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 evidential problem of evil?

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Abstract of Thesis

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In this thesis I assess the capacity of sceptical theism to defend the rationality of classical-theistic belief against the evidential problem of evil. I investigate Graham Oppy and Michael Almeida's charge in 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil' that the sceptical theses by appeal to which Michael Bergmann attempts to undermine evidential arguments from evil generate an unacceptable moral scepticism, and conclude that Oppy and Almeida's charge poses no threat to Bergmann's brand of sceptical theism. I then examine Daniel Howard-Snyder's arguments from progress and complexity and consider to what extent they support Bergmann's sceptical theses. After evaluating various formulations of the progress argument, I conclude that by sceptical-theistic lights, Bergmann's sceptical theses do not admit of rational acceptance *a posteriori*. Finally, drawing on Wes Morriston's 'The Evidential Argument from Goodness', I argue that however one attempts to ground their justification, Bergmann's sceptical theses conspire to render classical theism unsupportable *a posteriori*. I conclude that sceptical theism provides an adequate response to the evidential problem of evil only if (i) there are *a priori* grounds on which to accept classical theism, or (ii) the sceptical theist is rationally entitled to treat her theistic belief as basic.



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Introduction

Two problems of evil

According to the position which I shall label *classical theism*, there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being.¹ Since the Enlightenment, classical theism has come under vigorous attack, particularly within philosophy, but it has proven extremely difficult to refute, with a not inconsiderable number of high-profile philosophers – in addition to a significant proportion of the general population – steadfast in their conviction that it is true. Of the problems which those who reject classical theism believe it to face, one has dominated discussion in the literature over the past fifty years: the problem of evil.² In its philosophical manifestation,³ the problem of evil consists in the difficulty of justifiedly believing that there is a perfect being while acknowledging certain facts about evil. There are standardly taken to be two versions of the problem of evil, a logical problem and an evidential problem, distinguished on the basis of the set of facts about evil with which the proposition that a perfect being exists is taken to be in tension. Atheologians who invoke the logical problem of evil in attempting to undermine the rational tenability of classical-theistic belief hold that the mere existence of evil constitutes proof that no perfect being exists, while those who invoke the evidential problem of evil in their efforts to impugn classical theism maintain that the vast amount of evil in the world, in conjunction with facts about its nature and distribution, provides strong inductive support for the supposition that no such being exists.

In this thesis I assess the adequacy of the sceptical-theist response to the evidential problem of evil. Sceptical theists attempt to undermine evidential arguments from evil by demonstrating that we ought to be sceptical about our entitlement to determine, of any particular fact about evil, to what extent, if any, its

¹ I shall treat 'is omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good' as synonymous with 'is perfect'. Thus, classical theism asserts that there is a perfect being.

² I shall work with a broad conception of evil on which any instance of human or animal suffering constitutes an evil.

³ In addition to the philosophical problem, which is the focus of this essay, theists commonly recognize both a practical dimension and an existential dimension to the problem of evil – see, for example, page 1 of Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams' Introduction to their jointly edited collection *The Problem of Evil*.

obtaining lowers the probability that there is a perfect being. I argue that in accepting theses capable of generating sufficient scepticism to defeat arguments from evil, the sceptical theist forfeits any right that she might otherwise have to support her theism by appeal to facts about the nature of the world. Consequently, I claim, the sceptical theist's sceptical commitments conspire to render her theism ungrounded unless there is *a priori* reason to believe that there is a perfect being, or her belief that there is a perfect being is properly basic (or straightforwardly deducible from propositions of which she has properly basic belief). I shall begin by setting out and comparing a logical and an evidential argument from evil.

The logical problem of evil

Proponents of the logical problem of evil argue that the claim that a perfect being exists is inconsistent with the claim that there is evil, where two claims are inconsistent just in case it is logically impossible that their conjunction should be true. The charge of inconsistency usually runs as follows. Any being of limitless power would be capable of eliminating all evil; any being cognizant of everything would know of every evil that occurs; and any being of perfect goodness would seek to eliminate as much evil as it could. Thus, it is claimed, the existence of a perfect being logically precludes the occurrence of evil, from which it follows, in conjunction with the obvious fact that the world contains evil, that no such being exists. More formally, the argument runs thus.

(1_L) Were there a perfect being, there would be no evil.

(2_L) There is evil.

Thus,

(3) There is no perfect being.

The evidential problem of evil

Those who seek to undermine the rationality of classical-theistic belief by appeal to the evidential problem of evil hold that the amount of evil in the world, allied with facts about its nature and distribution, renders it epistemically improbable that there is a perfect being. Many atheologians who pursue this line of attack appeal to the notion of epistemic rationality, contending that the amount of evil that exists is so great as to render it epistemically irresponsible to accept classical theism.

The following is a simple formulation of an atheistic argument that is sensitive to particular facts about the evil in the world.

- (1_E) Our world contains a great deal of horrific evil. Among innumerable cases of barbarism, young children are beaten and raped; innocent people are condemned to agonizing and humiliating deaths in front of bloodthirsty mobs; and animals are kept in appalling conditions before being butchered in slaughterhouses.

- (2_E) Were there a perfect being, our world would contain far less horrific evil. Fewer, if any, young children would be beaten or raped; fewer, if any, innocent people would be condemned to agonizing and humiliating deaths in front of bloodthirsty mobs; and fewer, if any, animals would be kept in appalling conditions before being butchered in slaughterhouses.

Thus,

- (3) There is no perfect being.

This argument differs from that with which we illustrated the logical problem of evil in distinguishing between different types and amounts of evil. The atheologian who attacks theism by appeal to the logical problem of evil holds that the existence of a perfect being is inconsistent with the occurrence of any evil whatsoever, so she sees no need to either (i) draw any distinction between evils of different kinds (between, for example, the horror of witnessing a loved one perish in a fire, and the frustration

which one feels in having to deal with an intensely irritating student), or (ii) appeal to the vast amount of horrendous evil that afflicts sentient beings every day.

Responding to the logical problem of evil

It is sufficient for one's successfully defending theism against the logical problem of evil that one should show that we have good reason to suppose the following claim false.

- (4) A perfectly good being would prevent any evil that it were capable of preventing.

One persuasive argument against (4) appeals to the supposed value of free will. The atheologian is usually happy to allow that we possess free will, and the theologian attempts to show that so long as we regard our possessing free will as a good, there is strong reason to suppose (4) false. Briefly, the argument runs as follows.⁴ For any free creature x , only if x never freely chose to do wrong would an omnipotent and omniscient being be capable of preventing, without compromising x 's freedom, any evil for which x , if left free, would be responsible. On the supposition that there are free creatures, it is very likely that a significant proportion of them will quite often do wrong. Hence, on the supposition that there are free creatures, it is very likely that a significant proportion of them will be such that only by regularly restricting their freedom would an omnipotent and omniscient being be able to prevent their perpetrating evil. Thus, with respect to any possible world w that contains – or would, if actualized, come to contain – significantly free creatures, the following claim is highly plausible:

- (5) Were an omnipotent and omniscient being x to actualize w , w would come to contain a significant amount of evil E such that only by regularly curtailing creaturely freedom would x have been capable of preventing E .

⁴ The argument to be sketched is a simplified version of an argument that Alvin Plantinga propounds in, among other places, *God, Freedom and Evil*.

Hence, on the reasonable supposition that were it to actualize a world, a perfect being x would actualize a world that contained significantly free creatures,⁵ it is likely that any world that x actualized would come to contain a significant amount of evil E such that only by regularly restricting creaturely free will would x have been capable of preventing E .⁶ Thus, on the supposition that the value of a world's creatures' being granted unrestricted freedom⁷ is so great as to outweigh the harm in which their freely performed actions result, and on the assumption that a perfect being would seek to maximize the value of any world that it actualized, it is likely that any possible world that a perfect being x actualized would come to contain evil that x would elect not to prevent. Consequently, it is probable that (4) is false. Hence, since (1) entails (4), the argument just sketched supplies us with good reason to deny (1), thereby thwarting the atheologian's efforts to establish (3) on the basis of the argument from (1_L) and (2_L).

Gratuitous evil

In seeking to undermine the rationality of classical-theistic belief, most contemporary atheologians have moved away from logical arguments from evil and appeal instead to arguments that are sensitive to particular facts about evil, contending that the amount of human and animal suffering, in conjunction with facts about its nature, duration and distribution, constitutes strong evidence against the existence of a perfect being. The argument from (1_E) and (2_E) to (3) constitutes one such attack on theism. (1_E) is indisputably true, and in conjunction with (2_E) entails (3), so the argument's cogency turns solely on the plausibility of (2_E). How might the atheologian try to establish (2_E)? (2_E) attempts to capture the intuition that

⁵ Or, at least, that were conducive to the development of significantly free creatures.

⁶ Why would it not be sufficient to establish that it is likely that any world that a perfect being x actualized would come to contain some (possibly very small) quantity of evil E such that only by (possibly very infrequently) curtailing creaturely freedom would x be able to prevent E ? It might be held that if, in order to prevent the occurrence of evil E , an omnipotent and omniscient being x were required only very occasionally to restrict creatures' freedom, it would be better, all things considered, if x did so, for were their freedom to be restricted only very occasionally, the value of the creatures' having been granted free will would not be compromised sufficiently to justify on the ground of the supposed sanctity of free will x 's failing to prevent E . The thought is that although divine intervention would erode the value of free will, the degree to which this value would diminish were an omnipotent and omniscient being x to curtail freedom only occasionally would not be sufficient to justify x 's failing to intervene to prevent the occurrence of moral evil in worlds most of whose inhabitants did good most of the time.

⁷ That is, freedom that is not subject to divine curtailment.

at least some of the evil in the world is *gratuitous*, where an evil is gratuitous just in case there is no reason in virtue of which an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting it. Now if, for some evil E, there is no reason in virtue of which an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting E, then it is inconsistent with the existence of a perfect being that E should occur. Thus, only if the world contains no gratuitous evil is classical theism true.

The following two conditions can reasonably be supposed jointly sufficient for an evil E's being gratuitous:

- (G₁) There is no good state of affairs G for whose obtaining it is logically necessary that E should obtain, and which is such that at least one possible world in which E and G both obtain is either better than any possible world in which neither E nor G obtains, or equal in value to the best possible world in which neither E nor G obtains.

- (G₂) There is no evil state of affairs E' for whose non-obtaining it is logically necessary that E should obtain, and which is such that at least one possible world in which E obtains and E' does not is either better (less bad) than any possible world in which E' obtains and E does not, or equal in value to the best possible world in which E' obtains and E does not.

In asserting that the world contains gratuitous evil, the atheologian claims that there are evil states of affairs E such that for any reason R, an omnipotent and omniscient being would not be morally justified in permitting E for R. Following William Rowe,⁸ this claim is standardly argued for as follows.

- (a) There are evil states of affairs E such that we cannot think of any reason in virtue of which an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting E.

⁸ 'The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism'

Thus,

- (b) There are evil states of affairs E such that there is no reason in virtue of which an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting E.

The inference from (a) to (b) is inductive: from the (supposed) fact that for certain evils E, we have been unable to discern any reason that would justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in allowing E, the atheologian infers that *there is* no reason that would justify any such being in allowing E. There are two claims that the atheologian must defend if she is to establish the existence of gratuitous evil by appeal to some such argument as that from (a) to (b). First, she must supply us with reason to think (a) true. Secondly, she must provide us with grounds to suppose (a) to furnish (b) with strong inductive support. Let us examine these claims in turn.

Is there inscrutable evil?

Following Daniel Howard-Snyder, let us describe as *inscrutable* any evil E such that even after much thought and reflection, we can find no reason that could plausibly be supposed capable of justifying an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting E. Then (a) asserts that there is inscrutable evil. Sceptical theists accept (a), but some non-sceptical theists have challenged it.⁹ In light of the sceptical theist's committing herself to it, I shall not attempt to mount a rigorous defence of (a), but shall explain briefly, by reference to two of the more popular theodicies, why I take (a) to be plausible. Consider William Rowe's example of a young girl's being brutally raped, beaten and strangled. What could justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting such an atrocity to occur? Some have suggested that the little girl's suffering occurred as a result of her attacker's having freely decided to abuse her, and that, consequently, only by violating the freedom of the attacker's will would an omnipotent and omniscient being have been able to ensure that no harm befell her. By appeal to some such supposition as that a world that contains free creatures is better than a world that does not, the (putative) fact that the rape,

⁹ Those theists who propound theodicies might deny (a).

beating and strangulation took place as a result of free human agency might be taken to constitute a reason in virtue of which an omnipotent and omniscient being would have been justified in allowing them to occur.

This putative theodicy strikes me, as it has struck many, as deeply implausible: while there might be a significant amount of evil for which it can account, there are many instances of atrocious suffering, suffering that we have excellent reason to think a perfect being would, in the absence of very strong countervailing reason, prevent, that cannot reasonably be attributed to the exercise of free will. For example, on the (overwhelmingly plausible) supposition that of the creatures which inhabit the Earth, only humans have free will, there were, prior to the birth of the first human, millions of years of animal suffering whose occurrence cannot be explained by appeal to any free-will theodicy.¹⁰ Moreover, there is very good reason to take the evil-willed's being left free to commit acts that cause terrible suffering to be of insufficient value to justify, on the ground of the supposed sanctity of free will, an omnipotent and omniscient being's failing to so intervene as to ensure that that suffering would not occur. No one, I should suggest, can seriously maintain that the value of the would-be attacker's being left free with respect to whether to abuse the girl was so great as to render an omnipotent and omniscient being morally warranted in permitting the suffering that she and her family endured as a result of his actions. Among innumerable methods by which it could have prevented the atrocity, an omnipotent and omniscient being could have so altered the content of the would-be attacker's desires as to ensure that he longer wanted to rape the girl. Without any impulse to commit rape, the man would have posed no threat to the girl, and the reconfiguration of his desires could have been executed in such a way

¹⁰ I am aware that Tim Mawson, among others, has argued that the free-will theodicy can be extended to account for the existence of natural evil (i.e., evil that does not result from the exercise of free will). I shall not here investigate that proposal in any detail, but merely note that it is subject to the following two, *prima facie* powerful, objections. (1) It cannot sensibly be maintained, on the basis of any consideration having to do with the conditions governing the possibility of human agency, that the natural laws' not being subject to divine violation constitutes a good of sufficient value to account for all natural evil. Even if it is accepted that it is necessary for our having the capacity to exercise free will that there should be laws of nature, it does not follow that were these laws to be occasionally suspended, perhaps so as to ensure that there would be no earthquake or volcanic eruption in a densely populated area, we should be rendered so perplexed as to lose our capacity to decide freely how to act. (Note that in many cases, our lack of scientific knowledge would ensure that we were completely ignorant of any such suspension of the natural laws.) (2) Despite Peter van Inwagen's claims to the contrary, there is excellent reason to think that there are actualizable possible worlds containing at least as many free creatures as our own that are governed by laws of nature that result in far less suffering than occurs as a result of the laws of nature in operation here.

as to appear perfectly normal to him. It might even be argued that in so intervening, an omnipotent and omniscient being would not have violated the supposedly precious freedom of the man's will, for it is plausible that we are typically not free with respect to what it is that we want: in many cases – I take rape and murder to be paradigms – subjects are lumbered with desires that they find abhorrent and would much rather not have. Thus, it is not only their potential victims who would stand to gain from divine intervention; the evil-willed would themselves benefit were their desires to be rendered more conducive to human flourishing.

Let us turn now to a brief examination of the capacity of John Hick's soul making-theodicy to undermine (a). Hick attempts to account for the existence of evil on the assumption of classical theism by motivating two claims: (i) that ours is a world that is conducive to moral and spiritual development, and (ii) that there is reason to think that were it to actualize a world, a perfect being would choose to actualize a world that were conducive to moral and spiritual development. On the supposition that virtues acquired through sacrifice and endeavour possess greater value than would any with which one might be gifted by an act of divine charity, (ii) is plausible. In support of (i), Hick argues that moral and spiritual development cannot take place in a paradisiacal world in which no harm ever befalls anyone. On the contrary, the cultivation of such virtues as courage, charity and compassion requires that one face danger to which one can respond courageously, encounter people in need to whom one can give, and experience such suffering and hardship as will enable one to empathize with those deserving of sympathy and pity. Hence, if we are develop the souls with which Hick supposes us to have been endowed, we must be exposed to a considerable amount of grave evil.

Soul-making considerations suffice to render theistically explicable the existence of some horrific evil, but it cannot reasonably be maintained that they are capable of accounting for all the prolonged undeserved suffering that occurs. Such is the quantity of terrible suffering in the world that there is good reason to think that at least some horrific evil qualifies on the soul-making theodicy as gratuitous. For example, had the Nazis killed at Auschwitz only five hundred thousand Jews rather than more than a million, the capacity of the Holocaust to nurture one's soul through contemplation of the suffering that it caused would not have been diminished, rendering gratuitous on Hick's theodicy the evil that consists in the imprisonment and execution in the most appalling conditions imaginable of

hundreds of thousands of men, women and children. Further, on the assumption that only humans have souls, Hick's theodicy, like its free-will counterpart, is unable to explain why animals should have been condemned to suffer for millions of years prior to the birth of the first human. Perhaps it will be argued that on account of its occurring as a result of the operation of the laws of nature, much animal suffering is theistically explicable on the supposition that there is value in our world's being governed by such laws. However, as we pointed out in assessing the free-will theodicy, there is good reason to think that an omnipotent and omniscient being would have been able to actualize a law-governed world that contained far less natural evil.

Further still, one might hold that the soul-making theodicy offends against the conception of a divine being as perfectly just. Unless he invokes some other theodicy, Hick is committed to maintaining that a young girl's being raped, beaten and strangled is to be accounted for on the theistic hypothesis by appeal to soul-making considerations: such is "the soul-making potential" of the girl's being abused – the very description of it as such makes one decidedly uncomfortable – that an omnipotent and omniscient being would have been morally justified in permitting her to suffer. It is, however, decidedly unclear quite how the girl should have stood to benefit from the actions of her attacker. Can it seriously be supposed that her soul may have developed as a result of her ordeal? Perhaps it will be claimed that only by being harmed would the girl have had the opportunity to exercise forgiveness, but it cannot sensibly be maintained that it was necessary for her being able to cultivate her capacity to forgive that she should suffer so cruelly. Indeed, even if one concedes that the classical-theistic hypothesis renders it likely that there is some sort of afterlife, thereby permitting Hick to claim that soul-development need not be curtailed by death, it is, by Hick's own lights, implausible in the extreme that the girl's suffering should have rendered her soul – if such there be – more amenable to enrichment: if suffering is conducive to the cultivation of virtue, then it is likely that the girl's soul would have developed far more on Earth than in Heaven.

Now it might be argued that in considering whether to intervene, a perfectly good being would have been concerned not only with the girl's growing morally and spiritually, but also with the moral and spiritual development of her attacker, of members of her family, and, indeed, of anyone else aware of the suffering that she endured. However, in reasoning thus, the theist would run the risk of ascribing to

the supposed object of her worship a deeply unpalatable moral instrumentalism. It could reasonably be held that had an omnipotent and omniscient being permitted the girl to be raped, beaten and strangled on the ground that in learning of her having suffered thus, others could come to grow morally and spiritually, it would have violated what might plausibly be thought her right to be treated, in accordance with the second formulation of Kant's categorical imperative, not as a means to an end, but as an end in herself.

Limitations of space preclude a detailed examination of other proposed theodicies, but I hope that these remarks demonstrate the difficulty that one encounters in attempting to unearth reasons that would justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in failing to so intervene as to prevent the most atrocious of the world's evils. Many reasons have been advanced in an effort to explain how an omnipotent and omniscient being might be justified in allowing horrendous evils E to occur, but none, so far as I can see, stands up to scrutiny: on inspection, would-be reasons have been found to either:

- (i) cite goods G such that either it is not logically necessary for G's obtaining that E should occur, or at least one possible world in which G fails to obtain and E does not occur is better than any possible world in which G obtains and E occurs,

or

- (ii) cite evils E* such that either it is not logically necessary for E*'s failing to occur that E should occur, or at least one possible world in which E* occurs and E does not is better (less bad) than any possible world in which E occurs and E* does not.

Given that the sceptical theist accepts (a), I shall not attempt to examine every candidate reason why an omnipotent and omniscient being might permit some particularly horrific evil, and explain why I think that that reason falls foul of either (i) or (ii), but rather simply suppose – not, I think, unreasonably – that there is indeed inscrutable evil.

Gratuitous, or merely inscrutable?

On the supposition that there is inscrutable evil, how much warrant does the atheologian have to suppose that there is gratuitous evil? Appealing to deficiencies in, and the limitations of, our cognitive faculties, sceptical theists deny that

- (a) There are evil states of affairs E such that we cannot think of any reason in virtue of which an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting E,

supplies

- (b) There are evil states of affairs E such that there is no reason in virtue of which an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting E,

with strong inductive support. Daniel Howard-Snyder¹¹ and Michael Bergmann¹² attempt to undermine the inference from (a) to (b) by arguing that we ought to be sceptical about our knowledge of the realm of value. Stephen Wykstra¹³ employs what he takes to be a condition of reasonable epistemic access, CORNEA, in trying to demonstrate that our (supposed) inability to discern reasons that would justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting horrific evil furnishes us with very little reason, if any reason at all, to suppose that there are no such reasons. In endeavouring to thwart the atheologian's efforts to establish (b), William Alston¹⁴ appeals to a wider-ranging scepticism, maintaining that our (alleged) inability to handle the complexity involved in comparing the respective values of different possible worlds, our (presumed) lack of modal knowledge, our (putative) lack of knowledge of the full range of goods and evils, and our (supposed) lack of knowledge of what Alston denotes 'the secrets of the human heart' conspire to

¹¹ 'The Argument from Inscrutable Evil'

¹² 'Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil'

¹³ In, among other places, 'The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: on Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance''

¹⁴ 'The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition'

render the atheologian unwarranted in reasoning from (a) to (b). In the next section I shall focus on Bergmann's value-scepticism and consider an objection to it raised by Graham Oppy and Michael Almeida. After explaining Almeida and Oppy's objection, I shall argue that it fails, drawing on work by Nick Trakakis and Yujin Nagasawa,¹⁵ and Michael Rea in collaboration with Bergmann himself.¹⁶

Michael Bergmann's value scepticism

Bergmann appeals to the following three theses in an effort to show that the atheologian is not reasonably entitled to accept (b) on the basis of (a).

- (ST1) We have no good reason for thinking that the goods we know of are representative of the possible goods.
- (ST2) We have no good reason for thinking that the evils we know of are representative of the possible evils.
- (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.¹⁷

Let us begin by explaining how these claims are supposed to undermine the inference from (a) to (b). Suppose that there are goods outside our ken, goods of which we have no knowledge and, thus, of whose value and relations to other goods and evils we are ignorant. Unless we were in a position to grasp such goods and appreciate their intrinsic value and relations to other goods and evils, we should not be in a position to rule out the possibility that their being realized should depend on some evil E's obtaining, and that they should be of sufficient value to render an omnipotent and omniscient being morally justified in permitting E in pursuit of

¹⁵ 'Skeptical Theism and Moral Skepticism: a Reply to Almeida and Oppy'

¹⁶ 'In Defense of Skeptical Theism: a Reply to Oppy and Almeida'

¹⁷ 'Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil', page 279

them. Consequently, for the atheologian to be justified in inferring (b) from (a), she must be justified in reasoning from

- (c) Every good we know of is either of insufficient value to justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting E, or does not require for its realization the obtaining of E,

to

- (d) Every possible good is either of insufficient value to justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting E, or does not require for its realization the obtaining of E.

However, the inference from (c) to (d) is undercut by (ST1) – (ST3): if we have no good reason to suppose the goods of which we are aware representative, in respect of their reason-furnishing potential, of the possible goods, we are not justified in taking (c) to supply us with reason to accept (d). Hence, Bergmann concludes, the atheologian is not warranted in reasoning from (a) to (b).

There are at least two ways in which one might challenge Bergmann's strategy for undermining evidential arguments from evil. First, one might challenge theses (ST1) – (ST3) directly, attempting to show either that they are false, or that there is good reason to doubt that they are true, or that – for some other (possibly non-epistemic) reason – they do not admit of rational acceptance. In attacking Bergmann so, the atheologian might concede that (ST1) – (ST3) would, if true, succeed in undercutting the atheologian's warrant to infer (b) from (a), but would maintain that we have good reason not to accept them. Alternatively, one might try to show that (ST1) – (ST3) fail to undermine the inference from (a) to (b). In pursuing this line of attack, the atheologian would contend that (ST1) – (ST3) are insufficiently sceptical: one could quite reasonably affirm Bergmann's three theses while maintaining that (a) furnishes us with good reason to accept (b). It might, for example, be argued that it is not sufficient for Bergmann's being justified in rejecting the inference from (a) to (b) that we should have no good reason to suppose the goods of which we are aware representative of the possible goods. Rather, it might be held, Bergmann must show that we have good reason to suppose

the goods of which we are aware *un*representative of the possible goods. In the next section I examine Oppy and Almeida's contention that there are moral grounds on which to refuse to accept (ST1) – (ST3).

Is the sceptical theist committed to an unacceptable moral scepticism?

Oppy and Almeida argue that if the value-scepticism to which Bergmann appeals is of sufficient strength to undermine evidential arguments from evil, then it is of sufficient strength to undermine our ordinary patterns of moral reasoning. On the supposition that any form of scepticism that threatens to undermine our ordinary patterns of moral reasoning is unacceptable, they conclude that (ST1) – (ST3) do not admit of rational acceptance, and – thus – do not threaten evidential arguments from evil. By appeal to (ST1) – (ST3), Bergmann argues that we are in no position to reasonably think it unlikely that there are goods that would render an omnipotent and omniscient being morally justified in permitting appalling evils. Oppy and Almeida contend that if Bergmann is right in supposing this to be so, then we are in no position to reasonably think it unlikely that there are goods that would render *us* morally justified in permitting appalling evils.

I have identified in 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil' at least three charges that Oppy and Almeida lay against sceptical theism.

Charge 1

*...if we could easily intervene to [prevent some atrocious evil], then it would be appalling for us to allow [the consideration that by (ST1) – (ST3), it is not unlikely that it is for the best, all things considered, if we do not intervene] to stop us from intervening. Yet, if we [take seriously the thought that it is not unlikely that it is for the best, all things considered, if we do not intervene], how can we also maintain that we are morally required to intervene?*¹⁸

That is, it would appear that in virtue of being committed to the claim that it is not unlikely that it is for the best, all things considered, if we do not intervene to prevent terrible evil, the sceptical theist is unable to maintain reasonably that we are morally required to intervene.

Charge 2

¹⁸ 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil', page 506, paragraph 1

*If we are not prepared to judge that it is unlikely that a particular instance of rape and murder is not also a very great good – and that is just the kind of judgment which acceptance of (ST1) – (ST3) is supposed to preclude – then we do not have sufficient reason to interfere, and to prevent the rape and murder, no matter how little it would cost us to do so.*¹⁹

That is: it is necessary for our having sufficient reason to intervene to prevent some terrible evil E that we should be prepared to judge that it is unlikely that E's occurrence would lead to some very great good; the sceptical theist is rationally prohibited from making any such judgment; thus, the sceptical theist does not have sufficient reason to intervene to prevent terrible evils.

Charge 3

*... our reasoning from pro tanto reasons to all-things-considered reasons always relies upon a 'noseeum' inference of just the kind which appears in our evidential argument from evil. If sceptical theism is sufficient to block 'noseeum' inferences about values, then we lose our ability to reason to all-things-considered conclusions about what to do.*²⁰

That is: if one refuses to infer 'There is no reason why I should not prevent E' from 'I have found no reason why I should not prevent E', then one is unable to arrive at a reasoned decision whether to prevent E; on account of rejecting such "noseeum" inferences when they occur in evidential arguments from evil, the sceptical theist cannot reasonably perform such inferences in the course of deciding how to act; thus, sceptical theists cannot make reasoned decisions whether to attempt to prevent evil.

It is not clear whether Oppy and Almeida intend that each charge be read separately or treated as part of a cumulative case against sceptical theism. I shall thus consider each charge in turn in an effort to assess the threat which it poses to the rational

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, paragraph 2

²⁰ *Ibid.*, page 507, paragraph 2

tenability of the sceptical-theistic defence of the epistemic reasonableness of classical-theistic belief.

Must the sceptical theist hold that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were we not to prevent terrible evils?

The arguments by which Oppy and Almeida seek to motivate Charge 1 proceed from the premise that in subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3), the sceptical theist rationally commits herself to the claim that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were we to permit such terrible evils as a child's being left to drown. This premise seems reasonable: if one holds, with (Oppy and Almeida suppose) Bergmann, that (ST1) – (ST3) together motivate the claim that it is not unlikely that it would be, concerning some horrific evil E, for the best, all things considered, were an omnipotent and omniscient being to allow E to occur, then it is difficult to see how one could be justified in refusing to hold that (ST1) – (ST3) together motivate the claim that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were *we* to allow E to occur. One might, though, object to this premise by distinguishing between intrinsic and instrumental value, and holding that while the world-state which would obtain on an omnipotent and omniscient being *x*'s allowing an evil E to occur might be equivalent in value to the world-state which would obtain on a human subject S's allowing E to occur, the state of affairs which consists in S's electing not to prevent E is of greater intrinsic disvalue than the state of affairs which consists in *x*'s electing not to prevent E.

The instrumental value of an evil's being permitted to occur is determined by the value of the world-state which is instantiated as a result. So, an omnipotent and omniscient being *x*'s permitting E is equivalent in instrumental value to a human subject S's permitting E just in case the world-state which would be instantiated on the obtaining of the former is equivalent in value to the world-state which would be instantiated on the obtaining of the latter. I shall argue that it is possible that there should be evils E such that the instrumental value of an omnipotent and omniscient being *x*'s allowing E to occur is equal to the instrumental value of a human subject S's allowing E to occur, but the intrinsic disvalue of S's allowing E to occur is greater than the intrinsic disvalue of *x*'s allowing E to occur. Hence, the state of affairs which consists in S's allowing E to occur is worse than the state of affairs

which consists in *x*'s allowing E to occur: the two states of affairs are equivalent in instrumental value, but the former is of greater intrinsic disvalue. I shall then argue that it is possible that the intrinsic disvalue of the state of affairs which consists in S's permitting E should be sufficiently greater than the intrinsic disvalue of the state of affairs which consists in *x*'s permitting E for the following two conditions to be satisfied.

- (e) It would be better, all things considered, were an omnipotent and omniscient being to permit E;
- (f) It would be better, all things considered, were a human subject S *not* to permit E.

Hence, it is possible that it should be for the best, all things considered, for an omnipotent and omniscient being to permit E, but not be for the best, all things considered, for any of us to permit E.

Plausibly, humans' freely vowing to abide by moral principles constitutes a good state of affairs, even if, perhaps by some unknown metaphysical quirk or other, it would, consequentially speaking, sometimes be better were one or another such principle to be violated. Suppose, for example, that the world-state which would obtain on the occurrence of an event *e* is of slightly greater value than the world-state which would obtain on the non-occurrence of *e*; that the permission of *e* is in contravention of a moral norm; and that no one has any reason to think that the world-state which would obtain were *e* to occur is either better than or equivalent in value to the world state which would obtain were *e* not to occur.²¹ On account of there being a moral principle that the permission of *e* contravenes, it is necessary for *e*'s taking place as a result of human agency that someone should do wrong. Further suppose, as seems reasonable, that there is significant intrinsic value in a human agent's endeavouring, frequently in the face of great difficulty, to live in accordance with moral principles, and significant intrinsic disvalue in a human agent's knowingly disobeying any such principle. Given the limitations of our knowledge, moral principles play an important role in helping us decide how to act, guiding us in our deliberations and supplying us with sound bases for our actions. Thus, for any

²¹ *e* might, for example, consist in a child's suffering physical harm.

human subject S, it is possible that it would be better, all things considered, for S not to allow *e* to occur, even though the world-state which would obtain were *e* to occur is of greater value than that which would obtain were *e* not to occur.

An omniscient being, on the other hand, would always be in a position to ascertain which (if either) of two possible courses of action would generate more value, so it would not stand to gain anything from the capacity of moral principles to ease decision-making in times of uncertainty. Further, an omnipotent being would never have to struggle to abide by any principle, so there would be less nobility – and thus less intrinsic value – in its resolving to respect moral principles than in a human's resolving to respect such principles. It might, then, be held that for its being better, all things considered, for an omnipotent and omniscient being to allow *e* to occur, it is both necessary and sufficient that the world-state which would obtain were *e* to occur should exceed in value the world state which would obtain were *e* not to occur; it might be held, that is, that divine axiology is purely instrumentalist. At the very least, it is plausible that there is a significant discrepancy in intrinsic value between a human's resolving to abide by moral principles, and an omnipotent and omniscient being's resolving to abide by such principles. Consequently, it is reasonable to think it possible that there should be evils E such that it would be for the best, all things considered, were an omnipotent and omniscient being not to prevent E, but would not be for the best, all things considered, were any of us not to prevent E.

These considerations suggest that Oppy and Almeida ought not to attempt to reason deductively from

- (i) its not being unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were an omnipotent and omniscient being not to prevent some terrible evil E,

to

- (ii) its not being unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were any of us not to prevent E.

There is, however, a strong inductive argument from (i) to (ii) to which they might appeal. In advancing our counterexample to the supposition that (i) entails (ii), we stipulated that the state of affairs which would obtain were *e* to occur is slightly greater in value than the state of affairs which would obtain were *e* not to occur. The rationale behind that stipulation is this: if the former state of affairs were of significantly greater value than the latter, it could not plausibly be held that the state of affairs which consists in a subject S's endeavouring to adhere to moral principles is of such intrinsic value, and the state of affairs which consists in S's knowingly violating moral principles of such intrinsic disvalue, that it would nevertheless be for the best, all things considered, were S not to allow *e* to occur. Suppose, for example, that *e* consists in an army general's being poisoned through drinking arsenic-laced wine; suppose that the general's being thus murdered is sufficient for the cessation of a devastating conflict; and suppose that if the general is not so murdered, then thousands of civilians will die. Then even if it is accepted that the considerations which we raised above succeed in demonstrating that there is intrinsic disvalue in a subject's allowing the general to drink the poisoned wine, and intrinsic value in her preventing his drinking the wine, the discrepancy in value between the consequences of his being poisoned and the consequences of his not being poisoned is so great that it cannot reasonably be maintained that it would not be for the best, all things considered, were the subject to allow the general to drink the wine.

The moral, then, is that intrinsic-value considerations do not carry sufficient weight to block the inference from (i) to (ii) when the consequences of an evil's being permitted are significantly better (or less worse) than the consequences of its being prevented. Hence, Oppy and Almeida could construe the inference from (i) to (ii) inductively and argue that it is likely that: if it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were an omnipotent and omniscient being to permit some terrible evil E, then it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were one of us to permit E, thereby showing that (i) furnishes (ii) with strong inductive support. Were they to construe the inference from (i) to (ii) in the manner suggested, Oppy and Almeida would, I think, be entitled to hold that anyone who accepted (i) would, in so doing, rationally commit herself to supposing it very likely that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were one of us to allow E to occur.

Responding to Charge 1

Suppose that we grant that (i) renders (ii) probable, grant that the sceptical theist is committed to (i), and – hence – grant that, concerning some terrible evil E, the sceptical theist is committed to holding that it is likely that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were we not to prevent E. Does it then follow, as Charge 1 claims, that the sceptical theist is unable to maintain reasonably that we are morally required to prevent E? I shall argue that it does not.

Implicit in the argument by which Oppy and Almeida seek to motivate their first charge is the supposition that we *ought to* maintain that each of us would be morally required to intervene to prevent the occurrence of evil E in such cases as that of a child's being in danger of drowning; the charge consists in the claim that as a result of her subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3), and (allegedly) thereby rationally committing herself to the claim that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were E to be allowed to occur, the sceptical theist cannot reasonably maintain that any of us would be morally obliged to prevent E. Now there are various ways in which one might challenge this supposition. One might, for example, adopt an ethical anti-realism and deny that there are any moral facts, then argue that that if there are no moral facts, there is nothing to ground moral duties: if there is nothing in virtue of which it would be wrong for one not to intervene, then there is nothing capable of furnishing one with a moral duty *to* intervene. More subtly, one might argue, along divine command-theoretic lines, that it is necessary for there to be duty-generating moral facts that there should exist a perfect being, and, hence, that no self-professed atheist can consistently object to sceptical theism on the ground that sceptical theism threatens the reasonableness of our supposing agents to be morally obliged to try wherever possible to prevent the occurrence of evil: if one denies that there is a perfect being, then, the objection will run, one cannot consistently hold that there are moral duties for sceptical-theistic belief to threaten.

I shall assume that such anti-realist worries can be assuaged (i.e., assume that we do have moral duties whose status as such needs to be protected) and ask whether in accepting sceptical theism, and (supposedly) thereby thinking that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were some terrible evil E to occur, one loses any right that one might otherwise have to hold that any

agent in a position to intervene has a moral duty to attempt to prevent E. Now as we noted, Oppy and Almeida's argument relies on the claim that the sceptical theist would face a *problem* were it to be shown that her position rationally precludes her from holding that a subject would be morally obliged to attempt to rescue a child whom he saw to be in danger of drowning; without any such claim, Charge 1 gives us no reason to reject sceptical theism. It is not wholly clear from the text, however, in exactly what they take this putative problem to consist.²² Here are two ideas:

Charge (1a)

S does, as a matter of objective metaphysical fact, have a duty to endeavour to save the child; in subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3), the sceptical theist rationally precludes herself from recognizing that S has a duty to endeavour to save the child; thus, one ought not to accept sceptical theism, since there are truths which in subscribing to its sceptical theses one would preclude oneself from acknowledging.

Charge (1b)

One ought to hold that S has a duty to endeavour to save the child; the sceptical theist is rationally precluded from holding so; thus, one ought not to accept sceptical theism, since there are second-order norms with which it is in tension.^{23 24}

²² Oppy and Almeida ask, rhetorically, how, in light of her (allegedly) supposing that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were the child to be allowed to drown, the sceptical theist can maintain that S is morally required to try to save him, but it is not clear what they take it to be about the sceptical theist's making this supposition that prevents her from maintaining so.

²³ (1a) and (1b) are not equivalent, for unlike (1a), (1b) is apt to be pressed even if there are no objective moral facts. For example, in maintaining that *x* ought to hold that S has a duty to endeavour to save the child, one might seek to ground *x*'s supposed duty not in objective moral facts, but rather in *x*'s subscribing to certain moral principles. It would be argued that in adopting certain moral principles, *x* commits himself to holding that S has a duty to try to save the child. Such principles need not be grounded in objective moral facts (they might instead be construed along quasi-realist lines), so (1a) and (1b) constitute distinct charges.

²⁴ By 'second-order norms' I mean norms that govern our attitudes to first-order norms. There is a first-order norm in virtue of which S has an obligation to try to save the child. Argument (1b) purports to show that the sceptical theist cannot reasonably endorse this first-order norm: she is unable to bear to it the appropriate attitude, and consequently violates a second-order norm.

Assessing charge (1a)

We observed above for Charge 1 to threaten sceptical theism, it is necessary that the proposition that it would be for the best, all things considered, were an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being to allow the occurrence of some evil E should lend strong inductive support²⁵ to the proposition that it would be for the best, all things considered, were we to allow the occurrence of E. I argued that Oppy and Almeida are justified in taking this condition to be satisfied. However, if they are to succeed via (1a) in indicting (ST1) – (ST3) on the charge of encumbering anyone who accepted them with an unacceptable moral scepticism, Oppy and Almeida must show that in subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3), one would commit oneself to holding not just that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were S to allow the child to drown, but also that S would be *justified* were she to allow the child to drown. Consequently, they must establish the following supposition:

- (g) If there is an unknown good capable of rendering an omnipotent and omniscient being justified in allowing the child to drown, then there is an unknown good capable of rendering S justified in allowing the child to drown.

Nick Trakakis and Yujin Nagasawa²⁶ have challenged this supposition by appeal to Richard Swinburne's claim²⁷ that in virtue of its being our creator and benefactor, an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being would have rights over each human that no human has over any other. Swinburne argues that whether a consideration constitutes a reason for a being's permitting a creature to suffer depends on the relation in which that being stands to the creature, and holds that just as a child's parents have over her rights that they do not have over other children (for example, to allow her to undergo a painful operation), so an omnipotent and omniscient being would have over each of us rights that none of us has over anyone else. Hence, it is possible that there should be goods capable of rendering an

²⁵ A proposition *P* lends strong inductive support to a proposition *Q* just in case on the supposition that *P* is true, the probability of *Q*'s being true is high.

²⁶ 'Skeptical Theism and Moral Skepticism'

²⁷ *The Existence of God*, page 217

omnipotent and omniscient justified in permitting the child to drown but incapable of rendering any of us justified in permitting the child to drown.

Now admittedly it does not immediately follow that (g) is false, since it is possible that for any good G capable of justifying an omnipotent and omniscient being in not saving the child but incapable of justifying S in not saving the child, there is a good G' that *is* capable of justifying S in not preventing E, thus ensuring that (g)'s consequent is true whenever its antecedent is true. However, so far as I can see, nothing to which the sceptical theist is committed rationally compels her to hold that for any unknown good capable of rendering true (g)'s antecedent but incapable, for the reason that Swinburne advances, of rendering true its consequent, there is some other unknown good capable of rendering true (g)'s consequent (and thereby preserving (g)'s truth). Hence, the sceptical theist is justified in taking Swinburne's objection to cast serious doubt on (g). I thus conclude that in the absence of a more rigorous defence of (g), charge (1a) fails to supply one with any reason not to accept (ST1) – (ST3).

Assessing charge (1b)

Why might it be thought that the sceptical theist is rationally precluded from holding that S has a duty to try to ensure that the child comes to no harm? The most natural line of thinking is this.

- (i) Only if it would not be for the best, all things considered, for the child to be allowed to drown does S have a duty to endeavour to prevent the child's drowning.
- (ii) The sceptical theist holds that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, for the child to be allowed to drown.

Thus,

- (iii) The sceptical theist ought to hold that it is not unlikely that S does not have a duty to endeavour to prevent the child's drowning.

Thus,

- (iv) The sceptical theist cannot reasonably hold that S has a duty to endeavour to prevent the child's drowning.

There is, however, good reason to reject premise (i). (i) is plausible only on a consequentialist theory of ethics; on deontological theories, the supposed fact that it might be for the best, all things considered, for the child to be allowed to drown would have no bearing on whether S ought to try to save him. This suggests the following line of sceptical-theistic defence: maintain that divine morality is consequentialist but human morality deontological. The basic idea is this. The ethics of human evil-prevention are governed by rules or imperatives. Such rules are insensitive to the possibility that it should sometimes be for the best that horrific evil be allowed to occur. It is always wrong, no matter how potentially wonderful the consequences of non-intervention, for a human subject in a position to help to stand back and watch a child drown. An omnipotent and omniscient being, on the other hand, would not be subject to such rules; whether it were justified in permitting horrific evil would depend solely on whether the overall value of the consequences of its doing so were at least as great as the overall value of the consequences of its not doing so.

By way of support for so distinguishing between divine and human morality, consider the vast discrepancy between our cognitive powers and those of an omniscient being. Owing to our being unable, at least on the supposition that our modal and moral knowledge is as limited as the sceptical theist alleges, to determine reliably whether it would be better, all things considered, for horrific evils to be allowed to occur, it is necessary for our possessing the capacity to make sound decisions about how to act that we should adhere to universal moral principles. An omniscient being, on the other hand, would have no need for such principles, for it would be cognizant of all the facts relevant to determining whether it would be better, all things considered, for evils to be allowed to occur. Hence, the sceptical theist is free to hold that S is morally required to intervene, even if she is, on account of subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3), committed to supposing it not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, for the child to be allowed to drown.

One might also challenge premise (ii). Oppy and Almeida's principal target in 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil' is Bergmann, whom they suppose to be committed to thinking it not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were terrible evils to be allowed to occur. However, it might be held that Bergmann is committed to holding, of an evil E, not that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were E to occur, but that we are in no position to reasonably suppose it unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were E to occur. Bergmann is naturally read as attempting to undermine evidential arguments from evil by appeal to scepticism about our right to suppose those regions of the realms of reasons and value with which we are familiar to constitute representative samples of those realms. But then consistency would demand that Bergmann *not* hold that it is not unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were E to occur; Bergmann ought rather to profess ignorance of whether or not it is unlikely that it would be for the best, all things considered, were E to occur. In holding that it is not unlikely that it would be better, all things considered, for an omnipotent and omniscient being to allow E to occur, one would commit oneself to a claim of the very sort that (ST1) – (ST3) purport to undermine. Hence, both premises of the argument from (i) to (iv) are highly questionable. I thus conclude that if it is advanced as (1b), Charge 1 fails to undermine sceptical theism.

Responding to Charge 2

According to Charge 2, it is necessary for a subject's having sufficient reason to intervene to prevent the occurrence of some terrible evil that she should judge it unlikely that were she to intervene, she would prevent the occurrence of some very great good. Now it might be thought that this putative necessary condition is unreasonably strong. Suppose that an individual, S, is walking past a river and sees that a child is in danger of drowning. Further suppose, with (at least if Almeida and Oppy are to be believed) Bergmann, that S is in no position to assign reasonably a low probability to the claim that there are goods which, were she smarter and better equipped, she would recognize as furnishing her with reason not to try to save the child. Then S cannot reasonably judge it unlikely that there is some great good for whose realization it is necessary that she should refrain from helping the child. Does it follow that S does not have sufficient reason to intervene, and prevent the child's

drowning, no matter how little it would cost her to do so? I shall argue that it does not.

We first need to establish what it would be for S to have sufficient reason to try to rescue the child. In holding that S has sufficient reason to intervene, what would one be taking S's supposed reason to intervene to be sufficient *for*? In the absence of any explicit help from the text, I offer three suggestions. Let us distinguish between reasons for which we ought to act (moral duties) and reasons for which we are entitled to act (moral permissions), and distinguish both from the reasons for which we in fact act; and let R be a reason for S to intervene to prevent the child's drowning. Then there are three states of affairs – S's being morally required to intervene, S's being morally permitted to intervene, and S's being motivated to intervene – for whose obtaining R might be sufficient.

We thus arrive at three claims which Oppy and Almeida might defend:

- (2a) For any reason R for a subject S to intervene to prevent evil, it is necessary for R's being sufficient to render it morally obligatory for S to intervene that S should judge it unlikely that were she to intervene, she would prevent the realization of some great good.
- (2b) For any reason R for a subject S to intervene to prevent evil, it is necessary for R's being sufficient to render it morally permissible for S to intervene that S should judge it unlikely that were she to intervene, she would prevent the realization of some great good.
- (2c) For any reason R for a subject S to intervene to prevent evil, it is necessary for R's being sufficient to motivate S to intervene that S should judge it unlikely that were she to intervene, she would prevent the realization of some great good.

Now the arguments with which I attempted to defend Bergmann against Charge 1 can be used to challenge (2a). Indeed, it seems that on any plausible account of how we acquire moral duties, a subject's having a moral duty to endeavour to prevent the occurrence of a terrible evil is not dependent on her making any judgment to the

effect that it is unlikely that her endeavouring so would prevent the realization of a great good. If (2a) is true, then for any set *A* of facts in virtue of whose jointly obtaining a subject *S* possesses a moral duty to try to prevent evil, *A* contains psychological facts about *S*.²⁸ Hence, (2a) entails that no moral duty is objective: whether a subject is morally required to prevent evil turns on whether she makes a certain probability judgment. Now if, as the moral realist supposes, there are objective moral facts, then these facts generate moral duties *independently of any facts about human psychology*: it is just because there is an objective fact in virtue of which it is, say, wrong to allow children to die that one is morally obliged to do everything in one's power to ensure that no child whom one is in a position to save drowns. Given that the facts which generate them are objective, the moral duties with which one is thereby supplied are objective. Hence, if moral realism is true, then (2a) is false.

Further, even if one were to deny that there are objective moral facts in which to ground a subject's moral duties, and sought instead to ground such duties in her subscribing to certain moral principles,²⁹ it is not at all obvious why it should be necessary for the subject's ethical commitments to impose on her a duty to intervene to prevent evil that she should make any judgment about the likelihood that in intervening she would prevent the realization of a great good. So far as I can see, then, the facts – if such there be – in virtue of which one acquires a moral obligation to try to prevent an evil *E* obtain whether or not one makes any judgment about the likelihood that it would be better, all things considered, were one to permit *E*. I thus conclude that (2a) is false.

Now (2b) entails (2a), so if the argument just sketched suffices to demonstrate the falsity of (2a), then it suffices to demonstrate the falsity of (2b). Obligatoriness implies permissibility, so from its being morally incumbent on a subject to intervene, it follows that it is morally permissible for her to intervene. Hence, if it is consistent with *S*'s being morally required to intervene that she should make no judgment about the likelihood that it would be better, all things considered, for her

²⁸ For example, any such set contains the fact that *S* judges it unlikely that were she to intervene, she would prevent the realization of some great good.

²⁹ It might be argued, for example, that in committing oneself to live in accordance with certain moral principles, one acquires a duty to do one's best to protect from serious unmerited harm anyone whom one is in a position to help, whether or not there are objective moral facts in virtue of which those principles are true.

not to intervene, then it is consistent with S's being morally permitted to intervene that she should make no such judgment.

Moreover, even if one is not persuaded by my case against (2a), there is very strong independent reason to reject (2b). To falsify (2b), it is sufficient that one should identify a reason R such that:

- (i) R suffices to render S morally justified in attempting to rescue the child,

even though

- (ii) S does not judge it unlikely that were she to rescue the child, she would prevent the realization of some great good.

Now as Oppy and Almeida themselves note, S has strong *pro tanto* reason to intervene to prevent the child's drowning. If S has strong *pro tanto* reason to intervene, then only if S had strong *pro tanto* reason *not* to intervene would S not be morally warranted in intervening. Thus, unless she has strong *pro tanto* reason not to intervene, S's *pro tanto* reason to intervene suffices to render her morally justified in intervening. Hence, unless she has strong *pro tanto* reason not to intervene, S's *pro tanto* reason to intervene satisfies condition (i). As noted, (2b) is true only if (ii) fails whenever (i) holds. Therefore, (2b) is true only if from

- (iii) S's not judging it unlikely that were she to intervene, she would prevent the realization of some great good,

it follows that

- (iv) S has strong *pro tanto* reason not to intervene.

However, it is quite clear that (iii) does not entail (iv). The mere fact that a subject does not judge it unlikely that a course of action A would lead to some undesirable consequence – in our example, the non-realization of some great good – does not generate any reason for her not to pursue A. After all, the grounds on which she

refuses to judge thus might be utterly lacking in rational merit. I thus conclude that (2b) is false.

Claim (2c) belongs to psychology, not philosophy, and is anyway highly dubious, so I shall not address it here. I shall consider in evaluating Charge 3 to what extent, if any, commitment to sceptical theism threatens one's capacity to make reasoned decisions about how to act, but I take it that whatever philosophical worries one might have about their position, sceptical theists are no less disposed than anyone else to endeavour to help anyone at risk of suffering serious undeserved harm.

Responding to Charge 3

It is Almeida and Oppy's belief that in subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3), Bergmann is committed to holding that we are in no position to reasonably suppose it unlikely that there are goods that provide us with reason not to intervene to prevent appalling suffering. Charge 3 concerns the bearing that the sceptical theist's presumed inability to reasonably think it unlikely that the realization of some wonderful good depends on her permitting some appalling evil may have on her capacity to make sound moral decisions.

Oppy and Almeida attempt to reconstruct the reasoning which they believe that S would have to employ to arrive at an all-things-considered reason to prevent the child's drowning.

- (i) There is *pro tanto* reason for me to intervene to prevent the child's drowning.

- (ii) I have found no *pro tanto* reason for me not to intervene to prevent the child's drowning.

Hence, from (ii),

- (iii) There is no *pro tanto* reason for me not to intervene to prevent the child's drowning.

Thus,

(iv) I have an all-things-considered reason to prevent the child's drowning.³⁰

Oppy and Almeida point out that the inference from (ii) to (iii) is of the same form as the inference from (a) to (b):³¹ in each case, one concludes that there is no good or reason of a certain kind on the basis of one's having been unable to discern any good or reason of that kind. Sceptical theists reject such inferences when they feature in evidential arguments from evil: they claim that the atheologian is not entitled to hold, on the ground that she cannot discern any, that there is no reason that would justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting horrific evil. So, if the fact that an evil is inscrutable does not warrant the atheologian in concluding that it is gratuitous, then, by parity of reasoning, the fact that S has been unable to discern any *pro tanto* reason not to intervene to prevent the child's drowning does not warrant her in concluding that there is no *pro tanto* reason for her not to intervene. Hence, given that she takes (ST1) – (ST3) to together undermine the inference from (a) to (b), the sceptical theist cannot reasonably accept (iii) on the basis of (ii).

According to Oppy and Almeida, the inference from (i) to (iv) is a reconstruction of the moral reasoning which we undertake when we decide whether to intervene to prevent the occurrence of evil.³² It is not immediately clear, though, quite how the sceptical theist's supposed inability to reason from (ii) to (iii) is supposed to bear on her capacity to make sound moral decisions. Here are two ideas.

(3a) In virtue of being unable to legitimately reason from (ii) to (iii), the sceptical theist cannot acquire an all-things-considered reason to prevent E.

(3b) In virtue of being unable to legitimately reason from (ii) to (iii), the sceptical theist cannot reasonably take those *pro tanto* reasons that she has

³⁰ 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil', page 507

³¹ That is, of the same form as the atheologian's inference from an evil E's being inscrutable to E's being gratuitous.

³² 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil', page 507

discovered to together constitute an all-things-considered reason to prevent E.

Assessing charge (3a)

According to charge (3a), the sceptical theist cannot come to possess all-things-considered reasons to prevent the occurrence of evil. (3a) poses little threat to sceptical theism. Oppy and Almeida do not give an explicit definition of 'all-things-considered reason', so I shall work with the following construal: one possesses an all-things-considered reason to prevent E just in case one has

(α) considered every *pro tanto* reason to prevent E,

(β) considered every *pro tanto* reason not to prevent E,

and

(γ) correctly judged that the *pro tanto* reasons to prevent E are collectively stronger than the *pro tanto* reasons not to prevent E.

Now the sceptical theist's being unable to reasonably accept (iii) on the basis of (ii) does not bear on her capacity to fulfil (α) – (γ). The sceptical theist is no less able than anyone else to recognize *pro tanto* reasons for or against the prevention of an evil E, and given any set S_1 of *pro tanto* reasons to prevent E and any set S_2 of *pro tanto* reasons not to prevent E, she is no less able than anyone else to weigh up S_1 and S_2 and correctly judge whether, on the basis of the *pro tanto* reasons that she has thereby considered, she ought or ought not to prevent E. Of course, given that she doubts whether those areas of the realm of value with which we are familiar are representative of that realm, the sceptical theist ought to doubt, for any evil E, whether her search for *pro tanto* reasons for or against preventing E is complete; she ought to doubt, that is, whether she has succeeded in considering every *pro tanto* reason. However, while this threatens the sceptical theist's entitlement to *suppose herself in possession* of all-things-considered reasons (and thus motivates (3b)), it does not bear on her capacity to *acquire* such reasons.

To illustrate, suppose that S believes that there is a good outside our ken that furnishes her with *pro tanto* reason not to prevent some evil E, and suppose that her belief is correct. Owing to this reason's involving a good outside her ken, S cannot grasp it. Consequently, she does not possess an all-things-considered reason to prevent E, for the simple reason that there is a *pro tanto* reason not to prevent E that, through no fault of her own, she has failed to consider. Notice, though, that it is not the fact that she *believes that* there are goods outside our ken that prevents S's arriving at an all-things-considered reason to prevent E. Rather, it is the fact in virtue of which this belief is true that renders her unable to arrive at an all-things-considered reason: it is because there is some ungraspable good whose realization depends on the non-occurrence of E – and which thus generates a *pro tanto* reason not to prevent E that she cannot discern – that S is unable to possess an all-things-considered reason to prevent E. Notice, too, that on account of this hypothesized good's being outside our ken, *none of us* is able to arrive at an all-things-considered reason to prevent E; the sceptical theist is no worse off than anyone else. So, if Oppy and Almeida are able to acquire all-things-considered reasons to prevent evil, then Bergmann and his fellow sceptical theists are, too. I thus take (3a) to be false: if the sceptical theist's ability to arrive at all-things-considered reasons is impaired, it is impaired not by the fact that she subscribes to (ST1) – (ST3), but by the (supposed) fact – namely, the existence of goods outside our ken – that warrants her in subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3).

Assessing charge (3b)

In attempting to impugn sceptical theism by appeal to (3b), one would argue not that it is necessary for a subject's having an all-things-considered reason to intervene that she should reason from (ii) to (iii), but rather that it is necessary for her *being justified in taking herself* to have an all-things-considered reason to intervene that she should *endorse* the inference from (ii) to (iii). The allegation is that the sceptical theist cannot reasonably take any set of *pro tanto* reasons that she has found to constitute an all-things-considered reason, for she takes seriously the possibility that she should be unable to consider everything that merits consideration. Suppose that, as Oppy and Almeida contend that she must, the sceptical theist concedes that she has no idea whether there are goods of which she is currently unaware and which

would, were she more intelligent and better equipped, provide her with strong *pro tanto* reason not to prevent some evil E. In that case, the sceptical theist cannot reasonably endorse the inference from (ii) to (iii), for in recognizing the extent of her putative ignorance of the realm of value, she must acknowledge that her inability to discern any *pro tanto* reason for her not to intervene does not warrant her in concluding that there is no such reason. To illustrate:

1. S knows that only if she arrives at it having considered every *pro tanto* reason for or against preventing E does a reason R constitute an all-things-considered reason for her to prevent E.

Hence,

2. If S doubts whether she has considered every *pro tanto* reason for or against preventing E, then she ought to doubt, of any reason R, whether R constitutes an all-things-considered reason for her to prevent E.
3. In light of her scepticism about the extent of our knowledge of the realm of value, the sceptical theist ought to doubt whether she has considered every *pro tanto* reason for or against preventing E.

Hence,

4. For any reason R, the sceptical theist cannot reasonably treat R as an all-things-considered reason for her to prevent E.

Therefore, whether or not (i) and (ii) do, as a matter of logical or metaphysical fact, supply her with good reason to accept (iv), the sceptical theist is in no position to reasonably *suppose that* (i) and (ii) supply her with good reason to accept (iv); whether or not she in fact possesses an all-things-considered reason to intervene, the sceptical theist cannot reasonably *take herself* to possess an all-things-considered reason to intervene.

Construed as (3b), Oppy and Almeida's third charge against sceptical theism consists in the contention that in embracing sceptical theism, one forfeits the right to

suppose, for any evil E, those *pro tanto* reasons for or against preventing E that one has unearthed to together constitute an all-things-considered reason to prevent E. Why, though, should it matter whether one can reasonably suppose oneself in possession of all-things-considered reasons to endeavour to prevent evil? As Bergmann and Michael Rea point out in 'In Defense of Skeptical Theism', Oppy and Almeida set out in 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil' to show that sceptical-theistic commitments undermine ordinary moral practice. However, the sceptical theist's ability to make sound decisions whether to try to prevent the occurrence of evil is not obviously impaired by her (supposedly) being unable to take any set of *pro tanto* reasons that she has discerned to constitute an all-things-considered reason for her to prevent E. Indeed, it can reasonably be argued that ordinary moral practice is largely rule-governed, leaving little room for the sort of detailed deliberation that Oppy and Almeida attempt to capture in the reasoning from (i) to (iv), and – thereby – nullifying any threat that (3b) poses: if ordinary moral practice typically does not involve employing such reasoning, then the supposed fact that sceptical-theistic commitments preclude one from doing so is of little consequence.

By way of support for the claim that ordinary moral practice is largely rule-governed, consider under what conditions many of the most important moral decisions are made. The example that Oppy and Almeida cite is illustrative: a subject S's having to decide whether to try to rescue a drowning child. The gravity and urgency of the situation afford S no time to undertake a comprehensive search for *pro tanto* reasons for or against mounting a rescue, so even if she embraced (ST1) – (ST3), and were thereby unable to reasonably suppose any such search exhaustive, she would be no less able than anyone who rejected (ST1) – (ST3) to respect ordinary moral practice. As suggested above, to aid us in our decision-making we posit universal moral principles, of which *whenever possible, always try to prevent children suffering great harm* is a paradigm, on which we fall back when faced with such challenging circumstances as those under which we are typically required to make the most important of our moral decisions; very rarely, if ever, do we engage in reasoning that could properly be represented as an inference of the form of (i) to (iv). So, conceived of as an objection to the claim that in subscribing to sceptical theism, one would jeopardize one's ability to follow ordinary moral practice, (3b) carries little weight.

Is (3b) self-undermining?

The supposed fact that she is rationally precluded from regarding any set of *pro tanto* reasons as an all-things-considered reason to prevent some evil E constitutes a problem for the sceptical theist only on the supposition that the ethics of human evil-prevention are consequentialist. For suppose that it is held that whether a subject S would be justified in permitting some evil E turns not on whether it would be for the best, all things considered, were E to occur, but on whether in permitting E, S would violate some rule or other. In that case, so long as S grasped the rules that determine whether and under what conditions it is permissible for one to permit such evils as E, she would have no need to reason as from (i) to (iv). If the ethics of human evil-prevention are deontological, then the putatively all-things-considered reason at which one would attempt to arrive in employing such reasoning would be of no normative consequence: it would not possess the capacity to determine whether one would be justified in permitting E. Hence, (3b) poses a threat to the sceptical theist only if the ethics of human evil-prevention are consequentialist. I shall now argue that within any argument against sceptical theism that appealed to (3b), (3b) would be redundant.

Unless severe restrictions are imposed on the range of the relevant quantifier, consequentialism entails that we are rarely, if ever, in a position to acquire an *all-things-considered* reason before deciding how to act, and rarely, if ever, in a position to reasonably *take ourselves* to have acquired such a reason. On consequentialist ethical theories, there are potentially many considerations that one would have to weigh up in order to acquire an all-things-considered reason to perform some morally significant action. Suppose that one holds that in deciding how to act in any morally significant situation, one ought always to endeavour to maximize some particular end (for example, human flourishing). Given the complexity of the world and the innumerable relations, causal and logical, that obtain between different states of affairs, there are very few, if any, morally significant situations in which subjects can arrive at all-things-considered reasons: there are, quite simply, too many things to consider. Moreover, as noted above, moral decision-making typically takes place in trying circumstances, when our capacity to evaluate evidence and assess the value of states of affairs is diminished,

and is often subject to severe time constraints. On consequentialism, then, it is unreasonably optimistic to think that subjects will standardly be able to acquire all-things-considered reasons. More importantly, consequentialism also undermines one's entitlement to believe oneself in possession of all-things-considered reasons. For as soon as one recognizes that consequentialism entails that there are potentially many possibilities that one must recognize and many states of affairs that one must evaluate for one to be justified in supposing oneself to have considered everything relevant to the determination of the best course of action for one to take, and acknowledges that one's capacities to deliberate so are severely limited, one is, in embracing a consequentialist theory, rationally committed to doubting one's entitlement to treat the *pro tanto* reasons of which one is in possession as together constituting an all-things-considered reason.

We demonstrated above (3b) carries weight against sceptical theism only if the ethics of human evil-prevention are consequentialist. Hence, one can reasonably reject sceptical theism on the basis of (3b) only if one accepts consequentialism. We have just observed, though, that consequentialism by itself entails that we are standardly unable to reasonably suppose ourselves to possess all-things-considered reasons. Thus, if one accepts consequentialism, one cannot reasonably take it to be a problem if we are typically unable to reasonably suppose ourselves to possess all-things-considered reasons. Consequently, one can reasonably reject sceptical theism on the basis of (3b) only if one does not take it to be a problem if we are typically unable to reasonably suppose ourselves to possess all-things-considered reasons. But (3b) consists in the supposition that it *is* a problem if we are typically unable to reasonably suppose ourselves to possess all-things-considered reasons. Hence, sceptical theism cannot reasonably be rejected on the basis of (3b): to be entitled to hold that (3b) gives us reason to reject sceptical theism, one would be rationally compelled to reject the very supposition – namely, that in being unable to reasonably suppose herself in possession of all-things-considered reasons, the sceptical theist faces a problem – on which (3b)'s capacity to threaten sceptical theism depends.

Dealing with an objection

One might argue against the premise from which the argument just sketched proceeds. I suggested that a consequentialist is committed to the claim that we are rarely, if ever, in a position to reasonably take any set of *pro tanto* reasons that we have discerned to constitute an all-things-considered reason. It might be argued, however, that if the range of the universal quantifier is appropriately restricted, the consequentialist is not so committed. Plausibly, not all *pro tanto* reasons are relevant to determining what one ought to do. Suppose, for example, that in performing some action A, S would bring about some very bad consequence B, though no one suspects that this is so. Then the fact that it would lead to B constitutes a *pro tanto* reason for S not to perform A. It could reasonably be held, however, that on account of its deriving from a fact that no one is in a position to grasp, this reason plays no part in generating any all-things-considered reason: it lies outside the domain of considerations over which the universal quantifier ranges. Thus, the envisaged objection would run, consequentialists are not committed to holding that we are rarely, if ever, in a position to reasonably take ourselves to possess all-things-considered reasons, and so my argument for (3b)'s being self-defeating fails.

Accessible and inaccessible reasons

The main problem with so objecting to my argument is this: the supposition on which the objection rests – namely, that not all *pro tanto* reasons are relevant to the determination of all-things-considered reasons – furnishes the sceptical theist with a powerful defence against any argument by which one attempts to derive from sceptical theism an unacceptable moral scepticism. Suppose that R is a *pro tanto* reason for a subject S to permit the occurrence of some evil E. Let us say that R is accessible to S if S is in a position to recognize that R constitutes a reason to permit E, and inaccessible to S if S is not in a position to recognize that R constitutes a reason to permit E. Now suppose that R consists in its being necessary for the obtaining of some good G that E should be allowed to occur. Then only if she were appreciative of G's value would S be in a position to recognize R as a *pro tanto* reason for her to allow E to occur. Hence, if R consists in its being necessary for G's

obtaining that E should be permitted to occur, then only if S were in a position to grasp G's value would R be accessible to S. By the Kantian maxim that *ought* implies *can*, behavioural evaluation is sensitive only to *pro tanto* reasons to which subjects have access: provided that she is not responsible for any inaccessible reason's being inaccessible, then of the two types of *pro tanto* reason, those to which she has access and those to which she does not, only accessible reasons play a part in determining whether a subject is justified – and so blameworthy – in performing (or failing to perform) a particular action. Thus, whether S is worthy of moral blame in failing to prevent some evil E turns just on how the *pro tanto* reasons to permit E to which she has access compare in respect of collective strength with the *pro tanto* reasons to prevent E to which she has access.

Having distinguished between accessible and inaccessible *pro tanto* reasons, let us conceive of an all-*relevant-things-considered* reason (for a subject S to prevent some evil E) as an all-things-considered reason where the set of considerations over which the universal quantifier ranges contains only accessible *pro tanto* reasons. The rationale behind the imposition of the relevance condition is this. Suppose that S is (blamelessly) unable to see that were E prevented, some great good G could not obtain. Then by the Kantian maxim cited above, the fact that it is necessary for G's being realized that E should be permitted plays no part in determining whether S would be justified were she to fail to prevent E. Hence, the fact that it is necessary for G's being realized that E should be permitted is not relevant in determining whether S ought or ought not to prevent E. In general, only *pro tanto* reasons to which one has access play a part in determining whether or not one is justified in pursuing a particular course of action or permitting some particular state of affairs to obtain. Hence, only all-things-considered reasons that are a function of accessible *pro tanto* reasons are relevant in determining whether one is morally justified in allowing to occur such atrocities as a child's being left to drown.

Now it is sufficient for S's arriving at an all-relevant-things-considered reason to intervene that she should reason as follows.

- (i) There is *pro tanto* reason for me to intervene to prevent the child's drowning.

(ii') After careful reflection, I have found no *pro tanto* reason for me not to intervene to prevent the child's drowning.

Thus,

(iii') I have an all-relevant-things-considered reason to intervene to prevent the child's drowning.

S can arrive at (iii') by appeal to (i) and (ii') without having to perform any such inference as that from (ii) to (iii); her entitlement to reason from (i) and (ii') to (iii') does not depend on her being justified in making any "noseeum" assumption. In general, one can arrive at an all-relevant-things-considered reason to perform (refrain from performing) an action A without having to infer from one's failure to find any reason not to perform (refrain from performing) A that there is no such reason to be found. Hence, given that it is sufficient for one's being in a position to make sound moral decisions that one should be in possession of all-relevant-things-considered reasons, the alleged dependence of inferences of the form of (i) – (iv) on "noseeum" assumptions does not threaten our ordinary moral practice: even if we are not entitled to make such assumptions, we do not need to employ, in the course of either practical or theoretical moral deliberation, any reasoning that requires that we do so.

We thus arrive at the following two defences of sceptical theism, each sufficient to undermine (3b).

Defence 1

In asking whether a subject S has an all-things-considered reason to prevent some evil E, leave unrestricted the domain over which the universal quantifier ranges, so that on any consequentialist theory of ethics, it is necessary for S's having an all-things-considered reason to prevent some evil E that she should

(α) identify every possible consequence C of her permitting E, assess C's value, and make a reasoned judgment about the likelihood of C's obtaining in the event of her permitting E,

and

- (β) identify every possible consequence C of her preventing E, assess C's value, and make a reasoned judgment about the likelihood of C's obtaining in the event of her preventing E.

Hence, it is necessary for S's being justified in taking herself to possess an all-things-considered reason that she should be justified in supposing herself to have fulfilled (α) and (β). Thus, owing to S's not being justified, on any consequentialist theory, in supposing herself to have fulfilled (α) and (β), no one who takes the ethics of human evil-prevention to be consequentialist can reasonably treat it as a problem if subjects are rarely, if ever, in a position to reasonably suppose themselves in possession of all-things-considered reasons. Hence, given that (3b) carries weight against sceptical theism only on the supposition that the ethics of human evil-prevention are consequentialist, Oppy and Almeida cannot reasonably object to sceptical theism on the ground that in subscribing to its sceptical theses, one rationally precludes oneself from taking any set of *pro tanto* reasons for or against doing so that one has unearthed to supply one with an all-things-considered reason to prevent some evil E.

In mounting such an objection, Oppy and Almeida would have to accept a consequentialist ethical theory, but consequentialist theories entail – independently of any sceptical-theistic commitments – that we are rarely, if ever, in a position to reasonably suppose ourselves in possession of all-things-considered reasons. Yet (3b) relies on the claim that it is a *problem* if a theory yields this consequence. Hence, (3b) is self-undermining: to be warranted in rejecting sceptical theism on the basis of (3b), one would have to accept a theory that yields the very consequence on the ground of sceptical theism's yielding which (3b) urges that sceptical theism be rejected.

Defence 2

In asking whether a subject S has an all-things-considered reason to prevent some evil E, so restrict the domain of quantification that only those goods and evils to

which S has access play a part in the determination of all-things-considered reasons. Thus, (ST1) – (ST3) do not threaten the "noseeum" inference from 'I have found no *pro tanto* reason not to prevent E' to 'There is no *pro tanto* reason not to prevent E', for on the proposed domain restriction, only goods and evils within one's ken are capable of generating *pro tanto* reasons that are apt to instantiate the existential quantifier in 'There is *pro tanto* reason not to prevent E'. Hence, we are capable of surveying as much of the domain of reasons as we need to survey to be able to arrive at – and to be justified in supposing ourselves to have arrived at – all-things-considered reasons to prevent evil; *pro tanto* reasons that involve goods and evils outside our ken do not constitute relevant considerations. Hence, the sceptical theist's capacity to reasonably suppose herself in possession of all-things-considered reasons is not threatened by her supposed commitment to the claim that it is not unlikely that there are goods that, in Oppy and Almeida's words, "were we smarter and better equipped, we could recognize as [supplying us with reason not to intervene to prevent terrible evils]":³³ such goods, if such there be, are not apt to figure in *pro tanto* reasons that play a part in the determination of all-things-considered reasons.

In summary, the claim that the sceptical theist is unable to reasonably treat any set of *pro tanto* reasons that she has adduced as an all-things-considered reason is true – but poses no threat to sceptical theism – if the domain of quantification is left unrestricted, and false if the domain is narrowed. (3b), therefore, fails. I thus conclude that Charge 3 does not threaten the rational tenability of sceptical theism.

I have considered three charges that Oppy and Almeida level against sceptical theism – here conceived of as classical theism supplemented with Michael Bergmann's value-scepticism – in their efforts to demonstrate that sceptical theism yields an unacceptable moral scepticism, and found them all to fail. I thus conclude that Oppy and Almeida have failed to supply us with any moral grounds on which to reject sceptical theism.

³³ 'Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil', page 506.

Assessing the epistemic credentials of the sceptical theist's sceptical theses

According to Bergmann, we have no good reason to think the goods and evils with which we are familiar representative, in respect of their capacity to provide an omnipotent and omniscient being with morally sufficient reasons not to prevent appalling evils, of the possible goods and evils. Is this so? Consider the following argument, letting 'E' designate a particularly horrific inscrutable evil.

- (1) None of the goods that we have discovered possesses the capacity to furnish an omnipotent and omniscient being with a morally sufficient reason to permit E.

Thus, it is likely that

- (2) None of the goods that we have yet to discover possesses the capacity to furnish an omnipotent and omniscient being with a morally sufficient reason to permit E.

The argument from (1) to (2) purports to supply us with a reason, consisting in our never having found, despite searching extensively, a good capable of rendering an omnipotent and omniscient being morally warranted in permitting E, to suppose the goods of which we know representative, in respect of their capacity to provide an omnipotent and omniscient being with morally sufficient reasons to permit terrible evils, of the possible goods. So, if the argument from (1) to (2) is cogent, then (ST1) is false. Hence, in committing herself to (ST1), the sceptical theist must deny that the argument from (1) to (2) succeeds. To what might she appeal in seeking to undermine the inference from (1) to (2)?

Daniel Howard-Snyder's arguments from progress and complexity

In 'The Argument from Inscrutable Evil', Daniel Howard-Snyder argues that there is reason to think that there might be goods outside our ken. He begins by telling a

story about our species' discovery of the goods with which we are at present familiar. According to this story, the discovery of goods has been a long, drawn-out process, with fertile periods of development in our capacity to recognize and appreciate goods interspersed with fallow periods, often spanning thousands of years, during which no new good was unearthed. For example, we discovered early in our development such basic pleasures as those deriving from sexual activity and the consumption of certain foods, but it was not until significantly later, perhaps as recently as two thousand years ago, that we learned to appreciate the value of such virtues as selfless charity and humility. Howard-Snyder does not assert that his story is true; he argues, quite reasonably, that archaeology, our most reliable source of knowledge of the distant past, is not equipped to establish precisely when our ancestors came to appreciate the value of goods. Rather, he maintains that we have no good reason to suppose that his story is false: it is consistent with everything we know that the development of our knowledge of value should have happened much as his story says. This constitutes the first part of Howard-Snyder's progress argument.

Howard-Snyder next argues that the supposition that our knowledge of value has up to now increased sporadically renders it quite likely that there are goods that we have yet to discover. Thus, given the plausibility of this supposition, we have reason to think that there might be goods that are, for the time being, outside our ken, goods of whose existence we are currently unaware and, thus, whose value we are presently in no position to appreciate. It is possible that some of the hypothesized goods of which we are presently ignorant should be capable of rendering an omnipotent and omniscient being morally justified in permitting atrocious evil. Hence, we have reason to deny that (1) supplies (2) with strong inductive support.

On the assumption that there are goods that we have yet to discover, and letting 'E' designate some inscrutable evil, one or the other of the following two possibilities obtains:

- (α) There are goods that we have yet to discover, but none of these goods could render an omnipotent and omniscient being morally justified in permitting E.

- (β) There are goods that we have yet to discover, and at least one of these goods could render an omnipotent and omniscient being morally justified in permitting E.

Howard-Snyder's progress argument gives us no reason to favour (β) over (α). By itself, the progress argument establishes no more than that it would not be surprising if our knowledge of the realm of value is incomplete; it gives us no reason to think that any presently unknown good would be capable of supplying an omnipotent and omniscient being with a morally sufficient reason not to prevent E. The mere fact, if it is a fact, that there are goods outside our ken gives us no reason whatsoever to think that any of these supposed goods could supply an omnipotent and omniscient being with a morally sufficient reason to permit E. If he wishes to motivate (β), Howard-Snyder must do more than argue that it is quite likely that our knowledge of the realm of value is incomplete. Perhaps Howard-Snyder's second argument, the argument from complexity, will strengthen his case.

The complexity argument

The argument from complexity proceeds from the observation that the goodness of a state of affairs S is sometimes a function of S's complexity. On the basis that horrific evil involves great suffering, Howard-Snyder reasons that it would require a good of immense value to justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting such evil to occur, and concludes that it would not be surprising if an omnipotent and omniscient being's reasons for permitting as much horrific evil as we find in the world have to do with goods whose complexity is beyond our grasp.

The arguments from progress and complexity are supposed to jointly furnish us with good reason to be in doubt whether it is quite likely that if there were goods for whose sake an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally warranted in permitting horrific evil, we should discern them.³⁴ Now it might be argued that if we have good reason to doubt whether it is quite likely that if there were such goods, we should discern them, we are not justified in accepting (2) on the basis of (1). Hence, if the progress and complexity arguments together give us good reason to be

³⁴ 'The Argument from Inscrutable Evil', page 301

sceptical about our capacity to discern goods capable of justifying an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting horrific evil, then they together suffice to reduce the capacity of the argument from (1) to (2) to threaten (ST1).³⁵

The complexity argument does lend some support to Howard-Snyder's contention that if there were goods with the capacity to render inscrutable evils non-gratuitous, it would not be surprising if they were too complex for us to grasp, thereby supporting the contention that from the fact that we are unable to discern any good for whose sake an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in allowing to occur such atrocities as the Holocaust and the Lisbon earthquake, we are not warranted in inferring that no such good exists. However, it is not clear that the progress and complexity arguments are equipped to support (ST1).

Recall that in attempting to cast doubt on (ST1), we appealed to the argument from (1) to (2). If the argument from (1) to (2) is cogent, then (ST1) is false. Thus, if the progress and complexity arguments are to defend (ST1), they must be capable of undercutting the inference from (1) to (2). The progress and complexity arguments jointly purport to supply us with good reason to be in doubt whether it is quite likely that were there goods for whose sake an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting as much horrific evil as occurs in the world, we should discern them. Hence, the progress and complexity arguments are capable of underpinning a successful defence of (ST1) only if:

- (i) We have reason to be in doubt whether it is quite likely that were there goods capable of rendering an omnipotent and omniscient being morally warranted in permitting such quantities of horrific evil as we find in the world, we should discern them,

entails (or at least furnishes with strong inductive support)

- (ii) We have reason not to accept (2) on the basis of (1).

³⁵ It is this line of theistic defence that Stephen Wykstra pursues in 'The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: on avoiding the evils of "appearance"' and 'Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil'.

Now only if

- (iii) We have reason to suppose the set of goods of which we are presently aware not to constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods,

do we have reason not to accept (2) on the basis of (1). Hence, the progress and complexity arguments are capable of underpinning a successful defence of (ST1) only if:

- (i) We have reason to be in doubt whether it is quite likely that were there goods capable of rendering an omnipotent and omniscient being morally warranted in permitting such quantities of horrific evil as we find in the world, we should discern them,

entails

- (iii) We have reason to suppose the set of goods of which we are presently aware not to constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods.

There is, however, good reason to deny that (i) entails (iii). To see this, first consider the following claim.

- (1_P) It is quite likely that (even) if there were pixies at the bottom of my garden, I should fail to detect any pixie.

This claim is highly plausible: there is good reason to think that I should not discern any pixie even if there were pixies to be discerned. But now consider the following assertion:

- (2_P) There actually are pixies at the bottom of my garden.

(2_P) is manifestly ridiculous, whereas (1_P) is highly plausible. Thus, (1_P) lends no support to (2_P). Now consider the following analogues of (1_P) and (2_P).

(1_{HS}) It is quite likely that were there goods capable of justifying an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting such quantities of horrific evil as we find in the world, we should not be able to discern them.

(2_{HS}) There actually are goods capable of justifying an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting such quantities of evil as we find in the world.

As the pixie example shows, none of the plausibility of (1_{HS}) transmits to (2_{HS}); for all one would show in motivating (1_{HS}), (2_{HS}) may be epistemically bankrupt. Now if (1_{HS}) does not render (2_{HS}) probable, then (i) does not support (2_{HS}). Thus, the progress and complexity arguments – which together purport to establish no more than (i) – do not lend any support to (2_{HS}). But note that only if we have reason to think that there really do exist goods capable of justifying an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting as much horrific evil as occurs in the world do we have reason to suppose the set of goods of which we are presently aware not to constitute, in respect of its members' capacity to render an omnipotent and omniscient being morally justified in permitting so much such evil, a representative sample of the set of possible goods. Hence, only if we have reason to accept (2_{HS}) do we have reason to suppose the set of goods of which we are presently aware not to constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods. Thus, given that the progress and complexity arguments do not give us reason to accept (2_{HS}), the progress and complexity arguments do not support (iii). Consequently, the progress and complexity arguments do not support (ii). Therefore, the progress and complexity arguments are incapable of underpinning a successful defence of (ST1) against the argument from (1) to (2).

Turning the tables on the sceptical theist

Now it might reasonably be contended that the argument from (1) to (2) gives us reason to think that there is no good for whose sake an omnipotent and omniscient

being would be morally justified in permitting horrific evil. However, even if she were to concede that (1) does not constitute a reason to deny (ST1), the atheologian might insist that, *a posteriori*, we have at least as much reason to affirm the following three theses, (ST1*) – (ST3*), as to affirm Bergmann's (ST1) – (ST3).

(ST1*) We have no good reason for thinking that the goods we know of are *not* representative of the possible goods.

(ST2*) We have no good reason for thinking that the evils we know of are *not* representative of the possible evils.

(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 *not* representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

The atheologian might then argue as follows.

i. What is the overall value of the world depends largely on whether there are outside our ken very great goods and very great evils.

Thus,

ii. Only if we had some idea how likely it is that there are very great goods outside our ken, and some idea how likely it is that there are very great evils outside our ken, would we have any idea what is the overall value of the world.

iii. If (ST1) – (ST3) and (ST1*) – (ST3*) are true, then we have no idea how likely it is that there are very great goods outside our ken, and no idea how likely it is that there are very great evils outside our ken.

Hence,

- iv. If (ST1) – (ST3) and (ST1*) – (ST3*) are true, then we have no idea what is the overall value of the world.
- vi. We have, on the basis of evidence acquired *a posteriori*, no more reason to accept (ST1) – (ST3) than to accept (ST1*) – (ST3*).

Hence,

- vii. Unless she has *a priori* reason not to accept (ST1*) – (ST3*), or is justified in accepting as basic propositions that entail that (ST1*) – (ST3*) are false, anyone who accepts (ST1) – (ST3) on *a posteriori* grounds thereby rationally precludes herself from denying (ST1*) – (ST3*).

Hence,

- viii. Unless she has *a priori* reason not to accept (ST1*) – (ST3*), or is justified in accepting as basic propositions that entail that (ST1*) – (ST3*) are false, no one who accepts (ST1) – (ST3) on *a posteriori* grounds can reasonably hold that we have any idea what is the overall value of the world.
- ix. Only if one is justified in supposing the overall value of the world high is one justified in supposing classical theism true.

Hence,

- x. Unless she has *a priori* reason not to accept (ST1*) – (ST3*), or is justified in accepting as basic propositions that entail that (ST1*) – (ST3*) are false, no one who accepts (ST1) – (ST3) on *a posteriori* grounds can reasonably suppose classical theism true unless: (α) she has *a priori* reason to accept classical theism, or (β) classical theism is apt to be believed basically.

To be justified in rejecting (ST1*), one would have to find good reason to think that the goods of which we know are not representative of the possible goods. Now perhaps it will be held that Howard-Snyder's progress argument supplies us with reason to think (ST1*) false. Note, however, that to be justified in rejecting (ST1*), it is not sufficient that one should show that there is reason to think our knowledge of the realm of value incomplete. Rather, one would have to show that there is reason to think that at least some of the goods that reside in those parts of the realm of value which we are supposed not to have surveyed are substantially different in nature and value from the goods with which we are familiar. As it stands, Howard-Snyder's progress argument provides us with no reason to think that any hitherto undiscovered good differs sufficiently in nature or value from any that we have found for the set of goods of which we are at present aware not to constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods.

Perhaps it will be contended that Howard-Snyder's complexity argument gives us reason to think (ST1*) false. Again, though, this is not so. The fact – if it is a fact – that the value of a state of affairs is sometimes a function of its complexity gives us no reason to think that the goods of which we are aware are not representative of the possible goods. The complexity argument, even when considered in conjunction with the progress argument, is incapable of supplying us with any reason to think that there *actually are* undiscovered goods that are significantly different in nature or value from any good with which we are familiar; the most that the complexity argument is capable of showing is that there is some reason to think that *if* there are goods that far exceed in value any with which we are familiar, *then* we may not be able to discern those goods. To constitute evidence against (ST1*), however, the argument would have to give us reason to suppose that the antecedent of this conditional – i.e., 'there are goods that far exceed in value any with which we are familiar' – is true. This it cannot do: the supposition that the value of a state of affairs is sometimes a function of its complexity lends no support to the claim that there exists some good whose value far exceeds that of any of the goods that we have hitherto discovered.

Reformulating the progress argument

I have argued that the progress argument fails to furnish us with good reason to think that there are goods outside our ken that differ substantially in nature and value from any good with which we are familiar. However, it might be thought that the progress argument could be reformulated in such a way as to supply the sceptical theist with reason to reject (ST1*). In Howard-Snyder's hands, the argument purports to show only that we cannot reasonably rule out that there are goods outside our ken. I have pointed out that this is insufficient to undermine (ST1*). But consider the following construal of the argument:

1. For each period p of development in our knowledge of value, the goods that we unearthed during p differ substantially in nature and value from those goods with which we had been familiar prior to p .

Therefore, it is likely that:³⁶

2. There will be future periods of development in our knowledge of value during which we shall unearth goods that differ substantially in nature and value from those goods with which we are at present familiar.
3. If there are undiscovered goods that differ substantially in nature and value from those goods with which we are at present familiar, then the set of presently known goods does not constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods.

Thus, it is likely that:

4. The set of presently known goods does not constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods.

³⁶ Conditional, of course, on our species' remaining in existence.

Now unlike Howard-Snyder's version of the progress argument, the argument from 1 to 4 does supply us with some reason to reject (ST1*). How much support the revised progress argument lends to the case against (ST1*) depends, first, on how many periods of development in our knowledge of value there have been (the degree to which 1 renders 2 probable is proportional to the number of periods of development in our knowledge of value), and, second, on how we construe the relation of being representative of (henceforth, 'the representative-of relation') that (ST1*) invokes: for the set of presently known goods not to constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods, to what extent would any good outside our ken have to differ in nature and value from those goods with which we are currently familiar?

Suppose that the representative-of relation were so construed that only if there are goods outside our ken that differ greatly in nature and value from those of which we are aware would the set of presently known goods not constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods. Then the argument from 1 to 4 might not supply the sceptical theist with much reason to deny (ST1*), for while it may be that each period of development in our knowledge of value yielded cognizance of goods that are somewhat different from and slightly more valuable than any of which we had known previously, during no such period did we unearth goods that are radically different from and far exceed in value any of which we had known previously. On the other hand, it might be argued that although for every period p of development in our knowledge of value, the set S of goods of which we had known prior to p constitutes a representative sample of the union of S and the set of goods that were discovered during p , the set of goods that were discovered during the first such period does not constitute a representative sample of the set of goods that had been discovered by the end of the most recent such period. This line of reasoning proceeds from the observation that, in the following sense, the representative-of relation is not transitive. Let p_1 , p_2 and p_3 be three periods of development in our knowledge of value such that $p_1 < p_2 < p_3$; and let S_1 be the set of goods unearthed during p_1 , S_2 be the set of goods unearthed during p_2 , and S_3 the set of goods unearthed during p_3 . Then it is possible that: S_1 should constitute a representative

sample of $S_1 \cup S_2$; S_2 should constitute a representative sample of $S_2 \cup S_3$; but S_1 should not constitute a representative sample of $S_1 \cup S_3$.³⁷

These reflections suggest that there are at least three versions of the revised progress argument that we ought to distinguish:

Version A

- 1a. Of each period p of development in our knowledge of value, the following is true: the set S of goods that had been discovered prior to p does not constitute a representative sample of the union of S and the set of goods that were discovered during p .

Therefore, it is likely that:

2. The set of goods of which we are aware now does not constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods.

Version B

- 1b. Of most periods p of development in our knowledge of value, the following is true: the set S of goods that had been discovered prior to p does not constitute a representative sample of the union of S and the set of goods that were discovered during p .

Therefore, it is likely that:

2. The set of goods of which we are aware now does not constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods.

³⁷ By way of analogy, consider the relation of being similar in appearance to: it is possible that x should be similar in appearance to y ; that y should be similar in appearance to z ; but nevertheless that x should not be similar in appearance to z .

Version C

- 1c. Since some time t , successive developments in our knowledge of value have revealed that the set of goods of which we knew at t is not representative of the set of possible goods.

Therefore, it is likely that:

2. The set of goods of which we are aware now does not constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods.

Now so long as there have been at least two periods of development in our knowledge of value, the degree to which 1a's being true renders 2 probable is greater than the degree to which 1b's being true renders 2 probable. To see this, note that 1a is true only if every period p of development in our knowledge of value revealed the set of goods of which we had known prior to p not to be representative of the set of possible goods. On the supposition that there have been quite a few such periods, 1a, if true, provides strong inductive support for 2: if there have been quite a few periods of development in our knowledge of value, then it is likely that there will be further such periods; and if every previous period p of development in our knowledge of value showed the set of goods of which we had known prior to p not to be representative of the set of possible goods, then it is likely that any further such period of development will reveal the set of goods of which we know presently not to be representative of the set of possible goods.

Now for every period p of development in our knowledge of value that failed to reveal the set of goods of which we had known prior to p not to be representative of the set of possible goods, the degree to which 1b renders 2 probable decreases. Hence, on the supposition that 1a and 1b are both true, version A of the revised progress argument lends more support to 2 than does version B. On the other hand, on any construal of the representative-of relation on which a subset s of a set of goods S constitutes a representative sample of S unless there are members of S that differ quite substantially in nature and value from every member of s , 1b is more plausible than 1a, for unlike 1a, 1b does not demand that every period p of

development in our knowledge of value should have revealed the set of goods of which we had known prior to p not to be representative of the set of possible goods.

Consequently, versions A and B of the revised progress argument are of roughly the same strength: while the degree to which 1a's being true renders 2 probable is greater than the degree to which 1b's being true renders 2 probable, thus giving the sceptical theist reason to prefer version A to version B, 1b is more likely to be true than 1a, thus giving the sceptical theist countervailing reason to prefer version B to version A. For the sake of simplicity, I shall thus focus on versions A and C of the revised progress argument in my assessment of the argument's capacity to supply the sceptical theist with good reason to suppose (ST1*) false.

Version C of the revised progress argument differs substantially from versions A and B. In propounding version C, one would be free to allow that very few, if any, of the periods p of development in our knowledge of value revealed the set of goods of which we had known prior to p not to be representative of the set of possible goods. It would be claimed, rather, that the goods of which we know today are substantially different from, and far exceed in value, the goods of which we learned during the first few periods of development in our knowledge of value. Version A of the revised progress argument purports to establish 2 by showing that it is likely both that (i) there will be more periods of development in our knowledge of value, and that (ii) the next such period will reveal the set of goods of which we know at present not to be representative of the set of possible goods. Version C, on the other hand, purports to establish 2 by appeal to the more modest claim that via a series of gradual increases in our grasp of value, we shall likely discover, sometime in the (possibly distant) future, that the set of presently known goods does not constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods. 1c is thus significantly more plausible than 1a, but the degree of inductive support that 1a's being true lends to 2 is greater than the degree of inductive support that 1c's being true lends to 2.

How ought the representative-of relation to be construed?

Now on a construal of the representative-of relation on which it is necessary for a subset s of a set of goods S not to constitute a representative sample of S that some of S 's members should differ very substantially in nature and value from any member of s , 1a is plausible only if we suppose there to have been few periods of

development in our knowledge of value. For suppose that we allow that there have been many such periods. Then on a construal of the representative-of relation of the type being considered, 1a entails that during each period of development in our knowledge of value, we became aware of goods that differ very greatly in nature from and far exceed in value any of which we had known prior to it. Consequently, we should expect our grasp of value today to include apprehension of goods that differ from those of which we learned much earlier in our development far more substantially than do our most recently discovered goods. Thus, 1a will come out true on what I shall describe as a "strong" construal³⁸ of the representative-of relation only if we suppose there to have been very few periods of development in our knowledge of value. Clearly, though, the fewer periods of such development there have been, the less support 1a's being true lends to 2. Consequently, version A of the revised progress argument is not apt to support (ST1*) if one works with a strong construal of the representative-of relation. In the course of evaluating version C of the revised progress argument, I shall argue that the sceptical theist's strategy for dealing with evidential arguments from evil commits her to working with a (very) strong construal of the representative-of relation. Hence, I shall conclude that the sceptical theist cannot reasonably appeal to version A of the revised progress argument in attempting to challenge (ST1*).

As we pointed out above, on a moderately strong construal of the representative-of relation, 1c is significantly more plausible than 1a on the supposition that there have been many periods of development in our knowledge of value, for even if many – perhaps even all – pairs of consecutive periods p_1 and p_2 of development in our knowledge of value are such that the goods of which we learned during p_1 differ only slightly in nature and value from those of which we learned during p_2 , it remains open that over a significant stretch of time, containing many periods of such development, such slight differences should together generate the substantial differences between recently discovered goods and their anciently discovered counterparts that lend support to 2. However, I shall contend that in taking (ST1) – (ST3) to together undermine "noseeum" inferences when they occur in evidential

³⁸ Let us say that a construal of the relation of being representative of is "strong" just in case the following condition obtains: a subset s of a set S constitutes a representative sample of S in some respect R unless there are members of S that differ very substantially in R from each member of s . On a weak construal of the representative-of relation, it is sufficient for a subset s of a set of goods S not to constitute a representative sample of S in R that there should be members of S that differ only slightly in R from each member of s .

arguments from evil, the sceptical theist commits herself to working with a very strong construal of the representative-of relation, then argue that 1c cannot reasonably be supposed true on any such construal. My claim, then, is that if (ST1*) – (ST3*) are read as the sceptical theist's strategy for undermining evidential arguments from evil obliges her to read (ST1) – (ST3), then neither 1a nor 1c supplies us with good reason to accept 2.

There are construals of the representative-of relation on which the argument from 1c to 2 gives us some reason to deny (ST1*). For example, if we take it to suffice for a subset *s* of a set *S* of goods not to constitute a representative sample of *S* that there should be members of *S* that differ somewhat in nature and value from each member of *s*, then 1c is plausible, and 1c supplies 2 with reasonably strong inductive support, thereby giving us reason to reject (ST1*). Consider, though, what the denial of (ST1*) so construed would assert. It would say this:

~(ST1*₁) We have good reason to think that there are possible goods that differ somewhat in nature and value from any good with which we are presently familiar.

Contrast this relatively weak reading of the negation of (ST1*) with the following, much stronger thesis:

~(ST1*₂) We have good reason to think that there are possible goods that differ very substantially in nature and value from any good with which we are presently familiar.

The second thesis is far less plausible than the first. Moreover, neither version A nor version C of the revised progress argument supports the second thesis. If we construe the representative-of relation in such a way that it is necessary for a subset *s* of a set *S* of goods not to constitute a representative sample of *S* that there should be members of *S* that differ very substantially in nature and value from any member of *s*, then 1a is deeply implausible. Can it reasonably be maintained that during every period of development in our knowledge of value, we have unearthed goods radically different from any of which we had known previously? If our knowledge of value has increased incrementally in the manner that Howard-Snyder suggests in

'The Argument from Inscrutable Evil', then as far as I can see, it cannot. 1a ought thus to be rejected. Hence, if construed as $\sim(\text{ST1}^*_2)$, the claim that we have good reason to suppose the set of goods of which we are aware not to be representative of the set of possible goods is not supported by version A of the revised progress argument.

On the construal of the representative-of relation invoked in (ST1^*_2) , 1c is slightly more plausible than 1a, although one might reasonably argue that in many respects the goods that we discovered most recently are not substantially different in nature or value from those goods that Howard-Snyder's story alleges were discovered earliest in our species' development. For example, to what extent does the good that consists in one's sexually stimulating a partner differ in nature and value from the good that consists in one's empathizing with the plight of a starving child? Superficially, the two states of affairs differ substantially, but both essentially involve humans and require for their realization one's possessing the capacity to recognize and attend to the needs of another.

Moreover, recall how Bergmann attempts to undermine evidential arguments from evil that appeal to the notion of an evil's being gratuitous. He holds that $(\text{ST1}) - (\text{ST3})$ together suffice to undermine the inference from (i) our being unable to find a reason in virtue of which an omnipotent and omniscient being would be within its moral rights to permit some horrific evil, to (ii) there being no such reason, maintaining that in accepting these three theses, one leaves oneself unable to reasonably rule out the possibility that there should reside in some hitherto unexplored corner of the realm of value goods G of such value, and so related to other goods and evils, that an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting for the sake of G evils so grave as a young child's being raped, beaten and strangled. (ST1) has the capacity to defeat such "noseum" inferences only if it suffices to render the sceptical theist epistemically entitled to take seriously the possibility that there should be goods that differ *enormously* in nature and value from any of which we are aware. For not only do we not know of any good that could plausibly be held to supply an omnipotent and omniscient being with a morally sufficient reason to allow to occur such quantities of horrific evil as we find in the world, but we cannot even imagine what any such good would be like. This inability to so imagine constitutes strong reason to think that the degree of difference in nature and value between Bergmann's hypothesized divinely justifying

goods and the most sophisticated goods *G* of which we are presently aware is far greater than the degree of difference in nature and value between *G* and the most basic goods of which we know. Indeed, it is tempting to maintain that the discrepancy in these two degrees of difference is so great that it cannot reasonably be held that the differences in nature and value between any two of the goods of which we are aware amount to much at all: compared with a good capable of justifying an omnipotent and omniscient being in permitting such vast amounts of horrific evil, each of the goods of which we know is remarkably similar to each of the others.

Defeating the revised progress argument

The above reflections suggest that the sceptical theist cannot reasonably appeal to version C of the revised progress argument in attempting to validate her rejection of (ST1*). For this argument to be capable of lending support to a case against (ST1*), two conditions must obtain: (i) the argument must be rationally persuasive (i.e., its premise, 1c, must confer a high degree of warrant on its conclusion, 2), and (ii) the relation of being representative of that (ST1*) invokes must be construed in such a way that for some time *t* prior to the most recent period of significant development in our knowledge of value, the degree to which the goods of which we knew at *t* differ in nature and value from the goods of which we know now is sufficiently great to render the following claim true:

- (>) The set *S* of goods of which we knew at *t* does not constitute a representative sample of the set of goods of which we know now.³⁹

The problem for the sceptical theist is that if we so construe the representative-of relation that (ST1) – (ST3) are together capable of undermining evidential arguments from evil, then (>) is false. For (ST1) – (ST3) to be capable of undermining the strongest evidential arguments from evil, they must be capable of defeating the following inference:

³⁹ In formulating (>), I assume that the set of goods of which we know now includes the set of goods of which we knew at *t*.

- (α) None of the goods that we have ever discovered has the capacity to supply an omnipotent and omniscient being with a morally sufficient reason to permit horrific evil.

Therefore, it is probable that:

- (β) No good has such capacity.

(ST1) – (ST3) have the capacity to defeat the inference from (α) to (β) only if they rationally permit us to take seriously the possibility that there should be goods outside our ken that differ *radically* from any good with which we are familiar. But if there are goods outside our ken that differ radically in nature and value from any good with which we are familiar, then the differences in nature and value between the goods of which we learned earliest in our development and the goods of which we know today are insufficiently great to render (β) true. Hence, for (ST1) – (ST3) to be equipped to serve their intended role in protecting the rationality of classical-theistic belief from atheological attack via evidential arguments from evil, the sceptical theist must work with a construal of the representative-of relation on which 1c is false. Thus, version C of the revised progress argument cannot fulfil its intended function of undermining (ST1*): it can bring down (ST1*) only by bringing down (ST1) with it. Thus, since the sceptical theist is committed to (ST1), she cannot reasonably appeal to version C of the revised progress argument in seeking to undermine (ST1*).

I have sought to show that given the use to which she puts (ST1) – (ST3) in endeavouring to undermine evidential arguments from evil, the sceptical theist is rationally obliged to work with a construal of the relation of being representative of on which none of 1a, 1b and 1c can reasonably be supposed true. I thus conclude that by the sceptical theist's own lights, none of the three versions – A, B and C – of the revised progress argument that I have assessed is capable of supplying one with good reason to deny (ST1*) – (ST3*).

Summary

I have attempted to demonstrate that one of the arguments – that from the nature of the development of our knowledge of value – by appeal to which sceptical theists try to motivate their rejection of "noseeum" arguments from evil leads to (ST1*) – (ST3*) at least as much support as it lends to (ST1) – (ST3). Now if we have no good reason to think that the goods (evils) of which we are aware are representative of the possible goods (evils), and no good reason to think that the goods (evils) of which we are aware are *not* representative of the possible goods (evils), then we are in no position to reasonably make, on the basis of any set of known axiological facts, any judgment about the overall value of the world. But if we are in no position to reasonably make any judgment about the world's overall value, then we cannot reasonably believe, without either (i) *a priori* grounds on which to do so, or (ii) rational entitlement to do so basically, that the world is governed by a perfect being. This constitutes the first of two arguments that I propound for the non-acceptability of sceptical theism on *a posteriori* grounds: in committing oneself to (ST1) – (ST3) on *a posteriori* grounds, one would render oneself unable to reasonably believe, without either *a priori* reason to reject (ST1*) – (ST3*) or warrant to treat as basic propositions that entail that (ST1*) – (ST3*) are false, that the world is of sufficient overall value for classical theism to be true.

Scepticism about sceptical theism

The argument presented in the preceding section purports to show that the *sceptical* component of the sceptical theist's position is inapt to be supported *a posteriori*. Drawing on the work of Wes Morriston,⁴⁰ I shall in this section present and defend an argument that purports to show that in light of the sceptical theist's commitment to (ST1) – (ST3), the *theistic* component of her position is inapt to be supported *a posteriori*. I shall argue that no matter how the sceptical theist attempts to support them, (ST1) – (ST3) together suffice to render her theism unacceptable *a posteriori*.

Prima facie, the occurrence in a world of such evils as a young girl's being raped, beaten and strangled has a negative effect on the world's value; it would be better, *ceteris paribus*, if such atrocities did not occur. Conversely, the obtaining in a world of such goods as a woman's giving birth to a healthy child has a positive effect on the world's value. Of course, we are rarely – if ever – in a position to determine to what degree the occurrence in a world *w* of an evil *E* reduces *w*'s value (or to what degree the obtaining of a good increases *w*'s value), but we ordinarily take ourselves to be entitled to make such judgments as that the fact that it contains *E* detracts from *w*'s overall value. Sceptical theism, however, threatens our entitlement to make such judgments. If we take seriously the possibility that the most hideous evils that we are capable of imagining should be serving great goods that lie in some hitherto unexplored corner of the realm of value, then we are not justified in taking the process by which we arrive at our judgments about value to be reliable. The realization of states of affairs whose obtaining we judge to have a negative effect on the world's value might very well be, all things considered, for the best; and the realization of states of affairs whose obtaining we judge to have a positive effect on the world's value might very well be, all things considered, for the worst. In endorsing (ST1) – (ST3), one would give up, for any *pro tanto*-evil state of affairs *E*, any entitlement that one might otherwise have to believe correct one's commonsense judgment that it would be better, all things considered, were *E* not to

⁴⁰ 'The Evidential Argument from Goodness'. Morriston demonstrates that the sceptical theist's strategy for undermining evidential arguments from evil can be pursued no less successfully by a demonist – i.e., someone who supposes there to exist a being unlimited in respect of power, knowledge and evilness – who wishes to undermine evidential arguments from goodness (i.e., arguments for the conclusion that known facts about goodness suffice to render demonism rationally untenable).

obtain; and give up, for any *pro tanto*-good state of affairs G, any entitlement that one might otherwise have to believe correct one's commonsense judgment that it would be better, all things considered, were G to obtain.

It is important to distinguish between two charges on which one might attempt to indict (ST1) – (ST3) on epistemic grounds:

(C1) In subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3), one rationally commits oneself to supposing unreliable the process by which one judges, of any state of affairs S, whether the effect that S's obtaining has on the overall value of the world is positive or negative (or neither).

(C2) In subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3), one rationally precludes oneself from supposing reliable the process by which one judges, of any state of affairs S, whether the effect that S's obtaining has on the overall value of the world is positive or negative (or neither).

In challenging the *a posteriori* acceptability of sceptical theism, it is the second of these charges that I have sought to press. So far as I can see, in endorsing (ST1) – (ST3) one would not commit oneself to supposing incorrect, for any state of affairs S, one's commonsense judgment whether S's obtaining would, all things considered, be for the better or for the worse. So, in subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3), one imposes on oneself no rational obligation to *deny* that one's commonsense *pro tanto* judgments about value reliably track the truth. I thus believe that as it stands, (C1) does not threaten the rational tenability of the sceptical theist's three sceptical theses.

(C2), on the other hand, presents the sceptical theist with more of a problem. Let us distinguish the following three positions that a subject S might adopt with respect to the reliability of the process by which she judges, of any state of affairs *s*, whether the effect that *s*'s obtaining has on the overall value of the world is positive or negative. S might believe:

(i) that this process is reliable,

(ii) that this process is unreliable,

or

(iii) that she is in no position to judge that this process is reliable.

In pressing (C1), one would try to show that in virtue of accepting (ST1) – (ST3), the sceptical theist is rationally committed to believing (ii). I have argued that (C1) fails. In pressing (C2), one would seek to demonstrate that in accepting (ST1) – (ST3), the sceptical theist rationally commits herself to believing (iii) and thereby forfeits any right that she might otherwise have to believe (i). Suppose that E is a *pro tanto*-evil state of affairs; suppose, that is, that E is such that so far as one can tell, its obtaining has a negative effect on the value of the world. Is one justified in supposing E an all-things-considered evil? Plausibly, E constitutes an all-things-considered evil only if there is no good for whose being realized it is necessary that E obtain, and which is such that it would be better, all things considered, were G and E both to obtain than were neither G nor E to obtain. Hence, one is justified in supposing E an all-things-considered evil only if one is justified in supposing there to be no such good G. But in accepting (ST1) – (ST3), one obliges oneself to take seriously the possibility that there should be, for any evil E, some such good G. Hence, in accepting (ST1) – (ST3), one commits oneself to denying that one is justified in supposing, of any evil E, that there exists no good G such that: it is necessary for G's being realized that E should obtain, and it would be better, all things considered, were G and E both to obtain than were neither G nor E to obtain. Hence, in accepting (ST1) – (ST3), one would commit oneself to denying that one is justified in supposing any *pro tanto*-evil state of affairs an all-things-considered evil. By analogous reasoning, it can be shown that in accepting (ST1) – (ST3), one would commit oneself to denying that one is justified in supposing any *pro tanto*-good state of affairs an all-things-considered good. Thus, in accepting (ST1) – (ST3), one would relinquish any right that one might otherwise have to believe reliable the process by which one judges, of any state of affairs S, whether the effect of S's obtaining on the world's overall value is positive or negative. I thus conclude that the sceptical theist is rationally committed to conceding (iii): she ought to hold that for any state of affairs S, commonsense *pro tanto* judgments about value give

her no reason to suppose true any assessment that she makes about the effect of S's obtaining on the overall value of the world.

Before assessing the extent to which sceptical theism's committing its adherents to accepting (iii) threatens its rational tenability, let us return briefly to (C1). It might be argued that although in subscribing to (ST1) – (ST3) one would not necessarily commit oneself to believing (ii), the sceptical theist is nevertheless vulnerable to (C1), for in refusing to reject classical theism in the face of what we know about evil, she compels herself to accept not just (ST1) – (ST3), but also the following three theses:

- (T1) We have good reason to think that the goods of which we know are not representative of the possible goods.
- (T2) We have good reason to think that the evils of which we know are not representative of the possible evils.
- (T3) We have good reason to think that the entailment relations of which we know between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are not representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

Now unlike (ST1) – (ST3), (T1) – (T3) *are* such that in subscribing to them, one would commit oneself to supposing unreliable the process by which one judges, of any state of affairs S, whether the effect that S's obtaining has on the overall value of the world is positive or negative. While she does not explicitly sign up to (T1) – (T3), it can be persuasively argued that the sceptical theist is no less committed to them than she is to (ST1) – (ST3). It is essential to the sceptical theist's position that she should believe both that

- (α) for every horrific evil E, there is a good G such that: G's being realized depends on E's occurring, and it would be better, all things considered, were G and E both to obtain than were neither G nor E to obtain,

and

(β) there exists inscrutable evil.

It is their commitment to (β) that sets sceptical theists apart from those theists who propound theodicies, while (α) is a corollary of the classical-theistic claim that there exists a perfect being.

Recall that an evil is inscrutable just so long as even after much thought and reflection, we can find no reason that could plausibly be supposed to morally justify an omnipotent and omniscient being in allowing it to occur. So, in committing herself to the existence of inscrutable evil, the sceptical theist holds that there is evil E such that for any known good G, an omnipotent and omniscient being would not be morally justified in permitting E in pursuit of G. But if one concedes that there is evil E such that no known good is of sufficient value to render an omnipotent and omniscient being morally justified in permitting E, yet steadfastly maintains that there is a perfect being, then one ought to hold that the set of known goods does not constitute a representative sample of the set of possible goods. For unless there are members of the set of possible goods that substantially exceed in value any good with which we are familiar, it is highly likely that any inscrutable evil is gratuitous, and, thus, highly likely that there is no perfect being. I thus submit that in accepting (α) and (β), the sceptical theist commits herself to (T1). By analogous reasoning, it can be shown that the sceptical theist is also committed to (T2) and (T3). Hence, it can reasonably be maintained that while her commitment to (ST1) – (ST3) does not compel her to do so, the sceptical theist's implicit commitment to (T1) – (T3) forces her to accept (ii). I conclude, then, that for any state of affairs S, the sceptical theist ought to doubt the truth of any judgment that she makes about the effect that S's obtaining would have on the overall value of the world.

The scepticism spreads

The sceptical theist holds, remember, that we are in no position to reasonably assign a low probability to the claim that it is not unlikely that there is some great good in virtue of which an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally warranted in failing to so intervene as to prevent the occurrence of such atrocities as a young girl's being raped, beaten and strangled. In holding so, I shall argue, she is in no

position to judge what a world that had been actualized by a perfect being would be *like*. Now of course, she could make certain claims about the *type* of world that such a being would be likely to actualize: she would, for example, be perfectly within her epistemic rights – perhaps even rationally obliged – to maintain that were it to actualize a world, a perfect being would actualize the very best possible world that it were capable of actualizing. However, in taking seriously the possibility that there should be great goods outside our ken, goods of such value that an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting in pursuit of them some of the most appalling evils that we can imagine, the sceptical theist leaves herself unable to reasonably attach any degree of likelihood to the claim that were it to actualize a world, a perfect being would elect to actualize a world like ours, and – hence – unable to reasonably treat any set of facts about the nature of the world as evidence that theism is true. By sceptical-theistic lights, it is possible that ours is the very last world that a perfect being would elect to actualize.

To illustrate, suppose that it is objected that there are far worse possible worlds than ours, worlds every one of whose inhabitants endures almost constant torment for the duration of its life. Notice, though, that by reasoning analogous with that by which Bergmann attempts to undercut the inference from an evil's being inscrutable to its being gratuitous, one can argue on the basis of (ST1) – (ST3) that we are in no position to reasonably assign a low probability to the claim that it might be for the best, all things considered, if each of us were to live a life of unrelenting misery.⁴¹ If our knowledge of the realm of value is as limited as Bergmann suggests, we cannot rule out the possibility that there should be some wonderful good whose obtaining depends on every sentient being's suffering horrifically, and which is of such value that it would be for the best, all things considered, were each of us to endure an earthly life of anguish and strife.

The moral, then, is that the sceptical component of her position threatens the sceptical theist's right to judge the value of possible worlds, and, thus, her right to compare any two possible worlds in respect of value. She forces herself to take seriously the possibility that the assessments of value that we are naturally inclined to make should be completely mistaken. Now it does not follow that the sceptical theist must deny that we are in a position to judge acts right or wrong, or deny that

⁴¹ Wes Morriston makes a similar point in 'The Evidential Argument from Goodness'.

we are able to ascribe to events or states of affairs such evaluative properties as goodness and badness. The sceptical theist is no less entitled than anyone else to assert that (for example) harming children is wrong and a young elephant's being trampled to death an evil. It does, however, follow that the sceptical theist is in no position to make judgments to the effect that it would be for the best, all things considered, were such-and-such an event (not) to occur. The (supposed) fact that it might ultimately be for the best does not entail that a young girl's being brutally raped, beaten and strangled does not constitute a most appalling evil. So, in Oppy and Almeida's terminology, the sceptical theist can freely endorse what we might conceive of as *pro tanto* evaluative judgments – she can freely endorse judgments of the form 'Considered in isolation, state of affairs S constitutes an evil' – but cannot reasonably endorse all-things-considered evaluative judgments (i.e., judgments to the effect that it would be better (or for the best), all things considered, were a particular state of affairs to obtain), for she embraces the possibility that what are universally recognized as evils should sometimes serve the purpose of enabling the realization of very great goods.

The upshot is that the sceptical theist is committed to denying that we are in any position to reasonably make any judgment about what a world that had been actualized by an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being would be like, for it is precisely the sort of all-things-considered value judgments that she is rationally precluded from endorsing that underpin judgments concerning the likely nature of a divinely actualized world. If one has no idea what a divinely actualized world would be like, then one cannot reasonably take any set of facts about the nature of our world to constitute any evidence for or against the claim that it was actualized by a perfect being. I thus conclude that the sceptical theist's sceptical commitments conspire to leave her theism without *a posteriori* support.

Alternative sources of theistic justification

I have argued that no one who endorses (ST1) – (ST3) can reasonably believe, on the basis of any set of known facts about the nature of the world, that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being. The sceptical theist subscribes to (ST1) – (ST3). Hence, for the sceptical theist to be justified in her theistic belief, her belief cannot be based on any evidence acquired *a posteriori*: in endorsing (ST1) –

(ST3), one forfeits any right that one might otherwise have to appeal in the course of trying to justify theistic belief to any set of known facts about the nature of the world. Now there appear to be three conditions under which one is justified in holding a belief. Subject to various qualifications concerning defeaters, a subject *S* is justified in believing a proposition *P* if at least one of the following three conditions obtains:

(a) *P* is well supported by evidence acquired *a posteriori*;

or

(b) *S* possesses *a priori* grounds for *P*;

or

(c) *S* is entitled to treat *P* as a basic belief.

I have argued that no one who endorses (ST1) – (ST3) can reasonably accept classical theism on the basis of evidence acquired *a posteriori*. It might, however, be argued that there are *a priori* grounds for theism.⁴² Alternatively, it might be argued that owing to its possessing some sort of special epistemic merit, the proposition that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being is apt to be believed justifiedly either on the basis of no evidence whatsoever, or on the basis of propositions that are themselves apt to be believed on the basis of no evidence. Alvin Plantinga, for example, has argued that certain religious beliefs are properly basic, in the sense that they do not stand in need of evidential support. Plantinga does not hold that classical-theistic belief – i.e., belief in the proposition that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being – is itself properly basic, but argues that one can arrive at such belief by appeal to propositions that one is rationally entitled to believe basically.⁴³

⁴² Such grounds might include ontological or moral arguments.

⁴³ 'Reason and Belief in God', page 154. According to Plantinga, among the (putatively properly basic) beliefs on the basis of which one might be entitled to accept classical theism are *God is speaking to me*, *God has created all this*, and *God forgives me*.

Plantinga distinguishes between propositional and non-propositional evidence, arguing that a subject *S* might be perfectly justified in accepting a proposition *P* even if *P* is overwhelmingly improbable with respect to the available propositional evidence. Suppose, for example, that *S* is accused of committing a crime. Suppose, further, that although the accusation against *S* is false, there is very strong propositional evidence – consisting in such propositions as that *S* was seen acting suspiciously in the vicinity of the crime scene around the time of the offence – that *S* is guilty. Plantinga notes that so long as her memory is functioning properly, *S* knows full well that she is innocent, despite the strength of the propositional evidence against her. Hence, there are certain epistemic situations in which the available propositional evidence plays little – if any – part in determining the degree to which it is reasonable for a subject to believe a proposition. Indeed, as Plantinga's example demonstrates, there are epistemic situations in which one has *knowledge* of propositions that are highly improbable with respect to the available propositional evidence. Is it possible for one to know that classical theism is true independently of any propositional evidence?

Plantinga suggests that a faculty that he designates – following John Calvin – 'the *sensus divinitatis*' is capable of delivering one with knowledge of certain religious propositions, including the proposition that there exists a being unlimited in respect of power, knowledge and goodness.⁴⁴ Plantinga holds that the *sensus divinitatis* imbues those propositions of which it furnishes us with belief with sufficient warrant to render them apt to be known. Thus, if one believes that there is a perfect being, and one's belief issued from one's *sensus divinitatis*, then one is perfectly justified in believing so, whatever the strength of the propositional evidence (for or) against classical theism.

I have insufficient space to conduct a detailed investigation into the epistemic merits of Plantinga's anti-evidentialist defence of the rationality of classical-theistic belief, but shall briefly highlight some of the objections that might be raised against this defence.

⁴⁴ Plantinga does not commit himself to the claim that this putative faculty delivers us with knowledge of the classical-theistic hypothesis directly, but does claim that this faculty is capable of furnishing us with knowledge of propositions that immediately and obviously entail the classical-theistic hypothesis.

Objection 1

Plantinga's defence of classical theism succeeds in circumventing evidential arguments from evil only on the supposition that the *sensus divinitatis* is causally responsible for the classical theist's believing theism. Plantinga identifies a sufficient condition for a subject's being justified in believing classical theism true: a classical theist is justified in her belief that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being, *if* that belief issued from her *sensus divinitatis*. However, there is very good reason to doubt that those who hold classical-theistic belief do so because of the workings of any such faculty as the *sensus divinitatis*. One might press this objection by appeal to the following argument, which purports to show that the hypothesis that there exists in those who accept classical theism some such faculty as the *sensus divinitatis* is explanatorily inert and thus unwarranted.

Consider the following two explanations of a subject's coming to accept classical theism:

Explanation 1: S was raised in a Christian community and was taught that the Bible, from which one of her parents read to her every night, is the Word of God. She was taught that God created and sustains the world, and that God is limitlessly powerful, knows everything that there is to know, and is perfectly loving. As a result of S's upbringing, she came to believe that there is a perfect being.⁴⁵

Explanation 2: S was raised in a Christian community and was taught that the Bible, from which one of her parents read to her every night, is the Word of God. She was taught that God created and sustains the world, and that God is limitlessly powerful, knows everything that there is to know, and is perfectly loving. In addition, S possesses a special faculty called 'the *sensus divinitatis*', which faculty supplies her with the belief that there is a perfect being.

⁴⁵ Clearly, this purported explanation can be adapted to apply to those who practise classical-theistic faiths other than Christianity.

Now it seems that for many classical theists, explanation 1 – or some variant thereof – would suffice to explain why they should believe there to exist a perfect being: in many cases, facts about the nature of the environment in which she was raised, together with facts about her psychology, suffice to account for a subject's possessing theistic belief. If that is so, then for many theists S, the hypothesis that S possesses a *sensus divinitatis* is redundant; explanation 2 possesses no greater explanatory power than explanation 1. Hence, since explanation 2 is more complex and appeals to more entities, it ought to be rejected in favour of explanation 1. The question why theists should believe as they do appears to be perfectly explicable without the hypothesis that each of us – or at least each theist – possesses a *sensus divinitatis*. Thus, even if it were conceded that a subject would be justified in holding any belief with which the hypothesized *sensus divinitatis* supplied her, it cannot sensibly be held that any theist in fact came by her theistic belief as a result of the operation of any such faculty.

Objection 2

There is significant discrepancy in content between the beliefs of those who belong to one religion and the beliefs of those who belong to another. Indeed, many propositions that are accepted by the members of one religion are logically inconsistent with propositions accepted by the members of another. Consider, for example, the proposition – if any – expressed by the sentence 'Jesus is the son of God'. Christians are adamant that this proposition is true, but Muslims and Jews – among many others – are insistent that it is false. Thus, if all those who are religious arrive at their theistic beliefs via the workings of some such faculty as the *sensus divinitatis*, then that faculty is in general unreliable: whichever religion – if any – is correct in its teachings, the majority of religious believers are such that a substantial proportion of their beliefs are false. Now Plantinga maintains that for S's knowing some proposition *P* that she believes, it is necessary that S's belief possess warrant, and he so construes the notion of warrant that only beliefs that are produced by a reliable faculty are apt to be warranted. Hence, according to Plantinga's own account of knowledge, it is necessary for a subject's knowing the propositions of which her *sensus divinitatis* furnishes her with belief that her *sensus divinitatis*

should be reliable. But a belief-generating faculty is reliable only if the vast majority of the beliefs that it produces are true. Thus, given that he holds that the *sensus divinitatis* is capable of supplying one with knowledge of God, Plantinga must find a way to account, in such a way that the *sensus divinitatis* comes out reliable, for the significant differences in belief-content between those who belong to one religion and those who belong to another.

Plantinga faces the following dilemma. For his attempt to ground the reasonableness of theistic belief by appeal to the hypothesis that each of us – or at least each theist – possesses a *sensus divinitatis* to work, it must be held either that

- (i) for every theist S, S arrived at her core theistic beliefs⁴⁶ as a result of the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*,

or that

- (ii) for some – but not all – theists S, S arrived at her core theistic beliefs as a result of the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*.

Each of these positions is riddled with problems.

Assessing (i)

We have noted that for any two religions R_1 and R_2 , there is significant discrepancy in content between the religious beliefs of those who belong to R_1 and the religious beliefs of those who belong to R_2 . Indeed, many of the religious propositions believed by those who belong to R_1 are logically inconsistent with the conjunction of the religious propositions believed by those who belong to R_2 . Hence, a substantial proportion of theists are such that a substantial proportion of their religious beliefs are false. Thus, if, as (i) asserts, every theist is supplied with her religious beliefs by the *sensus divinitatis*, then the *sensus divinitatis* is in general unreliable. Consequently, by Plantinga's own lights, the *sensus divinitatis* is not fit

⁴⁶ Roughly, those beliefs that are essential to the particular faith that she practises.

for purpose: on account of its not being equipped to supply us with knowledge, it has malfunctioned.

Perhaps it will be objected that while (i) may entail, in conjunction with obvious facts about the discrepancy in cognitive content between the beliefs that people of different religions hold, that the *sensus divinitatis* is in general unreliable, in particular theists this faculty does function properly. The thought is that while a substantial proportion of theists may be such that a substantial proportion of their *sensus divinitatis*-produced religious beliefs are false, a small proportion of theists might be such that the vast majority – or even all – of their *sensus divinitatis*-produced religious beliefs are true. Thus, while, say, the Buddhist might be mistaken in his beliefs about *karma*, and the Muslim mistaken in her belief about the relation in which the prophet Muhammad stands to Allah, the Christian might be correct in her belief that Jesus is the son of God, rose from the dead, and ascended to Heaven. However, this purported defence runs into the following problem: what entitles any theist to think that she is one of the lucky few whose *sensus divinitatis* is functioning as it should? We can use Plantinga himself as an example. In acknowledging that the majority of theists do not share his religious beliefs, and recognizing that among those people are many who have as much conviction in their religious beliefs as he has in his own, Plantinga has excellent reason to doubt the reliability of the supposed *sensus divinitatis*, and excellent reason to doubt that his religious beliefs issued from any such faculty. It is not good enough for a theist S just to claim that her religious beliefs are properly basic, for the widespread disagreement in theistic belief between those who belong to S's religion and those who belong to another constitutes a powerful defeater for the claim that S's *sensus divinitatis* is reliable.

Assessing (ii)

Consider now position (ii): for some – but not all – theists S, S arrived at her core theistic beliefs as a result of the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*. One advantage of switching from (i) to (ii) is that (ii) equips the reformed epistemologist with the resources to explain why there should be such discrepancy in content between the propositions held true by the members of one religion and the propositions held true by the members of any of the others. If only a reasonably small proportion of theists

came by their religious beliefs as a result of the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*, then it is possible that every belief that is produced by the *sensus divinitatis* should be true. Perhaps the *sensus divinitatis* appears unreliable only because we mistakenly assume that it is responsible for the production of all religious beliefs; many such beliefs might issue from faculties far less worthy of trust than the sacred *sensus*. There are, however, at least two serious problems with position (ii).

First, why should it be that only some theists are such that their religious beliefs were generated by a *sensus divinitatis*? In adopting (ii), one would have to hold either that (α) while every theist possesses a *sensus divinitatis*, only some theists are such that their *sensus divinitatis* is responsible for what they believe, or that (β) only some theists possess a *sensus divinitatis*. Each option is deeply problematic. Suppose that only some theists are such that their *sensus divinitatis* is responsible for what they believe, and let s_1 be the set of theists whose theistic belief derives from the operation of the *sensus divinitatis*, and s_2 the set of theists whose theistic belief does not. Then it can be forcefully argued, by appeal to the fact that there are many theists, no less convinced of the truth of their beliefs than she is of the truth of hers, and with whose beliefs hers are inconsistent, that no theist is justified in supposing that it is to s_1 , not s_2 , that she belongs. I thus take (α) to be implausible.

Now consider (β). Is there any rational basis on which to maintain that only some theists possess a *sensus divinitatis*? It might be argued that only those theists with appropriate theistic beliefs are blessed with a *sensus divinitatis*. Perhaps those who, in believing falsely of God, turn away from him, are not worthy of any such divine gift. However, any such argument will be viciously circular: if it is necessary for one's acquiring the correct theistic beliefs that one should possess a *sensus divinitatis*, it cannot be necessary for one's acquiring a *sensus divinitatis* that one should possess the correct theistic beliefs. Worse, it is inexplicable why a being who wanted to enter into a personal relationship with each of us should furnish only some of us with a sense by which to come to learn of its existence. I thus take position (ii) to be untenable: if some theists possess a *sensus divinitatis*, then every theist possesses a *sensus divinitatis*.⁴⁷ But then, as demonstrated above, the *sensus divinitatis* is in general unreliable.

⁴⁷ There is a further problem with the claim that only some theists possess a *sensus divinitatis*: what entitles any particular theist to suppose herself one of those lucky enough to have been endowed with this special faculty?

The unreliability objection becomes even more troublesome when we consider that a substantial proportion of people do not have any theistic belief at all. By the argument sketched in the previous paragraph, it is, in light of the widely accepted claim that any divine being would want us to acquire knowledge of it, inexplicable why it should confer on only some of us the ability to come by such knowledge. Hence, we seem forced to accept that if there is any such faculty as the *sensus divinitatis*, then all of us – be we theists, atheists or agnostics – possess it. But if it is accepted that each non-theist possesses a *sensus divinitatis*, then the *sensus divinitatis* is even less reliable than previously suggested: any *sensus divinitatis* belonging to a non-theist must have malfunctioned woefully, thus casting further doubt on the general reliability of this alleged faculty.

I hope to have demonstrated that there is good reason to reject the claim that in positing some such faculty as the *sensus divinitatis*, one would position oneself to justifiably hold that classical theism is apt to be believed either basically or on the basis of propositions that are apt to be believed basically.

Implications for arguments from evil

I have argued that in attempting to demonstrate that their theistic belief is justified, sceptical theists are not entitled to appeal to any set of facts about the nature of the world; by sceptical-theistic lights, classical theism does not admit of *a posteriori* justification. I suggested above that a belief that defies acceptability on *a posteriori* grounds might nevertheless be rationally held either on *a priori* grounds, or in virtue of being properly basic (or straightforwardly deducible from beliefs that are properly basic). In attempting to demonstrate that classical theism is apt to be reasonably believed, Plantinga seeks to motivate the claim that classical-theistic belief might derive from some such faculty as the *sensus divinitatis*, holding that any such faculty would be capable of supplying one with justified belief of the existence of a perfect being. In virtue of its non-dependence on propositional evidence, such belief would be basic; in virtue of its being produced by a reliable cognitive faculty, it would be justified. So, Plantinga's thesis that there exists in each of us a *sensus divinitatis* would, if true, support the claim that classical-theistic belief might be properly basic. Hence, in arguing against this thesis, I have attempted to block *one* line of argument by which the sceptical theist might try to

establish that classical theism does not stand in need of evidential support. So, even if my argument against the *sensus divinitatis* thesis succeeds, it remains open that for the sceptical theist classical theism might admit of properly basic belief. Further, I have not attempted to assess the prospects of the sceptical theist's mounting a successful *a priori* defence of classical theism. I do, however, hope to have shown that in attempting to defend, in light of what we know about evil, the epistemic respectability of classical theism, the sceptical theist cannot reasonably appeal to any evidence acquired *a posteriori*. In accepting (ST1) – (ST3), the sceptical theist commits herself to holding that nothing that we know about the nature of our world lends any support to the claim that there exists a being unlimited in respect of power, knowledge and goodness.

Conclusion

Having explained how sceptical theists attempt to undermine evidential arguments from evil, I investigated Graham Oppy and Michael Almeida's efforts to derive from Michael Bergmann's brand of sceptical theism an unacceptable moral scepticism. I discerned three charges that Oppy and Almeida level against sceptical theism and attempted to show that none succeeds. I then sought to show that while sceptical theism might be morally acceptable, it is rationally acceptable only if classical theism is either justifiable *a priori* or apt to be believed basically (or is straightforwardly deducible from propositions that are apt to be believed basically).

By demonstrating that Daniel Howard-Snyder's progress argument, by appeal to which he attempts to undercut the atheologian's inference from inscrutability to gratuity, lends at least as much support to the claim that the goods of which we know are representative of the possible goods as to the claim that the goods of which we know are *not* representative of the possible goods, I showed that the sceptical theist's three sceptical theses, (ST1) – (ST3), are not fit to be accepted *a posteriori*. I then sought to show that however the sceptical theist attempts to motivate them, (ST1) – (ST3) conspire to leave her theism without *a posteriori* support.

I argued that given her commitment to (ST1) – (ST3), and her belief that (ST1) – (ST3) together suffice to undermine, for any evil E, the inference from (a) our being unable to discern any reason in virtue of which an omnipotent and omniscient being would be morally justified in permitting E, to (b) there being no such reason, the sceptical theist rationally precludes herself from judging, of any possible state of affairs S, whether the effect of S's obtaining on the overall value of the world would be positive or negative. In appealing to (ST1) – (ST3) in an effort to undermine evidential arguments from evil, the sceptical theist commits herself to holding that no matter how much suffering a state of affairs S may bring about, it remains open that it would be for the best, all things considered, were S to obtain. But in taking seriously the possibility that, in virtue of serving very great goods beyond our ken, the obtaining of the worst *pro tanto* evils that we can imagine should actually be, all things considered, for the best, one commits oneself to taking seriously the possibility that, in virtue of serving very great evils beyond our ken, the obtaining of

the best *pro tanto* goods that we can imagine should actually be, all things considered, for the worst. Thus, I argued, the sceptical theist cannot reasonably endorse, for any state of affairs S, any all-things-considered judgment of the value of S. Hence, the sceptical theist cannot reasonably endorse, for any possible world *w*, any all-things-considered judgment of the value of *w*, and, thus, cannot reasonably judge, of the actual world, that its overall value is high. Hence, since for her being justified in supposing the world to be governed by an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being, it is necessary that the sceptical theist should be justified in supposing the world's overall value high, the sceptical theist is not justified in holding, on the basis of any set of known facts about the nature of the world, that classical theism is true.

Having thereby shown that by sceptical-theistic lights classical theism does not admit of support *a posteriori*, I identified two alternative routes by which the sceptical theist's theism might acquire epistemic justification. I suggested that there might be available to the sceptical theist *a priori* grounds on which to accept theism, and recognized the possibility, championed by reformed epistemologists, that classical theism should admit of properly basic belief. I then raised two objections, each carrying considerable *prima facie* weight, against Alvin Plantinga's claim that on account of its issuing from a special faculty by which one is capable of perceiving the divine, classical-theistic belief is apt to be basic.

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