

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 26 | Issue 1

Article 4

1-1-2009

Skeptical Theism and Empirical Unfalsifiability

Ian Wilks

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Wilks, Ian (2009) "Skeptical Theism and Empirical Unfalsifiability," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil20092614

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

SKEPTICAL THEISM AND EMPIRICAL UNFALSIFIABILITY

Ian Wilks

Arguments strong enough to justify skeptical theism will be strong enough to justify the position that every claim about God is empirically unfalsifiable. This fact is problematic because that position licenses further arguments which are clearly unreasonable, but which the skeptical theist cannot consistently accept as such. Avoiding this result while still achieving the theoretical objectives looked for in skeptical theism appears to demand an impossibly nuanced position.

I consider herein the relationship between skeptical theism and the following claim (where "God" is taken in a standard way as referring to an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-loving being):

(U) Every claim about God is empirically unfalsifiable.

The charge of empirical unfalsifiability has been a common line of attack against theism. Do proponents of skeptical theism adequately shield themselves from it? I argue not. U is, I believe, an unavoidable by-product of that position, in that an argument strong enough to justify that position will justify U as well. This fact puts into relief difficulties inherent in skeptical theism itself.

I

Skeptical theists strengthen their claim to knowledge of God's existence by weakening their claim to knowledge of God's purposes. This concession is a well-known tactic of defense in the debate over the problem of evil. Cases of evil pose no evidential threat to the claim that God exists when they can be depicted as serving his benevolent purposes. But many cases defy such explanation. What is the theist to say about an evil which no stretch of the imagination can link to benevolent purposes? The tactic of defense proposed by skeptical theists is to admit failure, but then make light of the admission. "Of course there will be many cases of evil which serve God's purposes in ways we cannot explain," they say. "But that is only to be expected, given the nature of God." Failure to give replies to the empirical evidence of evil posed by non-theists should not lower our confidence that potential replies do exist and could be given.

This defensive tactic has an epistemological side and a metaphysical side.



Epistemologically, the point is to emphasize the simplicity of our cognitive apparatus. God's wisdom exceeds ours, Stephen Wykstra suggests, at least as much as an adult's exceeds a one-month-old infant's.¹ And what one-month-old infant could be expected to understand the purposes behind the actions of an adult? Add to this the fact that "it is part of Christianity and many theistic religions to suppose that our earthly life is but a small initial segment of our total lives; there is life after death and indeed immortality."² We have no cognitive access to this latter stage, and cannot be expected to discern how things now may work to serve things then. So it is natural that we often fail to know what the outweighing goods are for given evils. This may be so, as William Alston notes, even when we are in fact aware of a good that turns out to be an outweighing one for a given evil; we may be aware of the good without being aware of its connection with the evil.³ In sum, the cognitive distance between ourselves and God is such that we should *expect* in many instances not to know what purposes of his are being served. The sort of empirical evidence appealed to in the problem of evil is accordingly discounted.

Metaphysically, the point is to emphasize the moral complexity of the cosmos. There is no reason to expect it has anything like a fractal structure, where the relation of goods and evils is patterned throughout the parts of the cosmos the way it is patterned in the cosmos as a whole. Rather, it may be patterned so that "many of the goods below its puzzling observable surface, many of the moral causes of God's current allowings and intervenings, would be 'deep' moral goods," and thus not open to view.⁴ Its patterns may be hidden, not just unknown. Hence we have the principle commonly at work in the writings of skeptical theists and formulated thus by Michael Bergmann: "We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are."⁵ Parallel principles arise for the unrepresentativeness of the possible evils we know of, and for the unrepresentativeness of the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and possible evils. Whatever our own cognitive abilities, our very surroundings may themselves fail to be transparent. This explains our inability to answer the evidential challenges of non-theists. So the empirical evidence to which they appeal is accordingly discounted.

¹Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments From Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 155.

²Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 73.

³William Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," in Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, p. 109.

⁴Bruce Russell and Stephen Wykstra, "The 'Inductive' Argument from Evil: A Dialogue," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988), pp. 146–147.

⁵Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Noûs* 35 (2001), p. 279.

For all we know, human minds are too simple for grasp of God's strategies in achieving his benevolent goals, and those strategies too complex for grasp by human minds. The gist of these arguments from human simplicity and cosmic complexity is that we cannot use the state of the world as a measure of God's beneficence in setting goals, or effectiveness in meeting them, because of our plausible deficiencies in grasping the connection between goal and result. There is no evil of which we can knowingly say, "There is no strategy on which God would ever have allowed this."

Framing the point in terms of divine strategies facilitates seeing how the arguments taking us this far will take us all the way to U. Attempts to falsify a claim about God empirically can be represented in this generic objection:

If God is like this then why is the world thus?

"Like this" pertains to the content of whatever claim about God is to be falsified. "Thus" pertains to the empirical evidence appealed to as falsifying. To that generic question the arguments of skeptical theists license this generic response:

The world may be thus because of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God's being like this.

"May" signals that the respondent is only trying to raise a doubt about the evidence offered, not refute it outright. In the context of the problem of evil this distinction is registered by saying that the respondent is only offering a defense, not a full theodicy.⁶ A defense is enough to discount the evidence, enough to block it from performing its intended office of falsification. The key point is that responses capable of doing this can be deployed outside the context of the problem of evil. They can be deployed to answer any and all empirical evidence offered against claims about God. The human simplicity and cosmic complexity arguments guarantee that, for the purposes of explaining away empirical evidence, unknown divine strategies can always be appealed to when known ones fail. That fact makes appealing to unknown divine strategies an inexhaustible method of defense.

Here is why. The generic pattern of objection-and-response given above is applicable indifferently to omniscience, omnipotence and omnibenevolence, and all other divine attributes, showing the pattern on which claims about them can be defended. Whatever it is we want to maintain about God, we can maintain it against contrary empirical evidence by invoking the possibility of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God's having that property.⁷ The generic objection-and-response can be specified accordingly:

⁶The defense/theodicy distinction is, of course, well-known from Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), p. 27, and idem, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 165.

⁷Of course we can also invoke the possibility of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God's having *some other* property as well. But the ease with which we can invoke the generic response already given means that we do not even need to bother with this broader explanatory variant.

If God wants this then why is the world thus? . . . The world may be thus because of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God's wanting this.

If God does this then why is the world thus? . . . The world may be thus because of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God's doing this.

If God is in a given relation to certain being(s) then why is the world thus? . . . The world may be thus because of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God's being in that relation to the being(s).

This list may be extended, along the same pattern, according to whatever else is attributed to God above and beyond omniscience, omnipotence and omni-benevolence, and above and beyond what he is said to want, do and relate to. Plug *any* divine property or relation into the format and the resulting response will operate just as coherently as a defense against the corresponding objection.

In other words, take the empirical evidence offered as a way of showing that God is lacking in a property or relation normally attributed to him and pose this question:

If God has this property, or stands in this relation, then why is the world the way it appears in the evidence?

To every such question there follows a ready response:

The world may be the way it appears in the evidence because of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God's having this property, or standing in this relation.

There is no empirical evidence against theism that cannot be questioned as above. So there is none to which that response cannot be given. So there is nothing to be said about God that is empirically falsifiable. And that is what is asserted by U.

In this way the arguments from human simplicity and cosmic complexity which give us skeptical theism give us U as well. If we cannot use the state of the world as a measure of God's beneficence in setting goals and effectiveness in achieving them, then we cannot use it to gather falsifying evidence against anything attributed to God.

We may discern the relationship between skeptical theism and U another way. Remember the explicit purpose of skeptical theism: to show that for all we know the evils of the world are requisite steps in God's beneficent plan. For all we know, every evil is ultimately benign, being ultimately in the service of a good. A key application of this result is to the hypothetical case of divine deception. It is possible that God has deceived us in some way. If so this would be an evil. And of this evil we could say, as before, that for all we know it is a requisite step in God's be-

neficient plan. For all we know it is a benign evil, and God is a benign, not an evil, deceiver. Now return to the most generic objection-and-response form above:

If God is like this then why is the world thus? . . . The world may be thus because of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God's being like this.

The response may be re-formulated to exploit the possibility that God is a benign deceiver:

The world may in fact *not* be thus at all. It may only appear thus as a consequence of God's activities as a benign deceiver.

All of the other objection-and-response forms can be re-formulated accordingly. All of them can appeal to the possibility that a piece of empirical evidence is in fact nothing but a piece of benign deception wrought by God. Any empirical evidence against any claim about God may be discounted in this way.⁸ This gives grounds enough to justify U. So again, the arguments which give us skeptical theism give us U as well.

Now some will demur at these results and point out that unfalsifiability means unfalsifiability *in principle*. Perhaps all of the empirical evidence we know about from this world is incapable of falsifying claims about God. But, at the same time, perhaps there is a kind of empirical evidence which in principle, were we to encounter it, would have this capability. Can we not *imagine* a state of our world so extreme that it would yield evidence of this sort? Consider, for example, the claim that God loves us. Keith Yandell offers this hypothetical case as one in which that claim would be empirically falsified:

- (a) Every sentient creature has, for every moment of his existence, been in such pain that were he to have felt more pain he would have lost consciousness.
- (b) This wretched condition is caused by biological features essential to the species.
- (c) Suicide is impossible and so is cessation of procreation, so that future generations will exist under the same conditions.
- (d) Insofar as intellectual life is possible under these circumstances, men rise above the level of imbecility only to record and roundly curse their plight

⁸In particular, the entire "divine hiddenness" approach to the problem of evil—as formulated, for example, in John Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993)—is dispatched at a stroke once we come to accept the possibility that God is a benign deceiver. If it is possible that God deceives benignly, then it is possible that God withholds truth benignly.

- (e) Insofar as moral life is possible under these circumstances, each man's deepest wish is to increase the sufferings of every other if this were possible.⁹

Say the facts were as described. Then the objection, "If God is like this then why is the world thus?" would be expressible thus: "If God loves us then why is the world as described in (a)–(e)?" Here is the corresponding response:

The world may be as described in (a)–(e) because of an unknown strategy of carrying out what is involved in God's loving us.

To serve as an adequate defense, the response need only express a possibility. Does it? My answer appeals to the ease with which a possibility may be established, and the even greater ease of establishing it when referenced to the abilities of an infinitely able being. The conditions (a)–(e) strike us as completely implausible strategies for advancing God's benevolent goals, but the incessant lesson of skeptical theism is that we are in no position to render final judgment on such matters. The fact that a strategy strikes us as unusable by God is imperfect evidence of unusability, no matter how strongly we are struck by its implausibility. The possibility remains.

Take any scheme of hypothesizing empirical conditions under which a claim about God might be in principle falsifiable. We can respond similarly to it. However inimical the conditions, the evidence they offer can always be trumped by appeal to human simplicity and cosmic complexity. If our cognitive abilities really do lag so far behind God's, if our ignorance of the afterlife really is so pronounced, if the cosmos really is so morally deep, and if the distribution of goods and evils really is so unrepresentative, then the possibility remains open that conditions as severe as (a)–(e), or even severer conditions than these, could arise as divinely chosen strategies in the service of divinely chosen goals. The arguments of skeptical theism make claims about God empirically unfalsifiable *in principle*.

At this point a critic might object thus: "Skeptical theism may show that claims about God cannot be refuted outright on the basis of empirical evidence. But does it not at least allow them to be shown improbable? After all, some of the possible strategies for advancing divine aims, such as the one supposedly at work in the suffering-intensive world just outlined, seem pretty unlikely. Say a piece of empirical evidence can be reconciled with God's existence *only* by appealing to an improbable strategy for advancing divine aims—that is, one which God would seem not likely to pick. In that case the evidence appears to tell us that God probably does not exist. Can we not at least then say that God's existence has been falsified in the sense of being shown improbable? In other words, has it not been shown at least *unreasonable* to believe that God exists? If so then it follows that U is not implied by skeptical theism."

⁹Keith Yandell, "Reply to Nielsen," *Sophia* 3 (1968), p. 18. This passage is cited in James F. Sennett, "Theism and Other Minds: On the Falsifiability of Non-theories," *Topoi* 14 (1995), p. 155.

A notable property of this response is its presumption that we have insight into what strategies God would be unlikely to pick. One must ask whether we can actually rely on having this insight. The skeptical theist, at least, is in no position to argue that we do. Questioning the probability of any proposed divine strategy amounts to asking this:

If God is like this then why would he choose such a strategy?

"This" refers to whatever it is about God that would seem to make the choice improbable. The arguments of skeptical theists lend credence to this response:

God may choose such a strategy because of an unknown higher-level strategy for picking lower-level ones to advance his aims.

And so they lend credence to this response, which follows the pattern of the above formulations:

God may choose such a strategy because of an unknown higher-level strategy for picking lower-level ones to carry out what is involved in his being like this.

The inscrutability of God, so far as skeptical theists lead us to understand, does not just apply selectively to his strategies for advancing his goals, but to all other workings of the divine intelligence, including possible reasons for picking certain goal-advancing strategies, and not others, in the first place. But if we do not reliably grasp how God may arrive at his strategies for advancing his goals, how can we tell that a proposed strategy is not one he would probably pick? For all we know there is some particular higher-level strategy that determines God's choice of lower-level strategies; and for all we know, if the higher-level one were familiar to us, the lower-level one it helped pick would not seem improbable at all. We simply do not grasp enough about God to know what sorts of lower-level strategies he is disposed to pick. So we do not know enough to say that one such strategy is a more improbable object of divine preference than another.

Skeptical theists want to claim: "But we do know enough to judge the improbability of the above strategy." Let us then set that affirmation beside the affirmation characteristic of an empirical argument from evil:

(1) God would probably not employ that evil to advance his goals.

(2) God would probably not employ that strategy to advance his goals.

The non-theist cites an evil and invokes (1). Skeptical theists respond by blocking use of (1). We do not know enough about God, they say, to know that (1) is true. But to defend against the problem posed by U, skeptical theists now say that we *do* know enough about God to know that (2) is true. The problem is that their arguments have only been directed to telling us how little we know about God, not how much. So they give us no confidence that we actually

do know claims like (2). Quite the contrary. The arguments from human simplicity and cosmic complexity give ample reason to believe that claims like (2) are in the same boat as claims like (1), that both are subject to doubt, and that both are thereby blocked from use in philosophical exchange.

Skeptical theism invokes the inscrutability of divine purposes without suggesting limits on how inscrutable those purposes are, or constraints on how extensively that consideration is to be employed. That consideration is therefore left free to operate as a confounding factor against all use of empirical evidence to test claims about God. Any such evidence against a claim can be undercut by appealing to an unknown purpose:

The situation comprising both the claim and the supposedly falsifying evidence may hold because of an unknown purpose of God which is served by its holding.

Skeptical theism thus yields U. By its lights, empirical evidence fails to refute claims about God and fails to render them improbable. Unknown purposes can always be appealed to for explaining why a claim about God is neither shown false nor improbable by the empirical evidence that is presented as doing this. This discounting consideration is always available in discourse about God, and readily so, to strip the probative force from seemingly contrary empirical evidence.

Wykstra compares the cognitive distance between ourselves and God to the distance between a one-month-old infant and an adult. Keeping in mind the arguments from human simplicity and cosmic complexity, we see how modestly this comparison puts the point about distance. Perhaps our level of comprehension comes that close to God's, but for all we know it does not. It may be more like the cognitive distance between an insect and an adult. Indeed, skeptical theism leaves us with no assurance that the distance is not even more extreme. After all, God is omniscient. We are in this sense infinitely distant from him while an insect is only finitely distant from us. So for all we know we are infinitely less able to discern the God's purposes than an insect is to discern ours. Putting the same point in reverse, for all we know an insect is infinitely more able to discern our purposes than we are to discern God's.

This comparison exploits in full the point about ignorance that skeptical theists are pressing. With this point in mind, it should not come as a surprise that their views permit a discounting technique as liberal as the one employed above. With this discounting technique in mind, it should not come as a surprise that their views justify a position as uncompromising as U.

II

This analysis reveals the force of skeptical theism as a response to the empirical evidence of evil. Skeptical theists will invoke as much of the content of U as necessary to parry arguments based on such evidence. They generally may not need to invoke the whole content of U—i.e., U itself—and perhaps might not wish to, since accusations about the empirical unfalsifiability of their claims have bothered theists in the past. But nonetheless they *can* invoke U, in full or in part, as need arises.

And that imparts a certain kind of strength to their position. Claims about God are empirically unfalsifiable. So finding empirical evidence against such claims involves finding empirical evidence to falsify the empirically unfalsifiable. That is impossible. So the skeptical theist prevails against this kind of attack.

But at what cost? U offers an easy response to non-theists who put forward empirical evidence against theism. But in a more general sense it sits uncomfortably with theism. It is important to understand why this is so.

The problem is not, as Antony Flew is famous for suggesting, that the empirical unfalsifiability of claims about God would make them all meaningless.¹⁰ This line of criticism depends on an unduly limited conception of meaning, one which essentially rises and falls with logical positivism. It need not detain us here.

The problem is rather that U will license moves in arguments that strike most people as unreasonable. Skeptical theists may well acknowledge the wrongness of conclusions yielded by such arguments, but must nonetheless accept the reasonableness of arguments licensed by U. Of course skeptical theists may not themselves explicitly assert U. But they do deploy arguments that justify it. So they cannot be consistent in faulting those theists who appeal to U. This is the sense in which I say that they "must" accept the reasonableness of arguments licensed by U.

One argument licensed by U defends the claim that God created the planet earth less than 10,000 years ago.¹¹ This view has some biblical basis, but is opposed by a wealth of geological evidence which suggests that the earth is much older. U discounts that evidence, since, obviously, no empirical evidence will falsify the empirically unfalsifiable. Here is the objection:

If God made the world less than 10,000 years ago, why does the world contain geological evidence suggesting otherwise?

And so here is the response:

The world may contain geological evidence suggesting otherwise because of an unknown strategy of carrying out what was involved, less than 10,000 years ago, in creating the world.

We do not know what was involved, or what the unknown strategy was. But we can speculate. Perhaps God put a misleading fossil record in place to test the faith of those humans who, thousands of years later, would discover it and question the truth of parts of scripture. God could, of course, be a benign deceiver, and if so would be perfectly capable of proceeding in this way.

So U allows us to discount any and all empirical evidence against the claim that the planet earth is less than 10,000 years old. U therefore defends the claim that God created it within that period of time. Defending a claim

¹⁰Antony Flew, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM Press, 1955), pp. 96–99.

¹¹The following adapts an example from Bruce Russell; see his "Defenseless," in Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, pp. 196–197.

by discounting such a mass of credible empirical evidence will seem an irrational move to many. But skeptical theists must accept the rationality of defending the claim by these means. This is not to say that skeptical theists must accept the claim itself. They may well reject it.¹² But they must accept the rationality of this way of defending it.

On this model it is easy to defend extremely literal interpretations of religious texts. Say one champions a literal reading of Joshua 10: 12–13, in which the sun is depicted as having been caused by God to stand still in the sky for the duration of about a day. On the basis of the wording taken thus one may form the general belief that it is the sun that moves around the earth and not the other way around (since the anomaly of the event is characterized as the sun's standing still). What about all of the astronomical evidence which suggests otherwise? U allows us to discount this evidence. Again we can elaborate. The objection is this:

If God made the world in such a way that it is orbited by the sun, why is there so much astronomical evidence suggesting otherwise?

The response is this:

There may be so much astronomical evidence suggesting otherwise because of an unknown strategy involved in creating the world in such a way that it is orbited by the sun.

Perhaps, unlike the last case, we cannot even speculate on what this unknown strategy might be. No matter. For all we know God is a benign deceiver, and for all we know he has a perfectly good reason for engaging in this deception. So U again allows us to discount empirical evidence against a claim about God. Defending this claim by discounting the evidence against it will seem an irrational move to many. But skeptical theists must accept the rationality of the defense, even if they reject the claim itself.

On this model, indeed, parody arguments proliferate. Say one champions the claim that God wishes to maximize the number of pink elephants on the planet earth. But what, asks the objector, about the mass of contrary empirical evidence, since no such elephants have ever been observed? If God wishes to maximize the number of pink elephants, why is there so much evidence suggesting otherwise? The claimant discounts the evidence on the basis of U, elaborating as follows:

There may be so much evidence suggesting otherwise because of an unknown strategy involved in maximizing the number of pink elephants.

¹²In other words, I am not arguing that skeptical theists need to be skeptical about the current scientific account of the world's age. They may well accept that account. I am merely arguing that when another theist rejects that account, and defends the rejection by appealing to U, elaborating the argument as above, skeptical theists must regard this argument as a rational one. The argument I advance here is focussed on the rationality of arguments, not the rationality of conclusions, and so it is not subject to the critique of Russell's argument posed by Michael Bergmann in "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," pp. 289–291.

For all we know, the best way to maximize the long-term number of pink elephants may be for there to be none of them over a certain interval of time—and we are presently in that interval. Or for all we know there may be many pink elephants now alive, but through the benign deception of God we are failing to perceive them. Skeptical theists may well not accept that God wishes to maximize the number of pink elephants, but they must accept the rationality of defending the claim by these means.

"But there is a difference in the theses under consideration here," a critic might say. "We have more reason to think that God acts beneficently than to think he created the world less than 10,000 years ago and placed it in the orbit of the sun—and, in turn, more reason to think those claims true than to think he created pink elephants. Does not the differing level of independent rationality in these theses make a difference in how rational it is to discount empirical evidence against them?"¹³ Can the skeptical theist reason in this way to escape the above inferences?

We must understand the implications of attempting this response. It depends upon claims of this form:

- (1) We have more reason to think God would do x than y .

Now the skeptical theist elsewhere tells us that we should be skeptical about the particular version of this claim at work in empirical formulations of the problem of evil:

- (2) We have more reason to think God would prevent this evil than allow it.

Say we do have more reason to think God would prevent some cited evil. Even so, we are told, we can discount that fact as a consideration in debate. We can discount it because what we have more reason to think God would do is a feeble indicator of what God actually does. The considerations of human simplicity and cosmic complexity tell us why it is a feeble indicator. They tell us that *his* reasons for doing what he does do are far beyond the grasp of *our* reasons for thinking what he would do.

This is what the skeptical theist tells us about (2). But the same lessons apply more generally to (1), (2) simply being an instance of (1). We may have more reason to think that God would do x than y , but we can discount that as a consideration in debate about whether God actually would do y . What we may have more reason to think God would do simply loses its probative force in the face of this kind of skepticism.

But now the eccentric theist steps forward and claims that God has created a sub-10,000 year world orbited by the sun, with pink elephants. The skeptical theist demurs and says, "We have more reason to think that God would create the earth after the fashion described by our best science than otherwise." But in this response we see a reversal. The skeptical theist is now attaching probative force—having just denied it—to what we have more reason to think God would do. This facilitates attaching probative force to claims like (1) generally and accordingly facilitates attaching it

¹³This objection was raised by Thomas Flint.

to (2), since (2) is an instance of (1). The defense against the eccentric theist thus compromises the defense against the non-theist. So in these exchanges, how does the skeptical theist hold both the eccentric theist and the non-theist at bay? Doing so requires knowing enough about God's reasons to make it possible to refute the eccentric theist, but not so much as would make it impossible to refute the non-theist. It requires an exacting middle ground between excess and deficiency of knowledge. If this position is even achievable it will require internal refinements to the content of skeptical theism not so far provided by those who sponsor the view.

What *has* been provided is a position only calibrated to the needs of joining issue with the non-theist. To this end the arguments justify a strong skeptical position:

- (3) God may possibly not do what we have good reason to believe he does.

This implies that we should not expect to diagnose what God does. But it also implies that we should not be surprised if our diagnosis turns out *quite opposite* to what he does. God may have reasons to do things which defy our best understanding of what things he may have reasons to do. So consider three possible situations corresponding to (3):

- (4) God occasionally does not do what we have good reason to believe he does.
- (5) God often does not do what we have good reason to believe he does.
- (6) God almost always does not do what we have good reason to believe he does.

These situations are formulated at increasing levels of severity. Which level is the one that represents God's actual level of inscrutability? Skeptical theists want to be skeptical but perhaps not too skeptical. So they might prefer a formulation at the (4)-end of the spectrum. But the sorts of argument that tell us (3) is true also tell us that we can never know which of (4), (5) or (6) is true. They will certainly leave (6) in play as a plausible alternative. Those skeptical theists who reject a claim like (6) outright are accordingly guided by belief patterns which are extraneous to their position. They are not guided by anything in the arguments by which they fortify their view. As formulated to date, skeptical theism warrants minimal bounds on its own skeptical pronouncements. By its lights, for all we know, God *does* almost always have reasons to do things which defy our best understanding of what things he may have reasons to do, and for all we know *did* create a sub-10,000 year world orbited by the sun, with pink elephants, our wealth of empirical evidence against these claims notwithstanding.

The lesson is that once we allow ourselves a strong discounting strategy in defending one claim about God we open the door to its use in defending

other claims about him too. If this seems an unacceptable result—well, that is why the use of strong discounting strategies is often a two-edged tactic of debate.

III

Skeptical theists can, of course just *accept* the above schemes of reasoning as being rational. For that matter, they can accept U. They can decide to consider the above considerations unthreatening to their position. The question is then whether that decision makes sense, and I claim it does not. Skeptical theism is part of the debate over whether it is rational to be a theist given the evidence of evil. Theists engage in this debate as part of a more general program of defending the rationality of religious faith, and skeptical theism realizes its objectives only insofar as it contributes to this more general program. But once it accepts the above schemes of reasoning as rational it makes no contribution at all. Far from it. If defending theism against the empirical evidence of evil leads to accepting the above schemes of reasoning as rational, then theism comes off looking less rational than it did before the defense. If theism's standard of rationality is the standard at work in those schemes of reasoning, then one might as well spare the effort of dispute and simply pronounce belief in God to be irrational.

What is the skeptical theist's alternative to conceding a self-defeating conception of rationality? The alternative is to refine the arguments informing skeptical theism so that they no longer justify U. They need to be strong enough to discount any and all empirical evidence brought forward by the opposing side in the problem of evil debate. But they need to be weak enough that they not discount any and all empirical evidence *tout court*. Arguments for skeptical theism need to license a certain level of discounting, and yet they need to be constrained not to license too much. But this latter requirement is not addressed in existing formulations of such arguments. Nor is it obvious that it can be addressed, since it appears to demand a position that would be impossibly nuanced.¹⁴

Acadia University

¹⁴Thanks to Thomas Flint and an anonymous referee for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.