needed no longer concern myself with him and that I had my fill of discussion with him." (Rosenblatt 1948, p.164)
59. It is, of course, always possible that Saadia meant to be espousing only the simple position Leaman and others have attributed to him and that in finding evidence of a more complicated and palatable position in his work I've shown only that he was inconsistent and confused. It would take more historical scholarship in ninth-century philosophical thought than I can muster to sort out with any confidence what exactly Saadia himself meant his position on the problem of evil to be. But if, as Maimonides seems to think, the simple position generally attributed to Saadia is both stupid and impious, then the principle of charity might also be invoked here in support of my interpretation of him.
60. Rosenblatt 1948, p.295.

61. Rosenblatt 1948, pp.284-285.

62. Rosenblatt 1948, p.292.

63. Rosenblatt 1948, p.292-293.

64. Leaman 1995, p.61.

65. I do not mean to suggest that these are the only reasons for the similarity in their views. Their religious and philosophical traditions influence each other, and no doubt Aquinas's position is partly shaped by influences from Jewish sources.

66. See, for example, William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979) 335-341, and "The Empirical Argument from Evil", in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William Wainwright, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986). For an opposing view, see Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of Appearance" and Rowe's response, "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra", both in *The International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984). See also Alvin Plantinga, "The Probabilistic Argument from Evil", *Philosophical Studies* 35 (1979)1-53. The discussion is carried further in the following essays in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996): Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil" and "On Being Evidentially Challenged"; Stephen Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil"; Peter van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence"; and William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look".

67. Rosenblatt 1948, p.264.

68. For an excellent argument to this effect as regards science, see Helen Longino, "Essential Tensions — Phase Two: Feminist, Philosophical, and Social Studies of Science", in *A Mind of One's Own. Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, ed. Louise Anthony and Charlotte Witt, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), pp.257-272.

69. I am grateful to Shalom Carmy, Christopher Hughes, Norman Kretzmann, David Shatz, and David Widerker for very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.