

How *not* to render an explanatory version of the evidential argument from evil immune to skeptical theism

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Abstract Among the things that students of the problem of evil think about is whether explanatory versions of the evidential argument from evil are better than others, better than William Rowe's famous versions of the evidential argument, for example. Some of these students claim that the former are better than the latter in no small part because the former, unlike the latter, avoid the sorts of worries raised by so-called "skeptical theists". Indeed, Trent Dougherty claims to have constructed an explanatory version that is "fundamentally immune to considerations pertaining to skeptical theism". I argue that he has done no such thing.

Keywords Problem of evil · Theism · Atheism · God · Skeptical theism · Trent Dougherty

Among the things that students of the problem of evil think about is whether explanatory versions of the evidential argument from evil are better than others, better than William Rowe's famous versions of the evidential argument, for example.¹ Some of these students claim that the former are better than the latter in no small part because the former, unlike the latter, avoid the sorts of worries raised by so-called "skeptical theists".² We might try to assess this claim in its full generality, but it will prove more fruitful, in my opinion, to assess each explanatory version to see whether it is better on this score. Elsewhere, I argue that Paul Draper's explanatory version is not better.³ Here I argue for the same conclusion for another version, specifically Trent Dougherty's, which lacks any premise according to which suffering is more likely or

¹ See Rowe (1979, 1986, 1988, 1991, 1996, 2003).

² For example, Draper (1992), Draper and Dougherty (2013), and Dougherty (2014).

³ Howard-Snyder, unpublished.

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21 predictable on naturalism than theism, a fact about other explanatory versions that
 22 skeptical theists and their ilk have exploited.⁴ Indeed, not only does Dougherty's ver-
 23 sion have no such premise, it is "fundamentally immune to considerations pertaining
 24 to skeptical theism"—or so he says. Is he right?

25 Here's the relevant passage:

26 Given: The universe seems indifferent to the suffering of sentient beings.

- 27 1. It is known that the hypothesis of indifference predicts the data of an appar-
 28 ently indifferent universe.
- 29 2. It is unknown whether the hypothesis of theism predicts the data.
- 30 3. The hypotheses have approximately equal prior probabilities [that is, equal
 31 chance of being true before considering observational evidence].
- 32 4. Therefore, the data confirm the hypothesis of indifference and not the hypoth-
 33 esis of theism.

34 Here is how the argument works. Imagine a pair of scales in which we are
 35 weighing evidence concerning theism and atheism. One side of the scales is
 36 labeled "Theism" and the other side is labeled "Hypothesis of Indifference."
 37 Premise 3 says the scales are at first even. Premise 2 says that there is nothing
 38 to put on the scale marked "Theism." Premise 1 says that there is something
 39 to put on the scale marked "Hypothesis of Indifference." The conclusion says
 40 that after we have weighed the evidence, the scales tip to the side labeled
 41 "Hypothesis of Indifference."

42 Not only does this argument not make a noseum inference, it doesn't
 43 assign any probability at all to observed evils given theism. So this version
 44 seems to be fundamentally immune to considerations pertaining to skeptical
 45 theism, except insofar as they can be brought to bear on premise 3.⁵

46 What should we make of this argument and its informal commentary? I'll categorize
 47 my answer to this question under two headings: the data and the argument.

48 But first a remark about "the Hypothesis of Indifference" (HI). Dougherty never tells
 49 us what it is. Many of us, however, will recognize it from Draper's work, where it is used
 50 to refer to the hypothesis that "neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings
 51 on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by nonhuman
 52 persons".⁶ Presumably Dougherty has the same thing in mind.

53 The data

54 We are told that it is "given" that "The universe seems indifferent to the suffering of
 55 sentient beings." What does that mean? We can give this sentence a *de re* reading
 56 and a *de dicto* reading. On the *de re* reading, there is an *x* such that *x* is numerically
 57 identical with the universe and *x* has the property of seeming indifferent to the suffer-
 58 ing of sentient beings. On the *de dicto* reading, there is a proposition, the proposition

⁴ See, e.g., Bergmann (2009) and Howard-Snyder, unpublished.

⁵ Dougherty (2014, Sect. 6.3).

⁶ Draper (1989, p. 13).

59 that the universe is indifferent to the suffering of sentient beings, and that proposition
 60 has the property of seeming to be true. My purposes will be served on either reading
 61 since what I have to say can be said about both, *mutatis mutandis*. I choose the *de*
 62 *dicto* reading. Notice that, on the *de dicto* reading, we are told that what's "given"
 63 as our "data" is that (i) there is a certain proposition—the proposition that the uni-
 64 verse is indifferent to the suffering of sentient beings—and (ii) that proposition has
 65 the property of seeming to be true. Call this conjunction the *data proposition* and
 66 call the proposition brought to our attention in the first conjunct the *core proposi-*
 67 *tion*.

68 Now focus on the core proposition, the proposition that the universe *is* indifferent
 69 to the suffering of sentient beings. Notice two things about it. First, it presupposes that
 70 there is something that answers to "the universe" and, second, it attributes a mental
 71 state to it, the state of indifference. Some of us, impressed by the unsettled state of
 72 theorizing about the metaphysics of parts and wholes, might well wonder whether
 73 there is anything that answers to "the universe". But even those of us who have no
 74 such qualms will insist that it is unwise to ascribe a mental state to the universe. After
 75 all, the universe is an inanimate object and, as a matter of necessity, inanimate objects
 76 lack mental states. Taken strictly and literally, it's going to be a hard sell that the core
 77 proposition has the property of seeming to be true.

78 *Diagnosis* Dougherty is speaking metaphorically. He doesn't really mean to draw
 79 our attention to the proposition that there is a universe that has a certain mental state,
 80 the state of indifference. What he means to draw our attention to is a proposition
 81 that is much less contentious, e.g., that sentient beings on earth suffer in a variety of
 82 ways without need or benefit, or something like that. Although this is a significant
 83 improvement, in what follows I will use the proffered metaphorical expression of the
 84 core proposition.

85 So we have the core proposition and a claim about it: that it seems to be true, that it
 86 has the property of seeming to be true. Here we need to slow down. Do we *really* want
 87 to say that the core proposition has the property of seeming to be true? How could
 88 we tell such a thing? More importantly, what is that property, the property of seeming
 89 to be true, which the proponent of the argument—call her *Athea*—says that the core
 90 proposition has?

91 Here we would do well to remember that there's a world of difference between
 92 saying something of the form "p seems *to me* to be true" or "it seems *to me* that p" and
 93 saying something of the form "*p* seems to be true" or "it seems that *p*". Whether any
 94 particular utterance by me of the former pair is true is a matter of how things stand
 95 with respect to *me*, e.g., whether I am in a seeming state toward p when I consider
 96 it. Whether any particular utterance of the latter pair is true, however, is not a matter
 97 of how things stand with respect to me (or you, for that matter). Rather, it is more
 98 a matter of how things stand with respect to *p itself*. We meet a peculiar resident at
 99 the local psychiatric ward who claims to be Cleopatra. No doubt it seems *to her* that
 100 she is Cleopatra, no doubt that proposition seems to be true to her. But should we
 101 infer that the proposition that she is Cleopatra, *the proposition itself*, thereby has the
 102 property of seeming to be true? Surely not. The same goes for *Athea*. The proposition
 103 that the universe is indifferent seems to her to be true. But it hardly follows that that
 104 proposition has the property of seeming to be true. If ever there was a fallacy, the

105 overreaching seemer's fallacy is one: "p seems *to me* to be true, so *p* seems to be true"
 106 or "it seems *to me* that p, so it seems that *p*". So what is this property of p, the property
 107 of its seeming that *p*, if it isn't the property of its seeming *to me* that p?

108 Although *simpliciter* seemingness isn't the same property as to-me-seemingness, as
 109 we might call them, presumably the former is not completely unrelated to the seeming
 110 states of such persons as there may be. Suppose there were no persons, and so there
 111 was no one with respect to which any proposition seemed any way. In that case, would
 112 some proposition still seem to be true, would some proposition have the property of
 113 *simpliciter* seemingness? I suspect not. If that's right, then whether or not a proposition
 114 p has that property is not completely a matter of how things stand with respect to p
 115 itself, without reference to the seeming states of anyone.

116 Are there any propositions that paradigmatically count as having the property of
 117 *simpliciter* seemingness? Consider the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$, or the proposition
 118 that *everything red is colored*, or the conditional corresponding to *modus tollens*. If
 119 any proposition has the property of *simpliciter* seemingness, the property of seeming
 120 to be true, these do. So then, suppose they do, and suppose their having *simpliciter*
 121 seemingness is a matter of their seeming true to some people or other.

122 *But which people?* That's a surprisingly difficult question to answer. In virtue of
 123 which people, and what proportion of them, is any particular proposition such that
 124 it—the proposition itself—has the property of seeming to be true, the property of
 125 *simpliciter* seemingness? Call this the "reference class problem".

126 Let's think very briefly about some solutions. They fall into two mutually exclu-
 127 sive and jointly exhaustive classes: (i) the property a proposition has when it seems
 128 *simpliciter* to be true is identical with or otherwise closely related to the property of
 129 its seeming to be true to everyone who considers it, and (ii) the property a proposition
 130 has when it seems *simpliciter* to be true is identical with or otherwise closely related
 131 to the property of its seeming to be true to some but not all people who consider it.

132 The problem with *the everyone solution*, as we might call it, is that it's false. Some
 133 people who consider at least some of our paradigms are just, well, screwed up. There's
 134 no nice way to put it. Either they don't understand them when they consider them or they
 135 understand them but they "just don't get it," as they say. More importantly for present
 136 purposes, even if our paradigms were such that they seemed to be true to everyone
 137 who considered them, that wouldn't help Athea. That's because it is false that the core
 138 proposition—the proposition that the universe is indifferent to the suffering of sentient
 139 beings—seems to be true to everyone who considers it. For example, it doesn't seem
 140 to be true to me when I consider it. And I'm not alone. It doesn't seem to be true to
 141 many people when they consider it, especially many students of the problem of evil.
 142 So on the everyone solution to the reference class problem, the data proposition is
 143 false.

144 What about the alternative, *the some-but-not-all-people solution*? The problem with
 145 it is that it is enormously difficult to say which people, and what proportion of them,
 146 count, and to say so in a way that does not smack of arbitrariness. We can see this
 147 especially in the case we are concerned with. Athea must specify just which people
 148 count, and which don't, and explain why her specification is correct. Of course, it
 149 would be arbitrary in the extreme for her to answer that the only people who count are
 150 those to whom the core proposition in fact seems to be true. So there must be some

151 other way, some non-arbitrary way to identify a population whose seeming states are
 152 the relevant ones, relevant to the question of how we are to understand what, exactly,
 153 this property of *simpliciter* seemingness is supposed to be. Has anyone discovered
 154 such a way? Of course not. Any such population is a pipedream. But just to pursue
 155 the matter a little further, suppose we do find some non-arbitrary way to identify our
 156 pipedream population, and suppose we poll them for the seemers and the no-seemers.
 157 (Note well: the no-seemers need not be those to whom the core proposition seems
 158 false. I would think that, typically, the no-seemers will be those who *lack* a pro-
 159 seeming state when they consider the core proposition, which is not the same thing as
 160 its seeming to them that it's false.) Suppose the seemers achieve a simple majority—by
 161 one. Well then, on the principle that a simple majority wins, the core proposition—the
 162 proposition that the universe is indifferent to the suffering of sentient beings—has the
 163 property of *simpliciter* seemingness: it seems to be true. But now imagine that two of
 164 the seemers die in an auto accident. Then the no-seemers have a majority by one. Has
 165 the core proposition just lost the property of *simpliciter* seemingness? Or imagine that
 166 whenever the no-seemers discover that the seemers have a majority, they knock off
 167 just enough seemers to make the core proposition lose that property. Does the core
 168 proposition keep gaining and losing the property of *simpliciter* seemingness? Perhaps
 169 the simple majority principle isn't the right one. Perhaps there's another principle, for
 170 example the two-thirds majority principle. But why prefer it? For that matter, why
 171 prefer any of them? Doesn't it all seem just a little...arbitrary? More importantly, is
 172 this really the sort of reflection and concern that Dougherty wants us to bring to a
 173 consideration of the data of his explanatory version of the evidential argument from
 174 evil?

175 Of course, it might be that when Athea informs us that “The universe seems indif-
 176 ferent to the suffering of sentient beings” she means to say neither more nor less than
 177 that “The universe seems *to me—Athea—to be indifferent to the suffering of sentient*
 178 *being*”. Suppose that's true. Then we have an explanatory version of the argument from
 179 evil for atheism that takes as its datum, as what's “given,” that it seems to Athea that the
 180 universe is indifferent to the suffering of sentient beings, that the core proposition—
 181 that the universe is indifferent to the suffering of sentient beings—has the property of
 182 *seeming to be true to Athea*. While some people may find this datum to be compelling
 183 evidence to think that there is no God, I have a difficult time getting jazzed up about it.

184 *Upshot* Athea informs us that it is “given” that “The universe seems indifferent to
 185 the suffering of sentient beings”. However, it's difficult to know what she's proposing
 186 as “given”. It can't be that it seems that an inanimate object, the universe, has a mental
 187 state, the state of indifference. But when we turn to something less contentious, we're
 188 left with the overreaching seemer's fallacy or the reference class problem or something
 189 of relatively little interest. So what's the “data”? What's “given”?

190 Of course, if what's given is simply the core proposition—i.e., the proposition that
 191 the universe is indifferent to the suffering of sentient beings—and not the additional
 192 claim that that proposition seems to be true, then we won't have any difficulties of the
 193 sort I've just been surveying. But if we go this route, then it becomes very important
 194 to know what non-metaphorical proposition, exactly, is “given”. If it is the proposition
 195 that sentient beings on earth suffer in a variety of ways without need or benefit, we
 196 might well wish to ask “Without need for what? And, without benefit for whom?”

197 If the answer is “Without need for anyone’s good, and without benefit to anyone,”
 198 we might well then ask, “Why do you suppose that sentient beings on earth suffer
 199 in a variety of ways without need for anyone’s good or benefit to anyone?” If the
 200 answer is “Because we can’t think of any good for which it is needed and we can’t
 201 think of any benefit for anyone,” then we will not have been given an argument that is
 202 “fundamentally immune to considerations pertaining to skeptical theism”.

203 I propose to pretend in what follows that we know what data is given. Now let’s
 204 inspect the argument itself, with Dougherty’s claim in mind: that the argument he
 205 states is “fundamentally immune to considerations pertaining to skeptical theism”.
 206 (The qualification “except insofar as they can be brought to bear on premise 3” need
 207 not concern us.)

208 The argument

209 There are three points to make about Dougherty’s argument in relation to his claim.

210 First, (4) does not follow from premises (1) to (3). According to Athea, the data
 211 confirm HI but not theism since, given equal priors, it is known that HI predicts the
 212 data and it is unknown whether theism predicts it. That’s a *non-sequitur*. At best, all
 213 that follows is

214 4’. The data confirm HI and it is unknown whether the data confirm theism.

215 Notably, at least some of those who are attuned to “considerations pertaining to skept-
 216 ical theism” will warmly embrace (4’). Indeed, this is exactly the sort of thing the
 217 skeptical theist might say, not to mention her friends the skeptical atheist and the
 218 skeptical agnostic.

219 In order to avoid the *non-sequitur* and the warmly embracable (4’), we must add a
 220 premise to Dougherty’s argument. Perhaps this will do: it is known that theism does
 221 not predict the data. Or perhaps this: theism does not predict the data. I’m not sure
 222 which to add, but add we must lest our interest in Dougherty’s argument turns to dust.

223 Let’s mention both of them and leave it up to Athea which she would prefer:

224 2.5 (It is known that) theism does not predict the data.

225 Second, in the first paragraph of the informal commentary Dougherty uses the scale
 226 metaphor to tell us “how the argument works”. There we read this sentence: “Premise
 227 2 says that there is nothing to put on the scale marked ‘Theism.’” This sentence is
 228 false. That’s because premise (2) in the argument states “2. It is unknown whether the
 229 hypothesis of theism predicts the data” and, if we aim to translate (2) into the terms
 230 of the scale metaphor, we should say “Premise (2) says that it is unknown whether
 231 there is anything to put on the scale marked ‘Theism,’” and not what Dougherty says.
 232 Of course, when we dwell a moment on this better translation of premise (2), we will
 233 want to ask “Unknown to whom?,” the answer to which can only be “us,” in which case
 234 the best translation of (2) in the terms of the scale metaphor is “It is unknown to us
 235 whether there is anything to put on the scale marked ‘Theism’”. Now, I submit that it’s
 236 pretty close to obvious that the way to translate premise (2) of Dougherty’s argument is
 237 not “There is nothing to put on the scale marked ‘Theism’” but rather “It is unknown
 238 to us whether there is anything to put on the scale marked ‘Theism’”. How could

239 someone confuse the former for the latter? Well, if one were unconsciously drawing
 240 the inference “It is unknown to us whether there is anything to put on the scale marked
 241 ‘Theism’; therefore, there is nothing to put on the scale marked ‘Theism’,” one might
 242 engage in that confusion. Indeed, it’s difficult not to see in the informal commentary an
 243 implicit noseum inference like this. And, as everyone knows, noseum inferences—
 244 whether explicit or implicit—are hardly “fundamentally immune to considerations
 245 pertaining to skeptical theism”.

246 Third, if there is a noseum inference implicit in Dougherty’s informal commentary,
 247 we might well expect to find one implicit in the argument itself, or something close
 248 enough to one so as not to be “fundamentally immune to considerations pertaining
 249 to skeptical theism”. Is our expectation well-founded? Well, the argument explicitly
 250 contains this premise:

251 2. It is unknown [to us] whether the hypothesis of theism predicts the data.

252 And, as we’ve seen, the argument is a *non-sequitur* unless we charitably add premise
 253 (2.5):

254 2.5 (It is known that) the hypothesis of theism does not predict the data.

255 Once we exercise charity, however, we might well ask how these two premises are
 256 related to each other. Do they just show up in the argument side-by-side, having nothing
 257 to do with each other? Surely not. Surely the thrust of thought here requires a closer
 258 connection than that. Surely it requires that the latter is inferred from the former. Thus,
 259 a more perspicuous expression of Dougherty’s explanatory version of the evidential
 260 argument from evil goes as follows:

261 1. It is known that HI predicts the data of an apparently indifferent universe.

262 2. It is unknown [to us] whether theism predicts the data.

263 2.5 **Therefore, (it is known that) theism does not predict the data.** (2.5)

264 3. The hypotheses have approximately equal prior probabilities.

265 4. Therefore, the data confirm HI and not theism. (1, 2.5, 3)

266 And, clearly enough, the inference from (2) to (2.5) is not “fundamentally immune to
 267 considerations pertaining to skeptical theism”.

268 After all, one might well wonder on the basis of considerations pertaining to skept-
 269 ical theism whether, grounds for belief in God aside, it would be unknown to us
 270 whether theism predicts the data or exactly how it predicts the data, if it did predict it.
 271 Moreover, one might well wonder on the basis of considerations pertaining to skept-
 272 ical theism whether (i) the move from “Theism has the property of being unknown
 273 by us to predict the data” to “Theism has the property of not predicting the data” is
 274 reasonable, or whether (ii) the move from “Theism has the property of being unknown
 275 by us to predict the data” to “Theism has the property of being known by us not to
 276 predict the data” is reasonable. Furthermore, one might well point out that theism does
 277 not predict that the universe seems indifferent to the suffering of sentient beings only
 278 if there is no good or other reason that would justify God in permitting the universe to
 279 seem indifferent to the suffering of sentient beings—an obvious implication that we
 280 must not be in doubt about if we are to reasonably infer that theism does not predict
 281 the data. In that case, one might naturally wonder why we should believe that there is

no such good or other reason. The fact that the argument or its informal commentary already invites us to move easily from the unknown to the known strongly suggests that lurking here is another such invitation, to move easily from “we don’t know of any such good or other reason” to “there is no such good or reason”—which is hardly “fundamentally immune to considerations pertaining to skeptical theism”.

It may well be that one day someone will come up with an explanatory version of the evidential argument from evil that is “fundamentally immune to considerations pertaining to skeptical theism”. This much is clear, however: if Dougherty’s argument is any indication of the prospects for such an argument, that day is a long way off.⁷

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