

The Problem of Error: The Moral Psychology Argument for Atheism

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Abstract The problem of error is an old argument for atheism that can be found in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy. Although it is not widely discussed in the contemporary literature in the Philosophy of Religion, I resurrect it and give it a modern spin. By relying on empirical studies in moral psychology that demonstrate that moral judgments from human beings are generally susceptible to certain psychological biases, such as framing and order effects, I claim that if God is responsible for making human beings such that we have these biases, this means that God is not a perfect being. The findings in empirical moral psychology create a problem for the existence of God, traditionally conceived.

1 Introduction

The generally understood historical problem of error was argued against by the likes of Descartes, and it was defended by Hume. It generally states that there is a problem contained with the following statements: (1) God is omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent, (2) He is responsible for the making of human beings, and (3) Human beings generally are built to make certain errors in judgment. For, if God is omnibenevolent, then he is not an evil deceiver. If God is not an evil deceiver, then when making human beings, he would not construct us such that we make errors in judgment. Furthermore, he would have the power and knowledge not to construct us in this fashion. For instance, Descartes discusses phantom limb syndrome, where subjects who have lost a limb can at times still feel the sensation of pain in where the missing limb should be. If God is not an evil deceiver or

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demon, then why would he construct our psychologies such that we can make such errors in judgments? Concerning the problem of error, Descartes writes:

To begin with, I acknowledge that it is impossible for God ever to deceive me, for trickery or deception is always indicative of some imperfection. And although the ability to deceive seems to be an indication of cleverness or power, the will to deceive undoubtedly attests to maliciousness or weakness. Accordingly deception is incompatible with God.

Next I experience that there is in me a certain faculty of judgment, which, like everything else that is in me, I undoubtedly received from God. And since he does not wish to deceive me, he assuredly has not given me the sort of faculty with which I could ever make a mistake, when I use it properly (1641, p. 546).

The problem of error, which broadly focuses on errors in psychological human decision-making, as a specific kind of contention, has been lost since the Early Modern Era in the Philosophy of Religion, although interpretations of Medieval and Early Modern philosophers' views on this issue are still discussed today in the History of Philosophy.¹ Yet, I offer a contemporary rendition of the problem of error for present-day Philosophy of Religion relying on recent findings in empirical moral psychology. To be sure, there are many other fascinating findings in contemporary science that can be used to help buttress the problem of error, and the problem of error need not necessarily be cast in light of ethical judgments. For instance, we perceive tables to be solid bodies, but physics instructs us that tables are mostly empty space. Our visual perceptions are drastically deceptive. However, for space concerns, I will focus here only on certain recent experiments concerning psychological biases found specifically in moral psychology on moral judgments. Although the problem of error can focus on cases not related to ethics at all, I will focus specifically on certain findings in moral psychology. As I will discuss below, the specific errors in judgment I rely on in moral psychology are particularly pressing in that if God put us on this earth for moral testing, then endowing us with certain cognitive biases in moral decision-making is especially deceitful.

I will first discuss and explain the numerous moral psychology experiments that demonstrate that we generally are susceptible to biases such as framing and order effects. Next, I will outline and clarify my modern rendition of the problem of error argument for atheism. This contention will be called *the moral psychology argument*. Finally, I defend the moral psychology argument for atheism from numerous objections. This is a new contribution to the literature in that I resuscitate an old kind of argument for atheism that has generally been lost in contemporary

¹ The problem of error perhaps also can fall within the general category of being a specific kind of dysteleological argument. However, today, the dysteleological argument primarily focuses on biological properties in light of evolutionary theory and adaptiveness (Gould 1980; Dawkins 1986). On the other hand, the problem of error falls more in the domain of psychology rather than biology, and it need not necessarily be couched in light of evolutionary theory and adaptiveness. Hence, regardless if the problem of error can be categorized as a specific kind of dysteleological argument, in the text, I say that as a *specific kind* of contention, the problem of error has been lost since the Early Modern Era. Also, the problem of error may be viewed as being a novel instance of the problem of evil. Yet, as a *specific kind* of contention of the problem of evil, it has been lost since the Early Modern Era.

Philosophy of Religion. Furthermore, I provide a more modern rendition of the contention by relying on recent findings in empirical moral psychology.

2 Cognitive Biases for Moral Cognition

Numerous philosophers such as Sinnott-Armstrong (2008), Nadelhoffer and Feltz (2008), Schwitzgebel and Cushman (2012, 2015), and Alex Wiegmann et al. (2012) have discussed various cognitive biases for moral judgments that have been robustly borne out in experimental studies.² However, they have not used such data to form a more modern rendition of the problem of error. While some philosophers have attempted to use such studies in order to make a claim in moral epistemology that moral intuitions are not justified, we will not be concerned with making such an ambitious claim in moral epistemology. All that we need for our purposes is the mere descriptive psychological claim that there are the relevant cognitive biases that generally apply for moral judgments. Even if moral intuitions are at times justified even though we generally still have the relevant cognitive biases, the moral psychology argument for atheism does not at all rely on or require debunking intuitionism as a form of justified belief in moral epistemology, and the moral psychology argument for atheism will still work. As we shall see, all that is needed for our contention regarding the empirical findings is the simple descriptive rather than epistemically normative claim that the relevant biases do occur.

We will now discuss framing effects. Framing effects in psychology are widely found in a variety of different kinds of decision-making, moral and non-moral. The first kind of framing effect we will discuss is one in which the way a moral dilemma is worded or framed in some cases can alter or impact a person's moral judgments. Read under one description of a moral scenario, a participant makes a particular moral judgment, but slightly change the descriptive wording of what essentially is the same situation, then the participant may make a different judgment.

For instance, Petrinovich and O'Neill found framing effects in the trolley problems (1996). In the trolley cases, imagine there is a *lever case* in which a trolley is about to run over five people, but you may pull a lever to divert the trolley on a side track in order to save the five people. However, it just so happens that there is one person who is on the side track who will be killed if you pull the lever to save the five. In the *footbridge case*, imagine that the same trolley is heading towards the same five people, but now you are on a footbridge that hovers over the track. In your company is a heavyset man whose body mass is large enough to stop the trolley if you kill him by pushing him over the bridge on to the track in order to save the five.

² There are many harmful biases in moral psychology that we all will not be able to discuss here. Although I will show how order and framing effects play a pernicious role in moral cognition, other biases we generally have are for favoring ingroup rather than outgroup members and having an evolved nepotism. While some biases may be seen as initially more harmful than others, I focus on order and framing effects since they are better able to handle numerous objections described below. Furthermore, I need not focus on the perceivably most harmful psychological biases since all that is required for my argument for atheism is to show that there is some degree of harmful biases that cannot be accounted for by a perfect God.

Our experimenters found that what moral decision was made in the scenarios generally depended on the wording that was used. They presented the cases to some subjects using the word ‘save’ rather than ‘death.’ For example, the lever case to some would be described as where pulling the lever will *save* five lives. However, to the other group of subjects, they framed the situation differently and used the word ‘death’ rather than ‘save.’ For instance, the lever case would be described to the other group as where pulling the lever will lead to the *death* of one life. Petrinovich and O’Neill found that in the lever case, participants presented with the ‘save’ wording generally concluded that it is morally permissible to pull the lever. However, subjects given the ‘death’ wording generally decided that it is morally wrong to pull the lever. Our experimenters found that using ‘save’ versus ‘death’ generally affects judgments in a variety of other different moral cases such as the footbridge case. Differences in decisions generally were made based on the framing or wording of the questionnaire. These results help to show that people generally will give different answers to this issue depending on how the description is phrased or worded. Morally irrelevant factors such as the framing of a moral situation generally affect our moral judgments. Since our moral judgments can be influenced by the wording of a moral scenario, then such affected moral judgments in many cases will be inconsistent with previous judgments we have made or with future judgments when the wording is relevantly different but the non-moral facts are the same. Of course, making consistent judgments in any domain of inquiry is a virtue, and making inconsistent or contradictory judgments is a clear form of error in decision-making. For two presented cases that have the same non-moral facts but are framed differently, the two moral problems are essentially the same. Therefore, it cannot be the case that morality requires us to do X in one case but to not do X in the other. Hence, such cognitive biases lead us to act against what morality requires in some cases.

Haidt and Baron have found framing effects for a host of diverse moral situations, where in a within-subjects design, participants were each presented with what is essentially the same moral scenario twice, where each was framed in a divergent way and where they were presented one right after the other. Nevertheless, statistically significant framing effects were still found (1996). Leboeuf and Shafir (2003) have found that having a longer time to deliberate over a moral matter does not eliminate framing effects. Shiloh et al. (2002) discovered that increasing rational thinking before making a moral judgment actually increases the probability that one will succumb to framing effects. All of the above studies demonstrate that at many times our moral decisions are generally affected by irrelevant factors, such as the wording of a scenario, which in many cases will lead us to make inconsistent moral judgments from previous or future ones; judgments that lead to a kind of error.

Schwitzgebel and Cushman (2012, 2015) have shown that philosophers’ intuitions are susceptible to order effects. Order effects are usually unconscious biases, where a participant’s judgment on each item in a group of questions may potentially vary depending on what order the items are presented.³ At twenty-five

³ Order effects can be considered to be a subset of framing effects.

major research universities, they ran a series of studies on 324 professional philosophers, 753 professional academic non-philosophers, and 1389 non-academics with no graduate degree in any field. They provided participants with a list of moral scenarios for making moral judgments. For example, the first scenario was the lever case trolley problem. The second case was also the previously discussed footbridge case. Later on in the same study, as, for instance, questions fourteen and fifteen, our experimenters re-asked participants both of these cases but reversed the order in which they were presented. In re-asking the questions, our experimenters slightly varied the cases, but kept the morally relevant features the same. For instance, they would use a runaway boat instead of a trolley that is about to run over five swimmers, but you can push a large person in the boat's path to stop the boat but end up killing the large person. This second time around, they would switch the ordering and ask the footbridge case variant right before the lever case variant.

The entire study was littered with several different kinds of pairs of cases, such as the lever and footbridge case, where the pairs of questions were re-asked in slightly altered form later in the same test while keeping the morally relevant factors the same, but the cases were presented in a different order. Upon running the tests, our experimenters ran the data to see whether or not the ordering of the scenarios played a substantial role in influencing and biasing the decisions made on the moral scenarios, where participants will give different answers on a type of question depending on what order it was presented. They found that philosophers are just as susceptible to order effects as non-philosophers.⁴ They write, "Our analysis found no support for the view that philosophical expertise enhances the stability of moral judgment against order effects... (2012, p. 147)." They discovered that order effects have a large scale influence on philosophers' intuitions on moral scenarios presumably without their awareness. Notice here that certain professional philosophers will at times make inconsistent judgments on given cases. They will make inconsistent moral judgments due to unconscious cognitive biases. Present them with a moral case, and one judgment is expressed. Present them with what is essentially the same case again at a different time ensconced in a different ordering of cases, and a different contradictory judgment is made. Furthermore, they found that this susceptibility does not decline even when the philosopher is forced to think longer about the cases and told to contemplate alternative phrasings of them, is already familiar with the trolley problems, claims to have expertise on such problems, or reported beforehand that they already have prior stable views on the issues (2015). The existence of order effects for moral judgments have also been replicated by Petrinovich and O'Neill (1996) and Wiegmann et al. (2012). These studies show that our moral judgments on ethical situations can be affected by what order the situations are presented or arise. However, the ordering of moral cases is an irrelevant factor for determining the truth of a moral situation in the relevant cases. Yet, pernicious order effects are found in many participants, and having a PhD in Philosophy with a specialization and training in ethics combined with working at a top research university does not make one less susceptible to order

⁴ They did find that philosophers appeared to be more susceptible to order effects than the folk, but this finding was only marginally significant rather than statistically significant.

effects as compared to the folk. Since our moral judgments generally are affected by the morally irrelevant factor concerning the ordering of moral situations in the relevant cases, many of our judgments will be inconsistent with our own previous or future moral judgments due to this fact. Making contradictory judgments is a form of error in decision-making. Moreover, due to order effects, some of our moral judgments will be wrong.

Finally, Nadelhoffer and Feltz (2008) have found that there is an actor-observer bias. The actor-observer bias is found widely in various domains of inquiry in psychology, in both moral and non-moral cases. It generally is where the people or actors involved in an action view things differently than those observers that are not a part of the action. Our experimenters ran tests on the lever case trolley problem. Some subjects received the *actor lever case*, where the vignette stated that the subjects themselves were the person who had the option of pulling the lever. The other participants were given the *observer lever case*, where the vignette stated that someone else was at the lever and had the option of pulling it. In this setup, the subject filling out the moral questionnaire is merely an observer. When asked about the moral permissibility of pulling the lever, subjects were more likely to allow for the permissibility of pulling the lever in the observer lever case rather than the actor lever case. This study suggests that whether one is an actor or an observer in a moral situation can have a significant impact on what moral judgment one makes. However, the morally correct answer for the lever scenario should not be dependent on whether you are the actor or the observer. Whether one is the actor or the observer in this case is morally irrelevant. This study suggests that this morally irrelevant factor can affect one's moral judgment and may lead one to make an inconsistent judgment at times depending upon how a moral scenario is framed. Making contradictory judgments on what is essentially the same moral case is a form of cognitive error. As a result, it can also at times lead us to make incorrect moral judgments. In conclusion of this section, all of the above studies provide robust and replicated empirical evidence that human beings generally are susceptible to certain cognitive biases in moral cognition; biases that lead to errors.

3 The Moral Psychology Argument for Atheism

The moral psychology argument for atheism is a throwback to the problem of error. Recall that the problem of error need not necessarily deal with certain errors in *moral* judgments and rather can be about errors in judgments about physics, biology, phantom limb syndrome, etc. However, the particular problem of error constructed here is a more modern rendition of it that relies on the above empirical findings in moral psychology. It basically contends that there is a problem contained within the following claims that (1) God, as traditionally conceived, is omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent, (2) God is responsible for creating us, and (3) Human beings are generally susceptible to the above cognitive biases. For, if the traditional God exists, he would not have made us generally susceptible to such biases.

The problem put forth in the moral psychology argument is that God is omnibenevolent and is not an evil deceiver, so he would not want us to be susceptible to unconscious errors such as making contradictory judgments due to framing effects. Also, God is omnipotent and would have the power to not make us susceptible to the above psychological biases. Moreover, God is omniscient, so he would know how to make us without such biases. Yet, framing and order effects robustly exist. Since God is not supposed to at all be an evil deceiver, the fact that there is some or any degree of harmful psychological biases in moral cognition is sufficient to at least begin to spring the trap in the moral psychology argument.

Moreover, we can inductively infer that God would be able to make us without the above psychological biases by not undermining other important goods that God would have reason to bring about.⁵ There is no greater good that the possibility of such errors allows for that would not be capable of being brought about without the given possibilities of error. The above unconscious biases lead to making contradictory judgments at times. The capacity to make such contradictory judgments does not appear to lead us to any greater goods that absolutely require the presence of such cognitive capacities in order to bring the greater goods about. Let us take a step back and look at this. Making contradictory moral judgments in moral philosophy is an egregious error. The above cognitive biases that at times produce contradictory judgments do not appear to lead to some greater good. Furthermore, they do not appear to be absolutely required in order to lead to some greater good. There is a general glitch in our cognitive makeup that is wholly unnecessary, and a perfect God could quite easily eliminate this pointless glitch while still maintaining potential goods. Yet, the glitch remains.

Let us entertain some possible greater goods for having such biases. Making such contradictory judgments do not help to make us form more ethical decisions in life. For, having contradictory judgments in a set of moral beliefs is problematic on any moral theory. They could lead us at times to unconsciously make incorrect moral judgments. Moreover, God could easily make a world in which we have the capacity to choose between good and evil, but there is the absence of the above unconscious biases that lead us to at times make inconsistent judgments.

Second, making the above cognitive biases is not required to have free will. If anything, such unconscious biases may undermine our conscious fundamental will or intention to have and maintain a consistent set of moral beliefs. It is perfectly possible for God to allow us to have free will without constructing us to have such unconscious psychological biases. If we did not have such biases that at times lead us to make contradictory judgments, it is still open for us to freely choose between right and wrong.

Third, the above biases are not required in order to make the world sufficiently challenging for moral testing. God does not need to endow us with such biases in order to properly test us to live an ethical life by in part requiring that we watch out to make sure we do not succumb to such biases and at times make inconsistent judgments. It is already difficult for most people to resist various temptations as it is and to not give into sin. It is a serious challenge for many to do the right thing when

⁵ To view an inductive argument for the problem of evil, see Rowe (1979, 2001).

one already knows what is right and wrong, such as to not cheat on one's partner with a sexually desirable and interested other or to not give into the vice of gluttony when presented with fine foods. There is no need to add the extra factors related to the above psychological biases to provide us with moral testing.⁶ Not only does this point add more fuel to the fire that generally endowing humans with the dispositions for the relevant cognitive biases is problematic for God's existence, but it also helps to demonstrate that such biases are extraneous and unnecessary for moral testing. Several faiths believe that one significant reason why God supposedly put us in the world is for moral testing. However, God supposedly also generally and unnecessarily equipped our minds with the capacity to be susceptible to certain cognitive biases that leads us to make inconsistent judgments in many cases without our conscious awareness. Also, as a result, some of our moral decisions will be incorrect at times. However, if God exists, he would not have made us generally susceptible to such pernicious biases. If theism is true, the probability of the existence of the given errors will be very, very low. If God put us on this Earth for moral testing, this makes the presence of the given biases especially egregious and deceitful.

Fourth, along the lines of Hick's soul-making theodicy (1966), one may contend that there may be goods such as soul-building that God cannot affect without making our moral cognition somewhat imperfect. Although, Hick rightly points out that explaining human imperfection based on the fall in the Garden of Eden cannot be taken seriously since such a story is problematic in light of evolutionary theory, God wants humans to morally develop on Earth, and this requires giving us some limitations in moral cognition, such as perhaps susceptibility to order and framing effects. There is overriding goodness in having soul-building and moral development. Perhaps God wants us to more readily apply moral rules, principles, or ethical theories to have a greater consistency in moral judgments such that we no longer commit the above biases. However, the problem with this response is that while there may be some good in certain kinds of moral development that need not require having the above cognitive biases, order effects are still widely found in professional moral philosophers in top research institutes who claim to have familiarity, expertise, and stable views on the relevant moral cases. As an entire class, moral philosophers generally have special training and perhaps are the most highly trained in regards to ethics. Moral philosophers generally have formal training in logic. They also largely learn about ethical theories that are supposed to systematize particular moral conclusions in applied ethics cases in a logically consistent way. For example, deontologists and utilitarians know ethical theory, but they also contend that their respective theories are the underlying framework for consistent judgments made on real world cases, such as how to justly distribute tax dollars, allocate scarce medical resources, keep one's promises, protect the environment, treat one's co-worker in the workplace, decide when a war is just, etc. Normative ethical theorists' training is not only theoretical, but when studying

⁶ The above discussed psychological biases are not understood to be psychological heuristics, although other biases are tied to certain heuristics. Heuristics are fast and frugal means of reasoning that may not find the best solution at all times to an issue but may find solutions that are good enough given one's aims. Heuristics are generally understood to be beneficial in that they are evolutionary adaptations.

ethical theory, such views must be the underlying framework that consistently underwrites conclusions on real world applied ethical issues in a diverse array of fields, such as in business, environmental, and medical ethics. In other words, they also think about moral decision-making in a broad array of applied ethical issues. In this respect, moral philosophers are trained to think systematically and consistently at the theoretical level but also broadly at the applied ethical level. Part of the relevant moral philosophers' training also consists in examining and scrutinizing historical texts of great moral thinkers to look for inconsistencies in thought and faulty reasoning.

As a class, moral philosophers generally have unique combined formal training in logic, in thinking systematically about the underlying ethical theories that may underwrite decisions on a broad array of real world cases, in scrutinizing such systematized moral world views for consistency, and in analyzing for consistency the classic and some of the most dense ethical ideas in recorded human history. Therefore, we should have an initial presumption that moral philosophers will be less susceptible to order effects than the folk. Yet, those who are the most advanced in terms of moral development and trying to have a consistent set of moral judgments are equally susceptible to order effects as the folk. Given their training and work experience, if God made us disposed to order effects in order for moral development, then we especially should predict that those with doctorates in ethics at the top research institutes should generally be less susceptible to committing such morally irrelevant biases based on the ordering of such ethical scenarios in moral deliberation as compared to others.⁷ However, those with PhD's in ethics who are most advanced in moral education and adhering to a consistent set of moral judgments are just as prone to order effects as the folk. The above prediction is not born out in testing. Therefore, the objection from soul-making fails. All in all, it is more likely that the theistic God that purportedly has the above discussed goodness, knowledge, and power does not exist.

As we can see, there is good evidence for believing there is no greater good that would justify the existence of the above cognitive errors; a greater good that absolutely requires the existence of such errors. Given such evidence, we may inductively infer that *no good state of affairs* is such that an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being justifiably must obtain it by requiring the existence of

⁷ We can conclude that Hick's line of thought is problematic since it falsely predicts that philosopher's at the top research institutes who are most advanced in moral education and making consistent moral judgments generally should be less susceptible to order effects. As an aside, members in certain other fields also initially may be thought to be better than the folk or better than average at avoiding the biases, such as psychologists or medical doctors, although as a class, there is comparatively less of such an expectation since they generally lack the rigorous and unique training of moral philosophers for consistent moral decision-making across an entire moral world view. However, there may be at least some expectation that the likes of psychologists and medical doctors might do better than average because, for example, psychologists are aware of cognitive biases, so they generally might be better able to watch out for them. Also medical doctors make moral decisions on a regular basis, such as decisions about life and death, telling patients the truth, and getting informed consent from patients when necessary. Given the constant practice of making such decisions on a regular basis, they may acquire an expertise of not being susceptible to framing effects in their relevant field. However, studies show that practicing psychologists (Fagley et al. 1999) and medical doctors (McNeil et al. 1982; Perneger and Agoritsas 2011) are just as generally susceptible to such biases as non-practitioners.

such errors. If God exists, he would not have made us generally susceptible to such biases. Hence, through a non-deductive inference, it is likely that God does not exist.⁸

To note, God supposedly put us on this earth for moral testing. As such, we admittedly can choose to do the wrong thing in our moral deliberations, and I am in no way stating that someone who consciously knows that an act is wrong but still freely chooses to do the wrong action is the point of emphasis concerning the problem of error in the moral psychology argument for atheism. I do not state that people who knowingly and freely choose to do the wrong thing is what leads to the problem for God's existence. I perfectly accept for the sake of argument that the general possibility of knowingly and freely deciding to do that which is unethical is not problematic for God's existence concerning specifically my rendition of the problem of error. People making the wrong decision is to be expected at times, and I do grant that at many times our actions are free. It is granted that if God put us on this Earth for moral testing, then as finite imperfect rather than infinite and perfect creatures,⁹ we should be able to knowingly and freely make unethical moral judgments. However, the problem for God's existence as presented in the moral psychology argument lies in the point that it appears that the traditional God does not exist when we come to realize the presence of the above unconscious cognitive biases we generally are susceptible to in moral deliberation. Even when we want to make consistent and good ethical judgments, unconscious psychological biases can still deter us from avoiding the error of making contradictory judgments. It is important to notice that this is an unconscious error that can be distinguished from the situation where someone consciously knows that an act is wrong but still freely chooses to perform the morally wrong act. For, with the relevant cognitive biases, a person may want to consistently perform good actions, but the biases can still interfere with the process of deliberation without her conscious awareness and make her choose and perform inconsistent actions despite her noble intentions.

Also, such cognitive biases can be distinguished from making unethical decisions based on a lack of knowledge of the relevant non-moral facts of a case or of having the incorrect non-moral facts of a moral scenario. We use the non-moral and relevant surrounding facts of moral situations in order to help us make correct moral judgments. Using false non-moral facts, such as that a certain race is genetically inferior to another, or lacking knowledge of the relevant non-moral facts can lead to making incorrect moral judgments. However, the problem of error concerning cognitive biases can differ in that one can have and use all and only all of the relevant correct non-moral facts in moral deliberation, but the above cognitive biases can still lead to making inconsistent judgments at different times on a case.

Finally, the influence of the biases can be distinguished from making inconsistent moral judgments due to a lack of being taught that one should not make inconsistent moral judgments. For instance, in childhood, certain people may have not received such proper moral education from their negligent parents. Moreover, they proceeded

⁸ I will address the response from skeptical theism in the next section.

⁹ Descartes relatedly claims that humans are imperfect and occupy a space between God and nothingness (1641, Meditation 4).

to grow up without having such proper moral instruction. Therefore, they are prone to making many inconsistent judgments. The influence of the cognitive biases can differ from these kinds of situations in that even if a person is taught that making inconsistent moral judgments is wrong, they can still make inconsistent judgments due to the fact that they were influenced unconsciously by certain psychological biases, such as is the case with many professional moral philosophers teaching at the top research universities.

For instance, if I am a policy maker, such as a legislator or judge, I intend to do the right thing, I have had the proper moral education such that I know what the right thing to do in a given case is, and I have and use only all the relevant and correct non-moral facts, I may still make inconsistent judgments on the same kind of case at different times based solely on my psychological makeup that God has supposedly given me. For, if the moral situation X presented to me, for example, is preceded by a certain unrelated ethical policy problem A, I may make a particular judgment on X. However, when a case Y is presented to me in which the relevant moral factors in Y are identical to X but Y is preceded by a different kind of unrelated ethical policy problem B, such an ordering of the scenarios may throw me off, and I may give a contrary moral verdict to Y than if the ordering of the policy cases that were presented to me was different. I will give a contradictory policy decision to Y than X even though X and Y are essentially the same moral case. I may be susceptible to pernicious order effects.

God purportedly and generally constructing our moral psychologies in such a fashion allows us to question his existence because many of us are psychologically set up to give inconsistent judgments in many cases due to unconscious psychological processes that God supposedly gave us even though we consciously want to make consistent judgments, do the right thing, have the proper moral education and moral knowledge, and use only all the relevant and correct non-moral facts. It is fine in light of the moral psychology argument that God made the world such that we have the option of freely choosing right from wrong and we sometimes do knowingly and freely decide to do the wrong thing and make such errors in moral judgments. However, when many errors of inconsistency stem from unconscious psychological processes that are part of the general human condition and are generally beyond our real-time conscious awareness despite, for instance, the goodness of our intentions and our moral knowledge, then we may conclude that it is likely that God does not exist.

To note, notice that for the moral psychology argument to work, it is not necessary that one shows that there can be no justified moral beliefs. One need not maintain a moral epistemological skepticism in order for the moral psychology argument for atheism to work. For, even if we can be justified at times in holding certain moral beliefs, the mere descriptive fact that many of us are prone to the relevant biases at times in moral decision-making still leads to the stated problem in God's existence. In fact, notice above that when I have articulated the moral psychology argument, I have even assumed at times that there is moral knowledge.

Concerning the qualities of God required in the moral psychology argument for atheism, I take it that most theists maintain the traditional conception of God that he is omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent. Most also maintain that God is

responsible for creating us. If one maintains that God is lacking in at least one of these qualities, then my contention admittedly does not apply to such a being, and such a being lies outside the scope of the moral psychology argument. Nevertheless, I take it that the traditional God as so described is accepted by most theists of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic faiths, so I understand my argument to have quite a significant scope. Furthermore, I take it that the next claim in the moral psychology argument concerning the descriptive psychological statement that we generally are susceptible to the relevant cognitive biases in moral decision-making is true given the above discussed robust and replicated empirical data. I now will discuss and anticipate numerous possible objections against my contention.

4 Objections

We will have the space to address five objections. One may object that some forms of deception are benign. For instance, hiding the fact from your friend that you are throwing a surprise birthday party for him or her is not an immoral form of deception. Perhaps, the deception as outlined in the moral psychology argument is benign. However, this is not the case as the deception at hand leads to serious problems. The biases are responsible for many people with genuinely good intentions in given situations to make contradictory decisions at different times on such matters. In moral philosophy, putting forth contradictory moral judgments is highly problematic. This is clearly not a good state of affairs. Moreover, such decisions, especially when wrong, may negatively and significantly affect many other lives and determine how others live and die.

One may contend that now since we know of the biases through modern psychology, this will help us overcome the biases. Discovering the biases through empirical investigation is no different from other discoveries in the various sciences that God lays out for us to uncover. Upon making this discovery, now we can be even more careful when making moral decisions, and we must be mindful of the possibility of succumbing to these biases. Keeping such a watchful eye given that we now know about the relevant cognitive biases will allow us to avoid making the relevant mistakes. This may be analogous to how making discoveries in physics has allowed us to make safer planes and bridges that are less likely to malfunction. Hence, there really is nothing problematic in the above psychological biases.

Nevertheless, the dilemma here is that even before recorded human history, countless have lived and died before the recent discoveries in moral psychology. They were not aware of the cognitive biases in moral decision-making since such biases had not been discovered yet. However, in many cases, such innumerable lives have made inconsistent decisions based on unconscious psychological influences despite their honorable intentions, sufficient moral education of right from wrong, and despite having knowledge of the relevant non-moral facts. Moreover, such decisions, especially when wrong, may have also negatively affected the lives of many others. The above is not a desirable state of affairs that a wholly good God would allow for; an undesirable state of affairs that arises from how he supposedly constructs the moral psychologies of human beings.

Third, let us look at a Cartesian objection to the problem of error (1641, Meditation 4). Descartes claims that making erroneous judgments is not the fault of God but is the fault of the human agent. Our intellect and understanding gathers relevant facts concerning an issue. However, erroneous judgments occur when we use our free will to make judgments on an issue that goes beyond the information in our understanding. If there is not a clear and distinct answer that presents itself in light of the relevant facts gathered in our understanding, then we should refrain from making any judgments until such a solution presents itself upon, for instance, gathering further relevant information. However, if we use our wills to make a judgment in this circumstance instead of remaining agnostic, then this is how errors can be made. Since we cannot blame God for giving us free will to make various life decisions on our own, including on ethical matters, the use of our wills to make erroneous judgments is our fault since we misuse our free will and go beyond the knowledge in our understanding. Therefore, the problem of error is not the fault of God. Hence, there is no problem for God's existence. In this respect, Descartes says that error is a privation in the sense that errors occur due to a lack of relevant knowledge of an issue that ought to be contained in the human understanding.

The problem here is that with the moral psychology argument, professional moral philosophers with PhD's working at the top research institutes who may have all the relevant non-moral facts, the highest level of expertise and moral education in ethics, spent previous time contemplating the relevant cases, claim to already have firm views on such cases, and may know what is right and wrong on the relevant cases contained within their understanding or intellects are still susceptible to the relevant cognitive biases. Recall that they are just as liable to such biases as non-philosophers and the folk. Even though I grant that we do at many times have free will to decide what actions to perform, the above Cartesian objection that error is our own fault rather than God's since errors occur when we exercise our wills without having a clear solution to a problem in our understandings fails when applied to the moral psychology argument. It fails because as part of general human nature, we commonly are built to be vulnerable to such cognitive biases without our conscious awareness even when we know the solution to the problem. Also recall that when we are given more time for deliberation to, for example, make sure our judgements are consistent, we are even more susceptible to the relevant biases. Our knowledge, training, and decisions are at times undermined by the above specified unconscious psychological influences that are part of the human condition that at times unknowingly subvert our second order desires, base preferences, wills, and our moral knowledge in our understandings.

Fourth, Descartes later also contends that even though we are deceived at times concerning the use of a particular mental faculty, it is generally the case that such a faculty is not deceptive (1641, Meditation 6). For instance, he explicitly discusses dropsy, where one can be thirsty when having this ailment, but drinking water in this case is detrimental to one's health. While he fully admits that being thirsty in this case is an act of deception from God, he claims that generally speaking, when we get thirsty, being thirsty is usually beneficial to one's biological well-being. He writes, "[Y]et it is much better that [the feeling of thirst] should be deceitful in that

instance, than if, on the contrary, it were continually fallacious when the body is well-disposed. The same holds true in other cases (1641, p. 559).” Likewise, he may object that our moral faculties that arrive upon moral judgments may at times be faulty and deceptive given the cognitive biases, but most of the time our moral psychologies get it right. However, notice that there is a problematic admission of deception here. Making the corresponding move as in the dropsy case, he would admit that God deceptively has constructed us at times to make the relevant errors of inconsistencies in moral judgments. Yet, despite such errors, our moral psychologies generally do get things right. However, this move is immediately problematic in that an omnibenevolent God in no way should be an evil deceiver. If God is a deceiver, as Descartes seems ready to admit, then the traditional God does not exist. Notice that allowing for God to even slightly be an evil deceiver is incompatible with the notion of a wholly good God, and it will generate the desired problem for God’s existence. The traditional God cannot allow for even the smallest amount of evil deception in the construction of our moral psychologies.

A final objection is an appeal to ignorance from the skeptical theist as applied to my moral psychology argument. This is where humans ignorantly perceive apparent problems of error, but God works in mysterious ways, and human beings are ignorant of his ‘big picture,’ purposes, and final aims. If God exists, then God’s reasons are inaccessible to us. Some theists may be skeptical that we can have knowledge about God’s reasons for giving us our particular cognitive faculties. One cannot know God’s ultimate plan or purpose. Human moral knowledge of goodness is not representative of moral knowledge *tout court*. Humans possess massive ignorance concerning God’s ethics and his overall motivations.

However, I take it that there already are several sufficient responses in the literature against skeptical theism, where skeptical theism entails several conclusions that theists largely would be unwilling to accept (Piper 2007; Hasker 2010; Schon 2010; Linford and Patterson 2016). For example, if we cannot know the true nature of God’s goodness, intentions, and reasons, then we must be skeptical about divine revelation and any communication with God, such as through prayer, concerning his statements on matters of the world. We must also be skeptical about moral knowledge coming from God. We cannot trust the Bible, scripture, the Ten Commandments, Jesus, Muhammad, etc. regarding moral instruction. If we witness the brutal raping and murdering of innocent women and children, then we cannot be justified in believing that such acts are wrong. For, God’s unknown intentions could be such that these acts at all times are morally permissible. For all we know, it could be morally incumbent for us to perform such acts on a daily basis regardless of Jesus’ teaching. Skeptical theism can also lead to an epistemic skepticism regarding the external world. Perhaps unbeknownst to us, God has reason to make us believe there is an external world when there really is none. In the above fashion we can respond to skeptical theism since it has many problematic implications that run counter to many core beliefs theists largely hold.

5 Conclusion

I purport to have provided a contribution to the contemporary Philosophy of Religion literature by resurrecting an old specific kind of argument, the problem of error, and providing it with a novel modern spin. The problem of error itself need not necessarily focus on errors of inconsistency in moral judgments but may instead focus on, for example, errors in judgment on matters of physics, biology, dropsy, etc. In this case, by drawing on robust and replicated findings in contemporary moral psychology concerning psychological biases on moral judgments, I contend that there is a problem for God's existence contained within the claims that (1) God, as traditionally conceived, is omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent, (2) God is responsible for creating us, and (3) Human beings are generally susceptible to the above cognitive biases. For, if God exists, he would not have made us generally susceptible to such biases. Coupled with the fact that there is good inductive evidence for believing there is no greater good that would justify and necessitate the existence of the given cognitive biases, I have concluded that it is likely that God does not exist. Finally, I have defended my thesis from numerous objections.

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