

The Theist's Defeater: The Problem of Epistemic Evil

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After presenting a compelling case for skepticism, Descartes famously maintained that such extreme doubt can be theologically resolved. (Descartes 1984: 24-43) Since God exists and is not a deceiver, he would not create thinking beings that were systematically deluded about the world around them. This serves to vindicate, to at least some extent, the beliefs of not only the believer, but the non-believer as well: theist and atheist alike have God-guaranteed faculties, even if the atheist doesn't believe as much. Nevertheless, according to Descartes, the theist is in a superior epistemic position. By believing in a divine guarantor of his faculties, the theist has a higher level of knowledge: he has *scientia*, and not mere *cognitio*. (Descartes 1984: 48-9, 101) The theist's privileged state is evidenced by his ability to respond to skeptical hypotheses about dreams and demons and by his ability to tell a story about why his faculties must be reliable. The atheist, on the other hand, is supposedly speechless in the face of skepticism.

In more recent years, Alvin Plantinga claims to have scored a similar point on behalf of the theist, or at least against the atheist. (Plantinga 1993: 194-237, Plantinga 2002) This time, the atheist's problem is not that he is left speechless in the face of evil demons, but that his own naturalistic worldview should undermine his belief that his faculties are reliable. The atheistic naturalist believes, after all, that his faculties developed as a result of natural selection, which implies that his cognitive faculties are built to serve the end of survival, not necessarily of truth. As long as his cognitive

faculties lead him to the occasional meal or mate, and away from the jaws of his natural predators, they have acquitted themselves well by evolutionary standards. The problem is, faculties could clear this bar without being truth-conducive. The faculty that says “the swimming rock is coming to crush me” is likely to have the same result as the faculty that says “the shark is coming to eat me.” In both cases, the believing creature swims quickly away to mate another day. Thus the naturalist’s own story about the development of his faculties leaves it open that those faculties are survival-conducive but not truth conducive. Meanwhile, the theist believes in a God who guarantees that our faculties are truth conducive as well as survival conducive. So, once again, the theist is in a superior epistemic position, this time because his worldview doesn’t introduce defeaters of the sort introduced by naturalism.

Volumes have literally been written evaluating both of these arguments. (Beilby 2002, Doney 1987) There are many questions that confront both of them. Philosophers have long thought that an air of circularity exudes from Descartes’ theological epistemology, and the frequent response to Plantinga is that the survival-conducive faculties should be expected to be truth-conducive as well. (Van Cleve 2002), (Fodor 2002), (Ramsey 2002) and (Alston 2002) I have little to say about these, and the many other criticisms of Plantinga and Descartes’ arguments. Instead, I wish to offer a blow on behalf of the atheist. In particular, I wish to argue that the theist has a problem with defeaters that by his own lights is at least as bad as the naturalists. It is likely, in fact, that his problem is a good deal worse.

Let's rewind the debate back to the first presentation of Descartes' evil demon argument. The evil demon is, at first, simply a god who is not so good as to guarantee our faculties.

...firmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable.

(Descartes 1984:14)

Descartes cannot seriously entertain the idea that God toys with him so mercilessly, however. God is too good for that. So, the evil demon is born. "I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me." (Descartes 1984: 15) This imagined evil demon, then, becomes the source of skeptical doubt. If I cannot rule out the possibility that I am being deceived by an evil demon, then I cannot know that I am not being misled at every intellectual step. If I cannot know that, it seems, then I can know nothing.¹

We have already seen how the theist gets out of this skeptical conundrum. It can be clearly and distinctly perceived that God exists and is good, and since he is good he

would not allow us to be so thoroughly misled about the world. Not only would he not deceive us himself, but he would not let us be so deceived. Thus, the theist's worldview provides him with an answer to the skeptic and a coherent story to tell about the source of his knowledge.

The theist's response to skepticism is obviously not open to the atheist. The atheist does not clearly and distinctly perceive that there is a god, so by his own lights there is no guarantor of his faculties.² There are, however, many other anti-skeptical strategies available to the atheist. For my purposes, I want to focus on one such strategy which, though by no means universally accepted, has certainly won many adherents in recent years.³ Call this the *remoteness strategy*.

According to the remoteness strategy, the mere possibility of an evil demon is not sufficient to undermine our knowledge of the world around us. If the existence of such a demon is a far-out enough possibility we needn't worry about it. An evil-demon is only an epistemic problem for us if there is a reasonable likelihood that we could be forming beliefs under its influence, thus introducing a live possibility that we are being deceived. If an evil demon is a sufficiently distant possibility, then there is no sense in which it threatens our cognitive performances. In other, more technical, words, we only have to rule out that there is an evil demon if there is a sufficiently close possible world that is a demon world. If no close possible world is a demon world, we needn't rule out that we are being deceived by such a demon.

According to this strategy, skeptical challenges are only successful if they indicate that the subject is in some sense lucky to have the truth. The remoteness strategy

maintains that the possibility of demon inspired systemic error is simply too remote to be of epistemic consequence. If an evil demon is even possible, it is radically unlikely, and so we can rest assured that our faculties are for the most part truth conducive.

This is where problems arise for the theist. Not only can the theist not avail himself of the remoteness strategy, his own beliefs unleash a defeater that threatens to undermine all of his knowledge. The theist, after all, believes that in the real world there lurks a close cousin to the evil demon: God. The theist does not, of course, think of things that way. Like Descartes, the theist sees God as too good either to deceive us or to allow us to be deceived. I will not quibble with the theist's conviction that God is good. Instead I want to argue that by the theist's own lights this conviction is not inconsistent with our being rather systematically deceived.

The theist must maintain that God's goodness is not inconsistent with our being systematically deceived for the same reason that the theist must maintain that God's goodness is not inconsistent with a child dying of hunger every five seconds. In other words, the theist must either believe that it would be a worse evil for our faculties to be unreliable than for a child to die every five seconds, or the theist essentially believes that there is a God whose goodness doesn't prevent him from being a deceiver. The theist therefore not only cannot rule out the possibility of an evil demon, his own belief system commits him to the demon's proximity.⁴

By believing in a being that could systematically deceive us, the theist is giving up the easiest way to embrace the remoteness strategy. More importantly, however, he is introducing a defeater for most, if not all, of his beliefs—a defeater that is at least as

strong as the non-theist's belief in naturalism.⁵ Even if one does not buy the remoteness strategy, one should believe its converse: if an epistemic threat is sufficiently close, it defeats one's beliefs unless one rules it out. If one is in fake barn country, for example, one's barn-beliefs are in serious danger. The worry is that the theist's belief puts him squarely in the center of fake-barn country—or at least he has no reason to think otherwise. Though the theist does not believe God is a deceiver, he does believe that God's goodness does not prevent him from allowing, and perhaps causing, things that seem quite bad. Like holocausts. Or hunger. Or any of a litany of natural disasters. The theist must ultimately embrace the conclusion that these things are perfectly consistent with God's divine plan. If this is the case, it is hard to see how, by the theist's own lights, our being systematically deceived is a particularly remote possibility.

The theist is likely to reply that this argument confuses what God does with what God allows.⁶ An all good God, it might be said, can allow any number of evils to befall the human race without being obligated to intervene. Nevertheless, a good God cannot actively be a deceiver.

The tenability of this response relies on the contentious idea that doing a harm is somehow morally worse than knowingly refraining from preventing a harm that one could prevent without comparable cost. This idea is questionable in the best of circumstances, but here it is not clear that it applies. Famine, tsunamis, cancers and plagues are, according to the theist, part of the design implemented by an all powerful God. He not only allows them to happen, he put them in the world in the first place. Perhaps there is a reason for him to have done this. But whatever that reason is, it or a similar reason could surely explain his sowing the world with seeds of deception. More

importantly, the argument really doesn't require that God be a deceiver. It merely requires that he allow us to be deceived, or at the very least allow us to develop in such a way that our faculties are systemically unreliable. If evil is to be explained because God is for various reasons non-interventionist, then nothing about God would seem to prevent his allowing all manner of epistemic evils to afflict us. If the theist believes God allows devils and the like to trouble the world, then surely the theist should think that evil demons are possible, and perhaps even probable.⁷ If the theist accounts for natural evil by believing that God wound the world and let it spin without intervention, then at the very least the theist has the same defeaters as the naturalist—if natural selection doesn't produce truth conducive faculties, there is no more reason to believe God would counteract that tendency than there is to believe he would counteract the other natural tendencies that give rise to much more obvious evils.

Perhaps, though, the theist would argue that even though the existence of some apparent evil is consistent with God's plan, there are thresholds of evil that would be intolerable and could serve no better good. The deception of humans would be beyond that threshold.

In a world where there are holocausts, where a child dies a painful death from hunger every five seconds, where thousands of people die because of natural disasters every few years, this seems like a tasteless bullet to bite. Deception seems a minor evil by comparison. Surely we would be relieved, not horrified, if it turned out that holocaust deniers were vindicated and that somehow the whole horror had been a mere mass hallucination. Even if it does seem that systematic deception would be beyond the pale, I don't see how a believer could be so sure of that as to relegate it to a merely remote

possibility. Surely the odds are at best inscrutable, as a good divine plan should be. But if they are inscrutable, then it seems the theist is saddled with a defeater he cannot rule out.

Perhaps, though, some can claim a clear enough conception of God's plan to assert with confidence that he could not, in fact, deceive all of humanity like this. Perhaps doing so would clearly frustrate any possible plan for our salvation or for our moral betterment, or perhaps such deception would leave us so completely dehumanized that it is inconsistent with the notion of a caring god.⁸ Perhaps. Unfortunately, this reasoning only thwarts a sort of universal skepticism. Even if systematic deception of all humans is beyond the pale, the systematic deception of one individual is surely not and no theist, it seems, can rule out the possibility that he is such a deceived individual. So even the theist who has a particularly impressive grasp of God's plan cannot rule out a significant defeater. His own beliefs pollute what might well be a propitious epistemic environment, leaving him with lots of belief, but no knowledge.

There are, of course, ways to resist the epistemological underpinnings of this argument. In particular, it can be maintained that our beliefs cannot really undermine our knowledge in this way. Perhaps all that matters is that our faculties are in fact truth conducive and the possibility of mass deception and error is remote, and our beliefs about those faculties and the possibility of error have no bearing on the epistemic status of our first order beliefs. This is a possible view. But it is not a view that is open to Plantinga, Descartes, or those philosophers inclined to argue that the theist is in an epistemically superior position. Those arguments depend upon the claim that at least some epistemic harm can be done by an agent's beliefs about his own faculties and his environment, and

that some advantage can be gained from having a coherent story to tell about why those faculties must be truth conducive. My argument shows that if this is true, it is far from clear that the theists have the higher ground.⁹

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1 There is much debate as to what constitutes the best formulation of Descartes' skeptical arguments, but those issues are largely beside the point. Any of the leading contenders will serve my purposes. See Pryor (2000), Williams (2005), Stroud (1984).

2 This doesn't mean, of course, that if the theist is right that the atheist's faculties are not in fact guaranteed by God. They are, of course. Given his ignorance of that fact, however, the atheist cannot defend his faculties.

3 It is explicitly embraced by Sosa (2007), Heller (1999), DeRose (1995), Nozick (1981) among others. Something like it is embraced by reliabilists of almost all stripes. There is a large group of philosophers who do not agree with the modal distance strategy as stated, but for whom a similar version of my argument will still work. Included in this group are dogmatists, like Pryor (2000).

4 After writing an earlier draft of this paper, I discovered that Evan Fales suggests a similar argument in Fales (1996) without developing it.

5 I don't actually think the belief in naturalism introduces a defeater at all, but even if Plantinga is right, it seems clear that the theist is in a similar stew.

6 This was pressed by ***.

7 Plantinga at various points seems to believe that natural evil could be explained by demons. See, for example, Plantinga (1974) p. 194. If so, it would seem a short step to evil demons with other agendas.

8 This has been suggested to me by ***.

9 Acknowledgements....