

SKEPTICAL THEISM, MORAL SKEPTICISM,  
AND EPISTEMIC PROPRIETY

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Several philosophers level the charge of moral skepticism against skeptical theists of the Bergmann variety.<sup>1, 2</sup> This sort of skeptical theism, which is perhaps the most popular response to the evidential problem of evil among contemporary philosophers of religion<sup>3</sup>, can for our purposes be defined as the conjunction of theism<sup>4</sup> with the following skeptical thesis:

ST: We have no good reason for thinking that the goods, evils and entailment relations between them *of which we are aware* are representative of the goods, evils, and entailment relations between them that there are.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *locus classicus* for the moral skepticism – sometimes called the moral paralysis – (Almeida and Oppy 2003). Since then, this criticism of skeptical theism has resurfaced in several places. See (Anderson 2012), (Maitzen 2013). For recent defenses of skeptical theism against the moral skepticism objection, see (Bergmann 2012), (Howard-Snyder 2014), and (Rea 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Among the philosophers who defend skeptical theism, I count the following as additional targets of my argument: Michael Rea, Peter van Inwagen, William Alston and the early Wykstra. For their views, see (Rea 2014), (Van Inwagen 1991), (Alston 1991), and (Wykstra 1984).

<sup>3</sup> (Dougherty 2012), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Howard-Snyder emphasizes that theism is not entailed by skeptical theism. I agree with him on this, but since Bergmann is my primary target, I follow his characterization of the view. For a discussion of where Bergmann and Howard-Snyder's views diverge, see (Howard-Snyder 2014).

<sup>5</sup> The informed reader will notice that I, following Rea, have combined Bergmann's ST1, ST2 & ST3 into a single thesis. I do this simply for convenience.

Commonsense, as we are told by Bergmann, requires that we assent to the truth of ST.<sup>6</sup> However, so the moral skepticism objection to skeptical theism goes, if we affirm ST, then whenever we are forced to deliberate about what we should do in moral contexts, we will find that we are morally paralyzed; that is, we will have no rational basis for choosing to bring about some state of affairs or to refrain from doing so. The following example is illustrative of this worry:

Suppose that Bethany witnesses a young child torturing a puppy by spraying it with lighter fluid. Moreover, suppose that she notices a matchbox nearby, and the child begins to reach for it. As a conscientious endorser of ST, Bethany begins to deliberate about whether or not she should intervene (and let us add that the child in question is, conveniently, having considerable yet not insuperable difficulty striking the matches, allowing Bethany more than sufficient time, under normal circumstances, to deliberate). She thinks to herself, “Well, it’s obvious that I don’t know what the entailment relations are between the evil I am witnessing and other possible goods of much greater value. Given that I have no good reason to think my grasp of the realm of value is representative of how the realm of value really is, then, I should suspend my belief concerning whether intervening would be a morally obligatory action.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> (Bergmann 2012), 11-12.

<sup>7</sup> An anonymous reviewer suggested the possibility that perhaps Bethany should intervene because, for instance, she is a dog-lover and not because she has engaged in any conscious deliberative activity as a cognitive reason for intervening. In other words, perhaps the distinction between moral deliberation (i.e.

But this conclusion is absurd. Of course Bethany should intervene. Therefore, the objector to skeptical theism tells us, ST is false. It is the merit of this objection and the merit of Bergmann's response to it which are the subject of this essay.

In this paper, I argue that ST commits the skeptical theist to the following dilemma: *either* skeptical theism leads to moral skepticism *or* the evidential argument from evil succeeds. That is, the skeptical theist must choose one or the other of these unpalatable disjuncts. Moreover, not only must one of the disjuncts be false, but which disjunct is selected by a given proponent of skeptical theism will reveal the strength of their skeptical commitment as articulated by ST.

In **section I**, I will introduce the evidential argument from evil, followed by an explanation of how ST can undermine the argument. Then, in **section II**, I will return to the argument against ST spawning from the worry of moral skepticism. And after introducing a crucial distinction between weak and strong interpretations of ST in **section III**, I will present my argument that ST commits its adherents to accepting either moral skepticism or the success of the evidential argument from evil. Lastly, in **section IV**, I will briefly comment on some implications of my argument for skeptical theism.

### *I. The Evidential Argument from Evil & ST*

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in Bethany's case) and speculative deliberation (i.e. in the case of the argument from evil) would allow for moral action when deliberation concerning the evidence of evil might nevertheless be prohibited. I'm not optimistic about the prospects of such a response. However, even if it were permissible, calling a moral action 'rational' in this sense would still allow us to call it 'irrational' in whatever sense the inference in the evidential argument from evil is irrational by the skeptical theist's lights.

Evidential arguments come in many forms, so I will simply focus on one of the versions of the argument found in the work of William Rowe.<sup>8</sup> Before presenting the argument, however, let us begin by considering two pieces of evidence<sup>9</sup> which are mentioned in the premises of the argument:

*Bambi* – In some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.

*Sue* – Following an evening of excessive drinking, an unemployed man seeks out his partner following a quarrel between the two of them. Instead of his partner, the man finds her 5 year-old child, and he proceeds to rape, brutally beat and strangle her until she is left for dead.<sup>10</sup>

With these two horrendous stories in mind, we can then formulate the evidential argument from evil in two steps. The first step is inductive while the second step uses the inductively inferred conclusion as a premise in a further deductive argument. The argument proceeds thusly:

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<sup>8</sup> See (Rowe 1988).

<sup>9</sup> I don't mean anything particularly technical by 'evidence' here. Thus, I do not intend to separate propositional evidence from something akin to Plantinga's "grounds". See (Plantinga 2000).

<sup>10</sup> See (Trakakis 2007), 119-20. *Sue* is based on a story in the *Detroit Free Press* run on January 3, 1986. I've abbreviated the story significantly due to space considerations. Also, the labels *Bambi* and *Sue* are found in (Alston 1991), 100.

(P) No good state of affairs *we know of* is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*.

From which we can inductively conclude:

(Q) No good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*.

Next, we can incorporate *Q* into a deductive argument (let '*G*' represent the claim God exists, and let us assume that gratuitous evils, like *Bambi* or *Sue*, are inconsistent with *G*):

1.  $G \rightarrow \neg Q$
2.  $Q$
3.  $\therefore \neg G$

Stated informally, this argument simply says that if God exists, then there are no gratuitous evils. But there are gratuitous evils. Therefore, God does not exist. While one might deny the first premise<sup>11</sup> of the deductive argument, skeptical theists direct their criticism toward the inductive step of Rowe's argument. And rather than attack the inference by offering a theodicy in response to *P* (i.e. rather than identify some good or class of goods of which we are aware that could justify God's permission of *Bambi* or *Sue*), skeptical theists suggest that ST undermines the inference from *P* to *Q*, even if *P* is true.

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<sup>11</sup> As does, for instance, (Van Inwagen 2006).

Now, how does this undermining take place? Well clearly, if someone is to infer  $Q$  from  $P$ , then they need to have good reason to think that their *grasp* of the realm of value – including goods, evils and the entailment relations between them – constitutes a representative sample of the *complete* realm of value. But ST<sup>12</sup> is simply a denial of this. Thus, if ST is true, then Rowe’s argument cannot succeed (at least, not by way of this sort of inductive inference).

## *II. The Moral Skepticism Objection to ST*

Suppose that the truth of ST indeed undermines the inference from  $P$  to  $Q$  in the evidential argument from evil. In that case, one obvious response to the skeptical theist would be to question the truth of ST.<sup>13</sup> The most prominent strategy for arguing against ST’s truth is to argue that it commits skeptical theists to various sorts of untenable skepticisms. As noted above, we shall attend solely to the argument against skeptical theism which contends that it is committed to an extreme sort of moral skepticism. Here is that argument:

### *Argument for Moral Skepticism*

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<sup>12</sup> Here it is again as a refresher: we have no good reason for thinking that the goods, evils and entailment relations between them *of which we are aware* are representative of the goods, evils, and entailment relations between them there are.

<sup>13</sup> One might respond in other ways: i) following (Dougherty 2008), one might suggest that in the case of the evidential argument from evil, some sort of phenomenal conservatism principle is sufficient for inferring  $Q$  from  $P$ , ii) perhaps there are other logical forms of the argument from evil to which one might turn, or iii) one might simply point out – see (Draper 2014) – that while our inability to think of theodicies to justify evils may not disconfirm the existence of God, nevertheless the *existence* of those evils may still disconfirm God’s existence.

1. If ST is true, then we should be skeptical about the reliability of our *all-things-considered* value judgments.
2. If we should be skeptical about the reliability of our *all-things-considered* value judgments, then we are morally paralyzed (i.e. we cannot engage in moral deliberation on the basis of our value judgments).
3. Therefore, if ST is true, then we are morally paralyzed (from 1 & 2).
4. But it is absurd to believe that we are morally paralyzed (Premise).
5. Therefore, it is not the case that ST is true (from 3 & 4).

Let me begin with a clarification. As premise (1) indicates, ST does not deny us access to any knowledge of the realm of value whatsoever. What it denies us, rather, is an entitlement to claim that we have reliable access to the *all-things-considered* value of some states of affairs. But is premise (1) true? Well, one might worry that we have access to certain deontological moral facts in some cases and that whenever these facts are present and recognized to be present, we can reliably judge the *all-things-considered* value of a given state of affairs. If such cases are admitted, then it appears as if premise (1) is false. I have three things to say in response to this point.

First, even if there are situations where we can recognize that we are morally obligated to perform a given act, the class of moral situations which lack such deontological features is surely quite vast. And so long as we are denied moral knowledge in a sufficient number of cases—perhaps due to the presence of consequentialist considerations and absence of deontological ones—an appropriately modified argument can be given with

essentially the same force.<sup>14</sup> Second, even in cases where we have moral obligations to do or refrain from some action, those obligations may be sufficiently abstract that when we attempt to determine the particular way in which we will carry out that obligation, we may remain morally paralyzed.<sup>15</sup> To see this, consider the obligation one has to be a good parent. This is a very general obligation, and there are many roads to fulfilling it (e.g. send your children to public or private school, coach their baseball team, take jazz dancing lessons with them, etc). Moreover, because of the plurality of options with respect to fulfilling one's general obligation to be a good parent, one is not obliged to fulfill that obligation in any *one* of the possible ways. However, in attempting to choose between one's options to fulfill this general obligation in some particular way, the truth of ST will reemerge as an obstacle to ascertaining the *all-things-considered* value of the state of affairs about which one is deliberating. And this is because once one resumes deliberation about how to fulfill the general obligation, value judgments will again be in play. Thus, even if we can track the deontological facts of a given state of affairs, those facts will be too general to enable us to determine the *all-things-considered* value of the state of affairs under consideration. Thirdly, Michael Bergmann, the inspiration for ST and my primary interlocutor, accepts premise (1). Thus, I submit that skeptical theists ought to instead focus their response to the *Argument for Moral Skepticism* on premise (2). Consider the following passage from Bergmann:

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<sup>14</sup> See (Wykstra 2012) for an argument along these lines.

<sup>15</sup> See (Kvanvig 2014), 125-7 for similar thoughts applied to the question of the existence epistemic obligations.

[In] cases where it is important for us to be guided by considerations of possible good and bad consequences of our actions, we aren't morally bound to do what *in fact* has the overall best consequences (since we typically can't determine that). What is relevant are *the likely consequences* we have some reason to be confident about after a reasonable amount of time and effort aimed at identifying the expected results of our behavior. If, after such consideration, a particular course of action seems to clearly maximize the good (or minimize the bad) among the consequences we're able to identify and we non-culpably and reasonably take ourselves to have no overriding consequences-independent obligation to refrain from that action, then that action is a morally appropriate one for us to perform.<sup>16</sup>

In this passage, we see that Michael Bergmann thinks the best response to the *Argument for Moral Skepticism* is to deny premise (2), which said that if we should be skeptical about the reliability of our *all-things-considered* value judgments, then we are morally paralyzed. In essence, then, Bergmann is suggesting that in cases of moral deliberation where we lack some potentially significant awareness of the realm of value, we are nevertheless permitted to form beliefs about what we ought to do and act on them. In other words, it is not *all-things-considered* value judgments which are necessary for deliberating about what to do in moral contexts, but rather, *some-things-considered* value judgments.

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<sup>16</sup> (Bergmann 2009), 392. The italics are my own.

### III. Can ST Escape Moral Paralysis?

But now, we must think more carefully about the consequences *for proponents of ST* of denying premise (2), and to do so, we need to first distinguish between two very different interpretations of the implications of ST for deliberation. Once again, recall ST:

ST: We have no good reason for thinking that the goods, evils and entailment relations between them *of which we are aware* are representative of the goods, evils, and entailment relations between them that there are.

According to the *strong interpretation* of ST, if we accept the truth of ST, then the evidential weight of our intuitive judgments concerning the value of a given state of affairs amounts to precisely zero.<sup>17</sup> As a result, anytime we deliberate about what to do or what to believe on the basis of our intuitions of value, then we are forced to shelve those intuitions. In such a scenario, they cannot inform us of what is most likely to occur or what will result in the greatest overall value; consequently, we won't be able to complete the deliberative process.

According to the *weak interpretation* of ST, acceptance of ST does not eradicate all the evidential potency of our intuitions about *all-things-considered* value. Rather, ST can be alternatively understood as a cautionary prescription, such that whenever one's deliberations require trusting intuitions concerning the *all-things-considered* value of some state of affairs, then one should not assign high evidential weight to those intuitions. If

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<sup>17</sup> (Dougherty 2014) calls a version of this (modified to apply only in the context of evidential arguments from evil) the 'No Weight Thesis', and he attributes it to Bergmann.

we follow this prescription in our deliberations, then it is consistent with the *weak interpretation* of ST that we assign *some* positive evidential strength to our intuitions of value, so long as the assigned strength is not too high.

But now, let us see how the distinction between *strong* and *weak interpretations* of ST interact with the two arguments we've considered in this paper; namely, the evidential argument from evil and the argument for moral skepticism. We begin with the evidential argument (i.e. the inductive first step), which you will recall is:

(P) No good state of affairs *we know of* is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*.

From which we can inductively conclude:

(Q) No good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*.

Applying the *strong interpretation* of ST to this argument yields the clear result that the inference from *P* to *Q* cannot go through. Both the fact that none of the goods of which we are aware seem to justify *Bambi* or *Sue* and the fact that our intuitions concerning such cases tend (at least, according to Rowe) to classify them as instances of gratuitous suffering depend on our intuitions of value. But according to the *strong interpretation* of ST, relying on such intuitions in an argument is epistemically illicit. Therefore, the inference from *P* to *Q*, on the *strong interpretation* of ST, fails.

Now what happens if we follow the *weak interpretation* of ST and apply it to the inference from *P* to *Q*? The strength of the evidence for each individual person will of course vary with the strength of the individual seemings involved<sup>18</sup>, but in at least some cases, the evidential argument from evil will succeed. Of course, what is meant by saying that the evidential argument from evil will succeed should not be read too strongly. All its success amounts to is that evil will in some cases count as evidence against the existence of God (i.e. the probability that non-theism is true will be greater on the evidence of evil than it is on background knowledge alone), even if that evidence can itself be outweighed (or overruled) by other considerations (e.g. natural theology, theodicies or properly basic religious beliefs).<sup>19</sup>

So in summary, if the skeptical theist is to successfully maintain that the evidential argument from evil cannot succeed on the basis of ST, they must hold to the *strong interpretation* of ST. So now consider again the argument for moral skepticism.

1. If ST is true, then we should be skeptical about the reliability of our *all-things-considered* value judgments.

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<sup>18</sup> Not to mention the fact that someone will need to determine how confident they are about the truth of ST in the first place, whether or not it is interpreted in the strong or the weak manner.

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps someone doubts my assumption that Bergmann thinks that evil does not disconfirm the existence of God *at all*. Consider then the following enlightening passage from (Bergmann 2012), 23-4 (italics are mine):

“Sometimes, when we are exposed to a vivid portrayal of some actual instance of horrific suffering *E*, we are tempted to think that a perfectly loving God wouldn’t permit *E*. I think it is a mistake to think that we can see that this is true or even likely...Given ST1-ST4, these epistemic possibilities are things we have *no good reason to think are even unlikely* if God exists.”

2. If we should be skeptical about the reliability of our *all-things-considered* value judgments, then we are morally paralyzed (i.e. we cannot engage in moral deliberation on the basis of our value judgments).
3. Therefore, if ST is true, then we are morally paralyzed (from 1 & 2).
4. But it is absurd to believe that we are morally paralyzed (Premise).
5. Therefore, it is not the case that ST is true (from 3 & 4).

The first thing to notice is that whether or not one is interpreting ST in the strong or weak sense *makes no difference* to whether they would accept premise (1). Rather, ST's interpreted strength becomes relevant in premise (2) since that premise defines the scope and limits of the skepticism prescribed by premise (1). And as should be clear, for the argument for moral skepticism to succeed, one must interpret ST *strongly*. If one adopts the *weak interpretation*, such that our value intuitions in moral contexts retain at least some evidential weight, then it will be permissible for us to decide what to do on that evidential basis, even if that basis is only slight.

What then is Bergmann's suggested escape from the argument for moral skepticism? He tells us that we only need to decide what to do and what to think on the basis of "the likely consequences" of our actions.<sup>20</sup> Now then, what are those estimations of the likely consequences of our actions if they are not our beliefs about what actions in fact lead to the best *all-things-considered* consequences? Those beliefs are admittedly fallible, since anyone who acts upon them has not considered *every* possible variable, but they are,

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<sup>20</sup> (Bergmann 2009), 392.

according to Bergmann, a sufficient basis for completing moral deliberation. Thus, Bergmann counsels us to adopt a *weak interpretation* of ST, and in so doing, to reject premise (2) of the above argument. While this suggestion nicely avoids the implications of moral skepticism, I submit that it is not a path open to Bergmann.

Why is this path not open to Bergmann? Consider what we have just seen. If someone adopts the *weak interpretation* of ST, then they can avoid the argument for moral skepticism. This is a good thing (or so I say). However, if they adopt the *weak interpretation* of ST when considering the evidential argument from evil, then some versions of that argument will succeed. And this is a bad thing (or so skeptical theists, like Bergmann, say). However, if we start from the hope of undermining these evidential arguments with ST, then the *strong interpretation* of ST is required. But once one adopts the *strong interpretation* of ST, then the argument for moral skepticism succeeds as well. And suppose someone like Bergmann wishes to avoid *both* moral skepticism and the success of all forms of the evidential argument from evil involving the inductive inference. Then that person will be forced to interpret ST *weakly* in the former case and *strongly* in the latter case. That is, they must be of two minds with respect to their interpretation of ST.

I submit that such two-mindedness with respect to ST is impermissible in this case. As I have been at pains to make clear above, ST is a thesis which is employed by skeptical theists to undermine deliberation in the evidential argument from evil. But moral contexts are no less deliberative than contexts in which someone entertains the evidential argument from evil. Consequently, any two-mindedness with respect to ST will be *ad hoc*

at best. The upshot, then, is that Bergmann and like-minded skeptical theists cannot have it both ways. They must choose which interpretation of ST they want to endorse as a deliverance of common sense, and once they do this, either some versions of the evidential argument from evil will succeed—on the *weak interpretation*—or moral paralysis will (for them) ensue—on the *strong interpretation*.

#### *IV. Conclusion*

By way of conclusion, then, I would like to briefly reflect on the implications of this argument. Assuming that skeptical theists would rather avoid commitments to moral skepticism, it seems that the evidential argument from evil cannot be undermined simply on the basis of ST. This does not mean that ST, on the *weak interpretation*, will not alter the evidential significance of evil at all. Indeed, skeptical considerations regarding the realm of value and divine-human relations should undoubtedly reduce the confidence of anyone who bases their belief or non-belief that God exists solely on their intuitions concerning evil. Thus, if I am right, skeptical theism will not lose all of its dialectical significance, though that significance will indeed be moderated. What this shows us, however, is that the success of the too much skepticism objections, insofar as they rely on an understanding of skeptical theism which is wedded to a *strong interpretation* of ST, do not spell doom for skeptical theism as a whole. Rather, such arguments simply force us to reassess the proper evidential significance of those skeptical considerations proposed by the likes of Bergmann and others.

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