Agnosticism, the Moral Skepticism Objection, and Commonsense Morality

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Many arguments from evil for atheism rely on something like the following line of thought:

_The Inference._ On sustained reflection, we don’t see how any reason we know of would justify God in permitting all the evil in the world; therefore, there probably is no such reason.

Some critics of the Inference insist that _even if_ the premise is true and _even if_ we lack evidential and non-evidential warrant for theism, we should not draw the Inference. You might think of these critics as “agnostics about the Inference,” as I have described them elsewhere.¹ You ask them to set aside whatever might be said in favor of theism and then put a question to them: how likely is it that there is no reason that would justify God in permitting all the evil in the world given that we can’t see how any reason we know of would do the trick? “Beats me,” they reply; “I’m in no position to tell”.

There are different versions of agnosticism about the Inference. The one I had in mind in my 2009—which I called _Agnosticism_ with a capital ‘A’—affirms among other relevantly similar theses that

_**Agnostic Thesis 1 (AT1).** We should be in doubt about whether the goods we know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are._

The Agnostic—with a capital ‘A’—continues: given AT1 (and, for ease of exposition, let’s set aside the relevantly similar theses), we should be in doubt about whether some good we don’t know of figures in a reason that would justify God. But if we should be in doubt about that, then we should be in doubt about whether there is a reason that would justify God. And if we should be in doubt about that, we should _not_ infer that there is no such reason, even if we don’t see how any reason would justify God and even if we lack evidential and non-evidential warrant for theism. To do otherwise exhibits an unseemly lack of intellectual humility.

One objection to Agnosticism is _the Moral Skepticism Objection—or the Objection_, for short—a simple version of which goes like this. Let _Ashley’s suffering_ name the evil done to twelve-year old Ashley Jones and what she suffered and lost in Stanwood, Washington, September 21, 1997, who while babysitting her neighbor’s kids, was raped and bludgeoned to death by an escapee from a local juvenile detention center. Suppose we could have easily intervened to prevent Ashley’s suffering without any cost to ourselves. In that case, it would be absurd to suppose that we should be in doubt about whether we should have intervened. _Obviously_ we should have intervened. Agnosticism, however, implies otherwise. It tells us that since we should be in doubt about whether the goods we know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are, we should be in doubt about whether there is a reason that would justify God’s nonintervention. But if that’s right, then so is this: since we should be in doubt about whether the goods we know of constitute a representative sample of

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¹ Howard-Snyder 2009: 18.
all the goods there are, we should also be in doubt about whether there is a reason that would justify our nonintervention, in which case we should be in doubt about whether we should have intervened. So Agnosticism implies that we should be in doubt about whether we should have intervened. But that’s absurd. Obviously we should have. So Agnosticism is false.

It will prove useful to summarize the main argument of the Objection:

1. If Agnosticism is true, then we should be in doubt about whether we should have intervened to prevent Ashley’s suffering (if we could have).
2. We should not be in doubt about whether we should have intervened.
3. So, Agnosticism is false.

I suspect that the Objection fails. Stephen Maitzen thinks otherwise. In what follows, I will assess his defense of the Objection after I summarize my reasons for suspicion. Before I proceed, though, let me clarify some things about Agnosticism.

First, Agnosticism is not skeptical theism. It is consistent with atheism, naturalism in particular. Second, when the Agnostic says that we should be in doubt about something, she does not mean that we should doubt that it is so. For one to be in doubt about something is for one neither to believe nor disbelieve it as a result of one’s grounds for it seeming to be roughly on a par with one’s grounds for its denial. If one doubts that something is so, one is at least strongly inclined to disbelieve it. Being in doubt lacks that implication.

Third preliminary: according to Maitzen,  

If we believe theism, we should believe that Ashley’s suffering was a consequence of something necessary or optimal for her own net benefit, whereas if we’re Agnostics we should be in doubt about whether it was.2

This is false, and not just because theism does not entail that “Ashley’s suffering was a consequence of something necessary or optimal for her own net benefit”3. For even if it did entail that, it is not true that “if we’re Agnostics we should be in doubt about whether it was”. That’s because of the “even if” clauses that define Agnosticism. Here’s how they work. Suppose you’re a theist who thinks your warrant for theism swamps that for atheism, so much so that you’re virtually certain there’s a God, and suppose you think that theism entails that “Ashley’s suffering was a consequence of something necessary or optimal for her own net benefit”. Suppose further that you take yourself to see how “Ashley’s suffering was a consequence of something necessary or optimal for her own net benefit”. In that case, you’ll be apt to infer that we should not be in doubt about whether it was. Still, you might well put yourself in the shoes of those who disagree with you rosy assessment of theism and theodicy and reflect on what we should think from

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2 Maitzen 2014: 23xx.
3 At the very best, all that Maitzen can properly claim here (and I don’t mean to suggest that it is proper) is that theism entails that it is God’s permission of Ashley’s suffering, or something comparably bad, that is a consequence of something necessary or optimal for her own net benefit. Ashley’s suffering itself need not be such a consequence. See Rowe 1979 and Swinburne 1998 for guidance on how to express the relevant relations between “something necessary or optimal for her own net benefit” and her suffering.
their perspective; and you might express the conclusion of your reflections as follows: “even if we don’t see how any reason would justify God and even if there is no evidence and non-evidential warrant for God’s existence, we should not infer that there is no such reason”. That’s how an Agnostic can consistently be a theist while not being in doubt about whether “Ashley’s suffering was a consequence of something necessary or optimal for her own net benefit”.

Unlike the Agnostic I have just represented, in what follows the Agnostic I will represent holds that the premise of the Inference really is true, that we really don’t see how any reason we know of would justify God in permitting all the evil in the world.

Fourth, when the Agnostic says that we don’t see how any reason we know of would justify God in permitting all the evil in the world, she means that we don’t see how any reason we know of would fully justify God in permitting all of it. This is compatible with her seeing how some reason we know of would fully justify God in permitting some of it, perhaps even a great deal of it; and it is compatible with her seeing how some reason we know of would partially justify God in permitting all of it.

Fifth and final preliminary: Maitzen says that I aim to rebut the objection by rebutting it as an objection to the skeptical part of skeptical theism, which part he [that is, me, Dan Howard-Snyder] labels “Agnosticism,” a label he intentionally capitalizes, presumably in order to distinguish this position from others more commonly called “agnosticism.”

This is mistaken. As I said, Agnosticism is a version of agnosticism about the Inference. I did not use a capital ‘A’ in order to distinguish Agnosticism from other positions more commonly called “agnosticism”. I used a capital ‘A’ to give it pride of place among other versions of agnosticism about the Inference. (Think Alston, Bergmann, Rea, Wykstra etc.) Thus, Agnosticism is not “the skeptical part of skeptical theism”; it is false that “in all essential respects Agnosticism just is the skeptical part of skeptical theism”; it is not true that “[s]keptical theism adds theism to Agnosticism”.

To illustrate the difference between Agnosticism and other versions of agnosticism about the Inference, and to underscore the importance it can make, consider a familiar variation on the Inference:

The Inference*. No good we know of would justify God in permitting all the evil in the world; therefore, probably no good would do so.

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4 Maitzen 2009: 18, his emphasis.
6 “Some critics, however, insist that even if the premise is true and even if there isn’t better evidence or non-evidential warrant for God’s existence, we should not infer that there is no justifying reason. These are the agnostics about the Inference…There are different versions of agnosticism about the Inference. The one I have in mind—henceforth Agnosticism with a capital A—affirms…” (Howard-Snyder 2009: 17-18).
7 Maitzen 2014: 7xxx; 8xxx.
Now recall the agnostic part, or a part of the agnostic part, of Michael Bergmann’s agnosticism:

ST1. We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.\(^9\)

ST1 targets the Inference\(^*\) via (something at least equivalent to)

Bergmann’s Specific Principle. We should believe that, probably, no good would justify God in permitting all the evil in the world on the basis of no good we know of would do so only if we have good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

I lose sleep over Bergmann’s Specific Principle. For consider the following question: what makes it the case that no good we know of would justify God is a truth-conducive basis for believing that no good would justify God? Answer: the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are. In effect, then, Bergmann’s Specific Principle tells us to believe that a population has a certain property on the basis of a sample uniformly possessing it only if we have good reason to think that the latter is a truth-conducive basis for believing the former. Since there’s nothing special about this belief, its epistemic status, and the basis for it, it appears that, if we affirm Bergmann’s Specific Principle, we’ll also have to affirm

Bergmann’s General Principle. We should believe something on the basis of something else only if we have good reason for thinking that the latter is a truth-conducive basis for believing the former.

Bergmann’s General Principle has notoriously undesirable epistemic consequences. That’s one reason why I worry about joining him in his approach to the Inference.

(I should add that Bergmann nowhere endorses the principles I have named after him. I suspect that he might respond to my worry in something like the following way: restrict the application of the General Principle to occasions on which we harbor some doubt about whether the basis of our belief is truth-conducive, and restrict the application of the Specific Principle in the same way. So restricted, I’d sleep much better—although I sometimes stay awake over ST1 itself. I mean, if we have a large enough sample that over a long period of time remains uniformly thus-and-so, doesn’t that give us some reason to think that the whole population is thus-and-so, just a tiny little bit of reason? If so, then, contrary to ST1, it’s not true that we have no reason to think that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.)

Now contrast Bergmann’s approach with the Agnostic’s approach. According to the Agnostic,

AT1. We should be in doubt about whether the goods we know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are.

\(^9\) Bergmann 2001: 279.
AT1 targets the Inference* via (something at least equivalent to)

The Agnostic’s Specific Principle. We should believe that, probably, no good would justify God in permitting all the evil in the world on the basis of no good we know of would do so only if it is not the case that we should be in doubt about whether the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

For reasons like those mentioned above, it appears that, if we affirm the Agnostic’s Specific Principle, we’ll also have to affirm

The Agnostic’s General Principle. We should believe something on the basis of something else only if it is not the case that we should be in doubt about whether the latter is a truth-conducive basis for believing the former.

None of the notoriously undesirable epistemic consequences of Bergmann’s General Principle are consequences of the Agnostic’s General Principle (and nothing similar to the concern I raised for ST1 itself can be raised for AT1 itself). Indeed, the Agnostic’s General Principle seems quite sensible. Upshot: Agnosticism, with a capital ‘A’, differs importantly from some other versions of agnosticism about the Inference.

I now turn to a summary of my assessment of the Objection.

I claimed that our assessment of the Objection should reflect the epistemic implications of our moral theories or principles, which come in two types: (i) those that posit right- and wrong-making features of an act that should leave us in doubt about its moral status and (ii) those that posit right- and wrong-making features of an act that should not leave us in doubt about its moral status. Any theory or principle of the first type is an instance of Moral Inaccessibilism; any theory or principle of the second type is an instance of Moral Accessibilism. If we endorse an instance of Inaccessibilism, then, prior to our assessment of the Objection, we should be prepared to deny premise (2), while if we endorse an instance of Accessibilism, then, prior to our assessment of the Objection, we should be primed to deny premise (1). Either way, the epistemic implications of our moral theories or principles imply that the Objection is unsound.

To illustrate how a moral theory or principle might prepare us to deny premise (2), I stated three theories or principles that take the total consequences of an act very, very seriously, and I argued that if any of them is correct, we should be in doubt about whether we should have intervened to prevent Ashley’s suffering (if we could have). One of them was

Objective Maximizing Act Consequentialism (OMAC). An agent’s act is permissible solely in virtue of the fact that its total consequences are no overall worse than those of any option open to him; otherwise, it is impermissible.

I have in mind a concept of “consequence” that implies what many of my consequentialist friends say, namely that what you do among the options open to you will
have ramifications until the end of time and all of them are morally relevant. So understood, OMAC implies that we should be in doubt about whether we should have intervened. For we are in no position to tell whether the unforeseeable consequences of intervention are better than nonintervention, and the unforeseeable consequences swamp the foreseeable ones; thus, we should be in doubt about whether the total consequences of our intervening are overall worse than our not intervening. In that case, we should be in doubt about whether we should have intervened and, prior to assessing the Objection, we should be prepared to deny premise (2)—if we endorse OMAC.

To underscore how darkness envelops us on this score, I noted how much of our behavior has massive and inscrutable causal ramifications. Killing and engendering, and refraining from killing and engendering, ramify in massive ways because they are directly identity-affecting actions. They directly “make a difference to the identities of future persons [that is, a difference to what people there will be] and these differences are apt to amplify exponentially down the generations”. Moreover, much of our other behavior is indirectly identity-affecting. To illustrate the general point, imagine Richard, a first-century bandit in southern Germany who, while raiding a small village, spares the life of a pregnant woman, Angie. Angie, it turns out, is the great-great- . . . [add 97 ‘great-’s] . . . great-grandmother of Adolf Hitler. By permitting Angie to live, Richard played a role in the occurrence of the Holocaust. Moreover, anyone who refrained from killing any of the intermediate ancestors of Hitler before they engendered the relevant child, or assisted in introducing the parents of each generation, or refrained from introducing them to others, and so on, played a role as well. Which one of these people throughout the generations had an inkling that their behavior would contribute to such a horror? (For sources of massive causal ramification distinct from identity-affecting actions, see Lenman 2000, 347-348.)

As it was with Angie and Richard, so it is with Ashley and us. We are in the dark about the unforeseeable consequences of our intervening and not intervening; moreover, the foreseeable consequences are but a drop in the ocean of the total consequences, and all but that drop is inscrutable to us. So, if we endorse OMAC, then when we turn to assess the Objection we should already be in doubt about whether we should have intervened; we should already be prepared to deny premise (2). To illustrate the point that if we endorse an instance of Accessibilism, then, prior to our assessment of the Objection, we should already be primed to deny premise (1), I stated three moral theories or principles that take the consequences of an act much, much less seriously than OMAC and I argued that if any of them is correct, then we should be primed to deny that Agnosticism implies that we should be in doubt about whether we should prevent Ashley’s suffering (if we could have). One of them was

Requirement Rₜ. Intervene to prevent horrific evil you can prevent, unless you believe there is better reason for you not to intervene.

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10 Cf. Elinor Mason: “consequentialism demands that we make decisions that have as their justification the whole future” (2004: 317, emphasis added).
13 See Howard-Snyder 2009: 30-39 for my replies to objections to this argument.
My argument for concluding that, given \( R_s \), Agnosticism does not imply that we should be in doubt about whether we should prevent Ashley’s suffering was roughly this: given \( R_s \), the presumption of intervention can be overridden only by *our believing* there is better reason for us not to intervene, and our *not* believing there is better reason for us to intervene is compatible with *someone else* believing there is better reason for them not to intervene. Thus, it might well be the case that we should be in doubt about whether there is some reason we don’t know of that would justify *someone else’s* permitting it, e.g. God’s, even though we should not be in doubt about whether *we* should prevent it.

After saying a few words about how my suspicions about the Objection were unaffected by whether we assumed theism or naturalism to be true, and after arguing that the reasons motivating those suspicions undermined Almeida and Oppy’s variants on (the simple version of) the Objection, I invited those who held moral theories or principles other than the six I had discussed to do two things:

First, explain how it is that, on your theory or principles, we should not be in doubt about whether we should intervene to prevent Ashley’s suffering. When you give your explanation, be sure to take into account the fact that most of what we do is either directly or indirectly identity-affecting, and thus that most of what we do has massive causal ramifications. If you deny this fact, explain why. If you don’t deny it, explain how it is that, despite this fact, we should not be in doubt about whether we should intervene, given your theory or principle. If your explanation appeals to expected value, indifference, intuition, virtue, duties, or the tea leaves in your kitchen sink, explain why objections to your explanation have no force.

Second, explain how it is that, given your theory or principles, Agnosticism implies that we should be in doubt about whether we should intervene to prevent Ashley’s suffering. And whatever you say on that score, make it plain why it is that your own theory or principles aren’t really driving the doubt and Agnosticism is just coming along for the ride.\(^\text{14}\)

So how does Maitzen respond to this invitation?

Initially, as follows:

While Howard-Snyder’s point is worth making in the debate over skeptical theism, in a way his point isn’t really news. As I see it, the Moral Skepticism Objection to Agnosticism reflects a worry arising from *commonsense morality*, and therefore the objection reflects the *mixture* of consequentialist and non-consequentialist elements that commonsense morality notoriously contains. Commonsense morality apparently holds that, in general, the consequences of our intervention do *and yet don’t* matter to our obligation to intervene: commonsense morality is both consequentialist and non-consequentialist, or neither purely one nor purely the other.\(^\text{15}\)

What should we make of this?

\(^\text{14}\) Howard-Snyder 2009: 53.

\(^\text{15}\) Maitzen 2014: 12xx, his emphasis.
Suppose we go along with the idea that there is such a thing as commonsense morality. Furthermore, let’s suppose that it “holds that, in general, the consequences of our intervention do and yet don’t matter to our obligation to intervene”. In that case, we might well ask: why should the Agnostic care about a worry that arises from something obviously false? Maybe we should suppose instead that “commonsense morality is both consequentialist and non-consequentialist”. But what does that mean? According to Maitzen, “theories of moral obligation” divide into “two exhaustive categories: roughly, those that say our obligation to intervene depends on the total consequences of our intervention, and those that say it doesn’t”; the former he calls “consequentialist” and the latter “non-consequentialist”. In that case, commonsense morality says both that our obligation to intervene depends on the total consequence of our intervention and that it does not. But again: why should the Agnostic care about a worry that arises from something obviously false?

(This is a good place to note another misrepresentation by Maitzen. He says that, in the course of my argument, I distinguish consequentialist and nonconsequentialist theories and he represents my argument as relying on that distinction. I drew no such distinction, however; and my argument does not rely on it. I distinguished Accessibilist and Inaccessibilist theories and principles; that line runs orthogonal to the line between nonconsequentialist and consequentialist theories and principles.)

Back to the main thread of discussion: Maitzen sees the contradiction in commonsense morality but, he says, “we needn’t conclude that [it] is self-inconsistent” and he “propose[s] a way of resolving the apparent inconsistency”. It isn’t clear to me what it is to “resolve” an explicit contradiction, but it is clear to me that Maitzen’s “way of resolving” this contradiction involves what he calls a “rational reconstruction” of our obligation to intervene in Ashley’s case. According to Maitzen, that reconstruction consists of “an explanation” that has three features: (i) it constitutes “a logically consistent basis” for our obligation to intervene, (ii) it “makes the best sense possible of what commonsense morality tells us is our clear obligation to intervene,” and (iii) it is “incompatible with Agnosticism”. Now, I grant that his explanation does not contain an explicit contradiction, and so it’s an improvement over what he calls “commonsense morality”. But I deny that it “makes the best sense possible of what commonsense morality tells us is our clear obligation to intervene”. In fact, another explanation much more in keeping with commonsense makes much better sense of our obligation; moreover, that other explanation is compatible with Agnosticism.

Let’s begin with a simple question: exactly what moral principle governing the prevention of suffering like Ashley’s informs Maitzen’s explanation of our obligation to intervene? Well, on the one hand, he says that “[s]urely the consequences for Ashley do matter in some way to our obligation to intervene”. This suggests that our obligation depends on the consequences to her. But, on the other hand, he says that it “depends on what we predict [or “at least implicitly assume”] will be the total consequences to that

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16 Maitzen 2014: 11xxx.
18 Moreover, I wouldn’t draw the latter line the way Maitzen does; I would draw it the way Frances Howard-Snyder draws it in her 1994.
19 Maitzen 2014: 13xxx.
21 Maitzen 2014: 17xxx, his emphasis.
individual if we intervene or don’t intervene”. This suggests that it depends on what we predict or assume. These are very different suggestions. According to the first, if our not intervening to prevent someone’s suffering is better for him overall, we are obligated not to intervene, never mind whether we predict or assume that it is overall better for him that we intervene. According to the second, if we predict or assume that it is overall better for him that we intervene, then we are obligated to intervene, never mind whether our not intervening is overall better for him. According to the first, to tell whether we are obligated we must judge alternative futures. According to the second, to tell whether we are obligated we must access our minds. So which does Maitzen intend?

I suspect it’s the first. That is, I suspect that, according to Maitzen, commonsense morality tells us that our obligation to prevent suffering depends on the consequences of our intervening or not intervening, but it does not depend on the total consequences for everyone until the end of time. When it comes to what we are obligated to do, the only consequences that matter are those for the individual, e.g. Ashley. Commonsense morality, on Maitzen’s view, “restrict[s] our focus to the overall consequences for her”.

Another question: Maitzen says that our obligation “depends on” the consequences for the individual. But it could depend on the consequences in two ways: solely or just partly. Which is it? He mentions in passing a “risk to ourselves,” and he intimates here and elsewhere that the suffering in question is undeserved and involuntary, all of which suggests that we are not obligated to intervene if doing so poses a significant risk to us, or if the suffering is undeserved or (under certain conditions) undergone voluntarily. If Maitzen has other things in mind, then, since we don’t know what they are, we can’t assess whether, on the principle he has in mind, we should be in doubt about whether we are obligated to intervene in Ashley’s case. The only way forward, therefore, is to suppose he has nothing else in mind.

So I will take it that the moral principle governing the prevention of suffering like Ashley’s that informs Maitzen’s explanation is

Maitzen’s Morality. One is obligated to prevent someone’s undeserved suffering if and only if the total consequences for him will be better if one intervenes than if one doesn’t—unless one can’t intervene or there’s a significant risk to oneself or he deliberately chooses to endure it.

The main thing to notice about Maitzen’s Morality is that it is false, obviously false. (1) Suppose there are two people each of whose undeserved and involuntary suffering you can prevent without cost to yourself, but you can’t prevent both. Maitzen’s Morality implies that you are nevertheless obligated to prevent both. But you aren’t. (2) Suppose that you can prevent a stranger’s undeserved and involuntary suffering at no cost to yourself, but you can do so only at grave cost to your loved ones. Maitzen’s Morality implies that you are still obligated to prevent his suffering. But you aren’t. (3) Suppose that you can prevent the undeserved and involuntary suffering of an individual at no cost to yourself, but you can do so only if you fail in your special obligation to preserve the lives of thousands who are under your proper authority. Maitzen’s Morality implies that

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22 Maitzen 2014: 14xxx.
23 Maitzen 2014: 18xxx, my emphasis.
you are nevertheless obligated to prevent his suffering. But you aren’t. (4) Suppose that you can prevent someone’s undeserved and involuntary suffering at no cost to yourself and you permit it only for the sake of some significantly outweighing good that has nothing to do with him; moreover, suppose that you know that he would choose to endure it if he were to deliberate with all the relevant information. Maitzen’s Morality implies that you are still obligated to prevent his suffering. But you aren’t. (5) Suppose that you can prevent someone’s undeserved and involuntary suffering at no risk to yourself and you can permit it only for the sake of some significantly outweighing good that has nothing to do with him; moreover, suppose that you know that he will be properly compensated for enduring it. Maitzen’s Morality implies that you are nevertheless obligated to prevent his suffering. But you aren’t. And note that none of these cases requires that you exploit the sufferer or treat him as a mere means, or that you are unfair or unloving or lacking in compassion or empathy.

At this point, we might well pose a familiar question: why should the Agnostic care about a worry that arises from something obviously false? Maitzen’s Morality is not just false. It does not “[make] the best sense possible of what commonsense morality tells us is our clear obligation to intervene” in cases like Ashley’s. That’s because it restricts our focus in a way commonsense does not. It restricts our focus to the individual and oneself. Commonsense knows no such bounds. It does not turn a blind eye to others. A much better explanation of our obligation to prevent suffering like Ashley’s relies on a moral principle that respects commonsense morality’s concern for others in addition to the individual and oneself, a principle aptly named

*Commonsense Morality. One is obligated to prevent someone’s undeserved suffering if and only if the total consequences for him will be better if one intervenes than if one doesn’t—unless one has sufficiently good reason not to intervene and one permits it for that reason.*

I do not claim that Commonsense Morality is true. I only claim that it is much more in keeping with commonsense than Maitzen’s Morality. Moreover, Commonsense Morality is compatible with Agnosticism. For even if I am in doubt about whether some good I don’t know of would figure in a reason that might justify someone else in permitting Ashley’s suffering, e.g. God, it does not follow that I thereby have sufficiently good reason not to intervene; thus, to the extent that I sensibly think that the foreseeable consequences for Ashley reliably indicate the overall consequences for her, I should conclude that I’m obligated to intervene. Consequently, if I believe Commonsense Morality, I should be primed to deny premise (1) of the Objection.

Maitzen denies that the Agnostic can sensibly think of the foreseeable consequences for Ashley as reliably indicating the total consequences for her. Indeed, he even goes so far as to represent Agnosticism as *the view that* the foreseeable consequences for Ashley do not reliably indicate the total consequences for her, *as the view that* the former “bear no known relation” to the latter, *as the view that* there’s a “haphazard relation” between the two. In section 3 of his paper, Maitzen identifies someone as “Howard-Snyder’s Agnostic,” who “tells the intervener that his having acted to protect Ashley produced foreseeable consequences for her that bear no known relation to the total consequences for her: for all any of us can tell, Ashley is worse-off overall for
his having intervened”. Maitzen then gives three replies on behalf of the intervener, the third of which is this:

Most likely of all, however, the intervener will reply to the Agnostic in something like this way: “It’s absurd to say that I only guessed that I’d help Ashley overall if I prevented what looked to be an imminent assault on her. You say that the consequences for Ashley of my intervention that I could foresee don’t reliably indicate the overall consequences for her. You say that, for all I can tell, I made her worse-off overall by intervening. But that’s crazy. Of course she’s better-off overall because I intervened. Or at the very least she’s probably better-off overall.” I think a response along those lines makes the best sense of his—and our—belief that he was obligated to intervene. But it’s a response that Agnosticism must reject.

“Howard-Snyder’s Agnostic,” however, is not the real Agnostic. Maitzen misrepresents Agnosticism. The real Agnostic asserts that

- we should be in doubt about whether the foreseeable consequences of our intervening and not intervening reliably indicate the total consequences for everyone until the end of time.

Maitzen represents her as asserting that

- the foreseeable consequences of our intervening and not intervening do not reliably indicate the total consequences for Ashley.

But the real Agnostic said no such thing. She never restricted her focus to “the total consequences for Ashley”. Of course, Maitzen might wish to argue that the former entails the latter, but I’ll consider that argument when I see it. Until then, I see no reason why the Agnostic can’t affirm the former while denying the latter.

Interestingly, Maitzen does not argue that the foreseeable consequences of our intervening and not intervening reliably indicate that it’s overall best for Ashley that we intervene. Instead, he says that to suppose otherwise is “crazy,” and proposes that we properly “take for granted that our intervention will do her more overall good than harm”. Suppose he’s right. Suppose we properly take that for granted. Why can’t the

26 Maitzen 2014: 17xxx.
27 Nearly 20% of the sentences in section 3 of Maitzen 2014 represent the Agnostic as asserting something about the consequences for Ashley. At one point, Maitzen writes, quoting me: “Yet Agnosticism says that the consequences we can foresee are ‘but a drop in the ocean,’ as Howard-Snyder puts it (30), a negligible contribution to the total consequences for Ashley” (Maitzen 2014: 17xxx, emphasis added). Here’s what he’s quoting: “the foreseeable consequences are but a drop in the ocean of the total consequences” (Howard-Snyder 2009: 30, emphasis added).
28 Maitzen 2014: 17xxx and 20xxx, his emphasis.
Agnostic do the same? How does Agnosticism, real Agnosticism, and my defense of it imply that she cannot?

Let’s briefly consider the bearing of naturalism and theism in all this. Is there some significant tension between, naturalism or theism, on the one hand, and Agnosticism and my defense of it, on the other? As I have been at pains to point out, to answer this question we must state what moral principles we bring to the task. Maitzen thinks that friends of commonsense will bring Maitzen’s Morality. I disagree. If commonsense offers any moral principle relevant to the prevention of suffering like Ashley’s, it is much, much closer to Commonsense Morality. So suppose you are a naturalist or a theist who is a friend of commonsense and, as such, you endorse Commonsense Morality. Suppose you also accept premise (2) of the Objection. Does your naturalism or theism in conjunction with Commonsense Morality give you any reason to accept premise (1)? Not that I can see. For neither naturalism nor theism give you any reason to think that Agnosticism and my defense of it entails that you have sufficiently good reason not to intervene; consequently, neither naturalism nor theism give you any reason to think that Agnosticism and my defense of it entails that you should be in doubt about whether you should intervene.

“But hold on a minute,” someone might retort. “Unlike a naturalist, if you’re a theist, you will think that there really is some morally sufficient reason that justifies God’s non-intervention in Ashley’s case, a reason that He actively used in permitting it. If in addition you don’t see how any reason you know of would be sufficient, then, for all you can tell, there is a reason that would justify your non-intervention in Ashley’s case. Consequently, you should be in doubt about whether you are obligated to intervene.”

A theist who endorses Commonsense Morality might well reply as follows: “Yes, I think that there really is some morally sufficient reason that justifies God’s non-intervention in Ashley’s case, one that He actively used in permitting it; and yes, I don’t see how any reason I know of would be sufficient; and yes, for all I can tell, there is a reason that would justify my non-intervention in Ashley’s case. But it simply doesn’t follow that I should be in doubt about whether I am obligated to intervene. Whether that follows depends on what moral principle governs the prevention of suffering like Ashley’s. I think Commonsense Morality does. Thus, I think that it follows that I am not obligated to intervene only if it is true that, if, for all I can tell, there is a reason that would justify my non-intervention, then I have sufficiently good reason not to intervene. But it is false. It’s being the case that, for all I can tell, there is a reason that would justify my non-intervention is not sufficiently good reason for me not to intervene.”

I conclude that if you endorse Commonsense Morality, then, whether you are a naturalist or a theist, you have no reason to dissent from my defense of Agnosticism—at least not by virtue of your naturalism or theism. Of course, there may well be some naturalist or theist who endorses some obviously false moral principles on which my defense of Agnosticism fails. But to repeat: why should the Agnostic care about that?

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30 Thanks to Frances Howard-Snyder for comments on this paper.
REFERENCES