

## **In Defense of Skeptical Theism: A Reply to Almeida and Oppy**

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Some evidential arguments from evil (e.g., those presented in Rowe [1979, 1988, and 1991]) rely on a “noseum” inference of the following sort:

NI: If, after thinking hard, we can’t think of any God-justifying reason for permitting some horrific evil then it is likely that there is no such reason.

(The reason NI is called a ‘noseum’ inference is that it says, more or less, that because we don’t see ‘um, they probably ain’t there.’<sup>1</sup>) Skeptical theists, us included, say that NI is not a good inference and that evidentialist arguments from evil that depend on it are, as a result, unsound. Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy [2003] argue that Michael Bergmann’s [2001] way of developing the skeptical theist response to such arguments fails because it commits those who endorse it to a sort of skepticism that undermines ordinary moral practice. Skeptical theism, they say, commits us to the claim that, for any terrible evil E we might consider preventing, we can assign no probability to the claim that great goods would be secured by our failure to prevent E. But, they write, if this is true then, contrary to what we all believe, “we cannot arrive at a reasoned view about whether or not to intervene to prevent E.” [2003: 516] In this paper, we defend Bergmann’s skeptical theist response against this charge.

### **I**

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<sup>1</sup> Wykstra introduces this name for this sort of inference in his [1996].

In developing his skeptical theist position, Bergmann relied on the following three claims [2001: 279]:

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 the permission of possible evils.

Here, two clarificatory remarks are in order.

First, note that a sample of *xs* can be representative of all *xs* relative to one property but not another. For example, a sample of humans can be representative of all humans relative to the property of *having a lung* while at the same time not being representative of all humans relative to the property of *being a Russian*. For ST1 – ST3, what we are interested in is whether our sample of possible goods, possible evils, and entailment relations between them (i.e., the possible goods, evils, and relevant entailments we know of) are representative of all possible goods, possible evils, and entailment relations there are *relative to the property of figuring in a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us*. Although that property is not explicitly mentioned in ST1-ST3, it is representativeness relative to that property that ST1-ST3 are speaking of.

Second, it should be noted that, absent further explanation, it is hard to tell what sorts of things are referred to by the term ‘goods’. In some contexts, the term might refer to concrete

objects or events that have some sort of positive value; in other contexts it might refer to abstract states of affairs or properties whose occurrence or exemplification would have or constitute some sort of positive value. For our purposes (in accord with what we take to be fairly standard practice in the literature on the problem of evil), we take ‘goods’ to be abstracta—properties or states of affairs. Actual goods, then, would be either states of affairs that actually obtain or properties that are actually exemplified; merely possible goods would be states of affairs that exist but do not obtain, or properties that exist but are not exemplified.

Once this is clear, it is easy to clear up a certain confusion about how to read claims like ST1 – ST3. In their paper [2003: 505, n.7], Almeida and Oppy complain that ST1 admits of the following two readings:

ST1a: We have no good reason for thinking that the goods we know of are representative of goods that there are in the world.

ST1b: We have no good reason for thinking that the goods we know of are representative of the goods that there are in all possible worlds.

On the plausible assumption that both properties and states of affairs are necessary beings, however, ST1a and ST1b are equivalent. It is only on the assumption that goods are contingent things—concrete objects or events, say—that ST1a and ST1b come apart. Presumably it is this assumption that motivates Almeida and Oppy to say that ST1b is both “less controversial” than ST1a and also “of no use to the skeptical theist, since—as Rowe insists—goods in other possible worlds cannot justify God’s actions in our world.” [2003: 505, n. 7] These remarks make sense on the assumption that goods are contingent beings (though, in that case, ST1a is hardly a

plausible *reading* of ST1; it is better thought of as a *replacement* for ST1). But they make no sense on the assumption that we are making, that goods are necessary beings.<sup>2</sup>

That said, we may now examine more closely Almeida and Oppy's objection to Bergmann's argument. Bergmann began his response to evidential arguments from evil that depend on NI by noting that theists and nontheists alike should agree with ST1-ST3.<sup>3</sup> He then pointed out that the truth of ST1-ST3 should convince us that NI is a bad inference. Almeida and Oppy, on the other hand, claim that by endorsing ST1-ST3, Bergmann is committed to a sort of skepticism that undermines ordinary moral practice. The basic idea is as follows. Suppose you conclude on the basis of ST1-ST3 that there might, for all you know, be some great good that would result from God's permitting some terrible evil E—a good that would provide God with reason to permit E. Then, Almeida and Oppy argue, you should likewise conclude that there might, for all you know, be some great good that would result from your permitting E—a good that would provide *you* with reason to permit E. If you conclude this, however, then it seems you are committed to the claim that, for all you know, it would be best, all things considered, if you did not prevent E. But then, they say, it is hard to see how you could reasonably conclude that you would not be justified in permitting E. But, of course, we can (in many such cases) reasonably conclude that we ought to intervene (and hence that we are not justified in failing to intervene). If, for example, you see a small child being abducted in a supermarket and you can easily and at no cost to yourself prevent the abduction from continuing, it would be morally abhorrent for you not to intervene. Indeed, it would be especially appalling for you to refrain from intervening on the grounds that the continuation of the abduction might, for all you know,

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<sup>2</sup> Note too that our reading of ST1 in no way departs from the reading explicitly recommended by Bergmann in the paper to which Almeida and Oppy are replying. (Bergmann 2001: 293, n. 4)

<sup>3</sup> For a defense of the claim that theists and non-theists both should agree with ST1 – ST3, see Bergmann [2001: 284 – 85] as well as Alston [1991: 44 – 5 and 1996: 316-19].

result in some very great good. Thus, Almeida and Oppy conclude, insofar as endorsing ST1 – ST3 commits us to the (false) conclusion that we cannot arrive at a reasoned decision about whether to prevent terrible evils, the skeptical theist strategy defended by Bergmann fails.

The rest of this paper will proceed as follows. In section II, we argue that the *strongest* conclusion that Almeida and Oppy’s argument could establish is not the general claim that *skeptical theism* as such undermines ordinary moral practice but rather the significantly weaker claim that endorsement of ST1 – ST3 *in the absence of various background beliefs that theists are very likely to possess* undermines ordinary moral practice.<sup>4</sup> We then go on in sections III and IV to argue that Almeida and Oppy have not even successfully established this weaker conclusion.

## II

Bergmann [2001] characterizes skeptical theism as traditional theism (the view that there exists an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent being) plus further “skeptical theses” like, but not necessarily identical to, ST1 – ST3. For present purposes, then, let us say that a skeptical theist is anyone who is both a theist and a proponent of ST1 – ST3. And let us say that the “skeptical theist strategy” is just the strategy of appealing to ST1 – ST3 (or relevantly similar claims) in an effort to rebut the evidential argument from evil.

According to Almeida and Oppy, the central idea behind the skeptical theist strategy is that “considerations of human cognitive limitations are *alone* [their emphasis] sufficient to undermine [evidential arguments from evil].” [2003: 498] We don’t dispute this; but, obviously enough, the skeptical theist strategy will not be deployed in a vacuum. Skeptical theists, after all,

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<sup>4</sup> Almeida and Oppy indicate that what we call the ‘weaker’ claim is the claim that they aim to establish. But they take that ‘weaker’ claim to imply the claim that skeptical theism as such undermines ordinary moral practice. [2003: 498; 2003: 508]

are *theists*. Thus, when they consider the bearing of skeptical theism on *their* moral practice, they will inevitably and quite sensibly do so in a way that takes account of other things that they believe. But once this fact is appreciated, it is clear that most skeptical theists will find themselves completely untouched by Almeida and Oppy's argument. The reason is simple: theists very typically believe that God has commanded his creatures to behave in certain ways; and they also very typically believe that God's commands provide all-things-considered reasons to act. Thus, a skeptical theist will very likely not find it the least bit plausible to think that ST1 – ST3 leave us without an all-things-considered reason to prevent harm to others in cases like the abduction scenario described in section I. For even if ST1 – ST3 imply that we do not know *much* about the realm of value, they do not at all imply that we know *nothing* about that realm; and, in particular, they do not imply that we lack knowledge of God's commands *as* God's commands.

Almeida and Oppy explicitly grant that one might reply to their argument by appealing to the fact that God has somehow revealed to us the fact that great goods cannot be secured by our failing to prevent terrible evils like the supermarket abduction. But, they say:

in making this sort of reply, one would be giving up the skeptical theist ambition: it is no longer true that it is merely considerations about our cognitive limitations that yield the desired conclusion. The whole point of the skeptical theist response is that it is supposed to avoid appeal to the other evidence which theists possess for the existence of a perfect being and the directives that that being makes in connection with our behavior. [2003: 508]

But this reply just confuses the skeptical theist's *argument* with her assessment of how the *premises* of that argument bear on other beliefs that she holds. To appeal to divine revelation in

arguing that ST1 – ST3 undermine the crucial no-seeum inference in some evidential argument from evil *would* be to give up the skeptical theist’s ambition. But to appeal to such revelation in showing that (*contra* Almeida and Oppy) ST1 – ST3 do not undermine the skeptical theist’s own moral reasoning is not to give up that ambition.

Almeida and Oppy are simply wrong, then, to claim that their argument “carries over to all versions of ‘skeptical theist’ responses to evidential arguments from evil.” [2003: 498] That is, they have *not* established the strong claim they have set out to prove, namely:

SC: *All* skeptical theists are in the predicament of having their ordinary moral practice undermined.

But it is important to note that, for all we have said so far, their argument might at least apply to anyone who endorses ST1 – ST3 in the absence of standard theistic background assumptions. And surely there can be such people. Indeed, skeptical theists are typically recommending that their atheistic opponents accept claims like ST1 – ST3 without, in the same breath, recommending that they abandon their atheism. For all we have said so far, then, Almeida and Oppy’s argument might at least show the truth of the weak claim:

WC: *Nontheists* who endorse the skeptical theses like ST1-ST3 are in the predicament of having their ordinary moral practice undermined.

In the next two sections, however, we argue that Almeida and Oppy have not even successfully established this significantly weaker conclusion.

### III

Consider again a case where we see someone, with obviously malevolent intentions, grab a child in a supermarket. Suppose we can easily and at no cost to ourselves prevent the abduction

from continuing. Is there anything the non-theistic proponent of ST1 – ST3 can sensibly say on behalf of the claim that we have all-things-considered reason to prevent the abduction?

Let us begin by stipulating, as Almeida and Oppy are prepared to do, that we have pro tanto reason to prevent the abduction. Since Almeida and Oppy do not want their argument to rest on the assumption that consequentialism is correct [2003: 510, n. 21], we are free to assume that our pro tanto reason in this case might include, say, awareness of a serious prima facie duty to prevent great harm to others together with awareness that the abductor's success will likely result in great harm to others (whether or not that harm might ultimately be outweighed by countervailing goods).

Now, according to Almeida and Oppy, apart from skeptical theistic assumptions, our natural line of reasoning in this sort of case would be as follows (cf. [2003: 507]):

- (1) There is pro-tanto reason for us to intervene to prevent the abduction.
- (2) We have found no pro-tanto reason for us to permit the abduction.
- (3) Therefore: There is no pro tanto reason for us to permit the abduction. (From 2)
- (4) Therefore: We have all-things-considered reason to prevent the abduction. (From 1, 3)

Importantly, the inference from (2) to (3) is a no-seeum inference of the sort that normally figures in evidential arguments from evil. But, they argue, just as the no-seeum inferences that figure in evidential arguments are undermined by ST1 – ST3, so too the inference from (2) to (3) is undermined by ST1 – ST3. The reason is as follows. According to Almeida and Oppy, if we are convinced of ST1 – ST3, then we cannot sensibly assign any likelihood to the truth of claims like P1 and P2:

- P1: Permitting the abduction will produce some outweighing good or prevent some worse evil.

P2: Permitting the abduction (or something as bad) is *required* to produce some outweighing good or to prevent some worse evil.

Plausibly, we also would be unable sensibly to assign any likelihood to the truth of P3:

P3: If only we were smarter or better informed, we would be aware of goods the awareness of which would override whatever prima facie duties we might have to prevent the abduction.

But, if any of P1 – P3 is true, then (3) might well be false. Thus, on their view, if we endorse ST1 – ST3, then we must remain agnostic about the likelihood of claims like P1 – P3; but if we do that, then we cannot reasonably infer that there *is* no pro tanto reason for us to permit the abduction from the premise that we have *found* no pro tanto reason to permit the abduction.

Are they right about this? Suppose that they are. That is, suppose that premise (2) does not in fact support premise (3); and, for good measure, suppose that we are not independently justified in believing (3). What follows for *ordinary moral practice*? Not much of interest, it seems. For even if the argument from (1) – (4) is bad, surely the following line of reasoning is sensible:

- (1a) There is *strong* pro tanto reason to prevent the abduction.
- (2a) We have found no pro tanto reason to permit the abduction.
- (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 the abduction would turn up evidence pointing to even a weak pro tanto reason to permit the abduction.
- (4a) Therefore: we ought to prevent the abduction.

Note that we leave open the question whether (1a) – (3a) support (4)—the claim that we have all-things-considered reason to prevent the abduction. Almeida and Oppy say virtually nothing about their conception of what it is for there to *be* a reason to do *x*, of what it is to *have* a reason to do *x* (can there *be* reasons one does not *have*?), or of what it is to have *all-things-considered* reason to do *x*; nor do they say much of anything about their conception of how these notions are connected with properties like *being such that one ought to do x* or *being such that one has sufficient reason to do x*. Absent such clarification, it is a bit hard to say whether (1a) – (3a) support (4). But 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 the abduction.

The point, in short, is that even if it is true that a proponent of ST1 – ST3 is committed to thinking that, for all she knows, there is some all-things-considered reason (presently unknown or at least unappreciated by her) to permit some terrible evil E, it doesn't at all follow that she is committed to doubting that she *ought* to prevent E. The following claim is (for all Almeida and Oppy have shown, anyway) perfectly consistent:

- (\*) For all I know, there is some all-things-considered reason (presently unknown or at least unappreciated by me) for me to permit E; but still, I know that I ought to prevent E.

If that sounds odd, just consider the fact that—as Almeida and Oppy themselves admit [2003: 512]—we often do not know the long-range consequences of our actions. 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.

At this juncture, it is instructive to consider the above remarks in conjunction with an example that Almeida and Oppy offer in support of their contention that skeptical theism undermines ordinary moral practice. They write:

When faced with a decision about whether or not to perform an action, rational people act on the basis of the relevant considerations that are available to them (whether or not those considerations count as knowledge or even, perhaps, rational belief). Second, and more importantly, we have to be able to factor self-confessed ignorance into our process of deliberation. It need not be ‘foolish to avoid action because of something we don’t know not to obtain’. Suppose that we don’t know that it is not the case that the floorboards are rotten (or ... that we are not prepared to make any estimation of whether or not it is the case that the floorboards are rotten). How can we then step with complete confidence onto the floor? In practical considerations—no less than in theoretical considerations—probabilities are the stuff of deliberation. And whereof one not prepared to assign probabilities, thereof one is simply not able to deliberate. [2003: 515]

The idea here, we take it, is 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.

But suppose they are right. Still, the following line of reasoning (if the premises were true) would be perfectly sensible:

- (7) We have *strong* pro tanto reason to step on the floor.
- (8) We have found no pro tanto reason to refrain from stepping on the floor.
- (9) We have no reason to believe (and, indeed, good reason to doubt) that any further investigation we could make before we would have to make a decision about whether to step on the floor would turn up evidence pointing to even a weak pro tanto reason to refrain from stepping on the floor.
- (10) Therefore, we ought to step on the floor.

One might think that our agnosticism about the probability that the floorboards are rotten constitutes reason to doubt (9). 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 *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. For, after all, by Almeida and Oppy's own lights [2003: 515], neither the awareness of our agnosticism about claims like P1 – P3 nor the considerations that lead us to such agnosticism are, by themselves, supposed to constitute either pro tanto reason for permitting the abduction or reason for thinking that such a reason would be turned up by further investigation.

In sum, then, even if Almeida and Oppy are right in thinking that belief in ST1 – ST3 undermines a no-seeum inference from the premise that we have found no pro tanto reason to prevent some terrible evil to the conclusion that there is no pro tanto reason to prevent that evil,

it does not follow that proponents of ST1 – ST3 cannot sensibly reach the conclusion that they *ought* to prevent that evil. Furthermore, it should be clear that the moves made to save ordinary moral practice do not have parallels that could be employed by someone aiming to save the evidential argument from evil. The basic move we have made is to concede (at least for the sake of argument) that the no-seeum inference from (2) to (3) is bad, and to argue that one does not need to believe that there is no pro tanto reason to refrain from doing  $x$  in order to believe (reasonably) that one ought to do  $x$ . The idea is that in cases like the abduction scenario, even if there are reasons that we are not aware of to permit the abduction, those reasons do not bear on what we ought to do. To concede that the crucial no-seeum inference in the evidential argument is bad, however, is to give up the game. For, after all, to say that God might, for all we know, have reason to permit some instance of terrible evil is just to say that there might, for all we know, be reasons of which we are not aware that do bear on what God ought to do.

#### IV

One way of getting at the source of our disagreement with Almeida and Oppy is to notice an inconsistent triad of claims that emerges in light of the above discussion of the Almeida and Oppy's argument. Consider a person  $S$  who is in a situation in which she can easily prevent—in a way that (as far as she can see) will cause no significant loss—some terrible evil  $E$ . Now consider these three propositions in connection with such a case:

- (I)  $S$  reasonably believes that  $S$  ought to prevent  $E$ .
- (II)  $S$  is unable sensibly to assign any probability to any of the following three propositions:

Q1: S's permitting that terrible evil E will produce some outweighing good or prevent some worse evil.

Q2: S's permitting that terrible evil E (or something as bad) is *required* to produce some outweighing good or prevent some worse evil.

Q3: 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.

- (III) S reasonably believes that S ought to prevent E only if S can sensibly assign a low probability to Q1, Q2, or Q3.

Almeida and Oppy clearly think that (I) will be true of the abduction case. We agree. But we disagree with Almeida and Oppy about what to say about (II) and (III). We find ST1-ST3 extremely plausible. And we think that proponents of ST1 – ST3 are committed to (II). So we accept (II) and reject (III). Almeida and Oppy, on the other hand, seem to be committed to (III) and to the denial of (II). At any rate, if they were to abandon (III), it is hard to see what reason they could give for thinking that the truth of (II) undermines ordinary moral practice. By our lights, however, Almeida and Oppy have not adequately defended (III); nor, in our view, is (III) independently plausible. The conjunction of ST1 – ST3 represents a moderate and sane skepticism concerning our abilities to discover facts about goods and evils. As Bergmann says in the paper to which Almeida and Oppy are objecting, “It just doesn’t seem unlikely that our understanding of the realm of value falls miserably short of capturing all that is true about that realm” [Bergmann 2001: 279]. (III), on the other hand, seems clearly to be false, as evidenced by the cogency of the argument from (1a) – (4a) and the consistency of (\*).

At one point in their paper, Almeida and Oppy make remarks that suggest that they recognize the attractiveness of our approach, which favors (II) over (III):

In sum, then, the skeptical theist response to evidential arguments from evil, if successful, really would pose a serious threat to ordinary moral practice. In any decision situation, we would be in the position of the person who is ‘out of her depth’ and who knows that she is ‘out of her depth’. What is objectionable about this is not the thought that we might always be ‘out of our depth’, in the sense that we are unable to *fully* evaluate the considerations which bear on our decision; for, of course, none of us can know all of the long term consequences of any action we perform—no doubt there were all kinds of good deeds which were causally necessary for Hitler to be born—and to this extent we are always ‘out of our depth’ in deciding what to do. Rather, the problem is that, if we are always ‘out of our depth’ *and* if we always aware that we are ‘out of our depth’, then we can never give first personal endorsement to any of our actions; moral deliberation can never end in anything more than the equivalent of tossing a coin. [Almeida and Oppy 2003: 512]

On the one hand, they say that it’s *obvious* that we are always out of our depth in our moral reasoning. On the other they say that our moral practice is undermined if we always *realize* we are always out of moral depth. But, given that sensible people realize what is obvious, this is just to say that they think the moral practice of sensible people is always undermined. If they think that, why charge skeptical theists with having any special problem in this regard? More to the point, though: isn’t this just a *reductio* of the claim that the realization that we are out of our depth (in the sense described above) inevitably undermines ordinary moral practice? We do not

need to believe that we have fully fathomed the realm of value in order to (reasonably) believe that we ought to save a child from being abducted from a supermarket. Nor do we have to have opinions about the likelihood that the abduction will produce some great outweighing good. All we need is our awareness of a strong prima facie duty to prevent harm for others, together with the rational conviction that the abduction will cause harm and that no evidence that could be turned up by further investigation (in the time available) would support the claim that we ought to permit that harm. And this we can have regardless of our ability to assign probabilities to future consequences, and regardless of whether we accept ST1 – ST3.<sup>5</sup>

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