

The Skepticism of Skeptical Theism

Edward Wierenga*

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Abstract

Skeptical theism is a type of reply to arguments from evil against God's existence. The skeptical theist declines to accept a premise of some such argument, professing ignorance, for example, about whether God is justified in permitting certain evils or about the conditional probability that the world contains as much evil as it does, or evils of a particular sort, on the hypothesis that God exists. Skeptical theists are thus not supposed to be skeptical *about* theism; rather, they are theists who are skeptical about something else. But that raises the question of exactly what else. In particular, does skepticism with respect to some claims about God and evil lead to a more pervasive skepticism? More precisely, is skeptical theism committed to additional skepticism about God? Is skeptical theism committed to global skepticism, including skepticism about ordinary, commonplace beliefs? Or is skeptical theism at the very least committed to a broader skepticism about matters of morality? This paper takes up these questions.



Keywords

Skeptical theism, evil, the problem of evil, Rowe.

* Ph.D. in Philosophy, Professor of Religion and of Philosophy Emeritus, University of Rochester, NY, USA, Email: edward. | wierenga@rochester.edu

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1. Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil

Skeptical theism is a type of reply to arguments from evil against God's existence. In a standard form, it consists in professing ignorance of, or skepticism about, God's reasons for permitting evil. There are different variants of the argument from evil, however, and skeptical theism has figured more prominently as a reply to some, rather than others. Throughout much of philosophical history, the primary form of the argument has been the *logical* problem of evil. This is the version David Hume (1947) had in mind when he had his character Philo say,

Epicurus' old questions are yet unanswered. Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?

And it culminated in the last century with J. L. Mackie's (1955) contention that

...It can be shown, not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another...

In its simplest form, the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false.

The logical problem of evil is thus the contention that the existence of evil and the existence of God are logically incompatible.

Alvin Plantinga's influential developments of the Free Will Defense (1967, 1974, and 1977) have persuaded many philosophers that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect God is consistent with, or logically compatible with, the existence of evil. Although he gave an early statement of skeptical theism, his use of it as a reply to the logical problem of evil is more subtle. The statement occurs in an often-quoted passage in Plantinga (1977, p. 10):

Why suppose that if God *does* have a good reason for permitting evil, the theist would be the first to know? Perhaps God has a good reason, but that reason is too complicated for us to understand. Or perhaps he has not revealed it for some other reason.¹

Plantinga's actual development of the Free Will Defense, however, makes

1. Compare a parallel passage in Plantinga (2000, p. 467), where the target is the evidential argument from evil.

no explicit appeal to skeptical theism. Nevertheless, there are some suggestions of it. In the first place, the very project hints, at least, at skeptical theism. Plantinga is careful to distinguish a *defense* against evil from a *theodicy*. The former is the logical task of showing that God's existence is *compatible with* the existence of evil. The latter is the project of doing this by saying "what God's reason for permitting evil *really is*" (1977, p. 28). Now Plantinga's announced reason for presenting a defense rather than a theodicy is that a defense is all that is required to meet the objection that God's existence is incompatible with the existence of evil. But his acknowledgment that: "a theodicy would be much more satisfying, if possible to achieve," *suggests* that it might well be beyond our capacities to achieve. Secondly, there are intimations of skepticism in Plantinga's consideration of what worlds God was able to actualize. For example, he asks whether "it was within God's power to create a world that contained a better mixture of moral good and evil than [the actual world]—one, let's say, that contained as much moral good but less moral evil?" He adds, "The answer is not obvious at all. Possibly this was *not* within God's power..." (1977, p. 55). Again, this is just the hint of a suggestion (or perhaps an intimation of a hint of a suggestion). But I conjecture that Plantinga's view (at that time) was that we simply *do not know* which worlds God was able to create or actualize. And thus there was a version of skeptical theism at play in this response to the logical problem of evil.

I mentioned above that philosophers have tended to concede that the logical problem of evil is a failure—the Free Will Defense shows that the existence of God and the existence of evil are logically consistent. But that has led to formulations of the argument from evil as an evidential or inductive or probabilistic objection. The core idea here is the claim that, although the existence of evil is compatible with God's existence, the presence of evil provides good evidence against God's existence, or the presence of evil shows that God's existence is unlikely. It is in response to arguments of this form that skeptical theism has become widely endorsed.

An especially influential version of this objection was introduced by William Rowe. He presented and defended the following argument (Rowe, 1979, p. 336):

- (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 omniscient, 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. (1) (2)

Rowe's essay is often reprinted under the title, "The Inductive Argument from Evil,"¹ and William Alston calls it that while criticizing it (Alston, 1991), but in fact, the argument displayed above is not supposed to be inductive. Rowe claims that it is *valid*, which is a property of *deductive* arguments.² Since Rowe thinks that (2) is a conceptual truth, and he expects theists to accept it, if there is any inductive reasoning here, it is in support of the first premise, (1).³

It is this first premise about which the skeptical theist expresses doubt. Human beings are simply not in a position to be able to tell whether some instance of suffering could have been prevented by an omniscient, omnipotent being without thereby losing a greater good or permitting an equally bad or worse evil.⁴

Rowe apparently hoped to find inductive support for the existential claim (1) makes by way of a particular case. He tells a story of a fawn trapped in a forest fire ignited by a lightning strike. No one is aware of the fawn, then or later, as it "lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering" (1988, p. 337). The fawn's suffering is an evil, according to Rowe, that an omnipotent, omniscient being could easily have prevented. It is, moreover, "apparently pointless". That is, it is not required for some greater good nor would its prevention result in the occurrence of some equally bad or worse evil. That is,

(4) The suffering of the fawn is an intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

1. See, for example, Pojman & Rea (2015, pp. 264-271).

2. Rowe (1979, p. 336). An argument is valid just in case it is not possible for its premises to be true and the conclusion false. In fact, this argument is not *formally* valid, by which I mean that it is not valid due to its logical form. However, straightening this out goes beyond the scope of this paper. There are the questions of whether to translate the subjunctive in (2) to express an indicative conditional and of how best to quantify over instances, as in (1), or occurrences, as in (2), which if they are prevented do not occur. It will be simpler just to stipulate an additional premise:

(2.5) If (1) and (2), then (3),

But I won't bother to make this explicit.

3. In (1991, p. 70), Rowe claims that (2) has the "appearance of being a necessary truth". I think he is mistaken about that but since my aim is to set forth skeptical theism, I will not pursue the point here. For some reasons to be skeptical about (2), see William P. Alston (1991, pp. 33-35).

4. Stephen Wykstra was among the first to develop the skeptical theist response to Rowe's argument. See especially his (1984). For a useful collection of more recent work on this topic, see Dougherty and McBrayer (2014).

Now (1) follows deductively from (4) by existential generalization; so we still do not have any inductive reasoning. Moreover, the skeptical theist who professes ignorance of (1) can be expected to profess ignorance of (4), as well. Rowe does not claim to have *proven* (1) from (4), admitting that he does not *know* that (4) is true. Rather, his claim is that it is reasonable to believe (4)—despite the fact that he concedes that there might be some good of which we are aware but which is such that we do not realize that it is connected to the fawn’s suffering in a way that requires that suffering, and he concedes that there might also be some unfamiliar good, one of which we are completely unaware, that is similarly linked to the fawn’s suffering. Rowe nevertheless insists that it is *reasonable* for us to hold that there is no greater good or prevented evil that justifies the fawn’s suffering.¹ The skeptical theist will, of course, continue to demur; claiming that our inability to discern what connections to possible goods and evils the fawn’s suffering has, prevents it from being reasonable for us to believe that the connections that would justify God in permitting it are absent. So the skeptical theist will hold that the example of the fawn’s suffering is not compelling.

Rowe has another strategy for attempting to support (1). It is to concede that even if this example is not compelling, there are other examples like it that are. He writes (1979, pp. 337-338),

It seems quite unlikely that *all* the instances of intense suffering occurring daily in our world are intimately related to the occurrence of greater goods or the prevention of evils at least as bad; and even more unlikely should they somehow all be so related, [that] an omnipotent, omniscient being could not have achieved at least some of those goods... without permitting the instances of intense suffering that are supposedly related to them.²

Here the skeptical theist can deny that it is as unlikely as Rowe claims that all instances of intense suffering are connected to a greater good or

1. In his (1991) Rowe supplements the example of the fawn with an actual example of a little girl who was brutally raped, beaten, and murdered by her mother’s boyfriend. I will continue to state the objection by reference to the suffering of the fawn, although the rape and murder example is more horrific and thus potentially more useful to Rowe’s argument. In any event, we should not let our use of a fanciful illustration lull us into a complacency about the depth and extent of evil. This second example was introduced into the literature by Bruce Russell in his (1989).

2. William Hasker (2004, pp. 50-51) seems to endorse a version of this position. He writes, “To be sure, when we consider the evils singly we may be willing to admit that we could be in error regarding some event as a “genuine evil”... After all, the causal relations between events in the world are deep and complex and are often obscure to us. But that *all* of the events that strike us as “genuine evils” ... are ultimately *not* genuine evils, but rather such that their being permitted contributes to a greater good – that this is so is difficult (though perhaps not absolutely impossible) for us to believe.”

prevented evils. At any rate, the skeptical theist will profess ignorance as to just what the likelihood of that is. Indeed, it seems that a skeptical theist need not add extra skeptical considerations. Rather, he or she will say the situation is like this: The example of the fawn's suffering is unconvincing. No doubt there are many additional examples of intense suffering. But if they really are similar to the example of the fawn, they will be unconvincing, too. Finding additional examples that are unconvincing does not make it any more plausible that (1) is true.¹

Rowe has subsequently defended different versions of the evidential argument from evil, to which the skeptical theist must give a slightly different response. One of these arguments begins with the claim

(P) No good we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting E1 and E2

(Where E1 is the evil of the fawn's intense suffering and E2 is the evil of an actual case of rape and murder²) from which Rowe infers, inductively,

(Q) No good at all justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting E1 and E2

From this latter, Rowe deduces

(Not-G) There is no omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being.³

The crucial claim for Rowe is the contention that (P) makes (Q) probable. It is clear what the skeptical theist will say in response, namely, that the fact that our epistemic capacities do not permit us to discern a justifying good (or prevented evil) related in the right way to E1 or E2 is no evidence at all that there is no such good (or prevented evil). Given our epistemic limitations, our failure to discern a good linked in the right way to these evils makes it no more likely that there is none than that there is.⁴

1. The skeptical theist does not claim that the *likelihood* that the suffering of the fawn is connected to the promotion of a greater good or the prevention of a greater evil in a way that permits it is very low, and similarly for any of the additional examples of intense suffering. That would leave it open that among a large collection of independent examples one of them is not connected to a greater good or prevented evil that justifies it. Rather, the skeptical theist claims about each such case that the likelihood is unknown, not that it is very low.

2. See note 6.

3. Rowe (1991). See also his (1988). I have used the formulations of (P) and (Q) and the structure of the argument as Rowe summarizes his earlier position in (1996). In fact, in (1991) Rowe uses (Q) to deduce (1) and then uses the original argument. And in (1996) Rowe gives yet another version of the argument, moving directly from (P) to (not-G). I will ignore this last version, as the response of the skeptical theist will, I believe, be the same.

4. See, for example, Howard-Snyder (1996) Alston (1996).

Having set out several versions of the evidential or probabilistic argument from evil¹ and identified the skeptical theist's response to these arguments, I turn in the remainder of this paper to ask whether the skeptical theist is committed to unacceptably skeptical consequences.

2. Skeptical Theism and Theological Skepticism

The skeptical theist professes cognitive limitations that result in an incapacity to discern God's reasons for permitting evil. It is natural to wonder whether those epistemic limitations lead to further agnosticism about God's nature or his actions, to a skepticism more generally about traditional theological assumptions. On the one hand, this might be a consequence that is acceptable to theists. Christians, for example, are accustomed to the idea that "now we see through a glass, darkly" (I Cor. 13:12 KJV), which John Calvin (1969, I, p. 565) takes to indicate "what a tiny portion of that truly divine wisdom is given us in the present life." Calvin adds, anticipating the cognitive limitations endorsed by skeptical theism, that the author of I Corinthians "implies that the immeasurable cannot be comprehended by our inadequate measure and with our narrow capacities." More recently, in a somewhat more devotional context, the theologian Miroslav Volf (2006, p. 22) has written:

... Our images of God are rather different from God's reality. We are finite beings, and God is infinitely greater than any thoughts we can contain about divine reality in our wondrous but tiny minds. We are sinful beings, and God is different from what we conceive in our selfishness and pride. Finite and self-centered as we are, we often forget God's warning through the prophet Isaiah: "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:9). When we forget that, we unwittingly reduce God's way to our ways and God's thought to our thoughts. Our hearts become factories of idols in which we fashion and refashion God to fit our needs and desires.

1. I have not mentioned variations on the argument that are explicitly probabilistic. In his (1996) Rowe develops the argument in Bayesian terms. And Draper (1989) argues that the probability that pleasures and pains are distributed in the way they actually are, is much higher on the hypothesis that no supernatural being is responsible for the condition of sentient beings than it is on the hypothesis that God exists. Accordingly, the actual distribution of pleasure and pain is better explained by the "hypothesis of indifference" than it is by the existence of God. Skeptical responses to these versions of the argument will add a skepticism about some of the relevant probabilities. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss that.

So there is a strand in Christian thought, at least, which emphasizes our cognitive inadequacy for understanding God. But that should not provide a license for complete theological skepticism. It would not square with claiming to “know that my redeemer lives” (Job. 19:25), or with (sincerely) reciting the creeds or professing the faith. In short, if skeptical theism leads to utter theological skepticism, it is hard to see what makes it a form of theism rather than agnosticism. So the skeptical theist will want to block the slide to theological skepticism. I think that can be done, but I will defer until the next section to specify how.

3. Skeptical Theism and Global Skepticism

Some critics of skeptical theism have alleged that it leads to global or radical skepticism.¹ Bruce Russell (1996, p. 196) gives an example that could be turned into such an objection. He considers the hypothesis that God created the universe a mere 100 years ago, complete with written and geological records of a much longer past, and he imagines a person who holds that, “for all we know, there are ... reasons beyond our ken which would justify God in deceiving us about creating the universe 100 years ago.”² If the skeptical theist holds that there may be reasons beyond our ken that justify God in permitting various evils, should not the skeptical theist concede that there may be similar reasons beyond our ken that justify God in deceiving us about the age of the earth? In that case, if the reasonable response in the first instance is withholding the proposition 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, the reasonable response in this case is to withhold belief in the proposition that the world is more than 100 years old. So the skeptical theist should also be a skeptic about the age of the earth. And similar examples could be constructed for a broad range of similar empirical propositions.

The skeptical theist has a plausible rejoinder to this objection. To see it, we need to notice a disanalogy between the two cases. In the case of a particular evil, the skeptical theist agrees that the evil exists. Let us focus on the suffering of the fawn. In this case, the skeptical theist agrees that the

1. Richard Gale in his (1996) makes this charge against Peter van Inwagen’s (1991). Gale’s point applies, at best, to the particular details of van Inwagen’s treatment, so I will not consider it here.

2. Russell uses the example to argue that since it is reasonable to believe that the universe is more than 100 years old, despite the epistemic possibility that God would have reasons for deceiving us about that, it is similarly reasonable to believe that cases of inscrutable evil are, despite the epistemic possibility that God would have reasons for permitting them, really cases of pointless evil. In effect, Russell is arguing in support of the contention that (P) justifies (Q). So I am using the example differently than Russell intended.

fawn's suffering occurs. The skepticism is about whether there is some good that is appropriately related to that suffering which justifies God's permitting it, not about whether the suffering occurs. In the more general case, the skeptical theist also agrees at the outset that the world is more than 100 years old. The epistemic possibility that there is some good that would have permitted God to deceive us about that age does not discredit the claim that the earth is much older than 100 years, just as the epistemic possibility that there is a good appropriately related to the suffering of the fawn that justifies God in permitting that suffering does not cast any doubt on whether the suffering occurred. The skeptical theist might be unable to say just why he or she is so sure that the earth is more than 100 years old, but the skeptical theist is in the same boat as everyone else on this issue—there is no special reason why the skeptical theist needs a better reply to the threat of skepticism generally than does anyone else.

The same rejoinder is available to the charge that skeptical theism leads to theological skepticism; so we may return briefly to the question left unanswered at the end of the last section. As we have seen repeatedly, the skeptical theist professes ignorance about whether certain events are related in an appropriate way to some unspecified good. The skeptical theist does not profess skepticism about whether the events in question really happened. Similarly, to take one of the examples implicit in our earlier discussion, skeptical theism need express no doubt about whether it happened that “on the third day he rose again from the dead.” Skepticism, if there is any, is about exactly which goods are related in the right ways to the resurrection—not about whether the resurrection occurred or about whether any other articles of the faith are true. Moreover, a skeptical theist who nevertheless accepts doctrinal or creedal claims is under no extra obligation, beyond that of any theist, to say on what basis those doctrinal or creedal claims are accepted.

4. Skeptical Theism and Moral Skepticism

The most challenging objection to skeptical theism, I think, is the charge that it leads, not to skepticism generally and not to skepticism about all divine matters, but to skepticism, not nearly as far afield, with respect to further matters of morality. If we have no idea whether there is some good that God is aware of and that justifies him in permitting a certain instance of suffering, then we would be rash indeed if we attempted to prevent that suffering. If the instance of suffering serves God's purposes, we should, for that reason, allow it to occur. If, as skeptical theism alleges, we have no idea whether a given instance of suffering is needed for a good that God sees and intends,

then we should also have no idea whether we should act to prevent that instance. Bruce Russell (1989, pp. 197-198) puts this objection forcefully in the following passage involving an onlooker to an evil:

...let us suppose ... that even after failing to find sufficiently weighty moral reasons to justify God's allowing, say, the brutal rape, beating, and murder of a little girl we are *not* justified in believing that there are none. It will follow that we are also not justified in believing that some human being who could easily have stopped the heinous crime did something wrong in failing to intervene. After all, the same reason that justifies God in not intervening, if God exists, may be the reason why the human onlooker should not have intervened.

And William Hasker (2014, p. 51) makes the point with respect to our own moral choices:

Our judgments about such things [to recognize instances of good and evil and to discern the logical and causal connections between events] ... play a crucially important role in our everyday existence. For us to seriously adopt a skeptical or agnostic attitude about such matters would have serious consequences for our moral lives.

Hasker adds, "There does not seem to be any way to completely undermine the force of the evidence for (1) short of a radical skepticism which would have very serious consequences for our moral reasoning in general".

I think it is possible, contrary to what Hasker claims, to be skeptical about whether there are any instances of intense suffering that God could have prevented without losing a greater good (or permitting an equally bad or worse evil) without having to be skeptical about all moral reasoning.

We can start by thinking about what we look at in moral reasoning. I think that we will find that there are two respects in which what we reasonably believe about our own moral obligations differs from what we can reasonably believe about God's obligations. In the first place, moral reasoning involves a choice from among *alternatives*. At any given time, an agent has a range of alternative actions from which to choose; these are the actions that are open to the agent. And in the second place, for all but the most hard-core deontologists, choosing from among these alternatives requires predicting and evaluating the *consequences* that would ensue on each alternative. One need not be a thoroughgoing consequentialist to view moral reasoning in this way; e.g., even W. D. Ross (2002) recognized the *prima facie* duties of beneficence (promoting the good) and non-maleficence (not promoting evil), and the Kantian question of whether one can consistently will a maxim to be a universal law requires considering the *effects* of performing an action. In the discussion to follow I will, for the

sake of convenience, formulate matters in a vaguely consequentialist way.

We make our judgments about the likely outcomes of our actions and the likely value of those outcomes with less than full knowledge, but we nevertheless assume that we arrive at a reasonable belief sufficient to justify our acting.¹ We assume that we can reasonably believe that some of our alternatives are better than others, even though we are not able to trace their likely consequences very far into the future. So there is a difference between the total consequences of each of my alternative actions (at a given time) and the value of each, on the one hand, and what I may reasonably believe about them, given my cognitive limitations, on the other. In judging others, moreover, we make allowances for people who are not very skilled at predicting the outcomes of their actions or who are misinformed about the true value of some end. This is particularly the case in our moral judgments about children. We will not regard children as acting immorally if they choose an action for its short-term good consequences while being non-culpably unaware of its longer-term worse consequences. Similarly, we will not judge them to have acted wrongly if they choose to perform an action that had a foreseeable bad consequence if they didn't appreciate just how bad or how much worse than the alternatives it was.²

When we make moral choices, we must do so within the context of what we are able to predict about the outcome of our actions. If it seems to me that my action will prevent an instance of intense suffering without eliminating a greater good or bringing about an equal or worse evil (and I have no alternative action with even better consequences) then I am typically justified in thinking that it is right for me to prevent that suffering. But since

1. Compare J. S. Mill's (2001, p. 24) familiar remark that "It is truly a whimsical supposition that, if mankind were agreed in considering utility to be the test of morality, they would remain without any agreement as to what is useful, and would take no measures for having their notions on the subject taught to the young, and enforced by law and opinion. There is no difficulty in proving any ethical standard whatever to work ill, if we suppose universal idiocy to be conjoined with it; but on any hypothesis short of that, mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness; and the beliefs which have thus come down are the rules of morality for the multitude, and for the philosopher until he has succeeded in finding better. That philosophers might easily do this, even now, on many subjects ... and that mankind have still much to learn as to the effects of actions on the general happiness, I admit, or rather, earnestly maintain. The corollaries from the principle of utility ... admit of indefinite improvement ..." where Mill claims both that we do have principles for judging the utility of our actions but that those principles are in continuous need of refinement.

2. It may seem as though I am ignoring the distinction between holding that someone did something wrong and *blaming* that person for doing wrong, and that the case of the child who doesn't predict far enough into the future or who doesn't appreciate the seriousness of some evil it is a case in which we withhold blame, not that the child hasn't done wrong. The point of the examples, however, is to motivate the view that the child *reasonably believes* that the choice of action is a good one; that its consequences will be at least as good as any alternative.

I realize that my prediction about the future and my grasp of what goods there are and how they are related to my actions are restricted by my cognitive limitations, I am in no position at all to judge what someone else, *not so limited*, would be justified in doing. In particular, if I believe that God can see (infinitely) far into the future, that he has a perfect grasp of what goods there are, and that he has a perfect knowledge of the causal connections between events, I should conclude that I have no idea what will seem best to God. I will have no idea whether by looking farther into the future or by having a vastly better understanding of good and evil, God does discern a great good that requires the instance of suffering and which justifies him in not preventing that suffering. In this respect, I am like the child who only sees a little bit but who realizes that the parent knows best. We can be skeptical about what reasons God has for acting or what he should do while nevertheless making moral judgments about what we ought to do, given the circumstances we are in and in which we make those judgments. So skeptical theism does not require moral skepticism.

A second way to argue for this claim appeals to differences in the sets of alternative actions open to different agents. As we have seen, a moral agent chooses, at a time, from a set of alternative actions open to the agent at that time. Naturally enough, different agents, even at the same time, will have different sets of alternatives, depending upon differences in their abilities, their knowledge, their strength, their locations, and, more generally, in the circumstances in which they find themselves. If one of my alternatives is better than anything else I can do, it might not even be one of your alternatives. In that case, perhaps I ought to do it, but you need not (because you cannot). And even if it is one of your alternatives, you might have an even better action open to you that is not open to me. In that case, it would be better for you to do something else, even if it would not be better for me to do something else.

It is obvious that the alternative actions open to God are vastly different from the alternatives open to us. I think we cannot even begin to imagine most of the actions available to God. Given this, the skeptical theist's claim that we do not know what God ought to do seems quite plausible; since our knowledge of what he is able to do is so limited, we are not in a position to judge what he ought to do. But skepticism about what is the best among God's options should not lead to skepticism about our own; our own alternatives are typically familiar, the kinds of things we and other people are used to thinking about. So, I can hold reasonable beliefs about what I should do, even though I am ignorant of what God should do.

It might be objected, however, that if preventing an instance of intense suffering is something I can do, then it is surely something that God can do.

But if he is not preventing the suffering, then the suffering must be something that God wants, and so *I* should not prevent it, either. In a way, this is the same objection that we have already answered by appealing to differences in our abilities to predict outcomes and evaluate their consequences. We are now in a position to make a further point, however. Perhaps *preventing the suffering* is indeed one of God's alternatives but that *allowing the suffering so that I can prevent it* is another of God's alternatives and is, in fact, a better alternative, for whatever reason, to his preventing the suffering himself. Of course, allowing the suffering so that I can prevent it is not one of *my* alternatives. So it could turn out that preventing the suffering is the best alternative open to me, but that there is a better one open to God. I should not use the fact that he seems not to be preventing the suffering as a reason not to do so myself.

Finally, we can use the ideas we have just been discussing to reply to an objection given by Richard Swinburne (1998, p. 23). He holds that

Our understanding of an agent being good would be gravely deficient unless we thought that, other things being equal, a good agent will stop pain and other suffering, if he can do so easily. And if our understanding of possible reasons why anyone might allow suffering to occur provides us with no reason for supposing that a good God might allow certain suffering, we ought to believe that there is no God—unless we have contrary reason.

The point I want to focus on is Swinburne's claim that we do not understand what it means for an agent to be good if we think that someone is good who does not stop pain and suffering that could easily be stopped when we can see no reason that would justify that pain and suffering. If it seems to us that there are instances of suffering that God could prevent without eliminating a great good that justifies it and without bringing about an equal or worse evil, then, if we understand what it is to be good, we should not think that God is good.

I think that Swinburne's claim is correct in the ordinary case, in which the agent is much like us, an agent who has similar capacities for predicting the outcomes of his or her actions, who has similar abilities for evaluating those outcomes, and who has pretty much the same range of alternative actions from which to choose. If we saw no reason that would justify an instance of intense suffering and we could stop that suffering, then we would not be good if we did not stop it. And if we see no such reason, anyone much like us, in the ways I just mentioned, would most likely have no such reason, either. So no one much like us could be good while neglecting to stop such evil. But God is so vastly different from us that it is no discredit either to his goodness or to our understanding of what is required to be good if he fails to prevent or stop an evil for which we do not see the reason.

I have tried in this paper to defend skeptical theism against the charges that it leads to theological skepticism, to global skepticism, and to moral skepticism. The most difficult criticism, it seems to me, is the last of these three, but I hope that I have been able to dispel it. In that case, the skepticism of the skeptical theist need not extend beyond skepticism about what reasons God has for permitting evil to occur.¹

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