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PISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING SKEPTICAL THEISM

Trent Dougherty

The thesis of this short paper is that skeptical theism does not look very plausible from the perspective of a common sense epistemology. A corollary of this is that anyone who finds common sense epistemology plausible and is attracted to skeptical theism has some work to do to show that they can form a plausible whole. The dialectical situation is that to the degree that this argument is a strong one, to that same degree (at least) the theorist who would like to combine common sense epistemology with skeptical theism has some work to do.

The thesis of this short paper is that skeptical theism does not look very plausible from the perspective of a common sense epistemology. A corollary of this is that anyone who finds common sense epistemology plausible and is attracted to skeptical theism has some work to do to show that they can form a plausible whole. The argument can be summarized as follows.

- (1) If common sense epistemology is correct, then it is relatively easy to justifiably believe that there exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- (2) If it is relatively easy to justifiably believe that there exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse., then skeptical theism is not a plausible response to the problem of evil.
- (3) Therefore, if common sense epistemology is correct, then skeptical theism is not plausible.

This is not the place to defend the rectitude of common sense epistemology.¹ Thus there is no premise here which asserts the antecedent of the first premise. The dialectical situation is that to the degree that this argument is a strong one, to that same degree (at least) the theorist who would like to combine common sense epistemology with skeptical theism has some work to do.²

I. What Is Skeptical Theism?

In short, skeptical theism is a response to the evidential problem of evil, most notably formulated by William Rowe thusly:³



1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
2. An omnipotent, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

Skeptical theists in one way or another reply that the only evidence for 1 is that there are instances of intense suffering for which we cannot think of some greater good which would have been lost if it were prevented or some evil equally bad or worse which would have resulted if it were prevented, and that furthermore we have no reason to suppose that we would be able to think of such if it existed.

II. What Is Common Sense Epistemology?

This is not the place for a thorough exposition of common sense epistemology, but I can give a sufficient amount of detail in a short space. Though Socrates may not approve, I will begin with some examples. The natural place to start is with Moore.⁴ Moore's famous argument refutes the skeptic thus: "See, look there, I have hands, thus I'm not a handless brain in a vat." Moore never built much explicit epistemological theory upon this terse contestation, but one way to understand it is that the common sense beliefs—like the one about hands—have more going for them than any skeptical scenario. This is especially so in the case of skeptical arguments which strike many as mere sophistry and, at any rate, are rather complicated and arcane. Thus one is justified in holding on to beliefs that seem to just stare you in the face until there is some overwhelming reason to doubt them.⁵

Another form of common sense epistemology is represented by Chisholm.⁶ According to Chisholm there are basic epistemic principles which link our appearance states to justified beliefs having the same content as those appearance states. James Pryor has recently taken up the defense of essentially this view.⁷ Chisholm offers multiple epistemic principles for various basic sources of justification, but some common sense epistemologists offer single simple principles to do what Chisholm does with many. Such a principle can be gleaned from Pryor. I will call it the Principle of Immediate Justification.

(PIJ) [W]henever you have an experience as of *p*, you thereby have immediate *prima facie* justification for believing *p*.⁸

Two more examples are Michael Huemer and Richard Swinburne. Huemer calls his principle the Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism.⁹

(PC) If it seems to *S* as if *P*, then *S* thereby has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that *P*.

Swinburne calls his principle the Principle of Credulity. Swinburne:

This principle claims that every proposition that a subject believes or is inclined to believe has (in so far as it is basic) in his noetic structure a probability corresponding to the strength of the belief or semi-belief or inclination to believe. Understanding ‘seems’ in the epistemic sense . . . then put more aphoristically, the principle says: things are probably as they seem to be.¹⁰

What all these views have in common is that experiences, inclinations to believe, appearance states and the like are sufficient to justify the beliefs they give rise to. Since epistemic seemings seem to cover all these cases I will use Huemer’s principle (PC) in what follows, though I don’t think anything rides on that choice. I think basic idea of common sense epistemology is sufficiently clear and (PC) sufficiently broad to cover most if not all admissible precisifications.

III. Why Does Common Sense Epistemology Threaten Skeptical Theism?

Given a common sense epistemology, if it seems to someone that for some given instance of evil that it is a witness for the first premise of Rowe’s argument, i.e., a witness that there exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse, then that person is justified in that belief. And the stronger that impression, the more firmly in place that justification will be. To dislodge the justification will require considerations which create a stronger impression to the contrary or bring it about that the impression is lessened, so that it no longer seems to the individual in question that there couldn’t be a reason for the evil.

And it is not just that there are some evils such that it is not the case that any suggested justification seems viable. Rather, what many people claim to experience is that it seems to them that it is not the case that, possibly, there is a justification for this evil. It is a distinctively *modal* intuition. Some eschew modal intuitions¹¹ but this wipes out much knowledge. We can see that there couldn’t possibly be a counter-example to Modus Ponens.¹² At any rate, most common sense epistemologists—all the ones mentioned above—allow that modal intuitions justify modal claims. So there is no confusion here between absence of evidence and evidence of absence. If common sense epistemology is correct then we *do* have evidence of absence: the strong intuition concerning some evils that there could not possibly be anything to justify this.

Now consider the central claims of skeptical theism. Derk Pereboom has recently done an excellent job of summing up the main thrust of skeptical theism.¹³

Skeptical theism claims that because of the limitations of our cognitive capacities, the nature of the good is or might well be beyond our understanding to such a degree that we should not expect to understand how it is that God’s governance of the universe accords with divine goodness.¹⁴

Paul Draper boils the thesis down to a succinct principle.

ST1: Humans are in no position to judge directly that an omnipotent and omniscient being would be unlikely to have a morally sufficient reason to permit the evils we find in the world.¹⁵

Notice, though, that for the skeptical theist to provide a defeater for our hypothetical individual the skeptical theist's considerations will have to wipe away the initial appearance of gratuity or else those considerations will have to have to generate a stronger appearance of truth. It's hard to see how there could be any general considerations that could do that. For those for whom horrendous evils appear obviously gratuitous, it is highly unlikely that reminding them that they are finite and fallible is going to erase the strong impression, horror even, at apparently gratuitous evils. Again, the kind of instance of evil which are at the center of the Problem of Evil—apparently gratuitous horrendous evils—create *very* strong impressions. It is therefore going to be easy for someone who honestly considers ST1 to nevertheless reasonably fail to have an undercutting defeater. Don't get me wrong: ST1 is quite plausible. And it might even reduce the extent of our confidence in the negative intuition. But it is thereby damned with faint praise, for the sense that there are horrendous gratuitous evils is, for many of us, *overwhelming*. Thus it does not fully defeat the initial *prima facie* justification and we remain justified in taking evil as evidence against the existence of God.

As one who thinks there is something clearly right in skeptical theism, but who is committed to common sense epistemology (and occasionally has a strong sense that certain evils defy all possible justification) I am very interested in further research which might show that the two theses are better bedfellows than they appear to me to be.

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NOTES

1. The current main alternatives—skepticism, contextualism, relativism—are not very attractive to say the least. Contextualism has become somewhat popular. For a very recent exposition and critique, see Richard Feldman, "Contextualism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Epistemology*, 2nd edition, ed. Jonathan Dancy, Ernest Sosa, Matthias Steup (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

2. I wish to emphasize that the argument I will take up is *not* a reductio. That is, I will *not* argue from the denial of the consequent of (3) to the denial of the antecedent of (1) and conclude that since the plausibility of skepticism entails the incorrectness of common sense epistemology it thereby ought to be rejected because of its dire epistemological consequences. That is another argument entirely and I will not treat it in any way below. For moral versions of such an argument see Bruce Russell, "Defenseless," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 193–205 and, more recently and more thoroughly, William Hasker, *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2004), chap. 3 "The sceptical solution to the problem of evil."

3. I quote from *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. The article originally appeared in the *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979).

4. See "A Proof of the External World," 1939 reprinted in Sosa and Kim, *Epistemology: An Anthology* (Blackwell, 2000), chap. 2. See also "A Defense of Common Sense," *Contemporary British Philosophy* (2nd series), ed. J. H. Muirhead, 1925. Reprinted in G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (1959).

5. In a related article Klaas J. Kraay gives short shrift to the justification conferred by commonsense epistemology saying "I suspect that defenders of Rowe would prefer stronger support (than that which may be conferred by the Principle of Credulity)." "Absence of Evidence and Evidence of Absence," *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2007): pp. 202–27. However, if common sense epistemology is correct then—though everyone no doubt wants as much support as they can have for their beliefs—the proponent of Rowe's argument has adequate support for reasonable belief and thus is not to be dismissed so lightly.

6. See *Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd edition. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989).

7. James Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," *Nous*, 34 (2000), pp. 517–49.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 536.

9. Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), p. 99.

10. Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 142. Swinburne also defends the principle in his *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 20–22 and then—pp. 22–23—goes on to suggest just the line of thought pursued here: that the principle licenses an inference to the truth of Premise 1 of Rowe's argument. This is my application of what Swinburne says. He makes no mention of Rowe and the evidential argument he considers (p. 13) is very different from Rowe's. Rowe himself realizes that he needs some kind of principle of credulity. See his "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 13 (1982), and then again very briefly in "The Empirical Argument from Evil" in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 227–47, esp. p. 244.

11. Peter van Inwagen stands out. See his *Ontology, Identity, and Modality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chap. 13 for example.

12. Van McGee's "A Counter-example to Modus Ponens" notwithstanding, *Journal of Philosophy* (September 1985), 82 (9): pp. 462–71. And I don't think it is the case that we infer this from seeing its necessary truth. In fact, I think in most cases of modal intuition it works the reverse. That is, we see from the apparent absence of counter-example, that it must be a necessary truth. In mathematics this is often the only evidence available.

13. Plausibly, Stephen Wykstra was the first to bring this kind of argument to the attention of analytic philosophers with his "The Human Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): pp. 73–94.

14. Derk Pereboom, "Free Will, Evil, and Divine Providence," in Andrew Chignell, *God and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 88.

15. Paul Draper, "The Skeptical Theist," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, p. 176. In these two summaries I am avoiding explicitly probabilistic formulations of the issue for the sake of simplicity. Nothing rests on this ultimately.