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On what god would do

Rob Lovering

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Abstract Many debates in the philosophy of religion, particularly arguments for and against the existence of God, depend on a claim or set of claims about what God—qua sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being—*would do*, either directly or indirectly, in particular cases or in general. Accordingly, before these debates can be resolved we must first settle the more fundamental issue of whether we can know, or at least have justified belief about, what God would do. In this paper, I lay out the possible positions on the issue of whether we can know what God would do, positions I refer to as Broad Skeptical Theism, Broad Epistemic Theism, and Narrow Skeptical Theism. I then examine the implications of each of these views and argue that each presents serious problems for theism.

Keywords God · Skeptical theism · Evidential argument from evil · Broad Skeptical Theism · Broad Epistemic Theism · Narrow Skeptical Theism · Intrinsic dependence · Extrinsic dependence

Introduction

Many debates in the philosophy of religion, particularly arguments for and against the existence of God, depend on a claim or set of claims about what God—qua sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being—*would do*, either directly or indirectly, in particular cases or in general. Examples of such debates include the following:

- whether God would allow this or that natural evil to exist (direct and particular),
- whether God would allow any natural evil whatsoever to exist (direct and general),

R. Lovering (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA 95053, USA
e-mail: rlovering@scu.edu

- whether God would allow this or that moral evil to exist by allowing free creatures to exist (indirect and particular),
- whether God would allow any moral evil whatsoever to exist by allowing free creatures to exist (indirect and general).

(Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, I will write simply of what God would do without explicitly distinguishing between what God would do, directly or indirectly, in particular cases or in general.)

Indeed, theists and atheists alike have developed arguments that depend on a claim or set of claims about what God would do. For example, theist Robin Collins has developed an argument for the existence of an intelligent designer which depends on the claim that God would create a fine-tuned universe containing a world that could support intelligent life. William Lane Craig has developed an argument for the existence of God which depends on the claim that God would cause a universe to be. Atheist William Rowe has developed an argument for the nonexistence of God which depends on the claim that God would not allow horrendous—and thereby seemingly pointless—evils. And atheist J. L. Schellenberg has likewise developed an argument for the nonexistence of God which depends on the claim that God would make his existence more obvious to those who seek him in sincerity.[1]

Of course, the list of arguments which depend on a claim or set of claims about what God would do could go on indefinitely. But what's particularly noteworthy is that, despite the fact that theists and atheists tend to disagree about what God would do, either in particular cases or in general, they seem to agree on this: that we can know, or at least have justified belief about, what God would do.

Or do they? Take the so-called skeptical theists, theists (predominantly Judeo-Christian) who doubt that we can know what God would do in some cases, particularly those involving horrendous evils. Specifically, skeptical theists hold that the evidential argument from evil—an argument for the nonexistence of God based on the variety and profusion of evil in the world—"suffer[s] from the defect of presupposing certain claims to be true that are either false or not shown to be true."[2]

Consider, for example, William Rowe's version of the evidential argument from evil:

P1: Probably, there are pointless evils.
P2: If God exists, there are no pointless evils.
C: Probably, God does not exist.[3]

The point of contention between the likes of Rowe, on the one hand, and skeptical theists, on the other, lies with P1, since both proponents of the evidential argument from evil and skeptical theists agree that God would not allow evils to be pointless. Proponents of the evidential argument from evil hold that at least some evils are pointless, that is, the sorts of evil that God would not allow—hence, P1. While in reply, skeptical theists hold that P1 has not been shown to be true. In a remark that epitomizes

[1] See Collins (1998, pp. 47–75); Craig (2003, pp. 24–29); Rowe (2003, pp. 186–192); Schellenberg (1993).

[2] Rowe (2007, p. 121).

[3] Rowe (2007, p. 120).

skeptical theists' position on the evidential argument from evil, Daniel Howard-Snyder claims that considerations about our cognitive limitations "constitute a good reason to be in doubt about whether it is highly likely that we would see a reason that would justify God in permitting so much evil if there were a reason."[4]

With this in mind, one can see that at the core of the debate on the evidential argument from evil is the question: Is this or that horrendous evil pointless? That is: Is this or that horrendous evil the sort of evil *that God would not allow?* Skeptical theists hold that we cannot know whether this or that horrendous evil is of the sort that God would not allow since, due to cognitive limitations, we cannot know whether this or that horrendous evil is evil *all things considered*. Skeptical theists, then, do *not* agree that we can know what God would do, at least with respect to cases involving horrendous evil.

But, as Graham Oppy has argued, skeptical theism introduces a tension for Judeo-Christian theists. He writes:

> So, what's it to be? Should we be confident that we can have insight into the reasons of the being described in the core claims of Christianity or not? If a nonbeliever is expected to accept that we have no idea whether it is likely that we'd see a reason justifying God in permitting horrendous evil, why on earth would you expect a nonbeliever to accept that we can see perfectly well that it is likely that we'd see a reason justifying God in creating a fine-tuned universe? Perhaps we nonbelievers might agree with Collins that the fact that it is good for intelligent, conscious beings to exist would provide God with a *pro tanto* … reason to create a world that could support intelligent life, just as we can surely insist that the fact that certain actions and events are horrendous evils would provide God with a *pro tanto* reason to prevent them. But why should we nonbelievers think that there is reason to have confidence about the move to an all-things-considered judgment in only one of these cases?

He continues:

> [William C.] Davis argues that "when all of the features of the world calling for explanation are taken together … the compelling verdict is that the world is much more the way one would have expected it to be given God's existence than it would have been if metaphysical naturalism were true." But, again, if we are to follow Howard-Snyder in accepting that we have good reason to be in doubt about whether it is highly likely that we would see all-things-considered reason that justifies God in permitting so much evil, why should we be prepared to follow Davis in supposing that we have no good reason to be in doubt about whether it is highly likely that we would see all-things-considered reason that justifies God in making a world like ours? Howard-Snyder clearly thinks that nonbelievers should concede that they are not well-placed to make judgments about what an omniscient and perfectly good being would permit (by way of horrendous evil); and Davis clearly thinks that nonbelievers should allow that they are well-enough placed to make judgments about the kind of universe that

[4] Howard-Snyder (1998, p. 112).

> an omniscient and perfectly good being would create. I do not think that *any* Christian apologists can reasonably expect to have it both ways here.[5]

In addition to his central contention—that Christian apologists cannot reasonably expect to have it both ways here—Oppy's remarks suggest the following: that, with regard to debates that depend on a claim or set of claims about what God would do, before they can be resolved we must first settle the more fundamental issue of whether we[6] can know what God would do, either in particular cases or in general. For if we cannot know what God would do, then we cannot know whether God would create a fine-tuned universe, allow horrendous evils, cause a universe to be, make his existence more obvious to those who seek him in sincerity, and so on. And if we cannot know these things, then the arguments for and against God's existence that depend on these claims fail. All that to say, until this more fundamental issue is settled, arguments for and against God's existence that depend on a claim or set of claims about what God would do are, for all intents and purposes, sound and fury signifying nothing.

In what follows, I lay out the possible positions on the issue of whether we can know what God would do as well as their implications. Specifically, I contend that, with regard to whether we can know what God would do, three views exhaust the possibilities:

(1) Broad Skeptical Theism: The view that, in every case, we cannot know what God would do.
(2) Broad Epistemic Theism: The view that, in every case, we can know what God would do.
(3) Narrow Skeptical Theism: The view that, in some cases, we can know what God would do and, in some cases, we cannot.

I then examine the implications of each of these views and argue that each presents serious problems for theism. Specifically, I contend the following:

(a) Given Broad Skeptical Theism, theists must relinquish every positive argument for God's existence, since every positive argument for God's existence depends on a claim about what God would do.
(b) Given Broad Epistemic Theism, theists lose the principal grounds on which they reject P1 (above)—that, probably, there are pointless evils. Thus, unless theists come up with a new, plausible objection to P1, they are left staking their case against the evidential argument from evil on positive arguments for God's existence.

[5] Oppy, review of *Reason for the hope within*, http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/graham_oppy/hope-within.html.

[6] Following Oppy, by "we" I mean to include both theists and non-theists. After all, theists and non-theists present these arguments *to each other* in an attempt to settle the issue of God's existence, not simply to give autobiographical reports to each other regarding what they happen to believe. Given this, what would be the point—dialectically or epistemically speaking—of presenting arguments for God's existence that depend on a claim about what God would do if theists did *not* assume that non-theists can know what God would do? Likewise, what would be the point of presenting arguments for the nonexistence of God that depend on a claim about what God would do if non-theists did *not* assume that theists can know what God would do? I can't think of one, at least, not one that is philosophically interesting.

(c) Given Narrow Skeptical Theism, until theists provide a principled distinction between those cases in which we can know what God would do and those cases in which we cannot, Narrow Skeptical Theism is, at bottom, *ad hoc*.

On whether we can know what god would do

Implications of Broad Skeptical Theism

As stated previously, Broad Skeptical Theism is the view that, in every case, we cannot know what God would do. Embracing Broad Skeptical Theism would cost theists dearly, for in doing so, they would thereby relinquish every positive argument for God's existence, or so I shall argue. Specifically, I shall argue that every positive argument for God's existence depends on at least one claim about what God would do. Thus, if we cannot know what God would do à la Broad Skeptical Theism, then we cannot know that God exists on the basis of positive arguments for his existence.

There are, I submit, two ways in which a positive argument for God's existence can depend on a claim about what God would do: intrinsically and extrinsically.

Intrinsic dependence

A positive argument for God's existence depends *intrinsically* on a claim about what God would do if a claim about what God would do may be derived from it, either immediately or after one or both of the following conceptual claims (stated formally) are added to the original argument:

> Conceptual Claim 1 (CC1): If God exists and X exists or is the case, then God allows X to exist or to be the case. (Or, in reference to the past: If God exists and X existed or was the case, then God allowed X to exist or to be the case.)

> Conceptual Claim 2 (CC2): If God allows X to exist or to be the case, then God would allow X to exist or to be the case. (Or, in reference to the past: If God allowed X to exist or to be the case, then God would allow X to exist or to be the case.)

By referring to these as conceptual claims, I'm simply trying to convey that they are true in virtue of their constitutive concepts. Regarding CC1, recall that by "God" we mean a sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient being; one who, as such, serves as the final arbiter of what things exist or are the case, at least with respect to logically possible things. Accordingly, if God exists and, say, green cars exist, then God allows green cars to exist. (Or, if God exists and it was the case that dinosaurs existed, then God allowed it to be the case that dinosaurs existed.) So understood, one can see how CC1 is true simply in virtue of its constitutive concepts.

Regarding CC2, as one can see, the "would" in this claim is used in the main clause of a conditional statement to express, in this case, a likelihood. Given CC2, then, if God allows, say, cats to exist, then God would allow cats to exist, i.e., then it's likely that God allows cats to exist. More specifically, if the likelihood of God allowing cats

to exist is 1, then the likelihood of God allowing cats to exist is greater than 0.5. So understood, one can see how CC2 is true simply in virtue of its constitutive concepts.

An example of a positive argument for God's existence that depends intrinsically on a claim about what God would do is as follows:

P1: If some cars are green, then God exists.
P2: Some cars are green.
C1: Therefore, God exists.

From P1 – C1 one may derive the following:

C2: God exists and some cars are green. (From P2 and C1)

To P1 – C2 one may add:

P3: If God exists and some cars are green, then God allows some cars to be green. (CC1)

Given P3, then, one may derive:

C3: God allows some cars to be green. (From C2 and P3)

To P1 – C3 one may add:

P4: If God allows some cars to be green, then God would allow some cars to be green. (CC2)

Given P4, then, one may derive:

C4: God would allow some cars to be green. (From C3 and P4)

A claim about what God would do, then, may be derived from the original argument (P1 – C1) after CC1 and CC2 are added to it. Accordingly, the original argument depends intrinsically on a claim about what God would do.

Extrinsic dependence

A positive argument for God's existence depends *extrinsically* on a claim about what God would do, on the other hand, if a claim about what God would do may be derived from it after adding to it the following intelligibility claim (stated formally) as well as one or more of the preceding conceptual claims (CC1 and CC2):

Intelligibility Claim (IC): We understand argument A (with "A" referring to the argument in question).

An example of a positive argument for God's existence that depends *extrinsically* on a claim about what God would do is as follows:

P1: If God is perfect, then God exists.
P2: God is perfect.
C1: Therefore, God exists.

To P1 – C1 one may add the intelligibility claim:

P3: We understand P1 – C1. (IC)

From P1 – P3 one may derive:

C2: God exists and we understand P1 – C1. (From C1 and P3)

To P1 – C2 one may add:

P4: If God exists and we understand P1 – C1, then God allows us to understand P1 – C1. (CC1)

Given P4, one may then derive:

C3: God allows us to understand P1 – C1. (From C2 and P4)

To P1 – C3 one may add:

P5: If God allows us to understand P1 – C1, the God would allow us to understand P1 – C1. (CC2)

Given P5, one may then derive:

C4: God would allow us to understand P1 – C1. (From C3 and P5)

A claim about what God would do, then, may be derived from the original argument (P1 – C1) after IC, CC1, and CC2 are added to it. Accordingly, the original argument depends extrinsically on a claim about what God would do.

Intrinsic and extrinsic dependence: historical arguments

Having covered the difference between an argument's intrinsic and extrinsic dependence on a claim about what God would do, let us first examine historical positive arguments for God's existence that depend *intrinsically* on a claim about what God would do. For practical purposes, I will restrict this examination to three historical positive arguments for God's existence: the teleological, cosmological, and ontological arguments. (For an examination of arguments beyond these three, see footnote 11.) There are, of course, numerous versions of the teleological, cosmological, and ontological arguments. Again, for practical purposes, I will consider only one version of each, assuming that the claims I make about them that may be made about the other versions as well.

Consider, first, the following version of the teleological argument:

P1: Machines are produced by intelligent design.
P2: The universe resembles a machine.
C1: Probably, the universe was produced by intelligent design.
P3: Probably, God is the intelligent designer of the universe, i.e., probably, God designed the universe.
C2: Probably, God exists.[7]

[7] P1 – C1 are taken from Rowe (2007, p. 55).

From P1 – C2 one may derive the following:

C3: Probably, God exists and, probably, God designed the universe. (From P3 and C2)
P4: If, probably, God exists and, probably, God designed the universe, then, probably, God allowed the universe to be designed. (CC1)
C4: Probably, God allowed the universe to be designed. (From C3 and P4)
P5: If, probably, God allowed the universe to be designed, then, probably, God would allow the universe to be designed. (CC2)
C4: Probably, God would allow the universe to be designed. (From C4 and P5)

Since a claim about what God would do may be derived from this version of the teleological argument after adding CC1 and CC2 to it, this version of the teleological argument depends intrinsically on a claim about what God would do.

Consider, next, the following version of the cosmological argument:

P1: There exist things that are caused to be.
P2: Nothing that is caused to be can be the cause of itself.
P3: There cannot be an infinite regress of causes.
C1: Therefore, there exists an uncaused first cause.
P4: Probably, God is the uncaused first cause, i.e., probably, God caused the universe to be.
C2: Probably, God exists.[8]

From P1 – C2 one may derive the following:

C3: Probably, God exists and, probably, God caused the universe to be. (From P4 and C2)
P5: If, probably, God exists and, probably, God caused the universe to be, then, probably, God allowed the universe to be caused to be. (CC1)
C4: Probably, God allowed the universe to be caused to be. (From C3 and P5)
P6: If, probably, God allowed the universe to be caused to be, then, probably, God would allow the universe to be caused to be. (CC2)
C5: Probably, God would allow the universe to be caused to be. (From C4 and P6)

As with the teleological argument above, since a claim about what God would do may be derived from this version of the cosmological argument after adding CC1 and CC2 to it, this version of the cosmological argument depends intrinsically on a claim about what God would do.

Finally, consider the following version of the ontological argument:

P1: God exists in the understanding.
P2: God might have existed in reality.
P3: If something exists only in the understanding and might have existed in reality, then it might have been greater than it is.
P4: Suppose God exists only in the understanding.

[8] This is a modified version of an argument presented by Pojman (2003, p. 2).

C1: God might have been greater than he is.
C2: God is a being than which a greater is possible.
C3: The being than which none greater is possible is a being than which a greater is possible.
C4: It is false that God exists only in the understanding.
C5: God exists in reality as well as the understanding.[9]

From P1 – C5 one may derive the following:

P5: If God exists in reality as well as the understanding, then God allows himself to exist in the understanding. (CC1)
C6: God allows himself to exist in the understanding. (From C5 and P5)
P6: If God allows himself to exist in the understanding, then God would allow himself to exist in the understanding. (CC2)
C7: God would allow himself to exist in the understanding.[10] (From C6 and P6)

As with the preceding arguments, since a claim about what God would do may be derived from this version of the ontological argument after adding CC1 and CC2 to it, this version of the ontological argument depends intrinsically on a claim about what God would do.

And so it goes with numerous other historical positive arguments for God's existence, such as the argument from miracles, the argument from religious experience, and the argument from morality.[11] Many historical positive arguments for God's existence, then, depend intrinsically on a claim about what God would do.

[9] Rowe (2003, pp. 41–42).

[10] Though this may sound odd to some, remember that, presumably, God does not allow himself to exist in the understanding of the vast majority beings, at least, beings of which we are aware (dogs, cats, gorillas, etc.).

[11] Consider, for example, the following version of the argument from miracles:

P1: Extraordinary events occur.
P2: In some cases, these extraordinary events could not have been the result of natural causes.
C1: In such cases, these extraordinary events must have been the result of supernatural causes (i.e., they must have been miracles).
P3: Probably, God causes the extraordinary events that could not have been the result of natural causes.
C2: Probably, God exists.

From P1 – C2 one may derive the following:

C3: Probably, God exists and, probably, God causes the extraordinary events that could not have been the result of natural causes. (From P3 and C2)
P4: If, probably, God exists and, probably, God causes the extraordinary events that could not have been the result of natural causes, then, probably, God allows the extraordinary events that could not have been the result of natural causes to be caused. (CC1)
C4: Probably, God allows the extraordinary events that could not have been the result of natural causes to be caused. (From C3 and P4)
P5: If, probably, God allows the extraordinary events that could not have been the result of natural causes to be caused, then, probably, God would allow the extraordinary events that could not have been the result of natural causes to be caused. (CC2)
C5: Probably, God would allow the extraordinary events that could not have been the result of natural causes to be caused. (From C4 and P5)

Or, consider the following version of the argument from morality:

P1: Moral laws exist.

Of course, not *every* historical positive argument for God's existence depends intrinsically on a claim about what God would do. But every historical positive argument for God's existence depends *extrinsically* on a claim about what God would do. Indeed, the argument employed in my explanation of an argument's extrinsic dependence on a claim about what God would do is a version of the ontological argument. And it's worth mentioning a couple of others. Consider, for example, the following version of the argument from miracles:

P1: Extraordinary events occur.
P2: In some cases, these extraordinary events could not have been the result of natural causes.
C1: In such cases, these extraordinary events must have been the result of supernatural causes (i.e., they must have been miracles).
P3: Probably, God is the cause of extraordinary events that could not have been the result of natural causes.
C2: Probably, God exists.

From P1 – C2 one may derive the following:

P4: We understand P1 – C2. (IC)
C3: Probably, God exists, and we understand P1 – C2. (From C2 and P4)
P5: If, probably, God exists, and we understand P1 – C2, then, probably, God allows us to understand P1 – C2. (CC1)
C4: Probably, God allows us to understand P1 – C2. (From C3 and P5)
P6: If, probably, God allows us to understand P1 – C2, then, probably, God would allow us to understand P1 – C2. (CC2)
C5: Probably, God would allow us to understand P1 – C2. (From C4 and P6)

As one can see, a claim about what God would do may be derived from this version of the argument from miracles after IC, CC1, and CC2 are added to it. Accordingly, this version of the argument from miracles depends extrinsically on a claim about what God would do.

Footnote 11 continued

P2: Moral laws must have been enacted by someone.
P3: Moral laws could not have been enacted by human beings.
C1: Therefore, moral laws must have been enacted by someone other than human beings.
P4: Probably, God has enacted moral laws.
C2: Probably, God exists.

From P1 – C2 one may derive the following:

C3: Probably, God exists and, probably, God has enacted moral laws. (From P4 and C2)
P5: If, probably, God exists and, probably, God has enacted moral laws, then, probably, God allows moral laws to be enacted. (CC1)
C4: Probably, God allows moral laws to be enacted. (From C3 and P5)
P6: If, probably, God allows moral laws to be enacted, then, probably, God would allow moral laws to be enacted. (CC2)
C5: Probably, God would allow moral laws to be enacted. (From C4 and P6)

Rather than continuing to provide examples *ad nauseum*, I will trust that I've made my point.

Consider, also, the following version of the argument from morality:

P1: Moral laws exist.
P2: Moral laws must have been enacted by someone.
P3: Moral laws could not have been enacted by human beings.
C1: Therefore, moral laws must have been enacted by someone other than human beings.
P4: Probably, God is the one who enacted moral laws.
C2: Probably, God exists.

From P1 – C2 one may derive the following:

P4: We understand P1 – C2. (IC)
C3: Probably, God exists, and we understand P1 – C2. (From C2 and P4)
P5: If, probably, God exists, and we understand P1 – C2, then, probably, God allows us to understand P1 – C2. (CC1)
C4: Probably, God allows us to understand P1 – C2. (From C3 and P5)
P6: If, probably, God allows us to understand P1 – C2, then, probably, God would allow us to understand P1 – C2. (CC2)
C5: Probably, God would allow us to understand P1 – C2. (From C4 and P6)

Again, as one can see, a claim about what God would do may be derived from this version of the argument from morality after IC, CC1, and CC2 are added to it. Accordingly, this version of the argument from morality depends extrinsically on a claim about what God would do.

And so it is, presumably, with every other positive argument for God's existence, historical or otherwise. Whether it be the teleological argument, the cosmological argument, the argument from religious experience, or what have you—each and every positive argument for God's existence is such that a claim about what God would do may be derived from it after adding to it IC, CC1, and CC2.

Every positive argument for God's existence, then, depends on a claim about what God would do, either intrinsically, extrinsically, or both. To rebut this, one would have to reject CC1, CC2, or IC. Rejecting CC1 and CC2 would involve rejecting conceptual truths, and rejecting IC would entail that we do not understand any of the positive argument for God's existence. It's unlikely, then, that theists will reject CC1, CC2, or IC. So, bracketing the rejection CC1, CC2, or IC, were theists to embrace Broad Skeptical Theism—the view that, in every case, we cannot know what God would do—they would thereby relinquish every positive argument for God's existence, a costly endeavor indeed.[12]

Implications of Broad Epistemic Theism

Perhaps, then, theists should adopt Broad Epistemic Theism, the view that, in every case, we can know what God would do. Were they to do so, they would avoid relinquishing every positive argument for God's existence as they would have to do if

[12] Of course, this does not pertain to theists who hold that belief in God can be properly basic, such as reformed epistemologists.

they embraced Broad Skeptical Theism. They would, however, have to relinquish something else—something of great value to many theists, I might add—namely, Narrow Skeptical Theism. For to embrace Broad Epistemic Theism is, of course, to reject Narrow Skeptical Theism. And rejecting Narrow Skeptical Theism would cost theists dearly as well, for Narrow Skeptical Theism provides the grounds for their principal objection to the evidential argument from evil. To see this, consider once again Rowe's version of the evidential argument from evil:

P1: Probably, there are pointless evils.
P2: If God exists, there are no pointless evils.
C: Probably, God does not exist.

As stated previously, skeptical theists reject P1. Specifically, theists such as Howard-Snyder contend that P1 depends on what has come to be known as the "noseeum assumption": that, in the case of horrendous evil, we would very likely see or comprehend a greater good, if there were one. In turn, they have rejected the noseeum assumption, embracing in its stead what is being referred to here as Narrow Skeptical Theism. Specifically, theists such as Howard-Snyder have objected that we cannot know whether this or that horrendous evil is the sort of evil that God would not allow since, due to cognitive limitations, we cannot know whether this or that horrendous evil is evil *all things considered*.

But by embracing Broad Epistemic Theism and, in turn, rejecting Narrow Skeptical Theism, theists would no longer have skeptical "for-all-we-know" claims as a way of rejecting the noseeum assumption and, with it, P1. So, without Narrow Skeptical Theism, theists would lose the very grounds on which they reject P1. Moreover, since theists tend to accept P2, without these grounds, not only would the evidential argument from evil succeed, it would do so *by theists' own lights*. At least, the evidential argument from evil would succeed by theists' own lights until either one of two things happens: (1) theists develop a new, plausible objection to P1 or (2) they come up with even *stronger* grounds for believing that God exists.

As far as I know, theists have not done (1)—they have not developed a new, plausible objection to P1. Assuming this is correct, that leaves theists with (2).

Regarding (2), theists would be right to point out that, even without Narrow Skeptical Theism, Rowe's evidential argument from evil can be rebutted. After all, Rowe himself recognizes that—despite the evidential argument from evil—theists may be rationally justified in believing that God exists so long as they have even *stronger* grounds for believing that God exists.[13] As Rowe writes, "To the extent that she has stronger grounds for believing that the theistic God exists than for accepting [P1], the theist, on balance, may have more reason to reject [P1] than she does for accepting it."[14] But this, of course, is not the end of the story. Rowe continues, "However, in the absence of good reasons for believing that the theistic God exists, our study of the evidential form of the problem of evil has led us to the view that we are rationally justified in concluding that probably God does not exist."[15] All this to say, if theists were to accept Broad

[13] Rowe (2007, p. 130).

[14] ibid.

[15] ibid.

Epistemic Theism and, at the same time, successfully rebut the evidential argument from evil, they would need to possess positive reasons for believing that God exists that were strong enough to reject P1. Whether or not such reasons are available to them is a well-trodden topic and will not be settled here. But it is noteworthy that, by embracing Broad Epistemic Theism, theists would be staking their case against the evidential argument from evil on positive reasons for thinking God exists, reasons strong enough to reject P1. And if the history of the philosophy of religion is any indication, coming up with such reasons will prove to be very difficult. Indeed, if such reasons were currently available, our continuing to debate the evidential argument from evil would be, well, pointless.[16]

Implications of Narrow Skeptical Theism

If theists reject both Broad Skeptical Theism and Broad Epistemic Theism, they are left with Narrow Skeptical Theism, the view that, in some cases, we can know what God would do and, in some cases, we cannot. If Narrow Skeptical Theism is to be plausible, however, a reason must be provided for thinking that we can know what God would do in the some cases and not in others—simply declaring this to be the case will not do. And whatever the reason is, it should be rooted in a principled distinction between the cases. Since, to my knowledge, theists have yet to do this, I will attempt to do so for them here, using as touchstones cases mentioned in the introduction, namely, Collins's case regarding a fine-tuned universe and Howard-Snyder's case regarding horrendous evils.

If we are not precluded from knowing what God would do in Collins's case while we are in Howard-Snyder's case, the question is: What is it about the former that allows us to know what God would do, and what is it about the latter that precludes us from knowing what God would do? What's the relevant difference between these two cases which generates the epistemic asymmetry constitutive of Narrow Skeptical Theism?

Well, one apparent difference is that Howard-Snyder's case requires our having knowledge of the correct account (assuming there is one) of when states of affairs are

[16] Whether it would be a pointless *evil* I'll let the reader decide.

A further problem with Broad Epistemic Theism, independent of its implications for the evidential argument from evil debate, is that it entails that we can know much more than theists have traditionally thought we could know, such as whether God would allow, say:

- the Red Sox to win the World Series five years in a row,
- all the world's active volcanoes to erupt at once,
- coffee to be sold at a thousand dollars an ounce,
- another Nazi Holocaust,

or, to play on an infamous philosophical issue,

- more than, say, 100 angels to dance on the head of a pin.

This will likely strike many theists as implausible, I submit, since it renders God far less cognitively superior than theists typically consider him to be. It narrows the gap between his knowledge and our knowledge to an unseemly degree, making God out to be merely the most knowledgeable in a group of otherwise epistemic peers. And theists tend to hold that the epistemic gap between us and God is much greater than that—indeed, for some theists, the gap is best understood as one of kind rather than degree.

all things considered good and when they are all things considered bad (or, if you like, evil)—of the correct account of the good, for short—while Collins's case does not.[17] A tentative principled distinction, then, is that we are precluded from knowing what God would do in cases that require having knowledge of the correct account of the good, but not otherwise.

But this will not suffice for a number of reasons. First, it's not clear why we would be precluded from knowing what God would do in cases that require having knowledge of the correct account of the good. What is it, exactly, about cases that require having knowledge of the correct account of the good that precludes us from knowing what God would do?

According to skeptical theists, of course, it's that *we do not have* knowledge of the correct account of the good—at least, we do not have the *degree* of knowledge required to determine when states of affairs are all things considered good and when they are all things considered bad. More specifically, skeptical theists claim that, in order to conclude that evil in any given case is evil *all things considered*, we would have to believe that we are in a position to determine when evils are not justified by goods. And this, they contend, requires that we have reason to believe that we have knowledge of all the possible goods that may serve to justify horrendous evil—that is, to the correct account of the good which establishes when states of affairs are all things considered good and when they are all things considered bad. But, according to skeptical theists, we don't have reason to believe that we have knowledge of all the possible goods that may serve to justify horrendous evil. For all we know, they submit, were we to know what God knows, we might know that God had no choice but to allow for the evil in our world.

But, if theists would have us be so skeptical about the good—about which we seem to know quite a bit, even if imperfectly—shouldn't they have us be equally skeptical (if not more so) about the creation of universes—about which we know nothing at all? (To be sure, we may know a *little* about the *beginning* of a *particular* universe, but this is not one and the same as knowing about the *creation* of *universes*.) Specifically, regarding Collins's case, shouldn't skeptical theists hold that, in order to conclude that a fine-tuned universe which contains a world that could support intelligent life is one that God would create, we would have to believe that we are in a position to determine when a given universe is more suitable for creation than others? If so, then, by parity of reasoning, this would require that we have reason to believe that we would have knowledge of all the possible universes—all the possible ways in which the universe might have been. But we don't have reason to believe that we would have knowledge of all the possible ways in which the universe might have been—at least, we have no more reason to believe that we would have knowledge of all the possible ways in which the universe might have been than we would have knowledge of all the possible goods that may serve to justify evil. Indeed, for all we know, were we to know what God knows, we might know that God would have had no choice but to create a universe that *wasn't* fine-tuned, one that *didn't* include a world that could

[17] Incidentally, it *is* assumed by both parties in the debate on the evidential problem of evil that there is a correct account of the good. Indeed, it's hard to see how this debate would get off the ground if it were *not* so assumed.

support intelligent life.[18] Paraphrasing David Hume, a very small part of this great universe, during a very short time, is very imperfectly discovered to us; and do we thence pronounce decisively concerning all the ways it might have been?

The second reason this proposed principled distinction—that we are precluded from knowing what God would do in cases that require having knowledge of the correct account of the good, but not otherwise—will not suffice is that, contrary to what has been assumed up to this point, Collins's case, like Howard-Snyder's case, requires having knowledge of the correct account of the good. His own defense of what kind of universe God would create clearly demonstrates this: "Since God is an all good being, and *it is good* for intelligent, conscious beings to exist, it is not surprising or improbable that God would create a world that could support intelligent life."[19] As one can see, Collins's case requires having knowledge of the correct account of the good as it involves not only the explicit claim that it is good, all things considered, for intelligent, conscious beings to exist, but also the implicit claim that a fine-tuned universe which includes a world that could support intelligent life is a good one, all things considered.

Of course, Collins never employs the phrase "all things considered," but surely this is implied. After all, the alternative interpretation is that Collins is simply claiming that it is good for intelligent, conscious beings to exist, *all else being equal*. But if Collins is simply making an all-else-being-equal claim, then it remains possible that it is *bad* for intelligent, conscious beings to exist, *all things considered*. Needless to say, this would render Collins's fined-tuned-universe defense of God's existence unsound. For from the mere fact that a state of affairs is good, all else being equal, it doesn't follow that it is good or even *probably* good, all things considered. In turn, it doesn't follow that, probably, God would create such a state of affairs. Indeed, this seems to be the very kind of point that skeptical theists have made regarding the evidential argument from evil: from the mere fact that a state of affairs is evil, all else being equal, it doesn't follow that it is evil or even *probably* evil, all things considered. The most charitable (albeit deleterious) interpretation of Collins's position, then, is that he is making all-things-considered claims.

That Collins's case depends on having knowledge of the correct account of the good should probably come as no surprise, for it is difficult to think of a case about what God would do which *doesn't* require having knowledge of the correct account of the good. For what God would do in each case will have to be compatible with, if not determined by, his perfect goodness. From the broadest case regarding what God would do—the case of what kind of universe(s), down to the smallest of details, God would create—to the narrowest of cases—such as the case of, say, whether God would perform a miracle in this situation or allow evil in that situation—each will have to be compatible with God's perfect goodness. Accordingly, any judgment regarding what God would do in each of these cases will depend on having knowledge of the correct account of the good—what God would do in each of these cases will turn, in part, on whether the states of affairs constitutive of each case are all things considered

[18] Of course, if this were the case, then we would have reason to believe that God does not exist.

[19] Collins (1998, pp. 53–54) (emphasis mine).

good and, in turn, compatible with God's perfect goodness. Thus, knowing what God would do in *any* case requires having knowledge of the correct account of the good. Hence, if, in an attempt to defend Narrow Skeptical Theism, theists were to accept this proposed principled distinction—that we are precluded from knowing what God would do in cases that require having knowledge of the correct account of the good, but not otherwise—then, ironically, we could *never* know what God would do and Broad (not Narrow) Skeptical Theism would be true.

For these reasons, this proposed principled distinction between Howard-Snyder's case and Collins's case—that we are precluded from knowing what God would do in cases that require having knowledge of the correct account of the good, but not otherwise—simply will not do. And *that* it will not do is much more problematic than one might initially think. For beyond this first proposed principled distinction, it's rather difficult to think of a second, and this is due to at least two things.

The first reason it's difficult to think of another principled distinction is perhaps best explained in two steps.

The first step involves noticing that cases involving horrendous evils—as is Howard-Snyder's—are treated by skeptical theists as *paradigmatic* cases in which we cannot know what God would do. Indeed, although applicable in principle to cases not involving horrendous evils, I don't know of a single instance in the relevant literature in which someone has invoked skeptical theism—as understood here—to defend his position on a case *not* involving horrendous evils.

The second step involves noticing something else, namely, that the salient feature of cases involving horrendous evils—that which is doing the probabilifying work vis-à-vis God's existence—is that of goodness/badness. The rest, for all intents and purposes, is conceptual garnish. Rowe's famous case of horrendous evil involves the suffering of a terminally burned fawn, but it might as well have involved the suffering of a terminally frostbitten wolf. For it's not so much the *kind* of being that's suffering or the *way* in which the being is suffering that's doing the probabilifying work vis-à-vis God's existence, but the suffering itself, specifically the badness of the suffering. Similarly, Collins's case involves the apparent design of the universe as a whole (or, at least, a large portion of it), but it might as well have involved the apparent design of parts of the universe, such as the bacterial flagellar motor or the immune system.[20] For, again, it's not so much the kind of thing that appears to be designed or the way in which it appears to be designed that's doing the probabilifying work vis-à-vis God's existence, but the appearance of design itself, specifically the goodness of the apparent design. In each of these cases, then, it is the goodness/badness that does the probabilifying work vis-à-vis God's existence, not the things or ways in which the goodness/badness is instantiated.

So, given that cases involving horrendous evils are treated by skeptical theists as paradigmatic cases in which we cannot know what God would do *and* that the salient feature of such cases is that of goodness/badness, any proposed principled distinction—if it's to be plausible, at any rate—is likely to utilize this salient feature.

[20] These have been cited by supporters of intelligent design theory, such as Michael Behe, as irreducibly complex systems and, as such, appear to be designed.

The second reason it's difficult to think of another principled distinction is that there are cases that do *not* involve horrendous evils which, nevertheless, have goodness/badness as their salient feature. Consider cases involving divine hiddenness, those involving "the absence of convincing evidence for the existence of God, or, more specifically, to the absence of some kind of positive experiential result in the search for God."[21] In such cases, the salient feature vis-à-vis God's existence is once again that of goodness/badness. For, simply put, the absence of some kind of positive experiential result in the search for God is deemed by some to be bad, and others to be good (or, at least, not so bad), all things considered.[22] Goodness/badness, then, is the salient feature of such cases.

Or consider cases involving free will. Once again, in such cases, the salient feature vis-à-vis God's existence is that of goodness/badness. For that human beings have free will is deemed by some to be good, and others bad (or, at least, not so good), all things considered.[23] Goodness/badness, then, is the salient feature of cases involving free will.

And for those cases in which goodness/badness is not *the* salient feature vis-à-vis God's existence, it is typically *among* the cases' salient features. Cases involving religious experiences and miracles, for example, typically include goodness/badness among their salient features, as such events are deemed by some to be good, all things considered. (Indeed, when, if ever, have you heard such cases invoked as evidence of God's existence in which the religious experience or miracle in question was deemed neutral or bad, all things considered?) So goodness/badness is among the salient features of cases involving religious experiences and miracles.

For these reasons, it's difficult to think of another beyond the above proposed principled distinction. Of course, *that* a principled distinction beyond the one discussed here cannot be found isn't certain, but one thing is: *if* one cannot be found, then the epistemic asymmetry at the heart of Narrow Skeptical Theism is, at bottom, *ad hoc*.

Conclusion

I have argued that, with respect to the issue of whether we can know what God would do, either in particular cases or in general, there are three possibilities:

(1) Broad Skeptical Theism: The view that, in every case, we cannot know what God would do.
(2) Broad Epistemic Theism: The view that, in every case, we can know what God would do.
(3) Narrow Skeptical Theism: The view that, in some cases, we can know what God would do and, in some cases, we cannot.

[21] Schellenberg (2004, p. 31).

[22] For example, Schellenberg thinks the absence of some kind of positive experiential result in the search for God is bad, while Michael J. Murray thinks it's, at least, not so bad. See Schellenberg (1993), Murray (2002, pp. 62–82).

[23] For example, Michael J. Murray thinks free will is good, while David Lewis thinks free will is, at least, not nearly as good as some theists make it out to be. See Murray (2009, pp. 282–294), and Lewis (2009, pp. 472–481).

I have also argued that each view has troubling implications for theists. Specifically, I have argued that:

(a) Given Broad Skeptical Theism, theists must relinquish every positive argument for God's existence, since every positive argument for God's existence depends on a claim about what God would do.
(b) Given Broad Epistemic Theism, theists lose the principal grounds on which they reject P1 (above)—that, probably, there are pointless evils. Thus, unless theists come up with a new, plausible objection to P1, they are left staking their case against the evidential argument from evil on positive arguments for God's existence.
(c) Given Narrow Skeptical Theism, until theists provide a principled distinction between those cases in which we can know what God would do and those cases in which we cannot, Narrow Skeptical Theism is, at bottom, *ad hoc*.

If this is correct, theists are in the unenviable position of having to decide among three unsavory views on this fundamental issue.

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