

The Evidential Argument from Goodness

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Imagine someone—call him a “demonist”—who believes that the world is ruled by an all-powerful, all-knowing, and omnimalevolent demon. The Demon, as we shall call him, rejoices in severe and prolonged pain, in heartbreak and destruction, in disloyalty and betrayal, in the suffering of the innocent, in unjust punishment. He has, in short, an intense dislike for anything that you or I might approve of or enjoy. If he had his druthers we’d all be utterly miserable and come to a bad end.

Now I’ve certainly never met a demonist, and I suppose we can agree that demonism would be an extraordinarily implausible view. Still, it is worth asking *why* this is so. What is it that makes demonism so absurd?¹ In part 1 of this paper, I explore and critically evaluate the suggestion that we know the Demon does not exist because there are so many instances of goodness that such a being would have no apparent “reason” for allowing. Throughout, my demonist will be helping himself to the “insights” of theists who defend classical theism against a parallel problem—the so-called evidential problem of evil—by claiming that we just don’t know enough to make the argument go through. In part 2, I draw out two implications. First, that this purely defensive strategy works just as well for demonism as for theism. And second, that if this approach to the argument from evil works as well as some theists believe, then there is no *empirical* basis on which to make any judgment about the moral character of whatever omnipotent, omniscient being may exist.

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1. Demonism and the Evidential Problem of Goodness

So what is it that makes the demonist's claim so absurd? There are two considerations that I want to mention only to set to one side without a lengthy discussion. In the first place, many *theists* would claim that demonism is *logically incoherent*. They would argue that omnipotence and omniscience are logically inconsistent with malevolence. An all-powerful, all-knowing creator would necessarily be perfectly good, loving, and so on. I think is a mistake,² but I won't insist on that point here. Even if demonism is incoherent in just the way that some theists believe, I think it is still useful to ask whether there is any *other* way to show that demonism is false. Specifically, I want to ask whether there is some range of facts about our world, relative to which demonism is sufficiently unlikely to warrant the judgment that the Demon does not exist.

In the second place, it may be said that there is *no evidence* for the existence of any such demon and that this by itself constitutes a sufficient objection to demonism. Some philosophers think that the default position for completely arbitrary hypotheses should be disbelief and not merely agnosticism. If there is no argument *for* demonism, then we don't need an argument *against* it to justify the belief that demonism is false. But even if this is correct, I think it is quite useful to consider the question that I am asking here. Are there straightforward *empirical* grounds for thinking that demonism is *false*? Is there something about the character of the world that makes demonism unlikely enough to *warrant the judgment* that there is no such demon?

At first glance, it might appear that there is. Are there not innumerable "good" states of affairs that no self-respecting demon would put up with if he had a choice? Acts of kindness and compassion, of generosity and courage. Sunsets and symphonies and babies' smiles. And the feeling you have when you wake up just being glad to be alive. Surely the Demon would have prevented such things as these.

It's true, of course, that there is a lot of evil in the world. But evil hasn't triumphed over goodness. As Hume's Cleanthes says in a somewhat different context: "Health is more common than sickness; pleasure than pain; happiness than misery. And for one vexation which we meet with, we attain, upon computation, a hundred enjoyments."³ How could this be so if the world were ruled by an omnipotent, omniscient, omnimalevolent demon?

My imaginary demonist is not without resources for a response, however. He can point out that in our world good and evil are often linked in such a way that evil cannot come about unless the Demon permits certain goods. Evil feeds on goodness.

It is because life is, by and large, a good thing that we regard premature death as an evil. If parents did not find their offspring delightful, they would not be devastated by the death of a child. If no one enjoyed a symphony neither would anyone be disappointed by the business failure of an orchestra. And so on.

Hume's Cleanthes may be right when he points out that health is more common than sickness. But we must remember that sickness and death infect the whole of life. We fear them, we guard against them, and—eventually—we succumb to them. Cleanthes may also be right when he says that pleasure is more common than pain. But as Philo is quick to point out, pain is "infinitely more violent and durable. One hour of it is often able to outweigh a day, a week, a month of our common insipid enjoyments; and how many days, weeks, and months, are passed by several in the most acute torments?"⁴

It must be conceded that the Demon might allow a fair amount of goodness for the sake of the evil he prizes. Still, it may seem that there are many particular *instances* of goodness that no serious demon would be at all *likely* to permit—instances of goodness that, *as far as we can see*, the Demon could prevent without sacrificing anything that is important to him. Consider the following pair of examples.

First, the Bambi case. A lovely fawn is born in a beautiful forest. As it happens, there are few predators in the area, and food is plentiful. The fawn grows up to be the leader of its herd and has a long and healthy life. It can have any female it wants, and it experiences whatever pleasures go to make up an entirely satisfying life for a buck deer. It remains vigorous into old age and dies quickly and painlessly.

Would it be so terrible (from the Demon's point of view) if Bambi had instead been trapped in a forest fire, suffering terrible burns before finally expiring? What conceivable evil would the Demon have had to sacrifice in order to prevent Bambi from having a good life? Is it not likely that the simple pleasures of Bambi's long life are *demonically pointless*?

Second, consider the case of Mother Theresa. In the course of her life, she heals the sick and eases the pain of the dying, bringing hope and inspiration to countless others. Her life is filled with deep satisfaction, and she dies relatively painlessly in old age, believing that she is going to spend eternity with a God who loves her as she has loved others.

Would it be so terrible (from the Demon's point of view) if Mother Theresa had been raped and murdered at the age of five? What conceivable evil would he have had to sacrifice by arranging things in that way? Is it not likely that Mother Theresa's life is *demonically pointless*?

With examples like these in mind, we can present our objection as a three step argument.

1. There are *demonically pointless goods*—goods that the Demon would have no suitable demonic reason for allowing.
2. If the Demon existed, he would have prevented all such goods.
3. Therefore the Demon does not exist.⁵

The first premise of our argument *could* be false, of course. It is *logically possible* that the Demon has suitably malevolent reasons for allowing each and every instance of goodness, including the lives of Bambi and Mother Theresa. But given the number and variety of goods that *appear to us* to be demonically pointless, it is hardly likely that there isn't even one that actually *is* demonically pointless. And since it takes only *one* demonically pointless instance of goodness to make premise 1 true, it is quite likely that it is true.

Presumably no demonist would deny premise 2. Our conclusion is entailed by 1 and 2. So it also seems quite likely that the conclusion of the argument is true. Unless someone can give a better reason for thinking that the Demon does exist than we have just given for thinking that he doesn't, we are fully justified in believing that there is no such demon. Let's call this the *evidential argument from goodness*.

Have we now got the demonist into a corner he can't get out of? I'm not sure that we do. For one thing, the Demon may have reasons of a *general policy* sort for allowing various *classes* of goodness. There may be no *particular* evil that is made possible by the good lives of Bambi and Mother Theresa. But the Demon may nevertheless have had a suitably malevolent reason for allowing a *great many* cases like these.

No reason has been given why the Demon would zap Bambi that isn't an equally strong demonic reason for going after countless other fawns. Bambi was lucky, but would the Demon really get more of what he wants by frequent intervention in the course of nature? From the Demon's point of view, after all, nature may be quite an exquisite system. As Hume's Philo says:

The stronger prey upon the weaker, and keep them in perpetual terror and anxiety. The weaker too, in their turn, often prey upon the stronger, and vex and molest them without relaxation. Consider that innumerable race of insects, which either are bred on the body of each animal, or, flying about, infix their stings in him. These insects have others still less than themselves, which torment them. And thus on each hand, before and behind, above and below, every animal is surrounded with enemies, which incessantly seek his misery and destruction.⁶

I doubt that insects are capable of much in the way of suffering. But Philo's general point about the way in which organisms harass each other is well taken. Even without specific demonic

intervention, nature provides for quite a lot of "misery and destruction." And it is not in the least obvious that there would be less suffering overall if the Demon had a policy of starting forest fires (or something) whenever a promising young fawn is born. What would become of the forests? And what of the predators? Would nature really have been more to the Demon's liking? Would it have been less "red in tooth and claw?"

For cases like that of Mother Theresa, the demonist may want to offer a kind of "free will defense." The Demon, he may say, gives human beings the ability freely to choose between good and evil. *Freely* done evil, we may suppose, has more "value" in *his* eyes than pre-programmed evil. But even an omnipotent demon cannot *make us freely* do evil. The most he can do is to create morally free beings, counting on them to misuse their freedom often enough to satisfy his craving for evil choices on the part of his creatures.

It's a bit of gamble, of course. But history shows that the Demon's gamble has paid off. For every act of deep kindness and generosity, countless others are motivated by pure selfishness. For every genuine act of courage many more are cowardly. For every person who is ennobled by the harsh challenges life has forced upon her, innumerable others are broken by those challenges. Some few persons exercise their faculty of free choice in such a way as to build morally admirable characters. But a vast number of persons do just the opposite—turning themselves into trivial people who care nothing for the deeper challenges that life offers.⁷

At this point, it is tempting to object that the Demon doesn't have to choose between giving everybody free choice all of the time and never giving anybody a choice. For example, he could have warped Mother Theresa's will without interfering with anyone else's freedom. He could have allowed the rest of us to choose without interference while making sure that Mother Theresa never got a chance to choose the path of compassion.

However, this response seems rather to miss the point of the demonist's free will defense. It's not as if there is something *especially* offensive (from the Demon's perspective) about the particular case of Mother Theresa. The reason given for preventing *her* good deeds is just as strong a reason for preventing St. Francis or Gandhi or Martin Luther King or any other doer of good from exercising his freedom of choice. If we still think there is a problem here, then our real complaint must be that the Demon has allowed *far too many* good choices. That from a demonic perspective there is altogether *too much* moral goodness in the world.

Notice how the issue has been shifted. Instead of focusing on *single instances* of goodness, as we started out to do, we are now concentrating on the sheer *amount* of goodness in the world. We are not challenging the claim that the Demon has a malevolent

reason for allowing *some* goodness—or even that he has a malevolent reason for not putting the brakes on Mother Theresa. Our claim is rather that there are *more* good states of affairs than a serious demon could find reason to allow.

But the demonist has a comeback to this complaint as well. *For all we know*, he may say, the Demon *has* prevented quite a lot of moral goodness. How do we know that he hasn't prevented exactly the correct amount? That he hasn't prevented enough goodness to ensure a suitably miserable world history?

If we are going to win our debate with the demonist, we will need to come up with an answer to this obvious question. After all, *we* have given an *argument* against demonism, and it is the soundness of *our* argument that is presently at issue. We have claimed that there is *too much* goodness in the world. Or at least that it is *highly likely* that there is too much. Are we entitled to make this claim? If we can't defend it by appealing to particular examples of demonically pointless goodness, how can we defend it?

But is it really so clear that we cannot legitimately appeal to particular examples? We got into trouble because we said the Demon would have eliminated the good lives of Bambi and Mother Theresa, but we were not willing to say that the Demon would have eliminated *all* good lives. But perhaps we should have argued in a slightly different way. Perhaps we should have claimed that the Demon would have eliminated *all* cases of goodness that *meet or surpass* a certain *level* of goodness—the level, say, that is attained by Bambi and Mother Theresa. And why do we think that? Well, *we simply don't see any reason* (not even a reason of the general policy sort) why the Demon would need to allow *any* instances of goodness at *that* level.

If this is our argument, two replies are available to the demonist. In the first place, he can point out that *we also* don't see any reason why the Demon would have allowed instances of goodness *below* the levels of Bambi and Mother Theresa. Consider, for example, a life that is *almost* as long and compassionate as that of Mother Theresa. (Presumably there are such lives.) Do we really see any reason why the Demon would have allowed that much goodness but no more? Doesn't the logic of the critic's argument force him down a slippery slope with nowhere to stop short of a world in which there is no goodness at all?⁸

In the second place, the demonist can be expected to insist that our inability to see what the Demon's reasons are has no tendency to show that he doesn't have any. Why think that *we* would be able to figure out what the Demon's reasons for allowing the most striking instances of goodness might be?⁹ After all, the Demon (unlike us) is omniscient. He knows all the complicated interconnections of events. He knows what would have happened if he had adopted our recommendations. For

instance, he may know that someone else would have done *even more good* if he had eliminated Mother Theresa and Gandhi and the rest. *For all we know*, then, the Demon may have had perfectly suitable reasons for allowing them to do their thing.

Ah, but in that case, you may say, the Demon could simply have eliminated one further doer of goodness. The trouble with this reply is that we are not in a position to say who would have done what if the Demon had eliminated that anonymous doer of goodness. Given the interconnections of events, and the rippling effects of small changes in history, we can be sure that lots of things would have been different. Different people would have been born, they would have faced different situations, and so on. How would they have responded to those situations? Only the Demon knows. Consequently, *we* are in no position to deny that there would have been even more goodness in the world if the Demon had changed his policies in the ways we have suggested. The proper thing for *us* to do is simply to *withhold judgment*.

Or is it? It's true that there could be unknown demonic reasons for allowing various striking instances of goodness, but it is *at least as likely* that there are unknown demonic reasons for *not* allowing them. Perhaps these parallel possibilities simply cancel each other out, leaving us where we started, with the balance of probability leaning heavily against demonism.¹⁰

The logical situation can be described as follows. For some class of strikingly good states of affairs, *G*, we have been asking why the Demon would allow *G*. The demonist has made a great deal of the fact that *we* can see no greater good the Demon prevents or evil that he achieves by allowing *G*. *For all we know*, the unknown bad-making properties of allowing *G* are sufficiently weighty to counterbalance the good-making properties (whether known or unknown) of allowing *G*.

Fair enough. Allowing *G* may indeed have *unknown bad-making characteristics*. But it may *also* have *unknown good-making characteristics*. The possibility of unknown good-making characteristics thus *cancel out* the possibility of unknown bad-making characteristics, leaving us right where we started, with the *known* bad-making characteristics of allowing *G* clearly outweighing the *known* good-making characteristics of allowing *G*.

Has the demonist finally been refuted? I doubt it. It's true in a way that the two possibilities cancel each other out. It's also doubtless true that (for many values of *G*) the *known* good-making properties of allowing *G* outweigh the *known* bad-making properties of allowing it. So *if one had* to make a judgment, one would have to say that allowing *G* is demonically pointless. *But do we have enough to go on to make a judgment?*

I think the demonist can plausibly argue that we do not. The reason is that we have no idea either *how many* unknown good-

making and bad-making properties there are or how *important* such properties are. Nor do we have any idea whether the *known* good-making and bad-making properties are at all likely to be a representative sample of the whole class of such properties. Consequently, we have not been given a sufficient basis on which to make a definite judgment one way or the other about whether an omniscient being would see that the good-making properties of allowing *G* outweigh its bad-making properties.

The following analogy will help to make this point clear. Imagine a scale with a ten pound weight on the left side and a five pound weight on the right. Soon other weights will be placed on the scale, some on one side and some on the other. How many additional weights will be distributed, how heavy they are, and on which side of the scale each will be placed is unknown. The question is: Which way will the scale tip after those additional weights have been placed on it? And the point is that we haven't been given enough information to answer that question. It's true that at present the scale tips to the left. It's also true that the possibility that enough weight will be added to the right side to tip the scale that way is canceled out by the possibility that enough additional weight will be placed on the left side to tip it even farther in that direction. But without more information than this, it would be foolish to place a bet, much less form a belief about what is going to happen.

Returning to the case we are interested in, it seems that the size and configuration of the "space" of unknown good-making and bad-making properties of allowing *G* is completely unknown. For all we know, it may be very large, and the properties may be quite significant. There is therefore no reason to suppose that the *known* good-making and bad-making properties constitute an adequate basis for making a judgment about what the Demon could reasonably be expected to do about *G*.

An important detail is missing from my sketch of the imaginary demonist. I haven't said what it would mean for my demonist to put his beliefs into practice. His worldview is certainly a depressing one, but as far as my characterization goes, the demonist may be as morally upright as you please. In spite of his belief in the Demon and in spite of his skepticism about the consequences of his actions for the world as a whole, he may be as compassionate as Mother Theresa and as committed to fighting injustice as Martin Luther King. Some people shake their fists at God. Perhaps my demonist shakes his fist at the Demon. Let us suppose that he does.

I anticipate the following objection. Shouldn't the demonist's repeated use of the phrase, "for all we know," turn him into a kind of *moral skeptic*? Suppose he is a courageous person who is about to attempt a very dangerous mission. He plans to assas-

inate Hitler, believing that this will end the Holocaust and bring the war to a speedy conclusion. Suddenly he is overcome by doubts. He doesn't know whether this will actually make *the world as a whole* better or worse. He knows only that if he succeeds in pulling it off, the Demon has a suitably demonic reason for allowing him to do so. From the Demon's point of view, after all, the assassination of Hitler may be just what is needed to bring about even greater evils or to prevent great goods that would not otherwise come into existence. Then again, maybe not. So what's a morally decent demonist to do? No matter what he does, he *may* be making things worse rather than better overall.

Or—to take another example¹¹—suppose that the demonist has discovered a cure for cancer. Should he reveal it to the world? Maybe so. Then again, maybe not. For all he knows, the world will be made worse overall by the elimination of cancer. Perhaps there is a potential Hitler out there who has bone cancer. Without the "cure," he will surely die. With it, he will go on to produce untold misery for millions. Won't my skeptical demonist find himself drowning in a sea of moral skepticism?

I'm not overly impressed by this line of argument. In itself, demonism provides no reason for thinking of any particular course of action either that it will make *the world as a whole* worse or that it will make *the world as a whole* better. All that the demonist is committed to is that the Demon has a suitably demonic reason for *allowing* him to do whatever he ends up deciding to do. By itself, this gives him no reason for hesitating to do what he sees as his duty.

After he has acted, the demonist may be tempted to reason as follows. "The Demon wouldn't have allowed this unless it was pleasing to him, in which case it wasn't the best thing to do, after all." But this would be a mistake. As we have seen, the Demon's reasons *may* be of the *general policy* sort. He may allow a particular action—not because he wants it done—but because it belongs to a general class of actions (those that are *freely* done, perhaps) such that he needs to allow all or most of the actions in that class. The Demon may wish that the demonist hadn't done *this* particular action—perhaps it is an action that puts a temporary obstacle in his path. But he may also see that the consequences of preventing all such actions would be demonically undesirable.

However, the really fundamental problem with the suggestion that moral skepticism falls out of our defense of demonism is this. The critic seems to suppose that our moral decisions must at least partially be based on a judgment about what will make *the world as a whole* better. But this is very implausible. Everything we do has unintended consequences, most of them completely unknown to us. If we did need to make a judgment about the consequences for the world as a whole in order to

decide what to do, we would have to be skeptical about *every* proposed course of action

Here, perhaps, we can find a more appropriate use for the idea that unknown positive and negative possibilities for *the world as a whole* simply cancel each other out, leaving us with what we *know*. That doesn't entitle us to make a judgment about the consequences for the world as a whole, but we don't have to make a judgment about that in order to decide what to do. We should of course be as well informed as is appropriate to the seriousness of the decision we are about to make. But when we have done our best, we must decide on the basis of what we know—not on the basis of what (for all we know) *might or might not* be the case. With this in mind, I think the morally committed demonist can go right ahead and assassinate Hitler, or publicize his cure for cancer, without worrying overmuch about what only the Demon can know.

2. "Skeptical Theism" and the Evidential Problem of Evil

The reader might or might not be persuaded by the various defenses of demonism that I have offered. But she will not fail to notice they have been deliberately constructed in such a way as to parallel some of the currently fashionable attempts to rebut the evidential argument from evil. Many (though not all) philosophical theists¹² adopt a purely defensive posture in response to the problem of evil. They don't claim to know why God allows evil. But given our cognitive limitations, they say, there is no reason why we should be aware of God's reasons for allowing evil. Consequently, the fact that *we* (limited as we are) can see no reason for various evils provides no warrant for asserting that God doesn't have perfectly good reasons.

Some of these "skeptical theists,"¹³ as I shall call them, construct possible "stories" about God's reasons for allowing evil—stories that *for all we know* might be true.¹⁴ They don't claim to be able to show that any of them are true, but they insist that the burden of proof is on the other side. As long as these stories have not been ruled out, God may, *for all we know*, have perfectly acceptable reasons for allowing evil.

What I am suggesting here is that *if* this purely defensive strategy works for theism, then it works no less well for demonism. My imaginary demonist can play exactly the same game, producing exactly the same standoff. For reasons that I shall spell out in a moment, I think that skeptical theists should be made rather uncomfortable by this result.

Just how close is the parallel? When I've tried this argument out on various people, some have suggested the following disanalogy between the case of God and that of the Demon. The Demon, they say, would surely want to destroy everything good. Therefore, he would simply annihilate everything, including

himself. Obviously, he hasn't done that. So—assuming that it's good that something exists—we have, after all, a sound argument from goodness against Demonism.

The objection is based on a misunderstanding. As I defined it out the outset, "demonism" does not entail that the Demon wants to destroy everything that is "good" in *any* way. It claims rather that the Demon is *omnimalevolent*—that he rejoices in suffering and in moral evil.

Still, this might be thought to get the demonist into trouble in another way. If the Demon is truly *omnimalevolent*, must he not want to inflict suffering on *himself*? But if the suffering of others is what makes him happy, wouldn't he need to go easy on *them* if *he* wants to be miserable? In this way, it might seem that *omnimalevolence* is a completely incoherent concept. No one could be malevolent toward *everyone*.

There are many escape routes from this argument. We might agree that the Demon does want to suffer—that he is a true masochist. But who's to say that he doesn't suffer? Perhaps from the frustration he experiences at the fact that he can't inflict suffering on others without allowing a significant amount of happiness. Or perhaps he has the means to inflict suffering *directly* on himself—by becoming incarnate in the person of a martyr, for example. The possibilities are endless.

Alternatively, the demonist might stipulate that the "omni" in *omnimalevolence* ranges exclusively over *other* persons. Even if the Demon delights only in the pain of *others*, he can still be malevolent enough for the purposes of the point I want to make here. The argument from goodness (against a Demon who wishes to make others suffer) is once again very much on a par with the argument from evil. And if the latter argument fails due to our cognitive limitations, then so does the former one.

Some theists may be inclined to offer a quite different reason for thinking that the case of the Demon is different. Skeptical theists in particular often connect their belief in God with their confidence in the reliability of their own cognitive faculties. Alvin Plantinga, for example, has argued that naturalistic evolution (evolution without God) constitutes an undefeatable "defeater" for the reliability of our cognitive faculties.¹⁵ Undoubtedly Plantinga would say the same of my demonist hypothesis. If the Demon exists, then for all we know, he is a Deceiver and our faculties are completely untrustworthy.

Once again, however, the demonist has a comeback. For one thing, he may say, we *are* deceived about many things—including some of the most important matters. If demonism is true, then many people build their lives around a supposedly loving God who does not exist. Others mistakenly believe that the universe is uncreated. Perhaps the Demon is delighted by these errors. But while he is malevolent enough to enjoy our

cognitive errors, he need not be a *Systematic Deceiver*. Although he laughs at our mistakes, he may not want us to be deceived about *everything*. Indeed, the value (from the Demon's perspective) of a father's anguish over the death of a child may depend partly on its *seriousness*, which in turn depends on the *reality* of that child and its horrible death. It's quite plausible to suppose that the Demon wants us to see real suffering in a real world—suffering that afflicts real people who know at least in part what is happening to them. Consequently, there is little reason to think that the demonist hypothesis significantly raises the probability of *systematic* deception.

At the same time, it is far from clear that *skeptical* theism¹⁶ significantly raises the probability of reliable faculties. The skeptical theist's God has "good reasons" not only for allowing *all* the suffering in the world but also for allowing *all* the considerable quantity of ignorance, error, and deception that actually exists. Are we really so sure that the skeptical theist's God could not also have reasons for deceiving us about everything? If he did have such reasons, we'd certainly be unlikely to know of them!

It seems, then, that the alleged epistemological advantages of *skeptical* theism over demonism are largely imaginary, in which case there is no reason why the demonist cannot deal with the problem of goodness in just the way that the skeptical theist deals with the problem of evil.

Even if I am wrong about this, it doesn't affect the point I am making about the evidential argument from goodness. The fact—if it is a fact—that systematic deception is more likely on demonism than on theism does not constitute an adequate defense of *the evidential argument from goodness* against the "skeptical demonist's" objections. Even if our confidence in our own cognitive faculties prevents us from taking demonism seriously, the happy lives of Bambi and Mother Theresa have nothing to do with securing this result. The amount and variety of goodness in the world—the sunsets and symphonies and babies' smiles—provides no more warrant for rejecting demonism than the amount and variety of misery provides for rejecting classical theism.

I have suggested that this result ought to make skeptical theists rather uneasy. But why? Why can't they simply say that neither the evidential argument from evil nor the evidential argument from goodness is at all successful?

That is probably the right thing for the skeptical theist to say. Still, we have to wonder whether his strategy for defeating these arguments doesn't work entirely *too* well—so well that it deprives us of any possible justification for believing anything whatever about God's moral character. We can make up as many possible stories about God's reasons for allowing evil as we like—stories that, *for all we know, might* be true. But if we

have no reason to think that any of them *are* true, why should we believe that God is in fact good rather than evil?

At this point, many people will find themselves agreeing with Hume's Cleanthes, when he responds to Demea's proposed theodicy by demanding *evidence*:

No! replied Cleanthes, No! These arbitrary suppositions can never be admitted ... Whence can any cause be known but from its known effects? Whence can any hypothesis be proved but from the apparent phenomena? To establish one hypothesis upon another, is building entirely in the air; and the utmost we ever attain, by these conjectures and fictions, is to ascertain the bare possibility of our opinion; but never can we, upon such terms, establish its reality.¹⁷

If we don't have enough to go on to say how good the universe is, why should we believe that its creator is wholly good? How are we to decide about the creator's moral character *except* by looking around the world he has produced and forming some judgment about it? On what *other* basis are we entitled to embrace any hypothesis at all about God's moral character?

If we stick to the data provided by our experience of the world, it seems that we are entitled to conclude *neither* that God is perfectly good *nor* that he is perfectly evil. The mixture of good and evil, of pleasure and pain, of happiness and misery that we find in the world is an insufficient basis for drawing either of those conclusions. As Hume's Philo puts it, "mixed phenomena can never prove unmixed attributes."

Indeed, on the ground marked out by skeptical theists, it seems that we cannot justify *any* confident judgment about God's moral character by appealing to the mixture of good and evil that we find in the world. Demonists cannot prove their case by appealing to evil. Theists cannot prove theirs by appealing to goodness. And neither camp can prove that its opponent is mistaken by appealing to the *mixture*. The issue simply cannot be settled on straightforward empirical grounds.¹⁸

If this is right, then the really fundamental issue is not whether evil and suffering disprove theism, but whether there is *any* basis at all on which a reasonable person can believe God (if he exists) is wholly good.¹⁹ Whether skeptical theists can respond successfully to this challenge is a question for another occasion.²⁰

Notes

¹ For another discussion of demonism as it relates to the problem of evil, see Steven M. Cahn, "Cacodaemony," *Analysis* 37 (Jan. 1977): 69–73. Cahn's target is somewhat different from mine, however. Whereas he had Hick's theodicy in his sights, I am concerned with more recent moves that have been made by theists to defuse the

evidential argument from evil without constructing a theodicy.

² Indeed, I believe it can be argued that maximal power logically entails the ability to make evil choices. See Wes Morriston, "Omnipotence and Essential Goodness: Are they compatible?" *Religious Studies* 37 (June 2001): 143–60, and Wes Morriston, "Omnipotence and the Anselmian God" *Philo* 4, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2001): 7–20.

³ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, part 10.

⁴ *Ibid.* There is one salient instance in which pleasure "reaches ecstasy and rapture." But Philo complains that it fails to "continue for any time at its highest pitch and altitude." "The spirits evaporate," he says, "the nerves relax, the fabric is disordered, and the enjoyment quickly degenerates into fatigue and uneasiness."

⁵ Compare Rowe's version of evidential argument from evil in William L. Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335–41.

⁶ *Op. cit.*

⁷ The free will defense of demonism allows for the possibility of "lucky exceptions" like that of Mother Theresa. If the critic insists that this would be unacceptable to the Demon, the demonist may appeal to the possibility of an afterlife in which such exceptions are dealt with. Perhaps the Demon isn't through with Mother Theresa, and a few millennia in hell will succeed in warping her character, "defeating" the goodness in her earthly life, and turning her into something more to the Demon's liking. For theistic analogues of this move, see John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 2nd edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1978). See also Marilyn Adams, "Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God," *The Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 63 (1989): 297–310. Both would agree that God's love for individual persons is such that he must ensure that evil is engulfed (or even defeated) in the context of the lives of those persons. Both would also agree that for many persons this does not happen during the course of their earthly lives. Consequently, they think it happens only in the life to come.

⁸ For an analogous line of argument, see Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, 327–8.

⁹ For a somewhat analogous line of argument, see especially Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 73–94.

¹⁰ The inspiration for this suggestion came from Michael Tooley, "An Evidential Argument from Evil: The Inductive Step," presented at the 76th annual meeting of the *American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division* (Seattle, Washington, March 27–31, 2002). Tooley is not of course responsible for my development and application of his idea.

¹¹ I owe these examples, as well as the general line of thought, to Michael Tooley.

¹² For some representative statements of this view, see the following articles: William P. Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," *Philosophical Perspectives: Philosophy of Religion* 5 (1991): 29–68; Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil," *Archivio di filosofia* 56 (1988): 557–84; Peter van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives: Philosophy of Religion* 5 (1991): 135–65; Wykstra, *op. cit.*

¹³ Of course, none of these philosophers are *epistemological* skeptics. But they do think there are special reasons for being skeptical about our capacity to know what God is up to. It is *solely* for this reason that I have chosen to refer to them as "skeptical theists." (It is also worth noting that these philosophers also tend not to put much stock in the classical arguments for the existence of God.)

¹⁴ See especially the articles by van Inwagen and Alston cited in note 11. Plantinga's much discussed version of the free will defense is often viewed in this light as well—as a reconciling explanation that, for all we know, *might* be true.

¹⁵ See Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 216–37, and Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 227–40.

¹⁶ By "skeptical theism," I just mean theism that deals with the problem of evil by arguing that, for all we know, God might have good reasons for allowing evil.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*

¹⁸ A small qualification is necessary here. If Richard Swinburne is right, there is an *indirect* empirical case for saying God is perfectly good. The case is indirect, because the empirical part of Swinburne's argument is supposed to establish only that the most likely explanation of various facts about the world entails the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and "perfectly free" being. It takes a bit of conceptual analysis, together with various assumptions about the nature of moral truth, to draw out the further implication that such a being would necessarily be perfectly good. The evaluation of this argument of Swinburne's is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁹ There is also, of course, the question whether there is any basis for supposing that there is an omnipotent, omniscient being.

²⁰ Some skeptical theists claim that there are one or more sound arguments for the existence of God. But amongst these only Plantinga's version of the ontological argument has a conclusion which entails the existence of a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good (see Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974], chapter 10). And the key premise of this argument (that a Greatest Possible Being is possible in the "broadly logical" sense) is not obviously true. At most Plantinga's argument establishes that such a being is *either possible or impossible* (see John Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982], 55–63).

When push comes to shove, of course, many skeptical theists will join Plantinga in claiming that their most fundamental beliefs about God simply *do not require evidence or argument*—that they are "*properly basic*." For Plantinga's most recent defense of this view, see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, *op. cit.* For an excellent critique of Plantinga's view, see Keith M. Parsons, "Reformed Epistemology: An Atheist Perspective" in *God Matters*, ed. Raymond Martin and Christopher Bernard (New York: Longman, 2002), 232–43.