

The Problem of Evil: Skeptical Theism Leads to Moral Paralysis

Scott Sehon

Abstract

Natural disasters would seem to constitute evidence against the existence of God, for, on the face of things, it is mysterious why a completely good and all-powerful God would allow the sort of suffering we see from earthquakes, diseases, and the like. The *skeptical theist* replies that we should not expect to be able to understand God's ways, and thus we should not regard it as surprising or mysterious that God would allow natural evil. I argue that skeptical theism leads to *moral paralysis*: accepting skeptical theism would undermine our ability to make any moral judgments whatsoever. Second, and more briefly, I argue that skeptical theism would undercut our ability to accept any form of the argument from design, including recent approaches based on fine-tuning.

Keywords: Theism • God • Skeptical theism • Problem of evil • Moral skepticism • Wykstra, Stephen • Bergmann, Michael • Rea, Michael

The Problem

God, apparently, made some funny decisions in May of 2008. On the second of May, cyclone Nargis struck Myanmar. The death toll was estimated at 130,000 and 2.5 million people were left homeless. Then, just 10 days later, a massive earthquake struck in China, killing over 70,000 and leaving 5 million homeless.¹ Of course, mere statistics

S. Sehon

Department of Philosophy, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME 04011-8484

email: ssehon@bowdoin.edu

¹ Sanderson (2008).

cannot begin to convey the human tragedy here. Each person who died was loved by other people and left behind grief stricken siblings, children, cousins, or parents. Naturally, both of these disasters had some human help in wreaking such havoc. The military junta in Myanmar was extremely slow in allowing humanitarian aid into the country, and it has been alleged that many children died needlessly in China because they were in shoddily built schools at the time of the quake. But no plausible human action could have done much to mitigate the human tragedy that unfolded. Especially in the case of the earthquake, just a few minutes warning presumably could have saved thousands of lives by allowing people to leave unsafe buildings. But seismologists tell us that we humans simply have no reliable way of predicting earthquakes in the short-term.²

If God exists, and if he made the world and the natural laws, then God *caused* the cyclone and the earthquake. Even if we deny that such events are *actions* performed by God, surely an omnipotent God could have stopped the disasters, and he could have done so without interfering with anyone's free will. If nothing else, God could have at least given the residents more warning. He chose not to. Of course, the earthquake and the cyclone are but two disasters taking lives and leaving people destitute. And I haven't even mentioned diseases and other natural sources of suffering. The UN estimates that 25,000 people die every day of starvation.³

God is, by hypothesis, omnipotent and completely good. So why does God do these things? If there were a human being who could easily have saved the lives of the 200,000 or so people who died in Myanmar or China, surely the person would have done so. Suppose there were someone who simply could have provided three minutes warning to people in unsafe buildings in China; we would regard it as criminal if such a person decided she had better things to do. But God chose not to warn people. Surely this is not what we would expect of a perfectly good agent; it is, on the face of things, a mystery for theism that God would act in this way. So shouldn't we say that such events at least count as strong evidence against the existence of God?

We can lay this out as an explicit argument in the following way:

² Sanderson (2008).

³ Kirby (2003).

- (1) If observation O is an unexplained mystery for theory T₁, but is not a mystery for theory T₂, then O is evidence against T₁ as compared to T₂. [Premise]
- (2) Natural disasters of the sort that occurred in May 2008 are unexplained mysteries for theism but not for atheism. [Premise]
- (3) Natural disasters of the sort that occurred in May are evidence against theism as compared to atheism. [1,2]

Premise (1) is, of course, vague, and working out the details would be contentious, but it is meant to be a fairly benign statement about evidence and theories. So the theist must deny premise (2). The traditional way of denying premise (2) would be for the theist to explain why we would actually expect a good and all powerful being to allow disasters like those in China and Myanmar. In other words, we expect a theodicy, in which the theist identifies morally sufficient reasons God might have for allowing the evils we see. Philosophers and theologians have devoted considerable effort to providing such theodicies, but their successes or failures are not the topic of this paper.

Instead I want to look at a very different sort of theistic response to the argument from evil. Stephen Wykstra and others have said that we should be skeptical about our ability to discern God's reasons for allowing evil; since God's knowledge is vastly superior to ours, we should not expect to understand why God allows the suffering we see. This approach is sometimes dubbed "skeptical theism." I will make two arguments about this approach to the problem of evil. First, I will argue that were the skeptical theist to take her approach seriously, she would find herself the victim of *moral paralysis*: she would undermine her own ability to make any moral judgments whatsoever.⁴ Second, and much more briefly, I will claim that the adoption of skeptical

⁴ Almeida and Oppy (2003) make a similar claim: they claim that skeptical theism as proposed by Bergmann (2001) would lead to moral skepticism. Their argument for the claim is somewhat different from the ones I will present in section 3. Their argument most directly applies to circumstances in which an agent can intervene and prevent a particular evil. My arguments are more general and, I hope, somewhat more intuitively presented.

theism would undercut our ability to accept any form of the argument from design, including recent approaches based on fine-tuning.

Skeptical Theism

Wykstra puts his claim as an epistemic principle, the “Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access” or CORNEA for short: “we can argue from ‘we see no X’ to ‘there is no X’ only when X has ‘reasonable seeability’—that is, is the sort of thing which, if it exists, we can *reasonably expect to see* in the situation.”⁵ This seems fair enough. As Wykstra points out:

Looking around my garage and seeing no dog entitles me to conclude that none is present, but seeing no flea does not; and this is because fleas, unlike dogs, have low seeability: even if they were present, we cannot reasonably expect to see them in this way.⁶

The analogy is clear: Looking around as best we can, many of us see no plausible reason that would justify God in having allowed Cyclone Nargis and the Sichuan earthquake to kill 200,000 people (The theodocists are the exception: they do claim to see, at least in rough outline, adequate reasons for God having done this. But, as I said, that is a topic for a different paper.) Wykstra claims that we should not *reasonably expect* to see the reason God had for allowing this disaster or others. When it comes to understanding God’s ways, we are like humble nearsighted folks glancing around a garage looking to see whether there are fleas. Or to take another of Wykstra’s analogies: “Imagine a doctor, squinting at a used hypodermic needle and seeing no germs, inferring that the needle does not appear to have any germs on it (that it is appears germless), and from this, that it does not have any germs on it (that it is germless)”⁷ In more general terms, Wykstra claims,

The disparity between God’s vision and ours, I suggested, is comparable to the gap between the vision of a parent and her one-month-old infant. This gives

⁵ Wykstra (1996, p. 126).

⁶ Wykstra (1996, p.126).

⁷ Wykstra (1996, p. 128).

reason to think that our discerning most of God's purposes are about as likely as the infant's discerning most of the parent's purposes.⁸

We can sum this up by saying that Wykstra affirms the following principle: we should not expect to be able to see the ultimate good that results from God's actions.

So the skeptical theist appears well placed to deny premise (2) in the argument above. It is not that Wykstra provides an *explanation* for God's decision to let so many people suffer and die. Rather, skeptical theism renders it *unmysterious* in the following way: If we simply have no idea why God does what he does, if it is beyond our understanding, then we can't regard it as surprising or mysterious that God would allow so much suffering, and therefore the existence of suffering does not constitute evidence against theism.

Moral paralysis

On one level, Wykstra's humility before the vision of God seems appealing and appropriate, and it has been echoed by religious writers through the ages, including, arguably, the author of the Book of Job. However, I believe this humility has disastrous consequences. I shall make two distinct, but related, arguments in support of this claim.

First argument

Let's begin by considering an example far from theology. Suppose someone is watching what appears to be a poker game. The observer knows the standard ranking of hands and is familiar with many varieties of poker. In the game before her, sometimes things turn out as she expects—i.e., the player who appears to have the best hand takes the pot. But it often happens that the player who takes the pot did not seem to have the highest ranked hand.

Our card-watcher considers various hypotheses: maybe the standard ranking does not apply, maybe the cards a player holds are not the ones that count as part of her hand, or maybe there are some communal cards that she can't see. But no hypothesis seems to

⁸ Wykstra (1996, p.129).

make sense of the game. No matter how hard the card-watcher tries, she cannot formulate a theory that successfully correlates with the data about who takes the pots.

Now somebody joins the card-watcher and sees the following three hands being played: a full house, two pair, and king high. The person asks who is going to win, but the card-watcher must honestly reply, "I have no idea; I thought I knew a lot about poker, but after watching for the last hour, all I can say is that there must be much more to this game than I am able to see. Maybe these are super-intelligent beings, and I should not expect to understand the rules. It would be foolhardy for me to venture a guess about any particular hand." And if the card watcher were asked to join the game, she would certainly decline; it would be foolish to take such risks if you don't understand the rules.

I take this example to illustrate two fairly simple points about theories. When our observer started watching the card game, she had a theory about how the game was likely to be played. But her theory didn't work. There were many instances where the person who took the pot was not the one the theory predicted. So the card-watcher reasonably concluded that the initial theory must be wrong. Put as a general principle, if *T* is a theory about subject matter *S*:

- (I₁) If many states of affairs involving *S* are inconsistent with *T* then we should regard *T* as inadequate and unreliable with respect to *S*.

After the card-watcher gave up on the initial theory, she tried others, but none seemed to work; any theory she could think of was also inadequate and unreliable. So the card-watcher concluded that she really did not know what was going on. The general principle is this:

- (I₂) If all plausible theories we can think of about *S* are inadequate and unreliable with respect to *S*, then we should admit that we are massively ignorant about *S*, and we should not, with any confidence whatsoever, make any judgments about particular cases.

My claim is that the theist, who believes in an omnipotent and completely good personal God, begins in a position very much like that of the card-watcher. Like all of us, the theist judges her own actions and the actions of others in accord with some sort common sense moral theory. The theist has seen many situations where her moral theory would yield apparently obvious answers about what to do: anyone who can easily save

130,000 lives from a cyclone should do so; anyone who can easily stop a huge earthquake would do so; and any sane, moral person would give people three minutes warning with which to escape a building that is about to collapse. But these judgments are, on their face, inconsistent with the theist's data about what agents in general ought to do, for God is a completely good agent, and God did not do those things. Thus, there are many states of affairs in which the theist's moral theory apparently gives wrong answers; so, in accord with (I₁), she should regard her moral theory as inadequate and unreliable.

Of course, things are different if the theist has a theodicy, whereby she can explain why God allows the suffering caused by natural evil, even though we ourselves should try to limit it. With an adequate theodicy, the theist can still hold onto her moral theory of how agents in general should act. But the skeptical theist tells us that there will be no such theodicy, and that we should expect not to understand the reasons God allows horrendous suffering from natural evil. So the skeptical theist seems to be stuck with the conclusion that any plausible theory we can think of about how agents in general ought to behave is inadequate and unreliable. And given (I₂), it follows that we should admit that we are massively ignorant about what agents in general ought to do.

At the analogous point in the dialectic, when the card-watcher rightly concluded that she must be massively ignorant about the card game, she wisely declined to make judgments about which hand ought to win. Similarly, in accord with (I₂), the skeptical theist should admit that she is massively ignorant about when agents should prevent or not prevent suffering, and she should not have any confidence whatsoever in the moral judgments she is inclined to make. Thus, if the theist takes seriously the claim that God has good reasons for allowing so much suffering, then the theist should be the victim of *moral paralysis*: she should have no confidence in her moral judgments; she should have no idea when to allow suffering and when not to allow it, and she should also be unwilling to make moral judgments concerning the actions of others.⁹

⁹ One might reply, as did an anonymous referee for this Journal, that what is morally justified for an agent to do is a function of what the agent *believes* to be the morally best act she can do, given that she reasonably believes that the evidence she possesses is adequate to justify her doing that act. And of course it is quite correct that an agent can be morally justified even in the absence of perfect information.

Objection and reply

The skeptical theist might reply to this argument by claiming that God's actions are a special class and can be isolated from the rest of moral theorizing. The claim would be that God's actions are not inconsistent with our common sense morality, despite the fact that we have seen God allow horrific natural evils, for common sense morality only concerns *human* agents, or at least *non-divine* agents. On this view, common sense morality is not about agents *in general*. Accordingly, common sense morality asserts that it would be wrong of any *human* to allow an earthquake, but instances of God allowing an earthquake are not inconsistent with that. Keith Yandell suggests a reply of this sort when he writes:

...it does not follow that because we ought not to allow something, God ought not to allow it, or that because it is permissible or right for God to allow something, it is permissible or right for us to do so.¹⁰

But if God is a genuine moral agent, then we need to ask why his actions are outside the scope of common sense morality. It cannot simply be that different moral standards apply to God, for to say that would be to equivocate on our use of moral terms. If the goodness of God is to be judged by different, and unknown, standards, then the word "good" no longer has its ordinary meaning when applied to God, and theists should stop using it. Perhaps the skeptical theist will point out that God's circumstances are different from those of any human agent. For example, God is omniscient and it is thus possible that God knows something that justifies him in acting differently than any human should act. But there are now two routes the theist can take. First, she can tell us what makes God's circumstances so different, and why these differences justify God in allowing natural disasters; for example, the theist could tell us what sort of facts an omniscient God might know that would make it reasonable for him to act differently than

However, the point of the above argument, and the next one to follow, is that the skeptical theist *cannot* reasonably believe that the evidence she possesses is adequate to justify her doing that act.

¹⁰ Yandell (1993, p. 327).

human agents should act. But if the theist takes this route, she is back on the path of providing an actual theodicy—she is no longer taking the skeptical approach.

The second route, and the one the skeptical theist must take, is to say the following two things:

- I have no idea what facts make it right for God to allow suffering from natural evil, but
- I know that those facts are not relevant to any moral decision of mine—they can be safely ignored in my own moral deliberations.

However, these two claims are in significant tension with one another. If God's reasons are entirely unknown, then it is hard to fathom how the theist could possibly know that those reasons are not relevant to my situation. In general, if we don't know what facts are in a given set, then we can't know what that set of facts implies about us; if we are ignorant of certain facts, then our ignorance extends to implications of those facts.

There are some apparent exceptions to this general principle, but not of the sort that will help the skeptical theist. For example, there might be facts that make it a good idea for the Secretary of the Treasury to take certain complicated economic steps, and I may be ignorant of those facts; but a trusted economist friend might tell me something about them, e.g., that they entail that I should get out of the stock market. Thus I would know something about how a certain set of facts applies to me without actually knowing the facts themselves. Even in this case, of course, *someone* does know the facts, and I am simply relying on what my knowledgeable informant tells me. So the only way that this will be of help to the skeptical theist is if there is an agent who does know God's reasons, and can tell me that the reasons do not apply to my deliberations. But according to skeptical theism, no human will be in such a position; only God knows the facts that justifies his actions. The only possibility left open, it seems, is that God himself tells me that his reasons do not apply to me, and that I should ignore his actions. I respond to this sort of proposal in section 4 below.

Second argument

The second argument relies less on specific examples of natural evil and stems instead directly from the skeptical theist's own positive affirmations of our ignorance of

God's ways. Wykstra tells us that the gap between our vision and God's "is comparable to the gap between the vision of a parent and her one-month-old infant."¹¹ As Wykstra puts it, God's purposes have "seeability" from our standpoint, and we should not expect to be able to see the ultimate good that results from God's actions. Of course, Wykstra's claim here is quite general; it is not just that we can't understand why God allows earthquakes and the like. Rather, we should not, in general, expect to understand the good that comes of God's decisions, whether the decision be to act or not to act.

Of course, God, being omnipotent, could do all kinds of things at any given moment, from curing sick people, to tripping bank robbers, to undoing global warming. Or he could levitate my cup of coffee, which I foolishly left in the kitchen a few minutes ago, over to my spot here in the living room, so as to save me the trip. Or he could decide not to do that. There are countless things God might do or not do at any given moment, and, according to the skeptical theist, I cannot expect to see why he does or does not do any of them.

This ignorance on my part becomes important when I am considering performing some action of moral significance. For any given proposed action on my part, there will be various choices by God that are in the *vicinity* of my action. By that I mean the following. There are choices God apparently makes which are such that God's reasons or purposes *might* be relevant to the question of how I should act, depending on what his reasons are. Suppose, for example, that I am contemplating writing a \$100 check to Oxfam, hoping thereby to have some small effect on world hunger. There are various decisions by God that might be relevant here:

- God is not simply feeding the starving people in the world himself.
- God hasn't taken \$100 out of my bank account and sent it directly to Oxfam
- God created weather conditions that help contribute mightily to famine in parts of the world.

These decisions by God admittedly do not, by themselves, imply anything directly about what I ought to do. Perhaps God wouldn't dream of taking money from my account directly, for he wants it to be my choice to help people; perhaps he is creating adverse

¹¹ Wykstra (1996, p.129).

weather conditions and allowing starvation so as, in part, to give people like me the opportunity to help (this is the sort of theodicy that is pushed by Swinburne 1998). On these hypotheses about God's actions, it looks likely that I ought to proceed with my charitable donation, or at least we can say that God's reasons do not undermine my moral reasons for contributing to Oxfam. But if skeptical theism is true, then things are very different. According to skeptical theism, I simply cannot expect to understand God's purposes, and cannot expect to understand how it is that his actions ultimately lead to the most good. So, while it could be that God allows starvation precisely to give people like me an opportunity to do something about it, it is also entirely possible that God allows starvation because starvation itself is a good thing or leads to good things. Perhaps, for example, starvation is somehow good for the souls of the starving people, and Oxfam's interventions are messing with that. Since we just can't know why God allows starvation, we can't know what ultimate purpose is served and why it is good.

As I contemplate writing my check to Oxfam, this leaves me in a bind. On some hypotheses about the good served by God's actions, my writing a check is a good thing. On other hypotheses about God's purposes, my writing a check would in fact be a bad thing, for it would be acting against the very good God is trying to accomplish. If I am not a skeptical theist, I could weigh the reasons and probabilities, and perhaps I might be able to conclude that it is unlikely that attempts to feed hungry people will go against and undermine God's purposes. But if skeptical theism is correct, I can do no such weighing, for I am as able to divine God's purposes as an infant is able to divine a parent's. So I just don't know what God is trying to accomplish by allowing starvation, and accordingly just can't know whether my action will be in line with the ultimate good he is trying to achieve or will be directly contrary. And it is not just that I can't *know*; given the vastness of the gap between our vision and God's (according to the skeptical theist), I can't even begin to assign probabilities here. So I am left to conclude that I have no clue whether or not to write a check to Oxfam. I become morally paralyzed.

Of course, the point generalizes beyond this particular example. Let A be an action of potential moral significance. My claim is that there are almost always certain to be actions of God in the vicinity of A , and that there will be competing hypotheses, H_1 and H_2 , about the ultimate goods served, such that if H_1 is true, then my action would be

ultimately good, and if H_2 is true, then my action would be ultimately bad. (In the example above, H_1 would be that God allows starvation so as to give people like me the opportunity to combat it; H_2 would be that the starvation and suffering itself is a good thing, perhaps because it helps the souls of the victims somehow.) And given skeptical theism, we have no way of even assigning probabilities to H_1 and H_2 . So we have:

If H_1 is true, then my action would ultimately be good

If H_2 is true, then my action would ultimately not be good

I have no way even of assigning probabilities to H_1 or H_2 .

It will follow from this that I have no way of assigning a probability to the claim that my action will ultimately be good. For suppose that I did know that the probability of my action being ultimately good was 0.2. From the second statement above, if my action is good, then H_2 is not true. It then would follow that the probability of H_2 not being true is at least 0.2, contrary to the skeptical theist's view that we can assign no probability to H_1 or H_2 . So, given skeptical theism, I have no way of knowing whether any of my proposed actions is ultimately good; indeed, I cannot even assign a probability. And if I genuinely have no idea whether or not my action would be good, then I have no way of knowing whether or not to perform it. Once again, the result is that, if I were to take skeptical theism seriously, I should be morally paralyzed.

To fend off a misunderstanding of the argument, let me emphasize that by looking at God's actions when contemplating our own, we are not "playing God"; we are not pretending that we have God's insight or his knowledge. Rather, we are just recognizing that a good God has reasons for the things he does. As we are deciding what to do, some hypotheses about God's reasons will point in one direction, others will point in another direction. If we genuinely have no idea at all about which hypothesis is true, then we have no idea which direction we ought to be pointed.

Wykstra's own analogies actually make this point quite clearly. Recall the doctor trying to see germs on a needle by staring with the naked eye. Wykstra's point has to be that when we look for God's reasons for allowing the tsunami, we are like the doctor. Of course, in real life, the doctor has *other* ways of determining whether there are in fact germs on the needle: she can look with a microscope or perform various chemical tests. According to Wykstra's skeptical theism, we have no such fallback when it comes to

seeing the alleged good behind the tsunami. We are like infants compared to God, and nothing we can do in our short mortal life will change that. But this yields a massive problem for us: in terms of the analogy, we *really want to know* whether there are germs on the needle; out of the analogy, we *really want to know* whether there are good reasons for preventing suffering from natural disasters, cancer, or starvation. But, according to the skeptical theist, we have no way of knowing this.

The skeptical theist might reply that, while it is hard for us to make sense of God's choices, we should play it safe by simply eliminating suffering when we can. Of course, that can't be quite right as it stands. We know that we should not go around eliminating *any* suffering we can, for we know that many cases of suffering are not ultimately bad (e.g., I cause some of my students a degree of suffering when I give them the grades they deserve on papers; I caused my children to suffer pain when I had them vaccinated against various illnesses). But the theist still might propose that, since we can't have God's insight into when suffering serves a further good, we should just play it safe by operating in accord with common sense morality to the best of our abilities—calculating as best we can about when to eliminate suffering. Of course, the argument above indicates that if, when we are calculating, we take into account actions of God that are in the vicinity of our proposed action, then we will not be even able to assign probabilities to competing hypotheses about whether our proposed action is good. But the skeptical theist might suggest that we should just “play it safe” by doing the best we can, deliberately ignoring any thought or hypotheses about God's actions that are in the vicinity of ours.

But on what grounds are we to ignore God's actions? Why would we think that ignoring God's actions will make it more probable that our calculations will be correct? The skeptical theist would seem to be saying: “if we pay attention to the body of evidence provided by God's actions, then the problem of what to do is intractable; therefore we will ignore that evidence.” But this is absurd. Consider a non-theological example: suppose that the Food and Drug Administration in the United States is considering whether to approve a certain drug for human use. Perhaps the general background knowledge held by the FDA would indicate that it seems somewhat more

probable than not that the drug will be safe and effective. But suppose that there are also a number of large-scale randomized trials, and that these trials yield massively contradictory and uncertain results; on some of the studies the drug is incredibly toxic and dangerous, on others it is effective, on others it is neither. And we have no antecedent reason for accepting or rejecting any of these particular studies. Should the FDA say, “well, the problem seemed tractable before these studies came in; now it is not tractable, so we should just ignore these studies.” This would be the height of epistemic and moral irresponsibility. But it is, on this line of response, what the skeptical theist would be proposing. The actions of God, combined with skeptical theism, yield the result that we would lose all reason to trust our moral judgments. We cannot legitimately regain that trust by arbitrarily ignoring the actions of God.

Bergmann and Rea’s reply: “Do as I say, not as I do.”

The skeptical theist might reply a different way by saying that the paralysis is alleviated because God has given us instruction on how we ought to behave. Bergmann and Rea offer just this sort of reply.

theists very typically believe that God has commanded his creatures to behave in certain ways; and they also very typically believe that God’s commands provide all-things-considered reasons to act.¹²

Bergmann and Rea claim that even if, on skeptical theism, “we do not know *much* about the realm of value,” we still know something, for skeptical theism does not imply “that we lack knowledge of God’s commands *as* God’s commands.”¹³

There are two problems with this “do as I say, not as I do” reply. First, there are general epistemological worries about how the theist is to ascertain exactly what it is that God is commanding us to do. Second, there is an epistemological worry that is specific to skeptical theism: would we know what to do even if we knew what God was saying to us? I’ll take these in order.

¹² Bergmann and Rea (2005, p. 244).

¹³ Bergmann and Rea (2005, p. 244).

Given that it is contentious that God even exists, any claim to know what God is saying to us will certainly be contentious as well. Bergman and Rea are not explicit about God's medium or his message. Are God's moral commands delivered via scripture? tradition? individual revelation? Each of these options will be fraught with problems. Scripture and religious tradition seem to deliver quite dubious moral messages when taken at face value. For example, according to Leviticus (25:44-45), God told Moses, "Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves ... they will become your property."¹⁴ There can be ingenious attempts to interpret around these scriptural words, but one suspects that such attempts are informed not by exegetical first principles, but by a prior confidence in what are basically correct moral values; one then works to read these moral values back into scripture, even when scripture seems at odds with them. Such an interpretive approach might make some sense if we have some antecedent confidence in our ability to make moral judgments on our own, but the skeptical theist has thrown this confidence aside. On the Bergmann and Rea response, we are to do what God tells us to do, rather than reasoning things out on our own; so, we can't employ our common sense moral reasoning when interpreting what it is that God is telling us. So it will become very difficult to interpret around recalcitrant scriptural passages (e.g., those condoning slavery).

Perhaps the claim is that God gives us commands in a more subtle and interesting way, namely by implanting in us moral intuitions and a moral reasoning ability. Of course, it is not clear on what grounds we should infer that God is *commanding* us to use our intuitions and moral reasoning; within some within religious communities, particularly evangelical protestant communities, religious leaders insist that we trust scripture even if our own moral intuitions tell us otherwise. But there is a deeper problem than the evidential one. Surely we would be using our moral reasoning ability if we took into account God's actions and inactions as an example. This is all but explicit

¹⁴ There is a widely circulated letter on the internet mocking those who would simply cite Biblical injunctions against homosexuality. It is addressed to Laura Schlessinger, and asks questions such as: "I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?" The full letter can be seen at http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_drl.htm.

in the popular acronym “WWJD?” that demands that we ask what Jesus would do about any particular moral situation. But once we start taking into account God’s choices (e.g., to allow tsunamis, earthquakes, and starvation), then we are precisely where we began: we are forced to admit that we are incredibly ignorant about the ultimate good that results from any particular action, and we should be morally paralyzed. So, if God is commanding us to use our intuitions and moral reasoning ability, and if this is to be of any use in avoiding the arguments given in section 3, then the skeptical theist’s claim must be this: God tells us to use our intuitions and moral reasoning ability, except he also tells us that we are to ignore data that come from his own actions or inactions. But this position makes the general epistemological worry even more severe, for on what possible grounds can the skeptical theist claim to know that God has given us such a specific command?

The second problem is an epistemological worry that is more specific to skeptical theism. Whatever ordinary doubts we have concerning our ability to discern the word of God, skeptical theism multiplies those worries greatly. The skeptical theist’s official position is that we are like infants when it comes to understanding the vision of God. But if we can’t, in general, understand why God does what he does, then we should have no confidence in interpreting what we might otherwise take to be signs from him. In other words, skeptical theism gives us even more reason to doubt that we are correctly discerning the content of any message from God.

Moreover, even if we were quite sure that we knew the *content* of God’s message, we should still not know how to use this information. Here’s why. Suppose that it was absolutely clear and undeniable that God spoke to me and that he said, “Scott, give \$100 to Oxfam.” But, according to skeptical theism, I still cannot have any justified idea about the good God hopes to accomplish with any of his actions, *this one included*. I don’t know *why* he is giving me this message. There is more than one coherent hypothesis about God’s aim in speaking these words:

- God hopes that I will follow his command and give \$100 to Oxfam.
- God counts on the fact that I don’t like being told what to do, and that this message will lead me to put the \$100 toward some other purpose entirely.

Of course, we are inclined to think that a good agent would not ordinarily be deceptive, and that the second hypothesis is thus unlikely. But the skeptical theist says that we shouldn't expect to be able to discern God's reasons for his actions. When we see school buildings collapse on young children, we are supposed to remain detached and completely skeptical about our ability to discern God's purpose in allowing such suffering. Why does this skepticism suddenly disappear when interpreting alleged communicative acts of God? The skeptical theist is hoist by his own petard. If we are like infants before the purposes of God, then all bets are off, and we have no justification for assuming that God wants us to obey seemingly clear commands (if he gave us any, which is, of course, contentious).

Argument from design

The argument from design remains the most popular argument for the existence of God. But the theist who says that we shouldn't expect to understand God's ways when it comes to preventing suffering is prevented from affirming this argument. The argument from design, in all of its various forms, relies precisely on the assumption that we can understand something of God's motivations. We look at beautiful things in the world, at its order and symmetry, and the theist says, "I have an *explanation* for these facts, for these are the sorts of things that a good God would *want* to produce." If we didn't believe that a good God would want to produce beauty or order, then the existence of order and beauty would be utterly irrelevant to the existence of God. So to get any argument from design off the ground, one must believe that one knows something about God's purposes and motivations.

This point is sometimes missed, especially by proponents of Intelligent Design in the United States. They sometimes seem to argue that if we can't find a naturalistic, evolutionary explanation for some *X*, then *X* must be the result of intelligent design. At minimum, this would only even begin to follow if we know something about what an intelligent designer would want to do, and, in particular, that an intelligent designer would have reason to produce *X*. Without this assumption, *X* is left entirely unexplained by the intelligent design theory as well.

The point here is a fairly fundamental one about explanation. An explanation of *X* renders *X* unmysterious or unsurprising when, in the absence of explanation, *X* might have seemed mysterious or surprising. One might well suggest that the beauty of the world (or its order or its coherence) is something *prima facie* mysterious, something that could use an explanation. But to say that the existence of God *is* this explanation presupposes that the existence of God would render it unsurprising or unmysterious that the world is beautiful. In other words, the hypothesis that God exists must give us some reason to *expect* a beautiful world. But for the existence of God to give us reason to expect anything, we have to know something about what God would want to do.

This is true, in particular, for arguments based on the fine-tuning of the constants. It appears that a number of physical constants are arrayed within the very narrow range required for life, and one can argue that the probability of this is extremely small. By itself, this fact is meaningless; any particular arrangement of the constants will appear to be exceedingly unlikely. In and of itself, mere unlikelihood of the arrangement we have is no evidence at all in favor of design. The fine-tuning can be used as part of an argument for the existence of God only if we can say that theism would lead us to *expect* that the constants would be in that range. Many theists, of course, say that God, because of his goodness, would likely *want* a universe in which life could evolve. Such theists might be able to parlay this into the claim that that theism explains the fine-tuning of the constants, but that atheism does not. But note that theism explains the fine-tuning only if we have some expectations about what a good God would do, and, in particular, that he would want to create a universe with conditions appropriate to life. All of this goes by the wayside on skeptical theism. If we don't know why God allows suffering, then this ignorance presumably stems from our inability to fathom God's ways in general. Wykstra himself is fairly explicit on this point, as he argues generally from "the disparity between a creator's vision and ours". My point is simply that you can't insulate our epistemic humility and assume that it only applies when God fails to prevent suffering. If God's ways are mysterious when it comes to earthquakes or allowing 25,000 people a day to starve to death, then his ways are mysterious *simpliciter*, and the theist no longer has any particular reason to expect that God would want a universe with life or with beauty or with anything else. So even if skeptical theism worked as an answer to the

argument from evil, and even if it did not land us in moral paralysis, it would undercut any reason we have to believe in God based on the beauty of the world.

Acknowledgments: I delivered a draft of portions of this paper at the Ian Ramsey Center Conference on “God, Nature, and Design” in July 2008. I am grateful to the comments of the audience there, and especially grateful to Jason Marsh, Jon Marsh, Tim Mawson, Neil Manson, and J. Brian Pitts for an enlightening and useful follow up conversation. A much earlier version of these ideas was presented in Madison, Wisconsin in 2005 at a conference in honor of Keith Yandell. Still earlier versions have been presented in my classes at Bowdoin College over the last decade.

References

- Almeida, M and Oppy, G. (2003). Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. 81(4), 496-516
- Bergmann, M. (2001). Skeptical theism and Rowe’s new evidential argument from evil. *Nous*. 35(2), 278-296
- Bergmann, M. and Rea, M. (2005). In defence of skeptical theism: a reply to Almeida and Oppy. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. 83(2), 241-251.
- Kirby, A. (2003). “UN Warns of Future Water Crisis,” BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/2818615.stm>, accessed on October 6, 2008
- Sanderson, H. (2008). “Seismologist: China Quake Had No Warning Signs,” Associated Press Online.
- Swinburne, R. (1998). *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wykstra, S. (1996). Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil, in D. Howard-Snyder (Ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (pp. 126-150). Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Yandell, K. (1993). *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. New York: Cambridge University Press