

Article

The Problem of Evil, God's Personhood, and the Reflective Muslim

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Abstract: Is it correct to think of God as a perfectly good personal agent? Not so, argue John Bishop and Ken Perszyk. Bishop and Perszyk, in their most recent work, *God, Purpose, and Reality: A Euteleological Understanding of Theism* (2023), outline a series of challenges that bring into question this concept of God—i.e., as a perfectly good personal agent, who is unique, unsurpassably great, all-powerful, and all-knowing. I aim to critically evaluate one of these challenges, namely the Normatively Relativised Logical Argument from Evil (NRLAFE). The NRLAFE has God's perfect goodness as its target. Bishop and Perszyk argue that people who are committed to certain values about what constitutes right relationship amongst persons, might reasonably judge God as lacking perfect goodness. They also contend that the relevant values will likely be endorsed by theists. My aim in this paper is twofold: first, I aim to assess the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil, in light of the tradition of Islamic Theism. The tradition of Islamic Theism is as broad as it is deep, and within the tradition there are a variety of ways in which God has been conceptualised. This includes debates as to whether we can view God as a personal agent. Second, I contend that we have available to us, from within and beyond the tradition of Islamic Theism, a set of resources that: (a) permit us to understand God as being a personal agent; and (b) allow us to resist the NRLAFE while endorsing the value commitments that Bishop and Perszyk have in mind. The perspective I bring to this paper is that of a reflective Muslim—i.e., a person of the Islamic faith who acknowledges that people of other religious and non-religious persuasions are as educated and concerned with seeking truth and avoiding error as they themselves are.

Keywords: problem of evil; God; Islamic philosophy



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1. Introduction

This paper has as its focus a novel argument from evil formulated by John Bishop and Ken Perszyk.¹ In their most recent work, *God, Purpose, and Reality: A Euteleological Understanding of Theism* (2023), Bishop and Perszyk argue that, relative to certain normative assumptions, we may judge a personal God as not worship-worthy. The argument may be characterised as follows:

P1. To be worthy of worship, an all-powerful personal God must have perfect, flawless personal goodness.

P2. Being good as a person requires being morally good, and moral goodness includes goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons.

C1. If an all-powerful personal God is to be worthy of worship, then God's perfect goodness must imply perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons (from P1 and P2).

P3. Relative to certain normative assumptions, God lacks perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons.

C2. An all-powerful personal God is not worthy of worship (from C1 and P3).

In the section to follow, we will consider each premise and the relevant supporting arguments. Following this, we critically engage with the argument by exploring notions of

divine personhood, divine goodness, and the normative assumptions at play. Our discussion will also draw on aspects of Islamic Theism to explore and evaluate the central themes and assumptions that underpin the Bishop-Perszyk argument. I contend that we have grounds to doubt the reasonableness of their argument from evil. The perspective I bring to this paper is that of a reflective Muslim whose reflections have led to an acknowledgment that, people of other religious and non-religious persuasions are as educated and concerned with seeking truth and avoiding error as they themselves are.²

2. The Bishop-Perszyk Argument from Evil

P1. To be worthy of worship, an all-powerful personal God must have perfect, flawless personal goodness.

There are a few terms in the first Premise that need defining. Bishop and Perszyk employ the standard view of God commonly found in analytic accounts of theism, that is; God is unique, unsurpassably great, all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good personal agent (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 11). Furthermore, to describe God as personal is to broadly acknowledge that:

...God is an intentional agent, with personal attributes, who is related interpersonally to other personal intentional agents. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 10)

Divine goodness is here characterised, in P1, as personal goodness that is flawless and perfect. This leads us to the second premise, which casts personal goodness as moral goodness.

P2. Being good as a person requires being morally good, and moral goodness includes goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons.

As stated, within standard analytic accounts of theism, God is taken to be perfectly good. Bishop and Perszyk argue that if God is taken to be a personal agent, then divine goodness has to be understood as (or as essentially including) moral goodness, since this is how we would normally construe the goodness of a person. They contend:

...if God is a person, God's unsurpassably great goodness is the perfect goodness of a person. Being good as a person requires being morally good, and moral goodness includes goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 27)

Moral goodness is here understood as including relational goodness; personal moral goodness requires goodness in relation to, and with, other persons.

C1. If an all-powerful personal God is to be worthy of worship, then God's perfect goodness must imply perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons (from P1 and P2).

Premises One and Two, taken together, lead us toward the conclusion that a personal agent who is worthy of worship, must possess perfect moral goodness. Perfect moral goodness is understood to imply perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons. Accordingly, God's relationship to, and with, other persons must exhibit perfect moral goodness on God's part.

P3. Relative to certain normative assumptions, God lacks perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons.

Bishop and Perszyk contend that it is reasonable to affirm the view that God lacks moral goodness. They argue that people who are committed to certain values about what constitutes right relationship amongst persons might reasonably judge that P3 is true. They also contend that the relevant value commitments will likely be endorsed by theists (Bishop and Perszyk 2011, p. 110). This premise is key to the overall argument and a careful exploration of its motivations is needed.

An initial issue is perfect moral goodness, and as Bishop and Perszyk observe, it becomes most pressing when we consider the problem of evil—i.e., that the personal God cannot be both all-powerful and all-good given the existence of evil (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 29). When speaking of evil, they have in mind horrendous evil in the sense given to

this term by Marilyn McCord Adams—'evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole' (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 31; and Adams 1999, p. 26). Some have argued that God may have a morally adequate reason for permitting (and, ultimately causing) all the evil that exists (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 29). For example, God may be justified in permitting evil, since evil is a logical consequence of granting created beings morally significant free will. Such an approach may go a significant way toward addressing the problem of evil; however, for Bishop and Perszyk, there is a lingering question:

...the problem of defending the consistency of the omnipotent personal God's goodness and the existence of evil might seem to be resolved, yet the question may remain whether the kind of goodness that this apparent solution shows to be compatible with existing evil, is *goodness enough* for the goodness of the uniquely worship-worthy God. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 30)

We may frame the question as follows: is it reasonable to view an all-powerful person who allows (and ultimately causes) evil as having the required goodness to be the fit object of worship? (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 30). Perhaps, in a similar vein to Adams, we could counter that God can defeat evils by bringing participants in horrors into the joy of eternal personal relationship with himself, such that victims of evil come to view their lives as good on the whole (Adams 1999, pp. 20–21). Bishop and Perszyk, nevertheless press their concern, namely:

It seems clear that Adams assumes that, while God would have caused injustice in his relationships with created persons if he had merely balanced off their sufferings against greater goods, God will introduce no defect in his relationships if those sufferings are defeated. . . . But we think this assumption may be contested. If God first caused or permitted created persons to suffer horrors and then compensated them even 'incommensurably'—God would be responsible for what might be judged a less than fully just and loving relationship with those other persons. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 31)

Bishop and Perszyk here make it explicit that they regard the exercise of personal omnipotence first to sustain horrendous sufferings and then (wonderfully) to redeem them as being morally flawed (Bishop and Perszyk 2011, p. 122). There is also the issue of trust:

God would have an unavoidably manipulative relationship with created persons, whilst they, for their part, could hardly give God their final trust, being naturally wary of compensations bestowed by one who once caused them such suffering. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 31)

Adams' reflections on this issue reveal a similar set of concerns, and in response to Bishop and Perszyk, she writes:

...there is the leftover question of whether and/or how God means to be good to us after the worst has already happened. John Bishop and Ken Perszyk have pressed a still deeper question: whether a God who set us up for horrors by creating us in a world like this has exhibited perfectly loving relationality toward us. . . . whether a God who sets us up for horrors by creating us in a world like this is trustworthy, whether God's track record in putting us in harm's way and not rescuing us takes God out of the category of people to whom it is reasonable to entrust oneself as to a parent or intimate friend. (Adams 2017, p. 25; quoted by Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 32)

Bishop and Perszyk are not claiming that everyone will endorse the third premise, nor that it is rationally compelling. Rather, relative to certain commitments, which may themselves be reasonably held by theists, it is reasonable to affirm the view that God lacks perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons. The central normative assumption may be understood as follows—*moral perfection must include acting*

perfectly well in relationship with other persons, and that this strategy (of first permitting and sustaining horrors and then compensating the participants) would not amount to acting perfectly well in relation to those persons caught up in horrors.³ Why, we may ask, would it amount to not acting perfectly well—one reason is that it *would be flawed because God would seem to be contriving or manipulating his relationship with created persons, rather than engaging in a mature, mutually respectful, and mutually trusting inter-personal relationship.*⁴

The following analogy may help us better appreciate the normative assumption at play. Consider the case of a young girl who is very ill. Her father elects to put her through a course of medical treatment that is painful, it also takes a heavy toll on her emotional and psychological health. The father accompanies his daughter during her treatments, assuring her of its necessity. He also promises her that once the treatments are over, they will take timeout and do all the things his daughter enjoys. And, indeed, once the daughter recovers, the father does as he has promised. Now, imagine, after many years, the daughter, now a young woman, discovers that there was an alternative course of treatment available. This alternative would not have been painful, nor would it have taken a heavy emotional and psychological toll. Her father was aware of this treatment, and it would have been available to her if he had consented (there were no financial constraints at play either). Yet, the father chose the other painful option. During and after her illness, the father was always available to his daughter and seemed deeply loving toward her. Yet, on reflection, the daughter, now a young woman, may rightly view their relationship as contrived and manipulative; she would also likely lose trust in him. She may also come to view her father as being less than good and less than loving.

A similar response may arise when we think about a personal God who allows and sustains horrors and then goes on to compensate for and defeat these horrors. Perhaps, God could have created a world with significantly morally free creatures with no horrors; if such a world is not possible, then God would also have the option of not creating one. We witness horrors, and many experience horrors. A personal, all-powerful God could have held back from creating a world such as ours. Bishop and Perszyk may argue that personal omni-God's relationship with us can be seen to be contriving and manipulative, and one that makes it hard to trust. Accordingly, the moral cost of horrors seems extraordinarily high. Such a God, if he did exist, would be seen to lack perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons.

C2. An all-powerful personal God is not worthy of worship (from C1 and P3).

Once we grant C1 and Premise Three, it follows that a personal God is not worthy of worship. Bishop and Perszyk also observe that their argument is not an argument for atheism; rather, it helps open up a space where we may explore alternative concepts of God, or at least alternatives that jettison notions of God as a personal agent. They note,

Personal-omniGod theorists may, of course, sincerely avow that they do not share the normative assumptions that generate this conclusion—assumptions about what God's personal goodness would have to be if God is to be worship-worthy. But they ought not to deny that those normative assumptions may be held reasonably, nor that, when they are held, give rise to serious—and, for some, decisive—doubts about the worship worthiness of the personal omniGod. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 34)

As I shall argue, there are grounds for reasonable doubt about various aspects of the Bishop-Perszyk argument. We may very well share their value commitments, yet we may also reasonably doubt the application of these commitments to judgments about divine goodness. First, however, let us consider the concept of a personal God within Islamic theism.

3. God and Personhood

The Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil, just outlined, clearly has as its target the concept of an all-powerful God as a personal agent. An initial question for the reflective

Muslim is whether Islamic theism allows for the concept of a personal God? At face value, this would seem to be the case. Within the Quran, God is described as:⁵

- Having knowledge and awareness—Allah comprehends all things in His Knowledge (Q. 65:12), and Allah is well aware of all that you do (Q. 3:153);
- Performing actions—Allah is the All-Wise Creator (Q. 36:81);
- Free in actions—when He intends a thing, His Command is, “be,” and it is! (Q. 38:82);
- Able to enter into relationships—Allah took Abraham as an intimate friend (Q. 4:125).⁶

The Quran also describes God as having a face (Q.2:115), hands (Q.48.10), shin (Q. 68:42), and a throne (Q. 2:255). Whether we understand these descriptions literally or as metaphors, they seem to lean toward a personal view of God. There is also the Quranic view that there is nothing else like God (*laysa kamithlihi shay*—there is nothing like unto Him, Q. 42:11). This can also be seen to be consistent with the view that God is a personal agent, a unique personal agent. Matters are less clear-cut when we delve deeper into Muslim scholarship on this issue. For example, Mohammad Saleh Zarepour writes that, ‘from the viewpoint of many Muslims, God is not a person’ (Zarepour 2021, p. 121); similarly, Muhammad Legenhausen observes that among Muslim thinkers, the belief that God is a person is a minority position:

...there is no ... unanimity among Muslim theologians and philosophers in the claim that God is not a person. There have been Muslim theologians who have held that God quite literally sits upon his throne in heaven. Nevertheless, within the fold of Islam (at least among theologians), belief in a personal God is a minority position. (Legenhausen 1986, p. 307)

How do we reconcile the language of the Quran with the view that God is not a person? Writing on the issue of God and Evil from a Muslim perspective, Tim Winter notes that the language of the Quran makes God accessible for the majority. He observes that for true thinkers, such language can be understood as metaphor and does not indicate that God is a person; to do so risks idolatry. He writes:

While theodicies of various kinds may helpfully serve pedagogic ends...they exist only for the majority of the faithful, who need a God made accessible by some straightforwardly anthropopathic descriptions. True metaphysicians find them unnecessary and shift the focus away from the God of ‘resemblance’ (tashbīh) proclaimed in those scriptural passages which so profusely name Him, to the God of ‘otherness’ (tanzīh) announced in other texts such as ‘Nothing resembles Him’ (42:11)... and the seemingly humanising lexis of scripture and mysticism exists not to indicate an actual ‘personhood’ in God but to provide a context for a set of salvifically effective and needful human responses to divine initiatives and commands. This apophasis secures the final victory over the animism of ancient Arab idol-worship; a right understanding of the Second Commandment, famously dear to Islam, obviates any theodicy, and indeed makes it nearly blasphemous. (Winter 2017, p. 246)

Winter’s stance is thought-provoking—i.e., that the way scripture leads us to think of and relate to God does not necessarily define Who or What He Is. While Winter is eloquent in strongly expressing these views, other Muslim thinkers have argued that God is a superpersonal being, namely, God is personal though not a person (Zarepour 2021, p. 129).⁷ For instance, Zarepour contends that:

...God is a personal being but not a person. In the same manner, as I am a person, but I share many attributes (e.g., weight and size) with subpersonal beings (e.g., trees and cars), God is a superpersonal being but He shares many attributes (e.g., speech and will) with persons like us. (Zarepour 2021, p. 129)

I accept that we may make a distinction between God being personal and God being a person. For the purposes of this paper, I use the terms person and personal interchangeably. The reason for doing so is that the Bishop-Perszyk argument is unaffected by this distinction;

the argument would apply whether we view God as a person or superpersonal—both concepts understand God as literally having personal attributes.

As we reflect on the argument from evil defended by Bishop and Perszyk, we could embrace the prevailing Muslim view that God is not a person, thereby defusing the argument. If we do not view God as a personal agent, then the first premise carries no weight, since there is no commitment to a personal God as being worthy of worship. We still would need to be cautious, even if we jettison viewing God as being personal, there may be other variations of the problem of evil that may come up (Bishop 2021; Bishop and Perszyk 2023, Chp. 5). Muslim thinkers are very much up to the challenge. Here, I have in mind Khalil Andani, who has recently argued for an Islamic Neoplatonic theodicy in which he contends that evil is not created by God (Andani 2023). Andani's theodicy is not committed to viewing God as a personal agent; however, it does present God as creating only what is absolutely perfect and good.

We may step back from the view that God is a person; nevertheless, there are likely to be other forms of the argument from evil that may arise. At this juncture, I suggest it may be premature to abandon the view of a personal God. I acknowledge that such a view within Muslim tradition is not the standard view and very much in the minority; however, this in-and-of-itself is not a good reason to reject such a view of God. There is also the spectre of idolatry that Winter alludes to. Bishop and Perszyk share a similar concern, noting that 'taking God to be, literally and metaphysically, a person may seem suspiciously like an idolatrously anthropomorphic construction of the divine in our own image' (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 23). There are two points, by way of a response, that may be made here: (1) to say that God is a personal agent is not equivalent to the claim that divine personhood corresponds wholly to human personhood, and (2) our primary cue for considering God to be a personal agent is that it is consistent with scripture, we are not extrapolating divine personhood from human personhood.

We may also acknowledge that personal language about God as used in scripture can be read as metaphor; nevertheless, we may contest Winter's view about true metaphysicians resisting the claim that God is to be understood as a person. The literature on this issue reveals several respected thinkers who are at home with the view of God as a personal agent.⁸ There is available to us a second strategy that may also defuse the Bishop-Perszyk argument, and that involves questioning human personhood.

This strategy is likely to be seen as radical; nevertheless, once we deny that human beings are persons, then the Bishop-Perszyk argument falls away. Bishop and Perszyk take it for granted that human beings are persons, if human beings are not persons, then moral duties owed only to persons will not apply to them. I acknowledge this is a radical move, however, some would regard denying divine personhood as being equally radical. As noted above, talk of divine personhood is conceivably metaphor, perhaps talk of human personhood can also be understood as metaphor—albeit a very useful and even necessary metaphor. Questioning human personhood may strike us as counter-intuitive, yet such a view seems consistent with certain Sufi views on human nature.⁹ Some Sufi Muslims have held the view that the self is an illusion:

...that the human soul is kept apart from God only by the illusion of the self and only by love can self be overcome... (Waugh 2005, p. 35)

Rumi seems to have been sensitive to this possibility, he invites his readers to, 'journey from the self to the Self and find the mine of gold, and to leave behind what is sour and bitter and move toward the sweet' (Star 2008, p. 71). We may also wonder if God is the only real person and if we carry only the image of personhood. A mountain is three dimensional, yet its image is two dimensional, or perhaps one dimensional. Similarly, human personhood exists as an image of the divine person; thus, we lack full personhood. If this is the case, then it may be idolatrous to view ourselves as persons.¹⁰ Interestingly, Martha J. Farah and Andrea S. Heberlein draw on the findings of neuroscience to argue that our perceptions around human personhood is an illusion akin to visual illusions, and

that ‘it is the result of brain mechanisms that represent the world nonveridically under certain circumstances’ (Farah and Heberlein 2007, p. 45).

In summary, we have considered the question of whether Islamic theism allows for the concept of a personal God. We may respond by noting that most Muslim thinkers accept personal language when speaking about and addressing God; however, they may not necessarily view God as a person. Importantly, viewing God as a personal agent need not be seen as being inconsistent with Islamic theism. We have also considered some challenges to the idea of a personal God, from within and beyond the tradition, for example: that such a commitment is a minority view, not the view of true metaphysicians, and that it risks idolatry. These challenges can be met. I acknowledge there are other significant challenges related to transcendence, immanence, and divine simplicity, these also need to be addressed; however, such a task is beyond the scope of this paper.¹¹

We may then present four possibilities that are open to the reflective Muslim, these are as follows:

- (1) Not understanding God literally as a personal agent, such a stance would be unaffected by the argument presented by Bishop and Perszyk. There may nonetheless be other applicable iterations of the argument from evil—especially if we continue to understand God as sustaining all of creation while also being perfectly good and loving.
- (2) Affirm that God is a personal agent and deny human personhood; such a move would also defuse the Bishop-Perszyk argument. Although there are likely to be other applicable iterations of the argument from evil.
- (3) Set aside personhood, saying that neither God nor human beings are literal persons. This view would also defuse the Bishop-Perszyk argument. There may, however, be other applicable versions of the argument.
- (4) Understanding God as an all-powerful and perfectly good personal agent and affirm human personhood: endorsing this view places us squarely in the sights of the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil.

These are then the four possibilities open to the Reflective Muslim.¹² The first three possibilities are unaffected by the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil. The fourth possibility is the target of the argument. There are other *controversial* possibilities that may also serve to defuse the argument; for instance, one may take God to not be all-powerful, or not all-knowing, or not perfectly morally good. I am, however, sympathetic to understanding God as being all-powerful and a perfectly good personal agent; accordingly, I will need to consider the reasonableness of the Bishop-Perszyk argument. To this end, the sections to follow will delve deeper into the theme of divine goodness and the normative assumptions at play.

4. Divine Goodness

As with views on the personhood of God, there are several possible approaches to the issue of divine goodness. Our aim in this section will be to evaluate divine goodness as it is presented by Bishop and Perszyk. According to Bishop and Perszyk, divine goodness is to be understood in terms of moral goodness. They contend:

...if God is a person, God’s unsurpassably great goodness is the perfect goodness of a person. Being good *as a person* requires being *morally* good, and moral goodness includes goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons. If God is a person, then, God’s perfect goodness must imply perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 27)

This characterisation of divine goodness gives rise to six significant concerns. The first concern with this view is that it seems to presume a close correspondence between divine personhood and human personhood. We may acknowledge that being a good human person requires being morally good, but why suppose our view of a good human person

would also apply to God? There is considerable asymmetry between God and human beings. God is held to be all-powerful, all-knowing, the creator and sustainer of all that exists; human beings, on the other hand, hold none of these attributes. In addition, our awareness and understanding of our own personhood develop and evolve over time, we also view our sense of self as being contingent and somewhat vulnerable; none of this would apply to God. These differences suggest that divine personhood would be significantly different from human personhood. Admittedly, none of the 'asymmetries' mentioned entail that God's goodness as a person is not (or does not include) moral goodness. We may, nevertheless, argue that it seems rather swift to assume that if we understand God as being personal, divine goodness must then be understood in terms of moral goodness. It seems hasty to assume that characteristics we normally associate with human personhood, would also be characteristics of divine personhood. There may be other ways to understand personal divine goodness; however, the question for Bishop and Perszyk is twofold: why must we understand personal divine goodness in terms of moral goodness, and more importantly, is moral goodness the only, or best way of understanding personal divine goodness? There may be other ways to understand divine goodness; for example, in a recent work, Elif Nur Balci examines the Mu'tazila tradition and its understanding of the problem of evil as a helpful structural framework for comprehending horrendous evil and the concept of a good God (Elif Nur Balci 2022). I further elaborate on these possibilities at the end of this paper.

The second concern relates to the applicability of moral categories to God. Consider the normative assumption Bishop and Perszyk have in mind- i.e., to reject as morally flawed the exercise of personal omnipotence first to sustain horrendous sufferings and then (wonderfully) to redeem.

This assumption relies on a moral judgment, namely, that it is morally flawed because God would seem to be contriving or manipulative in his relationship with created persons rather than engaging in a mature, mutually respectful, and mutually trusting interpersonal relationship. Such a judgement is understandable within the context of interpersonal human relationships; however, God is not simply an individual within a community of individuals; God is held to be the being upon whom every other entity is dependent for their very being. While we may acknowledge that God is a person, we would also view God as being significantly different from human persons. The moral cost would indeed be too high for a human person to allow and sustain horrors. It is questionable whether the moral judgments we employ among human persons would also apply to God. Or whether, indeed, there are any external standards of morality or ethics that God is obliged to meet. There is then reasonable doubt about applying human moral judgements in relation to a personal God's perfect goodness.¹³

The third concern relates to divine goodness being judged in terms of what would constitute a just and loving relationship. Given the context of interpersonal relations among human persons, we often make moral judgements about the nature of our relationships. There are, however, grounds to doubt whether human interpersonal relationality would be an appropriate basis from which to judge the divine-human relationship. There are important differences; for example, human relationships such as friendship and romantic love, more often than not, involve peers. Our relationships with family or friends will also involve change as individuals grow and mature over time. A divine-human relationship could never be a relationship between peers, it may deepen over time; however, growth and maturity will only be applicable to the human dimension of the relationship. An all-powerful, personal God is also seen as the source of life and our very being, as one in whom we hope to find ultimate peace and love; we do not usually view our family, friends, and partners in this way. The judgments, accentuated by Bishop and Perszyk, about the necessity of mature, respectful, and mutually trusting interpersonal relationship, seem reasonable for interpersonal relationships among peers but not necessarily suitable for the divine-human relationship. Think here of the case involving the unwell young girl; perhaps the treatment with no side effects had a very high mortality rate. The father may

not have spoken to his young daughter about this possibility, knowing that it would only complicate matters for her—hence, what seems contriving and manipulative is really an act of deep love and care.

The fourth concern relates to the risk of cognitive idolatry. This concern relates to the standard of goodness that is implicit in the Bishop-Perszyk argument. For example, in response to the Free Will Defence, Bishop and Perszyk argue that the question remains as to whether:

...the kind of goodness that this apparent solution shows to be compatible with existing evil *is goodness enough* for the goodness of the uniquely worship worthy God. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 30)

And at a later point, they argue that:

If God first caused or permitted created persons to suffer horrors and then compensated them—even ‘incommensurably’—God would be responsible for what might plausibly be judged a less than fully just and loving relationship. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 31)

Implicit in the approach Bishop and Perszyk have taken is the view that for God to be worthy of worship, God must be judged to possess enough goodness, justice, and love. They judge a personal God who allows and sustains horrors as falling short of this requirement. As outlined above, there are significant concerns in relation to how Bishop and Perszyk formulate and apply the notion of goodness to a personal conception of God.

There is also a deeper, interlinked issue here, and it relates to how Bishop and Perszyk view personhood. They maintain that,

...being a person is conceptually a matter of being a person amongst persons, in relation with other persons, and (in certain ways, and under certain conditions) answerable to other persons. (Bishop and Perszyk 2023, p. 33)

It is true that ‘no man is an island,’ and that, in general, we are not self-sufficient and very much reliant on others. Nevertheless, I suggest we may fairly doubt this conceptual claim. It does not seem to be conceptually true that being ‘a person is conceptually a matter of being a person amongst persons, in relation with other persons.’ We can bring to mind *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, the central character from Ibn Tufayl’s novel, who, as an infant, lands on an uninhabited island (Ibn Tufayl 2015). His personhood is not diminished by him being the only person on the island. Or imagine the first human ancestor who became self-aware; if there were no others with this capacity, they may have felt alone, but they would nevertheless still be a person. A thought experiment may be helpful here; imagine waking up one morning and discovering that everyone else in the world had disappeared. Would you stop being a person at this point simply because there are no other persons present? The intuition here is that we would still regard ourselves as a person.

God is also likely to be an exception; God may be held to be a person who is self-sufficient. We can imagine a personal God who exists prior to there being any other persons, there does not seem to be any conceptual difficulty involved here. If God is an exception, it is also questionable whether God would be answerable to other persons in the same way human persons are. Accordingly, the concept of personhood and the standard of goodness Bishop and Perszyk have in mind risk a form of cognitive idolatry.¹⁴ They have a concept in mind that a personal God is required to meet, however, that concept may be too narrow so as to be aligned with the discovery of truth.

The fifth concern also relates to the relativised approach that Bishop and Perszyk employ. As noted above, they argue that, relative to certain normative assumptions, God would be responsible for what might plausibly be judged to be a less than fully just and loving relationship with created persons. Accordingly, the goodness that we observe is not *goodness enough* for the goodness of the uniquely worship-worthy God. Perhaps we could imagine a world in which there is suffering, but not horrendous suffering. Given such a world, it might still be argued that, relative to certain normative assumptions, God would be responsible for what might plausibly be judged as being less than perfectly morally

good. After all, it is morally flawed to cause and sustain suffering and then to redeem it. Now imagine another world in which there is no suffering. An argument could still be made that, relative to certain normative assumptions, God would be judged as less than perfectly morally good. After all, it is morally flawed to shield a person or community from the consequences, even painful consequences, of their own free actions. Now, one may agree that there is always a normatively relativised argument at hand and that *conceptually*, a personal God could never be perfectly morally good. Such a move would miss the key insight here, and that is on the Bishop-Perszyk approach, perfect moral goodness becomes elusive—much like a perpetually shifting goal post. The concern here is that a relativised approach leads us into a self-sealing argument. There could never be any counter-evidence, since we could always find ways to view a state of affairs as being flawed. To be fair, Bishop and Perszyk do not present their argument in this way since their focus is horrendous evil. This may give rise to an intriguing and perhaps provocative question: are there horrendous evils?

There is a *hadith* that suggests a change of perspective when we are in the presence of God, once in heaven, our perspective on suffering will change. The *hadith* is as follows:

...[a] person from amongst the persons of the world be brought who had led the most miserable life (in the world). . .he would be made to dip once in Paradise and it would be said to him. O, son of Adam, did you face, any hardship? Or had any distress fallen to your lot? And he would say: By Allah, no, O my Lord, never did I face any hardship or experience any distress.¹⁵

If such a deep transformation takes place in God's paradise, then it is possible that those who suffered horrors may, in retrospect, cease to view their experiences as cases of horrendous evil. Bishop and Perszyk may object that, this scenario also seems morally flawed. God acts first to allow and sustain horrors, then acts to alter our perception of these horrors. By way of a response, we may note that the definition of horrendous evil turns on a *prima facie* judgment, namely, that it 'constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole'. The post-mortem transformation is such that, victims of horrors come to view their lives as a great good to them on the whole, they realise their lives were always a great good. Accordingly, the *prima facie* reason for doubt dissipates in God's heaven. This is not to deny that evil and suffering occurred; rather, we revise our judgment of that evil and suffering and no longer view them as being horrendous in nature. Bishop and Perszyk could argue that there remains a normatively relativised argument even in the absence of horrors; this approach, however, will strike our concern outlined earlier—i.e., that a relativised approach leads us into a self-sealing argument.

The sixth concern relates again to the standard of goodness. There seems to be an implicit assumption, on the Bishop-Perszyk approach, that *God's goodness (if he is a personal being) includes acting morally well in developing and participating in inter-personal relationships (i.e., not taking actions on one's own part which will impair one's relationship with others)*.¹⁶ Such an assumption needs further clarification, as there are cases where we may distinguish between the moral goodness of an agent and the outcome of an action taken by the agent. Bruce Langtry explains this distinction as follows:

An agent may be motivated by a desire to bring about a good state of affairs, and this desire may be fulfilled, but the moral goodness of the action and of the agent may diverge far from the quality of the result. For example, the quality of the result can vary with luck and with the interference of other people, without there being any variation in the moral goodness of either the action or the agent. (Langtry 2008, pp. 73–74)

The key insight here is that the moral status of an outcome does not necessarily reflect the moral standing of the agent whose actions led to that outcome. Think here of a mother who entrusts her son with a large sum of money to invest wisely; the son breaches that trust and skips town with that money. Or the son loses that money after his investments

go bad. Neither the son's betrayal nor the investments going bad would impinge on the moral character of the mother. It may be argued that God would be immune to external factors such as luck and malign conspirators. We can appeal here to morally significant freewill as possibly a morally sufficient reason for the existence of evil and horrors. This would then allow us to contend that God remains perfectly morally good, since evil and horrors are an outcome of this form of freewill. Accordingly, a contrived and manipulative relationship, if viewed as the outcome of God allowing and sustaining freewill, need not be seen to impinge on God's moral goodness.

In summary, we have considered six concerns with the way Bishop and Perszyk understand and judge divine goodness. These concerns, if justified, also serve as grounds to doubt P2—i.e., *being good as a person requires being morally good, and moral goodness includes goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons*. This claim may be true about human persons, but is it also true if we construe God as a personal being? A reflective Muslim may acknowledge that there are reasonable grounds to doubt the claim that the perfect goodness of a personal God, must be understood in terms of moral goodness. There are also grounds for doubt that our moral categories are also applicable to God. In addition, P2 presupposes an unnecessarily constrained understanding of personhood. The concerns highlighted also provide grounds to doubt P3—*Relative to certain normative assumptions, God lacks perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons*. That is, a relativised approach may not provide a meaningful basis from which to judge divine goodness; and the horrors that the normative assumptions relate to may not turn out to be horrors on the whole. We may also doubt that the outcomes of divine action allow us to judge the degree to which God is morally good. Given these concerns, we have grounds to doubt the overall reasonableness of the Bishop-Perszyk argument.

Our discussion of divine goodness has touched on the normative assumptions and value commitments at play within Islamic and Abrahamic theism. The section to follow aims for a deeper consideration of these normative assumptions and commitments and the tempering effect they may have on the Bishop-Perszyk argument.

5. Normative Assumptions and Value Commitments

Bishop and Perszyk appeal to normative assumptions to motivate their argument from evil. The central normative assumption at play involves rejecting as morally flawed the exercise of personal omnipotence, first to sustain horrendous sufferings and then (wonderfully) to redeem. This normative assumption serves as the basis for judging whether a personal God is worthy of worship. We may acknowledge that the values that underpin this assumption are reasonable and at home within Abrahamic theism—i.e., the need for mature, mutually respectful, and mutually trusting interpersonal relationships. There are, however, within Islamic and Abrahamic theism a variety of normative assumptions and value commitments at play.

We may speak of a family of Abrahamic normative assumptions that are hierarchical and contextual in nature. For instance, the love of God and love for our neighbours are arguably the most important value commitments within Abrahamic theism. These are closely followed by values about the importance of life and the prohibition against killing. The prohibition on killing also permits exceptions in cases of self-defence; nevertheless, it is a normative assumption that carries much weight. In addition, this assumption is applicable to human beings; it is not a value commitment that God is expected to hold. As is often the case, Abrahamic theists hold that life and death are God's prerogative alone. Understood in this way, we can observe an interplay among a variety of normative assumptions and value commitments.

Within Islamic theism, there are also key value commitments such as patience (*sabr*), trust in God (*tawakkul*), and forgiveness (*maghfira*) that hold deep value, especially when faced with evil and suffering. These commitments may also serve as grounds for reasonable doubt with regard to the approach Bishop and Perszyk have taken. If there are a family of commitments at play within Abrahamic theism, then such commitments can potentially

act to parry the thrust of the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil. Consider the example of Farid Ahmed, whose wife was gunned down in cold blood during Friday prayers, along with fifty others, in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019. Ahmed forgave the gunman; he spoke about the importance of peace, love, and forgiveness and that he did not want to have ‘a heart that is boiling like a volcano.’¹⁷ It is likely that Ahmed would agree that it is wrong to cause and allow horrors and that we need an attitude of caution toward those who perpetrate horrors. Yet he does not judge God according to these commitments; his hope and trust in God remain deep and profound.

The example of Farid Ahmed shows that our normative assumptions do not exist in isolation; rather, they reside within a family of assumptions and values, and there is an interplay among them. We then have grounds to doubt the reasonableness of the normative assumption that Bishop and Perszyk have in mind, even though we can affirm the value commitments that underpin this assumption. The reason being that, within Abrahamic theism, God is not necessarily seen as being bound by the assumptions and commitments that we may hold.

Given our discussion above, we have grounds to doubt the truth of P3—i.e., *Relative to certain normative assumptions, God lacks perfect moral goodness in relation to, and relationship with, other persons*. We may acknowledge that the value commitments at play are reasonable; nevertheless, the normative assumption that they underpin seems inconsistent with the spirit of Abrahamic theism. There is one further value commitment that, I suggest, could also serve to temper the approach taken by Bishop and Perszyk, and that is intellectual humility. As I shall contend, it is a value commitment that is reasonable and at home within Islamic theism.

6. Intellectual Humility

For the purposes of this paper, I take ‘intellectual humility’ to mean the following: (a) recognising that judgements based on our normative assumptions and value commitments are fallible, and (b) recognising that the quality of our judgements, based on our assumptions and commitments, are dependent on the information available to us. Intellectual humility arises from acknowledging the limitations of our cognitive capacities. There are times when our value-based judgements will be mistaken, and the correctness of our judgements are contingent on the background information available to us.

Understood in this way, intellectual humility rests comfortably within the tradition of Islamic theism. We may here refer to the Quranic narratives about Moses and the enigmatic person of Khidr to explore this further. Moses is instructed by God to meet with Khidr. Having met with him, Moses accompanies him on a journey—Khidr; however, warns Moses that he will see things that may disturb him and that he is not to ask questions. As the narrative unfolds, Moses observes Khidr behaving in ways that strike him as immoral,

So they set out, but after they had boarded a ship, the man [Khidr] made a hole in it. Moses protested, ‘Have you done this to drown its people? You have certainly done a terrible thing!’ (Q 18:71)

After a series of such episodes, Moses loses patience with Khidr and questions him about his behaviour. Khidr’s response is intriguing; he explains:

As for the ship, it belonged to some poor people working at sea. So I intended to damage it, for there was a ‘tyrant’ king ahead of them who seizes every ‘good’ ship by force. (Q 18:79)

The act of damaging the ship saves it from being plundered. Moses’ moral outrage most likely subsides at this point. He may have come to see Khidr as acting in the best interests of the ship owners and perhaps even the passengers. The owners and passengers would have been outraged as well, much like Moses. Khidr had put their livelihood and lives at risk; however, what becomes clear is that his actions are in their best interests. The ship owners get to keep their ship and their livelihood while allowing for a means of transport for travelers. The outrage experienced by Moses is reasonable and understandable,

yet he is also mistaken in his judgment. There is more at play than Moses is aware of, and once we see the broader picture, our judgement of Khidr may shift from outrage to one of curiosity and perhaps even admiration for his wisdom.

The Khidr narrative invites us toward intellectual humility, namely, recognising our epistemic limitations, viewing our value judgements as fallible, and considering the correctness of our judgments as dependent on the information available.¹⁸ If we are comfortable with endorsing intellectual humility, we then have grounds to temper the metaphysical application of the value commitments that Bishop and Perszyk have in mind. We feel outrage and also heartbreak at the suffering we witness in our world. Evil and suffering are real, as is our recognition of injustice and the perversion of good. It is nevertheless a separate question, nevertheless, as to whether we are in a reasonable epistemic position to assess whether God exhibits perfect moral goodness (if indeed we understand divine goodness as moral goodness). Given intellectual humility, we should be very cautious about doing so.

If indeed there is a personal God, we would have to acknowledge a sizable epistemic gulf between God and created beings—we cannot so to speak, ‘step into God’s shoes’, or have a ‘God’s eye view’. Without a jury of peers, could we really put God’s character on trial? Even among peers, Abrahamic theism endorses caution about judgments of character. Given intellectual humility, there are reasonable grounds to doubt that we are in an epistemic position to assess God’s character. We simply may not have the requisite cognitive capacities and access to the relevant information that would allow for a reasonable assessment to be made. If we accept the importance of Intellectual Humility, we then have grounds to doubt our standing to judge P3 to be true.

7. Conclusions and Reflections

We have covered much ground, and in thinking through the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil, a reflective Muslim has a number of options before them. A reflective Muslim may not hold God to be a person or personal being; as such, their commitments will be unaffected by the Bishop-Perszyk argument. It is also possible that a reflective Muslim who believes in a personal God may begin to rethink their concept of God in light of what Bishop and Perszyk have to say. Alternatively, a reflective Muslim may be unmoved by the Bishop-Perszyk argument, and if my discussion of the issues is correct, we have grounds for doubting the reasonableness of their argument from evil.

There are six issues at play within the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil that allow room for reasonable doubt. We may summarise these issues as follows:

1. The Bishop-Perszyk argument presupposes human personhood. There are strands of Muslim thought and contemporary science that cast doubt on this idea. We have a sense of self, yet our sense of personhood may not be veridical and may, in a way, risk idolatry.
2. Bishop and Perszyk cast divine goodness of an all-powerful personal God as moral goodness. There are several issues with understanding divine goodness in this way. It may be the case that goodness in relation to human personhood is best understood as moral goodness, although it remains to be seen as to why divine personal goodness also needs to be understood in this way. Similar questions arise as to whether our moral categories, norms of inter-personal relationships among humans, and the interdependency of persons necessarily apply to God.
3. The relativised approach taken by Bishop and Perszyk in order to judge divine goodness is concerning. As noted above, a normative commitment always seems to be at hand to doubt divine goodness, even when there is no suffering. The risk with this approach is that divine goodness becomes an ever-shifting goal post, and the relativised approach becomes self-sealing. In addition, the horrors that the normative assumptions relate to may not turn out to be horrors on the whole.
4. The Bishop-Perszyk argument involves judging God’s moral goodness in relation to God allowing and sustaining morally significant freewill, the associated horrors, and

then acting to redeem them. There is, however, reasonable doubt as to whether the consequences of divine action correspond to the degree to which God is morally good. The moral status of an outcome does not automatically reflect the moral standing of the agent whose actions led to that outcome (even if the outcome is a relationship that is contrived and manipulative).

5. Bishop and Perszyk appeal to normative assumptions and value commitments as part of their argument. We may acknowledge that the value commitments at play are reasonable and at home within Abrahamic theism. These commitments, as I have argued, are not privileged within Abrahamic theism as they are within the Bishop-Perszyk argument. Bishop and Perszyk employ these value commitments in a way that is not wholly in keeping with the spirit of Abrahamic theism (since our value commitments are not necessarily seen as being applicable to God). Accordingly, we may accept the value commitments at play yet doubt the reasonableness of the relevant normative assumption.
6. There is also the issue of intellectual humility. If my argument is accepted, then considerations of epistemic humility serve to significantly attenuate our standing to judge divine goodness (especially if we assume that divine goodness is moral goodness).

These issues, whether taken individually or collectively, serve as grounds to doubt the reasonableness of the Bishop-Perszyk argument. While we may set-aside the Bishop-Perszyk argument from evil, we also need to be cognisant of other possible philosophical and theological challenges that wait in the wings for those who are open to viewing God as a person or personal being. These challenges, I believe, can be met, although further work will be needed. Importantly, a reflective Muslim need not abandon their commitment to a personal God, if they have such a commitment, in virtue of this argument from evil. A reflective Muslim may also have good reason to remain open to a personal concept of God. The Quran, at face value, permits viewing God as a personal being. Faith and its associated phenomenology lean toward a personal, relational view of God.

Reflecting also on suffering and appropriate responses to suffering, I believe, invites and perhaps requires a personal response. This is especially true for victims of horrors; it is through a deeply personal response to their plight that healing may begin. If indeed there is a God—a God who responds to evil and suffering, then such a God would need to be able to respond in a way that is deeply personal and compassionate. Moreso, if God is to be considered worthy of worship. There is also the issue of divine goodness and whether we need to construe it as moral goodness. It seems to me that there may be other ways of thinking about divine goodness (e.g.,) aesthetic goodness and prudential goodness. There is also phenomenological goodness, whereby God's presence is itself a source of goodness. Think here of Psalm 16:11: *Your presence fills me with joy and brings me pleasure forever*. Perhaps we could think of divine goodness as God acting from love, where love can be taken to include two desires, one for the good of the beloved and one for union with the beloved. Understood in these ways, divine goodness need not be seen to bind God to any obligations or duties and paves the way for a more profound understanding of divinity—i.e., God as freely choosing to act from love. These considerations are by no means decisive, and a full defense must wait for another day—*inshaAllah*.

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Notes

- 1 I am deeply indebted to John Bishop for his generous comments and suggestions and for the many precious hours he gave to help me understand the argument. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers and also to Imran Aijaz for his helpful comments and suggestions.
- 2 I employ the Reflective Muslim approach in some of my other publications, [Ali \(2013, 2018, 2023\)](#).
- 3 In personal correspondence with John Bishop.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 I use <https://quran.com/> to source translations of Quranic verses by Mustafa [Khattab \(2015\)](#) and Abdul Haleem, accessed on 2 December 2023.
- 6 ‘To say that God is personal is to acknowledge the following things: God has knowledge and awareness; God performs actions; God is free in the actions he performs; and God can enter into relationships with persons other than himself’ (see [Peterson et al. 2009](#), p. 77). For a fuller discussion of God within Muslim tradition, see [Doko and Turner \(2023\)](#); see also Celene [Ibrahim \(2022\)](#), [Ali \(2016\)](#), and [Aijaz \(2015\)](#).
- 7 Zarepour also approves of Roger Pouivet, who writes, ‘there is nothing absurd in saying that God is personal but not a person. . . . [I]t is possible for God not to be a person without that meaning He has no intelligence, will, omniscience, freedom and love’ ([Zarepour 2021](#), p. 129; [Pouivet 2018](#), p. 14).
- 8 Al Ghazali ([Griffel 2009](#), p. 280): ‘For al-Ghazali, God is *not* the cause of the world but its creator. God is a personal agent who freely chooses and who precedes his creation, for instance.’; Richard [Swinburne \(1996](#), p. 3): ‘Theism claims that God is a personal being—that is, in some sense a *person*’; Alvin [Plantinga \(1984](#), p. 265): ‘*God* is the premier person, the first and chief exemplar of personhood. . . .’; Elenore [Stump \(2013](#), p. 31): ‘Since there is one mind and will in God, in our sense of ‘person’, God is a person too’; Marilyn McCord [Adams \(2016](#), p. 138): ‘Many personal omniGod devotees—I among them—have claimed that loving relationality between God and horror-participants could not only “swamp,” but even defeat horrors.’
- 9 A summary of personhood within Muslim thought, see J. [Walbridge \(2017\)](#). See also [Janos \(2017\)](#) on Al Farabi’s discussion of oneness; see also [Inati \(2000\)](#) for a discussion on Ibn Sina’s view on God and Evil; and see also [Kamal \(2016\)](#) for an exploration of the view of Mulla Sadra on the individuation of being (*al-tashakhus*) and God.
- 10 Viewing the self, or human personhood as an illusion to be overcome, may also serve as the basis for a potential theodicy. In the aftermath of horrors, there is also the real possibility of what is termed Post Traumatic Growth—i.e., *positive psychological change that many individuals experience after a life crisis or traumatic event*. The broken and shattered self makes way for a transformative journey. See [Stump \(2010\)](#) for a fuller discussion of this in relation to the problem of evil.
- 11 For a summary of these arguments, see Chapter One of [Bishop and Perszyk \(2023\)](#).
- 12 There is the possibility of a fifth option, and that is to suspend belief in whether God is a person.
- 13 See also [Legenhausen \(2024\)](#), who suggests that God may be understood as a moral agent; however, God does not act for reasons and does not engage in practical reasoning.
- 14 Bishop and Perszyk have in mind a Lockean forensic account of personhood. The forensic aspect involves understanding a person as ‘a being having legal rights and obligations.’ ([Bishop and Perszyk 2023](#), footnote 45, p. 33).
- 15 Sahih Muslim 2807: Book 52, Hadith 42: <https://sunnah.com/muslim:2807>, accessed on 4 February 2024.
- 16 In personal correspondence with John Bishop.
- 17 The Farid Ahmed story has also received significant media attention see: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/495317/watch-christchurch-mosque-attack-survivor-talks-of-the-art-of-forgiveness>, accessed on 4 February 2024.
- 18 For an exploration of the person Khidr within Muslim thought, see ([Omar 2022](#)).

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