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Penultimate Draft

Skeptical Theism Proved

Abstract: Skeptical theism is a popular response to arguments from evil. Many hold that it undermines a key inference often used by such arguments. However, the case for skeptical theism is often kept at an intuitive level: no one has offered an explicit argument for the truth of skeptical theism. In this article, I aim to remedy this situation: I construct an explicit, rigorous argument for the truth (of one version) of skeptical theism.

1. Introduction

Skeptical theism is a popular response to arguments from evil. Many hold that it undermines a key inference often used by such arguments. However, the case for skeptical theism is often kept at an intuitive level: no one has offered an explicit argument for the truth of skeptical theism. In this article, I aim to remedy this situation: I construct an explicit, rigorous argument for the truth (of one version) of skeptical theism.

2. Skeptical Theism and Arguments from Evil

Take some evil E. A God-justifying good for E is a good G that is such that God would (at least possibly) be justified in bringing about (or allowing) E for the sake of G. A good is a God-justifying good if and only if (i) it outweighs E and (ii) it could not have obtained without E (or something as bad as or worse than E) obtaining.¹ Some arguments from evil rely on something like the following inference:

(1) We know of no God-justifying good for an evil E.

¹ This is a standard understanding of God-justifying goods (what Michael Bergmann (2012) calls God-justifying *reasons* and what others call *morally* justifying reasons). See e.g. Rowe (1979: 336), where he says “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” and Bergmann (2012: 11), where he says “a good state of affairs G—which might just be the prevention of some bad state of affairs E*—counts as a God-justifying reason for permitting an evil E if and only if (i) G’s goodness outweighs E’s badness and (ii) G couldn’t be obtained without permitting E or something as bad or worse.” (2012: 11, footnote 5) Many other philosophers operate with this understanding of a God-justifying good, see e.g. William Alston (1991), Daniel Howard-Snyder (1996), Hud Hudson (2014a), Stephen Maitzen (2014), William Rowe (1991), (1996), and (2006), and Michael Bergmann (2001) and (2012).

(2) Therefore, probably, there is no such good.²

Since it is assumed that God's existence is incompatible with *gratuitous evil*³—evil for which there is no God-justifying good—it follows that, probably, God does not exist. Skeptical theists reject the inference from premise (1) to (2): they claim that our (supposed) lack of knowledge of a God-justifying good does not render it probable that there is no such good, and hence this version of the argument from evil fails.⁴

Skeptical theism comes in many varieties (for different examples, see Cullison 2014, DePoe 2017, Hudson 2013 and 2014a, and Wykstra 1984 and 1996). However, in this article, I will be exclusively concerned with one particular type of skeptical theism. For the purposes of this article, a skeptical theist is a monotheist that affirms the following thesis:

SKEPTICISM: We have no good reason to think that the goods and evils that we know are (causally)⁵ connected to some instance of evil are representative, in respect to their value, of the actual goods and evils that are connected to said instance of evil. (Hendricks 2018a: 116)

Goods and evils are taken to be states of affairs, and different states of affairs have different values. Take some disvaluable (bad) state of affairs X. If a state of affairs Y outweighs X *and* Y could not have obtained without X, then Y (at least possibly) justifies one in allowing X. More exactly, one is justified in allowing X *only if* the total value of the *set of states of affairs* that are produced by X is greater than the total value of the set of state of affairs that would have obtained had X not occurred. Thus, it is a necessary condition for God to be justified in allowing X that the sets of states of affairs produced by X are more valuable than the set of states of affairs produced by $\sim X$.⁶ In the terminology introduced above, if the set of states of affairs produced by X is greater than the set produced by $\sim X$, it is a God-justifying good. The inference from (1) to (2) claims that this necessary condition is probably not satisfied, and hence there is probably gratuitous evil, and hence God probably does not exist.

² The most prominent proponent of this inference is William Rowe (1979).

³ While this assumption is common and will be taken for granted in this article, a growing number of philosophers reject it (see, for example, Hasker 2008, Rubio 2018, Mooney forthcoming, Sullivan 2013, and van Inwagen 2006).

⁴ Skeptical theists have argued that skeptical theism undermines other arguments from evil as well, see e.g. Bergmann (2009) and Howard-Snyder and Bergmann (2004).

⁵ There is some controversy as to whether a good being *causally* connected to an evil is sufficient for it to be a God-justifying good. While Kirk Durston (2000) thinks it is, Paul Draper (2013) and others think it is not—they hold that there must be a *logical* connection. However, my argument works for either view, as I illustrate in footnote 9.

⁶ It is implied here that the set of states of affairs produced by X could not have obtained via $\sim X$.

So, in determining whether there is a God-justifying good for X , we need to know the total value of the set of states of affairs connected to X and the total of the set of states of affairs connected to $\sim X$. As such, SKEPTICISM amounts to the claim that we have no good reason for thinking that the states of affairs that we know are (causally) connected to some instance of evil are representative, in respect to value, of the actual states of affairs (causally) connected to the prior mentioned instance of evil. Crucially, this (SKEPTICISM) entails that we have no good reason to think that the total value of the set of states of affairs that are actually connected to some instance of evil E fall within a particular range of value: if we have no good reason for thinking that the value of the states of affairs *actually* connected to E fall within the same value range (are representative) of the states of affairs connected to E that we know of, then we have no good reason to think that the total value of the set of states of affairs actually connected to E falls within a particular value range. And if we have no good reason to think that the set of states of affairs actually connected to E fall within a particular value range, then we cannot infer that there probably is no God-justifying good for E , since to say that is to say that the total value of the set of states of affairs connected to E is probably lower than the total value of the set of states of affairs that would have come about if $\sim E$ obtained. (I illustrate this further at the end of section 3.2.)

More abstractly, the reason many hold that SKEPTICISM undermines the inference from (1) to (2) is due to the idea is that an inductive inference is only justified if we have good reason to think that the sample one is inferring from is *representative*. If we have no good reason to think the sample is representative, then the inductive inference it supports is unjustified. Some examples will help illuminate why this is so.

Suppose that Mary, a scientist, conducted a study that (she claims) showed that drug D cured cancer in the patients that participated in the study. And suppose that Mary inferred from the fact that it cured the patients involved in her study that D would cure all cancer patients. However, suppose that Mary did not give any indication of the steps she took to ensure that her sample of cancer patients used in her study is representative of all cancer patients. And suppose further that when pressed in person, Mary did not produce any good reason for thinking that her sample of cancer patients is representative. In such a case, we should not accept the conclusion of her inference: while her conclusion may be correct, we are unjustified in accepting it on the basis of her inductive inference.

Consider another example (borrowed from Hudson 2011 and 2014b): I suspect there is a rabbit in my garden, so I hire the A1 Rabbit Extermination Team to investigate. The team arrives and begins to look around for rabbits. After 20 minutes, they come and tell me that they have checked my garden and there are not any rabbits in it. "How do you know this?" I ask. They reply that they checked part of the garden and found no rabbits. They inferred from their finding

no rabbits in that part of the garden that there probably are not any rabbits in the whole garden. If they have good reason to think that the part of the garden they checked is representative of the whole garden in respect to rabbit population, then this inference is justified and I should be happy with the job they have done. I want to put my mind at ease, so before paying them for their work, I ask “Why should I think the section of the garden that you checked is representative? What steps did you take to ensure that it was?” In response, they give me no good reason to think that it is and are not able to tell me any steps they took to ensure that the section they checked is representative. I am not impressed by their response. The right move here is to hire a new pest control service. The A1 Rabbit Extermination Team has not given me good reason to think that they have done their job well: they have given me no good reason to think that there are no rabbits in my garden, and I am not justified in accepting their inference. Indeed, since they have no good reason to think that there are no rabbits in my garden, *they* are not justified in accepting their inference either.

In respect to arguments from evil, and in particular the inference from premise (1) to (2), the question is whether our sample of goods and evils (i.e. states of affairs) we know of is representative. And the relevant property in respect to representativeness of our sample of goods and evils is the value of the goods and evils (state of affairs) we know of (see Hendricks 2018a). SKEPTICISM, however, says that we have no good reason to think that our sample of goods is representative in respect to value. Hence, given that an inductive inference is only justified if we have good reason to think its sample is representative, SKEPTICISM undermines arguments from evil that rely on an inductive inference like the one above. While there is more to say about this normative premise, the purpose of this article is to show that SKEPTICISM is true, not defend the normative premise.⁷

Obviously, only *theists* can be *skeptical theists*. However, skeptical theists think that everyone, including atheists, should accept the skeptical component of skeptical theism. That is, skeptical theists think that everyone should endorse SKEPTICISM, and hence everyone ought to reject (certain) arguments from evil. Unfortunately, reasons for endorsing SKEPTICISM run slim. To motivate SKEPTICISM, sometimes we are given an analogy about parents and children (e.g. Wykstra 1984) or an analogy about rabbits and gardens (Hudson 2014b). Other times, we are reminded that humans are cognitively limited creatures (e.g. Alston 1989 and Bergmann 2001). However, these analogies and reminders will (likely) not pressure the anti-skeptical theist to adopt SKEPTICISM: those who do not already endorse SKEPTICISM are unlikely to be persuaded by these analogies and reminders. Perhaps due to the tendency of skeptical theists to stay at the intuitive level, direct challenges to SKEPTICISM are difficult to come by, with Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs 2016 being an exception. (See Hendricks 2018a for a response). Below, I

⁷ For more on this normative premise, see Alston 1989, Bergmann 2001, and Hudson 2006, 2014b, and 2017.

aim to remedy this situation: I will put forth an explicit argument for the truth of SKEPTICISM, that shows that *everyone* ought to endorse it.

2.1 Clarifying Scope: What I *Will* and Will *Not* Argue

The topic of this article is concentrated exclusively on why we should endorse SKEPTICISM. There are many other issues that pertain to skeptical theism and the problem of evil that I will simply gloss over. This is in part because these issues have been addressed elsewhere and in part because addressing those issues would take this article far astray from its central thesis. In this section, I will briefly make explicit the scope of this article.

Since I have argued elsewhere (Hendricks 2018a) that SKEPTICISM is a plausible way to understand skeptical theism as it is advocated by Michael Bergmann (e.g. Bergmann 2001), I will not rehearse those arguments here. Instead, I will take for granted that SKEPTICISM approximates to the skeptical theism that Bergmann advocates. Additionally, I will not enter the ongoing debate about whether SKEPTICISM entails some sort of excessive skepticism. Many articles have been written on this issue, and it would take far too many words to do the problem justice.⁸ What I *will* do in this article is this: I will put forth an argument for the truth of SKEPTICISM: I will try to show that everyone, theist or not, should endorse SKEPTICISM.

3. THE PRECLUSION ARGUMENT

In this section, I will introduce and defend three theses, and show that they entail SKEPTICISM.

3.1 CONNECTION

Consider the following thesis:

CONNECTION: if (i) S knows that some event E occurred, (ii) S has no good reason to think that there is no state of affairs x connected to E such that S knows nothing significant about x, then (iii) S has no good reason to think that there is no x connected to E such that the value of x is inscrutable to S.

The inference from (i) and (ii) to (iii) seems rather uncontroversial: if I know nothing significant about x, then the value of x will no doubt be inscrutable to me. Indeed, it seems to follow by definition. Let us say that a state of affairs is inscrutable just in case we know nothing significant about it. Rephrased, then, CONNECTION states that the value of an inscrutable state of affairs is inscrutable.

⁸ For arguments to the effect that SKEPTICISM entails some sort of excessive skepticism, see e.g. Stephen Maitzen (2014), Erik Wielenberg (2010), and Hud Hudson (2014b) and (2017) (Hudson is a skeptical theist, but he worries about its skeptical implications). For defenses of skeptical theism against these worries, see e.g. Bergmann (2012), Daniel Howard-Snyder (2009), Michael Rea (2013), and Hendricks (2018b), (forthcoming a), and (forthcoming b).

3.2 PRECLUSION

Now consider:

PRECLUSION: if for some event E that S knows of, she has no good reason to think that there is no inscrutable state of affairs connected to E, then S has no good reason to think that the value of the states of affairs connected to E that she knows of are representative of the value of the states of affairs actually connected to E.

PRECLUSION, like CONNECTION, seems obviously true: if I have no good reason to think that there is no state of affairs x such that (a) x is inscrutable and (b) x is connected to E, then I have no good reason for thinking that all states of affairs connected to E fall within the same range of value. To illustrate this, suppose I am considering a set of states of affairs {w, x, y} connected to E, as detailed in Figure 1. And suppose further that I have no good reason to think that there is no state of affairs, call it v*, connected to E such that the value of v* is inscrutable.

| States of affairs (possibly) connected to E | v* | w | x | y |
|---|----|----|----|----|
| Value of states of affairs | ? | 15 | 25 | 30 |

Figure 1 (“?” = the value is inscrutable, and “*” = I have no good reason to think it is not connected to E)

The fact that v* is an inscrutable state of affairs means that I have no good reason to think that its value falls in the range of {w, x, y}, and if I have no good reason for thinking its value falls in that range, then—since I have no good reason to think v* is not connected to E—I have no good reason to think {w, x, y} are representative, in respect to value, of the states of affairs actually connected to E. Indeed, if I did have good reason to think that the value of v* falls into the range of {w, x, y}, it would follow that it is *not* an inscrutable state of affairs: if I have a good reason to think that the value of v* falls within the range {w, x, y}, then I have at least some idea of its value (namely, that it is probably within the range of {w, x, y}), and therefore its value is not inscrutable. And hence the inscrutability of v* conjoined with the fact that I have no good reason to think that it is not connected to E entails that I have no good reason to think that the value range of {w, x, y} is representative of the states of affairs actually connected to E. Crucially, this means that I have no good reason for thinking that the total value of the set of states of affairs

connected to E falls within any particular range, and this means that the total value of the set of states of affairs connected to E is inscrutable: since I have no good reason for thinking that v^* is not connected to E and it is inscrutable—its value could be incredibly high, middling, or incredibly low—I have no good reason for thinking that the total value of the set of states of affairs connected to E falls within any particular range. For example, suppose v^* actually obtains and is actually connected to E. Suppose further that the value of v^* is incredibly high, say $10^{10,000}$. If that is the case, then, assuming the only other states of affairs connected to E are w , x , and y , the total value of the set of states of affairs produced by E (i.e. $\{v^*, w, x, y\}$) is incredibly high, and is not reflected by the value of $\{w, x, y\}$. This, again, is why SKEPTICISM is held to undermine arguments from evil. (See section 2.)

3.3 EVENT

Finally, consider the following thesis:

EVENT: For any event (good, evil, ordinary) E, we have no good reason to think that there are no inscrutable states of affairs (causally) connected to E.⁹

EVENT, I take it, is fairly obvious: while some event we know of may appear to have no connection to inscrutable states of affairs, this does not justify the conclusion that there are no such states of affairs connected to it: we have no good reason for thinking that some event we know of is not causally connected to an inscrutable state of affairs. This is because many connections are separated by long periods of time, making it more difficult to perceive them. For example, there is a long period of time between smoking (consistently) and getting cancer, which makes it more difficult to see the connection between these states of affairs.

⁹ As stated earlier (footnote 5), SKEPTICISM and my argument can be run in terms of logical connections between goods and evils. Read this way, EVENT claims that for any event E, we have no good reason to think that there are no inscrutable states of affairs *logically* connected to E. Call this revision EVENT*. EVENT* seems clearly true. This is because humans are not the types of beings that, if there is a logical connection between states of affairs, they will probably know about it. Indeed, as illustrated in my discussion of *a posteriori* necessary truths below, humans are not the types of beings that are good at identifying logical connections—logical connections are difficult to discern for humans. So, our lack of knowledge of an inscrutable state of affairs logically connected to E certainly is not a good reason to think there are no such states of affairs. Additionally, events are often complex, making their logical connections even more difficult to discern. This becomes clearer when we consider *a posteriori* necessary truths. For example, if genetic essentialism is true—the thesis (very roughly) that a person S could not have existed with different genetic makeup—then there is a logical connection between any event involving S and the state of affairs consisting of her genetic makeup. Or, suppose that the mind-brain identity theory is right, and to be in e.g. *pain* is to have brain state B. If this is the case, then there is a logical connection between any event that includes pain and B. The truth value of these theses (i.e. genetic essentialism and the mind-brain identity theory) is not obvious, which casts doubt on just what logical connections between events and states of affairs there are. This problem gets worse considering numerous other epistemically possible *a posteriori* necessary truths. Additionally, it is difficult to discern logical connections between present events and past states of affairs and equally difficult to discern logical connections between present events and future (or present but far removed from human experience) states of affairs. This all strongly supports EVENT*.

Moreover, many connections have not yet occurred (such as the connections between current events and future states of affairs), and many current events are connected to states of affairs that have obtained in the past, making it all the more difficult to discern them. For example, World War II ended the way it did largely due to Winston Churchill's actions. That particular state of affairs—the end of World War II—was connected to an event that is easy to gloss over: the position that Lady Randolph Churchill slept in on the night Winston Churchill was conceived. Had Lady Randolph Churchill slept in any other position, the route of the spermatozoa would very likely have been altered, which would make it very likely that her son would have different chromosomes, making it such that her son would have been very different from the Winston Churchill we came to know, and this would make it very likely that World War II would have ended differently. When the end of World War II was current, it would have no doubt been difficult to see how that state of affairs was connected to the earlier, seemingly insignificant event of Lady Randolph Churchill sleeping in such and such a position. (I borrow this example from (Durstun 2000: 66.) Clearly, then, it can be difficult to perceive connections of present events with past states of affairs.

Furthermore, some connections are complex and therefore difficult for humans to perceive. For example, consider again smoking: many years ago, it wasn't obvious to anyone that smoking was connected to getting cancer: the connection between smoking and getting cancer was complex, and took some time to discern. There are no doubt other connections between states of affairs that are complex and difficult (or perhaps impossible) for humans to discern. Because of the complexity of connections, the fact that we cannot perceive (many) future connections, and the fact that it is difficult to discern connections between a current event and a past state of affairs connected to it, we have no good reason to think that there aren't any inscrutable states of affairs connected to any event. (Indeed, since we know that for any event we observe, there are very likely distant (past and future) states of affairs connected to it that we know nothing about, we have good reason to think that there are inscrutable states of affairs connected to it). And hence, EVENT is secured.

3.4 From CONNECTION, PRECLUSION, and EVENT to SKEPTICISM

EVENT and CONNECTION entail that for any event E we know of, we have no good reason for thinking that there are not inscrutable states of affairs connected to E. However, this means that PRECLUSION holds for *all* E we know of, meaning that for *any* E, we have no good reason to think that value of the states of affairs that we know are connected to E are representative. But, of course, this is just a generalized way of stating SKEPTICISM: “instances of evil” referred to in SKEPTICISM are just particular events, and EVENT and CONNECTION, therefore, entail that for any instance of evil (event), we have no good reason to think that there are not inscrutable states of affairs connected to it. And from this, PRECLUSION entails that we have no good reason to think

that the value of the states of affairs that we know are connected to some instance of evil are representative, in respect to value, of the states of affairs that are actually connected to said instance of evil. And this means that we have no good reason to think that the value of the states of affairs we know are connected to E are representative of the value of the states of affairs actually connected to E. And hence EVENT, CONNECTION, and PRECLUSION entail SKEPTICISM which, as we saw above, undermines arguments from evil. More formally, we may put this argument as follows:

THE PRECLUSION ARGUMENT

- (3) For any E we know of, we have no good reason for thinking that there are not inscrutable states of affairs connected to E. (From EVENT and CONNECTION.)
- (4) Therefore, for any E we know, we have no good reason to think that that the states of affairs we know are connected to E are representative in respect to value of the actual states of affairs connected to E. (From (3) and PRECLUSION.)
- (5) Therefore, SKEPTICISM. (From (4).)

To deny THE PRECLUSION ARGUMENT, one must deny EVENT, CONNECTION, or PRECLUSION. But this is an unenviable position to be in since these theses seem clearly true.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have used THE PRECLUSION ARGUMENT to show that SKEPTICISM is true. Critics of skeptical theism, therefore, owe us an explanation for why THE PRECLUSION ARGUMENT fails.¹⁰

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¹⁰ For comments on this article, thanks to Paul Draper and Brett Lunn. And thanks especially to G.L.G—Colin Patrick Mitchell—for particularly insightful comments.

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