Skeptical Theism, Fideism, and Pyrrhonian Skepticism

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Abstract

Is skeptical theism tenable once one acknowledges, as proponents of that view do, one's cognitive limitations vis-à-vis religious matters? In this article, I aim to answer that question both by examining the apparent radical skeptical implications of the skeptical component of skeptical theism and by comparing this view with fideism and Pyrrhonism, which also lay emphasis on our cognitive limitations. My ultimate purpose is to determine which of the three stances it makes more sense to adopt once the limitations of human cognitive powers are recognized.

Keywords: Skeptical Theism, Fideism, Pyrrhonism, Cognitive Limitations, Intellectual Humility.

1. Introduction

Skeptical theism is a common view among analytic philosophers of religion who are concerned with the challenge posed by the existence of apparently gratuitous evil. But is skeptical theism tenable once one acknowledges, as proponents of that view do, one's cognitive limitations vis-à-vis religious matters? In this article, I aim to answer that question both by examining the apparent radical skeptical implications of the skeptical component of skeptical theism and by comparing this view with fideism and Pyrrhonism, which also lay emphasis on our cognitive limitations.

I will describe those three stances in more detail in the subsequent sections, but for now it suffices to offer the following succinct characterizations. Skeptical theism is the view that we should be skeptical

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about our capacity to fully know or understand God's reasons for acting or refraining from acting in a certain way. Fideism is the view that reason is, at least by itself, useless for attaining knowledge or justified belief about religious matters in general, faith being either the only or the primary means to acquire religious knowledge or justified religious beliefs. And Pyrrhonism is a form of skepticism that, applied to religious matters, consists in suspending judgment about, among other issues, whether God exists, whether (if God exists) he has certain attributes, and whether human cognitive powers are intrinsically useless for acquiring religious knowledge or justified religious beliefs. My ultimate purpose in this article is to show that Pyrrhonism is the stance that it makes more sense to adopt once the limitations of human cognitive powers are recognized.

Here is a bird's-eye view of the article. In Section 2, I first briefly present the evidential version of the argument from evil. I then describe the replies offered by the theodicist and the skeptical theist, focusing on the latter's reply. In Section 3, I explore three types of skepticism one seems compelled to adopt if one accepts the skeptical component of skeptical theism and argue that skeptical theists have not provided compelling reasons to reject the claim that their position has radical skeptical implications. Then, in Section 4, I succinctly present two types of fideism and consider whether they are positions that the skeptical theist might be willing to adopt if he realizes that the skeptical component of his view has radical skeptical implications. In Section 5, I examine whether Pyrrhonian skepticism is a more consistent stance than both skeptical theism and fideism given the recognition of the limitations of human cognitive capacities. In Section 6, I offer some concluding remarks.

2. The Argument from Evil and Skeptical Theism

The so-called argument from evil is an argument for atheism rather than agnosticism. In other words, it is an argument for an ontological rather than an epistemological form of religious skepticism. I will first offer a brief characterization of the evidential version of the argument from evil to set the stage for the presentation of skeptical theism. I hasten to remark that I will not be concerned with the soundness of the argument from evil.

According to the evidential version of the argument from evil, although the existence of evil is not logically inconsistent with the existence of the God of theism – as the logical version of the argument maintains – it is more probable given atheism than given theism. For this reason, the existence of evil constitutes strong evidence against the existence of God. This version of the argument lays emphasis on the notion of gratuitous or pointless evil, which is an evil that is such that there are no God-justifying reasons either

for directly bringing it about or for permitting it. What is a God-justifying reason? According to Michael Bergmann (2009, p. 376), «a good state of affairs G […] is a God-justifying reason for permitting an evil E if and only if (1) G's goodness outweighs E's badness and (2) G couldn't be obtained without permitting E or something as bad or worse». An evil for which we cannot think of a God-justifying reason is commonly called "inscrutable". Here is a possible formulation of the evidential version of the argument:

The evidential argument from evil
(1) For some actual evils we know of, we can't think of any God-justifying reason for permitting them.
(2) So probably there aren't any God-justifying reasons for permitting those evils.
(3) If God existed, he wouldn't permit those evils if there were no God-justifying reason for permitting them.
(4) Therefore, probably God does not exist (Bergmann, 2012, p. 11).

The crucial step of the argument is the inference from (1) to (2), so much so that most variants of the evidential argument from evil make a similar inference[1]. Stephen Wykstra (1996, p. 126) calls this type of inference "noseeum inference": since we do not see 'um (i.e., the goods that outweigh the horrific evils), they probably do not exist.

Theists have followed two main strategies for responding to the evidential argument from evil. One strategy is to propose a theodicy, which usually consists in denying that there are gratuitous evils: theodicists reject premise (2) of the evidential argument from evil because, by their lights, one can think of some God-justifying reasons for directly causing or allowing even the most horrific evils. Theodicists can adopt two different views. First, they can claim that, «for every actual evil found in the world, one can describe some state of affairs that it is reasonable to believe exists, and which is such that, if it exists, will provide an omnipotent and omniscient being with a morally sufficient reason for allowing the evil in question» (Tooley, 2015, sect. 4). Second, they can claim «not only that such morally sufficient reasons exist, but that the reasons cited are in fact *God's* reasons» (*ibid.*). We may call the first type of theodicy "modest" and the second "ambitious". It should be noted that, more recently, it has been argued that theodicists can adopt a different strategy: instead of denying premise (2), they can deny, on the basis of deontological considerations, the claim

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1. This kind of argument has been defended particularly by Rowe (1996a; 1996b). A different kind of evidential argument from evil is proposed by Draper (1996), who maintains that some significant set of facts about evil counts against theism because there is an alternative hypothesis ("the Hypothesis of Indifference") that explains those facts much better than the theistic hypothesis.

that the existence of God is incompatible with the existence of gratuitous evil (Reitan, 2014; Mooney, 2019). If this strategy were adopted, one could still distinguish between modest and ambitious theodicy inasmuch as the theodicist can claim that certain deontological constraints or rules either might be, or in fact are, those which regulate God's behavior with respect to the elimination of evil.

The second main strategy consists in claiming that, owing to the cognitive limitations of human beings, one cannot discern what reasons God might have for either directly causing or permitting certain horrendous evils. This is the strategy followed by the skeptical theist, who maintains that humans cannot know whether there are gratuitous or pointless evils: he adopts an agnostic or suspensive stance with regard to the full range of goods, evils, and their connections that there are. The skeptical theist therefore questions the noseeum inference from (1) to (2): from our inability to come up with a God-justifying reason for directly causing or permitting an evil, we cannot infer that there is no such reason – in other words, from the fact that an evil is inscrutable, it does not follow that it is gratuitous. Given that, if God existed, there would be a cognitive abyss between him and us, he could well have reasons for directly bringing about or allowing certain horrific evils that we would be completely unable to think of, know, or understand[2].

Michael Rea (2013, p. 483) proposes the following definition of skeptical theism: «No human being is justified (or warranted, or reasonable) in thinking the following about any evil e that has ever occurred: there is (or is probably) no reason that could justify God in permitting e». And Bergmann (2012, pp. 11-2) points out that the skeptical theist endorses particularly the following "skeptical theses":

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.

ST3: 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 the permission of possible evils.

ST4: We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have.

2. Among advocates of skeptical theism, one should count Wykstra (1984; 1996); Alston (1996a; 1996b); Howard-Snyder (1996); Plantinga (1996); van Inwagen (1996a); Bergmann (2001; 2009; 2012; 2014); Bergmann and Rea (2005); and Rea (2013).

As Bergmann (ivi, p. 12, n. 7) remarks, the skeptical component of skeptical theism also includes the view that the above and similar skeptical theses undermine the noseeum inference of the evidential argument from evil.

3. Skeptical Theism's Radical Skeptical Implications

I agree with skeptical theists that non-theists (both atheists and agnostics) can or should accept the skeptical component of skeptical theism (Bergmann, 2001, p. 284; 2009, p. 375; 2012, pp. 11, 24; 2014, pp. 209, 219; Hendricks, 2019, pp. 267-8). I accept it myself, but I think that the skeptical theist should in turn accept what seem to be the wide-ranging undermining or debunking implications of his view – or else abandon its skeptical component.

When presenting the skeptical component of his stance, the skeptical theist typically hastens to clarify that his skepticism is intended to be local or moderate: he restricts its scope to the realm of potentially God-justifying reasons for either directly causing or permitting certain evils. That is, he only affirms certain limitations to our knowledge about value and modality rather than a complete skepticism about these or other realms (van Inwagen, 1996a, p. 163; 1996b, pp. 237, 242, n. 17; Bergmann, 2009, p. 377). However, as has been noted in the literature, what the skeptical theist regards as a restricted agnosticism appears to *(i)* spill over into his theism, *(ii)* undermine the epistemic justification of our moral beliefs in general, and *(iii)* even spread across the board. In the first three subsections that follow, I first present the different types of skepticism to which the skeptical component of skeptical theism seems to lead, namely, theological skepticism, moral skepticism, and global skepticism. I then expound what I take to be the main reasons offered by skeptical theists for why their view does not actually lead to what they regard as unpalatable forms of skepticism, and I explain why I think those reasons are not strong enough to avoid the radical skeptical implications of the skeptical theists' stance. Then, in the fourth subsection, I consider the view according to which those who call attention to such implications regard them as a *reductio* of skeptical theism.

3.1. Theological Skepticism

Let us begin by considering the theological skepticism to which the skeptical component of skeptical theism seems to give rise. Note, first, that there seems to be a tension between the skeptical and the theistic components of the view. On the one hand, the four skeptical theses identified by Bergmann express the view that we cannot tell *whether or not* the goods, the evils, and

their connections of which we have knowledge are representative of all the goods, the evils, and their connections that there are. This means that, for all we know, there might be gratuitous evils – and, similarly, that, for all we know, there might be no gratuitous evils. On the other hand, the skeptical theist thinks he knows that, given that God is an omnibenevolent and loving creator, the goods, the evils, and the connections between them of which we have knowledge are *not* representative of the goods, the evils, and the connections between them that there are. That is to say, he thinks he knows that God does have all-things-considered reasons for directly causing or permitting certain evils; his point seems to be only that we cannot expect to have cognitive access to, or to understand, those reasons. Thus, it seems that, if he consistently embraced the skeptical component of his view, the skeptical theist would have to accept that he does not have such knowledge, which undermines his theism, or at least his belief that God is an omnibenevolent and loving creator.

Someone might argue that the tension is merely apparent because saying, e.g., that we have no good reason to think that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are is actually compatible with theism. For the reason for "having no good reason to think that *p*" may be that one has good reason to think that not-*p*, which in the present case means that one has good reason to think that the possible goods we know of are *not* representative of the possible goods there are. Similarly, with respect to Rea's definition of skeptical theism, it might be argued that the reason for saying that we are not justified in thinking that there is (probably) no reason that could justify God in permitting a horrendous evil may be that there is always such a reason. This interpretation, though in principle acceptable, will not do because – as noted at the outset of Section 3 – the skeptical component of skeptical theism is independent of its theistic component inasmuch as it is a skepticism that, according to the skeptical theist himself, can or should be accepted by the non-theist. That the interpretation in question is incorrect is confirmed by the following remarks by Bergmann:

According to (ST1)-(ST4), it *doesn't* appear that there is no God-justifying reason for permitting for (E1) and (E2)[3]. Nor does it appear that there is such a reason. Nor does it appear likely that there is. Nor does it appear likely that there isn't. Rather, we just don't know how likely it is that there is a God-justifying reason for permitting evils such as (E1) and (E2) (Bergmann, 2009, p. 387).

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3. (E1) is «the evil of a fawn trapped in a forest fire and undergoing several days of terrible agony before dying» and (E2) is «the evil of a 5-year-old girl being raped, beaten, and murdered by strangulation» (Bergmann, 2009, p. 377).

So again, if the skeptical theist really accepts the skeptical component of his view, how can he be epistemically justified in believing, on the basis of the theistic component, that God would not directly cause or allow gratuitous or pointless evils? It seems that both components cannot be held together.

Note, second, that the arguments for the existence of God that conclude that there must be a good being that is the cause of the all-things-considered goods one observes in the natural order or in people's lives are undermined by skeptical theism inasmuch as we do not know if the goods in question do not actually entail certain evils (Wilks, 2004, pp. 316-8; 2013, p. 460). Skeptical theists usually accept this objection, but remark both that *(a)* there might be a way, other than simple observation of how good something is, of determining that certain things are really all-things-considered goods, and that *(b)* there might be other theistic arguments that are sound (Bergmann, 2009, p. 389). Now, with regard to *(a)*, the skeptical theist owes us a precise account of how such a determination is carried out; mentioning a mere possibility will not do given the recognition of our ignorance of whether there exist gratuitous evils. And with regard to *(b)*, I think the problem is not restricted to certain theistic arguments. For if our cognitive capacities are such that we are unable to determine whether there are gratuitous evils, how can we confidently affirm that our cognitive limitations do not extend to any argument bearing on the existence of God, his possession of certain attributes, his purposes and actions, or any other fact concerning the divine? How can we come to know that there is a God? Or if we can gain such knowledge, how can we know that God is omnibenevolent? Or if we are capable of knowing this, how can we know that he is not a systematic deceiver motivated by benevolent reasons that are beyond our ken?[4] It seems that, if the skeptical theist wants to be consistent with his agnosticism about the existence of gratuitous evils, he should have doubts about at least much of what he regards as his theological knowledge. Given that we are talking about a being that has attributes that are (or at least seem to be) beyond human comprehension, it appears to be an *ad hoc* move to limit the extent of our ignorance to part of the realm of value and modality. Bergmann (2009, pp. 380-1) remarks that «it's important to realize that the skeptical theist's skepticism does

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4. For example, Beaudoin (2000, pp. 299-300) remarks that, given the skeptical component of skeptical theism, we cannot discard that there is a reason for God to decree that all humans go to purgatory after death, or to inspire the Old Testament prophets to tell lies, or to create humans in such a way that they often have delusional mystical experiences, or to directly cause such experiences.

nothing to show that theism is likely to be true or reasonable to believe», but only «undermines certain arguments from evil for atheism». The point I am making here is stronger: not only does the skeptical theist's skepticism not show that theism is reasonable, but it actually seems to entail that it is not reasonable to endorse theism given how limited our cognitive capacities are. The skeptical theist will probably reply that this is only true if the premises in the arguments for theism refer to reasons God would have to act in a certain way, but that such premises are uncommon in those arguments. However, my point is precisely that the skeptical claim about our cognitive limitations cannot arbitrarily be restricted to such premises, leaving untouched other theological propositions.

Bergmann (2012, p. 11) maintains that the skeptical theist's skepticism «has to do with our lack of certain kinds of knowledge of what God's reasoning is or would be like». Why only *certain* kinds of knowledge? Because the skeptical theist clearly thinks that we do have knowledge of parts of what God's reasoning is or would be like. But how does one obtain such knowledge? It seems that either through the use of one's cognitive faculties or via revelation. In the former case, if our cognitive limitations are such that they prevent us from understanding or knowing parts of God's reasoning, how can we be justified in believing that such limitations do not affect the arguments and analyses we use to come to understand or know another part of God's reasoning? In both cases, it seems that we cannot exclude the possibility that God has all-things-considered justified reasons to deceive us into believing that we have come to correctly understand or to know part of his reasoning via the use of our cognitive faculties or via revelation. I think that the skeptical theist is driven not so much by his having conclusive reasons to believe that he does have partial knowledge of theological matters as by his desire to avoid a sweeping theological skepticism at all costs.

3.2. Moral Skepticism

The second type of skepticism seemingly entailed by the skeptical theist's skepticism is moral in nature. If we are not justified in making claims about whether there are gratuitous or pointless evils, then it seems that our moral knowledge is, at the very least, much more limited than we think. For we have no compelling reason to affirm that an action we regard as morally appalling or inexcusable will not, in either the short or the long run, cause some greater good or prevent some greater evil. Neither do we have a strong reason to affirm that an action we regard as morally right will not, in either the short or the long run, cause some

greater evil or prevent some greater good. From an internalist point of view, it seems that, if God exists, we cannot tell whether any given action is all-things-considered morally right or wrong. And from an externalist point of view, it seems that we are at least much less morally reliable than we think given that, if God exists, our cognitive faculties are such that we are incapable of having a grasp of all the goods, the evils, and the connections between them that there are, and of the total moral value or disvalue of at least certain states of affairs. The awareness of such a lack of moral knowledge or such a limitation in moral knowledge might in turn have serious practical implications inasmuch as it might lead to indecision and even to paralysis in the face of what we commonly regard as horrific evils: should we interfere to prevent such evils – particularly when we can easily prevent them – or doing so might prevent the occurrence of some outweighing good, or contribute to the occurrence of some greater evil, of which we have no grasp?[5]

Bergmann (2009, pp. 392-3; 2012, pp. 13-4) offers the following considerations in reply to the moral skepticism objection. First, while with regard to certain actions it is key to consider their possible good and bad consequences in making moral decisions, there are other actions that are intrinsically right or wrong. He remarks that there is nothing in ST1-ST4 that keeps us «from knowing (perhaps via moral intuition) certain moral truths about what is intrinsically wrong, regardless of the consequences» (Bergmann, 2012, p. 15; cf. 2014, pp. 211-2). Second, with respect to the former actions, «we aren't morally bound to do what *in fact* has the overall best consequences (since we typically can't determine that)» (Bergmann, 2009, p. 392). Rather,

we morally *ought* to (a) consider (for an appropriate length of time) the consequences we can reasonably expect of performing them and of the live alternatives to performing them, (b) refrain from performing them if the reasonably expected consequences of performing them seem significantly worse than the reasonably expected consequences of one of the live alternatives, and (c) perform them if the reasonably expected consequences of performing them seem significantly better than the reasonably expected consequences of each of the live alternatives (Bergmann, 2012, pp. 13-4).

Third, God's moral decision-making is analogous to ours: he will seek to bring about the best consequences of his actions except in those cases

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5. For the view that the skeptical component of skeptical theism commits its proponent to moral skepticism and, hence, to moral paralysis, see, among others, Tooley (1991); Russell (1996); Almeida and Oppy (2003); Jordan (2006); and Maitzen (2014). Cf. Wachterhauser (1985) and Fales (1992).

in which an action's being morally right or wrong is independent of the consequences. Bergmann maintains that, by endorsing ST1-ST4, we are committing ourselves

to the view that we don't know, *just by reflecting on possible goods, possible evils, the entailments between them, and their seeming value or disvalue*, what God's reasons might be. But it doesn't follow that we have no way *at all* of knowing anything about what reasons God might have for doing things (if God existed). We know that if an act is intrinsically wrong regardless of the consequences, a morally perfect being like God would have an all-things-considered good reason not to do it (ivi, p. 15).

And fourth, just as it may be morally appropriate for someone to permit their child to suffer in order to attain some greater good but morally inappropriate to do the same with someone else's child, so too may it be morally appropriate for God, *qua* loving creator, to permit someone to suffer in order to attain some greater good but morally inappropriate for me to do so. It is therefore crucial to consider what kind of relationship one has with the person who is permitted to suffer.

I find Bergmann's considerations unconvincing, for at least three reasons. First, how can we know or justifiably believe that the actions we regard as right or wrong regardless of the consequences correspond, if there is a God, to those that this supernatural person regards as being so? Setting aside that the appeal to intuition is often a magic card one plays to justify certain beliefs in too easy a way and that people have conflicting moral intuitions, and supposing that God knows by intuition, how can we know or justifiably believe that our intuitive capacity is such that we can grasp the things that God is able to grasp? Also, can we rule out the possibility that God might have an all-things-considered reason to deceive us into thinking that there are actions that are intrinsically right or wrong, or into thinking that the actions we regard as being intrinsically right or wrong are those that are really so? Lastly, is God constrained by the alleged realm of moral values or principles or is he rather its source and, hence, dictates what is right or wrong and can change what is one or the other? Once we recognize as plausible the skeptical component of skeptical theism, the above are questions that, if there is indeed a God, we do not seem able to answer.

Second, I think that Bergmann's line of argument establishes at most that, from our own limited cognitive vantage point, we cannot but go along with some criterion or other when making decisions in our daily lives for the simple reason that we cannot remain completely paralyzed. Even the ancient Pyrrhonists recognized that, since they could not remain utterly inactive, they made decisions on the basis of a non-epistemic criterion,

namely, their own non-doxastic appearances, i.e., the various ways they were non-doxastically appeared to (see especially Sextus Empiricus, *Pyrrhonian Outlines*, I 21-4). So, I agree that the skeptical component of skeptical theism does not necessarily lead to moral indecision or paralysis. But the pragmatic constraint in question in no way entails that we can affirm that we have moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs, and hence that our decisions are (likely to be) correct in an objective sense because they are based on such knowledge or justified beliefs. For we are still in the dark about whether what we regard as goods are all-things-considered goods, about whether what we regard as evils are all-things-considered evils, about whether we have a grasp of all the relevant entailment relations between them, and about whether the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs do reflect their actual total moral value or disvalue. The three rules mentioned in the first of the quoted passages above that tell us what we morally ought to do in no way guarantee that we will be brought into the light concerning those issues. Despite our best efforts, we might fail to find out what the correct course of action is. This is of course a difficulty with which both theists and non-theists are confronted on a daily basis, but the skeptical theist's skepticism adds another source of doubt about the epistemic justification of our moral beliefs about alternative courses of action, a source of doubt whose implications are to be taken into consideration when deciding how to act.

My third reason concerns Bergmann's final consideration. I will set aside the fact that it is at least sometimes extremely difficult to determine when, and to what extent, one is morally justified in permitting someone to suffer in order to attain a greater good, both when one has a close relationship with them and when one does not. For what I want to emphasize is that, even if what is morally appropriate depends on the kind of relationship one has with the person who is permitted to suffer, we are still in the dark about whether it is in fact the case, and not a *mere possibility*, that it is morally appropriate for God but not for us not to prevent someone from suffering in order to bring about some outweighing good.

Let me finally remark that Daniel Howard-Snyder (2014, p. 304) claims that one should intervene to prevent the suffering of others by appealing to a principle he calls "Commonsense Morality", according to which «[o] ne is obligated to prevent someone's undeserved suffering if and only if the total consequences for him will be better if one intervenes than if one doesn't – unless one has a sufficiently good reason not to intervene and one permits it for that reason». Note, first, that if one accepts the skeptical component of skeptical theism, then it does not seem possible to determine what the *total* good and bad consequences for the person

affected by the apparently undeserved suffering are. Second, one may claim that not knowing whether there is an objective all-things-considered reason not to intervene is a sufficiently good reason not to intervene.

3.3. Global Skepticism

The third type of skepticism to which skeptical theism seems to lead us is global in nature: given the skeptical theist's skepticism, our knowledge in general would be severely undermined, including our knowledge about the external world and the past (this is usually called "the Pandora's box objection"). Indeed, we do not know how likely it is that there is a God-justifying reason for directly causing or permitting our being deceived by an evil demon or by God himself into thinking, e.g., that there is a physical external world when actually there is not, or that the universe has existed for millions of years and that I have existed for several years when in fact both the universe and I came into existence a few minutes ago[6].

A response offered by some authors is that we do not know that those scenarios do not obtain by realizing that the possible goods, possible evils, and their connections that we know of provide no God-justifying reason for directly causing or permitting those scenarios – which would be serious instances of evil – and concluding that, since God exists, they must not be actual. Rather, we know that the skeptical scenarios do not obtain in some independent way: we have plenty of empirical evidence that supports our commonsense beliefs and we have the arguments against global skepticism that have been propounded by philosophers. Since we independently know that skeptical scenarios are not actual, we can conclude that, if God exists, he has no all-things-considered reason for directly causing or permitting them[7].

I confess that I do not see how that move can dodge the skeptical bullet. For the independent reasons to think that the skeptical scenarios are not actual are defeated by our not knowing how likely it is that God has an all-things-considered reason for deceiving us into believing that there is an external physical world or that we did not come into existence five minutes ago. Indeed, given the skeptical theist's skeptical theses, we do not know how likely it is that, if God exists, he would have an all-things-considered reason to make us believe that the evidence for our

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6. See Russell (1996, pp. 196-7); Wilks (2009, pp. 72-3; 2013, pp. 461-6); and Law (2015; 2017). Cf. Gale (1996, pp. 208-9).

7. See Beaudoin (2000, p. 299; 2005, p. 45); Bergmann (2009, p. 391; 2012, p. 27); and Wielenberg (2010, p. 514). Cf. van Inwagen (1996b, p. 235).

commonsense beliefs is strong even though it is not, or that the arguments for the existence of the external world or the distant past are sound even though they are not[8]. Or if we think that we come to know that there is an external physical world or that we were not created a few minutes ago by means of intuition, we have no clue how likely it is that God, if he exists, would have an all-things-considered reason to make us believe that intuition is a reliable belief-forming process even though it actually is not[9]. Likewise, we are in the dark about how likely it is that God, if he existed, would have an all-things-considered reason to make us believe that skeptical hypotheses are highly implausible even though they are not, or to make us hold commonsense beliefs with the highest degree of confidence even though they are false – and so, *pace* Bergmann (2001, p. 290), such an impression of implausibility and such a high degree of confidence do not dispel the radical skeptical challenge raised by the skeptical component of skeptical theism. But are all these possibilities not far-fetched? Not more far-fetched, by my lights, that the possibility that, if God exists, he might have an all-things-considered reason to allow the rape, torture, and murder of a young child, or the existence of concentration camps.

3.4. *Reductio ad Absurdum*?

Bergmann (2009, p. 386) remarks that «the obvious implication» of the various versions of the objection according to which, «by endorsing the skeptical theist's skepticism, one is committed to some other unpalatable form of skepticism […] is that, given that we should reject the unpalatable skepticism, we should reject the skeptical theist's skepticism too». He also points out that opponents of the skeptical theist's skepticism rarely recognize the plausibility of the skeptical theses ST1-ST4, but typically try to show that such skepticism commits one to some other unpalatable skepticism. But since Bergmann cannot get around the high plausibility of those theses and of the conditional that, if those theses are true, then the noseeum inference drawn in evidential arguments from evil is not a

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8. The same consideration applies to the view that the skeptical theist can appeal to externalism, phenomenal conservatism, Alstonian epistemology, or non-reductionism about testimonial knowledge to counter the arguments that purport to establish that skeptical theism entails an unacceptable amount of skepticism (Hendricks, 2020). For the skeptical theist seems to be in the dark about how likely it is that God, if he existed, would have an all-things-considered reason to deceive us into believing that the counter-arguments based on those four epistemological theories are sound when in fact they are not.

9. The same point applies to Rea's claim that we know, by means of rational intuition, that it would be evil for God to bring it about that a radical skeptical hypothesis or scenario is true (Rea, 2013, pp. 490-1).

good inference, he is doubtful that the skeptical theist's skepticism does indeed imply the kinds of implausible skepticism some affirm it implies (Bergmann, 2012, p. 28).

I both agree and disagree with Bergmann and the authors who reject the skeptical theist's skepticism. I agree with Bergmann that, *pace* those authors, the skeptical theses of skeptical theism seem plausible, and I agree with those authors that, *pace* Bergmann, the theses in question have broader skeptical implications. But I disagree with both Bergmann and the authors in question that those skeptical implications are unpalatable or implausible. Because I am quite comfortable with radical skepticism, I do not take the wide-ranging skeptical implications of the skeptical component of skeptical theism as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the view, but rather as an indication that the skeptical theist should get rid of its theistic component in the sense that he should become suspicious of the epistemic status of his theistic beliefs – as well as of other beliefs of his. In sum, I am not an opponent of the skeptical theist's skepticism; I am an opponent of the skeptical theist's intention to arbitrarily restrict that skepticism or of his unwillingness to recognize its full debunking implications.

4. Fideism

How can the skeptical theist respond when confronted with the arguments that draw the full implications of the skeptical component of his stance? One possibility is to appeal to fideism. What is fideism? Richard Popkin (2006, p. 630) defines it as the view «that truth in religion is ultimately based on faith rather than on reasoning or evidence» or «that the fundamental tenets of religion cannot be established by proofs or by empirical evidence but must be accepted on faith». Popkin distinguishes between two forms of fideism: extreme and moderate (ivi, pp. 631-2). Extreme fideism, which he also calls "irrationalist or antirationalist", maintains that religious truths are contrary to those that are supported or justified by evidence and rational standards, and that they cannot be attained by using our rational capacities. Some extreme fideists have claimed that one can attain religious truths in suprarational or extrarational ways, such as mystical experiences. Others have attempted to show the limitations of human reason by appeal to skeptical arguments, typically taken from the armory of ancient skepticism. By contrast, moderate fideism maintains «that faith precedes reason in establishing certain fundamental truths but that reason and evidence can play some role both in the search for truth and in the explanation and comprehension of them» (ivi, p. 631). This means that, «[o]nce rational inquiry has revealed the need

to accept some fundamental principles or beliefs on faith, then it may be possible to show that these commitments are reasonable, probable, or plausible» (*ibid*.). Thus, fideism encompasses both the radical view that maintains that reason is hopeless even after knowledge has been acquired by revelation and the mitigated view that maintains that reason can perform some explanatory or clarifying function when it is preceded and supported by faith[10].

It seems that the skeptical theist could accept the full package of skeptical implications entailed by his position if he embraced fideism. For the fideist is more consistent with the skeptical component of her stance than the skeptical theist is with the skeptical component of his stance. Let us consider extreme fideism first: whereas the extreme fideist thinks that one can gain no religious knowledge or understanding by means of reason, the skeptical theist thinks that he can compartmentalize religious matters into those that fall within the scope of our rational capacities and those that lie beyond them. As I remarked in the previous section, this compartmentalization seems arbitrary once one recognizes humans' cognitive limitations about religious or divine matters. However, the problem with adopting extreme fideism is that we have no evidential or epistemic reasons for any of our theistic beliefs if we take religious truths to be utterly independent of such reasons, a position that skeptical theists are not willing to endorse.

The moderate fideist, too, is more consistent than the skeptical theist: whereas the former thinks that one can acquire some sort of understanding of certain religious matters by means of reason only to the extent that one's religious beliefs are based on faith, the latter thinks that it is in principle possible to gain knowledge of certain religious matters by means of reason alone. But given the recognition of our cognitive limitations, it seems more plausible for a theist to claim that we can gain such knowledge through the use of our rational faculty only if this faculty gets aid from faith. And whereas adopting extreme fideism would be too

10. Plantinga (1983) makes a distinction between two types of fideism that is similar to Popkin's: whereas moderate fideism maintains that one must rely on faith rather than reason in religious matters, extreme fideism maintains that faith and reason conflict and that this conflict is to be resolved by preferring faith and suppressing reason. Penelhum (1983) focuses specifically on those he calls "skeptical fideists", who seem to correspond to a large extent to Popkin's extreme fideists. Pritchard's (2017; 2021) quasi-fideism is close to moderate fideism in that, whereas the religious believer's fundamental commitments or certainties are a matter of faith rather than reason, some of his religious beliefs, which presuppose those basic arational commitments, are rationally held and so in the market for being rationally grounded knowledge. Carroll (2008) traces the history of the term "fideism" from its origins in French theology to its current use in philosophy and theology.

high a price for the skeptical theist to pay, adopting moderate fideism leaves room for evidential or epistemic reasons to play a part in extending or examining our faith-based knowledge.

5. Pyrrhonism and Intellectual Humility

The Pyrrhonist recognizes humans' cognitive limitations and is not afraid of drawing the full skeptical implications of such limitations[11]. From his agnostic perspective, extreme fideism is more consistent with that recognition than both skeptical theism and moderate fideism. In Section 3, we saw that the skeptical theist fails, or refuses, to appreciate the radical skeptical implications of the skeptical component of his position. With regard to moderate fideism, although the Pyrrhonist has no objection to the idea of employing one's cognitive capacities to search for truth – if any there be – he finds it mysterious why one could all of a sudden be able to understand religious truths once one has accepted them on faith. Are we to suppose that our cognitive capacities are somehow "upgraded" when they are enlightened by faith?

Note, however, that although the extreme fideist strikes the Pyrrhonist as more consistent than his fellow moderate fideist, the Pyrrhonist thinks that the extreme fideist is not cautious and humble enough. For, from the Pyrrhonian perspective, it is far from clear that one's faith-based beliefs are not actually the result of wishful thinking, self-delusion, or some other epistemically contaminating factor. Indeed, the limitations of our cognitive capacities are also observed in the fact that many people hold beliefs that seem to be deeply irrational, groundless, or biased, such as beliefs in ghosts, witches, chakras, akashic records, the aura, the predictive power of Tarot cards, the healing power of certain stones, or the influence of the positions and movements of celestial bodies on earthly occurrences and human affairs. Can we rule out the possibility that the extreme fideist's religious beliefs are not similarly the result of epistemically distorting or contaminating factors? The extreme fideist might reply that such a line of argument is nothing but the result of the very same approach he rejects: one is criticizing the extreme fideist's stance by having recourse to theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence, which are useless when it comes to the acquisition of religious knowledge. He might also reply

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11. The picture of Pyrrhonism offered in this section is based on my interpretation of Sextus Empiricus's skeptical stance as presented in his substantial extant writings (see Machuca, 2022). On the ancient Pyrrhonist's attitude towards religion, see Knuuttila and Sihvola (2000); Annas (2011); Thorsrud (2011); Bett (2015); Marchand (2016); and Spinelli (2016).

that his religious beliefs, unlike the above magical or superstitious beliefs, derive from a reliable source of information, namely, his personal religious experience.

Such replies probably make sense from the internal vantage point of the extreme fideist. But from the external vantage point of the Pyrrhonian skeptic, who holds no religious or superstitious beliefs, it is a live possibility that the extreme fideist's reliance on faith is nothing but the result of the influence of epistemically contaminating factors, whose impact on our beliefs and decisions is widespread and largely non-conscious, as countless studies in cognitive psychology have shown (see Machuca, 2022, ch. 8; 2024, sect. 5.4). Also, the Pyrrhonist observes that both the extreme fideist and the superstitious person appeal, in order to justify or ground their respective beliefs, to personal experience. Why is such experience to be regarded as veridical in one case but not in the other? Note, in addition, that if one cannot acquire religious knowledge by using one's cognitive capacities, how can one come to know, by using those capacities, that faith is a reliable source of religious knowledge? If the extreme fideist replied that he uses faith to establish the reliability of faith, then he would fall prey to epistemic circularity – something that would not probably be a source of concern for him. Finally, the Pyrrhonist observes that we are confronted with a considerable number of conflicting religious beliefs, many of which are said by the believers to be based solely on faith. If the conflicting beliefs cannot all be true, then most of them are false despite being based on faith and have to be explained by, e.g., the influence of some epistemically irrelevant factor whose contaminating effects are not detected by those who hold the beliefs in question[12].

If we take into consideration the various stances that have been examined, there is by the Pyrrhonist's lights what we might call a *progression in intellectual humility*:

ambitious theodicy → modest theodicy → skeptical theism → moderate fideism → extreme fideism → Pyrrhonism.

This progression in intellectual humility may be viewed as parallel to a progression in consistency: as one moves through the line, each new

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12. Thus, I think that Pyrrhonism is intrinsically incompatible with any kind of fideism, and so that fideism can only be viewed as a *distorted* extension of Pyrrhonism (*pace* Pritchard, 2021). Besides the reasons offered in the body of the text, note that, even if the Pyrrhonist grants that there are spontaneous and unavoidable feelings and gut reactions that, as such, are not subject to skeptical inquiry, he would not go so far as describing them – as Pritchard does – as *commitments* or *certainties*, arational or otherwise. Also, since I interpret Pyrrhonism as a radical form of skepticism that targets both theoretical and everyday beliefs, I do not think that it can be regarded as a form of quietism (*pace* Pritchard, 2021).

stance to the right is more consistent than that immediately to the left with the recognition of the limits of human knowledge and understanding. It might be objected that the charge of inconsistency does not apply to the proponent of a theodicy because it is only the skeptical theist, the fideist, and the Pyrrhonist who lay emphasis on our cognitive limitations. Note, however, that some proponents of theodicies remark that their explanations not only are based on knowledge acquired through life experiences but are also speculative and involve thought experiments (e.g., Swinburne, 1996, p. 45). They therefore recognize that there are limits to what we can know about religious matters. In fact, the modest fideist is cautious enough not to claim that he knows God's actual reasons for causing or permitting certain evils. Perhaps it is only the ambitious theodicist who, though intellectually arrogant, is not inconsistent.

I have compared the Pyrrhonian skeptic with different kinds of theists. But one can also compare him with other kinds of radical skeptic. First, the atheist (i.e., the ontological skeptic) believes that our cognitive powers are such that we are able to confidently establish the conclusion that God does not exist. In the case of the Pyrrhonist, by contrast, the awareness of his cognitive limitations makes him refrain from making *any* kind of assertion, whether positive or negative, about the existence and nature of an alleged God[13]. But the Pyrrhonist differs also from a confident or assertive kind of agnostic who contends that it is permanently impossible to affirm whether or not God exists and, hence, believes that we must suspend judgment on this issue once and for all. The Pyrrhonist, by contrast, limits himself to reporting what has thus far happened to him, leaving open the possibility that at some point he might be able either *(i)* to affirm or *(ii)* to deny the existence of God. Of course, he might also come to the conclusion that *(iii)* it is indeed permanently impossible to affirm whether or not God exists. If any of these options materialized, he would of course cease to be a Pyrrhonist: if *(i)* occurred, he would become a theist, and if either *(ii)* or *(iii)* occurred, he would become a different kind of skeptic.

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13. It might be objected that the Pyrrhonist should refrain from making assertions not only about God but about anything whatsoever. However, he seems to make quite a few assertions in his criticisms of skeptical theism and fideism: that human cognition is limited; that the extreme fideist's reliance on faith may be nothing but the result of self-delusion or some other epistemically contaminating factor; that there are conflicting religious beliefs; that intellectual humility is a value one should aim at. In reply, the Pyrrhonist would say that, in criticizing the above positions, he is either *(a)* arguing in an *ad hominem* manner, i.e., showing that his rivals' own views have implications that are at odds with those very views, or *(b)* reporting on how he is appeared to, i.e., on the various ways things strike him at the moment, without making any claim about what is objectively the case.

6. Conclusion

Skeptical theism is the card played by the theist dissatisfied with theodicean explanations that, it seems, succeeds in blocking the atheological conclusion of the evidential argument from evil. But it is a two-edged sword. The skeptical theist thinks that he can partially unleash skepticism to neutralize the atheist's argument, while at the same time keeping it on a short leash so as not to threaten his theism – or his moral beliefs or his beliefs in general. But he cannot have his cake and eat it too.

The skeptical theist makes an *ad hoc* move against the evidential argument from evil inasmuch as he seems to arbitrarily circumscribe our ignorance of religious matters. Why is one cognitively limited with respect to certain religious matters but not with respect to others? What is the principled way of distinguishing between those religious matters that are cognitively accessible to us and those that are not? The fideist is more consistently humble than the skeptical theist: once one recognizes one's own cognitive limitations regarding religion, it does not make much sense to make a distinction between those religious matters regarding which one can acquire knowledge or form justified beliefs by means of the use of reason (alone) and those regarding which one cannot.

The Pyrrhonian skeptic is both more cautious and more radical than the fideist. More cautious because he refrains from maintaining that our cognitive faculties are (all by themselves) useless to acquire religious knowledge or to form justified religious beliefs. More radical because he does not have recourse to faith as a means to acquire knowledge of, or to form justified beliefs about, the existence and nature of God. The Pyrrhonist and the fideist might agree that the skeptical component of skeptical theism has undermining or debunking implications for all religious beliefs that are based on evidential or epistemic reasons, but the former also raises doubts about the kind of support that faith can lend to religious beliefs. The Pyrrhonist remarks that, if one is intellectually humble enough, one will accept both that religious beliefs incompatible with one's own are also said to be based on faith and that faith-based beliefs (including one's own) might be the result of wishful thinking or self-delusion or some other epistemically contaminating factor.

If we recognize our cognitive limitations in matters of religion, aim to be consistent with that recognition, and value intellectual humility, then it seems that Pyrrhonian skepticism is a safer stance to adopt than either skeptical theism or fideism[14].

14. An early version of this article was presented at the workshop *The (Non)Existence and Nature of God: Metaphysical, Logical, and Epistemological Debates*, Pontificia Univer-

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