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A Rejection of Skeptical Theism

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Abstract

The evidential problem of evil has become an important topic within the philosophy of religion. This formulation of the problem of evil states that it is unlikely that God exists given the existence of pointless suffering. In response, many theists have taken a position known as skeptical theism, which argues that one cannot make any reasonable judgments about such cases of suffering, as humans are not omniscient and therefore cannot know whether there may be goods attached that could justify the inherent evil of the suffering. This paper argues that skeptical theism as a response to the evidential problem of evil undermines the rest of theism, as it forces skepticism about all other tenets of religious faith. In addition, this paper argues that skeptical theism makes any relationship with the divine, a core tenant of most theistic religions, impossible. Given these reasons, skeptical theism is not a logical standpoint for the theist to take, as it cannot pose a compelling response to the problem of evil without quickly leading to a level of skepticism that undercuts theism.

Rowe's Formulation of the Evidential Problem of Evil and the Response of Skeptical Theism

In his 1996 essay entitled "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,"

William Rowe gives his formulation of the evidential problem of evil as follows:

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

¹ William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder, 2 (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

Rowe's argument forms around the existence of pointless suffering. Pointless suffering is suffering that an omniscient, omnipotent being could prevent without a) losing a good so great that the world would be worse off without it, or b) causing an equally bad or greater evil to exist. Most would agree that (2) is accurate and God would do anything possible to prevent instances of suffering unless his intervention would lead to the forfeiture of some greater good or the imposition of some greater evil. In addition, most would agree that the conclusion follows if both (1) and (2) turn out to be true. Given the aforementioned case, it seems as though Rowe only needs to prove that cases of pointless suffering do exist in order to logically conclude that it is at the least very unlikely that God exists.

In an effort to claim that (1) is correct and cases of pointless suffering exist, Rowe describes a fawn trapped in a forest fire. The fawn is unable to escape, leading to it burning horribly and finally dying several days later. Rowe argues that this is a clear case of pointless suffering, as it seems impossible that there could be any greater goods attached to or any evils prevented by such a case. Clearly, an omnipotent, omniscient being would have been well aware of the fawn's suffering and could have either prevented it in the first place or ensured its timely end. Rowe admits that such a case may not prove conclusively that (1) is true, but it does give good reason to believe that cases of pointless suffering, even if there are only a few, do occur.²

In response to Rowe's formulation of the evidential problem of evil, many philosophers moved to the position that has become known as skeptical theism. Their claim was that humans do not have any good reason to believe that one would be able to see any of the goods that could potentially be related to instances of seemingly pointless suffering. One of these philosophers was Michael Bergmann, who lays out three skeptical theses in his article entitled "Skeptical

² William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder, 4 (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil." Bergmann believes these theses form the core of the skeptical theist's view. While all three factor into his discussion of skeptical theism, most of his argument defends the first thesis. He states this as "ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are."³ Essentially, Bergmann argues here that one cannot make any reasonable judgements about cases of seemingly pointless suffering, as whether or not there may be goods associated with such cases cannot be definitively known.

Much of Bergmann's argument rests on the idea that humans are not omniscient and therefore cannot know if there are any goods that have a direct link to cases of seemingly pointless suffering.⁴ Bergmann is correct. It is possible that an omniscient God, should he exist, could know of goods that are beyond human knowledge. However, it is severely detrimental to theism as a whole for one to argue for this view.

Arguments against Skeptical Theism

An argument in response to Bergmann and the rest of skeptical theism in general is as follows:

1. If one accepts skeptical theism (ST), then one accepts the idea that one cannot make reasonable judgements about what God would do in any given situation, as humans are not omniscient.
2. If one cannot make reasonable judgments about what God would do in any given situation, then one cannot know if any of the other tenets of religious faith are true (e.g. that God created humans in his image or the idea that there is an afterlife).
3. Therefore, if one accepts ST, then one must remain skeptical about all other aspects of religious faith.

³ Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Noûs* 35 (2001): 279.

⁴ Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Noûs* 35 (2001): 284-285.

Skeptical theism clearly opens the door to a much more expansive version of skepticism than it ever intended. If one accepts that God is omniscient and therefore capable of bringing about certain goods that are beyond human knowledge, then one must accept that humans can make no reasonable judgments about what God would do in any given situation. Given this, one has no plausible reason to believe that any other tenets of religious faith are accurate. For example, if one cannot know how God would act in any given situation, then one cannot know whether or not God created humans in his image. It may have been the case that by God *not* creating humans in his image and instead creating humans in an entirely different way, he brought about goods outside of human knowledge. The same can then be said of all other aspects of religious faith, which seem to undermine theism in a very substantial way.

One of the most crucial tenets of theistic faith is the idea that one must form a personal and loving relationship with the divine. Accepting ST renders this impossible. An argument for this is as follows:

1. If one accepts ST, then one cannot know the reasons behind any of the things that God allows or does himself.
2. Truly loving relationships seem to be impossible when one party does not know the morality behind the other party's actions, particularly when those actions directly lead to harm or suffering for the first party.
3. Therefore, if one accepts ST, then one cannot have a truly loving relationship with God.

The argument here is very similar to that of Richard Gale in his paper "Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil." Gale argues that, "while we need not understand all of the beloved's moral reasons for her behavior, it must be the case that, *for the most part*, we do in respect to behavior which vitally affects ourselves."⁵ It seems to be the case that humans are unable to understand God's motivations or what goods he is possibly bringing about for a large

⁵ Richard Gale, "Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder, 211 (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

amount of the evil in the world; thus, it is unlikely that humans could ever form a trusting and loving relationship with the divine. As Gale argues, such a relationship would be possible if and only if humans knew the reasoning behind *most* of the suffering in the world. However, as this is not the case, it seems like any relationship with the divine defined as *truly* loving is simply impossible.⁶

Objections in Favor of Skeptical Theism

It seems clear that the first response the skeptical theist will offer here is that ST is not detrimental to theism as a whole, as the theistic God is not a deceiver. This argument would most likely have the following organization:

1. If God exists, then he is a perfect being.
2. If he is a perfect being, then he cannot intentionally deceive humanity.
3. Humans know all other tenets of religious faith through God.
4. Because God cannot deceive humans, one can know that these other tenets are true.
5. Therefore, all other tenets of religious faith are true.

This argument states that a perfect god, such as the standard conception of the theistic God, would be incapable of lying to humanity, as lying is generally morally impermissible. As certain religions tell humans that all other tenets of theism are handed down by God directly and God is incapable of deception, it seems to logically follow that all other tenets are true. If so, skeptical theism poses no serious threat to the rest of theism.

In response to the second consideration—that ST makes a truly loving relationship with the divine impossible—the theist will here point to the fact that humans consistently form truly loving relationships with others, even considering one cannot ever truly *know* another's motives or the impacts of those motives. Yet, humans believe that entering into such relationships is

⁶ Richard Gale, "Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil," in *The Evidential Argument From Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder, 210-211 (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996).

logical. The theist will argue that it is therefore completely reasonable to enter into a loving relationship with the divine.

Response to the Objections in Favor of Skeptical Theism

While the theist's response regarding God's perfection is worthwhile, it ultimately fails. If one uses the standard theistic parent-child analogy here, it becomes clear that God could in fact be capable of deceiving humans.

It seems to be the case that there are certain situations that more or less justify parents deceiving their children in an effort to secure long-term benefits that may be unavailable otherwise. One example of this may be with adopted children. Many parents of adopted children choose to wait until their child is at a relatively mature age before revealing to them that they are not their biological parents. Others may even choose to withhold the truth completely. Most people would agree that such deceptions are not ideal but are also not nonsensical and are easily justifiable as the parents are simply trying to do what is best for the child in the long run.

If one then applies this to God, it seems clear that there could be scenarios where God would deceive humans regarding certain theological truths in an effort to gain long-term benefits that would otherwise be unachievable. This becomes even more plausible if one accepts the skeptical theist's argument and says that it is possible there exist goods beyond human knowledge. If such a good is possible and if such a good were so great that the world would be substantially worse off without it, then it seems clear that God would be justified in deceiving humans in order to obtain it.

This idea of God's deception even seems to have theistic backing in some cases. Certain sects of Christianity and Islam believe that their religions are necessary, as God believed humanity was not ready for full revelation before their formulation. As God believed humanity

was not yet ready to receive his full word, these sects believe that deceiving humanity until the time came when humanity was ready was justifiable.

William Rowe offers another argument about how skeptical theism leads to a more substantial form of skepticism that can be adapted to form a second argument as to why God would be capable of deceiving humanity. Many sects in Christianity hold a belief that God first created all of the angels as near-perfect beings. Eventually, Satan and his cohorts revolted, and God sentenced them to eternal damnation. Rowe argues that, given the near-perfection of these fallen angels and humanity's lack of perfection, if one accepts skeptical theism, then one cannot know whether or not it could be the case that God would choose to sacrifice humanity in order to secure the salvation of Satan and his comrades.⁷

If one alters this slightly one can say that, if one accepts skeptical theism, then one is unable to make any reasonable judgments as to whether or not there could be circumstances in which God would be justified in deceiving humanity for the sake of a greater good. More importantly, if one accepts skeptical theism, then one is also committed to the idea that there could be certain circumstances in which God would be *morally obligated* to deceive humanity about certain theological truths in order to obtain a good so great the universe would be worse off without it. It seems clear that accepting skeptical theism also leaves the door open to the possibility of God deceiving humanity in a morally justifiable way. Therefore, proponents of skeptical theism must remain skeptical about all other aspects of religious faith, including those tenets that God reportedly handed down directly.

The theistic response that a relationship with the divine is still possible also fails when one considers it a bit more closely. While it is true that humans do form truly loving relationships

⁷ William Rowe, "Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism, and the Problem of Evil," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59 (2006): 91.

with others even though others possess the capability to lie, it seems to be the case that one only forms such relationships with those one trusts. In order for humans to move from simply being close with each other to this higher level, it seems to be the case that mutual trust, respect, and benevolence must first be established. As the motivations behind much of what God seems to allow in the world remain unseen, it appears to be the case that forming such a foundation is impossible, as the goods he may or may not be bringing about are beyond human knowledge. This again demonstrates that skeptical theism and its inherent skepticism towards the divine means that humans cannot form a truly loving and personal relationship with any deity when that deity's motives are unknown.

Conclusion

In sum, it is clear that skeptical theism fails as a response to Rowe's formulation of the evidential problem from evil. While it certainly does pose certain issues for the problem of evil, it is clear that its inherent skepticism can also be used to attack the rest of theism in general. In addition, it seems to be the case that skeptical theism makes the prospect of forming a personal and loving relationship with the divine impossible. As this is central to almost all theistic religions, this is clearly a major area where skeptical theism unintentionally undercuts its own argument. While none of this *conclusively* proves that God does not exist, it does seem as if the evidential problem still poses a serious threat to theism and must be taken into further consideration by theists.

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