

Reply to Trakakis and Nagasawa

Nick Trakakis and Yujin Nagasawa (2004) criticise the argument in Almeida and Oppy (2003). According to Trakakis and Nagasawa, we are mistaken in our claim that the sceptical theist response to evidential arguments from evil is unacceptable because it would undermine ordinary moral reasoning. In their view, there is no good reason to think that sceptical theism leads to an objectionable form of moral scepticism.

We beg to differ. In our view, the criticisms of Trakakis and Nagasawa do not touch the heart of our objection to sceptical theism. However, in order to defend this contention, we need to begin by recapping the discussion to this point.

1.

We take the following as our representative evidential argument from evil:

- (E1) We have been unable to find even *pro tanto* reasons why the world would not be non-arbitrarily improved if a perfect being prevented E. (Premise)
- (E2) (Therefore) There are not even *pro tanto* reasons why the world would not be non-arbitrarily improved if a perfect being prevented E. (From 1)
- (E3) There are at least *pro tanto* reasons why the world would be non-arbitrarily improved if a perfect being prevented E. (Premise)
- (E4) (Therefore) There is all-things-considered reason why the world would be non-arbitrarily improved if a perfect being prevented E. (From 2, 3)
- (E5) (Therefore) The world would be non-arbitrarily improved if a perfect being prevented E. (From 4)
- (E6) (Therefore) There is no perfect being. (From 5)

The target of the sceptical theist critique of this argument is the move from (1) to (2). According to sceptical theists, quite general considerations about our cognitive limitations suffice to show that no reasonable person should suppose that the move from (1) to (2) is good. A canonical example of this sceptical theist response may be found in Bergmann (2001) and Bergmann and Rea (forthcoming), where we discover the following argument:

- (B1) We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially God-justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us; and we have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially God-justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us;

and we have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and permission of possible evils, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially God-justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us.

(B2) (Therefore) The following argument:

E1a: After thinking hard, we can't think of any (even) potentially God-justifying reason for permitting some horrific evil

E1b: Therefore, it is likely that there is no God-justifying reason for permitting that horrific evil.

should be rejected by all reasonable people.

Although we don't put the point quite this way in Almeida and Oppy (2003), our chief objection to this argument is that it is on all fours with the following argument:

(C1) We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially human-justifying reason for permitting preventable evils that we see around us; and we have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially human-justifying reason for permitting the preventable evils that we see around us; and we have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and permission of possible evils, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially human-justifying reason for permitting the preventable evils that we see around us.

(C2) (Therefore) The following argument:

C1a: After thinking hard, we can't think of any (even) potentially human-justifying reason for permitting the readily preventable horrific evils that we see around us.

C1b: Therefore, it is likely that there is no human-justifying reason for permitting the readily preventable horrific evils that we see around us.

should be rejected by all reasonable people.

But this argument is plainly unacceptable. In particular, we say, it is clear that the argument from C1a to C1b. ought not to be rejected by *all* reasonable people. And we say this because we think: (1) that C1b. is needed for ordinary moral reasoning; and (2) that, for *many* (if not all) reasonable people, there is no justification for C1b. that does not go by way of C1a.

2

Trakakis and Nagasawa make three major criticisms of the argument of Almeida and Oppy. First, they claim that the sceptical theist need not be committed to a sweeping thesis about our lack of knowledge with respect to the realm of value; instead, the sceptical theist might be committed to a moderate claim about our lack of knowledge of God's purposes and intentions. Second, they say that, as a matter of principle, unknown goods cannot justify our actions. And, third, they hold that sceptical theists might reasonably insist that that the evils at issue in evidential arguments from evil are such that only God could be justified in permitting them to occur.

As we made clear in Almeida and Oppy (2003), we take it that, as a matter of definition, sceptical theists are committed to a sweeping thesis about our lack of knowledge with respect to the realm of value. The sweeping thesis is quite explicit in Bergmann (2001), Alston (1991) (1996) and Howard-Snyder (1996), i.e. it is explicit in the main targets of Almeida and Oppy (2003). Moreover, we explicitly acknowledged that theists could quite reasonably accept the moderate claim, e.g. on the basis of what Rowe calls the "Moore shift". Given that God permits the horrible evils, and given that we are unable to figure out God's reasons for this permission, we can infer that God has reasons that are unknown to us for permitting those evils. Taking this route does not, as far as we can see, open one up to the charge of moral scepticism. So, we say the first suggestion made by Trakakis and Nagasawa fails to engage with our argument: it is not open to *sceptical theists* to endorse only the moderate claim without renouncing their sceptical theism.¹

On their own admission, the second criticism advanced by Trakakis and Nagasawa depends upon the first: if sceptical theism is a sweeping thesis about our lack of knowledge with respect to the realm of value, then the adoption of sceptical theism lays one open to the charge that recognition of one's ignorance concerning the probability of there being unknown goods can undermine one's ability to make all-things-considered judgments about what to do. Since, as we have already indicated, we think that it is simply an analytic truth that sceptical theists are committed to the sweeping thesis, we

¹ Matters don't end with the point made in the main text. For suppose we were to allow what we might call "limited scepticism", i.e. scepticism concerning God's purposes and intentions in allowing evil. We can then certainly argue in the following way.

1. We (human beings) are always (at least) morally permitted not to interfere with the purposes of God.
2. For all we can tell, there are divine purposes in allowing certain evils.
3. (Therefore) For all we know, we are morally permitted not to interfere with those evils.

But of course (3) is false. We *do* know that we are not morally permitted not to interfere with those evils. So this tack is not going to help "limited sceptical theists".

say that the second criticism advanced by Trakakis and Nagasawa also fails to engage with our argument.

The third criticism advanced by Trakakis and Nagasawa requires a little more development. We claim that, insofar as sceptical theists rely only on quite general considerations about our cognitive limitations, they have no grounds for giving differential treatment to (B1) and (C1). If considerations concerning our ignorance of possible goods, possible evils, and the possible connections between possible goods and possible evils are sufficient reason for acceptance of (B1), then those same considerations are also sufficient reason for acceptance of (C1). In effect, the reply of Trakakis and Nagasawa is to insist that we might find grounds for distinguishing between (B1) and (C1) by appealing to the difference in roles that are occupied by us and by God. Perhaps, for example, God has rights over us that we do not have over each other: only God is in a position in which there is entitlement to permit horrific evils. But we insist that this reply is not available to sceptical theists. True enough, it may be reasonable for theists to distinguish between (B1) and (C1) on these kinds of grounds: perhaps, for example, we have it on God's authority that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially human-justifying reason for permitting preventable evils that we see around us. However, the sceptical theist claim is that considerations about our cognitive limitations are, *in themselves*, sufficient reason for acceptance of (B1) on the part of all reasonable people. Surely this cannot be so.

We conclude, contrary to the claim of Trakakis and Nagasawa, that they have not succeeded in showing that our attempt to implicate the sceptical theism in moral scepticism should be viewed with a measure of scepticism. If there is something wrong with our objection to sceptical theism, the error remains to be detected.

References

- Almeida, M. and Oppy, G. (2003) "Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81, 496-516
- Alston, W. (1991) "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition" in J. Tomberlin *Philosophical Perspectives 5: Philosophy of Religion* Atascadero CA: Ridgeview, 29-67
- Alston, W. (1996) "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil" in D. Howard-Snyder (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 311-32
- Bergmann, M. (2001) "Sceptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil" *Nous* 35, 278-96
- Bergmann, M. and Rae, M. (forthcoming) "In Defence of Sceptical Theism: A Reply to Almeida and Oppy" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*
- Howard-Snyder, D. (1996) "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil" in D. Howard-Snyder (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 286-310

Trakakis, N. and Nagasawa, Y. (2004) "Sceptical Theism and Moral Scepticism" *Ars Disputandi* [<http://www.ArsDisputandi.org>] 4