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# SKEPTICISM AND THE SKEPTICAL THEIST

John Beaudoin

According to skeptical theists, our failure to find morally justifying goods for certain of the world's evils fails to constitute even *prima facie* evidence that these evils are genuinely gratuitous. For even if such reasons did exist, it is not to be expected that our limited intellects would discover them. In this article I consider whether their skepticism about our ability to discover morally justifying goods for various evils commits skeptical theists to more radical forms of skepticism.

## I.

Skeptical theists maintain the following thesis about human cognitive access to possible moral goods (the formulation is Michael Bergmann's):

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.<sup>1</sup>

We can think of possible goods as possible states of affairs that have positive moral value: states of affairs such as that in which human beings cultivate loving relationships with one another, gain deeper understanding of nature, or freely engage in acts of charity. *Possible goods we know of* are possible goods that we find to obtain in this world, or that, at least, we can imagine obtaining. The eradication of smallpox is a possible good in this sense. So also is the condition in which human beings enjoy the beatific vision in Heaven, since we can imagine the obtaining of such a good.

According to ST1, it is a live possibility that the possible goods humans know about are only a small, unrepresentative sample of all the possible goods there are. To say that this is a live possibility is to say that it is true for all we know: for all we know, we are poorly epistemically situated *vis-a-vis* the full range of possible goods. Put differently, we are in no good position to know what is the objective probability that the possible goods we know of are representative of the full range of possible goods.<sup>2</sup>

An evil is *inscrutable* if, even after thinking hard about it, we know of no possible good which is such that obtaining that good, or making it possible that it obtain, morally justifies God in permitting the evil. Put differently, an evil is inscrutable if we know of no *morally sufficient reason* (MSR) for God's permitting it. If in fact there is no MSR for an evil, known or not,



then the evil is *gratuitous*. The suffering of children with cancer is an inscrutable evil if we cannot imagine anything that would justify God's permitting it; if in fact nothing *could* justify his permitting it, then this evil is gratuitous. Theists are committed to believing that no actual evil is gratuitous in this sense.<sup>3</sup>

The following question has received considerable attention: *is the inscrutability of an evil a good reason to believe in its gratuitousness?* That is, is our failure to find any MSR for an evil good reason to believe that there in fact is no reason that could justify God's permitting it? William Rowe has argued that it is.<sup>4</sup> Let us refer to any such inference - from the inscrutability of an evil to its gratuitousness - a *Rowean inference*. One of Rowe's examples involves a fawn that dies slowly and painfully from burns incurred in a forest fire ignited by lightning; call this evil E. The inference is:

P: No good we know of justifies God in permitting E.

Q: So no good at all justifies God in permitting E.

And since God cannot co-exist with gratuitous evil, the inscrutability of E is *prima facie* evidence of God's non-existence.

ST1 is supposed to block Rowean inferences like the one above by providing the Rowean with an undermining defeater for his belief in E's gratuitousness: the truth of ST1 would make P poor inductive support for Q. The good that justifies God's permitting the fawn's suffering might simply be beyond our ken, and so one cannot rationally accept ST1 and continue to hold Q on the basis of P. In this way, the Rowean argument from evil is defeated.

What some critics allege is that there is for skeptical theists a serious downside to deploying ST1 against Rowe's evidential argument. The claim, roughly, is that they thereby commit themselves to other, worse forms of skepticism, such as skepticism about the past, about morality, about certain theological propositions, or about the reliability of their own belief-forming mechanisms. After all, God might have some morally good but inscrutable reason for actualizing any of various scenarios described by skeptics. For all we know, by the skeptical theist's lights, God has some good but inscrutable reason for engaging in massive deceptions on a level with those perpetrated by Descartes's evil genius. I'll call this the *Pandora's Box* (PB) objection to skeptical theism. My aim below will be to explicate the various forms PB can take, and to consider whether any plausible rejoinders are available to skeptical theists.

## II.

Below is one formulation of PB. Let *s* be the state of affairs in which God created an old-looking universe five minutes ago. Skeptical theists allegedly are committed to all of the following:

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God has the power to actualize *s*.
- (3) For all we know, there is an MSR for God's actualizing *s*.

From these it is supposed to follow that:

- (4) For all we know, God actualizes *s*; for all we know the universe is only five minutes old.

Thus, for example, Bruce Russell:

Is the view that there is a God who, for reasons beyond our ken, allows the suffering which appears pointless to us any different epistemically from the view that there is a God who created the universe [5 minutes] ago and, for reasons beyond our ken, has deceived us into thinking it is older? It does not seem to be. .... [I]f it is not reasonable to believe that God deceived us, for some reason beyond our ken, when he created the universe, it is not reasonable to believe that there is some reason beyond our ken which, if God exists, would justify him in allowing all the suffering we see.<sup>5</sup>

Russell's phrasing is apt to mislead. It prompts Bergmann to give the following characterization of PB:

The persuasive force of [PB] depends entirely on the false assumption that it is *excessively skeptical* to have any serious doubts about whether the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are. Those proposing [PB] appeal to our reasonable disapproval of excessive skepticism and then try to get us to disapprove of ST1 on the grounds that it involves excessive skepticism. But having doubts about the representativeness of the goods we know of is *not* excessively skeptical. The possibility that the goods we know of aren't representative of the goods there are is a live possibility, one that we are sensible to consider and take seriously. It is not remote and far-fetched in the way the Cartesian demon and the [5-minute]-old earth possibilities are.<sup>6</sup>

Let us be clear that it is not, or at least it *need* not, be any part of PB to claim that skepticism about our access to possible goods is on a par with - as 'excessive' as - skepticism about the past or about the reality of the external world.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the claim is that anyone who believes in a being who has the power - and, for all we know, a morally sufficient reason - to engage in large-scale deceptions should consider it a live possibility that for some good but inscrutable reason this being *is* engaged in such a deception. If we are obligated to suspend judgment about whether there are God-justifying reasons for all of the inscrutable evils we observe, then we ought to suspend judgment as well on whether God actualizes *s*.

Bergmann is correct, nevertheless, when he claims that PB is a weak objection, at least as it stands. The problem with it is this: it presupposes that the basis on which any skeptical theist believes that God does not actualize *s* is a Rowean inference, from 'I can't see what would justify God's actualizing *s*' to 'probably there is no reason - probably God does not actualize *s*.' This basis

for believing that *s* does not obtain is unavailable to the skeptical theist; that much is correct. But the point is that other, *Rowean-inference-independent* (hereafter, 'RI-independent') reasons - perhaps the same ones atheists or non-skeptical theists have for believing in an old universe (whatever such reasons might be) - might still be available to the skeptical theist. In other words, in order that skeptical theists be committed to skepticism about the past, the following must be true: the only, or the principle basis they have for believing that God does not actualize *s* is their failure to imagine any good reason that would justify God's engaging in such a large-scale deception. Whether this is true - whether skeptical theists are without any RI-independent reasons for disbelieving in *s* - is not to the point here: the point is that a commitment to ST1 does not *by itself* entail any commitment to skepticism about *s*.

Consider an analogy. Suppose I know nothing about Smith's honesty, or lack thereof. For all I know, Smith is an inveterate liar. Now I claim to believe something (*P*) Smith told me, but not on the basis of Smith's telling me; instead, I've confirmed with my own eyes that *P*. Clearly in this case it wouldn't do for someone to challenge the rationality of my belief by pointing out that for all I know Smith is a liar; my belief that *P* isn't based on Smith's testimony.

In the same way, if a skeptical theist's only basis for believing in an old universe is his belief in God's omnibenevolence (more specifically, in God's unwillingness to engage in deceptions except when there is good reason to do so), then he has a problem, since by his own lights God's moral perfection is no guarantee against his permitting all sorts of inscrutable evils. But, in principle at least, the skeptical theist might have good independent reasons for believing in an old universe - some reason not having to do with God's moral character. Perhaps there is some theologically neutral, telling philosophical argument for rejecting skepticism about the past. If there is, then on this basis the skeptical theist can conclude that God has no MSR for actualizing *s*, since he has not actualized it. But this knowledge won't have been arrived at by any Rowean inference.

So much for the initial formulation of PB. Formulations that substitute for *s* skeptical scenarios involving (say) other minds or the external world can be dealt with in similar fashion. This holds true even if the skeptical scenario involves God's endowing us with a set of belief-forming mechanisms all of which are unreliable. Any reasons available to non-theists for trusting in the reliability of our belief-forming mechanisms are ones of which skeptical theists can avail themselves, subject only to the following restriction: they must be compatible with the latter's theological commitments and with any account they provide about the possible causes of our (possibly) limited moral vision.<sup>8</sup> The suggestion, for example, that our cognitive deficiency in this area is only one symptom of a more general cognitive defect that afflicts post-Fall humanity runs the risk of undermining any attempt to marshal RI-independent grounds for rejecting the more radical forms of skepticism.<sup>9</sup>

### III.

Consider now a formulation of PB aimed at showing that at least skeptical theists cannot avoid an unpalatable *theological* skepticism. The skeptical

theist allegedly is committed to all of the following, where *r* is the state of affairs in which God provides us, through some mode of special revelation, with *false* information about his eschatological plans for humanity:

- (1) God exists.
- (2) God has the power to actualize *r*.
- (3) For all we know, there is an MSR for God's actualizing *r*.
- (4) We have no good RI-independent reasons for believing that God does not actualize *r*.
- (5) So for all we know God actualizes *r*; for all we know God's revelation is false and (hence) so are our beliefs about his eschatological plans for humanity.

I rejected the previous versions of PB for the reason that skeptical theists might have independent grounds on which to hold the target beliefs, such as the belief in the reality of the external world; they need not arrive at them by performing any Rowean inference - what ST1 prohibits. The proponent of PB, however, might suggest that at least in the present case *no such independent grounds are available*: we only have God's revelation as a source of information about his eschatological plans, and the reliability of this source is what the present version of PB puts in doubt.<sup>10</sup>

Return again to the case of Smith. Smith testifies to me that *P*, and now I accept *P* on the basis of Smith's testimony; unlike in the previous case, I don't have the testimony of my own eyes to the truth of what Smith told me, or any other independent grounds for accepting *P*. If I now come to believe that, for all I know, Smith is a liar, or at least that in these matters he lies as often as he tells the truth, then I have an undermining defeater for my belief that *P*. Allegedly, skeptical theists are in roughly the same position in respect to their beliefs about God's plans, such as their belief that some souls will be saved: God, for all we know, has some good but inscrutable reason for deceiving us in such matters, and we have nothing to go on here but God's own word.

Clearly the upshot of PB is that it would be *irrational* for skeptical theists to hold the target beliefs about God's eschatological plans on the basis of his revelation, in the same way that the Rowean would be irrational to hold *Q* on the basis of *P*, if he also accepts ST1. The implicit epistemic principle at work here appears to be roughly the following:

D: Suppose *P*'s belief *B* is based on *R*.<sup>11</sup> Now consider some proposition *S* which is such that if *S* is true, then *R* is no good basis on which to believe *B*. If *P* believes that *S* is true for all *P* knows, then *P* cannot rationally continue to hold *B* on the basis of *R*.

Confronted with the present version of PB it would be tempting, perhaps, for the skeptical theist to reject principle D and to replace it with some principle about defeaters that enables him to avoid the charge of irrationality.<sup>12</sup> But going this route involves some risk. Suppose, for example, that D is replaced with the following principle:

D': Suppose P's belief B is based on R. Now consider some proposition S which is such that if S is true, then R is no good basis on which to believe B. If P believes that *probably* S is true, then P cannot rationally continue to hold B on the basis of R.

According to D' the inscrutable probability of S would be insufficient to make it a successful undermining defeater: it must be that P believes S *probably* is true - more likely true than not. That would avoid the problem raised by the present version of PB since, plausibly enough, it was not claimed that *probably* God has a good reason for providing us with a false revelation. But it comes at the cost of rendering ST1 innocuous against the Rowean argument from evil, since ST1 does not allege that *probably* the possible goods we know of are unrepresentative of the total range of possible goods there are; ST1 only states (to paraphrase) that *for all we know* they are unrepresentative.<sup>13</sup> Skeptical theists who want to retain the ability to block Rowe's crucial inference cannot avoid PB by using D'.

Similarly risky would be the suggestion that *r* represents a state of affairs so intrinsically evil that no omnibenevolent being, in any recognizable sense of the term *benevolent*, could permit its actualization, and that on this basis skeptical theists can avoid PB by rejecting (3), above. The claim, based perhaps on a moral intuition, would be that there *could not* be an MSR for God's actualizing *r*. The problem is that there's not much to recommend the view that *r* is a worse state of affairs than any of the evils we observe in this world, the permission of which is, according to theists, compatible with God's impeccable moral character. At the very least, the skeptical theist who goes this route must concede that our intuitions about what is morally justifiable *sub specie æternitatis* are, at least in some extreme cases, reliable. And this opens the door again to evidential arguments from evil that proceed from actual evils comparable to or (I would estimate) far worse than *r*.

What other recourse is there for skeptical theists, if any? I outline two alternatives below.

(1) *Reject (4), above, by reasoning inductively from the truth of God's independently checkable revelations.* Some of what God tells us might be independently verifiable, either by empirical scientists (e.g. archaeologists), or by philosophers.<sup>14</sup> If in these revelations God has a track-record of honesty, then we might reason inductively to the truth of what he tells us regarding matters not independently checkable. It is, after all, commonplace to reason thus in regard to other humans.

But there are two major worries here. The first is that in order for this suggestion to work, it must be practically feasible to check out God's other revelations - if not all of them then at least a large enough number of them to establish a solid track record of honesty. The practical barriers to this are, however, considerable, beginning with the difficulties in determining whether a given revelation is one genuinely from God, and including also the problem of being able to interpret the revelations accurately and specifically enough that we know what would constitute confirming evidence for them.

But perhaps the more compelling worry here is the traditional one about tying one's faith in God or his revelation to the results of empirical

investigations by historians and scientists: if a skeptical theist's confidence in the truth of God's uncheckable revelations must rise and fall with the vicissitudes of historical scholarship, for example, then he is likely to find himself always vacillating between belief and unbelief.

(2) *Give a circular justification for judging it improbable that God actualizes r.* Assume that the proposition that God deceives us for some good reason is improbable relative to what we learn by divine revelation (imagine God begins every revelation with 'Truly I say unto you....'). To claim on this basis that it is *not* true for all we know that God's revelation is false would of course involve us in circularity: using revelation's outputs to justify belief in its reliability. But as many are quick to point out, the same circularity infects any attempt to show the reliability of more mundane belief-sources such as sense-perception by using their outputs. If in the latter case the circularity involved is unobjectionable, then why not in the former case? Of course the analogy with sense perception is much too facile as it stands. The issue is whether revelation in its various modes constitutes what William Alston calls a *doxastic practice* roughly on a par with sense perception in its epistemic credentials - e.g. in the degree to which it is self-supporting, and in the sophistication of its defeater system.

Alternative (2) seems to me the only recourse for skeptical theists that holds out much hope of obviating the present form of PB. The literature on the topic - especially on Alston's recent work on it - is already considerable, however, and too complex to get into here.<sup>15</sup>

What can be said is that, absent a compelling argument for the unlikelihood of anyone's making good on the suggested analogy between special revelation and more mundane belief-sources, that theological skepticism is unavoidable by skeptical theists *because RI-independent grounds for rational belief in God's revelation are unavailable*, has not conclusively been shown.<sup>16</sup> Of course, other means by which to link skeptical theism with a broad theological skepticism might exist, but none, so far as I know, has been suggested.

#### IV.

I look now at two more forms that PB can take. According to the first, ST1 prohibits skeptical theists from using inverse-probability arguments in natural theology. According to the second, the *moral* skepticism explicit in ST1 and in other skeptical theses to be listed below is, from the standpoint of moral *praxis*, crippling or at least degrading. I'll have comparatively more to say about the second challenge.

The central idea behind the use of inverse-probability in natural theology is that God's existence *probabilifies*, to varying degrees (which might be expressed only comparatively), certain of the empirical observations we make. In some cases it is claimed that if God exists then the observed phenomena are rather to be expected, and that this is so because of what we know about God's nature - in particular, that he is omnibenevolent - and about value. Here is an example from Richard Swinburne:

Does a God have reason for making a world in which men have responsibility for the well-being of each other? Fairly evidently, to



some extent yes. A world in which good things can only be attained by co-operation is one which a God has reason to make - for benefiting each other is a good thing. .... A good God, like a good father, will delegate responsibility. In order to allow creatures a share in creation, he will allow them the choice of hurting and maiming, of frustrating the divine plan. Our world is of course one where creatures have just such deep responsibility for each other.<sup>17</sup>

The crucial point is that *this type of argument centrally involves making claims about what sorts of things we are likely to find in a world created and superintended by God*. Swinburne expresses some diffidence about our ability to make such judgments, given our human limitations, but on the whole he finds no prohibitive implausibility in our doing so.<sup>18</sup>

But anyone who embraces ST1 *will* find it too implausible to claim that we know (on grounds independent of any revelation from the being whose existence is to be shown), even to a good approximation, what to expect to find in a world God creates.<sup>19</sup> That's exactly why finding massive amounts of evil in the world does not, on the skeptic's view, tend to disconfirm God's existence. For all we know, the achieving of some great good requires that God permit so much evil. Similarly, for all we know, there is some great good the obtaining of which requires that God *not* create a world in which creatures are significantly responsible for one another's well-being. And so the assignments of conditional probability - even comparative ones - cannot be made here, and natural theological arguments by inverse-probability cannot get off the ground.

This version of PB is, I believe, correct, so long as it isn't simply built into the theistic hypothesis that God wants to create a world with the features we find this one to have. Swinburne, for methodological reasons<sup>20</sup>, makes conditional assignments of probability on the more austere hypothesis that God exists - i.e. that there is a disembodied spirit who is omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, necessary, and perfectly good. Given only the austere hypothesis, and given the live possibility that God, for some inscrutable good reason, would refrain from creating a world with the features we find this one to have, the evidence in question has inscrutable probability on the hypothesis, and the inverse-probability arguments cannot be formulated. Whether this represents a serious problem for skeptical theists depends entirely on how much importance, if any, they assign to being able to prove God's existence, either at all or by this particular method, and opinions on these matters are likely to differ from one skeptical theist to another.<sup>21</sup>

The final version of PB to be looked at here involves the claim that the moral skepticism explicit in ST1 and in several other skeptical theses listed below commits skeptical theists to a practically incapacitating skepticism about our ability to make moral judgments even in mundane contexts. The other skeptical theses are below (ST2 and ST3 are given by Bergmann):

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 that 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.

ST4: We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have.

A particular skeptical theist might reject one or more of ST1-4, but for simplicity let's assume that skeptical theists embrace all four theses. ST2 is a natural corollary of ST1, and it is equally relevant to countering inductive arguments from evil, since the reason for which God prevents some inscrutable evil might be in order to avoid some worse evil that is beyond our ken.

The idea behind ST3 is that there might be unsuspected connections - physical, metaphysical, or logical - between certain goods and certain evils. Suppose that we know of a certain possible good G which is such that if the only way to get G were to permit some evil E, then G would justify God's permitting E. Suppose the problem (in respect to its usefulness to theodiscists) with G is that, to all appearances, E simply is not a necessary precondition for obtaining this good; it seems to us that God could get G by other means much less costly in human suffering. What ST3 alleges is that humans really are in no good position to make the following inference:

1. So far as we know E is not a necessary condition for God's bringing about G.
2. So E is not a necessary condition for God's bringing about G.

The skepticism at issue here is not specifically moral, but it is relevant in an obvious way to our ability to make claims about the existence of God-justifying moral reasons for various evils.

Daniel Howard-Snyder provides an expression of ST4:

[W]hy can a child discern the literary merits of a comic book but not *Henry V*? .... Why can a child recognize the value of his friendship with his buddy next door but not the full value of his parents' love for each other? Surely because *Henry V* .... and adult love involve much more than he is able to comprehend. And this is true of adults as well, as reflection on our progress in understanding the complexity of various things of value reveals. For example, periodically reflecting on the fabric of our relationships....we might well find strands and shades that when brought to full light permit us to see love as more valuable than we had once thought.<sup>22</sup>

The idea here is not that our estimates of the total moral value in some state of affairs might be wrong because there are unknown goods or evils causally or logically connected with this one (ST1 & ST2), or known goods or evils connected with it in unknown ways (ST3). Rather, it is that we can be wrong, perhaps radically, about the intrinsic value of things apart from

their connections with other states of affairs. We might know, for example, that free will is good, but fail to realize just *how good* it is, in itself. So even if, for example, the value of our being free does not *seem* great enough to justify God in permitting moral evils like the Holocaust, that is no good reason to suppose it is not in fact good enough.

As with ST1, my interest in ST2-4 is not in their truth or falsity, but in whether commitment to them really has the unpalatable consequences that critics have alleged (of course, if they do, then depending on what those consequences are, they might bear on the truth or falsity of the theses that entail them). Of the import skeptical theism has for our ability to make moral judgments even in the most quotidian contexts, Evan Fales says:

In matters of morals, we seek to know what the *total good and evil* associated with contemplated states of affairs are, for it is this which determines whether those states are to be desired, and whether we should seek to bring them about. But if our knowledge of the moral value of these states of affairs is as radically defective as the [skeptical] theist has to claim - states of affairs which are not only common but often within our power to produce or prevent - then we have indeed lost our grip upon the possibility of using moral judgments as a guide for action and evaluation.<sup>23</sup>

Part of what makes it difficult to determine the implications of the skeptical theses for our ability to act morally and to make moral judgments about the actions of others is that skeptical theists might hold widely divergent views about the nature of moral decision-making and evaluation, and the import of ST1-4, or of some subset of these, might be different depending on the details. We can, however, make a few general observations.

(1) The truth of the skeptical theses would indeed, as Fales contends, preclude our knowing, at least on our own, the total intrinsic and instrumental value of states of affairs we might contemplate in our moral deliberations. That we would *like* to know the total value is no doubt true as well. That we *need* to know it in order that we be capable of acting as responsible moral agents is less obvious, which leads us to the next point.

(2) Skeptical theism raises no barriers to *agent* evaluation, if this only requires us to determine whether it was the *intention* of the agent to do the right thing. Judgments about praiseworthiness and blameworthiness can still be made even if, for all we know, an apparently evil action has unknown good consequences, and vice-versa. Of course this is not enough fully to escape the charge that skeptical theists will be morally crippled by their skepticism: it remains to be shown that we can confidently make moral choices, and this involves the evaluation of alternative courses of *action*.

(3) When it comes to evaluating actions we might just interest ourselves in what seems right and wrong relative merely to our (possibly) limited information, but then we must concede that, for all we can tell, our moral judgments might be wildly off the mark. Alternatively, we can prevail upon God simply to *tell us* what is right, and follow his commands regardless of whether we are able to comprehend the moral reasoning behind

them. Fales attributes a version of the latter view to Marilyn McCord Adams: it is only for us to follow the rules God hands down to us. What chiefly (though not solely<sup>24</sup>) worries Fales is the degradation of our status as moral agents the view seems to involve.

God's commands *could* take the form of strictly prescribing or enjoining certain actions, regardless of the consequences foreseeable by us. But if they were of this form, our moral freedom (beyond decisions as to how to apply the Law in particular circumstances) would consist of nothing more than the ability to choose whether to obey or not. Deliberation with a view to the consequences of action would be morally irrelevant. But such a limited form of moral responsibility as this would hardly suit the "station" of an intelligent dog, let alone agents such as ourselves.<sup>25</sup>

It is less easy here than in previous cases to determine whether skeptical theism has the bad consequences imputed to it: what is degrading is, after all, largely a matter of personal taste. I leave it to the reader to consider whether the present view puts us in an abject condition *qua* moral agents. If it does, and if it is any part of theism to attribute to human moral agents the sort of responsibility for their actions that requires of them more than what we can do on Adams's view, then the skeptical theist confronts a problem of internal inconsistency at worst; at least, he must accept that his condition as a moral agent is low. If it is believed that skeptical theism does not have this consequence, then Adams's view represents for skeptical theists at least one way in which to obviate the present version of PB.

Other moral theories may or may not be ones to which skeptical theists can subscribe consistent with their skeptical commitments; they have to be considered case by case. And there might be other ways in which to argue that skeptical theists are committed to some form of moral skepticism. Brice Wachterhauser, for example, claims that certain of the world's more heinous evils are test-cases in the sense that any point of view that does not recognize them as gratuitous cannot plausibly be considered a *moral* point of view at all. After describing some of these evils, Wachterhauser says:

These are "limit cases" for moral theory such that any moral theory can be tested by its ability to give a convincing account of why such evils are morally unjustifiable. Any moral theory which cannot give such an account can quite plausibly be dismissed and any theory which claims that such evils are only apparently unjustifiable strains our moral credulity beyond its possible limits. If we can know anything at all about the nature of unjustifiable evil it must be based upon such cases or the very project of moral understanding must be hopeless from the start. .... [W]e cannot appeal to the difference between divine and human knowledge in order to understand God's response (or lack thereof) because there are no principles that could possibly justify the existence of such an evil.<sup>26</sup>

This is not uniquely a problem for *skeptical* theists: it is supposed to

be a problem for any theist who believes that no actual evil is gratuitous. But skeptical theists doubtless will find Wachterhauser's remarks in the quoted passage - especially the last statement - merely question-begging.

### V.

What Rowe finds especially objectionable about skeptical theism is that it appears to have the consequence that *no amount of evil in the world can constitute even prima facie evidence of God's non-existence*.

For, to repeat their constant refrain, since we don't know that the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are, we cannot know that it is even likely that there are no goods that justify God in permitting whatever amount of apparently pointless, horrific evil there might occur in our world. Indeed, if human life were *nothing more than a series of agonizing moments from birth to death*, their position would still require them to say that we cannot reasonably infer that it is even likely that God does not exist. But surely such a view is unreasonable, if not absurd.<sup>27</sup>

It follows that we have a good reason to reject the skeptical theses that entail this absurd consequence.

Note, incidentally, that what Rowe says does not entail that skeptical theists could not rationally *believe* that the evils in the envisioned world are gratuitous - only that this could not be *inferred* - consistent with ST1-4 - from their inability to imagine any MSR for God's actualizing such a world. Possibly there are non-inferential grounds on which to believe in the gratuitousness of these evils. The issue then comes down to whether, according to one's broader epistemology, it is rational to believe in this way in the gratuitousness of the evils, while also upholding the skeptical theses. At the least, this view would require rejecting principle D, above. And it might open the door to a different form of the evidential argument from evil: one that does not require the atheologian to reject any of ST1-4.<sup>28</sup>

Suppose that the skeptical theses do have the implication Rowe mentions: that no amount or variety of evil whatsoever could constitute (for us) evidence of God's non-existence. Then skeptical theists must choose between biting the bullet and accepting the consequence despite its (at least) superficial implausibility, or they must attenuate somewhat their skepticism and claim that some evils are bad enough that if there were a good reason for God's permitting them, probably we would know about it. They then would have to claim that none of the evils we find in this world are this bad. The obvious drawback is that, now, Rowean arguments from evil are no longer out of order.

Of course, if there is independent and overwhelmingly good reason to believe that the skeptical theses, or any one of them (any one by itself appears sufficient to block Rowean inferences, though for convenience I have focused mainly on ST1), are true, then we simply are forced to accept

even their less palatable implications. My aim here has been to show that these implications are less grave than some have claimed.

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## NOTES

1. "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Nous* 35 (2001), p.279. Bergmann builds into skeptical theism two other claims, ST2 and ST3, that will be discussed in the penultimate section.

2. For reasons that I have already been mentioned elsewhere (see the article in note 16), it cannot plausibly be maintained that probably the goods we know of are an unrepresentative sample of the full range of goods. Fortunately for skeptical theists, only the weaker claim - that for all we know the sample of goods we know of is unrepresentative of the full range - is needed for the defensive purpose to which they put ST1.

3. But see William Hasker, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992), pp.23-44. Can a theist believe that some *merely possible* evils are gratuitous? That depends: if God exists necessarily, and if he is essentially omnibenevolent, then *in no possible world is there a gratuitous evil* - i.e. in no possible world is there an evil so bad that nothing could justify God's permitting it. See the discussion by Richard Gale in his *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.229.

4. See his "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979), pp.335-41; "Evil and Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988), pp.119-32.

It should be noted that Rowe has since revised his argument. See "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Indiana University Press, 1996), Chap.14.

5. "Defenseless," in Howard-Snyder, p.197. See also, in the same volume, Richard Gale, "Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil," pp.208-9.

6. "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," pp.290-1.

7. Even if they were on a par, this wouldn't commit the skeptical theist to holding the other forms of skepticism. Skepticism about other minds might be as offensive to common sense as skepticism about the past, but neither entails the other.

8. Ophthalmologists can provide an account of near-sightedness in terms of the shape of the eye and the focusing of light. Part of any full defense of ST1 should be an account of just how moral vision might be impaired: it is not obvious, after all, just how so many goods might escape us. Is it that we have some special faculty for finding moral goods, and this faculty is not working properly? How does it get impaired? Is the condition inherited? Is it remediable by any means available to us and apart from God's help?

9. For more on this, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000), Chapters 7 & 8.

10. One can substitute for *r* any other state of affairs in which God reveals to us false information on matters to which we have no epistemic access except by God's revelation: e.g. information about God's own nature not provable by any form of natural theology, or revelations about history that are for one reason or another not independently checkable by historians.

11. R can be another belief, or some experience. In the latter case, B can be inferred from R, or formed on the basis of R in the so-called "basic" way, as when I immediately (i.e. non-inferentially) form the belief that there is a horse in front of me on the basis of a certain visual experience.

12. For some in-depth discussion of the concept of undermining defeaters, see the discussions of Plantinga's argument against naturalism in James Beilby (ed.) *Naturalism Defeated?* (Cornell University Press, 2002), esp. Parts II & IV.

13. This suggests that skeptical theists might simply modify ST1 and argue for the stronger claim that *probably* the possible goods we know of are unrepresentative of the full range. But see note #2.

14. Ignore here any questions about why God would reveal something we can find out for ourselves; perhaps it is for the very reason I'm discussing.

15. See Alston's *Perceiving God* (Cornell University Press, 1992). For more on epistemic circularity, see Ernest Sosa's "Philosophical Skepticism and Epistemic Circularity" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* supp.vol.68 (1994), pp.263-90.

16. This conclusion is much weaker than the one I defended in a previous article. The present article is aimed in part at correcting that earlier error. See my "Inscrutable Evil and Skepticism," *Heythrop Journal* 41 (2000), pp.297-302.

17. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Clarendon Press, 1991), pp.187;189. See the first several chapters in *The Existence of God* for details on the Bayesian approach Swinburne uses. It is worth noting that in some cases it is claimed, consistent with ST1, only that, relative to the proposition that God exists, the observations are as likely as not, while on any rival hypothesis according to which there is no God, the observations are downright unlikely. In this case, the theistic 'hypothesis' is differentially confirmed over its rivals though it is not claimed that God's existence makes the observations in question more likely than not. Whether this formulation of the argument is viable depends on whether we can equate 'the observations are as likely as not if God exists' with 'the objective probability of the observations is .5 if God exists'.

18. *The Existence of God*, pp.110-11.

19. That is, aside from trivial things such as 'things that owe their existence to God', or 'things that are not gratuitous evils'.

20. Building more into a hypothesis tends to complexify it and consequently to drop its prior probability - one of the key factors in the Bayesian formula Swinburne uses to represent the evidential import of the evidence he considers. For more on the implications of skeptical theism for natural theology, see my "Evil, the Human Cognitive Condition, and Natural Theology," *Religious Studies* 34 (1998), pp.403-18.

21. Cf. the remarks on this version of PB in Paul Draper, "The Skeptical Theist," in Howard-Snyder, p.188; and Richard Gale, op.cit., pp.208-9.

22. "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil," in Howard-Snyder, pp.302-3. Cf. William Alston on p.323 of the same volume: "[A] good's being 'known' does not necessarily put us in a favorable position to assess its magnitude and hence does not necessarily put us in a favorable position to say whether its obtaining would justify God's permitting a certain evil..." ("Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil").

23. Evan Fales, "Should God not have Created Adam?," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992), pp.192-208.

24. There are likely to be problems associated with our ability correctly to interpret and apply God's commands, for example, and with the authenticity of the revelations in which they are couched.

25. "Should God not have Created Adam?," p.204.

26. "The Problem of Evil and Moral Skepticism," *International Journal for the*

*Philosophy of Religion* 17 (1985), pp.172;173.

27. "Skeptical Theism: A Response to Bergmann," *Nous* 35 (2001), p.298.

28. For more on non-propositional reasons for believing in the gratuitousness of certain evils, see Jerome Gellmann, "A New Look at the Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992), pp.209-15.