

Skeptical Theism

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Abstract

Most *a posteriori* arguments against the existence of God take the following form:

- (1) If God exists, the world would not be like *this* (where ‘this’ picks out some feature of the world like the existence of evil, etc.)
- (2) But the world is like *this*.
- (3) Therefore, God does not exist.

Skeptical theists are theists who are skeptical of our ability to make judgments of the sort expressed by premise (1). According to skeptical theism, if there were a God, it is likely that he would have reasons for acting that are beyond our ken, and thus we are not justified in making all-things-considered judgments about what the world would be like if there were a God. In particular, the fact that we don’t see a good reason for X does not justify the conclusion that there is no good reason for X.¹ Thus, skeptical theism purports to undercut most *a posteriori* arguments against the existence of God. What follows is an account of the nature of skeptical theism, an application of skeptical theism to both the argument from evil and the argument from divine hiddenness, and a review of the cases for and against skeptical theism.

1. The Nature of Skeptical Theism

Skeptical theism is a conjunction of a metaphysical thesis and an epistemological thesis. The metaphysical thesis is that God exists, where ‘God’ is an honorific title describing the most perfect being possible. The epistemological thesis is that humans are not justified in making *all-things-considered* judgments about what God has done or would do in any given situation.² It is the second, epistemological, thesis of skeptical theism that is crucial, and for this reason the name ‘skeptical theism’ is an unfortunate one. There are theists who deny the epistemological thesis (e.g. Swinburne 1998; Hasker 2004) and non-theists who accept it (e.g. Draper 1992).

The skeptical component of skeptical theism is used as a criticism of so-called ‘noseeum’ inferences.³ A noseeum inference takes the following form:

As far as we can tell, there are no X’s.
Therefore, there are no X’s.

A noseeum inference essentially begins with a statement about the absence of evidence and concludes that there is evidence of absence (e.g. Kraay 2007). Surely such an inference is sometimes warranted. For example, suppose that as far as you can tell, there are no donkeys in your office. From this premise it is reasonable to conclude that there are no donkeys in your office. But just as clearly, this same inference pattern is sometimes unwarranted. For example, as far as you can tell, there is no life elsewhere in the universe. However, this fact alone does not license the conclusion that there is not life

elsewhere in the universe. Skeptical theism claims that inferences concerning what God would do are of this second type.⁴

2. How Skeptical Theism is Deployed

In the contemporary literature, skeptical theism features most prominently as an undercutting defeater for some *a posteriori* arguments for atheism. What follows is an explanation of the skeptical theist's strategy as applied to both the argument from evil and the argument from divine hiddenness.

2.1. THE ARGUMENT FROM EVIL

Skeptical theism is primarily deployed to undercut evidential arguments from evil for atheism. If skeptical theism can successfully challenge the evidential argument from evil, it has thereby de-fused the most widespread and plausible argument for atheism.⁵ Defining a gratuitous evil as one that is not necessary to secure some compensating good or prevent some evil that is equally bad or worse, the paradigmatic noseem version of the evidential argument from evil can be stated as follows (e.g. Rowe 1979):

- (1) At least some of the evils in our world *appear* gratuitous.
- (2) Therefore, at least some of the evils in our world *are* gratuitous.
- (3) If God exists, there is no gratuitous evil.
- (4) Therefore, God does not exist.

Applied to this argument, skeptical theism says that the inference from (1) to (2) (the inference from the existence of *inscrutable* evil to the existence of *gratuitous* evil) is unwarranted given our cognitive limitations. Given our limited moral perspective, it is not surprising that we are unable to see God's justification for allowing evil in the world.

In this way, skeptical theism offers a more sophisticated response to the argument from evil than the typical theodicy. Defenders of the argument from evil attempt to show that (2) is true. Theodacists attempt to show that (2) is false. Skeptical theists commend agnosticism about (2).⁶ Thus, the skeptical theist can agree with the defender of the argument that many of the evils in our world are so terrible that we have no idea how they could be justified. However, against the defender of the argument, she can insist that this state of affairs does not constitute a good reason for thinking that there is no justification for the evils in our world.

2.2. THE ARGUMENT FROM DIVINE HIDDENNESS

Skeptical theism can be deployed in precisely the same way against the argument from divine hiddenness (e.g. Alston 1996; Bergmann 2009; Howard-Snyder 1996b; for a rejection of this move, see Schellenberg 1996). The argument from divine hiddenness claims that if God existed, his loving nature and desire to be in communion with capable creatures would compel him to set up the world so that everyone would believe in him. Thus, God would seek to make his existence obvious. But since it's not obvious that God exists, this fact thereby provides evidence for his non-existence. The argument can be stated as follows:

- (5) If God exists, then he would, at all times, make himself known to all creatures capable of entering into a relationship with him.

- (6) But God has not made himself known, at all times, to all creatures capable of entering into a relationship with him.
 (7) Therefore, God does not exist.⁷

Applied to this argument, skeptical theism says that we should be skeptical about (5).⁸ This is because (5) is an all-things-considered claim about what God would do. Obviously God would *not* make himself known to all capable creatures if he had morally sufficient reasons for not doing so. Perhaps, for example, God would allow a period of divine hiddenness to secure some compensating good for either the person in question or others or both. And the mere fact that we can detect no such good reason is not justification for the conclusion that there is no such good reason. And if not, then there is no reason to endorse (5).

3. *The Case for Skeptical Theism*

Why should we think that skeptical theism is true? Since the metaphysical thesis of skeptical theism is logically separate from the epistemological thesis, and it's the latter that matters here, what follows are the various defenses of the skeptical component of skeptical theism. These defenses can be parsed into roughly four types: arguments from analogy, arguments from complexity, arguments from alternatives, and arguments from enabling premises.⁹

3.1. ARGUMENTS FROM ANALOGY

Perhaps the most common defense of skeptical theism is an appeal to analogy. Consider the case of a young child making all-things-considered judgments about what her parents would do in a certain situation (e.g. Wykstra 1984, 1996; Plantinga 1988). Given the child's limited knowledge, she can't see why her parents would, say, allow the doctor to cause her pain with an injection. However, the fact that she is not aware of a good reason does not justify her in concluding that there is no good reason.

The parent /child analogy has been critiqued in the literature as too weak to establish skeptical theism (e.g. Rowe 1996, 2001, 2006; McBrayer 2004). Other analogies have been offered in its place. For example, suppose a novice was watching a chess match between the world champion Kasparov and an opponent (e.g. Alston 1996). The fact that a novice cannot see a good reason for Kasparov's making a particular move does not justify him in concluding that there is no good reason for Kasparov's move.

The connection between such analogies and skeptical theism is clear. The cognitive distance between a young child and a parent or between a chess novice and Kasparov is much less than the cognitive distance between us and God (cf. Fitzpatrick 1981). Thus, just as one's inability to detect a good reason in the former cases does not support the conclusion that there is no good reason, our inability to detect a good reason for allowing evils, hiddenness, etc. does not support the conclusion that there is no good reason for allowing the evils, hiddenness, etc.

3.2. ARGUMENTS FROM COMPLEXITY

Other defenses of skeptical theism do not rely explicitly on analogies but instead focus on the complexity of the judgments under consideration (e.g. Alston 1991; Durston 2000, 2005, 2006; Howard-Snyder, forthcoming). For example, given the complexity of history,

determining whether a particular instance of evil is gratuitous is an enormous undertaking. One brief illustration is sufficient to make the point:

On the night that Sir Winston Churchill was conceived, had Lady Randolph Churchill fallen asleep in a slightly different position, the precise pathway that each of the millions of spermatozoa took would have been slightly altered. As a result ... Sir Winston Churchill, as we knew him, would not have existed, with the likely result that the evolution of World War II would have been substantially different ... (Durstun 2000, 66)

An observer of Lady Churchill might have assumed that no great goods were to be secured by sleeping in one position rather than another. But given the specifics of human reproduction, this assumption is unwarranted and – in this case – plausibly false. Not all philosophers are convinced that the moral judgments made in the arguments for atheism are this complex (e.g. Trakakis 2003, 2006), but given the *pro tanto* case presented in examples like the foregoing, the burden of proof lies with the critic.

3.3. ARGUMENTS FROM ALTERNATIVES

Suppose you're a jurist in a criminal case, and – given only the videotape evidence – you cannot determine whether the defendant or his twin committed the crime. In this case, you are not justified in concluding that the defendant is guilty, and that's because there is a live possibility that you can't rule out, and this possibility would show that the defendant is innocent.

Several philosophers have defended skeptical theism in exactly the same way: there are live possibilities that we are in no position to rule out, and these possibilities show that God is justified in allowing what he does (e.g. Alston 1991; Van Inwagen 1991, 2003). These live possibilities take the form of *defenses*: descriptions of the way the world might be that explain why God might allow a particular state of affairs without claiming that these are God's actual reasons for allowing a particular state of affairs (e.g. the free will defense). They are possibilities that for all we know are true, and since we cannot rule them out, we cannot make any all-things-considered judgments about what God will do in a particular situation.

Philosophers have mixed reactions to this strategy. Some think that the requirement on justification that we rule out all inconsistent, live possibilities is too strong. For example, we don't have to rule out the possibility that we are deceived brains-in-vats to know that we have hands (e.g. Bernstein 1998). Others agree with the requirement and go a step further. For example, perhaps the skeptical theist need not come up with a *particular* defense to block the noseeum inference, but simply note that for all we know there *might* be defenses that we haven't thought of (e.g. Alston 1996; Bergmann 2009).

3.4. ARGUMENTS FROM ENABLING PREMISES

The most powerful arguments for skeptical theism insist that some sort of "enabling premise" must be reasonably believed before noseeum inferences are warranted and that this enabling premise is not met with regard to inferences about what God would allow. Two such enabling premises have been proposed: a claim about sensitivity and a claim about representation.

The earliest and clearest instance of the sensitivity strategy is known as the Condition on Reasonable Epistemic Access or 'CORNEA' for short (Wykstra 1984, 1996, 2007; Russell and Wykstra 1988). CORNEA says that inferences from 'I see no X' to 'There is

no X' are justified only if it is reasonable to believe that if there were an X, I would likely see it. So, for example, the inference from 'I see no donkey in my garage' to 'There is no donkey in my garage' is licensed by CORNEA since it's true that if there were a donkey in garage, I'd likely see it. However, skeptical theists have insisted that it's not reasonable for me to think that if there were a compensating good for any particular evil that I would see it. Given this assumption, the inference from 'I see no compensating good for this instance of evil' to 'There is no compensating good for this instance of evil' is not licensed by CORNEA.

CORNEA is clear and precise and has been accepted by some non-theists in the debate (e.g. Rowe 1984; Russell and Wykstra 1988). However, the principle has been widely criticized in the literature. Some argue that CORNEA violates both Bayes Theorem (e.g. Chrzan 1987) and closure under known implication (e.g. Russell and Wykstra 1988; Langtry 1996; Graham and Maitzen 2007). Others argue that CORNEA leads to near-global skepticism (Russell 1989; Howard-Snyder 1992; Stone 2003). For example, we should not believe that things would appear differently to us if we were brains-in-vats, thus we don't know that we have hands. Versions of the principle have been reformulated to avoid this implication (e.g. Howard-Snyder 1992), but it still appears that CORNEA rules out most of our inductive evidence (e.g. McBrayer 2009). For example, suppose I hold a one in a million lottery ticket and believe that I will not win the draw. However, it is not reasonable for me to believe that things would look different to me if I held the winning ticket – they would look just the same! Thus, according to CORNEA, my belief that I will not win the lottery is not justified. Finally, some have argued that the cognitive requirements imposed by CORNEA lead to an infinite regress for justification in the internalist sense of that concept (e.g. Swinburne 1998).

Dissatisfaction with CORNEA has left many skeptical theists to defend similar sounding principles that seem to avoid the pitfalls of the original requirement (e.g. Kraay 2007). For example, Plantinga (1988, 70) says that "...there is no reason to think that if God did have a reason for permitting the evil in question, we would be the first to know", and this precludes the inference in question. Howard-Snyder (1996a, 299) says that

... the inference from inscrutable to pointless evil is justified only if we have no good reason to be in doubt about whether, if some reason justified God in permitting so much horrific evil rather than a lot less, we would quite likely see how it justified Him.

The second strategy has to do with our knowledge of the *representativeness* of the inductive sample used in the noseeum inference. The inductive move from 'I see no X' to 'There is no X' is warranted only if it is reasonable for me to believe that my inductive sample of Xs is representative of the whole (e.g. Alston 1991, 1996; Draper 1992; Langtry 1996; Bergmann 2001, 2009; Howard-Snyder, forthcoming). For example, I shouldn't rely on my inductive evidence to conclude that all crows are black unless it is reasonable for me to believe that my sample of crows is representative of all crows. As applied to the argument from evil, the inference from 'I can see no reason to allow this evil' to 'There is no reason to allow this evil' is justified only if it is reasonable for me to believe that the sample of reasons that I can understand is representative of all of the reasons that exist.¹⁰

Grant, then, that inductive inferences require justified belief in the enabling premise about the representativeness of the sample in question. Are we justified in believing that our sample of goods, evils, and connections between the two is suitably representative? Some think that our knowledge IS suitably representative, and thus the noseeum

inference is warranted (e.g. Tooley 1991; Russell 1996). Others think that our knowledge is NOT suitably representative, and thus the noseem inference is not warranted (e.g. Sennett 1993). Still others think that we don't know either way whether our sample is suitably representative, and until we do, the noseem inference is unwarranted (e.g. Bergmann 2001, 2009).

4. *The Case Against Skeptical Theism*

As with any form of skepticism, skeptical theism has its critics. As one might expect, the most difficult challenge for skeptical theism is to limit the skeptical implications of the view so that it doesn't decay into a more widespread and threatening type of skepticism. Each of the following objections is presented in terms of a purported inconsistency, that is, skeptical theism is inconsistent with some other feature that we intuitively want to hang on to, thus skeptical theism is false.

4.1. INCONSISTENT WITH MORAL FACTS

Some philosophers have argued that skeptical theism – at least as applied to the argument from evil – implies a consequentialist view of normative ethics that cannot accommodate any absolute moral principles (e.g. Wachterhauser 1985; Tooley 1991). Since the skeptical theist is willing to allow that any seemingly gratuitous evil can be justified given sufficiently good consequences, she must hold an ethical view in which the ends ultimately justify the means.

Skeptical theists have two ways of responding to this challenge. One is to “bite the bullet” and insist that any action is in-principle morally permissible given sufficiently good outcomes. The other is to press the critic for examples of absolute moral principles and then show that the evils that occur in the world are not violations of such principles.¹¹

4.2. INCONSISTENT WITH INDUCTIVE REASONING

Some have argued that accepting skeptical theism is inconsistent with accepting any other inductive reasoning as legitimate (e.g. Russell 1996). For example, suppose one uses enumerative induction to conclude that all crows are black. A ‘skeptical crowist’ response is as follows: for all we know there are purple crows beyond our ken, and thus the fact that we see no purple crows does not license us to conclude that there are no purple crows. Thus, we should be skeptical of the conclusion that all crows are black.

Skeptical theists have responded to this critique in a straightforward way (e.g. Bergmann 2001). In the case of crows, we have good reason to suppose that our inductive base is representative of all the crows there are. In the case of, say, goods and evils, we do not have good reason to suppose that our inductive base is representative of all the goods and evils there are. Thus, skeptical theists can consistently accept some forms of inductive reasoning as legitimate.

4.3. INCONSISTENT WITH THEOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Many have argued that the skeptical theist's skepticism cuts both ways. If it undercuts arguments *against* the existence of God, it likewise cuts against arguments *for* the existence of God (Gale 1996; Beaudoin 1998, 2005; Laraudogoitia 2000; Wilks 2004, 2009;

Rowe 2006; Bergmann 2009; Maitzen 2009). For example, theists often cite the apparent fine-tuning of the universe as evidence for the existence of God since it is likely that God would want to create a world with certain features (e.g. rational beings). But this appears to be an all-things-considered judgment about what God would do. The same goes for other arguments that purport to show that God interacts with us. For example, a skeptical theist cannot reason as follows: God would want to save the baby from the horrible disease, and thus her being healed is a miracle that counts as evidence for the existence of God.

Some skeptical theists have accepted this result – everyone should be more humble in making predictions about what God would or wouldn't do (e.g. Bergmann 2009). But given the arguments offered for the existence of God by other skeptical theists, it is likely that some will want to resist this far-reaching conclusion.

4.4. INCONSISTENT WITH TRUST IN GOD

Not only does skeptical theism threaten one's *knowledge* of God, but it also threatens one's *relationship* with God. Gale (1996) argues that being in a close relationship with people requires being able to understand why they act as they do, and skeptical theism seems to preclude this in the case of God. Additionally, many argue that skeptical theism opens the door to divine deception on a massive scale, and thus skeptical theists are precluded from trusting divine commands, holy scriptures, mystical experiences, and so forth (e.g. Beaudoin 2000; Almeida and Oppy 2003; Maitzen 2007; Wielenberg 2009; Wilks 2009). Such philosophers suggest, for example, that skeptical theists cannot assume that God will do as he promised since he might well have reasons beyond our ken for breaking that promise.

Neither criticism is decisive. It seems that a necessary condition for a trusting relationship is that one have reasonably complete knowledge of what the other person would do *other-things-being-equal*, and skeptical theists can grant that we have that with regard to God. On the other hand, if we have little reason to think that other things *are* equal when it comes to God (after all, he allows mass murder that he could easily prevent), perhaps this theoretical knowledge of what God would do *other-things-being-equal* will not be robust enough to support a trusting relationship.¹² Theists are not impressed by the point about deception, either. Even if it is true that it is possible for God to deceive us, this doesn't imply that it's not rational to believe what he says. After all, we realize only too well that other humans can deceive us, but this doesn't imply that it's not rational to believe what other humans say.

4.5. INCONSISTENT WITH COMMONSENSE EPISTEMOLOGY

Others have argued that accepting skeptical theism is incompatible with accepting the sorts of commonsense epistemologies defended by the likes of G.E. Moore, Chisholm, Swinburne, Huemer, Pryor, and others (e.g. Rowe 1984; Swinburne 1988, 1998; Dougherty 2008). Whether one accepts this as a strike against skeptical theism or not depends on whether one favors the so-called commonsense epistemology. The most common complaint concerns the principle of credulity: if it seems to a subject S that P, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing that P. In other words, other things being equal, we are justified in believing that things are as they appear. But since the skeptical theist insists that we are not justified in believing that, say, an evil is gratuitous even though it appears that the evil is gratuitous, the skeptical theist must reject the principle of credulity.

Skeptical theists have responded to this worry in a number of ways. One important response is to distinguish between the locutions ‘it appears that there is no God-justifying reason’ and ‘it doesn’t appear that there is a God-justifying reason’ (e.g. Wykstra 1984; Bergmann 2009). Skeptical theists insist that the best we can say is the latter, and this is perfectly consistent with accepting the principle of credulity.

4.6. INCONSISTENT WITH COMMON KNOWLEDGE

Yet another objection to skeptical theism is not that it is inconsistent with a particular brand of epistemology but that it is inconsistent with particular instances of everyday knowledge. For example, philosophers have argued that by parity of reasoning, skeptical theists ought to be skeptical about each of the following:

- The earth is more than 100 years old (Russell and Wykstra 1988; Russell 1996, 2004).
- There is an external world (Gale 1996).
- There are no tricky leprechauns who are constantly deceiving us (Bernstein 1998).
- The earth revolves around the sun (Wilks 2009).

According to these philosophers, skeptical theists can’t know any of these claims because each relies on a noseum inference that is parallel to the one made in the argument from evil. Wilks (2009, 66–7) makes the point more generally:

Whatever it is we want to maintain about God, we can maintain it against contrary empirical evidence by invoking the possibility of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God’s having that property. The generic objection-and-response can be specified accordingly: If God wants this then why is the world thus? ... [sic] The world may be thus because of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God’s wanting this.

Unsurprisingly, skeptical theists reject this implication (e.g. Beaudoin 2000, 2005; Bergmann 2001, 2009) by trying to draw a principled line between skeptical hypotheses and the kinds of hypotheses used to motivate skeptical theism.

4.7. INCONSISTENT WITH METAETHICAL KNOWLEDGE

Some philosophers have argued that skeptical theism is inconsistent with our metaethical knowledge. For example, Tooley (1991) argues that the skeptical theist’s skepticism is warranted only if our moral knowledge is incomplete. But it is not incomplete.¹³ And thus the skepticism is unwarranted. Given that we know the enabling premise concerning the representativeness of our moral knowledge, the inductive step from ‘it appears there are no compensating goods’ to ‘there are no compensating goods’ is legitimate. Skeptical theists have attempted to undercut Tooley’s argument in a number of ways with varying degrees of success (e.g. Howard-Snyder 1996a; Bergmann 2001).

4.8. INCONSISTENT WITH MORAL DELIBERATION/MORAL KNOWLEDGE

Without a doubt, the most serious and widespread criticism of skeptical theism is that it is somehow at odds with either moral deliberation (Fales 1992; Russell 1996; Almeida and Oppy 2003, 2004; Hasker 2004; Pereboom 2004, 2005; Piper 2007; Maitzen 2009) or moral knowledge (Wachterhauser 1985; Russell 1996; Trakakis 2003; Jordan 2006; Schnall 2007). If we are never in a position to tell whether God has a reason for allowing

a particular *prima facie* evil or not, then we are never in a position to tell whether *we* should allow a particular *prima facie* evil or not. For all we know, the occurrence of that evil is necessary for the existence of some compensating good. So anytime the skeptical theist is faced with the opportunity to intervene in what looks like a terrible tragedy (e.g. rape, genocide, etc.), her skepticism prevents her from completing any moral deliberations. She ought to be agnostic about whether or not it is a good thing to intervene to stop the tragedy.

This criticism has received a great deal of attention in the literature. What follows are the five different responses on behalf of skeptical theism:

- (1) *Conflate blameworthiness with wrongness*: One suggestion by skeptical theists is that moral facts supervene wholly on an actor's mental states (e.g. Alston 1996; Bergmann 2001, 2009). For example, Durston (2006, 93) writes that "an agent is morally obligated to act on the basis of what that agent could reasonably be expected to know". Thus, we can say that fellow humans who fail to stop the apparent tragedy act wrongly because they don't know that whether the evil is gratuitous, though God acts rightly in allowing such an evil because he knows that it is necessary for a compensating good. The problem with this response is that it conflates two properties that moral theorists usually like to keep separate: blameworthiness and wrongness. It makes sense that an agent can do the wrong thing unawares, for example, and this particular response makes such a thing impossible. For example, Hitler did the wrong thing regardless of what he had reason to think was permissible. Thus, this response confuses *agent/character* evaluation with *act* evaluation.
- (2) *Divine revelation*: A second response is that since we know that God has commanded us to stop *prima facie* evils, this provides us with a moral reason to act (e.g. Adams 1986; Bergmann and Rea 2005; Schnall 2007). There are a number of problems with this response. First, even if successful, it only applies to theists. Is the skeptical theist willing to say that non-theists who don't know of God's commands have reason to allow rape to occur? Second, this response seems to commit the blunder noted above: it confuses what is reasonable to do with what is morally right to do. Third, if – as some critics of skeptical theism have suggested – skeptical theists are in no position to trust the revelations of God, then they have little to no reason for thinking that God's moral commands are accurate (e.g. Almeida and Oppy 2005; Maitzen 2007).
- (3) *Moral supervenience*: A different response to the objection claims that many moral facts strongly supervene on non-consequentialist bases (e.g. Bergmann 2009). For example, what makes an action morally right according to strict versions of Kantianism or libertarianism has nothing to do with consequences. Thus, given the truth of a strongly non-consequentialist view, a skeptical theist could know that an action is wrong even if she doesn't know the consequences of that action. The weakness of this response is this: for any plausible candidate of things that are morally wrong to do/allow regardless of consequences, there are examples of those actions on earth. If they are wrong to allow regardless of consequences, then God has acted wrongly in allowing them. If they are not wrong to allow given the appropriate consequences, then this defense fails.
- (4) *Special rights*: Another common suggestion is that what is right for a person depends in part upon his relationship to other people (Stump 1985; Swinburne 1998; Trakakis and Nagasawa 2004; Bergmann 2009). For example, it is morally permissible for a parent to punish her child but morally wrong for a stranger to punish that child. Perhaps, then, God has special rights over us as his creation, and these rights justify him in allowing certain things. Since we lack these rights, it is wrong for us to allow these

same things to occur. Thus, the fact that we know God might allow a *prima facie* evil to occur need not stymie our moral deliberations.

- (5) *Bite the bullet*: A final response to the moral critique of skeptical theism is to bite the bullet but soften the blow (e.g. Howard-Snyder, forthcoming). Granting that the consequences of an action are morally relevant, *everyone* has a problem with moral deliberation because it is virtually impossible to even roughly determine the moral value of the far-ranging consequences from almost any action. Anyone who accepts a moral view that grants consequences a functional role in determining what is morally right or good faces the specter of moral skepticism. Thus, there is no unique worry for skeptical theism.

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Short Biography

Dr Justin P. McBrayer has interests in (almost) all things philosophical. As a result, his professional work ranges widely from exploring the possibility of moral perception to defending a resolution to the non-identity problem to critiquing the arguments from evil and divine hiddenness. He has authored papers for *Philosophical Studies*, *Ratio*, *Faith & Philosophy*, *Bioethics*, etc. Dr McBrayer holds an interdisciplinary BS from Berry College, an MA in philosophy from the University of Montana, and a PhD in philosophy from the University of Missouri. He is currently assistant professor of philosophy at Fort Lewis College, the state liberal arts college for Colorado.

Notes

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¹ Some skeptical theists claim that the fact that we don't see a good reason for X provides *no* evidence for the claim that there is no good reason for X. A more nuanced version claims that not seeing a good reason for X provides *prima facie* evidence for the claim that there is no good reason for X, but that this *prima facie* evidence is outweighed by the realization that we would likely not see the good reason even if it were there.

² The distinction between *all-things-considered* judgments and *ceteris paribus* judgments is important. Skeptical theism allows that we might justifiably believe that, *other things being equal*, God would not let a sentient creature suffer. What it insists on is that we cannot justifiably believe that, *all-things-considered*, God will not let a sentient creature suffer, for he may have reasons for allowing this that are beyond our ken.

³ The name is due to Wykstra (1996). Noseeums are small gnats that are difficult to see even though they have a painful bite.

⁴ The variables in the noseem schema can be instantiated in a variety of ways. For example, the fact that we cannot tell whether there are goods beyond our ken does not show that there are no goods beyond our ken. This is a limit to our moral knowledge. Or the fact that we cannot see why an evil state of affairs is required for a good state of affairs does not show that there is no such connection. This is a limit to our metaethical knowledge. Finally, the fact that we see no reason for God to create the world in a particular way does not show that there is no such reason. This is a limit to our prudential knowledge.

⁵ However, it's an open question whether skeptical theism is a response to *all* evidential arguments from evil or merely those that rely on noseem inferences. For example, Draper (1989, 1996) thinks that skeptical theism doesn't undercut his version of the abductive argument from evil that relies on an inference to the best explanation of the facts in our world, including facts about pain and suffering. On the other hand, Bergmann (2009) and Van Inwagen (1991, 1996) think that some kind of skeptical theist move will work against the abductive version as well.

⁶ This isn't exactly right. The skeptical theist recommends agnosticism about (2) to a non-theist considering the argument from evil. Any theist committed to (3) can use a G.E. Moore shift to conclude the denial of (2). Thanks to Philip Swenson for pointing this out.

⁷ Just as there are different, and more sophisticated versions, of the argument from evil, there are different, and more sophisticated, versions of the argument from divine hiddenness. For an example, see Schellenberg (2007). I use a simplified version here simply to illustrate the role skeptical theism plays in the overall dialectic.

⁸ The caveat expressed in footnote 4 also applies here. Anyone who is committed both to the claim that God exists and (6) can use a G.E. Moore shift to conclude that (5) is false.

⁹ Skeptical theism has been widely defended in the contemporary literature. Notable defenses include: Alston (1991, 1996), Bergmann (2001, 2009), Fitzpatrick (1981), Howard-Snyder (1996a, forthcoming), Howard-Snyder and Bergmann (2001a,b), Lewis (1983), Plantinga (1988, 2000), Van Inwagen (1991, 2003) and Wykstra (1984, 1996, 2007).

¹⁰ If the class of all reasons is infinite, it will be difficult to make sense out of a ratio or a representative sample. In that case, it will be difficult to see how we ever have representative samples that enable inductive generalizations with regard to infinite classes. Thanks to Dugald Owen for raising this point. It's not clear to me that this objection is deadly: perhaps the skeptical theist can translate talk of reasons into talk of God-justifying goods or connections between goods and evils (since I assume that these classes will be finite).

¹¹ For example, one such principle that has been suggested in the literature is that one ought never allow a person to suffer solely for the benefit of another (e.g. Stump 1985; Tooley 1991). I think that this principle is false, but a skeptical theist could allow that this is an absolute moral principle but insist that we know of no violations of the principle in the natural world. For example, for all we know, the suffering we experience in this world is beneficial to us in ways that we cannot tell or beneficial for us in the afterlife.

¹² Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this point.

¹³ Tooley's reason for thinking that our moral knowledge is complete turns on a motivational internalist account of moral beliefs. Given internalism, it's unlikely that there would be moral facts that we are unaware of. However, one worry for this strategy is that motivational internalists are usually committed to some form of moral antirealism. But if moral realism is false, then the problem of evil loses its motivation – there really isn't any evil to begin with. Whether the non-existence of moral facts has other implications for the existence of God or the coherency of skeptical theism is beyond the scope of this article.

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