AXIOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

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ABSTRACT In this article, I contend that (a) disagreement over the definition of ‘good person’ indicates a challenge for the probabilistic argument from evil (PAE) and (b) the debate between value monism and value pluralism exposes obstacles for the PAE. I also highlight areas for further axiological inquiry with respect to the problem of evil and related problems. My goal is not to argue that the PAE fails, but to examine the axiology of the argument, to investigate some of its vulnerabilities, and to motivate novel evaluations of it by reframing it as an axiological rather than moral issue.

KEY WORDS: axiology, problem of evil, virtue, suffering, theism

God does not make a spoiled pet of a good man; he tests him, hardens him, and fits him for his own service.

—Seneca, On Providence

Introduction

There are interesting areas of overlap between axiology and the philosophy of religion. One area concerns the problem of evil (PoE). James Sterba (2017: 1) astutely notes that the project has benefited from the application of conceptual resources in metaphysics, modal logic, and probability theory, but that philosophers have yet to apply adequately the capital of moral philosophy. In this paper, I extend Sterba’s point by asserting that the broader discipline of axiology can advance our understanding of the PoE. Given that ‘evil’ can be construed as an axiological term, the problem can be examined as an axiological one. As such, a consideration of pertinent topics in

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value theory might expand our grasp of the probabilistic argument from evil (PAE). I thus claim that two issues raise questions for the PAE, thereby opening new lines of exploration. In particular, I argue that (a) disagreement about the definition of ‘good person’ indicates a challenge for the PAE and (b) the debate between value monism and value pluralism uncovers vulnerabilities for the PAE. I close by highlighting further lines of axiological inquiry.

**Key Concepts**

Axiologists commonly distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic value. For example, according to Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen (2015: 30), an entity has intrinsic value in virtue of its internal features, but has extrinsic value in terms of its external properties or relations. [It is important to note that the nature of intrinsic value is disputed. Some hold that intrinsic value is a matter of something’s being good for its own sake or as an end in itself, but others claim that ‘end in itself’ worth is better classified as ‘final value.’] One might say that the former entity is endoaxic: it possesses value *ab intra*. Such value is objective in the sense that it is independent of our attitudes. As Nicholas Rescher (2017: 16) puts it, using the language of the fitting attitude (FA) analysis of value, something has value not because it is valued but because it deserves to be so. The latter entity is ectoaxic: it has value *ab extra*. Instrumental value is often taken as the paradigm example of extrinsic value. Extrinsic value is also plausibly non-subjective.

Moreover, axiologists disagree about whether there is one intrinsic value or many. The former position is value monism (VM); value hedonism is an example. The latter position is value pluralism (VP); on this view, there is a plurality of intrinsic values, perhaps including knowledge, wisdom, freedom, pleasure, friendship, joy, creative endeavor, and the like. The difference between VM and VP can be construed as a disagreement about whether there is only one intrinsic value *simpliciter*. However, one can be a value monist or a value pluralist about welfare value. Welfare value concerns that which is intrinsically good *for human beings*. [For instance, see Heathwood (2015: 137). We might say that welfare value is a kind of local value that contrasts with cosmic value, or that which is intrinsically good for the world in toto. Assume that human persons possess libertarian free will. The fact that the world contains human persons with libertarian agency might be a cosmic value, but the fact that human persons are libertarianly free to pursue their own projects might be a welfare value which is good in a local sense such that human beings can cultivate their own flourishing in their own moral communities.] For example, psychologists hold that intelligence (measured as IQ) is the best predictor *for human life success*; the psychologist Richard Haier (2018) claims that, *ceteris paribus*, more intelligence is good
for humans. [See also Wolchover, 2012] One can hold that there is only one value for human beings, or one can hold that there are many. I will call this the difference between welfare value monism (WVM) and welfare value pluralism (WVP).

Chris Heathwood (2015: 140-41) emphasizes one kind of WVM, which he calls ‘perfectionism.’ [See also Cowan, 2020: 17] On this account, moral and intellectual virtue is the only intrinsic good for human beings. Perfectionism is an objectivist view of value; virtue is good for us independent of our beliefs and desires about it. For this paper, I distinguish between strong perfectionism and weak perfectionism. The former position holds that only the strict perfection of human moral and intellectual character is good for us. This claim seems implausibly demanding since, one might argue, no mere human being would meet such a standard, and thus in practice, nothing would be good for us, nor would it be the case that we ought to be strictly perfect. The latter view is that only excellence of character is good for us. Such excellence is a sufficiently high degree of moral and intellectual virtue which can fall short of strict perfection. The standard of weak perfectionism is difficult to achieve but arguably reachable by us.

On WVP, many things are good for humans, such as virtue, freedom, knowledge, intelligence, creative activity, etc. Assuming welfare values are comparable, a welfare value pluralist might hold that one welfare good is better than the rest. I explore this point in the next paragraph.

From the perspective of VP, axiologists distinguish between value comparabilism (VC) and value incomparabilism (VI). VC is the claim that values are relevantly comparable. In other words, two value-bearers \( x \) and \( y \) are axiologically comparable iff they stand in a relation such that \( x \) is better than, worse than, or equal to \( y \) concerning some covering consideration. Ruth Chang (2015: 205-208) adopts this characterization of axiological comparability, aptly calling it the trichotomous comparison. For instance, given two knives, the first is better than the second with respect to the covering property of sharpness. On this view, one value can be better than the rest regarding the factor of human flourishing. In contrast, VI holds that at least some values do not stand in such relations. For example, suppose freedom and wisdom are good for human beings. One might suspect that freedom is neither better than, worse than, nor equal to wisdom. Both are good, though one cannot rank or otherwise compare them according to a shared covering consideration. This incomparability might be ontic or merely epistemic. With the concepts of this section in place, I turn to the PAE.

**Axiology and the PAE**

In this section, I argue that (a) the debate concerning the meaning of ‘good per-
son’ raises a problem for advocates of the PAE, and (b) the disagreement between VM and VP indicates fruitful challenges regarding the PAE. Linda Zagzebski (2017) has emphasized (a). I summarize and extend her work. Concerning (b), I contend that this disagreement suggests a theistic objection to the PAE which addresses a gap in the relevant literature, though it is pertinent to the soul-making theodicy. I propose that examinations of (a) and (b) uncover opportunities for further exploration.

To start, consider a generic presentation of the PAE: although it is logically possible that God and evil coexist, given the latter’s existence, the existence of the former is epistemically improbable. [By ‘epistemic probability’ I mean the degree to which, given two propositions \( p \) and \( q \), \( q \) supports \( p \) or makes \( p \) plausible. On this view of probability, if \( q \) is true, then the likelihood that \( p \) is true is greater than .5. One might wonder how a necessary being could be possible but improbable. I set this concern aside, though it is worth pursuing elsewhere.] In short, on the PAE, the data of evil indicates that atheism is likely though not epistemically certain. We can expound on this argument as follows:

1. A world with inordinate suffering (I-Suffering or I-S) in terms of kind, quantity, quality, duration, and/or distribution is unworthy of divine actualization. [One benefit of articulating this axiological assumption in such a broad manner is that it can be modified and applied to various versions of the PAE, such as the argument from gratuitous evil, the argument from horrendous evil, or the argument from the excessively long duration of suffering in the world.]
2. If (1), then God would not actualize such a world.
3. Thus, God would not actualize such a world. [One might suspect that the sub-conclusion in (3) would give the PAE-advocate a reason to want God to exist, indicating that the PAE advocate might be a pro-theist (i.e., one who holds that the world would be better with than without God).]
4. If (3), then if there is a God, there is no such world.
5. Thus, if there is a God, there is no such world.
6. But probably, this is such a world.
7. Thus, probably, there is no God.

We can simplify the argument: (1) A world with I-S is unworthy of divine actualization. Thus, (5) if there is a God, there is no such world. (6) Probably, this is such a world. Thus, (7) probably, there is no God.

Consider arguments to support (1) and (6), which are likely the most controversial premises. For (1), according to perfect being theology, it is necessarily the case that God is perfect, possessing omni-attributes such as omnibenevolence, om-
niscience, and omnipotence. God is also a personal being. As Schopenhauer put it, the term ‘impersonal God’ is a *contradictio in adjecto*. [See *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, Chapter 2, ‘Section on Spinoza.’] Hence, God is a perfectly good person. [For convenience, I say ‘person’ though it should be noted that a Trinitarian might prefer ‘personal being’ to avoid the suggestion that God is only one person.] Now, as Zagzebski (2017: 43) notes, it is plausible to hold that a good person aims at producing good and preventing evil. Let us call this proposition ‘GP’ for ‘good person.’ Given GP, arguably, God would actualize a good world and prevent the actualization of an evil one. Assuming a world with I^S is evil, it is thus unworthy of divine actualization.

For (6), according to PAE-advocates, the world we observe seems to contain I^S of a kind, quantity, qualitative intensity, duration, and/or distribution that makes it a bad world, or at least prevents it from being sufficiently good, i.e., worthy of divine actualization. We might call these ‘world-bad-making properties’ (WBMPs) [I borrow this term from Klaas Kraay (2008.) For example, it seems there are too many instances of evil, some of which are gratuitous, others horrendous. Further, some evils endure too long, either for individuals or for the world as a whole. Lastly, there are cases in which good persons suffer undeservedly and bad persons enjoy unwarrantedly pleasant lives. Hence, probably, the actual world is not good enough to be the product of a divine person. From this proposition, PAE-advocates conclude that, likely, there is no God.

For many, (1) is more plausible than its negation. Indeed, the reader might be inclined to accept (1) as a matter of axiological insight. I set (1) aside for now. I believe that (6) can be answered by appealing to (a) and (b). I will outline such a case in the next two sections.

**Axiological Consideration (a)**

As Zagzebski (2017: 44) notes, GP can be construed in two ways: (i) a good person aims at producing good and preventing evil, and a condition for being a good person is aiming at producing good states of affairs and preventing evil states of affairs; or (ii) a good person aims at producing good and preventing evil, and a condition for something being a good state of affairs and something else an evil state of affairs is that a good person aims at producing the former and preventing the latter. The first characterization can be taken as a consequentialist account of ‘good person’ such that the consequences of a person’s actions make that person good or not. [Alternatively, one might construe (i) deontologically; i.e., if a person’s volition is to produce a good state of affairs or prevent an evil state, then that volition makes the person good.] The second account can be read as a virtue theoretic analysis of ‘good
person.’ What makes a state of affairs good is that a virtuous person aims (or at least desires) to produce it; what makes a state of affairs evil is that a virtuous person tries (or at least desires) to prevent it.

Here, one could object to (i) by noting that it is possible for someone to be good yet not aim at producing good states of affairs and preventing evil states; it is also possible for one to aim at producing good states of affairs or preventing evil ones yet not be a good person. For example, suppose a virtuous person is stranded alone for years on a deserted island. This person’s capacity for producing good states and preventing evil ones is severely limited. He cannot generate welfare value or prevent welfare disvalue, except perhaps for those states which benefit or harm himself alone. Yet the person has a virtuous character and hence counts as good. He is like a talented soccer player (Lionel Messi, say) who finds himself in circumstances in which, despite his ability to play the game, the global soccer community is unable to organize any games in which he can compete. For another example, suppose there is an evil dictator who, for wholly selfish reasons, aims to produce situations which are good for others and prevent ones evil for others. Nevertheless, the dictator has a vicious character and hence counts as evil. When informed by his assistant that his actions have benefited others, he says: ‘Who cares? I surely don’t! I want whatever I want whenever I want it. So I take it. If the results are good for others, so be it. If bad for others, let them suffer.’

It is important to note that GP is consistent with both (i) and (ii). However, although (i) supports (6) in the sense that the evil states of affairs in the world seem to count against the proposition that there is a good creator who brought them about, (ii) does not provide clear support for (6). Rather, with respect to the PAE, (ii) is favorable to theism. A theist can claim that God is by definition good in the sense of (ii), and that some state of affairs counts as good in virtue of being something that God causes, or at least permits. Hence, if one has independent reasons (e.g., the kalam cosmological argument) for believing that God exists and that the universe causally depends on God, one may conclude that this world is sufficiently good, despite its suffering. One might also contend that God does what he can to prevent evil in a world with libertarianly free creatures. [For instance, Almeida (2012: 176) has argued that it is possible that a perfect being cannot actualize a morally perfect world of libertarianly free creatures.] On this account, the theist may deny (6) and therefore reject the PAE.

Moreover, a theist who accepts perfect being theology might balk at the claim that God’s goodness depends on the consequences of his actions. This claim seems to entail that the standard for goodness is independent of God and that he must act in ways which produce results aligning with this independent standard so that he
makes the cut as a good person. A divine being possessing *aseity* need not rely on some external standard of goodness, in service of which he must act in order to qualify as good. Rather, God is good in virtue of his aseity. [This is not only a Christian theological notion. For Aristotle, God is blessed not by external goods, but by reason of himself and his own nature. See *Politics*, Book VII, 1323b.] Similarly, a perfect being theist might reject the claim that God’s goodness depends on his willing the good. This claim also suggests that value is independent of God and that God must align his will with this external principle of value. Instead, the perfect being theist can insist that God is by nature good. Indeed, he is the standard of goodness. As Robert Adams (1999: Ch. 1) writes, God is identical to what Plato called ‘the Good.’

At this point in the dialectic, one might object to GP. This definition seems circular, since ‘*good person*’ is defined in terms of ‘*good* states of affairs.’ I think this objection can be answered by noting that, probably, Zagzebski intended to highlight GP as a presupposition in some arguments from evil. She did not intend to offer an analytic or essential definition of ‘*good person*.’ But suppose that GP is a working definition for ‘*good person*.’ We can modify it. To start, I suggest the following, which I call GP$_2$:

\[ \text{a morally good person is one who aims at producing or desires to produce states of affairs which have positive intrinsic or extrinsic value and who aims at preventing or desires to prevent states of affairs which have negative intrinsic or extrinsic value, and a condition for something being a state of affairs with positive intrinsic or extrinsic value and something else being a state of affairs with negative intrinsic or extrinsic value is that a morally good person aims at producing or desires to produce the positive state and aims at preventing or desires to prevent the negative state.} \]

On this definition, ‘*morally good person*’ is defined in terms of states of axiological value. GP$_1$ therefore seems to avoid the circularity of GP, since axiological value is wider in scope than moral goodness. Yet a suspicion arises that GP$_2$ remains problematic, for ‘*morally good person*’ is defined in terms of value, but the latter is defined in terms of the former. Something still seems amiss about this definition. We might instead consider GP$_3$:

\[ \text{a morally good person is one who possesses a sufficiently excellent character and wills the welfare of all rational beings and, more broadly, all conscious beings.} \]

Moreover, we might say:

\[ \text{a condition for something being a state of affairs with positive intrinsic or extrinsic value and something else being a state of affairs with negative intrinsic or extrinsic value is that the positive state is fitting to be desired or pursued by a rational agent and} \]
the negative state is fitting to be avoided or prevented by a rational agent. (Call this definition ‘Fitting State of Affairs’ or FSA.)

This iteration of definitions seems to avoid the circularity of the previous two. The theist can adopt GP, and FSA as working definitions, thereby concluding that God never does evil, even if he permits it. [Again, this claim is not exclusive to the Christian tradition. Socrates says much the same at Republic, 379c. See Plato (2009: 626)] Rather, God wills the welfare of all persons. Thus, the actual world, being a divine product, is worthy of divine actualization, despite its evils.

In sum, on one hand, the advocate of the PAE can argue via modus tollens as follows: if God exists, then the actual world is an objectively sufficiently valuable state of affairs; but probably, the actual world is not an objectively sufficiently valuable state of affairs, given its I^5; therefore, probably, there is no God. The theist, on the other hand, can use modus ponens: if God exists, then the actual world is an objectively sufficiently valuable state of affairs; but probably, God exists (here, the theist can appeal to an independent argument for the plausibility of theism); therefore, probably, the actual world is an objectively sufficiently valuable state of affairs.

We now have a disagreement between two reasonable claims: on one hand, the proposition that God exists; on the other, the proposition that the world is not sufficiently valuable. As Schopenhauer put it, human life is a business which does not cover its expenses. [See The World as Will and Representation, Volume 3 of 3, 373.] Contra Schopenhauer, the theist can adopt GP, and FSA, cite evidence for theism, and conclude that the world is sufficiently valuable despite its apparent Schopenhauerian expenses. For the theist, the world’s value covers its costs. Here, the turn of the dialogue tasks the PAE-defender to explain why the theist should not adopt GP, and FSA.

Axiological Consideration (b)

Point (b) provides an independent challenge to (6). Assume arguendo that welfare value monism (WVM) is true. One motivation for this view is its simplicity. Plausibly, VM is theoretically simpler than VP, even if there are plausible reasons in favor of pluralism. Suppose moreover that weak perfectionism is the case. On this view, human excellence is the only welfare value. [The Stoics and the Cynics seemed to have held something like this view. As Diogenes Laertius (2012: 12) put it: the Cynics held that the only purpose of human life is to live in accordance with virtue; the Stoics also endorsed this position.] All other supposed welfare goods are instrumental for or reducible to human virtue. Now, one can argue that (6) (i.e., that this world is probably unworthy of divine actualization) is false. Although we observe instances of
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non-preferred suffering with respect to quantity, quality, etc., we do not observe the impermissibility of these instances. Similarly, we do not observe the gratuitousness of them. Impermissibility and gratuitousness are not observable properties. Rather, one attempts to infer impermissibility (gratuitousness) based on some supposed case of I³.

The theist who is also a welfare value monist can reject this inference by noting the presuppositions that the distribution of pleasure and pain in the world is a matter of moral desert, and that pleasure is a welfare good. The theist can deny these presuppositions. Rather, the theist can agree with Seneca: God is a benevolent father who loves his human offspring and desires that we value what is good for us, namely, moral and intellectual virtue. However, God is quite strict about the virtuous characters of his children, knowing that our welfare consists in excellence. Hence, God permits us to undergo suffering and experience insufficient pleasure, each of which improves character. Therefore, God has a sufficient reason to actualize a world in which he permits the kind of suffering which we experience in this vale of soul-making. Such suffering enables us to ‘gather true strength,’ as Seneca put it in Section I of *On Providence*. In short, God is in the business of making saints and sages, not epicures. Furthermore, the theist can argue that human beings are not sufficiently informed to make reliable judgments about the overall value of a world.

It is well-known that John Hick (2007, 2017) explored something like Seneca’s position. In any case, these thinkers did not argue for the soul-making theodicy by appealing to WVM. This appeal points to a new line of inquiry for the PAE and for the soul-making position, moving these projects deeper into the territory of axiology proper. Interesting questions arise from such a move. For example, how valuable is human excellence? Is it a world-good-making property (WGMP)? Supposing it is, how much justifying power does it have with respect to world actualization? How many cases of human excellence are necessary to justify the actualization of a world with as many evils as this world has? And how does this line of inquiry relate to the problem of non-human animal suffering?

One worry about the appeal to WVM is that it seems to entail a form of consequentialism insofar as the world’s suffering is justified by the virtuous persons it produces. On this objection, the end of virtue justifies the means of suffering. Since consequentialism is false, one might argue, the appeal to WVM fails. Moreover, as David Oderberg notes in *Why I am not a Consequentialist* [See page 5], consequentialism is not merely false; it is morally absurd.

There is a reply to this objection. First, one can avoid it by citing GP. Consider Seneca’s comparison of God with a good father who permits his children to suffer for the sake of character development. A virtuous father does not act the cosseting par-
ent, protecting his children from every negative state of affairs and thereby shielding them from life’s slings and arrows. Such a father knows that working through difficulties will strengthen the child’s character. Yet the father need not be a consequentialist. He does not will the suffering of his child, nor does he produce it, and then use that suffering as a means for character development; rather, he allows the inherent challenges of human life to shape the child’s character.

Similarly, God is neither a consequentialist nor a cossetting parent. Rather, God is good by nature, possessing the moral and intellectual virtues to the greatest possible degree. His actions are those of a perfectly good person. God does not create evil as a means to shape human character. Instead, God creates libertarianly free human persons able to shape their own characters toward virtue, and capable of being God’s free co-creators of the world, having the power to produce valuable states of affairs. This is a great good; yet it requires the permission of free human choices, some of which are evil. Nevertheless, within the limits of creaturely libertarian freedom, God achieves the good of improved human character in a soul-making world of human co-creators.

Moreover, it is plausible to hold that a world with a cossetting God would be objectively undesirable, since it would undermine human autonomy, rationality, agency, and dignity. One might worry that a world in which God constantly intervenes in human affairs to prevent us from harming one another would be similarly undesirable, something like a police state in which the officer in charge is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, knowing and stopping every infraction. In such a world, the arm of the law would be that than which nothing longer can be conceived.

In addition, to neutralize the objection from consequentialism, one can appeal to the doctrine of double effect (DDE). This doctrine has four principles: (A) for any intentional action performed by a moral agent, the action must be morally permissible or morally indifferent; (B) the agent may not directly will an evil effect, though the agent may permit it; (C) the action’s good effects must follow from it at least as directly as its bad effects; and (D) there must be a sufficient reason for permitting the bad effects. Arguably, God’s creation of free human beings meets these conditions. Regarding (A), God actualizes a world in which human beings possessing libertarian free will are able, as Gods’ co-creators, freely to choose the virtuous life, and furthermore, to cultivate their own characters toward that end. In itself, this is a morally permissible action. Further, plausibly, this action is better than creating a world of persons having excellent character who do not freely develop it. [Later in the paper, I suggest that this constitutes an axiological principle that I call bonum probationis.] God’s act of creation meets (B) as well. He does not will evil per se, but permits it for the sake of creating persons who can freely choose. God’s creation also meets (C):
the existence of free persons capable of choosing the virtuous life is a direct effect of God’s creation of such persons. This effect is not achieved by means of evil. With respect to (D), arguably, the effect of freely cultivated human excellence is a sufficient reason to permit the existence of moral evil.

Another worry about the appeal to WVM is that the soul-making position is implausible, or at least less plausible than atheism. For instance, one might say that although some virtues (e.g., courage, mercy, willingness to forgive) require a negatively-valued state of affairs, there are evils which seem unnecessary for character development. Alternatively, one might be concerned that if suffering builds virtuous character, and if such character is the only welfare good, then we ought to refrain from alleviating suffering when it is in our power to do so. Moreover, we should deliberately bring suffering upon ourselves and others for the sake of virtue. We ought to go beyond Diogenes of Sinope, who reportedly embraced cold statues and walked barefoot in scorching sand to cultivate endurance. We should seek all manner of suffering for ourselves and others.

To this objection that a WVM-backed soul-making view is implausible, one can start with a reference to Hick (2017: 273): the soul-making position is plausible in the sense that it is consistent with the evidence and has broad explanatory scope. It appears that ours is just the sort of world in which God can develop virtuous human beings via the trials of life. Next, one can appeal to so-called skeptical theism: the evils which appear to us as pointless might not be pointless; we are not in a sufficient epistemic position to know that a given evil is gratuitous, nor are we epistemically situated to know that a given evil is futile for character development. Moreover, even if a specific evil is not necessary for character development, it is plausible to hold that the kind of world in which such evils are possible is a concomitant of God’s creation of human beings who can freely develop in excellence. In this case, even if some evils are micro-gratuitous in the sense that they do not directly produce a state of affairs that justifies their occurrence within the world, they are not gratuitous in a macro-sense, since the world as a whole is such that it must contain the possibility that these evils exist. The world would be worse if God were to prevent this possibility. On this note, perhaps we should be careful not to undervalue virtue and misconstrue suffering. [Many ancient thinkers seemed to esteem virtue despite any related suffering they might endure. One thinks here of Socrates in *Apology*, who would not abandon what he believed to be his divinely commissioned post as philosopher and advocate of virtue, despite the suffering he experienced in that post, likening his job to a battlefield position. One might remember Antisthenes, who held that the wise person welcomes hardship (Dobbin: 16). One might also recall the writer of James at 1:2-4, who seems to agree with Antisthenes, or think of Jesus of Nazareth, who
according to the author of Hebrews endured and even scorned the suffering of crucifixion (Hebrews 12:2).

With respect to the objection that we should inflict suffering for the sake of virtue, one can reply that despite the general character-building utility of suffering, there are overriding moral prohibitions deliberately to harm persons, except in certain justified circumstances such as, say, self-defense, war, or retributive punishment. One can also argue that the sorts of suffering that are common in our world can help to cultivate character if faced appropriately, but it does not follow that artificially produced suffering has the same function.

A third objection is that VM and WVM are implausible, since they do not account for the intuition that there are numerous values. In addition, as Steven Cowan (2020: 17) notes, most philosophers accept VP. I am inclined to VP and WVP, and thus receptive to this objection. Let us assume that VP and WVP are true. Recall the controversy regarding value incomparabilism (VI) and value comparabilism (VC). Suppose further that VC is the case. There are many intrinsic values and many welfare values; at least some stand in relations of axiological comparison to each other. Virtue is among the welfare values that stand in such relations. One can contend that although there is a plurality of welfare values, the possession of excellent character is the greatest of them. [This view seems to accord with Jesus of Nazareth’s admonition to seek godly character above all else (Matthew 6:33) and to be perfect or complete in character (Matthew 5:48), a goal which Kant thought we can approximate asymptotically. It is also consistent with Socrates’ exhortation in Apology to seek virtue and the greatest improvement of the soul above other human pursuits.] Moreover, one might hold that the free cultivation of human moral and intellectual excellence is sufficiently great that God’s permission of human suffering is justified insofar as it enables us to train for excellence. Perhaps, then, God wants his human children to be persons who freely decide to become complete human beings, and therefore to cultivate excellent characters via the difficulties of life. For all we know, there is a God who values this state of affairs highly enough to permit the world’s evils.

**Evil and Transvaluation**

I closed the previous section by indicating the theist could argue that God’s permission of suffering is justified insofar as it enables us to become virtuous. Such a move likely raises objections. For example, what about suffering which is both gratuitous and horrendous? [I use ‘horrendous’ in something like the sense Marilyn McCord Adams (1999: 26) used it: ‘evils the participation in which constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole.’] What would be the value of such suffering?
Consider an argument from gratuitous and horrendous evil: if God exists, then gratuitous horrendous evil does not exist; probably, there is gratuitous horrendous evil; therefore, probably, there is no God. Several axiological resources are available in response to this argument. The skeptical theist objects by questioning the second premise (sometimes called the factual premise): we are not in an adequate epistemic situation to know that cases of evil which seem gratuitous are gratuitous. The theist could cite GP and FSA to argue that, even if we do not know God’s reasons for actualizing the world, we have independent arguments for theism. From these premises, one can reasonably conclude that the world is a collection of states of affairs which is good as a whole. On the assumption that a good world cannot include gratuitous evil, the theist can thereby deny the factual premise.

Alternatively, the theist could deny the factual premise by appealing to weak perfectionism and constructing an argument that the free development of human excellence justifies the permission of the evils which occur in this world. Perhaps our moral/axiological knowledge is limited; hence, it is epistemically possible that the value of virtuous character is higher than we realize.

Furthermore, the theist could accept the factual premise and deny the first premise (sometimes called the theological or the incompatibility premise), holding that since God has permitted gratuitous horrendous evil, his existence is not incompatible with it. Some philosophers have taken this approach. For example, William Hasker (2008) argues that God permits gratuitous evil for the sake of promoting the human motivation to combat evil. Peter van Inwagen (1988: 167) argues that there is no minimal amount of gratuitous evil and thus that God must accept at least some of it. And Michael Almeida (2020) argues that necessarily, God coexists with gratuitous evil in some possible world or other.

To consider another approach to denying the theological premise, one might appeal to the principle of organic unities (POU). G. E. Moore (1903: 27-28) characterizes it as follows: ‘The value of a whole must not be assumed to be the same as the sum of the values of its parts.’ Accordingly, the value of a whole is not necessarily equal to the sum of the values of its proper parts. Furthermore, it is possible that a whole is good although it has no good proper part. Imagine a masterful sculpture: one might argue that the whole is a value-bearer which has positive intrinsic value, although none of its proper parts has such value. One might then say that, like the sculpture, the value of the actual world is not necessarily equal to the sum of the values of its parts.

Suppose the world contains an instance of gratuitous horrendous evil. One could grant that this proper part of the world has negative value in virtue of its evil. However, it does not follow that the world as a whole has negative value. To claim such
would be to risk the fallacy of composition. Moreover, given the POU, even if one were to suppose that the sum of the values of the parts of the world is negative in virtue of an instance of gratuitous horrendous evil, it would not follow that the value of the world as a whole is negative. The POU presents a reason to think that the value of a world-whole can be good even if some of its proper parts are bad, and even if the sum of the values of its parts is bad.

Consider three related principles. According to Roderick Chisholm (2005: 306), who credits Franz Brentano, the value of a whole might be a function of the order of its elements in the following cases: the \textit{bonum variationis}, the \textit{bonum progressionis} (alternatively, \textit{malum regressus}), and the value of retribution. These examples illustrate ‘the good that there is in order or arrangement.’ The principle of \textit{bonum variationis} can be formulated as follows: other things being equal, it is better to combine two dissimilar goods than to combine two similar goods. For example, assuming that values are comparable, the aesthetic value of \( N \) (an excellent novel) and \( P_1 \) (an excellent painting) is better than the aesthetic value of \( P_1 \) and \( P_2 \) (another painting). Individually, we can suppose that \( N \), \( P_1 \), and \( P_2 \) have equal value. Yet the conjunction \( N \& P_1 \) is more valuable than \( P_1 \& P_2 \), since the former arrangement has more aesthetic variety than the latter, assuming aesthetic variety is itself valuable.

The principle of \textit{bonum progressionis} concerns the significance of increased value. This principle is emphasized in a passage from George Eliot (2007: 831): ‘But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good [my emphasis] of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.’ The principle can be articulated more precisely as follows: a whole consisting of valuable parts \( v_1 \) and \( v_2 \), such that the former occurs temporally before the latter and the relation between the two concerns increased value, is better than another whole with \( v_2 \) occurring temporally prior to \( v_1 \) such that the relation between the two is a decreased value. For example, if \( S \) is a situation in which \( v_1 \) is increased diachronically to a larger \( v_2 \), and if \( T \) is like \( S \) except that in \( T \) there is a decrease from \( v_2 \) to \( v_1 \), then \( S \) is preferable to \( T \). In short, a process which improves is better than one which deteriorates, even if the improvement are to some degree hidden from our view; it is better to start low and end high (a \textit{bonum progressionis}, a growing good) than to start high and end low (a \textit{malum regressus}).

With respect to the value of retribution, a world which contains retribution, repentance, or remorse might be more choice-worthy than a world which does not, even though a world which contains any of these axiological Three Rs would contain evil. For instance, a world which includes Brown, Brown’s theft, and Brown’s
retributive punishment for the theft would be good insofar as the value of retributive justice would be realized. And this would be true despite the evil that exists in virtue of Brown’s theft.

In sum, according to these three axiological principles, the ways in which parts are ordered and the relations in which they stand to each other are themselves valuable. Moreover, new values can supervene on the order. These values contribute to the worth of a whole, and do so in a manner independent of the values of its proper parts. And to these three principles, we might add a fourth, what I will call the **bonum probationis**: it is better that a good created person be put to moral and intellectual tests which sharpen his goodness than that a good created person be untried and/or undeveloped. We might also call this the **Seneca Principle**. Hick (2017: 268) also suggests such a principle.

We have supposed that the actual world contains gratuitous horrendous evil. Nonetheless, it might be the case that the world in toto is positively valued or axiologically neutral. According to Chisholm (2005: 314), if possible worlds are value-bearers, an evil proper part of a world would be totally defeated if the world as a whole is not bad (i.e., either axiologically counterbalanced or positively valued), and transvalued if the world-whole is good (i.e., positively valued). Perhaps such transvaluation is itself a significant good. Recall the **bonum variationis**: it is better to combine dissimilar goods than to combine similar ones. It epistemically might be that the best way to actualize this principle is to combine a sufficient number of dissimilar goods, and that this combination requires at least one instance of gratuitous horrendous evil. How can one be reasonably confident that this is not the case? For all we know, an application of **bonum variationis** is part of what makes a world-whole good. In other words, the **bonum variationis** might be a cosmic value. If so, then any gratuitous horrendous evil contained in such a world might be transvalued by the fact that the world itself is good.

Consider also the **bonum progressionis**. Plausibly, it is better for a world to improve than to deteriorate. Moreover, arguably, it is better for a world to improve than to remain axiologically the same over time, and better to improve greatly than only moderately or slightly. [Perhaps it is also better for a world to improve such that the increased value proceeds according to a course of hills, valleys, and turns, like a hiking trail, rather than via a steady and straight incline from low to high, like a ladder. In both cases, the value of the world starts low and ends high. However, the hill/valley approach adds variation, unpredictability, and dramatic interest (themselves valuable) whereas the ladder approach is uniform. I am not familiar with any work in the literature on value theory about the comparative values of the hill/valley and ladder increases. This would be an interesting area of research.] It might be that a world
which includes a sufficient degree of growing goodness requires at least one case of gratuitous evil. For example, perhaps the growing goodness of the world requires our contribution to this growth via our free decisions to act in morally appropriate ways, and moreover our free choices must be supported by a proper moral motivation which can be maintained only if the world does in fact include micro-gratuitous evil. [Hasker (2008: 195) takes something like this position.]

Furthermore, suppose that the cosmic overcoming of gratuitous evil is itself a cosmic good, which would thus require the existence of gratuitous evil. Thomas Metcalf (2020) addresses this idea. Metcalf proposes the hypothesis (H): ‘A world is better, ceteris paribus, proportionally to the magnitude at which the total quantity of first-order gratuitous evil decreases, forward in time, in that world.’ He notes that, on (H), ‘a “rags-to-riches” world is eo ipso better than a rags-to-rags world, and even better than some riches-to-riches worlds are. A world that began in a fallen state but progressed eventually into a state of goodness would be superior to a world that began in a state of goodness but just got worse … This progress in elimination of first-order gratuitous evil is itself a good, and so presumably, the world overall is better insofar as this progress occurs.’ The bonum progressionis principle supports (H). And for Metcalf, (H) is intuitive.

I offer the following analogy to emphasize the intuitiveness of (H). Suppose a coach is hired to lead basketball team (BT) for the upcoming NBA season. BT won the last two NBA championships. The coach leads BT to a third consecutive championship. This is a good state of affairs. The coach has performed well. However, the coach does not win the Coach of the Year award because, according to the voters’ reasoning, he was given a team which was already excellent. Other coaches have done a better job with resources of lower quality.

But now suppose that BT finished the previous two seasons in last place. BT is dysfunctional: the players are undisciplined, unmotivated, and disunited. Nevertheless, the coach leads BT to a championship despite the team’s poor starting point. Intuitively, this state of affairs is better. The coach wins the coaching award, and deservedly so. At the highest level of the sport, he has taken a bad team and made it very good. Here, we have a case in which a rags-to-riches situation is better than a riches-to-riches situation. Similar stories can be developed to show that a rags-to-riches situation is better than a riches-to-rags or a rags-to-rags situation.

Lastly, consider the value of retribution. For all we know, it might be that a sufficiently good world is good insofar as it contains one or more of the axiological Three Rs. One might also suppose that such a world requires an instance of gratuitous horrendous evil. [Arguably, such an evil state of affairs would not be completely pointless because it would be part of a whole which has more value than it would
otherwise. Such evil would not directly produce a justifying state of affairs within the world, and thus might be considered micro-gratuitous. However, the evil would be non-gratuitous in a macro-sense, since it would help to make the world as a whole good, thus transvaluing the micro-gratuitous evil. Alvin Plantinga (2017) has taken something like this approach, suggesting that God’s permission of evil enables the great values of the Incarnation and Atonement, which involve retribution, remorse, and repentance, though Plantinga’s position does not seem to require the existence of gratuitous evil. Perhaps such the Incarnation and Atonement make a world-whole good, and thereby transvalue any bad parts of that world. In any case, further reflection on *bonum variationis*, *bonum progressionis*, and retribution might be fruitful for a deeper understanding of the PAE.

Further Lines of Axiological Inquiry

The probabilistic problem of evil is emphasized in this paper. However, some points herein suggest responses to other problems of philosophy. Before closing, I will briefly address two additional problems for which the paper might indicate solutions: the problem of (resultant) moral luck, and what I call the problem of possible world comparison. These topics connect with the PAE in noteworthy ways.

One version of the problem of moral luck concerns how to factor the results of one’s actions when trying to determine whether one is a morally good person. Citing several authors, Andrew Latus (2021) calls this the problem of ‘resultant luck’ or ‘consequential luck.’ [One might suspect that if the goodness of God is construed consequentialistically, and if God does not know the future libertarian free actions of his creatures, then God is also subject to the problem of moral luck. I have explored this problem of divine moral luck in Crozat (2018) and (2019).] For example, if the results of Smith’s actions are largely beyond Smith’s control, yet those results determine the degree to which Smith is a morally good person, then it seems that resultant moral luck is a significant factor in determining Smith’s moral goodness. Smith’s goodness is dependent on external factors, including other persons and their actions, over which Smith has no control. [One might think here of Koheleth in Ecclesiastes 2:18-19, who reasonably complained that the results of his life’s work would be left in the control of others, some of whom might be unwise.] For many, this appears to be a problem; as the Cynics put it, such matters should not be entrusted to luck. (Dobbin, 2012: 13) I suggest that this is a problem if one assumes that only the consequences of a person’s actions make that person good or not. However, if one affirms GP₃ and FSA, the problem of resultant moral luck seems avoidable. Instead, one can hold that
a person is morally good in terms of possessing an adequately virtuous character, which he himself freely develops, in a manner which is under his control. On this view, there is little room in the analysis of for resultant luck.

Consider now the problem of possible world comparison. Some thinkers have assumed that God must create the best possible world, or one of the best, or at least a sufficiently good one (i.e., that God must satisfice). Notice that this view presupposes two propositions: first, that possible worlds are value-bearers; second, that possible worlds stand in relations of axiological comparison. I will assume that possible worlds are value bearers, since it seems there would be no significant intellectual problem of evil without this assumption. Why should we accept that possible worlds stand in relations of axiological comparison? One might suspect that VI is true, at least with respect to possible worlds, and thus doubt that possible worlds are axiologically comparable. [Some axiologists worry that if values are irreducibly plural, there is no common factor had by all values. Hence, they cannot be compared. If so, it would seem that the values of possible worlds cannot be compared. Such incomparability might be ontic, or perhaps merely epistemic.] On this view, possible worlds are incomparable with respect to WBMPs and WGMPs, which would mean that there is no such thing as a possible world which is better than, worse than, or equal to any other possible world. On this account of modal axiology, a possible world might be good yet axiologically incomparable to any other. Indeed, Chang (2015: 212) suggests that the axiological comparison of possible worlds is not a proper subject of philosophical investigation. However, this line of thinking raises the concern that God would not be justified in actualizing any good possible world, since he would have no axiological reason to select one world over another.

I suspect that GP3 and FSA can help to address this problem. Suppose that possible worlds are not axiologically comparable. Logically prior to actualizing the world, God has a very large set of possible (or at least feasible, given human libertarian freedom) worlds from which to choose, many of which are sufficiently good. However, he has no value-based justification to select one world over another. In such a case, one might worry that God is in something like the existential bind which Jean-Paul Sartre claimed human beings face. We are free to choose, although there are no objective values to guide our choices. [Sartre (1987: 24-28) provides the example of the young man trying to decide whether to leave his mother and join the Free French Forces to defend his country, or to stay at home and care for his mother.] As Sartre suggests, this is a forlorn situation for us; we have no non-subjective value-based reason to choose one course of action over another. Further, the results of our choices have no objective value. We are free co-creators of the world, yet we have no axiological reason to produce one state of affairs over another. What a predicament!
It seems things would be different for God, who is a perfectly good person. One might think that whatever God freely does results in an objectively good state of affairs. Hence, God is not forlorn in a world sans objective value. He is the source of objective value. On this account, any world he decides to actualize is sufficiently good precisely because it is the result of his virtuous and free decision to act, even if his choice occurs in a situation such that good possible worlds do not stand in relations of value-comparison to each other. For Sartre, human beings are condemned to freedom in a world without objective worth, but God is not vulnerable to this distressing verdict. A world with God is objectively choice-worthy.

Yet even if God’s selected world is objectively good, one might wonder how God could rationally pick a world to actualize in the first place. The theist could answer that God chooses a world at his will or desire and that, given his perfect character, any result would be good. God has sufficient reason to create a world with virtuous human beings, even if God lacks sufficient reason for deciding which world to create, and hence has no rationale for selecting this specific world. The selection is arbitrary, which one might think unproblematic, given that the available worlds for selection are axiologically incomparable and that the selector is perfect. One could then examine the theist’s response by exploring the plausibility of a perfect being choosing to create a world knowing that the selection would be arbitrary.

It might be that such a decision is neither rational nor irrational. Rather, it is a- rational, like a painter selecting red instead of yellow for a painting in which rationality does not dictate a specific selection of color. In such a case, the painter picks red because red is valuable and because he likes it, but not because red is objectively better than yellow. Similarly, perhaps God chooses one among many incomparably good worlds and that his choice is based on preference. One might suspect that, were God unable to choose in this situation, God would be imperfect – per impossible. Hence, we should not be surprised that God makes a choice to actualize one among many good yet axiologically incomparable worlds. Sometimes, you just gotta choose. [In the popular television show The Good Place, one of the main characters is a philosophy professor whose primary flaw is that he has trouble choosing in situations that seem a-rational, such as whether to eat the blueberry muffin on the left or the one on the right. In these situations, the character uses his prodigious capacity for reasoning to seek conclusive arguments to support decisions for which there are no such arguments. His Buridanian indecisiveness sometimes makes his life and the lives of others worse. God does not suffer from such flaws.]

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have examined two axiological issues in light of the PAE: the nature of a good person and the debate between VM and VP. I have suggested that the
PAE project would benefit from further study of these and similar topics, thereby opening fresh areas of exploration. I closed by suggesting avenues for further inquiry. For example, the POU and related axiological principles provide the theist with interesting answers to the PAE. My objective has not been to disprove the PAE, but to explore its axiological terrain and unearth themes to motivate new examinations of the argument.

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