A fundamental problem for skeptical theism

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Abstract: The argument from divine hiddenness says that since probably there is pointless divine hiding, then probably God does not exist. Francis Jonbäck argues that a good response to this argument is to deny that one can assign a probability value to the claim that there is pointless divine hiding. I argue in this article the opposite, and that we should instead choose a theodicy response.

Introduction

Skeptical theism is acknowledged by many as a good response to the problem of evil and the argument from divine hiddenness.[1] Simply put, the problem of evil is that we would expect the world to be better given that there is a good and omnipotent God, while the argument from divine hiddenness is that we would expect to have more evidence of the existence of God given that there is a good and omnipotent God. Skeptical theism responds to these arguments by challenging the idea of what we have reason to expect. God may have good reasons for allowing evil or hiding which we have no reason to think that we should know, and thus these arguments are not good arguments against the existence of God, according to skeptical theism.

In a recent clearly written and well structured book, Francis Jonbäck presents a defense of what he calls value agnosticism as a response to the argument from divine hiddenness.[2] Value agnosticism says that we are not is a position to estimate how probable or not it is that God has good reasons for hiding. In this article, I will argue that there is a critique which Jonbäck hardly discusses, but which is devastating to the whole project of skeptical theism. This critique is a rejection of the basic claim of skeptical theism that we have no reason to believe that we know all, or even a representative sample, of the possible goods and possible evils that there are.

This claim is central also in the work of Michael Bergmann.[3] Jonbäck's value agnosticism is very similar to Michael Bergmann's version of skeptical theism, but Jonbäck uses another name for the view, in order to avoid people thinking that one has to be a theist in order to adopt the skepticism of skeptical theism, and so I will also use the term "value agnosticism" in this article.[4] I will start by presenting Jonbäck's case before discussing what I think is a fundamental problem for his case: namely, that it is based on the agnostic-value thesis instead of the principle of credulity (to be presented below). I will end by presenting an alternative approach.

Jonbäck's case for value agnosticism (skeptical theism)

Jonbäck discusses a version of the argument from divine hiddenness, formulated as follows:

1) There are cases of divine hiding that probably do not constitute a necessary condition for a good that would render the positive value greater overall, or for the avoidance of an evil that would render the negative value worse overall.
2) If God exists, there are no cases of divine hiding unless they constitute a necessary condition for a good that would render the positive value greater overall, or for the avoidance of an evil that would render the negative value worse overall.
Therefore:
3) Probably, God does not exist.[5]

More simply put: If God exists, there is no pointless divine hiding. Probably there is pointless divine hiding, so probably, God does not exist. Against this argument, Jonbäck discusses two responses – a theodicy response[6] and the response of value agnosticism. He finds that the theodicy response fails, whereas the response of value agnosticism succeeds. The response of value agnosticism is as follows:

> We are not in a position justifiably to assign probability values to propositions stating that cases of divine hiding do not constitute a necessary condition for a good that would render the positive value greater overall, or for the avoidance of an evil that would render the negative value worse overall.[7]

In other words, according to Jonbäck, premise one in the argument from divine hiddenness is wrong, since it assigns a probability value to a proposition which one is not justified in assigning probability values to. Jonbäck discusses different counterarguments to this response and finds that none of them is successful.[8] I will now argue that there is a critique, which he hardly discusses, but which is a fundamental problem for value agnosticism.

A fundamental problem for value agnosticism

Jonbäck finds the following principle very plausible: "We should be agnostic about whether we know all, or even a representative sample, of the possible goods and possible evils that there are."[9] He calls the principle *the agnostic-value thesis*. This principle is his reason for accepting the value-agnostic response that we cannot justifiably assign probability values to propositions stating that there probably is or probably is not pointless divine hiding.

There is a principle which contradicts the agnostic-value thesis, and that is the principle of credulity, which says that we should believe that things are as they appear unless we have reasons not to.[10] Richard Swinburne uses this argument to criticize the skeptical theism of Stephen J. Wykstra.[11] My critique will be similar, but applied especially to Jonbäck's formulations and extended by a discussion of how we assign probability values to propositions. I will start by explaining what the principle of credulity says, why it is a good principle, and how it contradicts the agnostic-value thesis.

The principle of credulity says that, unless we have reasons not to, we should believe that things are as they appear to our mind to be. A good reason for accepting the principle of credulity is that if one should instead only believe what one has good reason to believe, one must say that about every reason, and then one will never believe anything, but rather be a global agnostic.[12] While the agnostic-value thesis says we have *no reason* to believe that we know a representative sample of goods and evils, the principle of credulity contradicts this by *being* such a reason, saying that we should believe that things are as they appear unless we have reasons not to.[13]

The principle of credulity says we should believe that things are as they appear—but does it appear to be the case that we know the possible goods and evils that there are? It is always possible that there are things we do not know, and sometimes we have good reason to think that there is something we do not know. When it comes to unknown goods and evils, it is of course possible that there are many types of goods and evils that we do not know. But it is also possible that there are not, so we should believe that things are as they appear until we have reason to change our mind.

It matters here how coarse-grained we make the types of goods and evils. Is just "disease" a type of evil, or "diseases caused by bacteria", or "diseases caused by specific bacteria"? The more fine-grained the types of evils are, the more likely there are to be unknown types. A well-willing interpretation of Jonbäck is that he thinks in terms of very fine-grained types of goods and evils, so that God could be allowing many evils now in order to prevent, for example, a future unknown bacterially caused disease. But again: as long as it might well *not* be the case that God allows evils in order to prevent a future unknown bacterially caused disease, we should believe that things are as they appear until we have reason not to—otherwise we will become global agnostics.

What I think of as a fundamental problem for value agnosticism is that it is based on the agnostic-value thesis, whereas a sound epistemology needs to be based on the principle of credulity. Here are two reasons why the principle of credulity should be epistemologically basic: First, we can see by analogy that the agnostic-value thesis leads to global agnosticism. The agnostic-value thesis says that we should be agnostic about knowing all or even a representative sample of goods and evils, then concludes from that that we are not justified in assigning probability values to propositions that state that there probably is or probably is not pointless divine hiding. But it seems by analogy that we should say that we should be agnostic about knowing all or a representative sample of the *facts* that there are, and then conclude that we are not justified in assigning probability values to propositions claiming that something is true, since the (epistemic) probability of a proposition depends on what else is true.

The second reason is closely linked to the first and has to do with the question of how we ascribe probability values to propositions. Jonbäck writes that he is talking about epistemic probability, meaning that "we assign a certain probability to a proposition given an evidence base, and the assigned probability reflects our confidence in its truth."[14] But what is the evidence base when we assign any proposition a probability? Is it the evidence we know or all the evidence there is? If it is the evidence we know, that supports the credulity principle, which says that our basis of reasoning is how things appear to be to us. If it is all the evidence there is, we do not know what that is and can never assign probability at all. This is the reasoning of the agnostic-value thesis: that when we do not know all the evidence, we are not justified in ascribing probability to the propositions in question. It seems, then, that ascribing any proposition any epistemic probability at all presupposes the credulity principle over the agnostic-value thesis.

These two closely related reasons for accepting the principle of credulity over the agnostic-value thesis both say that value agnosticism leads to global agnosticism. I said above that this is a critique which Jonbäck hardly discusses. By saying that he *hardly* discusses it, what I mean more precisely is that he discusses an argument that value agnosticism leads to global agnosticism, but not the two arguments I have offered here. I will now look briefly at the argument he does discuss, and how he argues that value agnosticism does not lead to global agnosticism.

The argument from global agnosticism that Jonbäck discusses is as follows:

(1) Surely, theists can justifiably assign probability values to the claim that God has not deceived us about how reality really is.
(2) If value agnosticism is true, then theists cannot justifiably assign any probability value to the claim that God has not deceived us about how reality really is. (That is to say, global agnosticism would follow.)
Therefore: (3) Value agnosticism is false.[15]

The response Jonbäck offers to this argument is a restriction strategy, where he restricts value agnosticism so that, while we must remain agnostic about the possible goods and evils there are, we need not be agnostic about reasons God may have for such a total deception. While this may sound like an ad hoc restriction, Jonbäck argues that it is not ad hoc since common sense supports both the claim that we do not know the possible goods and evils there are and that we are not totally deceived about how reality is.[16]

I think that the problem with this response is not so much that it is ad hoc, but rather that it is question begging. The argument says that value agnosticism implies global agnosticism, including agnosticism about any common-sense opinion, but then it is question begging to use common sense to argue against it.

An alternative solution to the argument from divine hiddenness

Jonbäck concludes that value agnosticism is a successful rebuttal of the argument from divine hiddenness, while the theodicy response fails. My own view is the opposite. I have presented above why I believe the value agnostic response fails, but will briefly sketch a theodicy response to the argument from divine hiddenness.

A "theodicy response" can be understood in different ways. Jonbäck says that a theodicy response must present a good reason for divine hiding that outweighs the evil of divine hiddenness.[17] This seems fair, but it is still ambiguous. Must there be a reason that God has for hiding in every particular case where God seems hidden, or could there be a general and overall good reason that God has for creating an independent world where God seems generally hidden without there being specific goods connected to each event where God seems hidden?

The first option presupposes that if there is a God, he must consider, in case after case, whether or not to hide himself. The second option allows that God could have had a reason for creating a world where God generally seems hidden and cannot show himself clearly. It may seem that the omnipotence of God necessitates that God can always reveal himself in any event, but what option two says is that God may have created a world which is such that God must remain generally hidden in order to achieve God's goal with this world (even if God could at any point give up the overarching goal and reveal himself).

Jonbäck seems to presuppose the first option, since his formulation of the argument from divine hiddenness says that "If God exists, there are no cases of divine hiding unless they constitute a necessary condition for a good that would render the positive value greater overall, or for the avoidance of an evil that would render the negative value worse overall."[18] Note the focus on "no cases", whereas the second option presented above will accept that there are cases of divine

hiddenness where there is no greater good being realized in the particular instance, but nevertheless it was good that God created such a world.

I should add that Jonbäck has even further requirements for what it takes to be a theodicy response. He presents the following theodicy requirement:

> The theodicy requirement: In order for a good to be able to figure in a reason God might have for remaining hidden, (a) the value of the good must outweigh the evil of divine hiding, and (b) the good cannot be such that it, itself, constitutes a sufficient condition for an evil that would render the value worse overall.[19]

While I agree with the general idea expressed in point a, it is not clear what one has to show in order to meet the requirement in point b. This may mean that Jonbäck has something specific in mind when discussing the theodicy response, while I have something different in mind when using the term "theodicy response". Maybe Jonbäck would not disagree with my kind of theodicy response. However, I think that he should have discussed the best kind of theodicy response when discussing the argument from divine hiddenness, which I believe is a kind of option two theodicy.

There is no room in this article to present and defend a full theodicy response, but I have done so in other texts.[20] Very briefly, I argue that God wanted to create an independent world in order to actualize several different type and token unique values. A type value is a value that can be instantiated at several times and places, e.g. joy. A type value is unique if it has intrinsic properties different from other values, e.g. fun is a type unique value in virtue of having different intrinsic properties than peace, love, etc. A token value is an instantiation of a type value *at a certain time and place*, e.g. the joy of attending the party yesterday at my neighbor's house. Thus, the joy I experience as I write this article is token-unique from my joy yesterday at my neighbor's house.

Examples of type unique values that God actualizes in our universe are genuine independence (that beings, to some extent, influence what happens), self-creating creation (that beings cause their own characteristics over time), the creativity of creation (that new things occur), and surprise (that unexpected things occur). Examples of token unique values God actualizes in our universe are the specific occurrences of good things and every specific person that comes into being in our universe. If one rejects a substance ontology in favor of a relational ontology, one can argue that it is only possible for God to actualize these token unique values in our universe. In other words, the specific persons existing in our universe could only have come into being here. For a defense of such a view, see the book *Structure and Being* by Lorenz Puntel.[21]

The good that outweighs evil is the eternal happiness offered to all by God, and the only possibility for us to experience this happiness was to come into existence in exactly this universe. And this universe is an independent universe where God is hidden. God could have made a less independent universe where the existence of God was more obvious, but it would have been a different and less independent universe actualizing other type and token unique values. While it would have been good for God also to create other universes—and maybe God has—it was also good for God to create this universe. That it was good for God to create this universe is what is needed for a theodicy response to work.

However, it could seem that the argument proves too much. It seems that this theodicy could be used to defend any kind of universe, regardless of how horrible it was, since it actualizes token

unique values. My response to this is double: Firstly, the critique seems to imply (at least) the ethical view that when it comes to bringing someone into existence and allowing the possibility of evil as a necessary means, good should overwhelmingly outweigh the evil and the evil should not be too great. I agree, and think that this double criterion is fulfilled in our universe, but that it would not be in a hell-like universe.

Secondly, it is important that our universe actualizes both unique type and token values. If God just wanted more unique token values, they could have been actualized in a good universe. In our universe, there are both unique type values and unique token values, and some of the unique type values could not have been actualized in a universe where God was in full control. In our universe, type values like independence and surprise are actualized. I cannot see that God could actualize a new kind of type value in an extremely horrible world, even if it would actualize unique token values. But since unique token values are already being actualized in our universe (and probably a better universe as well), God does not have a good reason to create a horrible universe in addition.

This response has a problem with the fact that it may be difficult to draw exact borders between type values. Is a very high degree of independence or surprise another type value than a moderate degree of independence, or not? However, combined with the first response, I believe these considerations are enough to use this theodicy to defend God creating and sustaining our universe, but not a hellish universe.[22]

Conclusion

Facing the problems of evil and divine hiddenness, there are two different main strategies one can follow. The first is to use reason to consider reasons for and against the arguments and to consider their weight in light of other relevant arguments. The second strategy is to be fundamentally skeptical to the ability of reason to consider and assess the arguments.

I have argued in this article that the first strategy is the one that should be followed, while the other strategy leads to great problems. The main problem of the second strategy is that it is based on a principle which has as a key consequence that we should be skeptical to knowing anything at all.

Of course, it is good to be humble and open to the fact that there are probably many things that we do not know that we do not know. Nevertheless, reason is the best tool we have in search for truth. Given a premise of global skepticism, anyone can claim anything without there being a criterion for choosing between different theories. Instead, we should believe the theory which is best justified given what we believe to be true in the present, and at the same time be open for new and better answers in the future.

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[1] Michael Bergmann, "Commonsense Skeptical Theism," in *Reason, Metaphysics, and Mind: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Kelly James Clark and Michael Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). It is also very close to the position of Stephen J. Wykstra, being a typical use of his CORNEA-principle (Stephen J. Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of Appearance," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984)).

[2] Francis Jonbäck, *The God Who Seeks but Seems to Hide* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017).

[3] Bergmann.

[4] Jonbäck, 45.

[5] Ibid., 5.

[6] What is meant by «theodicy response» is discussed below.

[7] Jonbäck, 13.

[8] Ibid., chapter three.

[9] Ibid., 45.The principle is a combination of Michael Bergmann's thesis 1 and 2, in Bergmann, 11-12. I understand possible goods and possible evils to be any good or evil that could be actualized now or later.

[10] Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 20.

[11] Ibid., 25-29.

[12] Ibid., 21.

[13] Note that emphasis is on there being no *reason* at all for believing it, as opposed to there being reason to *know* it for certain.

[14] Jonbäck, 6.

[15] Ibid., 55.

[16] Ibid., 59-60.

[17] Ibid., 15.

[18] Ibid., 5.

[19] Ibid., 15.

[20] Atle Ottesen Søvik, *The Problem of Evil and the Power of God*, Studies in Systematic Theology (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Atle O. Søvik, "Actualizing Unique Type and Token Values as a Solution to the Problem of Evil," *Religions* 9, no. 1 (2018).

[21] Lorenz B. Puntel, *Structure and Being: A Theoretical Framework for a Systematic Philosophy*, trans. Alan White (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).