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Not Skeptical Theism, but Trusting Theism

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William Rowe's (1979) version of the argument from evil is still widely discussed among philosophers of religion today. Letting the term "gratuitous evil" stand for *an evil that an omnipotent, omniscient being would not have sufficient moral reason to allow*, the argument can be succinctly stated as follows:

- 1) If God exists, gratuitous evils do not exist.
- 2) Gratuitous evils exist.
- ∴ 3) God does not exist.

The most prominent theistic response by far to Rowe's argument is to advance "skeptical theism," the view that our inability to detect reasons that would justify an omnipotent, omniscient being's allowing various evils—i.e., "inscrutable evils"—is not sufficient evidence for thinking such reasons do not exist. Over the last three decades, a vast literature has amassed debating the merits of skeptical theism, and it is easy to get the sense that the rationality of theism itself depends crucially on the viability of the skeptical theist response.¹ I will argue that this is mistaken, as there is no need for theists to maintain that non-theists are wrong to treat inscrutable evils as compelling evidence for atheism. I will show that theists instead need only take themselves to have grounds for rejecting the existence of gratuitous evils and that they may

look for these grounds among their more personal reasons for sustaining their trust in the theistic God rather than the more generally available skeptical considerations appealed to by skeptical theists. Accordingly, I call this alternative approach “trusting theism.” I will also show that the viability of trusting theism seems crucial to the rationality of theism whether or not skeptical theism is successful. Finally, I will show that trusting theism does not render theism impervious to possible counterevidence in the way skeptical theism has been accused of doing.

I. Rowe’s Friendly Atheism

My discussion takes its cue from an often overlooked feature of Rowe’s own approach to the problem of evil. Rowe does not view his argument from evil as an attack on the rationality of theism. Rather, he explicitly maintains that some theists can rationally reject the argument by way of a Moorean Shift, a form of inference (found in G.E. Moore’s (1953) famous attempt to defeat external-world skepticism) by which one deduces that an opponent’s major premise is false on the grounds that one has a better case for accepting the negation of the opponent’s conclusion.² Specifically, Rowe suggests the theist could reason as follows.

- 4) If God exists, there are no gratuitous evils.
- 5) God exists.
- ∴ 6) There are no gratuitous evils.

If the theist can justifiably take herself to have grounds for God’s existence that are stronger than the grounds inscrutable evils afford her for the existence of gratuitous evils, Rowe points out that she will be justified in rejecting the crucial premise of his evidential argument.

Indeed, Rowe suspects many theists *are* justified in taking themselves to have such grounds, which is why out of the three following “varieties of atheism” (as he calls them), he chooses to endorse “friendly atheism.”

Friendly Atheism – the view that Rowe’s argument from evil is sound, but theists can be justified in rejecting it.

Unfriendly Atheism – the view that Rowe’s argument from evil is sound, and theists cannot be justified in rejecting it.

Indifferent Atheism – the view that Rowe’s argument from evil is sound, and no position is taken on whether theists can be justified in rejecting it.

Thus we can understand Rowe’s overall position on the problem of evil to be that, *in the absence of compelling overriding grounds for theism*, the world’s inscrutable evils afford one sufficient justification for believing that gratuitous evils exist, and hence, sufficient justification for accepting atheism. In other words, Rowe thinks his argument is enough to justify his atheism, but he sees no need to claim that it ought also to compel a theist to give up her theism. It is just as well, he thinks, to be friendly towards theists on that point.

II. Unfriendly Skeptical Theists

Interestingly, theists have by and large chosen not to respond to Rowe’s argument in kind. Instead of attempting to validate his friendly view that they can be justified in rejecting his

argument by way of the Moorean Shift, the majority of theistic philosophers working on the problem of evil have attempted to refute his argument by advancing *skeptical theism*, a position that is just as “unfriendly” to atheists (i.e., proponents of Rowe’s argument) as the unfriendly atheism Rowe chooses to avoid is to theists.³ We can see this by looking at the “varieties of theism” that can be drawn parallel to Rowe’s varieties of atheism.

Friendly Theism – the view that Rowe’s argument from evil is unsound, but non-theists can be justified in accepting it.

Unfriendly Theism – the view that Rowe’s argument from evil is unsound, and non-theists cannot be justified in accepting it.

Indifferent Theism – the view that Rowe’s argument from evil is unsound, and no position is taken on whether non-theists can be justified in accepting it.

Skeptical theists are unfriendly theists, because they maintain that the human inability to detect reasons that would justify an omnipotent, omniscient being’s allowing various evils simply does not constitute sufficient evidence of gratuitous evils. To think otherwise, they claim, is to unjustifiably assume that mere humans possess the cognitive ability and/or background knowledge necessary to detect the sorts of reasons that an omnipotent, omniscient being would have for allowing evils.

It is worth emphasizing that the skeptical considerations they offer to support this position are equally available to all parties to the debate. For example, we can all entertain

analogical arguments that compare the gap between an omniscient mind and the human intellect to the gap existing between a parent and child (Wykstra, 1996) or a chess novice and chess master (Alston, 1996). And we can all appreciate that there would likely be some tricky consequential complexities involved in a supreme being's choosing whether to intervene in various physical causal chains (Durston, 2000). Likewise, we can all reflect on the possibility that a world owing its existence to a supreme creator could be imbued by that creator with deeper values than we can presently conceive (Wykstra, 1996). And we can all admit the possibility that our known sample of the necessary connections between such a being's allowing evils and bringing about greater goods may not be suitably representative of the whole set of such connections (Bergmann, 2009; Howard-Snyder, 2009). Thus skeptical theists would have us *all* conclude that the world's inscrutable evils simply do not constitute sufficient evidence of gratuitous evils.⁴

It is not crucial to the arguments of this paper that I take a stand on how compelling these skeptical considerations are, as my present objective is to show that theists wanting a response to the argument from evil do not *need* to endorse them in the first place. But I wish to briefly draw attention to one issue for them that seems to have gone unappreciated in the literature in order to better motivate taking the alternative approach of trusting theism, which is based on the Moorean Shift and will soon be explicated below.

It has not been adequately appreciated that proponents of Rowe's argument can maintain their belief that gratuitous evils (likely) exist while granting skeptical theists much (if not all) of what is of value in their skeptical considerations. Those considerations are effective in showing that a fair amount of epistemic humility is called for when we put our minds to determining the sorts of reasons an omnipotent, omniscient being—a being quite unlike us—might have for

allowing various evils. That is a heavy topic indeed, and we must certainly admit to having our cognitive limits. But it is a mistake to think proponents of the argument from evil cannot share in this humility. Far from needing to consider themselves complete experts on such matters, they can even grant that it is not terribly unlikely that there would be *some* evils that an omnipotent, omniscient being would be justified in allowing for reasons that would escape us. They only need the more modest presumption that we can reasonably take ourselves to be competent *enough* about such matters such that, given the great many inscrutable evils of various sorts that have occurred throughout history, it is rather unlikely that there are reasons beyond our grasp that would morally exonerate an omnipotent, omniscient being's allowing *all* of them.⁵ To my eye, the skeptical considerations raised by skeptical theists are insufficient to compel Rowe and his sympathizers to give up *that* presumption, but again, it is not crucial to my arguments in this paper that I am right about that.

Fortunately for those who wish to defend the rationality of theism against the argument from evil, they do not *need* to identify skeptical grounds sufficient to compel non-theists to give up that presumption of competence. Even supposing the presumption is perfectly justified for non-theists, it does not follow that the theist will have no reason to reject it. If she is already in possession of some crucial reason(s) to accept theism that non-theists could not be expected to share, perhaps from her personal religious experience, then by way of a slight extension of the Moorean Shift, *she* will have reason to be skeptical of that competency.

Here is the slightly extended Moorean Shift I have in mind.

- 7) If God exists, gratuitous evils would not exist.
- 8) God exists.

- .∴ 9) Gratuitous evils do not exist.
- 10) There are many inscrutable evils.
- .∴ 11) Humans must be rather seriously incompetent about the sorts of reasons an omnipotent, omniscient being would have for allowing such evils.

The theist who reasons thusly takes herself to have specifically *theistic* grounds for giving up the atheist's presumption of competence. And insofar as she does not view her crucial grounds for theism as binding on others, she has no need to join the skeptical theist in thinking her skepticism of the relevant human competency is based on considerations all should accept.

III. The Role of Trust in the Theist's Moorean Shift

This "friendlier" theistic approach is especially fitting for a theist who, as I suspect is common, grapples with the problem of inscrutable evil and finds that her ultimate response is one of *trust*—i.e., trusting God to have good reasons for allowing evils even when she cannot see what those reasons might be. She thereby generously extends the "benefit of the doubt" toward God (likely not without some struggle) and will not expect all others to do the same. Thus her position is the sort common in trusting relationships; we generally extend the benefit of the doubt further to our loved ones with respect to their questionable behavior than we would expect detached third parties to extend it to them.⁶ In order to recognize the role trust plays in the theist's Moorean Shift, I propose we make an amendment to (8). She does not simply hold the intellectual position "God exists" and then reason coolly from there to the conclusion that we must be seriously incompetent about the good reasons he has for allowing evils. Rather, she trusts God devoutly and is consequently willing to extend him the benefit of the doubt when it

comes to his managing of the world. So to more accurately reflect her actual chain of reasoning, we should substitute for “God exists” something like “God is trustworthy” or perhaps even the determination “I *will* trust God. This resilient trust in God is the lynchpin of the response to the argument from evil I call “trusting theism.”

To be clear, the response of trusting theism is not suitable as an *argument* intended to refute the atheist’s position on gratuitous evils. The trusting theist will not come to the debate attempting to show that her publicly available evidence for theism outweighs the counterevidence of inscrutable evils in a way similar to Richard Swinburne’s (2004) “cumulative case” approach.⁷ This does not mean, however, that the trusting theist must confine her response to the problem of inscrutable evils to her own private thoughts; there is a corresponding public philosophical project available. The proper role of the theistic philosopher here is to ward off unfriendly atheism by arguing that it can be rational (or at least, not obviously irrational) for theists to maintain their theism in the face of inscrutable evils *given their unique, trusting epistemic situations*. Insofar as this project is viable, theistic philosophers can have a response to the argument from evil that does not in any way commit them to maintaining that those who do not share their epistemic situations have mistakenly assessed the quality of their respective evidence in accepting the existence of gratuitous evils.

IV. The Indispensability of Trusting Theism for Theism Proper

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to evaluate the viability of trusting theism, I can show that it had better be viable, or theism itself is in serious trouble. It would be a mistake to think of trusting theism as merely an alternative response to the problem of evil that theists are free to utilize if they prefer not to maintain the “unfriendly” position of skeptical theists. As I

see it, trusting theism is indispensable for theists whether or not skeptical theism is successful in undercutting the atheist's argument from evil.

The point I want to make here is simple and may even be apparent from the discussion in the previous section. Theists who acknowledge the world's many inscrutable evils are *qua* theists committed to being more than *merely skeptical* of the human cognitive ability to detect the relevant sorts of reasons; they must be rather strongly *dismissive* of it. After all, theism entails that for *all* the world's many inscrutable evils, there are *in fact* reasons beyond our grasp that would justify an omnipotent, omniscient being's allowing them.⁸ And surely the epistemological considerations appealed to by skeptical theists are insufficient to render this scenario positively likely. As I see it, the only hope theists have for justifying their stronger, dismissive attitude towards the relevant human competency is to rely on their positive theistic grounds for trusting God to such a generous extent.⁹

Proponents of the argument from evil will notice an opening here for a more nuanced version of their argument that would sidestep the skeptical theist's criticisms altogether. They could argue that even if (granting skeptical theism) the world's many inscrutable evils are insufficient to justify outright belief that gratuitous evils exist, they are nonetheless sufficient to render it unreasonable to actually expect there are morally sufficient reasons for an omnipotent, omniscient being's allowing all of them. According to this more nuanced argument, a theist who goes on trusting God in the face of all this inscrutable evil is simply being more optimistic than the evidence allows. In other words, she is just too likely to be a dupe. This charge of overtrusting is, in my judgment, a most serious threat to the rationality of theism, and theistic philosophers need to take notice: defending the rationality of theism does not at all require arguing for skeptical theism, but it does require defending the rationality of trusting theism.

V. Trusting Theism and Falsifiability

There is a silver lining for the trusting theist to this charge of overtrusting. The fact that the rationality of her trust can be called into question shows that trusting theism is at least invulnerable to one serious objection raised against skeptical theism. The objection is put most forcefully by Ian Wilks (2009), who argues that skeptical theism is “unfalsifiable” in that it renders theism impervious to any possible counterevidence from evil.¹⁰ His basic argument can be summarized with the following syllogism.

- 12) If skeptical theism were true, no describable sufferings (if actualized) would render theism unlikely.
- 13) Some describable sufferings (if actualized) would render theism unlikely.
- ∴ 14) Skeptical theism is false.

Wilks thinks (12) follows from the general strategy of skeptical theism, which “invokes the inscrutability of divine purposes without suggesting limits on how inscrutable those purposes are” (Wilks, 2009, p. 71). And (13) seems true, because we can describe, for example, an entire world containing only profound and perpetual misery without the slightest trace of love, happiness, or fulfilment—a world we can be fairly certain the theistic God would not allow.

Skeptical theists would likely try to stop this argument at (12) by attempting to devise some way to constrain their skepticism such that it applies to all inscrutable evils in the actual world but not those permeating the world described above, which Wilks claims would “demand a position that would be impossibly nuanced” (Wilks, 2009, p. 71). Fortunately for the trusting

theist, it is much easier to see how she could draw such a demarcation. Trusting theism only claims that *those who have good reason to trust God* will consequently have good reason not to treat inscrutable evils as compelling evidence against theism, and I take it as obvious that one would not have good reason to trust God in a world of only perpetual misery.¹¹ Thus trusting theism is clearly falsifiable. But, of course, our trusting theist does not live in such a world. In fact, she (as I imagine her) takes herself to inhabit a world in which her belief in God's supremely loving and ultimately trustworthy nature is cultivated via a deeply-lived experiential process. Thus so long as it is an open question whether she can be justified in taking herself to occupy such a world, trusting theism is a viable—though falsifiable—response to the problem of inscrutable evil.¹²

VI. Conclusion

I have shown that for theists seeking a response to the argument from evil, the popular approach of skeptical theists has the unnecessary aim of showing that proponents of the argument have mistakenly assessed the evidential weight of the world's inscrutable evils. I have also argued that the rationality of theism depends crucially on the rationality of the alternative approach of trusting theism. I further argued that trusting theism is invulnerable to the charge of unfalsifiability made against skeptical theism.¹³ For all these reasons, I conclude that theistic philosophers working on the problem of evil would do well to back off from advancing skeptical theism and focus instead on defending the rationality of trusting theism.¹⁴

¹ Readers unfamiliar with this literature could start with survey articles by McBrayer (2010) and Dougherty (2011).

² Moore's (1953) own Moorean Shift was made in response to the following general argumentative strategy of external-world skeptics.

- i. If a certain epistemological principle is true (e.g., the principle that knowledge requires certainty), then we do not have knowledge of the external world.
- ii. That epistemological principle is true.

∴ iii. We do not have knowledge of the external world.

Moore attempted to refute this argument by arguing that the negation of (iii) is more obvious than the truth of (ii). He thought it much more plausible to think that he knew he was in possession of a pencil, for example, than to think that the skeptic was in possession of an accurate epistemology. Moore's response to skepticism received mixed reactions, particularly since he was unable to offer much in the way of a supporting argument for his claim to knowledge of external world objects. But whatever the merits of Moore's own particular Moorean Shift, the strategy itself is legitimate, since it functions simply by arguing, as is common in philosophical dialogue, that one proposition is more plausible than another. A successful Moorean Shift requires only that its proponent have a more compelling case for the negation of her opponent's conclusion than her opponent can offer for one of his premises.

³ I am aware of only a handful of *even brief* mentions of the Moorean Shift outside of Rowe's work: See Murray & Rea (2008), pp. 165-67; McBrayer (2010), p. 621, note 5; Dougherty (2011), p. 565; Evans and Manis (2009), p. 171. Rowe himself expresses surprise at the course the debate over his argument has taken in Rowe (2006), pp. 80-81.

⁴ The concluding section of Wykstra (1996, pp. 146-147) does, however, concede the *possibility* that since, as he sees it, inscrutable evils are at least *somewhat* more probable on atheism than theism, they could conceivably count as sufficient evidence for atheism. Perhaps, then, he is one skeptical theist at least who can be read as rejecting Unfriendly Theism in favor of something closer to Indifferent Theism.

⁵ Bass (2011) offers a Bayesian argument claiming a compounding effect of numerous inscrutable evils against the probability of theism.

⁶ There is a literature on the epistemic status of this aspect of trust that theistic philosophers would be wise to explore. See Keller (2004); Stroud (2006); Brown (2011); Jollimore (2011, chapter 3); Hawley (2014).

⁷ As I read him, Swinburne's approach counts as an "unfriendly theism." Though he agrees with the friendly theist that skeptical theists are wrong to think inscrutable evils do not count noticeably in favor of atheism, he does think there are outweighing grounds for theism in the form of publicly exchangeable arguments, which rationally support theism overall.

⁸ Note that the way I have stated this is able to accommodate Peter van Inwagen's (2006) claim that there must always be a bit of arbitrariness in where God chooses to draw the lines of allowed suffering. If such arbitrariness is truly unavoidable, then I think we can grant that God has good reason for allowing borderline cases.

⁹ This is not intended as a criticism of skeptical theism *per se*, since skeptical theists would not intend their skeptical considerations to reach this far. Indeed, many skeptical theists may already have in mind that something like the Moorean Shift is required for a defense of their actual position on gratuitous evils *qua* theists. The suggestion that skeptical theists simply conjoin their skeptical theism with the Moorean Shift is made by McBrayer (2010, p. 621 note 5) and Dougherty (2011, p. 565). My position, though, is that the Moorean Shift can just be employed on its own, as there is no discernible benefit for the theist to add skeptical theism to her Moorean Shift. Whereas she *needs* the Moorean Shift to justify her dismissiveness of the relevant human competency, she does not *need* skeptical theism. Skeptical theism is just unnecessary, unfriendly baggage.

¹⁰ Rowe also makes this argument in a published exchange with Howard-Snyder and Bergmann: "Since we don't know [according to the skeptical theist] that the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are, we can't know that it is likely that there are no goods that justify God in permitting human and animal life on earth to be nothing more than a series of agonizing moments from birth to death." (Howard-Snyder, Bergmann, & Rowe (2001), pp. 156-157.)

¹¹ I do not mean to suggest that it would be at all easy to say precisely which describable worlds are consistent with a rational theistic trust. That is a difficult and most interesting question. All I am saying is that since it is obvious that certain describable worlds are inconsistent with a rational theistic trust, trusting theism is obviously falsifiable.

¹² Here is a quick argument for thinking that trusting theism is at least not *obviously irrational* in the actual world. As a matter of empirical fact, many intelligent and apparently psychologically healthy people are able to trust in God's goodness and ultimate plan for the cosmos despite their awareness of the world's many inscrutable evils. Thus trusting God in this world is not akin to trusting him in a totally depraved world in which it is difficult to imagine sane people doing the trusting.

¹³ I suspect there is a further and most significant advantage of trusting theism over skeptical theism, but I will only briefly outline it here due to space constraints. I suspect trusting theism is less vulnerable to prominent objections alleging that the skepticism endorsed by skeptical theism entail undesirable skepticisms outside its intended domain. (See McBrayer (2010, pp. 616-620) for a survey of these objections.) Consider, for example, the objection that skeptical theism entails a pervasive theological skepticism—i.e., skepticism about *anything* God purportedly reveals to us, since he might, for all the skeptical theist knows, have good reason to deceive us. Notice that the trusting

theist (unlike the skeptical theist who bases his skepticism on generally available epistemological considerations) is only skeptical of her ability to detect the reasons that justify God's allowing evils *precisely because* she has a deep, committed trust in God—a trust which is clearly inconsistent with not even taking him at his word. In other words, theological trust is primary for her, and it would seem to entail only a restricted skepticism of human competencies only whenever trust requires it. If this works, then by extension, her trust in God would not entail a pervasive moral skepticism either (which is often alleged against skeptical theism) since the typical theist takes herself to be commanded by God to not murder or lie, to help others, etc.

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