

Reply to Bergmann and Rea

In Almeida and Oppy (2003), we set out to discredit sceptical theist responses to evidential arguments from evil. In particular, we argued that, if the considerations deployed by sceptical theists are sufficient to undermine noseem inferences in evidential arguments from evil, then those considerations are also sufficient to undermine noseem inferences that play a crucial role in the justification of ordinary moral reasoning.

Bergmann and Rea (2005) defend sceptical theism against our argument. They claim, first, that our argument fails to show that ‘sceptical theism as such undermines ordinary moral practice’, and, second, that our argument fails even to show that ‘in the absence of various background beliefs that theists are very likely to possess, [sceptical theism] undermines ordinary moral practice’.

Following Bergmann (2001), we shall suppose that the sceptical theist critique of evidential arguments relies upon the following three claims:

- ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
- ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
- ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and permission of possible evils.

Bergmann and Rea (2005) insist that Bergmann (2001) intended these claims to be read with an implicit restriction: we have no good reason for thinking these things ‘relative to the property of figuring in a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us’. We’re not sure what purpose is meant to be achieved by the insistence on this implicit restriction; however, we would point out that the plausibility of these claims seems unaltered if we instead insist on an implicit restriction ‘relative to the property of figuring in a (potentially) human-justifying reason for permitting evils that our ordinary moral practices enjoin us to prevent’. It is worth noting, in particular, that the justification that Bergmann (2001) gives for accepting ST1-ST3 adverts to quite general considerations concerning our cognitive limitations and the vastness and complexity of reality: these general considerations are supposed to be sufficient to establish that our understanding of the realm of value may well fall miserably short of capturing all that is true of that realm. But that justification seems entirely insensitive to a choice between the implicit restrictions that are here under consideration. If, given our cognitive limitations and the vastness and complexity of reality, we have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods that might figure as God-justifying reasons for permitting the evils we see around us, then surely, given those cognitive limitations and the vastness and complexity of reality, we

have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods that might figure as human-justifying reasons for permitting evils that our ordinary moral practice enjoins us to prevent.

According to sceptical theists like Bergmann, because we should accept ST1-ST3, we should reject the crucial *noseeum* claim in evidential arguments from evil; i.e. because we accept ST1-ST3, we should reject the claim that, if after thinking hard, we can't find any God-justifying reason for the permission of some horrific evil, then it is likely that there is no such reason. In Almeida and Oppy (2003), we claimed that, if this sceptical theist claim is right, then, by parity of reason, because we should accept ST1-ST3, we should reject that claim that, if after thinking hard, we can't find any human-justifying reason for the permission of some evil that ordinary moral practice enjoins us to prevent, then it is likely that there is no such reason. That is, we claimed that it follows from the truth of the sceptical theist claim that, because we accept ST1-ST3, we should accept that our failure to find a human-justifying reason for the permission of some evil that ordinary moral practice enjoins us to prevent tells us nothing at all about whether there is a human-justifying reason for the permission of that evil. But, we claimed, if that's right, then it seems that ordinary moral reasoning is imperilled: for, if our failure to find a human-justifying reason for the permission of some evil that ordinary moral practice enjoins us to prevent tells us nothing at all about whether there is a human-justifying reason for the permission of that evil, and if there is nothing else that tells us whether there is a human-justifying reason for the permission of that evil, then there is nothing at all that tells us whether there is a human-justifying reason for the permission of that evil. And if there is nothing at all that tells us whether there is a human-justifying reason for the permission of that evil, then, we claimed, it seems that our ordinary moral practice, which *ex hypothesi* enjoins us to prevent the evil, fails to operate within the bounds of reason.

Bergmann and Rea (2005) offer a variety of criticisms of the kind of argument that we have just rehearsed. We do not think that any of these criticisms is effective. The burden of our paper is to explain why we think that the argument of Almeida and Oppy (2003) survives these various criticisms.

1

The first response that Bergmann and Rea make to our argument is to insist that, while ST1-ST3 might entail that our failure to find a human-justifying reason for the permission of some evil that ordinary moral practice enjoins us to prevent tells us nothing at all about whether there is a human-justifying reason for the permission of that evil, theists are perfectly entitled to the assumption that there is something else that tells us whether there is a human-justifying reason for the permission of that evil. In particular, according to Bergmann and Rea, theists are perfectly entitled to claim that they know that God has commanded them not to permit the evil in question; and God's commanding in this way is clearly inconsistent with the existence of an (outweighing) human-justifying reason for the permission of the evil.

We think that this response is inadequate. Given the truth of ST1-ST3, there is evidently no reason to suppose that there is an *inconsistency* between God's commanding people not to permit the evil in question and the existence of an (outweighing) human-justifying reason for permission of the evil. After all, if, given our cognitive limitations and the vastness and complexity of reality, we have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods that might figure as God-justifying reasons for permitting the evils we see around us, then surely, given those cognitive limitations and the vastness and complexity of reality, we have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods that might figure as God-justifying reasons for God's commanding people not to permit the evil in question even though there is an (outweighing) human-justifying reason for permission of the evil. But, if this is correct then, while Bergmann and Rea are right to insist that theists typically believe both that God has commanded his creatures to behave in certain ways and that God's commands provide all-things-considered reasons for action, we have good reason to think that *sceptical* 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. At best, given sceptical theist endorsement of ST1-ST3, God's commands provide us with *pro tanto* reasons for action: but how shall we get from there to an all-things-considered judgment?

We take it that the argument that we have just given is enough to establish that Bergmann and Rea do not succeed in establishing that sceptical theists who endorse the sceptical theist argument from ST1-ST3 can consistently rely on other theistic beliefs to underwrite well established moral judgments. However, Bergmann and Rea also argue that anyone who endorses the sceptical theist argument from ST1-ST3 can consistently make judgments that are in line with ordinary practice. We take up this argument in the next section of our paper.

(Perhaps we should note that there may well be other ways of arguing for the conclusion that Bergmann and Rea do not succeed in establishing that sceptical theists who endorse the sceptical theist argument from ST1-ST3 can consistently rely on other theistic beliefs to underwrite well established moral judgments. In particular, there is the following line of thought. Suppose that we agree that God commands us not to perform certain kinds of actions. We have to decide how to apply these commands. Some cases are easy. We are not required to prevent the dentist or surgeon from harming her patient, since there is a greater good forthcoming. But how are other cases to be decided? Am I commanded to prevent Smith's suffering? Just as in the case of the dentist or surgeon, there might be an outweighing good forthcoming from the suffering. Given the sceptical argument from ST1-ST3, I have no way of knowing. If there is such a good, then surely God cannot be commanding me to prevent that suffering, any more than God commands me to prevent the suffering in the case of the dentist or surgeon. At the very least, it is hard to see how

we are supposed to get from God's commands to judgments about the particular cases with which we are confronted, given that we accept the sceptical theist argument from ST1-ST3.)

2

As Bergmann and Rea note, the argument of Almeida and Oppy (2003) depends upon the claim that a rational reconstruction of ordinary moral reasoning to a judgement to intervene to prevent an evil typically has the following form:

1. There is *pro tanto* reason for me to intervene to prevent E.
2. I have found no *pro tanto* reasons for me not to intervene to prevent E that outweigh my *pro tanto* reason to intervene to prevent E.
3. (Hence) There are no *pro tanto* reasons for me not to intervene to prevent E that outweigh my *pro tanto* reason to intervene to prevent E.
4. (Hence) I have all things considered reason to intervene to prevent E.

We claimed that the noseem inference from 2. to 3. is plainly no more and no less vulnerable to ST1-ST3 than the more familiar *noseem* inference in evidential arguments from evil.

Against this argument, Bergmann and Rea claim that, even if the argument from 1.-4. is a bad argument, there are other routes to the same conclusion that are not vulnerable to ST1-ST3. In particular, they claim that the following argument establishes the desired conclusion and yet plainly nowhere relies upon a noseem inference:

- 1a. There is (strong) *pro tanto* reason to prevent E.
- 2a. We have found no *pro tanto* reason to permit E.
- 3a. There is no reason to think (and, indeed, good reason to doubt) that any investigation that we could possibly conduct before having to make a decision about whether to prevent E would turn up evidence pointing to even a weak *pro tanto* reason to permit E
- 4a. (Therefore) We ought to prevent E.

According to Bergmann and Rea "it is hard to deny that (1a)-(3a) support (4a); and (4a) is all we need in order to save ordinary moral practice and to conclude that we are not justified in permitting E". However, we simply deny that (1a)-(3a) support (4a). If, owing to our acceptance of ST1-ST3, we are not prepared to endorse the claim that it is unlikely that there is outweighing *pro tanto* reason to permit E, then we cannot possibly have reason to endorse the claim that we have an *obligation* to prevent E. That is, without

3.1a It is improbable that there exists an outweighing *pro tanto* reason to permit E
we do not have good grounds to accept (4a), even if we accept (1a)-(3a).

Bergmann and Rea assert that there is no inconsistency in the claim that one knows that one has an obligation to prevent E even though one does not know whether there is some unknown outweighing reason that one permit E. In support of this claim, they offer the following case:

Perhaps the child is a nascent monster, and preventing his abduction and subsequent murder would result in the suffering of millions upon millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world. For all you know, the world might be better, all things considered, if he were murdered. Still, apart from only the most naïve and implausible versions of consequentialism, it might well be that you ought to prevent his abduction.

Now, of course, we do not deny that one can have an obligation to prevent E in circumstances in which, for all one knows, the consequences of fulfilling this obligation will be disastrous. But Bergmann and Rea are focussing on the wrong claim. The important question is whether there is inconsistency in the claim that one knows (or reasonably believes) that one has an obligation to prevent E even though one is not prepared to assign any probability to the claim that there is some unknown outweighing reason that one permit E.¹ If we suppose that preventing the suffering of millions and millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world *would* suffice to justify permitting E, then, unless we are prepared to make the judgment that it is *unlikely* that permitting E will prevent the suffering of millions and millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world, we have no reason to suppose that we have an obligation to prevent E. (In adverting to “naïve and implausible versions of consequentialism”, Bergmann and Rea seem to be casting doubt on the idea that preventing the suffering of millions and millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world would suffice to justify permitting E. But that is surely confusion on their part. If preventing the suffering of millions and millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world would not justify permitting E, then it makes no difference for the purposes of the present discussion whether we think it likely that permitting E would prevent the suffering of millions and millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world.)

The importance of the role of probability here should not be under-estimated. Suppose, again, that preventing the suffering of millions and millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world *would* suffice to justify permitting E. Suppose, further, that you assign probability p to the claim that permitting E *will* prevent the suffering of millions and millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world. What should you do? There are clear cases. If $p=1$, then—other things being equal—you should permit E. If $p=0$, then—other things being equal—you should prevent E. Plausibly, for values of p close enough to 1, and other things being equal, you should permit E; and for values of p close enough to 0, and other things being equal, you should prevent E. What to say about the remaining values of p is unclear, but can remain unsaid for present purposes; likewise, we can remain silent on exactly what “close enough” amounts to in this context. But, now, if your probability is just the interval $[0, 1]$ —i.e. if you are not prepared to assign any probability to the claim that permitting E *will* prevent the suffering of millions and millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world—then it surely follows that

practical reason gives you no advice about what to do. (And, as we emphasised in our earlier paper, this has the abhorrent consequence that the choice to permit the preventable evil receives no more and no less support from moral reasoning than does the choice to prevent it.)

Of course, this discussion proceeded under the assumption that preventing the suffering of millions and millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world *would* suffice to justify permitting E. But we can generalise. Suppose that you assign probability p to the claim that permitting E will bring about some (any) great outweighing good. What should you do? As before, there are clear cases. But the key point is that, if your probability is just the interval $[0, 1]$, then—as before—it follows that practical reason gives you no advice about what to do.

We conclude that, to the extent that Bergmann and Rea engage with our argument at all, they provide no reasons for thinking that someone who endorses the sceptical theist response from ST1-ST3 can consistently make judgments that are in line with ordinary moral practice. Ordinary moral practice relies upon our preparedness to judge, for example, that it is *exceedingly* unlikely that our permitting the rape and murder of a particular child will prevent the suffering of millions and millions of people and the ultimate destruction of the world. But, if mere considerations about our ignorance of possible goods and evils are sufficient to undermine confidence in the claim that it is unlikely that God's permitting the rape and murder of a particular child will bring about some greater outweighing good, then surely those same considerations are sufficient to undermine confidence in the claim that it is unlikely that our permitting the rape and murder of a particular child will bring about some greater outweighing good.

3

Some of the criticisms that Bergmann and Rea make of Almeida and Oppy (2003) are very wide of the mark. For example, they interpret us to be making, at a certain point, the claim that:

If we are aware of our inability to assign likelihood to the truth of the proposition that the floorboards are rotten, then we are unable to move from claim (5) to claim (6):

(5) We have found no *pro tanto* reason to refrain from stepping on the floor.

(6) Therefore: There is no *pro tanto* reason to refrain from stepping on the floor.

They then go on to say:

Perhaps whatever considerations counsel agnosticism about the relevant probability also constitute reason to think that further investigation would turn up at least a weak *pro tanto* reason to refrain from stepping on the floor. More plausibly, perhaps, those same considerations would themselves constitute at least weak *pro tanto* reason to refrain from stepping on the floor. But these points are neither here nor there as far as

our argument is concerned. If anything, they only point to the fact that the floorboard analogy was bad to begin with.

These remarks are utterly baffling to us. Our discussion of the floorboards is located in a response to some comments that were made by one of the referees of our paper. The point that we make is that we need to be able to factor self-confessed ignorance into our processes of deliberation. If we are not prepared to make any estimation of whether or not the floorboards are rotten, then this fact has to be recognised or registered in our deliberations about whether or not to step out onto the floor. At least *inter alia*, our referee claims that it is *irrational* to refrain from certain choices because of our unwillingness to assign probabilities to possible outcomes. We deny that this is so. Provided that the breaking of the floorboards matters enough to us, our unwillingness to make *any* estimation of whether or not the floorboards are rotten leaves us without the resources to reach a reasoned decision about whether to step out onto the floor. To fix ideas, suppose that we greatly value our lives, that breaking the floorboards will see us plummet to a painful death, and that we also attach great value to crossing the floor. In these circumstances, it is neither irrational to cross the floor, nor irrational not to cross the floor: for, without a more precise probability judgment—and more precise information about the magnitudes of the values involved—there is no verdict that practical reason can offer.

The idea, that we suggested that the inference from (5) to (6) is blocked by our inability to assign likelihood to the truth of the proposition that the floorboards are rotten, is a figment of the imaginations of Bergmann and Rea (as is the idea that we intended to draw an *analogy* between this suggestion and the sceptical theist response to evidential arguments from evil). Perhaps it will suffice for us to point out that, in the nature of the case, we do have *pro tanto* reason to step onto the floor, and *pro tanto* reason not to step onto the floor (desire to cross the floor, and desire not to die, respectively). The problem is that, without a probability judgment, we have no way of weighting these reasons in order to arrive at an all-things-considered verdict about whether to cross the floor.

4

One final point that we would like to insist on is that there is some fuzziness in the way that Bergmann and Rae characterise the target of our critique. On our view, sceptical theists have two commitments. First, they are committed to the truth of ST1-ST3. Second, they are committed to the claim that the truth of ST1-ST3 is alone sufficient to undermine the key *noseeum* inferences in evidential arguments from evil. Our attack is on the conjunction of these two views.² What we claim is that, if the truth of ST1-ST3 is sufficient to undermine the key *noseeum* inferences in evidential arguments from evil, then the truth of ST1-ST3 is sufficient to undermine key *noseeum* inferences that are required in the rational reconstruction of ordinary moral reasoning. Consequently, despite the claims of Bergmann and Rae to the contrary, we are not committed to the denial of the claim that the conjunction of ST1-ST3 is a moderate and sane scepticism concerning our abilities to discover facts about goods and evils. However, we are committed to the claim that, if it is true that the conjunction of ST1-ST3 is a moderate and sane scepticism

concerning our abilities to discover facts about goods and evils, then the truth of ST1-ST3 is not sufficient to undermine the key *noseeum* inferences in evidential arguments from evil. (Of course, the suppressed premise here is that, if it is true that the conjunction of ST1-ST3 is a moderate and sane scepticism concerning our abilities to discover facts about goods and evils, then the truth of ST1-ST3 is plainly not sufficient to undermine the key *noseeum* inferences that are required in the rational reconstruction of ordinary moral reasoning.)

In their assessment of where exactly there is disagreement between us, Bergmann and Rae identify the following “inconsistent triad of claims” that one might make about a person S who is in a situation in which she can easily prevent some terrible evil E:

1. S reasonably believes that S ought to prevent E.
2. S is unable sensibly to assign any probability to any of the following three propositions:
 - (a) S’s permitting that terrible evil E will produce some outweighing good or prevent some worse evil;
 - (b) S’s permitting that terrible evil E (or something as bad) is *required* to produce some outweighing good or prevent some worse evil;
 - (c) If only S were smarter or better informed, S would be aware of goods the awareness of which would override whatever *prima facie* duties she might have to prevent E.
3. S reasonably believes that S ought to prevent E only if S can sensibly assign a low probability to Q1, Q2, or Q3.

They then claim that, in cases in which we all agree that 1. is true, they accept 2. and reject 3., whereas we accept 3. and reject 2. We are not convinced that this is the best way to characterise the fundamental ground of disagreement between us. Rather, we would start by emphasising that we disagree about the standing of the following argument:

1. We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially God-justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us; and we have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially God-justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us; and 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 permission of possible evils, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially God-justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us.
2. (Therefore) The following argument:
 - 1a: After thinking hard, we can’t think of any (even) potentially God-justifying reason for permitting some horrific evil
 - 1b: Therefore, it is likely that there is no God-justifying reason for permitting that horrific evil.

should be rejected by all reasonable people.

Bergmann and Rea claim that this is a persuasive argument; we disagree. Moreover, the primary reason that we give for disagreeing is that we think that the above argument is on all fours with the following argument, which we take to be plainly unacceptable:

1. We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially human-justifying reason for permitting preventable evils that we see around us; and we have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially human-justifying reason for permitting the preventable evils that we see around us; and 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 permission of possible evils, relative to the property of figuring in a potentially human-justifying reason for permitting the preventable evils that we see around us.
2. (Therefore) The following argument:
 - 1a: After thinking hard, we can't think of any (even) potentially human-justifying reason for permitting the readily preventable horrific evils that we see around us.
 - 1b: Therefore, it is likely that there is no human-justifying reason for permitting the readily preventable horrific evils that we see around us.
 should be rejected by all reasonable people.

Of course, the reason why we think that *this* argument is unacceptable is that we think that the argument from 1a to 1b. ought not to be rejected by *all* reasonable people. And we think this because we think: (1) that 1b. is needed for ordinary moral reasoning; and (2) that, for *many* reasonable people, there is no justification for 1b. that does not go by way of 1a.

In closing, we emphasise again that the target of our critique is the sceptical theist *argument* for the conclusion that all reasonable people should reject the *noseum* inferences that are found in evidential arguments from evil. We say that this sceptical theist argument fails because it is overly ambitious. While the "G. E. Moore shift" described by Rowe (1979) provides a satisfactory response to evidential arguments from evil on the part of theists, the sceptical theist argument misfires, at least in part, because it *attacks* judgments that it is perfectly reasonable for non-theists to make.

References

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¹ Perhaps it is worth pointing out here that one can consistently maintain that it is very unlikely that there is an all-things-considered reason for one to permit E even though, *for all one knows*, there is an all-things-considered reason for one to permit E.

² See, for example, Almeida and Oppy (2003: 506).