

# Skeptical Atheism

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Presidential Address

Skeptical theism is the thesis that no human can have justified belief that there is some pointless evil. Some theists do not try to solve the evidential problem of evil with plausible theodicies. Instead they argue for skeptical theism. Here I intend to argue that some of the skeptical reasons William Alston and Stephen Wykstra offered against evidential arguments from evil are themselves unjustified. The objections either (1) raise the standards for reasonable belief too high, or (2) lower the standards for undermining the evidential argument from evil too low, or else (3) overlook replies atheists can make. Skeptical atheism is the thesis that some humans can have justified belief that there is some pointless evil. In the course of criticizing Alston's defense of skeptical theism I intend to make a case for skeptical atheism.

Alston aims his criticisms against all evidential arguments from evil, although William Rowe's argument in "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" is the one he specifically discusses. I will formulate a generic evidential argument from evil after presenting Rowe's.

Rowe claims that "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" (Rowe 336). William Alston thinks that we are not rationally justified in accepting that premise, and thus the so-called inductive argument from evil collapses (Alston 30).

Rowe's main argument (336) is:

1. 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.
2. 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.

3. Thus, there does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.

Although a theist might dispute Rowe's conditions, and Alston does lead with that, Alston recognizes that the more substantive issue is whether there is sufficient reason to believe that there is evil that incompatible with the existence of God. Allow me to define "pointless evil" as "evil that incompatible with the existence of God." Then Rowe's argument could be condensed this way:

- 1\*. There is pointless evil.
- 2\*. If God exists, then no evil is pointless.
- 3\*. Thus, God does not exist.

Alston recognizes that "Rowe does not claim to know or to be able to prove that [there is pointless evil] is true" (Alston 33). Rowe writes:

Perhaps, for all we know, there is some familiar good outweighing the fawn's suffering to which that suffering is connected in a way we do not see. Furthermore, there may well be unfamiliar goods, goods we haven't dreamed of, to which the fawn's suffering is inextricably connected. Indeed, it would seem to require something like omniscience on our part before we could lay claim to *knowing* that there is no greater good connected to the fawn's suffering in such a manner that an omniscient being could not have achieved that good without permitting that suffering or some evil equally bad or worse. (Rowe 337)

Alston thinks that no human has rationally justified belief, let alone knowledge, that there is pointless evil. Alston writes: "The criticism I shall be supporting attacks the claim that we are rationally justified in accepting [premise] 1" (Alston 30). Further, he thinks that garden-variety skepticism, not the purely theoretical skeptical scenarios that philosophers imagine, undermine the claim (Alston 35-36).

What prompts philosophers to call Rowe's argument "inductive," despite the fact that it is deductively valid, is the epistemic dimension of his argument. Rowe does not claim to know that there is at least one pointless evil. Thus, it is an issue of reasonable belief, not knowledge. Instead of "There is pointless evil," the first premise might be rendered more clearly as it is a justified belief that there is. The corresponding conclusion is that it is a justified belief that God does not exist.

Theists have a more difficult burden of proof when it comes to the evidential problem of evil. As long as atheists claim that it is impossible for theists' beliefs in both God and evil to be true, theists can defeat that argument by merely pointing out a logically possible state of affairs according to which God and evil co-exist. But if atheists make the more modest claim, not to know, but to believe reasonably, that God and various bad but actual states of affairs do not co-exist, theists cannot counter that argument successfully in the same way. They cannot merely point to some states of affairs that might obtain; rather, they must show that atheists' actual claims are unwarranted or false. I do not think that Alston has met this burden. What he does is to rehash arguments that might be successful against claims to know for certain that there are point-

less evils. Those claims are considerably bolder than Rowe makes.

Consider, for example, what Alston writes about the punishment-for-sin theodicy: According to Christianity, inward sins—one's intentions, motives, and attitudes—are more serious failings than outward behavior. Thus, someone could be a thoroughgoing sinner, and yet that fact might not be detectable by another person (who must rely on behavior as evidence). According to Christianity, the greatest sin is not making God the center of one's life (Alston 38). For all we know, punishment for sin might reform a person in life after death, even if it does not reform him in this life. In order to rule out the punishment for sin theodicy, someone would have to have justified beliefs about inward sins and the content of life after death. Thus, critics cannot even rule out the punishment for sin theodicy. If critics cannot rule out even the punishment for sin theodicy, they will be unsuccessful when it comes to more promising ones. If so, then Rowe's evidential argument from evil collapses. (Alston 39).

Alston formulates his argument in terms of an adult he names Sam. The gist of his argument is that we would need to have justified beliefs about Sam's inner thoughts and the content (if any) of his life after death in order to "rule out" this theodicy. But would we? In the first place, we could criticize the proposal without mentioning Sam or any other adult. For example, we could point out that animals, babies, and toddlers suffer, but they are not sinners.

Second, it is noteworthy that whenever someone uses a punishment-for-sin theodicy to account for the suffering of people the theodicist does not know, he, the theodicist, is reduced to sheer speculation. Consider Falwell and Robertson's use of the punishment-for-sin theodicy two days after 9-11. They were guessing that God was angry about feminism, the ACLU, banning organized and coerced prayer in the public schools, abortion, and tolerance of homosexuality. Thus, if Alston allows theists to use a punishment-for-sin theodicy for people they do not know, then Alston lowers the standard for fending off criticisms of a theodicy too low, allowing speculation to pass muster.

Third, Alston presupposes that arguments against life after death are not sufficient to show that the belief in no life after death is rationally justified. After all, if some of those arguments were sufficient to support the reasonable belief that there is no life after death, then that would support skepticism about theodicies that appeal to personal survival.

Is there such an argument? Yes. Paul Edwards presents an argument for the dependence of a person's identity on the continuous existence of that person's living body (Edwards 292-307). Thus, since there is very good evidence for people's bodies being mortal, there is very good reason to accept personal annihilation at death. An advantage of Edwards's argument is that it is consistent with at least one version of mind/body dualism. It does not presuppose mind/body materialism.

Edwards's argument adequately supports skepticism (if not knowledge) about both personal survival and any theodicy that appeals to it. This includes Alston's supplement to the punishment-for-sin theodicy and Hick's soul-making theodicy. Even Richard Swinburne, who used to attempt a theodicy without appealing to personal survival, has in more recent years concluded that personal survival is an indispensable part of a successful theodicy.

How does a theist respond to the challenge posed by the argument for personal annihilation? Well, it will not do to respond, as Alston does, with no argument at all. He merely cites the belief in personal survival as a way of evading falsifying evidence, like a cartoon character who, having painted himself into a corner, paints a hole in the wall and steps through it.

How does a theist respond? There appear to be two options. A theist would argue that personal identity does or does not depend on the continued life of that person's body. The first option, while enjoying the advantage of being consistent with every position on the mind/body problem, would require miraculous resurrection of bodies. This, in turn, would also require a successful argument for the existence of a God with enough power, knowledge, and goodness to accomplish the feat, not to mention a successful criticism of arguments against miracles. The second option entails an extreme form of mind/body dualism, and that would require successful criticism of arguments for a person's living body being necessary for the continued identity of that person. Swinburne has adopted this option, and some of his foes on this issue are fellow theists, such as van Inwagen and Geach. Inasmuch as both options are theistic responses to the problem of evil, they require that the greater good would be served by our continued existence in the hereafter. That, too, requires defense. In all events, rational defenses of theistic belief, not mere citation of belief, are necessary.

Perhaps we should note that Alston has pointed out that criticizing theodicies is not as simple as some people think. Granted. But we should not conclude that no such criticisms can be successful.

Appeals to the unknown content of life after death do not undermine arguments for the reasonable belief that there is no life after death. If Alston's appeal to the unknown were successful, then we could argue that there are no reasonable beliefs about the future because the future is unknown. Instead of appealing to the unknown, Alston must take on the more ambitious task of undermining arguments for no life after death. Further, if the appeal to life after death is not an empty appeal to ignorance, then it must also be argued that it is reasonable to believe in life after death.

Third, it could be observed that outward behavior frequently is adequate evidence for a person's mental states. Thus, although Alston rightly points out that we might not know someone's hidden mental states, it is not as if there are not plenty of cases where it is altogether reasonable to believe that God would not be punishing for sin. Small children and animals are prime examples.

Alston could reply that my first point only shows that punishment for sin is not God's reason in many cases, not that it is not the reason in any. All Alston must do is point to one case where it is unreasonable to believe that punishment for sin is not God's reason. But this is wrong. There is no need for an atheist to defend the claim that a specific case of suffering is pointless. An atheist can cheerfully state that maybe Sam is someone who has done wrong and deserves punishment. Sam being a wrongdoer is consistent with there being plenty of other cases of pointless suffering. Atheists need not existentially generalize from Sam's case.

It might be objected that Alston's Sam case is a generic example of an adult who might, for all we know, be a sinner. Thus, Alston is showing that atheists cannot rule out the punishment for sin theodicy for any adult. However, as I pointed out, a critic

of the theodicy need not mention any adult. Dostoevsky's character Ivan Karamazov made his case strictly on the basis of children. Rowe points to instances of non-moral evil, using the suffering of a fawn as an example. Further, even if a critic made the case using an adult, if we use standard criteria for reasonable belief, we in some cases do have reasonable beliefs about who merits punishment and who does not. Think of the courts and being a parent.

Knowing Sam's hidden mental states, or knowing the content of life after death, might be a requirement for knowing that Sam is not being punished for sin, but not for reasonably believing it. Alston invokes standards that are too strong.

Alston notes that according to Christians "the greatest sin is a self-centered refusal or failure to make God the center of one's life" (104). If this is so and God punishes for sin, then would we not expect atheists and people who are religiously indifferent to suffer more than religious people? Alston invites a standard criticism of the theodicy: that believers and disbelievers alike suffer, and there is no reason to believe atheists suffer more. Of course, Alston can make the unfalsifiable suggestion that atheists suffer more after death. He can also speculate that we do not really know who is religious and who is not. However, often we do have reasonable beliefs about who is religious and who is not.

It might be objected that I have been unfair in attributing to Alston the premise that "In order to rule out the punishment for sin theodicy, someone would have to know inward sins and the content of life after death." Suppose Alston merely means that someone would have to have the reasonable belief that people lack inward sins and have such-and-such content in life after death.

Well, if Alston is making this different claim, then a difficulty is that there are arguments that render belief in no life after death reasonable. And I pointed out that we often do have the reasonable belief that someone lacks serious inward sins. Alston would face the daunting task of arguing that no argument against life after death renders belief in personal annihilation rational. Alston does not even try to do that. All Alston does is to introduce life after death merely because there are Christians who advocate that belief.

Perhaps this leaves us with a stalemate. Yes, there can in some instances be reasonable beliefs in competing propositions. Perhaps the beliefs in personal annihilation and in personal survival are among these. Maybe it is open to Alston and other skeptical theists to appeal to the unfalsifiable possible content of life after death. Maybe the title of this paper should be "skeptical agnosticism."

That might be the case, were it not for an argument Rowe and other atheists could make. Alston mentions it in passing, but does not consider it. At one point Alston writes that the only way to defend the first premise of the evidential argument from evil is to identify a specific instance of it and existentially generalize. "How might one be justified in accepting 1? The obvious way to support an existential statement is to establish one or more instantiations and then use existential generalization. This is Rowe's tack, and I don't see any real alternative." (Alston 30).

Rowe saw an alternative, and Alston noticed it, but Alston did not appreciate the force of Rowe's point. I intend to run with it.

The point is that, since theism entails that no evil is pointless, at least one pointless

evil is incompatible with theism. Rowe does not have to existentially generalize from any specific example. He can consider the disjunction of all the cases that appear to be pointless and note that there is at least a small chance of each one actually being pointless. The probability of a disjunction is the sum of the disjuncts, minus the probability of both. Thus, the larger the number of bad things that have a small chance of actually being pointless, the higher are the chances that at least one actually is pointless. Granted that if O3 (all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good) God's existence is postulated, each disjunct has a zero chance of actually being pointless. But if our skeptical theist is skeptical of his own beliefs, and not just of evidential arguments from evil, then even the skeptical theist grants that there is some chance.

Now, a proof of the existence of O3 God would render the probability of each zero, but an argument for an indeterminate something or other that is labeled "God" would not.

It is true that we do not have (know) probabilities to assign. But we do know that the larger the number of bad things that have a small chance of being pointless, the worse it would be for theism. Rowe writes:

But even if it should somehow be reasonable to believe either of these things of the fawn's suffering, we must then ask whether it is reasonable to believe either of these things of *all* the instances of seemingly pointless human and animal suffering that occur daily in our world (Rowe 337).

When considering the problem of evil some theists stress that we know much less than everything whatsoever, and they are of course right in stating this fact. Alston brings it up: "Moreover, remember that our topic is not the possibilities for future human apprehensions, but rather what an omniscient being can grasp.... Surely it is eminently possible that there are possibilities ... that exceed anything we can anticipate, or even conceptualize" (Alston 45). Stephen Wykstra (73-93) makes substantially the same point when he stresses how little we know. I think some theists make the mistake of believing that this fact supports their beliefs.

I propose that we set aside the previous arguments and pretend that we are so ignorant that we cannot even have justified belief whether some or no evils are pointless. Does this skepticism favor theism?

No. It favors atheism. Here's why.

It should be noted immediately that if some evil appears to be pointless to us, and if O3 God exists, then God knows something we do not, namely, what justifies the evil (what renders it not pointless). But if we do not presuppose God's existence, things could also be worse than we suppose. What are the chances for theism? Consider the number of bad things that appear to be pointless evils. Consider also the number of bad things that actually are pointless evils. If we were to go along with Alston and maintain that we cannot have even justified belief that some evil is pointless, theists must be worse off, since they (tacitly) claim to have justified belief that no evil is pointless. Our ignorance leaves open the possibility that things are the same, better, or worse than they appear. Now, since theism entails that no evil is pointless, things could be better than they appear, and yet theism still be false. Things must be much better than they

appear for theism to be true. The number of evils that actually are pointless would have to be zero.

While atheism is consistent with no evil being pointless, no argument from evil for atheism is consistent with that proposition. Arguments from evil entail that some evil is pointless. It is noteworthy that theism can be true in only one way: if not a single one of the bad things that appear to be pointless actually is pointless. The intrinsic probability of theism, the probability before considering the evidence and argument, is the probability of one huge conjunction, where each conjunct does not have a probability of 1 unless we make the question-begging assumption of God's existence. Arguments from evil, on the other hand, enjoy an a priori advantage: the intrinsic probability of them, the probability in advance of evidence and argument, is of a huge disjunction. The first premise of Rowe's argument from evil for atheism can be true in many ways: if even a single one of the bad things that appear to be pointless actually is pointless. In short, skeptical considerations favor arguments from evil over theism.

It might be objected that I have treated events that seem to be pointless as independent of one another. But if they are not, if an evil being pointless depends on others being so, the probability might not be enough to justify atheism.

That is an important point, but I think I can mitigate its argumentative force.

For one thing, I stipulated that the probabilities were prior to considering evidence and argument. The suggestion that events are interdependent would itself require defense, and thus would not be prior to evidence and argument. Wykstra cited human ignorance as a reason to deny the need for any further reasoned defense of theism, and my reply is to his stance.

Second, the suggestion that it is possible that events are interdependent might be used to counter the claim to know that some evils are pointless. But my thesis is the more modest one to have justified belief. A reply to my thesis would thus require an argument for it being at least plausible that no evil is pointless. A mere suggestion of a possibility would not suffice.

Third, if it is contended that I have the burden of showing that it is plausible that events are independent of one another, I would point out that the burden is less than it might seem. After all, my thesis is consistent with interdependence, so long as it does not render theism more plausible (probable?) than not. I need not maintain that all events are independent. Moreover, many events appear to be independent of one another, and it would require evidence and argument to show that they are not. We must begin somewhere, and I take appearances to be the appropriate starting point.

Last, perhaps basically the same point can be made without referring to probabilities. Theism entails that no evil is pointless. That is a very strong statement, while its contradictory, some (at least one) evil is pointless, is comparatively modest. Skeptical theism is even stronger in that it is the thesis, not that no human has justified belief that some evil is pointless, but that no human can have it. But that is not all. Skeptical theism does not deny merely claims to know there is pointless evil. It rejects the contention that anyone has even justified belief that there is. Given how bold a stance skeptical theism is, skeptical atheism has a prior advantage.

I realize that this response is not decisive. After all, that would require considering arguments for events being so interdependent that my argument would be invalidated.

I can think of two ways theists might argue for interdependence here: one causal, the other moral. But I hasten to add that this would be an addition to skeptical theism, and I have tried to respond to just plain skeptical theism, not its revision.

The title of this paper is “Skeptical Atheism,” but it might be objected that there is nothing skeptical about the stance defended here. It is true that I am more optimistic than skeptical theists about our ability to achieve justified belief that some evil is pointless. But skeptical theists and I agree that no one knows that proposition, and so my thesis is skeptical to that extent. I am skeptical of theists’ ability to make a good case for the very strong thesis that skeptical theism is, and that is a reason to entitle this paper “Skeptical Atheism.”

Where does my argument leave us? Richard Swinburne (3-29) has argued that theists need a theodicy to answer the problem of evil. His reasons are that we should accept that things are as they appear unless there is a good argument for appearances being deceiving. It looks like some evils are pointless, and theodicies are arguments for those appearances being deceiving. Thus, Swinburne thinks that the burden of proof (or, if you prefer, the burden of arguing) is on everyone, theist and atheist alike. Atheists must formulate a good argument from evil; theists must respond with one or more plausible theodicies.

Alston, on the other hand, contends that the burden of proof is only on atheists. This is the only explanation I see for his practice of introducing Christian doctrines, even ones he regards as implausible, not bothering to defend them in the least, then daring skeptics to provide reasons for regarding the theodicies as unsuccessful. When skeptics provide those reasons, Alston tries to bat them down by appealing to another belief he regards as unfalsifiable by humans, namely, the content of life after death.

I agree with Swinburne’s stance, and I think I have given an independent argument for theists having a burden of proof.

The situation is comparable to a lottery, where atheists think that theists are holding a losing ticket. It will not do for theists merely to respond that they believe that the ticket is a winner, then point out—correctly—that atheists do not know that it is a losing ticket, and then infer—erroneously—that atheists do not have justified belief that it is a losing ticket. To pursue the analogy, theists would have to report having read in the newspaper, or heard on TV, that the six numbers matched the ticket. If not that, they would have to report remembering distinctly that at least a proper subset of the numbers matched. Theists must give plausible reasons against the proposition that it is a justified belief that some evil is pointless. For skeptical considerations favor atheism.

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