

## Sceptical theism and divine lies

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**Abstract:** In this paper I develop a novel challenge for sceptical theists. I present a line of reasoning that appeals to sceptical theism to support scepticism about divine assertions. I claim that this reasoning is at least as plausible as one popular sceptical theistic strategy for responding to evidential arguments from evil. Thus, I seek to impale sceptical theists on the horns of a dilemma: concede that either (a) sceptical theism implies scepticism about divine assertions, or (b) the sceptical theistic strategy for responding to evidential arguments from evil fails. An implication of (a) is that sceptical theism is at odds with any religious tradition according to which there are certain claims that we can know to be true solely in virtue of the fact that God has told us that they are true. This result will render conceding (a) unattractive to many sceptical theists.

### Introduction

Discussion of the argument from evil has shifted away from logical versions of the argument to inductive or evidential versions. One prominent reply to such versions of the argument from evil has been given the label ‘sceptical theism’.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I develop a novel challenge for sceptical theists.<sup>2</sup> I present a line of reasoning that appeals to sceptical theism to support scepticism about divine assertions. I claim that this reasoning is at least as plausible as one popular sceptical theistic strategy for responding to evidential arguments from evil. Thus, I seek to impale sceptical theists on the horns of a dilemma: concede that either (a) sceptical theism implies scepticism about divine assertions, or (b) the sceptical theistic strategy for responding to evidential arguments from evil fails. An implication of (a) is that sceptical theism is at odds with any religious tradition according to which there are certain claims that we can know to be true solely in virtue of the fact that God has told us that they are true. This result will render conceding (a) unattractive to many sceptical theists.

Before turning to my main argument, some stage-setting will be necessary. It will be essential to have in hand a clear understanding of sceptical theism

itself as well as the sceptical theist's strategy for rebutting evidential arguments from evil.

### **The nature of sceptical theism**

In this paper, I understand sceptical theism as theism (there exists a unique omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, necessarily existent creator of the universe) together with the claim that, for all we know, there are lots of goods, evils, and connections between good and evil of which human beings are unaware.<sup>3</sup> We may think of the collection of facts about goods, evils, and the connections between them as an iceberg. The sceptical theist maintains that we just do not know how much of this iceberg is visible to human beings; for all we know, we see most of the berg, and for all we know we see only its tip. As Michael Bergmann points out, sceptical theists need not maintain that a significant portion of the iceberg is *in fact* not visible to humans, or even that there is reason to believe this; the claim is merely that *we cannot tell* how much of the iceberg is visible. As Bergmann puts it, what the sceptical theist maintains is simply that 'it wouldn't be the least bit surprising if [axiological] reality far outstripped our understanding of it'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, sceptical theism as I will understand it here does *not* include the claim that our knowledge of good, evil, and the connections between them is massively incomplete; instead, it includes the weaker claim that our knowledge of the completeness of our knowledge of good, evil, and the connections between them is incomplete. When it comes to good and evil, we do not know how much we do not know.

With this sketch of sceptical theism in hand, let us consider how sceptical theism relates to the argument from evil. The following definitions will be useful in that task:

- D1 E is an instance of *gratuitous evil* = df. (1) E is an instance of evil, and (2) nothing would justify God in permitting E (if there were a God).
- D2 E is an instance of *inscrutable evil* = df. (1) E is an instance of evil, and (2) having thought about the matter really hard, we know of nothing that would justify God in permitting E (if there were a God).
- D3 Divine action A has *beyond-our-ken justification* = df. (1) there is some great good, G, such that (1) if God were to perform A, G would justify God in performing A, and (2) G or G's connection with A is beyond our ken.

It should be noted that, according to D3, that a given divine action has beyond-our-ken justification does not imply that the divine action does not also have justification that is within our ken. Additionally, D3 allows for both actual and

merely possible divine actions to have beyond-our-ken justification. There may be possible divine actions that God would be justified in performing but which He does not perform.

Some versions of the problem of evil depend on the so-called ‘noseeum inference’, which can be understood thus:

The noseeum inference E is an instance of inscrutable evil; therefore,  
(probably) E is an instance of gratuitous evil.<sup>5</sup>

Together with the observation that inscrutable evil exists and the assumption that the existence of gratuitous evil is incompatible with the existence of God, the noseeum inference yields the conclusion that God probably does not exist.

Sceptical theists deny that the noseeum inference is a good one. One sceptical theistic critique of the noseeum inference consists of three main elements. To understand these three elements, suppose that a critic of theism points to the existence of a particular inscrutable evil, E, and offers E as evidence against God’s existence. In response, sceptical theists first point to our ignorance concerning the completeness of our knowledge of good, evil, and the connections between them.

Second, sceptical theists claim that this ignorance implies that ‘we’re in the dark about whether – and how likely it is’ that the particular evil E is, unknown to us, inextricably connected with some good such that God’s act of permitting E has beyond-our-ken justification.<sup>6</sup> As Alvin Plantinga puts it, ‘God might have reasons we cannot so much as understand’.<sup>7</sup> The sceptical theist’s claim here is that we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God’s act of permitting E has beyond-our-ken justification. Bergmann puts it this way: ‘[W]e lack *any* good reason or justifying grounds for thinking that there isn’t ... a God-justifying reason [for permitting E].’<sup>8</sup>

This leads to the third element of the sceptical theist’s critique of the noseeum inference: because we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God’s act of permitting E has beyond-our-ken justification, E’s inscrutability is not a reason to think that E is, or is likely to be, gratuitous. Thus, the three main elements of the sceptical theist’s critique of the noseeum inference may be (roughly) summarized as follows:

The sceptical theist’s critique (STQ)

- (1) We don’t know how complete our axiological knowledge is.
- (2) So, we do not know how likely it is that God’s act of permitting E has beyond-our-ken justification.
- (3) Therefore, E’s inscrutability does not justify the claim that E is (or is likely to be) gratuitous (i.e. the noseeum inference fails).

It would be a mistake simply to identify sceptical theism with the rejection of the noseeum inference. That the noseeum inference fails is an *implication* of

sceptical theism. The foundation of the sceptical theist's rejection of the inference is the claim that 'it wouldn't be the least bit surprising if [axiological] reality far outstripped our understanding of it'.<sup>9</sup> The sceptical theist appeals to this claim to support claim (2) above, and claim (2) in turn is the basis of the rejection of the noseum inference.

The kind of reasoning that sceptical theists employ to defuse the noseum inference can be used in other ways as well. Consider the following example: A story in *The Guardian* (31 May 2006) on global warming attributes the following remark to a 'Washington lobbyist on the religious right': 'Is God really going to let the earth burn up?'<sup>10</sup> Presumably the lobbyist was implicitly suggesting that significant global warming will not occur because a perfectly good God would not permit it to occur. But consider the following line of reasoning: (1) We don't know how complete our axiological knowledge is; (2) so, we do not know how likely it is that God's act of permitting significant global warming has beyond-our-ken justification. Furthermore, God certainly possesses enough power and knowledge to permit or even cause global warming. Thus, we lack grounds for believing that it is false or unlikely that God will permit global warming – unless, of course, we somehow have good reason to believe that even if God's act of permitting global warming has beyond-our-ken justification, God won't act on that justification. Since it appears that we do not have good reason to believe this, sceptical theism, together with some additional plausible premises, leads to the conclusion that we are not justified in believing that it is false or unlikely that God will permit significant global warming.

Please note: I do not assert that this reasoning is sound. My position instead is that this reasoning is *at least as plausible* as STQ. My claim is that *if* sceptical theism generates a successful rejoinder to the argument from evil in the way described in STQ, *then* sceptical theism also generates broader uncertainty about what God will or will not do, in at least some cases.

### **Divine lies**

The Christian Bible depicts God as making certain declarations to human beings about what He will or will not do in the future. For example, the Old Testament reports that God told Noah that 'never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth', and in the New Testament the writer of the Gospel of St John attributes to Jesus the assertion that 'all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day'.<sup>11</sup>

It will be helpful at this point to introduce one more definition and to make two assumptions. First, the definition:

- D4 Proposition *p* has *word-of-God justification only* = df. the only reason we have for believing *p* is that God told us that *p*.

Given this definition, let us assume for the sake of argument that (1) God said the things attributed to Him in the scriptural passages quoted above, and (2) the propositions asserted by God in these statements have word-of-God justification only. The question to consider is the following: given these assumptions, can we know that these claims are true? Consider the following reasoning:

The threat of divine deception (TDD)

- (1) IF sceptical theism is true, THEN, for any divine assertion that  $p$ , we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God's act of intentionally asserting that  $p$  when  $p$  is false has beyond-our-ken justification.
- (2) IF, for any divine assertion that  $p$ , we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God's act of intentionally asserting that  $p$  when  $p$  is false has beyond-our-ken justification THEN we do not know  $p$  if  $p$  has word-of-God justification only (unless we have good reason for thinking that, even if God has some justification for lying about  $p$ , God doesn't act on that justification).
- (3) So, sceptical theism implies that we do not know any proposition that has word-of-God justification only (unless we have good reason for thinking that, even if God has some justification for lying, God doesn't act on that justification).
- (4) We do not have good reason for thinking that, even if God has some justification for lying, God doesn't act on that justification.
- (5) Therefore, sceptical theism implies that we do not know any proposition that has word-of-God justification only.

In thinking about this argument it is important to remember that merely possible divine actions can have beyond-our-ken justification. Thus, this argument does not imply that any divine assertions actually are false.

Premise (1) can be supported by reasoning that parallels the first two elements of STQ. According to sceptical theism, for all we know, there are lots of goods, evils, and connections between good and evil of which we are unaware. Thus, we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God's act of intentionally asserting  $p$  when  $p$  is false has beyond-our-ken justification.

Premises (2), (3), and (4) can be supported by reasoning that parallels the reasoning employed above in connection with the global warming example. Suppose that we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God's act of intentionally asserting  $p$  when  $p$  is false has beyond-our-ken justification. Since God has the power and knowledge to assert  $p$  when  $p$  is false, we lack grounds for believing that it is false or unlikely that God has intentionally asserted  $p$  when  $p$  is false – unless we have good reason to believe that even if God's act of lying about  $p$  has beyond-our-ken justification, God won't act on that

justification. Since it appears that we do not have good reason to believe this, we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that  $p$  is false, and hence we do not know that  $p$  is true.

I do not claim that TDD is sound. Instead, I claim that TDD is at least as plausible as STQ. If this claim is correct, then either (a) sceptical theism implies that we do not know any proposition that has word of God justification only, or (b) STQ fails. Thus, sceptical theists who endorse STQ face a dilemma: reject STQ, or accept that we do not know any proposition that has word-of-God justification only.

### *TDD clarified*

To clarify the nature of TDD, it will be useful to identify some conclusions it does *not* support. For instance, consider these remarks by Bruce Russell:

Is the view that there is a God who, for reasons beyond our ken, allows the suffering which appears pointless to us any different epistemically from the view that there is a God who created the universe 100 years ago and, for reasons beyond our ken, has deceived us into thinking it is older? It does not seem to be.<sup>12</sup>

Consider the following claims:

- (a) All who believe in Christ will have eternal life.
- (b) God's act of intentionally asserting that (a) when (a) is false has beyond-our-ken justification.
- (c) The universe is more than 100 years old.
- (d) God's act of causing us to believe (c) when (c) is false has beyond-our-ken justification.

Given the earlier assumption that (a) has word-of-God justification only, the relationship between (a) and (b) is importantly different from the relationship between (c) and (d). If we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that (b) is true, then we have no reason to accept (a); however, even if we cannot assess the likelihood of (d), we may nevertheless have reason to accept (c). This is because the evidence for (c) is not limited exclusively to the word of God; we have plenty of empirical evidence that supports (c).<sup>13</sup> By contrast, given our earlier assumptions, the only ground we have for accepting (a) is God's assertion that (a) is true. Under these circumstances, our possession of justification for believing that (b) is false or unlikely is essential for knowing (a), and, according to TDD, sceptical theism implies that we lack such knowledge. So TDD is not aimed at proving that sceptical theism leads to an all-encompassing scepticism; instead, TDD is aimed at establishing the weaker (but still significant) claim that sceptical theism leads to scepticism about all propositions that have word-of-God justification only.

In their defence of a different criticism of sceptical theism, Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy say this:

*[S]ceptical* theists ought not to believe that God's commands provide all-things-considered reasons for action. If one accepts that God could have reasons beyond our ken for permitting the rape and murder of children, then how can one reasonably deny that God could have reasons beyond our ken for commanding us to do that which we have outweighing reasons not to do? But if God could have reasons beyond our ken for commanding us to do that which we have outweighing reason not to do, then it is surely not true that God's commands provide us with all-things-considered reasons for action.<sup>14</sup>

Consider the following claims:

- (a) All who believe in Christ will have eternal life.
- (b) God's act of intentionally asserting that (a) when (a) is false has beyond-our-ken justification.
- (c) We have an all-things-considered reason to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.<sup>15</sup>
- (d) God's act of commanding us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves even when we lack an all-considered-reason to do so has beyond-our-ken justification.

The relationship between (e) and (f) may parallel that between (a) and (b). However, while sceptical theism may render us unable to assess the likelihood of (b), sceptical theism does not render us unable to assess the likelihood of (f). There is an important difference between (b) and (f), related to the difference between *promising* or *asserting* on the one hand and *commanding* on the other.

On at least some versions of divine-command theory, when God commands humans to perform a given action, He is not acting merely as a messenger, *informing* the humans that they have an all-things-considered reason to perform the action in question. Instead, by issuing the command, God *makes it the case* that the commanded humans have an all-things-considered reason to perform the act in question because in issuing the command, God thereby imposes on the commanded humans the moral obligation to perform the commanded act. For example, Robert Adams maintains that 'moral obligation is *constituted by* divine commands'.<sup>16</sup> On this sort of approach, claim (f) is impossible because the fact that God has commanded us to love our neighbours as we love ourselves *entails* that we have an all-things-considered reason to do so. So the considerations I have advanced so far are not sufficient to show that sceptical theism is at odds with the view that God's commands provide all-things-considered reasons for action (and hence I think that Almeida and Oppy's reasoning in the quoted passage is too fast).

The upshot is that while TDD is aimed at showing that the sceptical element of sceptical theism tends to overflow in certain ways, for all TDD shows, this

overflow remains within fairly definite limits. Specifically, it extends to all claims that have word of God justification only. It may extend further than this; however, TDD is not intended to show that it does.

### **Descartes, Kant, Hobbes, and Ross**

Descartes maintains that God cannot deceive on the grounds that God is perfect and ‘the light of nature teaches us that deception must always be the result of some deficiency’.<sup>17</sup> Let us distinguish two kinds of cases. In the first sort of case, God deceives us unintentionally. God holds a false belief that  $p$  and tells us that  $p$  is true. In this kind of case, God exhibits an intellectual or cognitive deficiency. Such a deficiency conflicts with God’s perfect nature (specifically, with His omniscience) and hence is impossible.

In the second kind of case, God knows that  $p$  is false but tells us that  $p$  is true in order to secure some great good (or prevent some great evil). If there is a deficiency here, it is a moral rather than intellectual one. But in order to know that this sort of deception on the part of God would imply a moral deficiency in God, we would have to know that God could never be morally justified in deceiving us. If TDD is sound, then the sceptical theist cannot consistently maintain that God could never be morally justified in deceiving us.

Is there any way a sceptical theist could reject TDD without also giving up STQ? One strategy for resisting TDD draws on the view that one thing that we human beings *do* know about morality is that lying is always morally wrong, *regardless of the consequences*. Kant seems to have held such a view.<sup>18</sup> If this Kantian view is correct, then we can know that no divine lie has beyond-our-ken justification (since no lie is ever justified), and hence premise (1) of TDD is false.

The central weakness of this line of reasoning is that the claim that lying is always morally wrong regardless of the consequences, whatever its pedigree, is implausible. It is not hard to think of situations in which it is quite plausible to suppose that lying is morally permissible. Many such situations involve lying in order to achieve a great good or to prevent a great evil. In his discussion of an ideal society, Plato advocates the rulers’ use of a ‘noble falsehood’, a lie told to the citizens for the good of the society as a whole.<sup>19</sup> John Stuart Mill advocates lying when doing so is the only way to save someone from a ‘great and unmerited evil’.<sup>20</sup> One of the examples mentioned by Mill is that of lying in order to withhold bad news from a dangerously ill person, a scenario that is explored at great length in James Morrow’s science fiction novel about a man who lies to his dying son about the seriousness of his illness.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, scenarios in which parents lie to their children for the good of the children present some of the most plausible examples of permissible lying.

This theme is explored in both film and literature; examples include Morrow’s novel as well as Robert Benigni’s 1997 film, *Life is Beautiful* and Cormac

McCarthy's novel, *The Road*.<sup>22</sup> These examples are particularly salient in the present context because theists often suggest that the relationship between God and His creatures is analogous to that between parents and their children.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Hobbes appeals to just these kinds of examples in objecting to Descartes' claim that God cannot deceive us:

It is the common belief that no fault is committed by medical men who deceive sick people for health's sake, nor by parents who mislead their children for their good ... M. Descartes must therefore look to the this proposition, God can in no case deceive us, taken universally, and see whether it is true ...<sup>24</sup>

It might be suggested that while these kinds of examples show that it is sometimes permissible for imperfect human beings facing difficult choices to lie, they do not show that it is permissible for a perfect being to lie. After all, what reason could God have to lie to us? More to the point, what reason could God have to lie to us with respect to the claim that all who believe in Christ will have eternal life? It is hard to think of a divine justification for lying about something like *that*.

But of course this is precisely the sort of reasoning for which sceptical theism is supposed to make trouble. Sceptical theists maintain that the fact that we cannot think of a justification for God's permitting a certain evil does little to suggest that no such justification exists. If sceptical theism supports this claim, then it equally supports the claim that the fact that we cannot think of a justification for God's telling a certain lie does little to suggest that no such justification exists. At the very least, the sceptical theist owes us an explanation of what distinguishes the two kinds of cases. On what grounds can a sceptical theist rule out the existence of some spectacularly grand good that is connected with divine lying in such a way as to justify it?

Another reason a Christian theist in particular may find the Kant-inspired view that it is always wrong for God to lie untenable is that there are passages in scripture that appear to depict divine deception. For instance, the Gospel of St John depicts Jesus as telling his brothers that he will not attend the Festival of Booths in Judea but then attending it later in secret.<sup>25</sup> And in one of his letters, Paul describes God as sending certain people 'a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false'.<sup>26</sup> Also relevant here is the binding of Isaac in the Old Testament.<sup>27</sup> While God is not portrayed as explicitly lying in that episode, a natural reading of the episode has it that God intentionally creates in Abraham's mind the belief that Abraham is going to have to sacrifice Isaac, a belief that ultimately turns out to be false. The Kantian line may not be available to those who take such passages seriously.<sup>28</sup>

Such passages are also relevant to premise (4) of TDD. Here, again, is that premise:

- (4) We do not have good reason for thinking that, even if God has some justification for lying, God doesn't act on that justification.

If the scriptural passages mentioned above do suggest divine deception, then such passages provide some indirect support for premise (4). They do this by presenting a challenge for any Christian who wants to make the case that we do have a good reason for thinking that, even if God has some justification for lying, God doesn't act on that justification. The passages discussed above may suggest that in at least some cases, God is justified in lying, and that He does indeed act on that justification.

The Kantian strategy for resisting TDD, then, is not particularly promising. However, perhaps there is a weaker view in the vicinity that will help the sceptical theist. Consider Ross's concept of *prima facie* duty.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps lying is *prima facie* wrong; lying is actually wrong unless there is a sufficiently weighty moral reason to lie. Consider the claim that even if sceptical theism is true, we have *some* reason to think that it is false or unlikely that God lies. Divine lies, because they are lies, are *prima facie* wrong; that they are *prima facie* wrong constitutes a (defeasible) reason to believe that divine lies do not occur. Thus, premise (1) of TDD is false.

The problem with this line of reasoning is the following: the claim that lying is *prima facie* wrong is about as plausible as the claim that permitting evil which one could have prevented is *prima facie* wrong. According to STQ, sceptical theism implies that for each case in which God permits evil, we do not know that it is false or even unlikely that God's permission of that evil has beyond-our-ken justification. So, if permitting evil is *prima facie* wrong, sceptical theists must say that knowing that permitting evil is *prima facie* wrong does not enable us to know that it is false or unlikely that God permits evil. In light of this, it is hard to see how the sceptical theist can consistently claim that knowing that lying is *prima facie* wrong *does* enable us to know that it is false or unlikely that God lies. Thus, the Rossian strategy does not allow the sceptical theist to rebut my contention that STQ and TDD stand or fall together.

### **Further objections and replies**

I have argued that sceptical theists who endorse STQ face a dilemma: reject STQ, or accept that we do not know any proposition that has word-of-God justification only. In this section I consider and respond to various objections to my argument.

One strategy for responding to my argument involves attempting to de-horn the dilemma by suggesting that religious believers should not be particularly troubled by the conclusion of TDD. According to this strategy, sceptical theists should respond to my argument simply by accepting the soundness of TDD. One version of this strategy rests on the claim that if God tells us something, we can be confident that He wants us to believe it, even if we cannot know that it is true. Moreover, the fact that God wants us to believe something is reason enough for

us to believe it. In this way, it might be argued that even if TDD is sound, religious believers still have good reason to believe what (they think) God has told them.

The first thing to notice about this response is its unusual implications concerning the nature of divine revelation. I take it that the traditional understanding of divine revelation has it that if God tells us that *p*, then He is *revealing* the truth of *p* to us. On the alternative understanding under consideration, if God tells us that *p*, then He is not revealing the truth of *p* at all. Rather, He is revealing something about Himself, namely that He wants us to believe *p*. Furthermore, the kind of reason we have to believe *p* is not one that provides *warrant* for our belief that *p* (I use the term ‘warrant’ to indicate whatever factor(s) make the difference between mere true belief and knowledge). Instead, it is a reason that provides prudential and/or moral justification for our ‘act’ of believing *p*. The response in question construes divine revelations that *p* as a lot like divine commands to believe *p*.

A deeper problem with this response is that, given the soundness of TDD, it is hard to see how sceptical theists can be confident that when God tells us that *p*, He wants us to believe *p*. In order to know that, we would have to know what God’s ultimate goal in telling us *p* is. But sceptical theism appears to make it impossible for us to know this. Given sceptical theism and the soundness of TDD, we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God’s act of telling us that *p* has beyond-our-ken justification. And this implies that, for all we know, God’s goal in telling us that *p* is not that we come to believe *p* but rather that we react in some other fashion. If we have no idea what God’s ultimate goals may be, then we have no idea what His more immediate goals may be, and hence we have no idea how He wants us to respond when He tells us something – or, indeed, does anything else. The basic problem here is that *if we have no idea what God is up to, then we have no idea how He wants us to respond to His interactions with us*.

There is another response that also involves accepting TDD but seeking to defuse its importance. This response begins with the observation that nothing in TDD implies that God is not morally perfect. Thus, even if we cannot know any propositions that have word-of-God justification only, we can at least be sure that, in the end, everything will turn out for the best.

It is important to recognize just how little this tells us in the context of sceptical theism. Given sceptical theism, it may be that the ultimate goods that God is pursuing are entirely beyond our understanding. So, even if we can be confident that everything will turn out for the best, we have no grounds for accepting any particular specification of just what form this great final outcome will take. For example, for all we know, everything turning out for the best includes all those who believe in Christ being annihilated at the moment of death. This seems a far cry from any recognizably Christian understanding of the fate of believers after death. To know that all will turn out for the best is, in the context of sceptical

theism, to know very little. It might be more accurate to say that what can be known, despite the soundness of TDD, is simply that everything will turn out for the best in the end – *whatever that means*.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, it appears that the sceptical theist who wants to endorse STQ faces the task of making the case that TDD and STQ do not stand or fall together. This would involve making the case that although our lack of knowledge regarding the completeness of our axiological knowledge prevents us from knowing, with respect to any particular evil, that it is false or unlikely that God's act of permitting that evil has beyond-our-ken justification, our lack of knowledge regarding the completeness of our axiological knowledge does *not* prevent us from knowing, with respect to any particular proposition that has word-of-God justification only, that it is false or unlikely that God's act of lying in asserting that proposition has beyond-our-ken justification. I cannot see how such an argument would go; of course, it does not follow that no such argument can be made. Perhaps this paper will prompt some sceptical theist or other to make this kind of argument.

### Conclusion

Theists and non-theists alike have worried about the difficulties associated with belief in a God whose ways and thoughts are much higher than our own. Hume, for example, concludes that natural religion leaves us with a conception of God so impoverished that 'it affords no inference that affects human life'.<sup>31</sup> C. S. Lewis worries that 'an utterly unknown quality in God cannot give us moral grounds for loving or obeying Him'.<sup>32</sup> Sceptical theists seek to exploit the limits of our understanding of God's ways in order to defuse the threat to theism posed by the presence of unexplained evil in the world. But scepticism is a tricky weapon, and I believe that sceptical theists are subject to a kind of philosophical blowback. *If* their brand of scepticism defuses the threat posed by the noseem inference, *then* it also threatens their claim to knowledge of God's purposes and intentions. The God depicted by the main monotheistic religious traditions is one that helps human beings understand what He is up to, at least in part, by telling us certain important facts about ultimate reality. The problem posed for sceptical theists by TDD is that it is not reasonable for them to take God at His word. If TDD is sound, then sceptical theism implies that, for all we know, God's word constitutes not divine revelation but rather a justified, divine lie.

Furthermore, notice that if TDD is sound, then Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike ought to think carefully about whether sceptical theism coheres with their other religious commitments. For as Nicholas Wolterstorff observes, 'deep in the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is the attribution of speech to God. To excise those attributions from those religions would be to have only shards left.'<sup>33</sup> Later, Wolterstorff notes that among the 'traditional principles guiding biblical interpretation in the Christian tradition' is the principle 'that God never

speaks falsehood'.<sup>34</sup> And in a discussion of the need for divine revelation within the Christian tradition, Richard Swinburne has this to say:

[W]e need historical information about how God provided an atonement, and practical information about how we can plead it. It is hard to see how we could get the historical information without God, either himself or through another, telling us what was happening; or the practical information without further divine instruction ... . And ... the goal of Heaven and the danger of Hell are things at which we can only guess without God telling us more. To strengthen some of these beliefs needed for our salvation, and to provide others of them, we need propositional revelation. ... [I]f there is a God, the truth about the universe is a very deep one, well removed from ordinary human experience. We need help from above, in order to understand the deepest reality.<sup>35</sup>

These passages suggest that there is *prima facie* tension between traditional Christianity and the claim that we cannot know any proposition that has word of God justification only. Therefore, if TDD is sound, there is *prima facie* tension between traditional Christianity and sceptical theism.

It has been suggested that sceptical theism is not a new hypothesis advanced by contemporary philosophers but rather has been part of traditional Christianity all along. For example, Stephen Wykstra writes:

[I]f we think carefully about the sort of being theism proposes for our belief, it is entirely expectable – given what we know of our cognitive limits – that the goods by virtue of which this Being allows known suffering should very often be beyond our ken. ... [T]his is not an *additional* postulate: it was implicit in theism (taken with a little realism about our cognitive powers) all along.<sup>36</sup>

There are various biblical passages that lend support to such a view.<sup>37</sup> Rather than delve here into tricky matters of scriptural interpretation, I will be content to make the simple observation that if (i) sceptical theism is part of traditional Christianity, (ii) TDD is sound, and (iii) traditional Christianity also includes the view that we can know propositions that have word-of-God justification only, then traditional Christianity is internally incoherent.<sup>38</sup>

## Notes

1. For the initial version in the contemporary philosophical literature of the evidential argument from evil see William Rowe 'The problem of evil and some varieties of atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1979), 335–341. For the initial version of the sceptical theist's reply see Stephen Wykstra 'Rowe's noseum arguments from evil', in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington and Indianapolis IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).
2. But see Ian Wilks 'Sceptical theism and empirical unfalsifiability', *Faith and Philosophy*, 26 (2009), 64–76 for some suggestive remarks on divine deception.
3. The literature includes various ways of understanding sceptical theism. The construal of sceptical theism that I employ in this paper – the version that is the target of my central argument – is drawn primarily from Michael Bergmann 'Sceptical theism and Rowe's new evidential argument', *NOUS*, 35 (2001), 278–296, and Michael Bergmann 'Sceptical theism and the problem of evil', in Thomas Flint & Michael Rea (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (New York NY: Oxford University

- Press, 2009). The conception of God that is employed here is derived from so-called 'perfect-being theology'; for useful discussions of this approach, see Thomas Morris *Our Idea of God* (Vancouver BC: Regent College Publishing), 35–40, and Peter van Inwagen *The Problem of Evil* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18–36.
4. Bergmann 'Rowe's new evidential argument', 284.
  5. Wykstra uses the term 'noseeum' in *idem* 'Rowe's noseeum arguments'.
  6. Bergmann 'The problem of evil', 383.
  7. Alvin Plantinga 'Epistemic probability and evil', in Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 73; also see William Alston 'The inductive argument from evil and the human cognitive condition', in *ibid.*, 119.
  8. Bergmann 'The problem of evil', 377, emphasis added.
  9. *Idem* 'Rowe's new evidential argument', 284.
  10. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,1786227,00.html> (accessed 12/6/09).
  11. Genesis, 9.11; John, 6.40. All scripture quotations contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.
  12. Bruce Russell 'Defenseless', in Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 197.
  13. See Bergmann 'Rowe's new evidential argument', 290, and 295, n. 27.
  14. Michael Almeida & Graham Oppy 'Evidential arguments from evil and sceptical theism', *Philo*, 8:2 (2005), 84–94, 86–87.
  15. Matthew, 22.39; Mark, 12.31.
  16. Robert Adams *Finite and Infinite Goods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 249.
  17. René Descartes *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, Laurence J. Leafleur (trans.) (New York NY: Macmillan, 1960), 108.
  18. For Kant's condemnation of lying see, for example, Immanuel Kant *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor (trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 182–183. For a useful contemporary discussion of the morality of lying, see Sissela Bok *Lying* (New York NY: Random House, 1989).
  19. Plato *Republic*, G. M. A. Grube (trans.) (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1992), 91.
  20. John Stuart Mill *Utilitarianism*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 2001), 23.
  21. Thomas Morrow *City of Truth* (New York NY: Harcourt, 1990).
  22. See Roberto Benigni (director) *Life is Beautiful* (film: Cecchi Gori Group Tiger Cinematografica, 1997), and Cormac McCarthy *The Road* (New York NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).
  23. See Bergmann 'Rowe's new evidential argument', 282.
  24. Elizabeth Haldane & G. R. T. Ross (trans.) *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 78. Descartes's reply to this objection is disappointing. He simply asserts that it is 'contradictory' to assert 'an intention to deceive on the part of God' (78).
  25. John, 7.8–10.
  26. Thessalonians, II, 2.11.
  27. Genesis, 22.1–12.
  28. Unsurprisingly, the proper interpretation of these passages is a matter of debate. For a helpful discussion of the passage from John, see Charles Giblin 'Suggestion, negative response, and positive action in St. John's portrayal of Jesus', *New Testament Studies*, 26 (1980), 197–211. For a helpful discussion of the passage from Thessalonians II, see George Harris 'Does God deceive? The 'deluding influence' of Second Thessalonians 2:11', *Master's Seminary Journal*, 16 (2005), 73–93.
  29. W. D. Ross *The Right and the Good* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1930), 19–20.
  30. For similar remarks, see William Rowe 'Friendly atheism, sceptical theism, and the problem of evil', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 59 (2006), 79–92, 90–91, and J. L. Schellenberg *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 302–303.
  31. David Hume *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1998), 88.
  32. C. S. Lewis *The Problem of Pain* (New York NY: HarperCollins, 1996), 29. Richard Gale presses this sort of worry in the context of sceptical theism; see Richard Gale 'Some difficulties in theistic treatments of evil', in Howard-Snyder *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 210–211.
  33. Nicholas Wolterstorff *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), ix.
  34. *Ibid.*, 225.

35. Richard Swinburne *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 73.
36. Stephen Wykstra 'The Humean obstacle to evidential arguments from suffering: on avoiding the evils of "appearance"', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 16 (1984), 73–93, 92–93.
37. The Book of Job is one good source of such passages; also relevant are Isaiah, 55.9 and Ecclesiastes, 8.17. For a brief discussion of other such passages, see Theodore Drange *Nonbelief & Evil: Two Arguments for the Nonexistence of God* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 193.
38. The basic idea of this paper was inspired by a remark I heard William Rowe make during a discussion of sceptical theism at an APA meeting; Rowe also provided comments on an early draft of the paper. Earlier versions of the paper were presented at a faculty forum at DePauw University in 2007, the Fourth Annual Philosophy of Religion Conference at Baylor University, and the 2009 Pacific Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association. I am grateful to my audiences on those occasions. For helpful feedback I am particularly grateful to Russell Arnold, Rich Cameron, Tom Crisp, Gregg Ten Elshof, Jen Everett, John Fischer, Michael Garten, Luke Gelinias, Renee Jorgensen, Klaas Kraay, Mark Krause, Jonathan Kvanvig, Sam Newlands, Michael Tooley, John Roth, Dan Shannon, Scott Spiegelberg, Brad Tharpe, Steve Wykstra, and various anonymous referees.