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A Skeptical Pragmatic Engagement with Skeptical Theism

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1. Introduction

Evil and suffering present some of the most pressing existential problems of human life, and they are also considered prominent stumbling-blocks for belief in the God of the classical theistic traditions Judaism, Christianity and Islam (e.g. Küng 2001). Accordingly, the tradition of *theodicy*—which seeks to account for the reasons a good and powerful God has for permitting all the suffering and evil of the world—has a long and distinguished history.

Over the last decades, though, theodicies have fallen somewhat out of fashion, and at least in Anglo-American mainstream philosophy of religion, they have more and more come to be replaced by the *skeptical theist* response to the problem of evil. This response is not, as the name might suggest, skeptical towards theism, or belief in God, but towards our ability to be in a position to ever determine what states of affairs that are overall good or bad, and, not least, how good and bad states of affairs are related to one another. Once we draw this ability into doubt, skeptical theists argue, it becomes rather presumptuous to claim that the problem of evil shows that the god of the classical theistic traditions does not exist, and the same problem applies to theodicies which claim to be able to guess God's motives—both strategies make unwarranted assumptions about our position vis-à-vis God.

Skeptical theism thus seeks to achieve more or less the same goal as theodicies—that is, to neutralize all arguments from evil and suffering against belief in the existence of God—but with substantially less philo-

sophical baggage: we can retain a religious commitment and at the same time be agnostic with regard to questions about the point of particular instances of evil and suffering and/or the point of evil and suffering in general.¹

1.1 Purpose and outline

The purpose of this paper is to approach and evaluate skeptical theism from the perspective of a pragmatic philosophy of religion outlined below. Concretely, this means that I offer a pragmatic reading of skeptical theism as an attempt to preserve the goods naturally generated in religious believers' interaction with the environment in the face of the problem of evil, and ask whether this attempt looks promising. Second, I will develop a pragmatic philosophical approach to religion that connects it closely to life orientations, and third, I use that approach to identify three problems that pragmatism, in the version developed here, has with skeptical theism. First, that skeptical theism separates between *belief* that God exists and the settings where talk about God as real rather than an illusion, or as existent rather than non-existent, gets its meaning (and pragmatic justification). Related to that is a second problem, namely, that there is a significant risk that skeptical theism might work *too well*, in the sense that it robs us of resources to criticize, for instance, elements of religious traditions that we judge to be sexist or homophobic.

A third problem is that skeptical theism helps reify the religion/atheism-distinction as a central element of philosophy of religion as well as of the Western intellectual climate. Here I will, in relation to a discussion of a pragmatic approach to the problem of evil, suggest that pragmatism's mediating ambition can open up new ways of understanding and communicating about the problem of evil. On this account, evil and suffering undermine the vitally important belief that what we do makes

¹ I will not discuss the tricky question of whether God's goodness requires of God that God makes sure that each person's suffering is somehow compensated for, or whether it is rather the total amount of goodness that needs to outweigh the total amount of evil. I will also not delve very deeply into the details of different kinds of evil, such as natural and moral evil. The interesting point for my purposes concerns the logical role played by the "skepticism"-part of skeptical theism, and to deal with that, I can, I believe, get along with a rather rough and everyday understanding of the problem of evil. In what follows, I will primarily speak of the problem of the huge amount of evil and suffering in the world (though I retain, for simplicity's sake, the established phrase "the problem of evil"), and hence, I save more detailed discussions of, for instance, the fact that *homo homini lupus*—that is, that there is so much moral evil that human beings cause each other—for some other occasion.

a difference, that the world's fate is open and partially under our influence, a threat that both believers and non-believers can feel the force of, and to which shared understanding and communication that transcends even the religion/atheism debate should be considered a possible and attractive response.

The *modest* conclusion of this paper is then that pragmatists ought not to adopt skeptical theism. The *less modest* conclusion is that a pragmatic philosophical approach may offer resources that make us better at preserving the valuable elements of religious traditions (such as the confidence in the concrete guidance offered by what I will call *paradigmatic responses*) and this amounts, I will suggest, to a meta-philosophical argument for the pragmatic value of pragmatic philosophy of religion. Although this will certainly not convince everybody, it suggests a possible way in which exchange between different philosophical approaches can take place.

2. Background: The problem of evil and the skeptical theist approach

2.1 The problem of evil in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy

In Anglo-American philosophy of religion, the problem of evil has often been discussed in two versions, the logical and the evidential, where the former concerns the question whether belief in God is really consistent with other propositions that we all accept (such as that "there is much suffering in the world"), and the latter whether belief in the existence of God can be rationally defensible in view of the massive suffering in the world (Mackie, 1955; Plantinga, 1975; W. Rowe, 1992). Of course, some sufferings are intimately connected to greater goods that would otherwise be unattainable, such as when I study a boring topic hard in order to obtain a degree that will give me a stimulating occupation. Plenty of suffering does not, however, seem to serve any such greater good, so that strategy does not allow the theist to explain away very much suffering. It is on the latter kind of suffering that both debates focus. In what follows, I concentrate on the evidential argument, since that is the argument skeptical theists address.

Evidential arguments from evil such as William Rowe's (1992) deal with evil and suffering that serve no discernible higher purposes, and suggest that such suffering should count as *evidence* against belief in the

existence of an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being. Theodicies respond to evidential arguments by offering a kind of counterarguments that seek to supply what critics claim cannot be supplied, namely, a plausible explanation of a perfectly good and omnipotent God's reasons for tolerating the evils and sufferings of our world. If, for instance, genuine free will among human beings is a very great good, then the fact that many people use that freedom to harm one another may be a consequence that we have to learn to live with, to take an often used version of theodicies. (Hick, 2004; Swinburne, 2004). The point is to show that God is not, contrary to appearances, morally blameworthy despite the fact that God can, in principle, prevent suffering whenever and wherever it occurs.

The main difficulties for theodicies lie, of course, in showing that the explanations are *plausible* given the amount of suffering in this world, and the problem becomes even more tantalizing once we accept a point already made by David Hume, namely, that most goods that we experience seem petty compared to the invasive character of suffering (Hume, 1990). The question arises: was it not *possible* for an omnipotent God to accomplish important purposes with less suffering, and not least less suffering for those who cannot even be said to deserve it, such as children? And if not, was it really worth it? This is one of the points Dostoevsky has Ivan Karamazov make in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and even a defender of theodicy such as Hick agrees that the vastness and uneven distribution of human suffering remains a major stumbling-block for any theodicy.²

2.2 Skeptical theism's approach

Enter skeptical theism. Compared to the rather contentious metaphysical and axiological claims theodicies are forced to make, skeptical theism promises to get away with a much lighter philosophical baggage, and its strategy is to cast doubt on the entire business of judging that there are, or that there are no, good reasons for an omnipotent being to allow the vast amounts of suffering that we see around us. Distinctions such as the ones between suffering that serves some greater good and sufferings that do not are, after all, always made from a human—all too human, skeptical theists would add—perspective.

² In a sense, then, I think it is fair to say that even defenders of theodicy have to make at least *some* appeal to skeptical theism-like stances as a fallback-position.

Skeptical theism differs from the response of someone like Ivan Karamazov by suggesting that the main problem with theodicies is not that they look cynical and indifferent to the sufferings of beings of flesh and blood, but that they portray the human epistemic position with regard to God and God's values as much stronger than we have reason to think that it is. Rather than returning the ticket to a redeemed creation, as Ivan Karamazov would have us do, skeptical theists suggest that we should stop judging God from the point of view of our limited human perspective. Both rejections and defenses of God thus commit the same mistake by taking *our* perspective to be sufficient for resolving questions of this kind.

Among the chief advocates of skeptical theism-approaches in contemporary philosophy are Michael Bergmann, Michael Rea, Justin McBrayer and Stephen Wykstra (Bergmann & Rea, 2005; Bergmann, 2001 & 2012; McBrayer, 2012; Wykstra, 1996). Bergmann fleshes out skeptical theism in four theses:

- st1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
 - st2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are
 - st3: We have no good reasons for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils
 - st4: We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have
- Bergmann, 2012, 11–12; cf. Bergmann 2001, 279

Taken together, these theses suggest that evidence-based atheistic arguments such as Rowe's above draw unwarranted conclusions from what *seems* to be the case (i.e. that there *seems* to be no good that would justify God's permitting these atrocities to happen) to what actually *is* the case (most likely, or quite probably, there *are* no goods that would justify God's permitting these atrocities to happen; hence, it is likely that God, at least as described by theists, does not exist). Elaborating on an idea of Wykstra's, Yujin Nagasawa and Nick Trakakis call this a *noseeum-assumption*: if we can see no acceptable reasons for God's permitting the vast amounts of suffering there are, then probably, there are no acceptable reasons either (Trakakis & Nagasawa, 2004).

Skeptical theism rejects the application of noseum-assumptions to the problem of evil because of their tendency to presuppose that we are perfectly capable of taking a God's eye view with regard to good and evil. One common analogy here is to compare the cognitive situation of human beings vis-à-vis God to that of a child's situation vis-à-vis its parents: children are often incapable of understanding why parents let them suffer various things that they take to be evils (such as medicines with painful side-effects), and skeptical theists are prone to ask why we should think that we are in a better position than the child with regard to God's motives for permitting suffering (Wykstra, 1996, 143). This means that the road of theodicy is closed for the skeptical theist, because the goods that theodicies typically appeal to are, after all, only good from *our* point of view. Hence, theodicies display a similar, if not larger, degree of hubris than atheistic arguments do. From a religious perspective, this is, however, no cause for concern, since the evidential argument loses its force once we adopt skeptical theism (which, of course, is different from saying that the problem of evil loses all its force).

What is interesting about the skeptical theist form of agnosticism about goods and evils at work in, for instance, the quote from Bergmann above, is its categorical tone: we have *no* good reasons to feel confident about our judgments about the overall value of some state of affairs, because there may be goods that we do not (as yet) know of, or complex relations to evils that we are not aware of, and so on. Skeptical theists do not, however, take it upon themselves to tell us what those goods are. Hence, we can say that they offer a *defense* rather than a *justification* of belief in God.

This sets skeptical theism apart from the kind of antiskeptical fallibilism typically advocated by pragmatists. First, because on such accounts, agnosticism, too, needs to be argued for: doubt/agnosticism is *not* the default position, but a stance that needs just as much grounding as firm belief to become acceptable. Second, because pragmatism combines fallibilism with the conviction that it is possible to make *progress* through intelligently undertaken inquiry. Such progress suggests that we are not, in fact, groping in the dark with regard to values such as good and bad: we can see what kind of attitudes and behaviors that have typically caused harm and suffering in the past, and also ways in which harm and suffering can be relieved.

And it does not stop there: experience allows us, fortunately, to extrapolate in such a manner that we need not commit all individual possible mistakes there are to be able to make progress. For instance, we have

learned that imposition of dogmatically held doctrines or principles very often cause more harm than good, and that we, overall, tend to cause more suffering when we act in an unempathic and paternalistic manner, resort to sexism and homophobia, and so on and so forth. If we would take the skeptical theist agnosticism at face value, it is far from clear how we could know that we have actually made *progress* when we stop treating homosexuals as pariah—at least not if we take ‘progress’ to be related to the overall (moral) state of the world. In short, we know, a pragmatist would say, quite a lot about how to cause suffering and how to do good, and how we should typically act to make the world a better place.

If we still hold that we should doubt that the goods that we have thus come to embrace are *really* representative of the (possible) goods there are and that we cannot really know much about the overall value or disvalue of any given situation, then this is not a modest, but in fact a very presumptuous claim. The burden of proof does not automatically fall on the one who makes certain positive claims here: it falls equally on agnostics and skeptics.

In what follows, I will develop a pragmatic alternative that, in my view, manages to preserve our confidence in our moral judgments without jeopardizing the goods naturally generated in religious human beings’ interactions with the environment, or, to put it more bluntly, to show a way in which a religious commitment can be retained without having to accept the problems generated by skeptical theism. First, though, I will look at some criticisms of skeptical theism, and a couple of skeptical theist responses that I will engage with later on.

2.3 Two objections to skeptical theism

I will now turn to two standard objections to skeptical theism that you find in the literature. First, an objection specifically directed against the parent-analogy. The parent-analogy seems to presuppose, a critic such as Trent Dougherty points out, that if the ways of the adult world are complex for children, then how much more complex should not the ways of God’s world be, given the enormous cognitive distance between finite human minds and God’s omniscient mind? That presupposition is, however, Dougherty argues, flawed, because it overlooks the fact that with increasing abilities to create and manage complex states of affairs, we should also expect increasing abilities to make those states of affairs *transparent* to less advanced beings such as us. Hence, rather than conclude that the parent-

analogy strengthens the skeptical theist case, Dougherty argues that it weakens it (Dougherty, 2012). In a similar vein, Rowe argues, parents are certainly forced to let their children suffer from time to time, but then, they still do all they can to comfort them, rather than retain the distance that suffering human beings often feel with regard to God (Rowe, 2006).

Another family of objections resembles the pragmatic approach sketched above in that it sets focus on skeptical theism's pessimistic stance towards our cognitive abilities, but it moves in a slightly different direction. Rowe argues that skeptical theism undermines the *theism*-part of "skeptical theism" to such an extent that we should be skeptical of any grounds we may have for endorsing theism (Rowe, 2006). Others concentrate more directly on moral skepticism: if skeptical theism is right, then we cannot really tell whether the situations that we judge to be bad are actually good: they might serve some higher purpose that we cannot know of. Then why should we feel obliged to do something about them, and risk making things *worse*? (Almeida & Oppy, 2003)

There are several skeptical theist responses to this objection. Here, I will note just one that I return to later. It is true, most skeptical theists seem to agree, that skeptical theism rests on a form of skepticism about our cognitive and moral abilities. This would, Bergmann and Rea admit, lead to a serious moral skepticism *unless religious believers that accept ST1–ST4 can find other reasons for having confidence in the adequacy of their moral judgments*. But, Bergmann and Rea claim, they *do* have other reasons; namely that these judgments are in accordance with God's revealed commands. Moral skepticism is, however, a genuine problem, they suggest, for *non-believers*, who cannot draw on such independent sources to justify their moral stances, but they pose no serious threat to skeptical theism, according to them (Bergmann & Rea, 2005, 244–5).

The debate over the viability of skeptical theism should not, I would argue, be taken as some intellectual exercise or merely as a question about whether one is epistemically entitled to hold certain religious beliefs. Rather, I take it to be an ongoing serious discussion about whether, and to what extent, religious ways of thinking and acting in the world—which a substantial amount of people value highly—can be retained in the face of evil and suffering. This means that there are what I, inspired by Dewey, would call *goods naturally generated in human interaction with the environment* that are at stake here (Dewey, 1981, ch. 10). Let us see which resources a pragmatic philosophy of religion may offer those who wish to preserve those goods.

3. Pragmatic philosophy of religion

3.1 Pragmatism as a mediating philosophy

Pragmatists are generally critical of dualisms because of their tendency to reify distinctions made for certain practical purposes, and James famously described pragmatism as a mediating philosophy (James, 1975, 23ff; Pihlström, 2013). One aspect of such mediation is that pragmatists typically seek to find middle ground that can allow us to transcend entrenched debates and warring positions in order to preserve important goods valued on each side. One such entrenched debate that we should seek to transcend is, I will suggest towards the end of the paper, the religion/atheism-debate, and I will try to show how that is related to my skeptical response to skeptical theism in the following sections.

Dewey points out that philosophy does not, in and of itself, contain the necessary resources to determine which of the goods generated in human interaction with the world that are genuinely good and which that are not—such judgments can only be made in relation to factual and normative conceptions of a good human life that are generated within the many practices we find ourselves engaged in, and they are always made in response to concrete problems, like when clashes between goods generated in different human practices occur, whether at a subjective or an intersubjective level. Such clashes cause insecurity about what to do to reconcile the conflict, and here, philosophy can offer a space where we can think through and evaluate the wider consequences of different possible ways of reconciling those conflicting goods. This means that the authority of philosophy stems from its ability to function as a kind of metapractice where we can negotiate conflicts and clashes by drawing on normative and factual insights made across a range of practices, and where the measure of success is whether the proposed solutions that philosophers come up with can actually be brought back to the problematic situations and, when applied, make us better at handling them (Dewey, 1981, 305).

3.2 Approaching religion from a pragmatic perspective

From the point of view of a pragmatic philosophical anthropology, human beings are constantly engaged in exchanges with the environment, exchanges that aim to create and maintain a kind of equilibrium with the environment. Problems emerge and inquiry is instituted when equilibrium is disrupted, and equilibrium is restored once we find a way of solving the problem, or at least a way to handle the situation relatively well.

It is essential, many pragmatists insist, that we understand that what is sought for here is primarily a kind of equilibrium in *praxis*—that is, our habits of thought and action are seen as an integrated whole where equilibrium shows itself in the relative absence of problematic situations, and thus of conflicting impulses to act that threatens to paralyze us entirely (James, 1979, 57–8).

Human beings are, unlike at least almost all other animals, not only concerned about equilibrium with regard to the physical aspects of our existence. Moral and existential concerns and problems also arise and affect our behavior in many ways, causing us to wonder about the rightness and wrongness as well as the meaningfulness and meaninglessness of events and states of affairs, perhaps even of life as a whole. Human goods and evils are not just enjoyed or suffered; they are also *perceived* as goods and evils and this triggers reflection on how they may be preserved/avoided in the future (Dewey, 1981, 298).

Through such reflection, we learn that many of the things that we care most about, such as love, friendship, health, and so on, are typically *fragile goods*, by which I mean that although we can do much to safeguard them, they can never be brought completely under our control, and that it is hence not entirely up to us to decide whether those goods will obtain or not. (A parallel point holds for evils, I would claim.) In other words, we do not only need habits of thought and action that enable us to *obtain* certain goods or protect ourselves from various evils; we also need habits of thought and action that can help us account for why life is this way, enable us to respond appropriately both when we accomplish and fail to accomplish our goals, and also give expression to the human existential situation with its finiteness and fragile character. Of course, all of these habits of thought and action also work back, in a number of ways, on our views of which goods we should pursue in the first place.

I will refer to these habits of thought and action as a person's *life orientation*. A life orientation helps us come to terms with existential questions about what it is like to be a human being living in a world of fragile goods, what to consider proper attitudes to both success and failure in such a world, and which goods we should strive for. This means that life orientations have an inherently normative dimension: they aim to be *adequate* in the sense of doing justice to human life, our experiences of living as human beings in the tensions between love and hate, life and death, success and failure, and so on. Hence, Eberhard Herrmann suggests that we understand life orientations as *conceptions of human flourishing* that paint

a picture of what human life is like at its best, and help us respond to and come to terms with the fact that the present condition is so far from perfect (Herrmann, 2004).

What, then, is the relation between life orientations and religion? I would suggest that *religious* life orientations' conceptions of human flourishing typically draw on one or several religious traditions' rites, symbols, myths and stories, and hence that a religious person's habits of thought and action relating to the human condition of fragility are typically affected by those rites, symbols, myths and stories in recognizable ways.

"Affected" implies that at least for some people, the rites, symbols, myths and stories of a religious tradition have a strong appeal. Whence this appeal? Here, I think it would be a mistake to fall in the philosophical trap to suggest that they appeal to us because we think that the God they bear witness to is *real*, or *exists*, so that the appeal would somehow be external to the rites, symbols, myths and stories. I want to propose, instead, that it is the very appeal of these rites, symbols, myths and stories that gives content to, and justifies, our talk about God as real and not an illusion. This appeal is also, I would hold, inextricably linked to the way they help us attain a form of existential equilibrium with the environment. That is, the adoption of a religious life orientation drives us towards belief in God, rather than vice versa.

Let me elaborate here. The different rites, symbols, myths and stories found in some religious tradition can be seen, I would suggest, as transmitting to us a set of *paradigmatic responses* to life's existential conditions (cf. Davies, 2011, 42–3). To call them paradigmatic is to say that although they are not directly applicable to all life's situations, they offer certain exemplary patterns of response that we can strive to integrate in our habits of thought and action and thus make, to some extent at least, our own. Occasionally, paradigmatic responses are transmitted in the form of direct commands, but more often, they are transmitted as the exemplary behavior of some religious person. Responding thus is taken to be an integral part of what it is to lead a good human life.

Now I think we are in a better position than before to answer the question about the appeal of religious rites, symbols, myths and stories. In order to appeal to us, they need to resonate with, and, at the same time, challenge and transform our conception of human flourishing in such a way that we come to think, as James put it, that there is "something wrong" with us as we "naturally stand", and that this "wrong" can be overcome if we make "proper contact with the higher powers" (James, 1985, 400). I re-

peat, this is not a conclusion that we reach independently of these rites, symbols, myths and stories, and that we only later adopt to make "proper contact with the higher powers". It is a conclusion that we reach *through* them: what they suggest about the way I lead my life currently, and how I *should* live. In other words, our emotions and moral judgments play a pivotal role here: they help us discern the shortcomings of our current way of living and they motivate us to seek to integrate the paradigmatic responses of some religious tradition into our habits of thought and action.

Life orientations are thus built from below, and "light dawns gradually on the whole" in the sense that we can then, in retrospect, discern patterns and shared principles in the paradigmatic responses that we seek to integrate in our life orientations (Wittgenstein, 1972, § 141). Here, I want to make some tentative suggestions about a couple of such principles that I think we can discern in very many religious traditions and their various secular counterparts, such as ideologies and life philosophies.

First, that our accomplishments are not, strictly speaking, deserved by us, and correspondingly, that the failures that have cast other people in dire conditions cannot be entirely blamed on them either. This point is intimately related to the point I made above about the fragile character of the goods of human life, and it manifests itself in, among other things, paradigmatic responses that urge us not to revel in accomplishments, or look down on those who fare less well.

These paradigmatic responses are, in my view, closely related to another principle also transmitted via religious paradigmatic responses and that, initially, might seem to draw in a very different direction: that *what* we do, and do not do, matters enormously, and that we thus are under a moral obligation to help those less fortunate than us—not out of altruism, but simply because we are no more deserving of a good life than they are.

The ability of religious traditions to speak to us is, then, a function of the way they manage to engage us emotionally by offering rites, symbols, myths and stories that together help reconstruct our life orientations in a direction which enables us to respond more adequately to the human existential condition. We should not, though, be tempted to adopt the conclusion that a religious person adopts *everything* transmitted as paradigmatic responses: sometimes, we fail to adopt even elements that we find appealing (like when the demands are very high). Here, religious traditions typically also offer ways of coping with such shortcomings, such as rites of penance and forgiveness. And sometimes, I will suggest below,

we may *reject* certain paradigmatic responses as sexist, for instance, and refuse to integrate them in our life orientations on those grounds. There is thus an interesting reciprocal relation between religious traditions and life orientations, where each part stands in judgment of the other, and where different strategies to negotiate tensions and clashes have evolved. It is hence a mistake, a pragmatist would hold, to see a religious tradition as a monolithic entity immune to critique from other sources than its own: its mission to appeal to us can bring about even rather radical reconstructions, although they are rarely *presented* as such.

The picture I have sketched here comes rather close, I would say, to the Jamesian idea that the proper way to evaluate religion has nothing to do with, for instance, its origins, but concerns its ability to help us lead lives that take into full account the character of the environment in which we find ourselves. According to James, this also means that various religious and existential approaches need to be assessed via what he calls “spiritual judgments” (James, 1985, 13). These are no crass judgments about what enables us to feel well, but concern rather directly whether a religious commitment enables us to direct our energies in constructive ways—where “constructive ways” cannot be defined independently of our life orientation. Let us see, now, what happens when we bring this approach to bear on skeptical theism.

4. Returning to skeptical theism

I have already pointed out that one interesting non-pragmatic feature of skeptical theism is that skeptical theists treat belief in God as generated and in principle possible to uphold independently of our confidence in whether the paradigmatic responses that a religious tradition transmits via rites, symbols, myths and stories make the world a better place (which we must, according to skeptical theism, remain skeptical of). What makes this move unpragmatic is that from a pragmatic point of view, it is the very insight that the paradigmatic responses transmitted in the rites, symbols, myths and stories actually make me a better person—one that aspires (and occasionally manages) to do less evil and more good than before, thus making the world a better place – that gives substance to talk of God as real rather than an illusion. Unless we think that judgments such as these *are* in fact representative in the sense that we think that the good in the world is promoted better if we adopt religious belief with its implications for the way we behave, compared to if we remain focused on, for

instance, our own well-being, then why adopt religious belief in the first place, and why seek to integrate the paradigmatic responses transmitted in rites, symbols, myths and stories in my life orientation? In practice, the kind of moral agnosticism advocated by skeptical theists seems pretty hard to uphold.

One possible response that the skeptical theist may adopt is to take recourse to the alleged complexity of God's world compared to ours, and hold that whatever progress we may make here on Earth, such progress is relative to the context of the human point of view, and since things may always look quite different from *God's* point of view, we should take any such claims about progress with more than a pinch of salt. Now, I think such strong divisions between our and God's point of view leads to counterintuitive results. To show why, we can return to Dougherty's critique of the parent-analogy: with increasing ability to manage complexity, we should expect an increasing ability to make the goods of the universe, and their relations to sufferings, clearer to us. In a parallel fashion: we should expect that along with an increasing ability to manage complex states of affairs, we should also expect an increasing ability to arrange states of affairs in such a way that *our* judgments about good and bad are by and large the same as God's. In the absence of such a parallel, the possibility of a yawning gap between God's and man's projects opens up, a possibility that threatens to undermine the deeply religious sense that what *we* do makes a difference, that we are not just spectators of some cosmic drama, but agents with a stake in the struggle to redeem the world.

Let me illustrate. Consider the scenario jokingly presented by Robert Nozick: the purpose of the human race is to function as a living supply of food for a superior form of creatures set on an intergalactic journey (Nozick, 1981, 586). In order to maximize the supplies for the superior creatures and assure that we have a reasonably good life while we await the final slaughter, God has instilled various properties in us that will make us able to prosper and multiply, including a moral sense. This moral sense will cause us to judge the superior creatures immoral, because they use us merely as means and not as ends in any way, but given *God's* purposes, this is a mistaken judgment. Nowhere would the skeptical theist reminder that we do not have full overview prove to be more prophetic than in a scenario like this.

The point of the above example is this: once we begin to stress the size of the gap between our and God's perspectives along skeptical theist lines, it seems that these kinds of examples become more than bizarre

fantasies, consistent as they are with the evidence we possess. But would this scenario satisfy our deeply religious sense that we are partaking in a redemptive struggle? Would we still feel a strong urge to integrate the paradigmatic responses of some religious tradition in our life orientations? Would this be a being that we would still call 'God'? Intuitions may differ here, but I think the answer to these questions is 'no', and I am pretty sure that the skeptical theist would agree. The professed agnosticism has, I take it, rather definitive limits, such as that the goods that we do *not* know of should still be goods *for us*. But why expect or demand *that*? Is that not much too presumptuous, given the limited human perspective that skeptical theism does so much of?

A defender of skeptical theism could, at this point, respond that I have forgotten about the strongest reply to this kind of objections, namely, to appeal to revelation. Let us look closer at the credentials of that response.

4.1 Skeptical theism, revelation and the risk of proving too much

Bergmann and Rea suggest that in the absence of reasons to trust our moral abilities, religious believers' confidence in the adequacy of their tradition's paradigmatic responses can be traced to their status as being commanded by God. (Bergmann & Rea, 2005). From a pragmatic point of view, that response will not work, because it puts, again, the cart before the horse by suggesting that trust in revelation comes *before* confidence in the paradigmatic responses which would ground talk of revelation as genuine rather than illusory. More importantly, I also believe that appeal to revelation helps us discern another problem that pragmatists have with skeptical theism.

Far from settling a debate, appeals to God's commands typically tend to involve us in a tangle of questions about which criteria we should use to determine when we have a genuine instance of revelation and when not. This problem sticks rather deep, because if the skeptical theist defense would prove successful, we may well wonder whether it might not function as a defense of more than many (most? all?) religious believers would ever bargain for. After all, most of us are familiar with religious conservatives' claim that their opposition to, for instance, gay rights, equality between the sexes, and so on, is not a matter of opinion, but of God's revealed commandments, and that hence, we should not trust our all too human perspective on these things and be fooled to fight for things like equality between the sexes or between people of different sexual orientations.

In cases like these, we see that appeals to revelation or commandments, besides the fact that they tend to function as "conversation stoppers", to borrow a famous expression from Richard Rorty (1999, 168–74), inevitably involve us in reflection about further validation, revision, or perhaps even rejection of claims that something was revealed: which hermeneutical principles of interpretation were used to reach this conclusion? Why adopt *those* principles and not others? And on it goes. James argues that in these cases, there is simply no way around appeals to spiritual judgments. It seems more or less impossible to make a case for viewing something *as* a revelation from God without pointing to its fruits by way of how it causes us to think and act in less wicked ways than before, and such appeals presuppose, in turn, a solid and settled background of judgments about goods and evils that we do *not* doubt.

Now, I am not accusing skeptical theists of being religiously conservative (and some would, most likely, not see this an accusation either); I am just pointing out that it is far from clear that skeptical theism offers much guidance with regard to, for instance, how we may criticize outmoded sexist, homophobic, and so on, religious practices and/or commandments. At least a substantial number of religious believers would consider the lack of such resources to be highly problematic. Pragmatism claims that a key to developing such resources is to uphold the distinction between paradigmatic responses and life orientations, and see that just as paradigmatic responses can appeal to us, they can also come to seem highly problematic, and even impossible to integrate in our life orientation. This opens for critical reflection and negotiations between elements within our life orientation and various proposed paradigmatic responses.

From the pragmatic point of view adopted here, the strategy of skeptical theism is ultimately unconvincing because in order to make its case, it separates belief in God from our confidence in our ability to evaluate the paradigmatic responses which, on my analysis, grounds religious life orientations. Then, it casts the latter in doubt in order to fend off arguments against the former. To repeat: *from a pragmatic point of view*, this is tantamount to sawing off the branch on which you are sitting.

I will soon return to the third problem that pragmatism sees with skeptical theism. First, though, I want to return to the question of whence philosophy derives its authority. The pragmatic perspective rests, like all philosophical perspectives, on certain presuppositions that are far from obviously correct or true (whatever we take those terms to mean). Pragmatism, we saw above, suggests that one way to contrast different philo-

sophical perspectives could be to take their different proposals back to the problematic situations that triggered inquiry in the first place, so we can see whether they offer resources to handle those situations better than before. Hence, I need to say something about whether pragmatism offers a more promising way to preserve the goods that skeptical theists seek to preserve, in order to spell out the pragmatic case fully.

5. Pragmatism and the problem of responding to evil

Most opponents of skeptical theism either advocate the need for theodicies (which leads to the problems already mentioned) or atheism. On the pragmatic approach, it is important to remember that atheism is no live option for most religious believers: they find themselves believing in God, and this is because they find the paradigmatic responses suggested by the religious tradition's myths, stories and narratives *adequate*, a judgment that involves not just our intellect, but our emotions as well. Atheist critics of skeptical theism, such as Rowe, hence fail to present working solutions because they forget that for many people "God is real because He produces real effects", as James perceptively puts it (James, 1985, 407).

The paradigmatic responses transmitted in the rites, symbols, myths and stories of some religious tradition show us, then, that one central aspect of the problem of evil is the *practical problem* of how to respond adequately to evil and suffering. The religious 'promise' is that adequate responses to evil and suffering are not alien or *external* constraints on our behavior, that we need commandments from God or something similar to discover. Ideally, they arise within us, when we take life's fragile character into account. A dedication to the promotion of good and resistance towards evil is not a means to a good life; *is* a truly good life. As James stresses in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, for religion, "in its strong and fully developed manifestations, the service of the highest [is never] felt as a yoke" (James, 1985, 41)

To take the Christian tradition, with which I am most familiar, a believer might thus respond to the evidential argument from evil that contrary to what the critic claims, God actually does a lot to battle evil. Via the rites, symbols, myths and stories transmitted in the Christian tradition, we learn how evil can be resisted and even overcome. The evidential argument operates, on such an account, with a rather crude analysis of what it would be for a being such as God to battle evil—but so do many of the thinkers they criticize as well. From the pragmatic point of view, God is

real in the sense that God acts on us, and to stipulate that besides this, God can *also* battle evil in an even more direct way, namely, through performing actions that somehow violate or bypass the laws of nature, but chooses not to, or does it only in a patchy manner, risks making God very, very distant from, and apparently indifferent to, our human endeavors. Pragmatists doubt that this is the kind of God that could really transform our lives in such a way that we see the struggle against suffering as an integral part of a flourishing human life rather than some externally imposed duty. On this perspective, theodicies become understandable yet ultimately very problematic attempts to bring the distant God somewhat closer to us.

I started this paper with the claim that the problem of evil is perhaps the most pressing of all existential problems. Now, a critic may object, it looks as if it is simply a matter of making a Jamesian choice as outlined in "The Will to Believe" and then the problem is solved once and for all. Such a resolution of the problem of evil would be a Pyrrhic victory for a philosophy which prides itself on taking human experience as the starting- and end-point of sound philosophy. Surely, there is more to the problem of evil than the practical dimension?

I think pragmatism is perfectly capable of responding affirmatively here and of capturing the equally important existential dimension of the problem of evil. Recall that a bearing idea of many religious traditions and their secular counterparts is that what *we* do makes a genuine difference—and that a struggle against evil and suffering will thus not be in vain. I think the evidence can sometimes cause a form of despair, despair that offers an important clue, I would say, to understanding the existential aspect of the problem of evil: we begin to seriously doubt whether there is really any *point* in fighting evil and suffering, and hence, the striving to integrate that ambition in our conception of human flourishing comes under strain.

The kind of doubt that presses itself upon us is hence, ultimately, doubt about whether it is worthwhile to strive for such integration, or whether we should accept that it is impossible to keep evil and suffering at bay, and thus go our own way and hope that we and our dear ones will turn out to be among the lucky ones that can lead relatively affluent lives even without much support from others. Note, though, that I do not take this doubt, and the strain it puts us under, to be particularly pressing for people who endorse *religious* life orientations—the doubt that what we do actually makes a positive difference is equally pressing for any life orientations that stress the importance of human agency.

Here, finally, we come to a third pragmatic problem with skeptical theism, and to grasp it, we need to keep pragmatism's ambition to be a mediating philosophy in mind. Skeptical theism claims that we should be agnostic about the adequacy of our ability of distinguishing right from wrong, and seeks, instead, to found confidence in the paradigmatic responses in, for instance, revelation (a strategy that, I have sought to show, does not work). Here, I want to draw attention to another consequence of the strategy to appeal to revelation and other tradition-specific sources of knowledge: namely, that this kind of strategies ignores important similarities in the way that believers and non-believers respond to evil and suffering, and hence overemphasizes the importance of the religion/atheism-divide. This is well illustrated by, for instance, the way that Bergmann and Rea hold that moral skepticism may result for *non-believers*, but not for *believers*—because the latter, unlike the former, have firm grounds for being confident about the adequacy of their moral judgments (Bergmann & Rea, 2005).

Rather than reifying this distinction and even seek to use the threatening skepticism to gain the upper hand over non-religious life orientations, pragmatism urges us to note that the paradigmatic responses transmitted via religious rites, symbols, myths and stories are actually very similar to the paradigmatic responses transmitted in analogous ways in very many different non-religious ideologies and humanistic outlooks. Sami Pihlström thus suggests that it is actually possible to see religious believers and atheists as fellow inquirers, and in my terms, we can see those inquirers as engaged in a shared struggle against the apathy that threatens to come over us when we begin to think that what *we* do makes no positive difference after all (Pihlström, 2013). Compared to the skeptical theist approach, pragmatism thus seeks to move focus to the differences that really matter in practice, and to the many overlaps and similarities that can function as a platform for joint discussion and communication. In a pragmatic sense, the theism/atheism-debate may, rather often, turn out to be, pragmatically speaking, rather unimportant and counter-productive.

6. Concluding remarks

Pragmatic philosophy, including pragmatic philosophy of religion, thus seeks ways to help us preserve the kind of goods generated in human experience as a natural function of ways of interacting with the environment. It is from this vantage point that skeptical theism falls short, partly

by undermining our confidence in our ability to evaluate the value of various paradigmatic responses to suffering, partly by proving too much, and partly by contributing to the reification of the distinction between religion and atheism. Thus, it risks concealing important similarities between different life orientations' responses to suffering and the problem of evil.

Pragmatism seeks middle ground here by retaining the possibility of doubt while setting such doubt within a context of confidence, a strategy that gives piecemeal criticism of all human practices, including religious practices, pride of place. Such fallibilism requires confidence in the human perspective and also confidence that the human endeavor is worthwhile: that the improvements that we accomplish are *genuine* improvements (and that when they are not, we are capable of detecting this, at least in due time).

The modest conclusion is hence that pragmatists should not adopt skeptical theism. The less modest conclusion is that pragmatic philosophy of religion promises a more fruitful way of approaching the question of the way in which we may, from a philosophical point of view, understand, articulate and preserve important goods residing in religious practices without either rejecting religion entirely or constructing a defense of religious practices that pits religious believers and non-believers against one another. As regards questions about the appropriate response to evil and suffering, I would suggest that in practice, the paradigmatic responses of many religious and non-religious people are often so similar that we will discover that differences within each group are as, or more, significant than differences between these groups. That suggests that we should, *pace* skeptical theists, be wary of approaches that make the religion/atheism divide a central element of their strategy to preserve the goods residing in religious practices. Like all distinctions, the religion/atheism distinction is useful in certain contexts, but not in others. Pragmatism suggests that this may be one of the contexts where it becomes counterproductive, and also indicates why and how further inquiry may, and ought to, take a different direction.³

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