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3 Skeptical theism
An historical view

Justin McBrayer

It is obvious to almost everyone that the world contains a great deal of evil. But are any of the evils in our world gratuitous? An evil is gratuitous just in case there is no all-things-considered sufficient reason for an omniscient moral agent to allow it. Typically, whether there is a sufficient moral reason to allow an evil turns on whether or not the evil is necessary either to secure a compensating good or to prevent an equally bad or worse evil. For example, the pain of an injection is evil, but it is not a gratuitous evil since it is necessary for the compensating benefits of inoculation. Gratuitous evils, on the other hand, serve no greater moral purpose.

'Skeptical Theism' refers to a family of views which share the following two commitments: God exists, where 'God' functions as a maximally honorific title describing the most perfect being possible (hence the 'theist' portion of the nomenclature), but our epistemic position *vis-à-vis* God is such that we are in no position to conclude that the evils we experience in the world are gratuitous (hence the 'skeptical' portion of the nomenclature). In particular, says the skeptical theist, the mere fact that we cannot see a morally sufficient reason for allowing a given evil is not indicative of whether or not there is such a reason. The gist is that we are in no position to know (or even justifiably believe) that any evils in our world are gratuitous.

Skeptical theism has historically been deployed as a response to the argument from evil. The 'argument from evil' refers to a family of atheistic arguments that begin with premises about the existence, nature, duration, or distribution of evil in the world and conclude that God does not exist. Now it is widely conceded that the mere existence of evil is not evidence against the existence of such a being. To serve as evidence, the evil in question must at the very least be gratuitous, i.e. it must serve no moral purpose. And most philosophers agree that the existence of gratuitous evils would count as evidence against the existence of God.[1] Hence, the primary importance of skeptical theism is its potential to undermine some formulations of the argument from evil for atheism. If it is true that we are in no position to conclude that any of the evils of the actual world are gratuitous, then we are in no position to determine whether a crucial premise in the argument from evil is true.

Skeptical theism is initially attractive for many theists. On the one hand, it allows the theist to grant both that the world is filled with various evils and that

they oftentimes *appear* to be pointless or unnecessary for any compensating good of which we can conceive. On the other hand, it allows the theist to reject what is likely the most persuasive argument for atheism without requiring her to specify the point for all of the evils in the world (as required by a theodicy). In short, the skeptical theist can agree that the evils in our world seem pointless – but insist that the mere fact that they seem pointless to her is not a good reason to think that they really are pointless. And hence we are in no position to leverage our beliefs about evil for the conclusion that God does not exist.

Not all theists are, of course, skeptical theists.[2] There are other ways of responding to arguments from evil, including the aforementioned possibility of offering a theodicy. A theodicy is an attempt to show that none of the evils in the world are actually gratuitous – in other words, it is an attempt to explain the point behind the evils of the world. And not all non-theists reject the skeptical component of skeptical theism. In fact, some non-theists accept the epistemic limitations insisted on by skeptical theists, but argue that at best it undermines some versions of the argument from evil while leaving others unscathed.[3]

Whether skeptical theism is ultimately tenable may depend on the precise species of skeptical theism in question. It may turn out that some versions are more plausible than others. This article sketches the development of skeptical theist views in Western philosophy and then surveys both the standard formulations/defenses of skeptical theism and the standard criticisms of skeptical theism in the contemporary philosophical literature.

The historical roots of skeptical theism

The term 'skeptical theist' was made popular by Paul Draper in a 1996 essay critical of the position (Draper 1996). However, the kind of skepticism about evil that is at the core of skeptical theism has been around for quite a long time. Perhaps the earliest expression of such skepticism is found in the book of Job in the Hebrew *Tanakh* or the Christian Old Testament. The story of Job poetically explores a number of issues, but the foremost concerns the suffering of innocents: why do bad things happen to good people? The book provides no straightforward answer to this question (or any other), but it has traditionally been read as advocating a kind of skepticism about our abilities to fathom the ways of God. Job is an upright, innocent man, yet his family, health, and material possessions are stripped from him. Amidst his suffering, Job collectively mourns with several friends, and they debate the justice of his fate. In the end, God speaks to Job and asks him whether he can answer a host of questions that are apparently more basic than his questions about justice. The point, of course, is that if Job is unable to grasp these simple matters, how much more is he unable to grasp the more complex matters?

> Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven – what can you do? Deeper than Sheol – what can you know?
>
> (Job 11:7–8)

Classical Hellenistic thought gives little prominence to the problems of philosophy of religion, though the moral skepticism endorsed by some would make skeptical theism a natural fit. However, with the rise of theism in the West, attention turns quickly to the problem of evil. Late Roman and medieval thinkers had much to say on philosophy of religion. In fact, Etienne Gilson argues that the spirit of medieval philosophy is "the spirit of Christianity penetrating the Greek tradition, working within it, drawing out of it a certain view of the world" (1936, p. viii). As part of this transformation, medieval thinkers had to come to reconcile the existence of God with all of the various facts about evil in their dark world. While medieval thinkers certainly do not respond to the problem of evil with a unified voice, it's fair to say that the bulk of philosophical responses to evil take the form of theodicies. For example, medievals suggested that evil was a privation (St. Augustine), that evil is the result of free will (St. Augustine), that evil is a benefit to humans who experience it (St. Thomas), or that evil is the result of the unjust getting their due (Maimonides).

That said, there was a significant skeptical streak in medieval theology that is often described by contemporary commentators as the *via negativa*. The basic premise of such theology is that God is so different and beyond us as humans that we are rarely able to understand him or speak truly of him. At best, we can either say what God is not (hence the *via negativa*) or say things that are true of God as approximations. For example, Gregory of Nyssa writes that God is:

> ". . . incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words . . ."
>
> (Against Eunomius I:42, Vaggione 1987)

Similar passages can be found in the work of St. Augustine, St. Thomas, St. John of the Cross, and others. While there is no direct application of this sort of skepticism to the problem of evil, it is not implausible to see this sort of skepticism about humanity's ability to decipher the nature and reasons of God as a precursor to skeptical theism.

Though medieval sources hint at the view, skeptical theism finds its clearest expression and most rigorous defense in the work of modern philosophers. Take, for instance, a passage from Descartes' *Meditations*. In the Fourth Meditation, Descartes is attempting to resolve a puzzle about error: how could we ever have false beliefs if we were created by a perfect being? The puzzle can be seen as an instance of a problem of evil – given the existence of God, we would not expect that anything in his creation be imperfect, but, at the very least, we are imperfect, so this is a reason to think that there is no God. Descartes' initial response to the problem is a paradigmatic expression of skeptical theism:

> As I reflect on these matters more attentively, it occurs to me first of all that it is no cause for surprise if I do not understand the reasons for some of God's actions; and there is no call to doubt his existence if I happen to find that

> there are other instances where I do not grasp why or how certain things were made by him. For since 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 . . . there is considerable rashness in thinking myself capable of investigating the impenetrable purposes of God.
>
> (AT 55, Cottingham 1984 pp. 38–39)

While Descartes goes on to offer a more theodicy-like explanation for error (namely, that the scope of our will outstrips the scope of our intellect), this move appears redundant given the skepticism expressed here. Assuming that we can understand evidence in terms of surprise, the idea is roughly this: since it is unsurprising that Descartes wouldn't grasp God's reasons even if they were there, then the fact that he doesn't grasp a reason for allowing humans to err is not evidence for the conclusion that there are no such reasons.

Leibniz echoes Descartes in embracing the epistemic limitations on our abilities to determine the reasons of God, and he does so in a way that leverages such skepticism as a response to problem of evil-type objections. In the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, he addresses those who claim that "God could have done things better" (Discourse #3). He claims that this sort of objection ". . . is only founded on the inadequate knowledge we have of the general harmony of the universe and of the hidden reasons for God's conduct, which makes us recklessly judge that many things could have been done better" (Discourse #3, Woolhouse and Francks 1998, pp. 55–56). Importantly, Leibniz is careful to circumscribe the scope of his skepticism. While we can know general *ceteris paribus* claims about God (e.g. that the happiness of minds is his main end, that he does everything for the best, that the simplicity of means is balanced against the richness of ends), we cannot know about God's *particular* reasons for acting or allowing in any given instance. "But to have particular knowledge of the reasons which led [God] to choose this arrangement of the universe, to allow sin, to dispense his saving grace in a certain way, is beyond the power of a finite mind . . ." (Discourse #5, Woolhouse and Francks 1998, p. 57). This is an important distinction that contemporary skeptical theists are just beginning acknowledge.

Perhaps it goes without saying that Locke's epistemology – where our knowledge is limited by the ideas provided to us via intuition and sensation – provides an easy defense of the kind of skepticism endorsed by skeptical theism. But in book I of the *Essay on Human Understanding*, Locke explicitly rejects an inference about innate ideas on skeptical theistic grounds. In the context of rejecting nativism about principles and ideas, Locke confronts the person who claims that God's goodness would ensure that at the very least all men have the innate idea of God. Locke responds as follows:

> This argument, if it be of any Force, will prove much more than those, who use it in this case, expect from it. For it we may conclude, that God hath done for Men, all that Men shall judge is best for them, because it is suitable to his goodness so to do, it will prove [too much]. . . . I think it a very good Argument, to say, the infinitely wise God hath made it so: And therefore it is best. But it seems to me a little too much Confidence of our own Wisdom, to say, I think it best, and therefore God hath made it so . . .
>
> (*Essay*, Book I, Chapter IV, §12, Nidditch 1975, pp. 90–91)

Here Locke rejects the inference from "it seems best to me as a human" to "therefore God would do this for us." In the context of the current debate over the soundness of the argument from evil, the inference is isomorphic: "it seems best to me to eliminate a world with this evil" to "therefore God would not allow this evil."

And in a later discussion on the possibility that God might be material, Locke cautions against making inferences about what is possible for God on the basis of our understanding:

> 'tis an overvaluing our selves, to reduce all to the narrow measure of our Capacities; and to conclude, all things impossible to be done, whose manner of doing exceeds our Comprehension. This is to make our Comprehension infinite, or GOD finite, when what he can do, is limitted [sic] to what we can conceive of it.
>
> (*Essay*, Book IV, Chapter X, §19, Nidditch 1975, p. 630)

Moving on from Locke, Kant's restrictions on our knowledge of the noumenal world (including God), it's unsurprising that his epistemic framework can be employed to defend the view that while we might know that God exists, we cannot go further to know about his reasons for actions and his use of evils to procure compensating goods.[4] What is more surprising is that, in many ways, Hume's work is a paradigmatic expression of the skeptical element within skeptical theism. Of course, Hume primarily employs his skepticism to undercut arguments for theism such as the argument from biological design. He does so by showing that it's unreasonable for us to make claims about what God would or wouldn't do on particular occasions. Consider Philo's response to Cleanthes in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*:

> At least, you must acknowledge that it is impossible for us to tell, from our limited views, whether this system contains any great faults, or deserves any considerable praise, if compared to other possible, and even real systems.
>
> (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, § V, Flew 1992, p. 228)

The basic lesson is that given our epistemic position, we shouldn't make claims about what God has or hasn't done on particular occasions. As humans, our perspective is too limited to make such judgments reasonable:

> The great source of our mistake on [the subject of God] and of the unbounded license of conjecture which we indulge is that we tacitly consider ourselves in the place of the Supreme Being and conclude that he will, on every occasion,

> observe the same conduct which we ourselves, in his situation, would have embraced as reasonable and eligible. . . . What we imagine to be a superior perfection may really be a defect.
>
> (*Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, § XI, Hendel 1995, pp. 154–155)

But if this is correct, then by parity of reasoning, arguments from evil that assume that our world is flawed in major ways would make the same mistake. These arguments rely on a premise to the effect that if there were a God, he would have done things differently. But if it's true that we have no reason to think that a particular element of the world is a perfection (e.g. design) or a defect (e.g. gratuitous evil), then we certainly cannot cite such perfections or defects in arguments either for or against the existence of God.

Hume himself seems to recognize that his skepticism cuts both ways, and his response to the argument from evil (as voiced by Philo in § 10–11 of the *Dialogues*) is roughly that of the skeptical theist. Consider Philo's brief re-capitulation of the problem of evil at the close of § X:

> For this [world] is not, by any means, what we expect from infinite power, infinite wisdom, and infinite goodness. Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance surely. From some cause then. Is it from the intention of the Diety? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his intention? But he is almighty. Nothing can shake the solidity of this reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive; *except, we assert, that these subjects exceed all human capacity*, and that our common measures of truth and falsehood are not applicable to them; a topic, which I have all along insisted on . . .
>
> (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, § X, Flew 1992, p. 264, emphasis the author's)

On the one hand, then, Philo agrees that this world is not as we should expect given the truth of theism. But on the other, his official position is that our expectations count for little when it comes to making reasonable claims about the existence of God.[5] That is the position of skeptical theism. Hume's considered view seems to be that we cannot draw any conclusions whatsoever about whether or not the evils we see in the world are actually gratuitous. Indeed, Hume closes the *Dialogue* with words that sound like a ringing endorsement of skeptical theism: "To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step toward being a sound, believing Christian" (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, § XII, Flew 1992, p. 292).

Contemporary defenses of skeptical theism

Skeptical theism remains a popular view both among students first encountering the problem of evil and among professional philosophers. But the precise nature and the scope of skeptical theism's skepticism can vary widely. What follows is a survey of the most influential defenses of skeptical theism in the contemporary literature.

Arguments from analogy

Some skeptical theists have appealed to analogies to defend their view (Wykstra 1984, 1996; Plantinga 1988). It is unreasonable for a young child to conclude that there is no good reason for her parent's behavior simply on the basis that she is unable to determine such a reason. It is unreasonable for a chess novice to conclude that there is no good reason for the chess master's move on the basis that the novice is unable to fathom such a reason. It is unreasonable for a patient to conclude that a painful course of treatment is not necessary for a compensating good on the basis of her inability to detect such a good. Similarly, it is unreasonable for humans to conclude that there is no good reason for the evils we find on earth on the basis that we are unable to determine, fathom, or detect such a reason. Hence, skeptical theism is the reasonable response for a theist to make to the argument from evil.

The soundness of the argument from analogy ultimately depends on the similarities of the analogs. Are there relevant differences between the paradigmatic cases offered here and the case of humans to God? Some philosophers have thought so, and various challenges have been offered, particularly to the parent-child analogy (Rowe 1996, 2001, 2006; McBrayer 2004).

Arguments from complexity

Some skeptical theists appeal to complexity to defend skeptical theism (Alston 1991, 1996; Durston 2000, 2005), while Howard-Snyder (2009) uses complexity to undermine an objection to skeptical theism. It is not reasonable for me to make judgments about how many people will have car accidents today. The matter is simply too complex for me to calculate on my own, so without some sort of reliable testimony, it is the kind of thing that I cannot know. Similarly, it is unreasonable for me to make judgments about how the evils of today might be related to present or future goods (known or unknown). Hence, skeptical theism is the reasonable response for a theist to make to this form of the argument from evil.

The argument here parallels the familiar complaint against consequentialist forms of ethics, including utilitarianism (Lenman 2000). It has been argued that if doing the right thing ultimately depends on calculating the net pleasures of an action in the long run, then we should all be moral skeptics about whether any particular action is morally right. Whether this kind of response is effective against the argument from evil ultimately depends on (a) whether the moral facts depend on consequences of this sort and (b) whether the sorts of judgments required to motivate the argument from evil are as complex as some would have us believe. There is disagreement about both points (Trakakis 2003, 2006; Maitzen 2013).

Arguments from CORNEA & similar principles

One of the most technical defenses of skeptical theism is due to Stephen Wykstra (1984, 1996; Russell and Wykstra 1988). Wykstra defends a general epistemic principle and then notes that as applied to the debate over evil,

the principle implies that we should be skeptical of our ability to determine whether a particular evil is gratuitous. The general principle is a condition on reasonable epistemic access (CORNEA). According to CORNEA, upon seeing no X's, it is reasonable to conclude that there are no X's only if it is reasonable to believe that if there were an X, one would likely see it.[6] This principle appears to explain a wide range of epistemic data. For example, my not seeing any germs on my hand does not make it reasonable for me to believe that there are no germs on my hand because it is not reasonable for me to believe that I'd see any germs if they were there. As applied to the argument from evil, my not seeing a reason or a compensating good for any particular evil does not make it reasonable for me to believe that there is no reason or compensating good for that evil for the following reason: it is not reasonable for me to believe that I'd be aware of this reason or compensating good even if it existed. Hence, skeptical theism is the reasonable response for a theist to make to evidential arguments from evil.

Other philosophers have endorsed defenses of skeptical theism that rely on similar epistemic principles (Plantinga 1988, Howard-Snyder 1996). However, many philosophers have challenged CORNEA-based defenses of skeptical theism. There two sets of challenges. On the one hand, some philosophers have accepted CORNEA (or something like it), but argued that it *is* reasonable to think that if there were a compensating good that we would likely know about it (Rowe 1996, 2001). If that's right, then even if CORNEA (or something like it) is true, it won't help to defend skeptical theism.

But by far the most popular challenge is to deny the epistemic principle itself. Further, there are two separate sorts of challenges to CORNEA: either it fails to satisfy basic, epistemic theoretical desiderata; or else it fails to account for non-skeptical views about the scope of our everyday knowledge. Regarding the former, it has been argued that CORNEA violates Bayes' Theorem (Chrzan 1987) and closure under known implication (Russell and Wykstra 1988; Langtry 1996, Graham and Maitzen 2007). Regarding the latter, it has been argued that CORNEA leads to different sorts of very extensive skepticism (Russell 1989, 1996; Howard-Snyder 1992; Stone 2003; McBrayer 2009). If these critics are right, no appeal to general epistemic principles like CORNEA is sufficient to defend skeptical theism.

Arguments from induction and meta-ethics

Skeptical theists urge skepticism about a particular kind of moral judgment; namely, the judgment that at least some of the evils in our world are gratuitous. In other words, skeptical theists are committed to a certain kind of moral skepticism (albeit one that they hope is narrowly defined). One popular defense of this limited kind of moral skepticism relies on the combination of an epistemic principle about induction and a meta-ethical claim about the limits of our moral knowledge (Alston 1991, 1996; Langtry 1996; Bergmann 2001, 2009). The epistemic principle says that my inductive inference from 'no F that I know of is G' to

'no F is G' is a good inference only if we have reason to think that the F's and G's that I know about are representative samples of all the F's and G's that there are. For example, the inference from 'no crow that I know of is white' to 'no crow is white' is good only if I have reason to think that I've seen a representative sample of all the crows that exist.

The meta-ethical claim that is paired with this principle of induction says that, as a matter of contingent fact, no human knows whether or not his acquaintance with good or evil or the connection between the two is representative. Bergmann, one of the foremost advocates of this sort of skeptical theism, offers the following skeptical theses for consideration:

> ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
> ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
> ST3: We have no good reason for thinking the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.
>
> (Bergmann 2001, p. 279)

Bergmann argues that ST1–ST3 are true. The influence of the modern philosophers is perhaps nowhere more apparent than here: given human limitations, we just don't have a strong grasp on the range of goods and evils and the connections between the two of them. Putting together the inductive principle and the meta-ethical claim, we have a defense of skeptical theism. The inference from 'no good that I know of will compensate for this evil' to 'no good will compensate for this evil' fails because we have no good reason for thinking that my knowledge of good and evil and the connections between the two is representative.

Challenges to this defense must come in one of two places: either the necessary condition on induction or the meta-ethical claim about the representativeness of our moral samples. As a matter of fact, all contemporary challenges are aimed at the latter (Tooley 1991; Russell 1996). But the burden of proof is high: the defense goes through (a) if it is determined that our moral knowledge *fails* to be representative (Sennett 1993) or (b) if the representativeness of our moral knowledge is inscrutable (Bergmann 2001, 2009).

Arguments from context

Most recently, skeptical theism has been defended by appeal to epistemic considerations regarding context or contrast classes (McBrayer 2012). This defense relies on the truth of controversial (but popular) epistemic moves that restrict what one justifiably believes to particular contexts or contrast classes. The basic idea is that it is reasonable to believe P only if one can rule out all of the relevant non-P alternatives,

and which non-P alternatives are relevant depends on context or contrast classes at hand. A contrast principle like the following is indicative of this sort of move:

> S is justified in believing P as opposed to other propositions in contrast class C if and only if S is able to rule out all propositions in C except for P.
>
> (Sinnott-Armstrong 2008, p. 259)

For example, I am justified in believing that the animal before me is a zebra rather than a giraffe, but I am not justified in believing that the animal before me is a zebra rather than a cleverly disguised mule. What I am justified in believing depends on the context or contrast class.

To see how such a view opens the door to skeptical theism, consider the standard formulation of the argument from evil. Are we justified in believing that a given evil is gratuitous? This depends on whether we can rule out all the *relevant* alternatives in which the evil is non-gratuitous. And which of the total set of possibilities is relevant? This depends on the context and contrast classes relevant to the argument from evil. In the context in which we are explicitly wondering whether there might be an omnipotent, omniscient being using evils for purposes beyond our ken, this alternative is relevant. And – as even the critics of skeptical theism seem to agree – we are in no position to rule out this alternative. Our evidence is simply indeterminate. Hence – in this context at any rate – we are not justified in believing that a given evil is gratuitous.

Contemporary criticisms of skeptical theism

Skeptical theism entails at the very least a limited form of moral skepticism. For example, while skeptical theists grant that we can know that some things are evil and others are good, they demur on our judgments about whether or not an omniscient being would have an all-things-considered sufficient moral reason for allowing any given evil. But this level of skepticism might be problematic given other philosophical commitments. This section canvasses four prominent objections to skeptical theism, each in the form of an argument from false implication.

Skeptical theism implies a radical skepticism

One of the major complaints about skeptical theism is that the skeptical component implies a more general, and radical, skepticism (Russell and Wykstra 1988, Russell 1996, 2004; Gale 1996; Bernstein 1998; Wilks 2009, 2013). The general idea is that for any claim whatsoever, someone can always come up with a God-like hypothesis concerning that claim that posits reasons and features that are beyond our ken. For example, you don't see a troll sitting next to you. Should you conclude that there is not a troll next to you? No, says the objector, because you admit that for all you know God might have a reason for wanting an invisible troll to be next to you. So you can't reason from 'I don't see a troll' to 'there is not a troll'. After all, this inference is parallel to the inference from 'I don't see a compensating good for this evil' to 'there is no compensating good for this evil'. Hence, skeptical theism implies a radical skepticism.

No skeptical theist on record has accepted this implication. The trick is to draw a principled distinction between the cases the skeptical theist wants to be skeptical about and the everyday sort of cases that she does not want to be skeptical about. A number of different strategies have been offered, and each differs with the precise species of skeptical theism under consideration (Beaudoin 2000, 2005; Bergmann 2009; McBrayer 2012). Whether the strategies are successful is beyond the scope of this survey.

Skeptical theism implies global theological skepticism

Other philosophers reject skeptical theism – or argue that *theists* should reject skeptical theism – because it has false implications about the scope of their *theological* knowledge. This objection is a demand for consistency on the part of theists. It appears difficult to reconcile theistic commitments to the existence of God, trust of scripture, etc. with such a deep skepticism about the reasons of God. For example, if the skeptical theist's skepticism undermines the argument from evil for atheism, it also undermines arguments for theism (Gale 1996; Beaudoin 1998, 2005; Laraudogoitia 2000; Wilks 2004, 2009; Rowe 2006; Maitzen 2007; O'Connor 2013). The point is related to the one made previously by David Hume. Hume adopts a skeptical position about making God-related judgments in order to undercut the argument from design. But this same skepticism commits him to a skeptical theist-type response to the argument from evil. Similarly, the skeptical theist response to the argument from evil appears to commit contemporary philosophers to skepticism about the argument from design and other arguments for the existence of God. A robust version of this criticism seems to imply that no argument can be marshaled either for or against the existence of God. The skeptical theist's skepticism seems to imply that – at least as far as the evidence goes – we should all be agnostics about the existence of God.

Skeptical theists have noted this criticism, and there are two broad strategies for response. First, the skeptical theist could accept the implication of this criticism and agree that, given human limitations, no one is in a position to marshal evidence one way or the other when it comes to the existence of God. Some philosophers seem attracted to this response. For example, Bergmann (2009) claims that everyone – skeptical theists included – should adopt a more humble approach to conclusions about what God would do in any given scenario (and hence a more humble approach to arguments for the existence of God). Second, the skeptical theist can reject the implication of this criticism and try to draw a principled distinction between what must be reasonable to believe to make the argument from evil credible and what must be reasonable to believe to make some other theistic argument credible. For example, the form of skeptical theism that is motivated by a principle of induction plus a claim about the limits of our

metaethical knowledge, appears to have no implications for the reasonableness of our beliefs about design.

Skeptical theism implies moral consequentialism

Some philosophers reject skeptical theism not on epistemic grounds but on moral ones. For example, some have argued that if skeptical theism is true, this implies some sort of consequentialist view of ethics in which the end ultimately justifies any means (Wachterhauser 1985; Tooley 1991). This is because skeptical theists look at the evils in the world around us and claim that no one is in a position to judge whether or not the evils are actually gratuitous; the hidden assumption seems to be that if the evils were necessary for some greater good, then the evils themselves might be justified. Hence, anything – rape, torture, starvation, childhood cancer – is in principle morally justifiable provided that enough good comes of it. God, it seems, is a utilitarian.

Skeptical theists don't often like this implication, but they have done little in the literature to rebut the charge. They have at least two options. First, skeptical theists can deny that there are any absolute moral principles. Thus, even if the correct moral theory is non-consequentialist, the skeptical theist can allow that any moral principle can be ultimately 'trumped', given good enough consequences. On this response, the skeptical theist 'bites the bullet', but insists that the implication of her view is not a false one. Second, skeptical theists can agree that there are at least some absolute moral principles, but insist that the evils of our world never result from God shirking one of these particular principles (Stump 1985).

Skeptical theism implies global moral skepticism

By far the most common objection to skeptical theism is that it implies a radical form of moral skepticism or otherwise prohibits rational deliberation about how one ought to live or act (Wachterhauser 1985; Fales 1992; Russell 1996; Almeida and Oppy 2003, 2004; Trakakis 2003; Hasker 2004; Pereboom 2004, 2005; Jordan 2006; Piper 2007; Schnall 2007; Maitzen 2009, 2013). Recall the target of the skeptical theist's skepticism: she claims that we are not in an epistemic position to tell whether any of the evils in our world are gratuitous. For all we know, each is necessary for some greater good. But – assuming that there are no absolute moral principles (see previous section) – this seems to imply that we never know whether a given action is right or wrong. Suppose a skeptical theist were witnessing a child drowning. Is she morally obligated to save him? Not if his drowning is necessary for some greater good. Hence, it appears that the skeptical theist cannot have any particular moral knowledge and that her skepticism effectively prevents her from deliberating about what she ought to do in any given situation.

Skeptical theists are sensitive to this critique and have offered a number of different responses to the problem. One strategy requires divorcing rightness/wrongness from the consequences of the action. Suppose rightness/wrongness supervenes

on an actor's mental states or other nonconsequentialist factors. For example, it might be wrong for the average human to let the child drown though not wrong for God to let the child drown because God might have knowledge that the human lacks, e.g. that the child's death will bring about sufficiently good consequences (Alston 1996; Bergmann 2001, 2009; Durston 2006). As another example, it might be wrong for the average human to let the child drown though not wrong for God to let the child drown because God might have rights and privileges over the child that the average human lacks (Stump 1985; Swinburne 1998; Trakakis and Nagasawa 2004; Bergmann 2009).

A second strategy concedes that consequences play a role in determining the rightness/wrongness of an action but insists that there is no *unique* problem here for skeptical theism. For example, suppose we always have a moral reason for prohibiting *prima facie* evils even though it could be the case that these evils are ultimately justified (Bergmann and Rea 2005; Schnall 2007). Or suppose that far-ranging consequences do play a role in determining the rightness/wrongness of an action. Given the limits to our knowledge argued for previously (§ Arguments from Complexity), it's not just skeptical theists who must face up to moral skepticism: no one can know what is right or wrong, because no one is in a position to determine the long-term consequences of any given action (Howard-Snyder 2009).[7]

Notes

1 Not all philosophers agree about this. In particular, Peter van Inwagen argues that the existence of gratuitous evil is compatible with the existence of God (2006, esp. chapter 6).

2 Two examples of theists who deny the epistemic component of skeptical theism are Swinburne (1998) and Hasker (2004).

3 For example, Draper (1989, 1996).

4 In particular, see § 57–58 of Kant's, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Ellington 2001.

5 Philo closes the dialogue with a long list of defects in the world that apparently could be easily remedied to make the world a better place. This forms the crucial premise for his argument from evil. But after elaborating on his list, Philo draws the following conclusion:

> What then shall we pronounce on this occasion? Shall we say, that these [evil] circumstances are not necessary, and that they might easily have been altered in the contrivance of the universe? This decision seems too presumptuous for creatures, so blind and ignorant. Let us be more modest in our conclusions. Let us allow that if the goodness of the Deity . . . could be established on any tolerable reasons *a priori*, these [evil] phenomena, however untoward, would not be sufficient to subvert [the existence of a good Deity] but might easily, in some unknown manner, be reconcilable to it. . . . I am Sceptic enough to allow that the bad appearances, notwithstanding all my reasonings, may be compatible with such [divine] attributes as you suppose . . .
>
> (Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion, § XI, Flew 1992, pp. 273–274)

6 This is a paraphrase of CORNEA. Its actual formulation has evolved over time. Here is the canonical version of CORNEA from Wykstra's (1984) paper and an updated version from his 1996 defense of CORNEA:

> On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim 'It appears that P' only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her.
>
> (1984, p. 85)

> CORNEA . . . says that something further is needed for one to move from (P) "We see no good with J" to (Q) "There is no good with J": what is needed is that it be reasonable to believe that if some good did have J, then we likely would see it.
>
> (1996, p. 135)

7 Thanks to Dustin Locke and Daniel Speak for comments on an early draft of this paper.

Further reading

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