

DOES GOD EVER INTEND THAT SINS OCCUR?

CHRISTOPHER HUGHES
KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

I

In “Does God Intend that Sin Occurs? We Affirm.”¹ Matthew Hart and Daniel Hill attempt to motivate and defend the claim that God sometimes intends sins by appeal to Scripture. The scriptural passages the authors discuss at greatest length in defense of their view are from the book of *Exodus*, and concern God’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart, so Pharaoh would not let the Jews leave Egypt, so God could manifest His power in response to Pharaoh’s refusal to let the Jews leave Egypt. But I didn’t find the authors’s case here convincing. In particular, it seemed to me that an opponent of the view the authors champion could respond to that case as follows:

Exodus 9: 12-16 leaves no doubt that God’s power being shown (to Pharaoh), and His name being proclaimed in all the earth, was an intended result of what God did (to Pharaoh’s heart). But it seems to allow that Pharaoh’s sinful refusal (as opposed to Pharaoh’s refusal), though a (foreseen) result of what God does, was not an intended result thereof. The heart-hardening is causally upstream of the sinful refusal to let the Israelites go, which is causally upstream of the plagues and destruction, which is causally upstream of the intended result (the display of God’s power (to Pharaoh) and proclamation of His name). But then, in the case from Frances Kamm discussed by the authors, the party-giver’s invitation is causally upstream of the party’s going ahead, which is causally upstream of the guests feeling bad about the mess, which is causally upstream of the guests helping clean up, which is causally upstream of the party’s (not just starting but also) ending happily, and turn-

1 Matthew J. Hart and Daniel J. Hill, “Does God Intend that Sin Occur? We Affirm”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12, no. 1 (2020). doi:10.24204/ejpr.v0i0.2950.

ing out on balance to be a good thing. Nevertheless, if Kamm is right, (even if the inviter is apprised of all the relevant causal facts) it is not (as Kamm puts it) the inviter's "goal in action" to produce a bad feeling in her guests. The bad feeling is not "what the inviter is aiming at", or "trying to bring about" — as we might say more idiomatically, she's not trying to make her guests feel bad. So the bad feeling of the guests is a result, and a foreseen result, but not an intended result of anything the inviter does. If Kamm's inviter is not 'aiming to' make her guests feel bad, why is she doing something that she foresees will make them feel bad? Presumably, because she thinks both that (a) it would be better (for all concerned) to have a happy party (even punctuated by a transient episode of bad feeling on the part of the guests) than to have no party at all, and that (b) she doesn't have the option of having an on-balance happy party in which the guests don't even temporarily feel bad. Given (a) and (b), she sees a happy-party-with-a-bit-of-bad-feeling, a blighted-by-onerous-(insufficiently shared)-cleanup party, and no party at all, as her available outcomes, and she takes the first one to be the best. Now in fact the inviter might have another option: she might be able to invite the guests, have the party, hire a cleaning agency to do all the cleaning up afterward, and tell the guests that all the cleaning up will be taken care of by someone else (assume that the guests won't feel bad that the inviter hired outside help). If the inviter thinks of this option, and, given her economic circumstances, etc., is perfectly happy to hire helpers to clean up, then she'll invite the guests, and have the party, but inform the guests of the arrangements (in timely fashion), and the guests's feeling bad won't be a result (intended or otherwise) of the invitations and the party. So if the inviter does what she foresees will make the guests (at some point) feel bad, that is because either (i) she sees that she has no options beyond {having an on balance happy party in which guests at some point feel unhappy, having a 'blighted' party, having no party at all}, or (ii) she has such options, but is unaware of them, or (iii) she is aware that there are such options, but she doesn't think any of them are as good as having an on balance happy party in which guests at some point feel unhappy. To move to the case involving God and Pharaoh, (a) God certainly has the option of making His power known to Pharaoh, and His name proclaimed in all the earth, without the etiology of that result involving a sinful refusal of Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt. And (b) He is certainly aware that He has that option. But the passage under discussion allows that as God sees it,

(c) it would overall be better than not for His power to be known to Pharaoh, and His name to be proclaimed in all the earth, and (d) none of the ways in which God could bring it about that His power is known to Pharaoh, and His name is proclaimed in all the earth, that don't have an etiology that includes Pharaoh's sinful refusal to let the Israelites go, are overall, as good a way to bring about the intended result as the way God actually chooses (which does have such an etiology). In other words, the passage cited allows that (God knows that) of the options {*displaying His power to Pharaoh and making His name known in all the earth by getting Pharaoh to sinfully refuse to let the Israelites go, displaying His power to Pharaoh and making His name known in all the earth, in some way that does not involve getting Pharaoh to sinfully refuse to let the Israelites go [a way that might not 'pass through' a Pharaonic refusal, or else might pass through a sinless Pharaonic refusal], not displaying His power to Pharaoh and making His name proclaimed in all the earth*}, the first option is the best. This makes the case look at least in some respects not so different from Kamm's case. In Kamm's case, we might say, it's important to distinguish between a (foreseen) intermediate result and an intermediate "goal of action". As the inviter fires up her computer to invite her guests to the party she's decided to hold, she foresees a bunch of intermediate results (e-mailed invitations going out, invitations being accepted...) and an ultimate result — an on-balance happy party. Some of the (foreseen) intermediate results are also intermediate goals. For example, when the inviter turns on the computer, she does so so that she can get into her e-mail account; her getting into her e-mail is not just a result of her turning on her computer, but a goal thereof. Other (foreseen) intermediate results are not intermediate goals — e.g., her firing up the computer (slightly) heats up the room she and the computer are in, but she didn't fire up her computer in order to heat up the room, and the heating up of the room is not one of her intermediate "goals in action". Among the results of the inviter's action is the guests's coming to the party and at a certain point feeling bad about the current mess and at a certain point feeling bad about the current mess. This is an intermediate result, but it's not an intermediate goal of the inviter: it's an intermediate result part of which is an intermediate goal of the inviter (viz., the guests's coming to the party), and part of which is a foreseen intermediate result that the inviter is not aiming at. The *Exodus* passage allows that, analogously, for God, the ultimate goal of action is that His power be known to Pharaoh, and His name proclaimed in all the

earth, and Pharaoh's sinful refusal to let the Egyptians go is an intermediate result, part of which is an intermediate goal (the refusal) and part of which is a foreseen result at which God isn't aiming (Pharaoh's sinning).

Or consider a different case, closer to cases discussed by Aquinas. Suppose that you're in a dangerous place (say, a room in which a boiler may explode any moment). Because I want you to be in a safe place, I want you to leave the room very quickly. So I have as a 'proximate' or 'intermediate' goal for you to vacate the room quickly, and as an 'ultimate' goal for you to be in a safe place. Suppose that because you have a deformity, you cannot walk quickly without pain, unless you get an injection in your legs first. The injection would immediately enable you to move quickly without pain, but (as I am aware) it would also make it much more likely that you'll have a fatal stroke in the next 24 hours. I'm in the room with you, and I have everything necessary to give the injection. What do I do? I tell you: "the boiler's about to explode: leave the room NOW", and I don't give you the injection. In this case, your leaving the room in haste and in pain is a foreseen intermediate result of what I do — one which consists partly of a goal (your leaving the room in haste) and partly of a foreseen but unintended result (your leaving the room in pain). In telling you "the boiler's about to explode: leave the room NOW", my aim is to get you leave the room in haste; your leaving the room in pain is not included in my goals, be they intermediate or ultimate. We can think of this case as involving a defeater and a "meta-defeater" (defeater-defeater), just like Kamm's: I have a pro tanto reason to not get you to leave the room quickly and without an injection (the pain you'd feel in doing so), and a meta-defeater of that pro tanto reason, consisting in the danger of an explosion, together with the danger of a stroke). Again, we might say that the *Exodus* passage leaves open that this last case is analogous to the case involving God and the Pharaoh. That is: God has a pro tanto reason not to get Pharaoh to sin (sins are bad, just as pain is), and thus a defeater of His getting Pharaoh to sin, but He has a meta-defeater, given that if Pharaoh doesn't refuse, or sinlessly refuses, things will overall be worse (because either the ultimate goal (God's power becoming known to Pharaoh, and God's name being proclaimed in all the earth) won't be attained, or it will be attained in an overall worse way).

Note that in the boiler-room case, in some sense I have a choice about whether you'll leave the room in haste and in pain, or in haste but not in pain — (assuming you'll go along with my command, and won't resist the in-

jection)) it's up to me whether you'll leave the room in pain as well as in haste. And in some sense (it seems to me) I choose to bring it about that you'll leave the room in haste and in pain. At least, I choose to bring about things that I foresee will result in your leaving the room in pain as well as in haste, which is awfully close to choosing to bring about that result. The situation with God and the Pharaoh, for all the *Exodus* passage says, might be like that. That is, it might be that God has a choice about whether He'll get (or at least, for open theists, whether He'll try to get) His power displayed and His name proclaimed via a sinless refusal of Pharaoh, or via a sinful refusal, and in some sense He chooses to get (or at least try to get) the ultimate end via sinful as opposed to sinless refusal. But that doesn't mean that His aim is that Pharaoh sinfully refuse, any more than, in the hypothetical case, my aim is to get the endangered person to leave the room in haste and in pain.

It would be different if the relevant *Exodus* passage went like this:

But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, so that He would refuse to let the Israelites go. Then God sent plagues on Pharaoh, and his servants, and his people, so that His power would be known to Pharaoh, and in all the earth His name would be proclaimed as the Almighty God who smites those who sinfully refuse the requests of His prophets.

If that's how the passage went, given the modified ultimate goal, it would be natural to suppose that the sinful refusal was not just the foreseen result, but also the intermediate goal of the heart-hardening.

Similarly, I don't think the first of the two Pauline passages discussed by the authors clearly imply that God intends sins. (And likewise for the second passage, though for reasons of brevity I shall not discuss it.) An opponent of the authors might again say that, in these passages, the sins are not what God is aiming at, any more than than Kamm's inviter is aiming at the bad feeling of her guests, but He knowingly gets them to sin, because He deems that doing so is part of His best option in the circumstances — all the alternatives, whether they involve not making plain to the vessels of mercy what they've been spared, or making it plain to them, without vessels of wrath sinning, are for one reason or another, inferior to the option God actually chooses.

The passage under discussion goes:

Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honourable use and another for dishonourable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with

much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory — even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles? (*Romans*, 9: 21)

This would seem compatible with following scenario: God has created certain persons who He foresaw would be subjected to His wrath, and make known His power (the “vessels of wrath”). That those persons would be subjected to His wrath, and would make known His power, was not just something God foresaw, but also something He intended: it was an intermediate goal of His creating those persons. God’s ultimate goal in creating the vessels of wrath was that other persons (“the vessels of mercy”) would better appreciate just how merciful He was towards them (just how much they had been spared). But God’s subjecting sinful persons to His wrath, and making His power known thereby, is an intermediate result of God’s creating the vessels of wrath, but not an intermediate goal. That intermediate result consists of a part that is an intermediate goal of God’s creating those persons (God’s subjecting (those) persons to His wrath, and making His power known thereby), and a part that is a foreseen but not intended result of His creating them (God’s creating (those) sinful persons. (i.e. God’s creating persons who not only would be those persons, but also would sin)). Just as, in the Pharaoh case, the ultimate goal (the Pharaoh’s seeing God’s power, God’s name being proclaimed in all the earth) does not seem to require that Pharaoh’s refusal be sinful, so too in this case: on the face of it, if a capricious god subjected a group of sinless vessels to wrath, whilst sparing a group of sinful ones, the spared and sinful vessels would still feel they have been treated very mercifully). So again, it seems that the opponent of the authors has room to say that in this case, too, the sinning of the vessels of wrath is not something at which God is aiming, but something He ‘puts up with’ (“endures with much patience”), because He has a certain ultimate goal, and He considers ways of achieving that goal which don’t involve the sinning of the vessels of wrath overall worse than the one He chose (which does). (Why would God judge that (all) non-vessel-of-wrath-involving ways of getting vessels of mercy to appreciate how mercifully they’d been treated were inferior to some vessel-of-wrath-involving method of doing that? *Romans* 9:21 does not say. Why would God judge that (all) ways of getting vessels of mercy to appreciate how mercifully they’d been treated involving subjecting sinless vessels to wrath

were inferior to some sinful-vessel-of-wrath-involving way of getting vessels of mercy to appreciate how mercifully they'd been treated? Again, the passage under discussion does not say, but it is natural to suppose that God would regard subjecting sinless vessels to wrath as a very bad thing. So it could be that although God wouldn't want vessels of wrath to be sinless (i.e. regards the sinless as "ineligible to be vessels of wrath"), He nevertheless is not aiming at the sinfulness of vessels of wrath, in the same way that in Kamm's example, although the inviter does not want it to be the case that the people who come to the party will be untroubled by the mess that the party will cause, she nevertheless does not have "as a goal in action" that people coming to her party feel bad (about the mess.)

II

Despite the tenor of some of my comments, I am not without sympathy for much of what the authors argue. I don't see any obvious reason to suppose that whenever S (in acting) has as a goal of action to get someone to commit such-and-such kind of sin, S does something wrong. Surely there are circumstances in which one can be glad that someone committed a certain kind of sin, without anything being amiss. Suppose, for example, I have a disposition to say unkind and unfair things about university administrators. At some point I manifest my disposition with someone who, unbeknownst to me, is a university administrator. She kindly and patiently shows me that I am being unkind and unfair. If I am not too prideful, I might subsequently be glad that my disposition to sin in that way manifested on that occasion, since this undermined that disposition. But equally, my wife might be glad that my disposition to sin in that way manifested. Indeed, if she knew in advance, or even suspected that, should the disposition manifest, it would subsequently be undermined, she might hope that I'd commit the sin of saying unfair and unkind things about administrators. Now suppose that the administrator knows or at any rate thinks that I have the disposition to say unkind and unfair things about administrators, and knows or at any rate thinks that she could undermine that disposition, if I manifested it. Mightn't she try to get me to say something unkind and unfair about administrators, without doing anything wrong (Mightn't that be her aim?) Or if this seems unsavourily manipulative, take a different case. Suppose a prosecuting attorney knows that

the person on trial committed a racist hate crime, and is also impulsive and incontinent. Her aim might be to get that person to tell a racist lie about the judge, or about one of the jurors, or about the ethnic group to which the judge or juror belongs — thus making it more likely that the jurors would see that the person charged is guilty, and would convict. Is this wrong? Or, to slightly modify the example, suppose that in one of the electoral debates, Biden had as an intermediate goal to get Trump to manifest his disposition to tell racist lies. Would there be anything wrong with that? We might think of things this way: if a possible goal of action (whether ultimate or intermediate) involves wrongdoing (on the part of the agent, or on the part of someone else), then (knowingly) choosing that goal is “pro tanto wrong” — i.e., choosing that goal has a feature that as it were “inclines” that choice to (moral) wrongness. But that choice needn’t be “all things considered “(morally) wrong — i.e. (morally) wrong *simpliciter*, because just as an object can lean without falling — as long as a countervailing force keeps it from falling — a choice which “inclines to (moral) wrongness” needn’t be (morally) wrong — as long as other features of the choice keep it from being (morally) wrong. (Compare: we might say that intentionally lying to someone is always pro tanto morally wrong, i.e. always has a moral-wrongness-inclining feature, but needn’t be all things considered morally wrong--i.e. morally wrong *simpliciter*, as long as other features of the action in question keep it from being morally wrong.)

Someone might wonder here whether the Biden or the prosecuting attorney cases are intuitively different from the case discussed by Kamm, or the boiler room case. So far as I can see, they are. In the latter two cases, we are (or at least I am) reluctant to say that Kamm’s inviter is trying to get her guests to feel bad, or that I am trying to get the endangered person to feel pain, whereas in the cases I’ve sketched, it seems very natural to say that the prosecuting attorney, or Biden, is trying to get the criminal or Trump to tell racist lies. I’m not sure exactly why I am disinclined to say that Kamm’s inviter is trying to get her guests to feel bad (about the mess), and inclined to say that the prosecuting attorney, or Biden, is trying to get the criminal or Trump to tell a racist lie. Perhaps it’s because I think of the prosecuting attorney or Biden as choosing to say this rather than that to the criminal, or Trump, with a view to saying what will induce the criminal or Trump to tell a racist lie, and I don’t think of Kamm’s inviter as doing anything analogous. (Suppose I were told that, at the party, Kamm’s inviter said these things rather

than those things to the guests, with a view to getting the guests to feel bad (about the mess). Then I would consider the guests' feeling bad (about the mess) an intermediate aim of the inviter, at the time of the party (even if the guests' feeling bad (about the mess) was not an intermediate aim of the inviter, at the time she sent out the invitations). But whatever the explanation of my inclinations and disinclinations in the cases under discussion, I have them, and I don't think I'm unusual in this regard.

For these reasons (and more), like the authors, I see no obvious reason to think that trying to get someone to sin is always wrong.

