

A Reply to Søvik¹

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Abstract: Recently in this journal, Atle Ottesen Søvik has argued that there is a critique of Skeptical Theism that I hardly discuss in my book *The God who Seeks but Seems to Hide*. According to him, this critique is "devastating" to the whole project of Skeptical Theism. Here I present his critique and show that he is incorrect.

Recently, in *Theofilos* 2018/1, Atle Ottesen Søvik argued that there is a critique of Skeptical Theism that I hardly discuss in my *The God who Seeks but Seems to Hide*. According to him, this critique is "devastating" to the whole project of Skeptical Theism. In the following, I present his critique and show that he is incorrect.

In *The God who Seeks but Seems to Hide*, I use and endorse a version of Michael Bergmann's Skeptical Theism and give it the more fitting name, Value Agnosticism.² Søvik claims that a fundamental thesis of Value Agnosticism, namely The Value Agnostic Thesis, is incompatible with the Principle of Credulity. To be explicit, he writes that "there is a principle that contradicts the Agnostic Value Thesis and that is the Principle of Credulity".³ This is a rather strong claim. Two theses, beliefs or propositions are contradictory if it is *impossible* for both to be true at the same time. Let us state the thesis and the principle to see if it is impossible for both to be true:

The Value Agnostic Thesis: We should be agnostic about whether or not we know all, or a representative sample,

of the possible goods and possible evils that there are.

The Principle of Credulity: Everything being equal, if it seems that p then probably p.⁵

I have spent a few minutes and a coffee break in order to find a contradiction here, but I cannot find one. Certainly, it would not be impossible to be agnostic with respect to one knowing a representative sample of the possible goods and possible evils that exist and, at the same time, believe that one should take one's "seemings" at face value. Perhaps, one has not got any seeming whatsoever with respect to one having representative knowledge of all the possible goods and evils that exist. It might even be the case that The Value Agnostic Thesis just seems to be true, in which case that very seeming together with the Principle of Credulity actually supports the Value Agnostic Thesis.

At another place, Søvik claims that the Principle of Credulity contradicts the Value Agnostic Thesis by "*being*" a reason against the agnosticism expressed by the Value Agnostic Thesis. This might be

taken (or let us take it) as the weaker claim that there actually is no contradiction here, but instead that the principle somehow reduces the probability of The Value Agnostic Thesis.⁶ However, I cannot see how the principle in itself would constitute such a reason. Alternatively then, Søvik means to say that the Principle of Credulity together with a "seeming" he himself has or (perhaps) we all should have, could constitute a reason against the Value Agnostic Thesis.⁷ If so, such a reason could be formulated as consisting of the following argument, which we might call *The Seeming Argument against the Value Agnostic Thesis*:

The Seeming Argument against The Value Agnostic Thesis:

- (1) We *seem* to know a representative sample, of the possible goods and possible evils that there are.
- (2) If we *seem* to know a representative sample of the possible goods and possible evils that there are then we probably know a representative sample of all the possible goods and possible evils that there are.

Therefore:

- (3) Probably we know a representative sample of all the possible goods and possible evils that there are

Premise (1) consists of an appeal to a presumed general seeming and premise (2) is a qualified version of the Principle of Credulity. However, (1) is controversial and (2) is false.

It is easy to see that (1) is controversial. There are quite a few skeptical theists (or value agnostics) who apparently do not have the seeming that (1) alludes to and who, in the literature on the subject, have argued against it. Also, if one wants

to convince someone else by presupposing a seeming as controversial as (1), well then you most certainly would fail in your endeavour.

Now, even if it is enough for me to deny (1), I actually think that the qualified version of the Principle of Credulity that (2) expresses is false. The Principle of Credulity has many proper areas of application, but to apply the principle to *direct* seemings about samples being representative, (say) with respect to a certain property, is not one of them. Here is a story which we can call *The Teleportation-story* I just made up:

The Teleportation-story:

Sam has just been teleported from earth. He is now standing on a distant planet revolving around the Alfa Centauri-system. After a while of dizziness from the teleportation, Sam starts looking towards the horizon. He sees two tiny (about one-meter tall) trees. Now, astonishingly enough, he finds himself with the rather complicated direct seeming that the trees he happens to see in front of him are representative of all the trees that exist on this planet. In other words, even though he does not know anything about the rest of the planet he thinks that probably there are no more trees on the planet that are taller than one meter.

Certainly, Sam would at the very least need to have additional reasons indicating something about how large the planet is and whether or not the climate is suitable for different types of trees. More specifically, Sam needs to have additional reasons concerning whether or not the climate is suitable for trees being (say) taller than one meter before he can be justified when forming a belief based on the seeming that he has.

By comparison, Søvik would need reasons in addition to the seeming he has in order to reach his conclusion. In general, I think one needs more than just a direct seeming, in order to reach a conclusion about such complicated things as samples being representative to whole groups of objects, with respect to the objects having certain properties. This would be true whether the objects in question are concrete or abstract. Also, this would be true whether or not the property of the objects in question is the property of ‘being taller than one meter’ (which is a property a concrete tree might have) or the property of ‘being able to figure in a reason God might have for permitting a certain evil’ (which is a property an abstract good might have). The latter is the property of possible goods that I focus on in *The God who Seeks but Seems to Hide*. Then again, in that book I am generally positive to the Principle of Credulity, even though, I describe the principle as an inference from ‘seemings’ and call it a SEEUM inference:

A SEEUM inference: An inference from ‘there seems to be an X’ to ‘there is an X’ or to ‘there probably is an X’.⁸

There is another principle that I am more skeptical about namely, The Negative Principle of Credulity. According to that principle, everything being equal, if it does not seem that p, then probably not p⁹. I present this principle, as an inference from the fact that one does not have any seemings about the subject matter in question. In the literature on Skeptical Theism, this inference is known as a NOSEEUM inference and it is defined like this:

A NOSEEUM inference: An inference from ‘it does not seem to be any X’ to ‘there is no X’ or to ‘there probably is no X’.¹⁰

A NOSEEUM inference is used in the following argument, which we can call The NOSEEUM *Argument from Evil*:

The NOSEEUM Argument from Evil:

- (1) There does not seem to exist a greater good that justifies God in permitting evil.
- (2) If there does not seem to exist a greater good that justifies God in permitting evil then probably such a good does not exist.

Therefore:

- (3) Probably there is no greater good that justifies God permitting evil

Furthermore:

- (4) If there is no greater good that justifies God in permitting evil than God does not exist.

Therefore:

- (5) Probably God does not exist

Søvik would argue against premise (1), by formulating a so-called theodicy, and he has no problem conceding the NOSEEUM inference expressed by premise (2). However, I cannot see a greater good that justifies God in permitting evil so I would concede (1), but I am very much against the NOSEEUM inference expressed by (2). The only way to justify (2) would be to argue that the possible goods and possible evils we know of are representative of the possible goods and possible evils there are and that they are representative with respect to the property of ‘being able to figure in a reason God has for permitting evil’.

Søvik does not give a reason for thinking that we have representative knowledge of the kind presupposed by premise (2). Also, the teleportation-story above

should make it obvious that to support the claim that we have representative knowledge about possible goods and possible evils, by alluding to a direct (complex) seeming, is both controversial and unconvincing.

So, let me end by offering a challenge for Søvik; I want him to formulate an argument for why we should accept the following proposition, which we can call *The Søvikian Proposition*:

The Søvikian Proposition:

The possible goods and possible evils we know of are representative of the possible goods and possible evils that really exists.

To my mind, there are two ways Søvik could respond to this challenge. He could try to argue that The Søvikian Proposition should be the default stance and that the prior or intrinsic probability of us knowing a representative sample of the possible goods and possible evils that exist, is high. More precisely, he would then need to argue that The Søvikian Proposition is

true in a high percentage of all possible worlds, or at least in this and the nearby possible worlds, for example, the worlds that include people like us. This I think is just an impossible task to take on.

Perhaps, an easier option would be to give a posteriori reasons for why The Søvikian Proposition is true in this actual world. Michael Tooley presents the only reason for this that I know of, in the literature on the subject. Tooley argues that since we still, to this day, have not discovered any new significant possible goods and evils, we may conclude that we know most or a representative sample of them.¹¹ However, from that fact, we can at most conclude that we will probably not discover any more such goods during our lifetime, not that there are none.¹² Then again, perhaps Søvik can come up with some other reason. However, until then I think we should suspend judgment with respect to The Søvikian Proposition and continue to endorse the Value Agnostic Thesis.

Notes

1. **Editorial note:** This article by Francis Jonbäck is not peer-reviewed and is therefore included in the *forum*-section. It is a reply to an earlier, peer-reviewed article by Atle Søvik in *Theofilos* 10 (2018), 4-11, entitled "A Fundamental Problem for Skeptical Theism".

2. The name 'Value Agnosticism' is more fitting, since it does not imply or suggest that one has to be a theist in order to endorse the thesis. See for example Justin McBrayer, 'Skeptical Theism' in *Philosophy Compass* (2010), 245 or Francis Jonbäck, *The God Who Seeks but Seems to Hide* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 45. 'Skepticism' is also often used as a broader claim that there is very little that we actually are justified in believing. See for example Graham Oppy, *Atheism and Agnosticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018), 14.

3. Søvik "A Fundamental Problem", 5.

4. Jonbäck, *The God Who Seeks*, 45.

5. See Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 20 or Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), ch. 13. See also Søvik, "A Fundamental Problem" 6.

6. Søvik at least admits that it is possible that there are types of good and evil beyond our ken. See Søvik, "A Fundamental Problem", 6.

7. This is, as far as I can see, the best interpretation of what Søvik tries to argue.

8. Jonbäck, *The God Who Seeks*, 50.

9. This principle was formulated, although not endorsed, by Michael Martin in 'The Principle of Credulity and Religious Experience,' *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), 83.

10. Ibid. This inference was named by Stephen Wykstra in 'The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of Appearance,' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984).

11. Michael Tooley, 'The Argument from Evil,' *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991), 114-15.

12. See Michael Bergmann, 'Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil,' in Thomas Flint (ed.) and Michael Rea (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford UP 2009), 392.

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