

# Agreeing to Disagree

Atle Ottesen Søvik

Professor of Systematic Theology,  
Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society  
*atle.o.sovik@mf.no*

Francis Jonbäck

Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Theology,  
Uppsala University  
*francis.jonback@teol.uu.se*

Our debate about whether or not we should be agnostic or more positive with respect to our knowledge of possible values as well as disvalues began in December 2016. Recently, we have written two responses to each other in *Theofilos* and continued the debate by sending exactly twelve e-mails back and forth and we have now decided to end the debate by agreeing to disagree.

The debate centered around the agnostic value thesis presented in Jonbäck's book *The God Who Seeks but Seems to Hide*. According to the thesis we should be agnostic about whether we know all, or even a representative sample, of the possible goods and possible evils that there are. An implication is that we should not say that probably there is pointless divine hiding or pointless evils, since God may have a good plan with it that we do not understand.

In *Theofilos* 2018/1, Atle Ottesen Søvik quite extensively discussed the agnostic value thesis. Among other things, Søvik argued that the agnostic value thesis counts against the principle of credulity according to which something seeming *p* are to be taken as *prima facie* evidence for *p*.

In *Theofilos* 2019/1, Jonbäck offered a reply claiming that he could see no contradiction between the agnostic value thesis and the principle of credulity. He claimed that we should believe that things are as they seem, but to him it does not seem that our understanding of goods and evils are either representative or not, and thus he is agnostic. Since Søvik claimed that we probably have a representative view with respect to possible goods and evils (which Jonbäck calls the Søvikian proposition), Jonbäck challenges Søvik to defend it.

So, there are two interconnected issues here. The first concerns whether or not there is a contradiction between the value agnostic thesis and the principle of credulity. The second concerns whether or not we should be agnostic or more positive with respect to having representative knowledge of possible goods and evils.

We both agree that there is no straightforward contradiction between the thesis and the principle. However, according to Søvik, there is another practice-oriented contradiction lurking in the bushes. At least in our moral practice and deliberation on how to act, it is vital that we can use a negative version of the principle

of credulity. If the agnostic value thesis is correct, then we cannot act on the basis that “the act does not seem to have bad consequences (lead to any overall bad states)” so “probably it will not have any bad consequences”. Thus, Søvik argues, we should be more positive with respect to our knowledge about the realm of values.

Jonbäck also thinks that this is a problem, but that this is a problem for atheists and not for theists. He has argued elsewhere that theists have independent or worldview-related reasons (reasons conditioned on the existence of God) for believing that the class of goods and evils with the property of *being able to figure in reasons humans have for deliberating and acting are representative*.<sup>1</sup>

Søvik does not think that this restricted strategy Jonbäck uses works because, as he argued in *Theofilos* 2018/1, the

value agnostic thesis also entails global agnosticism and skepticism with respect to trusting God. Jonbäck disagrees and has presented two defeaters for that argument elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

Søvik and Jonbäck agree that there may well be a lot of goods and evils that we do not know about. Søvik nevertheless wants to say at the present moment that probably these are (roughly) all the goods and evils there are, while being open to the fact that the future may prove him wrong. Jonbäck on the other hand prefers to say that since he cannot find reasons for believing that our sample of possible goods and evils are representative, we should not say today that probably we know (roughly) all the goods and evils there are, but rather we should be agnostic. We leave it up to the readers to make their own decision.

#### References

- Jonbäck, Francis, *The God who Seeks but Seems to Hide*, Leuven: Peeters, 2017.  
 Jonbäck, Francis, ‘A Reply to Søvik’, *Theofilos* 11, no. 1, (2019): 49-53.  
 Jonbäck, Francis, ‘Why Skeptical Theists are Not Involved in a Scenario of Olly-Style Deception’ *Forum Philosophicum*, 23, no. 1, (2018), 59-69.  
 Søvik, Atle Ottesen, “A Fundamental Problem for Skeptical Theism”, *Theofilos* 10, no. 1, (2018): 4-10.

#### Notes

1. See Francis Jonbäck, *The God who Seeks but Seems to Hide* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 66.
2. See Francis Jonbäck ‘Why Skeptical Theists are Not Involved in a Scenario of Olly-Style Deception’, *Forum Philosophicum* 23, no. 1 (2018).