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Response to Papers Critiquing "God's Moral Goodness"

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This paper is a response to the critiques in *Filosophia Religii* 2022 and 2023 of my paper, "God's Moral Goodness" (in *Filosophia Religii* 2022). I argue for the preferability of Aquinas's way of arguing to God's nature from the most general observable features of the world, over Anselm's way adopted by Mark Murphy of drawing out the consequences of God being a "most perfect being". I claimed against Vladimir Shokhin, that my probabilistic argument leads to the simplest and so most probable kind of God. To Igor Gasparov's claim that an even simpler kind of God would be one who has no un-realised potentialities, and so one in which his one property of divinity includes all his activity, I argued that on the contrary, such a God would have no free will, and so not be truly omnipotent. To Mark Wynn's claim that Christianity holds that God does not choose arbitrarily between equally good alternatives, but has preferences which do not merely track the relative goodness states of affairs, I answer that to postulate a God with such preferences simply moves the arbitrariness of God from his actions to his nature, and so postulates a less simple God than I postulate. I argue also against Vladimir Shokhin's claim that humans do not have the power to discover God's reasons for permitting horrendous evils, by drawing attention to some features of my own theodicy, which might begin to make it plausible that we do have this power. I reject Mark Wynn's claim that on my theodicy no possible balance of evil over good observable by humans on earth could constitute evidence against the existence of God, and that in consequence nothing observable by such humans could constitute evidence for the existence of God. Kirill Karpov pointed out that there are vast disagreements about which world states are good and which are evil, and so we are in no position to judge whether my requirement for a cogent theodicy that every evil state is a logically necessary condition for some comparable good state, is satisfied in our world. I argued against him, that the mere existence of moral disagreement does not show that none of us can discern moral truths; and that on the contrary, many moral disagreements are resoluble by the method of "reflective equilibrium". To Mark Murphy's claim that God does not have "requiring reasons" to conform to the "familiar welfare orientated" morality, which humans

are obliged to follow, I reply that the same very general principles of morality apply both to God and to humans, but their application varies with the degree of power, knowledge and freedom possessed, and the causal power exercised, by humans and by God. To Murphy's claim that God as "the ultimate source" of the goodness of created beings cannot be constrained by what constitutes their goodness, I object that what constitutes moral goodness is determined in part by paradigm examples of moral goodness, including promoting, and preventing setbacks to, the well-being of created beings. To Vladimir Shokhin's endeavor to support his view that God is too great for humans to understand his ways, by various quotations from Scripture, I adduce quotations from Scripture which suggest the contrary. None of the contributors expressed a view on my claim in the earlier paper that God is not merely a "best acting" God, but also a "best feeling" God, except for Vladimir Shokhin who agreed with me; and so I welcome this conclusion to our symposium.

Keywords: affections, Anselm, Aquinas, Augustine, God, impassible, moral goodness, Mark Murphy, theodicy, Vladimir Shokhin

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Ответ Р. Суинберна на критику статьи «Моральная благость Бога»

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Предлагаемый текст представляет собой ответ на критику моей статьи «Моральная благость Бога» (*Swinburne R.G.* God's Moral Goodness // Философия религии: аналит. исслед. / Philosophy of Religion: Analytic Researches. 2022. Т. 6. No. 2. С. 5–18). Я доказываю предпочтительность Аквинатова способа вывода представлений о природе Бога из наиболее общих наблюдаемых характеристик мира в противоположность восходящему к Ансельму Кентерберийскому и принимаемого Марком Мёрфи способу выводить следствия из определения Бога как «всесовершеннейшего существа». Против возражений, выдвинутых Владимиром Шохиным, я утверждаю, что мой вероятностный аргумент приводит к представлению о самом простом, а поэтому и о самом вероятном виде Бога. На утверждение Игоря Гаспарова, что еще более простым видом Бога был бы тот, у которого нет нереализованных потенциальных возможностей, и поэтому его единственное свойство божественности включает всю его деятельность, я утверждаю, напротив, что такой Бог не имел бы свободы воли, и поэтому не был бы действительно всемогущим. На утверждение Марка Уинна о том, что, согласно христианскому учению, Бог не выбирает произвольно между одинаково хорошими альтернативами, но у Него имеются предпочтения, которые не просто отслеживают относительную благость состояний дел, я отвечаю, что постулирование Бога с такими предпочтениями просто переносит свойственное Богу произволение с Его действий на Его природу, и таким образом постулируется концепция менее простого Бога, по сравнению с отстаиваемой мною. Я возражаю на утверждение Владимира Шохина о том, что люди не обладают достаточными способностями, чтобы познавать причины,

в силу которых Бог допускает чудовищное зло, обращая внимание на некоторые особенности моей собственной теодицеи, из которых можно заключить, что мы, вероятно, обладаем такой способностью. Я отвергаю также утверждение Марка Уинна, что, согласно предлагаемой мою теодицее, никакое возможное соотношение зла и добра, наблюдаемое людьми на земле, не может служить свидетельством против существования Бога, и, следовательно, ничто, наблюдаемое людьми, не может служить свидетельством в пользу существования Бога. Кирилл Карпов отметил, что существуют большие разногласия по поводу того, какие положения дел в мире считаются добрыми, а какие злыми, и поэтому мы никак не можем судить о том, удовлетворяется ли в нашем мире мое требование для убедительной теодицеи: что каждое злое положение дел является логически необходимым условием для некоторого сравнимого доброго положения дел. Я возразил ему, что само по себе существование разногласий относительно моральных оценок не показывает, будто никто из нас не может различать моральные истины; и что, напротив, многие моральные разногласия разрешимы методом «рефлексивного равновесия». На утверждение Марка Мёрфи, что для Бога нет «требующих оснований» соответствовать «привычной ориентированной на благополучие морали, которой обязаны следовать люди», я отвечаю, что одни и те же общие принципы морали применимы и к Богу, и к людям, но их использование варьируется в зависимости от степени могущества, знания и свободы, которыми обладают люди и Бог, а также от каузальной власти, которую они реализуют. На утверждение Мёрфи, что Бог как «верховный источник» благости сотворенных существ не может быть ограничен тем, что составляет их благость, я возражаю, что то, что составляет моральную благость, частично определяется парадигмальными примерами моральной благости, включая содействие благополучию сотворенных существ и предотвращение препятствий на пути к нему. В ответ на попытку Владимира Шохина подкрепить различными цитатами из Писания свою точку зрения, что Бог слишком велик, чтобы люди могли понять Его пути, я привожу цитаты из Писания, свидетельствующие об обратном. Никто из участников не высказал своего мнения по поводу моего утверждения в предыдущей статье, что Бог не только «наилучший действующий» Бог, но и «наилучший чувствующий» Бог, за исключением Владимира Шохина, который согласился со мной; и поэтому я приветствую такое завершение нашего симпозиума.

Ключевые слова: привязанности, Ансельм, Фома Аквинский, Августин, Бог, бесстрастие, моральная благость, Марк Мёрфи, теодицея, Владимир Шохин

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I am grateful to all the contributors to the symposium on my paper, “God’s Moral Goodness” [Swinburne 2022] for their important and relevant criticisms of that paper [Gasparov 2022; Karpov 2022; Murphy 2022; Shokhin 2023; Wynn 2022]. I shall arrange my responses to their comments on topics in the same order as I discussed them in that paper.

The Two Kinds of Argument to God's nature

My paper began with a comparison between two different ways in the history of thought in which philosophers have tried to demonstrate the nature of God, understood as creator and sustainer of the universe – Anselm's way of drawing out the consequences for the nature of that creator from that creator being a "greatest possible being", and Aquinas's way of arguing that the existence and nature of the universe is such as to entail or make it probable that its creator has a certain nature.

Mark Murphy (2022) is an Anselmian, and refers to God as "an Anselmian being". And, he equates Anselm's definition of God as "a being than which no greater can be conceived", in other words (if we assume that there cannot be two equally greatest beings) *the greatest* possible being with God being "the most *perfect* possible being" – an equation which in effect Anselm also assumes. But before we work out the nature of our creator on the assumption that he is the most perfect possible being, we need reasons to believe that there is such a being, from which plausibly it follows that he is our creator. Anselm's reason for believing that there is a greatest possible being was that – he believed – he had a sound ontological argument for this. Murphy [2022: 41] denies that his view depends on the soundness of any ontological argument; but claims instead that it is sufficient to rely on "the testimony of the church, along with some further justified premises". And he seems to suggest that that is his own reason for holding that belief. I assume that these further premises are also historical premises (and not typical premises of an argument of natural theology) – for example, premises that some church council or pope stated that God is absolutely perfect; and evidence that the church's testimony on matters of Christian doctrine is reliable. But in my view, though not perhaps in Murphy's view, such historical evidence on its own, without any reason to believe that there is a God who became incarnate in Christ and founded the church, is totally inadequate to make it probable that the church's testimony is reliable. However that may be, we need "intuitions" [Swinburne 2022: 7] about what a maximally perfect being would be like. Murphy spells out absolute perfection in terms of having all the good-making properties (or all the great-making properties). Then however, I claimed, "conflicting intuitions" arise about which properties are better to have or make one greater than do other ones; and in my view, different intuitions are compatible with the same "formal constraints" which Murphy [2022: 41] mentions. It needs to be shown, and Murphy has not shown, that being timeless and unchanging are great-making properties (or good-making properties); and, more generally, whether, to use Pascal's expressions, "the God of the [mediaeval] philosophers," is a greater, better, or more perfect God than "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob".

For reasons such as these I prefer Aquinas's way; and I have sought to develop it as an argument to the most probable hypothesis explaining the existence and general features of the universe. **Vladimir Shokhin** (2023) denies the cogency of inductive, that is probabilistic, arguments for the existence of God, and claims that abductive arguments ("inferences to the better explanation") are better. However, there would be no reason for adopting a "better explanation" unless "being better" was the same as being "more probable". Shokhin claims that while science deals with proportions of repeatable events, in arguing to the existence of God, we are

arguing to the existence of something "absolutely singular" [Shokhin 2023: 11]. But nothing discussable is absolutely singular, in the sense that it has no properties possessed also by observable things, since in that case, we would not be able to refer to such a being, and would not have the slightest idea about what is the topic of our discussion. God does have properties possessed by observable things, such as power, knowledge, and goodness, albeit to an infinitely higher degree than do observable things. Shokhin [Ibid.] suggests that instead of using the criteria for probable truth used in the sciences, we should use methods such as "rational intuition", "reasoning by analogy", and so on. Arguments are only likely to convince anyone if they begin from premises which the hearer accepts. My arguments begin from premises which everyone will accept – that there is a physical universe, that it is governed by fairly simple laws of nature, that these laws are such as – given the state of the universe at the time of the Big Bang – lead to the evolution of human bodies, and that human bodies are the bodies of conscious beings. It is not clear to me what are the premises of Shokhin's abductive arguments; what is their conclusion meant to be explaining. And arguments are only likely to convince anyone if it can be shown that the method of arguing is such as to draw from the premises a true conclusion (which may be only a conclusion about the degree of probability of some proposition). But there is not much general agreement about the criteria for an intuition being "rational", or about the criteria for which analogies between substances are evidence of further similarities. The criteria which I suggested, and repeated briefly in my essay on which the symposium is based, are ones which very many people with no initial religious beliefs can recognise as used by scientists and historians to establish probably true explanations of the events which they study. Hence they are appropriate for assessing explanations of events, which differ from those studied by scientists and historians in their scope – the existence of the universe is a bigger event than the existence of the solar system; and the fact that the universe is governed by laws of nature is a bigger fact than the fact that gravitational interactions between material objects are governed (approximately) by Newton's laws. Despite Kant, I do not see any reason to suppose that there are "firm boundaries between science and metaphysics" [Ibid.: 10]. I have argued [Swinburne 2021: 190–194] that Athanasius and several subsequent patristic authors argue that the orderliness of the universe is to be expected if there is one single creator, but would be most improbable otherwise; they argued for this on the assumption that the elements of which the universe is made, were earth, air, fire, and water. But – if we replace their physics by ours – their arguments are very similar to mine (though not, of course, formalised by a calculus).

I have used Bayes's theorem to formalise this style of argument [Swinburne 2004: 14–20]. I was careful to emphasise that we cannot give exact values to any of its terms, when Bayes's theorem is applied to assessing the probability of the existence of God; but I gave arguments for ascribing very rough intervals to the values of these terms, and so very rough values for the probability of the existence of God. That one can only ascribe very rough values to the probability of the existence of God is no objection to the use of Bayes's theorem, – because one can only give very rough values to the probability of any scientific or historical hypothesis whatsoever. But in the latter cases, one can say that one hypothesis is a lot more probable

than some other hypothesis, and that some hypothesis is fairly probable: and the same applies, I claimed, to the hypothesis that there is a God. In my analysis of scientific criteria, I stress the absolute importance of the criterion of simplicity in determining our choice of scientific theories. As Shokhin [2023: 12] remarks, as science progresses, scientific theories have become a bit more complicated. But that is no objection to my emphasis on that criterion, since I am only claiming that among theories which satisfy other criteria fairly equally well, the simplest theory is more probably true. But when the progress of science yields new evidence which would be very improbable given some current theory, then we have to postulate a new theory which is the simplest theory which makes the total (old and new) evidence probable, and that will be less simple than the previous theory.

How simple could God be?

I argued that the simplest kind of God, and so the most probable, was as a "essentially everlasting omnipotent being", from which the other traditional divine properties such as omniscience, omnipresence, and perfect goodness can be derived. Igor Gasparov claimed that my kind of God is too complex and there is a kind of God simpler than mine: and Mark Wynn argued that my kind of God is too simple.

I claimed that it follows from my account of the divine properties that God has libertarian free will; and also that God always acts in accordance with reason, in doing the best when there is a best, an equal best when there is an equal best, and otherwise always a good action. **Igor Gasparov** (2022) asks how can God be by nature good, if he is thus constrained to act in accordance with reason. On my account, God has in virtue of his omnipotence, a potentiality to do good or evil, but can never realise the latter potentiality, and this seems complicated. For this reason Gasparov supports what he regards as a simpler hypothesis than my hypothesis; and that is the Thomist hypothesis of a God who is the same as his essential properties, such as omnipotence and omniscience, and also including his activity. For Gasparov all these properties and activity are just one property; and that, Gasparov claims, makes God supremely simple, because there is no unrealisable potentiality in God.

I begin my response by pointing out that on my account the simplicity of a hypothesis, used as a criterion of its probable truth, is not quite the same as the simplicity of a substance (including one postulated by some hypothesis). The simplicity of a hypothesis consists in it postulating "the existence and operation of few substances, few kinds of substance, with few easily describable properties correlated in mathematically simple kinds of way" [Swinburne 2022: 3]. I stress the phrase "easily describable properties" which summarises my view explicated more fully elsewhere [Swinburne 2004: 54] that a hypothesis is simpler, insofar as the properties which it postulates are ones of which we can readily observe instances, or is defined easily in terms of the latter. "Absence of", "limit", "power", "period of time", being a "person", in terms of which the property of essential everlasting omnipotence is defined, are names of properties of which we can observe instances. By contrast the "simplicity" of a substance, in the sense in which patristic and mediaeval theologians understood it, consists in the fewness of its parts; and on the highly un-natural

view that the properties of a substance are parts of it, the God which many such theologians postulated, in which God had only one property seems a very simple substance. So even if Gasparov's God were simpler than mine in the sense of having fewer "parts", it would not follow that it is any more simple in the sense that it makes the hypothesis of his existence more probable.

How we cut up the space of features of objects into distinct properties seems an rbitrary matter; one can think of omnipotence and God's other traditional essential properties as distinct properties, or one can think of the conjunction of all the essential properties of God, as one single property of "divinity"; and then the hypothesis of the existence of God just is the hypothesis that the property of divinity is actual. But then it seems that every substance can be analysed at having only one property, if we define that property, as the conjunction of all the essential properties of the substance. So on that account of simplicity, God is no simpler than any other substance; or rather, than any other substance which simply consists in the co-instantiation of its properties. I have argued elsewhere [Swinburne 2019: 108–112] that some substances, human beings and possibly also fundamental particles, are distinguished from each other by more than the properties which they instantiate – they have a "thisness" which underlies the properties. But I endorse the view that God does not have thisness, which follows from Aquinas's [1963, Ia.11.3] claim that it is "in virtue of one and the same fact act that he is God, and this God". Gasparov, however claims that there is a difference between God and other substances, that other substances have potentialities which may or may not be actualised, and so properties additional to their essential properties; but God has no un-actualised properties. However God is normally supposed to choose freely which of vastly many good alternative states of the universe to bring about; and it seems to me that that is involved in the notion of omnipotence, as well as in Christian doctrine, according to which God freely creates the universe, becomes incarnate, and interferes in the regular operation is of natural laws – when he could have freely chosen not to do so. So all the properties of freely bringing about different states of the universe must, on Gasparov's account, be included in the divine essence. But God having free will must involve his having many non-actualised potentialities – such as the potentiality not to create the universe and the potentiality not to become incarnate – even if we say that God has no potentiality to do evil, rather than that God has the potentiality to do evil but cannot realise it.

Given that there is no best of all possible worlds, both because there may be many equally good worlds, all of them better than other possible worlds, and because there may be an infinite number of possible worlds, each less good than some other world, it might seem that God's choice of which world among those choices of worlds which would be equally good to make would be totally "arbitrary". **Mark Wynn** regards this consequence as contrary to "Christian revelation" in which "we are invited to think that God rejoices in the existence of human beings in particular, and indeed in the existence of the very human beings who in fact exist" [Wynn 2022: 65]. Hence, Wynn suggests, God may have "preferences which do not simply track the objective goodness of various possible states of affairs". This builds into God's nature certain extra properties – preferences for creating human beings rather than other rational creatures, and particular human beings rather than other ones

who might have existed. But that suggestion merely transfers the "arbitrariness" from the choices which God makes to the internal nature of God. God is supposed to have a certain arbitrary nature, not by his own choice – and that, on my account of what makes for the simplicity of a hypothesis, makes his hypothesis less probable. Further, like Gasparov's theory but for different reasons, Wynn's suggestion seems to deprive God of much of the free will which he would otherwise have; since having preferences and no reason for not acting on those preferences, he will inevitably conform to them. Even if there is no reason for God making one choice of a possible world in which there are different kinds of rational beings, or different particular humans, it doesn't follow that there is no reason for choosing that world. There is a reason – its goodness; God chooses which kind of goodness to instantiate, and so on which objective reason to act.

The Possibility and value of Theodicy

An argument from the existence and general features of the universe to the existence of God must take into account both the positive and the negative features. The most important positive features, as I mentioned earlier, include the features that the universe is governed by simple and comprehensible laws of nature, that these laws of nature are such as to bring about human bodies, and that human bodies are the bodies of conscious beings. The most prominent negative feature is the existence of evil, that is sin and suffering. I argued that, unless the positive arguments make it very probable indeed that there is a God, we need a successful theodicy to make it more probable than not that there is a God. **Vladimir Shokhin** (2023) claims that humans cannot possibly explain why God allows the many horrendous evils of this world. If he is right about this, their occurrence must count against the possibility of constructing a cogent inductive argument to the existence of God. I believe that I have the framework of a cogent theodicy, which I have outlined it in other writings, but I did not attempt to give even the briefest summary of it in my original paper for the reason that to do so requires at least a paper devoted to that topic. So I will confine myself to mentioning four main points of my theodicy, which – I hope – will begin to make it plausible that a cogent theodicy, and so a cogent inductive argument to the existence of God, can be constructed. I do indeed hold, as Shokhin mentions, that God has an obligation to ensure that the life of every human is on balance a good one, and so he has an obligation to compensate humans for their suffering. That compensation is, I believe, normally provided in this life, since I believe that for most humans life on earth is on balance good. But this compensation may be provided after death – as it is in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19–31). A human parent has the right to impose significant suffering on a baby for the sake of some future good to the baby – as when in a war-torn country without anaesthetics, the baby needs to undergo a painful operation which will save his or her life; the pain comes first, and the compensation later. So surely God has a similar right, and God can provide that compensation in an afterlife.

Secondly, I claimed that God has an obligation not to permit an evil unless doing so is logically necessary for the occurrence of a comparable good (either to the sufferer or to someone else). God permits such evils, either by causing them or by allowing some other being freely to cause them. I am not claiming that actual moral evils permitted by God are logically necessary for the occurrence of a comparable good, but only that God permitting humans freely to choose whether or not to cause these evils is logically necessary for the occurrence of a comparable good. The kind of free will which it is good that humans should have, and which I argue elsewhere [Swinburne 2014: 174–209] that fairly probably they do have, is "libertarian free will" to choose between good and bad, that is freedom to choose even given all the causes influencing us. If we have such free will, in my view it is not logically possible for God infallibly to foreknow how we will choose; he can only predict on the evidence available to him before we choose, how probable it is that we will make the good choice. So although no doubt God can predict our choices far better than we can, he cannot predict perfectly and so sometimes may regret the freedom he gives us. The book of Genesis (6:6) claims that when God saw the evil in the world before the Flood, he "was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth". So it may be probable on all the evidence available even to God, that we will make the good choice, but actually we make the bad choice, and the bad effect of that choice may sometimes be worse than the good of our having that freedom.

Thirdly, a theodicy only becomes plausible on a view of what the goodness of a human life consists in. It does not, I suggest, consist merely in enjoying an anxiety-free life, in which we can pursue together with others, sporting and intellectual achievements for a few decades. Rather, it consists also in overcoming, and helping others to overcome, the bad desires to which humans are inevitably subject if they are to have a choice between good and evil, and helping them to form good characters which will lead them to want to help others in all these respects; and also to reverence the good and help others to reverence the good, and so to reverence God himself.

And fourthly, a God who really trusted humans and wanted them to make a difference to themselves and the world would seek to give them real choices of enormous importance of whether to cause evil or good, and whether to cope with suffering in the right way; and thereby to form either a saintly character fitted for heaven, or an evil character fitted for some form of "damnation" (in its original sense of "loss of God"). Permitting the great evils to which Shokhin draws our attention, gives humans these choices of enormous importance. This is because we are so made that each time we make a good choice of some kind, it becomes easier to make a good choice of that kind next time; and each time we make a bad choice of some kind, it becomes easier to make a bad choice of that kind next time. (Of course, no one, except God who is totally responsible for our existence from moment to moment, has the right to permit us to cause or suffer real bad evils for the sake of a comparable good.)

These points need detailed filling out to make them plausible, but I do not sense that Shokhin's quick dismissal of theodicy has taken any account of them.

Mark Wynn (2022) argued that my theodicy, while perhaps valuable in showing that there is no good argument *against* the existence of God, would not be

of much help in supporting probabilistic arguments *for* the existence of God. He correctly pointed out that a probabilistic argument for the existence of God, could only succeed if it could show that the general character of the universe is such that it is the kind of universe which God would bring about. He then pointed out that God's obligation which I described above, to ensure that there is an overall balance of good over bad in the life of every human being, could always be fulfilled for every human whose life on earth was on balance bad, by providing for that human a life after death better than their life on earth. Wynn then claims that in that case, we have no reason to suppose that God would create any particular segment of a universe observable by humans on earth rather than any observable segment of a different possible universe, since, however much evil any rational agents suffered on earth, they could always be compensated for that in a life after death. And in that case, there could be no cogent argument from the particular character of the balance on earth (e.g. whether or not in the life of any human there is more good than bad or less good than bad) to the existence of God. If that were the only consequence of my theodicy, his objection would be correct. But, as I pointed out in the second point of my response to Shokhin about, on my theodicy God has an obligation not to permit an evil unless it is logically necessary for the occurrence of a comparable good. It is therefore a consequence of my theodicy, that there is no such evil; and whether or not there is such an evil depends on what kinds of evil occur on earth; and that limits the kinds of evils which God could allow to occur in a human life on earth.

But of course to recognise that there is or is not such an evil, we need to be able to distinguish evils from goods, and to recognise how important are some goods and how awful are some evils. **Kirill Karpov** pointed out that there are vast disagreements among humans about these matters. But, if the disagreements are not resoluble, all that that point would show is that each of us must assess whether there is a cogent theodicy by their own criteria of what is good and what is bad. It does not follow that there is no truth about whether there is a cogent theodicy; it merely follows that some humans are unable to recognise whether or not there is a cogent theodicy. However, many moral disagreements are resoluble by patient and open-minded argument, and in particular by the method called by John Rawls [1972: 20–21] "reflective equilibrium". The way I understand this method is as follows. Each of us starts from many "basic beliefs" about the moral worth – "good", "bad", "obligatory", "wrong" – of many particular actions. We then note that there is some general principle which would justify some of these basic beliefs (for example, the principle that "it is always wrong to kill a human except to prevent some other human being killed, or in retribution for another human having been killed"). We then find that that principle has the consequence that some other basic moral belief of ours (for example, that it is not wrong to kill a thief who is to stealing your possessions) would be false. We then reflect on whether we are so convinced about the latter basic belief as to reject the general principle; or whether the general principle seems to strengthen our other basic beliefs and for that reason to be very plausible, and so to lead us to reject the solitary basic belief inconsistent with it. And so we continue to look for underlying basic principles which make justify many of our basic moral beliefs, and thereby to make further progress. We are often helped to make progress by others who present us with

new examples of actions for moral assessment, which may strengthen or weaken our belief in some moral principle: and new suggestions of general moral principles which might justify many of our basic moral beliefs. In this way humans who disagree about moral matters may come into greater agreement. I see no reason to doubt that some atheists can and do convince some theists that their moral standards are incorrect in certain respects which would have the consequence that there cannot be a successful theodicy; and that opens the possibility that theists can convince some atheists that their moral standards are incorrect and so there can be a successful theodicy. The mere fact of initial disagreement about moral matters is no ground at all for claiming that there are no truths about these matters.

God's morality

Mark Murphy rightly emphasises, as do all the other contributors, that God is a very different kind of being from humans. That leads him to hold that God, as the most perfect being, would have a morality very different from the "familiar welfare orientated" morality [Murphy 2022: note 12], which humans are obliged to follow: and so he denies that God has requiring reasons, by which I assume that he means obligations "to promote and prevent setbacks to the well-being of creatures".

That is not inconsistent with the view that "all differences between agents' reasons must be rooted in some common reasons", a principle which Murphy [2017: 47] calls "quasi-Kantian". It would follow from this principle that, while the most general truths of morality apply both to God and humans, their application varies with the degree of power, knowledge and freedom possessed, and the causal power exercised, by humans and by God. Human parents are only to a very small degree the cause of the existence and subsequent life of their own children. God however, has a very much greater responsibility for the existence and subsequent life of all human children. So while both God and human parents, as the benefactors of human children, have obligations to promote the well-being of children, parents have only limited obligations to do this for the limited time of the earthly life of their own children while they remain children, and limited means which they have the right to use, to fulfil these obligations. God however has far less limited obligations to promote the well-being of all human children for their lives both before and after death, and the right to use means to fulfil these obligations of kinds forbidden to human parents, such as imposing very serious suffering on the children to provide some good for them or for others. Murphy, however [Murphy 2022: 46], denies the quasi-Kantian principle, and claims that while God has "justifying reasons for promoting the good of creatures", that is reasons for doing this if in fact he does it, he does not have requiring reasons to promote that good, reasons which make it obligatory for him to do it.

The main reason which Murphy gives for claiming this is that "God cannot be constrained and required by creaturely goodness" since God is "the ultimate source and explainer of the goodness of any created thing" [Ibid.: 45]. This view however leads to a variant of the Euthyphro dilemma. Is what God does good just because God does it, or does God do it just because it is good (for reasons other than that God does it)? Murphy seems to reject the second horn of this dilemma because

"the notion that the agency of the source of goodness in all good things is constrained and required by creaturely goodness… seems very implausible". So presumably he favours the first horn. But an omnipotent God is not supposed to be able to do the logically impossible, as Aquinas [1963, Ia. 25.3] emphasised: "whatever does not involve a contradiction is in that realm of the possible with respect to which God is called omnipotent". "Morally good", I suggest, is one of those many expressions whose meaning is defined in part by the objects to which they apply. Moral goodness just is the sort of goodness that involves (no doubt as well as other things) "promoting and preventing setbacks to the well-being of rational creatures". So its negation involves a contradiction, and so it is no constraint on God's omnipotence that he is morally required to promote and prevent setbacks to the well-being of creatures.

Murphy claims that although "God intended natural selection as a means to bring about rational animals" and God knew that natural selection involves creaturely evils [Murphy 2022: 47], God did not intend the evils, even as a means. There is, as Murphy argues, a distinction between intending an evil, and making use of an evil. One can make use of an evil which one knows will occur if one does some action, as a means to bring about some good, without intending the evil to occur as a means to the good – but only if one cannot bring about the good by any means which doesn't involve the evil. But if one can bring about some good by a means which doesn't involve the evil, but chooses to use the means which does involve the evil, then one does intend the evil as a means to the good. Murphy's example of crossing the room to get a cup of coffee by a route that involves stepping on someone's toes, when he could have chosen a different route which did not involve stepping on their toes, is a case of intending an evil as a means to a good. Murphy's reason [Ibid.: 48] for denying that we can "extend this reasoning to the divine case" is that "an Anselmian being does not have requiring reasons to look to the well-being of creatures". But, whether or not an Anselmian being has requiring reasons to prevent his creatures being harmed, Murphy claims that such a being has requiring reasons not to intend evil – "God's nature precludes God's intending evil, and so there are no goods that could justify God's intending evil for the sake of those goods" [Ibid.: 111]. Yet since Murphy allows that evils are involved in natural selection, the objection shows that, if God has such reasons, he does not act on them! Such a being is not perfect and does not deserve worship.

Murphy objects that I give no arguments in defence of my claim [Swinburne 2022: 12] that "surely a perfect being would not allow his creatures to suffer for no good reason." The "surely" was meant to appeal to the natural reaction, not merely of myself, but – I suggest – of almost all believers and unbelievers, that the claim is initially implausible and so needs justification.

In his discussion of my "fourth objection", Murphy suggests that having the perfections that we humans have "in a more eminent way" does not involve God being bound by the same requirements as we are bound by, but requiring "more from God, due to God's having so much more knowledge and power than we humans have" [Murphy 2022: 53]. Rather, according to Murphy, it involves God being bound by "a higher morality" than we are. I suggest that my understanding of "in a more eminent way" is a more natural one than Murphy's. Murphy distinguishes between "impure perfections" such as "being fast" or "being perceptive"

which presuppose some kind-limitation on the part of their bearer, and pure perfections such as "being powerful" or "being knowledgeable" which do not presuppose any limitation. He claims that this is the distinction which Aquinas makes between properties which can be "predicated positively" of God, and so are predicated analogically and literally, and properties which are predicated only metaphorically. He then claims [Murphy 2022: 53–54] that "it is no more than metaphorical to say that God is 'morally good' but in an eminent way." But he cannot claim Aquinas as an ally, because in the very article of *Summa Theologiae* [Ia.13.3] which we both cite, Aquinas gives "good" (*bonum*) along with "being" and "living", as an example of a word used literally to denote a perfection possessed by God. God's "goodness", which presumably includes "moral goodness", writes Aquinas, is predicated literally of God.

Vladimir Shokhin claims that God is too great for humans to understand his ways. He seeks to support this view by various quotations from Scripture which might seem to suggest that God's reasons are so far above ours, that we cannot understand them. That does indeed seem to be the Old Testament message of the book of Job, and the passage from Isaiah (55:8–9), cited by Shokhin [2023: 16]. On the other hand, Genesis (1:27) in its claim that God "created humankind in his image" claims that there is a considerable similarity between humans and God, which would suggest that we might expect to have some knowledge of his reasons for his actions. The Christian view has always been that a new revelation was given to humans by Christ, which went beyond and filled out the revelation of the old covenant, and I suggest that the New Testament, and in particular the teaching of Christ as recorded in the Gospels, sometimes provides reasons why God causes or allows sin and suffering. In his parable of the tares and the wheat (Matt 13:24–30), Christ makes the general point that if God were immediately to abolish evil, he would thereby abolish good at the same time. In John (9:1–2) Christ gives the reason why a particular man was born blind – "so that God's works might be revealed in his works". In (Rom 9–11) Paul gives what he takes to be God's reasons for causing or allowing various superficially bad events; for example, that the reason that Israel "did not succeed in fulfilling the law" (Rom 9:32) was that "they did not strive for it on the basis of faith". And the moral of the comparison of God to a potter who uses clay for different purposes, is that he uses different groups for different *good* purposes – "one object for special use and another for ordinary use" (Rom 9:21). Shokhin is mistaken in claiming [Ibid.: 15] that Scripture has no mention of any "obligations" of God to humans in his role as their father. The parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matt 20:12–16) clearly shows that God does fulfil his obligations, similar to those of a human employer, since the landowner says to those who worked a whole day "I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?". "Doing no wrong" means the same as "fulfilling obligations". The parable does of course make the further point that the landowner is supererogatorily generous to those who were unable to get work earlier in the day. A perfectly good God in his relation to his creatures often goes far beyond his obligations, but that does not mean that he does not fulfil his obligations. Christ compared God to human parents, when he pointed out that parents normally satisfy the requests of children for food, continuing "if you then who are evil,

know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him" (Matt 7:11). God is better than human parents, and so he will know "much more" (that is more on the same scale) than human parents, how to give good gifts to us.

God's feelings

The final section of my earlier paper claimed that God was not merely a "best acting" God, but also a "best feeling" God, and that the declaration of the Council of Ephesus that God is "impassible" is to be understood as claiming that God cannot have certain kinds of feeling, but can have other kinds of feeling. I was very surprised to find that none of the commentators objected to my account, and that the one commentator who discussed this issue, **Vladimir Shokhin** [2023: 18–19] agreed with me. I welcome this agreed conclusion to our exchange of ideas.

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