

## Why there is reason to remain sceptical of Durston's scepticism

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**Abstract:** In this reply I argue that Durston's defence of his argument from the complexity of history ought to be unacceptable to the theist as it undermines not only common theistic attitudes towards God, such as gratitude and praise, but also the rationality of our ordinary moral practices.

Kirk Durston's defence of his sceptical solution to the evidential problem of evil remains deeply problematic, or so I will argue.

Before proceeding further, however, I may point out that Durston makes two important assumptions that are only tacitly acknowledged. Firstly, he is assuming that Molinism is true – that is to say, that God possesses middle knowledge. For on Durston's view, God requires knowledge of various counterfactuals of free creaturely actions in order to calculate the overall net value of B (which consists of the series:  $S + C_{B1} + C_{B2} + C_{B3} + \dots C_{B\text{-end}}$ ) and thus to decide whether to permit some instance of evil E or to prevent E in favour of some more benign event S. Open theists, such as Hasker and Swinburne, will not be happy with this assumption.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, Durston is assuming a very stringent form of consequentialism, one which holds that the consequences of a particular event or action are *always* relevant in determining the overall moral value of that event or action. Theists, however, usually work within a deontological moral framework, according to which the overall moral value of an event (or action) can sometimes be determined without considering the amount of goodness produced by that event (or action), but only by attending to the intrinsic moral character of the event (or action). This, indeed, is the point of Ivan Karamazov's refusal to accept God's offer of eternal harmony if such harmony is purchased by the tears and blood of a tortured child.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, however, I will not challenge, but will grant, these two assumptions.

### **My first objection**

The first objection I raised against Durston was that we do not need to consider the consequences of some evil until the end of history in order to determine whether God is morally justified in permitting that evil. My objection was supported by three considerations, but it is only the first of these that I will consider here. This first consideration is formalized by Durston as follows:

- (1) One is justified in believing that caring for one's grandmother is good in spite of one's ignorance of future consequences to the end of history.
- (2) If one is justified in believing that caring for one's grandmother is good in spite of one's ignorance of future consequences to the end of history, then God is justified in permitting it.
- (3) Therefore, God is justified in permitting it.

Durston regards (2) as the Achilles heel of the argument. He responds to (2) by saying that, '[i]t does not follow that because we are justified in believing that something is good that, therefore, God is justified in permitting it'.<sup>3</sup> He then goes on to point out that, given the following intuitively plausible principle regarding moral obligation,

J An agent is morally obligated to act on the basis of what that agent could reasonably be expected to know,

it follows that, 'we can be fully justified in believing that caring for our grandmother is good while, at the same time, we can acknowledge that given what an omniscient being could reasonably be expected to know, God might not be justified in permitting it'.<sup>4</sup>

I will return to principle J very shortly. In the meantime, I may note that, looking back at my original reply to Durston and also bearing in mind that authors are not immune from misinterpreting their own work, I think it is clear that I was not making the kind of inference Durston imputes to me. It would be a gross error, partly for the reasons Durston identifies, for one to draw the following kind of inference: 'we are permitted (or obligated) to do X; therefore, God is permitted (or obligated) to do X'. But my argument is quite different; its premises may be represented as follows:

- (4) We are often epistemically justified in believing that the overall moral value of some event is good even though we are ignorant of the future consequences of that event.

A case in point is our belief that such acts as donating money to a charity, providing food and shelter to one's children, and caring for one's ill grandmother may be deemed to be overall good, despite our ignorance of the remote consequences of these acts.

- (5) If the overall moral value of some event is good, then God is morally justified in permitting that event.

This is just a restatement of Durston's view that if the difference between (what he calls) the A-series of events and the B-series of events is positive, then God is justified in permitting the A-series.<sup>5</sup>

- (6) Therefore, if we are often epistemically justified in believing that the overall moral value of some event is good (even though we are ignorant of the future consequences of that event), then we are often epistemically justified in believing that God is morally justified in permitting some event (even though we are ignorant of the future consequences of that event).

This kind of argument has, of course, problems of its own (related to the issue of whether knowledge or epistemic justification is closed under entailment). Clearly, however, it does not involve the sort of inference that Durston claimed to uncover in my original reply.

How would Durston respond to this restatement of my first objection? In the light of his main thesis – stated as: 'given the consequential complexity of history, the most rational position to hold is agnosticism regarding whether A–B is positive or negative for any event'<sup>6</sup> – there is little doubt that he would reject (4). This, however, is a high price to pay for any traditional theist.

Consider, for example, the attitudes that Christian theists usually take towards (i) various events in their life (e.g. the birth of their child, their conversion to the Christian faith); (ii) the mere fact that they and their loved ones exist; and (iii) various historical events (e.g. the resurrection of Jesus, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus and the subsequent spread of the Gospel message, the overthrow of the Nazis in World War II). A Christian theist would typically respond to such events by thanking and praising God, and this attitude of gratitude would be unintelligible were it not for the theist's belief that:

- (a) God is morally justified in permitting the events in question; and  
 (b) we are epistemically justified in accepting (a).

My initial worry, as Durston faithfully reports it towards the end of his paper, is that sceptical theists of the Durstonian variety, in virtue of rejecting (b), would have no grounds for thanking or praising God. Durston counters that the theists in question may still have grounds for accepting (a) and, therefore, for thanking

and praising God. These grounds would consist in ‘appeals to faith, divine revelation, personal experiences of God, a priori assurances and convictions’.<sup>7</sup> I do not think, however, that Durston *qua* sceptical theist is entitled to adopt such a strategy, and this for two reasons.

Firstly, Durston’s appeal to faith, revelation, and religious experience commits him to an invidious double standard. Sceptical theists such as Durston are, in effect, counselling us to be sceptical of appearances: things are bound to appear to us be X, but they are really Y; they only appear to us be X due to our impoverished cognitive faculties. Many events, in particular events such as a rape or murder, often vividly strike us as gratuitous evils. But if Durston is right, we should discount such experiences as misleading, for given our ignorance in the face of the complexity of history, we have no way of determining the true moral worth of any event. In that case, a rape or murder may appear to us as a pointless evil even when it is not pointless at all, and so appearances are to be distrusted.

But this sceptical attitude towards appearances is conveniently swept aside when the subject turns to the grounds for believing in the authenticity of some divine revelation or religious experience. It would not be too difficult, however, to find sceptical hypotheses that parallel Durston’s hypothesis of the consequential complexity of history in undercutting the evidential value of appearances – consider, for instance, Descartes’ evil-demon hypothesis, or the various naturalistic hypotheses that have been proposed to explain away religious experience. If we cannot be said to know the moral value of any event because we cannot rule out that there are some morally relevant considerations that lie in the distant future and are hence inaccessible to us, then why can we be said to know that it is God that we are experiencing given that we cannot rule out that, say, we are victims of some evil genius? In other words, if appearances (or, more precisely, the way we directly perceive or experience the world) cannot be trusted to provide us with access to the ultimate moral fabric of reality, then why should they be relied upon to provide us with access to any divine reality that there might be?

Secondly, Durston’s appeal to faith is question-begging. Although various accounts of faith have been developed by theologians and philosophers, it is generally agreed that faith in God amounts to more than mere propositional or intellectual assent. In particular, faith in God is often thought to involve attitudes of complete trust and love towards God. The problem, however, is that to trust and love God in this unconditional way involves, at the very least, being grateful and thankful towards God. It would be curious, indeed, if you loved God with all your heart and all your mind, and yet refused to thank and praise Him. So, to accept (a) above on the basis of ‘faith in God’ is already to accept the legitimacy of expressing gratitude and praise towards God – which is the very point under dispute.

### **My second objection**

My second objection was aimed at Durston's counter-intuitive claim that we cannot imagine worlds better than ours. Modifying slightly Durston's formalization of my objection so that it better expresses my line of thought, we have the following argument:

- (7) We are epistemically justified in believing that there are worlds where the removal of E2 (the rape and murder of a five-year-old girl) has better overall consequences than the occurrence of E2.
- (8) If we are epistemically justified in believing that there are worlds where the consequences of deleting E2 are better, then we have no need of precise knowledge regarding future consequences in order to justify the conclusion that God should have prevented E2.
- (9) Therefore, we have no need of precise knowledge regarding future consequences in order to justify the conclusion that God should have prevented E2.

Durston objects that no non-question-begging argument has been provided in support of premise (7). In my original reply, I was relying on the intuition that the removal of E2 from our world, or a world like ours, would most likely have consequences that are better than the consequences that would flow from the occurrence of E2. As Durston has proved, however, sceptical theists may not share this intuition. There is, nevertheless, good reason to accept (7), beyond any appeal to mere intuition, and it has to do with the consequences for morality if (7) were rejected.

My claim is that if we seriously entertain Durston's scepticism, and we therefore hold that we are not epistemically justified in believing that the prevention of E2 would result in a better world, our ability to engage in our ordinary moral practices would be undermined. I might add, for the record, that I do not think that sceptical theism is necessarily committed to an unpalatable form of moral scepticism.<sup>8</sup> I do think, however, that the kind of sceptical theism espoused by Durston inevitably threatens the rationality of morality. And my reason for thinking this, as Durston points out, is based largely on a recent and novel argument due to Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy.<sup>9</sup> Durston, however, objects that the way in which Almeida and Oppy model our ordinary patterns of moral reasoning is inaccurate. Our moral reasoning, according to Durston, does not normally proceed by way of some 'noseeum inference'; and although Durston does not explicitly offer any model of the way in which the average person arrives at a rational, moral decision, it seems fair to say that Durston would be committed to a model such as the following:

- (10) I have (or I can reasonably be expected to have) no *pro tanto* reason not to intervene to prevent E2.

- (11) I have (or I can reasonably be expected to have) a *pro tanto* reason to intervene to prevent E2.  
 (12) (Therefore) I am obligated to intervene to prevent E2.

To illustrate, consider a hypothetical case involving a person named ‘Stan’ who finds himself in a position to prevent E2 at no personal cost. Like the rest of us, Stan is ignorant of the long-term consequences of preventing E2, and so the only probability he can rationally assign to the proposition *The net moral value of allowing E2 to take place is negative* is about 0.5. As far as Stan knows, however, the consequences of allowing E2 to take place are much worse than the consequences of preventing E2. And what we are obligated to do turns crucially on what we know or what we can reasonably be expected to know – this, of course, is Durston’s principle J, cited earlier. Given J, therefore, Stan’s agnosticism regarding the future consequences of his choices is irrelevant in deciding what moral duties he has when faced with intrinsically evil events such as E2.

This is an interesting response, but I am afraid that it fails to come to grips with the Almeida/Oppy line of argument. Consider the following case, adapted from Almeida and Oppy. Suppose I am deciding whether to have cereal for breakfast. It is possible that if I choose to have cereal, this will set in motion a series of events ultimately leading to a nuclear war, a dreadful result that I would dearly wish to avoid. Normally, we would ignore this possibility for we would think of it as being highly improbable. Suppose, however, that I am persuaded by Durston’s scepticism about my entitlement to make probability judgements of this kind. I am therefore not prepared to assign any probability other than 0.5 to the proposition ‘my having cereal this morning will eventually result in a nuclear war’. In that case, I could not choose in any rational way to have cereal or to not have cereal. I could, of course, choose on the basis of a toss of a coin, but that would be an arbitrary choice rather than a choice informed by what I believe or have reason to believe.<sup>10</sup>

Similar things can be said about Stan. He too cannot rationally choose to intervene, nor can he rationally choose not to intervene – if he stands aside and watches the girl die a miserable death he is not open to any criticism, while if he decides to intervene he is not deserving of any praise. By his lights, he has no reason to prefer intervening to not intervening, or vice versa. The sceptical theist is therefore in no position to judge Stan’s apathy as being morally wrong.

Perhaps it will be objected that, even if we follow Durston in assigning a probability of 0.5 to ‘my having cereal this morning will eventually result in a nuclear war’, it need not follow that whatever reason I have to eat cereal will be matched (in evidential strength) by whatever reason I have to refrain from eating cereal. For if I were to assign a high degree of probability to ‘my having cereal this morning will provide me with the sustenance I require for the next few hours’, this may provide me with sufficient reason to decide to eat cereal.<sup>11</sup> But this is to overlook the serious moral implications of subscribing to ‘Pr (my having cereal

this morning will eventually result in a nuclear war) = 0.5'. Such a probability assignment is surely high enough to cancel out any short-term benefits one is likely to receive from eating cereal.<sup>12</sup>

It might be felt, nonetheless, that I am still missing Durston's point, which is after all that *lack of knowledge is not morally relevant*, or more precisely, that what we know and what we can reasonably be expected to know – and not what we cannot be expected to know – determines what moral obligations we have. Thus, given the consequential complexity of history, our fictional character, Stan, could not reasonably be expected to know whether his decision to prevent E2 would be overall good or bad. And since he cannot reasonably be expected to know this, Stan would know that, according to J, this lack of knowledge is irrelevant in deciding whether to prevent E2.

I have no intention of challenging J, but I do not think that J works in Durston's favour. To see this, consider the fact that, if Durston is right, then Stan can be expected to know the following: we cannot form any epistemically justified beliefs as to whether the prevention of E2 is overall good or bad. This is something that Stan would (or at least should) know and be aware of – and this piece of knowledge is morally relevant. Specifically, this piece of knowledge undercuts any reason Stan might have for preventing E2, just as in my earlier example my awareness of my ignorance (of the future consequences) undercuts any reason I have for eating cereal.

What this indicates is that noseem inferences cannot be bypassed in the way suggested in (10)–(12). Sceptical theists such as Durston reject the noseem inference as it occurs in evidential arguments from evil.<sup>13</sup> For the whole point of Durston's critique is that we are not entitled to infer from the claim that we cannot see any greater goods resulting from E2 that there are in fact no such greater goods. Similarly, Durston rejects any noseem inferences that occur in our everyday moral reasoning. He would therefore claim that, even though we cannot see any good reason for not intervening to prevent E2, our ignorance of the overall consequences of preventing E2 precludes us from thinking that there is no good reason for not intervening. There will always be some considerations relevant to the overall moral value of E2 that we have missed, and so we will always be bereft of an all-things-considered reason to prevent E2. But if we always lack an all-things-considered reason to prevent some evil, we can never be obligated to prevent the evil. It would be just as morally permissible to turn a blind eye to E2 as it would be to heroically intervene. Everything is permitted and nothing is forbidden. In that case, we may as well resort to tossing a coin in order to decide whether to save the little girl's life.

### **Conclusion**

Sceptical theism, then, may resolve the problem of evil, but only at the cost of burdening the theist with other, and perhaps equally difficult, problems. To

reject (4), for example, in response to the first objection I raise against Durston – to hold, in other words, that we cannot form epistemically justified beliefs regarding the overall moral value of some event, given that we are ignorant of the future consequences of that event – is to undermine the traditional theistic practice of expressing gratitude and praise towards God. Further, Durston's view that we ought to surrender our intuitive judgement that our world could have been better ends up jeopardizing our ability to engage in ordinary forms of moral reasoning.<sup>14</sup> There is good reason, therefore, to remain sceptical of Durston's sceptical theism.

## Notes

1. Open theists interpret God's omniscience in such a way that it includes neither foreknowledge (or, more specifically, knowledge of what free agents other than God will do) nor middle knowledge (i.e. knowledge of what every possible free creature would freely choose to do in any possible situation in which that creature might find itself). For a defence of open theism, see the movement's manifesto, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), authored by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger. See also Richard Swinburne *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 131–134, and William Hasker *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004).
2. David McNaughton has emphasized the importance of bringing deontological moral theory to bear on the problem of evil in two excellent papers: 'The problem of evil: a deontological perspective', in Alan G. Padgett (ed.) *Reason and the Christian Religion: Essays in Honour of Richard Swinburne* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 329–351, and 'Is God (almost) a consequentialist? Swinburne's moral theory', *Religious Studies*, 38 (2002), 265–281.
3. Kirk Durston 'The complexity of history and evil: a reply to Trakakis', *Religious Studies*, 41 (2005), 94.
4. *Ibid.*
5. See Kirk Durston 'The consequential complexity of history and gratuitous evil', *Religious Studies*, 36 (2000), 72.
6. Durston 'The complexity of history and evil: a reply to Trakakis', 92.
7. *Ibid.*, 98.
8. See Nick Trakakis and Yujin Nagasawa 'Skeptical theism and moral skepticism: a reply to Almeida and Oppy', *Ars Disputandi: The Online Journal for Philosophy of Religion* [<http://www.ArsDisputandi.org>], 4 (2004).
9. See Michael J. Almeida and Graham Oppy 'Sceptical theism and evidential arguments from evil', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 81 (2003), 496–516. The objection that sceptical theism is committed to an unreasonable form of moral scepticism has also been raised by Bruce Russell in 'Defenseless', in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 197–198. It is, indeed, frequently objected that sceptical theism leads unavoidably to an excessive degree of scepticism in other domains. David O'Connor and John Beaudoin, for example, argue that one of the hidden costs of sceptical theism is a serious curtailment of traditionally significant intellectual dimensions of theism, particularly natural theology and theodicy – see David O'Connor *God and Inscrutable Evil: In Defense of Theism and Atheism* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 219–221, and John Beaudoin 'Evil, the human cognitive condition, and natural theology', *Religious Studies*, 34 (1998), 412–418.
10. See Almeida and Oppy 'Sceptical theism and evidential arguments from evil', 510.
11. Durston suggests this line of response when writing that, 'An epistemic probability of 0.5 for either/or considerations (A–B is either positive or negative) means that we cannot assign any weight to the outcome of A–B. Thus, under J, we will have to make our rational moral decisions on what we could reasonably be expected to know, with each piece of knowledge weighted according to probability considerations.'; Durston 'The complexity of history and evil: a reply to Trakakis', 93.



12. To be sure, on Durston's view, I would not only be committed to the pessimistic claim that eating cereal is just as likely as not to trigger a nuclear war, but also to the optimistic claim that eating cereal is just as likely as not to lead to the complete eradication of poverty and illness. And perhaps, in any such pair of commitments, one is simply cancelled out by the other. However, if one seriously entertained the beliefs in question the most rational course of action would be to err on the side of caution and thus to do whatever one can to prevent widespread harm and suffering.
13. The term 'noseeum inference' was coined by Stephen Wykstra and refers to the inference from 'As far as we can tell, no goods morally justify God in permitting some instance of evil E', to 'There are no goods morally justifying God's permission of E'. Put more colloquially, 'we no see 'um (the goods in question), so they ain't there!'.
14. Another troublesome consequence of sceptical theism is that it leads to the so-called problem of divine hiddenness. For if God's reasons for permitting evil are too complicated for us to comprehend, it becomes quite perplexing as to why God could not at least make it evident to us that He exists and hence that He has some good reason for permitting us to suffer. I discuss this issue in 'What no eye has seen: the skeptical theist response to Rowe's evidential argument from evil', *Philo: A Journal of Philosophy*, 6 (2003), 250–266.