Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 38 | Issue 1

Article 7

1-1-2021

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Recommended Citation

Wessling, Jordan (2021) "On St. Isaac the Syrian's Argument Against Divine Retribution," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

DOI: 10.37977/faithphil.2021.38.1.7

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol38/iss1/7>

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ON ST. ISAAC THE SYRIAN'S ARGUMENT AGAINST DIVINE RETRIBUTION

Jordan Wessling

Many theists maintain that God punishes humans retributively, whereby God intentionally harms those punished as their sins deserve, without also aiming *qua* punishment to contribute to the immediate or ultimate flourishing of those punished, or to the flourishing of some third (human) party. By contrast, St. Isaac the Syrian in effect contends that such an understanding of divine retribution is incompatible with a plausible understanding of God's initial creative purposes of love and is thus untrue. In this paper, I present and substantially build upon Isaac's contention, and I defend the resulting developed argument as a good argument worthy of further consideration.

Many religious theists maintain that God punishes humans retributively. According to one way of understanding this teaching, God punishes individuals, with a fitting level of severity, primarily for the guilt accrued by past sins, and this punishment (*qua* punishment) need not, and regularly does not, aim to enhance the good or flourishing of those punished, but instead may be positively bad for the subjects of punishment. Christian theists, specifically, have often relied upon the noted understanding of retributive punishment to justify certain versions of the doctrine of hell as well as the atonement.¹ Such a divine retributivist view, however, is neither the perspective of all religious theists in general, nor Christian theists in particular. On the contrary, the repudiation of the claim that God exercises this kind of retribution has a long history in Christian thought.

One particularly outspoken Christian critic of the notion that God punishes retributively in the sense described is St. Isaac the Syrian (also known as St. Isaac of Nineveh). Isaac was a seventh century monk who remains widely respected among Eastern Christian communities (even among those who are otherwise splintered), but is relatively unknown in

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¹Regarding the doctrine of hell, see Adams, "Hell and the God of Justice," 433–447, and Clark, "God is Great, God is Good," 15–31. For a discussion of many of the relevant issues regarding the atonement, see Crisp, "Non-Penal Substitution," 419–433.

the Christian West today, despite the fact that he enjoyed an extensive readership in the West during the 13th–15th centuries.² Given the pastoral and exhortative purposes of many of his writings, Isaac does not normally structure arguments in a rigorous and systematic fashion. Nevertheless, careful attention to his writings yield a handful of perceptive arguments against the teaching that God punishes with the relevant form of retribution. In this paper, I examine and substantially extend one of these arguments, specifically one in which Isaac contends that the idea that God punishes humans with retribution (along the lines described) is incompatible with God's initial creative purposes of love, and is thus untrue. I label the resulting Isaac-inspired version of the relevant argument the *Argument from God's Purposes* (henceforth the AGP), and I defend the AGP as a good argument that merits further discussion.

The development and defense of the AGP is rolled out in three main sections. In the first section, I lay the foundation for the AGP. This I do by examining one of Isaac's arguments against divine retribution, collecting various conceptual resources from Isaac in the process. In gathering these resources from Isaac, I repeatedly supply added theses when judged necessary, all the while attempting to make it clear as to when I am expositing Isaac and when I am adding my own principles.³ In this first section, moreover, I draw principally from a set of interlocking and sequentially unfolding chapters (i.e., chs. 38–40) from a compilation of Isaac's essays referred to as "The Second Part."⁴ Due to limitations of space, I am unable to situate Isaac in his historical context, nor engage the secondary literature on him, in a way that would satisfy the historian. Instead, as I unpack Isaac's argument, I regularly make direct appeals to Isaac's writings as a means of providing some evidence that my reading is on the right track,

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²For a succinct overview of Isaac's ancient and contemporary influence, see Scully, *Isaac of Nineveh's Ascetical Eschatology*, xiv–xvii.

³For the development of the AGP, I utilize what might be deemed a rational reconstruction of an argument Isaac presses against the teaching that God punishes humans with retribution. The "rational reconstruction" I have in mind is the project of building upon, and presenting in a more rigorous and contemporary way, a form of reasoning found in Isaac. Among other things, such a reconstruction includes taking note of explicit claims and modes of reasoning found in Isaac, locating and stating relevant implicit assumptions apparently used by Isaac, adding additional theses to what Isaac says in the effort to strengthen his reasoning, and integrating all of the results of these procedures into the presentation of an argument that is potentially helpful for those who wish to consider divine punishment today. At minimum, the intent is for the ensuing rational reconstruction of Isaac's argument, the AGP, to be in keeping with the spirit, even if not the letter, of Isaac's original argument.

⁴"The Second Part" is a collection of writings that, though lost for a time, was rediscovered by Sebastian Brock in 1983 and published by him in translated form twelve years later. (For more on the finding of the second part of Isaac's writings, see the following two works by Sebastian Brock: "Isaac of Nineveh" and "Lost and Found.") This compilation is comprised of prayers, sermons, theological papers, and the like, and is so named because it constitutes the second portion of Isaac's better known, *The Ascetical Homilies of St Isaac the Syrian*.

even if such appeals are not demonstrative.⁵ In the second section of this article, I present and defend the AGP. The AGP is essentially a systematic presentation of the teachings and modes of reasoning underscored in the preceding section of this paper, although the manner in which I articulate and defend the AGP in this second section culls additional resources from Isaac as well as unrelated writings (contemporary and otherwise). Finally, in the third section, I present one salient philosophical-theological objection to the AGP, and I mine Isaac's writings for aid in considering how one might attempt to rebut this objection.

I. Isaac's Argument Against Divine Retribution

Like many contemporary Christian theologians and philosophers of religion, Isaac maintains that God's fundamental motivation for creating and guiding the affairs of humans is that of love.⁶ In his view, "Among all [God's] actions there is none which is not entirely a matter of mercy, love, and compassion: this constitutes the beginning and the end of His dealings with us."⁷ Elsewhere Isaac elaborates,

With what purpose and with what love did He create this world and bring it into existence! What a mystery does the coming into being of this creation look towards! To what state is (our) common nature invited! What love served to initiate the creation of the world! [. . .] In love did [God] bring the world into existence; in love is He going to bring it to that wondrous transformed state, and in love will the world be swallowed up in the great mystery of Him who has performed all these things; in love will the whole course of governance of creation be finally comprised. [. . .] With this design did He bring [rational beings] into existence [. . .].⁸

Isaac is clear. God creates and guides humanity—indeed the whole world—out of love.

The claim that God is motivated primarily⁹ by love to create and guide humans can be understood in two fundamental ways. It can be taken to

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⁵For what it is worth, many of the central features of my reading of Isaac are in step with recent treatments of the general contours of Isaac's theology. See, e.g., Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, 35–48, 283–297; and Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Nineveh*, 197–204.

⁶On Isaac's views on creation, see Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, 35–60.

⁷II/39, 22. All quotes taken from *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian), "The Second Part," Chapters IV–XLI*, translated by Sebastian Brock.

⁸II/38, 1–2.

⁹It is not entirely clear to me whether Isaac means to commit himself to the notion that God is motivated *wholly* by love in creating and guiding humans, or *primarily* by love in these ways. Because little of substance turns on which Isaac prefers for the purposes of this article, I speak of Isaac affirming the claim that God is motivated primarily or principally by love in creating and guiding humans. Additionally, in this context, when I say that God is *primarily* or *principally* motivated by love in the noted ways, I have in mind the notion that God's loving motive is *lexically ordered* over other concerns—that is, even if God has other concerns that do or might factor into His dealings with us, His love is absolutely prioritized over these other concerns. Isaac appears to affirm at least this much, albeit implicitly. (Thanks goes to Mark Murphy for suggesting a clarification along these lines on what "primarily" in this context means.)

mean that God is motivated by love to create and guide the collection or whole of all humans, or these creative and providential purposes can be understood to concern each and every human being, individually. I suspect that Isaac would want to affirm both ideas, insofar as each of these options is deemed an expression of divine creativity which is thereby worthy of God's affection.¹⁰ Regardless, Isaac is almost certainly committed to the teaching that God is deeply concerned with individual creatures, and that each and every human is produced and continuously providentially guided by divine love. For example, in the context of considering God's motivation for creating, Isaac writes that God "has a single ranking of complete and impassible love towards everyone [i.e., every rational creature], and he has a single caring concern for those who have fallen, just as much as for those who have not fallen."¹¹ That God's love is directed towards everyone, including those who have fallen and those who have not, indicates that Isaac understands God's loving care to extend to each individual human, and not that which is reducible to a love for some set or group of humans. Indeed, God provides for "all created things in His immeasurable compassion," and, echoing the language of Luke 15:7, Isaac claims that the Heavens rejoice "at a single sinner who repents," whether that sinner be a human or even a demon.¹²

As Isaac sees it, the God who is primarily motivated by love in His dealings with humans would not entertain the idea of punishing humans retributively. In fact, it is "abominable" to "suppose that retribution for evil acts is to be found in [God]."¹³ What, precisely, Isaac means by "retribution" is not something that he spells out entirely, however. But the way in which Isaac speaks of retribution reveals that he has in mind that which is relevantly similar to the rather strong characterization of retributive punishment that began this article. As shall become clear, Isaac specifically objects to the idea that God punishes (and hence harms, in some sense) individuals primarily for the guilt accrued by past sins in a manner which is not also aimed towards the good of those punished.¹⁴

Isaac, so far as I know, never considers the option that love might drive God to punish some humans in ways that are positively bad for them, but good for others. He never entertains the idea that, say, God might punish the guilty principally to keep them from hurting the innocent, to deter others from committing self-harming evils, or to communicate to victims that their victimization will not be tolerated (again, as far as I am aware). Instead, Isaac appears to assume that God need not choose between love of the guilty and love of the innocent in His punitive acts. The assumption, though substantive, is not an implausible one. Given omniscience, God probably can figure out ways to punish that are beneficial, or may

¹⁰See, e.g., II/10, 18–19, 24; II/38, 1–3.

¹¹II/40, 3; cf. II/38, 5.

¹²II/40, 7.

¹³II/39, 2.

¹⁴See II/39, *passim*.

in principle be beneficial, to all of those who are pertinently impacted.¹⁵ Whatever the case, the relevant argument from Isaac is not directed against those who say that God must punitively harm some exclusively or primarily for the sake of others. Rather, Isaac aims to demonstrate the falsity of the teaching that God punishes humans retributively in the sense just described. But almost certainly, Isaac would also object to the idea that God punitively harms the guilty solely or primarily for the sake of the innocent. Thus, in order to give Isaac's form of reasoning a broader reach, we shall extend Isaac's objection to retribution to include those who might modify the doctrine of divine retribution along the noted zero-sum lines.

With all that in mind, and in the attempt to unearth and expand upon some of the key ideas to which Isaac objects, we might understand the kind of retribution with which Isaac takes issue to be relevantly similar to "strong-retribution."

Strong-retribution: A form of punishment (i) that aims to punish, with the fitting level of severity, those who deserve it on account of their past misconduct, principally because they deserve it, (ii) that does *not* aim intrinsically, *qua* punishment, to promote the flourishing of those punished (e.g., by helping them reform), and (iii) that it is *not* performed principally because it is likely to bring about the immediate or ultimate flourishing of the one punished or the flourishing of some third (human) party.¹⁶

In what follows, I speak of God visiting or inflicting (and similar terms) strong-retribution on some individual when God is presented as punishing that individual in a manner that meets the specifications found in strong-retribution. For ease of expression, moreover, unless otherwise indicated I write in the remainder of this article as if all of Isaac's uses of "retribution" and like terms refer to "strong-retribution" (although, again, Isaac nowhere states and objects to such a precise principle; at most what may be said is that the rejection of such a principle is entailed by the various claims that Isaac affirms). So configured, Isaac's contention (in effect) is that God does not inflict strong-retribution on humans (or any rational creature, for that matter).

We should not suppose that God visits strong-retribution on humans, Isaac maintains, since the infliction of this punishment would be incompatible with God's love of those humans punished in this manner. For were God to inflict strong-retribution on some human, He would be administering a primarily "backward-looking" form of punishment (i.e.,

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¹⁵Relevant here is my "How Does a Loving God Punish?" as well as my "A Love that Speaks in Harsh Tones."

¹⁶This third condition is added to account for the perspective that retribution is morally justified on account of past wrongdoing, but that one should typically exercise retribution only when it is likely to have some positive outcome in the life of the one punished or in another's life, even when such retribution is not intrinsically directed towards these positive outcomes.

punishment based upon the guilt accrued through past failings, and *not* on what might benefit this or some other human). But such a form of punishment would not be taking into account the “forward-looking” goals of love, which aim to promote the flourishing of those loved. Isaac explains, here using “requital” as a synonym for “retribution,”¹⁷ specifically strong-retribution:

So then, let us not attribute to God’s actions and His dealings with us any idea of requital. Rather, we should speak of fatherly provision, a wise dispensation, a perfect will which is concerned with our good, and complete love. If it is a case of love, then it is not one of requital; and if it is a case of requital, then it is not one of love. Love, when it operates, is not concerned with the requiting of former things [. . .]; rather, it looks to what is most advantageous in the future: it examines what is to come, and not things that are past.¹⁸

In another place, Isaac submits that divine punishment, being an expression of love, is specifically directed towards the correction and reformation of the guilty.

God chastises with love, not for the sake of revenge—far be it!—but in seeking to make whole His image. And [God] does not harbor wrath until such time as correction is no longer possible, for He does not seek vengeance for Himself. This is the aim of love. Love’s chastisement is for correction, but does not aim at retribution.¹⁹

So, were God to inflict strong-retribution on some human, this would be incompatible with divine love because the former unlike the latter does not include the goal of promoting (or at least not substantially diminishing) the flourishing of the one punished.

To dig a bit deeper into the nature of this ostensible incompatibility, the tension that Isaac identifies between God’s love and the supposition that God visits strong-retribution on persons appears to rest upon what I shall call “intentional-harm.”

Intentional-harm. One performs an act, A, that amounts to an instance of intentional-harm of some person,²⁰ P, if the following conditions are jointly fulfilled: (i) A causes P to suffer, or otherwise diminishes P’s flourishing; (ii) A is performed in order to cause P to suffer or otherwise to diminish P’s flourishing, primarily because P’s suffering or the diminishment of P’s flourishing is deemed to be deserved, intrinsically valuable, and/or found pleasurable by the one inflicting A on P; and, finally, (iii) A is not intrinsically directed towards contributing to P’s

¹⁷See, II/39, 16.

¹⁸II/39, 17.

¹⁹I/48 (230) = PR 45 (323). Cited in Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, 40–41. Elsewhere Isaac eschews the notion that divine punishment is “brought about in order to requite past actions”; rather, “all” of God’s punishments are “for the sake of the subsequent gain to be gotten in them [i.e., those punished]” (II/39, 15).

²⁰For convenience, I here limit the discussion to the intentional-harm of persons, rather than, say, sentient beings more generally.

immediate or ultimate flourishing or to the flourishing of some third (human) party, nor is A performed principally because A is likely to bring about P's immediate or ultimate flourishing or the flourishing of some third (human) party.

Isaac certainly does not explicitly state or argue against any thesis that is quite like intentional-harm. Nevertheless, I postulate intentional-harm as that which contains a network of ideas that undoubtedly would be opposed by Isaac, and which undergirds the kind of teaching on divine punishment to which Isaac objects.²¹ As with strong-retribution, I will speak of God visiting or inflicting intentional-harm (and like locutions) on some individual if God, according to the description at issue, treats that individual in a manner that satisfies the conditions embedded in intentional-harm. Additionally, I subsequently write as if Isaac directly objects to intentional-harm, even though Isaac nowhere contends with such a developed thesis on harming individuals.

Suppose God inflicts strong-retribution on some human. Given the provided characterization of intentional-harm, plus the plausible assumption that God's visitation of strong-retribution on someone includes God's successfully acting in order to cause that individual to suffer or to diminish that individual's flourishing (minimally, by removing some relevant good from that person), it follows that inflicting strong-retribution on a human includes inflicting intentional-harm on that individual. For once it is agreed that divine instances of strong-retribution include God intentionally harming persons—by intentionally causing them to suffer or by diminishing their flourishing, primarily because it is deserved and not also principally to bring about the noted forward-looking benefits—God is envisioned as harming persons in a manner that amounts to intentional-harm. However, as Isaac would have us see it, God's inflicting of intentional-harm on some person contradicts God's love for that individual. This is because loving someone entails promoting that individual's highest available good or type of flourishing ("what is most advantageous"),²² when the opportunity to do so feasibly arises, and, crucially, not visiting intentional-harm on the beloved individual. Hence, if God punishes someone whom He loves in a manner that amounts to intentional-harm, as God would be via strong-retribution, God would be punishing that individual in opposition to His love for her.²³

But why think that God would not occasionally punish in opposition to His love, especially given the weight of human sin? As intimated already, one significant answer by Isaac to such a question has to do with his conception of why God choose to create, and consequently govern, humans in the first place. Specifically, if God, before humans ever existed,

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²¹In various places, for instance, Isaac reasons against claims to the effect that God is in the business of "bringing us to perdition and disaster" on behalf of the conclusion that God punishes for the benefit of those punished (II/39, 15).

²²II/39, 17.

²³See, e.g., II/39, 2–7, 15–21.

was principally motivated by love in His decision to create and providentially guide humans, then God would not be driven off His predetermined course of love in His punishments—as would be the case were God to inflict strong-retribution on sinful humans.

Isaac offers a number of reasons on behalf of the inference from God's initial loving motivation for creating and guiding humans to the exclusion of God inflicting strong-retribution. Here we focus our attention on just one primary justification that Isaac offers for this inference, namely, that which comes from God's omniscience and the perfect practical rationality, or means-end reasoning, derived therefrom. Considering the following example:

It is not (the way of) the compassionate Maker to create rational beings in order to deliver them over mercilessly to unending affliction (in punishment) for things of which He knew even before they were fashioned, (aware) how they would turn out when He created them—and whom (nonetheless) He created. [. . .] Such action does not belong to the Creator who, even before the cycle of the depiction of the universe has been portrayed, knew of all that was before and all that was after in connection with the actions and intentions of rational beings.²⁴

In the passage cited, Isaac refers to and rejects the notion that God punishes without end in hell. However, Isaac elsewhere uses similar reasoning to indicate, in effect, that God would not inflict any form of strong-retribution on a person.²⁵ For example, in speaking generally about divine retribution, Isaac contends that we cannot “believe of God that He would have done something out of retribution for anticipated evil acts in connection with those whose nature He has brought into being with honour and great love.”²⁶ Similarly, in another place, Isaac says that “God’s caring is guiding us all the time to what He wishes for us,” namely our “future good,” even “cunningly” and covertly using His foreknowledge to arrange the harms that befall us “for our advantage.”²⁷ And since God created every human in love, even while knowing they would turn astray, it would be a “childish view of the Creator” to suppose that “after what He had established had become corrupted against His will [by human sin], He devised some other plan, preparing ills in return for its corruption. Such are the feeble ways of understanding the Creator!”²⁸

Behind these instances of reasoning resides the supposition that when God decided to create and guide humans, He did so while foreknowing all facts concerning human wrongdoing. And yet, God’s decision to create and guide humans was principally motivated by love. However, Isaac believes it would be absurd for God to decide, primarily motivated by

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²⁴II/39, 6. All textual insertions within parentheses come from Brock’s translation of Isaac’s “The Second Part.”

²⁵See II/39, 2–5.

²⁶II/39, 2.

²⁷II/39, 5.

²⁸II/39, 17.

love, to create and guide humans, only to abandon that loving decision once humans misbehave as He knew they would when He originally formed said loving decision. Such a conflict of purposes “characterizes people who do not know or who are unaware of what they are doing,”²⁹ but not the omniscient God who, “with a love that cannot be measured,” established the world, and each human within it.³⁰

Clearly, Isaac’s argument rests upon the fundamental claim that God’s motivation for creating and guiding humans is love, a motivation that has tangible implications for how God deals with humans when they sin. Though Isaac never unpacks in detail what it means to be motivated by love to create humans, here the love is perhaps best viewed as anticipatory. Since humans do not exist prior to God’s choice to create, God creates humans *for the sake of love*, that is, so that humans might flourish and ultimately have the joy of being united to God in love.³¹ This, or some doctrine relevantly similar to this, is why God creates humans, according to Isaac.

On a reasonable reconstruction of Isaac’s thinking, then, God’s creating each human primarily for the sake of love ensures that God never visits intentional-harm on any human. Such intentional-harm is incompatible with God’s creative and providential purposes, and, for reasons that shall be discussed in the next two sections, Isaac maintains that there is nothing about the divine character that demands inflicting intentional-harm on sinful humans. On the contrary, Isaac assumes that God possesses the ingenuity and motivation to punish humans in benevolent, remedial ways.³²

With something like these assumptions in place, Isaac attempts to demonstrate that God’s loving motivations regarding creation preclude God from visiting strong-retribution on individuals. For when God considers whether or not to create humans, and for what reasons He might do so, He does this with all facts before Him, including all foreknown facts relevant to human sin. Yet, despite foreknowing the depth of human sin prior to His choice to create, God decides to create humans principally for the sake of love, together with the intention to promote and act consistently with each human’s flourishing whenever doing so is feasible.³³ But since it is always feasible for God *not* to punish humans with strong-retribution, God never punishes in this manner. Quite the opposite, God punishes only when the loving aim of correction is included.

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²⁹II/39, 6.

³⁰II/10, 19.

³¹See, in particular, II/38, 1–2; cf. 1/71 (345–346) = PR 74 (509–510); II/5, 8; *Gnostic Chapters* IV, 78. More specifically, Isaac envisions a kind of *deified* union between God and creature, where the human grows to resemble God and participate in His life. Unfortunately, we cannot discuss Isaac’s thinking on this matter. However, see the listed references for some of Isaac’s thinking on this topic as well as Alfeyev’s *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, 56–60.

³²E.g., II/39, 17–22.

³³Throughout this article, descriptions of God knowing or doing something *prior* to some event should be understood in terms of logical or explanatory priority; such descriptions are not intended to indicate (or deny) that God is temporal or “in” time.

Of course, Isaac is aware that certain biblical passages, specifically in the Old Testament, seem to depict God as one who inflicts strong-retribution on humans. But Isaac insists that such passages must be interpreted in light of the loving character of Christ, which Isaac affirms as incompatible with strong-retribution. "Tell me," Isaac asks rhetorically, "if God is someone who requites (evil), and He does what He does by means of requital, what commensurate requital do you see here [in Christ], O man? Show me."³⁴ No, Christ reveals God to be a Benevolent Father who, though mysterious and fearsome in certain respects, always punishes as a redemptive "Life-giver."³⁵ Unfortunately, Isaac does not engage in the kind of detailed biblical exegesis of this issue for which one might hope.

Isaac follows his reasoning to its perceived natural end. If God does not execute strong-retribution on humans, but always punishes with the goal of correcting and redeeming sinners, then punishment in hell similarly must be ordered towards redemption. This is a conclusion which Isaac embraces, envisioning hell as purgatorial. There sinners are chastised in love ("scourged by the scourge of love")³⁶ so that hell's inhabitants "will be perfected in love for Him" and thereby "partake of the divine outpouring which the blessed Creator is preparing in His grace."³⁷ In fact, Isaac takes things a step further and affirms universalism, the doctrine that all will eventually be saved.³⁸ The "all" here refers to *every* rational creature, "not even the immense wickedness of the demons can overcome the measure of God's goodness."³⁹

Note, however, that a broadly remedial view of divine punishment does not obviously require universal salvation. Against a definitively universalist outcome, for instance, many have argued that if, in love, God has granted creatures a measure of (libertarian) freedom that He will not override, then it is possible that some will simply choose to cling to their sins, and thereby forever frustrate God's saving purposes for them.⁴⁰ If such an option is viable, then one can maintain with Isaac that divine punishment is partially or wholly comprised of remedial aims without also committing oneself to the controversial doctrine of universalism.

The focus of this article, however, is not with an examination of divine punishment and things to come per se, but with the Isaac-inspired AGP, directed against the notion that God inflicts strong-retribution

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³⁴II/39, 15; cf. II/39, 19–23.

³⁵II/39, 23.

³⁶I/28 (141) = PR 27 (201–202). Quote taken from Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, 281.

³⁷II/40, 4.

³⁸Minimally, many commentators on Isaac understand him to affirm universal salvation. See: Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, 283–302; Hagman, *The Asceticism of Isaac of Ninevah*, 197–212; Hryniewicz, "Universalism of Salvation," 139–150; Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis*, 758–766; and Ware, "Dare We Hope for the Salvation of All?," 193–216.

³⁹Here Isaac quotes, with approval, "the blessed" Bishop of Tarsus, Diodore (II/39, 13).

⁴⁰The following works are here relevant: Buckareff and Plug, "Escaping Hell," 39–54; Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, ch. 4; Ragland, "Love and Damnation," 206–224.

on humans. We shall therefore leave the discussion about universalism aside, and focus instead on the logically separable AGP, which amounts to something like a more formal and systematic presentation of the ideas thus far canvassed.

II. The AGP

We are now in a position to consider the AGP. Relying upon the aforementioned notions of intentional-harm and strong-retribution, the argument may be stated as follows.

- (1) God's primary motivation for creating and guiding each human is love despite foreknowing all facts about human sin prior to this choice to create.
- (2) If God's primary motivation for creating and guiding each human is love despite foreknowing all facts about human sin prior to this choice to create, then God never inflicts intentional-harm on any human.
- (3) If God never inflicts intentional-harm on any human, then God never punishes humans with strong-retribution.

Therefore,

- (4) God never punishes humans with strong-retribution.

If the AGP is sound, in the spirit of Isaac we may uphold a general teaching about divine punishment, specifically, that God does not inflict strong-retribution on any human at any time. There is, moreover, a good case to be made that each of the premises of the AGP can be reasonably affirmed. We shall examine these premises in order.

The first premise, (1), is comprised of two theological theses. One of these is that God foreknows all facts about human sin prior to His decision to create. Recall, for Isaac, the importance of this theological thesis is to plant within his readers' minds the notion that God's creation of humans primarily for the sake of love was done with eyes wide open to the horrors of human evil, including the evil He would or could punish. This focus on God's foreknowledge, in turn, sets the stage for reason to think that God would not first create humans primarily for the sake of love, only to adopt an additional and opposing motivational structure once humans sin as God knew they would.

Understandably, Isaac does not discuss the nature of this divine knowledge with the level of precision and detail that has become customary within the contemporary philosophical literature on divine foreknowledge. It is fairly clear that Isaac simply assumes the now controversial claims that God can foreknow future contingents, and, also, that God can obtain this information prior to His decision to create.⁴¹ However, the relevant theological thesis within (1) does not require one to maintain that God foreknows

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⁴¹Relevant here is Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 205–217; and Zimmerman, "The Providential Usefulness of 'Simple Foreknowledge,'" 174–196.

future creational contingents in this manner. Instead, one could perhaps hold that God knows, prior to the decision to create, all possibilities—and where available probabilities—regarding human evil, and yet God still decides, principally motivated by love, to create and providentially govern humans. Such an understanding of divine knowledge would be consistent with open theism and the position sometimes called “simple foreknowledge,” and it provides a viable (even if contestable) interpretation of the claim found within (1) that God foreknows *all facts* about human sin prior to His choice to create humans.⁴² In order to circumvent gratuitous objections to the AGP based upon divine foreknowledge, we shall keep in mind for the remainder of this essay the number of ways in which the thesis within (1) pertaining to divine foreknowledge can be interpreted.

The second theological thesis embedded within (1) is that God’s primary motivation for creating and providentially guiding humans is love. Isaac likely inherited this conviction from the Syriac Christian theological tradition in which he stands, a tradition that places an emphasis on divine love.⁴³ But, of course, many Christian traditions place a premium on God’s love, and it is not the case that only Syrian Christians are inclined to believe that love is God’s primary motivation for creating and providentially guiding humans. On the contrary, many Christian theologians and philosophers, both past and present, explicitly affirm this theological thesis. In addition, the Syriac Christian tradition is not the only probable influence on Isaac’s thinking on God’s principle motivational stance concerning creation. The loving ministry of God-in-Christ looms large in Isaac’s thought, and informs the way in which Isaac sees God.⁴⁴ It is plausible that Isaac implicitly deems God’s love in Christ as providing more support (albeit indirect) for the thesis that God’s dealings with creation are primarily motivated by love than it does any viable competing hypothesis.⁴⁵ Whether or not Isaac reasons in precisely this way, I have defended something close to this reasoning elsewhere.⁴⁶ Interested readers are directed to that defense should they be skeptical of it. Apart from that defense, this second theological thesis of (1) has been ably defended by several contemporary theologians and philosophers.⁴⁷ Based upon such forms of argumentation, many will conclude that this second theological thesis within (1) is more plausible

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⁴²This interpretation is especially plausible if one holds that the only relevant facts prior to God’s choice to create concern possibilities, and perhaps probabilities, about what humans might freely do—i.e., at that logical moment, there are no facts (yet) about what exactly humans freely will do or would do in discrete circumstances.

⁴³See, Brock, “St. Isaac of Nineveh and Syriac Spirituality,” 84.

⁴⁴For a summary, see Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Isaac the Syrian*, 49–60, as well as Unger, “The Love of God the Primary Reason for the Incarnation According to Isaac of Nineveh.” Cf. Isaac’s II/39, 15–16; II/40, 12.

⁴⁵See, especially, Isaac’s *Gnostic Chapters*, IV, 78.

⁴⁶Wessling, *Love Divine*, 76–113 and 200–206.

⁴⁷For a representative sample, see Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 119–130; Kvanvig, *The Problem of Hell*, 112–119; Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 73–76.

than its denial. And, while this second theological thesis certainly has its detractors, with Isaac we shall assume the truth of it in what follows.⁴⁸

So, given the apparent plausibility of the two theological theses of (1), let us proceed on the assumption that (1) is true. But (2) is quite plausible once (1) is granted. (Recall that (2) is the following premise: if God's primary motivation for creating and guiding each human is love despite foreknowing all facts about human sin prior to this choice to create, then God never inflicts intentional-harm on any human.) For suppose, as found within (1), that God, with eyes wide open to the depth and expanse of human sinfulness that would (or possibly / plausibly would) transpire, creates humans for the primary purpose of loving them and guiding them in accordance with that love. Such a divine motivation for creating humans, we here assume with Isaac and with a great measure of independent plausibility, entails that God sets as His primary purpose concerning humans the aim of bringing about the flourishing and (ultimately) the highest good of each human (namely, loving union with Himself). If this is so, it seems fairly natural to presume that God is committed never to inflict intentional-harm on a human. In other words, it seems that God simply would not opt for a course of action that contravenes His initial loving purposes for creation, as would be the case were God to inflict intentional-harm on some human, given that He selected these purposes when He had all requisite knowledge before Him to avoid such colliding aims.

Drawing from what Joseph Raz calls *exclusionary reasons* provides another way of thinking about (2).⁴⁹ Exclusionary reasons are second-order reasons that exclude certain first-order reasons to act; they are, in other words, second-order reasons that dictate that certain first-order reasons should not factor at all into one's decision to perform some action. For instance, commands from an appropriate authority regularly provide reasons for specific actions that exclude opposing reasons derived from mere personal preference. Because a sergeant in the armed forces commands a private to rise for training early in the morning, the private has a second-order reason not to act on her (reasons-generating) desire to catch a bit of extra sleep. Promises provide another example. If Gary promises Allison that he will pick her up from the airport on Friday, he generates for himself a second-order reason totally to disregard whatever minor excuses he might find not to pick up Allison that Friday (e.g., he would rather watch television or enjoy a leisurely meal). Finally, it is plausible that standing in certain relationships or fulfilling particular roles to others can generate a consistent set of exclusionary reasons as well. Standing in the relationship of *being the parent of* or *being the caretaker of* young children, for example, often generates a pattern of second-order reasons to ignore

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⁴⁸By far, the most powerful criticism of which I am aware of (1)'s second theological thesis is found in Jonathan Edwards's *The Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World*. See my *Love Divine*, 76–113, for some of my objections to Edwards's views on this matter.

⁴⁹See, *Practical Reason and Norms*.

one's own inclinations and preferences that run contrary to the safety and wellbeing of the relevant children. Sometimes these exclusionary reasons can be experienced as burdensome, but they need not be. It is relatively easy to imagine a perfect parent who loves his children so deeply that the exclusionary reasons related to the care of his children are internal to his love and not experienced as an external imposition, at least not routinely so.

The obvious differences aside, God's creation of each human for the sake of love can be viewed as analogous to fulfilling the role of parent to all humanity. In the very act of creating humans for the sake of love, that is, God generates for Himself a pattern of second-order reasons for protecting and promoting the flourishing of each human—which, if not driven off course, eventuates in union with Himself—that excludes certain first-order reasons for action that would otherwise compete. Such exclusionary reasons would not be burdensome on God. On the contrary, from a perspective similar to that of Isaac's, God is unambiguously and steadfastly committed to His choice to create humans for the sake of love, a choice made with full awareness of the sins humans would (or might) perpetrate. All the same, God's loving motivation for creating and guiding humans sets certain parameters on how He will subsequently evaluate reasons for acting within creation. He now has exclusionary reasons not to act on certain kinds of reasons that are opposed to a human's flourishing. Minimally, God has exclusionary reason not to act on reasons that would amount to visiting intentional-harm on one or more humans.

It should be clear, then, how Raz's exclusionary reasons can be used to inform (2). Should God decide to create and guide humans primarily for the sake of love, despite knowing the depth and scope of human sinfulness prior to this decision, then God, by the very nature of the case, has exclusionary reason not to act on reasons that entail inflicting intentional-harm on any human. Of course, God's having such an exclusionary reason does not imply that He would not sometimes cause or allow humans to suffer. What (2) implies when read in light of Raz's idea of exclusionary reasons is that God would not act on any reasons He might have to visit intentional-harm on humans. But refusing to act on such reasons does not preclude God from causing a human to suffer in order to benefit her or another, for example.

Here is another way of getting at the main ideas behind (2). Jonathan Edwards refers to a *chief end* for which God creates humans (and the world more generally).⁵⁰ Such an end constitutes the most significant reason for which God creates humans, and this end is supposed to inform and order all other divine goals vis-à-vis humans. Minimally, all actions that God performs concerning humans are supposed to realize the chief end in some way, and no divine action concerning humans should contradict or

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⁵⁰*Dissertation Concerning the End for which God Created the World.*

otherwise thwart the achievement of God's chief end. (2) can be seen to refer to a kind of chief end, only the kind of chief end referenced in (2) may be held to be less totalizing than the Edwardsian understanding of the concept. The kind of chief end referenced in (2) may be judged to be less totalizing than the Edwardsian understanding of a chief end because (2) does not commit one to the teaching that *every* act God performs regarding humans in some way realizes, and never departs from, the chief end of divine-human loving union, and the subsidiary ways of human flourishing connected thereto. What is required, rather, is a certain perspective on God's primary motivation for creating and governing humans as well as one action-type that such a motivation precludes. Although less totalizing than an Edwardsian chief end in that respect, the noted doctrine in (2) concerning God's purposes obviously has implications for the kinds of endeavors God will take up and the actions He is willing to perform. Specifically, given the loving motives God adopts concerning the chief end for humans, God will not visit intentional-harm on humans.

Talk about exclusionary reasons and chief ends aside, the basic idea embedded within (2) should be clear enough. To suppose that the omniscient God decides once and for all to create and guide humans principally motivated by His love is not a mere sentimental teaching. Rather, it is a teaching that offers a framework for thinking about divine action. In the present case, what is relevant is that the God who creates humans for the sake of love is committed never to inflict intentional-harm on humans, sinful or otherwise.

(3), it will be remembered, is the premise that if God never inflicts intentional-harm on any human, then God never punishes humans with strong-retribution. The premise is analytically true, once it is agreed that God's inflicting of strong-retribution on humans entails that God inflicts intentional-harm on those punished, as discussed in the previous section. So, if the first portion of the premise regarding the visitation of divine intentional-harm is right, then it follows that God does not visit strong-retribution on humans. Thus, (3) appears to be true.

But if (3) is accepted, then, supposing one accepts the other premises as well, (4) follows. In that case, one should join Isaac in maintaining (in effect) that God does not punish humans with strong-retribution. God, as it were, has exclusionary reason not to consider punishing humans in ways that amount to intentional-harm (e.g., strong-retribution), given His primary creative and providential purposes. Alternatively put, because God's chief end regarding the creation of humans is the achievement of their highest good, specifically loving union with Himself, God never punishes in ways that are diametrically opposed to the advancement of this chief end, as would be the case if God punished with strong-retribution. For were God to adopt as His primary goal concerning humans the realization of their highest good, while simultaneously adopting the contradictory subsidiary goal of executing strong-retribution on sinful humans, God would be putting Himself at cross-purposes with Himself.

However, the perfectly intelligent God simply cannot be at cross-purposes with Himself by choosing subsidiary goals that frustrate His ultimate purposes, provided that God is perfectly able to bring His primary and subsidiary goals into alignment, which Isaac assumes is feasible for God.

III. The Anselmian Objection

However, not everyone shares with Isaac the assumption that God is able to punish in a manner that dovetails with God's loving purposes. On the contrary, perhaps the most significant objection to the AGP comes from reliance on a kind of reasoning concerning divine retributive justice that, if sound, undermines this very assumption. The relevant kind of reasoning is often associated with Anselm of Canterbury, though it can be found in other influential Christian theologians as well.⁵¹ Adapted for our purposes, the reasoning can be stated as follows. Sin against the infinite and holy God accrues an infinite demerit, and God simply cannot overlook offenses to His honor. To do so would be to violate the fundamental demands of justice, something God cannot do. Hence if God is not otherwise compensated, God simply *must* punish sinners in accordance with their demerit, at least when the offenses are particularly grievous. Provided that one maintains that God's punishing of sinners as their demerit warrants sometimes amounts to a kind of divine strong-retribution (which is often assumed to be the case by proponents of such an argument), this form of reasoning contradicts the conclusion of the AGP.

Let us label this kind of reasoning that undergirds the conclusion that God must punish humans with strong-retribution for uncompensated sins the "Anselmian Paradigm." Suppose that one accepts this paradigm, specifically the idea that God, unless He is otherwise compensated, *must* visit strong-retribution on humans for (significant) wrongdoing. This Anselmian understanding of the divine nature when paired with (1), or something like it, yields the following: God creates humans out of love, or with the *provisional* intention of acting consistently with love for them, yet God knows that He must punish humans who step out of line with strong-retribution. Since creation is generated from a place of love for humans, God, so to speak, always wants to be good to everyone, and all things being equal He would be, but God also knows that justice requires retribution of the kind that entails inflicting intentional-harm on some humans, specifically strong-retribution. On this Anselmian Paradigm, then, (1) is accepted (or something close to (1) is accepted), yet (2) is denied.

The most natural interpretation of the Anselmian Paradigm is one in which God's disposition to punish is modally strong. Minimally, it seems, defenders of the paradigm should maintain, once (1) is adopted, that God must punish sinners as they deserve for particularly grievous

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⁵¹E.g., *Cur Deus Homo* I, chaps. 11–5, 20, 25. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.1; and Jonathan Edwards, *Original Sin* I: II: III. See Eleonore Stump's recent discussion of the plausibility and influence of such a mode of reasoning in *Atonement*, ch. 3.

uncompensated sins in all but very distant worlds. For if God's requirement to punish humans with strong-retribution is based upon some contingent obstacle that might be removed with relative ease, then, given (1), God should remove it so that He can carry on with His loving purposes. But then (2) is not in danger of being contravened. In point of fact, moreover, recent defenders of the teaching that God must punish humans with strong-retribution for uncompensated sins do apparently opt for something like this modally strong claim.⁵² For such reasons, we shall proceed on the assumption that the defender of the Anselmian Paradigm who also subscribes to (1) is best served by the noted strong modal claim, namely, that God must, in perhaps all but very distant worlds, punish humans with strong-retribution for uncompensated sins on account of His perfect justice.

Isaac does not display awareness of anything like the Anselmian Paradigm. This is not entirely surprising since Isaac lived before Anselm, and because this paradigm, or a precursor to it, seems to have had less influence on Isaac's Eastern context.⁵³ Nevertheless, Isaac's descriptions of the divine character imply a firm rejection of the notion that God *must* visit strong-retribution on humans for uncompensated sins. Rather than requiring compensation, "To anyone who shows just a little suffering and will to compunction for what has occurred, to such a person immediately, at once, without any delay, [God] will grant forgiveness for their sins."⁵⁴ More generally, it may be said that the Anselmian Paradigm is not just incompatible with many of Isaac's theological commitments, but also considerably foreign to Isaac's way of thinking. Nonetheless, considering how Isaac might respond to the Anselmian Paradigm will perhaps furnish

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⁵²E.g., Corlett, "Divine Justice and Human Sin," 133–145, and Crisp, "Divine Retribution," 35–52. A notable reconfiguration of something akin to what I am calling the Anselmian Paradigm, complete with a modally weaker claim about the conditions under which God might punish, is found in Richard Swinburne's *Responsibility and Atonement*. There Swinburne argues that God need *not* punish sinners to the degree deserved for serious and uncompensated transgressions, but that it would be inappropriate for God to forgive humans for serious sins without minimally requiring repentance and apology (see 148 and 181–182). But on Swinburne's view it is good *for the sinner* for God to demand repentance and apology (and perhaps penance), and, crucially, Swinburne does not advocate anything relevantly like divine strong-retribution (although his defended view of divine punishment might be said to have its own shortcomings). The upshot is that it is difficult to see how Swinburne's modified Anselmian Paradigm provides special resources for a plausible objection to the AGP. *Mutatis mutandis*, a similar conclusion holds for more recent modifications of what might be recognized as broadly in keeping with the Anselmian Paradigm—e.g., William Craig's *Atonement and the Death of Christ*, Stephen Porter's "Swinburnian Atonement and the Doctrine of Penal Substitution," and Jada Twedt Strabbing's "Divine Forgiveness and Reconciliation." Since I do not know of a modified form of the Anselmian Paradigm (along with its modally weaker claim about divine punishment) that provides unique resources for a plausible objection to the AGP, I shall discuss modifications of the Anselmian Paradigm no further.

⁵³Relevant here is Lossky, "Redemption and Deification," 97–110.

⁵⁴II/40, 14.

the Isaac-inspired AGP with wider appeal—rather than merely leaving things to rest at a clash of competing paradigms. To that end, two lines of argumentation can be extrapolated from Isaac on behalf of the idea that God's punitive justice is not relevantly inexorable and that God is sometimes free to forgive those who repent.

Consider, first, the manner in which Isaac appeals to the ministry of Christ on behalf of God's forgiving nature.⁵⁵ In response to the question, "Will God, if I ask Him, forgive me these things by which I am pained and by whose memory I am tormented, things by which, though I abhor them, I go on backsliding?," Isaac points to God's various acts of mercy, especially as that mercy is displayed by Christ. In Christ one finds that "the right hand of our Lord is stretched out night and day, while he is on the look out to support, comfort, and encourage everyone—especially to see if he can find any who endure even just a little suffering and grief so that their sins may be forgiven."⁵⁶ Stated in more general terms, Christ, possessing the full character of God, manifested a ministry of love to the point of being willing to die for his enemies, and he taught his followers to forgive freely those who repent (e.g., Matt. 18:21–35). Isaac in effect maintains that Christ's presentation of freely-given forgiveness does not seem to fit well with the idea that God possesses a character of relevantly inexorable strong-retributive justice. Indeed, one might take things a step further and submit that Christ's actions indicate that God sometimes forgives without any repentance. While being crucified, for example, Christ is famously depicted as saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk. 23:34).⁵⁷ Whether or not this second step is warranted, we may draw from Isaac the insight that the way Christ forgives seems to stand in tension with the kind of inexorable divine punitive justice at issue.

A second response to the idea that God's uncompensated punitive justice is inexorable comes from the manner in which Isaac attempts to elicit certain intuitions about God's moral character.⁵⁸ Isaac regularly argues from the lesser to the greater—specifically, from human moral goodness to divine moral goodness—to argue that God would not visit what I am calling strong-retribution on anyone. Speaking of the disposition to exercise such retribution, for instance, he says, "We cannot even believe such a thing can be found in those human beings who live a virtuous and upright life and whose thoughts are entirely in accord with the divine will—let alone believe of God that He has done something out of retribution for anticipated

⁵⁵E.g., II/39, 15–16; and II/40, 14–16.

⁵⁶II/40, 15–17.

⁵⁷Biblical textual critics debate about whether Luke 23:34 belongs to the original gospel account (for a discussion, see Ehrman, *Studies in the Textual Criticism of the New Testament*, 86–90), and theologians and philosophers debate about whether and when God's forgiveness of humans is conditioned about repentance (see, e.g., Tombs, "The Offer of Forgiveness," and Strabbing, "Divine Forgiveness and Reconciliation").

⁵⁸E.g., II/39, 15–16.

evil acts in connection with those whose nature He has brought into being with honour and great love.”⁵⁹ In place of such retributivist thinking, Isaac submits, we should conceive of God as akin to, only greater than, a loving Father, who always punishes for our benefit.⁶⁰ It is easy to discern how one might utilize similar thinking in order to reject the relevant kind of inexorable divine justice, although Isaac never does precisely that.

Most of us admire the individual who freely but judiciously forgives persons without requiring compensation. A loving human father, for example, can forgive his prodigal son without requiring recompense. Similarly, a judge acting on behalf of the state can choose to pardon a contrite violator of the law or weaken the sentence given thereto. Mercies of these kinds are not unjust. So why maintain that a perfectly just God must exercise strong-retribution for uncompensated sins (even if something else may be required, such as penance)?⁶¹ This question is particularly acute when we add that the God who forgives the repentant also has the ability to bring restoration between the victim and victimizer.⁶²

Against such reflections, J. Angelo Corlett, in a recent defense of the inexorability of something very much like divine strong-retribution, argues that the notion that God can forgive freely is fraught with problems.

If it is thought that God has no perfect or absolute duty to punish sin, then God is not obligated morally to punish anyone at all for any reason, leaving open the possibility that God would forgive sin either on a case by case basis for [reasons that] are her “own,” or even universally. However, this position on divine justice encounters Plato’s Socrates’s Euthyphro problem [. . .], where divine justice might be changed with moral arbitrariness [. . .] what justifies God’s punishing in some case but not in others?⁶³

The challenge, then, for those who postulate that God is free to forgive uncompensated sins is to provide one or more plausible principles that guide God’s decisions as to when to forgive without being compensated and when to punish.

Isaac has the conceptual resources to meet such a challenge, although he does not address it directly. To simplify things, let us leave aside considerations where God’s decision concerning whether to forgive one individual might be taken to have positive or negative implications for others (which could be another means by which God acts non-arbitrarily on this issue). Instead, let us focus on the manner in which God’s choice of whether or not to forgive has implications for the wrongdoer. With that in mind, Isaac could say that, given that God has chosen to create humans for the sake of love, God always forgives freely (in part or whole), and

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⁵⁹II/39, 2.

⁶⁰II/39, 14–17, *passim*.

⁶¹For some biblical justification for appealing to human moral exemplars to understand God’s moral character, see Luke 11:11–13 (cf. Matt. 5:44–48; Eph. 5:1–2; Phil. 2:1–8; 1 Jn. 4:7–11).

⁶²Helpful here is Talbott, “Punishment, Forgiveness, and Divine Justice,” 151–168.

⁶³Corlett, “Divine Justice and Human Sin,” 138.

thus forgoes punishment (in part or whole), when (and to the degree to which) He knows that doing so will be (or is likely to be) as good or better for the wrongdoer than it would be should God choose not to forgive (in part or whole). Conversely, Isaac might say that God does *not* forgive freely when (and to the degree to which) He knows that doing so will be bad for the wrongdoer (e.g., increase the offender's moral complacency). In such circumstances, maybe God punishes in remedial ways. Were God to operate in such a manner, it is plausible that God's decisions would be guided by good moral reasons, and thus His decisions regarding when to forgive and when to punish (and to what degree) would not be arbitrary. Again, while Isaac does not exactly postulate such principles related to divine forgiveness, the point is that neither Isaac's way of thinking nor the Isaac-inspired AGP obviously rests upon the kind of moral arbitrariness that Corlett would have us believe.⁶⁴

The two Isaac-inspired responses I have offered to the Anselmian Paradigm are both controversial and would require more development than they can be given presently. Nevertheless, it seems that these responses minimally suggest that one may reasonably reject the Anselmian Paradigm. For those who are willing to reject this paradigm on the basis of such reasons, perhaps the most significant hurdle to adhering to (2) has been removed. I submit, moreover, that the two responses to the Anselmian Paradigm, working in concert with (1), provide indirect support for (2). But, clearly, if (2) is accepted alongside the other premises of the AGP, then (4) follows. In which case, one may affirm with Isaac that God does not punish humans with strong-retribution.

Conclusion

It might be said that a sufficient condition for a good argument is one in which an individual is justified in believing the conclusion of the argument on the basis of its premises. Whether the Isaac-inspired AGP meets that threshold is left to the reader's judgement—some, for instance, will require greater attention to the details of Scripture. Whatever the judgement, I hope I have shown that in Isaac rests the seeds of an argument for a significant conclusion that merits further discussion, namely, that God, because of His creative purposes guided by tremendous love, refuses to punish humans with the kind of retribution that amounts to intentional-harm.⁶⁵

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⁶⁴I trust that the reader is able to postulate additional divine action-guiding principles that are compatible with Isaac's basic way of thinking and circumvent Corlett's charge of moral arbitrariness.

⁶⁵There are many to thank for assistance in the completion of this article. First, this article was partially constructed while I was a Resident Fellow with the John Templeton Foundation funded Creation Project at the Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding, hosted by Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS) and directed by Thomas H. McCall. I am grateful

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to TEDS, the John Templeton Foundation, and McCall for providing a forum for the production of this paper. Thanks also goes to those affiliated with the Creation Project, each of whom provided thoughtful feedback on this article: Craig Bartholomew, Joel Chopp, Paul Gould, Geoffrey Fulkerson, Brian Matz, Thomas McCall, and Matthew Wiley. I am also indebted to additional friends not associated with the Creation Project for providing insightful comments on this paper: James (J.T.) Turner, Roger Turner, Steven Nemes, and Jonathan Chan. Finally, I am truly grateful to two anonymous referees at *Faith and Philosophy* and especially to Mark Murphy (the former editor of this journal) for their detailed feedback on this article, which not only strengthened this article but will also likely serve to inform future writing projects.

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