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On John McClellan's "Not Skeptical Theism, but Trusting Theism"

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1. Introduction

I am grateful for having the opportunity to comment on John McClellan's interesting and stimulating (2016) paper. At the same time I am somewhat dissatisfied with the essay, because I think that the proposed "McClellan shift" from *skeptical* to *trusting* theism faces serious problems. The troubles are mainly caused by the way in which the author suggests to extend and "amend" the theist's argument via the Moorean shift (which is in turn intended to be a counter-argument to the atheist's evidential argument from evil).¹

2. The Logical and the Evidential Problem of Evil

To begin with, I wished that McClellan had more clearly distinguished between what Rowe calls the *logical*—sometimes also called *deductive*—problem of evil and the *evidential*—sometimes also called *inductive*—problem of evil (see Rowe, 2007, pp. 113, 119).

While the logical problem supposedly implies that theism is *logically inconsistent*, the evidential problem has no such intended implication. There is not enough space here to discuss the logical problem in detail, but here is its brief and informal presentation:

- (i) God exists and is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful.
- (ii) Evils exist.
- (iii) If God is all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful, then gratuitous evils do not exist.
- (iv) Gratuitous evils do not exist. (Modus Ponens on i and iii)
- (v) Evils exist, but gratuitous evils do not exist. (Conjunction Introduction on ii and iv)²

Leibniz's response to the logical problem is well-known. In a nutshell it is to say that (i) is true, that (ii) is true, and that two truths cannot contradict each other; just how exactly they square lies beyond the scope of human knowledge. I actually think that Leibniz has a point here, although this would surely need more discussion.

But even if the theist can dodge this bullet, the evidential problem of evil still has to be addressed. Per Rowe, atheistic proponents of the evidential problem hold that

... the variety and profusion of evil in our world, although perhaps not logically inconsistent with the existence of God, nevertheless provides *rational support* for the belief that the theistic God does not exist. (2007, p. 119)

3. The Atheist's Evidential Argument from Evil

In light of the horrendous and profuse evils in the world, the evidential argument from evil can be stated as follows (see Rowe, 2007, p. 120):

- | | | | |
|-----|-----|--|-------------------------|
| 1 | (1) | God exists \rightarrow Gratuitous evils do not exist | A ³ |
| 2 | (2) | Probably, gratuitous evils exist | A |
| 1,2 | (3) | Probably, God does not exist | "MT" ⁴ , 1,2 |

The atheist may then offer the following *sub-argument* in support of line (2):

- | | | | |
|-----|-----|---|----------------------|
| 4 | (4) | Inscrutable evils exist \rightarrow
Probably, gratuitous evils exist | A |
| 5 | (5) | Inscrutable evils exist | A |
| 4,5 | (6) | Probably, gratuitous evils exist | \rightarrow E, 4,5 |

Notice that McClellan in his reconstruction of the argument omits the probabilities (i.e. a subject's degrees of belief) that need to be built into assertions (2) and (3) and into all other assertions relevant for discussing the problem; after all, we are dealing here with the *evidential* (or *inductive*) problem of evil.

4. The Negative Response of Skeptical Theism

First, what is skeptical theism? According to Rowe,

Skeptical theism can be roughly described as the position which holds that arguments against the truth of theism suffer from the defect of presupposing certain claims to be true that are either false or not shown to be true. (2007, p. 121)

Skeptical theism responds *negatively* to the atheist's evidential argument

from evil by attacking the atheist's potential sub-argument for line (2). The negative claim is that there is *no* rational justification for believing that (2) is true, or that (2) "has not shown to be true" (Rowe, 2007, p. 121)—and that thus (3) has not shown to be true either.⁵ Here is my reconstruction of the skeptical theist's attack; it rejects line (4) above and instead accepts:

7	(7)	¬(Inscrutable evils exist → Probably, gratuitous evils exist)	A
7	(8)	Inscrutable evils exist & Improbably, gratuitous evils exist	logic, 7
7	(5)	Inscrutable evils exist	&E, 8
7	(9)	Improbably, gratuitous evils exist	&E, 8
7	(10)	Probably, gratuitous evils do not exist	logic of probability ⁶ , 9

For the skeptical theist the human mind is just too limited to know whether gratuitous evils likely exist; apparent gratuitous evils may always produce some hidden greater good, or prevent some hidden greater or equally bad evil to occur.

But skeptical theism also claims that just because we humans are *incompetent to detect* that God has no sufficient reasons for allowing some evils does *not* mean that God probably *has no* sufficient reasons for allowing them; in other words, the existence of inscrutable evils does not entail the probable existence of gratuitous evils.

For the skeptical theist inscrutable evils exist, and not only that—we should even *expect* them to exist, "given what we know of our cognitive limits" (Wykstra, 1984, p. 91). To the theorist's mind God-purposed goods are "in many cases nowhere within our ken" (Rowe, 2007, p. 122). They are unknowable to us humans, and "it should be expected that much of the suffering in our world will be inscrutable to us" (Rowe, 2007, p. 123). The skeptical theist thus thinks that the persistent intuition of believers and non-believers that the existence of inscrutable evil disconfirms theism is mistaken (see Rowe, 2007, p. 123).

5. The Theist's Counter-Argument via the Moorean Shift

The theist's argument via the Moorean shift goes like this:

1	(1)	God exists → Gratuitous evils do not exist	A 1
---	-----	--	-----

- | | | | |
|------|------|---|----------------|
| 11 | (11) | Probably, God exists | A ⁷ |
| 1,11 | (10) | Probably, gratuitous evils do not exist | “MP”, 1,11 |

By making this move, the theist in fact says to the atheist: >Your “MT” is my “MP”!<

Thus, the *nub of the matter* is whether or not we have stronger rational justification for accepting line (11)—that God likely exists—than we have for accepting line (2)—that gratuitous evils likely exist (see Rowe, 2007, pp. 129-130).

Notice that McClellan’s characterization of trusting theism does not provide a single argument to show that we have better reasons for accepting (11) than we have for accepting (2). Instead, McClellan embarks on a strategy that is beside the point to my mind. For, instead of attempting to defend line (11), as it stands, McClellan suggests to “amend” line (11) and then “argues” for line (10) in a way quite different than suggested by the theist’s argument via the Moorean shift. I shall return to this issue below.

6. The Trusting Theist’s Extended Argument via the Moorean Shift

According to McClellan, there is no need for a theist to resort to skeptical theism. The suggested alternative is trusting theism (to be explained in more detail). The author suggests to argue that the rationality of theism does not depend on the rationality of skeptical theism but rather on the rationality of trusting theism.

While the first three lines of the above argument remain the same, McClellan (in my reconstruction of his argument) then adds line (5) and principles (P5) and (P6) to them in order to obtain what he calls “the slightly extended Moorean Shift” (McClellan, section II). The argument continues as follows:

- | | | | |
|------|------|--|--|
| 5 | (5) | Inscrutable evils exist | A |
| P5 | (P5) | Inscrutable evils exist ↔
We humans are incompetent to detect whether gratuitous evils exist or not | A |
| 5,P5 | (P6) | We humans are incompetent to detect whether gratuitous evils exist or not | ↔E, 5,P5
(<i>The Presumption of Incompetence</i>) |

Notice though that these additions really do no further work in the initial theist’s argument via the Moorean shift.

7. The Trusting Theist's "Amended" Argument via the Moorean Shift

Next, McClellan suggests "amending" line (11) by actually *replacing* it with what I call *The Trusting Theist's Requirement* (P7).

- | | | |
|----|--|----------------|
| 1 | (1) God exists \rightarrow Gratuitous evils do not exist | A ⁸ |
| P7 | (P7) God is trustworthy, i.e. one <i>should trust</i> that gratuitous evils do not exist | A ⁹ |
| P7 | (10) Probably, gratuitous evils do not exist | ?, P7 |

As a *consequence* of (P7), as it were, one should give God—a loved one—the benefit of the doubt (just as one gives the benefit of the doubt to all other loved ones). That is, one should accept that, probably, gratuitous evils do not exist. So, it is now really (P7) where the action is.

Per McClellan, the commitment to *The Trusting Theist's Requirement* (P7) is an *amendment* to (11)—but one that actually amounts to *substituting* in the line "God is trustworthy" (or even "I *will* trust God") for line (11) (section III). Moreover, as McClellan says, this "resilient trust in God is the lynchpin of the response to the argument from evil I call 'trusting theism'" (section III).

But in my view this substitution is *no amendment* at all, as it robs the theist's *argument* via the Moorean shift its entire logico-probabilistic force. Among the many questions provoked by McClellan's *amendment-move* are the following ones:

- a. Hasn't line (1) been rendered totally idle now? It seems to me that it does no logical work any longer.
- b. Related to the previous point, what exactly is the inference rule now by appeal to which we are supposed to infer line (11) from (P7)? I don't see any.
- c. Given that it can be shown *somehow* that line (11) follows from (P7), the *nub of the matter* now is whether we have stronger justification for accepting (P7) than we have for accepting (2). But I do *not* see *any* justification for (P7) offered by the author.
- d. Given the previous points, this is probably why McClellan says, "To be clear, the response of trusting theism is not suitable as an *argument* intended to refute the atheist's position on gratuitous

evils” (section III). But if the response is *not* suitable as a *full-blown argument*, why would any non-trusting theist or non-theist (i.e. anyone who buys into some conception of natural religion) waste any rational thought on it?

- e. Finally, doesn't the assumption that God is trustworthy already follow from the author's *tacit* assumption that, probably, God exists and (if so) that he is omnibenevolent? In this case, doesn't McClellan already presuppose what he is trying to show (thereby being guilty of begging the question)?

8. Appendix

Here are some principles I take to be relevant for the discussion:

(P1) God exists $\leftrightarrow (\exists x)(x = G)$ ¹⁰

(P2) God is an omnipotent and omniscient being \leftrightarrow
 $(\exists x)(x = G \ \& \ x \text{ is } P_{\text{OMNI}} \ \& \ x \text{ is } S_{\text{OMNI}})$

(P3) Gratuitous evils exist \leftrightarrow

$(\exists x)_{\text{EVIL}} (\exists y)(y = G \ \& \ y \text{ has no sufficient reasons for allowing } x)$, i.e.
 God has *no* sufficient reasons for allowing *some* evils¹¹

(P4) Gratuitous evils do not exist \leftrightarrow

$\neg(\exists x)_{\text{EVIL}} (\exists y)(y = G \ \& \ y \text{ has no sufficient reasons for allowing } x)$,
 i.e.
 God *has* sufficient reasons for allowing *all* evils

(P5) Inscrutable evils exist \leftrightarrow

$(\exists x)_{\text{EVIL}} (\forall y)_{\text{HUMAN}} (y \text{ is incompetent to detect whether } x \text{ is gratuitous or not})$, i.e.

We humans are incompetent to detect whether gratuitous evils exist or not

(P6) The Presumption of Incompetence (the r.h.s. of (P5)):

We humans are incompetent to detect whether gratuitous evils exist or not

(P7) The Trusting Theist's Requirement:

God is trustworthy, i.e.

One *should trust*¹² that gratuitous evils do not exist

Notes

¹ For ease of exposition, I have compiled a list of principles that are relevant for the discussion and can be found in the Appendix, section 8.

On John McClellan's "Not Skeptical Theism, but Trusting Theism"

² Notice that while no probabilities are involved in the discussion of the logical problem of evil, probabilities play a crucial role in the discussion of the evidential (or *inductive*) problem of evil. For the purpose of this essay I implicitly adopt a theory of *subjective* probability, according to which probabilities are identified with the degrees of a subject's belief in something (where the degrees of belief may be in need of rational justification).

³ Throughout the essay I use the symbols " \neg ", "&", " \rightarrow ", " \leftrightarrow ", and " \equiv " to express negation, conjunction, the material conditional, the material biconditional, and identity, respectively.

⁴ The two non-standard rules of inference employed in this essay are characterized as follows:

"MT": Input: $s \rightarrow \neg t$; pr (t); Output: pr ($\neg s$); Dependencies: standard

"MP": Input: $s \rightarrow \neg t$; pr (s); Output: pr ($\neg t$); Dependencies: standard

There is a kinship between "MT" and Modus Tollens, and between "MP" and Modus Ponens (or conditional elimination: $\rightarrow E$), although these inference rules are obviously not exactly the same.

⁵ See Wykstra (1984). John Hick's *soul-making theodicy* (e.g. 1973, p. 60), on the other hand, gives a *positive* response to the argument by claiming that *there is* rational justification for believing that (2) is *false*; in other words, (2) *can* be shown to be *false* for the proponent of such a theodicy—where a theodicy is "an attempt to explain what God's purposes might be for permitting the profusion of evil in our world" (Rowe, 2007, p. 124).

⁶ That it is improbable that gratuitous evils exist entails that it is probable that gratuitous evils do not exist—if it is assumed, as it standardly is, that it is certain that either an event (in this case gratuitous evil) occurs or not.

⁷ In section III of his essay McClellan then proposes an "amendment" to this assumption by substituting "for 'God exists' something more like 'God is trustworthy' or perhaps even 'I will trust God'"; see below for more discussion of this point.

⁸ See principle (P2) of the Appendix for McClellan's characterization of God. While I think that the author does not overtly presuppose that God is also omnibenevolent, I suspect that this presupposition is *already covertly* employed by him; see next note.

⁹ What exactly is the rational justification for making this assumption? It seems that a person is rationally justified in accepting that God is trustworthy only if she is already justified in accepting that God is omnibenevolent—and thus no deceiver. But isn't the presupposition that God (in case he, probably, exists) is omnibenevolent precisely what is at stake?

¹⁰ I believe that it is immaterial to the arguments under scrutiny whether we think of "existence" as the usual first order logic quantifier " \exists " or as a genuine predicate; in a Quinean spirit I analyze it as the first order logic quantifier.

¹¹ Instead of using the term *gratuitous evil*, Rowe uses the terms *pointless*

evil or unnecessary evil. Per Rowe (2007, p. 120), pointless or unnecessary evils exist just in case there is “*an evil that God (if he exists) could have prevented without thereby losing an outweighing good or having to permit an evil equally bad or worse.*” I take it that McClellan has this in mind when he speaks of *gratuitous evils* as being such that God has *no sufficient* reasons to allow them (see McClellan, section I).

¹² And one should trust “devoutly” and “resiliently”; see McClellan, section III.

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