Henry Straughan and Michael O'Connor

Chapter 12
Revelation and Reason in the *Ḥatäta Zär'a Ya'əqob*

Abstract: In this article, we seek to illuminate the philosophical method of the *Ḥatäta Zär'a Ya'əqob.* In particular, we trace the interaction between reason and revelation and the role of discursive argumentation versus immediate intuition. We draw out Zär'a Ya'əqob's method by explicating and examining his discussion of the epistemic significance of disagreement and his distrust of testimony; his argument for the existence of God; his theodical response to the problem of evil; and his practical ethics. In doing so, we argue that Zär'a Ya'əqob's central method of argument is abductive or an inference to the best explanation rather than a deductive method of deriving metaphysical and ethical conclusions from first principles. Zär'a Ya'əqob is committed to all phenomena being explicable in terms of God's purposes and pursuit of perfection, and he uses abductive reasoning to uncover such divine teleology. He appears to be relatively uninterested, in the *Ḥatäta Zär'a Ya'əqob*, in uncovering efficient causal mechanisms but rather seeks to know the purposes of various phenomena. We will also suggest that for Zär'a Ya'əqob discursive reason must be supplemented with intuitive revelation: discursive reason is necessary to criticise and free oneself from dogmatism and tradition, while intuitive revelation is required for wisdom. We further outline how Zär'a Ya'əqob's investigation into the teleological order of nature provides him with ethical guidance. We conclude by considering the role that final causation plays in Zär'a Ya'əqob's method and compare Zär'a Ya'əqob with his European contemporaries René Descartes and Gottfried W. Leibniz.

In this article, we seek to illuminate the philosophical method of the *Ḥatäta Zär'a Ya'əqob* (henceforth "the *Treatise*" or "HZY").[1] In particular, we trace the interac-

---

[1] We neither take a stance on nor address the authorship controversy surrounding the *Ḥatäta Zär'a Ya'əqob*; rather, we will typically write *as if* the authoring of text happened in the way described in the text. We hope that an analysis of the philosophical method of the text is interesting, regardless of who in fact authored it. See Anaïs Wion's *The History of a Genuine Fake Philosophical Treatise* (*L'histoire d'un vrai faux traité philosophique,* Mbodj-Pouye and Wion 2013; Wion 2013a; and Wion 2013b), and this volume's Introduction, for a summary of the history of the controversy. All translations of the *Ḥatäta Zär'a Ya'əqob* ("HZY") and of the *Ḥatäta Wäldä Ḥəywät* ("HWH") are

tion between the role of discursive argumentation versus immediate intuition or revelation and the abductive structure of Zär'a Ya'əqob's reasoning. Zär'a Ya'əqob is sure that testimony and tradition are not adequate sources of knowledge. The alternative source he identifies is the capacity for rational thought inherent in all of us. We suggest that abductive reasoning is central to Zär'a Ya'əqob's rational method, with Zär'a Ya'əqob applying something like a Principle of Sufficient Reason to investigate God's purposes in creating the world as he did. Furthermore, by uncovering the divine teleology, Zär'a Ya'əqob thinks we can discover how we ought to act. We also think that Zär'a Ya'əqob sees the truth-disclosing power of reason as something that does not depend on man alone. Instead, striking on the right explanation for a given phenomenon seems as much a matter of having the right reasons revealed by God as a matter of unaided argument.

We draw out Zär'a Ya'əqob's method by explicating and examining, in the following order, his discussion of disagreement and his distrust of testimony; his argument for the existence of God; his theodical response to the problem of evil; and his ethics. We close by considering some illuminating comparisons with Gottfried W. Leibniz, who we think may be a better companion than Descartes, to whom Zär'a Ya'əqob is often compared.[2] The text's fragmentary, allusive compression means that we must be careful with our conclusions, but we shall try to track Zär'a Ya'əqob's trains of thought and movements of style as best we can, re-tracing the jagged path between revelation and reason in his footsteps.

Abduction and Methodology

Our central claim is that Zär'a Ya'əqob's method is primarily abductive and teleological. An abductive argument, roughly speaking, is one in which the conclusion does not follow directly from the premises or, rather, where the argumentative weight does not lie in the deductive form.[3] Rather, it involves framing two or more explanations for a phenomenon and then appealing to explanatory criteria in settling on the best explanation for that phenomenon. For example, one explanation for why the Earth goes round the sun is in terms of gravity. Another invokes

---

taken from Zara Yaqob, Walda Heywat, Lee, Mehari Worku, and Belcher (2023), with page numbers referring to that translation.

2 Brooh Asmare's essay in this volume (Chapter 8) similarly questions the relevance of comparisons between Zär'a Ya'qob and Descartes. However, he argues for parallels between Zär'a Ya'qob and the German idealists rather than Leibniz.

3 We say this because any abductive argument can be reconstructed as 1. Y, 2. X explains Y, 3. X is the best explanation for Y, 4. If X is the best explanation for fact Y, then X is the case, 5. Therefore, X.

the agency of angels. The latter explanation is a poor explanation because it posits the existence of undetected and possibly undetectable entities. Similarly, Zär'a Ya'əqob's method involves positing explanations and rejecting alternatives on the grounds that they are bad explanations or, in some cases, not really explanations at all.

Our claim, then, is that Zär'a Ya'əqob's method involves taking a fact, such as the existence of the world, and then developing an explanation that fits a set of explanatory criteria. What makes matters difficult is that his explanatory criteria are not made explicit. Still, we think it possible to extract three general principles that constrain which explanations are acceptable. The first basic principle is what we will call his *Principle of Creation*, according to which "everything that we see is created [...] no creature may be thought of as created without a Creator".[4] Zär'a Ya'əqob holds, and also claims "every human being knows",[5] that all phenomena we experience are created and have a creator. The latter part is important to stress, since Zär'a Ya'əqob conceives of creation as an agential and teleological process. In particular, he considers God to be the creator of all and considers God as acting purposively in creation. This leads to the second basic principle, which we call the *Principle of Divine Teleology*, according to which the reason why things are as they are is that God has made them so and that God acts as he does to achieve the greatest perfection. As illustration, consider Zär'a Ya'əqob's gloriously teleological description of the natural world:

> I was marvelling at the beauty of God's creatures, each in its established order, the animals that eat plants and the animals that eat meat. They are drawn by their nature to preserve their life and to continue their kind. Moreover, the forest's trees and plants, which were created with great wisdom—grow shoots, bud, bloom, and produce fruit of their seed's kind without any mistakes. It's almost like they have a soul [...] This sun is the spring of light and the spring of the life of the world. The moon and the stars, which you yourself established, don't stray from their ordained paths [...] Everything is majestic and wonderful, and everything was created with wisdom.[6]

This *Principle of Divine Teleology* means that Zär'a Ya'əqob's method is teleological, in that Zär'a Ya'əqob is concerned with establishing the ends or "final causes" that God has in making matters the way that they are.

The combination of these first two principles evidently bears resemblance to the Principle of Sufficient Reason. This is the principle, according to Gottfried W.

---

4 HZY, p. 82.

5 HZY, p. 82.

6 HZY, p. 96.

Leibniz in the *Monadology*, "by virtue of which we consider that we can find no true or existent fact, no true assertion, without there being a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise".[7] Zär'a Ya'əqob does not make reference to reasons in his Principle of Creation, but his principles secure reasons for the existence of everything in two senses. First, the principle of creation ensures that everything has a cause, i. e., its creator (or the activity of its creator). Second, Zär'a Ya'əqob's agential and purposive conception of creation ensures that everything has a reason for its existence in the sense that it was created for a purpose (it has a final cause, in contrast to the efficient cause that is its creator or their creative activity). This is particularly clear when we consider Zär'a Ya'əqob's claim that "everything was created with wisdom". It is natural to think that a wise creator creates in accordance with reasons—for instance, in a well-designed machine (or a beautifully written poem), every part and aspect will serve a particular purpose and will be chosen over alternatives for a reason. Indeed, Leibniz himself claims to ground the Principle of Sufficient Reason on God's wisdom, writing in an undated text that "[o]ne of my great principles is that nothing happens without reason. That is a principle of philosophy. Nevertheless, at bottom it is nothing but an affirmation of the divine wisdom".[8] While we will return to a comparison with Leibniz at the end, it is worth pointing out another similarity between Zär'a Ya'əqob and Leibniz: both think the truth of their fundamental principles, the Principle of Creation and the Principle of Sufficient of Reason respectively, is somehow self-evident and accepted, knowingly or not, by everyone. Leibniz claims that all reasoning is based on this "great principle" and rhetorically asks in a letter to Clarke "[h]as not everybody made use of this principle, upon a thousand occasions?".[9] Similarly, Zär'a Ya'əqob claims that "the intelligence of every human being knows that everything that we see is created"[10] and appears to think this principle is too self-evident to stand in need of further justification.

Finally, Zär'a Ya'əqob does not just think God acts for the sake of ends but further that God's purposes are accessible to us. Hence, the third, complementary principle is what we call the *Principle of Accessible and Comprehensible Explanation*, according to which these reasons are comprehensible and accessible to us, in the sense that if we think hard enough we can understand why what is the case is the case. Such a principle rules out appealing to our ignorance or the inscrutability of God's purposes to "explain" phenomena. These principles, we suggest, form the basis of Zär'a Ya'əqob's explanatory criteria. Beyond that, though,

---

7 Leibniz and Gerhardt (1875–1890, Volume VI; p. 612) = Leibniz and Loemker (1970 [1969], p. 646).
8 Bodemann (1895, Volume IV, I, p. 39) = Curley (1972, p. 96).
9 Letter 5, Secs. 127 = Leibniz, Clarke, and Alexander (1977 [1956], pp. 96–97).
10 HZY, p. 82.

as we shall see, Zärʾa Yaʾəqob's criteria for deciding between different explanations which conform with these principles are not entirely clear and tend to be specific to particular explanations.

Disagreement and Testimony

One of Zärʾa Yaʾəqob's central claims is that there exists an innate faculty of reason, which he usually suggests is given to us by God. As he writes in Chapter 5: "to the one who searches out, truth will quickly be revealed [...] the one who inquires with the pure reason which the Creator has put into the human heart, to perceive the creation's established order and laws, will find the truth".[11] Zärʾa Yaʾəqob further claims that

> If we were to see by this light of our intelligence what is our duty, it cannot deceive us, because our Creator gave us this light that we may be saved by it, and not destroyed [...] all that the light of our intelligence reveals to us is from the fountain of truth[12]

Pure reason cannot lead us into falsehood. Zärʾa Yaʾəqob makes clear that all of us have the relevant powers of reason, stating that God has "given intelligence to each and every human being, so that they might recognise truth and lies".[13] Together, these quotations strongly suggest the *Principle of Accessible and Comprehensible Explanation* outlined above. Zärʾa Yaʾəqob is confident that investigation will reveal to us the truth if we choose to investigate by using reason.

Despite this, Zärʾa Yaʾəqob notes that we all too often fall into falsehood. In Chapter 3, he writes at length about the ubiquity of real-world disagreement, focusing on the doctrinal disagreement between the Ethiopian Church and Roman Catholicism and the more fundamental tension between the teachings of religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The first task facing Zärʾa Yaʾəqob, then, is to explain why people go wrong in deploying the faculty of reason before he can discuss how reason *ought* to be deployed.

Given that our faculty of reason is unfailingly truth-disclosing if deployed properly, any disagreement must be due to our failure to deploy the faculty of reason appropriately. A first problem in Zärʾa Yaʾəqob's eyes is that men are "weak and lazy" and are reluctant to investigate the truth, which can only be attained

---

11 HZY, p. 75.

12 HZY, p. 77.

13 HZY, p. 83.

with "great toil and patience".[14] A second problem is that many people falsely assume that they *already* possess knowledge. Speaking of the groups mentioned above—*fərang̱* (Catholics), Copts, Jews, and Mohammedans—he writes that "because they think they are knowledgeable, they don't search to find out the truth".[15] Of course, this would be no problem if they did know all. But Zär'a Ya'əqob thinks that the existence of disagreement gives us good reason to think that they do not. He notes that "human beings don't want to ask questions, and they rush to believe what they heard from their ancestors, without questioning".[16] He expands on why this is bad in the following passage:

> Look, how many lies our people believe with unshakable faith! They don't believe in all these because they investigated them and found them to be true, rather they believe in them because they heard about them from their ancestors. Why did [these people] lie, except to gain wealth and prestige?[17]

The argument here seems to be that peoples' beliefs are primarily determined by their predecessors' beliefs rather than by their own investigation of the truth. But what those predecessors said was determined primarily by the desire for wealth and honours. Since the desire for wealth and honours is not a truth-conducive factor, basing one's beliefs on those of one's predecessors is unlikely to be truth-conducive. It should be noted that this does not entail that the *fərang̱*, Copts, Jews, and Mohammedans are wrong about everything. Indeed, Zär'a Ya'əqob believes that there are some truths so self-evident that they cannot be denied. Thus, he writes in Chapter 6:

> [W]hy do all human beings agree in saying that there is a God, the Creator of all? Because the intelligence of every human being knows that everything that we see is created, that no creature may be thought of as created without a Creator, and that if there is a Creator, he is truthful. Because of this, all human beings agree on this point.[18]

More generally, Zär'a Ya'əqob can allow that the *fərang̱*, Copts, Mohammedans, and Jews may each have got at some important truths, such as the existence of God. His claim is just that one cannot tell what they have got right by testimony alone, nor will they be right for the right reasons. The foundation of Zär'a Ya'əqob's method, then, is distrust of testimony: It is reliance on testimony that drives us into false-

---

14 HZY, p. 73.
15 HZY, p. 72.
16 HZY, p. 73.
17 HZY, p. 74.
18 HZY, p. 82.

hood. Wisdom requires that we work things out by undertaking our own investigation, using our own intelligence. It is for this reason that residing in a cave is advantageous to Zär'a Ya'əqob's meditations: "through my escape and living in a cave, I found the occasion to make a perfect return to my creator, to think what I had never thought before, and to know the truth, which makes my soul rejoice with great joy".[19] Only away from the distorting influence of others can one deploy reason without interference.

At the same time, Zär'a Ya'əqob seems to think that reason cannot work without God's aid. In Chapter 10, just after declaring that human beings "don't reveal anything to us but their own empty and worthless ideas. Their human nature is so puny, but with the intelligence our creator graciously bestowed on us, we can know his greatness", he implores God to "[g]ive me understanding of what I should know about you".[20] This imprecation ("give me understanding") may just be a rhetorical flourish, but it suggests that Zär'a Ya'əqob does not expect to understand creation on his own—he needs God-given help *in addition* to the use of reason. It is worth noting here Zär'a Ya'əqob's consistent use of the language of revelation and illumination: "to the one who searches out, truth will quickly be revealed".[21] Notably, the claim that truth will be *quickly* revealed apparently contrasts with Zär'a Ya'əqob's claim that humans "desire to know creation's mysteries, but doing so is difficult. The truth won't be found without great toil and patience [...] human beings don't want to ask questions, and they rush to believe what they heard from their ancestors, without questioning".[22] This contrast between the great toil and patience of questioning and the quickness of revelation suggests that the acquisition of knowledge involves an active moment of seeking, involving the critical, and laborious, use of discursive reason, which puts the seeker in receptive state for the passive moment of revelation, which is not dependent on the activity or power of the seeker.

The Existence of God

In Chapter 3 of the *Treatise*, Zär'a Ya'əqob's worry about the ubiquity of disagreement gives rise to the question: How can God allow confusion over the truth and evil to exist? Zär'a Ya'əqob's immediate response is to pray, in the hope that God

---

19 HZY, p. 91.
20 HZY, p. 96.
21 HZY, p. 75.
22 HZY, p. 73.

will reveal to him why these epistemic and moral evils should exist. This is consistent with the picture outlined above, on which reason yields the correct explanation for phenomena in conjunction with grace, or revelation. In the process of praying, though, Zär'a Ya'əqob comes to doubt the existence of God: "Whom do I myself pray to? Is there a Lord who hears me? [...] Did I create myself with my own hands?".[23]

In considering the existence of God, Zär'a Ya'əqob dwells on the issue of *creation.* As noted above, Zär'a Ya'əqob is committed to the Principle of Creation that "everything that we see is created [...] no creature may be thought of as created without a Creator". This is an *a priori* principle according to which any complete explanation for the existence of an entity must cite a creator. Furthermore, as we have encoded in the Principle of Divine Teleology, Zär'a Ya'əqob's is committed to there being teleological—or final causal—reasons for every fact, rather than just efficient causes. Since creators are agents who act for the sake of ends, each fact must be explicable in terms of the purposive activity of some agent—not only does everything have a creator, but furthermore "everything was created with wisdom".

With this background picture, Zär'a Ya'əqob first considers the possibility that he created himself but dismisses this because he did not exist when he was created (the unarticulated premise being that only existing beings can create). He then considers the further possibility that his parents created him:

> If I say that my father and my mother created me then my parents' creator and their parents' creator must still be searched for, until arriving at the first ones who were not conceived like us, but who came into this world in another way, without parents. For if they were conceived, I don't know where their genealogy begins unless I say, "there is one being who created them out of nothing, one who was not created, but rather already existed and will exist forever, Lord of all the Almighty, who has no beginning or end, immutable, whose years are innumerable".[24]

In this passage, Zär'a Ya'əqob begins by entertaining but not committing to the view that his father and mother created him by a process of "generation". In explaining *why* his parents are not the appropriate creators, Zär'a Ya'əqob cannot appeal to similar reasons as above: for, obviously, his parents *did* exist at the beginning of his life. Instead, Zär'a Ya'əqob is concerned that such an explanatory route leads to an infinite regress of generation, since one must ask who created one's parents, and then who created their parents etc. Zär'a Ya'əqob's reasons for reject-

---

23 HZY, p. 69.
24 HZY, p. 69.

ing such an infinite regress of explanation appear to be partly epistemic: he thinks that at some point we must posit the foundational existence of an uncreated thing because otherwise we "know nothing".

It is not clear why we would "know nothing" on this picture. It is not obviously impossible that there could be an infinite chain of generation, so that there is no "first human". We might construe the argument as based on an appeal to the explanatory inadequacy of infinite regress. Suppose the first human was created like humans solely by generation and that those who generated the first human also had generators, who themselves had generators, and so on *ad infinitum.* To avoid an infinite chain of generators, the thought goes, we must posit the existence of an ungenerated thing that brought into being all other things. The problem is not necessarily with the metaphysical possibility of regress. It is rather a problem at the level of explanation. An explanation that cites an infinite chain of generators is not a good explanation. Why this is so, however, is not made clear: in such a regress, each existent would itself be explained by a previous generator or creator. Nonetheless, there is something intuitively unsatisfactory about such an infinite regress as an explanation, especially if what we are searching for is the purpose or final cause of our existence.

We get further elaboration of the explanatory power of God's existence in Chapter 6, in which Zärʾa Yaʿəqob declares:

> Because when all human beings agree with each other on something, that thing seems like the truth. [That's why God made it so that] all human beings cannot agree with lies, just as none of them can ever agree in their religious beliefs [which all have elements of falsehood introduced]. If only we would think [about this]: why do all human beings agree in saying that there is a God, the Creator of all? Because the intelligence of every human being knows that everything that we see is created, that no creature may be thought of as created without a Creator, and that if there is a Creator, he is truthful. Because of this, all human beings agree on this point.[25]

Here, Zärʾa Yaʿəqob uses the fact that reason ineluctably leads us to God as an explanation for universal agreement on God's existence. Zärʾa Yaʿəqob is not citing universal agreement on the existence of a creator God as testimonial support for his view that there is a creator-God. Given Zärʾa Yaʿəqob's distrust of testimony, even universal agreement might not be taken to constitute strong testimonial evidence for God's existence. Zärʾa Yaʿəqob's claim, rather, seems to be that God's existence is evident as soon as one starts thinking about creation because one realises that alternative explanations, such as those based on generation, cannot do the relevant explanatory work—they reveal nothing about our "origins". Here, he uses

---

25 HZY, p. 82.

this to carry out further explanatory work: namely, to explain why there is such widespread agreement on God's existence, agreement that is especially odd given the ubiquity of disagreement in practically every other sphere of human endeavour and religious thought. Of course, the fact that the existence of God can explain universal agreement on the existence of God is no longer a point in favour of the view given the emergence of widespread disagreement over the existence of God.

Why, though, should we think that we are capable of grasping the reason why the world exists in the first place? Why should we think there is such a reason? Is it not possible that we really *do* know nothing of our origins? If God does not exist, then Zär'a Ya'əqob cannot cite God's goodness as a reason to think that the world is comprehensible to us. So, either Zär'a Ya'əqob is assuming that God does exist and guarantees our access to the divine teleology, which would make his argument circular, or he is pre-committed to the view that the world is comprehensible to us if we use reason. Hence, Zär'a Ya'əqob appears to have a foundational commitment to the view that there is a reason for everything and that these reasons are accessible and comprehensible to us. At the same time, though, Zär'a Ya'əqob does seem to believe that reason comes from God and that it is *due to* God's influence that the world is comprehensible. What we seem to have is a kind of overlapping justification: God's existence confirms reason, and reason confirms God's existence.

It is worth noting that even if Zär'a Ya'əqob's argument from the explanatory inadequacy of an infinite regress goes through, it does not guarantee that the creator looks very much like an Abrahamic God. Why should the uncreated, unworldly thing bear any resemblance to God as usually construed? Zär'a Ya'əqob's theology is not obviously distinctively Christian,[26] but he does have some relatively thick conception of what God looks like. At least some of the work is done by Zär'a Ya'əqob's agential and teleological conception of creation. He writes:

> Because we exist and are not creators but rather are created, we have to say that there is a creator who fashioned us. Further, this creator who fashioned *us* with the faculties of reason and speech cannot himself be without these faculties of reason and speech, because from the abundance of his reason he created us with the faculty of reason.[27]

Note that here, we are described as "not creators". Assuming that "we" means "human beings", this suggests that Zär'a Ya'əqob does not think of giving birth as creation (at least not in the relevant sense); otherwise, we would be the creators

---

26 Firstly, Zär'a Ya'əqob rejects the authority of scripture *qua* scripture. Secondly, it is not clear what role, if any, the incarnated Christ has in Zär'a Ya'əqob's theology.
27 HZY, p. 70.

of other humans (recall that Zär'a Ya'əqob never affirms that his parents created him, but only affirms the conditional that *if* he says that his parents created him, this would still be an inadequate explanation of his existence). The crucial idea is that there is a creator who "fashioned us". Evidently, our parents did not fashion or design us. Rather, Zär'a Ya'əqob thinks that our creator must be a being that designed us, because creation is understood as an intelligent process of designing in accordance with reason. Hence, Zär'a Ya'əqob's conception of creation secures, at least, an intelligent and purposive God.

However, this line of thought serves to highlight the absence of justification for Zär'a Ya'əqob's teleological conception of creation. As above, one could justify such a conception by appealing to the existence of a wise God, but in this case such a conception is required to demonstrate the existence of a wise God. Nonetheless, we think this conception brings us to the core of his method. Zär'a Ya'əqob in effect applies a Principle of Sufficient Reason in assuming that there is a reason for everything, and that we are able to discover such reasons through the exercise of our intelligence, which we have called the Principle of Accessible and Comprehensible Explanation. Furthermore, once Zär'a Ya'əqob has satisfied himself regarding the existence of God, the application of this Principle of Sufficient Reason is straightforwardly governed by his theism. From this point, Zär'a Ya'əqob's philosophical method largely consists in taking facts about existence and asking why (a good and wise) God would have created the world thus. The question one asks is: What is the best explanation for why God created things this way?

Theodicy

Shortly after affirming the existence of God, Zär'a Ya'əqob addresses the presence of evil in the world. Here again we can see his abductive reasoning at work. He begins by assuming there is a reason for evil's existence in the divine scheme—that God must have had a purpose or end in creating a world with evil. His task then is to uncover a teleological explanation for evil. There are two components to his answer. The first is that man was created free: "God created human beings to be the owners of their own actions, to be what they want to be, whether good or evil".[28] However, as is often remarked regarding theodicies that stress the role of human freedom, freedom alone does not seem able to account for the prevalence of evil and falsehood, since it seems God could have created humans free but nonetheless disposed towards good and capable of easily attaining wisdom. And even if

---

28 HZY, p. 73.

one thinks that it is not possible for humans to be both free and *infallibly* good, it seems likely that freedom is compatible with there being less evil than there actually is. Hence, the second component of Zär'a Ya'əqob's answer is that God has created man not only free but also of such a nature that it is difficult for humans to uncover truth. Human nature includes the "weakness" and "laziness"[29] but also our carnality: the fact that "human beings chose fleshly pleasure, because they are fleshly beings. They seek to satisfy the desires of their flesh in every way that they can be found, whether good or evil".[30] Zär'a Ya'əqob gives the desire for "wealth or prestige" as an example of such desires which can lead us astray,[31] and later suggests, in regard to his son, that the desire for sex can also lead people astray.[32]

Having established that human nature causes evil, Zär'a Ya'əqob faces a further demand for explanation: why would God create man free and of such a nature that knowledge and virtue are difficult to attain? In his initial discussion, Zär'a Ya'əqob answers that "It is not God who created human beings as evil, rather it is God who gave them the choice to become whatever they want. Because God gave them this choice, human beings will be worthy of a reward if they are good or judgement if they are evil".[33] The idea here appears to be that both freedom *and* a carnal nature are necessary for humans to be able to *deserve* either reward or punishment, with the implicit idea being that there is something better about humans being able to *deserve rewards* rather than just receiving rewards. This idea is fleshed out further in Chapter 8, where Zär'a Ya'əqob makes explicit some of his key theodical assumptions. He writes that:

> God could have created us as perfect and made us live in a blessed state on earth. But he did not want to create us as such. Rather, he created us prepared for perfection. He put us amidst this world's trials so that we could become perfect, and worthy of our Creator's reward after our death.[34]

Here, Zär'a Ya'əqob claims that God *could* have created humans perfect. By this, we take him to mean that humans could have been created such that they neither commit nor suffer evil. Therefore, there must be a reason why God did not create us perfect. The idea is that God did not create us perfect because we can only de-

---

29 HZY, p. 74.

30 HZY, p. 74.

31 HZY, p. 74.

32 It seems reasonable to assume that other desires, such as for food or alcohol, are likewise carnal. It should be emphasised that for Zär'a Ya'əqob, these desires are not in themselves bad; rather, that they can lead people away from the search for truth (HZY, p. 74).

33 HZY, p. 74.

34 HZY, p. 88.

serve rewards for being virtuous if attaining virtue is an achievement, and for it to be an achievement, it must be difficult to attain. The underlying assumption must be that the world is more beautiful or perfect if there are humans who not only receive beatitude but further *deserve* beatitude.

To use the typology developed by John Hick in *Evil and the God of Love*, Zär'a Ya'əqob therefore embraces an Irenaean style of theodicy based on the value of ethical progress over an Augustinian one which "looks to the past, to a primal catastrophe in the fall of angels and/or men, for the explanation of the existence of evil in God's universe".[35] Zär'a Ya'əqob does not view evil as the result of an original transgression brought about by human freedom, nor does he see human suffering in general as the deserved punishment for original sin (though he does apparently think that, in the afterlife, the wicked will receive deserved punishment[36]). Rather, he views the existence of evil as a necessary means for achieving a greater good: the existence of individuals who deserve reward. He claims that "God did not create us as perfect, but rather as understanding beings with the potential for perfection [so that] we may be perfected while we live in this world, and after, be worthy of the reward that our Creator in his wisdom has prepared for us".[37] As Hick puts it, when describing Irenaeus' theodicy, the "world exists to be an environment for man's life, and its imperfections are integral to its fitness as a place of soul-making".[38]

Indeed, Wäldä Ḥəywät explicitly attributes this theodicy to Zär'a Ya'əqob in his interpretation of his master. In Chapter 11, "The Teaching of Zär'a Ya'əqob", Wäldä Ḥəywät writes that according to Zär'a Ya'əqob's doctrine

> The temptations and troubles that happen to human beings in this world are to test them, so that they will be worthy of the reward that their creator will graciously grant them. In fact, no wages are due to anyone who does not work, and no one is worthy of reward who has not been faithful during a period of testing.[39]

There is, however, a significant difference between Wäldä Ḥəywät and Zär'a Ya'əqob over the status of theodicy. While Zär'a Ya'əqob appears confident that he knows why God has created the world such that there is evil, Wäldä Ḥəywät is much more doubtful about man's ability to know God's reasons and seems to be of the view that though we should believe that God, given his wisdom and

---

35 Hick (2007 [1966], p. 237).

36 Cf. HZY, pp. 85–86.

37 HZY, p. 88.

38 Hick (2007 [1966], p. 237).

39 HWH, p. 127.

his goodness, has a reason for allowing evil, we cannot understand that reason. He argues that it is not fitting to ask why God acted as he did, or why he created humans in the way he did,[40] writing that "[w]e should not say to God, 'Why did you do this or do that?' [nor] 'why did you create me like this?'".[41] Zär'a Ya'əqob, in contrast, believes not only that we can come to understand God's reasons for acting as he did but also that it is vital that we do ask why God acted as he did, since understanding God's reasons gives us ethical knowledge. For instance, by reflecting on evil, Zär'a Ya'əqob comes to understand that he can achieve virtue through the difficult exercise of his intelligence, and also comes to understand the ways in which human desires can distort the exercise of intelligence, thus achieving the kind of self-knowledge that is necessary for virtue.

Set in the broader context of Zär'a Ya'əqob's method, the key point is that Zär'a Ya'əqob's theodicy emerges from the thought that God must have a purpose in creating evil, and proceeds by an inference to the best explanation. Zär'a Ya'əqob takes it as given that evil exists, God exists, and that man is both free and yet feeble. He then reasons that the value of moral achievement is the best explanation for the existence of evil. We take this to be abductive, since the value of achievement is clearly not the only logically possible explanation for the existence of evil. There is, for instance, the alternative explanation mentioned by Wäldä Ḥəywät in Chapter 10 of his *Treatise*, according to which this world is a prison house and punishment for the souls of wicked angels. Zär'a Ya'əqob instead takes the value of moral achievement to be the most natural explanation of evil.

Ethics

Zär'a Ya'əqob's abductive method is most prominent in his ethics. For Zär'a Ya'əqob, everything was created by God for a reason, and by uncovering that reason, we discover how we should act.[42] This teleological ethical vision is captured in the following lines:

> [T]he forest's trees and plants, which were created with great wisdom—grow shoots, bud, bloom, and produce fruit of their seed's kind without any mistakes. It's almost like they have a soul. Moreover, the mountains and valleys, the rivers and springs, all your works, glo-

---

40 HWH, p. 122.

41 HWH, p. 122.

42 This kind of broadly teleological conception of Zär'a Ya'əqob's ethics is also suggested by Dawit Worku Kidane (2012, pp. 105–107).

rify your name, O Lord [...] Everything is majestic and wonderful, and everything was created with wisdom.[43]

In articulating his ethics, Zär'a Ya'əqob starts with facts that are evident from experience, for instance that there are an equal number of men and women, that women menstruate, that people desire sex, and then asks why this is the case, seeking the best teleological explanation for the phenomenon. When deciding between various explanations for a phenomenon, he leans heavily on the idea of "naturalness" because for him what is natural is what God wills. For instance, God created menstruation, and so it is wrong to treat it as impure; God created the desire for sex because he wants us to procreate, and so sexual abstinence is wrong; God created an equal number of men and women because he favours monogamy, and so polygamy is wrong.

Zär'a Ya'əqob wants to say certain practices are natural and so right, such as monogamous marriage, sex, and regular eating, while other practices, such as fasting, sexual abstinence, and slavery, are unnatural and wrong. This ethical stance encounters problems when considered in conjunction with his theodicy. While the non-human natural world moves entirely according to God's plan, humans are capable of acting in a way that is not in accordance with God's will. Since both natural and unnatural practices are undertaken by humans, who are after all God's creation, Zär'a Ya'əqob needs to show how to differentiate between the two. One can imagine a defender of asceticism and abstinence arguing that the best explanation for sexual desire is not that God wants us to procreate, but rather that God wants to test us and so contribute to our moral improvement. Hence, Zär'a Ya'əqob has to show why certain actual practices are natural and certain are not.

In Chapter 12, Zär'a Ya'əqob offers a criterion, suggesting those desires are natural which are universal and ineliminable. He claims that those who try to eliminate their natural human desires are in fact unable to do so: "those who believe that monastic celibacy is better than marriage are drawn toward marriage [...] Those who reject their possessions will become flatterers of kings and wealthy people in order to acquire possessions".[44] The thought is that certain desires are inescapable, and so the best explanation for God implanting them in us is that they are good. Whether these desires are in fact universal and ineliminable is unclear: the desires for sex and material wealth are less obviously universal and ineliminable

---

43 HZY, p. 96.
44 HZY, p. 84.

than the desire for food. Perhaps Zär'a Ya'əqob does not need total universality and ineliminability to establish naturalness, just a sufficient degree.

Putting aside this question, other problems arise. Zär'a Ya'əqob suggests that drives such as the desire for wealth and the desire for sex are natural, and yet he also believes that following them can lead us into ignorance and wrongdoing. For instance, they can lead us into enslaving others or infidelity. Indeed, Zär'a Ya'əqob's theodicy requires the idea that our nature can lead us into wrongdoing. As he writes "human beings chose fleshly pleasure, because they are fleshly beings. They seek to satisfy the desires of their flesh in every way that they can be found, whether good or evil".[45] Hence, while trying to eliminate our natural desires is wrong, following our natural desires alone is not sufficient for goodness. Rather, we must have another way of distinguishing the right and wrong ways of following our natural desires. Zär'a Ya'əqob offers few arguments on this point. As an example: while criticising slavery, he says "the Creator of human beings [...] created us equal, as brothers and sisters [...] But Mohammed regarded weak human beings as the property of strong human beings and equated rational creation with irrational beasts".[46] The defender of slavery might, of course, respond that all men are not equal and that it is natural for the strong to dominate the weak; indeed, he might argue, mirroring Zär'a Ya'əqob, that this explains why slavery exists. Zär'a Ya'əqob appears to take the equality of men and the wrongness of slavery to be self-evident when one uses one's intelligence properly and so not in need of further justification or argument.

The thought might be something like this: when one's intelligence is not being distorted, what is natural (and so right) is known by a kind of immediate intuition. This connects with the significance of Zär'a Ya'əqob's philosophising alone away from society.[47] Once one escapes the corrupting influence of society (and the influence of one's own distorting desires for wealth and power) and seeks to discover God's will, the natural law is revealed. This fits in with the passage that we quoted at the start of this section. When in a proper state of contemplation, Zär'a Ya'əqob does not need to reason discursively about God's purposes in nature. Rather, his vision of the world is transformed such that he sees God's will and wisdom manifesting in the natural world. Perhaps it is likewise with slavery: when one uses one's intelligence properly, free from the distorting influence of doctrine, it is just clear that slavery is unnatural.

---

45 HZY, p. 74.

46 HZY, p. 79.

47 Cf. HZY, p. 92.

Zär'a Ya'əqob might think, then, that arriving at the right explanation involves a kind of perceptual revelation. If one is in the right conditions, the reason for things appears; the world lights up and God's purpose is made evident. This is suggested by the metaphors of light Zär'a Ya'əqob deploys in, for example, a passage in Chapter 5:

> [T]he creator put the light of intelligence in the human heart, that human beings may perceive good and evil [...] If we were to see by this light of our intelligence what is our duty, it cannot deceive us [...] And all that the light of our intelligence reveals to us is from the fountain of truth.[48]

Hence, one must free oneself from reliance on testimony and tradition and sincerely seek to uncover God's purposes. The application of reason is necessary to critique, and so free oneself from, inherited dogmas. Once one opens oneself up, God will then illuminate one's intellect in response.[49] The work of explaining the world thus relies on both God's grace and reason's power.

Final Causation

Zär'a Ya'əqob's appeal to God's purposes in explaining natural phenomena suggests interesting comparisons with European philosophers writing in the same century. So far, the dominant trend in Anglophone literature on Zär'a Ya'əqob has been to compare the *Treatise* with René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in part due to the similarity between Zär'a Ya'əqob's retreat to the cave and Descartes' exhortation to meditate in isolation.[50] For instance, Claude Sumner devotes a large portion of his article "The Significance of Zera Yacob's Philosophy" to comparing Zär'a Ya'əqob with Descartes, noting that he does this in part because "so many scholars have done so".[51] Likewise, Teodros Kiros in "The Meditations of Zara Yaquob" seeks to draw close parallels between Descartes and Zär'a Ya'əqob, arguing that while "nothing could be as stark as the differences between the material lives" of Descartes and Zär'a Ya'əqob, they are philosophical "soul mate[s]":

> Both were ardent believers in the power of Reason or intelligence as the final arbiter of human agonies. They were, each in his own way, staunch enemies of the dogmatics of the

---

48 HZY, p. 77.
49 HZY, p. 86.
50 Adam and Tannery (1964–1976, Volume XII, pp. 17–18) = Cottingham, Stoodhoff, Murdoch, and Kenny (1984–1991, Volume I, p. 12).
51 Sumner (1999a, p. 172).

church. For both of them the light of Reason should illuminate the dark regions of human thought. Neither of the two recognized teachers, priests or experts to represent the will of others by claiming to be the representatives of the will of God on earth. Finally, for Zara Yacob, God is revealed through Natural Reason; and for Descartes it is disclosed to intelligence.[52]

Similarly, in his article "Claude Sumner's Classical Ethiopian Philosophy", Teodros Kiros argues that the closest parallel to "Zera Yacob's method of inquiry" is "Descartes' method as articulated in his *Discourse on Method*".[53]

Our discussion of Zär'a Ya'əqob's method, however, reveals deep divergence with Descartes' method. Consider Descartes' claim in the *Fourth Meditation* that:

> [S]ince I now know that my own nature is very weak and limited, whereas the nature of God is immense, incomprehensible and infinite, I also know without more ado that he is capable of countless things whose causes are beyond my knowledge. And for this reason alone I consider the customary search for final causes to be totally useless in physics; there is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the purposes of God.[54]

For Descartes, the search for final causes, central to Zär'a Ya'əqob's ethics, epistemology, and theodicy, should be "entirely banish[ed] from our philosophy".[55] For Zär'a Ya'əqob, it is our duty to investigate God's purposes; for Descartes, such a project is "arrogant" and doomed to fail.[56] Descartes sought to overhaul philosophical methods based on final causes and replace them with a mechanistic philosophy based on efficient causes. He argues in Article 28 of the *Principles of Philosophy* that we should "never derive explanations from the purposes which God or nature may have had in view when creating them" and rather should appeal to God only insofar as we consider him "the efficient cause of all things".[57] Zär'a Ya'əqob, on the other hand, takes the search for God's purposes as the route to joy and wisdom, and as such the highest level of philosophy. Hence, we dissent from Teodros Kiros' view that Zär'a Ya'əqob's method of inquiry is similarly to Descartes'—in fact, they are fundamentally different.

---

52 Teodros Kiros (1998).

53 Teodros Kiros (1996, p. 44).

54 Adam and Tannery (1964–1976, Volume VII, p. 55) = Cottingham, Stoodhoff, Murdoch, and Kenny (1984–1991, Volume II, p. 39).

55 Adam and Tannery (1964–1976, Volume VIII, p. 15) = Cottingham, Stoodhoff, Murdoch, and Kenny (1984–1991, Volume I, p. 202).

56 Adam and Tannery (1964–1976, Volume VIII, p. 15) = Cottingham, Stoodhoff, Murdoch, and Kenny (1984–1991, Volume I, p. 202).

57 Adam and Tannery (1964–1976, Volume VIII, p. 15) = Cottingham, Stoodhoff, Murdoch, and Kenny (1984–1991, Volume I, p. 202).

Nonetheless, we suggest that another European contemporary of Zär'a Ya'əqob may provide fruitful comparison on the role of divine teleology in philosophical explanation: Leibniz. Leibniz, who extensively theorised the relationship between efficient and final causes, firmly rejected Descartes' banishment of final causes. Consider the following passage from Leibniz' critical notes on Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*, in which Leibniz argues against Article 28 of the *Principles*:

> As for the ends which God has proposed to himself, I am fully convinced both that they can be known and that it is of the highest value to investigate them; and that to disdain this inquiry is not without danger or suspicion. In general, whenever we see that anything is particularly useful, we may safely assert that one, among others, of the ends which God has proposed to himself in creating this thing is precisely that it render these services, since he both knew and planned this use of it.[58]

This paragraph captures one of Zär'a Ya'əqob's core methodological principles: the value and efficacy of investigating divine teleology. We can see the parallels clearly in the two philosophers' treatments of the afterlife. Consider first Zär'a Ya'əqob's appeal to God's justice to demonstrate the existence of an afterlife:

> Also, all righteousness is not fulfilled in this world. For, evil human beings achieve satisfaction from the good things of this world, while the gentle starve. There are evil human beings who are happy, and there are good human beings who are sad; there are vicious human beings who live lives of pleasure, while there are virtuous human beings who mourn. Therefore, after our death, another life and the perfection of justice is needed, where all human beings will be rewarded according to their actions.[59]

The view here is that God pursues justice, and so the virtuous must be rewarded and the wicked punished. But in this life, many wicked are happy and many virtuous suffer. Hence, there must be an afterlife in which justice is realised. As a result, we should act virtuously now so as to achieve beatitude in the next life. Appeal to God's justice produces cosmological conclusions and practical dictates.

Leibniz likewise believes that God pursues justice, writing in the preface to the *Codex Iuris Gentium* (1693) that God's "power and providence make it so that [...] nothing is done rightly without reward, and no sin is without punishment".[60]

However, Leibniz, like Zär'a Ya'əqob, notices and is disturbed by the obvious injustice of this life, writing in *Leibniz's Philosophical Dream* (ca. 1693) that we

---

58 Leibniz and Gerhardt (1875–1890, Volume IV, p. 360) = Leibniz and Loemker (1970 [1969], p. 387).
59 HZY, p. 86.
60 Leibniz and Gerhardt (1875–1890, Volume III, p. 389) = Strickland (2006, p. 152).

often see "injustice triumphant and innocence afflicted".[61] Hence, Leibniz concludes there must be an afterlife to rectify these injustices.[62]

Furthermore, in the *Meditation on the Common Concept of Justice* (1702–1703), Leibniz draws from this cosmological thesis the practical conclusion that it is "imprudent not to be just", since the afterlife ensures the virtuous are the happiest.[63]

Both Leibniz and Zär'a Ya'əqob use divine teleology to produce physical and practical conclusions. God's desire for justice allows us to derive the physical conclusion that there is an afterlife. The existence of the afterlife, in turn, gives us a practical imperative to act well now so as to attain blessedness in the next life and avoid damnation.[64]

While Descartes rejects the attempt to derive conclusions about the world from God's purposes, Leibniz and Zär'a Ya'əqob put divine teleology to prolific use in producing their cosmology and their ethics. Evidently, our discussion of the two thinkers is incomplete, but we want to suggest that Leibniz may provide a much more fruitful point of early modern comparison than Descartes.

61 Bodemann (1895, p. 111) = Lodge (2022, p. 2).

62 Leibniz and Gerhardt (1875–1890, Volume III, p. 389) = Strickland (2006, pp. 151–152).

63 Leibniz and Gerhardt (1875–1890, Volume III, p. 389) = Strickland (2006, p. 151).

64 It is worth noting that Descartes, in contrast, rejects the possibility of rational knowledge about the nature of the afterlife, writing to Elizabeth of Bohemia that "[a]s for the state of the soul after this life, I am not so well informed [...] Leaving aside what faith tells us, I agree that by natural reason alone we can make many gratifying guesses and have fine expectations, but we cannot have any certainty" (Adam and Tannery 1964–1976, Volume IV, p. 333 = Cottingham, Stoodhoff, Murdoch, and Kenny 1984–1991, Volume III, p. 277).