

Skeptical Theism is Incompatible with Theodicy

Abstract

Inductive arguments from evil claim that evil presents evidence against the existence of God. Skeptical theists hold that some such arguments from evil evince undue confidence in our familiarity with the sphere of possible goods and the entailments that obtain between that sphere and God's permission of evil(s). I argue that the skeptical theist's skepticism on this point is inconsistent with affirming the truth of a given theodicy. Since the skeptical theist's skepticism is best understood dialogically, I'll begin by sketching the kind of argument against which the skeptical theist's skepticism is pitched. I will then define 'skeptical theistic skepticism', offer a precise definition of 'theodicy', and proceed with my argument.¹

1. Background.

Inductive arguments from evil claim that the existence and prevalence of pain and suffering count as evidence against the existence of God. Some arguers from evil stake that claim on the following sort of argument. Where 'E' represents some inscrutable evil(s), e.g. the killing of an innocent child,

- (1) If God exists then there is a good that morally justifies God in allowing E;
- (2) We don't know of a good that would morally justify God in allowing E;²
- (3) So there probably isn't a good that would justify God in allowing E.
- (4) Therefore, God probably doesn't exist.

¹ I am grateful to Paul Draper for helpful comments on my work. I would also like to thank the Purdue Research Foundation for a grant that funded much of my work on this paper.

² More precisely: No good that is known to us is such that we know that it would morally justify God in allowing E. And technically, this isn't really a claim about evil. Rather, it's a claim about our *lacking a persuasive theistic explanation* for God's permission of evil. So the above is really an argument from the failure of theodicy. (For this observation I am indebted to Paul Draper.) But it's simple and suitable for present purposes.

Arguments from evil vary in kind and quality—most being subtler (and far more compelling) than this one. But skeptical theism’s success at refuting this or that argument is peripheral to my account. So although the above is an uncommonly easy target for the skeptical theist, it’s an adequate tableau for tracing the relevant battle lines. Accordingly, I’ll refer to (1)-(4) as ‘the argument from evil’, using it as a stand-in for its entire class.

The skeptical theist says that we should find the argument from evil unpersuasive, because we should reject the inference from (2) to (3)—or, more generally, any inductive inference that moves from our failure to recognize a good that would justify God’s permission of E to the claim that there (probably) isn’t such a good. For ease of expression, I’ll refer to the inference from (2) to (3) simply as ‘THE INFERENCE’. So the gravamen of the skeptical theist’s complaint is that we should reject any inductive move like THE INFERENCE.

Some skeptical theists say that we should reject THE INFERENCE because it evinces undue confidence in our familiarity with the sphere of possible goods and the entailments that (may) obtain (for all we know) between that sphere and God’s permission of E. “For all we know,” the objection goes, “There is a good that would morally justify God’s permission of E, and we just don’t know what it is—either because that good isn’t known to us, or because some good that’s known to us is connected to God’s permission of E in a way that we don’t understand.”

2. Skeptical theism.

Some skeptical theists base their objection to the argument from evil on (views that entail) the following two skeptical theses.

Axiological skepticism. We shouldn't think that the possible goods and possible evils that are known to us are representative of all possible goods and possible evils there are; and

Modal skepticism. We shouldn't think that the entailment relations we believe to obtain between possible goods and the prevention or permission of possible evils are representative of all such entailment relations there are.³

Before entering into the details of my argument, we should note four things about these skeptical theses vis-à-vis skeptical theism.

Firstly, not all skeptical theists are committed to what I'm calling *axiological skepticism* and *modal skepticism*. So note that when I speak of 'skeptical theism', I am referring to the subset of skeptical theistic views that involve a commitment—either implicitly or explicitly—to the foregoing skeptical theses in particular.

Secondly, the title of 'modal skepticism' has already been conferred upon a comparatively broader form of skepticism, advocated by Peter van Inwagen, which recommends skepticism about our cognitive grasp of metaphysical possibility in general.⁴ When I speak of the skeptical theist's *modal skepticism*, I mean to denote the relatively

³ Some skeptical theists, e.g. Bergmann, say that 'We have no good reason for thinking that known goods/entailments are representative of all goods/entailments'. Others, e.g. Howard-Snyder, say that 'We should be in doubt about whether known goods/entailments are representative of all goods/entailments'. Both imply that we shouldn't (epistemologically speaking) believe that known goods/entailments are representative of all those there are. That implication is the point of contact.

⁴ Cf. van Inwagen, 1998. The relationship between van Inwagen's modal skepticism and the skeptical theist's *modal skepticism* isn't immediately obvious. (The former claims that conceivability isn't a sure indication of metaphysical possibility; the latter pertains primarily to causal links between the realization of possible goods and God's allowance of certain evils.) So note the connection. One motivation for THE INFERENCE might be the supposition that we can imagine a possible world in which E is prevented by God *and* some (aggregation of) good(s) that counterbalance(s) E is realized. The skeptical theist claims that, for all we know, there isn't a possible world in which God prevents E and all of the counterbalancing goods that we enjoy (or will enjoy) in the actual world are realized—many of which, for all we know, aren't even known to us (cp. Bergmann [2001: 286]). For all we know, the argument goes, there are unknown entailment relations between those goods and God's permission of E. Thanks to an anonymous referee for noting that clarification would be helpful here.

weaker view that we should assume a skeptical posture toward modal suppositions about entailments that obtain between *possible goods and possible evils*.⁵

Thirdly, it's been said that skeptical theism has a theistic component and a skeptical component.⁶ So note that my argument concerns only the *skeptical* component of skeptical theism, defined as the conjunction of *axiological skepticism* and *modal skepticism*. Since phrases like 'skeptical theistic skepticism' and 'the skeptical component of skeptical theism' seem unwieldy, I'll hereafter use 'SC' to denote the *skeptical component* of skeptical theism, as in:

SC The *skeptical component* of skeptical theism (i.e., the conjunction of *modal skepticism* and *axiological skepticism*).

So my argument aims to establish that there is an inconsistency inherent to affirming both SC and the truth of a given theodicy.

Finally, we should emphasize what the skeptical theist means by *representativeness*. On this point Michael Bergmann notes that

... a sample of Xs can be representative of all Xs relative to one property but not another. For example, a sample of humans can be representative of all humans relative to the property of *having a lung* while at the same time not being representative of all humans relative to the property of *being a Russian*. To say a sample of Xs is representative of all Xs relative to a property F is just to say that if n/m of the Xs in the sample have property F, then approximately n/m of all Xs have F.... [W]hat we are interested in is whether our sample of possible goods, possible evils, and entailment relations between them (i.e. the possible goods, evils, and relevant entailments we know of) is representative of all possible goods,

⁵ Though van Inwagen would doubtless claim that his general form of modal skepticism entails what we are calling *modal skepticism*, it's obvious that the entailment doesn't go the other way. So I do *not* assume that the skeptical theist's *modal skepticism* entails a commitment to modal skepticism more generally (*a la* van Inwagen). That said, Bergmann cites van Inwagen's modal skepticism as support for the skeptical theist's *modal skepticism* (cf. Bergmann [2001: 286]). So at least in Bergmann's case, the distinction doesn't seem to be of any real moment.

⁶ Bergmann (2001: 278). Others object to the title 'skeptical theism', on the grounds that one needn't be a theist in order to endorse the skeptical theist's skepticism or to be persuaded that said skepticism undermines some argument(s) from evil (cf. Howard-Snyder [2009: 20]). Here, as I understand it, Howard-Snyder's specific point is that (so-called) 'skeptical theistic' skepticism is equally reasonable for theists and non-theists alike.

possible evils, and entailment relations there are *relative to the property of figuring in a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting the inscrutable evils we see around us.*⁷

Take, for instance, the skeptical theist's *axiological skepticism*. Let *Set G* be the set of all possible goods; and let *Set Kg* be the set of all possible goods that are *known* (to us). Suppose that no member of *Set Kg* has the property of being apt for morally justifying God's permission of E. According to the *axiological skeptic*, we shouldn't think it follows (even inductively) that no member of *Set G* has the property of being apt for morally justifying God's permission of E. So even on the supposition that no *known* good would morally justify God's permission of E, THE INFERENCE fails.

Add to this the skeptical theist's *modal skepticism*, and THE INFERENCE becomes even less worthy of our assent. Given the full force of *SC*, we shouldn't think that we comprehend the potentially God-justifying entailment relations that might, for all we know, obtain between known possible goods and known possible evils, known possible goods and *unknown* possible evils, *unknown* possible goods and *unknown* possible evils, or *unknown* possible goods and known possible evils.

The result of all this skepticism is that the domain of what we may justifiedly believe to be possible is a rather small subset of all that we shouldn't believe to be impossible. This result, I now argue, is inconsistent with the position that a given theodicy tracks with reality.

3. *Skeptical theism and theodicy.*

By 'theodicy', I mean any attempt to establish that God's permission of E would be morally justified by a particular good G. (In keeping with standard practice, I use

⁷ Bergmann in Flint and Rea (2009: 377); author's italics. See also Bergmann and Rea (2005: 242); and Howard-Snyder in Kvanvig (2009: 24-5), where he cites Bergmann and Rea (2005: 242).

‘good(s)’ as shorthand for ‘reason(s) *of any kind* in virtue of which [the theodist claims that] God’s permission of E would be morally justified’.) Observe, for precision, that ‘G’ is *my* variable, which I use as a stand-in for any given good(s) that the theodist might name.⁸ In rendering a theodicy, the theodist must name a *specific* good (or specify the members of an aggregate good) on which that theodicy is based. The *free will* theodist, for instance, would argue that “God’s permission of E would be morally justified in virtue of *the good of [moral] free will.*” In order to emphasize this point, I will hereafter refer to a theodicy based, e.g., upon specific good ‘G’ as a ‘G-based theodicy’. (A theodicy based upon specific good ‘G*’ would be a ‘G*-based theodicy’, and so-on; ‘G’ or ‘G*’, etc., might stand for aggregate goods, so long as the theodist specifies each member of the aggregation.) In this way we’ll avoid any equivocation about what, exactly, one is affirming when one affirms the truth of a given theodicy.

Call the view that *SC* is not incompatible with confidence in the truth of a given theodicy ‘*SC*-theodicy compatibilism’, or *compatibilism* for short. So the position at issue is this.

Compatibilism. There’s no inconsistency inherent in endorsing *SC* while affirming (rather than refraining from affirming) the truth of a given theodicy.⁹

Below I argue that *compatibilism* is false or, if true, its truth is predicated upon a philosophically uninteresting construal of theodicy.

⁸ What about, e.g., *privation* accounts (e.g. Augustine or Boethius)? Insofar as such an account constitutes a theodicy (*vis-à-vis* a defense), it posits a reason in virtue of which God wouldn’t be morally blameworthy for permitting E.

⁹ In case it isn’t clear, I mean *compatibilism* as the claim that, “For some theodicy Θ , there’s no inconsistency inherent in endorsing *SC* while affirming (rather than refraining from affirming) that Θ is veridical (with respect to Θ ’s claims about goods that would morally justify God in not preventing E).” Note, moreover, that on my account, God needn’t exist in order for Θ to be veridical. In speaking of a good that would morally justify God’s permission of E, I refer to a good that *would*, in the event that God exists (i.e., whether or not God does in fact exist), morally justify God in permitting E.

3.1. Two types of theodicy.

We'll begin by dividing all theodicies into two general types: *weak* and *strong*—so-called because what I'm calling a *strong* theodicy makes comparatively stronger claims than what I'm calling a *weak* theodicy.

A *strong* theodicy goes something like this. "I know of a reason for which God would be morally justified in permitting E. It's good G, which (we'll stipulate) obtains in the actual world.¹⁰ Therefore the argument from evil fails. For we *do* know of a good that would morally justify God in permitting E—namely, G."

By contrast, a *weak* theodicy goes like this. "I know of a good which, for all we know, is such that it would morally justify God's permission of E. It's good G, which (we'll again stipulate) obtains in the actual world.¹¹ So unless the arguer from evil can show that G is *not* such that it would morally justify God's permission of E, the argument from evil fails."

Note that one and the same good (moral free will, e.g.) may be employed in advancing either a *strong* or a *weak* theodicy. Their distinctive claims concerning what we know about a given good is what sets *strong* and *weak* theodicies apart. A simple way of casting the distinction is this. Consider how a theodacist might answer the question, "Do you think that we have more reason to affirm than to refrain from affirming your claim that God's permission of E would be morally justified in virtue of the good(s) featured in your theodicy?" If the theodacist answers 'No' or 'Maybe', he is a *weak*

¹⁰ Why this stipulation? In order to avoid objections of the form, "Of course we shouldn't think that this theodicy tracks with reality: We shouldn't think that G really exists!" That kind of objection is entirely beside my point here.

¹¹ I don't think that the *weak* theodicy, as I define it, really hangs on the existence of G (*vis-à-vis* the existence of G *for all we know*). In any case, that concern is peripheral to my argument. So, for the sake of simplicity, we'll again stipulate that G exists and obtains in the actual world.

theodicist. If the theodicist answers ‘Yes’, she’s a *strong* theodicist.¹²

I’ll now argue that *compatibilism* is false in the case of any *strong* theodicy. I then demonstrate that although *compatibilism* may be true in the case of some *weak* theodicy, its truth is uninteresting.

3.2. *The strong theodicy.*

Consider Strom, a *strong* theodicist, who argues along the following line. “I know of a reason for which God would be morally justified in permitting E. Here it is: [‘G’]. So the arguer from evil is simply wrong to claim that we don’t know of a good that would morally justify God’s permission of E. For we *do* know of such a good—namely, G.” We’ll call this ‘Strom’s G-based theodicy’.

Now suppose that Strom endorses *SC*.¹³ So Strom doesn’t believe that there is *not* some good, G*, such that G* is totally unknown to Strom. And Strom admits that for all he knows, if G* exists, G* is a good that is incomprehensibly greater than G in every morally relevant way.

What if there were a good like G*?¹⁴ Since G* would be unknown to Strom, he shouldn’t think that he knows what entailment relations obtain between the realization of G* and E’s being prevented or permitted by God. (Given *SC*, Strom shouldn’t even think that he knows such things about the goods that are known to him.) So if Strom endorses *SC* then Strom must admit that, for all he knows, G* might also be such that: The

¹² I don’t think that there’s a viable answer other than ‘Yes’, ‘No’ or ‘Maybe’. So any given theodical account must be either a *weak* or a *strong* theodicy as I’ve defined them.

¹³ What if Strom were to simply withhold judgment about *SC*? To answer that question, read through the rest of this section and note the following. If Strom withholds judgment about *SC* then he should withhold judgment about whether he shouldn’t hold the belief that a good like G* doesn’t exist. So he cannot (with consistency) take hold of the belief that there is *not* such a good. It still follows that he cannot reject disjunction *D*.

¹⁴ In order to avoid needless counterexamples from open theism, suppose further that G* would be known to the God of open theism—after all, if Strom doesn’t know of G*, he’d have no way of knowing whether it would be known to God, however we conceive of omniscience.

realization of G^* entails God's *prevention* of E; and God's *prevention* of E entails the realization of G^* .

Thus, if Strom endorses *SC*, he must admit that he doesn't know there is *not* some good in existence, G^* , such that:

- (a) In every morally relevant way, G^* is incomprehensibly greater than G;
- (b) The realization of G^* entails God's *prevention* of E; and
- (c) Given God's *prevention* of E, the realization of G^* is inevitable.¹⁵

If there is a good like G^* then Strom's G-based theodicy cannot possibly be veridical. I'll explain why below, but first I think it will be helpful to overview the remainder of my argument on this point.

We've established that, given his endorsement of *SC*, Strom shouldn't be at all confident that no good like G^* exists. If there is a good like G^* then one of three things must be the case:

- (1) There is no fact of the matter about whether God morally ought to realize G^* rather than permit E (thereby [possibly] realizing G);
- (2) God morally ought to realize G^* rather than permit E (thereby [possibly] realizing G); or
- (3) There is some good (or aggregate good), G' , such that G' would morally justify God's permission of E.¹⁶

¹⁵ One commentator worries that (c) is superfluous. So note that (c) blocks moves like the following. "I have (natural theological) reasons for believing that God exists. Since God hasn't prevented E, it follows that God had a morally satisfying reason to foreclose on the possibility of realizing any good that meets conditions (a) and (b). So if there is such a good, it must be that God knows that its realization would be unlikely in the event that God prevents E, and that's why God chose to permit E and realize G instead of (achieving the remote possibility of) realizing a greater good. There's no tension between *SC* and that complex of claims." So note that the skeptical theist is in no position to deny that there is a good in existence that satisfies *all* of conditions (a) through (c), and that condition (c) plays an important role in upcoming concerns.

¹⁶ Note that if G' is an aggregate good, its aggregation might include G. But it cannot be limited to G, since that would be tantamount to the claim that 'G would morally justify God's permission of E'—which, if a good like G^* exists, would be untrue (cf. upcoming discussion of *D*). I assume, of course,

Now let ' D ' stand for the disjunction of ' $(1) \vee (2) \vee (3)$ '. So the existence of a good like G^* entails D .

In a moment I'll demonstrate that each of D 's disjuncts is incompatible with the truth of Strom's G-based theodicy. So here's the upshot. Since the existence of a good like G^* entails D , it follows that the truth of Strom's G-based theodicy is incompatible with the existence of a good like G^* . And since, if he endorses SC , Strom shouldn't believe that no good like G^* exists, it follows that Strom shouldn't be confident in the truth of his G-based theodicy. Thus *compatibilism* is false in the case of any *strong* theodicy. In order to see why, let's consider each of D 's disjuncts vis-à-vis Strom's G-based theodicy.

Disjunct (1) corresponds to van Inwagen's Sorites Paradox-type examples, meant to establish that in some instances God's actualization of one state of affairs rather than another might be a matter of moral indifference—even when one appears to be better than its alternative(s). Since we've stipulated that (if a good like G^* exists) God's prevention of E would entail the realization of a good that is incomprehensibly greater than G in *every morally relevant way*, this tack doesn't seem to apply. Be that as it may, on (1) Strom's G-based theodicy misses the point entirely: If God wouldn't be morally obligated to bring about the in-every-morally-relevant-way better of two impossible states of affairs, it doesn't seem as though God's permission of E would require moral justification at all. In that case we might think of God's permission of E as *not unjustified*. But that would be so in virtue of the fact that God's action is a matter of

that Strom's G-based theodicy fails to be veridical if the realization of G is not sufficient (even if necessary) for God's permission of E to be morally justified.

moral indifference—not, as Strom’s G-based theodicy claims, in virtue of G. So if Strom shouldn’t believe that (1) is false then he shouldn’t believe that his theodicy is true.

If disjunct (2) is true then it couldn’t possibly be the case that G would morally justify God’s permission of E. For God’s permission of E would be morally unjustified, since God would be morally obligated to prevent E (thereby realizing G*) instead of permitting E (thereby [possibly] realizing G). In that case Strom’s claim that ‘G would morally justify God’s permission of E’ must be false. So if Strom shouldn’t believe that (2) is false then he shouldn’t believe that his theodicy is true.

Suppose Strom were to object along the following line. “*This* is how I know that no possible good like G* exists! I have reasons independent of my theodicy—natural theological reasons, e.g.—for believing that God exists. Notice that E obtains in the actual world. This means that no good like G* has been realized by God (for the realization of G* is incompatible with E; cf. condition ‘(b)’). So, *modus tollens*, no good like G* exists: Were it true that a good like G* exists, God would realize G* [to the exclusion of E]. But God has *not* realized G* [evidenced by the fact that E obtains]. Therefore, no good like G* exists.”

Why won’t this tack work for Strom? His first premise, “[Given that God exists,] if there were a possible good like G*, God would realize G*,” is surely false. (This is where disjunct (3) enters the picture.) For it might well be the case that God exists and

- (3a) Possible good G* exists (but does not obtain in the actual world);
- (3b) Evil E obtains in the actual world; and
- (3c) Good G’ obtains in the actual world.

So even if we assume that God exists and that G would, in the absence of any possible good like G*, morally justify God's permission of E, those assumptions only entitle Strom to the claim that, "If a good like G* exists then a good like G' exists." And that's of no use to Strom in defending the truth of his G-based theodicy. If a good like G* exists then God's permission of E would be morally justified *only if* a good like G' exists. In that case, Strom's G-based theodicy is inaccurate. For it would be G', *not* G, (at least not G alone,) that would morally justify God in permitting E. So if (3) is true then Strom's G-based theodicy is false.

That covers all of *D*'s disjuncts; so let's recapitulate. Given that Strom endorses *SC*, he shouldn't believe that no good like G* exists. In that case he shouldn't believe that *D* is false. Since each of *D*'s disjuncts is incompatible with the truth of Strom's G-based theodicy, it follows that Strom must reject *SC* in order to consistently affirm (rather than refrain from affirming) the truth of his own G-based theodicy. So in the case of any *strong* theodicy, *compatibilism* is false.

3.3. *The weak theodicy.*

Now imagine a dialogue between Winthrop, a *weak* theodicy, and Agnes, an *agnodicist*. (I envision an 'agnodicist' as one who is agnostic about whether any theodicy is true. Nothing is entailed by this position beyond what is strictly entailed by an ambivalent posture toward theodicy. For all I aim to show, Agnes might well be, e.g., a theist.) Winthrop argues along the following line. "I know of a good which, for all we know, is such that it would morally justify God's permission of E. [Here it is.] Call this good 'G'. Unless the arguer from evil can show that G is *not* such that it would morally justify God's permission of E, the arguer from evil has failed to establish that no good

known to us would morally justify God's permission of E."

How might Agnes reply? Here's one tack: "Your theodicy identifies a good (or apparent-to-us-good), G, for which you claim that God would be morally justified in permitting E. But I endorse *SC*. So I don't think we should believe that the realization of G is really as good as you say it is: For all we know, G's realization stands in entailment relations with other possible goods (cf. G*), or certain possible evils, such that the world would be an appreciably *better* place without the realization of G and what is entailed thereby. So we shouldn't affirm (rather than refrain from affirming) the truth of your G-based theodicy."

For reasons noted in connection with Strom's theodicy, Winthrop cannot reject Agnes's inference from *SC* to her conclusion that we shouldn't affirm the truth of his G-based theodicy. (That is to say, Winthrop must concede that *if* we endorse *SC*, we shouldn't be confident in the truth of his G-based theodicy.) So suppose Winthrop were to argue instead along the following line.

"Perhaps we should be in doubt about whether G would morally justify God's permission of E. Still, unless the arguer from evil can show that G would *not* morally justify God in permitting E—i.e. that my theodicy is indeed mistaken on this point—the argument from evil fails."

At this point I see no important difference between the *weak* theodicist and the skeptical theist as such. All Winthrop's theodicy adds to the conversation is speculation about apparent goods that might, for all we know, be apt for morally justifying God's permission of E. (Note, by the way, that I use 'apparent goods' as shorthand for something like, 'States of affairs whose realization strikes the untrained and unduly

credulous observer as preferable, in some morally relevant sense, to their non-realization’—since, to the skeptical theist’s mind, the ultimate goodness of ‘apparent goods’ is far from apparent.) At this point in the dialectic, the *weak* theodicy isn’t even arguing for the truth of his theodicy; he merely claims that we shouldn’t believe his theodicy to be false.

But this is nothing more than skeptical theism with a fancy-free jaunt into the realm of epistemic [for-all-we-know-not im]possibility. Once Winthrop assents to *SC*, he’s just a fanciful skeptical theist. So if ‘theodicy’ designates a *weak* theodicy then *compatibilism* is tautologically true, since fanciful skeptical theism is just a subspecies of skeptical theism—skeptical theism with some extra imagination. That there’s no inconsistency in endorsing both skeptical theism and a subspecies of skeptical theism is as uninteresting a fact as it is uncontroversial. So on the ‘*weak* theodicy’ reading, true as it may be, *compatibilism* does no work.

4. *An Objection.*

The skeptical theist might object along the following line. “The skeptical theist’s skepticism is a dialectical maneuver directed against moves like THE INFERENCE. And it needn’t be anything more.” This objection unfolds as follows.

Suppose our *strong* theodicy, Strom, finds himself in an argument with Isabelle, who embraces THE INFERENCE. Though Strom has his own reasons for thinking that the argument from evil fails—namely, his G-based theodicy—he recognizes that Isabelle is unpersuaded by his theodicy. So, *just for the sake of argument*, Strom grants Isabelle the supposition that his G-based theodicy fails to establish that G would morally justify God’s permission of E. “Nevertheless,” Strom might say, “*Even if* we grant the failure of

my theodicy, it's still the case that you, Isabelle, should be in doubt about whether the goods known to you are representative of those there are. So you shouldn't endorse THE INFERENCE."

The upshot of the objection is this. Strom needn't take on *axiological* and *modal skepticism* himself in order to claim that those skeptical concerns should diminish Isabelle's confidence in THE INFERENCE. So perhaps it's the case that if Strom himself endorses *SC* then he shouldn't be confident in the truth of his G-based theodicy. According to this objection, it doesn't follow that Strom cannot, with consistency, deploy those skeptical concerns in the context of a debate with Isabelle—all the while rejecting *SC* in other contexts, in which he's perfectly free to enjoy confidence in the truth of his theodicy.

I'll address this objection by dividing all skeptical theists into two camps: *real* and *rhetorical*. The *real* skeptical theist is one who is actually skeptical about whether the goods known to us are representative of those there are, and whether each good known to us is such that the conditions necessary for its realization known to us are all there are. So the *real* skeptical theist is actually an *axiological* and *modal skeptic*. The argument above has demonstrated that *real* skeptical theistic skepticism is incompatible with confidence in the truth of any given theodicy. It follows that, if by 'skeptical theistic skepticism' we mean '*real* skeptical theistic skepticism', *compatibilism* is false.

Alternatively, the *rhetorical* skeptical theist is one who isn't actually skeptical about whether the goods known to us are representative of those there are, or whether each good known to us is such that the conditions necessary for its realization known to us are all there are. The *rhetorical* skeptical theist merely uses that skeptical posture in

certain contexts to argue the following way. “Unless we should think that the goods known to us are representative of those there are, (etc.,) we shouldn’t endorse THE INFERENCE. Surely we shouldn’t think that. So we shouldn’t endorse THE INFERENCE.”

My reply to the *rhetorical* skeptical theist is this. Unless we should think that the goods known to us are representative of those there are, (etc.,) *we shouldn’t be confident in the truth of any given theodicy*. So your rhetorical maneuver cuts both ways. If Isabelle should take your skeptical concerns seriously then perhaps she should abandon THE INFERENCE. But if Isabelle should take *SC* seriously then so should Strom. So, to whatever extent *SC* should undermine Isabelle’s confidence in THE INFERENCE, *SC* should undermine Strom’s confidence in the truth of his theodicy.

This gives rise to the following dilemma: Should Isabelle and Strom take *SC* seriously, or not? If they should then Isabelle should refrain from affirming THE INFERENCE and Strom should abandon confidence in the truth of his theodicy. In that case *compatibilism* is false. On the other hand, if Strom and Isabelle shouldn’t take *SC* seriously then skeptical theism gives Isabelle no more reason to abandon THE INFERENCE than Strom his theodicy. In that case appeals to *SC* are hopelessly ineffectual—skeptical theism thus conceived does nothing to undermine THE INFERENCE. It cuts no ice. So even if *compatibilism* were true on that account, it would be so only because *SC* is construed in such a way as to make it too weak to be of any real value to the skeptical theist.

5. Conclusion.

I have argued that skeptical theistic skepticism is not consistent with affirming the truth of any given theodicy—at least not on any interesting construal of theodicy or the

skeptical theist's skepticism. Consequently, in replying to arguments from evil, the defender of theism must choose between skeptical theism and theodicy; she cannot, with consistency, deploy both strategies.

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