

# Skeptical Theism and God's Commands

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Published online: 1 November 2007  
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**Abstract** According to Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy, adherents of skeptical theism will find their sense of moral obligation undermined in a potentially 'appalling' way. Michael Bergmann and Michael Rea disagree, claiming that God's commands provide skeptical theists with a source of moral obligation that withstands the skepticism in skeptical theism. I argue that Bergmann and Rea are mistaken: skeptical theists cannot consistently rely on what they take to be God's commands.

**Keywords** God · Morality · Skepticism · Theism · Divine commands

## Introduction

In 1983, Charles Rothenberg lost a child-custody dispute with his ex-wife. In an attempt at revenge on her, Rothenberg then kidnapped their six-year-old son, David, and as the boy lay sleeping doused him with kerosene and set him on fire. David survived with third-degree burns covering 90% of his body and despite numerous surgeries remains terribly disfigured to this day. Those calling themselves 'skeptical theists' grant, at least for the sake of argument, that no theodicy is known by us to provide a morally sufficient reason for God's permitting David to suffer so terribly. But they insist that this disappointing situation is just what we should expect if theism is true: given the vast disparity between God's omniscience and our own limited knowledge, it should not surprise us if we fail to grasp the reasons that actually do (indeed, must) justify God's permission of suffering like David's.

Skeptical theists sometimes adopt the strong line that we should expect God's morally sufficient reasons to be inscrutable and sometimes the weaker line that we should not expect to those reasons to be scrutable. In either case, however, they aim

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to undercut what Stephen Wykstra calls the atheist's 'noseeum' inference from our failure to *see* God-justifying reasons to the conclusion that no such reasons *exist*.<sup>1</sup> After all, an omniscient God sees all the possible goods and evils there are, whereas presumably we do not, and an omniscient God sees all the ways in which achieving particular goods requires the permission of particular evils, whereas again we do not. Michael Bergmann, a prominent defender of skeptical theism, characterizes the position as combining traditional theism with the following additional claims that he thinks everyone should accept:

- ST1 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 the 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.<sup>2</sup>

Says Bergmann in defending ST1–ST3, 'It just doesn't seem unlikely that our understanding of the realm of value falls miserably short of capturing all that is true about that realm.'<sup>3</sup>

Some critics of skeptical theism have argued that it works *too* well, that it implies ethical skepticism of a kind that 'undermines our ability to engage in perfectly ordinary kinds of moral reasoning.'<sup>4</sup> For suppose we can easily and at no risk to ourselves prevent some horrific evil, E, about to occur – say, David's being burned alive – and suppose we also endorse principles ST1–ST3. According to Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy, even if we can see nothing that would justify allowing E to occur,

we should insist 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. Plainly, we should also concede – by parity of reason – that, merely on the basis of our acceptance of ST1–ST3, it is not unlikely that there is some good which, if we were smarter and better equipped, we could recognize as a reason for *our* not intervening to stop the event. That is, ... it is not unlikely that it is for the best, all things considered, if we do not intervene. But ... it would be *appalling* for us to allow this consideration to stop us from intervening. Yet, if we take [ST1–ST3] seriously, how can we also maintain that we are morally required to intervene?<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wykstra, S. J. (1996). Rowe's noseeum arguments from evil. In D. Howard-Snyder (Ed.), *The evidential argument from evil* (pp. 126–150). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Bergmann, M. (2001). Sceptical theism and Rowe's new evidential argument from evil. *Noûs*, 35, 278–96; p. 279.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Almeida, M., & Oppy, G. (2003). Sceptical theism and evidential arguments from evil. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 81, 496–516; p. 511.

<sup>5</sup> Almeida and Oppy, pp. 505–506, first emphasis added.

It appears, then, that skeptical theism induces a kind of moral paralysis that theists and others would rightly abhor.

According to Bergmann and Michael Rea, however, skeptical theists have a source of moral obligation that *withstands* the skeptical force of ST1–ST3 and that *would* oblige them to intervene to prevent E:

Sceptical theists, after all, are *theists*. Thus, when they consider the bearing of sceptical theism on *their* moral practice, they will inevitably and quite sensibly do so in a way that takes account of other things that they believe. But once this fact is appreciated, it is clear that most sceptical theists will find themselves completely untouched by Almeida and Oppy's argument. The reason is simple: theists very typically believe that God has commanded his creatures to behave in certain ways; and they also very typically believe that God's commands provide all-things-considered reasons to act. Thus, a sceptical theist will very likely not find it the least bit plausible to think that ST1–ST3 leave us without an all-things-considered reason to prevent harm to others in cases like [E]. For even if ST1–ST3 imply that we do not know *much* about the realm of value, they do not at all imply that we know *nothing* about that realm; and, in particular, they do not imply that we lack knowledge of God's commands *as* God's commands.<sup>6</sup>

For reasons I will now detail, Bergmann and Rea's reliance on divine commands is unpersuasive.<sup>7</sup> For we cannot identify God's commands, resolve questions about their relative importance, or apply them to our actual circumstances without assuming a greater knowledge of God's reasons, and thus a better understanding of the realm of value, than skeptical theism allows us.

### Identifying God's Commands

Taking guidance from God's commands raises the prior question of how to *identify* what God commands, what God wills for us. Some theistic religions claim that God never issued or no longer endorses some of the things regarded as operative divine commands by other theistic religions. Does God command followers to circumcise every male child among them (Genesis 17:10)? Traditional Jews say yes, while many Christians say either that God never commanded circumcision or that the circumcision command has been superseded (see Galatians 5:6). The Quran contains no command to circumcise, although most Muslims continue it as a traditional practice. Christians claim that God commands the baptism of all people in the name of the Trinity (Matthew 28:19), a claim that Jews and Muslims of course reject. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), Jesus announces commands that are

<sup>6</sup> Bergmann, M., & Rea, M. (2005). In defence of sceptical theism: A reply to Almeida and Oppy. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 83, 241–251; p. 244, emphases in original.

<sup>7</sup> Reliance on God's commands is not the *only* reply that Bergmann and Rea gave to Almeida and Oppy's charge of moral paralysis. But, it is nevertheless a reply that merits separate attention because it is a reply that is both understandably tempting for theists to make and yet very difficult to sustain. Evaluation of Bergmann and Rea's other replies must await another occasion.

supposed to supersede Old Testament law concerning divorce, the swearing of oaths, the treatment of enemies, and *lex talionis* ('an eye for an eye'). Holy writ contains many similar examples of conflicting commands.

Since none of these conflicting putative revelations is self-authenticating, followers of theistic religions have to decide which of them to take as genuine. The mode of presentation is the same in each case: the commands appear in ancient texts, such as the Old Testament, that the various religions often agree in revering as God's Word. Thus, nothing about the means of presentation distinguishes them, forcing adherents of the various religions to rely on their independent moral judgement to tell which of those commands most likely *do* express the will of a morally perfect God and whether God *does* intend the later commands to supersede the earlier ones. Consequently, identifying God's genuine commands requires human insight into God's reasons and intentions.

Suppose, for example, that a traditional theist announces that he has felt the presence of God commanding him to quit his gambling habit and donate that mis-spent money to charity; we can predict the approval of his clergy and fellow parishioners. But compare that approval with the reaction he would get were he to announce that God had commanded him to slaughter everyone in the neighboring town. In declaring that God could not possibly have commanded the latter action, his co-religionists would not rest their case on the nature of the alleged communication – 'Was it a voice? If so, what did it sound like, and did anyone else hear it?' – for nothing about the means of presentation would in fact quell their doubt that it actually came from God. Instead, they would rule it out as a divine command purely on the basis of its *morally objectionable content*. The Old Testament reports God as having repeatedly commanded the killing of men, women, and children (see 1 Samuel 15:3, among many examples), so it is not as if a command to kill would be out of character for such a God. Nevertheless, nowadays, anyone's claim that God has commanded him to wipe out the neighboring town would rightly encounter at least initial disbelief even among his religious group – principally, if not exclusively, on moral grounds. Thus, skeptical theism faces a problem encountered by divine-command theories of ethics, and at least as acutely: our very *identification* of God's commands presupposes that we independently understand the realm of value well enough to tell which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command. How can we understand the realm of value well enough to tell which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command and yet, as skeptical theism insists, not understand that realm well enough to tell which cases of horrific suffering a perfect being would be at all likely to permit?

One might object that the skeptical theses ST1–ST3 are consistent with our ability to know *enough* about the realm of value to know which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command.<sup>8</sup> This objection echoes the closing sentence of the passage from Bergmann and Rea that I quoted above, and I believe it reflects too sanguine a view of our ability to contain the spread of skepticism. According to skeptical theism, we lack what it takes even to *estimate the likelihood* that some compensating good justifies a perfect being's permitting David

<sup>8</sup> I owe this objection to an anonymous referee for *Sophia*.

Rothenberg to suffer as he did.<sup>9</sup> Skeptical theists grant that none of us can detect that compensating good, but given our limited knowledge of the realm of value, they ask, how could we estimate the likelihood that some compensating good lies beyond the limit of what we detect? By the same token, however, we cannot estimate the likelihood that some reason lying beyond our ken turns what seems to us to be a diabolical command into just the thing a perfect being would tell someone to do under the particular circumstances.

### Selective Obedience

Even when theists *concede* that God has issued a particular command, they sometimes consciously choose, on what look to be moral grounds, to disobey it. According to Leviticus 19–20, God forbids breeding cattle with other livestock (apparently beefalo is an abomination in God's eyes), mixing the kinds of seed sown onto a field, and wearing a garment containing both linen and wool. God also imposes the death penalty for cursing one's parents, adultery, male homosexual conduct (see also Romans 1:32), certain types of incest (which require death for everyone involved, sometimes by burning), bestiality, witchcraft, and blasphemy. Yet, it is unlikely that even Orthodox Jewish parents kill their children for parent-cursing or blasphemy, because they reason (if only implicitly) that God couldn't *really* want them to do that. So theists must be *non-skeptical* concerning their capacity to discern God's reasons, to tell *which* of God's commands God really wants us to obey. I wager that Bergmann and Rea don't check the label for divinely prohibited fiber-content before buying a suit of clothes, and not just because they might not know about the prohibition in Leviticus 19:19, but because they assume, if only implicitly, that the Creator of the universe surely does not *care* about that issue, even though the Bible portrays him as caring about it.<sup>10</sup> Their assumption is as sensible as it is hard to square with their skepticism about God's underlying purposes.

It does not solve the problem, furthermore, to respond that these embarrassing commands applied only to the ancient Israelites in their specific time and place because we still must rely on our own judgement – independent of any divine commands – to determine whether any of those ancient commands are meant to apply to us today. Even if scholarly exegesis can explain away the most awkward commands while retaining the rest, such explanations will surely depend on assuming human insight into the *relative importance* of particular values in God's grand scheme. Why not say that God cares first and foremost about the composition of our clothing and only secondarily about harm to children? Because we know

<sup>9</sup> William L. Rowe vividly addresses this point about our estimating likelihoods: '[According to skeptical theists,] since we don't know that the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are, we can't know that it is even likely that there are no goods that justify God in permitting whatever amount of apparently pointless, horrific evil there might occur in the world. Indeed, if human life were *nothing more than a series of agonizing moments from birth to death*, their position would still require them to say that we can't reasonably infer that it is even likely that God does not exist' (Rowe, W. L. (2001). *Skeptical theism: A response to Bergmann*. *Noûs*, 35, 297–303; p. 298, emphasis in original).

<sup>10</sup> For the record, Bergmann and Rea (p. 241) identify themselves as skeptical theists and thus as theists.

independently that such an attitude would be unworthy of a morally perfect being, something we could not know without knowing more about the realm of value than skeptical theism says we can know.

### Specific Guidance?

Bergmann and Rea claim that God's commands give even skeptical theists 'an all-things-considered reason to prevent harm to others in cases like' the burning of David Rothenberg. While we regard it as likely – again, based on our independent moral judgement – that God (if God exists) wants us to protect innocent children from harm, has God in fact commanded it? Biblical commands are often extremely specific, not simply general principles we must then somehow apply to particular situations. Has God specifically commanded us to prevent child abuse or even specifically commanded us not to abuse children? On the contrary, one finds death-penalty offences for children listed in Exodus (21:15, 21:17), Leviticus (20:9), and Deuteronomy (21:18–21), apparently endorsed by Jesus (Matthew 15:4; Mark 7:10), and several apparent endorsements of child-beating in Proverbs (13:24, 20:30, 22:15, 23:13–14, 29:15). Granted, Matthew 18:6 warns us against *corrupting* those children who believe in Jesus, and verse 18:10 commands us not to 'despise' such children, but it offers such children no specific protection against the kind of abuse David Rothenberg suffered and offers no protection at all for children who do not believe in Jesus. In sum, had Charles Rothenberg set his son on fire for committing blasphemy or because the boy had cursed him, it is not clear that he would have crossed any line drawn by the Bible or that any recognized command would have given us an all-things-considered reason to stop him.

If, instead, we try to extrapolate from God's pronouncements on other topics in order to discover the general principles God wants us to apply to the case of child abuse, we must assume for ourselves a substantial degree of insight into God's purposes. Consider, for instance, the second greatest commandment according to Jesus, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself' (Matthew 22:39), which some Christians may offer as a way of *dismissing* the jumble of conflicting commands I cited earlier. Suppose I hate myself; am I off the hook with regard to loving others, or, indeed, am I then obliged to hate others? 'Of course not,' one might reply; 'the commandment presupposes a healthy degree of self-love on the part of everyone to whom it applies. Moreover, as God's creature, you ought to love yourself and hence ought to love others.' Maybe so, but that reply explicitly depends on a claim about what the command presupposes: namely, a healthy degree of self-love on the part of those it commands. Thus, it presumes insight into God's assumptions in issuing the command, an insight skeptical theism says we have no right to think we possess.

Furthermore, even if we ignore these interpretive problems and grant that the command 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' gives us *some* moral guidance about what to do about David Rothenberg's suffering – presumably we ought to try to assuage it – it fails to give us enough guidance to answer the moral question that Almeida and Oppy pose in their criticism of skeptical theism: Must we intervene to *prevent* such suffering from occurring if we easily can? Even if the command clearly enough implies that neither Charles Rothenberg nor anyone else is allowed to burn David

alive, the command doesn't tell us whether, for example, we must use whatever *force* may be needed to prevent Charles from burning him – not, again, unless we make assumptions about the relative *importance* and overall *purpose* of the command, assumptions that skeptical theism denies us any confidence in making. In obeying the command to love one another, are we obliged to prevent people from behaving in harmful ways, or is it God's business to prevent them? The command itself doesn't say, and hence we have to rely on moral assumptions, including assumptions about the command's context and purpose, to answer this (by no means easy) question.<sup>11</sup> In sum, we simply can't *interpret* commands as expressions of God's will without assuming we know much, independently of those commands, about God's intentions, just as we can't interpret a constitution *as* expressing the will of its framers without assuming we know much about *their* intentions. But, of course, our knowing enough to identify, interpret, and apply God's commands ought to increase our confidence in drawing the very 'noseum' inferences that skeptical theism is deliberately designed to block.

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<sup>11</sup> One complication for Christians in answering this question arises from Jesus's pacifistic command in Matthew 5:39 that they 'resist not evil.'