

Evil and Skeptical Theism (2012)

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In this paper I critique a response to atheistic arguments from evil that has been called "skeptical theism." I start by formulating a simple atheistic argument from evil and briefly justifying its two premises. Then I defend the argument against a skeptical theist's potential response. First, I indirectly defend my argument by arguing that skeptical theism is both intrinsically implausible and has problematic consequences, which makes it an unreasonable response. Second, I directly defend my argument by presenting arguments supporting its second premise. I conclude that skeptical theism does not undermine my argument.

1. Introduction

Oppression, rape, child abuse, genocide, poverty, disease—these are just a few of the evils ubiquitous in this world. Thinking about the world's severe evils and the great extent to which they occur can be profoundly distressing; the unspeakable violence alone is overwhelming. Upon philosophical reflection, such evil seems to provide rational justification for atheism. For wouldn't an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, perfectly rational, and morally perfect God ensure that severe evils would never be realized? Wouldn't such evil be nonexistent if God really existed? It certainly seems so, and thus the existence of such evil seems to imply the nonexistence of God. In fact, the reality of such evil is one of the strongest challenges to traditional theism—perhaps the strongest one.^[1] The need to show that God's existence is not threatened by any of the world's evil is commonly called "the problem of evil." While there have been numerous responses to this problem, I want to focus on the response known as "skeptical theism," which is popular among both philosophers and laypersons. In fact, we are essentially confronted with it whenever a believer responds to the problem by saying that "God works in mysterious ways." Theistic philosophers have taken this idea and formulated it in more specific and sophisticated ways. For example, St. Thomas Aquinas adopts St. Augustine's explanation of how God can coexist with evil: God must be so good and powerful that he can produce good from evil.^[2] Contemporary philosophers similarly talk about God having "morally sufficient reasons" for permitting or creating the world's evil, which appears to be another way of talking about the existence of good that justifies God in permitting or creating the world's evil, thereby making such evil compatible with God's existence. Since the arguments defending discernable morally sufficient reasons for God's permitting or creating the world's evil are inadequate, the theistic apologist will commonly revert to claiming that there could easily be morally sufficient reasons beyond our (very limited) comprehension, which the apologist finds sufficient to undermine the idea that the existence of the world's evil rationally justifies atheism.

This essay aims to defend the idea that the world's evil rationally justifies atheism against skeptical theism. After slightly reformulating the argument from above and justifying its two premises, I present a skeptical theist's response targeting one of the premises. Then I provide a comprehensive defense of the argument against skeptical theism. Specifically, I argue that the skeptical theist's response is unreasonable because it is intrinsically implausible and has other problematic consequences. I also offer arguments supporting the premise that skeptical theism attacks. I conclude that skeptical theism does nothing to undermine the argument.

2. A Formal Presentation of the Atheistic Argument from Evil

I will begin by slightly reformulating the argument from above. As previously noted, it seems that if God really existed, then severe evils would not exist, and thus the existence of such evil seems to imply that God does not exist. But why does it seem that if God really existed, then severe evils would not exist? It seems so because these evils seem to be instances of *gratuitous evil*. Armed with this term, I will now reformulate the argument from above as follows (let's call it AAE):

(P1) If God exists, then there is no gratuitous evil in the world.

(P2) There is gratuitous evil in the world.

(C) Therefore, God does not exist.

Now some clarification is in order. The argument relies on the concept of gratuitous evil, but what is that? Put simply, it is evil that God, if he existed, would have no morally sufficient reason to permit or create. More specifically, it is captured by the following definition:

(GE) Evil is gratuitous if and only if it would be possible for God, if he existed, to prevent or not create the evil without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any worthwhile, sufficiently outweighing good, which is good that, when combined with the evil, results in greater overall goodness than the alternatives without the evil.

Thus there is a morally sufficient reason for God to permit or create an evil if and only if it is not possible for him to prevent or fail to create that evil without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good (or greater overall goodness). Now there are a few important things to recognize here, which are especially relevant to the justification of P2. First of all, a morally sufficient reason for God to permit or create evil must be found in something good. This good can consist of any number of individual goods, and these can be goods or divine purposes that are internal to theism (e.g., free acceptance of God)^[3], or goods that are independent of theism (e.g., freedom). Moreover, this good provides a morally sufficient reason for God to permit or create evil only if there is some logical or necessary connection between the good and the evil such that it is impossible (not a genuine task) to prevent or not create the evil without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of the good. For if there is no such connection, then God preventing or not creating the evil would not entail the elimination or prevention of the good, and so his morally sufficient reason for permitting or creating the evil could not even get off the ground because he could prevent or not create the evil with no loss of good. Finally, the good must not only outweigh the evil, but it must *sufficiently* outweigh it in that the combination of the two must render the world greater in *overall* goodness than the alternatives without the evil (which captures the idea that God is not justified in permitting or creating evil if there is a better or equally good alternative lacking the evil). The reason why the good simply outweighing the evil may not be sufficient is because evil can reduce the goodness that might be fully present in the alternatives without the evil, and so the goodness gained by permitting or creating the evil could be cancelled by the goodness lost.^[4]

Before turning to the justification of my argument's premises, let us consider some potential objections to GE. First, one could argue that this definition is inadequate because it only allows

for good to provide a morally sufficient reason for God to permit or create evil, yet the *prevention or avoidance of greater evil* could provide this reason. But if the absence of a greater evil counts as a "sufficiently outweighing good," this is not a problem. Also, and more importantly, it seems that the prevention or avoidance of greater evil cannot provide God with a morally sufficient reason for permitting or creating evil. For in order for such "greater evil prevention" to provide this reason, the absence of the lesser evil must entail the realization of the greater evil, which implies that God *must* choose to actualize either the lesser evil or the greater evil. But that these are the only two options available to God is very dubious. For starters, evil-free options are certainly conceivable and do not seem to be incoherent, which suggests that there are such options. Furthermore, evil appears to be a logically contingent aspect of the world, one that comes with the addition of the universe. It thus seems that God always has the option of not creating or annihilating whatever aspect of the created universe is responsible for the realization of evil—even if this is the universe itself. In other words, there always seems to be *some* available alternative without evil, and so any evil—even the lesser of two—would have to be justified by recourse to some sufficiently outweighing good, even if this good is the creation or sustaining of the universe itself. Therefore, GE retains its adequacy.

Second, perhaps GE is inadequate because we can construct situations in which specific cases of horrific evil, like Bruce Russell's Sue, [\[5\]](#) could be prevented or not created by God without him thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good even though God could still be justified in permitting or creating such horrific evil by recourse to some sufficiently outweighing good O. This would be the case if the realization of O entails the instantiation some evil equivalent to Russell's Sue, but not necessarily Russell's Sue itself. Thus, even if Russell's Sue is prevented or not created, some equivalent evil would have to replace it in order for O to be realized. Russell's Sue, however, works just as well as any of its equivalents, and so is justified by recourse to O. The problem with this kind of substitution is that replacing evil is not preventing or not creating it. For even though the specific instantiation of Russell's Sue could be prevented or not created by God without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of O, it is not the case that God could prevent or not create *the evil that Russell's Sue instantiates* without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of O. In other words, GE does capture the nongratuitousness of Russell's Sue in this scenario because the evil realized by Russell's Sue cannot be prevented or not created by God without him thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of O. Therefore, GE retains its adequacy.

Third, GE might be inadequate because in certain scenarios God could have a morally sufficient reason to permit or create evil even though he could prevent or not create it without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good. For example, imagine that God permits or creates some level of suffering S in order for some other agent A to freely respond to it with compassion, and that this compassionate response (CR) either itself sufficiently outweighs S, or its combination with some other good that entails S sufficiently outweighs S. Let's now suppose that A does not respond with compassion, which means that CR is not realized in order for S to be sufficiently outweighed by good. In this situation, God could have prevented or not created S without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good, and thus S would be gratuitous on GE. However, it might be argued that the *potential* for the sufficiently outweighing good to be

realized provides God with a morally sufficient reason for permitting or creating S because God cannot know in advance whether or not A will freely realize CR due to the incompatibility of divine foreknowledge and A's free will. In other words, even though S's realization does not guarantee that some sufficiently outweighing good will obtain, it is worth the potential payoff and so would not be gratuitous.

Underlying this counterexample to GE is the crucial assumption that divine foreknowledge and free will are incompatible. But if in fact they are compatible, then God can know in advance whether or not A will freely realize CR, and thus would have a morally sufficient reason to permit or create S only if the sufficiently outweighing good would actually obtain. So maintaining that divine foreknowledge and free will are compatible is sufficient to dissolve this counterexample and thus preserve the adequacy of GE. However, debate about this issue has persisted for centuries and certainly cannot be addressed here. Needless to say, there are many people—theists and nontheists alike—who would dispute the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and free will. Fortunately, we can account for the counterexample simply by modifying GE as follows:

(GE') Evil is gratuitous if and only if it would be possible for God, if he existed, to prevent or not create the evil without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any (a) worthwhile, sufficiently outweighing good or (b) favorable opportunity for some agent A that is not God to freely realize some worthwhile, sufficiently outweighing good, where a "favorable opportunity" is one in which it is more likely than not that A will realize the good.

While God may not know if A will freely realize the good, surely God knows (based on A's character and history) whether or not it is *more likely than not* that A will freely realize the good, and thus whether or not the opportunity for the good to be freely realized is a favorable one. Therefore, this modified definition can account for the kind of counterexample above, and so should be satisfactory for those who deny the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and free will.

Though a defense of this point is beyond the scope of this paper,^[6] I will assume the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and free will from here on out for two reasons. First, I think that it is true. And second, it is far more theologically appealing than its negation, for a being who does not know the truth value of a huge number of propositions about future states of affairs because they involve or are influenced by freely willed actions *does not know a lot of things*, and thus would not be all-knowing. Because I assume this compatibility, I will be using GE in the remainder of this paper.^[7]

3. Justification of the Premises

P1 is a necessary truth based on the properties of God. As a morally perfect being, God must have a morally sufficient reason to permit or create evil; for this is part of what it means to be morally perfect. And since "gratuitous evil" simply refers to evil that God, if he existed, would have no morally sufficient reason to permit or create, he will not permit or create it if he exists. Thus, God's existence entails the nonexistence of gratuitous evil.

The truth of P1 can also be demonstrated in the following, more in-depth way. Because God is all-powerful, he has the insurmountable power to do anything that is genuinely possible, which includes preventing or not creating any evil. He is also all-knowing, and so has all of the necessary knowledge to prevent or not create evil—when it will occur, how it can be prevented or not created, that he can prevent or not create it, and so on. Thus God's power and knowledge give him the insurmountable ability to prevent or not create any evil. Nevertheless, there may still be evil that God cannot prevent or fail to create without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good: if God preventing or not creating this evil entails the elimination or prevention of some sufficiently outweighing good, then preventing or not creating the evil without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of the good is not a genuinely possible task (something that can actually be done). So there is the potential for two kinds of evil: that which God can prevent or not create without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good, and that which God cannot prevent or fail to create without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good. And since he is all-knowing, God knows which kind of evil every instance of evil constitutes. Finally, God is morally perfect and perfectly rational, which entails that he is both sufficiently motivated to prevent or not create evil if he can do so without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good, and that such motivation will never be overwhelmed or defeated by any kind of immoral motivation or irrational force. It follows from (1) God's insurmountable ability to prevent or not create any evil, (2) his knowing which evil he can prevent or not create without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good, and (3) his insurmountable motivation to prevent or not create the evil he can prevent or not create without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good that (4) he will prevent or not create evil that he can prevent or not create without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good. Since gratuitous evil is, according to GE, precisely that which God can prevent or not create without thereby eliminating or preventing the realization of any sufficiently outweighing good, he will not permit or create it. So once again God's existence entails the nonexistence of gratuitous evil.

P2 is the putative contingent fact that there is gratuitous evil in the world. When reflecting on the terrible evil in the world, such as stalking, rape, sex trafficking, abduction of people and pets, child and spousal abuse, brutal murders and frightful deaths, war, genocide, torture, slavery, disease and mental illness, poverty and severe unevenness in resource distribution, dehydration and starvation, severe beatings, bludgeonings, burnings, and broken bones, cruelty to nonhuman animals, racism, heterosexism, sexism and misogyny, despotism, and so on, we cannot discern any worthwhile goods that provide morally sufficient reasons for God to permit or create them. For if we examine the worthwhile goods that are independent of theism such as health, the existence and experience of beauty, love, friendship, satisfaction, pleasure, excitement, happiness, purposeful activity and fulfillment, achievement and success, respect for oneself and others, peace, knowledge, virtuous behavior and character, justice, rights, and freedom—as well as goods that are internal to theism, such as hope, theistic belief, or loving, trusting, obeying, and worshipping God—we find that preventing or not creating such terrible evil at most entails eliminating or preventing the realization of a small amount of

this good, which is too little good to outweigh the evil. God's prevention of, or failure to create, the world's terrible evil perhaps entails the elimination or prevention of good things like (a) virtuous human or other-spirit responses to such evil^[8] and (b) human or other-spirit freedom to actualize such evil.^[9] But even if all of this terrible evil will result in virtuous responses, and thus that God preventing or not creating the evil entails preventing the virtuous responses, the responses do not come close to being worth the cost of this evil. While these virtuous responses may be better than their absence once such terrible evil has already become actualized, these responses are not intrinsic goods that we seek for their own sake such that it is better for there to be terrible evil in order to realize these responses than for there to be neither.^[10] One might object that these responses actually are intrinsic goods, but even if this implausible claim were true, the goodness of such responses would still be dwarfed by the terrible evil purportedly needed to realize them.

And even if God preventing this terrible evil entails eliminating or preventing the realization of the freedom to actualize such evil, this is merely the elimination or prevention of *certain options*, not of the freedom to actualize evil or of freedom *per se*. For example, the prevention of rape would merely be the elimination or prevention of the *freedom to rape*, yet this measly degree of freedom does not come close to being worth the terrible evil—which includes significant loss of the victim's freedom—that can be realized by rape.

Moreover, the good of virtuous responses conjoined with degrees of freedom does not come close to sufficiently outweighing the evil either. Imagine how outrageous it would have been for an able neighbor that could have prevented the case of Russell's Sue to have justified not intervening by recourse to the aggressor's freedom to do what he did, the compassionate responses towards everyone affected by the event, the aggressor admitting he did wrong and feeling regret for his actions, and the aggressor asking for forgiveness and the family forgiving him. For even if all of this followed this horrific event, these virtuous responses and the aggressor's freedom-preservation are not even close to being worthwhile, as they do not come close to outweighing the cruelty and brutality of the aggressor's behavior, a little girl having her rights violated and being used as a mere means to an end, the prodigious suffering of a little girl, her family, and anyone else affected by the event, and the overall injustice of the event. Thus, it would clearly be unjustified to allow this horrific event for such meager goodness, and I maintain that the same applies to all of the world's terrible evil.

On the other hand, God's prevention of, or failure to create, the world's terrible evil does not entail the elimination or prevention of worthwhile goods like health, the existence and experience of beauty, love, friendship, satisfaction, pleasure, excitement, happiness, purposeful activity and fulfillment, respect for oneself and others, achievement and success, peace, knowledge, justice, rights, virtuous behavior and character,^[11] a limited but satisfactory level of freedom, or any of the goods internal to theism mentioned above; for we can have such things without terrible evil (as many people do). In fact, at least some of these goods can be reduced or annihilated by such terrible evil; so preventing or not creating this evil would actually *promote* these goods (e.g., happiness, justice, and theistic belief). Because we cannot discern (or even conceive of) the goods that provide the morally sufficient reasons for God to permit or create the world's terrible evil, we can infer that *there is no morally sufficient reason for God to permit or create some of the world's evil.*^[12]

4. The Skeptical Theist's Response

In response to AAE, the skeptical theist^[13] will contest P2 on the grounds that we are not in a good enough epistemic position to say that this premise is true with any sort of confidence.^[14] According to this response, we can all agree that there *appears* to be gratuitous evil in the world, but we cannot infer its reality from its appearance. Such an inference assumes that if there are morally sufficient reasons for God to permit or create the world's apparently gratuitous evil, then we probably will discern them.^[15] But this discernability assumption is questionable in virtue of our epistemic limitations. Because of these limitations, we might be currently or permanently unable to discern the morally sufficient reasons that God could have for permitting or creating the world's apparently gratuitous evil. Specifically, we may not have epistemic access to all the logical (i.e., omnipotence-constraining) connections between the good and evil we know about, or to every single good that might exist. So there could be (a) known good with indiscernable logical connections to the world's apparently gratuitous evil, or (b) unknown good with logical connections to this evil, such that God preventing or not creating the evil entails the elimination or prevention of the good. Thus, our epistemic limitations make the possibility of there being *mysterious* morally sufficient reasons for God to permit or create the world's apparently gratuitous evil—ones that could be provided by unknown good, known good, or some combination of the two—just as plausible as there being no such reasons. Consequently, it is most reasonable to be *in doubt* about the discernability assumption and thus the reality of gratuitous evil.^[16]

5. Critique of Skeptical Theism

Despite its brevity,^[17] this response probably constitutes the strongest challenge to atheistic arguments from evil because of its very conservative aim. Rather than trying to refute such arguments, it aims to undermine them by conjuring up reasonable doubt toward them by using our epistemic limitations—which are undeniable—to not only motivate the possibility of mysterious morally sufficient reasons, but also to make it seem like a plausible threat to our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption to infer the existence of gratuitous evil. And because these mysterious reasons can stem from (a) epistemically inaccessible goods or (b) goods we know about with epistemically inaccessible connections to evil, the response effectively levels two threats towards our reliance on the discernability assumption. This makes being in doubt about this assumption even easier to accept.

Contesting skeptical theism, then, will be no easy task. Nevertheless, I contend that it can be challenged and ultimately overcome. First of all, I think that we should not regard the possibility of epistemically inaccessible logical connections between the good and evil we know about as a plausible threat toward our reliance on the discernability assumption. For even though we have epistemic limitations in that we do not have epistemic access to all of the intricate and innumerable *causal or contingent* connections between good and evil, this does not render it plausible that we do not have access to all of the *logical or necessary* connections between them. This is perhaps a possibility, but it is rather extreme and far-fetched.

But even if we can disregard the possibility of epistemically inaccessible logical connections between the good and evil we know about, we still face the threat of epistemically inaccessible goods with logical connections to evil, and so more must be done to defend the existence of gratuitous evil (P2) against skeptical theism. This can be done indirectly by arguing against the plausibility of skeptical theism itself, or directly by either trying other ways to vindicate our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption, or by offering arguments for P2 that do not rely on this assumption. In the remainder of this paper, I will use all of these measures to defend my argument against skeptical theism.

(1) *The Intrinsic Implausibility of Skeptical Theism*

Recall that the upshot of skeptical theism is that we should be in doubt about the existence of gratuitous evil because it is just as plausible for there to be mysterious morally sufficient reasons for God to permit or create the world's apparently gratuitous evil as it is for there to be no such reasons. Thus, because it is obviously quite plausible for reality to be what it appears to be, it must also be quite plausible for God to have mysterious morally sufficient reasons for the world's apparently gratuitous evil. But is it really plausible for God to have such reasons? While it certainly seems possible, it also seems highly implausible because this possibility entails the following:

(E1) There only appears to be gratuitous evil in the world, but in reality this is not the case. If this is true, then God is being deceptive.

(E2) God has morally sufficient reasons for evil that remain mysterious, so he (a) intentionally created us with a thirst for this knowledge yet without epistemic access to it and (b) remains silent instead of explaining it to us or even providing comfort and reassurance that such reasons exist. This lack of epistemic access and divine silence does not ease our suffering, but instead increases our already existing suffering due to frustration and alienation from a lack of understanding, and indignation from not receiving an explanation to which we feel entitled. (It could even be argued that we have a right to such an explanation, so it would be unjust to deprive us of it.)

In other words, the idea that God has mysterious justification for the world's apparently gratuitous evil is implausible because it introduces *even more* problematic evil that must be reconciled with God's existence.^[18] It is already implausible that a being who is all-loving, supremely benevolent and compassionate, all-loving, just, honest, trustworthy, and otherwise morally perfect would permit or create the immense and horrific evil that exists in our world; and the same applies to the divine deceptiveness and silence added by skeptical theism. Based on what we normally take to be loving, benevolent, compassionate, just, trustworthy, honest, and morally good, it is unreasonable to think that this contradictory behavior does not make skeptical theism at least *prima facie* implausible.

In response, the theist could deny that E1 and E2 are problematic consequences of skeptical theism. Let's begin with E1. Because God is not a deceiver, the theist will probably deny that he is being deceptive. For example, he or she might argue that God gave us a sufficient level of intellectual ability to think of skeptical theism in addition to providing us with free will, such that both, when properly used, lead us to the truth of skeptical theism. Perhaps we are not

trying hard enough to discern this truth, and so our unreasonable beliefs are our own fault.^[19] However, this objection does not succeed. We certainly do have the ability to think of skeptical theism, as well as the choice to be skeptical of appearances and to think critically; and P2-proponents can be accused of not trying hard enough and not being skeptical of appearances. But none of this negates the skeptical theist's own claim that the appearance of gratuitous evil that grounds the P2-proponent's unreasonable belief that gratuitous evil exists is *only* apparent and thus *deceptive*. Even if God has given us the tools to figure out the supposed truth despite the misleading appearance, he also intentionally built us with limited cognitive machinery that erroneously perceives gratuitous evil. If God has set up the world to appear how it is not, then he is being deceptive.

In regard to E2, the theist could hold that God could not have built us to comprehend what he can comprehend, and so our lack of epistemic access to his morally sufficient reasons for the world's apparently gratuitous evil—and his refusal to give us an explanation for it—is not problematic. This response, however, is also unsuccessful. Because he is omnipotent, for it to be the case that God could not have built us to comprehend what he can comprehend, it would need to be *impossible* for God to accomplish this. But this is extremely implausible because there is no problem with multiple minds having a sufficient level of comprehension to grasp an explanation of something. In fact, it is a very common occurrence for multiple human minds to understand the same complex material. Therefore, an all-powerful, all-knowing being could have made us more intelligent so that he could explain it to us. Of course, even if we assume the outrageous assertion that God is unable to explain it to us, there is still the problem of God's silence insofar as he does not (1) explain why he cannot explain his reasons to us (surely an all-knowing, all-powerful being could explain *something* to us in some way or another), or (2) provide any personal comfort or reassurance that such reasons really exist.

Given the failure of these responses, the theist might argue that there is a morally sufficient reason for these seemingly problematic behaviors of God. Perhaps the most promising option is to argue that the appearance of gratuitous evil, which requires divine deceptiveness and silence, is necessary for (a) us to develop into virtuous people by appropriately responding to evil and (b) the hiddenness of God, which in turn is necessary for our freely choosing to believe in him and to love and obey him. These things, in turn, constitute the good that is worth the price of his deceptiveness and silence. Thus, there is a morally sufficient reason for God to act this way.

This line of argument fails for several reasons. First, it seems false that we need to think that evil is gratuitous to virtuously respond toward it. After all, some people respond to others with compassion and understanding even if they deserve the suffering they endure, if the suffering is a result of carelessness or apathy on the part of the sufferer, or if they go through a bout of suffering to achieve a worthwhile end. Furthermore, there are probably many theists who virtuously respond to evil even though they think that *none* of it is gratuitous because such evil is inconsistent with their belief in God.

But even if it were true that the appearance that there is gratuitous evil is necessary for virtue *development*, God could have created us with fully developed virtuous characters, which is a better alternative because it has the good of virtuous character but lacks the costs of its

development. Of course, the theist could object that it is actually better to develop virtuous character instead of being created with it, but this strikes me as rather absurd. For why should we think that virtue development is an intrinsic good that is worth evil, especially when there is an alternative where the goal is realized without cost?

In other areas of life we intrinsically value the goal of development but not the development process itself. For example, we try to overcome things like cancer and AIDS by developing drugs that can cure them, but we do not intrinsically value the development process. Instead, we intrinsically value the goal of *the absence of disease* and value the development process *only as a means to the absence of disease*. But if we do not intrinsically value the development process in other areas of life, why would we do so when it comes to virtue? Or, if this is not a sufficient reason to deny the intrinsic goodness of virtue development, consider the necessary perfection of God, which means that he did not need to develop into a morally perfect agent (and he did not have a choice to do so). Instead, he has always been and always will be this way, yet this does not take away from his perfect goodness (it may even contribute to his goodness). If God's lack of moral development does not take away from his perfect goodness, then why would we place such a high value on our moral development, as opposed to always being this way? In fact, it seems that we would be more like God and hence better if we had always been virtuous, as opposed to needing to become virtuous. Therefore, virtue development cannot help to provide a morally sufficient reason for E1 and E2.

Furthermore, apparently gratuitous evil is not necessary for God to be hidden. If there were no apparently gratuitous evil, then there would not be an atheistic argument from evil, but there would still be incompatibility arguments,[\[20\]](#) the argument from scale,[\[21\]](#) and other such arguments that could render it questionable and hence not obvious that God exists. In addition, there could be no religious experiences, no seemingly miraculous events, and convincing naturalistic explanations of the universe's existence and the apparent design of some of its features. All of this would result in fewer theistic arguments and would therefore make it unclear that God exists. Of course, even if apparently gratuitous evil were necessary for it to be unclear that God exists, uncertainty about God's existence would not be necessary for us to freely choose to love and obey him. The obvious existence of our significant others, children, pets, and friends does not take away our free choice to love them (assuming that we do freely choose to love things—a very dubious claim). Moreover, the obvious existence of the police force or an authoritarian government does not take away our freedom to obey or disobey the law. There might be severe, guaranteed consequences for disobeying the law under an authoritarian regime, but this does not mean that we cannot choose to disobey the law and suffer the consequences, or obey the law and avoid the consequences. Therefore, free acceptance of God cannot help to provide a morally sufficient reason for E1 and E2, and once again it looks like there is no morally sufficient reason for God to act this way.

Due to the lack of discernable morally sufficient reasons for E1 and E2, the theist could once again retreat into mystery: there could be mysterious morally sufficient reasons for divine deceptiveness and silence that is beyond our comprehension. After all, it is not much of a stretch to posit that God could have mysterious morally sufficient reasons for E1 and E2 if he has such reasons to permit the world's immense and horrific evil, lots of which is arguably much worse than E1 and E2. While this is certainly a possibility, the addition of more mystery

pushes God even farther away from us, and offers nothing positive to reduce skeptical theism's intrinsic implausibility. Instead, we are still left with the original collection of the world's immense and horrific evil, deception about the nature of this evil, no explanation for it or for this lack of an explanation, and no comfort and reassurance that such explanation exists to buffer against it; none of which we would expect from a benevolent, compassionate, loving, just, honest, trustworthy, and otherwise morally perfect God. As such, skeptical theism is a weak and unreasonable response to AAE.

Before moving on, I want to point out that skeptical theism becomes even more implausible if the God in question is the God of Christianity. According to the Christian worldview, God not only loves us, but is interested in building loving relationships with us, and also places knowledge of him as the goal of human life and values it as a good beyond all measure. [22] However, permitting or creating immense and horrific evil, deceiving us about its nongratuitous status, refusing to either explain the reasons for why this evil is permitted or created or why he cannot give us this explanation, and not comforting us and reassuring us that such reasons exist is very counterproductive to securing our love and trust. Also, the God of skeptical theism is an extremely mysterious being that operates on a level far beyond our cognitive faculties, so we can have very little knowledge of him. This presents yet another barrier to us forming loving relationships with him, and also gives us little room to make progress on our goal as humans, as well as little opportunity to enjoy a good beyond all measure.

(2) Other Problematic Consequences of Skeptical Theism

A few other consequences of skeptical theism also weaken its plausibility. But before I present these, I want to discuss a few troublesome moral implications that are not consequences of skeptical theism even though they are typically thought to be. First, it is very tempting to think that skeptical theism entails that *we are always morally justified in permitting evil*. To see why, consider the evil things that we can permit. It certainly makes no sense to say that we can permit our own actions because we do not stand in an external relation to these actions that would allow us to genuinely permit them. Instead, we can either perform them or not. Also, we can permit only those things that we have the power to stop—we cannot say that we can permit things like earthquakes, plane crashes, or God's willing because such things are not within our power to prevent. In other words, we *must* permit these things because we cannot stop them, yet this is not really permitting them at all. Therefore, we can permit only those things that are external to us, and that we have the power to either permit or prevent, which are things like certain accidental happenings, certain actions of others, and some suffering of others. Now let's assume that God has morally sufficient reasons to permit or create all of the world's evil, including the accidents and the actions and suffering of others that we can prevent. In these cases, God is morally justified in permitting these things because his prevention of them entails the elimination or prevention of some sufficiently outweighing good. But if his prevention of such things would eliminate or prevent the realization of some sufficiently outweighing good, then our preventing them would eliminate or prevent the realization of this goodness as well, for we stand in the same external relation to these things as God does. In other words, given God's existence, we have a *guarantee* that any evil

permitted is morally justified by recourse to some sufficiently outweighing good. Therefore, we are always justified in permitting evil.

Even though this argument seems compelling, our always being justified in permitting evil does not follow from God's being justified in permitting the same evil; for it could be specifically God's permission of the evil that is justified by recourse to some sufficiently outweighing good.^[23] But given that we share with God the same external relation to the evil and any good that is necessarily connected to it, what explains the asymmetry when it comes to being justified in permitting it? How can God be justified while we are not?

As far as I can tell, there are two possibilities. Either (a) God's act of preventing the evil has negative consequences that our acts of prevention do not, or (b) our acts of preventing the evil have positive consequences that God's act of prevention does not. In both scenarios, the evil that can be prevented by us and God is necessarily connected to some good such that preventing the evil entails eliminating or preventing the realization of the good. Up to this point, there is no asymmetry—our preventing the evil or God preventing it will eliminate or prevent the realization of the good. But from here the scenarios will change in the following ways. In the first scenario, the good is not sufficiently outweighing, which means that it cannot by itself justify the permission of the evil. However, God's preventing the evil would have some negative consequences that would actually make the world worse than if he permits the evil. This is because the negative consequences, combined with the absence of the evil and the good (all from preventing the evil), makes the world worse than it would be with the evil and the good yet without the negative consequences (all from permitting the evil). As such, God is justified in permitting the evil given the negative consequences associated with his prevention of it. On the other hand, our prevention does not introduce these negative consequences, so we are not likewise justified in permitting the evil.

In the second scenario, the good is sufficiently outweighing; so it can by itself justify the permission of evil. However, our prevention of the evil would have some positive consequences that would actually make the world better than if we permit it. This is because the positive consequences, combined with the absence of the evil and the good (all from preventing the evil), makes the world better than it would be with the evil and the good yet without the positive consequences (all from permitting the evil). As such, we are not justified in permitting the evil given the positive consequences associated with our prevention of it. On the other hand, God's preventing the evil does not have these positive consequences, so he is justified in permitting the evil by recourse to the sufficiently outweighing good that will be eliminated or prevented by his prevention of the evil. Thus, given these two possible scenarios, skeptical theism does not entail that we are always morally justified in permitting evil.

Furthermore, God being justified in permitting others to do evil things does not necessarily entail that we are justified in our own doing of such evil things. This is because God's being justified is a function of his external relation to these actions—a relation that is different from our internal relation to an action that we ourselves perform.

Consider a few examples. Suppose that I like to freely flick boogers at my classmates. There are certainly many worse ways to treat others, but it is still evil to act this way. In this case, God might be justified in not stopping me from freely flicking boogers at my classmates because

this preserves my freedom to do so, and it is better to preserve my freedom despite the costs. On the other hand, I cannot appeal to my own freedom-preservation to justify my actions because my refraining from booger-flicking does not infringe upon my freedom to do so—indeed, this would be an expression of my freedom. Thus, I would not be justified in flicking boogers at my classmates even though God might be justified in allowing me to do so.

But what if we are dealing with much worse actions, actions for which preserving freedom would be insufficient to justify God in allowing them? Suppose that I have a sexually transmitted disease (STD) and enjoy infecting others with it. Let's also say that there is some mysterious good that is necessarily realized every time I succeed, yet this good by itself does not sufficiently outweigh the evil of what I do. In this case, I again cannot appeal to my freedom-preservation to justify my actions, nor could I appeal to some good consequence(s) of my actions. However, God might nevertheless be justified in not stopping me from freely infecting others with my STD because (a) this preserves my freedom to do so and realizes some mysterious good, and (b) while neither my freedom nor the mysterious good sufficiently outweigh the evil of my actions by themselves, the conjunction of the two do. Thus, once again, I would not be justified in infecting others with my STD, even though God might be justified in allowing me to do so.

While skeptical theism does not seem to have the problematic moral consequences that it is sometimes thought to have, it still seems to have other problematic consequences besides E1 and E2. One of these concerns its negative impact on our (seemingly reasonable) practice of evaluating characters and describing how people are. Our normal practice of evaluating people is an empirical enterprise: because we consider behavior to reflect character traits, we look at the data of people's behavior (i.e., how things *appear*) to infer character traits (i.e., how people *really* are). However, if it is reasonable to doubt the inference from apparently to genuine gratuitous evil because we may not have epistemic access to God's reasons in virtue of our epistemic limitations, then is it not also reasonable to be in doubt about the inference from behavior to character because we may not have epistemic access to the reasons of other people? Couldn't their behaviors mysteriously be other than they appear to be?

The theist may reply that doubt in the gratuitous evil case is reasonable because God's intellectual abilities are very far removed from us humans, and yet this does not imply reasonable doubt in the other case because we humans all operate on a similar level. However, this reply does not stay true to the skeptical spirit of skeptical theism. For it assumes that humans all operate on a similar level, which can be brought into doubt by arguing that even though all humans appear to operate on a similar level, we cannot infer the reality of this from its appearance. Just because others appear to be like does not mean that they actually do operate on our level; perhaps they really operate on such higher levels that we cannot understand and accurately evaluate them. For example, how do we know that pedophiles, serial killers, and rapists are not exceptionally intelligent beings that really have mysterious, morally sufficient reasons for their seemingly atrocious behaviors? We certainly do not have first-hand epistemic access to what they do, and we cannot comprehend how they operate (which means that they could not explain themselves to us). So why shouldn't we be in doubt about whether they are actually horrible people or very intelligent, wonderful beings cloaked in a human body and operating mysteriously?

If we remain consistent with skeptical theism and accept that moral perfection is just as compatible with permitting or creating horrific evil as not doing so, then behavior becomes worthless as an indicator of others' characters, and we are left with no way of forming reasonable beliefs about them. In fact, the loss of this inference from behavior to character allows the potential supernatural creator of the universe to have *any* kind of moral character, which leaves us with no more warrant for thinking that God is behind everything instead of a Perfect Devil. By using opposing *ad hoc* rationalizations, the moral data of our universe can be equally fitted to either supernatural hypothesis (or any other supernatural hypothesis for that matter).

Finally, this skeptical line of argument against the reality of gratuitous evil may prove too much because it seems to lead us into global skepticism toward inferences from apparent to real absences. In fact, it is very easy to run arguments parodying that of skeptical theism in any other context. Suppose, for instance, that I have a hankering for the rest of that Ben and Jerry's ice cream in the freezer. I rush into the kitchen, grab a spoon, and enthusiastically open the freezer door to look for it. When I do not find it in the designated place for ice cream, I start looking all around for it. Alas, careful searching turns out to be fruitless, so I close the door and sadly put my spoon back in the silverware drawer. I infer that there is no ice cream in the freezer based on its apparent absence by relying upon the assumption that if there is ice cream in the freezer, then I probably will see it; and such an inference seems perfectly reasonable. However, we can easily construct a parody of skeptical theism and argue that I cannot reasonably rely on the discernability assumption because, given my epistemic limitations, I may not be able to discern, for example, that there are extremely intelligent, technologically advanced extraterrestrials existing somewhere in our extremely enormous universe (or in another universe) that are playing a trick on me by placing a force field around my beloved ice cream to make it appear perfectly invisible to human perception. (These aliens are also quite good at covering their tracks—they teleported my Ben and Jerry's out of the freezer after tricking me, and had me vaguely "remember" that I finished it on a previous night.) Therefore, my epistemic limitations make the ice cream's presence despite the contrary appearance just as plausible as its absence, so I should be in doubt about both the discernability assumption and the inference based on it from the ice cream's apparent absence to its actual absence. In other words, my epistemic limitations make the possibility of undetectable trick-playing aliens a plausible threat to the discernability assumption, which means that my inference from the apparent absence of ice cream to its real absence is not reasonable after all. This kind of parody argument can be constructed for any other similar case, rendering unreasonable any belief about the absence of X based on the discernability assumption and the apparent absence of X.

(3) *Vindicating the Reliance on the Discernability Assumption*

Skeptical theists will probably deny that global skepticism is a consequence of their position, for they are not likely to grant that any inference from an apparent absence to a real one is unreasonable. They instead will probably maintain that some of these inferences are in fact reasonable, but that we have to look at the context or particular circumstances to judge when we can and cannot reasonably rely on the discernability assumption to make these inferences. For instance, Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann illustrate when they think it

reasonable to infer the absence of something by relying on the discernability assumption:[\[24\]](#) If one is looking in a refrigerator for a jug of milk and does not find one, it is reasonable to rely on the assumption and infer that there is no milk; but if one is looking for extraterrestrials and does not find any evidence of them, it is not reasonable to rely on the assumption and infer that there are no extraterrestrials in the universe. In the first case we "have what it takes" to rely on the discernability assumption, but in the second case we do not. Howard-Snyder and Bergmann then claim that the gratuitous evil inference is analogous to that for extraterrestrials, and thus is unreasonable.

While the inference regarding the milk jug is reasonable, and the one regarding extraterrestrials is not, I think that the inference from the appearance that there is gratuitous evil to its reality is more akin to the inference about the milk jug. But even so, how is the milk jug inference reasonable in spite of its vulnerability to the same skeptical critique leveled against the ice cream inference above? For the inference to be reasonable, the possibility that there are epistemically inaccessible, trick-playing aliens in virtue of our epistemic limitations cannot be sufficient to defeat our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption. To show this, we should examine why this assumption seems reasonable in this context—or why we seem to "have what it takes" to rely upon it—and raise the bar as to what constitutes a sufficient reason to doubt it. Because our visual detection seems to be the most accurate at short distances, milk jugs are big enough for us to easily see, and refrigerator contents are not far away from us given the small space inside refrigerators, we seem to have complete or sufficient epistemic access to refrigerator contents. In other words, we seem to "have what it takes" to reasonably rely on the assumption that if there is a milk jug in the refrigerator, then we probably will see it.

Furthermore, in order to defeat the prima facie reasonableness of this assumption, there must be a sufficient reason for us to doubt our reasonable reliance on it. But while we must certainly accept the fact that we have epistemic limitations and thus that epistemically inaccessible, trick-playing aliens *might* exist, this is not a sufficient reason to doubt our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption. In order for trick-playing aliens to provide a sufficient reason here, we would need some positive evidence or a good argument that they exist; yet there is no such positive evidence, nor any such good argument. The same applies to our epistemic limitations in general—they do not justify doubt about the discernability assumption unless there is some positive evidence or a good argument suggesting that we do not "have what it takes" to reasonably rely on the discernability assumption. But again, there seems to be no such positive evidence or good argument here. Thus there seems to be no sufficient reason to doubt our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption in this context, so we can reasonably infer the milk jug's actual absence from its apparent absence.

Now let's look at the case of extraterrestrials. Here we cannot reasonably rely on the assumption that if there are extraterrestrials, then we probably will find evidence of them. For starters, the extremely enormous size of the universe is positive evidence suggesting that our epistemic limitations provide a sufficient reason to be in doubt about this assumption: since we know that this size gives us very limited epistemic access to the contents of the universe, it seems just as likely that there is something out there that is simply too far away for us to

discover as there being no extraterrestrials at all. Moreover, we do not know how likely it is that any extraterrestrials have the technological capabilities to attempt contact with other life forms and, if so, whether they would want to do so. Therefore, the positive evidence of the universe's size, along with our ignorance concerning what kinds of extraterrestrials are likely to be out there, strongly suggest that we do not "have what it takes" to reasonably rely on the discernability assumption in this context. Thus, our epistemic limitations do provide a sufficient reason to be in doubt about this assumption, so we cannot reasonably infer the absence of extraterrestrials from their apparent absence.

Now that I have explained why the milk jug inference is reasonable and the extraterrestrial one is not, I can show why the gratuitous evil inference is analogous to the former and not the latter. First of all, it is *prima facie* reasonable that if there are morally sufficient reasons for God to permit or create the world's apparently gratuitous evil, then we probably will discern them because many of us appear to be fully developed moral agents and competent critical thinkers with complete epistemic access to good, evil, and the logical connections between them. As in the milk jug case, it *seems* that we "have what it takes" to reasonably rely on the discernability assumption in this context. Moreover, this *prima facie* reasonableness can only be undermined by a sufficient reason to doubt relying on the discernability assumption. And yet, as in the milk jug case, the possibility of epistemically inaccessible things in virtue of our epistemic limitations is not such a reason. Instead, there would have to be some positive evidence or a good argument for the existence of reasons available to God and not to us. However, such evidence or arguments would have to be positive evidence or good arguments for the existence of God,^[25] yet this is precisely what skeptics like Howard-Snyder and Bergmann do not think are necessary to undermine the atheist's gratuitous evil inference (which is surely a good idea given the bankruptcy of theistic arguments). In other words, they think that atheistic arguments from evil are unsuccessful regardless of whether or not theistic arguments succeed, and thus that the latter are irrelevant to the current discussion. Therefore, the only option left is to find some other positive evidence or a good argument suggesting that our epistemic limitations provide a sufficient reason to doubt our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption in this context.

Contra skeptical theists, I think that the *prima facie* reasonableness of our reliance on the discernability assumption can be preserved. As previously noted, our limited grasp of the causal or contingent connections between the good and evil that we know about is no reason to doubt our ability to conceptually discern the logical or necessary connections between them. For example, consider two childhood sexual abuse support group members that eventually fall in love and end up having a very meaningful life partnership, which probably would not have happened if there had been no abuse. Their being abused as children causally contributed to the distant future realization of their loving and meaningful relationship with each other, and surely no one would have been able to see this coming. This is, of course, a very exceptional case—it is unlikely that childhood sexual abuse consistently contributes to the realization of life partnerships. But given that horrific evil like this can contribute to the realization of good things like life partnerships despite the unlikelihood, we are simply unable to discern whether or not any given case of horrific evil will contribute to the future realization of some really good thing.

However, this inability to discern whether this contingent connection between good and evil will obtain does nothing to call into question our ability to discern whether there is a logical or necessary connection between such things. To return to my example, the realization of a loving and meaningful life partnership in no way necessitates that either party be a victim of childhood sexual abuse, or that they come together in a specific setting (nor does it require the other to be a specific person). The same thing applies to other cases of evil that causally contribute to good in the distant future, or vice versa: because the connections between good and evil are contingent, our inability to discern them does not compromise our epistemic access to the logical or necessary connections between them. Therefore, there is no suggestion here that our epistemic limitations provide a sufficient reason to doubt our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption.

Popular attempts to foster reasonable doubt about the rationality of relying on the discernability assumption often use analogies comparing all of us to novices that are not in a position to make the competent judgments of experts. But while these analogies are no doubt useful (and quite seductive) when it comes to illustrating what *could* be the case, they do not suggest that our epistemic limitations provide a sufficient reason to doubt our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption. These analogies would work here only if there were some positive evidence or good arguments that all of us are in fact novices, rather than trained experts, when it comes to our epistemic access to good and evil, or to the logical connections between that which we know about. Such positive evidence or a good argument, however, would have to be for the existence of some other being(s) with expertise to which we could compare ourselves; yet this is something that we do not seem to have. Again, there would be sufficient reason to think that there is such expertise if there were positive evidence or good arguments for God's existence, but we have already seen that theistic arguments are supposed to be irrelevant here. Thus, appeals to God cannot help (especially given their bankruptcy). Moreover, our universal novicehood is quite implausible, for many individuals appear to be fully developed moral agents and competent critical thinkers that are highly educated and sufficiently engaged with the material to qualify as experts—they certainly should be differentiated from novices that have not sufficiently engaged with such material, or are not sufficiently developed in order to do so. Because there is no positive evidence and no good argument showing that we are all novices, analogies assuming as much do not suggest that our epistemic limitations provide a sufficient reason to doubt our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption.

Another attempt to raise such doubt is what Howard-Snyder calls *the progress argument*.^[26] Our knowledge has progressed in several fields of enquiry, especially in science; and this progressive discovery of previously unknown aspects of reality strongly suggests more progress, which in turn implies that there is much we do not currently know about. Therefore, it would not be surprising if there is intrinsic good that we do not currently know about. Furthermore, given our ignorance about the discovery process of intrinsic good by our evolutionary ancestors, it would not be surprising if they had periodic discoveries of intrinsic good over tens of thousands of years dotted by several millennia-long intervals in which none was discovered. This would suggest that our lack of intrinsic-good discovery in the last few thousand years fits right in with the pattern exhibited by our ancestors, thereby suggesting more progress to be made and thus intrinsic good we do not currently know about. Once

again, the scientific progress analogy, along with a coherent narrative about what *might* have been the discovery process of our ancestors, is useful (and quite seductive) when it comes to illustrating what *could* be the case; but there is no positive evidence here suggesting that there is still progress to be made in discovering intrinsic good. For starters, the analogy with science is quite poor. While scientific discoveries *always* lead to more scientific questions, which implies more room for scientific progress and thus current ignorance about reality, this is not the case with intrinsic good—each discovery might be the last one, and no discovery suggests that there must be more that we do not know about. Moreover, there has been a mammoth amount of scientific discovery over the last few centuries, yet little to no discovery of intrinsic good. Thus, the fact that science strongly suggests more scientific discovery of *scientific entities or explanations* does not at all suggest that there is more intrinsic good to discover.

On the other hand, the analogy with science may not be intended to make such a suggestion. Perhaps this analogy is simply intended to show that the discovery patterns of things are relevant to the likelihood of future discoveries (and thus current ignorance). If this is the real point of the analogy with science, then the force of this argument would lie entirely with our *ignorance* concerning the discovery pattern of intrinsic good by our ancestors. But there is very little force here. Given that this argument relies on our ignorance of this discovery pattern, there is certainly no positive evidence here suggesting that there is more intrinsic good to discover, and thus that there is a sufficient reason to doubt our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption. Moreover, relying on our ignorance concerning our ancestors' discovery pattern of intrinsic good to argue that it *could* be the case that we are exhibiting the same kind of pattern, and thus it *might* be likely that there is still such good to discover despite the appearance to the contrary, is no more forceful than relying on our ignorance about extraterrestrials and the universe's contents to argue that it could be the case that there are aliens that sometimes trick us into not seeing refrigerator contents when they are really there, and thus it might be the case that they are really there despite the appearance to the contrary. While both cases stress our epistemic limitations to make possibilities look plausible, neither present a sufficient reason to doubt our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption.

A final attempt to show that we do not "have what it takes" to reasonably rely on the discernability assumption is what Howard-Snyder calls *the complexity argument*.^[27] The basic idea here is that some things are better than others because they are more complex, and so it would not be surprising if God's mysterious justification for permitting or creating the world's apparently gratuitous evil has to do with good that is just too complex for us to grasp. But once again, this is only a useful and quite seductive way of illustrating what *could* be the case—no positive evidence is presented that there is good that is too complex for us to grasp. In fact, the only positive thing that this argument really provides is a *plausible explanation* for why we might not be able to discern the good that gives God his mysterious justification for the world's apparently gratuitous evil, which does not amount to providing any evidential support for this possibility.

The only evidential support that Howard-Snyder tries to offer is the general phenomena of complexity sometimes hindering our ability to discern things (e.g., the validity of arguments or chess strategies), and that some people, especially children, can appreciate certain simple goods but not others that are more complex. But while these observations may be accurate,

they at best show that some people (novices) have not sufficiently developed, or have not had sufficient training or engagement with the material to appreciate the complex things that others (experts) do. They provide no good reason to doubt the reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption by philosophically minded experts. The only thing that these observations can do is to help the skeptical theist illustrate what could be the case via an analogy comparing all of us to novices that cannot make expert judgments, which I have already argued is insufficient to undermine our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption. Therefore, this argument does not suggest that our epistemic limitations provide a sufficient reason to doubt our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption.

As I have argued, there does not seem to be a sufficient reason to doubt our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption when inferring the reality of gratuitous evil from the appearance that there is such evil. Therefore, the inference to gratuitous evil is analogous to the milk jug inference, not to the extraterrestrial one. So it seems reasonable after all.

(4) No Discernability Assumption Needed

For the sake of argument, let's grant that we cannot reasonably rely on the discernability assumption to infer P2 from the appearance that there is gratuitous evil because it is plausible that there is epistemically inaccessible good.^[28] Even so, P2 is still probably true given the numerous kinds and severity of the world's apparently gratuitous evil. First of all, the severity of the world's apparently gratuitous evil requires any potential (mostly or entirely mysterious) sufficiently outweighing good to be *tremendously* powerful—and this reduces the likelihood that there are morally sufficient reasons for God to permit or create such evil. Take, for instance, the following evil-making features of rape:

- a. It violates the autonomy and the rights of the victim (e.g., his or her right to control his or her body and not engage in intimate acts).
- b. It causes physical pain, great mental suffering (in terms of intensity and amount of time), and psychological damage in victims, which can involve traumatizing them and immensely reducing their quality of life.
- c. It makes the victim's family and friends suffer as well, sometimes immensely reducing their quality of life (and perhaps traumatizing them if they witnessed the event).
- d. It makes people who are simply aware of it suffer through empathy for victims and others affected by it, or through fearing for themselves or friends and family.
- e. It is very unjust.
- f. It involves pleasure in the aggressor(s) at the expense the victim.
- g. It reflects an insensitive or sadistic desire or character on the part of the aggressor(s).

This is not comprehensive or very detailed, but it provides good reasons why rape is a very severe evil. (Some of these might not apply in every case, but all of them do apply in several cases.)

Now in order for there to be a morally sufficient reason for God to permit or create this evil, the good that is logically connected to it must not only outweigh the applicable evil-making features listed above, but must be powerful enough to outweigh the evil by so much that the overall goodness outweighs the goodness of the alternatives that lack the evil. This, however, seems very unlikely because (1) it seems unlikely that the good will outweigh these evil-making features to begin with, (2) the suffering and psychological damage that people experience from the evil can hinder the ability to experience goodness, and (3) terrible evil like this will change the course of events, and can thereby prevent the realization of good things that would have otherwise occurred. In other words, the evil not only introduces a strong negative element in itself that must be outweighed, but it subtracts from the positive goodness that would be present in the alternatives that lack the evil. Add to this the numerous other kinds of apparently gratuitous evil that I mentioned in section 3, which require even more fantastic goodness to sufficiently outweigh them and their goodness-reducing effects, and it becomes even more far-fetched that there is no gratuitous evil.

In fact, I think that probabilistic considerations will illustrate just how far-fetched the nonexistence of gratuitous evil really is. Consider first a fair coin toss: heads and tails are the only two possible outcomes, and only one of these outcomes will occur. Furthermore, given that the probability of each possible outcome is .5 due to the coin's fairness, the probability of getting at least one heads outcome in a string of n coin tosses is given by the formula:[\[29\]](#)

$$P = 1 - (.5)^n$$

So in a string of 5, 10, and 20 fair coin tosses, the probability of getting at least one heads outcome is, respectively:

$$P = 1 - (.5)^5 = .96875$$

$$P = 1 - (.5)^{10} = .99902$$

$$P = 1 - (.5)^{20} = .9999999$$

But what happens if the coin is not a fair one? Let's say that the coin is weighted in favor of getting heads such that, instead of the outcomes being equally probable, the probability of heads is .7 and that of tails is .3. Then the probability of getting at least one heads outcome in a string of 5, 10, and 20 coin tosses is, respectively:

$$P = 1 - (.3)^5 = .99757$$

$$P = 1 - (.3)^{10} = .99999$$

$$P = 1 - (.3)^{20} = .9999999999$$

Now consider how similar this is to the issue of whether there is gratuitous evil. Any existing apparently gratuitous evil is either gratuitous or not gratuitous; these are the only two possible outcomes, and only one of these outcomes will occur for each evil since evil cannot be both gratuitous and nongratuitous. Also, if we grant the skeptical theist that it is just as plausible

that the world's apparently gratuitous evils are mysteriously nongratuitous as it is that they are genuinely gratuitous, then the actual status of any given evil in the collection of apparently gratuitous evil will be like a fair coin toss: the probability of it being mysteriously nongratuitous or genuinely gratuitous is .5 in either case. Finally, recall from note 12 that it only takes one instance of gratuitous evil—or one outcome of evil being gratuitous here—to make P2 true. As such, the probability of P2 being true is analogous to the probability of getting at least one heads outcome in a string of fair coin tosses; so we can apply the formula $P = 1 - (.5)^n$. But now we have to decide what n is going to be, or how many apparently gratuitous evils exist and need to be plugged into the formula. Conservatively, we could only plug in categories of evil instead of individual occurrences.^[30] For example, instead of plugging in the huge number of individual rapes, we could plug in a 1 for the category "rape" by assuming that God is justified in permitting all instances of rape by recourse to some sufficiently outweighing good if he is so justified in permitting just one instance of it. Again, this is a conservative approach—if there are good grounds for thinking that God would need a fresh justification for permitting each instance of rape, or at least a fresh justification for permitting instances that are sufficiently different than other instances, then we could plug in a large number for n and get a very high probability for there being gratuitous evil (as with the fair coin tosses, once n gets to 10, the probability is over 99%). While the latter approach does seem to be justified, we will stick with the conservative approach of plugging in only categories of evil. In fact, if we were very conservative by plugging in only the 5 or 10 worst categories of evil that I mentioned back in section 3, we would still end up with the respective probabilities of .96875 and .99902 of there being gratuitous evil. This is obviously quite high.

At this point the skeptical theist may object to assigning definite probabilities to the outcomes, insisting that we are in no epistemic position to do so. Now this may be the case; but as I argued at the beginning of this subsection, the severity of the world's apparently gratuitous evils, which requires any potential sufficiently outweighing good to be tremendously powerful, suggests that it is not just as plausible for the evil to be mysteriously nongratuitous as it is for them to be genuinely gratuitous. This severity instead suggests that these evils are more likely to be genuinely gratuitous, and thus that we should be calculating the probability of P2 being true like we would calculate the probability of getting at least one heads in a string of unfair coin tosses where the coin favors heads. As such, the probability of P2 being true is even higher than it would be on our very conservative approach of treating the issue as analogous to a string of fair coin tosses. For example, if we again conservatively took only the 5 or 10 worst categories of evil and, in light of their severity, treated the probability of each one being genuinely gratuitous as at least .7 (which strikes me as a conservative estimate), then the respective probabilities of P2 being true would be .99757 and .99999. We thus can be quite confident that P2 is true.^[31]

6. Conclusion

In this paper I have defended the idea that the existence of severe evil rationally justifies atheism against skeptical theism. After formally presenting an atheistic argument from evil (AAE), the brief justification of its premises, and the critical response of skeptical theism, I set out to construct a comprehensive defense of the argument. I began by indirectly defending it, arguing that the intrinsic implausibility and other problematic consequences of skeptical

theism make it an unreasonable response to AAE. I then moved on to directly defending AAE. First, I attempted to vindicate our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption when it comes to inferring genuine from apparently gratuitous evil, arguing that skeptical theism does not provide a sufficient reason to doubt this assumption. Then I argued that P2 is probably true, without relying on the discernability assumption, because of the numerous kinds and severity of the world's apparently gratuitous evil. I therefore conclude that skeptical theism does not undermine AAE.

Notes

[1] Andrea Weisberger, "The Argument from Evil" in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* ed. Michael Martin (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 166: "The existence of evil is *the* most fundamental threat to the traditional Western concept of an all-good, all-powerful God."

[2] Thomas Aquinas, "The Summa of Theology, Part 1" in *On Politics and Ethics* ed. and trans. Paul E. Sigmund (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1988), p. 32.

[3] It is of course necessary that these divine purposes do not rest on ideas that attribute morally unacceptable behavior to God, as this simply introduces a new problem. Take, for example, the idea that God permits or creates evil in order to test us in some way. Even if we ignore the absurdity of the idea that a being who knows everything is testing us (since testing is undertaken to *gain knowledge*), it is cruel and unjust to use evil to test us when there are other ways of doing so. After all, God is all-powerful and all-knowing, so surely he could find another way to test us. What's more, even if there turned out to be no other way to test us, it would still be cruel and unjust to use the world's evil—especially horrific evil—for the sake of testing us. In fact, the thought of God using the majority of the world's evil to test us makes the most morally unacceptable example of humans testing on other humans (or other animals) pale in comparison. Another example is that God permits evil—or at least that for which humans are responsible—in order to determine who goes to Heaven and who goes to Hell. Aside from the questionable coherence of a morally perfect being who creates a place of endless and unspeakably intense suffering as punishment for earthly crimes that cannot be proportional in magnitude, this idea has God allowing a huge amount of evil at the expense of humans and other animals for the needless, game-like purpose of "who gets to go where." Once again, such behavior is both unjust and cruel (perhaps even sadistic). A final example is the idea that God might permit evil in order to show us the consequences of living separately from him (i.e., living autonomously). This implies that God created us as autonomous agents and yet set up creation to contain the evil that it does as consequences of autonomous living. It also suggests that God set us up to experience these consequences, which is obviously cruel and unjust. And even if God did not set us up like this, he still built into his creation extreme vengeance for those who autonomously turn away from him. Such vindictiveness and disrespect toward human autonomy is not the behavior of a morally perfect agent, but instead that of an unjust, cruel, power-hungry despot with an extreme psychological dependence on humans living with him.

[4] Nothing that I have said requires God to be a goodness-maximizer. The only requirement on God is that he can permit or create evil only if this results in greater overall goodness than

evil-free alternatives, and this is compatible with God choosing one option with evil over another with more evil and more overall goodness.

[5] This is a case of a 5-year-old girl from Flint, Michigan who was beaten, raped, and strangled to death by her mother's boyfriend on January 1st, 1986. This example gets its title from being brought into this debate by Bruce Russell in his "The Persistent Problem of Evil" in *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (April 1989).

[6] For a clear and concise defense of this compatibility, see Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 289-291.

[7] As far as I can tell, adopting the slightly different GE' as the proper definition of gratuitous evil would not compromise any of my arguments defending AAE. At most, it would require some minor reformulation.

[8] Possible responses are things like compassion, advocacy, courage, opposition, confession and regret, and asking for and giving forgiveness.

[9] I say that God's prevention of, or failure to create, terrible evil "perhaps" entails the elimination or prevention of virtuous responses and the freedom to actualize such evil by humans or other spirits for the following reasons. First, it is probably false that *all* of this terrible evil is followed by virtuous responses because there seems to be cases in which there is no opportunity for any such response (e.g., nonhuman animal suffering in nature). Also, there are many cases in which no such response results even when there is the opportunity for them. In fact, sometimes the victims are blamed for their plight, which adds more evil to the situation. Second, the elimination or prevention of human or other-spirit freedom to actualize terrible evil is entailed by God's prevention of such evil on one conception of God's prevention of evil but not on another. This entailment does hold if we conceive of God's prevention of terrible evil in a *direct* fashion such that he is ready to directly and systematically thwart humans and other spirits from actualizing terrible evil. If this were the case, then it would not be possible for humans or other spirits to actualize such evil, and thus they would not have the freedom to do so. However, the entailment does not hold if God's prevention of evil is conceived in an *indirect* fashion such that he prevents terrible evil by preventing, not creating, or at least sufficiently weakening the character dispositions or inclinations of humans and other spirits to actualize terrible evil. In this case, humans and other spirits have the freedom to actualize terrible evil, but simply would not do so because they lack sufficient dispositions or inclinations. If this kind of prevention is possible, then God could prevent terrible evil while preserving the freedom of humans or other spirits to actualize such evil. While I do think that such indirect prevention by God is possible and thus that the entailment does not hold (which means that human or other-spirit freedom cannot provide any justification for God to permit terrible evil), I do not rely on this being the case. Instead, I aim to show that the preservation of human or other-spirit freedom to actualize terrible evil does not provide God with sufficient justification for permitting such evil even if his prevention of the evil does entail the elimination or prevention of the freedom to actualize it.

[10] That it is better to have no terrible evil and no virtuous responses than to have both is suggested by at least some of the virtuous responses themselves. For these responses are

goods that are restorative or preventative in nature—that is, they intend to restore things back to the way that they were before the evil occurred, or to prevent future occurrences of evil. For example, compassionate responses are intended to buffer against or eliminate suffering, and this suffering-eliminating purpose makes these response are good. But since the value of compassionate responses lies in their intention to counteract suffering, it is *the absence of suffering* that is the real, intrinsic value here, not the response itself. Thus, by seeking the absence of suffering, compassionate responses aim to restore things back to how they were before certain evil events occurred, thereby suggesting that it is better for there to be no suffering and no compassionate responses than for there to be both. This seems to be confirmed by the compassionate person, who surely does not actively desire to exercise his or her disposition, but only does so if necessary.

[11] It should be noted that even if it is better for virtuous character to be *developed* in people through observing and engaging in virtuous responses to evil instead of them simply being endowed with it (to which I do not agree), this does not hurt my argument because such development can and does occur in the absence of the terrible evil in question. In other words, this terrible evil can be prevented or not created by God without him thereby preventing the realization of virtuous character development.

[12] It should be noted that P2 is a very modest claim, even more modest than what my argumentation here suggests. Specifically, even though I have suggested that there is quite a bit of terrible evil that is gratuitous, there only needs to be one instance of gratuitous evil (like the specific case of Russell's Sue) in order for P2 to be true. Sadly, there are innumerable contenders for this one instance throughout the history of the universe.

[13] Technically, this skeptic does not have to be a theist, yet I imagine that most such skeptics are in fact theists. Also, any atheist or agnostic that takes this position is speaking on behalf of skeptical theism and is therefore indistinguishable from a skeptical theist within the context of this debate. As such, I refer to anyone defending skeptical theism as a skeptical theist.

[14] William Lane Craig, "Theistic Critiques of Atheism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* ed. Michael Martin (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 73.

[15] Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann, "[Grounds for Belief in God Aside, Does Evil Make Atheism More Reasonable Than Theism?](#)" in *God and the Problem of Evil* ed. William Rowe (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001).

[16] Daniel Howard-Snyder, "[God, Evil, and Suffering](#)" in *Reason for the Hope Within* ed. Michael Murray (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

[17] The brevity here is of course due to my own concise depiction of skeptical theism. To be sure, its more sophisticated defenders will offer arguments in order strengthen the plausibility of skeptical theism. I will deal with such arguments later on when I attempt to vindicate our reasonable reliance on the discernability assumption.

[18] The use of skeptical theism against atheistic arguments from evil is thus like trying to treat severe depression with an antidepressant that has mild depression as a side effect.

[19] I would like to thank Richard Gale for pointing out this objection.

[20] Patrick Grim, "Impossibility Arguments" in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* ed. Michael Martin (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1990), Chapter 12.

[21] Nicholas Everitt, *The Non-Existence of God*, Chapter 11.

[22] William Lane Craig, "Theistic Critiques of Atheism." pp. 71, 74-75.

[23] I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this objection.

[24] Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann, "[Grounds for Belief in God Aside, Does Evil Make Atheism More Reasonable Than Theism?](#)"

[25] There cannot be direct evidence of such epistemically inaccessible reasons because if we had such evidence of them, they would not be epistemically inaccessible after all. Thus, indirect evidence of them via positive evidence or good argument for God's existence is the only way for us to think such mysterious reasons exist.

[26] Daniel Howard-Snyder, "God, Evil, and Suffering."

[27] Daniel Howard-Snyder, "God, Evil, and Suffering."

[28] As I argued early on in section 5, the possibility of mysterious logical connections between the good and evil we know about should not be regarded as a plausible threat to our reliance on the discernability assumption, and so my argument in this section disregards it. Now if this possibility really were a plausible threat, then it would certainly weaken my argument. However, given how extreme and far-fetched this possibility really is, rejecting it seems quite reasonable.

[29] It may be helpful to keep in mind that the probability of getting at least one heads is the same as the probability of not getting all tails.

[30] This may not be conservative enough for skeptical theists who want to lump all apparently gratuitous evil together into a single category, thereby making it equally probable that this evil is genuinely gratuitous as mysteriously nongratuitous (which results from plugging 1 in for n). However, I do not think that such treatment of evil is justified because different categories of evil vary in severity and have different evil-making properties, which calls for them (like the coin tosses) to be considered independently of one another. For example, even if broken bones turned out to be nongratuitous in virtue of some good, this gives us no reason for thinking that evils like rape—which are much more severe—are likewise rendered nongratuitous in virtue of the same good, or that there must be some other, stronger good that does the job. And even if an evil that is comparable to or greater in severity than rape turned out to be nongratuitous in virtue of some good, this gives us no reason for thinking that rape is similarly connected to that good given their differing evil-making properties, or that there must be some other good to do the job. (I would like to thank Fred Rauscher for pointing out both the possibility of treating all apparently gratuitous evil as one big category and the need to address it.)

[31] If we took only the 5 or 10 worst categories of evil and treated the probability of each one being genuinely gratuitous as .2, the respective probabilities of P2 being true would still be .67232 and .89263. So even if we set the probability of evil being genuinely gratuitous at such an absurdly low level, we still can be quite confident that P2 is true. For such confidence to be truly shaken, we need grounds for thinking that the probability of evil being genuinely gratuitous is extremely low, which we certainly do not have. (I have instead provided grounds for thinking that the opposite is true.)



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