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Trust, Silence, and Liturgical Acts

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INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that skeptical theism, if true, would provide a forceful reply to the evidential problem of evil. Many of the leading objections to skeptical theism (hereafter, *ST*) take the form of showing unacceptable consequences of endorsing *ST* in response to the evidential problem of evil. This "Unacceptable Consequences" argument, as I shall refer to it, comes in a number of forms:

Global Skepticism: If *ST* were true and a satisfactory response to the evidential problem of evil, then by parity of reasons we would be committed to all sorts of wide-ranging skeptical conclusions, perhaps even global skepticism.[1]

Moral Skepticism: If *ST* were true and a satisfactory response to the evidential problem of evil, then by parity of reasons it would lead to a kind of moral skepticism.

Moral Paralysis: If *ST* were true and a satisfactory response to the evidential problem of evil, then by parity of reasons it would undermine moral deliberation.[2]

Lack of Trust: If *ST* were true and a satisfactory response to the evidential problem of evil, then it would undermine our trust in God.[3]

In the present chapter, I offer a defense of ST against one version of the Unacceptable Consequences argument, specifically the *Lack of Trust* argument. One might think that endorsing *ST* would make it more difficult for the individual to trust that God is working toward the good; my goal is to show why this is not the case.

[1] See, for example, McBrayer (2012), particularly section III; and Dougherty (2008).
[2] See, among others, McBrayer (2012), Jordan (2006), and Piper (2007).
[3] For an objection to *ST* along these lines, see Wielenberg (2010) and Maitzen (2007).

I argue that the motivation for adopting *ST* can be seen as a way of responding not only to the problem of evil, but also the problem of divine hiddenness.[4] Below, I address the relationship between *ST* and another problem—the problem of divine silence. As with discussions of the problem of evil, the problem of divine silence can focus either on divine silence in general or on the divine silence to a particular kind of suffering; I adopt the latter approach. I argue that how silence should be interpreted depends on what other beliefs we have about the character of the agent who is silent. Given a Christian understanding of the nature of God, divine silence need not give reason to doubt God's trustworthiness. Silence would only justify *Lack of Trust* if God did not provide an accessible way of experiencing His presence despite His silence. But divine silence is compatible with divine self-disclosure, and such self-disclosure can help sustain one's trust in God, despite God's silence.

I argue that the liturgical life of the Church—specifically Eucharistic celebration—can provide a basis of maintaining one's trust in God even if those practices do not result in propositional knowledge regarding His justification for evil. I end by considering what this argument does, and does not, establish. I do not seek to prove that skeptical theism is true, or that belief in God is rational. However, for one who is already disposed towards theistic belief of a certain sort, the presence of evils for which one does not know the reason or for which God does not provide any answer need not undermine one's trust in God.

I EVIL AND SILENCE

Most philosophers of religion who invoke *ST* do so in response to the problem of evil. Given that the "problem of evil" is not a single problem or argument, it is more accurate to say that most philosophers of religion who invoke skeptical theism do so in response to evidential versions of the problem of evil. According to these sorts of arguments, the amounts and kinds of evil the world contains give us reason or evidence to believe in the nonexistence of God even if they are not logically incompatible with his existence. Evidence of God's existence is, in a sense, hidden from us and our inability to understand what reasons He has for allowing evil, many claim, count against the rationality of belief in His existence.[5] And so while the problem of evil and the problem of

[4] It is not my intention to argue for skeptical theism in this chapter. For arguments of that sort, see McBrayer (2010b) and (2012) (as well as other chapters in this book).
[5] Since I'm primarily concerned with evidential versions of the problem of evil in this chapter, what is at issue is not God's existence but the rationality of belief in such.

divine hiddenness might be formally distinct,[6] many people take the hiddenness of God to be an evil that God must have a justifying reason for, given that it is precisely God's hiddenness that leads to individuals not believing in and uniting themselves to Him. So it is natural to see skeptical theism as a line of response not just to the problem of evil, but also to the problem of divine hiddenness.

In a recent article, Michael Rea argues that divine hiddenness does not cast doubt on the belief that God strongly desires to promote the well-being of all of His rational creatures, despite what many proponents—as well as some opponents—of the argument from divine hiddenness have supposed (Rea 2009). Rea thinks that what is usually thought of as the problem of divine hiddenness is best thought of instead as involving silence, rather than hiddenness. The reason for this is that the considerations used to motivate the claim that God is hidden—specifically, that the evidence in support of God's existence is inconclusive and that many individuals rarely if ever have an experience that seems to them to involve direct experience of the love or presence of God—does not establish the claim that God is hidden. Instead, it only establishes the weaker claim that God is silent: "that God hasn't made a special effort to ensure that most of his rational creatures detect (as such) whatever signs of his existence there might be" (Rea 2009: 80). However, even if a being isn't hidden, it may still be that he is silent in a way that calls into question his goodness:

> A man who chooses to whisper rather than shout instructions to his children, knowing all the while that they cannot (yet) hear him over the racket they are making, is being silent toward his children in the sense that I have in mind. . .. Henceforth, when I speak of divine silence I will be speaking simply of the fact that inconclusive evidence and absence of religious experience both obtain. As I understand it, then, divine silence is compatible with God's having provided some widely and readily accessible way for his creatures to find him and to experience his presence, albeit indirectly, despite his silence. (Rea 2009: 81)

This leads Rea to ask the following question: "Assuming divine silence doesn't contribute to our well-being or to any greater human good, does the fact of divine silence give us any reason to doubt that God cares about us?" (Rea 2009: 81). Divine silence, Rea argues, is compatible with the love and goodness of God if He provides an accessible way of experiencing His presence despite His silence. Such a way can be found in the liturgical life of the Church.

Below, I extend the general contours of Rea's response to the problem of divine silence to the closely related issues of *ST*. While Rea argues that divine silence is compatible with divine presence and love, I hope to place Rea's point within the context of a discussion about the implications of *ST*. *ST* arises in response to our not knowing what justifying reason God has for allowing

[6] See, for example, van Inwagen (2009); for a contrary position, see Schellenberg (2010).

certain evils to occur. I argue that the motivation for adopting *ST* need not be undermined by divine silence. As Rea's argument makes clear, how silence should be interpreted depends on what other beliefs we have about the character of the agent who is silent. Given a Christian understanding of the nature of God, divine silence does not give reason to believe in a *deus abscondus*. Liturgical practices can provide a way of responding to divine silence even if those practices do not result in propositional knowledge regarding the justification for evil. In particular, I show how liturgical acts can provide an opportunity for maintaining trust and faith in the face of God's apparent silence in the face of evil.

II SUFFERING IN SILENCE

Before moving to the argument, it will be helpful for us to have a particular case in mind. This is particularly true given that I'm interested in showing not how God's silence is no threat to a believer's trust in Him in the face of particular instances of suffering rather than in the face of evil in general.[7] One reason for focusing on a particular case, rather than evil in general, is that it helps avoid a problem that Michael Levine says plagues many contemporary analytic treatments of evil, namely "opting for an antiseptic approach to the problem of evil" (Levine 2000: 99). And others have raised a similar criticism that abstract treatments of evil are problematic because they tend to devalue the suffering of those who are experiencing the evil.[8] So my goal in this section is to give an example of evil that I'll be working with in what follows. And while this will be the only example that I'll be directly addressing, I think it should be obvious how many of the considerations below would also be relevant to other instances of suffering.

Consider the case of Lee. Lee is a theist who is justified in his theistic beliefs. He has considered the plethora of arguments for and against the existence of God. He thinks that a cumulative case—one based on, say, the modal ontological argument, the contingency-based cosmological argument, and the fine-tuning argument—can be made for the rationality of belief in God's existence. While he thinks that the logical problem of evil fails, he does think that the evidential problem of evil lowers the rationality of belief in God. That is, his subjective probability for the proposition "God exists" is lowered when he considers the existence, kinds, magnitude, and distribution of evil

[7] For a worthwhile discussion of what is particularly troubling about the problem of evil is suffering, see Stump (2010: 4ff).

[8] See, for instance, the discussion in Stump (2010).

in the world.[9] Yet, for him at least, the subjective probability is still above .5. More specifically, Lee is a Christian. He thinks that specific Christian doctrines—most notably the Incarnation and the Sacramental life of the Church—give reasons to think that God is not hidden to such a degree that it makes it irrational for him to believe in God's existence.

Lee is also a first-time father. Shortly after his son Cooper is born, Lee learns that Cooper suffers from a previously unknown genetic abnormality. Because no one has been previously diagnosed with the same abnormality, there is no prognosis for what the abnormality will mean for Cooper's life and future. But in the first few years of Cooper's life, it becomes clear that the abnormality causes myriad problems: gross motor delays, vestibular disorientation, coordination problems, and a significant speech delay, which perhaps masks a cognitive delay. These various problems cause suffering not only for Cooper (he is, for example, aware that he's unable to communicate effectively with others) but also for Lee, who loves and cares for the flourishing of his son. As Eleonore Stump has argued elsewhere, "what is bad about the evil a human being suffers is that it undermines (partly or entirely) her flourishing" (Stump 2010: 11).

The initial uncertainty of his son's illness causes Lee to go into depression for a while, for which he seeks therapy. Over the first few years of Cooper's life, Lee comes to function better under the uncertainty caused by Cooper's illness, but the situation still takes a toll on him. He takes a less-desirable job in another part of the country with a lower cost of living, relocating his family to where he and his wife can focus more on Cooper's care and therapy. There, Cooper receives physical, occupational, and speech therapy weekly. And while Cooper makes great strides, his condition still has a significant negative impact on his life. Over the years, Lee cries out repeatedly for God to help him know how best to care for his son, to minimize his son's suffering, and to cope with his own. But he receives no divine guidance on how best to seek care for Cooper; no reassurance that Cooper will flourish in his life; no confirmation of the quality of his parenting, protection, and love for Cooper.

III TRUST AND SILENCE

We now have a particular instance of suffering—Cooper's suffering from his genetic abnormality, but also the related suffering of Lee on behalf of Cooper. Furthermore, it is unclear to Lee as to why this particular instance of suffering has occurred. It seems to be, as one doctor once described Cooper's condition,

[9] It may be that embracing *ST* blocks the lowering of his subjective probability entirely, or that it merely reduces the degree to which the evidential problem of evil lowers the rationality of belief in God's existence.

"a freak accident, like getting struck by lightning—twice." As Trent Dougherty writes, "One's not understanding why one's suffering is occurring is a constituent, perhaps the key constituent, of one's overall suffering which makes it almost unbearable at times" (Dougherty 2012: 21). It's not that Lee thinks God doesn't have a good reason for allowing his son to suffer; rather, it's that he's asked God to help him understand what he can best do to alleviate and mitigate that suffering in a way that hasn't met with a reply. Lee, we might say, isn't looking for a theodicy; he's looking for a response. And instead he's met with silence.

We are now in a position to see how being in such a situation might incline a person towards endorsing *ST*. As David James Anderson writes, "Skeptical theists claim that this fact (the fact that we cannot see any possible reasons for divine permission of evil) is not at all surprising on theism, and does not count as a reason (at least not a strong reason) against it" (Anderson 2012: 27). Lee's awareness of the evidential problem of evil and the various theistic responses to it, especially when coupled with his own situation, is what inclines him to endorse *ST*. For example, he find himself agreeing with the words of Alvin Plantinga: "Our grasp of the fundamental ways of things is at best limited; there is no reason to think that if God *did* have a reason for permitting the evil in question, we would be the first to know" (Plantinga 1996: 70). But even if one grants this, it might seem that God's not giving an individual any indication what His reason is for allowing a particular instance of suffering might make it harder for that individual to trust God.

At this point, it would be helpful to have an account of the nature of trust. Annett Baier (1995) and Linda Zagzebski (2014) suggest that trust is a three-place relation. According to Zagzebski,

> trust combines epistemic, affective, and behavioral components, each of which is a three-place relation. When X trusts Y for purpose Z, (1) X *believes* that Y will get Z and that X may be harmed if Y does not do so. (2) X *feels* trusting towards Y for purpose Z, and (3) X *treats* Y as if it will get Z. I do not claim that all three components of trust are necessary in every instance, but I think that they are present in standard cases. (Zagzebski 2014: 2f in manuscript)

In the present context, we might say that Lee trusts God with Cooper's flourishing just in case (1) Lee believes that God is, in fact, working toward Cooper's flourishing; (2) Lee feels trusting toward God with respect to Cooper's flourishing; and (3) Lee treats God as if He will, to the best of his ability and consistent with His other aims, bring about Cooper's flourishing.[10] Cooper's genetic abnormality, and the suffering it causes, could of course impact any of these three elements, and it may impact them all. And these aspects of trust are

[10] Although Lee may hope for Cooper's flourishing, and the healing that it requires, in this life, he trusts that even if that doesn't happen here it will happen in the life to come.

also related to the theological virtue of faith, which requires trust in the one who is the object of one's faith. By faith, "man freely commits his entire self to God" (Aquinas 1954: 5) a commitment which could not be done unless the individual trusted God and His promises. According to the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, "faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the certainty of things that appear not." So Lee's trust in God is part of his faith in God and God's loving-kindness towards Cooper. The question, then, is how Lee can maintain trust and faith in God regarding Cooper despite his son's suffering.

As mentioned above, Michael Rea has recently argued that the bulk of the reasons usually given for divine hiddenness is better understood as supporting divine silence. Rea interprets the problem of divine hiddenness in terms of the following biconditional:

H1: God is hidden ↔ God permits INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE & ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE to obtain (Rea 2009, 78),

where inconclusive evidence and absence of religious experience are understood as follows:

INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE: For many people, the available a priori and empirical evidence in support of God's existence is inconclusive: one can be fully aware of it and at the same time rationally believe that God does not exist.

ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: Many people—believers and unbelievers alike—have never had an experience that seems to them to be a direct experience or awareness of the love or presence of God; and those who do have such experiences have them rarely. (Rea 2009: 76)

Rea grants that the left-to-right conditional involved in H1 is true; but he thinks that the right-to-left conditional is false, for the mere fact that God permits INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE doesn't mean that he is hidden. To support his claim, Rea makes the following analogy:

> Suppose there's an object—a car, perhaps—that is in plain sight in Wilma's driveway but which Wilma can't see because her eyes are closed. The car isn't hidden from her; she's just not looking. Indeed, even if someone had put the car in her driveway knowing that she wouldn't be looking, we wouldn't want to say that the person had hidden the car from her. (Rea 2009: 79)

Rea's suggestion is that, for all we know, "there's something analogous to 'opening our eyes' that we all can do that would allow us to receive experiences or other evidence of the presence of God" (Rea 2009: 79). Given that many, perhaps even most, people haven't done this, most people may have good reason for thinking that God doesn't exist insofar as they don't see any justifying reason God could have for allowing INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE. But Rea thinks it false to think of this as involving

hiddenness, which suggests that God is intentionally making it difficult for humans to figure out his presence:

> The term I would prefer to use in characterizing what we seem to know about God's self-disclosure to the bulk of humanity is, therefore, not hiddenness but rather silence. To say that something is hidden implies either that it has been deliberately concealed or that it has been concealed (deliberately or not) to such a degree that those from whom it is hidden can't reasonably be expected to find it. This is why divine hiddenness would seem to require justification. If God cares about our well-being, one would think that, absent special reasons for doing otherwise, he would put us in circumstances such that we could reasonably be expected eventually to find him. But inconclusive evidence and absence of religious experience don't imply that God is deliberately concealing his existence from us; nor do they imply, on their own, that we can't reasonably be expected eventually to find him. What they do imply is that God hasn't made a special effort to ensure that most of his rational creatures detect (as such) whatever signs of his existence there might be or whatever messages he might be sending us. (Rea 2009: 80).[11]

By divine silence, then, Rea means to refer to the fact that both INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE obtain, when God could disclose himself in a way that they fail to obtain.

Rea then raises the following question: "Assuming divine silence doesn't contribute to our well-being or to any greater human good, does the fact of divine silence give us any reason to doubt that God cares about us?" (Rea 2009: 81). The parallel between this question and the evidential problem of evil should be obvious (and if one thinks that divine silence is itself an evil, Rea's question becomes a version of the evidential problem of evil). While Rea thinks this question is "natural," he also thinks the reasoning behind it is flawed insofar as silence can be interpreted in different ways:

> It is flawed in just the same way in which complaints about the behavior of human persons are often flawed: it depends on a particular interpretation of behavior that can in fact be interpreted in any of a number of different ways, depending upon what assumptions we make about the person's beliefs, desires, motives, dispositions, and overall personality.... Silence is an interpretable kind of behavior; and, as with any other person, God's behavior doesn't wear its interpretation on its sleeve—it can be understood only in the light of substantial background information. (Rea 2009: 82f)

For Rea, divine silence would only give us reason to question God's love for us if "we had good reason to think that God had provided no way for us to find him or to experience his presence in the midst of his silence" (Rea 2009: 83). But, as Rea points out, many theists think it is false to say that they have no way

[11] Rea grants that further facts, when coupled with INCONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE and ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, may in fact justify the claim that God is hidden; but he doesn't think we yet have reason to think there are such further facts.

to experience God in the midst of His silence; that is, for many theists there are reasons to think that God has in fact provided other means to draw people into His presence. In the next section, I want to show how Christians in particular think that God has in fact provided other such means to show His love and solidarity with humans despite what might be interpreted as divine silence.[12]

IV THE INCARNATION AND THE TABLE

Above, I have summarized Rea's argument as to why divine silence need not conflict with God's love and care for His creation. Rea ends his article by considering and defending the following claim:

DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE: God has provided some widely and readily accessible way of finding him and experiencing his presence despite his silence.

If a person, such as Lee, had reason to think that DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE were true, then the mere fact (or even what would look like to that individual as a fact) that God is silent in the face of suffering would not by itself give reason to question God's concern for him. Rea in fact argues that we have some reason to think that DIVINE SELF-DISCLOSURE is plausibly true, as least for adherents of some religious traditions. Rea suggests the liturgical actions and practices "can be ways of experiencing the mediated presence of God" (Rea 2009: 92). It will, of course, be easier to proceed if we have a particular religious tradition, and a set of liturgical practices, in mind. In what follows, I'll explore Rea's suggestion along the lines of Christianity. But it should be clear from the treatment below how similar considerations might also be made within other religious and liturgical traditions.

At the heart of the Christian tradition is the belief that God became incarnate in human flesh in order to reconcile us with God and so that we might know God's love.[13] Furthermore, many Christians believe that the divine blessing is fully revealed and communicated in the Church's liturgy. The liturgy not only recalls the events of God's salvation of humans, but makes them present to those who participate in it. The Church's liturgy finds its most intense expression and culminates in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which confers efficacious grace for the redemption of God's creation.[14] Furthermore, "by the Eucharistic

[12] Russell asks the following question: "if God is good, and cares about us, wouldn't he want us to be apprised of his game plan? Wouldn't he want the universe to be morally transparent. . . to sensitive creatures like ourselves?" (Russell and Wykstra 1988: 147). Rea's article also gives an answer to this question; though it is an answer that I here do not have the space to investigate. See Rea (2009: 84–87).

[13] There are, of course, further reasons for the incarnation; see Beaudoin (2003: 457–60).

[14] I am not here arguing that the Eucharist is the only liturgical practice which can serve the role of preserving one's trust in God in the face of apparent divine silence, but only that it is one—perhaps even the best—liturgical practice to serve that role. By partaking of the Eucharist, one is participating in the very Incarnation of God Himself, and the justification and sanctification that His atoning life, death, and resurrection make possible.

celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all" (Beaudoin 2003: 1326). By participating in this sacrament, the believer augments his union with God and finds a foretaste of the perfected union with God that is to come. The Eucharist thus points beyond the suffering of this present life toward the beatific vision. "For now we see in a mirror [a]dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

When Lee participates in the Church's liturgy, and most specifically when he partakes of the Eucharist, Lee may find faith and trust in God to be sustainable despite Cooper's suffering. To be clear, the sacrament does not give Lee answers to his questions about God's reason for allowing Cooper to suffer. What he finds is compassion and presence, a presence which means that God is not silent to Lee's concerns. When partaking of the Eucharist, Lee feels God's presence more palpably than any other time, and there can trust that God *is* working toward the flourishing of all His people, including Cooper, even if he is not able to understand *how* that is. God may give no answers, but He gives Himself. And this, more than answers or reasons, is what Lee ultimately needs.[15] During the Eucharist, it is thus false that ABSENCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE obtains for Lee, and thus false that he experiences divine silence despite neither knowing God's reasons for allowing his son's suffering nor having guidance from God on best to care for Cooper.

V CONCLUSION

Above, I've suggested that the failure to understand why God allows a particular instance of suffering need not mean that God is silent with respect to that suffering. Drawing on Rea's work, I've argued that the liturgical life of the Church—specifically the Eucharistic celebration—can provide a basis of maintaining one's trust in God even if it does not result in propositional knowledge regarding His justification for evil. I have not attempted to argue that skeptical theism is true, or that believe in God is rational (although I have assumed that such believe can be rational, at least for some individuals). But

[15] Joshua Thurow has noted that if the *Moral Skepticism* version of *Unacceptable Consequences* succeeds, then the response I've given here to *Lack of Trust* will fail, since "if the moral skepticism problem goes through, then it seems like I wouldn't know that God is doing something good for me by providing the liturgy, and so I may still rightly not trust God." This seems to be true. But note that if this were the case, then it would be *Moral Skepticism* that was doing all the work, and not *Lack of Trust*. Keep in mind also that my goal in the present chapter is only to deal with the latter objection to *ST*.

for some individuals who are already disposed toward certain kinds of theistic belief, the presence of evils for which one does not know the reason or for which God does not provide any answer need not undermine one's trust in God. Justin P. McBrayer has recently argued that the skepticism of skeptical theism is context sensitive (McBrayer 2012). His conclusion sits well with what I've argued above. For some individuals, not knowing God's reason for allowing a particular evil might give them reason for doubting the existence or trustworthiness of God. But for other individuals who already have robust religious beliefs, particularly when they are in certain contexts—at the Table, for example—God's silence need not undermine their trust and faith.

Of course, whether or not the epistemic response to suffering outlined above will succeed for a particular individual will depend upon a number of factors: the suffering involved, the reasons the individual has which count in favor of her religious belief, the liturgical practices associated with those religious beliefs, etc.... Orthodoxy is, at least etymologically, about right worship rather than just mere right belief. And so it should not be surprising that a person's liturgical practices, and not just propositional beliefs, may be relevant to the individual's ability to trust God in the face of suffering.[16]

[16] I am very grateful to Brent Peterson, Joshua Thurow, and Leigh Vicens for very helpful and thorough sets of comments on an earlier draft of this chapter. I'd also like to thank Justin P. McBrayer and Trent Dougherty for inviting me to contribute to this project and allowing me to reflect on issues that are at least as much autobiographical as academic for me.

Part IV

Skeptical Theism's Implications for Morality

Skeptical Theism

New Essays

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS