

Skeptical theism and Skepticism About the External World and Past

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Abstract

Skeptical theism is a popular - if not universally theistically endorsed - response to the evidential problem of evil. Skeptical theists question how we can be in a position to know God lacks God-justifying reason to allow the evils we observe. In this paper I examine a criticism of skeptical theism: that the skeptical theists' skepticism re divine reasons entails that, similarly, we cannot know God lacks God-justifying reason to deceive us about the external world and the past. This in turn seems to supply us with a defeater for all our beliefs regarding the external world and past? Critics argue that either the skeptical theist abandon their skeptical theism, thereby resurrecting the evidential argument from evil, or else they must embrace seemingly absurd skeptical consequences, including skepticism about the external world and past. I look at various skeptical theist responses to this critique and find them all wanting.

1. Skeptical Theism

Evidential arguments from evil often take something like the following form:

If God exists, gratuitous evil does not exist.

Gratuitous evil exists.

Therefore, God does not exist

By 'God' I mean a being that is omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely good. Most theists accept that God will allow an evil if there is an God-justifying reason for him to do so - e.g. if that evil is required by God to secure some compensating good or to prevent some equally bad or worse evil. A 'gratuitous evil', by contrast, is an evil there is no God-justifying reason to permit.

By a 'God-justifying reason' I mean a reason that would actually justify God in permitting that evil. Suppose I can save a child drowning in a river by reaching out to him from the bank with a piece of splintered wood. I decide against doing so because I might get a splinter from the wood. The risk of getting a splinter gives me *some* reason not to save the child using that piece of wood, but of course it's hardly an adequate reason. If God exists, then presumably he

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has not just *some* reason to permit the evils we observe, but adequate reason - reason that justifies him in permitting those evils.

Further, for an evil to be gratuitous, there needs to be no *all-things-considered* good reason for God allow it. An all-things-considered good reason is a reason that, when all factors are taken into account, justifies the relevant course of action (or inaction). Suppose I see child A is about to walk into some nettles. I have good reason to prevent her doing so: she'll get badly stung. That 's a reason that would justify me in stopping her. Still, all-things-considered it might be better if I *didn't* stop child A and instead stopped child B whom I can see is about to walk in front of a car (assuming I can't do both). God may similarly allow evils he has reasons to prevent, including evils he'd be justified in preventing. What God presumably won't allow is evils he is *all-things-considered* justified in preventing. Henceforth, when I discuss 'God-justifying reasons' for doing x, I'll mean reasons that all-things-considered justify God in doing x.

Why suppose the second premise of the above argument is true? A so-called 'noseeum' inference has been offered in its support.¹ It is suggested that if we cannot think of any God-justifying reason for an evil we observe, then we are justified in concluding that no such reason exists.

One obvious way to challenge this evidential argument from evil is to try actually to *identify reasons* why God might be justified in allowing the evils we observe, thereby showing that the evils are not, after all, gratuitous. Various attempts have been made. Some suggest that much of the evil we observe (in particular, the moral evils - the morally bad things we do of our own volition) can be explained as a result of God giving us *free will*. Some suggest that many natural evils - such as the natural diseases and disasters which cause great suffering to the sentient inhabitants of this planet - can be explained as a result of the operation of natural laws that are required for compensating or still greater goods (e.g. perhaps the tectonic plate movements that cause earthquakes and thus much suffering are necessary for life to emerge in the first place, say). Some suggest that many evils are divinely justified because they are for character-building or 'soul making' purposes. Just as a parent will permit their child repeatedly to fall off their bike and graze their knees given it's only by enduring such repeated falls that the child can gain not only the good of being

¹ Wykstra dubbed such arguments 'noseeum' inferences. See his 'Rowe's noseeum arguments from evil' in D. Howard-Snyder, (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Indiana: Indiana University Free Press, 1996) 126–50.

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able to ride their bike but also the justified sense of achievement that comes with it, so God will permit us to graze our metaphorical knees given that it's only by such means that we can become better people.

However, even many theists accept that these various explanations of why God would allow such evils are not only individually, but collectively, inadequate. I'd suggest that, for the two hundred thousand year history of human beings, the death of on average around half of every generation of children (usually in a pretty horrific way), with all the child and parental suffering and grief that that involves, is on the face of it, *very* difficult for theists to explain in any of the above ways, as is the hundreds of millions of years of horrific non-human suffering that occurred before we humans showed up.

The skeptical theist takes a rather different approach to the evidential argument from evil. Rather than try to identify the reasons why God is justified in allowing observed evils, the skeptical theist suggests that our inability to identify such reasons is not a sound basis for concluding that no such reasons exist.

The skeptical theist challenges the noseem inference offered in support of premise 2. True, we are sometimes justified in inferring that there are no *F*s given that there do not appear to be any *F*s. I am justified in believing there are no elephants in my garage given there do not, looking in from the street, appear to be any there. But, the skeptical theist, points out, noseem inferences aren't always sound. I am not justified in supposing there are no insects in my garage just because there do not, looking in from the street, appear to be any. Given my perceptual limitations, there could, for all I know, still be insects present. But then, suggests the skeptical theist, given *our* cognitive limitations, there could, for all we know, be God-justifying reasons for the evils we observe despite our inability to think of any.

We might think of those goods of which we are aware and those evils of which we are aware (and the entailment relations between them of which we are aware) as the tip of an iceberg of reasons. According to the skeptical theist, we don't know how much of this iceberg is accessible to us or how representative the tip is. But then, given our cognitive limitations, we cannot conclude from the fact that the part of the iceberg to which we have cognitive access contains no God-justifying reason to allow the evils we observe that it is probable (or even more probable than not) that there is no such reason in what remains. We are, insists the skeptical theist, simply *in the dark* about whether such a reason exists.

So, the skeptical theist maintains that, even if we can't identify any God-justifying reasons for the evils we observe, we are not justified in concluding that gratuitous evils exist. But then the evidential

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argument fails. Let's call the above skeptical theist attempt to block the noseum inference the 'anti-noseum argument'.²

Note that skeptical theism involves to claims: (i) theism, and (ii) skepticism regarding our ability to think of the reasons that might God justify God in allowing observed evils. Also note than even an atheist might embrace the skeptical part of skeptical theism. While failing to believe in God, they may nevertheless accept that, for all they know, there is a reason that would justify God, *if* he existed, in allowing the evils we observe.

Skeptical theism has been embraced and developed by several philosophers of religion, including Alvin Plantinga who, in response to the evidential problem of evil, says:

...from the theistic perspective there is little or no reason to think that God would have a reason for a particular evil state of affairs only if we had a pretty good idea of what that reason might be. On the theistic conception, our cognitive powers, as opposed to God's, are a bit slim for that. God might have reasons we cannot so much as understand.³

Michael Bergmann, a leading defender of skeptical theism, puts the objection thus:

The fact that humans can't think of any God-justifying reason for permitting and evil, doesn't make it likely that there are no such reasons; this is because if God existed, God's mind would be far greater than our minds so it wouldn't be surprising if God has reasons we weren't able to think of.⁴

² I note in passing that a version of the evidential argument from evil might still succeed even if the claim that gratuitous evil exists cannot be justified. Suppose that for a belief to be justified, it's epistemic probability must be at least 0.85 (if one bullet is placed in six chamber revolver, the chamber is spun and the gun about to be fired, the probability it won't fire is 0.85, but intuitively I am not justified in thinking the gun won't fire). But then suppose the probability that gratuitous evil exists is 0.84. Then the probability that gratuitous evil exists is not sufficient for belief that it exists to be justified. Nevertheless, a probability of 0.84 is sufficient to lower theism's probability below credibility. My thanks to Trent Dougherty for flagging this.

³ A. Plantinga, 'Epistemic probability and evil', in D. Howard-Snyder (ed.) *op cit.* 1996, 69–96, 73.

⁴ M. Bergmann, 'Commonsense skeptical theism' in K. Clark and M. Rea (eds.) *Science, Religion, and Metaphysics: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9–30, 11.

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According to Bergmann, the skeptical theist's skepticism (detached from their theism) includes as a main ingredient endorsement of such skeptical theses as:

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

ST2: We have no good reason for thinking the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.

ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

ST4: We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have.

Bergmann maintains that, given the truth of ST1-ST4, we are in the dark about whether there exist God-justifying reasons to permit the evils we observe. Thus the evidential argument from evil fails.

As McBrayer and Swenson⁵, two defenders of skeptical theism, point out, the skeptical theist's anti-noseeum argument applies, not just with respect to God-justifying reasons to allow or bring about evils, but with respect to God-justifying reasons to allow or bring about *anything at all*. If skeptical theism is true, we cannot, from the fact that we are unable to think of a God-justifying reason for God to bring about or allow so-and-so, justifiably conclude that no such reason exists.

Notice however that the skeptical theist need not - and arguably should not - be *too* skeptical regarding knowledge divine reasons.

Note, first of all, that skeptical theism allows theists can legitimately draw *some* conclusions about divine reasons given what they observe of the world. For example, they can legitimately infer from the fact that Bert's house burnt down last night, that God, if exists, had an adequate reason to permit that. Here is an inference from an observed evil to a conclusion concerning divine reasons that *is* permitted by the skeptical theist.

⁵ McBrayer, J. and Swenson, P. 'Skepticism and the argument from divine hiddenness', *Religious Studies* **48** (2012), 129–150.

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Further, note that skeptical theists can allow that we can also know at least some of God's reasons by means of some form of direct, divine revelation. Perhaps God can and indeed has directly revealed to some of us what his reasons are, and indeed what reasons he lacks. In which case, *no inference* - let alone a noseum inference - *at all* is required in order for us to possess knowledge of both the existence and the absence of God-justifying reasons.

So skeptical theists can, and usually do, allow human knowledge of divine reasons. They're merely skeptical about our ability to think of the reasons God might have for creating or allowing the evils - and indeed the various other things - we observe. They question only the 'noseum' inference from (i) we can't think of any such reasons, to (ii) no such reasons exist.

Note that skeptical theists disagree over whether the evils we observe provide some evidence against theism. Some insist the evils we observe provide no evidence *at all* against theism. Others allow that observed evils may provide *some* evidence against theism. They merely insist that - given the shaky nature of any noseum inference from observed evils to the conclusion that no God-justifying reason for those evils exists - what evidence there is falls short of allowing us justifiably to conclude that the world contains gratuitous evil and that consequently theism is false.

2. Skeptical theism and knowledge of God's goodness

As McBrayer and Swenson acknowledge⁶, skeptical theism also appears to threaten a number of arguments for the existence of the God of traditional monotheism. How are we to know that, not only is there an omnipotent and omniscient creator of the universe (a lower case 'g' god, if you like) but this creator is *good* (the upper case 'G' God)? According to McBrayer and Swenson, *not* by observing the universe and drawing conclusions about divine goodness on that basis. For if skeptical theism is true, we are as much in the dark about whether a good God would, or would not, bring about the goods we observe as we are about whether he would, or would not, bring about the evils we observe. But then observed goods are no more evidence for a good God than observed evils are evidence against.

Michael Bergmann, another proponent of skeptical theism, concurs that arguments for divine goodness based on identifying

⁶ McBrayer and Swenson (2012) op cit.

some feature of the universe as an all-considered good are undermined by skeptical theism. According to Bergmann, anyone who supposes the order we see in the natural world or the joy we witness in people's lives give us reason to think that there is a benevolent God who is the cause of such things is failing to take into account the lessons of skeptical theism.⁷

This isn't to say that skeptical theism has the consequence that we should be skeptical about the existence of a good God. As Bergmann points out: 'We needn't conclude ... that the skeptical theist's skepticism is inconsistent with every way of arguing for the existence of a good God'⁸. Alternative ways by which we might come justifiably to believe in the existence of God might perhaps involve other forms of inference invulnerable to skeptical theism (e.g. an ontological or moral argument), or divine revelation.

3. The Pandora's Box Problem

One leading response to skeptical theism is to show that *it opens up a skeptical Pandora's Box*: it entails forms of skepticism that even the theists finds implausible and unacceptable. In particular, skeptical theism appears to require we also embrace *skepticism about the external world and the past*.

Consider the following familiar example of an *undercutting defeater*. I am watching, through a window, a series of widgets pass by on an assembly line. The widgets clearly look red. I come to believe the widgets are red on that basis. Presumably, given the widgets appear perceptually red to me, then it is *ceteris paribus*, reasonable for me to believe the widgets are red. However, suppose I am then told, by someone who has previously proved to be a reliable source of information, that the widgets are lit by a special defect-revealing light, a light that makes even non-red things look red. Is it *still* reasonable for me to believe the widgets are red?

Intuitively not. Why not? Because I now have good reason to think that the method by which I acquired the original belief is, in the circumstances in which I formed it, not to be trusted.

What, exactly, is 'defeated' in such cases? That's arguable. Some maintain that *knowledge* is lost in such cases. Even if the widgets are

⁷ M. Bergmann, 'Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil' in T. Flint and M. Rea (eds.) *Oxford Handbook to Philosophical Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 374–399.

⁸ Bergmann, (2009) op cit.

red (and I've been misled about that defect-revealing light), I don't *know* they are red. Others are inclined to think that knowledge need not be lost in such cases, but that at the very least *reasonable belief* is lost. Lasonen Aarnio⁹, for example, argues that in such cases knowledge may be retained (e.g. if knowledge belief is acquired by means of a safe method, and the method employed - visual perception in this case - is indeed safe) but that reasonable belief is lost. According to Lasonen Aarnio, the reason reasonable belief is lost is that someone who continues to maintain their belief that the widgets are red even after having received the new information about the defect-revealing light, has embarked upon a belief-forming strategy that is not knowledge-conducive. Lasonen Aarnio suggests reasonableness

is at least largely a matter of managing one's beliefs through the adoption of policies that are generally knowledge conducive, thereby manifesting dispositions to know and avoid false belief across a wide range of normal cases. Subjects who stubbornly stick to their beliefs in the face of new evidence manifest dispositions that are bad given the goal of knowledge or even of true belief.¹⁰

Someone who continues to believe even after acquiring such new evidence about the unreliability of the method by which they formed their belief will likely end up believing many falsehoods. I shall assume that Lasonen Aarnio is correct: whether or not knowledge is necessarily 'defeated' in such cases, reasonable belief is. Call such defeaters *rationality defeaters* (leaving it open whether knowledge is also lost).

But then doesn't skeptical theism generate a rationality defeater for beliefs regarding the external world and past? Given that it appears to me both that I ate toast for breakfast this morning and that there is an orange on the table in front of me, it is presumably reasonable for me to believe I ate toast for breakfast and that there is an orange before me. But if I now learn that, (i) God exists, and (ii) for all I know, there is a God-justifying reason for God to deceive me about these things, then, runs the objection, I can no longer reasonably believe I had toast for breakfast or that there is an orange there. For skeptical theism blocks any attempt to justify the belief that there are unlikely to be such God-justifying reasons by means of a noseum inference:

⁹ M. Lasonen Aarnio, M. 'Unreasonable Knowledge', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 24 (2010) 1–21.

¹⁰ Laasonen Aarnio (2010) op cit. 2.

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'I can't think of a good reason why God would deceive me in that way, therefore there probably is no such reason.' But then skeptical theism would seem to have the consequence that, for all I know, God does indeed have a good reason to deceive me in this way and is deceiving me for that reason. Just as learning about that defect-revealing light provides me with an rationality defeater for my belief that the widgets are red - I should be skeptical about whether or not the widgets are red - so learning that (i) and (ii) generates a rationality defeater for my beliefs about the external world and past - I should be skeptical about the external world and past.

Of course, most theists reject the view that we should be skeptical about the external world and past. They believe we can reasonably hold beliefs about both. But if their skeptical theism requires that they embrace such a broad skeptical position, then it appears they must either embrace that broad skeptical position, or else abandon their skeptical theism, thereby resurrecting the evidential argument from evil.

Note that other beliefs also appear to be thrown into doubt by skeptical theism. Take a theist's belief that their religion - Christianity, let's say - is true. Skeptical theism appears to entail that, for all they know, there is a reason that justifies God, if he exists, in deceiving them about Christianity (maybe the truth of Christianity is something about which God wishes to trick us in order to achieve some, to us unknown, greater good). But then it seems skeptical theism provides our Christian with rationality defeater for their Christian beliefs. They should, it seems, be skeptical about Christianity, just as they should be skeptical about the external world and past.

Note that, even if disbelievers (those who believe there is no God) do accept the skeptical part of skeptical theism (they endorse the thought that they are in no position to know whether there's a reason that justifies God, if he exists, in deceiving them), they don't end up falling into the same skeptical swamp. For, on their view, there exists no such God, and thus no such deceiver.

Commonsensism

In response to the Pandora's Box Objection, some insist that, yes, we cannot by means of a noseem inference, conclude God lacks a reason to deceive us about the external world and past - i.e. we cannot think of a reason why God would deceive us about the external world and past; therefore there probably is no such reason. However, while *that* way of establishing that God lacks a reason to so deceive us is blocked,

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other ways of knowing that he lacks such a reason may remain. Perhaps, given there are these other ways of knowing about the external world and the past (ways that don't rely on any noseum inference regarding God's reasons), skeptical theism constitutes no threat to such knowledge.

For example, Michael Bergmann, in response to the Pandora's Box objection, appeals to what he calls *commonsensism*.

Commonsensism: the view that (a) it is clear that we know many of the most obvious things we take ourselves to know (this includes the truth of simple perceptual, memory, introspective, mathematical, logical, and moral beliefs) and that (b) we also know (if we consider the question) that we are not in some skeptical scenario in which we are radically deceived in these beliefs.¹¹

Bergmann then considers Sally, a hypothetical agnostic who believes ST1-ST4 but who also signs up to commonsensism. According to Bergmann, given Sally's commonsensism, especially clause (b),

she knows, in addition to the fact that she has hands, that's she's not a brain in a vat being deceived into thinking she has hands. And similarly, she knows that if God exists, then God doesn't have an all-things-considered good reason for making it seem that she has hands when in fact she doesn't. She knows this despite her endorsement of ST1-ST4... By endorsing ST1-ST4, Sally is committing herself to the view that we don't know, *just by reflecting on possible goods, possible evils, the entailment relations between them, and their seeming value or disvalue*, what God's reasons might be. But it doesn't follow that we have no way *at all* of knowing anything about what reasons God might have for doing things... In general, for all the things we commonsensically know to be true, we know that God, (if God exists) didn't have an all-things-considered good reason to make them false.¹²

Note the intriguing move made here: from the fact that we do know (other than by means of a noseum inference) about the external world and past, we can infer that God, if he exists, has no God-justifying reason to deceive us about the external world and past. A similar move is made by Beaudoin¹³ who, in response the

¹¹ M. Bergmann (2012) op cit. 10.

¹² M. Bergmann (2012) op cit. 15.

¹³ J. Beaudoin, J. 'Skepticism and the skeptical theist', *Faith and Philosophy*, 22 (2005) 42–56.

thought that skeptical theism entails that, for all we know, God actualised **s**: an old-looking universe that is in truth just five minutes old (this being the universe we inhabit), suggests that while we cannot infer God lacks a reason to so deceive us about the age of the universe from the fact that we cannot think of any such reason, insists that nevertheless we can infer God lacks such a reason from the fact that we do, in fact, know the universe is older than that. Beaudoin draws the following analogy:

Suppose I know nothing about Smith's honesty, or lack thereof. For all I know, Smith is an inveterate liar. Now I claim to believe something (P) Smith told me, but not on the basis of Smith's telling me; instead I've confirmed with my own eyes that (P). Clearly in this case it wouldn't do for someone to challenge the rationality of my belief by pointing out that for all I know Smith is a liar; my belief that (P) isn't based on Smith's testimony.¹⁴

Similarly, then, says Beaudoin, we may yet know the universe is old, not by way of a noseum inference to a conclusion about God's lacking reason to deceive us concerning its age, but in some other way. Perhaps, says Beaudoin,

there is some theologically neutral, telling philosophical argument for rejecting skepticism about the past. If there is, then on this basis the skeptical theist can conclude that God has no [morally sufficient reason] for actualizing **s**, since he has not actualized it.¹⁵

I call this the *Bergmann/Beaudoin response* to the Pandora's Box objection to skeptical theism.

I don't believe the Bergmann/Beaudoin response succeeds in disarming The Pandora's Box objection. Consider another putative example of rationality defeat, which I call *Olly's Orange*¹⁶.

Olly's Orange

Suppose I seem very clearly to see an orange on the table in front of me. Other things being equal, it seems reasonable for me to believe

¹⁴ Beaudoin 2005 op cit. 44.

¹⁵ Beaudoin 2005, op cit. 45.

¹⁶ I previously used this example in S. Law, 'The Pandora's Box Objection to Skeptical Theism' in *International Journal of Religious Studies*, **78** (2015) 285–299.

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that there is an orange there. Suppose I do consequently form the belief that there's an orange there. However, I now come by new information. I am given excellent reason to believe (i) that someone called Olly is present who is in possession of an amazing holographic projector capable of projecting onto the table before me an entirely convincing-looking image of an orange, and (ii) that I am entirely in the dark about whether Olly is now projecting such an image. Given this new information, is it reasonable for me to continue to believe there's an orange before me?

I think the answer is pretty clearly no: it's not reasonable for me to continue to hold my belief about the orange. I should, given this new information, withhold belief - be skeptical - about whether there's an orange there.

Now in response to my skepticism, suppose someone argues like so. It is *generally* reasonable for us to trust our senses and memories. As Bergmann notes, 'it is clear we know many of the most obvious things we take ourselves to know (this includes the truth of simple perceptual [and] memory...beliefs).' In particular, such skeptic-busting principles as the following are plausible:

P1. If it clearly perceptually looks to me as if S is the case, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is reasonable for me to believe that S is the case.

P2. If someone tells me that S is the case, then, *ceteris paribus*, it is reasonable for me to believe S is the case.

(The *ceteris paribus* clauses here will obviously include where you also have good reason to distrust your senses or the testifier. E.g. it's not reasonable to believe a stick is bent given it looks bent when half immersed in this glass of water if I have good reason to suppose that even straight sticks look bent under those circumstances.) But then, given it clearly looks to me as if there is an orange on the table before me, it *is* reasonable to believe there is an orange there. This is something I can 'commonsensically' take myself to know. And, given I can reasonably believe that there is an orange there, so I can reasonably believe I am not being deceived by Olly etc. about there being an orange there. So I am *not* in the dark about whether Olly is using his projector. I can reasonably believe (and indeed know) that he is not.

I think it is pretty clear that something has gone wrong with this Bergmann-Beaudion-style boot-strapping justification for supposing I can reasonably believe there is an orange there and thus reasonably believe Olly is not deceiving me.

Note, in particular, that even if principles such as P1 and P2 are correct, the *ceteris paribus* clause surely kicks in when I am presented

with new evidence that my senses (or the testifier) are not to be trusted in the circumstances in which I formed the belief. *Ceteris paribus*, I can reasonably there's an orange there if that's how it looks. But not given I have good grounds to accept, and do accept, the new information that (i) Olly is present and easily capable of deceiving me, and (ii) for all I know Olly is in fact deceiving me. Under *these* circumstances, it seems I possess a rationality defeater for my perceptually-based belief. I reasonably consider myself 'commonsensically' to know there's an orange present.

But then similarly, irrespective of whether it is, *ceteris paribus*, reasonable for us to believe that things are perceptually as they appear to be, given I have good grounds to accept, and do accept, that (i) there is a being easily capable of deceiving me perceptually, and (ii) for all I know this being is deceiving me, then I have a rationality defeater for my perceptually based beliefs.

Hence the Bergmann/Beaudoin response to the Pandora's Box objection appears to fail.

Can we know God is no deceiver?

Another response to the Pandora's Box objection is to argue that we can, independently, know God is no deceiver because we can know that God is good and a good God is no deceiver. In his *Third Meditation*, Descartes offers an argument for this claim. He says God 'cannot be a deceiver, since it is a dictate of the natural light that all fraud and deception spring from some defect', and God is without defect. However, Maitzen¹⁷ (2009) points out that while fraud and deception flow from some defective situation (a terrorist about to explode a bomb who can only be thwarted by deception, for example) it does not follow that 'fraud and deception are defective *responses* to that situation'.¹⁸ Hobbes similarly points out, in response to Descartes, that 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...¹⁹

¹⁷ S. Maitzen, S. Skeptical theism and moral obligation. *International Journal of the Philosophy of Religion*, **65** (2009) 93–103.

¹⁸ S. Maitzen, op cit. 97.

¹⁹ E. Haldane, E., and G.R.T. Ross (trans.), *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Volume II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 78.

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Where a reason sufficient to justify us in engaging in deceive exists, our engaging in such deception does not require there be any defect in us. So why does God's similarly engaging in such deception require there be some defect in him? The New Testament also contains passages suggesting God engages in deliberate deception. St. Paul describes God as sending some people 'a powerful delusion, leading them to believe what is false.' (2nd Thessalonians 2:11). So the Cartesian thought that God is no deceiver is Biblically challenged, too.

Is being 'in the dark' about whether God has reason to deceive us sufficient to justify skepticism?

Here's another response to the Pandora's Box problem.

Suppose Paul tells me, with seeming sincerity, that he had an apple for breakfast. I have only just met Paul and don't know anything about him. Nevertheless, I believe him. Is it reasonable for me to believe him?

Well, am I not *in the dark* about whether Paul has reason to deceive me about his breakfast this morning? Paul is a complete stranger to me. I know nothing about his background or his motives. So, *for all I know*, Paul has some all-things-considered good reason to deceive me about his breakfast. Should I not then withhold judgement about - be skeptical - about whether Paul had an apple for breakfast?

Skepticism in this case seems absurd. Surely, despite the fact that I am in the dark about Paul's motives and the reasons he might have to deceive me, it's reasonable for me to just take Paul's word for it about his having an apple for breakfast.

Note that principle P2 explains why it's reasonable for me to take Paul's word for it about the apple: *ceteris paribus* it is reasonable for me to take testimony at face value; hence it's reasonable in this case. Notice that if I *were* sceptical in this case, then consistency would require I be sceptical about a great deal since much of what I believe is based on the testimony of folk not well known to me - folk who, for all I know, have reason to deceive me.

Hence, a defender of skeptical theism may insist, the mere fact that I am in the dark about whether God has good reason to deceive me - the fact that for all I know he has reason to deceive me - does not entail that I cannot reasonable believe God's testimony, or indeed my senses and memory.

To assess this response to the Pandora's Box Objection, we need to get clearer about what being 'in the dark' and 'for all I know' mean

here. When sceptical theists say we are 'in the dark' about whether there exist God-justifying reasons for God to allow the evils we observe - that 'for all we know' such reasons exist - they re-articulate this thought in a variety of ways. Some speak of probability. They say that the probability of God having such a reason is *inscrutable* to us, by which they mean that we cannot reasonably assign any probability to God's having such a reason: neither high, nor low, nor middling. Others speak of probability but say only that we cannot assign a *low* probability to God's having such a reason.

If we now turn to the case of Paul, I think it is pretty clear that while I might, correctly, say 'for all I know' Paul has a reason to deceive me - that I am 'in the dark' about whether Paul has reason to deceive me - the sense with which these expressions are being used is not that with which they are used by the skeptical theist.

It's actually very reasonable for me to believe that Paul lacks a reason to deceive me because, after all, Paul is a human being, and I know a great deal about human beings generally, including the kind of reasons that lead them to deceive others, the extent to which they can survey the range of reasons that would motivate them to deceive others, and so on. Given all this information about human beings and their reasons to deceive, it's reasonable for me to believe that, while Paul might have reason to deceive me, the probability he actually has such a reason is low. But then that low probability doesn't give me a rationality defeater for my belief that Paul had an apple for breakfast given only that he told me so. True, I am, in a sense, 'in the dark' about whether Paul has such a reason - 'for all I know' Paul has such a reason - but only in the very weak sense that it's possible that he has such a reason - I can't entirely rule out his possessing such a reason. I can still reasonably assign a *low* probability to his having such a reason.

When we turn to a skeptical theist's claim that we are 'in the dark' about whether there are God-justifying reasons for observed evils, on the other hand, the claim is that the probability God has such a reason is *inscrutable* and/or is at least *not* low. If we could reasonably suppose the probability of there being such a reason was low, then perhaps we might still reasonably believe there's no such reason, and thus reasonably believe that the evils we observe are gratuitous. So, if their response to the evidential problem of evil is to succeed, the skeptical theist's sense of our being 'in the dark' re the existence of certain God justifying reasons needs to be a very different sense to that which applies in the case of Paul's potential reasons to deceive me.

But then if it's in this stronger sense that we are supposedly 'in the dark' regarding the existence of God-justifying reasons of observed

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evils, then it will also be in this stronger sense that we are ‘in the dark’ regarding the existence of God-justifying reasons for God to deceive us about the external world and past. But then the analogy drawn between our ‘being in the dark’ about God’s having good reason to deceive us and my being ‘in the dark’ about Paul’s having good reason to deceive me fails. Even if it is reasonable for me to trust Paul, notwithstanding my being ‘in the dark’ about his having good reason to deceive me, it does not follow that it’s reasonable for me to trust God, notwithstanding my being ‘in the dark’ about God’s having good reason to deceive me. It seems I really do have reason to distrust God since I cannot - as I can in the case of Paul - *reasonably assign a low probability to God’s having good reason to deceive me.*

Note, by the way, that in *Olly’s Orange*, for my analogy to appropriate, I must be ‘in the dark’ in the strong sense about whether Olly has turned his projector on. That’s to say, I cannot reasonably assign a low probability to Olly’s having turned his projector on. Under those circumstances, it appears I do have a rationality defeater for my belief there’s an orange before me.

Conclusion

Perhaps the Pandora’s Box objection to skeptical theism can successfully be dealt with, but it seems clear to me that none of the above attempted solutions succeed. In which case, the sceptical theist does appear to be faced with a dilemma: (i) maintain their sceptical theism in order to deal with the evidential argument from evil, but then lose reasonable belief in the external world, the past, and Christianity (or Islam, or whatever), or (ii) abandon their skeptical theism, leaving them to again face the evidential problem from evil.

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