

***Skeptical Demonism***  
***A failed response to a Humean challenge***

Wes Morrison  
University of Colorado Boulder

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on materials in Hume's *Dialogues*, I develop an argument for saying that it is unreasonable to accept either the hypothesis that the universe is ruled by perfect benevolence, or that it is ruled by perfect malice. I then show how skeptical theists would respond to this argument, and how their response might be imitated by an imaginary "skeptical demonist" (a defender of the "perfect malice" hypothesis). Finally, I give reasons for thinking that neither skeptical demonism nor skeptical theism is successful in blunting the force of the Humean challenge.

*Our sense of music, harmony, and indeed beauty of all kinds, gives satisfaction, without being absolutely necessary to the preservation and propagation of the species. But what racking pains, on the other hand, arise from gouts, gravels, megrims, toothaches, rheumatisms, where the injury to the animal machinery is either small or incurable? Mirth, laughter, play, frolic, seems gratuitous satisfactions, which have no further tendency: spleen, melancholy, discontent, superstition, are pains of the same nature. How then does the Divine benevolence display itself, in the sense of you Anthropomorphites? None but we Mystics, as you were pleased to call us, can account for this strange mixture of phenomena ...*

– David Hume<sup>1</sup>

The beauties and benefits that grace our lives are often said to show God's goodness to creatures, bearing witness to his love and care for them. Some theists even find in

them an argument for God's goodness and wisdom. But a moment's reflection shows this to be hopelessly one-sided. If we are to infer anything about God's moral character from our experience of the world, then – as Hume so clearly saw – we must consider the *mixture* of good *and* ill, of beauty *and* ugliness, of benefit *and* harm that characterizes life in our world.

### ***Hume's challenge***

In Part XI of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume has Philo<sup>2</sup> briefly consider four different hypotheses about the moral character of the “first causes” of the universe, with a view to deciding which of them best fits the “mixed phenomena” we experience.

There may four hypotheses be framed concerning the first causes of the universe: that they are endowed with perfect goodness; that they have perfect malice; that they are opposite, and have both goodness and malice; that they have neither goodness nor malice. Mixed phenomena can never prove the two former unmixed principles; and the uniformity and steadiness of general laws seem to oppose the third. The fourth, therefore, seems by far the most probable (212).

Hume here leaves open the possibility that the universe has two or more “first causes.” Given that we have no a priori information about its (or their) moral character, he holds that if we are to form any opinion on this subject, we must do so by “looking around the world” and considering how likely its general features are, given each of the four hypotheses. When we do so, he thinks we can effectively rule out all but the fourth. The two “unmixed” hypotheses do a poor job of explaining the

mixture of good and ill we find in the world. If the ultimate source of things were perfectly good, we would expect things to be far better. If it were perfectly malicious, we would expect things to be far worse.

For reasons that need not detain us, Hume sets aside the third hypothesis,<sup>3</sup> but he seems more favorably disposed to the fourth, according to which the ultimate source is “entirely indifferent” to the welfare of creatures, having “no more regard to good above ill, than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy” (211). This, Hume has Philo say, is the “true conclusion” – not because it gives us a reason to expect anything in particular, but because (unlike the other hypotheses) it gives us no reason to expect a world different from the one revealed to us by experience.

Does Hume really mean to endorse the indifference hypothesis? It’s not clear that he does. Elsewhere he has Philo defend the more modest thesis that there are no empirical grounds for drawing any definite conclusion about the moral character of the first causes of the universe.<sup>4</sup> It’s not entirely clear how all this is meant to fit together, but perhaps we can smooth things out by reading Hume as saying that one should not endorse any hypothesis about the moral character of the first causes, but that the indifference hypothesis is significantly more likely than any *one* of the others. That would give Hume’s view a modest tilt toward indifference, since indifference would be the *least unlikely* of the four. But such a tilt would be entirely consistent with his overall skepticism.

Whether or not this is the right way to read Hume, I believe that his *Dialogues* provide materials with which we can mount quite an interesting challenge

to the claim that “perfect goodness” (in a sense that entails perfect benevolence toward creatures) rules our world. The trick is to view it as one of several hypotheses, and then to show that the mixture of good and ill we find in the world is much less likely given either of the two “unmixed” hypotheses (perfect goodness or perfect malice) than it is given the indifference hypothesis. That will provide a reason for *not accepting* either of the unmixed hypotheses – that is, for refraining from judging either of them to be true (or especially likely).<sup>5</sup> Such a position would of course be entirely consistent with a complete suspense of judgment.<sup>6</sup>

By actively considering *both* “unmixed” hypotheses (perfect goodness *and* *perfect malice*) we can sharpen the challenge to the standard theistic view that a perfectly good deity rules the world. If the latter hypothesis fares no better than the former against our Humean challenge, that’s already a problem for traditional theists. And if it should turn out the observed mixture of good and ill makes it unreasonable to accept the perfect malice hypothesis, then theists have the non-trivial burden of explaining why it does not also make it unreasonable to accept the perfect goodness hypothesis.

To get a feel for how this sort of argument might go, it will help to pit very specific versions of the perfect goodness and perfect malice hypotheses against a very specific version of Hume’s *indifference* hypothesis. Then we can consider how well a Hume-style argument for not accepting either of the two “unmixed” hypotheses holds up against the challenge of *skeptical theism* and its evil twin, *skeptical demonism*.

### *Demonism vs. Indifference*

Since I want to focus attention primarily on the *moral character* of the ultimate source of things, I shall assume – at least for the sake of argument – that there is a single creator and ruler of the universe, and that it has the maximum possible degree of knowledge, intelligence, and power.<sup>7</sup> I shall also assume that its preference structure gives high priority to certain aesthetic values – that it could be expected to appreciate a great variety of different kinds of being, including a prodigious variety of different and interrelated types of living things. It will be convenient to treat these points as part of our background information, as we consider various hypotheses about the moral character of this being, particularly with respect to its attitude towards (and treatment of) sentient creatures.

Also included as part of our background information is the “uniformity and steadiness of general laws,” as well as the fact that the universe contains sentient creatures who can experience pleasure and pain and are capable of being benefited or harmed in many other ways, and that some of these creatures are rational animals, who can form social bonds and can make and carry out long-term plans. *Explicitly excluded* from background information is the mixture of goods and ills actually experienced by these creatures, the degree to which they flourish or flounder, and the distribution of pleasure and pain in their lives. Observations of this mixture will count as “new evidence” as we evaluate various hypotheses about the moral character of the creator and governor of the universe.

Just three such hypotheses will be considered: (i) that the creator is perfectly *benevolent*, (ii) that it is perfectly *malicious*, and (iii) that it is completely *indifferent*

to the welfare of individual creatures. An inventive philosopher might frame any number of “mixed” moral character hypotheses, but it will not be necessary to consider any of them here.

The first hypothesis is endorsed by classical theism; I’ll refer to it as the theistic view, or *theism* for short. Few (if any) people ever give serious consideration to the second hypothesis. But since the thought that the world is ruled by a maximally powerful, intelligent, and *malevolent* being will figure prominently in what follows, let’s give it a name. I’ll call it *supreme demonism* – or simply *demonism*. Demonists (if there are any) believe in what I shall refer to as *the Demon*.

The third hypothesis may be referred to as *the indifference hypothesis*, or simply as *indifference*. It is much more specific than Hume’s indifference hypothesis, since it concerns the moral character of a single maximally powerful and intelligent person.<sup>8</sup> But it does have this much in common with Hume’s idea: it says that the creator and ruler of the universe is not concerned with what’s good or bad for individual creatures.

So how do these hypotheses fare when we consider the “mixed phenomena” of good and ill in our world? Beginning with *demonism*, let’s do a thought-experiment of the kind suggested by another passage of the *Dialogues*.<sup>9</sup> Imagine someone of “very limited intelligence” (intelligence on, roughly, the human scale) who pays a “visit” to our world. Prior to this visit, she is given all the background information specified above. But she is also informed that the Demon is the creator and governor of the world she is about to observe. That’s all she knows before taking into account the “mixed phenomena” of good and ill to be found there. Here, then, is

the question. Should this visitor not be surprised – should she not be very surprised – to discover that the mixture isn't worse than she finds it to be? To find so much, and so many varieties of goodness in the mix? Think, for example, of heart-melting sunsets, of babies' smiles, of Mozart and Beethoven, of the feeling you have when you're simply glad to be alive. These and other experienced goods too numerous to mention are not in scarce supply. As Hume's Cleanthes says, "Health is more common than sickness; pleasure than pain; happiness than misery. And for one vexation which we meet with, we attain, upon computation, a hundred enjoyments" (200). Cleanthes may be stretching things a bit here, but he has a point.

So, then, our imaginary visitor must be quite surprised to discover so much pleasure and well-being and good cheer mixed in with all the misery that she must surely have expected to find. All the same, she knows that the Demon is the creator and ruler of this world, and she rightly concludes that he has a suitably malevolent reason for putting up with this profusion of goodness. No doubt, she reasons, the Demon has to permit great goods for the sake of yet greater evils or to prevent even greater goods.

Now imagine a second such visitor to our world – a person of limited intelligence who has the same background information as the first visitor, with one important exception. This visitor has been informed that the creator and ruler of the world he is about to observe is perfectly good and benevolent. He will be surprised by all the pain and misery and failure mixed in with all the pleasure and flourishing that he expected to find. But for reasons parallel to those cited above, he rightly concludes that the deity must have a suitably benevolent (though to him unknown)

reason for including so much misery in the mix. He doesn't know what that reason is, but he rightly concludes that there must be one.

Imagine, finally, a third visitor – one who has been given no prior information about the *moral character* of the creator and ruler of the world he is about to visit, but who has all the background information specified earlier. The exquisite beauty of nature and the prodigious variety of living things will not surprise him given what he's been told about the creator's aesthetic preferences. Nor will the mixture of good and ill experienced by the creatures surprise him, since it's well within the range of what might be expected in a world of the kind specified by his background information. "If every thing in the universe be conducted by general laws, and if animals be rendered susceptible of pain," he reasons, "it scarcely seems possible but some ill must arise in the various shocks of matter."<sup>10</sup> But once our third visitor has taken a look around, it may occur to him to wonder if anything can be said about the moral character of the creator and governor of this world. He inquires into the matter, and *demonism*, *theism*, and *indifference* are among the hypotheses that he considers and compares. He might, I suggest, give the following argument for preferring the indifference hypothesis, and so for not accepting either of the others. "Indifference makes no difference," he reasons. "That is, it makes no difference to what we should expect just on background information. But the mixture of good and ill that I've discovered would be very surprising indeed given either demonism or theism. If the Demon were in charge, one should expect things to be far worse for creatures. If a benevolent God were in charge, one would expect a vastly more favorable mixture of good and ill. The mixture that I've discovered is antecedently



*much* less likely on either demonism or theism than it is on the indifference hypothesis, and this is a reason of considerable weight for preferring it to the others. Given that there is nothing (other than the abundance of evil in the mixture, of course) to be said in favor of demonism, and nothing (other than the abundance of goodness in the mixture) to be said in favor of theism, it would be quite unreasonable for me to accept either of those hypotheses.”

The third visitor’s reasoning is not an argument to the best explanation, since he does not conclude that the indifference hypothesis is true, or even that it is particularly likely to be true. He doesn’t claim to have considered all the possibilities – for example, he hasn’t considered the possibility that the ultimate source of this world has a mixed moral character. But he does claim to have discovered a strong reason for preferring indifference to each of the other hypotheses he has considered, and so for not accepting either of them.

It will be useful to distinguish two arguments here – one for not accepting demonism, and one for not accepting theism. We can exhibit their common structure as follows. Let  $O$  be a set of uncontested observation statements, let  $H_1$  and  $H_2$  be a pair of logically incompatible hypotheses, and let  $B$  be everything we know that’s logically independent of the statements in  $O$ . We can then argue as follows.

1. The (epistemic<sup>11</sup>) probability of  $O$  given  $H_2$  and  $B$  is significantly higher than that of  $O$  given  $H_1$  and  $B$ .
2. The (epistemic) probability of  $H_2$  given  $B$  is not lower than that of  $H_1$  given  $B$ .
3. If 1 and 2 are both true, then  $O$  makes it unreasonable to accept  $H_1$ .

4. So O makes it unreasonable to accept H1.

Substitute the mixture of good and ill we find in the world for O, indifference for H2, and demonism for H1, and you have a Hume-inspired argument for concluding that the mixture makes it unreasonable to accept demonism. And, *mutatis mutandis*, you have a Hume-inspired argument for concluding that the mixture makes it unreasonable to accept theism. I shall refer to each of these arguments as *the Humean Argument*, leaving it to the context to make clear which of them I am referring to.<sup>12</sup>

So how might a demonist (or a theist) respond to the Humean Argument? One possibility, of course, would be to give strong reasons for believing that demonism (or theism) is highly likely given only background information. Then premise 2 would be false, and we'd be in the position of the first (or the second) Humean visitor to our world. Another possibility would be to defend a theory about reasons the Demon (or God) would likely have for causing or permitting the mixed phenomena disclosed by experience – or, as we may put it, to provide a “demonadicy” (or a theodicy). If the probability of some comprehensive demonadicy (or theodicy) given demonism (or theism) were high enough, this would undercut the claim that the mixture of good and ill is surprising on that hypothesis.

But there is a third possibility – the one I shall attempt to evaluate in this paper. Demonists (or theists) may argue that it is unreasonable to form any expectation whatever about the mixture of good and ill given demonism (or theism). They may say that the probability of the mixture we've discovered given demonism (and also given theism) is inscrutable – that it is neither high nor low nor middling

nor a bit above middling nor a bit below. In order to see why they might think this, we need to take a quick look at what has come to be known as the “skeptical theist” response to evidential arguments from evil.<sup>13</sup>

*Skeptical theism and the “noseeum” inference*

Skeptical theism was originally developed in response to a rather different sort of evidential argument – one that explicitly relies on what Stephen Wykstra has aptly dubbed a “noseeum” inference – an inference from our failure to discover (to “see”) a morally sufficient reason for God’s permitting some terrible evil to the conclusion that there is no such reason.<sup>14</sup> Here is a generic version of the argument.

5. Despite our best efforts, we have been unable to discover reasons that would justify God in permitting some of the worst evils.
6. So it’s quite likely that there is no such reason.
7. But God (if he exists) wouldn’t permit the worst evils unless he had a justifying reason.
8. So it’s quite unlikely that God exists.

Since this argument bears a strong resemblance to William Rowe’s 1979 version of the evidential argument from evil, I’ll refer to it as a “Rowe-style argument.”<sup>15</sup>

Skeptical theists accept premises 5 and 7 of the Rowe-style argument, but reject the noseeum inference from 5 to 6. Some try to block it by developing “just-so” stories in which God has morally sufficient reasons for permitting various evils. They don’t claim that any of these stories is especially likely to be true, but merely that one of them might, for all we know, be true – in which case, there is (for all we know) a God-justifying reason even though we have been unable to discover it.

Suppose, for example, that libertarian free will is necessary for moral responsibility and moral goodness. And suppose further that for each possible person there is a fact of the matter about what that person would freely do in any possible situation in which she was made free. For all we know, the truth-values for these “counterfactuals of creaturely freedom” (as they have come to be called) might be such that not even God could achieve a better overall balance of *moral* good and evil. Arguably, this would provide a God-justifying reason for permitting all the evil that exists. So then, for all we know, there is such a reason.<sup>16</sup>

Some of the details of this story (especially the part about the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom) are highly controversial. But if you think it might (for all we know) be true, then you have a reason to reject the noseem inference at the heart of the Rowe-style evidential argument. If, on the other hand, you think this particular story is too implausible to take seriously, you may wish to consider other stories designed to do the same job. As long as we can’t discredit *all* such stories, a skeptical theist may insist that we are in no position to make the noseem inference from 5 to 6 of the Rowe-style argument.<sup>17</sup>

However, many skeptical theists think we don’t need a just-so story in order to see that this particular noseem inference is fallacious. It is unreasonable, they think, to expect finite creatures like us to discover *God-sized* reasons for permitting evil. And this, they say, is all it takes to derail the move from 5 to 6. Stephen Wykstra, one of the pioneers of this view, puts the matter succinctly: “If God does exist, it’s not surprising that we often cannot see these goods God sees. God being God (and us being us), this is just what one should expect.”<sup>18</sup> But if it’s unsurprising

that we don't see the goods for the sake of which God permits terrible evils, then the fact that we don't see them constitutes little evidence for thinking that they're not there.<sup>19</sup>

Michael Bergmann, another prominent skeptical theist, builds a formidable case against Rowe's noseem inference. His argument deploys several much discussed "skeptical theses," which can perhaps be summarized in one sentence: we have no good reason to think that the possible goods and evils and entailment relations we know of are a representative sample of all that there are.<sup>20</sup> Bergmann thinks his skeptical theses are plausible, that the burden of proof is on anyone who rejects them, and that together they provide a strong "commonsensical" reason for rejecting the noseem inference at the heart of the Rowe-style argument.<sup>21</sup>

To see how this works, let  $H$  be some horrific evil for which we can think of no God-satisfying reason. Then for all we know, there might be some great *unknown good* that God cannot achieve without permitting  $H$ ; or there might be some even greater *unknown evil* that God cannot prevent without permitting  $H$ ; or there might be some *unknown entailment relation* such that one or the other of these things holds with respect to some *known goods or evils*. In any or all of these ways, God might (for all we know) have a morally sufficient reason for permitting  $H$  that is utterly beyond our ken. The fact that we can't see what *God's* reasons are is therefore utterly unsurprising.

### ***Implications for the Humean Argument***

Even if reflections like these derail the Rowe-style argument, they seem at first glance to be entirely irrelevant to the Humean Argument, since it doesn't make

the noseum inference that skeptical theists seek to undermine. The Humean Argument says that the observed mixture of good and evil is surprising given theism. That, and *not* the fact that no one has come up with a plausible God-justifying reason for permitting evil, is said to make the observed mixture count as evidence against theism.<sup>22</sup> It's true, of course, that a highly plausible God-justifying reason would blunt the force of the argument by raising the probability of the observed mixture given theism. But that's not much of an objection unless and until somebody actually provides such an account – or, more precisely, until somebody comes up with one that is quite likely given theism.

Skeptical theists disagree. They think this places the burden of proof in the wrong place. What we should say about the probability of the mixture of good and ill given theism, they say, depends on the correct assessment of the probability of God-justifying reasons for permitting so much evil in the mixture. Before concluding that the probability of the mixture given theism is low, we must first establish that the probability of a God-justifying reason is low.<sup>23</sup> But since we cannot avail ourselves of a noseum inference, we are unable to do that. We are simply “in the dark” about the probability of a God-justifying reason – in which case (so it is claimed) we are *also* completely “in the dark” about the probability of the observed mixture of good and ill given theism. We can't say that it's high or low or middling or a bit above middling or a bit below – it's simply inscrutable. Therefore (it is alleged) we cannot meaningfully compare it to the probability of the observed mixture given indifference, and the first premise of our Humean Argument for not accepting theism must be rejected.

I do not think that this is an adequate response to the Humean Argument, but I'll hold my fire until we've seen how the issue plays out in the context of the parallel Humean challenge to *demonism*. If all goes according to plan, it will be obvious to the reader that the skeptical theist's general strategy works just as well (or poorly) for demonism as it does for theism. So what I have to say in defense of premise 1 of the Humean Argument for not accepting demonism will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the parallel argument for not accepting theism.

### *Skeptical demonism*

If a perfectly malicious Demon rules the universe, he must have suitably malevolent reasons for permitting creatures to experience so much goodness and for permitting them to flourish as often and for as long as they do. At this point, someone might be tempted by a Rowe-style "argument from goodness" against demonism. Letting G stand for the amount and variety of goodness we find in the lives of creatures in our world, the argument might go something like this.

9. Despite our best efforts, we have been unable to discover a demonically sufficient reason for permitting G.
10. So it's quite likely that there is no such reason.
11. But the Demon (if he exists) would not permit G unless he had a demonically sufficient reason for doing so.
12. So it's quite likely that the Demon does not exist.

We are now ready to add a *skeptical demonist* to our cast of characters. The skeptical demonist grants premises 9 and 11, but she rejects the noseum inference of 10 from 9. She may argue that it is fallacious by developing a just-so story about

the Demon's reasons for permitting creatures to experience so much goodness. To take just one example, she might provide a Molinist-style free will defense. For all we know, the Demon strongly prefers harms that are *freely inflicted* to those that aren't. A vast amount of harm is freely inflicted on creatures by other creatures, and of course the Demon rejoices in such harm. If you ask why the Demon permits so much goodness, our skeptical demonist may reply: "Well, for all we know, the Demon's preferences and the truth-values of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are such that the Demon is most fully satisfied by a policy that permits many animals to flourish and to experience many goods." As far as I can see, this move works just as well (or poorly) for a demonist as it does for a theist.

If you don't think this story is plausible enough to do the job, the skeptical demonist should be able to come up with others – stories featuring heartbreak and loss (which obviously presuppose hearts to be broken and goods to be lost), or perhaps stories about an afterlife in which creatures who were happy on earth come to wish they'd never been born and in which the evils they then experience are intensified by the memory of goods experienced in their pre-mortem lives. The skeptical demonist will then demand that we rule out *all* such stories before concluding that there is no demonically sufficient reason.

Alternatively, the skeptical demonist may claim that no such story is required. If the Demon exists, he possesses the maximum possible degree of knowledge and intelligence and power, and from this alone she may conclude that it is to be expected that *Demon-sized* reasons would be utterly beyond our ken. Our failure to discern them therefore provides little or no evidence for saying that there are none.



Suppose (at least for the sake of argument) that this is right. How might it be relevant to the *Humean* line of argument developed earlier? Once again, the skeptical demonist may borrow from the skeptical theist's playbook. She may insist that the probability of the observed mixture given demonism *depends on* the probability of a demonically sufficient reason for causing or permitting the observed mixture. In order to conclude that the probability of the mixture given demonism is low, one must first establish that the probability of a demonically sufficient reason is low. But without a noseum inference of the sort that's just been demolished, it's not easy to see how that could be done.

Our skeptical demonist may also borrow from Bergmann's way of making the skeptical theist's case, working with suitable demonic analogues of his skeptical theses. For all we know, she may say, there are unknown goods and evils and entailment relations, such that the demon cannot prevent the goods we celebrate without giving up great (known or unknown) evils or permitting even greater (known or unknown) goods. We have been given no reason to rule out these possibilities.

Since we're so completely "in the dark" about these matters, we must refrain from making any judgment at all about the probability of a demonically sufficient reason. It is simply inscrutable. But then the probability of the observed mixture given demonism must also be inscrutable. In which case, we can't compare it to the probability of the observed mixture given indifference, and premise 1 of the Humean Argument must be rejected. Thus reasons our skeptical demonist.

### *The failure of skeptical demonism*

Does this take care of business for the demonist? I think not. Let's begin by recalling that the Humean Argument compares a pair of conditional *epistemic* probabilities. To what degree, it asks, should demonism should lead a rational person to expect a mixture of good and ill like the one we find in our world? And how does that compare with the degree to which one should expect such a mixture given the indifference hypothesis? To answer these questions we do *not* need to assess the "objective probability" of a demonically satisfying reason within some large and uncharted space of logically possible goods and evils and entailments. We can find significant support for premise 1 without attempting anything as ambitious as that.

Think about it this way. The Demon (if he exists) is perfectly malicious. He hates the goods in life that we celebrate, and rejoices in the horrors we lament. Causing horror and misery and preventing happiness and pleasure are among his highest priorities. Given such a perfectly malevolent preference structure, he has *a* reason – indeed a very powerful reason – for producing a much less "friendly" mixture of good and ill. And this (I say) gives us quite a strong reason to expect a less favorable mixture given demonism. By contrast, we have no reason at all to find the observed mixture of good and ill especially surprising given the indifference hypothesis. (Indifference, we've said, makes no difference.) So in the absence of positive evidence for thinking otherwise, we should conclude that the mixture is significantly *more* surprising given demonism than given indifference, which is all that premise 1 of the Humean Argument says.

The skeptical demonist may reply that without knowing more about the “space” of goods and evils and entailments that would be known to the Demon, we have no reason to deny that there are demonically satisfying reasons for causing/permitting the mixture, and (therefore) no reason to form any expectation about the mixture given demonism. But I think this would be to misread the dialectical situation. The case I have made for premise 1 does not depend on a prior judgment about the probability of a demonically satisfying reason. The perfect malevolence of the Demon’s preference structure already gives us *a* reason for expecting a much nastier mixture of good and ill on demonism than the one we’ve observed. There is room for disagreement about just *how* strong this reason is, but it doesn’t cease to be *a* strong reason just because the skeptical demonist has reminded us that there *might* be an unknown something that should, if we knew of it, lead us to expect a mixture no worse than the one we’ve actually found. There might, after all, be an unknown something such that, if we knew of it, would give us even more reason to expect a far worse mixture. As far as I can see, these competing “unknowns” cancel one another out, leaving us exactly where we started, with quite a strong – and as yet undefeated – reason for expecting to discover a much nastier mixture of good and ill.

All the same, one might wonder where this leaves the epistemic probability of a demonically sufficient reason for causing/permitting the observed mixture. Well, it cannot be denied that if (A) the epistemic probability of the mixture given demonism is low (low enough to make it significantly lower than the probability of the mixture given indifference), then (B) the epistemic probability of a demonically

satisfying reason must also be low. But it doesn't follow that we must establish (B) on independent grounds and use it to help establish (A). Indeed, this way of thinking about (A) and (B) seems to me to get things exactly backwards. If we accept (B), it is because we think we already have an undefeated reason for accepting (A), and not the other way around.

Does this mean that we are, after all, making an unwarranted judgment about the probable contents of a vast and uncharted "space" of logical possibilities? This charge might have merit if we were making a claim about some sort of descriptive objective probability. But that's not what we're doing. We're merely trying to determine what a reasonable person should say given the evidence available to her.<sup>24</sup> It is (I say) entirely reasonable for her to find the mixture quite surprising given demonism. Unless and until she is given a positive reason to think otherwise, she should give little credence to the thought that there is a demonically satisfying reason for causing/permitting a mixture no "worse" than this one. In arriving at this position, she has not relied on a noseum inference. Nor has she drawn an inductive inference from a possibly unrepresentative sample of goods and evils and entailments. Good Humean that she is, she has dropped every "arbitrary supposition or conjecture" and reasoned "merely from the known phenomena"<sup>25</sup> – from what she knows about sentient creatures and the world they inhabit and from what might be expected if the world is ruled by perfect malice.

### ***Application***

The foregoing remarks apply *mutatis mutandis* to theism. *As far as the observed mixture of good and ill in the world is concerned*, theism is epistemically

on a par with demonism. *If* the observed mixture were all we had to go, it would be unreasonable to accept either of these hypotheses about the moral character of the creator and ruler of the universe.

I do not say that this is all we have to go on or that theism and demonism are epistemically on a par *all things considered*. Hume may have thought the observed mixture was all we have to go on in trying to make a judgment about the moral character of the first cause(s), but I make no such claim. For all I've said here, we may be justified in believing on other grounds that theism is true, or that demonism is false, or both.<sup>26</sup> Without further investigation, therefore, one should not claim that theism and demonism are epistemically on a par all things considered.

But even if they were, and even if both of them could be decisively ruled out, it would be a mistake to jump to the conclusion that the indifference hypothesis is especially likely to be true, since we haven't considered the full range of hypotheses about the moral character of the supposed creator and ruler of the universe. In particular, we've said nothing about the multitude of *mixed* moral character hypotheses that might be framed by an inventive philosopher. For all we've said, the observed mixture of good and ill might be more likely given one of them than it is given indifference. But that's not a problem for the Humean Argument. It's just more grist for the mill: if one or more of the mixed character hypotheses can't be ruled out, this gives us even more reason *not to accept* the view that the world is ruled by perfect benevolence (or by perfect malice).

### ***Concluding remarks***

As developed here, the Humean Argument focuses on just a tiny sliver of logical space. It asks about the moral character of a personal ultimate who is just assumed to exist and to possess maximal power and knowledge. These points were treated as given – as background information shared by all three “visitors” to our world. Obviously, many other possibilities might have been considered. The ultimate cause(s) might be limited in power or knowledge, but not in benevolence. Or it (they) might be impersonal. Or there might no first cause(s). But despite its narrow focus, the Humean Argument has real bite. Demonists may be in short supply, but there are many theists whose view of God’s moral nature falls well within the slice of logical space under consideration here. If the Humean Argument is successful, it shows that one should *not accept* their view that God is perfectly benevolent.

I have not here attempted to show that the argument is successful or that it can be defended against every objection that might be raised. *My* project is much less ambitious than that. It is merely to show that *skeptical theism fails to provide an adequate response*. To see why this is so, I thought it would be useful to work out the logic of the situation in connection with a hypothesis nobody believes. That’s why I brought demonism into the discussion and gave an imaginary skeptical demonist a run for her money.

It is well to be reminded of our cognitive limitations, and a degree of epistemic humility is no doubt advisable. But one wonders whether skeptical theists have picked the right thing to be skeptical about. *If* the choice is between suspending judgment about God’s moral character, and suspending judgment about the

probability of the observed mixture of good and ill given perfect benevolence – *and* given perfect malice! – then (I say) their skepticism is misplaced.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith (New York, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), 198. All page references are to this edition. Referred to hereafter as *Dialogues*.

<sup>2</sup> For ease of exposition, I make the plausible assumption that Philo speaks for Hume in this matter, and I shall often refer to Hume’s position without mentioning Philo.

<sup>3</sup> He equates it with the Manichaeic hypothesis that the world is a battleground in which the forces of light are arrayed against the forces of darkness, which he dismisses from consideration on the ground that it makes the “the perfect uniformity and agreement of the parts of the universe” rather surprising (*Dialogues*, 211).

<sup>4</sup> “What then shall we pronounce on this occasion? Shall we say that these circumstances are not necessary, and that they might easily have been altered in the contrivance of the universe? This decision seems too presumptuous for creatures so blind and ignorant” (*Dialogues*, 210).

<sup>5</sup> Among contemporary philosophers, Paul Draper has done more than anyone else to develop this sort of challenge. The argument I’ll be considering is inspired by Draper’s original argument. See Paul Draper, “Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists,” *Noûs* 23: 331-50. Referred to hereafter as *Draper*. Reprinted in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.), *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 12–29.

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<sup>6</sup> One might, of course, have pragmatic reasons for betting one's life on a hypothesis that she does not "accept" in my sense. I take no position here on the rationality of such Pascalian wagering.

<sup>7</sup> Here I depart from Hume. In Part XI of the *Dialogues*, Cleanthes and Philo are considering the hypothesis that the universe is the product of a *finitely* powerful, good, and wise being.

<sup>8</sup> Nor is it identical to Paul Draper's "Hypothesis of Indifference," according to which "neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by non-human persons" (*Draper*, 339). On the other hand, it is very close to what Draper calls "the Indifferent Deity Hypothesis" (*Draper*, 347).

<sup>9</sup> *Dialogues*, 203.

<sup>10</sup> *Dialogues*, 207.

<sup>11</sup> By the epistemic probability of a proposition, I mean the degree of credence that should be given by a rational person. In this case, I am concerned with a conditional epistemic probability – with the degree to which a rational person should expect the observed mixture of good and ill given theism (or demonism). I'll be concerned exclusively with epistemic probabilities throughout, but won't always flag them as such.

<sup>12</sup> I call them Humean arguments in deference to their original inspiration, but they also bear a strong resemblance to the argument given by Paul Draper in the article referenced in note 5.



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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, it was a non-theist who first gave the position this apt name. See Paul Draper, “The Skeptical Theist,” in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 175-192.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Wykstra, “Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil,” in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 126-150.

<sup>15</sup> William Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16:1-11.

<sup>16</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, “Epistemic Probability and Evil,” in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 69-96. Once it’s granted that the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom have definite truth-values at all, they seem to provide theistic defenders with a kind of wildcard. These peculiar counterfactuals may (for all we know) have whatever truth-values they need to have in order to get the theist out of trouble. There was never any real need for Plantinga to bring in the possibility that “Satan and his cohorts” are responsible for natural evil, since the counterfactuals of *human* freedom might (for all we know) be such that a difference in the amount or distribution of natural evil would have resulted in a less favorable balance of moral good over moral evil.

<sup>17</sup> For additional just-so stories, see Peter van Inwagen, “The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil,” *Philosophical Topics* 16:161-87 and “The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5:136-

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65. Another excellent source is William P. Alston, “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 4:29-67.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen J. Wykstra, “Does Skeptical Theism Force Moral Skepticism? Hesitations over Bergmann’s Defense,” in Kelly James Clark and Michael Rea, eds., *Reason, Metaphysics, and Mind: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 30-31.

<sup>19</sup> For Wykstra’s most recent attempt to formulate and defend a general epistemological principle that has the desired implication, see Stephen Wykstra and Timothy Perrine, “The Foundations of Skeptical Theism: CORNEA, CORE, and Conditional Probabilities,” *Faith and Philosophy*, 29:375-399.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Bergmann, “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil” in Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 376. Referred to hereafter as *Bergmann*.

<sup>21</sup> See Michael Bergman, “Commonsense Skeptical Theism” in Kelly James Clark and Michael Rea, eds., *Reason, Metaphysics, and Mind: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28.

<sup>22</sup> The Humean Argument is *not* an argument from the failure of theodicy. Two papers by Paul Draper have helped me understand this crucial point. See “The Limitations of Pure Skeptical Theism” (forthcoming in *Res Philosophica*) and “Confirmation and the Truth about CORNEA” (in this volume).

<sup>23</sup> This is my best attempt to understand Bergmann’s response to the Draper argument cited in note 5. See *Bergmann*, 383.

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Draper puts the point succinctly: “being completely in the dark about whether the probability of J [that there is a God-justifying reason for permitting observed evils] is high in some non-epistemic sense of the word ‘probability’ does not imply being completely in the dark about whether the epistemic probability of J is high” (“The Limitations of Pure Skeptical Theism” (forthcoming in *Res Philosophica*)).

<sup>25</sup> Hume, *Dialogues*, 202.

<sup>26</sup> Plausible arguments for saying that an omnipotent and omniscient being must be perfectly benevolent are in short supply. But the following argument for rejecting demonism seems promising to me. Suppose it is necessarily true (all else equal) that one ought to promote that welfare of others. Then an *omniscient* being would know that this is so, and would (if we can assume a fairly modest version of moral internalism) have at least *some* inclination to promote the good of creatures. But a perfectly malicious demon would have no such inclination. It follows that the Demon (as defined above) does not exist. (This line of argument might also be deployed against the indifference hypothesis).

<sup>27</sup> My debt to the work of Paul Draper is evident throughout. I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for Oxford University Press for vigorous and insightful comments and criticisms, Kate Rogers for her stimulating comments at the 2013 meeting of the Society for the Philosophy of Religion, and Beth Seacord for making numerous corrections and helpful suggestions.