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Skeptical Theism and Moral Skepticism

A Reply to Almeida and Oppy

Abstract

Skeptical theists purport to undermine evidential arguments from evil by appealing to the fact that our knowledge of goods, evils, and their interconnections is significantly limited. Michael J. Almeida and Graham Oppy have recently argued that skeptical theism is unacceptable because it results in a form of moral skepticism which rejects inferences that play an important role in our ordinary moral reasoning. In this reply to Almeida and Oppy's argument we offer some reasons for thinking that skeptical theism need not lead to any such objectionable form of moral skepticism.

1 Introduction

[1] Evidential arguments from evil such as those developed by William Rowe, Paul Draper, and Bruce Russell aim to show that the existence of evil – particularly instances of horrendous evil – significantly lower the probability of theism's being true.¹ A crucial move in such arguments is the inductive step from 'No goods we know of morally justify God's permission of evil' to 'It is therefore likely that no goods at all morally justify God's permission of evil'. Following common practice, call this *The Noseeum Inference* (we no see 'um [the goods in question], so they ain't there!). This inference is, in turn, undergirded by the following assumption:

If there are goods justifying God's permission of evil, it is likely that we would discern or be cognizant of such goods.

[2] Call this *The Noseeum Assumption*, or NA for short. A familiar response to evidential arguments from evil, one having a distinguished lineage in theistic religious traditions, is to reject NA by casting doubt on our ability to comprehend God's reasons for permitting evil. This view, which has come to be known as 'skeptical theism', has been developed in various ways. But in the hands of theists such as Michael Bergmann and Daniel Howard-Snyder, it has come to represent the view that we should be *in doubt* about the truth of NA.² According to this

1. See William Rowe, 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,' *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335–41, 'Ruminations about Evil,' *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 69–88, and 'The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look,' in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1996), pp.262–85; Paul Draper, 'Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists,' *Noûs* 23 (1989): 331–50; and Bruce Russell, 'The Persistent Problem of Evil,' *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 121–39.

2. See Michael Bergmann and Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'Grounds for Belief in God Aside, Does Evil Make Atheism More Reasonable than Theism?' in William Rowe (ed.), *God and the Problem of Evil* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), pp.140–55.

line of thought, an awareness of our cognitive limitations, particularly when compared to the vastness and complexity of reality as well as the infinite wisdom of God, should incline us to be in doubt about whether we would see a reason that would justify God in permitting evil if such reason there be. On this view, our epistemic situation is such that we cannot with any degree of confidence assign any probability (whether it be low, middling, or high) to the proposition expressed by NA. But in that case it is no more reasonable to affirm NA than to refrain from affirming NA, thus undercutting any warrant attaching to The Noseum Inference and, by extension, to evidential arguments from evil.

2 The Almeida/Oppy Critique of Skeptical Theism

[3] Perhaps the most common criticism that has been made of skeptical theism is that its skepticism runs too deep. The objection, more precisely, is that skepticism about NA leads to excessive and unreasonable skepticism in other areas. This line of thought has recently been defended by Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy, who present skeptical theism as being committed to an objectionable form of moral skepticism.³ Their argument may be summarised as follows:

[4] Suppose we concede to the skeptical theist that, in the light of our cognitive limitations, it is not unlikely that there are goods beyond our ken which justify God in not preventing E, where 'E' represents the suffering and death of a fawn trapped in a forest fire. Suppose also there is a witness to E (following received tradition, call him 'Stan') who could intervene to stop E at no personal cost, but fails to do so. What was previously conceded is that it is not unlikely that there is some good which, if we were smarter and better equipped, we could recognise as a morally sufficient reason for God not intervening to stop E. But then – by parity of reason – we must also concede that, in the light of our cognitive limitations, it is not unlikely that there is some good which, if we were smarter and better equipped, we could recognise as a reason for Stan's failure to intervene to stop E. Put differently, if it is not unlikely that there are unknown goods that would be foregone if God were to prevent E, it is also not unlikely that there are unknown goods that would be foregone if Stan were to prevent E. In that case, however, we cannot claim that it is best, all things considered, that Stan intervene to prevent E. Indeed, we are in no position to criticise Stan whatever he decides to do, even if he decides to turn a blind eye to E. But surely it is implausible to think of Stan's failure to intervene as being morally permissible. Thus, skeptical theism, insofar as it leads to the unpalatable view that we cannot judge Stan's inaction to be wrong, ought to be rejected.⁴

[5] The central claim here may be expressed in conditional form: If considerations about our cognitive limitations provide compelling grounds for thinking it not unlikely that there are unknown goods secured by God's failure to prevent E, then the same considerations would provide compelling grounds for thinking

3. Michael J. Almeida and Graham Oppy, 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 496–516.

4. Almeida and Oppy, 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil,' pp.505–506.

that it is not unlikely that there are unknown goods secured by Stan's failure to prevent E. (This, however, need not involve any commitment to the claim that the unknown goods are the same in the divine and human cases.)

[6] But even if the aforementioned conditional statement were true, why should that lead us to think (contrary to our ordinary moral practice) that it is morally wrong for Stan to intervene? In other words, why hold that our ordinary moral practice is undermined by the refusal to assign any probability value to statements such as, "There are unknown goods secured by Stan's failure to prevent E"? To help us see why the skeptical theist's refusal to make any positive judgments about likelihoods puts her in the invidious position of being unable to make any rational moral decisions whatsoever, Almeida and Oppy have us consider the structure of ordinary moral reasoning. Suppose, for example, that Stan decided to intervene to prevent the fawn from suffering horribly. His decision would presumably reflect a pattern of reasoning that runs something like this:

[7] (1) There is a *pro tanto* reason for me to intervene to prevent evil E. (Premise)

[8] (2) I have found no *pro tanto* reason for me not to intervene to prevent E. (Premise)

[9] (3) (Therefore) There is no *pro tanto* reason for me not to intervene to prevent E. (From 2)

[10] (4) (Therefore) I have an all-things-considered reason to intervene to prevent E. (From 1, 3)

[11] The point here is that the move from *pro tanto* reasons to all-things-considered reasons always relies on a noseum inference of the same kind that appears in evidential arguments from evil. The skeptical theist, however, rejects the noseum inference not only as it occurs in evidential arguments, but also in the above reconstruction of our moral reasoning. The skeptical theist, in other words, claims that, even though we can find no reason for not intervening, there may well be some reason beyond our ken for not intervening, and so the noseum inference from (2) to (3) will not be warranted. If that is the case, however, we will always be devoid of all-things-considered reasons when deliberating what to do – we will always be 'out of our depth'. Our ability to engage in ordinary forms of moral reasoning would therefore be undermined.⁵

3 Where Almeida/Oppy Go Wrong

[12] Although this poses a considerable challenge to skeptical theism, we believe that this challenge can be met. But before showing how this may be done, it may be helpful to recast Almeida and Oppy's argument along the following lines:

[13] The skeptical theist position runs as follows:

[14] (5) Our knowledge of goods and evils, as well as the interconnections between them, is very limited.

5. Almeida and Oppy, 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil,' pp.507, 512.

[15] (6) (Therefore) For all we know, there are goods beyond our ken G which justify God in permitting E.⁶

[16] (7) (Therefore) For all we know, if God had prevented E, G would be lost.

[17] But if (5) is accepted, a parallel argument can be developed along the following lines:

[18] (5) Our knowledge of goods and evils, as well as the interconnections between them, is very limited.

[19] (8) (Therefore) For all we know, there are goods beyond our ken G which justify *us* in permitting E.

[20] (9) (Therefore) For all we know, if *we* had prevented E, G would be lost.

[21] The skeptical theist, then, is faced with the following challenge:

[22] How can your grounds for accepting (7) not be used as grounds for accepting (9)? In other words, can it be shown that one who accepts the argument encapsulated in (5)–(7) need not be committed to the parallel argument summarised in (5), (8) and (9)?

[23] To avoid the descent into moral skepticism, perhaps the most promising strategy available to the skeptical theist is to moderate her skepticism. In particular, skeptical theism need not be construed (although it often is construed) as the sweeping thesis that our knowledge with respect to the realm of value (e.g., our grasp of the range of goods and evils, and the interconnections between them) is severely limited. Instead, the skeptical theist need only hold that it is *God's* purposes or intentions that often elude us. That is to say, our knowledge or understanding of *God-justifying goods* falls miserably short, even though our grasp of *goods in general* is quite adequate. But then the conclusion Almeida and Oppy wish to draw from skeptical theism does not follow. To see this, consider the following reconstruction of their argument in relation to the moderate version of skeptical theism we have just outlined:

[24] (10) Our knowledge of God's purposes is very limited.

[25] From this, it can be inferred that

[26] (6) For all we know, there are goods beyond our ken G which justify *God* in permitting E.

[27] But, clearly, it does not follow from (10) that

[28] (8) For all we know, there are goods beyond our ken G which justify *us* in permitting E.

6. The operator 'For all we know' is to be understood along the lines of 'It is epistemically possible that...' or 'We can assign no probability to the claim that...'. Although it may be questioned whether (6), thus understood, can be inferred from (5), here we are not concerned with this aspect of the skeptical theist case.

[29] The inference from (10) to (8) will be warranted if we presuppose a broad form of skeptical theism like that expressed by (5). Skeptical theists, however, need not make any such presuppositions.⁷

[30] According to our diagnosis, then, the problem with the Almeida/Oppy critique is that it is based on the following assumption:

If considerations about our cognitive limitations provide us with grounds to think that, for all we know, there are unknown goods justifying God's permission of E, then such considerations will also constitute grounds for thinking that, for all we know, there are unknown goods justifying our permission of E.

[31] But this assumption is false. To see this, suppose that the relevant considerations about our cognitive limitations are narrow in scope, so that they only concern our epistemic access to God-justifying goods (as in (10)). As we have just indicated, the above assumption, when read in this way, clearly ought to be rejected.

[32] The Almeida/Oppy critique, however, targets only that form of skeptical theism that is based on considerations about our access to goods and evils in general. Almeida and Oppy, therefore, are committed to the above assumption only if the relevant considerations about our cognitive limitations are given a broad scope, so that they relate to our epistemic access to goods and evils in general (as in (5)). But even if the above assumption, construed in this way, were acceptable, it would merely show that Almeida and Oppy have singled out for criticism a broad variety of skeptical theism while neglecting other and perhaps more robust forms of skeptical theism. In any case, the above assumption is not acceptable even when construed in the way suggested by Almeida and Oppy. At least two lines of thought indicate that this is so.

[33] (I) There cannot, as a matter of principle, be any unknown goods justifying our actions (or omissions). For it is necessarily true that if some good is not known by us, then it cannot play any role in the moral justification of our behaviour. Assume, for example, that there is some good that would morally justify you in breaking into your neighbour's house – let's say that your neighbour has just suffered a heart attack and if you break into his house you may prevent him from dying. The good in question may be described as '(Having a reasonable chance of) saving your neighbour's life'. Assume further that you have no epistemic access to this good, for you do not know that there is a good reason for breaking into your neighbour's house. Since this good is not known to you, you cannot recognise it

7. Interestingly, if we turn to the historical development of skeptical theism as a response to Rowe's evidential arguments from evil, we find that initially only a moderate form of skeptical theism was advocated – see, in particular, Stephen Wykstra, 'The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of "Appearance",' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 88. Later, however, skeptical theism was buttressed with a generalised skepticism, involving a skeptical outlook on our cognitive powers in such areas as modality and axiology – see, for example, William Alston, 'The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,' *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 59–60, and Michael Bergmann, 'Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil,' *Noûs* 35 (2001): 279.

and endorse it as a reason for breaking into your neighbour's house. But you are morally justified in doing A for reason R only if R is a reason you endorse as a morally good reason for doing A. Therefore, the good of saving your neighbour's life, by dint of being unknown to you, cannot morally justify you in breaking into your neighbour's house – indeed, it cannot provide moral justification for anything you do. More generally, any goods lying beyond our ken are incapable of justifying (in a moral sense) our behaviour.⁸

[34] (II) Richard Swinburne has stated that, 'God as the author of our being would have rights over us which we do not have over our fellow men'.⁹ Parents, for example, have certain rights over their children which strangers do not (e.g., the right to insist that their children go to bed early), and these rights arise from the parents being (to some extent) the source of their children's existence as well as their role as benefactor and provider for their children. Similarly, God – in virtue of his role as our creator and benefactor – may have the right to allow us to endure abuse and murder, whereas we do not have those sorts of rights over each other.

[35] Almeida and Oppy are not unaware of this line of thought, but they note that 'the fact that there are differences between us and a perfect being with respect to goods of which we have knowledge is completely beside the point'.¹⁰ For according to Almeida and Oppy, the kinds of considerations that lead skeptical theists to think it not unlikely that unknown goods are secured by a perfect being's failure to prevent E must also lead us to think it not unlikely that unknown goods

8. Similar points have been made by Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'The Argument from Inscrutable Evil,' in Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, pp.292–93, and William Alston, 'Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil,' in Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, p.321. The claim that unknown goods could not play a role in morally justifying our behavior may be contested along the following lines: Suppose someone whom I justifiably take to be authoritative assures me that a great countervailing good, otherwise unobtainable, will result if I break into my neighbor's house. Could I not then be morally justified in breaking into my neighbor's property even though I do not know what the resultant good is? But in these sorts of cases it is not the good(s) produced by my behavior that renders that behavior morally justified. Rather, it is my relying, in an epistemically justified way, on the authority of some person that renders my behavior morally justified. It may also be objected that, even if unknown goods cannot justify one's behaviour, recognition of one's ignorance concerning the likelihood of there being unknown goods can provide the requisite justification – and it is recognition of this sort that is commended by skeptical theists. The idea here is that, if you are deliberating about whether to do A and if you are aware that (a) there may well be some goods beyond our ken that would be secured by doing A, and (b) we cannot – due to our cognitive limitations – make any judgments as to how likely it is that there are unknown goods served by doing A, then you cannot make an all-things-considered judgment as to whether you ought to do A. But given that you are unable to make such an all-things-considered judgment, you are entirely within your rights in choosing to do A – indeed, no one is in a position to criticise any choice you make in these circumstances. We concede that this may be an effective criticism of consideration (I), but only if skeptical theism is given the kind of broad construal mentioned above.

9. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p.217. See also Swinburne's 'The Problem of Evil,' in Stuart C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), p.92, and *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p.224.

10. Almeida and Oppy, 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil,' p.509.

are secured by our failure to prevent E – irrespective of any differences there may be between a perfect being and a human being in virtue of their disparate roles.

[36] However, this is far from obvious. If, as Swinburne has suggested, God may have rights over us that we do not have over each other, then there will be situations where we have good reason to think that (a) God may be morally justified – in virtue of occupying role R – in permitting evil E, but (b) we cannot be morally justified – in virtue of not occupying role R – in permitting E. In other words, there are evils such that no person S can be morally justified in permitting them unless S occupies role R (the evils in question will most likely be particularly bad ones such as rape and murder). So, even if – for all we know – there are morally good reasons beyond our ken for permitting, say, rape, such reasons cannot justify us in permitting rape since we do not occupy the requisite role (i.e., the role of benevolent creator and sustainer of the universe). But then Almeida and Oppy are wrong in claiming that the kinds of considerations offered by skeptical theists as grounds for thinking that there is some unknown good justifying God's permission of E would also constitute grounds for thinking that there is some unknown good justifying our permission of E. For what this claim overlooks is that one must occupy the right kind of role before any goods – known or unknown – can provide any moral justification to one's behavior.¹¹

[37] We conclude therefore that Almeida and Oppy's attempt to implicate the skeptical theist in moral skepticism should itself be viewed with a measure of skepticism.¹²

11. Perhaps situations such as the following might be thought to be counterexamples to the claim made in the main text: Suppose that God told you that he wanted a certain rape to go ahead in order to secure some great good. But then your permitting this rape would be the right thing to do, despite the fact that you do not occupy the requisite role of creator, sustainer, etc. It would be a strange God indeed who counseled you to act in such a way. Be that as it may, the problem identified here can be resolved by specifying the relevant roles in a broad enough way. The claim would then be that there are evils such that no person S can be morally justified in permitting them unless S occupies role R, where R includes not only such items as 'creator of heaven and earth', but also 'recipient and executor of the commandments of God' (saints are often thought of as fulfilling the latter role).

12. Thanks are due to Graham Oppy for many helpful discussions and comments on issues relevant to the present paper.