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Sceptical Agnosticism

Francis Jonbäck | ORCID: 0000-0001-6313-1209
Faculty of Theology, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden
francis.jonback@teol.uu.se

Abstract

Agnostics as well as theists should answer evidential arguments from evil, at least when confronted with them. In this paper, I answer such an argument by appealing to sceptical agnosticism. A sceptical agnostic is not only undecided about the existence of a perfectly good and omnipotent God, but also believes that we cannot make any judgement about whether or not *seemingly* gratuitous evil probably is gratuitous. I argue that such agnosticism has several advantages compared with sceptical theism.

Keywords

sceptical agnosticism – sceptical theism – omni-God – the problem of evil – global scepticism

1 Introduction

The agnostic attitude towards the existence of a morally perfect and omnipotent God has not received the attention it deserves. This is unfortunate for several reasons. One is that any argument for the conclusion that such a God exists or does not exist is also an argument against being agnostic about the existence, or non-existence, of such a God.[1] Fence-sitting is not a privileged

1 Another reason why agnosticism requires attention by philosophers is the simple fact that there are a significant number of agnostics in our world. According to a survey from 2008 carried out by the multinational research project known as the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), 19 per cent of respondents in Sweden consider themselves agnostic. The same survey shows that 14 per cent of Danish and Norwegian respondents are agnostics.

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position in that respect; agnostics, too, must defend their view, at the very least when faced with arguments against it.[2]

In this paper, I focus on sceptical agnosticism as a response to evidential arguments from evil. A sceptical agnostic is not only undecided about the existence of a perfectly good and omnipotent God, but also believes that we cannot make any judgement about whether or not *seemingly* gratuitous evil really is, or probably is, gratuitous. Such judgements are present at least in Rowe-style evidential arguments from evil. I argue that sceptical agnosticism has several advantages when compared with sceptical theism. That is to say, all else equal, endorsing the scepticism that both views include, agnosticism rather than theism is the rational choice.

2 Defining Sceptical Agnosticism

Sceptical theism consists of two components. The first component is a sort of scepticism about our knowledge of the realm of values. The second component is just theism—the belief that at least one god exists.[3] I think of sceptical agnosticism as having the sceptical component in common with sceptical theism, but differing in that the former accepts theism while the latter accepts agnosticism in its stead.

These figures are among the highest in Europe while Sweden along with Japan has the highest percentage of agnostics in the world. See table from the ISSP survey in Keysar and Navarro-Rivera (2013: 563). Moreover, so-called unaffiliated "religious nones" (a category including both atheists and agnostics) make up almost 20 per cent of the population in the United States and are the fastest growing 'religious' group in the United States and Canada. See, for example, Wilkins-Laflamme (2014), Sherkat (2014) and Pew Research Center (2008). Comparable trends are evident in Western Europe. See, for example, Norris and Inglehart (2011) and Voas (2009). Furthermore, sociologists like Charles Taylor point out that we are experiencing a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and even unproblematic to one in which it is seen as one option among many. We have moved from a time when faith was the default option to one in which uncertainty is the point of departure. The natural conclusion is that neither theism nor atheism is generally considered the default option. See Taylor (2007: 13).

2 One might think of an agnostic as someone who has not taken a stance on the question of whether or not God exists. In this context, however, I think of an agnostic as someone who has given some consideration to the question of whether or not God exists and then decided to remain undecided. Such an agnostic has thus taken a stance—to remain undecided—and having taken such a stance he or she also needs to be able to defend it when confronted with arguments against it.

3 The God in focus is usually the God of omni-theism. The God of omni-theism is at a minimum perfectly good and omnipotent. In this paper I use a capital 'G' when referring to the God of omni-theism.

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The sceptical component can be defined more precisely; here I follow Michael Bergmann (2009: 376) and assert that it consists of two distinct principles:

> *The sceptical component*: (i) we should be sceptical about whether the possible goods and possible evils we know are representative of *all* possible goods and possible evils, and (ii) we should be sceptical about whether the necessary conditions for the realisation of the possible goods and possible evils that we know are representative of the necessary conditions for the realisation of the possible goods and possible evils there are.[4]

Endorsing the scepticism stated in (i) and (ii) is reasonable because we have no reason to think that our knowledge about the realm of values is representative.[5] Bergmann (2001: 284) even states that scepticism of the kind that (i) recommends is "extremely modest and completely appropriate even for those who are agnostic about the existence of God. It is just the honest recognition of the fact that it wouldn't be the least bit surprising if reality far outstripped our understanding of it".

Nevertheless, the sceptical component above only appeals to two propositions that are needed in order to defeat evidential (Rowe-style) arguments from evil. Such arguments include something like the following reasoning:

(1) We cannot see how some evils in our world could be necessary for the realisation of greater goods, or for the avoidance of worse evils.[6]

4 Two points should be noted here. First, Bergmann (2009: 379) often also includes a thesis stating that we should be sceptical about whether the value or disvalue we perceive in complex states of affairs accurately represents their true (dis)value. As I do not use such a thesis in this paper, I have not included it. Second, in accordance with Bergmann, the sceptical component is often construed as the sweeping thesis that our grasp of the range of goods and evils (and the necessary conditions for their realization) is severely limited; this is the perspective adopted in this paper. However, it is not always construed in this way; as an alternative, one might think that it is only God's specific purposes or intentions that often elude us. See, for example, Trakakis & Nagasawa (2004).

5 If there are reasons to suggest, for example, that our known sample of possible goods is or is not representative, we would need to change our mind. However, in the absence of such reasons the sceptical component serves as a rational starting point or as a default position. See Bergmann (2001: 284).

6 A good is greater or outweighs an evil if and only if the positive value of the good in question exceeds the negative value of the evil in question. See Trakakis (2007: 234).

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(2) If we cannot see how some evils in our world could be necessary for the realisation of greater goods, or for the avoidance of worse evils, then these evils are not necessary for the realisation of greater goods, or for the avoidance of worse evils.

Therefore:

(3) There are evils in our world that are not necessary for the realisation of greater goods or for the avoidance of worse evils.

The sort of evils referred to here are so-called gratuitous evils. The above reasoning thus simply consists of the move from there seeming to be gratuitous evils to the judgement that there are gratuitous evils.[7]

Using (3) one can now formulate an argument against the existence of a perfectly good and omnipotent God—let us call it the God of omni-theism—as follows:

(4) If the God of omni-theism exists, there are no evils in our world unless they are necessary for the realisation of greater goods or for the avoidance of worse evils.

Therefore:

(5) The God of omni-theism does not exist.

Although premise (4) is controversial,[8] the sceptical component suggests scepticism against the implication in premise (2). More specifically, given (i) we are unable to make a justified judgement on whether or not there are greater goods outweighing seemingly gratuitous evils and given (ii) we are not able to make a justified judgement about whether or not seemingly gratuitous evils actually are necessary for the realisation of such possible goods.

Having the sceptical component in common, both sceptical theism and sceptical agnosticism can defeat the above and similar arguments from evil. The real difference between the two is the second theistic and agnostic component. Starting with sceptical theism, the sceptical component is, as already

7 This sort of inference is called a noseeum inference, a term introduced by Stephen Wykstra (1996: 126).

8 See, for example, Van Inwagen (2006) and Sullivan (2013); and for an overview on God and gratuitous evil, see Kraay (2016a, 2016b).

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mentioned, just theism, broadly understood as the belief that there exists at least one god (see Oppy 2018: 5). However, since sceptical theism is developed to object to Rowe-style arguments from evil against the God of omni-theism I will qualify the theistic component as follows:

> *The theistic component*: the belief that only the God of omni-theism exists.

Believers in the God of omni-theism are generally also monotheists. They do not believe that there are other gods beside the omnipotent and morally perfect God they believe in.

Turning to sceptical agnosticism, I follow Graham Oppy (2018) and define agnosticism, or in this case the agnostic component, as the considered attitude of not believing in any gods while also withholding judgement about the existence of at least one of them. Besides not believing in gods, an agnostic would thus either (a) withhold judgement about the existence of one particular god, (b) withhold judgement about the existence of some particular gods or (c) withhold judgement about all gods. As I focus on the God of omni-theism, I will qualify the agnostic component as follows:

> *The agnostic component*: the considered attitude of not believing in any gods while also withholding judgement about the God of omni-theism.[9]

The term 'considered attitude' is important. Oppy (2018: 4), for example, distinguishes agnostics from what he calls innocents. While agnostics have considered the alternatives, innocents have not and thus have not been able to decide between theism, atheism and agnosticism. Young children, for example, may simply have no notion of God or gods and it would therefore make no sense to call them agnostics.

However, the notion of a 'considered attitude' is also vague. We might, for example, distinguish between being an unreflective agnostic and a reflective agnostic. An unreflective agnostic knows the alternatives but has made a decision without reflecting on the evidence whereas a reflective agnostic has to some degree, or even carefully, considered the relevant evidence or arguments for the existence of God or gods and then decided to withhold judgement.

Nevertheless, the main point here is that implicit in the concept of agnosticism is a decision to withhold judgement precisely because agnosticism is a

9 When defining agnosticism, one usually needs to define what qualifies as being a god. However, since my focus here is on the God of omni-theism it is not necessary to deal with that question in this particular paper. Everyone would agree that the God of omni-theism is at least a serious candidate for being a God.

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'considered attitude' about the existence of gods. Moreover, since an agnostic has made a decision, he or she also needs to defend that decision, at least when confronted with, say, an evidential Rowe-style argument from evil. More specifically, since such arguments conclude that God does not exist, one wonders why agnostics reject that conclusion and withhold judgment by remaining (well) agnostic?

Fortunately, the sceptical component, as shown above, gives the agnostic an answer to this question. Moreover, sceptical agnosticism has two major advantages over sceptical theism.

3 Advantages of Sceptical Agnosticism over Sceptical Theism

The first advantage is quite straight-forward but nonetheless often overlooked. Not only does the sceptical component defeat Rowe-style arguments from evil sufficiently similar to that outlined above, it also defeats any a posteriori argument purporting to demonstrate the existence of a good God by appealing to empirical observations of a world that is seemingly good overall. More specifically, if we cannot be certain that the possible goods and possible evils that we know of are representative of *all* possible goods and possible evils, we cannot justifiably say that the goods we see in our world are not necessary for the realisation of worse evils. Sceptical agnostics can thus defeat *a posteriori* arguments based on empirical observations of a good world and sceptical theists simultaneously lose some support for their theism. This is an important conclusion because even though theists might be able to give arguments for the existence of a first cause or even a personal being who created the world, they would now find it difficult to prove that this being is also good. They would have to use a priori arguments such as ontological arguments or perhaps arguments from scriptural authority to show that there is a perfectly good God, and such arguments are quite controversial in the first place.

The second advantage is arguably even more pressing for the theist. With very few exceptions, most objections against sceptical theism purport to show that the view entails, or suggests, forms of scepticism that one would not want to endorse or be committed to.[10] Arguably the worst kind of such scepticism would be global scepticism.

10 There are exceptions. Michael Tooley (1991: 114–115), for, example, argues that since we to this day still have not discovered any new significant goods and evils, we may conclude that we are aware of most, or a representative sample, of the possible goods and evils that there are. For a response, see Bergmann (2001: 288).

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By the term 'global scepticism' I really mean full-blown scepticism—scepticism about knowledge of the external world, about our capacity of intuition being truth-conducive, about our moral judgements and about inductive reasoning, etc.

It may sound odd to argue that the sceptical component leads to global scepticism. After all, the sceptical component suggests scepticism about a specific domain, namely the realm of values, and not about, say, the external material world or inductive reasoning about small and middle-size physical objects. However, advocates of this sort of argument do not suggest that the sceptical component in itself necessarily leads to global scepticism. Rather, it is the sceptical component in combination with theism—sceptical theism—that does. Ian Wilks (2009: 73), for example, argues that even if we had astronomical evidence suggesting that God did not create this world in which the sun orbits earth a sceptical theist must accept that "[t]here may be so much astronomical evidence suggesting otherwise because of an unknown strategy involved in creating the world in such a way that it is orbited by the sun". Such a strategy would presumably involve the realisation of a greater good, and since we have no reason to believe that the goods, we know are representative of the goods there are we are in the dark about the reality of such a possible divine strategy.

Moreover, Bruce Russell (1996: 197) argues that God might deceive us for the sake of a greater good, and to deny such deception is to deny sceptical theism itself. He writes that "[i]f it is not reasonable to believe that God deceives us, for some reason beyond our ken, when he created the universe, it is not reasonable to believe that there is some reason beyond our ken which, if God exists, would justify him in allowing the suffering we see." In the same vein, Stephen Law (2015: 289) asks: "how do we know that God doesn't have good reason to create a false impression of an external world, or good reason to create the false impression that the universe and myself are more than 5 min old?"

Law (2015: 289–290) explains why sceptical theism leads to global scepticism by first presenting the following amusing story about Olly and his reality projector:

> Suppose I see what appears to be an orange on the table in front of me. Let's assume I'm thereby prima facie justified, and indeed can be considered commonsensically to know, that there's an orange there. But suppose I then discover the following. Someone—call him Olly—possesses a holographic projector capable of producing entirely convincing-looking visual appearances onto the table in front of me. Now suppose the probability that Olly is using his projector is inscrutable to me. Suppose, for example, that I learn Olly has an urn of balls. Prior to my observing the

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> table, Olly selected a ball at random from this urn. If the ball was black, Olly projected an entirely convincing-looking holographic image of an orange onto the table. If Olly selected a non-black ball, he placed a real orange on the table. I have no clue concerning what proportion of balls in Olly's urn are black. For all I know, all the balls are black, none are black, 50% are black, etc. I can't reasonably assign any probability to any of these hypotheses. Thus, I remain in the dark about whether Olly placed a real orange, rather than a holographic image of an orange, on the table.

The fictional character Olly with his reality projector is meant to represent God with his attribute of omnipotence. Moreover, just as we have no clue whether or not Olly picks a black or non-black ball a sceptical theist has no clue whether or not there is a possible good figuring in a reason God might have for arranging an Olly-style projection of our living reality.

Note that not only is the kind of scepticism—global scepticism—entailed by sceptical theism very severe. It is only a problem if you believe in God. The point here is that while there may be answers to the objection (there might, for example, be a disanalogy between the story about Olly and God) sceptical agnosticism does not even have to deal with the objection. Moreover, since most people would not like to commit to such a severe scepticism as global scepticism, sceptical agnosticism here has an important advantage over sceptical theism.

4 Objections

There are of course potential objections. First, however, I want to stress the modesty of the claim with respect to the first advantage above. Only arguments that appeal to empirical observations of a seemingly good world are addressed and defeated by the sceptical component. That is to say, one might—as stated above—use other arguments to show that there is a good or even perfectly good God.

Nevertheless, a sceptical theist might argue that theism has an advantage of its own when considered in conjunction with the sceptical component—an advantage with respect to answering another frequently mentioned objection, namely that the sceptical component leads to moral scepticism or to what Mark Piper (2007: 72) calls "moral aporia." According to such aporia, when we are in a situation where we can relieve someone's suffering we are presented with the alternative of relieving the suffering if it would lead to goodness being best served or refraining from relieving the suffering if it would lead to goodness

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being best served. However, if we endorse the sceptical component, we cannot assign a probability value to either of the two options. It may be argued that a worldview-related advantage for theists here is that theists can base their moral decisions on divine commandments.[11] In other words, they do not have to make inductions from a perhaps unrepresentative sample of known goods and evils. Unfortunately, the objection from global scepticism seems to slip in through the back door. The question now is why sceptical theists should trust God's supposed commandments at all. If God exists, perhaps there is a greater good involved in giving false commandments to theists. Moreover, given the scepticism sceptical theists endorse, they are completely in the dark about how probable or improbable it is that there is such a greater good.[12]

Nevertheless, sceptical theists might instead try to argue that sceptical theists and sceptical agnostics are at least equally at a disadvantage. With respect to the second advantage discussed above, theists could object by claiming that since sceptical agnostics do not deny the existence of God, they too must accept global scepticism. More specifically, the claim would be that sceptical agnostics withhold judgement about God's existence and by virtue of the sceptical component they should not be surprised if God happens to exist as well as deceive them.

However, I do not think this argument is a tough bullet to bite. If we compare the following two alternatives, it is quite clear that *the sceptical agnostic's option* does not sting as much as does the *sceptical theist's option*:

> *The sceptical agnostic's option*: withhold judgement about God's existence, and if God exists do not be surprised if we are deceived by Him.
>
> *The sceptical theist's option:* believe that God exists and do not be surprised if we are deceived by Him.

Some might argue that it would be even better (more of an advantage) to endorse sceptical atheism. If we deny the existence of God and commit to the sceptical component, then global scepticism is completely off the table. However, the problem is that the sceptical component still undermines one of the strongest arguments for atheism, namely the argument from evil.[13] That

11 See, for example, Bergmann and Rea (2005: 244–245).

12 See, for example, Wielenberg (2010) and Law (2014).

13 According to a recent empirical study on which of the most usual arguments philosophers think are the most forceful, the argument from evil got the highest rating. See De Cruz

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is to say, even if sceptical atheism is an option, without Rowe-style arguments from evil the evidential support for agnosticism might be stronger than the support for atheism.

Finally, even if one agrees with the above assessment, one might consider it somewhat unfair to compare sceptical agnosticism to sceptical theism. Agnosticism is not a worldview and thus has nothing substantial to reconcile with the sceptical component. Conversely, theism can be considered a worldview and accordingly provides answers to several questions that we might consider to be worldview-related. Such questions include "why is there something rather than nothing at all?", Why is there evil and good in the first place?", "Do humans have a free will?", "Is there a life after death?" and "is there a meaning to life and, if so, what is it?" Because it provides answers to such questions, sceptical theism is a more comprehensive view than sceptical agnosticism, so it is unsurprising that some difficulties are encountered when trying to reconcile the theistic worldview with the sceptical component. Moreover, having answers to a range of worldview-related questions might be considered an advantage of its own.[14]

Perhaps then the advantages of sceptical agnosticism are less surprising than one might think. However, since the sceptical component is so often associated with theism and since the second advantage constitutes such a severe problem for sceptical theism, I think they are worth noting. Moreover, sceptical agnostics can of course adopt other secular worldviews that do not include a God or gods; they could (and perhaps theists should) even commit to theism in a non-doxastic manner and thereby enjoy most if not all the benefits of having answers to the worldview-related questions above. That is to say, they could just accept theism in their life or hope that theism is true and that there is life after death and so on.[15] Indeed, the version of agnostic and beliefless religion dubbed 'religious agnosticism' by Garry Gutting (2013) might very well be a rational option if one accepts the sceptical component.[16]

& De Smedt (2016). For an argument for the conclusion that sceptical atheism has a disadvantage compared with sceptical theism, see Jonbäck (2021).

14 I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this issue.

15 Standard requirements for hope include a desire for something to be true and it being epistemically possible that this something is true. See, for example, Palmqvist (Forthcoming).

16 See also, for example, Draper (2008).

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5 Conclusion

To conclude: arguments from evil need to be answered not only by theists, but by agnostics as well. In this paper I answered a Rowe-style argument from evil by appealing to sceptical agnosticism. A sceptical agnostic is not only undecided about the existence of a perfectly good and omnipotent God, but also believes that we cannot make any judgement about whether or not *seemingly* gratuitous evil probably is gratuitous. I argued that such agnosticism has several advantages when compared with sceptical theism. According to the first advantage, the scepticism endorsed by both sceptical agnostics and sceptical theists defeats evidential arguments from evil, but also inductive *a posteriori* arguments that try to show that a good God has created the world. That is to say, all else being equal, endorsing the scepticism that is central to both views makes agnosticism a more rational choice than theism. According to the second advantage, sceptical agnosticism finds it easier to address objections purporting to show that the scepticism inherent to both views implies global scepticism. I also considered a number of objections. In particular, I pointed out that since theism is a worldview, while agnosticism is not, sceptical theism might have the advantage of being a more comprehensive view than sceptical agnosticism. I explained this by stating that theism provides answers to a range of worldview-related questions. In order to have answers to such questions, the sceptical agnostic must either adopt a secular worldview or commit to theism in a non-doxastic manner.

Still, given the severity of in particular the second advantage, sceptical agnosticism seems to be the rational choice. However, I want to end by stressing that I have not made an all things considered assessment here. Thus, this conclusion is only tentative. There might be further reasons not considered in this particular paper that suggests that theism or perhaps atheism is the rational choice for those who endorse the scepticism often associated with sceptical theism. Also, exactly which particular worldview agnostics rationally can commit to, in what way they can commit to it, and whether it is compatible with their scepticism, remains an open question for further investigation.

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