

Chapter 28

The Moral Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism

Abstract: Skeptical theism combines theism with skepticism about the ability of human beings to know God's reasons for permitting suffering. In recent years, it has become perhaps the most prominent theistic response from philosophers to the evidential argument from evil. Some critics of skeptical theism charge that it implies positions that theists and many atheists alike would reject, such as skepticism about our knowledge of the external world and about our knowledge of our moral obligations. I discuss these charges, with emphasis on the charge of moral skepticism. I argue that the charges have merit, and I conclude by rebutting the claim that God's commands could give skeptical theists moral guidance despite the morally skeptical implications of their position.

Keywords: God; Theism; Problem of evil; Morality; Skepticism; Skeptical theism; Moral skepticism; Moral obligation; Divine commands

1. The evidential argument from evil

A Google search on the term "child torture" retrieves the following case among others: in 2010, four-year-old Dominick Calhoun of Argentine Township, Michigan, died after days of being beaten and burned by his mother's boyfriend. "I've been doing this a long time, and this is the worst case of child abuse I've ever seen," said the local police chief; "in all respects, he was tortured." Dominick's grandmother reported that "burns covered his body" and that his brain was "bashed out of his skull." A neighbor told police he heard Dominick screaming, over and over again, "Mommy, make him stop." Dominick's crime? Wetting his pants.¹

Where was God while this was going on? Why would an all-powerful, all-knowing, and morally perfect God stand by and let someone torture Dominick to death? Atheists of course reply, "Nowhere: there's no God in the first place." Some theists answer by offering theodicies: attempts to explain why the universe is in some sense better, or at least no worse, if God allows Dominick's torture than it would be if God prevented it. In their view, God's letting Dominick suffer must achieve some compensating good (or prevent some evil at least as bad) that not even God could achieve (or prevent) otherwise. Theodicies try to specify those goods (or evils).

Those in the theodicy business face a daunting challenge. On reflection, the only goods we can think of seem to fail, individually and collectively, to provide a sufficient moral justification: either they look too small to *offset* the disvalue of Dominick's suffering, or else we can't see how an omnipotent God would *need* to allow Dominick's suffering in order to achieve those

¹ "Police: Man tortured 4-year-old to death for wetting his pants," <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/04/15/michigan.child.torture>; "Dominick Calhoun, Argentine Township boy who died after beating, remembered for big blue eyes, big personality," http://www.mlive.com/news/flint/index.ssf/2010/04/dominick_calhoun_argentine_tow.html (both accessed 26 May 2011).

goods. Even after thinking hard about it, we can't see how God's permission of that suffering could be justified by (1) a four-year-old child's somehow deserving it, (2) the value (if any) of the boyfriend's libertarian freedom to torture Dominick, (3) the value of someone else's libertarian freedom to do something in light of the torture, or (4) whatever beneficial attention to the problem of child abuse this case may generate. Justification (1) looks preposterous, and (2)–(4) seem, at best, to violate Dominick's autonomy by treating him merely as a means to some good end that even consequentialists must admit doesn't look good *enough*.

Even if we consider possible benefits of a less mundane kind, such as Dominick's "experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God,"² we can't see how achieving those benefits would force an omnipotent God to permit Dominick's suffering. Or consider instead the prevention of some horrific evil: suppose that Dominick, had he not been killed, would have grown up to commit brutal murders. Even on that wild supposition his suffering remains unjustified, since his *painless* death would have prevented that future evil at less cost. Furthermore, such speculation about Dominick's future brutality could provide the justification we seek only if we had some reason to believe it, and we don't. Again, our search for an adequate justification comes up empty.

According to leading versions of the evidential argument from evil, the best explanation of our inability to *find* an adequate moral justification for God's letting Dominick suffer is that no such justification *exists*; we can't find what isn't there. But any action or permission of a perfect God must be morally justified; therefore, no such God exists. This partly abductive reasoning is the most popular philosophical argument for atheism to emerge in the last several decades. The most popular theistic rebuttal, and the focus of this essay, is the line of reasoning known as "skeptical theism," so called because it combines theism with the denial of human knowledge or justified belief in a particular domain.

2. Skeptical theism

Skeptical theists grant that no theodicy is recognized by us as providing a morally sufficient reason for God's permitting all of the suffering that exists or even for permitting Dominick's particular share of it. Again, however, they stress that this disappointing situation is hardly surprising if theism is true: given the disparity between God's omniscience and our own limited knowledge, it shouldn't surprise us if we fail to grasp the reasons that actually do (indeed, must) justify God's permission of suffering.

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 shouldn't expect those reasons to be scrutable. In either case, however, they aim to undercut what Stephen Wykstra (1996) calls the atheist's "noseeum" inference from our failure to *see* God-justifying reasons to the conclusion that no such reasons *exist*. After all, an omniscient God sees all the possible goods and evils there are, whereas presumably we don't, and an omniscient God sees all the ways in which achieving particular goods requires the permission of particular evils, whereas again we don't. Michael Bergmann, a defender of skeptical theism, characterizes the position as combining theism with the following additional claims that he thinks everyone should accept:

² The phrase is William L. Rowe's, applied in the context of a different case of horrific evil; see Rowe 1996: 277.

- 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 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. (2001: 279)

Bergmann summarizes ST1–ST3 by saying, “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” (*ibid.*).

If it works at all, the skeptical theist’s reply works exceedingly well: it undercuts any inference one might draw from the existence of any amount of evil, however horrific, to the non-existence of morally sufficient reasons for God’s permitting that evil. Consider again the actual evil of Dominick’s suffering and the possible good represented by his “experiencing complete felicity in the everlasting presence of God.” None of us can see how achieving that good must constrain God to permit the suffering, and at least some of us share the predicament of Ivan Karamazov: we can’t see how achieving that good would *atone for* the suffering even if the suffering were *necessary* for achieving the good.³ But, the skeptical theist replies, our epistemic disappointment isn’t surprising if ST1–ST3 are true. If we’re miserably ignorant about the realm of value – and it wouldn’t be surprising if we were – then we’ll be miserably ignorant about the range of justifications at God’s disposal, since of course God (if God exists) has access to the entire realm. Indeed, according to skeptical theism, we’re never justified in believing that God’s permission of Dominick’s suffering isn’t necessary for Dominick’s *own* greater good.

3. Skeptical theism and radical skepticism

Some critics of skeptical theism charge that it works *too* well, that its skeptical attitude toward our knowledge of value implies positions that many theists and nontheists alike would reject. For example, Bruce Russell argues that skeptical theism implies radical skepticism about the external world (Russell 1996: 196–197), and Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy argue that skeptical theism “undermines our ability to engage in perfectly ordinary kinds of moral reasoning” (2003: 511).

A theological basis for external-world skepticism goes back to Descartes, who in my view failed to neutralize it. In the First Meditation, Descartes briefly worries that God might be thoroughly deceiving him, but then he cites God’s reputation for goodness in order to dismiss the worry and move on to consider, instead, the Evil Demon hypothesis. But if deception is ever good, all things considered – imagine deceiving a murderer about the location of a potential victim – then presumably a good God could deceive us, and if we’re as clueless about God’s true purposes as skeptical theism says we may be, then for all we know radical deception on God’s part represents the *height* of goodness.

³ See Dostoevsky 1990.

Descartes thinks he knows enough about the nature and implications of supreme goodness to rule out a radically deceptive God: in the Third Meditation, he writes that God “cannot be a deceiver, since it is a dictate of the natural light that all fraud and deception spring from some defect.” However, while all fraud and deception no doubt spring from defective or imperfect *situations* – for example, ones in which a murderer seeks another victim – it by no means follows that fraud and deception are defective or imperfect *responses* to such situations. In that case, then, fraud and deception are again consistent with God’s perfection, and we can rule them out only by presuming that God can have no morally sufficient reasons for committing them. Skeptical theism denies us that presumption, and so it denies Descartes his confident dismissal of this particular skeptical worry. For all he or we know, radical divine deception is supremely good.

Even if he dismisses too quickly the possibility of divine deception, however, Descartes at least recognizes his theistic belief as a potential source of radical doubt. No sane person believes in the existence of an Evil Demon whose job it is to deceive us about our surroundings, but plenty of people believe in the existence of God, a being powerful enough to bring off radical deception and not barred from it if we allow that deception can be good, all things considered.

But there’s another way in which theism threatens our knowledge quite apart from the possibility of divine deception. According to theism, something literally *magical* stands at the foundation of our universe: a nonphysical God who created the universe from nothing at all and via methods that we have no reason to think natural science could ever unravel. God had free rein over which natural laws, if any, to create, and given science’s unavoidable *reliance* on natural laws there’s no reason to think science could dig “underneath” all natural laws to discover the reasons, if any, God had for creating them. If the universe is at bottom magical, then our inescapably non-magical ways of figuring it out are doomed to fail eventually. According to naturalism, by contrast, nothing magical stands at the foundation of our universe, and so there’s no reason in principle why science can’t make our knowledge of the origin and workings of the universe ever deeper.⁴ Indeed, insofar as we can explain some fact in natural-scientific terms, to that degree we don’t – and, more important, needn’t – invoke the intentions of agents to explain it. But theism regards God’s intentions as *fundamental* to the universe, in which case we can’t hope to understand the universe ever more deeply by means of our non-magical scientific methods. Unlike naturalism, theism puts a barrier in the path of our ever-deeper knowledge of the universe, a barrier we must hit sooner or later.

4. Skeptical theism and moral obligation

Problems arise for skeptical theism in the ethical realm as well. In the remainder of this essay, I’ll consider an ethical objection to skeptical theism raised by Almeida and Oppy and will defend that objection against replies jointly offered by two skeptical theists, Bergmann and co-author Michael Rea. I’ll only mention here, without elaborating on it, a familiar theological casualty of skeptical theism that theists may well find troubling: If worries about our poor grasp of value prevent us from *doubting* God’s goodness on the basis of the suffering we experience or witness,

⁴ See Schaffer 2003: 503–504; compare Ladyman et al. 2007: “We have inductive grounds for denying that there is [an ontologically] fundamental level [of reality], since every time one has been posited, it has turned out not to be fundamental after all” (178). Alvin Plantinga has famously argued that naturalism itself provides grounds for skepticism about the external world. His argument is trenchantly criticized by the contributors to Beilby (2002).

they ought to prevent us from *affirming* God's goodness on the basis of the sudden cures, spontaneous recoveries, and averted disasters that we experience or witness.⁵

Almeida and Oppy's most telling criticism of skeptical theism accuses it of undermining our ordinary sense of moral obligation. Suppose we can easily prevent some horrific evil (call it "E") such as the torture of Dominick Calhoun, and suppose we also endorse ST1–ST3. In those circumstances, according to Almeida and Oppy, even if we ourselves can see nothing that would justify allowing E to occur,

we should insist that it is not unlikely that there is some...reason for a perfect being's not intervening to stop E. Plainly, we should also concede – by parity of reason – 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 *our* not intervening to stop the event. ...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? (2003: 505–506, first emphasis added)

Hence it appears that skeptical theism induces a kind of moral paralysis that theists and nontheists alike would rightly abhor.

One objection to Almeida and Oppy's argument relies on distinguishing between the indicative conditional (a) "If E occurs, then God has a morally sufficient reason for letting E occur" and the subjunctive conditional (b) "If E *were* to occur, then God *would* have a morally sufficient reason for letting E occur." Because it imagines us considering E when there's still a chance for us to prevent E, Almeida and Oppy's argument depends on (b) rather than (a). But according to the objection, (a) doesn't imply (b), and hence those who accept (a) needn't accept (b). According to theism, because Dominick's torture in fact occurred, God had a morally sufficient reason for letting it happen. But, according to the objector, that claim wouldn't have allowed an onlooker to reason this way: "If Dominick's torture were to occur because I allowed it, then God would have a morally sufficient reason for allowing it too."

However, I don't see how the distinction between (a) and (b) grounds an effective objection to Almeida and Oppy. Although indicative conditionals don't in general imply subjunctive conditionals, that fact is irrelevant here. Theists must regard each of (a) and (b) as *necessarily* true. Any possible world in which God lets E occur without having a morally sufficient reason for letting E occur is a world in which God lacks perfection in power, knowledge, or goodness, and theism says there are no such worlds: God is perfect in every world, not just the actual world. Almeida and Oppy, therefore, needn't rely on the false assumption that any indicative conditional implies the corresponding subjunctive conditional. They can rely instead on the fact that (b) is necessarily true from the perspective of theism.

Skeptical theists might object to Almeida and Oppy's argument in various other ways. First, they might object that framing the moral problem in terms of the production of good consequences and the prevention of bad ones simply assumes a consequentialist framework and ig-

⁵ See Swinburne 1998: 27, cited in Pereboom 2005a: 165.

nores deontologically important ideas such as the rights and the autonomy of those whom we allow to suffer. Second, they might challenge the assumption that we're obligated to intervene *only if* we can reasonably judge the probability that E is for the best, all things considered; perhaps we have that obligation regardless of any judgment of probability.⁶ Third, they might challenge the closely related assumption that our obligation to intervene dissolves *because* we also believe it not unlikely that, were we smarter and better equipped, we would discern a good reason for us not to intervene; again, perhaps we have that obligation regardless of our attitude toward such a counterfactual conditional.

The first reply, attacking the broadly consequentialist framework of the problem, has some force. It does seem that Dominick's autonomy gets ignored in all this talk about the possible goods produced and possible evils prevented if we let him be tortured to death; such talk threatens to treat him merely as a means to an end rather than as an end in himself. The problem, however, is that ST1–ST3 are *themselves* couched in broadly consequentialist terms, or at least they presuppose justifications couched in those terms. I know of no version of skeptical theism that claims that God might have a non-consequentialist (say, Kantian) duty to permit Dominick's suffering, a duty that remains inscrutable to us for non-consequentialist reasons. Nor can I see how such a version could plausibly work. On the standard Kantian theory of duty, we can discover duties by rational reflection alone. Hence, even if it's possible for us to overlook some existing duties, or mistake for duties what are in fact not duties, it's less plausible that our reflective understanding of our duties should fail to be even *representative* of the duties there actually are. A deontological version of ST1–ST3 therefore looks less plausible than a consequentialist version, and so it becomes hard to defend skeptical theism by rejecting consequentialism.

Indeed, the strongly consequentialist flavor of ST1–ST3 gives anti-consequentialists an independent reason to reject skeptical theism. Some people oppose consequentialism because they say it makes the moral status of our actions unknowable by us, given our inability to know the *total* consequences of our actions and given that the unforeseeable consequences swamp the foreseeable ones.⁷ These people reason, plausibly, that it would *make no sense* if we could commit moral wrongs whose wrongness none of us could ever detect. One might reply that we could commit wrongs out of inculpable ignorance without ever being *blameworthy* for those wrongs, but this reply threatens to sever any connection between wrongness and blameworthiness. It seems odd to think that we could spend our lives doing wrong – not just doing *harm*, doing *wrong* – without ever being blameworthy for it. If consequentialism implies that we could, consequentialism inherits that oddity, and likewise for skeptical theism if its reliance on consequentialism implies the same result. Instead, I think skeptical theism's best answer to anti-consequentialist worries is the one I broached at the end of Section 2: skeptical theists should

⁶ One might wonder how theists (skeptical or not) could assign anything but high probability to the claim that E is for the best, all things considered, since presumably whatever occurs, including E, is something that a perfect God permits to occur, and whatever a perfect God permits to occur must be for the best. Theists could reply by rejecting the assumption that (1) any event occurs only with God's permission or that (2) whatever God permits to occur must be for the best, but either reply seems to sacrifice an element of traditional theism: (1) seems entailed by the combination of divine omniscience and divine omnipotence, and (2) seems entailed by those properties together with God's moral perfection. Nevertheless, even if whatever occurs is for the best, theists could allow for human actions that are *wrong* in non-consequentialist terms: actions springing from malicious motives, for instance. This reply, however, may prove of limited use to skeptical theists whose skepticism is captured by ST1–ST3, since (as I suggest in the text) ST1–ST3 seem to presuppose consequentialism.

⁷ I take this worry about consequentialism to be one of the points of Lenman 2000.

keep their consequentialism and claim that, for all we know, Dominick's suffering was necessary for his *own* greater good. In that case, the threat to his autonomy becomes less worrisome: we do sometimes force children to undergo suffering against their will (think of a painful vaccination) for what we take to be their own good, and we regard ourselves as justified in doing so.

Now consider the second and third replies to Almeida and Oppy, according to which we *are* obligated to prevent E even if we can't reasonably judge the probability that E is for the best, all things considered, and even if we can't discount the likelihood that there's some compelling reason, beyond our ken, for not intervening. The following analogy, I believe, can help us to see that those replies won't work.⁸ Imagine that a well-armed tribesman walks into a jungle field hospital and sees someone in strange garb (known to us as the surgeon) about to cut open the abdomen of the tribesman's wife, who lies motionless on a table. It certainly looks to the tribesman like a deadly assault, and thus he sees good reason to attack the surgeon and no particular reason not to. But suppose that the tribesman also believes that strangely garbed magicians (known to us as surgeons) travel around who miraculously save dying people by cutting them open. As a result, he occurrently believes "If this is one of those life-saving miracles, I shouldn't expect to know it." The incision is about to happen, and clearly there's no time to investigate before acting. Given his beliefs, does it follow that he *ought* to attack the surgeon, i.e., that he would be wrong to refrain? I think not. At most what follows is that he *may* attack the surgeon, even at the cost of preventing his wife's life-saving appendectomy: we get at most permission rather than obligation. Skeptical theism asks us to admit that we occupy the same position with respect to the realm of value that the tribesman occupies with respect to modern medicine: we shouldn't expect to see how it works. Yet skeptical theists such as Bergmann and Rea claim to preserve, despite their skepticism, our ordinary moral *obligation* to intervene in such cases (247). Their claim is correct only if the tribesman is obligated to attack the surgeon.

Again, however, the tribesman isn't obligated to attack: his legitimate self-doubt ought to give him pause, or at any rate it lets him off the moral hook if he decides not to intervene, for he sees a reason to think he may *bring about*, rather than prevent, his wife's death by acting as his instincts tell him to act. Skeptical theists persistently claim that only those goods you know of – rather than goods beyond your ken – can justify your inaction in the face of what seems to you to be an obligation to intervene (e.g., Howard-Snyder 1996: 292–93, criticized in Pereboom 2005b: 89). But their claim ignores the fact that, in high-stakes circumstances, *recognition of your own ignorance* can also justify your inaction, a point conceded by two recent defenders of skeptical theism; they write that "recognition of [your] ignorance concerning the likelihood of there being unknown goods" can render you "unable to make an all-things-considered judgment as to whether to do [some action] A," in which case "you are entirely within your rights in choosing to do A – indeed, no one is in a position to criticise any choice you make in these circumstances" (Trakakis and Nagasawa 2004: n. 8). As before, we get *permission* to intervene rather than an obligation to intervene: choosing not to intervene wouldn't expose you to legitimate criticism.⁹

⁸ See Piper 2007: 71 for a different analogy put to a similar purpose.

⁹ On this point, compare Stump 1985 (412–413): "God can see into the minds and hearts of human beings and determine what sort and amount of suffering is likely to produce the best results; we cannot. ...Therefore, since all human suffering is prima facie evil, and since we do not know with any high degree of probability how much (if any) of it is likely to result in good for any particular sufferer on any particular occasion, it is reasonable for us to eliminate the suffering as much as we can." Note Stump's use of the term "reasonable": she evidently wishes to preserve our moral permission to eliminate suffering. Yet ordinary morality regards it as not just reasonable but obliga-

There is, in addition, a type of belief we can expect theists to possess and nontheists to lack that also undermines the moral obligation to intervene in cases of horrific evil: the belief that *someone exists who can make this suffering turn out for the sufferer's best even if I don't intervene*. Given the badness of severe suffering, why don't we feel obligated to prevent children from ever undergoing painful rabies vaccinations? Because we're confident that sometimes severe suffering will turn out for the sufferer's best. Suppose we believe, as many theists do, that someone exists who can *always* make suffering turn out for the sufferer's best (see, e.g., Gellman: 188; Stump: 411–413). We ought, I submit, to feel less obligated (or less clearly obligated, if obligation doesn't come in degrees) to prevent and relieve suffering than we would feel if we didn't believe in such a potential guarantor of a good outcome.

Again, one might counter that God makes us witness current or imminent suffering because God *wants* us to reduce or prevent it, but skeptical theism denies us any confidence in drawing that conclusion, as a general rule of thumb and even more so with regard to a particular case of suffering. For suppose that the tribesman is a theist; even then he can't confidently conclude, given what *else* he believes about his own competency in that situation, that God would want him to attack the surgeon. We have yet to see, therefore, how to reconcile skeptical theism with our moral obligation to intervene in cases like the torture of Dominick Calhoun.

5. Skeptical theism and God's commands

Skeptical theists sometimes reply that God's commands give them a source of moral obligation that *withstands* the skeptical force of ST1–ST3 and that *does* obligate them to intervene to prevent suffering like Dominick's if they easily enough can:

Sceptical theists, after all, are *theists*. ...[T]heists 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...plausible...that ST1–ST3 leave us without an all-things-considered reason to prevent harm to others in cases like [Dominick's]. 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 lack knowledge of God's commands *as* God's commands. [Bergmann and Rea: 244, emphases in original]

This line of reasoning can seem compelling enough that it's worth showing in some detail why skeptical theists can't consistently rely on it.¹⁰ In short, we can't 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 therefore a better understanding of the realm of value, than skeptical theism grants us.

tory for us to intervene, at least on some occasions; ordinary morality imposes an obligation to intervene, and preserving permission need not preserve the obligation.

¹⁰ Schnall 2007 relies on the same line of reasoning in defending skeptical theism against the charge of moral skepticism.

5.1 Identifying God's commands

Taking guidance from God's commands raises the prior question of how to identify what God commands. 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. Suppose we consider one obvious source of God's commands if any such commands exist: the monotheistic sacred scriptures. Does God command followers to circumcise every male child among them, as Genesis 17:10 reports? 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 Qur'an 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 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. So 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 to charity what he would have spent on gambling. 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 told him to slaughter everyone in the neighboring town. In declaring that God couldn't possibly have commanded the latter action, his co-religionists wouldn't 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's 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 as God's commands" (to quote Bergmann and Rea) 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, then, 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 theists insist, 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. This objection echoes the closing sentence of the passage from Bergmann and Rea that I quoted above, and it reflects too optimistic 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 Dominick to suffer as he did.¹¹ 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 can’t estimate the likelihood that some reason lying beyond our ken turns what seems to us a diabolical command into just the thing a perfect being would tell someone to do under the particular circumstances.

5.2 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 1:27, 32), certain types of incest (which require death for everyone involved, sometimes by burning), bestiality, witchcraft, and blasphemy. Yet it’s unlikely that even Orthodox Jewish parents kill their children for parent-cursing or blasphemy, because they reason (if perhaps 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 doesn’t *care* about that issue, even though the Bible portrays him as caring about it.¹² Their assumption is as sensible as it is hard to square with their skepticism about our knowledge of God’s underlying purposes.

It doesn’t 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 judgment – 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

¹¹ Rowe says this: “[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 2001: 298, emphasis in original).

¹² For the record, Bergmann and Rea (2005: 241) identify themselves as skeptical theists and thus as theists.

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

5.3 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 torture of Dominick. 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? Not in any scripture I can find. 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 Dominick suffered and offers no protection at all for children who don't believe in Jesus.

In sum, had Dominick been beaten to death for parent-cursing or blasphemy, it isn't clear that his abuse would have crossed any line drawn by the Bible or that any recognized command would have given us an all-things-considered reason to prevent his death. If you reply that in God's eyes a four-year-old simply *can't* commit the crimes of parent-cursing or blasphemy, I'd say that you're relying – entirely properly – on your ordinary moral judgment, independently of any divine commands. But Bergmann and Rea's point is that God's commands can guide skeptical theists even after they've *stopped* relying on their ordinary moral judgment to fathom God's ways.

Furthermore, if we try to extrapolate from God's pronouncements on *other* topics in order to tease out the 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: self-love on the part of those it commands. Thus, it presumes insight into God's assumptions in issuing the command, insight skeptical theism says we have no right to think we possess.

Moreover, even if we ignore these interpretive problems and grant that the command "Love thy neighbor as thyself" gives us *some* moral guidance on what to do about Dominick's suffering – presumably we ought to try to relieve it – it fails to give us enough guidance to an-

swer the moral question that Almeida and Oppy pose in their criticism of skeptical theism: Must we intervene to *prevent* such suffering if we easily can? Even if the command clearly enough implies that neither his mother's boyfriend nor anyone else may torture Dominick, the command doesn't tell us whether, for example, we must use whatever *force* may be needed to prevent the torture – 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, must we 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.¹³ 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 denies us the right to draw.

At this stage, one might reply that God himself could provide the insight we need in order for us to identify, interpret, and apply his commands – the insight I've said skeptical theism denies us any reason to think we possess. According to this reply, we'd find ourselves in a skeptical quandary about God's commands except that God has given us, or at least could give us, the guidance we need to escape the quandary. But the skeptical problem recurs at this stage too. As I argued earlier, if deception is ever good, all things considered, then it's consistent with God's perfection that he deceive us at any time, including when he apparently tells us his intentions and purposes in issuing a command.¹⁴ The same result also applies if God ostensibly tells us his justification for permitting some evil whose justification we have trouble discerning on our own: skeptical theism denies us any confidence that God is disclosing his true justification. In fact, it's worse. Skeptical theism denies us any confidence that we've *ever* managed to identify, by any means, the justification God actually relies on for any of his actions or omissions: for all we know, any justification we entertain, however compelling it might seem, is shallower, or at least other, than the justification that actually motivates a perfectly wise God. Skeptical theism makes our relation to our Creator deeply mysterious, even mystical.¹⁵

¹³ One complication for Christians in answering this question arises from Jesus's pacifistic command in Matthew 5:39 that they “resist not evil.”

¹⁴ See also Wielenberg 2010: 517, which cites examples from the Old and New Testaments that portray both God the Father and God the Son as having deceived.

¹⁵ Parts of this essay are reproduced from Maitzen 2007 and Maitzen 2009 with the kind permission of the publisher, Springer Science+Business Media. I thank Christian Lee and Matthew Lee for helpful written comments on an earlier version of this essay.

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