

**Finding the Flaws in Wykstra's Formulation of Skeptical Theism:
An Alternative Argument for Atheism**

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At first glance the argument for skeptical theism as formulated by Stephen Wykstra seems to be acceptable reasoning in support of theism despite the problem of evil. On further examination, however, the argument only briefly sidesteps the greatest obstacle for theism. I find flaws with Wykstra's formulation including his use of the analogy between fleas in a garage and God's capacity and intention for good. He also assumes moral perfection of God, or at least moral superiority, which has not been successfully established by any of the traditional philosophical arguments for theism. Showing the weaknesses of skeptical theism has serious implications against choosing theism over atheism in the face of evil. This analysis eliminates skeptical theism as an acceptable argumentative strategy for navigating past the problem of evil. Given the evidential problem of evil, I believe that if a choice must be made between theism and atheism, the weaknesses of Wykstra's skeptical theism argument lead us to choose atheism.

Although agnosticism is currently a possible position in the discussion of theistic belief, I believe indefinite suspension of judgment is a poor approach. While someone may be hesitant to choose, this indecisiveness is unwarranted. Continual reevaluation of arguments and counterarguments as new evidence is presented is an epistemic responsibility and allows the option to change one's mind. Therefore, I assert that there is no danger in choosing between atheism and theism. I find it unnecessary to continue

the indecision of agnosticism ‘for the certainty of avoiding error,’ as philosopher William Rowe writes in *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction* (102). Ultimately, either atheism or theism is true; and thus, in opposition to Rowe’s claim, I believe that the agnostic is always wrong, no matter the truth. Hence, I argue that it is more admirable to choose either atheism or theism than to wade ambivalently in agnosticism.

After examining the Cosmological, Ontological, and Design Arguments as the traditional philosophical arguments for a theistic God, Rowe judges that “taken singly or together, they fail to establish theistic belief” (Rowe 66). He continues to refer to the arguments as plausible for God’s existence. Rowe offers the possibility of their significance for theism as he suggests they provide some rational support for the belief. However, these arguments do not prove God’s existence as has previously been claimed (Rowe 67). This lack of argumentative support permits theism to crumble further when evil is identified in the world. I believe the existence of unnecessary evils, like the fawn’s suffering, discredits theism and has not been successfully surpassed. Atheism is left as the more rational and reasonable option. Stephen Wykstra attempts to justify evil with skeptical theism by purporting the existence of divine goods that we are psychologically incapable of understanding. The following is the reconstruction of Wykstra’s argument from a handout written by William Stephens:

- 1) If we look in a garage and see no dog, then we’re entitled to believe that there’s no dog in the garage.
- 2) BUT, if we look in a garage and see no fleas, then we’re NOT entitled to believe that there are no fleas in the garage.
- 3) Similarly, our not being able to think of a good that might justify God in permitting the fawn’s suffering does NOT entitle us to think there isn’t such a good.
- 4) Therefore, the fact that we cannot even imagine what such a good would be is just what we should expect to be true of a God who knows goods that are inscrutable to us.

My first difficulty with Wykstra's argument arises from the analogy he draws from premise 2 in formulating premise 3. He is essentially comparing fleas and God's capacity and intentions for good. Regardless of the unflattering image of God that this offers, the analogy fails because of the dissimilarity between the two. With premises 1 and 2, I agree that a dog's presence should be easily perceived, but we cannot claim there are no fleas just because we fail to sense them. However, the presence of fleas in the garage can be objectively tested beyond our original sensory perception. For example, I might place a flea-less dog in the garage and check to see if he is infested with fleas after some time. If so, then I have confirmed the presence of fleas in the garage even though I did not initially see them. If the dog is not infested and no insecticides have been used on the dog or the garage during this time, then I can conclude that there were no fleas in the garage as I originally perceived. Wykstra attempts to create an analogy, but we cannot similarly test for the presence of God or for his divine concepts of good. He might further argue that this would be correct as it is precisely the intent of his conclusion: the divine goods are inscrutable to us and no human tests are capable of measuring for these goods. Yet I still find that the connection he is attempting to create is very weak. The two examples are far too dissimilar to function as a successful analogy. Wykstra would have to find something much closer to God in perceptibility, or lack thereof, which cannot be objectively tested as the fleas can. This task may prove to be quite difficult considering theism's assertion of God's uniqueness. This weakness in Wykstra's argument diminishes his ability to assert that divine and incomprehensible goods justify evil. We then return to atheism as our only valid option given the undeniable prevalence of evil in the world.

The other major complication I find in Wykstra's argument is his assumption of God's moral perfection, or at least moral superiority, in his conclusion. Even if I grant the analogy between premises 2 and 3 to be sufficient, it is still apparent that the conclusion does not necessarily follow from premise 3. Wykstra appears to be flirting with the fallacy of begging the question. He attempts to reassert theism's strength in the presence of evil with a conclusion that requires truth of theism, and consequently the theistic attributes. He contends that evil exists justifiably because God has moral perfection and supreme wisdom such that we should anticipate our inability to understand God's intentions of good in the face of evil. The theistic God must exist for us to have these expectations of him and ourselves. Without this assumption, the skeptical theism argument fails to accomplish the goal of justifying evil. If a morally perfect, omniscient creator of our world is not assumed, then we have no basis to accept Wykstra's answer that evil is justified by these superior expectations. The perfections implied by the theistic God transform evil into a problem that must be explained.

Wykstra might object to my argument by following William James in suggesting that the chance at receiving the vital goods is worth the risk of error (Rowe 102). However, I believe the potential for these vital goods provides a reason to suspect misguided intentions in human action. It seems more gratifying and awe-inspiring to witness and receive the true good spirit of humankind rather than to wonder if each kind act is used merely as means to earn the vital goods. This is not fatal to Wykstra's objection because some people may be able to overlook this pessimistic consideration and accept all good acts as admirable, regardless of the motivation.

However, I believe that Wykstra's derivation of inscrutable goods from theistic attributes renders humans morally paralyzed. We become incapable of judging our own actions, never mind anyone else's. By skeptical theism we can no longer assess the world by our conceptions of good and evil. How can we strive for moral perfection if it is constituted by a concept that we cannot comprehend? Our quest for moral perfection becomes aimless if we are unable to grasp the end we are working toward. Our notions become worthless if it can be argued that God has incomprehensible, yet superior goods that surpass our best efforts. We are forced to assume that any and all evils may have divine justification in order to maintain consistency. Why offer any moral concern to the beaten dog, the injured horse, the battered wife or the starving child if the fawn's suffering is justifiable by God? This position eliminates our capacity to distinguish when human intervention is warranted from when we interfere with God's goods.

I think that atheism offers liberation rather than moral handicap. For an atheist, evil is not a problem. There is no unattainable, incomprehensible example of a morally perfect creator to which every action and event is compared. Even without a standing example of moral perfection, we can function within our own ideals of morality, continually striving to be better and making judgments on moral evil, relative to our concepts of goodness. Natural evils like the fawn's suffering can be explained in conjunction with Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection. Nature maintains relatively stable and sustainable populations, before human intervention, by eliminating the weak through predation, competition, disease, or natural disasters. Any death or suffering that occurs in the process is essentially for the betterment of nature as a whole and need not be explained beyond the continual cycle of life and death. Therefore,

atheism establishes itself as a more rationally supported and reasonable position by eliminating evil as a problem.

Not only does Wykstra's Skeptical Theism argument fail to make a valid analogy between unseen fleas and God's inscrutable goods, it also assumes God's existence to account for evil and reaffirm belief in theism. I find that these weaknesses return us to analysis of the problem of evil. Atheism relinquishes us from the view of evil as a problem. Without the need to compare our world to a morally perfect being, we can reinterpret occurrences of "evil" as necessary consequences of life, including the case of the charred fawn. For an atheist, moral evils can still be justly analyzed by our conceptions of good and judged accordingly. The skeptical theist must instead acknowledge the infinite possibilities of divine goods which override our assessments and justify evils. Since I believe the only valid positions in the debate of God's existence are theism or atheism, agnostics must confront their hesitation and choose. Given Wykstra's inefficacy in formulating skeptical theism to explain the problem of evil, theism appears to be the weaker position. Thus, I propose that atheism is the only standing option.

Works Cited

- Rowe, William. *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2007. Print.
- Stephens, William. "William Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion*, Chapter 7: The Problem of Evil." 2010. Print.