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Sceptical theism and moral scepticism

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Abstract: **Several theists have adopted a position known as 'sceptical theism', according to which God is justified in allowing suffering, but the justification is often beyond human comprehension. A problem for sceptical theism is that if there are unknown justifications for suffering, then we cannot know whether it is right for a human being to relieve suffering. After examining several proposed solutions to this problem, I conclude that one who is committed to a revealed religion has a simpler and more effective solution. In particular, according to traditional Judaism, God has permitted us, indeed commanded us, to relieve suffering, so we know that it is right for us to do so. I further show how God's command, according to Judaism, that we save lives provides an answer to an analogous argument put forward by David Hume. Thus, revealed theistic religions can sometimes solve problems more effectively than theism alone.**

Sceptical theism is an approach to the theological problem of evil that has been adopted by many philosophers of religion.[1] It is, in a nutshell, the view that we simply do not and cannot know God's purposes in allowing the evil that exists in the world. Several philosophers, however, have raised difficulties for this approach. In particular, it has been argued recently that if we profess ignorance of God's moral justification for allowing evil, we deprive ourselves of moral justification for any action we might take against evil; for presumably whatever reason God has for allowing the evil is also a reason why *we* should allow it.[2] I refer to this difficulty as 'the moral problem for sceptical theism' (or 'the moral problem' for short). There have been several attempts to respond to this difficulty,[3] but it is far from clear that any of them is completely successful.[4]

I think that if we are limited to natural theology – that is, to thinking about God using only the resources of science (i.e. sense experience and human reason), as opposed to using resources vouchsafed in revelation – then the moral problem for sceptical theism is a serious difficulty, a difficulty that, as far as I can see, can be resolved only at the expense of raising other difficulties. But if it is discussed in the context of a rich religious tradition, including canonical texts that are believed

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to express the revealed will of God, then that tradition may very well provide a simple, satisfactory resolution of the difficulty.

In the first section, below, I will exhibit the role that sceptical theism plays in its dialectical context, and will show how the moral problem purports to prevent it from playing that role. I will also deal briefly with some attempts in the literature to dismiss the problem. In the second section, I will examine some promising possible solutions, showing that some of these mitigate the problem somewhat, while others render it practically irrelevant, but only at the cost of raising other difficulties. In the third section, I will present what I think is Judaism's solution of the problem, as found in canonical and traditional texts. In the final section, I will examine a different problem, one raised by Hume, involving theism and morality; I will show that the logic of this problem is similar to that of the moral problem for sceptical theism, and that the same texts that solve the moral problem for sceptical theism solve this problem as well.

The moral of the story is that some problems for theism can be given much more simple, effective, and elegant solutions if we do not limit ourselves to mere theism itself, but rather make use of the resources of developed theistic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I am not, of course, suggesting that philosophers who are sceptical theists adopt the tenets of one of these religions, with all its doctrinal baggage. I merely want to make clear that a person who is already committed to one of these religions has a handy solution to the moral problem for sceptical theism, as well as to certain other problems. I thereby hope to dispel the mistaken impression that any problem for 'thin', or 'restricted', theism is *ipso facto* a problem for any religion that includes theism.[5]

The problem of evil, sceptical theism, and the moral problem

The moral problem for sceptical theism arises in the context of discussion of the theological problem of evil, viewed as an argument against theism. Since it is necessary to be familiar with this context in order to understand the moral problem fully, I will begin by presenting some background. (I beg the sophisticated reader's pardon for rehashing the standard moves in the dialectic of the problem of evil. I will try to be brief.)[6] According to theism, God created and controls the world. Moreover, according to theism, God is absolutely perfect; that is, among other things, God is all-powerful and perfectly good. The problem is that if God is perfectly good, He wants there to be no evil in the world; if He is all-powerful, then whatever He wants to be the case will in fact be the case. So it seems that according to theism, there should be no evil in the world. But there is evil in the world. Therefore, theism is false.[7]

One standard defence of theism against this argument is to cast doubt on the premise that the theistic God would not want any evil in the world. It is suggested

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that a perfectly good God would allow, or even produce, evil if He had a morally sufficient reason for doing so; that is, if creating a substantially better, or more valuable, world would logically require that it contain evil, then God might very well acquiesce in the existence of evil in the interest of making a better world. It is suggested, in particular, that a world containing agents with free will and the opportunity to choose good over evil is incomparably better than one that lacks such beings, even though a world with free will inevitably involves at least the possibility of evil. These suggestions in defence of theism can be developed and put forward as a theodicy, purporting to provide the actual justification of God's allowing evil to exist.

One such theodicy is essentially that a world containing moral good – for example, people acting out of respect, compassion and love for each other – is incomparably better than one without moral good. But in order for there to be moral good, there must be agents with free will, who can freely choose to do good or evil; for the special value of moral good cannot be achieved merely through the pre-programmed behaviour of automatons. This is generally referred to as 'a soul-making theodicy'. Alternatively, it is sometimes claimed that the mere existence of free will makes the world better than it could otherwise be, no matter what free agents do. In either case, if agents are to have free will, it must be in their power to make the wrong choices, as well as the right ones; and in order for a choice to be really right or really wrong, it must be possible for these agents knowingly to bring about real good and real evil, which they can do only by manipulating a nature governed by discoverable causal laws – laws which entail that sometimes nature itself produces evil (as well as good) even without human agency. This is why God allows the evil that exists in the world.

But it has been argued, notably by William Rowe,[8] that there are some instances of evil that defy this kind of theodicy, for they seem to be utterly gratuitous, that is, unnecessary for the achievement of any good. There apparently are cases of prolonged, intense suffering such that we are incapable of explaining why God does not prevent them, for they play no discernable role in improving the world. Even if it is *possible* that God has some justifying reason for allowing these evils, nevertheless it is highly *improbable* that there are any such reasons; that is, the evidence available to us makes it unreasonable for us to believe that there is such a reason, and therefore, all else being equal, it is unreasonable for us to believe that the theistic God exists.

To meet this objection, some theists have adopted the position known as 'sceptical theism'. They admit that we simply do not know, perhaps cannot know, why God allows all the evils that He does allow; we cannot explain how every evil that exists had to exist, or had to be possible, in order to make possible a greater good (or in order to avoid a greater evil – henceforth understood). But they go on to point out that according to theism, God is omniscient, and therefore

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far beyond us in knowledge and wisdom, as well as in power and in goodness. Thus, the theistic God has ways that we cannot fathom of bringing about results that we would recognize as good; furthermore, He may very well recognize and appreciate kinds of good that we have never so much as imagined. Given God's perfect goodness, every evil that He allows to exist must be logically necessary for the existence of a good so great that it outweighs the evil, making the world with both the evil and the good better than it would have been without the evil and therefore without the good, even though we cannot understand, in many cases, how this is so. Therefore, our inability to explain or justify every instance of evil is reasonably to be expected, if theism is true; and therefore whatever *seemingly* gratuitous evil exists cannot count against theism, even to the extent of rendering theism improbable.

Sceptical theists often draw an analogy to the relation between our knowledge and God's from the relation between a child's knowledge and that of her parents. For example, a child may appreciate the good of avoiding pain, disability, and death, but fail to see how her parents' saddening her by preventing her from running into the street is related to this good. Furthermore, the child may fail to appreciate at all such values as human dignity and autonomy, and so fail to see why her parents are so apparently unfair as not to prevent their adult neighbour from running into the street. Analogously, we can appreciate the good of altruism, but fail to see how a certain evil serves to promote altruism, though God sees it. And there may be some goods that we cannot fathom at all, such that God allows certain evils because they are necessary for the attainment of those goods, though we cannot even begin to understand God's justification for allowing these evils. (Obviously, I cannot give an example of a good that we do not recognize as such. But perhaps an example of a good that people generally failed to recognize until relatively recently is equality of women and men in the workplace.) Thus the existence of evils that we cannot justify no more entitles us to infer that God is not all He is supposed to be than the child's inability to understand her parents' actions entitles her to infer that her parents are unethical, or 'mean'. The child should trust her parents as being much wiser than she is, and we should trust God as being much wiser than we are.

The moral problem for sceptical theism, as posed by Bruce Russell, is as follows: the sceptical theist holds that, for any given evil E, we are not in a position to say that God is not justified in permitting E, since E may be necessary for an outweighing good in a way that we cannot fathom. Now suppose that a human being, Jones, is in a position to eradicate E, and that as far as he or we can tell, his doing so would not produce any greater evil or prevent the achievement of any outweighing good; but he decides not to eradicate it. We would normally say that Jones's refraining from eradicating E was morally wrong. But the sceptical theist is committed to believing that we are not in a position to judge Jones's failure to eradicate E as wrong; for the evil may have been necessary for some outweighing

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good in a way that neither he nor we can fathom. That is, sceptical theism entails moral scepticism.[9]

Some philosophers have attempted to avoid the problem, that is, to resist the inference from sceptical theism to moral scepticism. Daniel Howard-Snyder, for example, says that since Jones did not know of any outweighing good for which E was necessary, it was not *for the sake of* that outweighing good that he refrained from eradicating E; and therefore we are justified in judging that Jones behaved wrongly.[10] William Alston makes a similar point, saying that though there may be a good reason for Jones not to eradicate E, nevertheless, since this reason was not *his* reason for not eradicating E, we know that he acted wrongly.[11] However, considerations about that for the sake of which Jones acted or about *his* reasons reflect on the type of person Jones was at the time of his deliberation and action, or on his motivation at that time; they do not tell us whether the act itself was the right or the wrong thing to do. Thus Alston and Howard-Snyder seem to overlook the distinction, made by Russell in posing the problem, between our moral evaluation of the agent or his motives on the one hand, and on the other hand, our moral judgement as to the rightness or wrongness of the act. To the extent that the latter judgement is based on the value of the act's consequences, it seems that, according to sceptical theism, we are never in a position to judge, of any failure to eradicate evil, that *it* was wrong.[12]

Michael Bergmann, while sympathetic to the proposed solutions of Alston and Howard-Snyder, accepts, for argument's sake, Russell's distinction between judging the agent and judging the act as undermining those solutions. But he claims that there is nothing untoward, and therefore no problem for sceptical theism, in acknowledging that we are not in a position to know whether there is an outweighing good that would justify Jones in not eradicating E.[13] Bergmann does have a valid point, for independently of sceptical theism, there is reason to think that we never know what all the consequences of our actions will be; we know only a few of the more or less immediate consequences. So to the extent that the rightness or wrongness of an action depends on the value of its overall consequences, we generally do not know whether a given action is right or wrong. Though some have claimed that this ignorance is a serious problem in ethics,[14] others have claimed that it is not.[15]

However, whether or not it is a serious problem, I think that sceptical theism makes it more of a problem than it would otherwise be. Suppose we are not sceptical theists; and suppose we know someone, P, who is suffering from the effects of extreme poverty, and we can help him, either by giving him food, clothing, and shelter, or by offering him a job. We generally think that we are justified in assuming that P's suffering is a bad thing, that the world would be better without it, and that therefore the sooner it is alleviated the better. We may have some *slight* doubts as to whether we should help P – after all, sometimes things just don't work out the way we expect, and so our attempts to help might

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backfire, whereas P's continued suffering might have some unexpected extremely good effects. But we generally view these doubts as so far-fetched that we should not take them seriously; rather we think that the morally right thing to do is to take steps to relieve P's suffering as soon as possible.

Now suppose, instead, that we are sceptical theists; we know (or are committed to believing – henceforth understood) that somehow, perhaps in a way that we cannot understand, P's suffering is a logically necessary condition of some greater good. Furthermore, since we know that every case of suffering is necessary for a greater good, and we often cannot see how this is so, we must admit that there definitely is much that we do not know about goods (and evils) and ways to bring them about. Moreover, sceptical theism seems to entail not only that there are goods beyond our ken, but also that some of these unknown goods have greater value than any good that we can imagine. This is so because there seem to be evils in the world so horrendous that we cannot imagine any resultant good that could justify them.[16] Yet according to sceptical theism, there must be some goods so great that they serve to justify even such horrendous evils. If so, then the sceptical theist must give more weight than others to the possibility that the good that God intends to achieve through P's poverty might be so great that the positive and negative value of all the goods and evils that we see to be relevant to the case pale by comparison, even perhaps to the point of being negligible in the calculation of what is for the best.

Thus, when it comes to deciding whether to relieve P's suffering, several relevant negative considerations that are, for others, mere far-fetched possibilities must be treated as *givens* by the sceptical theist. Therefore the sceptical theist has much more reason than others to suspect that relieving P's suffering would not have better consequences than not relieving it. Thus sceptical theism increases our doubts that relieving suffering, in any given case, is the right thing to do. Whether, in the final analysis, this increase in doubt is sufficient to render the doubt so problematic as to constitute a reason to reject sceptical theism will be discussed below, in the next section. Meanwhile, let us consider an attempt by Derek Pereboom to shed some more light on the issue.

Pereboom[17] cites Alston, Howard-Snyder, and Bergmann as 'claiming in effect that in morally justifying our actions, we are limited to goods that we understand, whereas the possible goods the sceptical theist is adducing are at least to some degree beyond our understanding'. He responds, citing Russell, that 'this does not seem right'. To show that it is not right, he presents two hypothetical cases, one analogous to the moral problem for sceptical theism, and the other a possible instance of it. In the first, a nurse named Jack serves in a clinic for patients suffering from a certain painful disease. He knows that these patients can be made to feel much less pain if they are given morphine. But though there is plenty of morphine available, the doctors in the clinic have never had morphine administered to these patients (and he has never asked them why). One day, Jack is alone

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with the patients in the clinic, and he asks himself whether he should give them morphine to relieve their intense pain. On the one hand, he does not see why these patients should not be given morphine, and he is well aware of the obvious reason to give it to them. But on the other hand, he figures that the doctors, who know much more than he does about this disease, must have some reason not to administer morphine to these patients, though he cannot figure out what that reason might be. It seems reasonable for Jack not to administer the morphine, at least until he can check with the doctors.

In the second case, Sue is a doctor who happens to be a devout sceptical theist. A drug becomes available that can cure a particular painful disease. But she hesitates to administer the drug. She reasons as follows: God must have morally adequate reasons for allowing, or even causing, people to suffer from this disease; and it seems that whatever these reasons might be, they are also reasons against her (or anyone's) doing anything to cure or prevent the disease. Assuming that Sue's adoption of sceptical theism is reasonable for her, she has just as much moral reason not to administer the new drug to her patients as Jack has for not administering morphine to his patients. That is, it is reasonable for Sue not to administer the drug, at least until she can check with God.

One wonders how Sue, being a sceptical theist, can be a practising physician in the first place; for the physician's job is to eliminate or lessen the suffering that God has inflicted, or at least has seen fit to allow. But this observation, far from undermining Pereboom's basic point, serves to strengthen it, by showing that sceptical theism seems to entail the implausible conclusion that we should at least have serious reservations about the permissibility of practising medicine.

Pereboom's examples seem to show that sceptical theism, if accepted as true, would wreak havoc with such normal moral judgements as that we ought to save lives and alleviate suffering – judgements that are endorsed by most theists and by most theistic religions, as well as by most plausible theories in normative ethics. The sceptical theist is committed to moral scepticism: if someone is dying, we have reason to doubt whether we should try to save him, and if someone is suffering, we have reason to doubt whether we should try to alleviate his suffering. The implication is that abandoning our moral judgements and being in perpetual doubt as to whether to prevent death and suffering, as sceptical theism (apparently) entails, is unthinkable; therefore sceptical theism is to be rejected in favor of our ordinary moral practice and judgements, and so cannot consistently be used by theists to solve the theological problem of evil.

Possible solutions

Though, as I argued above, I think that the responses of Alston, Howard-Snyder, and, to a lesser extent, Bergmann are too facile, nevertheless I think that there are several interrelated considerations that do seem to contribute to solving

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the moral problem for sceptical theism. Some of these considerations serve to diminish somewhat the sceptical theistic doubts about the propriety of relieving suffering; others effectively remove all such doubts, or render them practically irrelevant, but at the cost of committing us to certain positions with which many theists would feel uncomfortable.

First, it may be argued that if God allowed a particular evil, or a particular kind of evil, to exist *until now*, and therefore we can assume that its existence until now served a worthy purpose, that does not mean that the *continued* existence of the evil *into the future* serves any worthy purpose; so the sceptical theist has no reason to believe that he should not act now to put an end to the evil. It may be added, as a special case of this general consideration, that for all we know, the justification of a given evil may lie not in its future effects at all, but rather in its past causes. That is, a given evil may, for all we know, be a logically necessary *consequence* of an earlier good that outweighed it (like, for example, the pangs of hunger that render an earlier act of giving someone else one's food an act of self-sacrifice), rather than a logically necessary *precondition* of a future good that will outweigh it; and in that case, the good for which the given evil is necessary has already been realized, so we will not be interfering with the production of any greater, outweighing good if we put an end to the evil.

I would say that this argument is a successful refutation of the claim that sceptical theism entails that we definitely ought not to eradicate any evil, since God saw fit to allow it. However, it is not a successful refutation of the claim that the sceptical theist has more reason than others to doubt whether we ought to eradicate evil. It is true that a sceptical theist *is* committed to believing that any evil that *has* existed *was* justified, and he is *not* committed to believing that the evil's *continued* existence *would be* justified. But it seems that sceptical theists, who know that the existence of a given evil until now was justified, as well as that there are goods, including unimaginably great goods, beyond our ken, have more reason to suspect that putting an end to the evil is not the right thing to do than do others, for whom these factors are merely far-fetched possibilities.

On the other hand, we may view the current consideration as showing that the degree of moral sceptical doubt entailed by sceptical theism is not as great as one might think: first, we do not know whether any given evil is (only) a necessary consequence of an earlier greater good or (also) a necessary precondition of a later good; second, even if it is the latter, we do not know whether its continued existence is necessary for the achievement of the future good. Still, it remains to be seen whether the residual degree of doubt, entailed by sceptical theism, about the rightness of our eradicating evil is sufficient to constitute a real problem.

A second consideration[18] serves to render the doubt practically irrelevant to our deliberations: God is a lot smarter than we are, and as He knows much more than

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we do about goods and how to bring them about, He knows a lot more than we do about tactics and counter-tactics. So it may be suggested that if God's worthy purposes require that a given evil E persist, He can see to it that E persists, despite our best efforts to put an end to it. Lest this suggestion be seen as involving God's interfering with our free will in a way that is objectionable, we may develop it as follows.

According to at least some standard versions of theism, God has, from eternity, with the benefit of His omnipotence and omniscience – including knowledge of what people will do of their own free will – arranged, or orchestrated, everything that happens in the world so as to yield the best possible results. If the persistence of E is necessary for God's purposes, then He will see to it that no one is in a position to put a premature end to it. Therefore, if God has seen fit to place us (or allow us to be) in a position to put an end to E, then we can take this fact as an indication that our at least attempting to destroy E is consistent with His plan. If we succeed in putting an end to E, that means that either the good for which E was necessary has already been ensured or else, if additional evil is still necessary for achieving the requisite amount and kind of good, God will produce that amount and kind of good by means of a different evil E′ which would not, in the long run, lessen the good of the world. So we need not worry that in trying to destroy evil, we might sometimes be frustrating God's good purposes; for we could not frustrate God's purposes, even if we tried.

This last line of reasoning assumes that we can solve the notoriously difficult problem of reconciling God's omniscience with human free will.[19] However, it is possible to avoid making this assumption and still maintain the line of reasoning nearly intact. For even if God does not know necessarily and with absolute certainty what free agents will decide to do, nevertheless presumably He is sufficiently intelligent and knowledgeable that He can predict with *near* certainty everything that will happen, including events that depend on the decisions of free agents. For even decisions of a free agent are influenced to a large extent by the agent's character and inclinations, as well as by other factors, all of which God would be cognizant of. This near certainty seems to be compatible with our having free will, yet it also seems to be enough to make the likelihood that we can frustrate God's plans negligibly small. So we need not worry.

A third consideration, based largely on the preceding two, is that our trying to eradicate an evil may be precisely what God intended as the greater good for which the evil was a logically necessary condition. Indeed, this consideration is in keeping with what many adherents of a free-will theodicy – and in particular, a soul-making theodicy – have in mind. And it does seem somewhat plausible to say that, all else being equal, the world is better if it contains a certain evil plus benevolent efforts to eradicate it than it would be without the evil.

On the strength of the above considerations, we may take issue with Pereboom's example of Sue, the physician. Sue must realize that in the history of

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medicine, many diseases ravaged mankind for centuries, but eventually were either eradicated or at least controlled due to advances in medical science. So presumably both the unchecked prevalence of a disease for a given stretch of time and its eventually yielding to discovered medical cures are consistent with God's plan. Discovery of a cure should be understood as indicating that the continued unchecked spread of the disease is not absolutely necessary for the betterment of the world, and that from now on, any instance of the disease is probably intended by God to elicit the virtuous response of curing it, as well as to bring about other good consequences perhaps. And in any case, Sue can rest assured that God will make everything turn out all right no matter what.

(Sue's situation is more analogous to a situation in which the doctors at Jack's clinic, though they have never before prescribed or administered morphine to their patients, have just given Jack a box containing a dose of morphine for each patient in the clinic, but without giving specific instructions before leaving; moreover, they have assured Jack that they have hooked up the patients to monitors and have taken other precautions to ensure that any mistake Jack is likely to make while on his own will not have very bad consequences. It is not nearly as clear in such a situation as it is in Pereboom's original scenario that it would be reasonable for Jack not to administer the morphine.)

The conclusion to be drawn from our three considerations, especially the second, seems to be that it really doesn't matter what we do – God ensures that everything will turn out all right no matter what we freely decide to do. So we may as well just do what seems morally right to us, based on the goods that we recognize and know to be relevant, and not worry about consequences that we cannot know about or evaluate, if that would make us feel comfortable. God makes sure that everything turns out for the best in any case; and we can only hope to add a little bit of good to the world by having morally good intentions. Thus we have a very strong line of reasoning that seems to solve the moral problem for sceptical theism.

Unfortunately, the very strength of this line of reasoning may be seen as a weakness. First of all, though the view that God ensures that everything works out for the best has been embraced by many religious people, and can also be a source of comfort and optimism, nevertheless some religious people might be dismayed at the thought that what we do makes no morally significant difference to the course of events. Compared to the view that the righteous help God improve the world by their actions, the view we are now considering seems to detract from our actions', and therefore from our own, importance in the scheme of things.

Secondly, if we adopt this line of reasoning, and therefore we assume that God has, from eternity, arranged that whatever we do, the results will be equally good, then we seem to have no incentive to engage in any serious deliberation as to what we should do – for, we assume, it really doesn't matter what we do. Despite

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what I said above about our *intentions* to relieve suffering adding a bit of good to the world, even this is not clear; for presumably, in forming our intentions, we should take into account that what we decide to do makes no ultimate moral difference to the world, so we will do no real harm even if we decide to do what seems to us to be immoral.

Thus suppose that you and I are sceptical theists who adopt the line of reasoning suggested here, and we are confronted with a case of suffering that either of us can alleviate. Whatever emotions are aroused in us by this suffering, we realize that if we do not alleviate it, then either the suffering will be alleviated without our intervention or else, if it continues, it will be a good thing that it continues. Now suppose that you nevertheless form the intention actively to intervene to relieve the suffering, and I decide not to intervene. Should a third party (another sceptical theist, or even God), knowing our respective thoughts and intentions, think more highly of you than of me? I think not; after all, he should figure, you merely intend to do something that you know will, in the final analysis, make no significant difference, and I simply intend not to bother performing such an ineffectual act.

Thus, sceptical theism, as developed here in response to the moral problem, seems to raise another problem – that is, it seems to lead rationally to a kind of fatalistic passivity and apathy. Whether it would *in fact* lead people to such passivity and apathy is another question, more psychological than purely rational or logical. It may be claimed that even if we find the above arguments convincing, nevertheless human nature is such that we will continue to be deeply moved by suffering, to deliberate seriously about what to do about it, to attribute great importance to such deliberation, and to ascribe great moral worth (positive or negative, as the case may be) to the resultant decisions, intentions, and actions. Even if this claim about human nature is correct, would that mean that the sceptical theist does not have a residual problem?

I think there is a problem, though I can see how someone might not see it as a problem. To cite a historical analogy: David Hume famously argued that we have no reason to believe that what has happened in the past is any reliable guide to what will happen in the future; but he also claimed that human nature is such that even people convinced of the cogency of his sceptical argument will continue to make inferences about the future based on their experience of the past. Hume apparently could live with this situation. But subsequent generations of philosophers have viewed Hume's position as posing, rather than solving, what they came to call 'the *problem* of induction'.[20]

We could continue this discussion, coming up with further proposals for solving the moral problem for sceptical theism, and raising new difficulties for those proposals. (For example, a move that might seem promising would be to adopt a deontological, or non-consequentialist, normative ethical theory, according to which an act's rightness or wrongness does not depend on the value of its

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consequences. We could then perhaps rehabilitate the responses to Russell of Alston and Howard-Snyder, discussed earlier. However, I believe that one will find, upon making the attempt, that hammering out just the right sort of ethical theory – one that would both be plausible and solve all aspects of the moral problem for sceptical theism – is at least difficult.) But I think enough has been said to indicate the thorniness of the issue. Though it seems that the sceptical theist can make some progress toward solving the moral problem, nevertheless it is far from clear whether, in doing so, he does not raise other, related problems that are just as serious.

What I want to show, in the following section, is that adherents of developed revealed theistic religions, and of Judaism in particular, have available a much simpler and more obviously satisfactory solution to the moral problem for sceptical theism.

Judaism's answer

Scepticism about our ability to understand God's reasons for His actions has always been a theme in traditional versions of theism. For example, sceptical theism as an approach to the justification of suffering seems to be the main point of the end of the biblical Book of Job. Furthermore, the problematic moral implications of sceptical theism were recognized by reflective and sensitive religious people long ago. This can be demonstrated clearly from ancient and medieval Jewish religious texts. I think the clearest example is a Rabbinic gloss on a particular Biblical verse (Exodus 21.19), found in the Talmud and expounded by the medieval commentaries thereon. The verse occurs at the end of a passage describing the penalties incurred by someone who strikes someone else, thereby causing him severe, but non-fatal injury. The passage reads as follows:

> And if men strive together, and one smite the other with a stone or with his fist, and he die not, but keeps his bed: if he rise again, and walk abroad upon his staff, then shall he that struck him be acquitted: only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and he shall cause him to be thoroughly healed.[21]

The Talmudic gloss is: '''And he shall cause him to be thoroughly healed'' – from here [we see] that the physician has been granted permission to heal.'[22] Thus the Rabbis of the Talmud infer, from the Bible's injunction that one who causes injury must see to it that the injured person is healed, that healing is permitted.

The standard medieval commentator on the Babylonian Talmud, Rashi,[23] on the clause 'the physician has been granted permission to heal', comments: 'and we do not say ''The Merciful One [God] strikes and he [the physician] heals?''' Rashi interprets the Talmudic passage as addressing the line of thought that if God, who is supremely merciful, has seen fit to inflict suffering on someone – and presumably if a person suffers, this is at least consistent with God's will – then we

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should not be so presumptuous as to interfere and relieve the suffering. The Rabbis of the Talmud, he explains, point out that the Bible here implies that we should not act on this line of thought; rather, even though people's suffering, and perhaps dying, from injury and illness is (consistent with) the will of God, nevertheless God has permitted human beings to relieve or remove such suffering and to save lives. (Actually, as we shall soon see, He has in fact commanded us to save lives, and has at least strongly encouraged us to relieve suffering, if we can do so.)

Another standard medieval commentary on the Talmud, *Tosafot*,[24] here adds that we might have assumed that it is only in the kind of case described in the passage at Exodus 21.18–19, where the injury was inflicted by a freely chosen act of a human being, that the physician has permission to heal; 'but in a case of illness, which comes from Heaven, when the physician heals, he seems to be going against the decree of the King', and therefore he has no such permission. But the added emphasis implied in the doubling of the word for *healing* in the original Hebrew – an emphasis which the translator attempted to capture by using the word 'thoroughly' – indicates that we should not restrict, in this way, the permission to heal. (There are dissenting opinions, but the view of *Tosafot* that the physician's permission to heal is not restricted to humanly inflicted wounds is normative in Jewish Law.)[25]

Another biblical verse, along with its Talmudic gloss, makes an even stronger point. The verse, read literally, says: 'Do not stand still over your neighbour's blood'.[26] Although the meaning of the verse is not completely clear, at least one plausible interpretation of it is as commanding us not to stand idly by and let someone be killed, if we can save him. Thus the Talmudic gloss is: 'From where [do we know] that one who sees his friend drowning in a river or being dragged off by a wild animal or being assaulted by robbers is obligated to save him? Scripture teaches, ''Do not stand still over your neighbour's blood''.'[27] Here the scriptural verse is interpreted as telling us that we are not only permitted to save lives; we are actually obligated, or commanded, to save lives whenever we are in a position to do so. And presumably, just as a person who knows how to swim is obligated to save someone who is drowning, so also someone who knows medicine is obligated to cure people afflicted with potentially fatal illnesses.[28]

It seems to me that the above passages from the Bible, Talmud, and medieval commentaries provide a solution to the moral problem for sceptical theism raised by Russell and developed by Pereboom. The solution is, essentially, that once we know that God has given us permission to heal the sick, that He has forbidden us to stand idly by when we could save a life, and that He has at least encouraged us to alleviate suffering (see below), we are no longer plagued by the sceptical theistic doubts as to whether saving lives and alleviating suffering is the right thing for us to do.

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The sources discussing granting the physician permission to heal contain a direct answer to the moral problem. It is acknowledged that there is a prima facie case against the permissibility of saving from death and alleviating suffering, and in particular against practising medicine; the argument that God must have good reasons for inflicting or allowing suffering, and that therefore there may be good reasons for us not to relieve that suffering, is a strong one, one that needs to be addressed. But the Bible, as expounded by the Talmud, does address it. By requiring the assailant to see to it that his victim is healed of his wounds, the Bible implies that a physician is permitted to heal such wounds. Furthermore, by implying that the physician's license is not restricted to healing only humanly inflicted wounds, the Bible permits the healing of any illness that God inflicts, despite the plausible reasoning that human beings should not undo what God has done or allowed.

There are countless Biblical and Talmudic passages encouraging us to alleviate various kinds of suffering. The Bible usually expresses the point in terms of certain classes of people who tend to suffer more than others – the poor, the stranger, the widow, the orphan. We are told repeatedly not to take advantage of people from these vulnerable classes of society, and also to take measures to improve their lot. Certain forms of charity are obligatory. For example,

> When thou reapest thy harvest in thy field, and hast forgotten a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go back and fetch it; it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the widow; that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thy hands. (Deuteronomy 24.19)

We are also to be liberal in lending money to those who need it (see, for example, Deuteronomy 15.7–11). The way to merit good things from God is 'to share thy bread with the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house; when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him' (Isaiah 58.7); 'He that has a generous eye shall be blessed; for he gives of his bread to the poor' (Proverbs 22.9). As for the Talmud, it is replete with passages praising the giving of charity to the poor, and praising even more the performance of acts of kindness toward others who need help or moral support, whether rich or poor. For example,

> The Rabbis taught: In three ways acts of kindness are greater than charity. Charity is only with one's money; acts of kindness [are performed] both with one's body and with one's money. Charity is for the poor; acts of kindness are for both the poor and the rich. Charity is for the living; acts of kindness are for both the living and the dead.[29]

Apparently, according to Judaism, we have a strict, or perfect, duty to save lives when we are in a position to do so, and we have at least a meritorious, or imperfect, duty to alleviate poverty and suffering. We are not to worry about the possibility that in eradicating or limiting these evils we are preventing the attainment of some great, outweighing good for which the death or the poverty or

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the suffering is a logically necessary condition.[30] Thus we have a solution to the moral problem for sceptical theism.

It should be noted that there is a passage, which appears twice in the Talmud,[31] that may seem to go against this solution. The passage states that King Hezekiah (See Kings II.18–20) hid a book of medical remedies (or perhaps *The Book of Medical Remedies*) and the rabbis approved of his doing so. Rashi and others explain that Hezekiah's reason for hiding the book was that he saw that people were using the book to cure their illnesses, and were not praying to God to heal them. On this interpretation, the Talmud here seems to endorse Hezekiah's withholding medical help from people suffering from illnesses, perhaps even fatal illnesses, in the interest of achieving a greater spiritual good. However, this act of King Hezekiah is one in a list of six acts, three of which were approved, and three of which were disapproved. Even those that were approved constituted Hezekiah's, so to speak, going out on a limb; that is, he was acting in a way that seemed prima facie wrong. Furthermore, the approval came only after the fact. At least one way to understand the passage is as implying that before the fact, the rabbis would not have prescribed, or perhaps even allowed, that Hezekiah perform such acts.

In any event, Maimonides, among others, rejects even the possibility of *post facto* approval of withholding medical help, even for spiritual purposes, and offers two alternative reasons for Hezekiah's hiding the book of remedies: (1) the book described *supernatural* remedies, actual use of which is prohibited by the Torah, so when people began to use these prohibited remedies, Hezekiah hid the book; (2) the book contained descriptions of various poisons and their respective antidotes, and was intended to help physicians recognize the symptoms of the different poisons so that they could administer the appropriate antidote, but people began poisoning others using the poisons described in the book, so Hezekiah hid the book, since it was doing more harm than good.[32] On either of these interpretations, it can still be maintained that Judaism unequivocally enjoins doing all one can to relieve suffering and to save lives. Thus we can still maintain our solution, based on traditional Judaism, to the moral problem for sceptical theism.

How does this solution avoid the residual difficulties that we noted in the solutions available to 'thin' theism that we discussed in the preceding section, above?[33] One such difficulty was that if God has manipulated things so that they turn out for the best, no matter what we do or try to do, then all our efforts to make the world better are totally insignificant. But Judaism does not need to adopt the view that God has manipulated things in this way, at least not in order to solve the moral problem for sceptical theism; for that problem is solved simply in virtue of the fact that since God has, in effect, told us to save lives and relieve suffering, we can be confident that, from our religious perspective, that is what we ought to do. In fact, there is a theme in traditional Judaism that is contrary to the

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view that God has arranged to achieve His goals no matter what we do; this alternative theme is that we are meant to be active partners with God in developing and improving the world: God intentionally created an imperfect world, so that human beings would have the opportunity to make it more perfect; our actions do make a significant difference to the course of events, for better or for worse, and we are to view our purpose in life as to act, guided by God, so as to make the world better.[34] One way we serve this purpose is by saving lives and relieving suffering.

Given the above activist theme, the second, related, residual problem – i.e. that we will be led (or at least rationally should be led) to moral apathy and passivity – does not arise. However, I believe that there also is room in traditional Judaism to reject the activist theme and adopt instead the view that God has arranged that, no matter what we do, the results will be equally good – even the extreme view that our freedom is effectively limited to our intentions. (This view represents at least one way to interpret the Talmudic dictum 'All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven.'[35]) But even if a traditionally religious Jew does adopt the view that our actions have no morally significant effect on the course of events, nevertheless he cannot be passive, since God has commanded him to act to save lives and has strongly encouraged him to act to relieve suffering. Furthermore, he can still avoid apathy and maintain that his life has some importance in the scheme of things. For God has, in effect, told us that our efforts to relieve suffering are not misguided; if we try to relieve suffering, we thereby add to the value of the world, and do our part in realizing His plans – whether our efforts actually make a significant difference to the subsequent course of events or merely add the value of our good intentions and efforts to the amount of good in the world.

It remains to be asked whether Judaism's solution to the moral problem for moral scepticism raises difficulties of its own. Perhaps one such difficulty is in defining the scope and limits of the divine command to save lives. Taken at face value, this command seems to entail that we literally cannot rest while we know that people in far-flung parts of the world are dying of starvation or are being killed either by marauding armies or by natural disasters, and we could do something to help.[36] It must be admitted that this is indeed a thorny issue. With respect to giving charity, Judaism does provide some guidelines. For example, it is suggested that we give no less than 10 per cent of our income, and no more than 20 per cent. (It is a debated issue whether the very wealthy may, or even should, give more than 20 per cent.) In addition, giving charity to the poor of one's own city takes precedence over giving charity to the poor of another city. But with respect to giving money or devoting time and effort to saving lives in faraway places, I do not know of any clear guidelines.

Is it right for a family to maintain two cars, if by limiting themselves to only one they would save enough money to enable them to keep ten people from starving?

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Is it right for them to have even one car? I do not know how to answer such questions. But I do know that this is not a problem just for Judaism's solution to the moral problem for sceptical theism. It is a hotly debated question even among secular ethicists.[37] For on most ethical theories, as well as in common-sense morality, the moral imperative to save lives and relieve intense suffering is just as strong and just as apparently limitless as is the corresponding religious imperative. So suffice it to say that this difficulty is not a new one, engendered by considerations raised in this paper; and presumably any solution offered would probably be available to Judaism as well.

Hume on suicide, and Rachels on euthanasia

Before concluding, I want to look briefly at another argument, or pair of related arguments, that are analogous to the moral problem for sceptical theism in that they involve rejection of a particular theistic position, based on the claim that it would wreak havoc with normal moral judgements. I want to show that the same sources in Judaism that solve the moral problem for sceptical theism also provide theists with an answer to these arguments.

David Hume, in his posthumous essay 'Of suicide', argues that suicide is permissible, for it is a crime neither against God nor against society nor against the agent himself. In arguing that it is not a crime against God, he considers the claim that the disposal of human life is reserved for God, that is, that matters of life and death are for God, not man, to decide. He responds to this claim as follows:

> Were the disposal of human life so much reserved as the peculiar province of the Almighty that it were an encroachment on his right for men to dispose of their own lives, it would be equally criminal to act for the preservation of life as for its destruction. If I turn aside a stone which is falling upon my head, I disturb the course of nature; and I invade the peculiar province of the Almighty, by lengthening out my life beyond the period which, by the general laws of matter and motion, he had assigned it.[38]

Hume thus argues that if decisions as to the length of a human life were reserved for God, and He alone had the right to carry out His decisions through the operation of natural causes, such as earthquake and disease, as well as natural rescue and recovery, then just as it would be wrong for a person to decide to end his own life and to carry out that decision, for example, by taking poison or walking under a falling rock, so also it would be wrong for a person to decide to prolong his own life and to carry out this decision, for example, by dodging falling rocks or taking medicines. The point is that most of us do not believe that it is wrong for a person to take measures to prolong his own life by thwarting natural factors that threaten to end his life. Therefore we do not believe that questions of life and death are not ours to decide; and so, to be consistent, we should also believe that it is not

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necessarily wrong for a person to take active measures to end his life, despite the tendency of natural factors to prolong his life.

James Rachels has applied Hume's reasoning to the issue of euthanasia. He states the analogue of the claim that Hume is out to refute as follows: '"The life of man is solely under the dominion of God." It is for God alone to decide when a person shall die; therefore, we have no right to "play God" and arrogate this decision unto ourselves. So euthanasia is forbidden.' He proceeds to endorse Hume's refutation of this claim, or argument:

> The most remarkable thing about this argument is that people still advance it today, even though it was decisively refuted over 200 years ago by … David Hume. Hume made the simple but devastating point that *if it is for God to decide when we shall live and when we shall die, then we 'play God' just as much when we cure people as when we kill them*. … Therefore, if the taking of life is to be forbidden on the grounds that only God has the right to determine how long a person shall live, then the saving of life should be prohibited on the same grounds. We would then have to abolish the practice of medicine. But everyone concedes that this would be absurd. Therefore we may *not* prohibit active euthanasia on the grounds that only God has the right to determine how long a life shall last.[39]

Again, the point is that a particular position, held by some theists – this time the position that suicide and euthanasia are prohibited because it is for God alone to decide when a person shall die – would wreak havoc with normal, and generally theistically endorsed, moral judgements, such as that the practice of medicine is a good thing. And again, the proposed conclusion is that we should reject the position in question in favour of our ordinary moral judgements.

The rabbinic sources cited in the preceding section – particularly those about granting the physician permission to heal and commanding us to actively save lives – can be viewed as if they were a direct answer to Rachels and Hume. The point is that we (or at least Jews) can believe that *fundamentally*, issues of life and death are God's alone to decide, but that God has chosen to give up His prerogative with respect to *saving* lives, and has given us the permission, indeed the obligation, to try to save lives whenever we are in a position to do so. But He has nowhere given us permission to commit suicide or euthanasia; so one is not entitled to end his own life or the life of someone else – that remains something that only God is entitled to do.

(The Bible, of course, also contains passages which prescribe taking people's lives as well, primarily as punishment for certain crimes or sins, and in war and self-defence. Again, in all cases where killing is not explicitly enjoined or permitted, the prohibition of taking lives remains in effect. I am not arguing that Judaism absolutely forbids all forms of suicide and euthanasia. I am merely showing that Judaism is not precluded, by the logic of Hume's argument, from holding that suicide and euthanasia are prohibited *because* in general it is for God to decide who shall live and who shall die.)

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Of course, one is justified in adopting these answers only to the extent that one is justified in believing in traditional (or Orthodox) Judaism. However, I do not think that this is the place to argue for the justification of believing in traditional Judaism – just as, for that matter, this is not the place to argue *per se* for the overall justification of believing in theism or in sceptical theism. My main interest here has been merely to show that the moral problem is a real difficulty for sceptical theism, and that traditional Judaism includes a relatively simple and effective response to it, as well as to the (otherwise) cogent reasoning of Hume and Rachels.[40]

Notes

1. The view that we cannot understand God's ways, and in particular, cannot explain apparent instances of undeserved suffering, can be traced back to ancient times (see below). It has been put forward and defended in recent years by Stephen J. Wykstra 'The Humean obstacle to evidential arguments from suffering: on avoiding the evils of "appearance"', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **16** (1984); by William P. Alston 'The inductive argument from evil and the human cognitive condition', *Philosophical Perspectives*, **5** (1991); and by Daniel Howard-Snyder 'The argument from inscrutable evil', in *idem* (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington IN: University of Indiana Press, 1996). The latter collection also contains the article by Alston and a related article by Wykstra. Sceptical theism has also been adopted, and defended quite impressively, by Jerome I. Gellman *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), ch. 7.
2. See Bruce Russell 'Defenseless', in Howard-Snyder *Evidential Argument from Evil*, 193–205, at 197–198. H. J. McCloskey made a similar point in his 'God and evil', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, **39** (1960), reprinted in Nelson Pike (ed.) *God and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 61–84, at 71–72.
3. See Howard-Snyder 'The argument from inscrutable evil', 292–293; William P. Alston 'Some (temporarily) final thoughts on evidential arguments from evil', in Howard-Snyder *Evidential Argument from Evil*, 321; and Michael Bergmann 'Sceptical theism and Rowe's new evidential argument from evil', *Nous*, **35** (2001), 278–296, at 291–293.
4. See Derek Pereboom 'Free will, evil, and divine providence', in Andrew Chignell and Andrew Dole (eds) *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77–98, at 89–90; and *idem* 'The problem of evil', in William E. Mann (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 148–170, at 164–165.
5. David O'Connor *God and Inscrutable Evil: In Defense of Theism and Atheism* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998) distinguishes between 'restricted' and 'expanded' theism (he also refers to the latter as 'orthodox theism'). But even his expanded theism is limited to quite general doctrines about God and His relation to the world. As will become clear in what follows, what I mean by 'a traditional revealed monotheistic religion', and in particular 'traditional Judaism', includes beliefs about specific obligations imposed on human beings by God. Terry Christlieb 'Which theisms face an evidential problem?', *Faith and Philosophy*, **9** (1992), 45–62, at 58–59, comes somewhat closer to what I have in mind with his distinction between 'generic' theism and a 'given' elaboration thereof.
6. For a somewhat fuller treatment of the development of the problem of evil, and for citation of relevant sources, see Pereboom 'The problem of evil'.
7. Most presentations of the problem of evil make use of the doctrine of God's omniscience as well. But in the following discussion, whatever role omniscience plays in the initial formulation of the problem of evil is, I believe, irrelevant. See Alvin Plantinga *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York NY: Harper & Row, 1974) 13, 18.
8. William Rowe 'The problem of evil and some varieties of atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **16** (1979), reprinted in Howard-Snyder *Evidential Argument from Evil*, 1–11.
9. See Russell 'Defenseless', 197–198.
10. Howard-Snyder 'The argument from inscrutable evil', 292–293.

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11. Alston 'Some (temporary) final thoughts on evidential arguments from evil', 321.
12. See Russell 'Defenseless', 198.
13. Bergmann 'Sceptical theism and Rowe's new evidential argument from evil', 292–293.
14. See James Lenman 'Consequentialism and cluelessness', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, **29** (2000).
15. See J. J. C. Smart, 'An outline of a system of utilitarian ethics', in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 33; and Shelly Kagan *Normative Ethics* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1998), 64–65.
16. See the selection from Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* in Pike *God and Evil*, 6–16. Ivan Karamazov describes to his religious and sensitive brother Alyosha cases of evil involving the cruel, brutal infliction of horrendous suffering on innocent children. He then asks Alyosha to imagine himself in the place of the Creator, and asks whether he would allow such evil even if that were the only way to achieve some great good. Alyosha replies in the negative.
17. Pereboom 'Free will, evil and divine providence', 89–90; and *idem* 'The problem of evil', 164–165.
18. This and the next suggestion have been put forward, in a slightly different context, by Berel Dov Lerner 'Interfering with divinely imposed suffering', *Religious Studies*, **36** (2000), 95–102.
19. See Nelson Pike 'Divine omniscience and voluntary action', *Philosophical Review*, **74** (1965), 27–46, for a classic statement of the problem.
20. See David Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Tom L. Beauchamp (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The first of the two claims is argued for in section 4, 'Sceptical doubts concerning the operations of the understanding'; the second in section 5, 'Sceptical solution of these doubts'. Almost any introductory textbook in philosophy, or in philosophy of science, will include a discussion of Hume's 'problem of induction', e.g. Peter Godfrey-Smith *Theory and Reality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 39–40, has a very concise account, under the heading 'The mother of all problems'.
21. Exodus 21.18–19. The translation is from Harold Fisch (ed.) *The Holy Scriptures* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 1986).
22. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Bava Kamma*, fo. 85a. The translation is my own.
23. The name 'Rashi' is an acronym for Rabbi Shelomo Yitzhaki, whose commentary is printed alongside the Talmudic text in most editions. The translation of Rashi's comment is my own.
24. The name '*Tosafot*' literally means *Additions* – that is, additions to the commentary of Rashi. These comments or essays, by various authors, are also usually printed alongside the Talmudic text. Again, the translations are my own.
25. See *Shulhan Arukh: Yoreh De'ah* ch. 336. (The *Shulhan Arukh* is the authoritative code of Jewish Law in Orthodox Judaism.) For a dissenting opinion, see the medieval commentary of Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra on the verse in question.
26. Leviticus 19.16. See Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *The Living Torah: A New Translation Based on Traditional Jewish Sources* (New York NY: Moznaim Publishing, 1981), 350n.
27. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin*, fo. 73a; my translation.
28. See Rabbi Dr Norman Lamm 'Is it a *mitzvah* to administer medical therapy?', *The Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, **8** (Fall, 1984), 5–13, at 6.
29. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Succah*, fo. 49b; my translation. (The main kindness to the dead is seeing to it that the corpse is properly buried.)
30. An anonymous reviewer for this journal noted that it would be 'odd' if God allowed suffering for the good of the sufferer, yet commanded (or encouraged) others to relieve that suffering. Lerner 'Interfering with divinely imposed suffering', 98–101, suggests possible ways in which such odd scenarios could work out to be in the best interest of the (erstwhile) sufferer as well as the person who relieves the suffering.
31. Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Berakhot*, fo. 10b, and Tractate *Pesahim*, fo. 56a.
32. Maimonides *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Tractate *Pesahim*, end of ch. 4.
33. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Religious Studies* for stressing the importance of this question.
34. See *Midrash Tanhuma* on Leviticus 12.3; and Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Bava Batra*, fo. 10a. The ideas in these ancient sources have been developed by later Jewish thinkers into an activist religious worldview, according to which we can be God's partners in the ongoing creation of the world. See, for example, several of the traditional Jewish commentaries to Genesis 17.1.
35. Tractate *Berakhot*, fo. 33b.

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36. This difficulty was raised by an anonymous reviewer for *Religious Studies*.
37. See, for example, Peter Unger *Living High and Letting Die* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Kagan *Normative Ethics*, 153ff.
38. David Hume 'Of suicide' in Hume *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, John Lenz (ed.) (Indianapolis IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 151–160, at 155.
39. James Rachels 'Euthanasia', in Tom Regan (ed.) *Matters of Life and Death* (New York NY: Random House, 1980), 28–66, at 48–49. The italics are Rachels's.
40. I would like to thank David Shatz, Charlotte Katzoff, and David Widerker, as well as an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies*, for helpful comments. I especially want to thank Jerome I. Gellman for extensive discussions of the issues dealt with in this paper; though we still disagree about several of these issues, his input has been extremely helpful.

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