Skeptical theism, free will skepticism and atheism: pondering the scope of moral paralysis[1]

Teísmo escéptico, escepticismo sobre el libre albedrío y ateísmo: consideración sobre el alcance de la parálisis moral

Teísmo cético, ceticismo do livre alvedrio e ateísmo: pensar os alcances da paralisia moral

Rafael Miranda-Rojas[2]

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2   Doctor en Filosofía por la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile. Profesor de la Facultad de Ciencias Religiosas y Filosóficas, Universidad Católica del Maule (Chile). Correo electrónico: rafaelmirandarojas@gmail.com

Abstract

In this paper, I aim to show that Skeptical Theism (ST) implies the rejection of Free Will Skepticism (FWS). This is so because ST holds the so-called evidential argument from evil against theism. This argument presupposes free will (as a hidden premise), conducting this way to a skeptical conclusion without questioning the plausibility of FWS in the first place. I argue that this kind of conflict between two skeptical scenarios removes the validity of ST and FWS: It is *ad hoc* to assume a skeptical scenario S1 (ST) that supports thesis T1, and implicitly rejects the consequences of another skeptical scenario S2 (FWS) that discards T1. This implies the rejection of the so-called Moral Paralysis (MP) and shows a tension between Moral Skepticism (MS), ST and FWS. Moreover, the links between skepticism, dogmatism and atheism, as a case of epistemic defeasibility, are discussed.

Key Words: Skeptical Theism; Free Will Skepticism; Evidential argument; Evil; Moral Paralysis.

Resumen

En este artículo pretendo mostrar que el teísmo escéptico (TE) implica el rechazo del escepticismo sobre el libre albedrío (ELA). Lo anterior resulta debido a que TE sostiene el denominado argumento evidencial del mal contra el teísmo. Dicho argumento presupone el libre albedrío (como una premisa oculta), conduciendo hacia una conclusión escéptica sin cuestionar si quiera la posibilidad de ELA. Afirmo, entonces, que este tipo de conflicto entre dos escenarios escépticos remueve la validez tanto de TE como de ELA: resulta ad hoc asumir un escenario escéptico E1 (TE), el cual apoya la tesis T1, y que implícitamente rechaza las consecuencias de otro escenario escéptico E2 (ELA) que descarta T1. Lo anterior implica el rechazo de la denominada parálisis moral (PM) y revela una tensión entre el escepticismo moral (EM), TE y ELA. Adicionalmente, se discuten las conexiones entre escepticismo, dogmatismo y ateísmo como un caso de refutabilidad epistémica.

Palabras clave: Teísmo Escéptico, Escepticismo sobre el libre albedrío, Argumento Evidencial, Mal, Parálisis Moral.

Resumo

Nesse artigo tento demostrar que o teísmo cético (ST por sua sigla em inglês) implica a rejeição do ceticismo do livre alvedrio (FWS por sua sigla em inglês). Isso devido a que o teísmo cético (ST) admite um suposto argumento evidente do mal contra o teísmo. Esse argumento pressupõe o livre alvedrio (como premissa oculta), para conduzir desse modo a uma conclusão cética sem problematizar, primeiramente, a legitimidade do ceticismo do livre alvedrio (FWS). A meu ver, esse tipo de conflito entre dois cenários céticos elimina a validade do teísmo cético (ST) e do ceticismo do livre alvedrio (FWS): isto é assumir *ad hoc* um cenário cético S1 (teísmo cético) que afirma a tese T1, mas implicitamente rejeita as consequências do outro cenário cético S2 (ceticismo do livre alvedrio) que desconsidera T1. Isso indica a rejeição da suposta Paralisia Moral (MP) e aponta à tensão entre o ceticismo moral (MS), o teísmo cético (ST) e o ceticismo do livre alvedrio (FWS). Além disso, problematizam-se as relações entre ceticismo, dogmatismo e ateísmo, como um caso de improbabilidade epistêmica.

Palavras-chave: teísmo cético, ceticismo do livre alvedrio; argumento evidente; mal; paralisia moral.

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In this paper, my aim is to highlight a tension between two kinds of local skepticism and the practical-moral consequences of this conflict. By doing this, I hope to develop a new approach concerning the implausibility of affirming such skeptical theses in the first place. This enterprise is strengthened if there are intrinsic inconsistencies in the premises (implicitly or explicitly) or in the conclusions (and what follows from these conclusions)

of a skeptical scenario. Incompatibility of two local skepticisms, and the implausibility of the practical-moral consequences of such incompatibility, shows that skepticism is false, at least in these local cases. Put this way, the debate focuses on the hypotheses regarding the impossibility of showing that skepticism, broadly speaking, is false. Usually related to the subjective state of a subject S, to say that a skeptical scenario is false applies to cases where a criterion to discriminate between real cases and merely truthlike cases is found. I will try to show the falsity of the skeptical cases studied, appealing to an a priori inconsistency. My main point here is to show that this conflict between skeptical positions undermines both. Thus, it follows that not empirical evidence is required against skepticism, it suffices to find an a priori inconsistency. In other cases, like in the problem of pointless evil in the actual world, empirical evidence is more much appealing. It is important to bear in mind that one of the most difficult questions about skepticism is the indiscernibility criterion, that is, sharing (apparently) the same properties between a skeptical scenario and the nonskeptical situation. It is paradoxical (to say the less) that it is possible to affirm skepticism through indiscernibility, because in such a scenario what is true or false is not knowable. The mere possibility, the conceivability that I am a brain in a vat, seems to discredit that I know that I am not a brain in a vat. The modal epistemic link is very simple and has been widely discussed. Skeptical scenarios that could not be tested in the first place cannot be discarded. So, it does not follow from

K ¬ p ("I know that I am not a brain in a vat")

That

K ¬ ◊ p ("I know that it is impossible that I am a brain in a vat")

With restrictions like this, the skeptical slippery slope is avoided, at least in cases of thought experiments empirically uninformed. Could something similar with the tension that I observe between Skeptical Theism and Free Will Skepticism be done?

In a nutshell, Skeptical Theism (henceforth, ST) is "a strategy for bringing human cognitive limitations to bear in reply to arguments from

evil against the existence of God." (Dougherty, 2014) Question one: Does this kind of local skepticism (since it is about knowledge of the reasons God might have for allowing apparently gratuitous evil, and not about knowledge *simpliciter*) presuppose or assume that a subject S can freely decide to do what is wrong? Question two: Could there be any case or instance of gratuitous evil without free will? My main hypothesis is that this is not possible, and therefore ST demands rejecting Free Will Skepticism (henceforth, FWS). Since Alston (1991) and Howard-Snyder & Bergmann (2004) have developed a skeptical argument about the so-called problem of evil, it seems to be an implicit premise that without free will it is impossible to affirm gratuitous evil. Why is this so? Fundamentally, because the dialectic strategy against theism was not only to show the epistemic limitations of humans to know the reasons God might have for allowing some kinds of evils, but, at the same time, to put pressure on the idea that there is justification for evil in the first place. These notions (evil facts, evil actions and evil decisions) seem to presume free will; otherwise, the presence of evil in the world would be attributed to God. In fact, the standard defense (theodicy) aims at justifying the presence of evil in the world in order to achieve some greater good, with free will between them. Of course, this is not the central point of skeptical theism, at least not directly. It is, precisely, an implicit premise neither sustained nor argued. Rowe's argument (since 1979 until 2006) against the existence of God through pointless evil (or inscrutable evil) presupposes the possibility that pointless evil does not occur (that it is not necessary that there are pointless evils in the actual world); and this, again, presupposes free will. In this sense, my aim is to emphasize a tension between two kinds of skepticism and the moral consequences of this tension. Free will is taken for granted in the development of ST. Because free will is taken for granted, ST cannot be true or correct while FWS is also true or correct. That is: Both are inconsistent skeptical theses. FWS is a position that holds the thesis that there is no free will, therefore rejecting the mere possibility that a subject S decides to do A or B, or rejecting the deliberative process implicit on free will scenarios (Vilhauer, 2012). On the other hand, the so-called arguments from evil hold that at least some evils in the world are gratuitous or pointless, and, therefore, unjustified, assuming in this proposal that there is free will (Rowe, 1979; Howard-Snyder & Bergmann2004). About this, O´Connor (2010) states that (2010):

It is also presumed that human beings are free and responsible (on pain of attributing evil in the world to God alone, and so impugning His perfect goodness). Hence, those who believe that God is omni-determining typically are compatibilists with respect to freedom and (in this case) theological determinism. (p. 15)

This tension between ST and FWS shows that both proposals cannot be correct (if they are) simultaneously. This suggests that, paradoxically, a skeptical position demands some certainty: The certainty that what cannot be known is false by default. This has been discussed recently by Parker & Ian (2018). According to them, certainty about a belief B has a psychological background, which explains the link between certainty and dogmatism concerning skepticism: "Dogmatism can be understood as an unwavering conviction in one's beliefs and is further characterized by a failure to revise beliefs when confronted by contradictory evidence." (p. 158)

This means that there is no revision of this belief, it is not falsifiable. Skepticism seems to follow this path. The central point here is that conceptual inconsistency (a priori inconsistency) accomplishes the task of counterevidence, putting pressure on the conviction about skepticism. It is in this sense that a skeptical position could be understood as dogmatic, because it is a belief about the unknowability (henceforth, BU) of p with certainty, independent of the counterevidence against BU[3]. If this was the case with ST and FWS, it is implicit that there is no evidence that could defeat any of them or both. But the evidential argument from evil demands an evidentialist position, which, at the same time, lets the door to counterevidence against such a kind of argument open: It has a potential defeater and so, it is potentially false. This is a key issue for any skeptical position, because, *prima facie*, their truth value cannot be questioned without losing the main point of skepticism. As Maia (2002) points out, there is a limit to doubting: The moral (and political) consequences of skepticism.

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3   Following Lom (2001), an example of this kind of dogmatism is Nietzschean nihilism. According to Lom, on the path to questioning the value of moral positions, Nietzsche does not analyze the moral implications of nihilism, because it is a case of what is beyond doubt. According to Maia (2002, p. 551), Lom understands dogmatic nihilism as the belief that there is no value.

This means that practical consequences of skeptical scenarios should be considered at the moment of pondering their validity, if any.

On the other hand, FWS cannot be correct without evidence against free will, which suggests that besides being inconsistent with ST, FWS lacks epistemic justification. This suggests that skeptical hypotheses are cases of maladaptive beliefs, that is, beliefs that have an epistemic defect in their process of forming a belief. The so-called default mode network (henceforth, DMN), understood as the way through which subjects know automatically and intuitively (Parker & Ian, 2018, p. 162), suggests that some processes of belief/disbelief rely on analytic-empirical paths (Task positive network, TPN), which are centered on analytic and logical non social process. Precisely, TPN is the kind of process associated with disbelief and, therefore, with skepticism as a case of *certainty about disbelief*. About this, they hold that: "…nonreligious individuals may be inclined to produce messages which emphasize analytic/empirical arguments." (Parker & Ian, 2018, p. 183) In cases like this, it is relevant to bear in mind that *nonreligious* is a wider category than skeptical. The *absence of certainty* is understood as the *possibility of nondogmatic position*, for instance, in the case of an agnostic in contrast to an atheist (the latter being a case of dogmatism).

II

Bearing this in mind, Rutledge (2017 p. 263) has proposed recently a link between Moral Skepticism (MS) and ST, through what he calls Moral Paralysis (MP). As was reviewed in I, ST states that we do not have completely epistemic access to the existence of God. What is worse, ST tries to respond to arguments that state we have evidence against such existence. Particularly, the evidential argument from evil, which states that we have evidence against the existence of God through evil, conducts to a skeptical position not only about our knowledge of God, but about the reality of the object of that knowledge. In the words of Rutledge (2017), ST holds: "ST: We have no good reason for thinking that the goods, evils and entailment relations between them of which we are aware are representative of the goods, evils, and entailment relations between them that there are." (p. 263)

In other words, the fallibility and finitude of our knowledge would not allow us an access to the foundation of what is good and evil. Does this preclude also that a subject S takes certain decisions, specifically moral decisions, freely? This would be the case because ST stresses the reasons why some action could be understood as good or evil. That there are better or worse decisions seems to rely on the grounds of epistemic access to the criteria that make an action A better than B. In fact, one of the aspects that the argument from evil highlights is that not all events of evil seem to preclude gratuitous or pointless evil, cases in which there is not an ultimate event of goodness that justifies that evil, at least as far as S knows. As Dougherty (2016) points out, this is the central topic of the argument from evil:

> We will say that an evil, *E*, is 'pointless' or 'unjustified' if and only if there is no all-things-considered sufficient reason for God to allow it… Since on the present notion of pointlessness, the existence of unjustified evil is not compatible with the existence of God –that is, no possible world contains both God and unjustified evil. (p. 2)

Since William Rowe (1988), this has been the central point of the argument, mainly because it is this kind of events which seem to preclude the existence of God. Moreover, the example of Rowe (2004) is strengthened through the criteria of horrendous evil (not only gratuitous):

> A fawn is horribly burned in a forest fire caused by lightning. It lies on the forest floor suffering terribly for five days before death relieves it of its suffering.

> A five-year-old girl is brutally beaten, raped, and strangled in Flint, Michigan, on New Year's day a few years ago.

> The theist must believe that for each of these evils there is some greater good to which it leads, a good that an all-powerful being simply could not realize without permitting that evil. (pp. 5-6)

Rowe says that *theist must believe*, pursuing a *reductio ad absurdum* in case the theist agrees that there is no greater good behind those events. ST highlights the assumption, considering that an evidentialist position must agree with the limits of knowledge and, through this, with the *prima facie*

inscrutability of some events of evil. More recently, Trakakis (2007) has gone one step further, presenting a real case. This demands, at least, the absence of evidence against the pointless criterion. Another example of pointless evil seems to be the slaughter in Las Vegas on 2017. Not without reason, the media called this action *senseless evil*:

> Many of Trump's conservative Christian supporters praised his moral clarity. Evil is as evil does, they said, and if anything could be called evil, it is the senseless slaughter of people enjoying music on a Sunday night, unaware that a mass murderer loomed high above in a hotel suite. As remarks Susan Neiman, types of evils put some clarity between natural - moral, but the case of a deer burning for natural causes does not satisfy at all (is not her fault).[4]

Cases like this make the atheist rhetoric particularly strong, because beyond the epistemic discussion lies something indubitable: Actions like this would be intuitively *better not to occur*. The jump from this to the negation of the existence of God is the main point of discussion and does not mean to affirm *simpliciter* that there is no *senseless evil*. Moreover, the dichotomy natural evil – moral evil is not the central point here, since the theodicy's edge is not the main purpose of this paper.

III

So: Is it ST in a better epistemic position that atheism? Perhaps not, perhaps the best argument against pointless evil is the theist position, knowingly: Sustaining the inscrutability of some events of evil, indirectly rejecting the atheist assumption about pointless evil. This can be done, even if ST accepts that there is, in fact, horrendous evil. Of course, here inscrutability could not be understood as Rowe does and Dougherty (2016, p. 4) analyses: Pointless by default or which seems pointless. This assumption is epistemically unfounded and the theist position (including ST) does not have to assume plausibility of the link between:

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4   http://edition.cnn.com/2017/10/08/us/las-vegas-evil-debate/

i) Horrendous evil – Pointless evil.

Conceptually, there is a *non sequitur* here. This is so, basically, because there is a link or, more cautiously, it is possible that there could exist the link.

ii) Horrendous evil – Justified evil.

The main point is that *horrendous* and *pointless* have different conceptual content, they are not semantically equivalent concepts. So, the atheist that defends the evidential argument from evil must show that: a) *an evil is pointless not because it is horrendous*. Or, following Dougherty (2016): "Skeptical theists point out that absence of evidence is not always evidence of absence." (p. 5) The evidentialist assumption seems to preclude this possibility; It seems to demand that if there is evidence against pointless evils (that there is no such a thing as pointless evils), that should be evident, empirically evident. At this point, it is important to bear in mind that for the atheist the following distinction does not really matter:

iii) Justified evil – Pointless evil.

This is so because for atheism b) *there is no justifier that justified evil in the first place*. So, the evidential argument from evil puts pressure on the distinction justified-pointless without accepting the same thing (only assuming it for the sake of argument). Either way, this analysis shows that the dilemma that sustains MP does not hold, because the success of evidential argument from evil is not assured no matter what, which relates to the first horn of the dilemma. MP emerges at this point when a subject S has to make a rational decision that would be the better *all things considered*. Since there is no such an epistemic access to "all things considered", because there is no access to all the consequences of an action A, the subject S could take the paralysis option, not to do A[5]. Here is an example of MP and the eventual consequences of the same:

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5   An example of this on the public media is the *zugzwang* move (from chess), which appears at the end of the movie *Mr. Nobody*.
     http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0485947/?ref_=nv_sr_1

Suppose that Bethany witnesses a young child torturing a puppy by spraying it with lighter fluid. Moreover, suppose that she notices a matchbox nearby, and the child begins to reach for it. As a conscientious endorser of ST, Bethany begins to deliberate about whether or not she should intervene (and let us add that the child in question is, conveniently, having considerable yet not insuperable difficulty striking the matches, allowing Bethany more than sufficient time, under normal circumstances, to deliberate). She thinks to herself, 'Well, it's obvious that I don't know what the entailment relations are between the evil I am witnessing and other possible goods of much greater value. Given that I have no good reason to think my grasp of the realm of value is representative of how the realm of value really is, then, I should suspend my belief concerning whether intervening would be a morally obligatory action.' (Rutledge, 2017, p. 264)

If this was the direct (or indirect, for what matters here) consequence of ST in the realm of morality, even the defender of the skeptical view would agree that it is an undesirable consequence, because the central point of ST and the argument from evil is not rejecting a deliberative process in human beings, but to show the epistemic blindness about the potential gratuity of certain evil events: The absence of necessity of some evil events, the so-called greater good. However, it is important to note that even MP c) *is a deliberative choice*. In the example, Bethany decides not to intervene in the light of the potential counterintuitive consequences of doing so (preventing a major good). So, the problem is not that:

iv) Bethany does not deliberate rationally the best way to act. In fact she does.

Instead, the problem is:

v) The potential generalization of such a decision in similar circumstances, that is, MP.

This is the unacceptable consequence of ST, or so goes the argument against MP. Is that so? *Prima facie*, it seems that way, because the decision-making process of a subject S in cases like this relies on d) *the probable absence of reasons for acting, all things considered*. However, this is not the case, because:

vi) ST does not require MS and, for what matters here, neither MP.

In other words:

vii) MP is not an implicit premise of ST, contrary to the rejection of FWS discussed previously.

So, there is a *non sequitur* holding MP from ST. Moreover, ST does not have (and is not supposed to have) practical consequences, besides the theoretical plausibility of ST itself.

IV

Rutledge's (2017) central argument against ST is what he observes as a dilemma: "…either skeptical theism leads to moral skepticism or the evidential argument from evil succeeds. That is, the skeptical theist must choose one or the other of these unpalatable disjuncts." (p. 265)

It is worth asking if this dilemma is a problem for the skeptical theist or for the theist *simpliciter*. ST emerges as an alternative to the evidential argument from evil. As such, ST presupposes an incompatibilist view between God's existence – Evil in the world. More precisely, between:

viii) God's existence – Unjustified (pointless) evil in the world.

Unfortunately, the same argument that is useful for ST is used by the so-called new atheism to show that because there is an intrinsic epistemic limitation of a subject S on the argument from evil, such limitation avoids certainty on what the theist needs to affirm without doubt (without epistemic limitation) about God's existence and about their goodness. Would the triumph of the argument from evil be an unpalatable consequence for ST? Why? By itself, this consideration undermines the dilemma, because there will not be such unpalatable consequence as MP. Beyond this hermeneutic question there is one much more difficult, namely: Why the argument from evil should have the practical consequence of MP? This is not clear.

For Rutledge (2017), the central point is that MP is a consequence of MS, attending the criterion *all things considered*:

1. If ST is true, then we should be skeptical about the reliability of our all-things-considered value judgments.
2. If we should be skeptical about the reliability of our all-things-considered value judgments, then we are morally paralyzed (i.e. we cannot engage in moral deliberation on the basis of our value judgments).
3. Therefore, if ST is true, then we are morally paralyzed (from 1 & 2).
4. But it is absurd to believe that we are morally paralyzed (Premise).
5. Therefore, it is not the case that ST is true (from 3 & 4). (p. 268)

At first sight, this may be understood as a proof against MP, only because it is assumed as "absurd" (premise 4). Notwithstanding, the central problem that I have been trying to emphasize here is that:

ix) ST cannot be true if FWS is true.

If this is correct, the problem is with skeptical thesis *simpliciter* (any skeptical thesis). Following Caruso (2018), this seems to show that perhaps the problem is not MP, but MS. In fact, if the main point of questioning the deliberative process of making decisions (decisiveness) is to highlight the criterion of *all things considered*, then it is plausible to affirm that it does not matter if a subject S makes a decision based solely on *some things considered*, which is the most plausible scope for finite beings making finite decisions.

This is what Caruso calls consequentialist-based approaches, because mainly forward-looking aspects of action are considered, not backward, in contrast with the so-called Desert-based approach. Caruso says about this (2018):

> Consequentialist-based approaches are forward-looking in the sense that agents are considered proper targets of reprobation or punishment for immoral actions on the grounds that such treatment will…prevent the agent (or other agents) from performing that type of action in the

future. Desert-based responsibility…is considered to be backward-looking and retributivist in the sense that any punitive attitudes or treatments that are deemed appropriate responses for an immoral act/decision are warranted simply by virtue of the action/decision itself, irrespective of whatever good or bad results might follow from the punitive responses.[6] (p. 3)

The final consequence of taking seriously MS is not theoretical, but mainly practical: It would be impossible to attribute responsibility for action A or B, whatever the consequences of these actions are. In this sense, MP only shows an extremely bizarre unpractical consequence of MS. It is important to bear in mind that MP only shows us the counterintuitive consequences of demanding *all things considered* to be the central point of a decision-making process. So, the focus of MP e) *is not questioning if action A deserves praise or blame (central for MS positions), but to evaluate the mere possibility of making a decision in the first place*. Then, we can affirm that this moral consequence (MP), concerning ST and FWS, lacks epistemic warrant because:

x) The theoretical-practical analyses suggest that it is not correct to affirm MP in order to reject the evidential argument from evil.

At the same time:

xi) MP conflicts with FWS, showing that ST assumes the falsity of FWS, as it was intended in this paper.

If this is correct, the key point of this analysis is that the skeptical thesis has a central problem: f) *to assume without evidence the truth of the skeptical position*. At this point, the tensions between ST, MS and FWS make possible to show what is the core of epistemic problems with skepticism *simpliciter*.

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6   About this, see also García (2018).

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