The structure of the contemporary debate on the problem of evil

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Abstract: **This paper concerns the attempt to formulate an empirical version of the problem of evil, and the attempt to counter this version by what is known as 'sceptical theism'. My concern is to assess what is actually achieved in these attempts. To this end I consider the debate between them against the backdrop of William Rowe's distinction between *expanded standard theism* and *restricted standard theism* (which I label E and R respectively). My claim is that the empirical version significantly fails to challenge E in the way that a workable logical version would; and that sceptical theism significantly fails to defend R in the way that a workable theodicy would. My conclusion is that sceptical theism and the empirical argument play a significantly more limited role in the debate over evil than the arguments they are supposed to replace.**

Introduction

In recent times the positions on either side of the debate over the problem of evil have undergone significant technical refinement. On the non-theistic side, what was before formulated as a *logical* argument is now commonly formulated as an *empirical* one; this latter version is probabilistic in character, and is intended to be a more viable argument format, even if issuing in a weaker conclusion.[1] A response from the theistic side has been to formulate the position known as 'sceptical theism', which opposes the empirical argument without actually taking the full form of a theodicy. Here again there is an intended advance in the argument's viability at the cost of weakening its conclusion. In each case the point is to argue more effectively by claiming less – while still claiming enough to make the argument worthwhile.

The debate over the problem of evil is now commonly framed in terms of these two positions. Instead of thinking of the debate as pitting theodicies against the logical argument, it is common to think of it as pitting sceptical theism against the empirical argument. The question is then whether sceptical theism successfully undercuts the empirical argument. This seems a straightforward question, of

the yes-or-no variety, and the substantial literature which has arisen in an attempt to answer it has commonly approached it as such. I will, however, argue in the following that it is a more complex question than that; I believe that the weakening of the positions inherent in sceptical theism and the empirical argument limits for each its range of effective applicability.

In the following I want to identify certain *background concessions* which underlie debate between theist and non-theist. My thesis is that with one kind of concession in place, the empirical argument ceases to be useful as a tool of persuasion; with another kind in place, sceptical theism ceases to be useful. If I am correct, both arguments are highly circumscribed in application, and neither should be thought to have the dialectical range which a workable theodicy or a workable logical argument would enjoy. This fact, I claim, must be held in mind if the relation between sceptical theism and the empirical argument is to be fully grasped.

Background concessions

I begin with some comments on those background concessions. My point of entry into this matter recalls a distinction applied to the debate by William Rowe in an early response to the argument of sceptical theism:

> Let's call *standard theism* any view which holds that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, omni-good being who created the world. Letting 'O' abbreviate 'an omnipotent, omniscient, omni-good being', standard theism is any view which holds that O exists. Within standard theism, we can distinguish *restricted* and *expanded* theism. Expanded theism is the view that O exists, conjoined with certain other significant religious claims, claims about sin, redemption, a future life, a last judgment, and the like. (Orthodox Christian theism is a version of expanded theism.) Restricted theism is the view that O exists, unaccompanied by other, independent religious claims.[2]

Rowe labels these positions 'EST' (for expanded theism) and 'RST' (for restricted theism); I shall abbreviate further, and call them 'E' and 'R'. Each is a set of claims, R being a subset of E; these sets are intended to correspond respectively to the domains of natural theology and theology proper. I follow Rowe in seeing this distinction as providing useful basis for clarification of what is at issue between the empirical argument and sceptical theism.

I first consider R. Why would theists bother with R, when their full belief system is in fact E? What is the purpose of focusing on this particular subset of theistic claims? The purpose lies in the ambition of some theists to launch the most powerful kind of theistic argument: one which will not merely confirm the views of other theists, but actually challenge and change the views of non-theists. The theist in effect issues this kind of challenge to the non-theist: 'I will not at the outset assume any part of my belief system. Even so I will argue on your own ground and to your satisfaction, using only assumptions you will accept, that

certain key claims of my belief system are true.' This constitutes a strategic concession to employ a form of justification acceptable to the non-theist and theist alike; it is this concession which creates the possibility of actually persuading the non-theist. Many claims of E have no hope of being so justified, but some of its most important claims do have such hope, and the set of these is R. The famous proofs for God's existence are entries par excellence in this programme of defending R. And when the non-theist contests the results of these proofs by pressing the problem of evil, theistic responses which provide a theodicy may likewise be part of this programme. When a free-will theodicy, for example, appeals to the value of freedom in way of justifying the existence of evil, it is using an assumption perfectly acceptable to the non-theist; this is part of what allows it to be, indeed, another important entry in the programme.

The theist thus carries the argument to the non-theist on the non-theist's own ground. But the opposite can happen too; the non-theist can carry the argument to the theist on the theist's own ground. Obviously, if the non-theist begins the argument by assuming that parts of the theist's belief system are false, then the argument based on the assumption will be unpersuasive to the theist. An argument persuasive to the theist will need to begin by accepting that theistic belief system and *then* showing some part of it deficient. In effect the non-theist will need to issue this kind of challenge to the theist: 'I will not at the outset reject any part of your belief system. Even so I will argue on your own ground and to your satisfaction, using only assumptions you will accept, that certain key claims of your belief system are false.' Now this is what is implicitly attempted by the logical argument, which adopts the entire belief system of the theist (E) as its starting point, and then attempts to reveal a disabling tension between elements of that system. It is because it in effect begins with this strategic concession that it is potentially able to precipitate believers into non-belief (and has in fact done so on occasions when believers have deemed the argument to have been soundly formulated).

Great arguments in general are marked by a capacity not merely to confirm the belief of an ally but change the belief of an opponent. To do the latter requires that the argument begin on ground acceptable to the opponent. This is a tall order in the debate between theists and non-theists over theism, where the initial ground is so disparate. But it is achieved by the sorts of strategic concession just described. For the sake of argument, theists assume none of their initial belief system and then try to show part of it to be true; and likewise for the sake of argument, non-theists assume the whole of that belief system and then try to show part of it to be false. A theodicy is a valuable argument precisely because of its ability to advance the former programme; the logical argument is equally valuable because of its ability to advance the latter.

Here is the key point. A putative substitute for a theodicy should likewise be able to advance the former programme, and a putative substitute for the logical

argument should likewise be able to advance the latter; if either shows incapacity in this regard then it is not a substitute, whatever other merits as an argument it may possess. My claim is that sceptical theism cannot function as part of the former programme, and the empirical argument cannot function as part of the latter; so both fail to stand as substitutes for the arguments they are intended to replace. In subsequent sections I discuss the claim about the empirical argument's limitation, and then the claim about sceptical theism's limitation; but first I prepare the way by commenting on the debate which has arisen between the two.

The debate

The distinction between the logical and empirical arguments from evil is fairly involved, and is not fully captured merely by speaking of one as a logical, and the other as an empirical (or probabilistic, inductive or evidential) formulation. The following is a skeletal representation of the logical version:

(1) Evil exists.
(2) If evil exists then God does not exist.
(3) Therefore God does not exist.

The debate over this argument's soundness focuses on (2), which in effect states that the existence of any evil at all is inconsistent with the existence of God. To dispute (2) the theist must maintain that there is no inconsistency here; it is common for the theist to do this through the *greater-good hypothesis*, which holds that evils are instrumentally justified as being necessary to God's greater aims. The existence of such evils is thus portrayed as consistent with God's existence. A natural response open to the non-theist is to defend (2), and the logical argument as a whole, by rejecting the greater-good hypothesis.

But with the empirical argument the non-theist entirely circumvents the debate involved in that line of response. This argument makes no attempt to defend (2), and none to defend the logical argument. It does not, indeed, automatically reject the greater-good hypothesis. What it does do is suggest the inapplicability of that hypothesis *in some cases*. The key claim is that unjustified evil exists, and a distinct argument is formed around this claim, an argument which is about unjustified evil, not just evil in general:

(4) Unjustified evil exists.
(5) If unjustified evil exists then God does not exist.
(6) Therefore God does not exist.[3]

In (1) to (3) the contentious premise is (2), a hypothetical claim. But in (4) to (6) the contentious premise is (4), an existential claim. So advancing the *first* argument is essentially an exercise in conceptual analysis, as required for justifying

the hypothetical. What is needed is to show that the very concept of God fails to fit with the concept of a being that must make concessions in the form of evil in order to achieve intended aims. But advancing the *second* argument is essentially an empirical exercise, as required for justifying the existential. What is needed is to establish a clear example of unjustified evil. The work of advancing the first argument is thus a priori, and the work of the second is a posteriori; hence the description of the first as the logical, and the second as the empirical, argument from evil. Given that evil exists, the logical argument attempts to show that it is inconsistent with God. Given that unjustified evil is inconsistent with God, the empirical argument attempts to show that it exists.

Rowe's best-known formulation of the latter argument has a deductive core which corresponds directly to (4)–(6), and an additional empirical sub-argument in support of (4). In the sub-argument we consider a carefully chosen instance of seemingly unjustified suffering (a fawn's painful death by burning in a forest fire, or the brutal murder of a young girl):

(7)   No good we know of justifies that suffering.
(8)   Therefore no good at all justifies that suffering.[4]

This is an induction by enumeration. The probability attaching to (8) then attaches to (6); presumably this probability, while less than 1, is still significantly high.

The non-theist undertakes to discover an unjustified evil; the theist must reply that none is discoverable. How this reply goes is shaped by the way the non-theist claims to make the discovery in the above argument. The non-theist claims in (7) that no justifying good for some particular evil has been found, and probabilistically concludes in (8) that none exists. Now compare these two lines of theistic response to that inference. (A) The premise (7) may be shown to be false. The reason will be the actual discovery of a justifying good for that evil. This is the strategy of the *theodicist*. (B) The conclusion (8) may be shown not to follow. The reason will be that our minds are small compared to God's, so that our not finding a justifying good is poor evidence that none is to be found. Our incapacity to find may just as well derive from our incapacity to look. This is the strategy of the *sceptical theist*; given the difficulty of proposing justifying goods for all evils in way of theodicy, this would seem to be for the theist a strategically more promising response.

So the debate, as currently framed, develops thus. The logical argument is able to be challenged by the greater-good hypothesis. The empirical argument is then able to challenge application of this hypothesis to selected evils. The theodicist will respond by showing how the hypothesis does in fact apply to those evils; but the sceptical theist will respond that we can still legitimately advance the hypothesis, even though we cannot always actually explain how it applies to those evils – and this because of our cognitive limitations. This latter

strategy is nicely summarized by Wykstra in the account he gives of his own position:

> Looking around my garage and seeing no dog entitles me to conclude that none is present, but seeing no flea does not; and this is because fleas, unlike dogs, have low seeability: even if they were present, we cannot reasonably expect to see them in this way. But should we expect God-purposed goods to have the needed seeability? Arguing from the disparity between a creator's vision and ours, I urged not.[5]

In our attempt to discern the God-purposed goods behind evils we are bound to fail on occasion, given the cognitive distance between God and ourselves, so failure in this regard is not evidence of there being no God-purposed good behind some evils (any more than not seeing fleas is evidence of their not being present).

The debate between the proponent of the empirical argument and the sceptical theist thus turns on the status of (7). Is it evidence of unjustified evil? Or is it merely evidence of our cognitive limitations? Much depends on how these questions are answered. The strategic advantage goes to atheism if (7) is evidence of unjustified evil, because the option of using the empirical argument in lieu of the logical is then open. But the strategic advantage goes to theism if (7) is evidence only of our cognitive limitations, because the option of using the argument of sceptical theism in lieu of formulating a theodicy is then open. The non-theist would prefer not to depend on having to formulate a workable logical argument, and the theist would prefer not to depend on having to formulate a workable theodicy. Each side would prefer to have the other doing the heavy work.

So which side is correct? The answer to this question proves complex once the pragmatic circumstances of debate are considered. When non-theists assume the whole the theist's belief system in order to show part of it false, they are assuming doctrine which presupposes the inscrutability of divine purposes, and readily suggests our inability to apply the greater-good hypothesis in all cases; this allows theists to take (7) as evidence of cognitive limitations. But when theists assume none of that belief system in order to show part of it true, they lose the use of such doctrine and its presuppositions; in the ensuing debate they can no longer simply undercut in this way the non-theistic interpretation of (7) as evidence of unjustified evil.

The next part of this paper focuses on the implications of the non-theist's concession, the following part on the implications of the theist's. The proximate conclusion in each case is that the side that makes the concession needs to do the heavy work; the ultimate conclusion is that both the empirical argument and sceptical theism are limited in ways not anticipated by those who propose them, respectively, as replacements for a workable logical argument and a workable theodicy.

The empirical argument and the non-theist's concession

The value of a workable logical argument would lie in its ability to function under this strategy: assume for the sake of argument all of the theist's belief system and nonetheless show part of it to be false. It would be on this basis that the logical argument could serve as a means of persuading a theist to become a non-theist. So how does the empirical argument function under this strategy? The answer is that it functions poorly, because it is undercut by that strategy. It fails to accomplish what would be dialectically most valuable in a workable logical argument, and so fails to serve as a substitute.

Here is the problem.[6] In general, any theological doctrine in E which suggests that the purposes of God must inevitably surpass the comprehension of humans will have this undercutting effect. The most obvious example of such a doctrine is E's eschatological component, describing the dispensation of souls after the anticipated end of the natural order; the key notions in this doctrine are final judgment, heaven, and hell. The belief is that some such dispensation will be determined and enacted, which will have the effect of rectifying outstanding injustices by providing reward and punishment as earned during life.[7] This belief is also accompanied by the admission that the details of this process are at best obliquely expressed in religious texts. Now this admission gives a ready excuse for not being able to identify the good served by certain cases of evil. In fact, for someone accepting eschatological doctrine, the presence of such evils is to be expected; a doctrine of eschatology *presupposes* the existence of unresolved evils in the order of nature, since it is the very purpose of the eschatological events to bring them to resolution. Were there no such evils there would be nothing to resolve, and no point to the resolution which the eschatology predicts.[8]

In general we may say this. E contains doctrine which supports the exculpatory ignorance appealed to by sceptical theists. It contains doctrine which refers freely to what is in principle unexperienceable and unverifiable, and so gives good cause for expecting human insight to be limited and God's ways to be often beyond human grasp. This is, then, as noted, exactly the ground on which sceptical theism will flourish. When non-theists concede this ground for the sake of argument they concede ground which readily blocks the inference from (7) to (8), to the instant disadvantage of the empirical argument (though, as I shall argue, not likewise to the disadvantage of the logical argument).

Now there are certainly limits to *how much* exculpatory ignorance the theist may plead, given the doctrinal content of the particular E that is under consideration. Someone who accepts the full range of that doctrinal content will typically acquire some beliefs about the ultimate purposes of God in creating the natural world, allowing it to unfold historically, and then bringing it to completion. If those evils serve any purposes at all they must ultimately serve these; but this statement, which immediately conveys at least some insight into how the

greater-good hypothesis will apply, would seem to belie our supposed ignorance of justifying goods. The doctrinal content of a full religious belief system is far from being a blank slate on these matters, and the theist cannot claim complete ignorance about justifying goods.[9]

On the other hand, neither can the theist reliably claim much more than a general and incomplete knowledge of justifying goods. E may teach the ultimate goods served by particular evils, but this does not necessarily convey anything about which of those goods is served by a given evil, or how exactly the process unfolds in which that evil helps to bring one of those goods about. Some good we know of from the doctrines of E may well justify a given evil, but the complexity and inscrutability of God's ways may equally well ensure that we do not know which good it is. This is because the causal linkage between evil and good is potentially immense, and we have every reason *not* to be confident of our ability to understand that linkage thoroughly, or even partially – just as knowing the endpoints of a convoluted line does not suffice to know the convolutions lying in between. Alston captures this fact well in his remark that 'there is an un-questionably live possibility that God's reasons for allowing human suffering may have to do, in part, with the appropriate connection of those sufferings with goods in ways that have never been dreamed of in our theodicies'.[10] Even if the ultimate goods which must be served by evils have been disclosed to us, that is no guarantee that we can take any given evil and identify the good it serves by discerning the connection between the two.

So, in short, someone who accepts, for the sake of argument or otherwise, the full content of E, which includes its eschatological content, must accept that there are many evils to which there will be no known application of the greater-good hypothesis until the end of history. This will require adopting the sceptical theist's interpretation of (7) as constituting evidence of our cognitive limitations, not as constituting evidence of unjustified evil; this, in turn, will be a reason *not* to accept the inference from (7) to (8) as it is made at this present time. Given the cognitive superiority of God it arises as a matter of course that there should be evils whose justificatory picture is now incomplete, and therefore that there are some evils of which (8) cannot now be appropriately inferred. In this way the empirical argument from evil is decisively undercut when brought forward under the non-theist's concession. The non-theist who concedes E for the sake of ar-gument and then sets out to refute it is conceding eschatological content which makes the empirical argument incapable of bringing about that intended refu-tation. The same result would arise for the non-theist who, employing the same concession, attempted to construct an empirical argument against Trinitarian theory. The attempt to refute this doctrine by arguing that there are no three-in-one objects at all, given that none has so far been observed, would be undercut by the doctrine itself, which already presupposes that the Trinity is utterly unique among beings, and has no counterpart in the observable physical world. Our not

finding a three-in-one object in the empirical realm is to be expected given that presupposition, and so in that context does not serve as evidence that such an object does not exist.

Now contrast this result with the effect on E of a workable logical argument from evil, were one to be successfully formulated.[11] No parallel case for *its* inapplicability could be made. In proposing the logical argument, one is not claiming, 'even if the full doctrine of E is assumed this empirical evidence will still refute it', but rather, 'even if the full doctrine of E is assumed an inconsistency in it will still be found'. Doctrines of E – such as eschatological ones, or Trinitarian ones – for which there is no reasonable expectation of empirical disconfirmation are still expected to meet the most basic standard of rationality: internal coherence with other members of the set. If those doctrines can be shown to generate contradiction within the set, a telling case will have been made against E as a whole. This, of course, is precisely what the logical argument attempts; it reasons that there is a conceptual confusion among the supposed characteristics of God (because the very idea of God's having to make instrumental use of evil, as suggested in the greater-good hypothesis, does not cohere with ideas of infinite power and intelligence). Short of a Kierkegaardian tolerance for contradictory doctrines, this is a fair basis for disputing any belief system.[12]

The extra beliefs in E that are not in R transform E into quite a different sort of belief system altogether, one for which there is no expectation of empirical confirmability.[13] E has, in effect, a built-in capacity for completely undercutting the empirical evidence of evil brought against it, and in this regard shares the self-validating quality of a solipsistic position or an evil-genius hypothesis – both of which can likewise be argued to be consistent with any empirical evidence proposed against them. Now in the cases of solipsism and the evil-genius hypothesis there may well be no likelihood of discovering an internal contradiction to refute the position, but it has historically been thought otherwise with E; in E an internal contradiction – as expressed in the logical problem of evil – has widely been thought to arise. But say the current consensus view is correct, and the logical problem has been finally refuted (by the likes of Plantinga); for non-theists who wish to concede E for the sake of argument and then attack it through the problem of evil, it remains tempting to employ an empirical argument. But if my above argument is correct, trying to find empirical evidence to attack E on that basis will be like trying to find empirical evidence to attack solipsism or the evil-genius hypothesis.

Now, the fact that a workable logical argument would be able to prevail against theism *even under conditions of debate most advantageous to theism* while the empirical argument cannot explains my assertion at the beginning of this section – that the empirical argument does not effectively replicate what is intended by those who attempt a logical argument. An ambition of those who press the problem of evil is to challenge theists generally, and not just the natural

theologians who attempt to justify R on the basis of mutually acceptable premises. Challenging theists generally requires an argument which adopts an initial ground acceptable to theists generally, which means adopting at the outset, for the sake of argument, a full theistic belief system. This the empirical argument cannot do.

The view held by many non-theists that the logical argument has been refuted is thus enormously consequential; on this view the non-theist loses access to the very form of the argument from evil which *could* pose difficulties for E. The problem of evil has derived its vast prestige among philosophical problems precisely because of its ability to incite crises of faith among those who otherwise have no difficulty accepting a belief system like E, even though it possesses components inevitably bereft of evidential support. For these sorts of believers the fact of evil has haunted their faith experience and has often brought about apostasy. If the logical argument has in fact been refuted then atheism has lost a powerful tool of apostasy. This tool is not replaced by the empirical argument.

Sceptical theism and the theist's concession

The value of a workable theodicy would lie in its ability to function under this strategy: assume for the sake of argument none of the theist's belief system and nonetheless show part of it to be true. It would be on this basis that a theodicy could serve as a means of persuading a non-theist to become a theist. So how does sceptical theism function under this strategy? The answer is that it functions poorly, because it undercuts that strategy. It fails to accomplish what would be dialectically most valuable in a workable theodicy, and so fails to serve as a substitute.

Here is the problem.[14] Justifying evil by the greater-good hypothesis requires conceiving of evil as being at least partly determined by the nature of the consequences to which it gives rise. On this conception, the evil of some thing or event is not just determined internally by its character, but externally as well, by its causal relations to other things and events. So we cannot just discern immediately in a thing or event its status of evil, but must refer to other things and events in causal relations to it for a complete account.[15] What seems at first sight an evil can, on this basis, readily turn out to be good. Now the sceptical theist suggests that we can never reliably discern whether an evil is unjustified because we can never be sure that we are regarding the *entire* set of consequences to which the putative evil has been linked. God can do this, obviously, but we cannot. So we are overestimating our cognitive abilities when we come to believe of a given evil that no good we know of justifies it, or conclude from this belief that no good at all justifies it.

But if this is so of evils, it would seem to be so of goods as well. Goods can serve evils, in the sense that they can have outweighing evil consequences; a short-term

pleasure, for instance, which necessitated disproportionate suffering would be called an unjustified good.[16] So just as there are *justified evils* there are also *unjustified goods*, and once we say (with the sceptical theist) that we cannot reliably distinguish unjustified from justified evils, why are we not likewise committed to saying that we cannot reliably distinguish unjustified from justified goods?[17] This sceptical conclusion is an impediment to non-theists who wish to appeal to cases of unjustified (as opposed to justified) evil in way of arguing *against* God's existence, but it is likewise an impediment to theists who wish to appeal to cases of justified (as opposed to unjustified) goods in way of arguing *for* God's existence. Appealing to goods which are assumed to be knowable as such is, of course, the basis of the argument from design.

The argument from design reasons from the perceived goods achieved by operations of nature to the conclusion that there must be intelligence in those operations – intelligence which could only have been bestowed by an intelligent and benevolent creator. The strength of this inference can, as Richard Gale suggests, be challenged by counter-example using the sceptical theist's own methods.[18] The evidence of order leading to good, appealed to by those who advance the argument from design, becomes compatible with a Cartesian evil-genius hypothesis, since the sceptical theist cannot decisively appeal to perceived goods with the assurance that they are really goods. Present goods could turn into ultimate evils under the guidance of this being, and we – given what the sceptical theist tells us of our limitations – would have no way of knowing beforehand. More generally, *any* evidence based on an identified good is compatible with hypotheses suggesting a God with limited omnipotence, omniscience, or benevolence; the good so identified may well in future, for all we know, give rise to consequences which do not sustain its seeming quality of being good. If, for example, God is not entirely benevolent, then we would expect that many things which seem good now will turn out otherwise (a phenomenon we experience in dealing with less-than-benevolent human beings). Arguing for the sort of God proposed in the claims of R requires confidence in our cognitive ability to identify goods; but this confidence ought to be shaken by the lack of confidence in our ability to identify evil, as advanced by sceptical theists.

Now this is not to say that the scepticism of sceptical theists must affect *all* kinds of argument for the existence of God. There is nothing here, for example, which compromises the cosmological argument, since it does not depend upon our being able to identify goods and distinguish them from evils. (It depends rather on considerations of prior causation or sufficient reason, together with a rejection of infinite regress in causation or explanation.) But at the same time this is not the sort of argument which actually attempts to establish the existence of a morally good deity; the attempt is only to establish the existence of one who is temporally, causally or explanatorily first. To establish the *goodness* of God requires an argument which presents evidence of goodness, and it is difficult to see

how such evidence could be acquired in the absence of an ability to identify goods. God bears no demonstrable moral credit for the design of the universe unless it contains things which are demonstrably good. Order fails to be evidence of divine benevolence unless the order is seen to serve some good purpose (such as the existence of freedom or the development of character or intelligence), but seeing it as such requires an ability on our part to discern that a given purpose is a good one, not an evil or morally neutral one. In general, any experience or other evidence which suggests God's goodness will be an experience, or evidence, of something identified as good; our using it as such will presuppose our ability to make this identification.

If we are sceptical about our ability to identify evils then we are bound to be sceptical about our ability to distinguish evils from goods, and likewise about our ability to identify goods. This scepticism, taken in its full dimensions, is subversive to the theist's programme of defending R, and the sceptical theist who wishes to undertake this programme is in a difficult position. It is clearly unacceptable to propose a selective scepticism which asserts that theists can distinguish goods from evils in arguing that God is all-good but then denies that non-theists can do so in their attempt to refute such reasoning. While effectively stalemating arguments against R, sceptical theism also has the unintended effect of stalemating certain key arguments *for* R as well. In justifying R, the theist claims that our knowledge of God is significant enough that certain theistic beliefs are susceptible to justification; the sceptical theist (responding to the empirical argument from evil) then claims that our knowledge of God is insignificant enough that those same theistic beliefs are not susceptible to refutation. The latter claim obviously holds out the danger of substantially undermining the programme implicit in the former.

The cognitive-limitations argument, when is used to defend R, thus brings into question key methods of justifying it in the first place.[19] One can only add that defending R by appealing to statements more subversive to it than the argument defended against is a counter-productive strategy. Indeed, if the theist is refusing to accept what the non-theist offers as evidence then the theist and non-theist are no longer able to debate on mutually acceptable premises. In this debate, remember, the theist is undertaking, as a concession for the sake of argument, to use mutually acceptable premises in order to justify certain theistic claims in a way which will be persuasive to the non-theist. The use of sceptical theism effectively withdraws that concession, and therefore uses a strategy of defending R which undercuts the initial programme of justifying it.

When confronted with a seemingly gratuitous evil, and an inference to the effect that 'No good we know of justifies the evil; therefore no good at all justifies the evil', a response in keeping with the programme of justifying R on grounds acceptable to the non-theist would be to try and identify a good which actually justifies the evil, and to explain how it actually does so. The good must be

accepted as a good by both sides – as is, for example, the good of human freedom. If the direct connection between such a good and various evils is credibly argued, whereby the attainment of that good is shown to necessitate those evils, then the result is a theodicy. Such an argument, if successfully made, would only advance the theist's programme of defending R, and do nothing to undermine it. Whether a workable theodicy along these or other lines can be achieved is a continuing question; my point here is that in the context of this debate the ambitions of those who attempt to formulate theodicies are in no way achieved by those who succeed in formulating sceptical theism.

Conclusion

This brings us to the matter of assessing the debate between sceptical theism and the empirical argument. There are those who believe that sceptical theism prevails over the empirical argument, and those who disagree. Which party is correct? The purpose of the above study is to suggest a twofold response to this question, one which apportions an element of truth to either side.

The empirical argument does not successfully challenge the theist's belief system taken as a whole; sceptical theism undercuts that argument in this application. But there is another application. The theist claims that part of this belief system can be justified to the satisfaction of the non-theist. If the empirical argument is used to dispute this claim sceptical theism cannot, in response, be brought against it in defence of the claim because sceptical theism undercuts that very claim itself. The empirical argument, if it is to be refuted in this latter debate, must be refuted in some other way.

So I draw these two conclusions. First, sceptical theism prevails over the empirical argument in the debate arising when non-theists assume the whole of the theistic belief system to show part of it true. But second, it does not prevail over the empirical argument in the debate arising when theists assume none of their belief system to show part of it true. The first conclusion conveys the element of truth achieved by those who believe that the empirical argument yields to sceptical theism; the second conveys the element of truth achieved by those who disagree.

The above discussion does not constitute a *refutation* of the empirical argument or sceptical theism, let alone of both. It is a discussion of their range of useful application. The point made is that the range of each is sharply circumscribed, and that such circumscription makes them unable to play the kind of dialectical role that has traditionally been envisaged for a workable logical argument or a workable theodicy. These latter arguments are not so readily replaced. So if non-theists regard a workable logical argument as unattainable they are offering up a huge concession to theists; and if theists regard a workable theodicy as unattainable they are returning the favour.[20]

Notes

1. I will follow the earlier practice of William Rowe by referring to this argument as 'the empirical argument from evil'; see William Rowe 'The empirical argument from evil', in Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (eds) *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 227, n. 1.

2. William Rowe 'Evil and the theistic hypothesis: a response to Wykstra', in Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (eds) *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 160. The response is to Stephen Wykstra 'The Humean obstacle to evidential arguments from suffering: on avoiding the evils of ''appearance''', in Adams and Adams *The Problem of Evil*, 138–160.

3. Here are the statements corresponding to (4)–(6) from Rowe 'The problem of evil and some varieties of atheism', in Adams and Adams *The Problem of Evil*, 127–128: '1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. 2. An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. 3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.' This formulation specifies a particular kind of unjustified evil (suffering), and likewise specifies wherein its injustice lies (the fact that it could have been prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse). Otherwise it corresponds to the skeletal form expressed above (4–6). Rowe's formulation is obviously superior in precision; the purpose of the skeletal form is simply to express more clearly the distinction between the logical and empirical arguments from evil.

4. My formulation of this part of the argument is based on William Rowe 'Evil and theodicy', *Philosophical Topics*, **16** (1988), 120–121. Again, Rowe's own formulation is superior. For the two examples see *ibid.*, 120.

5. Stephen Wykstra 'Rowe's noseeum arguments from evil', in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington and Indianapolis IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 126.

6. My presentation of the empirical argument is, of course, based on Rowe's earlier formulations, as opposed to the formulation in his more recent 'The evidential argument from evil: a second look' in Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument*, 262–285. (This more recent version differs from earlier ones in containing no parts corresponding to (4)–(6). I am inclined to view this argument as a real departure from previous forms, and to be, if anything, a form of the 'divine hiddenness' argument. Hence my use of the older label 'empirical argument' for the previous forms.) My comments here, however, are very general, and apply to *any* argument which presses the problem of evil on the basis of empirical evidence. This would include Rowe's later formulation of the argument, as well as abductive versions of the argument – as in Paul Draper 'Pain and pleasure: an evidential problem for theists', *Nous*, **23** (1989), 331–350.

7. This sort of argument – one which exploits some of the purely theological doctrines of E, not available in R – is suggested in Rowe 'Response to Wykstra', 165–166. For actual uses of this sort of argument see, for example, Terry Christlieb 'Which theisms face an evidential problem of evil?', *Faith and Philosophy*, **9** (1992), 45–64; and see Richard Otte 'Evidential arguments from evil', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **48** (2000), 1–10, who argues that the probability arguments for the unlikelihood of theism given evil work less well when made for the probability of Christianity/Judaism/Islam given evil.

8. Obviously, an eschatology is so imprecise that it gives no hint at all as to how some distinct kinds of suffering, such as animal suffering, will finally be justified. But if the means exist for justifying human suffering in this way, it does not require a huge additional step to suppose that God will have the means to make other kinds of suffering justified as well.

9. This is the argument first made by Terence Penelhum; see 'Divine goodness and the problem of evil', in Adams and Adams *The Problem of Evil*, 69–82.

10. William Alston 'The inductive argument from evil and the human cognitive condition', in Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument*, 109. In 'The evidential argument from evil: a second look', 263, Rowe takes this as an argument for denying the truth of (7), as opposed to attacking the inferential link between (7) and (8).

11. It is, of course, common now to believe that a workable logical argument from evil is never going to be formulated. A comment like this from Alston in 'The inductive argument from evil', 97, is expressive of

a fairly common view: 'It is now acknowledged on (almost) all sides that the logical argument is bankrupt, but the inductive argument is still very much alive and kicking.'

12. Kierkegaard, of course, considers Christianity to be founded on the paradox that 'the eternal truth has come into existence in time'; see Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (tr.) *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), vol. 1, 209. The merit of this faith for Kierkegaard lies precisely in its *requiring* affirmation of contradictory statements.

13. In 'The empirical argument from evil', 240, Rowe raises the following argument against this conclusion. Since, he says, the components of R are a sub-set of the components of E, it follows that the probability of R must be greater than or equal to the probability of E. So we cannot say that the empirical argument may be effective against R, but not against E, since however much it reduces R's probability, it will reduce E's probability by that much or more – and so it *will* be effective against E. My response is that this reasoning is not applicable in arguments arising from the non-theist's programme of attacking E, because of the concession that informs that programme and those arguments. The non-theist is conceding the claims of E (which, of course, include those comprising R) for the sake of argument; whether what is being thus conceded is probable or improbable apart from the concession has no bearing on the course of debate once the concession is made. My argument in this section is that a workable logical argument would not be hampered by this concession, but that, by contrast, the empirical argument is immediately undercut by it.

14. For an important argument along the lines of the one I present in this section see David O'Connor *God and Inscrutable Evil: In Defense of Theism and Atheism* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), 219–224. This approach recurs in other places: Mark Bernstein 'Explaining evil', *Religious Studies*, 34 (1998), 151–163; John Beaudoin, 'Evil, the human cognitive condition, and natural theology', *ibid*., 403–418; and Jon Pérez Laraudogoitia, 'CORNEA against theism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, **48** (2000), 81–87.

15. In this sense, theists who adopt the greater-good hypothesis accept a consequentialist approach to defining evils. Such theists are consequentialist in applying moral theory to God, but may nonetheless be, as most theists are, deontological in applying moral theory to humans.

16. An unjustified good is a good which is not worth it, just as a justified evil is an evil which *is* worth it. The good of an unjustified good is not worth the evil it brings; but the evil of a justified evil *is* worth the good it brings.

17. In Bruce Russell and Stephen Wykstra 'The ''inductive'' argument from evil: a dialogue', *Philosophical Topics*, **16** (1988), 146, we encounter the notion of 'moral depth'; in a morally deep world moral causes are not likely to be '''near the observable surface'' of their effects'. This notion is useful for expressing the content of sceptical theism, but also for expressing this difficulty which besets it; the moral depth which hinders the non-theist's inference from evil to God's non-existence also hinders the theist's inference from good to God's existence.

18. Richard M. Gale 'Some difficulties in theistic treatments of evil', in Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument*, 208–209.

19. In 'Some (temporarily) final thoughts on evidential arguments from evil', in Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument*, 321–322, Alston says this: 'I would like to stress that my argument is neither based on, nor does it issue in, a generalized scepticism. For that matter, it is not based on, nor does it support, a general theological scepticism. It is compatible with our knowing quite a bit about the divine nature, activities, purposes, and relations with humanity. The conclusion of the argument is only that we are unable to form sound judgments on whether there are justifying reasons for God's permitting certain evils.' The argument I present above suggests that once we question our ability to form those sorts of judgments, we must also question our ability to discern between goods and evils. For the theist much depends upon our having this ability. On this point see O'Connor *God and Inscrutable Evil*, 220.

20. I wish to acknowledge helpful comments which I have received from Peter Byrne and an anonymous referee of *Religious Studies*, and from D. Goldstick and other participants of the session of the Annual Congress of the Canadian Philosophical Association at which I presented an earlier version of this paper in May 2003.