

Why Skeptical Theists are Not Involved in a Scenario of Olly-Style Deception

A New Response to the Global Skepticism Objection

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ABSTRACT According to Michael Bergmann, Skeptical Theism consists of two components: firstly, the belief that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good immaterial person who created the world, and secondly, the skeptical claim that we have no reason to believe that the possible goods and evils we know of are representative of the goods and evils that exist. According to the Global Skepticism Objection, Skeptical Theism entails that we should not be surprised if we are radically deceived by God: there just might be a greater good that can figure in a reason God has for deceiving us about reality. In support of this objection, Stephen Law presents an amusing analogy involving Olly and his reality-projector. In this paper, I outline the Global Skepticism Objection and Law's case in support of it. I then respond by arguing that the scope of Skeptical Theism should be restricted, and seek to justify this through a narrower construal of Theism and an appeal to common sense.

KEYWORDS Global Skepticism Objection; Noseeum Assumption about Olly-style Deception; Noseeum Assumption about Suffering; Restricted Skeptical Theism; Skeptical Theism

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INTRODUCTION

According to the GLOBAL SKEPTICISM OBJECTION, Skeptical Theism entails that we should not be surprised if we are radically deceived by God. In support of this objection, Stephen Law presents an amusing analogy involving Olly and his reality-projector. In this paper, I shall outline the objection along with Law's case for supporting it. I shall then respond by arguing that the scope of Skeptical Theism should be restricted, and shall seek to justify this through a narrower construal of Theism and an appeal to common sense.

I shall define Theism here as the belief that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good immaterial person who created the world. I shall use the title "God" to connote this person, and I shall use the terms "evil" and "suffering" interchangeably to denote seemingly gratuitous human suffering—i.e. to refer to suffering that does not seem to lead to any greater good or to an avoidance of some worse evil. Following Michael Bergmann, I take Skeptical Theism to consist of (i) Theism, and (ii) at least the following two skeptical theses:

- (ST1) We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods and possible evils we know of are representative of the possible goods and possible evils there are.
- (ST2) We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations between the possible goods and the permission of the possible evils that we know of are representative of all such entailments that there are.¹

Bergmann claims that (ST1–ST2) are entirely sensible and in no sense excessively skeptical.² I think he is right. Note the modest formulation "We have no good reason for thinking. . . ." This suggests that were we to be given such a reason, we would, or at least should, change our mind. But short of that, (ST1–ST2) do appear to constitute a good starting point.

1. Michael Bergmann, "Commonsense Skeptical Theism," in *Reason, Metaphysics and Mind: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Kelly James Clark and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9–30, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199766864.003.0002.

2. Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Nous* 35, no. 2 (2001): 284, doi:10.1111/0029-4624.00297.

Moreover, (ST1–ST2) suggest skepticism about our ability to assign any probability value to the truth of the following NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT SUFFERING:

NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT SUFFERING: If there are goods justifying God’s permitting seemingly gratuitous suffering, then we would be able to discern such goods.³

Not being able to assign any probability value to the truth of the NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT SUFFERING leaves us incapable of knowing whether it is probable or not that God allows seemingly gratuitous evil for the sake of a greater good. To be explicit, (ST1–ST2) suggest that there might just be goods beyond our ken, and that we do not know anything about the likelihood of our being able to discern such greater goods if they happened to exist. Thus, it would not be surprising if some of these greater goods (if they happened to exist) figured in a reason God had for permitting suffering.

THE GLOBAL SKEPTICISM OBJECTION

Advocates for the GLOBAL SKEPTICISM OBJECTION argue that Skeptical Theism not only suggests skepticism about the NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT SUFFERING, but entails skepticism about almost everything⁴—even beliefs for which we think we have a great amount of evidence. Ian Wilks argues that even if we have astronomical evidence suggesting that God did not create a world in which the Sun orbits the Earth, a skeptical theist must accept the following defeater:

There may be so much astronomical evidence suggesting otherwise because of an unknown strategy involved in creating the world in such a way that it is orbited by the sun.⁵

Presumably, such a strategy would involve the realization of a greater good, and since we have no reason to believe that the goods we know

3. An assumption which is called “Rowe’s Noseeum Argument from Evil” by Stephen Wykstra, in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 126–50.

4. Perhaps not skepticism about one’s own existence.

5. Ian Wilks, “Skeptical Theism and Empirical Unfalsifiability,” *Faith and Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2009): 73, doi:10.5840/faithphil20092614.

are representative of the goods there are, we cannot assign any probability value to whether or not there is such a divine strategy.

Bruce Russell argues that God might deceive us for the sake of a greater good, and to deny such deception is to deny Skeptical Theism itself. He writes:

If it is not reasonable to believe that God deceives us, for some reason beyond our ken, when he created the universe, it is not reasonable to believe that there is some reason beyond our ken which, if God exists, would justify him in allowing the suffering we see.⁶

In the same vein, Stephen Law asks rhetorically:

[H]ow do we know that God doesn't have good reason to create a false impression of an external world, or good reason to create the false impression that the universe and myself are more than 5 min old?⁷

A version of the GLOBAL SKEPTICISM OBJECTION can now be stated as follows:

- (gso1) Surely, we can justifiably assign probability values to the claim that God has not deceived us about how reality really is.
- (gso2) If Skeptical Theism is true, then theists cannot justifiably assign any probability value to the claim that God has not deceived us about how reality really is.

Therefore:

- (gso3) Skeptical Theism is false.

The argument is valid. Premise (gso1) seems commonsensical. Law presents the following story in support of (gso2):

Suppose I see what appears to be an orange on the table in front of me. Let's assume I'm thereby *prima facie* justified, and indeed can be considered co-

6. Bruce Russell, "Defenseless," in Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 197.

7. Stephen Law, "The Pandora's Box Objection to Skeptical Theism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78, no. 3 (2015): 289, doi:10.1007/s11153-015-9526-1.

mmonsensically to know, that there's an orange there. But suppose I then discover the following. Someone—call him Olly—possesses a holographic projector capable of producing entirely convincing-looking visual appearances onto the table in front of me. Now suppose the probability that Olly is using the projector is inscrutable to me. Suppose, for example, that I learn Olly has an urn of balls. Prior to my observing the table, Olly selected a ball at random from this urn. If the ball was black, Olly projected an entirely convincing-looking holographic image of an orange onto the table. If Olly selected a non-black ball, he placed a real orange on the table. I have no clue concerning what proportion of balls in Olly's urn are black. For all I know, all the balls are black, none are black, 50% are black, etc. I can't reasonably assign any probability to any of these hypotheses. Thus I remain in the dark about whether Olly placed a real orange, rather than a holographic image of an orange, on the table.⁸

Obviously, the story about Olly and his powerful projector is comparable with God and his property of being all-powerful, with the exception that God (if He exists) is capable of deceiving us by making what we might call a false "Olly-style projection" of reality, but does not need a projector in order to do accomplish this.

Moreover, in the same way as a person is completely clueless with respect to whether it was a black or non-black ball that Olly picked up, a Skeptical Theist is completely clueless with respect to whether or not there is a possible good that can figure in a reason God might have for arranging a false Olly-style projection of reality. We might say that skeptical theists not only accept that we cannot assign any probability value to the NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT SUFFERING, but must also accept that we cannot assign any probability value to the following NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT OLLY-STYLE DECEPTION:

NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT OLLY-STYLE DECEPTION: If there are goods justifying God's deceiving us by making a false Olly-style projection of reality, then we would be able to discern such goods.

Skeptical Theists (or at least Bergmannian Skeptical Theists) must accept this, because they endorse (ST1–ST2). To be explicit, (ST1–ST2) says that we have no reason to think that we know a representative sample of all the goods and evils that exist. If that is the case, then it would not be

8. *Ibid.*, 290.

surprising if there were goods that we did not know of (i.e. goods and evils beyond our ken) that can figure in a reason God might have for deceiving us about reality.

RESPONDING BY RESTRICTING SKEPTICAL THEISM

Law anticipates quite a few different responses to his objection, and deals with them thoroughly. However, to my mind, there is a quick and easy response that has not been acknowledged. Elsewhere, I have called the strategy used here the Restriction Strategy.⁹ The response consists of restricting Skeptical Theism just a little, so that the GLOBAL SKEPTICISM OBJECTION no longer poses a danger. What is needed is a kind of skepticism that still suggests that we cannot assign any probability value to whether or not the NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT SUFFERING is true, but that does not suggest that we cannot assign any probability value to whether or not the NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT OLLY-STYLE DECEPTION is true. Here, then, is my suggestion for a restricted version of Bergmannian Skeptical Theism—one which I shall call Restricted Skeptical Theism. The restricted version consists of (i) Theism and (ii) the following two restricted skeptical theses (RST):

- (RST1) We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods and possible evils we know of are representative of the possible goods and possible evils that there are with the exception of those possible goods and possible evils that can figure in a reason God might have for deceiving us by (say) doing a false Olly-style projection of reality.
- (RST2) We have no reason for thinking that the entailment relations between the possible goods and the permission of possible evils that we know of are representative of all such entailments that there are, with the exception of the entailment relations that can figure in a reason God might have for deceiving us (again) by doing a false Olly-style projection of reality.

With this restriction, we can keep skepticism with respect to the NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT SUFFERING, while no longer being skeptical with respect to the NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT OLLY-STYLE DECEPTION. An

9. Francis Jonbäck, *The God Who Seeks but Seems to Hide* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 59.

example might be helpful at this point. Let us say that I forgot where I put my key. I decide to look in my room, even though I am skeptical about whether it is there at all. I then confirm that the key is not on my desk and thus restrict my skepticism by thinking to myself that I have no reason for thinking that the key is not in my room, with the exception that I know that it is not on my desk. The same sort of restriction is made in (RST1–RST2), but with respect to possible goods and evils.

Someone might protest by claiming that I have made things too easy. Just as I obtained justification for restricting my skepticism about the key being in my room but not on my desk, I need justification for restricting the skeptical part of Skeptical Theism.¹⁰ I think there is both a theological and a philosophical (or pragmatic) way of justifying the restriction. According to the theological justification, Theism could be made narrower, so that the skeptical part of Skeptical Theism can be restricted. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, we are often told that humans are created in the image of God, and that He wants us to explore the divine wisdom in creation. If that is correct, the very concept of God suggests that God will not deceive us when we are engaged in exploring His creation.¹¹ Rather, according to this more narrow conception of Theism, God actually wants His creatures to know the truth about the world. This does not entail, however, that we should be able to know everything that God knows about—for example, why He permits seemingly gratuitous suffering.

The philosophical and pragmatic justification is that common sense gives us a reason to restrict the skeptical part of Skeptical Theism. Premise (gso1) in the GLOBAL SKEPTICISM OBJECTION itself states that “Surely, we can justifiably assign probability values to the claim that God has not deceived us about how reality really is.” However, rather than throwing out the whole of Skeptical Theism, the commonsensical thing to do is to keep skepticism about those other possible goods and evils that do not figure in a reason God can have for deceiving us, until we have a reason for giv-

10. Interestingly, Nagasawa and Trakakis note that Skeptical Theism was originally a restricted view proposed only to deal with the evidential argument from suffering. See Yujin Nagasawa and Nick Trakakis, “Skeptical Theism and Moral Skepticism: A Reply to Almeida and Oppy,” *Ars Disputandi* 4, no. 1 (2004): 226, doi:10.1080/15665399.2004.10819851.

11. See Alvin Plantinga’s argument for the conclusion that a theistic worldview fits well with a scientific investigation of reality. See Alvin Plantinga, “Deep Concord: Christian Theism and the Deep Roots of Science,” chapter 9 in *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199812097.001.0001.

ing up skepticism about those as well.¹² Notice again Bergmann's modest formulation of (ST1–ST2), “we have no good reason for thinking. . . .” The GLOBAL SKEPTICISM OBJECTION provides us with a reason for limiting the scope of (ST1–ST2). Now (RST1–RST2) seems like a good starting point (again), until further reasons for limiting the scope of (RST1–RST2) are given. We can compare this, too, with skepticism about the key in my room. In that scenario, my looking at my desk furnished me with a reason for restricting my skepticism. With respect to Skeptical Theism, common sense gave me a reason to restrict that view. Indeed, it is often suggested that it is common sense that tells us we are not in a scenario of Olly-style deception.¹³ I wholeheartedly agree with that. However, (ST1–ST2) also seems very sensible, almost commonsensical. How do we keep as much common sense as possible? Well, adopt (RST1–RST2).

Recently, Atle Ottesen Søvik has argued that since Skeptical Theism counts against common sense, you cannot use common sense to defeat the objection.¹⁴ However, my response to the objection is not meant to defeat the objection. (Then it would be question-begging.) My claim is that if one were to concede the GLOBAL SKEPTICISM OBJECTION, one would still have the option of formulating another version of Skeptical Theism for which the objection did not work.¹⁵ Moreover, as far as I can see, Restricted Skeptical Theism does not count against common sense, but is very much in accordance with it. That is to say, we have no reason for thinking that we know all, or a representative sample of, the possible goods and evils that there are, so it is sensible to suspend belief about that. However, it is also clearly common sense that we are not deceived about all of reality. Thus, we should restrict Skeptical Theism. Then again, if Søvik is not convinced, he will be perfectly entitled to use the theological argument for restricting Skeptical Theism instead.

12. One might think that this is an ad hoc solution. However, it is not. It just consists of acknowledging that the argument from global agnosticism only counts against skepticism about a certain class of possible goods and possible evils.

13. See, for example George Edward Moore, “Proof of an External World,” in *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen and Unwin / New York: Macmillan, 1959), 127–150.

14. Atle Ottesen Søvik, “A Fundamental Problem for Skeptical Theism,” *Theofilos* 10, no. 1 (2018): 7.

15. This is in accordance with how I stated the restriction strategy in Francis Jonbäck, *The God Who Seeks but Seems to Hide*, 59.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, according to the Global Skepticism Objection, Skeptical Theism entails that we should not be surprised if we are radically deceived by God. I have responded to this objection by restricting Skeptical Theism so that we can keep skepticism with respect to the NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT SUFFERING but no longer need to be skeptical with respect to the NOSEEUM ASSUMPTION ABOUT OLLY-STYLE DECEPTION. I have justified this restriction by narrowing the scope of Theism and appealing to common sense—in that we are surely not actually involved in a scenario of Olly-style deception.

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