

**Humble Theism:**  
**Wykstra's Skeptical Theism and Moral Paralysis**

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It seems that a perfectly good, yet all-powerful God would not allow meaningless suffering. William L. Rowe presents an evidentialist argument in a 1979 article, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism.”<sup>1</sup> He presents his argument in three statements: His first premise asserts that there are instances of unjustifiable evil. Secondly, he asserts that God would prevent any instances of unjustifiable evil. His valid conclusion from these two premises is that God does not exist as a perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent being. The argument runs as follows:

R1: There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.<sup>2</sup>

R2: An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.<sup>3</sup>

R3: There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.<sup>4</sup>

Since this argument is valid, if R1 and R2 are true, then R3 is also true. In this paper, I will examine an objection to R1, that of skeptical theism. Specifically, I will examine the skeptical theism as put forward by Stephen Wykstra, who Rowe believes provides the most powerful objection to the evidential argument. Then I will present an objection to skeptical theism, which states that skeptical theism leads to moral paralysis. I will conclude with an evaluation of the objection as it pertains to skeptical theism.

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<sup>1</sup> *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 no. 4 (October 1979): 335-341.

<sup>2</sup> Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” 336.

<sup>3</sup> Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” 336.

<sup>4</sup> Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” 336.

Rowe's evidential argument clarifies the problem of evil founded upon an empirical data. Arguments for atheism before Rowe's tend to be more conceptual.<sup>5</sup> Replies to Rowe's argument can be organized into several categories: ones that attempt to show why evil exists, ones that assert the existence of a reason for evil that is yet unknown, and ones that deny God's moral agency. This paper will focus on another view, skeptical theism, which argues that we cannot know whether there are reasons for evil. The argument of the skeptical theist centers upon the inability of the human intellect to perceive the reasons for instances of evil. While arguments fall into several categories, including arguments from analogy, arguments from cause and effect, and Bergmann's notable argument regarding the array of unknown goods and evils that might exist, I will portray the argument for skeptical theism based upon the condition termed "CORNEA". CORNEA was developed by Stephen Wykstra, concerning whom Rowe wrote, "no one, in my judgment, has raised such an important point (and clarifications) as his Wykstra."<sup>6</sup> Let us examine how Wykstra challenges R1.

Wykstra responds directly to Rowe in an article from 1984 entitled, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'."<sup>7</sup> In this article, he seeks to weaken, though not entirely discredit, Rowe's confidence in his argument. To understand Wykstra's argument, one must first understand that which makes Rowe's argument innovative and distinct. Instead of

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 16, no. 2 (1984): 77.

<sup>6</sup> William L. Rowe, "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 no. 2 (1984): 96, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40012631>.

<sup>7</sup> See footnote 5.

seeking to justify atheism upon conceptual grounds, Rowe introduces an empirical approach to arguments against God's existence, appealing to the common experience of suffering. As an illustration, he paints the pitiful picture of a faun caught in a forest fire. The faun is slowly scorched to death over several days, seeming suffering meaninglessly.<sup>8</sup> Wykstra seeks to make a distinction upon Rowe's use of the word 'appears'. Wykstra writes, "though the term 'appears' is ubiquitous in his case, Rowe provides no explication of its meaning."<sup>9</sup> Wykstra views this lack of explanation as problematic for Rowe's argument. To fill in the gap, Wykstra proposes the "Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access," referred to in brief as CORNEA. He defines CORNEA as the following condition:

On the basis of cognized situation *s*, human *H* is entitled to claim "It appears that *p*" only if it is reasonable for *H* to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if *p* were not the case, *s* would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her.<sup>10</sup>

The following syllogism arises by substituting "gratuitous evil exists" for *p* and "the suffering of the faun" for *s*:

C1: If gratuitous evil does not exist, then the suffering of the faun would likely be different than it is in some discernible way.

C2: God is defined as an omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly good being.

C3: Given C2, God's knowledge is vastly greater than that of human *H*, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them.

C4: Given C3, it is not reasonable for *H* to believe C1.

C5: Thus, human *H* is not entitled to the claim, "It appears that gratuitous evil exists."

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<sup>8</sup> Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 337

<sup>9</sup> Wykstra, 80.

<sup>10</sup> Wykstra, 85.

Thus, Wykstra proports to show that Rowe's first premise is not as strong as Rowe would like it to be. He asserts that to disprove his claim, Rowe must show that

one has justification for believing that [certain] instances [of suffering] belong to a class such that if Divinely purposed goods exist in connection with all known instances of suffering in this class, these goods would always or usually be within our ken."<sup>11</sup>

CORNEA is especially powerful, since Rowe recognizes that a "the theists own religious tradition usually maintains that in this life it is not given to us to know God's purpose in allowing particular instances of suffering."<sup>12</sup> Thus, CORNEA poses an impressive challenge to Rowe's argument.

Some say that skeptical theism, as portrayed by Wykstra, leads to moral paralysis, which would pose a problem regarding the credibility of CORNEA. To understand this objection, consider a skeptical theist who happens upon Rowe's suffering faun in trying to escape the same fire. Since he has no epistemic notion of what goods might be achieved by the suffering of the faun, he cannot know whether to take action or what action to take. Will he leave the faun to burn? End the faun's life? Attempt to transport the faun at the risk of his own safety? He cannot act, since he cannot know whether an action will lessen gratuitous evil (if that type of evil does exist) or prevent some greater good (if, on the other hand, the suffering of the faun is accomplishing a greater good). He cannot even assign a probability to the outcome of

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<sup>11</sup> Wykstra, 88.

<sup>12</sup> Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," 338-9.

the situation.<sup>13</sup> Along these lines, William Hasker asserts, “If he [that is, the skeptical theist] is to remain consistent with his skeptical principles he must *abandon the aim of maximizing the good and minimizing the bad*. . . . It remains the case that we are *completely unable* to make even a reasonable guess concerning their goodness or badness all-things-considered.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, at least under purely consequentialist terms, the skeptical theist faces a crippling dilemma.

Yet it seems evident that the skeptical theist must act as a moral agent. To give urgency to the above example, consider that the skeptical theist finds—instead of a faun—his mother, crippled by terrible burns from the fire. Imagine further that he has the means to help her, at no cost to himself. Even at cost to himself, it is evident that he must act to help her. Yet the skeptical theist, according to Hasker, stands still, unable to make a decision.

Under a purely consequentialist framework where morality is determined solely by weighing goods against evils, this argument might stand. While this objection correctly ascertains that the skeptical theist that must make a decision based on purely consequentialist considerations cannot make a decision, it ignores two important points.

First, while Hasker is correct in warning the skeptical theist away from consequentialism, like other moral agents, the skeptical theist has other indicators of morality available to him besides consequentialism. For example, the skeptical theist

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<sup>13</sup> William Hasker, “All Too Skeptical Theism,” in “Special Volume on the Occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of this Journal,” special edition, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 68 no. 1/3 (December 2010): 25.

<sup>14</sup> Hasker, 29; italics in original.

might make a decision founded upon divine revelation, such as, for example, the biblical command to “do to others as you would done to you.” As Bergmann and Rea remind readers, “Skeptical theists, after all, are *theists*.”<sup>15</sup> The skeptical theist might also operate based on the nature of a thing. For example, he might observe that the nature of a woman is not to be burnt.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, he might decide that he has a duty to his mother, who gave him life, to put her physical well-being above his own. Less philosophically rigorous but very often the case, he might operate upon of the psychological inclination referred to as the “conscience”. He acts because his conscience compels him, despite not having any knowledge of the potential goods involved in the suffering. Regardless of the source, knowledge of the goods and evils that will result from an action are not the only guiding force for moral agents.

Second, the skeptical theist is not alone in his moral paralysis. All human moral agents have incomplete knowledge of the full extent of goods and evils. It is evident from the limitations on the human intellect that a simple act can have unforeseen consequences. Additionally, even if knowledge of *all* of the goods or evils resulting from an action were possible, it would not be possible to objectively compare those outcomes. I grant that there seems to be some differentiation between evils such as stealing or

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Bergmann and Michael Rea, “In Defence of Sceptical Theism: A Reply to Almeida and Oppy,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83 no. 2 (June 2005): 244.

<sup>16</sup> Natural law theory, while a viable alternative to consequentialism, may also pose a problem to skeptical theists, since it presupposes the ability to know the teleological nature of a thing, which, it could be argued, is a position that CORNEA prevents the skeptical theist from holding. However, the nature of this example is not to propose an alternative to consequentialism, but merely to show that alternatives might exist for the skeptical theist.

killing. However, how does one decide between the death of a political leader, upon whom the good of a society depends, and the death of a parent, to whom one has a particular duty? Should one accept the death of a score of strangers when it could be prevented by the death of one's own child? Since the human intellect is limited by time, these events cannot be evaluated without reference to other factors that help define morality. Moral paralysis is not exclusive to skepticism. Moral paralysis accompanies any system of unmitigated consequentialism.

As a response to the atheist who says that God must not exist since, even after much reflection, one cannot know why God would allow gratuitous evil, skeptical theism stands strong. The idea that skeptical theism leads to moral skepticism forgets that any purely consequentialist framework will give that result. While the skeptical theist does not claim to have a complete knowledge of what goods might be gained or lost because of a particular action, he is in no way different than any other moral agent. Like others, the skeptical theist has access to other avenues of determining moral action, even some from within philosophy. Skeptical theism is a humble theism, recognizing that God's ways are not man's ways.



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