# Reasonable Action, Dominance Reasoning, and Skeptical Theism
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*Abstract*: This paper regiments and responds to an objection to skeptical theism. The conclusion of the objection is that it is not reasonable for skeptical theists to prevent evil, even when it would be easy for them to do so. I call this objection a "Dominance-Reasoning Objection" because it can be regimented utilizing dominance reasoning familiar from decision theory. Nonetheless, I argue, the objection ultimately fails because it neglects a distinction between justifying goods that are necessary for the existence of a good and those that are necessary for God's permission of the good.

Skeptical theism is an important and popular response to arguments from evil. Skeptical theism urges a kind of skepticism about our ability to discern possible reasons God might have for permitting the evils we observe. It then argues that this skepticism undermines, or greatly mitigates, various arguments from evil.

But skeptical theism is not without its critics. One powerful objection is what I call the "Dominance-Reasoning Objection" (DRO) to skeptical theism. The conclusion of this objection is that the reasonable thing for skeptical theists to do is to *never* prevent evil, even when it would be easy to prevent evil. But never preventing evil is clearly *unreasonable*—and frequently *immoral*—so we should reject skeptical theism. I call this objection the "Dominance-Reasoning Objection" because the best way to regiment this objection is in terms of dominance-reasoning familiar from decision theory. Specifically, as the objection goes, not preventing evil always "dominates" preventing evil for the self-identifying skeptical theist and so preventing evil is never the reasonable action.

The aim of this paper is to regiment and respond to this objection. I argue that the DRO ultimately rests on a misrepresentation of the skeptical theist's view about God's permission of evil. Specifically, it neglects a distinction—dating at least back to Wykstra's (1984) article—between there being a justifying good for *an occurring evil* and there being a justifying good for *God's permission* of an occurring evil. This distinction is important for how skeptical theists think about God's permission of evil. Further, given a more realistic representation of how skeptical theists think that incorporates this distinction, dominance reasoning will not apply to thinking about preventing evil. So, the DRO ultimately fails.

Section I briefly exposits skeptical theism, paying attention to this distinction from Wykstra. In section II, I briefly describe dominance-reasoning and articulate two principles about reasonable action. In section III, I provide an informal presentation of the objection with some quotations to indicate where it might be found in the literature. I then regiment the objection using dominance-reasoning before distinguishing it from the "too much skepticism" objection to skeptical theism. Finally, in section IV, I show how the objection rests on a misrepresentation of skeptical theism; specifically, the objection neglects the distinction Wykstra articulated.

## I.      Skeptical Theism, in Brief

In an ecumenical overview, Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wysktra (2017: 86) say that skeptical theists endorse these general theses:

(1) If the theistic God does exist, then very likely there is a divine-human gap such that we humans should, for many evils in our world, not expect to grasp the divine purposes and reckonings behind God's allowing of these evils.

(2) (1) entails the failure of a variety of important anti-theistic evidential arguments from evil.

Perrine and Wykstra see these claims as the general claims of skeptical theism—a common vector of different particular views associated with various authors. But (1) and (2) are quite vague and general. It will be useful to consider a more specific version of skeptical theism that fills in these details. Perhaps the most detailed version that has been critically discussed is Michael Bergmann's (2001). (Similar ways of filling in the details are in *inter alia* Alston (1991, 1996), Perrine and Wykstra (2014).):

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

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

ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

A few comments on how to understand ST1-3. First, ST1-3 do not claim that we have a good reason for thinking that the goods we know of *aren't* representative of the possible goods that there are. Rather, ST1-3 are more agnostic than that: we lack a good reason for thinking they are representative; it may be that they are, it may be that they are not. Second, the "possible goods" and "possible evils" are meant to be inclusive enough to include goods and evils that may not obtain or occur. In this sense, nuclear war in the 1970s is a possible evil; it is simply a *merely* possible evil, a *non-occurring* possible evil. Third, ST1-ST3 makes claims about whether one group of things is "representative" of another. But the same group of things may be "representative" of another group when it comes to one property but not another. If I have a matching set of dinnerware, then two plates from that set may be representative of the entire set when it comes to certain properties (say, being made out of porcelain or having a certain color scheme) but not other properties (say, shape and relative size). The relevant property of representativeness for ST1-3 that Bergmann has in mind is a good that is relevant to God's permission of evil. Thus, a skeptical theist might claim that we do have good reason for thinking the goods, evils, and connection between them that we are familiar with are representative of all goods and evils for some properties (e.g. properties relevant to justifying human action). It is merely that we have no good reason for thinking they are representative when it comes to the property of justifying God's permission of evil.

For purposes here, I'll assume that, for any occurring evil, God is justified in permitting that evil only if there is a justifying good for God's permission of that evil. Per usual, by 'good' I have in mind not simply some occurring greater good but some non-occurring (prevented) worse evil. Though it is not always accepted by skeptical theists (e.g. van Inwagen (2006: 100-111)), I'll also assume that a good justifies God's permission of an evil only if God could not have achieved that good without permitting that evil. Justifying goods might be realized in a variety of things, and they may change depending on the evil God would be permitting.[1]

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[1] For instance, Adams (1999) argues that the generic good features of the world may not be sufficient to justify God's permission of specific horrific evils. Rather, such evils must be justified by (roughly put) goods that apply to

It is important to notice that a good justifies God's *permission* of an evil and not necessarily the *evil* itself.[2] The skeptical theist recognizes two possible kinds of justifying goods. Sometimes a good justifies God's permission of an evil because the occurrence of the evil itself is necessary for that good. However, sometimes a good justifies God's permission of an evil because the good could not have occurred without the possibility of that evil occurring. In such a situation, the evil itself might not be necessary for a justifying good, but God's permission of it is.

This distinction is hard to grasp. Two examples might help clarify:

> A parent permits that her child undergoes a painful shot. The parent could have prevented the evil of the pain by simply refusing to take the child to the doctor. Nonetheless, the parent permits the evil so that the child can avoid an even worse evil of experiencing a painful disease.

> A parent permits that her child undergoes a painfully embarrassing public clarinet recital. The parent could have prevented that painful public event by forcing her child to practice the clarinet. Nonetheless, the parent permitted the evil by not forcing the child to practice thereby giving the child a chance to take responsibility for his actions. (An opportunity that, unfortunately, the child did not utilize.)

In both cases, it is plausible that the parent is justified in permitting these evils because there is some outweighing good that could only occur were she to permit that an evil might occur. But in the first case the occurrence of the evil itself—the painful shot—is necessary for the child to avoid a worse evil. By contrast, in the second, the occurrence of the evil itself—the painful public performance—is not necessary for the relevant good of developing responsibility. Rather, the parent's *permission* of that evil is necessary for the good of developing responsibility; after all, if the parent had forced her child to practice the clarinet, the child would not have had the opportunity to learn responsibility for his actions. Likewise, insofar as a good justifies God's permission of an evil it need not be because the evil is, itself, necessary for that good; it may just be that God's permission of that evil is necessary for that good.[3]

In what follows, I will use the term 'skeptical theist' to refer to someone who accepts (i) theism, (ii) Bergmann's (ST1)-(ST3), and (iii) the view that for every occurring evil God is justified in permitting evil only if that evil has a good that justifies God's permission of it. This is a more restrictive usage than some authors, like Perrine and Wykstra (2017), and would exclude the views of other skeptical theists, like perhaps van Inwagen (2006). But such terminological

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the context of the life of those who suffer horrific evils. Stump (1996) argues that, on Aquinas' view, suffering always ultimately benefits those who suffer. I neither endorse nor reject these suggestions; they are merely illustrative.

[2] Wykstra (1984: 75-6) and Alston (1991 [1996]: 101, 112ff.) were careful to draw this distinction. Anderson (2012) also draws attention to this distinction to defend skeptical theism. However, he uses it to defend skeptical theism from the objection that skeptical theism leads to all-things-considered value skepticism. That objection is different from the one I am considering here; see section III.D.

[3] One atheologian who *was* sensitive to this distinction was Mackie. After drawing the distinction (1982: 151-6), Mackie ultimately argues that it makes things worse for the theist. For, in the second kind of case, God could still *prevent* the evil even though it occurs. This means, he says, that God knowingly allowed the evil, which he says is equivalent to making it the case that the evil occurs (1982: 161-2). Thus, he says, one can invoke this distinction at the cost of God causing evil to occur! All I have to say in response is that I think Mackie is clearly mistaken—on broadly metaphysical grounds—for thinking that knowing allowing something to occur is the same thing as *making it the case* that the thing occurs. To take a simple example, a gardener might *knowingly allow* a certain weed to take over his garden; but he does not *make it the case* that his garden is overtaken by a weed—the weed does that.

issues are not particularly important, since they do not cause any great disagreements for my discussion here.

### II.    Dominance Reasoning

Sometimes an agent faces decisions where the outcome of their actions are unknown. The outcomes of their actions might be unknown because they don't know what proposition is true. (If I am unsure whether there is heavy traffic on the highway, I might not know if my decision to drive on the highway will result in me being late.) But even in situations where the agent is unsure of the truth of a proposition, it might be clear which action is the reasonable one. Frequently, it is clear because the agent can engage in what could be called "dominance reasoning."

Here is a simple example. Suppose I am making an omelet for breakfast. As I search through the fridge, I find some cream that my partner purchased. However, I cannot find the expiration date. I am thus unsure whether or not the cream is expired. Nonetheless, I am lactose intolerant. So regardless of whether the cream is expired or not, adding the cream to the omelet will make it worse. In this situation, the reasonable thing for me to do is to *not* add the cream, even though I am unsure whether or not it is expired.

It will be useful to represent examples like this more rigorously. So let us use the following "outcome matrix" to represent what, given the agent's perspective, are the potential outcomes of different actions. At the top of the outcome matrix are propositions or "states" of the world. For some agent, these are mutually exclusive and exhaustive of what the agent would regard as possibly true or possible states of the universe. There will always be at least one such possibility and frequently many more. On the left are potential actions. The actions are also mutually exclusive and exhaustive so that that the agent cannot perform more than one act and must perform at least one of them. Finally, the numeric value in the center of the box represents what amount of value the agent would assign to the *outcome* of what would happen, were the agent to perform that action, given that the proposition is true. I will assume that the agent could assign a numeric value for the outcome. This assumption is almost certainly false. But, as I'll suggest below, it will not matter for our critical discussion.[4]

For my particular decision involving cream, the outcome matrix might look like this:

|                  | Cream is expired | Cream is not expired |
| ---------------- | ---------------- | -------------------- |
| Add cream        | -20              | -10                  |
| Do not add cream | 10               | 10                   |

The specific numeric values here are arbitrary. However, the specific values do represent several things. First, looking at the top row, adding cream is *worse* if it is expired. Second, looking at the first column, if the cream is expired, it is better to not add it. Third, looking at the second column, if the cream is not expired, it is better to not add it.

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[4] The outcome matrixes are similar to, though not identical with, Jeffrey's consequence matrixes (1990). In standard decision theory, there is a set of propositions (or states) and a set of actions, like my outcome matrixes have. But there can be three more things (my descriptions here are causal, not rigorous). First, a set of outcomes. Second, a function that assigns to each outcome some numeric value from the integers representing its value. Third, a probability function assigning, for each outcome, how probable an outcome is likely to obtain, given one of the states and that one has performed that action. These are then used to determine the expected value of performing some action, given some proposition or state. Such expected values could then be put in an outcome matrix. I've decided that the additional formal machinery is unnecessary for my purposes here and have moved straight to values assigned to outcomes. There are various introductions to decision theory. See, e.g., Steele and Stefánsson (2015), Joyce (1998: chp. 1), Jeffrey (1990), or Kreps (1988).

It is natural for me to reason about this case as follows. *Regardless* of whether the cream is expired or not, it is better to *not* add the cream. Thus, while I am unsure of whether the cream is expired, it doesn't really matter. Either way, not adding the cream is the reasonable choice. In fact, it seems positively *un*reasonable for me to add cream, given the situation.

This kind of reasoning may be called *dominance reasoning*. For a person reasons that one kind of action "dominates" another (or, conversely, one action is "dominated" by another). This kind of reasoning is common in ordinary life, though it is not necessarily called "dominance reasoning." In fact, sometimes it is so obvious that some action is "dominated" that we do not even bother to rehearse the reasoning. For instance, in real life, when faced with such a case of the omelet and cream, I would almost never even think about adding the cream *precisely because* it would be a dominated action.

We can more precisely describe one action dominating another as follows:

> Given some outcome matrix for an agent, an action *a* dominates an action *b* if and only if, for every proposition in the outcome matrix, the value of *a* is greater than the value of *b*.

That statement merely provides a definition. We can use the definition to provide a principle as follows:

> *Dominance*. Given some outcome matrix for an agent, if an action *a* dominates an action *b*, then it is unreasonable for the agent to perform action *b*.

Intuitively put, *Dominance* says that if an agent expects *b* to have a worse outcome than *a* no matter how the world goes—no matter what is true—then it is not reasonable for the agent to do *a*. Notice that *Dominance* states conditions for when a specific action is unreasonable. It does not necessarily have any implications for when an action *is* reasonable. For instance, even if action *b* is dominated by action *a*, *Dominance* does not imply that it is reasonable for the agent to do *a*. However, for discussion, it will be useful to consider a complementary principle:

> *Non-Dominated*. Given some outcome matrix for an agent, if an action *a* is not dominated by any other action but *a* dominates some action, then it is reasonable for the agent to perform *a*.

Intuitively put, *Non-Dominated* says that if no matter how the world goes—no matter what is true—*a* is expected to have more value than some action and no action is expected to have more value than *a*, then it is reasonable for the agent to do *a*.

These principles are distinct, since one states conditions for an action to be unreasonable, and the other states conditions for an action to be reasonable. But both gain intuitive support for the case involving the omelet. In that case, the action *add cream* is dominated by *do not add cream*. Thus, *Dominance* implies that it would be unreasonable to perform the action *add cream*. Additionally, the action *do not add cream* is not dominated by any other action. Thus *Non-Dominated* implies that it is reasonable to perform the action *do not add cream*. Both results are intuitively correct.

**III.    A Dominance Reasoning Based Objection to Skeptical Theism**

In this section, I present and regiment what I call the "Dominance Reasoning Objection" (DRO) to skeptical theism. In section A, I provide an informal presentation of the objection, as well as a sequence of quotations to indicate that some authors have raised something like this objection. In section B, I briefly show how the objection might be extended to produce a "moral paralysis" objection. Then, in section C, I show how to regiment the objection using outcome matrixes. Finally, in section D, I distinguish this objection from another which it is easily confused, namely, a "too much skepticism" objection to skeptical theism.

*A. Informal Presentation and Exegetical Support*

Informally presented, the objection goes as follows. Skeptical theists, as defined here, believe that God exists. They also believe that for every occurring evil God is justified in permitting evil only if that evil has a good that justifies God's permission of it. But, given their commitment to ST1-3, they are also skeptical of their ability to identify those goods. Thus, suppose a skeptical theist is able to prevent some evil. She believes that the evil would be necessary for some greater good that God would secure. To be sure, she may be unable to see what that good is; but given her commitment to ST1-3 she also expects she would frequently be unable to see such goods. But, as a theist, she does not want to interfere with God's plans to bring about the good. Thus, given her views, the reasonable thing for her to do is to permit the evil. For only by permitting the evil can God bring about the (currently unseen) good. Yet obviously it is unreasonable, and frequently immoral, for a skeptical theist to permit evil that she could easily prevent.

A number of authors have presented something like this objection.[5] An early version is found in Madden (1964: 487-8). Madden considers a response to the problem of evil on which evils contribute to overall goodness; but, nonetheless, human beings with their "limited powers" are "unable to fathom" the connection between the overall goodness and the evil. Though Madden is not using the term 'skeptical theism,' the view he describes is close to what many skeptical theists hold. Madden argues that this view has the consequence that "we are wrong in thinking it is our moral duty to eliminate or mitigate evil circumstances" (1964: 488). After all, those evils contribute to some overall good—just, perhaps, a good we cannot fathom. Preventing those evils gets in the way of God bringing about those overall goods.

Almeida and Oppy (2003: 505-6) also present a version of this objection. Presenting the objection in the first person plural, they imagine that we are theists who accept ST1-3. Additionally, we are in a position where we are about to witness a particular evil E where we can intervene to prevent E at no cost to ourselves. As they see it, we should claim that "it is not unlikely that there is some good which, if we were smarter and better equipped, we could recognize as a reason for a perfect being's not intervening to stop E." Consequently, we should also claim that "given our acceptance of ST1-ST3, it is not unlikely that it is for the best, all things considered, if we do not intervene." But of course, they point out, it would be "appalling" for us to use our acceptance of ST1-3 to keep us from preventing E.

Pereboom (2005: 165) gives a detailed example. Suppose Sue is a doctor who is also a skeptical theist. She knows that many people have died from a painful disease *x*. But she believes God is justified in permitting the suffering of disease *x* for reasons beyond her kin. However, there is now a drug that cures disease *x* and Sue is wondering about administering it. Pereboom writes that Sue has "significant moral reason" to not administer the drug that cures disease *x*. After all, God has justifying reasons for permitting the death of the painful disease before the cure was found. Giving patients the cure now is likely to interfere with God achieving the types of justifying goods that God achieved before a cure was available.

Piper (2007) also gives a detailed example. Piper imagines Stan a "brave martial arts expert" who while taking a walk sees a "bum molesting a young girl" (2007: 68). Stan is also a theist and committed to ST1-ST3 (2007: 70). Piper says that Stan believes that God "must have reason(s) for allowing people to suffer that we cannot conceive" (2007: 71). Consequently, though Stan could easily stop the bum, Stan "pauses because it occurs to him that, for all he knows, there may be some significant benefit of which he has no conception that the molested girl will receive

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[5] Ekstrom (2021: 124) mentions, without clearly endorsing, this objection.

precisely *by being molested*, a good that the girl can receive in no other way" (2007: 71). In this case, Stan's commitment to theism and ST1-3 keep him from reasonably concluding that he should prevent the evil.

Though he doesn't give a detailed example, Rancourt also presents something like this objection. He writes that "…a skeptical theist could have no basis for intervening to prevent evil. Once sceptical theists accept that any evil they try to prevent could, as far as they know, be a justified evil, then they have no basis for concluding that they should intervene to prevent evil" (2013: 316). And later: "If God has a reason as creator to permit an evil, we would be wrong to interfere… As long as we admit that we cannot determine when God has good reason to permit an evil, we cannot know whether it would be good to intervene to prevent evil since there would always be the possibility that we were interfering with God's plan" (2013: 323-4).

Though her overall argument is more complex, Street (2014: 183) also gives an example that fits this type of objection. Street claims that if God exists, then "everything happens for a reason" (2014: 172)—including a potentially fatal accident involving a drunk driver (2014: 175). So suppose you see a very intoxicated individual get behind the wheel of a car, with two children in the back. The car moves erratically before turning towards oncoming traffic. You are able to call the police and provide a description of the individual and car. Further, Street says, it seems obvious that you should. But the "theist is unable to accommodate this point." After all, she says, the theist thinks that for *every* evil God has a morally good reason to permit it (2014: 180); and thus God likely has a morally good reason to permit the eventual car crash of the intoxicated individual you observed.

There are differences between these authors, both in terms of presentation and terminology. But I think many of them are circling the same objection. The objection is what I informally presented above: that the reasonable thing for skeptical theists to do, when confronted with evil they can easily prevent, is to let the evil happen. And, for that reason, skeptical theism should be rejected.

### B. *Extending the Objection*

This objection might be "extended" to produce a further objection, what might be called the "moral paralysis objection." The extended objection begins by noting that many theists adhere to either a commonsense morality or a revealed religion (or both). But, the extended objection continues, commonsense morality and revealed religions often claim that we are obligated to prevent evils in various ways. So imagine a skeptical theist who is an adherent to either commonsense morality or revealed religion (or both). According to the previous objection, in virtue of her commitment to skeptical theism, it is not reasonable for her to prevent evil. But in virtue of her commitment to commonsense morality or revealed religion (or both), it is reasonable for her to prevent evil. Thus, the combination of her views produces a kind of "moral paralysis" or "moral aporia." Her views together seem to imply that it is reasonable and unreasonable to prevent evil. Piper's "moral aporia" objection seems to be an instance of this extended objection. (See, specifically, Piper (2007: 72).) Part of Maitzen's (2014) objection to skeptical theism is an instance of this extended objection utilizing commonsense morality. Maitzen claims that common sense morality leaves us "in no doubt" that we are obligated to prevent the suffering of a 12 year old girl who was raped and killed; but skeptical theism leaves us "in serious doubt" that we are so obligated (2014: 291). Thus, Maitzen objects, the combination of commonsense morality and skeptical theism leads to conflicts about how to reason about preventing evils.

I will not provide a distinct response to these extended objections. For these extended objections requires the success of the previous objection. And I will argue that the previous objection fails.[6]

### C. Regimenting the Objection

In this section, I will regiment the informal reasoning from above using outcome matrixes. Regimenting the objection is useful for two reasons. First, it brings additional precision and clarity to the objection. Second, it helps avoid unhelpful exchanges between skeptical theists and their critics. Specifically, sometimes critics of skeptical theism allege it leads to problematic consequences. But often times the exact connection between skeptical theism and those consequences is obscure. Consequently, it can be tempting for skeptical theists to respond by simply denying their position has those consequences. Such exchanges are unhelpful. By regimenting the objection, I hope to make clear what the proposed connection between skeptical theism and the problematic consequences are. Thus, skeptical theists need a more robust response than merely denying the problematic consequences are consequences of their view. They will have to explain where the reasoning of this section goes wrong.

Consider the following scenario facing a skeptical theist. First, she is in a position where there is some evil, E, that could occur. Further, she could prevent the evil from occurring with little effort or difficulty. Second, she believes that for any occurring evil, there is a justifying good for the evil secured by God. Put it terms of possible states of affairs, she believes that such a state of affairs must obtain. (Though she also believes that, on her own, she is unlikely to be able to identify that good.) Let us further assume that, in this case, she believes that the justifying good would be bringing about a greater good. Third, we will assume that there are two potential outcomes to her actions: E occurs, E does not occur. Fourth, there are values attached to these outcomes. The values are somewhat arbitrary. Let us suppose that the value of E occurring is -100. Let us also suppose the value of the greater good occurring is +200. Putting all of this together, for this scenario, the skeptical theist's outcome matrix is:

|  | For any evil, there is a justifying good for that evil. |
| --- | --- |
| Prevent E | 0 |
| Do not prevent E | 100 |

Looking at this outcome matrix, the action *do not prevent E* dominates the action *prevent E*. Given the principle *Dominance,* it follows that it is unreasonable for her to prevent E. Additionally, the action *do not prevent E* is not dominated by any other action, but it dominates some other action. Thus, from the principle *Non-Dominated* it follows that the reasonable thing to do is to not prevent E. Thus, from the skeptical theists beliefs, and these principles about reasonable action, it follows that the reasonable thing for skeptical theists to do is to not prevent evil E.

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[6] Bergmann and Rea (2005: 244ff.) appeal to divine commands when discussing Almeida and Oppy's (2003) paper. However, when Almeida and Oppy's objection is regimented as the DRO, it is not clear to me the best way for claims about divine commands to be used to respond to it. For instance, claims about divine commands, on their own, do not appear to offer a plausible challenge to the principles *Dominance* or *Non-Dominated*. Claims about divine commands could perhaps be used as part of a response that is consistent with *Dominance* and *Non-Dominated* by using them to produce an alternative outcome matrix with difference values for outcomes of action. But I myself will not pursue such a response here. For skeptical theism is not a position that assumes any revealed religion or any particular divine commands. And so it would be better for it to respond to this problem without appealing to a revealed religion or divine commands.

In setting up this outcome matrix we made several assumptions. Those assumptions are inessential for the relevant *do not prevent* action to dominate the *prevent* action. For instance, I assumed that E has a negative value of -100 and the justifying good has a value of +200. Clearly, those particular assignments are inessential for *do not prevent E* to dominate *prevent E*. All that is required for *do not prevent E* to dominate *prevent E* is that the value of the outcome of *do not prevent E* is higher than the outcome of *prevent E*. Another assumption that I made in this case is that the justifying good is an outweighing good—that the occurrence of the evil is necessary for some good with a higher amount of value. But we can also consider a case where the justifying good is the prevention of a worse evil—that the occurrence of the evil is necessary to avoid the occurrence of some worse evil with a greater amount of disvalue. For instance, suppose if E were not to occur, then E* would occur where E*'s value is -200. Then an outcome matrix for the skeptical theism might look like:

|  | For any evil, there is a justifying good for that evil. |
| :---: | :---: |
| Prevent E | -200 |
| Do not prevent E | -100 |

But, again, the action *do not prevent E* dominates *prevent E*.

But the reasoning of these cases generalizes in a problematic way. For, this reasoning will generalize to *any* evil that the skeptical theist is able to prevent with little to no cost to herself. Thus, given the skeptical theist's views, and these principles of reasonable action, for any evil she is able to prevent with little to no cost to herself, the reasonable action is to *permit that evil*. But that's clearly wrong. It is frequently reasonable to prevent evil with little to no cost to ourselves. Thus, we should reject skeptical theism. I call this the Dominance Reasoning Objection (DRO) to skeptical theism because it is regimented using principles involving dominance reasoning.

*D. "Too Much Skepticism" and the Dominance Reasoning Objection*

Before moving on to an evaluation of the DRO, one last clarification is in order. The DRO is distinct from what is sometimes called the "too much skepticism" objection to skeptical theism. The basic, abstracted structure of that objection is this:

1. We can have reasonable beliefs about some domain D only if we can have reasonable beliefs about certain claims C.
2. If skeptical theism is true, then we cannot have reasonable beliefs in claims C.
3. Therefore, if skeptical theism is true, we do not (and could not) have reasonable beliefs about domain D.

If we stop here, the argument is just that skeptical theism leads to skepticism about some domain D. If we go the further step and add the further premise that we do have reasonable beliefs about that domain D, then the objection can be extended to the conclusion that skeptical theism is false.

What I've just described is an abstract structure. Different versions of the "too much skepticism" objection are created by filling in the details. First, different versions fill in the details of the particular domain—e.g. beliefs about morality, revealed religion, the external world, etc. Second, different versions fill in the details by providing different defenses of the relevant premises. (For some discussion of these kinds of objections with relevant citations, see some of the essays in part III of McBrayer and Howard-Snyder (2013).)

There are three important differences of the "too much skepticism" objection and the objection I will focus on. First, all versions of this objection evaluate *beliefs*. That is, all versions of this objection claim that skeptical theism has normative implications for beliefs. The objection

I will focus on evaluates *actions*. Second, that objection alleges certain beliefs as *being unreasonable*. But the objection I will focus on also alleges that certain actions are *reasonable*. Finally, the argument I focus on rests on the principles *Dominance* and *Non-Dominated* whereas standards defenses of versions of the "too much skepticism" objection do not.[7]

### IV. Representing Skeptical Theism Correctly

In this section I argue that the DRO misrepresents skeptical theism. Specifically, it misrepresents the skeptical theist's views about justifying goods. Further, a more careful presentation of the position is immune to dominance-based reasoning.

The DRO misrepresents skeptical theism. Specifically, the position is not that for any occurring evil there is a justifying good for that evil. The position is that for any occurring evil there is a justifying good for *God's permission* of that evil. Thus, the outcome matrix below is simply inaccurate when it represents the possible states of the worlds the skeptical theist recognizes:

|  | For any evil, there is a justifying good for that evil. |
|---|---|
| Prevent E | 0 |
| Do not prevent E | 100 |

To create a more accurate outcome matrix, let us focus on two cases. According to the skeptical theist, sometimes evils *themselves* are necessary for some (justifying) goods. And, according to her, sometimes God's permission of some occurrence of evil is necessary for some (justifying) goods, even though the occurrence of that evil is not. Thus, the following setup is a better representation:

|  | E is necessary for a justifying good | God's permission of E is necessary for a justifying good |
|---|---|---|
| Prevent E |  |  |
| Do not prevent E |  |  |

The interesting question now is whether, given a more accurate setup of this outcome matrix, how to fill in the boxes. We can assume for simplicity that the first column is the same as the old inaccurate outcome matrix. For that outcome matrix *did* assume a case where the occurrence of E is necessary for a justifying good. This brings us to:

|  | E is necessary for a justifying good | God's permission of E is necessary for a justifying good |
|---|---|---|

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[7] I cannot fully elaborate on this last point, but let me say this. As I see it, the standard and most plausible defense of versions of the "too much skepticism" objection normally make the certain claims C about "all things considered" value. (See (e.g.) Jordan (2006) and Rutledge (2017) for an explicit appeal to the property of "all things considered" value and Russell (1996) for an implicit appeal.) Such defenses of the "too much skepticism" objection would then maintain that skepticism about discerning God's reasons for permitting evils "bleeds into" skepticism about all things considered value which, in turn, "bleeds into" some domain D of beliefs. I myself don't find this strategy particularly plausible for it is not particularly plausible that we can be reasonable in beliefs about (e.g.) the external world only if we can be reasonable in having beliefs about all things considered value. Even in the case of moral beliefs about what to do, it is contentious that we can be reasonable in believing that we are required to do something only if we are reasonable in assigning all things considered value judgments to it as well as alternative actions. (See Howard-Snyder (2009) for a now classic discussion of this issue in this context.) Thus, in my opinion, it is a good thing the Dominance Reasoning Objection does not incorporating such claims. However, I can't defend all of the things I say in this footnote here, though I will in subsequent work.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Prevent E | 0 | |
| Do not prevent E | 100 | |

The question for evaluating this objection is how to assign values to the right column. Here I will focus on one reasonable, coherent assignment a skeptical theist might provide. First, the skeptical theist might think that the evil is not necessary for some greater good. In fact, she might think that if the evil were to occur, then there just *wouldn't* be a greater good. (Compare: the parent believes that if her child has a painfully embarrassing clarinet recital, then it isn't a means to some further greater good.) Since the evil itself is -100, this means that not preventing the evil brings about -100. Second, the skeptical theist might maintain that preventing the evil itself is at the very least a neutral thing and perhaps a positive thing. A potential evil not occurring is, presumably, a neutral thing lacking positive or negative values. (Lots of potential evils do not occur.) But *preventing* an evil from occurring might, itself, be valuable. For instance, an agent who prevents an evil might have some degree of moral development; or requires cooperation with other moral agents; or evinces moral concern for what is bad. And skeptical theists might reasonably regard these things as valuable. (Compare: the mother believes that if her child were to prevent the painfully embarrassing clarinet recital by practicing hard, then her child would have built character with hard work, which is valuable.) So the skeptical theist might assign some positive value to preventing E, say 25. Thus the resulting outcome matrix looks like:

| | E is necessary for a justifying good | God's permission of E is necessary for a justifying good |
|---|---|---|
| Prevent E | 0 | 25 |
| Do not prevent E | 100 | -100 |

The important thing is that, in this outcome matrix, no action is dominated. For the action *prevent E* produces more value if the top right state of affair obtains; it does not if the top left state of affair obtains. And conversely for the action *do not prevent E*. Thus, dominance-based reasoning—including the principles *Dominance* and *Non-Dominated*—does not apply. But this matrix is a more realistic way of representing a skeptical theist's beliefs about justifying goods. Thus, given a more realistic representation of how skeptical theists reason, it is not the case that not preventing evil always dominates. Thus, the DRO to skeptical theism fails.

I'm regimenting the DRO using outcome matrixes and dominance-based reasoning. As I see it, regimenting the objection in this way brings clarity to it and forces skeptical theists to be clearer as to how they reject it. However, I recognize that not everyone will agree that regimenting the objection in this way brings clarity to it. Further, proponents of the objection do not, themselves, use outcome matrixes or explicitly invoke dominance-based reasoning. So some might even worry that by regimenting the objection in this way I have (somehow!) stacked the deck in my favor.

In order to remove these worries, I will supplement my response to the DRO with an informal response that does not explicitly appeal to outcome matrixes and dominance-based reasoning. (Though, obviously, I think such reasoning is best regimented using outcome matrixes and dominance-based reasoning.)

Informally presented, the objection goes as follows. Skeptical theists, as defined here, believe that God exists. They also believe that for every occurring evil God is justified in permitting evil only if that evil has a good that justifies God's permission of it. But, given their commitment to ST1-3, they are also skeptical of their ability to identify those goods. Thus, suppose a skeptical theist is able to prevent some evil. She believes that the evil would be

necessary for some greater good that God would secure. To be sure, she may be unable to see what that good is; but given her commitment to ST1-3 she also expects she would frequently be unable to see what the good is. But, as a theist, she does not want to interfere with God's plans to bring about the good. (Recall Rancourt (2013: 323): "If God has a reason as creator to permit an evil, we would be wrong to interfere…") Thus, given her views, the reasonable thing for her to do is to permit the evil. For only by permitting the evil can God bring about the (currently unseen) good. Yet obviously it is unreasonable, and frequently immoral, for a skeptical theist to permit evil that she could easily prevent.

However, the skeptical theist rejects this way of representing her position. Specifically, this way of representing her position is insensitive to the distinction Wykstra articulated. The skeptical theist doesn't necessarily believe that the evil *itself* is necessary for some greater good that God would secure. First, she believes that the it is *God's permission* of the evil that is necessary for some greater good not necessarily the evil itself. Second, she believes that frequently it is *human beings* that secure the relevant goods, not God. After all, as a theist, the skeptical theist believes that God intends for agents to bring about the good. And some goods that God intends for agents to bring about *essentially* rely on human activity such as human beings doing good things, developing moral character, cooperating together on worthwhile activities, evincing moral concern, etc.

Thus, suppose the skeptical theist is confronted with some potentially occurring evil. She might try to reflect—and reflect hard—on what outweighing good would justify God in permitting that evil. And suppose she fails to identify any. It is possible that this is a case where the evil is necessary for some outweighing good and it is beyond her kin. But it is possible that this is a case where there is no outweighing good the evil is necessary for. So if she is reasonable she would *not* reason that permitting the evil is the only way for God to secure some outweighing good. After all, this case might not be a case of that kind.

Summing up, the DRO to skeptical theism misrepresents the skeptical theist's position and a right representation of the position is immune from simple dominance-based reasoning. To be sure, this does not show that proponents of skeptical theism are immune from *any* objection based on practical reasoning. For instance, I have not addressed arguments that skeptical theists are committed to skepticism about *belief* of which actions are morally permissible. Such objections are a version of the "too much skepticism" objection. But this omission is intentional. I think there is no "one size fits all" response to these kinds of objections. The details matter. In this paper I've argued that, when we regiment the details of one kind of criticism of skeptical theism, we see that it fails. The question of whether (or why) other similar objections fail must wait for another time.[8]

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