

Opaque Theism and Divine Testimony

ERIK J. WIELENBERG

DePauw University

ewielenberg@depauw.edu

Abstract: A much-discussed objection to skeptical theism is that skeptical theism implies that divine testimony cannot provide us with knowledge. Here I argue that it is not skeptical theism that raises doubts about the trustworthiness of divine testimony; rather, the vast amount of inscrutable evil in our world together with God’s track record of deception is the source of the trouble. I draw on that insight to develop further my divine deception argument (Wielenberg 2014). The argument I will defend goes roughly like this: There is a lot of inscrutable evil in the world and the Christian God has a track record of being deceptive about future events. Therefore, divine testimony regarding future events is not a source of knowledge that such events will occur.

Keywords: Problem of evil, Skeptical theism, Divine revelation, Rowe, Wykstra

1. Introduction

A much-discussed objection to skeptical theism is that skeptical theism implies that divine testimony cannot provide us with knowledge. Here I argue that it is not skeptical theism that raises doubts about the trustworthiness of divine testimony; rather, the vast amount of inscrutable evil in our world together with God’s track record of deception is the source of the trouble. I draw on that insight to develop further my divine deception argument (Wielenberg 2014). The argument I will defend goes roughly like this: There is a lot of inscrutable evil in the world and the Christian God has a track record of being deceptive about future events.¹ Therefore, divine testimony regarding future events is not a source of knowledge that such events will occur. I spell this argument out more precisely in what follows.

¹ Subsequently I will speak simply of God; it is specifically the *Christian* God that I have in mind throughout this paper.

2. The Origin of Skeptical Theism

Skeptical theism entered contemporary philosophy as a result of William Rowe's 1979 presentation of his version of the evidential argument from evil. Rowe's argument employs two concepts: (i) *inscrutable* evils—evils such that, having given the matter some thought, we can see nothing that would justify God in permitting them, and (ii) *gratuitous* evils—evils such that there is nothing that would justify God in permitting them.² To illustrate inscrutable evil, Rowe provides an example of a fawn trapped in a forest fire, inviting the reader to agree that it is hard to see anything that would justify God in permitting the fawn's suffering. Rowe argues that there are many examples of inscrutable evils in the world that together constitute evidence for the existence of gratuitous evil in the world—ultimately leading to the conclusion that God probably does not exist (1979, 337). Rowe's argument is often understood as employing the so-called "Noseeum Inference": E is an inscrutable evil; therefore, E is probably a gratuitous evil.³ In response to Rowe's argument, Stephen Wykstra (1984) famously challenges the Noseeum Inference on the grounds that even if God did have a good reason for permitting the fawn's suffering, there is little basis for thinking that humans would have access to that reason. Thus was skeptical theism born.

In the decades since that famous exchange between Rowe and Wykstra, various criticisms of skeptical theism have been advanced. One criticism alleges that skeptical theism has skeptical implications that are unwelcome to theists. The specific version of that worry I will focus on here has it that skeptical theism undermines our trust in God's testimony. The claim, roughly, is that if skeptical theism is true, then God's declarations to humanity cannot be trusted and so cannot provide us with knowledge (see e.g. Wielenberg 2010, Hudson 2012, and Law 2015). In response to the worry that the skeptical component of skeptical theism has unwelcome consequences, a number of skeptical theists have sought to clarify exactly what skeptical theism is and have emphasized its modest nature. Their basic strategy has been to try to identify the most modest claim(s) required to block the Noseeum Inference. So, Michael Bergmann (2001, 2009, 2012, and 2014) claims that the core of skeptical theism is that we have no good reason for thinking that the goods, evils, and entailments between them that we know of are representative of all goods, evils, and entailments between them. Daniel Howard-Snyder proposes

² Rowe does not use the terms 'inscrutable' and 'gratuitous', but employing this terminology allows for a simpler statement of Rowe's argument than the one actually provided by Rowe.

³ This may not be the best way of understanding Rowe's argument; see Oliveira 2020, 321. However, we needn't settle that issue here as our focus is on skeptical theism.

that the core skeptical theist claim is that we should doubt whether the goods we know of are representative of all the goods there are (2009, 18). And Perry Hendricks (2023) identifies the core claims of skeptical theism as (i) for each divine permission of evil E, we have no good reason to think that E's perceived value resembles its actual value (16) and (ii) for each divine permission of evil E, we have no good reason to think that the perceived weight of God's reasons resembles the actual weight of God's reasons (60). Such thinkers, having pinpointed what they take to be the modest essence of skeptical theism, proceed to argue (plausibly, in my view) that such modest claims do not yield the destructive skeptical implications alleged by critics of skeptical theism (see e.g. Segal 2011 and Hendricks 2019, 2021, and 2023).

3. The Argument from Opaque Theism

I think that something important has been overlooked in the debate surrounding this particular objection to skeptical theism, namely: the implications of the fact that our world contains *a lot* of inscrutable evils. A couple of decades after his initial presentation of his argument from evil, Rowe wrote this:

The constant theme in my discussions of the problem of evil is our awareness that no good within our ken can reasonably be thought to justify an all-powerful, all-knowing, perfectly good being in permitting any particular instance of the *vast number* of instances of horrific suffering . . . that occurs daily in our world. (2001, 297, emphasis added)

In my view, the existence of a tremendous amount of inscrutable evil in the world explains the widespread interest in skeptical theism. The various theodicies on offer, both individually and collectively, fall well short of explaining why God permits the evils of our world. If we had plausible explanations for God's permission of all the evils in the world, no one would be particularly interested in skeptical theism. Similarly, if we had plausible explanations for God's permission of all the evils in the world except for, say, the suffering of Rowe's fawn, skeptical theism would be of very little interest. It would be reasonable to claim: we see that God has good reasons for all the evils except this one, so He probably has a good reason for that one too, even if we can't see what it is. I suggest further that it is the *scale* of the inscrutable evil in our world that leads some proponents of skeptical theism to emphasize the extremely feeble nature of our understanding of God's reasons for doing what He does. Consider, for example, these remarks by the founding father of skeptical theism:

A modest proposal might be that [God's] wisdom is to ours, roughly as an adult human's is to a one-month old infant's . . . even a one-month old infant can perhaps discern, in its inarticulate way, some of the purposes of his mother in her dealings with him . . . So for any selected instance of intense suffering, there is good reason to think that if there is an outweighing good . . . connected with it, we would not have epistemic access to it . . . if we think carefully about the sort of being theism proposes for our belief, it is entirely expectable . . . that the goods by virtue of which this being allows known suffering should *very often* be beyond our ken. (Wykstra 1984, 88–91, emphasis added; see also Fitzpatrick 1981, 25–27)

The upshot of this passage is that in most, if not all cases, we will have no idea what God's reasons are for permitting evil. Why does Wykstra make such claims—claims that go well beyond what is required to block the Noseeum Inference? I suggest that Wykstra does this precisely because he, like Rowe, is acutely aware of the massive amount of inscrutable evil that our world contains. Wykstra's plausible thought seems to be that so much inscrutability suggests that we have little understanding of why God does what He does. To a significant degree, we do not know what God is up to when He acts. Wykstra's comment about a one-month old infant is particularly striking; consider how little of his parents' motivations a one-month infant can understand. We can say that an infant's parent is *opaque* to the infant, meaning that because of the much greater sophistication and knowledge of the parent's mind as compared with that of the infant, the infant will, in general, have little understanding of the reasons behind the parent's actions. Similarly, we can define a view I shall call *opaque theism* as follows:

Opaque Theism: Because of the much greater sophistication and knowledge of God's mind as compared with the minds of human beings, human beings, in general, have little understanding of the reasons behind God's actions.

I take it that Wykstra's position is that the truth of opaque theism *explains* the widespread presence of inscrutable evil in the world. A somewhat oversimplified summary of the exchange between Rowe and Wykstra might go like this:

Rowe: There sure is a lot of inscrutable evil in the world—which makes it seem like God probably doesn't exist.

Wykstra: On the contrary!—God works in mysterious ways and His mind is largely incomprehensible to our puny human minds, so lots of inscrutable evil in the world is precisely what we should expect if God exists.

Assuming that God exists, the truth of opaque theism is the best explanation for the vast amount of inscrutable evil in the world. A widespread inability on the part of human beings to discern God's reasons for permitting evil is unlikely to be an evil-specific blindness; it is most plausibly understood as part of a fundamental human feebleness when it comes to comprehending the divine mind and its motivations. As God says: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways . . . For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8–9). And as one Christian thinker puts it: "God's ways must be mysterious or they would not be divine" (*Blackfriars* 1946, 282).

Let us say that a *mysterious divine action* is an act of God such that God's reason(s) for performing the action is (are) beyond our ken.⁴ Now consider a metaphorical object that we may call "God's Bag of Mysterious Actions". This metaphorical bag contains all (and only) mysterious divine actions. Skeptical theists seeking to avoid unwelcome implications of skeptical theism want to say something like this: we don't know much about God's Bag of Mysterious Actions beyond the fact that it's not empty—and the fact that the Bag isn't empty is sufficient to block the Noseum Inference but does not have any unwelcome further implications. However, the massive scale of inscrutable evil in the world tells us that not only is God's Bag of Mysterious Actions not empty—it is bursting at the seams. There are *lots* of actions in that Bag. Opaque theism explains why the bag is so full. It is worth noting that opaque theism does not imply that we have no understanding of what God's ultimate goals are. However, even if we have some grasp of God's ultimate goals, we may have little insight into why God does the particular things that He does, at least in part because we may have little understanding of the most effective means for God to attain His goals. As a simple illustration of this point, consider that an infant may (let us suppose) understand that her parent wants her to be healthy and yet have no understanding of why her parent subjects her to a painful vaccination. I shall use opaque theism to defend the following argument (assuming for the sake of argument that God exists):

The Argument from Opaque Theism

1. Our world contains a vast amount of inscrutable evil.
2. If God exists and (1) is true, then opaque theism is true.
3. God has a track record of engaging in deception about what will happen in the future.

⁴ For obvious reasons, divine *permissions* count as actions here.

4. If opaque theism is true and (3) is true, then divine testimony about what will happen in the future is not a source of knowledge.
5. Therefore, divine testimony about what will happen in the future is not a source of knowledge.

I take premise (1) to be obviously true, and I have explained the support for (2) above. Let us turn, then, to premises (3) and (4).

4. Divine Deception Revisited

I have previously argued that it is possible for it to be morally permissible (and even obligatory) for God to engage in deception (see also Hudson 2012, 153–154) and that Christian scripture depicts multiple examples of divine deception (Wielenberg 2014, 237–244). In previous work, I described what I call “the Great Deception Scenario”, which is “that there is, unknown to us, some great good that God can attain (or some great evil that He can avoid) only by employing the deception that all who believe in the Son will have eternal life” (Wielenberg 2014, 246; see also Rowe 2006, 90–91). I also claimed that there is a “real chance”, as opposed to a mere metaphysical possibility, that the Great Deception Scenario obtains (Wielenberg 2014, 246). I now believe that I was mistaken in claiming that skeptical theism helps to support the claim that there is a real chance that the Great Deception Scenario obtains (Wielenberg 2014, 245; see also Hudson 2012, 154). What I *should* have claimed is that opaque theism supports that claim (see also Oliveira 2020, 329–330).

The examples from scripture that I discussed in my previous work tell us that God has been deceptive in the past regarding future events, which makes it more plausible that God deceives us regarding future events. There are other examples of divine deception that strengthen that argument. One is at the very heart of Christianity—the Incarnation. By taking on human form as Jesus, God disguises Himself and intentionally misleads a great many people who, quite reasonably, take Him to be merely human and not divine.⁵ According to Christian scripture, Jesus gradually reveals Himself as the Messiah, a process that culminates with Jesus’s resurrection from the dead following His crucifixion. There are some parallels between this process of revelation and a scene in the 1971 film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Miyako Pleines describes the scene like this:

⁵ There is a long tradition in Christianity of understanding Jesus as intentionally deceiving the Devil through the Incarnation (see Denery 2015, 67-77 and 88-94).

When we first meet Willy Wonka, he walks towards the camera with a cane in hand. He has a pronounced limp, and he appears old and fragile. This is not the man we expected to see emerge from the greatest chocolate factory on Earth. Suddenly, his cane gets stuck in the cobblestone street. Wonka takes a few more unaided steps before stopping. He gives a slight look of concern before falling forward. We panic because we think the man is going down, only to find him tucking himself into an effortless somersault that ends with the audience cheering. (2022)

Gene Wilder, the actor who plays Wonka in the film, insisted that this scene be added to the film because he wanted to highlight Wonka's deceptiveness. Wilder explains: "No one will know from that time on whether I'm lying or telling the truth" (Pleines 2022).

Additionally, Matthew and Mark both describe an occasion on which Jesus deceives His disciples regarding future events. Some of Jesus's disciples ask Him: "[W]hat will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). In response, Jesus describes a series of (alleged) future events, culminating with God sending out "his angels with a loud trumpet call" to "gather his elect from the four winds" (Matthew 24:31). Throughout the description of these events, Jesus speaks to His disciples as if they will be present when all of this happens. For example, shortly after describing the trumpet call and the gathering of the elect, Jesus says to His disciples, "when *you* see all these things, *you* know that he is near" (Matthew 24:33, emphasis added). Jesus then says: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (Matthew 24:34; see also Mark 13:3–31). As Toussaint points out, "in all other instances in the Gospels 'this generation' refers to the then-present generation" (2004, 283). The most natural interpretation of the chapter is that Jesus is telling His disciples that the sequence of events He describes will take place sometime during their lifetimes—they will be present to observe all of these things (see Ehrman 2010, 156–162). Accordingly, early Christians anticipated that the *Parousia* (second coming) would happen in their lifetimes (see Ramage 2017, 200–203). That turned out to be false. Non-Christians are happy to see this as simply a case of Jesus being mistaken whereas Christians have, broadly speaking, tended to take one of two positions: *preterism*, according to which the events Jesus predicted have, despite appearances to the contrary, already happened, and *futurism*, according to which the events in question are still to come and, despite appearances to the contrary, Jesus did not intend to say that the events in question would happen within the lifetimes of at least some of his listeners (see Ezigbo 2015, 257–264). Both preterism and futurism require unnatural readings of the relevant text. However, once we recognize the permissibility (and other

examples) of divine deception, we are free to accept the most natural reading of the passage: Jesus deceives His disciples about the timing of the final judgement (perhaps because He wants them to live as if the final judgement could happen at any moment—but given opaque theism, who can say for sure?) In this same vein of a deceptive Jesus, Tyler Smith argues convincingly that the Gospel of John depicts “a Jesus who traffics in deception” (2017, 174) and that “deception and misdirection” are “parts of [Jesus’s] characteristic speech profile” in that Gospel. Smith likens the Johannine Jesus to the ancient Greek character Odysseus, who was “praised in antiquity for skillfully using deception” (182).⁶

Also relevant here are the Gospel reports that while Jesus was being crucified, He “cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani!’, that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matthew 27:46; see also Mark 15:34)—despite having earlier told His disciples that He would be crucified and subsequently resurrected. Jesus’s cry is the subject of much scholarly debate. However, it appears that, one way or another, there is some sort of divine deception going on here, either on the part of Jesus or God (the Father). If Jesus knows that God has not forsaken Him, then His dramatic crying out is part of His act of being merely human. On the other hand, if Jesus does think that God (the Father) has forsaken Him and is mistaken, then Jesus is deceived by the Father—deception of one member of the Trinity by another member.⁷ Edmund Neufeld (2021) suggests that “Jesus knew he must die, but in his final hours he expected some relief from God . . . but he perceived no response from God” (32). Nevertheless, according to Neufeld, Jesus was not actually forsaken by God (2021, 31). On that interpretation, it seems that God (the Father) deceives the human observers of Jesus’s crucifixion *through* Jesus, for Jesus’s cry surely caused those who heard it to believe (reasonably) that Jesus truly had been forsaken by God. Another interpretation is that God does forsake Jesus in that He lets Jesus’s enemies have their way with Jesus without intervening to put a stop to Jesus’s suffering (Kenneally 1946, 133). But Jesus does not merely state that God has forsaken Him; He asks *why*. Jesus’s forlorn cry of bafflement suggests that all is not proceeding according to God’s plan—if Jesus, who had predicted His own crucifixion, now does not understand what is happening, surely something has gone wrong? Yet, in the Christian view, it is all part of God’s plan. God’s plan therefore includes deception—part of the plan is to make it appear (certainly to human observers and possibly to Jesus as well) that things are not going according to the plan.

⁶ See also Reinhartz 2017.

⁷ This interpretation is suggested by Henry 1934.

Overall, then, there is a strong case to be made for premise (3) of the Argument from Opaque Theism. Let us turn next to premise (4), which says that God's track record of deception together with opaque theism means that God's testimony about what will happen in the future is not a source of knowledge.

5. Opaque Theism and Divine Deception

The vast amount of inscrutable evil in the world is explained by opaque theism:

Opaque Theism: Because of the much greater sophistication of God's mind as compared with the minds of human beings, human beings, in general, have little understanding of the reasons behind God's actions.

Additionally, the Christian God has a track record of deception that includes disguising Himself as a mere human being and repeatedly engaging in deception about future events. Let us make the optimistic assumption that non-reductionism about testimony is true. That means that testimony that *p* provides warrant for believing that *p* unless there is an undefeated defeater for *p* (Leonard 2023). So, let *p* = all who believe in the Son will have eternal life. According to non-reductionism about testimony, God's testimony that *p* should be taken as true unless we have reason to doubt it. I suggest that we do have reason to doubt it. First, we have God's track record, which includes a mixture of true and false claims about what the future will bring. Second, we have the truth of opaque theism. God routinely does things for reasons that are beyond our ken. It is part of His standard practice: So, He may well have a compelling reason to deceive us with respect to *p*. As Thomas Simpson points out, "speech is an intentional action" and sharing information is but one of many possible goals of such action (2012, 92). In light of God's track record and our feeble grasp of His reasons for action, any presumption of sincerity on the part of God is lost. Tess Dewhurst writes: "When a person orders a coffee at a café, she is entitled to believe that the waiter will not poison it. Of course, it is possible that the waiter has a secret grudge against her, and therefore has reason to poison her coffee, but she is entitled to presume that he has no reason to, and thus will not poison her coffee. One is similarly entitled to presume that a speaker has no reason to lie" (2009, 99). The analogy is instructive: suppose that the waiter had poisoned *and* deceived other customers for reasons beyond your ken. In that case you would lose not just your entitlement to presume that the waiter would not poison your coffee but also your entitlement to presume that the waiter would not deceive you. Similarly, because God has permitted countless evils for reasons beyond our ken *and* has been

deceptive in the past, we are not entitled to presume that God will not deceive us. Christopher Miles Coope, who raises doubts about the trustworthiness of divine testimony independently of skeptical theism, rhetorically asks: “[W]ho could possibly know what God might have a reason for doing?” (2001, 392).

With respect to p (all who believe in the Son will have eternal life), is this like the time Jesus accurately predicted Peter’s denial of Him—or is this like the time Jesus falsely told His disciples that they would experience the end of the age? There is simply no way to know. Therefore, opaque theism together with God’s track record of deception about future events provides an *undercutting* defeater (see Pollock 1986, 39) for all divine testimony about future events. Such a defeater does not give us grounds for thinking that divine testimony about future events is false; instead, it removes any warrant for thinking such events will occur that would otherwise be provided by the testimony. If we have no other reason for thinking that the events in question will occur, we are left with no basis for thinking that they will occur.

So, the idea behind premise (4) of my argument is that opaque theism and God’s record of deception work together to prevent divine testimony about the future from being a source of knowledge. It may be that each of opaque theism and God’s track record individually somewhat undermines divine testimony about the future as a source of knowledge, but I think that both of them together create more doubt. Suppose that God’s track record included some deception about the future but that God’s reasons for actions were largely transparent to human beings. In that situation we would generally know God’s reasons for testifying as He does, which presumably would give us some ability to distinguish cases of deception and honesty. As a simple illustration of this point, suppose we recognized that whenever God had been deceptive in the past it had been for reason R, and we are confronted with a situation in which God apparently reveals something about the future and we can see that it’s unlikely that reason R applies in the case at hand. Then, despite God’s past deception, we could be reasonably confident of God’s sincerity in the case at hand.

Alternatively, suppose that opaque theism was true but that God’s track record included no deception. In that case, despite often not knowing what God is up to, we could perhaps inductively infer that God is a reliable testifier about the future. It is the combination of God’s record of deception together with His habit of acting in mysterious ways that creates the problem: with God’s track record of deception and little insight into His reasons for action, it is not reasonable for us to trust what He tells us about the future.

6. Conclusion

I have argued here that God's track record together with opaque theism (rather than skeptical theism) leads to trouble for the Christian theist. However, it is also important to note that it is the existence of not just a bit but a vast amount of inscrutable evil that suggests opaque theism. Therefore, if a skeptical theist—or indeed any Christian theist—wishes to avoid the conclusion of the argument I have given, they must make the case against the existence of a lot of inscrutable evil in the world.⁸ But if Rowe is right that there are a great many inscrutable evils in the world—as I think he is—then there is a tension at the heart of Christianity. On the one hand we have opaque theism and a divine track record of deception; on the other hand we have the idea that God's testimony about what the future will bring is a source of knowledge about the future (see Hudson 2012, 152). Yet these two things appear to be in tension with one another. Coope (2001) nicely expresses this tension as follows:

Christianity is, at least in great measure, a revealed religion . . . [But] what makes us think that a good or perfect God would not deceive us about important matters, or that He would not lie to us? What gives us the assurance that what is apparently shown is not deliberately a mirage, put there for our good, for the good of other creatures, or for a dozen other reasons? (388)⁹

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⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for helping me to see this point.

⁹ I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for *TheoLogica* for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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