




ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Worship and the problems of human evil and suffering

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### Abstract

Consider a simple argument that worshipping God is wrong. This world is not a nice place. Not only do humans persecute and inflict other evils on each other, but millions of people suffer and die every year from preventable poverty-related causes, and it seems that few, if any, deserve their plights. It is unclear that we should want to be associated with, never mind worship, a being with the capacity to make the world a much better place but whose beneficence (or knowledge) permits things to go on in the ways that they do. At first blush, contempt is a more fitting response to God than worship. But, assuming God exists, perhaps we have reason to accept, if not worship, him in any case. Humans are comparably limited. We do evil unto each other, and, insofar as millions of deaths are preventable, our failure to prevent them is a failure of humans as well as of God. If we could (and should) have saved many lives and have not, our moral failings present us with our own, human, problem of evil and suffering. So, if we should reject God because so many people suffer, then we should reject ourselves when we could avoid evil and help others too. However, this article argues that we have practical, moral, and epistemic reasons to accept rather than reject ourselves, and similarly we have reasons to accept God. And if we have reason to accept God, then we have some reason to worship God. Worship is a way of acknowledging our own limitations and can help us survive, flourish, and help others in the face of the problems of human evil and suffering.

**Keywords:** worship; poverty; survival; suffering

### Introduction

Consider a simple argument that it is wrong to worship God if he is indeed the all-powerful, knowing, and benevolent ruler of the universe. This world is not a very nice place. Not only do humans persecute and inflict other evils on each other, but millions of people suffer and die every year from preventable poverty-related causes, and it seems that few, if any, deserve their plights. It is unclear that we should want to be associated with, never mind worship, a being with the capacity to make the world a much better place but who permits such terrible suffering (Hassoun 2015b). Given this divine problem of evil and suffering, it may seem, at first blush, that contempt is a more fitting response to God than worship.<sup>1</sup>

Philosophers typically use a version of the divine problem of evil and suffering to argue that belief in the existence of God is irrational (Mackie 1955; Rowe 1979). After all, if there really were an all-powerful, knowing, and benevolent God, then he would not let this evil

and suffering into the world (Adams and Sutherland 1989). So, one might think, given that evil and suffering do exist, such a God most likely does not.

Several scholars have also suggested, however, that the existence of evil and suffering provides evidence that, if God exists, he is not worthy of worship, that he should be rejected by the faithful, and that he is instead contemptible for allowing so much evil and suffering regardless of any beneficial designs he may have for humanity. This also seems to be a popular conclusion well beyond philosophical circles (Lewis 1983; Hassoun 2015a; Fosl 1997; Schweizer 2010; Bartholomew 2016; Balentine 2021).

But, assuming God exists (and is all-powerful, knowing, and benevolent), we argue that there exists some reason to accept, if not worship, him in any case. Acceptance minimally requires belief without a global negative judgement (we say more about it below).<sup>2</sup> Human beneficence, knowledge, and power are limited compared to God's and we often directly perpetrate evil that God simply fails to prevent. Even if it makes sense to say God is responsible for all natural evils that cause devastation (e.g., hurricanes) humans are often well-positioned to avert the resulting suffering but do not. And, if we could (and should) have saved many lives but have not, our moral failings present us with our own, human, problem of evil and suffering. So, if we cannot accept a seemingly irredeemable God, it is unclear how we can accept ourselves when so many people do evil and avoidably suffer. If the problem of divine evil and suffering gives us reason to reject God, the problem of human evil and suffering gives us as much, if not more, reason to reject humanity. Rejection, on this account, amounts to making a global negative judgement where we deem ourselves or others valueless or unworthy of redemption.

In addition, there is at least some reason to worship God in the face of human evil and suffering. We will argue that worship is a way of acknowledging our own limitations and can help us survive, flourish, and help others in the face of the problem of human evil and suffering. Often, we must accept our failings to survive them and acknowledge our failings to do better in the future. Understanding that we, ourselves, are limited in our understanding, power, and beneficence can help us to distinguish between the things that we, with our limited power, cannot change and those that we can. Moreover, adequately caring for others sometimes involves accepting our own limitations (i.e., we need to know what it is we can do and what we cannot in order to do what we can). By worshipping God, many people can find the humility necessary to get the help they need to accept themselves.

More precisely, supposing that an all-powerful, knowing, and benevolent God exists, the article will defend this general argument:

P1. Most people could and should have prevented much avoidable suffering and death and refrained from many evil acts but have not.

P2. Given that most people could and should have prevented much avoidable suffering and death and refrained from many evil acts but have not, there are human problems of evil and suffering.

SC1. There are human problems of evil and suffering.

P3. The human problems of evil and suffering are worse than the divine problems of evil and suffering.

P4 (implicit). If the human problems of evil and suffering are worse than the divine problems of evil and suffering, there is greater reason to reject ourselves than to reject God.

**SC2.** So, there is greater reason to reject ourselves than to reject God.

P5. We should not reject ourselves (we should accept ourselves for moral, prudential, and epistemic reasons).

P6. If we should not reject ourselves and there is greater reason to reject humanity than to reject God, we should not reject God.

**SC3.** We should not reject God.

P7. If we should not reject God (and he exists), we should accept him. (By the definition of acceptance and rejection.)

**SC4.** We should accept God (if he exists).

P8. If we have prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons to accept ourselves and should accept God, then we have some reason to worship God (if he exists).

**SC5.** We have some reason to worship God (if he exists).

**C.** We should accept God and we have some reason to worship God (if he exists). [From SC4 and SC5.]

Let us call the argument for the first sub-conclusion *The Argument for the Human Problems of Evil and Suffering*, the argument for the second sub-conclusion *The Argument for Unequal Rejection*, the argument for the third sub-conclusion *The Argument Against Rejecting God*, the argument for the fourth sub-conclusion *The Argument for Accepting God*, and the final sub-argument *The Argument for Worship*. Subsequent sections defend each of these sub-arguments in turn.

### The argument for the human problems of evil and suffering

There are many straightforward reasons to endorse the Argument for the Human Problems of Evil and Suffering's first premise. Namely, that most people could and should have prevented much avoidable suffering and death and refrained from many evil acts but have not.

First consider why most people could and should have prevented much avoidable suffering and death. Since the 1970s, Peter Singer has argued, for instance, that everyone should help end preventable suffering and early death, from lack of adequate food, water, shelter, healthcare, and so forth, whenever doing so does not require sacrificing too much (Singer 1972). He does not think our distance from those who are suffering nor the fact that others could (but will not) help undermines this obligation. Although one might quibble about how much each of us is required to do, millions suffer and die every year from preventable poverty-related causes, and it is hard to deny that most people should have done more to help when we have good evidence that aid programmes often work and that some kinds of aid are generally effective (Murphy 2000; Cullity 2004; Hassoun 2010; Miller 2010; Hassoun 2012).

Some philosophers reject the view that we have any positive obligations to aid because, for instance, they believe such obligations are too demanding, but, even if this is right, we argue that we have failed in our negative duties of justice (Melnik 1989). Some claim

that our institutions and our practices have caused great preventable suffering and death (Pogge 2008). Thomas Pogge (2008) argues, for instance, that we should compensate the victims of our shared and violent history of colonialism, slavery, and oppression as well as those unjust institutions currently impoverish. Market rules (e.g. governing trade, aid, and property rights) systematically disadvantage poorer segments of the global population. Any despot who manages to gain power in a poor country has the right to sell the country's resources, acquire loans, and enter into agreements binding future generations (Hassoun 2015b). And many people in poor countries still suffer from the legacy of colonialism from which many of the global rich have benefitted immensely. If Pogge (2008) is correct that people in past and present generations have caused considerable suffering and death in developing countries, it seems that we have failed to adequately address this suffering and failed to save many of the lives we could have saved by implementing different rules and institutions. In any case, we believe it is obvious that most people could and should have refrained from many evil acts but have not. Most of us have not only contributed to electing governments supporting poor international policies that impoverish people but contribute to terrible disasters like climate change. Few have never stolen or hurt another human being and most of us unjustifiably and intentionally hurt friends or family members on a regular basis in at least small ways. In short, humans often do evil unto each other, and many of those who are victims of evil do not deserve their fates.

So, we should accept the first premise of the Argument for the Human Problems of Evil and Suffering: Most people could and should have prevented much avoidable suffering and death and refrained from many evil acts, but we have not.

The second premise of the Argument for the Human Problems of Evil and Suffering is straightforward: Given that most people could and should have prevented much avoidable suffering and death and refrained from many evil acts but have not, there is a human problem of evil and suffering. Let us reflect first on the divine problems of evil and suffering before explaining and defending this premise.

Traditionally, many have used the problem of evil and suffering to question God's existence, but here the question is whether the problems of evil and suffering give us some reason to reject (as opposed to accept) God if he exists. As we use the term, acceptance is roughly belief without a global negative judgement – a stance 'toward the evaluative facts' or a 'practical or quasi-practical attitude' that inclines us not to resist 'the imperfections of our condition', but still allows us to try to improve upon them (Calhoun 2017, 331–332). If we accept God, then we acknowledge his existence and the existence of the evil and suffering he allows in the world. However, we do not believe God is only worthy of contempt, even if we nonetheless try to improve things by alleviating the evil and suffering in the world. We reject God when we do not accept him but overall judge him (including his existence and perhaps the means by which he achieves his designs for humanity) negatively. We assume, for the sake of argument, that God exists in what follows and will leave this qualification implicit. So, on the divine version of the problems of evil and suffering, if God exists, we have reason to reject him given that he, in his beneficence, power, and knowledge allows (if not causes) such evil and suffering. Overall, we do not view God in a positive or even neutral light. Rather, the divine problems of evil and suffering give us some reason to reject God and view him with contempt.

Consider, then, the human problems of evil and suffering. Insofar as millions of deaths and much suffering from poverty-related causes are preventable, our failure to prevent them is a failure of humans as well as of God. How should we respond to these failures? If God's failure to prevent evil and suffering provides a reason to reject God, then our failure to prevent avoidable suffering and death and our evil acts provide reason to reject ourselves. If we reject ourselves, we take our common humanity to be a proper object

of contempt on the basis of the evil and suffering we inflict and allow to persist in the world.<sup>3</sup>

The Argument for the Human Problems of Evil and Suffering's first sub-conclusion therefore follows from its first two premises: there are human problems of evil and suffering. The next section will lay out the second sub-argument, which concludes that there is greater reason to reject ourselves than to reject God.

### The argument for unequal rejection

Consider then the first premise of the *Argument for Unequal Rejection*, namely that the human problems of evil and suffering are worse than the divine problems of evil and suffering. Many philosophers hold that inflicting evil and suffering is worse than merely allowing it, even in cases where one creates agents who then go on to inflict harm (henceforth, we will sometimes refer to inflicting evil and suffering as *harming*) (Bennett 1981; Foot 1967; Hanser 1995; 1999; Quinn 1989a, 1989b; Woollard 2012a, 2012b). An agent inflicts harm when she acts, rather than fails to act, so as to bring about harm, while an agent allows harm when she fails to act so as to prevent some harm from occurring. One's positive agency must be involved in inflicting harm.<sup>4</sup> I inflict a harm if, for instance, I push someone off a cliff. I merely allow harm if I fail to catch someone before they stumble off a cliff. Although the person who falls off the cliff is harmed in either case, many think pushing the person off of the cliff is worse than allowing the person to stumble off the cliff. Counterfactually, the person who stumbles off the cliff probably would have experienced the very same harm regardless of my presence. However, the person who I push off the cliff probably would not have experienced any such harm. So, by inflicting a harm, I bring about a harm that counterfactually would not have occurred if I had not so acted.<sup>5</sup>

One might object that because God created humans, he thereby inflicts the evil and suffering perpetrated by humans. If God is the first cause of everything, perhaps God is inflicting all the harm that follows from his act of creation. If so, we have more reason to reject God than humans.

Plausibly however, God only allows the evil and suffering inflicted by us. At least many of those who acknowledge the existence of God also hold that God endowed humans with free will. On this view, God does not bring about everything occurring in the world. At least some human agents bring about events in the world. Even if God has inflicted some notable harms, such as in his test of Job, humans are inflicting an even greater number of harms (Kellenberger 2005; Loke 2018; Lim 2017; Torrance 1961).

At least those who believe inflicting is worse than allowing harm should agree that the human problems of evil and suffering are worse than the divine ones. After all, we are the ones who inflict evil on each other and we also fail to prevent, and sometimes inflict, suffering on others.

One might object that God's greater power or knowledge make the divine problems of evil and suffering worse than the human ones, as humans lack that power and knowledge. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, he can both foresee the possibility of forthcoming harms, and he can prevent them.

Although greater power and knowledge often make inaction worse, in this case allowing harm is not plausibly as problematic as inflicting harm. Consider a version of Bernard Williams' (1973) case of Jim and the soldier. Suppose a soldier holding six people hostage tells a bystander, Jim, that he must kill one hostage to save five others (otherwise the soldier will kill them all). If Jim kills the one, Jim may bear some responsibility for the death, but the soldier bears more responsibility. If Jim does not kill the one and if all six die, again he may bear some responsibility for the resulting deaths as he could have done something to prevent the soldier's actions, but not as much as the soldier. The soldier's intentional

agency is involved no matter what Jim does and the soldier could stop the killing simply by refraining from coercing Jim into doing so (and refraining from murder himself) – everyone would then be spared. So, what the soldier does is much worse than what Jim does, even if Jim acts wrongly.

One might initially think that God is like the soldier in that he puts humans in a world in which they will inevitably make decisions that cause evil and suffering, but God is not like the soldier because he does not create the dilemma itself. That is, God does not create the conditions that lead to the problems of human evil and suffering – humans do. He only allows for the conditions to arise in which the dilemma occurs, which makes God only indirectly responsible for bringing about that suffering.

Instead, God is like a parent who raised a child who inflicts some terrible harm. While the parent may bear some responsibility for creating the conditions in which the child ultimately inflicts this harm, the parent does not typically bear direct responsibility for the child's harmful actions (at least, not when the child is an adult). A person is directly responsible for a harm (or benefit) when no other agent mediates their involvement. A person is indirectly responsible for a harm when their involvement in bringing about the harm is mediated by another individual's involvement in the harm in such a way that the involvement of the former is dependent on the involvement of the latter but not vice versa. This dependency relation makes it so that the former would not be responsible for a harm if the latter refrained from harmful activities. So, if the child refrained from inflicting any harm, then the parent would bear no responsibility because no harm would have occurred.

If humans are like the child who inflicts evil or suffering, then it may instead initially seem as though humans are like Jim, who must make the choice of whether or not to kill, but we hold that humans are, instead, more like the soldier. This is because humans often have the ability to refrain entirely from inflicting harm. If humans, like the soldier, refrained from inflicting harm in the world, then, like Jim, God would not be contributing to those harms in any way. God would not have any obligation to prevent the evil and suffering we inflict were it not that we wilfully inflict it. We involve God in our harmful plans and not the other way around.

One might still be concerned that we have not done enough to defend against the claim that God is better placed to prevent or eliminate evil and suffering than humans. We have argued that, while God is only indirectly responsible for evil and suffering, human beings are directly responsible when they inflict or fail to prevent it. Assuming direct responsibility for inflicting or failing to prevent evil and suffering is worse than indirect responsibility, it follows that the problem of human evil and suffering is morally worse than the problem of divine evil and suffering. A critical reader might reply that this argument shows that human evils are worse than divine evils only in one respect, since the extent to which an agent is morally responsible for some harm is not entirely a function of whether the agent was directly or indirectly morally responsible for the evil. Other kinds of considerations, such as the psychological state of the agent or the likelihood of an agent succeeding in preventing some harm, can mitigate an agent's moral responsibility. Moreover, one might hold that such considerations overwhelmingly favour humanity over God. After all, God, like the parent, is far more rational than humans and far more powerful, so God can always succeed in preventing harm while humans (like the child), are much more fallible, and may find it much more difficult to do so. So, one might contend, an all-powerful and omniscient God bears more responsibility for the evil and suffering in the world than humans, and therefore we have more reason to reject God than to reject ourselves.

Compare the situation with that of a responsible adult who intentionally refuses to stop a child from ingesting cyanide when stopping the child is an easy task. It seems much worse for the adult to refuse to act than for the child (with limited judgement, due to her

young age) to intentionally give the cyanide to her friend. In this example, humans are like the child giving a friend cyanide to drink whereas God is like the adult, and the example shows that allowing a harm is sometimes worse (other things equal) than doing something harmful when the 'doer' is less rationally competent or otherwise more limited than the 'allower'.

As a point of clarification, we are open to the claim that allowing a harm is sometimes worse than doing something harmful, which is well demonstrated by this example, but our argument for why God is less worthy of rejection than humans also relies on a different distinction, namely direct versus indirect responsibility for bringing about some harm. Our claim is that direct responsibility for a harm is worse than indirect responsibility for a harm. This is because the involvement of a person indirectly responsible for some harm is always mediated by the intentional agency of another moral agent. If the other individual were to refrain from harmful activities, then no-one would be responsible for bringing about the harm. If the other individual proceeds, then both agents bear some responsibility for the harm. But, when the harmful outcome – regardless of whether it was executed as a doing or an allowing – is primarily intended by only one of the agents, then that agent bears the bulk of the moral responsibility (regardless of whether the outcome was the result of a doing or an allowing).

The question is whether God's indirect responsibility is greater than humanity's direct responsibility in light of our limitations. In the cyanide example, both the child and the adult are directly responsible for the harmful outcome – just as long as we are willing to grant that the child can bear any responsibility at all. Though, presumably, the child's responsibility is mitigated by their limitations whereas the adult's responsibility is not. Still, humans are not analogous to the child in the cyanide scenario. Humans are not perfect moral agents who are fully morally responsible for all of our actions. Still, humans, despite our limitations, do bear full moral responsibility for our actions most of the time. This is a central tenet of modern moral philosophy. To compare humanity to the child, from the moral standpoint, is simply to deny that we bear these burdens. Meaning, the question is whether God is more morally responsible for the evil and suffering we inflict on each other when his involvement in bringing about these evils is wholly dependent on the activities of full-fledged moral agents. We have contended that this is unlikely. So, we are not merely arguing that God is indirectly responsible for anthropogenic harms. We are arguing that God's responsibility is mediated and mitigated by the involvement of other moral agents and that God is, correspondingly, less morally responsible for bringing about evil and suffering than humanity. Importantly, humanity's dirtying of God's hands (as Bernard Williams might put it) might very well count as a moral trespass against God – one for which humans are susceptible to additional moral criticism.<sup>6</sup> From the Judeo-Christian standpoint at least, this could speak quite poorly of humanity in the overall moral calculus of who is most worthy of rejection.

Our previous reflections suggest that there is greater reason to reject humans than God even if an all-powerful God could eliminate all of the evil and suffering in the world while no individual human could. We further note that, if humans have free will, then our powers are roughly equal to God's in the ways that matter morally. That is, we could refrain from inflicting evil – even if it is very difficult for us to do so because we are more limited than God. Even though humans are fallible and limited compared to God, human limitations cannot be so extensive that they interfere with our free will. Meaning, if humans indeed have free will then each of us must be in a position to overcome those limitations and act in a way that makes us fully morally responsible for our actions. So, even if human limitations sometimes mitigate how morally responsible we are for causing evil and suffering, God has endowed us with the freedom to refrain from causing evil and suffering in the face of those limitations. Therefore, one might think there are additional moral criticisms that

make humanity worthy of rejection, which can be levied against us when we freely choose to not overcome our limitations and prevent evil. Presumably, God is never subject to these additional criticisms because he never suffers these limitations, while humanity continually amasses additional blame for failing to overcome its limitations. If so, then humans may yet be more worthy of rejection than God.

In conclusion, this subsection has argued that the reason humans are at least as criticizable and worthy of rejection as God, if not more so, is that we directly inflict evil and suffering, and, while we may sometimes be less morally responsible for causing evil and suffering due to our limitations, we are criticizable for failing to overcome our limitations while God is never the subject of these criticisms.<sup>7</sup> We hope some readers will find our arguments compelling but acknowledge that some readers will not accept the arguments for C3. Even so, the overall conclusions of this article, regarding the claim that there are some prudential and so forth reasons to worship God, may stand independently as we will argue for each using empirical evidence. In any case, we believe the above arguments present sufficient evidence to proceed on the conditional assumption that this premise is correct.

We therefore propose that there is greater reason to reject ourselves than to reject God. This is because, if the divine problems of evil and suffering give us reason to reject a seemingly irredeemable God, then the human problems of evil and suffering, which are greater, give us as much, if not more, reason to reject ourselves.<sup>8</sup> Often people bear more responsibility for doing evil and causing avoidable suffering than God, and we cannot reasonably accept those whose failings are greater without accepting those whose failings are less.<sup>9</sup>

So, it should follow that we have more reason to reject ourselves than God. Note also that the reason we might reject God in light of the divine problems of evil and suffering is that God's good attributes (e.g. his beneficence, power, and knowledge) are not good enough to make accepting him reasonable. So, if we have reason to reject God, we have reason to reject ourselves with our inferior beneficence, power, and knowledge.

The next sub-section defends the Argument Against Rejecting God. According to this argument, we should not reject ourselves and since there is a greater reason to do so than to reject God, we should not reject God.

### The argument against rejecting god

The first premise of the Argument Against Rejecting God states that we should not reject ourselves but rather that we should accept ourselves for moral, prudential, and epistemic reasons.<sup>10</sup> Again, acceptance is, roughly, belief without global negative judgement. Self-acceptance, then, is a belief that we are not irredeemably bad. If we accept ourselves, we can acknowledge our limitations and even desire to change them, but cannot deem ourselves worthy only of contempt. And, we have prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons to accept ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

Consider, first, some prudential reasons for self-acceptance. Failure to accept oneself is correlated with low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, perfectionism, and narcissism (Chamberlain and Haaga 2001a, 2001b; Flett, Besser, Davis and Hewitt 2003; Hoffman 2006; Loiacano 1989; Lundh 2004; McKenna and Bargh 1998; Walters and Simoni 1993). Such negative psychological traits are associated with poor overall physical and psychological well-being. For example, perfectionists often suffer from a sense of 'contingent self-worth' (MacInnes 2006). This sense of self-worth can be undermined by negative events, including negative feedback. Those whose self-acceptance is unconditional, on the other hand, have more robust senses of self-worth.<sup>12</sup> Like self-acceptance, self-forgiveness is a complex phenomenon, which includes one's willingness to give up negative self-assessments and corresponding negative emotions despite recognizing one's personal failures. Yet, it goes farther than self-acceptance in aiming to cultivate positive self-assessments and corresponding



positive emotions to replace the negative ones (Enright 1996). Self-forgiveness, which requires self-acceptance, is associated with a number of positive health outcomes (Lavelock et al. 2013, 2015; Worthington et al. 2001; Worthington and Scherer 2004; Worthington et al. 2007). For example, Worthington et al. (2001) and Lavelock et al. (2015) show that self-forgiveness is associated with an increase in positive experiences, such as empathy and compassion, and various measures of well-being. In contrast, rumination and tension associated with shame and guilt are negative consequences of denying oneself self-forgiveness.

Consider, next, some tentative moral reasons for self-acceptance. People who accept themselves are more likely to accept others, which is good for building social support networks (Omwake 1954). More importantly, self-acceptance appears to mitigate prejudice (Masuda et al. 2007; Rubin 1967a, 1967b). So, acceptance may well help prevent or alleviate suffering. In addition, people demonstrating self-acceptance tend to do a better job of appreciating their role in, and responsibility for, negative events without significant psychological distress (Leary et al. 2007). If that is right, there is some moral reason to accept ourselves.

Moreover, there is some reason to think self-acceptance will improve our epistemic abilities. Self-acceptance is associated with fewer irrational beliefs, which are defined as beliefs inconsistent with reality (Davies 2006, 2008a, 2008b). From a therapeutic perspective, irrational beliefs are problematic because they can lead people to develop dysfunctional emotional responses and behaviours, as well as psychological distress. People demonstrating self-acceptance also do a better job of accepting negative feedback (and may thus be more willing to accept their own failings) (Chamberlain and Haaga 2001b; Leary et al. 2007; Taylor and Combs 1952). So, self-acceptance may help one arrive at accurate beliefs about oneself.

Finally, there is evidence that accepting ourselves (and our limitations) can help us care for others. Romantic partners who have more self-compassion are described by their partners as more accepting, autonomy supporting and less controlling or verbally aggressive. Self-compassion involves selecting self-kindness over self-judgment (Neff and Beretvas 2013; Neff and Lamb 2009). Those with self-compassion are also more likely to compromise when in conflict with friends and family. Moreover, caregivers who show self-compassion experience less burnout and are more satisfied as caregivers (Raab 2014). In short, self-compassion and acceptance can help us care for others as well as ourselves.

The empirical evidence supports the following argument for self-acceptance: we have prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons to accept ourselves because acknowledging our own limitations often promotes survival, flourishing, and can help people help others, in the face of the problems of human evil and suffering. We must often accept our failings to survive and flourish despite them and acknowledge our failings to do better in the future. Understanding that we ourselves are limited in our understanding, power, and beneficence can help us to distinguish between the things that we, with our limited knowledge, power, and beneficence cannot change and those that we can. We may not be able to appropriately care for others without accepting our own limitations (we need to know what it is we can do, and what we cannot do, in order to do what we can). The evidence that self-acceptance can help us arrive at more accurate beliefs (Davies 2006) and accept negative feedback (Chamberlain and Haaga 2001b; Taylor and Combs 1952) suggests that it can help us acknowledge our failings (Leary et al. 2007). And, we have seen that people who accept themselves are more likely to form better relationships and to survive and flourish (Hawton 1987; Blair-West et al. 1999; Rihmer 2007; Hawton et al. 2013; Vazire and Funder 2006; Stucke and Sporer 2002; Luyckx et al. 2008; Zuckerman and O'Loughlin 2009; Sirois and Molnar 2016; Davies 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Taylor and Combs 1952; Chamberlain and Haaga 2001b; Leary et al. 2007; Neff and Lamb 2009; Neff and Beretvas 2013; Raab 2014).

We can allow that some people may not be better able to survive, flourish or help others if they accept themselves and that there are cases in which we should not let ourselves off the moral hook even to help others. Psychopaths, and other people with significant psychological deficits, may have no prudential, epistemic, or moral reasons to accept themselves (though perhaps self-acceptance can help such people take more responsibility for their bad behaviour). We similarly acknowledge that people who can avoid evil even when they despise themselves might not benefit morally from self-acceptance. We only argue that there are often prudential, epistemic and moral reasons for self-acceptance.

The second premise of the *Argument Against Rejecting God* says that since we should not reject ourselves, given the previously established sub-conclusion that there is greater reason to reject humanity than to reject God, we should not reject God. We take this premise to be self-evident. So, we should not reject God. The next sub-section defends *The Argument for Accepting God*.

### The argument for accepting god

Consider the first premise of *The Argument for Accepting God*: if we should not reject God (and he exists), we should accept him. This is true by the definition of acceptance and rejection since rejection is just the absence of acceptance. So, given that the last section established that we should not reject God (if he exists), *The Argument for Accepting God* conclusion follows directly: we should accept God (if he exists).

Let us put this another way: given that we have at least as much reason to accept God as we do to accept ourselves in light of the human problems of evil and suffering and given God's superior capacities, accepting God if we accept ourselves appears to be a requirement of consistency – we should not treat those who are more deserving as if they were less deserving. Moreover, given that prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons exist for accepting ourselves (as doing so can help us survive, flourish, and better care for others), then we have similar reason to accept God if similar prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons to accept God (if he exists).<sup>13</sup>

The empirical literature does indeed show some additional such reasons to accept God. Religiosity has been documented to help us come to terms with our limitations in part by helping us distinguish between what we can and cannot control. When God is perceived as a partner or collaborator, rather than an external force, people sometimes develop a sense of 'collaborative control' (Pargament et al. 1988; Krause 2010; Fiori et al. 2006). In such cases, people cede their sense of control over external factors to God, their partner, and take increased control over managing their internal qualities, such as how they cope with external factors. For example, a person suffering from cancer, which is outside of her control, might ask God to give her the strength to manage it (Fiori et al. 2004).

In summary, we are proposing that prudential reasons in favour of accepting God sometimes outweigh the moral reasons against doing so. Recall that the moral reasons against accepting God derive from the amount of evil and suffering produced. Some will object that the prudential benefits of accepting God cannot justify doing so as the idea that God is good enough to accept flies in the face of our moral intuitions. However, we believe that we should not hold others to a higher standard than we hold ourselves. Moreover, we should sometimes accept others even when given weighty considerations against doing so. Consider, for instance, how supporting a friend or romantic partner may require overlooking their faults. In fact, trust may often require at least withholding judgement that one's friend has done something unforgivable. Importantly, we should emphasize that this is not an argument that prudential reasons in favour of accepting God outweigh epistemic reasons against believing that God exists. That would be a different sort of argument. Accepting

God, which is belief without global negative judgement where we deem God valueless or unworthy of redemption, is not the same thing as believing that God exists. We are arguing that, assuming God exists, we have some reason to similarly overlook the faults we might perceive in God and accept him in order to obtain various prudential, moral, and epistemic benefits.

Of course, we understand that many religious people may prefer theological or moral reasons to worship God to prudential ones but given that prudential reasons can be more important, all things considered, than moral reasons and that prudential reasons can supplement moral and theological reasons, we believe that they may welcome these additional arguments instead of rejecting them as some who would not otherwise be inclined to worship God may find good reasons to endorse these arguments while remaining somewhat sceptical of other arguments for worship.

There is a difference, however, between acceptance and worship. Recall that acceptance is, roughly, belief without a global negative judgement. If we accept ourselves, we can acknowledge our limitations and even desire to change them. We should not deem ourselves unworthy of redemption nor hold ourselves in contempt. People use *worship* in many ways. On some accounts of worship, it is a kind of respect (Burling 2018). On other accounts, worship requires complete submission or obedience to an entity one views 'as absolutely worthy of worship', as well as the performance of 'rituals or communicative acts' expressing this obedience (Aikin 2010). Some believe worship 'involves affective and emotional attitudes such as awe (a type of fear) ... judging that the object of worship is more powerful in some respect than oneself... reverence – a form of humility and respect ... more straightforward emotional attitudes like love [and/or] ... aesthetic attitudes – admiration, marvel of existence, wonder and adoration' (Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 300). Others suggest worship is 'related to the notions of holiness and sanctity' and involves attributions of moral superiority (Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 301). They may also claim that it is 'an attitude that one can take only towards agents' that is distinct from veneration and hero-worship and comes in degrees (Bayne and Nagasawa 2006, 30). Finally, some argue that God is the only appropriate object of worship (Bayne and Nagasawa 2006; Lewis 1983).

Some of these views pose problems for other common monotheistic commitments, but our argument is compatible with many accounts of worship and, in this section, we have only argued that there is reason to accept, not that we must worship, God. Some views of worship may suggest we can legitimately worship things other than God and others are incompatible with many exercises of free will (e.g. if worship requires unconditional acceptance) (Aikin 2010; Cray 2011). We will suppose, here, that worship at least requires honour or exaltation. We hold those we worship in high esteem and see them as worthy of emulation in at least some important respects. However, our argument may work with a different account of worship that is compatible with free will and entails that God is the only appropriate object worthy of worship. In any case, thus far we have only argued that we have prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons to accept God, not that we must worship him. The next sub-section defends the final part of this article's argument – *The Argument for Worship*.

### The argument for worship

There are many compelling reasons to worship God. If we accept the existence of an all-powerful, knowledgeable and beneficent ruler, then perhaps that is grounds itself for worship (Cray 2011).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, some suggest that if God has provided us with the good things it involves, then perhaps we have a duty to worship him (Burling 2018, 488). Or, if God is perfect, that might be grounds for worship (Lewis 1983).<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, some insist that even an all-powerful, knowing, and beneficent ruler merits contempt if he allows evil and suffering to persist (Lewis 1983; Hassoun 2015a). After all, despite the good things God contributes to human lives, it often appears that he allows great evil and suffering in our lives as well. So, just as the good things in human life might ground a duty for thankful worship, the evil and suffering in human lives might give us reason to despise God.

But the *Argument for Worship's* key premise is the narrow claim that if we have prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons to accept ourselves and should accept God, then we have some reason to worship him based on similar justifications (if he exists).<sup>16</sup> Given God's comparative greatness, and given that we have prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons to accept ourselves, it seems God merits more than mere acceptance. In fact, the same kinds of prudential, epistemic, and moral considerations used to defend the claim that we should accept ourselves provides some reasons for some people to worship God (despite the evil and suffering he allows), especially if doing so can help us survive, flourish, and better help others.<sup>17</sup> Recall that as we use the term, *worship* at least requires honouring those we worship.<sup>18</sup> We hold those we worship in high esteem and see them as worthy of emulation in at least some important respects.<sup>19</sup> Worship may be a good way of acknowledging our own limitations.<sup>20</sup> For example, cultivating one's religiosity is associated with increased self-forgiveness, which can help people come to terms with personal failures (Krause 2010; Webb et al. 2012, 2017). Some scholars have found empirical evidence that seeking forgiveness from God and feeling forgiven promote self-forgiveness (Hall and Fincham 2005; McConnell and Dixon 2012; Lavelock, Snipes, Griffin, Worthington, Davis, Hook, Benotsch and Ritter 2015). Recall, moreover, that self-forgiveness, which requires self-acceptance, helps us to survive, flourish and/or help others (Chamberlain and Haaga 2001a, 2001b; Lundh 2004; Neff and Beretvas 2013; Neff and Lamb 2009; Raab 2014).<sup>21</sup> Consider that therapeutic pastoral care often works by helping people understand their limitations and forgive themselves. Behaviours, such as drug and alcohol use or infidelity in a relationship, often lead people to feel guilt or shame. When people perceive these as acts that alienate them from the sacred or the divine, therapeutic pastoral-care can help them seek forgiveness from God and themselves in order to better understand and overcome their personal failures (Worthington, Berry, and Parrott III 2001).

Perhaps it is even by worshipping God that many people can find the humility necessary to get the help they need to accept themselves. Many researchers have found a correlation between self-reported religiosity and humility, which may help improve well-being and promote self-acceptance (Weiss and Knight 1980; Bollinger and Hill 2012; Krause 2010; Sapmaz et al. 2016).<sup>22</sup> Existing studies suggest that religious people are more humble, self-forgiving, and report having better health and well-being (Krause 2010, 2015; Krause and Hayward 2014).<sup>23</sup>

We acknowledge that this is not a definitive argument for worship, as some may maintain that the proper ways of relating to God require more than acceptance, and yet does not amount to worship. Perhaps some will insist, for instance, that God merits praise but should not be held in high esteem or emulated.

Moreover, whether worship is a good way of acknowledging our own limitations and will help us get the help we need to accept ourselves, survive, and flourish probably depends on individual, and perhaps group, differences. We do not argue that accepting God is the only path to self-acceptance, which allows people to overcome their shortcomings and promotes well-being. We only argue that our proposal offers one such course, which may be more beneficial to some individuals and groups than others (Gibbs and Goldbach 2015; Strawbridge et al. 1998).<sup>24</sup>

Of course, many develop the self-acceptance necessary for flourishing without worship. Some do not think that most people have wrongly failed to prevent or caused much

suffering. Others do not seem to take our failings to provide reasons to reject ourselves. Yet others have found that self-acceptance can be achieved through various forms of individually driven self-development programmes, especially in the case of 'self-help' driven mindfulness activities like meditation. (Cavanagh et al. 2014). Cultivating mindfulness may, for instance, help people accept themselves (Carson and Langer 2006; Jimenez et al. 2010).

Whether worship will help us may also depend on how we worship. Mindfulness practices are at the centre of many forms of non-western religions (Bodhi 2011). Psychologists have begun utilizing mindfulness practices from these traditions to combat addiction and other negative psychological phenomena, so integrating mindfulness practices into monotheistic religious worship could be an alternative route to cultivating self-acceptance (Dryden and Still 2006, Kang and Whittingham 2010; Khanna and Greeson 2013). Among Christians in some geographical regions, researchers have found some religious practices and denominations increase well-being more than others (Koenig et al. 1994). The latter forms of worship may help less with developing the kind of self-acceptance or self-forgiveness needed to improve well-being.

One might object that our argument is inconsistent with the right account of worship or that we are presenting the wrong kinds of reasons for worshipping God because God should be worshipped out of duty, love or respect. Some believe, for instance, that worship is a relationship developed with God or hold that when we worship God, we fulfil our obligations with the expectation that God will fulfil his (whatever they are) (Luhrmann 2004; Pollner 1989). In doing so, we love, respect, and act out of duty to God. On our account, our reasons to worship are prudential, epistemic, and moral but do not capture the importance of developing this relationship.

The view that we propose is compatible with the relationship account of worship as well as many others and, moreover, provides new reasons to worship God beyond those suggested above. On our account, worship *at least* requires honour or exaltation, viewing those we worship as worthy of esteem and emulation (in at least some respects) and shaping our lives accordingly. But, worship may also require developing a relationship with God, and some of the evidence we offer suggests that it could help to develop a relationship with God. In some cases, religious individuals are better able to manage life stressors and acknowledge their own limitations when they perceive God as an ally or collaborator who helps to manage the life events outside of the individual's control (Pargament et al. 1988; Schieman 2003; Krause 2010; Fiori et al. 2006). Part of loving, respecting, and fulfilling our duty to God may be to have this relationship as well as to honour, exalt and view God as worthy of emulation, shaping our lives accordingly.

Assuming an all-powerful, knowing, and beneficent God exists, and given our arguments that we have prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons to accept ourselves and him, we have some reason to worship God. At least when worshipping God can help us survive, flourish, and/or help others, in the face of the problems of human evil and suffering, we have some reason to worship God (especially given God's comparative greatness).

## Conclusion

We believe that, if God exists, there is reason to worship him in light of the human problems of evil and suffering. Our beneficence, knowledge, and power are limited compared to his, and we are often the ones who harm each other. So, if we cannot accept God, because so many people do evil and avoidably suffer, it is not clear how we can accept ourselves. Perhaps, we cannot even blame God for not having made us better (if we fail due to our own free will). But, we have prudential, moral, and epistemic reasons to accept ourselves. Acknowledging our failings is often helpful for surviving them as well as flourishing and/or

doing better in the future. Understanding that we ourselves are limited in our understanding (and perhaps love) can help us to distinguish between the things that we, with our limited power, cannot change and those that we can. Moreover, we may not be able to appropriately care for others without accepting our own limitations (we need to know what it is we can do, and what we cannot, in order to do what we can). Finally, worship is a way of acknowledging our own limitations and can help us survive, flourish, and help others in the face of the problems of human evil and suffering. We believe that it is by worshipping God that many people can find the humility necessary to get the help they need to accept themselves.

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## Notes

1. The argument under consideration in this chapter is made primarily in reference to the Judeo-Christian God who is conventionally referenced using the 'he' pronoun. We follow this convention throughout the article but do not endorse it. The authors would also like to note that we are not religiously affiliated.
2. Although we will use the term 'belief' this might be more accurately characterized as an attitude that takes something as true – perhaps an 'alief' (Gendler 2008). For more on the distinction between belief and acceptance as doxastic attitudes, consider Cohen (1989), Bratman (1992), and Velleman (2000). For a discussion of acceptance and faith as doxastic attitudes, see Bishop (2002).
3. One might wonder, however, if all of those who reject humanity also have reason to reject themselves. If I am the sort of person who always fulfils my obligations and attempts to alleviate suffering etc., perhaps I have no reason to reject myself – just the rest of humanity. We can allow this possibility but believe it is remote – most people are far from perfect, each of us inherits the legacy of evil and suffering inflicted by humanity, and it is difficult to prevent ourselves from participating in and tacitly promoting this legacy. Even if it is only most relatively affluent people who could and should, have prevented much avoidable suffering and death (and if it is most of those who have committed evil acts who should, and could, have refrained from engaging in them) but have not, these individuals have some reason to reject themselves. At least, if human sin is as pervasive as many Christians seem to think, then each of us seems to have a good reason to reject their self. Of course, this argument may only hold for some people (e.g. those that bear at least their fair share of our collective failures). One can reject the general premise that all of those who reject humanity also have reason to reject themselves and still accept a weaker claim that some who reject humanity also have reason to reject themselves. In which case, the scope of our argument would be limited to these individuals, though we imagine that the number of people who have reason to reject themselves is quite large. We will continue on the assumption that our premise is sufficiently broadly applicable to support our argument.
4. For an agent to inflict some harm, she must not serve as its mere cause. Instead, her intentional agency must feature importantly in the ensuing harm. So, if I have a seizure and hit a friend with my hand while falling to the ground, I am not inflicting the ensuing harm. I am its mere cause. We do not deny that there may be some intentional omissions.
5. We acknowledge that this does not fully encapsulate the moral issues at stake in the doing/allowing distinction. For example, we would think that pushing the person off of the cliff is wrong even if the person counterfactually would have suffered the very same harm by accidentally falling off the cliff on her own.
6. Our hypothesis, albeit an untested empirical one, is that God is probably not in the position of the adult, in the above scenario, as often as it seems. We consider the somewhat comparable case of evil and suffering that God possibly inflicts through natural causes, like hurricane and wildfires above. But to support our hypothesis, we have already argued that a very large amount of evil and suffering in the world has observably anthropogenic causes (e.g. poverty and even climate change). If we were to strip away all of the situations where humans directly inflict evil on each other or create conditions of suffering, the world very well might, by comparison, seem like a paradise. If the world, without human inflicted evil and suffering and containing only the remaining evil and suffering that God is now responsible for, would be better than a world where there is only human-caused evil and suffering and no natural suffering (and it seems rather likely), then perhaps the human problems of evil and suffering are indeed worse than the divine ones. However, we note that humans may bear responsibility for many 'natural evils', such as harms caused by drought or brush fires. Humans have elected to settle in locations afflicted by natural disasters, and we have elected to grow the human population, crowd ourselves into densely populated areas, and make ourselves extremely vulnerable to localized disasters. There is evidence that good governance

can also prevent and alleviate much of the suffering natural disasters might cause, and, if God does exist, God has provided us with the resources to overcome many other natural evils, such as blighted crops and numerous illnesses. In addition, an increasing number of natural evils are notably anthropogenic, and we are beginning to witness an era in which the increasingly devastating natural evils caused by anthropogenic climate change are also increasingly the responsibility of humans as there are now catastrophic climate events that most likely would not have occurred if humans had been better stewards of the environment. Moreover, in line with the aphorism ‘God helps those who help themselves’, perhaps we would have the resources to overcome even more natural evils if we acted more regularly to alleviate and refrain from harm rather than pursue profit. Even where human agency is not involved, God primarily enables harms by creating an imperfect world and this may mitigate God’s responsibility to some degree – especially if he has good reason to do so. We acknowledge that these assertions are speculative but also note that any claims about the nature of God, both for and against our argument, are speculative.

7. Admittedly, this argument hangs on the claim that humans have free will. If humans do not have free will, then humans may not approach a level of moral responsibility comparable to that of God. This would force us to set aside the claim that humans are more worthy of rejection than God (P4 and, correspondingly, SC2). However, it still seems plausible that humans are worthy of rejection because of our serious moral failings, even if we are not more worthy of rejection than God. On the basis of this, SC3, the claim that we should not reject God, may yet be true, since the same sort of prudential reasons that justify accepting rather than rejecting ourselves (P5) also justify accepting (SC4) and worshipping God (SC5). Even if God is more worthy of rejection than we are – it may yet be good for us to accept and worship God for prudential reasons.

8. And, again, if we judge humanity poorly, we have at least some reason to judge the humanity in ourselves worthy of contempt (and in the remainder of the article we will consider the import of this implication in considering the reasons individuals have for self-acceptance).

9. Or, at least, it is not clear that the relatively affluent, and those who commit evil, can accept themselves without accepting God for this reason. Consider a buttressing argument: Perhaps, we cannot even blame God for not having made us better if we fail due to our own free will. God is responsible for endowing us with the capacity to choose what to do but is not responsible for what we choose to do. God is not blameworthy for our actions, nor is God blameworthy for our moral failings.

10. To clarify – in our arguments below, we show that there are moral and epistemic benefits derived from accepting ourselves.

11. The empirical literature we draw on in this article is suggestive, but we do not believe it does enough to fully establish the causal relationships we sketch. Still, we offer the argument for further debate and discussion noting here that more empirical evidence is necessary to fully establish our conclusions.

12. We acknowledge that this does not fully encapsulate the moral issues at stake in the doing/allowing distinction. For example, we would think that pushing the person off of the cliff is wrong even if the person counterfactually would have suffered the very same harm by accidentally falling off the cliff on her own.

13. One might object that if one is the sort of person who always fulfils one’s obligations and attempts to alleviate suffering, then one’s reasons for self-acceptance do not offer any reason to accept God: One is good and God is not. While we acknowledge that a moral saint might not have any reason to accept God, most of us are not moral saints. People often fail in our moral obligations to provide aid and prevent suffering and commit evil acts. So, our argument still works for most people.

14. Though the sense in which this is ‘grounds’ is up for some debate (Franklin 1960).

15. We acknowledge that some of these reasons may be more important than those presented in our argument. However, we present an argument that may work for those who are not convinced by other considerations.

16. Regarding our argument for this premise (i.e. P8), we argue that if the reader buys into the prudential reasons for accepting God, then it should be agreed that we also have reason to worship God, since worshipping God is prudent in the same way (i.e. both promote our well-being). It is a matter of rational consistency that, if the reader buys into the claim that prudential reasons count as reasons to accept ourselves and to accept God, then we have similar prudential reasons to worship God. In other words, we have similar justifications for worshipping God as we have for accepting ourselves and God (if he exists).

17. One might worry that there is an analogy between our worshipping God when doing so helps us survive, flourish and/or help others and someone befriending their kidnapper so that the kidnapper is nicer to her. The kidnapped person has some reason to befriend the kidnapper when doing so would help her survive, flourish, and/or help others. However, we do not argue that we have any reason to accept or worship God in order to make him nicer to us, rather we have argued that there are distinct pragmatic, moral, and epistemic reasons to worship God.

18. Again, our argument is compatible with many more demanding accounts of worship e.g. on which worship also requires engaging in certain religious practices.

19. Consider that we have reason to emulate people with the positive qualities normally attributed to God even if they also have some negative qualities. For example, Gandhi displayed many admirable qualities even though he maintained some sexist views. If admiring and emulating Gandhi in some respects can make us better people, then we have prudential and moral reasons to do so, regardless of any other qualities he possessed.
20. Note, here and throughout, how we argue that self-acceptance and the acceptance or ultimate worship of God are useful for acknowledging our own, very human limitations. We do not mean to imply that the acceptance or worship of God is useful for acknowledging God's limitations. Our argument is not dependent on the claim that God has any limitations or that humans would benefit from accepting them.
21. One might worry that self-acceptance and self-forgiveness are beneficial in theory but not practice. In a clinical setting, discussing the importance of self-acceptance or forgiveness may cause clients to fixate on their imperfection. Instead of self-forgiveness, then, the client may experience cycles of guilt. Note that we only point out that self-acceptance and forgiveness can be important – not what is necessary to get people to accept or forgive themselves. Once a person actually self-accepts or self-forgives, they get the benefits discussed making them important in therapies.
22. Of course, self-reports of well-being may be inaccurate in a variety of ways on different accounts of well-being, but we take this to provide some evidence that humility improves well-being.
23. Moreover, humble people are more understanding of others (Penrose 2010) and more often satisfied with their relationships (Bell 2016; Bell and Fincham 2019).
24. For example, LGBT youth, in certain religious contexts, tend to experience increased depression and suicidal thoughts (Gibbs and Goldbach 2015). In addition, some research shows that religiosity is associated with increased risk for depression when the stressors are familial, especially due to marriage or caregiving (Strawbridge et al. 1998). If so, then worship-related self-acceptance associated with religiosity does not appear to help individuals overcome depression in certain situations.

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