

An Evaluation of Skeptical Theism

FRANCIS JONSSON

Francis Jonsson is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Theology, Uppsala University, working in the field of Philosophy of Religion. He is currently writing a dissertation regarding different approaches to an evidential version of The Argument from Divine Hiddenness. Some of the approaches to the argument he is working on are: a skeptical theistic approach, an evidential approach, a pragmatic approach and an epistemic virtue approach.

Introduction

Arguments from evil and arguments from divine hiddenness are designed to create or shed light on problems by showing theists the seemingly immense gap between God and God's creation, or to be more specific, between (a) God and the existence of Evil and (b) God and the existence of people not believing that God exists.

In this article, I evaluate *Skeptical theism* with regard to how advocates for skeptical theism defend theism against the so called *Evidential Argument from Evil* and the *Evidential Argument from Divine Hiddenness*.¹

Theism is here defined as skeptical theists define it, namely as at least including the belief that there is an all-loving, almighty, all-knowing and perfectly good God.² The terms "suffering" and "evil" are used interchangeably to denote mental and physical human and animal suffering and the adjectives "horrific", "inscrutable" and "intense" are used in connection to suffering, to indicate that the suffering *seem* to be utterly pointless.

The article proceeds as follows. (1) Under the headline "The evidential arguments" descrip-

tions of an evidential argument from evil as well as an evidential argument from divine hiddenness are outlined. (2) Under the headline "Skeptical theism" a response from advocates for skeptical theism to the evidential arguments from evil and divine hiddenness is put forward. (3) Under the heading "Evaluating skeptical theism", Skeptical theism is evaluated with regard to two common arguments, namely the argument that Skeptical theism entails skepticism concerning our moral decision making and that it entails skepticism concerning most if not all theistic beliefs. It is shown that the two arguments can be countered.

The evidential arguments

Advocates for the evidential argument from evil often start their argumentation, with a narrative describing horrific and seemingly pointless evil in the world. Arguably, a well-known story concerning suffering is William Rowe's so called *Bambi-case*:

Suppose in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn [Bambi] is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.³

¹ A version of this article was presented at the "phalén picnic" in Åbo, the 19th of May, 2011, in connection to the conference "Culture and Context", arranged by the Nordic Wittgenstein Society.

² Bergmann, Michael, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil", 374-402 in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (ed. Flint, Thomas and Rea, Michael; Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 375

³ Rowe, William, "The Problem of Evil and some Varieties of Atheism", 335-341, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4, (1979), 337. For a fine collection of William Rowe's most important articles,

Advocates for the evidential argument from evil continue their argumentation by claiming: (1) if God is omniscient and omnipotent, God could prevent the suffering described in the Bambi-case, (2) if God is perfectly good he should prevent the suffering described in the Bambi-case, (3) there *seem* to be no justifiable reasons for why God wouldn't prevent the suffering. Finally, it is argued (4) there is actual suffering in the world similar to the suffering described in the Bambi-case and the conclusion is (5) Gods existence is unlikely or perhaps even highly unlikely.

Narratives describing how people find the existence of God to be obscure or hidden are not as frequently and explicitly invoked when concerning the argument from divine hiddenness. Nevertheless, there are stories that I think advocates for this type of arguments might have in mind. The following poignant passage from Mother Teresa's Book *Come Be My Light* could function as such a story:

Lord, My God, who am I that You should forsake me? The child of your love –and now become as the most hated one – the one You have thrown away as unwanted-unloved. I call, I cling, I want – and there is no One to answer – no One on Whom I can cling – no, No One. Alone. The darkness is so dark [...] ⁴

While Mother Teresa sees her experience as indicating that God is hidden but nonetheless exists, John Schellenberg thinks that this type of experience counts as evidence for that God doesn't exist. He writes:

Many religious writers, sensitive to the difficulties in which our evidence for God is involved, have held that God would wish (or at any rate, permit) the fact of his existence to be obscure. God, so it is said, is a hidden God. But upon reflection, it may well appear otherwise. Why, we may ask, would God be hidden from us? Surely a morally

perfect being – good, Just, loving – would show himself more clearly. Hence the weakness of our evidence for God is not a sign that God is hidden; it is a revelation that God does not exist. ⁵

Advocates for an evidential argument from divine hiddenness appeal, even though sometimes just implicitly, to cases like the Mother *Teresa-case* when arguing: (1) if God is omnipotent and omniscient he could make his existence clear to humans, (2) if God is all loving and perfectly good, He should desire to make his existence clear to humans in order to live in a loving relationship with them, (3) there *seem* to be no justifiable reasons for why God would hide, and (4) there are cases like the Mother Teresa-case where Gods existence is not clear, actual in the world. The conclusion is (5) Gods existence is unlikely or perhaps even highly unlikely.

The two evidential arguments can be put together. Let "E" stand for all the reports of horrific evil similar to the Bambi-case, as well as for all reports of God being hidden similar to the Mother Theresa-case. Let then "K" stand for whatever relevant background knowledge theists might have ⁶ and "G" for the existence of God. A version of the arguments, put together, can then be summarized as $P(G/K \text{ and } E) < 1/2$.

Skeptical Theism

The response from skeptical theists to the evidential argument from evil and divine hiddenness is that we can't make probabilistic claims concerning God's existence, because we are cognitively ill-equipped to know what could justify God in permitting horrific evil and his own hiding. In other words: Gods justifiable reasons are beyond our comprehension.

To put it yet another way: Skeptical theists argue not by formulating an explanation that would justify God in permitting horrific evil, but

including articles on the evidential argument from evil, see *William L. Rowe on Philosophy of Religion – Selected Writings* (ed. Trakakis, Nick; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

⁴ Mother Teresa, *Come be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*, (ed. Kolodiejchuk, Brian; New York: Doubleday, 2007), 186-187.

⁵ Schellenberg, John, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (London: Carnell UP, 1993), 1.

⁶ "Background knowledge" being evidence for and against the existence of God, that theists and atheists, who thought carefully on the matter, might have in common.

rather by more modestly claiming that we can't know that there isn't an explanation.

The responses are based on three, to my mind commonsensical, beliefs: (1) we don't know of all the goods there are, (2) we don't know of all the evils there are and (3) we don't know of all the connections between evils and goods there are. Since we don't know about all goods there are, we need to be agnostic concerning the actuality or possible actualizations of goods that justifies or could justify God in permitting suffering. We also need to be agnostic concerning whether actual suffering prevents other perhaps worse evils to occur.⁷

Another way to define Skeptical theism is to note that skeptical theists don't think "NOSEEUM-inferences"⁸ are valid when concerning God. The claim is that we can't infer that there is no justification for evil or divine hiding, from the fact that there doesn't *seem* to be such a justification. More elaborately, the claim is that even though NOSEEUM-inferences are valid sometimes and in some areas of our everyday lives, they are not valid with regard to theism.

According to skeptical theist Stephen Wykstra, NOSEEUM-inferences are valid only if, what he calls, the CORNEA-condition (the "Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access") is met. According to CORNEA, the inference from "there seems to be no X that justifies something Y, are valid only if it is reasonable to believe that if there were an X we would likely know of it."⁹

Even though CORNEA is developed with regard to the evidential argument from evil it might very well be called upon with regard to the evidential argument of divine hiddenness. However, a similar condition the "Hansen-

Scriven-thesis' (HST')" is introduced with regard to divine hiddenness by Thomas Morris. According to HST':

For any rational subject S and any positive existence claim p, if S rationally believes himself to be in good epistemic position relative to p, and S is in possession of no good evidence or any other epistemic ground for thinking that p is true, then S ought to adopt the cognitive relation to p of denial.¹⁰

Morris' point is that if a person S is in a position where God seems to be hidden, then S can conclude either (a) God doesn't exist or (b) God exists but S isn't in a good position to acknowledge this.

Accordingly, Skeptical theists argue that the NOOSEUM-inference, actual in the evidential argument from Evil and divine hiddenness, is invalid, either by arguing that CORNEA isn't met or, by appealing to HST' and claiming that God exists, but we are not in a good position to acknowledge this fact.

A vast number of analogies are created in support of these conclusions. With regard to the evidential problem of evil, the most famous one is Wykstra's *Good-parent-analogy*. Wykstra writes:

But if outweighing goods of the sort at issue exist in connection with instances of suffering, that we should discern most of them seems about as likely as that a one-month old should discern most of his parents' purposes for those pains they allow him to suffer – which is to say, it is not likely at all. So for any selected instance of intense suffering, there is good reason to think that if there is an outweighing good of the sort at issue connected to it, we would not have epistemic access to this: our cognized situation would be just as Rowe says it is with respect to (say) the fawn's suffering.¹¹

Rowe's response is as follows:

What do loving parents do when their children are suffering for reasons they cannot comprehend?

⁷ Bergmann, 376

⁸ The term "NOSEEUM-inference" was introduced in Wykstra, Stephen, "Rowe's Noseeum Argument from Evil", 126-150 in *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (ed. Howard-Snyder, Daniel Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1996), 126.

⁹ Wykstra, Stephen, "The Humean Obstacle to the Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'", 73-93 in *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 16, No. 16 (1984), 84-89.

¹⁰ Morris, Thomas, "The Hidden God", 5-21 in *Philosophical Topics*, Vol. 16 No. 2, (1988), 15.

¹¹ Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle", 88.

Loving parents do their best to relieve the suffering of their children.¹²

In other words, the evidential argument from evil can lead to the evidential argument from divine hiddenness. On the other hand, CORNEA and HST' can be invoked yet again (which Rowe is well aware of) and skeptical theists can claim that there might be something good actualized by God not showing himself in order to relieve suffering.

Evaluating Skeptical theism

There are several arguments against skeptical theism, where most of them are constructed so as to show that skeptical theism entails absurd or "unwelcomed" skepticism of different kinds. Here I will evaluate what I take to be the two most common arguments.

According to advocates for the first line of arguing against skeptical theism, the claim that we can't know or justifiably say that instances of seemingly horrendous evil lack justification, leads us to being unable to decide whether we should or shouldn't intervene when such evil occurs. For all we know, and given our cognitive limitations, the evil, or intense suffering which we perhaps could stop, could be there to make possible some greater good. Mark Piper e.g. argues that skeptical theism leads to moral *aporia* regarding how one should act when confronted with suffering which one could prevent:

The general form of such *aporia* can be given in this way: any moral agent who accepts [skeptical theism] will, when confronting any moral significant situation in which the agent could prevent innocent suffering, be faced with two moral precepts enjoining opposite courses of action: (A) "One ought to prevent the suffering if doing so will lead to goodness being best served." and (B) "One ought not to prevent the suffering if doing so will lead to goodness being best served." The agnosticism engendered by [skeptical theism] will

¹² Rowe, William, "Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism, and the Problem of Evil", 79-92 in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 59 No 2, (2006), 89.

make certain that a consistent skeptical theist will never be able to overcome this *aporia*.¹³

The skeptical theist seems indeed to be in serious trouble, if Skeptical theism entails skepticism or agnosticism concerning our moral decision making.

However, one to my mind promising way of responding is to argue that the decision, from our part, to prevent suffering in a particular situation should, at least in part, be based on (a) our relation to the suffering person in question, and (b) on our own cognitive abilities. Concerning (a) above I think Michael Bergmann is profoundly right when claiming the following:

[...] when considering whether to permit someone to suffer in order to bring about some outweighing good, it matters tremendously what one's relationship is to the one permitted to suffer. It may be morally appropriate for me to allow or even bring about certain minor sort of suffering in my own child for her good whereas similar treatment of some stranger's child would be morally inappropriate. Likewise, it may be morally appropriate for your loving and omniscient creator to permit you to experience preventable horrific suffering in order to achieve some greater good whereas it wouldn't be morally appropriate for another human to do so.¹⁴

Whether it's morally appropriate or inappropriate to prevent suffering also depends on (b) above, i.e. it is dependent upon our own cognitive abilities. To recognize this, we might invoke

¹³ Piper, Mark, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Moral Aporia", 65-79 in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 62, No 2, (2007), 72. For similar lines of thought see e.g. Almeida, Michael and Oppy, Graham, "Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil", 496-516 in *Australian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 81, No. 4, (2003), Hasker, William, "All to Skeptical Theism", 15-29 in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 68, No. 1, (2010), Sehon, Scott, "The Problem of Evil: Skeptical Theism Leads to Moral Paralysis", 67-80 in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol.67, No. 2, (2010) and Jordan, Jeff, "Does Skeptical Theism Lead to Moral Skepticism?", 403-417 in *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 72, No. 2, (2006).

¹⁴ Bergmann, 392.

the famous distinction between being wrong and being blameworthy. Although it might be wrong to prevent suffering in a particular situation, you're not morally blameworthy for preventing it, if you made your decision to prevent the suffering given what you know and your limited cognitive abilities.

Advocates for a second line of arguing against skeptical theism claim, that if continuing to be skeptical about being able to know what justifies God in permitting inscrutable suffering or divine hiding, then we also need to be skeptical about the truth of many, if not all, theistic beliefs. Rowe writes:

Skeptical theists choose to ride the trolley car of skepticism concerning the goods that God would know so as to undercut the evidential argument from evil. But once on that trolley car it may not be easy to prevent that skepticism from also undercutting any reason they may suppose they may have for thinking that God will provide them and the worshipful faithful with life everlasting in his presence.¹⁵

The claim that Skeptical theism entails skepticism about theistic beliefs is not as problematic for the theist as it might seem, at least not for all theists. The skeptical theist might easily argue that faith implies the possibility of doubt and that we can't know whether or not theistic beliefs are true is, precisely what is needed in order to have faith that God exists. Fideism is then perfectly compatible with skeptical theism.¹⁶

However, a second response is also valid for the skeptical theist who wants to argue that skeptical theism is compatible with knowledge regarding theistic beliefs. The skeptical theist might namely respond by denying a version of what we might call the *Evidential Criterion*. This criterion when concerning knowledge can be formulated as follows:

Evidential Criterion: A person's belief can be regarded as knowledge only if the person has good reasons (evidence) to believe that it is true.

The skeptical theist can deny the formulation of the criterion above by claiming that we only need good reasons for non-basic beliefs, i.e. non-inferential beliefs can be regarded as knowledge without a person having good reasons to hold these beliefs as true. The criterion can then be reformulated as follows:

*Evidential Criterion**: A person's inferential beliefs can be regarded as knowledge only if the person has good reasons (evidence) to believe that it is true.

The skeptical theist, can then in a *plantigian* manner, go on and argue that many theists hold their beliefs as non-inferential and properly basic, i.e. basic and properly so.¹⁷ This "proper basicity" might be supported using Alvin Plantinga's famous analogy-argument, i.e. by claiming that many theistic beliefs, with the exception of theistic beliefs regarding justifications of God not preventing horrific suffering, are just as non-inferential as the belief that (1) "I ate lunch this noon" or (2) "there are other minds than my own present in the world".¹⁸ The skeptical theist might add that (1) and (2) could and perhaps should be regarded as knowledge as should many theistic non-inferential beliefs.

My claim here is not that one should reject the evidential criterion and endorse the evidential criterion*, but rather that if arguing against skeptical theism by claiming that it entails skepticism about theistic beliefs, one also needs to argue that either (a) the evidential criterion is correct or (b) the evidential criterion* is correct but theistic beliefs are inferential beliefs and not non-inferential and properly basic.

If this evaluation is correct, it is not shown that the evidential arguments constructed as they are in this article, pose any serious threat for the-

¹⁵ Rowe, "Friendly Atheism", 91.

¹⁶ One necessary condition of having "Faith" is here: believing without epistemic reasons, i.e. without evidence indicating the truth of what one believes. For an easy read book on definitions of "faith" see e.g. Tiley, Terrence, *Faith – What It Is and What It Isn't* (New York: Orbis Books, 2010).

¹⁷ See e.g. Plantinga, Alvin "Reason and belief in God", 16-91 in *Faith and Rationality – Reason and Belief in God* (ed. Plantinga Alvin and Wollterstorff, Nicholas; Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame UP, 1983).

¹⁸ See Plantinga "Reason and Belief in God", 59 and/or Plantinga Alvin, *God and Other Minds – A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1967, 187-211).

ists, nor is it shown that skeptical theism entails skepticism concerning our moral decision making or concerning the truth of theistic beliefs in general.

Summary

One of the most influential and frequently addressed responses to the evidential argument from Evil and divine hiddenness is advocated by so called skeptical theists, who claim that we are cognitively ill-equipped to know Gods reasons for permitting suffering or for hiding from us. In this article I evaluate Skeptical theism with regard to two common arguments, namely the argument that Skeptical theism entails skepticism concerning our moral decision making and that it entails skepticism concerning most if not all theistic beliefs. It is concluded that Skeptical theism isn't in any serious trouble with regard to these arguments.