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# SKEPTICAL THEISM AND EPISTEMIC PROPRIETY

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

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### Abstract

Contemporary proponents of the problem of evil argue that evil is evidence, even strong evidence, against the existence of God. Next, these so-called atheologians claim that having such evidence against God's existence suffices for reasonably believing that God does not exist. In response to this argument, skeptical theists claim that humans are not cognitively proficient when it comes to determining whether or not the evils we see are actually incompatible with the existence of a God. As a result, they deny that the evils we witness constitute evidence (or in some cases, strong evidence) against God's existence. In this dissertation, I argue that whether evil constitutes evidence against God's existence depends on a number of details concerning the particular epistemic *perspective* through which experiences of evil are filtered and that even if evil is evidence (so-construed) against God's existence, it does not suffice for reasonable belief in the nonexistence of God. In chapter 1, I set the stage for our discussion by explaining where skeptical theism fits in as a response to the argument from evil. In chapter 2, I argue against the traditional skeptical theistic position that evil is not evidence of any sort against God's existence. In chapter 3, I explore and develop a more modest approach to skeptical theism: the epistemic principles approach. In chapter 4, I consider analogical arguments which aim to establish the reasonability of applying such epistemic principles to the argument from evil. In chapter 5, I draw from the shortcomings of the projects explored in the previous chapters to develop a *perspectival* theory of epistemic rationality and defeat

resulting in a new form of skeptical theism called *perspectival skeptical theism*. Finally, in chapter 6, I offer a retelling of the argument from evil, and in so doing, explain succinctly how *perspectival skeptical theism* improves on the more traditional forms of skeptical theism and can be used to supplement, rather than replace, other sorts of responses to the argument from evil.

# <u>Chapter 1</u> A Brief History of the Argument from Evil

The arguments from evil with which I am concerned are arguments aiming to establish the non-existence of a God understood in the manner of the major western monotheistic traditions (i.e. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism).<sup>1</sup> Such arguments proceed from two types of premises: one premise which articulates the attributes of God (usually including omnipotence and perfect goodness) and another premise which declares the existence of some type of evil or suffering.<sup>2</sup> Variations on the argument from evil claim that these two premises are either logically inconsistent or that their conjunction is unlikely to some degree. The former variety of argument has come to be called the *Logical Argument from Evil* (LAE) while the latter variety of argument falls under a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Although taking evil as inconsistent with God's existence is my primary concern in this dissertation, various arguments from evil have been offered historically that cast doubt on God's providential competence. A version of such an argument can be found in Plato's *Laws* (cf. John Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997)), and it is plausible that one could reasonably understand the Biblical character of Job as wrestling with an argument from evil of this sort as well.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The word 'evil' is often taken to include a moral dimension, such that a state of affairs or person is evil in virtue of some objective moral properties they exemplify. It is not clear that states of affairs in which people suffer always possess moral properties. Suppose moral anti-realism is true, such that there simply are no objective morally relevant properties. In such a case, even though there will be no moral evil, *suffering* could very well exist. Some authors prefer to focus on the problem of *suffering* rather than *evil* in order to sidestep this and other issues. Having noted that I am cognizant of such usage, I will proceed to talk in terms of 'evil' rather than 'suffering' since the difference will not be important for my purposes. For an attempt to demonstrate the difference, though in terms of 'evil' and 'bad things', see Stephen Griffiths, "The Problem of Pomegranates," in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 85-94.

number of possible designations<sup>3</sup>, including my preferred name, the *Evidential Argument from Evil* (EAE).

Responses to both LAE and EAE come in various guises, including defenses and theodicies. Although they will need to be defined more precisely later, in common usage, a defense is a *possible* explanation of God's permission of an evil while a theodicy is the *actual* explanation for God's permission of an evil.<sup>4</sup> A *greater goods* approach (i.e. defense or theodicy) attempts to explain why

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Other names for this version of the argument from evil are as follows: *empirical* (cf. William Rowe, "The Empirical Argument from Evil," in Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion, eds. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986): 227-47), inductive (cf. William Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," Philosophical Perspectives 5 (1991b): 29-67), local (cf. Peter van Inwagen, The Problem of Evil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)), inscrutable (cf. Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Seeing Through CORNEA," International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 32 (1992): 25-49) & probabilistic (cf. Timothy McGrew and Lydia McGrew, "The Argument from Miracles: A Cumulative Case for the Resurrection of Jesus," in The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology, eds. William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons (2009): 650)). The name evidential argument (cf. Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil," in The Evidential Argument from Evil, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996b): 286-310) seems to have stuck most with respect to the version of the argument(s) which Rowe has developed (cf. Marilyn McCord Adams, Horrndous Evils and the Goodness of God (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), William Hasker, Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God (London: Routledge, 2004), Linda Zagzebski, Philosophy of Religion: an historical introduction (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), Michael Murray, Nature Red in Tooth and Claw: Theism and the Problem of Animal Suffering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Nick Trakakis, The God Beyond Belief: in Defence of William Rowe's Evidential Argument from Evil (Dordrecht: Springer Publishing, 2006a), Graham Oppy, "Rowe's Evidential Arguments from Evil," in The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil, eds. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2013): 49-66).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974a): 192 is where we find an early articulation of how I use 'defense' and 'theodicy' above. As I point out later in this chapter, such usage is common but hardly uniform. For example, in Hasker's "An Open Theist Theodicy of Natural Evil" we find 'theodicy' being used in a way which is compatible with the above use of 'defense', and in Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* we find a modification of 'defense' which includes degrees of plausibility. Van Inwagen adds this further feature of defenses because he thinks that Plantinga's defense suffers in that while it may be *possible*, it does not seem *plausible*. The idea then, is that the more plausible a defense is – or in van Inwagen's terms, the closer to '*a very real possibility*' it is – the better it is as a response to an argument from evil (*Ibid*, 66).

God might allow evil in general or particular types of evil in order to achieve a greater good of sufficient value. Examples of such greater goods in the literature include soul-making<sup>5</sup> (i.e. the process of developing one's character over time through one's own free agency), morally significant free will of the libertarian variety<sup>6</sup> (i.e. free will that makes it such that with respect to some morally significant action A, any agent S can at some point in their life choose to either do A or refrain from doing A), religious experience or divine intimacy<sup>7</sup> (i.e. perhaps suffering is necessary for some particularly valuable type of religious experience, such as the experience of sharing in the suffering of a divine being), as well as others.

A different approach to arguments from evil has come to be called skeptical theism.<sup>8</sup> Although there are a variety of ways to develop a skeptical theistic response to the problem of evil, they generally endorse some version of the following thesis:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Cf. John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Cf. Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, as well as to some extent Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Cf. McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*, Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Laura Ekstrom, "A Christian Theodicy," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, eds. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2013): 266-280, and Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Paul Franks, *A Rational Problem of Evil: The Coherence of Christian Doctrine with a Broad Free Will Defense* (PhD Dissertation, University of Oklahoma, 2012): 5-12 expresses basically the same distinctions between skeptical theism, theodicy and defense that I have made here, although he prefers to use the term 'rebuttal' to refer to the type of response I consider when discussing skeptical theism.

(ST-Thesis) the goods of which we are aware are *not* representative of all the goods that could justify God in allowing some particular evil.

Notice, then, that anyone who argues that an evil counts as evidence against the existence of God assumes that there are no goods which morally justify God in allowing that evil. But of course, if such a person does not have a representative sample of the potentially morally justifying goods at God's disposal (i.e. if the ST-Thesis is true), then that person has a reason to doubt that the inference to God's non-existence is a legitimate one. Thus, skeptical theists attempt to motivate acceptance of the ST-Thesis in a variety of ways to which we will turn at the end of this chapter.

I will proceed as follows. First, I will trace the conceptual history of the problem of evil with the aim of discerning the proper placement of skeptical theism within that dialectic. Because skeptical theism has developed relatively recently, however, I shall begin with J. L. Mackie's exposition of the *logical argument from evil*, which appeared in publication within the past sixty years. I will then turn to Alvin Plantinga's *Free Will Defense*, widely regarded as a decisive refutation of Mackie's logical argument.<sup>9</sup> Once I have presented Plantinga's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> I am pessimistic myself that this is in fact the case since it seems that Plantinga has only shown that it is epistemically possible that the logical problem of evil fails. Epistemic possibility establishes neither metaphysical possibility nor plausibility, and thus, Plantinga's defense founders in that respect (Cf. Keith DeRose, "Plantinga, Presumption, Possibility, and the Problem of Evil," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21 (1991): 497-512). For some interesting argument against Plantinga's notion of transworld depravity, see Daniel Howard-Snyder and John O'Leary-Hawthorne, "Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense," *International Journal for Philosophy for Religion* 44 (1998): 1-21, Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Logical Problem of Evil: Mackie and Plantinga," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, eds. Justin P. McBrayer

defense, we will turn to William Rowe's *evidential argument from evil*, which I take to be the most compelling formal version of the argument from evil. I will introduce one of the more promising defense responses to Rowe's argument, due to Marilyn Adams, followed lastly by the skeptical theist's response, which aims at a different part of Rowe's argument. Thus, we will divulge the direction in which skeptical theists attempt to steer the argument from evil.

## 1. The Logical Argument from Evil

Rather than immediately delve into the details of the history of contemporary versions of the argument from evil, perhaps some background about the re-emergence of philosophy of religion is in order.<sup>10</sup> During the first half of the twentieth century, nearly all of the most illustrious analytic philosophers were atheists (e.g. Bertrand Russell & W. v. O. Quine).<sup>11</sup> Even among those philosophers with sympathies for religious faith, the object of faith was often not some transcendent being, but rather, something much more mundane, such as John Dewey's "unity of all ideal ends".<sup>12</sup> No doubt, the wide-

and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2013): 19-33 and Alexander Pruss, "A Counterexample to Plantinga's Free Will Defense," *Faith and Philosophy* 29.4 (2012): 400-415.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> For more thorough treatments of this history and the sources from which my summary is drawn, see the introductions to either William Wainwright, *The Oxford Handbook to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) or J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), as well as chapter 1 of Zagzebski, *Philosophy of Religion*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Zagzebski Philosophy of Religion, 15).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey*, 1925-1953: *Essays, Reviews, Miscellany, and a Common Faith* (Southern Illinois University, 1986): 29 & Wainwright *The Oxford Handbook to Philosophy of Religion*, 5.

ranging influence of the logical positivists, alongside their verification principle of meaning, was largely responsible for this lacuna of engagement with questions of religion. Once this verificationist principle (according to which a proposition p is meaningful *iff* p is either analytic or empirically verifiable) was exposed as untenable, however, new work in metaphysics, cognitivist ethics and philosophy of religion emerged.

Out of this reshaped philosophical landscape came a flourishing neo-Thomism of such figures as Jacques Maritain and Etienne Gilson, as well as the publication of Anthony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre's *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (1955),<sup>13</sup> which initiated a flurry of renewed interest in philosophy of religion. Shortly thereafter, a movement of religious epistemology, eventually to be dubbed "Reformed Epistemology", developed under the influence of (most notably) Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff. In an edited volume by these same two philosophers, *Faith and Rationality*, a number of contributors argued that belief in God could be rational without propositional evidence, a thesis with startling and refreshing implications for epistemology more broadly construed. Within this fresh paradigm of philosophical exploration, discussions surrounding the argument from evil—the most compelling argument against the existence of God—were reintroduced by J. L.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Though this book was indeed wide-ranging, the primary subject matter was that of the philosophical import of religious language.

Mackie. And it is Mackie's logical version of the argument from evil to which we now turn.

Mackie originally presented the *Logical Argument from Evil* as follows:

- 1. God is omnipotent & wholly good (premise)
- A wholly good being would eliminate evil as far as it could (definition)
- 3. An omnipotent being can eliminate all evil (definition)
- 4. Therefore, God would eliminate all evil (by 1-3).
- 5. Yet evil exists (premise)
- 6. Therefore, no omnipotent and wholly good God exists (by 4 & 5).<sup>14</sup>

After presenting this argument, Mackie then turns to a number of possible solutions. First, he enumerates solutions that involve explicitly denying one or more of the premises in LAE, such as denying that any evil really exists. While Mackie acknowledges that such solutions are clearly possible, they nevertheless seem to involve "only a half-hearted or temporary rejection" of the premises, which are "covertly re-asserted...elsewhere in [a theistic] system."<sup>15</sup> Because he believes no proponents of such solutions continue to reject the premises of his argument once they enter into other branches of theistic discourse (e.g. someone might deny that evil exists when talking to Mackie but presuppose it when

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," Mind 64 (1955): 200-201.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Ibid., 202.

accounting for the importance of the doctrine of atonement), Mackie urges that truly valuable discussion of LAE is to be found elsewhere; that is, within the realm of solutions reputed to respond to LAE *without* denying its main theological premise (i.e. premise 1). Mackie considers four such "fallacious solutions", each of which arises in discussions of the argument from evil quite often.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.1 The Counterpart Solution

Mackie first considers whether or not the existence of good might be related to evil in such a way that it *necessitates* the existence of evil. As Justin McBrayer puts it, one who advances a counterpart solution asserts that "good and evil are like metaphysical twins or like two sides of the same coin: anytime you have the one, you have the other."<sup>17</sup> The central question to answer, then, if one is to develop a successful counterpart solution is this: *what precise sort of relation do good and evil bear to one another?* Mackie attempts two answers by way of analogy, and rejects both of them.

First, Mackie suggests that good and evil are related as great is related to small. However, good is understood as being *opposed* to evil and aiming to eliminate it, while greatness and shortness are not so opposed to each other. And

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Justin P. McBrayer, "Counterpart and Appreciation Theodicies," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, eds. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2013): 195.

so, good and evil are not related to each other as great is related to small. The second suggestion Mackie offers is that good and evil are like the properties red and not-red. But immediately he objects to such an understanding since he takes it to be clear that even if conceptually the property of red could not exist without its negation, that would not entail that any world with a red object necessarily also had objects instantiating the property not-red. Thus, if this were the type of relation which good bore to evil, then it would fail to explain why God could not have created a world which contained only good and no evil to the same extent that it failed to explain why God could not have created a world which contained only red objects and no not-red objects.<sup>18</sup>

#### 1.2 Evil as a Necessary Means to Good Solution

Having fully rejected the Counterpart Solution, Mackie suggests alternatively that evil might be related to good by causal laws which necessitate the existence of evil in order to obtain good. But as Mackie rightly suggests, his version of this alternative is difficult to understand unless it just involves a rejection of God's omnipotence. After all, causal laws are surely subject to the will of God since he establishes them in the first place. But this solution suggests that God is instead subject to the causal laws, and it is difficult to imagine an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 204-5.

*omnipotent* God being subject to anything. So, Mackie thinks, this solution will also ultimately fail to address LAE.<sup>19</sup>

### 1.3 Hierarchy of Goods and Evils Solution

As Mackie envisions different types of good and evil in this proposed solution, there is a hierarchical structure to them, and various types of good and evil belong to different levels of the hierarchy. For example, to the category of a first-order good belongs "pleasure and happiness" while first-order evil involves "pain and misery". Second-order goods, such as the virtue of benevolence, are goods which are more valuable than first-order goods and require in some way the existence of certain first-order evils in order to obtain. To explain how this structure might be developed into a solution to the argument from evil, Mackie offers the following analogy:

> Consider some discordant portion of a symphony, which when taken in isolation is indeed aesthetically unpleasant, but when put into the context of a completed musical work gives rise to greater aesthetic goods which would have otherwise been impossible to produce. Just as the composer allows discordant parts for the sake of greater aesthetic goods, so God allows first-order evils for the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Ibid., 205-6.

sake of greater second-order goods. And furthermore, both the composer and God can be clearly seen to be justified in doing so.

While this solution seems more plausible than the first two, Mackie points out that just as first-order goods correlate with first-order evils, second-order goods (e.g. benevolence) correlate with second-order evils (e.g. malevolence). But then, a proponent of the hierarchical solution would need to find some thirdorder goods which were more valuable than second-order goods and sufficiently outweighed the presence of the second-order evils which were necessary for their realization. Indeed, this exercise could be repeated *ad infinitum*, and unless some higher-order good that did not necessitate a correlative evil (at the same level in the hierarchy) could be found, that solution would ultimately fail. However, Mackie thinks that there is at least one plausible candidate to avoid this objection; namely, the good of free will.<sup>20</sup>

### 1.4 Free Will Necessitates Evil

As Mackie represents the free will solution, it is a particular version of the hierarchy solution illustrated above. That is, Mackie suggests that free will is best represented as a third-order good which makes the second-order goods more valuable than they would be if they were to obtain in a wholly deterministic world. And furthermore, Mackie explains that on this view, certain second-order

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Ibid., 206-8.

evils, such as cruelty, would be "logically necessary accompaniments of freedom."<sup>21</sup>

But now, what reasons can a proponent of the free will defense offer in support of this claim that the existence of free will necessitates the existence of evils at lower levels in the hierarchy? A natural way to defend this claim is to argue for it, but Mackie tells us that it is typically just assumed rather than argued for. And so without an argument, we should at the very least examine our intuitions in the case, intuitions which, for Mackie, lead to the opposite conclusion. After all, he questions, what could prohibit an *omnipotent* God from creating free creatures who always freely chose to do the good?

Perhaps Mackie's challenge can be better understood and motivated by considering the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding the Virgin Mary, who was created without Original Sin and never committed any actual sins, despite possessing morally significant free will.<sup>22</sup> A proponent of the free will solution, then, needs to do more than merely assert that the existence of sinless free creatures is logically impossible. If God in fact did, at least by the admission of Catholicism, create one free being that always chose the good (i.e. the Virgin

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> This example is drawn in Zagzebski, *Philosophy of Religion* 2007, 152. See Bruce Russell and Stephen Wykstra, "The 'Inductive' Argument from Evil: A Dialogue," *Philosophical Topics* 26 (1988): 133-160, for an alternative example consistent with Protestant theology. They consider the archangel Gabriel as an instance of a sinless free agent. Of course, this is not an example of a merely *human* free agent that remains sinless. Thus, the Virgin Mary fits better as an example to which Mackie might point.

Mary), then why could he not have created a plurality of such beings? They need to develop a story which is both true for all we know and if true, shows that God's choice to create a plurality of free creatures entails the existence of evil. Alvin Plantinga's well-known free will defense, most rigorously developed in *The Nature of Necessity*<sup>23</sup>, purports to accomplish this very task.

## 2. Plantinga's Free Will Defense

Plantinga takes up Mackie's challenge by focusing on the "simple form" of the problem as follows:

- *p.* God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good.
- *q*. There is evil in the world.

Since Mackie alleges that p and q are inconsistent, Plantinga tells us that his goal will be to describe a possible world in which we assume that p is true, as well as some other proposition r, which when combined with p will be both consistent and entail q. Moreover, Plantinga notes that since the criticism Mackie advances is one of *logical* consistency, whatever proposition he evinces for r need only be *possible for all we know*. So long as this is true, p and q will have been demonstrated to be logically consistent, and thus vindicated. However, Plantinga acknowledges Mackie's point that the free will solution to the problem of evil does not wear its logical benefits on its sleeve, and thus, Plantinga will have to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*.

unpack what other information is needed to demonstrate the epistemically possible impossibility of a world with free creatures and no evil.

To do this, Plantinga suggests that we consider *transworld depravity*, a property which could for all we know constitute each and every human essence.<sup>24</sup> Plantinga defines transworld depravity as follows:

An essence *E* suffers from transworld depravity if and only if for every world *W* such that *E* possesses the properties is significantly free in  $W^{25}$  and always does what is right in *W*, there is a state of affairs *T* and an action *A* such that

(1) *T* is the largest state of affairs God strongly actualizes<sup>26</sup> in *W*,
(2) *A* is morally significant for *E*'s instantiation in *W*, and
(3) if God had strongly actualized *T*, *E*'s instantiation would have gone wrong with respect to *A*.<sup>27</sup>

On the basis of this definition, suppose person S suffers from *transworld* 

depravity, and ask whether or not it is possible for God to actualize a world in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> The essence of some X on Plantinga's view is a collection of properties without any of which X would cease to be X. So, he is just claiming that it is epistemically possible that all humans are essentially transworldly depraved.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> By 'significantly free in W' Plantinga means that for a person S in W who is significantly free, there are occasions in which S is "free with respect to an action that is morally significant for him" (Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 166).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Strong Actualization is a technical term for Plantinga which goes beyond simply God's bringing about some state of affairs, but includes him as a causal contributor as well—"God strongly actualizes a state of affairs S if and only if he causes S to be actual and causes to be actual every contingent state of affairs S<sup>\*</sup> such that S includes S<sup>\*</sup>" (Plantinga 1985, 49). Also, I should add for myself that I deny that strong actualization is closed over entailment. Such an understanding of strong actualization leads to the possibility of God strongly actualizing some free acts. See Jonathan Kvanvig, Destiny and Deliberation: Essays in Philosophical Theology (Oxford: Oxford University Publishing, 2011): 155 for a discussion of this, inspired by conversations between Kvanvig and Alex Pruss.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Plantinga, The Nature of Necessity, 188.

which *S* is both significantly free and does no wrong. Given that *S*'s essence is *transworldly depraved*, unfortunately for *S*, it is impossible that God actualize a world in which *S* is both significantly free and does no wrong. Why is this impossible? It is impossible because *for every possible world* in which both *S*'s essence is instantiated and *S* has morally significant free will, were that world actual, *S* would have chosen wrongly with respect to at least one morally significant action. Thus, this implication of transworld depravity is simply a matter of definition, not something to be disputed.<sup>28</sup>

But now, suppose that significant moral freedom is necessary for God to create a world containing a sufficient amount of moral goodness, and God desires to create such a world including free agents other than himself.<sup>29</sup> Ascribing such desires to God certainly appears reasonable. And now suppose that we engage in some innocent metaphysical speculation by considering the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Of course, someone might dispute the *coherence* of such a property or offer a competing property, which would logically exclude the presence of transworld depravity. Daniel Howard-Snyder and John O'Leary-Hawthorne have advanced objections to the notion of transworld depravity in this way by developing the concept of transworld sanctity in "Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense" (1998). They define transworld sanctity (*this is an updated version*) as follows: "An essence *E* enjoys [*transworld sanctity*] if and only if for every [world *W* at which *E* is instantiated with significant freedom and always does what is right], there is *no* action *A* and *no* maximal world segment *T*(*W*) such that if *T*(*W*) were actual, [*E*] would have gone wrong with respect to *A*" (Howard-Snyder 2013, 22 & 25). They further argue that we are not in a position to see whether transworld sanctity or transworld depravity is true, although we can know that they are logically exclusive, and thus, we should adopt an agnostic attitude with respect to whether or not either property is logically possible.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> There are subtle difficulties for the theist here since God could presumably have chosen to actualize a world in which he created nothing, which nevertheless satisfied the constraint of having significant moral freedom for himself and he always chose to perform good actions. I take it that the desire for creating *other* agents which are significantly free is part of Plantinga's defense and is plausibly motivated by Bonaventure's suggestion that God possesses self-diffusive goodness (McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 174-6).

possibility that *all essences suffer from transworld depravity*. If this is indeed possible, then Plantinga has located tools sufficient for responding to Mackie. Plantinga utilizes these considerations as follows: he claims that the conjunction of (p)-God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good—and (r)—i) every essence suffers from transworld depravity and ii) God actualizes a world containing moral goodness with significantly free creatures other than himself—entails (q)—there is evil in the world. As a result, Plantinga demonstrates both that Mackie's argument fails and that p and q are indeed compossible, rendering LAE useless as an argument against the existence of God.

Moreover, I should note two interesting advantages of Plantinga's particular defense. First, Plantinga's free will defense does not commit him to claiming that *every world with free will is better than any world without it*. All that is necessary for his defense to succeed is that some world with free will is both better than any world without it and at least as good of a world on the whole as any other possible world containing free will. Consequently, under at least one plausible interpretation of it<sup>30</sup>, Plantinga need not accept the hierarchical structure posited by Mackie, according to which any world with a third-order

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> It is not clear whether Mackie merely thinks i) that token goods which belong to a higher level of the hierarchy are more valuable than token goods at lower levels, such that a sufficient number of lower level goods might be collectively of more value than a single higher level good, or ii) that higher level goods are of such a value that any world containing higher level goods is automatically rendered more valuable than worlds without them. Plantinga's defense is only committed to the truth of the former. Here is the ambiguity in Mackie's text:

<sup>&</sup>quot;It is [...] being assumed that second order good is more important than first order good or evil, in particular that it more than outweighs the first order evil it involves" (Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 206-7).

good like free will was better than worlds only containing first- or second-order goods. Second, Plantinga's free will defense alone only works as a defense of *moral evils*. The distinction between *natural* and *moral* evil has become quite commonplace in the literature. In general, I take 'moral evil' to include any bad state of affairs which is brought about either by the intentional action of some free agent or by blameworthy negligence on their part. By 'natural evil', on the other hand, I understand any bad state of affairs which is not brought about by the will or negligence of free agents, including such evils as natural disasters (e.g. earthquakes, tsunamis, etc.), diseases, as well as the suffering of animals.<sup>31</sup>

Despite Plantinga's admittedly impressive contribution to the literature on the problem of evil, there nevertheless remains an undeniable intuition that much more can be said on behalf of the atheologian. While many atheists have admitted defeat with respect to LAE, including Mackie<sup>32</sup>, Plantinga's focus on both moral evil and logical consistency reveal that his defense, though a significant step forward in the history of the contemporary argument from evil, is nevertheless insufficient to put it completely to rest.<sup>33</sup> <sup>34</sup> The evidential

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> See Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 4-6 for a more detailed development of this distinction, as well as Hick *Evil and the Love of God*, 12-14.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Pres, 1982): 154.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> For similar claims in this vicinity, see William Rowe, "Ruminations about Evil," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 74-6, Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil," McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*, 29-31, and Howard-Snyder, "The Logical Problem of Evil," 27-32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> I should also acknowledge that Plantinga does mention a response to the worries about natural evil, which although highly speculative perhaps does meet the conditions of adequacy for a defense (Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974b): 58). Plantinga's response is as follows: if we assume that theism is true and that God could have

argument by William Rowe to which we now turn exploits both of these weaknesses.

# 3. Rowe's Evidential Argument from Evil

William Rowe began formulating his own *evidential* version of the problem of evil at least as early as 1969 when he published a review of Plantinga's *God and Other Minds*.<sup>35</sup> At this point in his philosophical development, Rowe had yet to fully articulate his thoughts on the problem of evil. Such articulation first began to appear in his "Plantinga on Possible Worlds and Evil" where he distinguished between a "*logical* form" and an "*epistemological* form" of the problem of evil.<sup>36</sup> According to the logical form, the propositions expressed by "God is omnipotent and perfectly good" and "evil exists" are logically inconsistent, and it was this form of the argument at which Plantinga's free will defense was aimed. However, as Rowe understands the difficulty evil presents, it is the latter epistemological form of the argument from evil that must be faced.

a morally justifying reason for allowing moral evil, then it doesn't seem like too difficult of a step to deal with natural evil. For instance, on the Christian story, before the natural order was even arranged for material beings such as ourselves, God created immaterial spirits, some of which fell by their own initial acts of moral evil. And Scripture gives Christians some justification for thinking that at least *some* of those events which they would group with *natural evils* were actually perpetrated by these fallen angels (i.e. the evils were never really natural, but rather, moral evils). And so it seems possible that *all* such ostensibly natural evils are actually moral evils due to the work of fallen angels. From which it would follow that there simply fails to be any *natural evil*. If this story is logically possible, then the problem of natural evil has been solved, or rather, disappears.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), William Rowe, "God and Other Minds," *Nous* 3.3 (1969): 259-284.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> William Rowe, "Plantinga on Possible Worlds and Evil," *The Journal of Philosophy* 70.17 (1973): 554-555.

This version of the argument simply claims that evil—including the magnitude, types and distribution of evil we find—present "rational grounds for atheism."<sup>37</sup> Thus, this epistemological form of the argument does not depend on the success or failure of the logical form of the argument.

Now, the roots of Rowe's ruminations are found in considering how one

might begin to demonstrate the reasonability of the following proposition:

*E*. There exist cases of severe, protracted, and involuntary human pain which are not *necessary* for any greater good.<sup>3839</sup>

This premise, referred to as the *factual premise* by some authors<sup>40</sup>, claims

that gratuitous evils (i.e. evils which are not necessary for any greater good) exist,

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 555.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Rowe, "God and Other Minds," 272. In William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979) 336, Rowe expands on what he means by 'not *necessary* for any greater good' where '*OG*' simply stands for the omni-God (i.e. a God that is omnipotent and omnibenevolent) as follows:

*Either* (i) there is some greater good, *G*, such that *G* is obtainable by *OG* only if *OG* permits  $s_1$ ,

*or* (ii) there is some greater good, *G*, such that *G* is obtainable by *OG* only if *OG* permits either  $s_1$  or some evil equally bad or worse,

*or* (iii) *s*<sup>1</sup> is such that it is preventable by *OG* only if *OG* permits some evil equally bad or worse.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> One might also worry that in formulating his worries this way, Rowe's concern can only be successfully developed against a backdrop of certain types of ethical theories. For example, Linda Zagzebski, "Good Person, Good Aims, and the Problem of Evil," Presented at *Notre Dame Problem of Evil Conference* (2013) argues that the following meta-ethical principle is assumed by Rowe: "(2a) A condition for being a good person is that she aims at producing good states of affairs and preventing evil ones." Zagzebski suggests that an alternative principle – "(2b) A condition for something being a good state of affairs and something else an evil state of affairs is that a good person aims at producing the former and preventing the latter" – is a better principle for understanding the metaphysics of value involved in the problem of evil. Moreover, she argues that (2a) is plausibly at odds with the Pauline Principle (i.e. "that one should not do evil in order to produce good"). There is much more that needs to be said about this argument to do it justice, but for our purposes here I will not engage with it further.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Trakakis, *The God Beyond Belief*, 51. Others, such as Neal Judisch, "Meticulous Providence and Gratuitous Evil," in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion: Volume 4*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 68, call this the 'evidential premise'.

something which Rowe confesses is incredibly difficult to demonstrate as *in fact* true.<sup>41</sup> However, as his later versions of EAE reveal, Rowe came to realize that establishing the truth of such a premise is unnecessary. Instead, all that was necessary for a successful argument was that he demonstrate that P was reasonable to believe, given certain assumptions about an agent's background information.<sup>42</sup>

Although variations on Rowe's arguments have resulted in what Nick Trakakis calls the early, middle and later versions of Rowe's EAE, I will focus on the middle Rowe's version, which Trakakis and I both agree is reducible to his earlier version of EAE.<sup>43</sup> What primarily separates the later Rowe's version of EAE apart is the incorporation of Bayesian epistemology.<sup>44</sup> Though this is certainly an important innovation in the argument's structure, the later version of EAE nevertheless garners plausibility on the same bases as the other versions

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Rowe, "God and Other Minds," 272.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Rowe begins to discuss the relevance of background information in his now classic 1984 article, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism" and expounds more on it when introducing the notion of expanded & restricted forms of theism in William Rowe, "The Empirical Argument from Evil."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Trakakis, The God Beyond Belief, 58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Ibid., 66-7 notes that Rowe also wishes to include in his final version of the evidential argument from evil the concession that theodicists have failed so far to explain certain examples of evil, such as the *Bambi* and *Sue* cases, to be presented shortly. Such an admission is one which skeptical theists urge requires adopting some version of skeptical theism: see Alston 1991b, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," 119.

of Rowe's argument. Since those bases are what will come under question later

in this dissertation, I will not expound the later version here.<sup>45</sup>

Rowe begins his EAE with two cases of particularly horrendous evils,

which, following the practice of William Alston, I will refer to as 'Bambi' and

'Sue'.46 Rowe offers descriptions of both scenarios, borrowing the latter from

Bruce Russell<sup>47</sup> who in turn drew from the *Detroit Free Press*<sup>48</sup>, as follows.

*Bambi* – In some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering.

*Sue* – The girl's mother was living with her boyfriend, another man who was unemployed, her two children, and her 9-month-old infant fathered by the boyfriend. On New Year's Eve all three adults were drinking at a bar near the woman's home. The boyfriend had been taking drugs and drinking heavily. He was asked to leave the bar at 8:00 p.m. After several reappearances he finally stayed away for good at about 9:30 p.m. The woman and the unemployed man remained at the bar until 2:00 a.m. at which time the woman went home and the man to a party at a neighbor's home. Perhaps out of jealousy, the boyfriend attacked the woman when she walked into the house. Her brother was there and broke up the fight by hitting the boyfriend who was passed out and slumped over a table when the brother left. Later the boyfriend attacked the woman again, this time she knocked him unconscious. After checking the children, she went to bed. Later the woman's 5year-old girl went downstairs to go to the bathroom. The unemployed man returned from the party at 3:45 a.m. and found

<sup>45</sup> For anyone interested in reading Rowe's late version of the argument, see William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996): 262-285.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," 32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Bruce Russell, "The Persistent Problem of Evil," Faith and Philosophy 6 (1989): 121-139.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> The story ran on January 3, 1986.

the 5-year-old dead. She had been raped, severely beaten over most of her body and strangled to death by the boyfriend.<sup>49</sup>

The *Bambi* case involves an instance of natural evil—which we should recall is the primary type of evil left unaddressed by Plantinga's defense, and thus constituted his defense's first weakness—while the *Sue* case involves an instance of moral evil (i.e. an evil which is perpetrated by an agent through their successful, intentional and freely chosen immoral actions). Thus, *Bambi* and *Sue* are offered by Rowe as representative instances of two types of particularly troubling evil with which a theist must deal in order to retain reasonable belief in the existence and goodness of God. Moreover, his conclusion is rendered more plausible to the degree which *Bambi* and *Sue* resist our attempts to offer possible morally justifying reasons that God might have for permitting them to occur. To put it another way, consider Rowe's argument as follows:

(*P*) No good state of affairs we know of is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*.

From which we can inductively conclude:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Nick Trakakis, *William Rowe on Philosophy of Religion: Selected Works* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2007): 119-20.

(*Q*) No good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*.

In order to reach the conclusion that the existence of God is unlikely, we need only conjoin Q with the factual premise E, substituting *Bambi* and *Sue* in as representative of the sorts of gratuitous evils under question in E. Once we have done this and granted that an omnipotent and omniscient being would not actualize such gratuitous evils in the world, the plausibility of the claim that God exists will decrease as the plausibility of Q increases. Thus, the more compelling the inductive inference from P to Q, the more uncomfortable (and perhaps irrational) belief in the existence and goodness of God becomes.

Importantly, the second fundamental weakness of Plantinga's defense after its inadequacy with respect to natural evil was its focus on logical consistency. Rowe acknowledges that Plantinga has managed to demonstrate the logical consistency of the premises of Mackie's logical argument from evil. What Rowe denies, however, is that such a demonstration is sufficient to address the *evidential* considerations of evil. That is, even if we can acknowledge that it is *possible* that God is morally justified in permitting the evil we see, it may nevertheless be very improbable that God exists. After all, many of the evils we witness seem positively unnecessary, that is, there is no greater good to which they lead. The things in need of explanation (i.e. *explananda*) in this case are evils such as *Bambi* or *Sue*, and any candidate to explain them (i.e. *explanans*) will be judged adequate or inadequate at least partly with reference to its explanatory power. Rowe's contention, then, is that we would not be as surprised to find examples of gratuitous suffering in the world given the non-existence of God as we would given God's existence. And thus, to the degree that theism fails to explain these evidential considerations, it loses credibility as a hypothesis in general.

# 4. The Approach of Theodicy (or Defense)

One prominent type of response to Rowe is to develop a defense or theodicy, which consists partly in identifying goods of which humans are aware that morally justify God in permitting some evil. Although the terms 'theodicy' and 'defense' are used differently by various authors<sup>50</sup>, I will use them in the following sense. A defense is a complete and consistent description of a possible

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> As mentioned in footnote 3, Plantinga takes a 'defense' to be a presentation of a logically possible reason for God to permit some evil while a 'theodicy' constitutes God's actual reason. My modification with degrees of plausibility is motivated by Van Inwagen, The Problem of Evil. I choose to couch the definitions of defense and theodicy in terms of possible worlds descriptions following Stump, Wandering in Darkness, 18-22. Still another use of 'defense' and 'theodicy' can be found in William Hasker, "An Open Theist Theodicy of Natural Evil," in Molinism: The Contemporary Debate, ed. Ken Perszyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 302, where a defense is characterized as anyone who attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the inference from evil to God's non-existence by some means other than pointing to possible or actual goods that might morally justify it. Pointing to possible or actual goods, for Hasker, just is to engage in theodicy. So Hasker's use of 'defense' is something much more akin to my use of 'skeptical theism', and he uses 'theodicy' to encompass both what I would term either a 'defense' or 'theodicy'. Since variations on Plantinga's way of using these terms is more or less standard in discussions, I will stick much more closely with his usage than Hasker's. For the difference between an 'epistemic' and 'logical' defense, which I aim to capture with the two different ways of determining degrees of plausibility, see McCord Adams, Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God, 18-9 & 22-3.

world, which includes propositions claiming that the God of the major western monotheistic traditions exists<sup>51</sup> and that evil exists. Furthermore, this definition of a defense allows for varying degrees of plausibility from one defense to another, and these degrees of plausibility could be a function of different types of modality. First, degree of plausibility could be determined by epistemic probabilities derived from the cognitive state of some given individual, or second, degree of plausibility could be determined by the closeness<sup>52</sup> of the described possible world to our own. Thus, on the latter view, a defense which included the claim that the earth was created by God approximately 10,000 years ago would be implausible because the possible world being described would not be close enough to the actual world.<sup>53</sup> On the former view, however, such a defense might be very plausible depending on the background beliefs included in the information state of the agent considering the defense.<sup>54</sup> Since I take both

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup>Or something near enough. I do not want to rule out defenses that are committed to God lacking some traditional attributes, such as immutability, impassibility or atemporality (cf. McCord Adams *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*). Furthermore, I acknowledge that there are complications in defining certain traditional attributes with adequate precision, such as omniscience or omnipotence. For instance, van Inwagen includes a modification of omniscience which states: A being O is omniscient iff O knows all propositions O is able to know (cf. Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 82-3). A similar modified definition of omniscience can be found in Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993): 178-82, as well as many open theists. Such modifications typically assume that omniscience is a modal concept in a way which is similar to omnipotence, but such a view is not uncontested (cf. Jonathan Kvanvig, "Unknowable Truths and the Doctrine of Omniscience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57.3 (1989): 485-507.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> On the notion *closeness of worlds*, see David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986): 20-7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Although, see Hud Hudson, *The Fall and Hypertime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014b) for a defense of the consistency of the deliverances of contemporary physical sciences and a literal reading of Genesis suggested in the text above.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Franks, A Rational Problem of Evil, 28-33 distinguishes between a narrow defense and a broad defense. A narrow defense only purports to demonstrate "the failure of a problem of evil" (28)

ways of determining degree of plausibility to be useful in different contexts, I will not commit myself to one or the other here.

When moving from defense to theodicy, however, I prefer to distinguish the two concepts with reference to the beliefs of the person *describing* a given possible world. Thus, I define a theodicy in two parts:

### A theodicy is...

- a) a complete and consistent description of a possible world, which includes at least the two following propositions: i) the God of the major western monotheistic traditions exists and ii) evil exists, and
- b) the person proposing the description believes that they are describing the actual world.

Eleonore Stump proposes a similar understanding of theodicy. As she describes her position in *Wandering in Darkness*, she is presenting a modified version of Aquinas's theodicy. Her justification for calling it a theodicy is that *she thinks* it is true, but that if anyone doubts parts of that theodicy, then they need not reject it outright. They can instead opt to consider it a defense with a great

while a broad defense adds the further requirement that the defense in question be "consistent with other things the Christian philosopher believes about the actual world" (29). This distinction highlights an important consideration that may come into play when determining the degree of plausibility for a defense *in my sense* in the following way: if some individual *S* considers a possible world description, one which is intended to constitute a defense, and believes that such defenses are only plausible if the defender also believes the propositions they have committed themselves too, then for every proposition constituting that defense which the defender takes to be false, *S* will judge the defense less plausible.
deal of plausibility.<sup>55</sup> So it seems reasonable that adding the perspectival clause (b) to the definition of a defense is sufficient for providing an adequate definition of 'theodicy', and it follows from this addition that what would constitute a theodicy with respect to one person might only constitute a defense with respect to another. Because of this feature of the above definition, in subsequent discussion, I will talk in terms of defense but note that each defense mentioned along the way could very well be viewed as a theodicy by its author. Nothing of philosophical significance, it seems to me, hangs on this particular manner of presentation.

So now that we have definitions of a defense and theodicy, how is it that a defense constitutes a response to Rowe? Essentially, a defender rejects premise *P* in Rowe's argument (i.e. the claim that no goods we know of morally justify God in permitting *Bambi* or *Sue* to occur). And we can see this clearly because any goods a defender might include in their possible world description, which they believe to be sufficient to morally justify God in allowing some given evil, would have to include goods of which *we are aware*. So in describing their possible world, they are describing a world which satisfies the negation of *P*; namely, that *there is some good state of affairs we know of such that if an omnipotent, omniscient being actualized it, that being would be morally justified by that good of affairs in permitting that evil (e.g. Bambi or Sue)*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Stump, Wandering in Darkness, 18-22.

Different defenses offer various candidates for the good state of affairs which is alleged to justify God in allowing evil. For example, according to John Hick's soul-making defense, the good of soul-making (i.e. being an agent who has brought about one's own character and virtue) could only be obtained in a world which included many types of evil. Eleonore Stump's Thomistic defense, which is in many ways similar to Hick's defense, suggests that suffering is medicinal for psychologically disintegrated persons. Thus, the good for which suffering is a necessary means in her defense is increased union with God, something which requires a degree of internal integration around the good. Other less individual-centric defenses include Bruce Reichenbach's natural law defense<sup>56</sup> (i.e. the idea that all natural and moral evils are necessary consequences of God's choice to actualize a world with consistent and predictable natural laws) and Plantinga's O Felix Culpa defense<sup>57</sup> (i.e. defense based on the idea that all broadly logical possible worlds contain God's "unlimited goodness, love, knowledge, and power" and "the best possible worlds contain incarnation and atonement<sup>"58</sup>). To help us get a better grasp of what a defense might look like in more detail, perhaps it would be good to briefly develop one of the more

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Developed in Bruce Reichenbach, "Natural Evils and Natural Laws: A Theodicy for Natural Evils," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1976): 179-196.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Developed in Alvin Plantinga, "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa,'" in *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Peter van Inwagen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2004): 1-25.
<sup>58</sup> René van Woudenberg, "A Brief History of Theodicy," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, eds. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2013): 187-8.

promising defenses, what I call the *Divine Intimacy* defense as developed by Marilyn Adams<sup>59</sup>.

### 4.1 Adams on Divine Intimacy

According to Adams, a successful defense must accomplish two crucial tasks. The good or goods posited by the defense must be sufficient to demonstrate how God would both i) *outweigh* the evil experienced by an individual *for that individual* with a sufficient amount of good and ii) *defeat* horrendous evil "within the context of an individual's life" by integrating it into that person's "relation to a great enough good."<sup>60</sup>

The notion of *outweighing* is relatively straightforward and is an additive relation in the following way. Consider some state of affairs *S* constituted by two parts, one good *G* and one bad *B*, and nothing else. *G outweighs B* if, and only if, *S* is on the whole good with respect to only *G* and *B*'s additive values.<sup>61</sup> For example, suppose I experience a certain amount of pleasure, say the equivalent of 9 hedons<sup>62</sup> where a hedon is a measurable unit of pleasure. Suppose further that both of my parents each experience 4 turps, where a turp is a measurable

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Technically, McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*, 2000, 18-19 calls her response to the problem of evil an epistemic defense rather than just a defense. Her use of this concept is derived from Nelson Pike, "Hume on Evil," *The Philosophical Review* 72.2 (1963): 13-4. <sup>60</sup> McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*, 28-29.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Furthermore, *G* counterbalances *B* if, and only if, *S* is on the whole neither good nor bad. And *G* is outweighed by *B* if, and only if, *S* is on the whole bad. This distinction was originally developed in the context of the problem of evil in Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 42 (1968-9): 21-38. <sup>62</sup> Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, chapter 9.

unit of displeasure. In this scenario, only a small amount of arithmetic is necessary to see that my pleasure *outweighs* the displeasure of my parents (notice also that with just a little more thought, it is clear that the state of affairs as a whole, which is equal to one hedon, is *less* good than the good part of that state of affairs which is my own pleasure, which is equal to nine hedons). Thus, Adams's first condition of an adequate defense requires that the balance of good and evil for an individual must tip on the side of good. This is insufficient for answering the argument from evil, however, since the *outweighing* relation does not explain why *B* cannot be simply removed without threatening *G* and resulting in a better overall state of affairs.

In response to this worry, Adams develops the notion of *defeat*, which unlike the *outweighing* relation, is not additive. Instead, *G defeats B* only if *S* is on the whole better because of the presence of *B* than the state of affairs constituted *only* by *G* would be.<sup>63</sup> Examples of the defeat relation are commonplace in aesthetics. For instance, the discordant harmonies of much choral music (utilized especially well in works such as Gustav Mahler's 2<sup>nd</sup> Symphony in *C minor: Resurrection* or *Lux Aurumque* by Eric Whitacre) would by themselves sound quite ugly (or at least cause great discomfort), but when incorporated into a completed work help other parts of the work to transcend one's expectations of their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> You'll notice that I characterize this solely as a necessary rather than a sufficient condition. It's unclear to me that *B* must be essential to obtaining the great value whole involved. What's more plausible is that *B* or some other equally bad state of affairs must be essential to obtaining the great value of the whole.

aesthetic value. Furthermore, not only is the value of the work much heightened by the presence of dissonance, but the badness of the dissonance itself is given a new sort of meaning because of its incorporation into and essentiality for the *whole* musical work. In addition to aesthetic goods, many states of affairs are constituted essentially by parts which in themselves are bad or evil, but because of their presence make possible greater goods. Examples of such goods are commonplace when considering relational virtues and actions, such as compassion, forgiveness, generosity, gratitude and the like. Adams contends, then, that unless it can be demonstrated how God could *defeat* evil in this sense (i.e. by incorporating each evil into a great enough good), no adequate defense against the argument from evil would be possible.

Perhaps what is most unique to Adams' defense is her definition of a *horrendous evil*. While I will generally use this term (or the alternative term 'horrors') to mean, as van Inwagen does, *"high local concentrations* of evil"<sup>64</sup>, when discussing Adams, it will be important to understand her meaning of the term. Adams defines 'horrendous evil' as:

evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering of which) constitutes prima facie reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 95-6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> McCord Adams, Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God, 26.

For Adams, unless a defense can satisfy her conditions of *outweighing* and *defeat* for evils such as horrors (e.g. participation in Nazi death camps, running over and killing one's child, or enduring harsh systematic oppression of a minority group to which one belongs), then the defense fails to address the real problem with evil in our world.<sup>66</sup>

Given these adequacy conditions for a defense, as well as her focus on particularly horrendous evils, what does Adams have in mind, then, for responding to the argument from evil? The more difficult of the two conditions is the requirement of *defeat*. To satisfy this condition, God must transform what was once "merely human horror-participation into occasions of personal intimacy with God," a task which is primarily accomplished by the Incarnation, a traditionally Christian doctrine.<sup>67</sup> By becoming incarnate, Adams claims, Christ successfully completed the transformation of human horror-participation in the following ways. First, Christ addressed the problem of the "metaphysical sizegap" between humans and deity. Adams explains what constituted this size-gap in the following way: prior to the Incarnation, humanity suffered by not "fitting in" with the rest of creation. That is, they were neither merely material nor merely immaterial, but rather, they belonged to both of these realms. And thus, due to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Indeed, this failure of such defenders as Alvin Plantinga and Nelson Pike is used by Adams to explain what she finds so unsatisfying in how they frame the problem with evil and God's existence: see McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God*, 17-32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> McCord Adams, Christ and Horrors, 51.

being composed of both types of substance (i.e. biological & spiritual)<sup>68</sup> humans were acutely vulnerable to horrors. In Adams's own words:

If personality were not tied to an animal life cycle, if early childhood adaptations did not become so readily entrenched...If biology did not so easily dominate, even swallow psychology, we would not be vulnerable to degradation through disease and radical deprivation of material needs. If mind and body, personality and animality, were not so interactive and integrated, we could not by invading the body so deeply wound the soul.<sup>69</sup>

But as noted above, this vulnerability to horrors did not exhaust the unenviable state humans inhabited, for they additionally suffered from an inability to identify with a God who possessed a nature entirely 'incommensurate' with their own.<sup>70</sup> Thus, by assuming a human nature alongside his divine nature, Christ closed this metaphysical gap, coming to belong to the very same *kind* as humans (i.e. God assumed a human, biological nature in addition to God's already spiritual nature). But not only did humans benefit from coming to belong to the same kind as God, they also came to understand God's nature better because Christ *himself* suffered horrendous evil and even perpetrated it (i.e. by symbolically becoming a ritual curse on the cross<sup>71</sup>). As a result, all humans profited from increased solidarity with God in virtue of their own relations to horrendous evil.<sup>72</sup> In other words, because of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> McCord Adams, Horrendous Evil and the Goodness of God, 94-5).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Ibid., 141 & 166. See also McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 71 where Adams claims Christ perpetrated horrors as a complicit member of a society which engaged in the horrors of Rome.
<sup>72</sup> In Ibid., 168-74, Adams notes that her account of the Incarnation is in tension with the doctrines of impassibility (i.e. the idea that God cannot be affected by anything) and immutability (i.e. the

Christ's relation to horrendous evils, each human could rightly take their own horror-participation as a way to identify directly with the inner life of God. And the integration of human horror-participation with divine intimacy, alleged Adams, would be a great enough good to render any horrendous evil *defeated*.

But of course, *defeat* was only one condition of adequacy for Adams's defense. She also claimed that her explanation for evil would demonstrate how God could guarantee a life that was on the whole good to each individual person, satisfying the *outweighing* condition. In order to satisfy the outweighing condition, Adams proposes that God might guarantee eternal 'heavenly bliss', due to the beatific vision, for all humans, such that no matter what finite amount of evil was endured during one's earthly career, it would eventually be significantly outweighed in eternity.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, concludes Adams, if the Christian story of the Incarnation is plausible and interpreted in terms of God's desire to achieve increased intimacy with humanity through the defeat of horrendous evils, then the argument from evil fails to establish its conclusion.<sup>74</sup>

idea that God cannot change). Although Medieval theories of Christology are consistent with her account, she prefers a Christology that implies actual suffering experienced by the Godhead. <sup>73</sup> Ibid., 157 and 162-4. Of course, this portion of Adams's defense will sit uncomfortably with many theologically minded individuals due to its universalist implications, implications which are explicitly embraced by Adams in her text.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> At this point, it is worth pointing out that philosophers offer theodicies as responses to the argument from evil in different ways. Some philosophers identify particular features of a possible world that help to explain why evil exists, but others have a more general approach. Some philosophers rather, simply present a full theistic metaphysical picture of the way the world is that strikes them as plausible. That picture might not directly answer the argument from evil, and thus, retain the argument as an anomaly of sorts for the theory to later address. The presence of such an anomaly, however, will not be a decisive factor for rejecting the reasonability of their theistic metaphysical theory. Such an approach is analogous to, for instance, Spinoza's approach

While defenses (theodicies) such as Adams's have enjoyed success in varying degrees, they also share a commitment which until recently had been routinely assumed by many of the disputants involved in the argument from evil. That commitment is the belief that we humans have sufficient cognitive resources to identify the sorts of goods which might justify God in permitting various evils. Clearly Adams thinks that we have a plethora of such goods at our disposal, and at the very least, it seems reasonable to think that we can identify such goods when considering minor cases of evil. However, suppose that someone is not persuaded by Adams's suggestion that the possibility of divine intimacy is sufficient as a response to the evidential argument from evil. Suppose further that no good we are aware of seems even remotely adequate for exonerating God from the blame consequent on permitting horrendous evils such as Rowe's Bambi and *Sue*. Does the inability of theists to imagine a good which could serve as a morally sufficient reason for God to allow *Bambi* or *Sue* spell doom for the rationality of theistic belief?

# 5. Skeptical Theism

to his monistic metaphysics, which contained the anomalous *explanatory isolation thesis* (i.e. explanations given under one attribute (i.e. thought or extension) must remain under that attribute) conjoined with the claim that thought and extension are identical substances. This was addressed to some extent by the theory, but a fully satisfying explanation of the anomaly was insignificant when compared to the sheer explanatory merit of the metaphysical theory taken as a whole.

In response to these sorts of questions, skeptical theists suggest an alternative answer to Rowe's argument from evil.<sup>75</sup> Rather than try and identify a particular good we know of that would justify God in allowing some particular evil, especially when faced with evils such as *Bambi* or *Sue*, skeptical theists suggest that we should call into question the legitimacy of the inductive inference from *P* to *Q*.

Now, were this a casual enumerative induction from *all A*'s *I* have seen are *B*'s to *all A*'s are *B*'s, there would be little room for an objection. In such cases, induction is a rationality preserving and accepted inferential practice because we have good reason to think the *A*'s we have encountered constitute a representative sample of all the *A*'s there are. For instance, if I were to inductively infer that *all crows are black* on the basis of seeing all and only black crows in my lifetime, then we could generally agree that such an inference would be legitimate. And this inference would be legitimate because we generally agree further that the crows I have encountered constitute a representative sample of the property of *being black*. That is, if some number, m, of crows possess the property of *being black* out of all the crows there are with respect to that m/n of all the crows there are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> As a clarification, Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition" addresses the problems of Bambi and Sue by first considering whether defenses or theodicies might contribute in some way to responding to these questions. However, since Alston finds all of the defenses or theodicies at his disposal wanting, he eventually considers the possibility that reasons *beyond our ken* might morally justify God in permitting these horrendous evils. Thus, his article is illustrative of what sorts of positions the questions above might force one to adopt.

possess the property of *being black*.<sup>76</sup> However, in the case of gratuitous evils which allegedly justify the move from P to Q, skeptical theists call the propriety of the inductive inference into question by, more specifically, calling into question whether the sample of good states of affairs we know of constitute a representative sample of the good states of affairs there actually are.<sup>77</sup>

For clarity and precision, let ' $\Gamma$ ' refer to the set of all possible good states of affairs, some of which we will be aware, but not necessarily all. The proponent of EAE is committed to saying that of all the members of  $\Gamma$  of which we know, n, some number, m, of them lack the property *being able to justify God in permitting Bambi or Sue* (henceforth, I will refer to this property as *J*). Next, they claim that m and n represent the same number, such that there is a 1:1 ratio between those members of  $\Gamma$  which we know of and those of which we know that lack *J*.<sup>78</sup> And thus, since the sample of  $\Gamma$  outlined is representative of  $\Gamma$  as a whole, according to the atheologian, they can infer that a 1:1 ratio holds between the members of  $\Gamma$ as a whole and those which lack *J*. That is, they can infer that all members of  $\Gamma$ lack *J*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Chris Tucker, "Why Skeptical Theism Isn't Skeptical Enough," in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 49-54.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Nous* 35 (2001): 278-296 was the earliest skeptical theist, of which I'm aware, to frame the debate in terms of representative samples of goods, and he remains its primary proponent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Plantinga notes that it would be more precise to say not only that of the goods we know of in  $\Gamma$  in fact lack *J*, but rather, that *we know* they lack *J* (see Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil," *Archivo di filosofia* 56 (1988): 561).

Clearly it would be unreasonable to require that the atheologian demonstrate with certainty the exceedingly strong claim that all members of  $\Gamma$  lack *J* in order to rationally hold that *Bambi* or *Sue* constitute evidence against the existence of God. As we would expect, the skeptical theist offers a more modest proposal. They offer reasons for doubting that our sample of good states of affairs in  $\Gamma$  is representative of the whole with respect to *J*. Such reasons come in various forms, including analogies and certain intractable aspects of many cases of evil. Let us consider these reasons respectively.

### 5.1 Motivations for Skeptical Theism

One much discussed analogy in favor of skeptical theism has been developed by Stephen Wykstra, who suggests that our relationship to God is *analogous* to a child's relationship to their parents.<sup>79</sup> For example, if parents allow their children to be vaccinated at a young age, few of those children understand why their parents are allowing them to undergo such torture. Presumably, if some child is young enough, she *cannot* understand her parents' reasons for allowing such suffering, potentially even developing trypanophobia as a result.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> I consider the merits of this particular analogy more fully in chapter 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Stephen Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Pres, 1996): 139. An alternative analogy proposed by Zagzebski, *Philosophy of Religion*, 143-4, though initially introduced as an example of the *existential* problem of evil (i.e. the problem of understanding why God, who one knows to exist, would choose to relate to us in some particular way), invokes the epistemic distance between a dog and its owner. The analogy, I take it, is intended as follows: when a dog-owner becomes upset with their pet, often we do not expect the dog to understand *why* the owner is upset. But of course, the inability of a dog to glean reasons for why their owner acts in such a way can hardly serve as a reason for the dog to doubt the owner's existence or goodness due to the epistemic distance between the two.

Yet, parents are clearly justified in allowing such suffering, despite their child's inability to comprehend the morally sufficient reasons which justify it. Such is our situation with respect to God, or so Wykstra avers.

While Wykstra's analogy begins to pave an interesting way towards skeptical theism, Daniel Howard-Snyder offers the following insightful criticism of this particular example from Wykstra:

Our cognitive poverty doesn't preclude our knowing a great many things. What we need, then, is some good reason to think that we are like infants *in this respect*. We need some reason to believe that, like infants, there's a good chance that we are shooting in the dark when it comes to inferring pointlessness. Wykstra gives us no hints.<sup>8182</sup>

In other words, Howard-Snyder contends that were our epistemic

situation with respect to God relevantly similar to that which holds between an

infant and parent, then we would indeed have a reason to believe that the

members of  $\Gamma$  of which we are aware do not constitute a representative sample

of all the members of  $\Gamma$  with respect to possessing *J*. But our epistemic situation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Quoted in Trakakis, *The God Beyond Belief*, 122. Originally from Howard-Snyder, "Seeing Through CORNEA," 39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> In addition to Howard-Snyder's criticism, William Rowe, "Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism, and the Problem of Evil," *International Journal for Philosophy of* Religion 59 (2006): 79-92 complained that the parent analogy, when pressed further, actually undercut Wykstra's initial point. The parent analogy was intended to emphasize the epistemic distance between us and God, but Rowe notes that we would expect more from parents; namely, that they would be noticeably *with* their children in the midst of such suffering and communicate the reasons for the child's suffering where it could be communicated in any way. For further discussion of this issue, see Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," where he modifies his argument slightly and Trent Dougherty, "Reconsidering the Parent Analogy: Unfinished Business for Skeptical Theists," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 72.1 (2012): 17-25 for further criticism of the analogy. In chapter 4 of this dissertation, I respond to Dougherty's criticism of the parent analogy; however, I eventually reject the parent analogy for other reasons as providing a sufficient motivation for adopting skeptical theism.

with respect to God is *not* relevantly similar to that between an infant and parent. So, Wykstra's parent-child analogy fails as a reason in support of skeptical theism.

Acknowledging the short-comings in Wykstra's argument, William Alston offers a different analogy which he believes to be more apt than the parent-child analogy.<sup>83</sup> Suppose that a complete neophyte with respect to the game of chess has an opportunity to observe chess master Karpov in action. In such a scenario, the novice would have no idea what reasons motivate Karpov to make a given move in the match. Indeed, were she to consult all the reasons for a given move of which she was aware and find that none of them reasonably motivated the move under consideration, she would not be justified in then concluding that no reason was available to properly motivate Karpov's moves. Moreover, because of Karpov's epistemic superiority with respect to chess moves, the novice would plausibly be justified in holding that there is some reason which justifies Karpov's move, despite her inability to see it. But at the very least, if she is a particularly cautious epistemic agent, it is reasonable for the novice to be agnostic about the proposition that Karpov has a good reason for making the move he does, even when no such reason is evident to her.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup> William Alston, Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on the Evidential Argument from Evil," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press (1996a): 317.

Upon completing this illustration, Alston suggests that we apply it in service of skeptical theism in the following way. The chess novice's epistemic situation with respect to Karpov *does* seem relevantly similar to the epistemic situation between ourselves and God. If God were to exist, God would understand the ramifications of certain possible choices far better than we could, surely exhibiting a greater epistemic distance between himself and us than even Karpov and the novice. And therefore, Alston concludes, we should adopt the same doxastic attitude with respect to whether or not there exists a morally sufficient reason for God to permit *Bambi* or *Sue* as the attitude we adopt with respect to whether or not there exists a sufficient reason for Karpov to make his particular chess move (one for which no motivating reason is evident to the novice). That is, we should at least be agnostic whether *P* is or is not evidence for *Q*.

This chess master analogy too has difficulties, specifically in the form of a relevant disanalogy between Karpov's relationship to an onlooker and God's relationship to human agents. That disanalogy is that, plausibly, Karpov has a good reason to keep his strategy hidden, lest someone divulge it to his opponent. In the case of God's relationship to those who suffer, however, God plausibly has

many reasons to reveal his purposes to them, and thus, the analogy fails to motivate skeptical theism.<sup>84</sup>

As we move away from the use of analogies, an alternative method for motivating the skeptical theist's claim that the inference from P to Q is problematic is to identify features of the world which we have good reason to think are beyond our cognitive reach. For example, Daniel Howard-Snyder has suggested recently<sup>85</sup> that according to Christian theism, union with God is an incredibly great good, and it is possible that great suffering is a necessary condition for attaining union with God. To claim otherwise would be equivalent to claiming that we have a reasonable grasp of what sorts of things might be necessary conditions for union with God. But to claim this would be unreasonable *in excelsis*. At best we should be agnostic about these necessary conditions, and so, we should also be agnostic about whether or not apparently gratuitous evils are evidence against the existence of God.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Of course, perhaps God *does* have a reason to keep his purposes hidden. For more on this, turn to the end of chapter 4 where I assess the *Parent Analogy*. Also, see Daniel Howard-Snyder & Paul Moser, *Divine Hiddenness: New Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Michael Rea, "Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God," in *Metaphysics and God: Essays in Honor of Eleonore Stump*, ed. Kevin Timpe (New York, NY: Routledge Publishers, 2009): 76-96 and Kevin Timpe, "Trust, Silence, and Liturgical Acts" in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 264-276 for responses to the relevantly similar issue of divine hiddenness.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder, Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism," in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion, Volume 2*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 27-8.

Another feature of the world, one which would be true whether or not God exists, is what Kirk Durston calls the *consequential complexity of history*.<sup>86</sup> According to Durston, causal chains are incredibly complex entities. One small change at any point in a causal chain "not only changes the entire causal chain from that point onward to the end of history, it also changes the evolution of all other causal chains that interact with the revised causal chain at any point in the future."87 When considering the usual definition of a gratuitous evil, the sort of evil in mind when we consider Bambi or Sue, it is evident that causal consequences are of particular importance. An evil *E* is gratuitous in the context of EAE if, and only if, God could not have removed E without losing a greater good or consequently actualizing another evil that would have been at least as bad as E. Durston then contends that the atheologian who claims that the inference from *P* to *Q* is a good one is committed to claiming that our cognitive capacities are sufficient for making reasonable predictions about the morally significant causal ramifications of different apparently gratuitous evils. But since our cognitive capacities are not sufficient for making such predictions, we cannot claim that the good states of affairs of which we know lack J. Thus, the EAE fails.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> See Kirk Durston, "The Consequential Complexity of History and Gratuitous Evil," *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 65-80 for the original presentation of the argument from the *consequential complexity of history*. Also, see Kirk Durston, "The Failure of Type-4 Arguments from Evil," *Philo* 8 (2005): 109-122 for further development, a criticism from Nick Trakakis, "Evil and the Complexity of History: A Response to Durston," *Religious Studies* 39 (2003): 451-458 and Kirk Durston, "The Complexity of History and Evil: A Reply to Trakakis," *Religious Studies* 42 (2006): 87-99 for a response.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Durston, "The Consequential Complexity of History and Gratuitous Evil," 66-7.

There are some worries one might raise about Durston's argument. As Nick Trakakis has suggested<sup>88</sup>, Durston seems to assume too high a standard for reasonable evaluative judgments. And more importantly, if the remote causal consequences of a given seemingly gratuitous evil are what Durston has in mind, it is exceedingly implausible to think that the one who suffers will benefit from the good which Durston claims outweighs the suffering. Thus, Durston's argument only succeeds by way of violating a relatively well accepted<sup>89</sup> constraint on responses to the problem of evil; namely, that one who suffers from a given evil benefit in some way from the good for which that evil is a necessary condition.<sup>90</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

While these analogy and complexity arguments in favor of skeptical theism have been very influential, prior to considering the question of motivating skeptical theism, to which they are addressed, we must consider what epistemological theses and principles might guide our intuitions about what is reasonable to believe in the case that skeptical theism *is* sufficiently motivated. Thus, we will set aside until chapter 4 the question of whether or not skeptical

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> Trakakis, The God Beyond Belief, 138-45.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> Though, I should add, by no means universally accepted. Indeed, Durston rejects it, as does it seems van Inwagen.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> Among many others, McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, and Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, explicitly place such requirements on any adequate response to the problem of evil.

theism has been sufficiently motivated and instead turn to the various epistemic considerations proffered in its support. In the next chapter, we begin by considering the plausibility of modal skepticism and other forms of restricted skepticism developed by Michael Bergmann, William Alston and Peter van Inwagen. As we will see, they ally themselves with a highly contentious epistemological thesis (i.e. the *No-Weight Thesis*), which leads to some very unpalatable consequences elsewhere.

# <u>Chapter 2</u> Extreme Skeptical Theism: Reasons for Doubt

In this chapter, we will look at three versions of skeptical theism, developed independently by Michael Bergmann, William Alston and Peter van Inwagen. I find each of these positions wanting on account of their apparent agreement that skeptical ruminations render evil evidentially impotent with respect to the existence of God. But surely this thought, which I shall refer to as the *No Weight Thesis* (henceforth, 'NW')<sup>1</sup>, that due to the truth of various types of skepticism, one cannot rationally believe that God's existence is *prima facie* disconfirmed by evil/evils (e.g. Holocaust) is implausible. I will support this claim regarding the implausibility of NW after explicating each of the skeptical theistic views alluded to above.

My chapter will have the following structure. In **sections 1, 2** and **3** I will develop the positions of Bergmann, Alston and Van Inwagen in favor of skeptical theism (in that order). Then in **section 4**, I will turn from this expository project to my critique of all three versions of skeptical theism surveyed. As I mentioned above, each of them endorses NW, and I will offer two objections to it. First, I will press an epistemological objection that we ought to give modal intuitions epistemic presumption, *pace* van Inwagen, even when dealing with possibilities

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Trent Dougherty, "Skeptical Theism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL =

<sup>&</sup>lt;http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/skeptical-theism/>.

not obviously connected to our everyday practical lives.<sup>2</sup> In **section 5**, I will argue secondly that anyone who endorses NW is committed to some implausible and intractable forms of skepticism, the most serious of which is moral skepticism. If this claim is correct, then anyone endorsing NW will suffer a sort of deliberative paralysis when confronted with decisions about what to believe or do with respect to the specified domains of inquiry.

# 1. Bergmann's Skeptical Theses

Each philosopher I consider in this chapter approaches skeptical theism from an angle differing only slightly from the other two. I will draw attention to the distinctives of each position as I proceed. So let us begin with Michael Bergmann's position, which derives its inspiration from Thomas Reid's commonsense epistemology.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Peter van Inwagen, "Modal Epistemology," Philosophical Studies 92 (1998): 70.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The designation 'commonsense' epistemology is used in at least two competing ways in the literature which are relevant to our discussion. Trent Dougherty, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism," Faith and Philosophy 25 (2008): 173-4 defines it in terms comparable to James Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," Nous 34.4 (2000): "[W]henever you have an experience as of p, you thereby have immediate prima facie justification for believing p." Bergmann, on the other hand, rejects this formulation since it commits one to denying the NW-thesis, which I discuss later in the chapter. For more concerning the ongoing conversation between Bergmann, Dougherty, and more recently Jonathan Matheson, see Dougherty, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism," Jonathan Matheson, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism: A Response to Dougherty," Faith and Philosophy 28.3 (2011): 323-331, Trent Dougherty, "Further Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism," Faith and Philosophy 28 (2011b): 332-340, Michael Bergmann, "Commonsense Sceptical Theism," in Reason, Metaphysics, and Mind: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga, eds. Kelly James Clark and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 3-8, Trent Dougherty, "Phenomenal Conservatism, Skeptical Thesim, and Probabilistic Reasoning," in Skeptical Theism: New Essays, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014b): 21-31, & Jonathan Matheson, "Phenomenal Conservatism and Skeptical Theism," in Skeptical Theism: New Essays, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 3-20.

Michael Bergmann suggests that skeptical theism consists of two *separable* components, which are, oddly enough, a commitment to theism and a series of skeptical theses.<sup>4</sup> His reason for representing skeptical theism as divisible into two parts is to point out that one can accept either of the two components of skeptical theism without accepting the other, and this move indeed breaks from the literature to some extent. For instance, Stephen Wykstra, whose view we will discuss more fully in the next chapter, argues that the skeptical component of skeptical theism is largely *motivated* by aspects of God's relationship to humans (e.g. God's being related to us as a loving parent).<sup>5</sup> Thus on Wykstra's view, to reject theism is to relinquish the most promising motivation for skeptical theism in the context of the evidential argument from evil. Bergmann, however, demurs. He claims that his form of commonsense skepticism needs no more motivation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," 279, Michael Bergmann and Michael C. Rea, "In Defence of Skeptical Theism: A Reply to Almeida and Oppy," *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 83.2 (2005): 244, Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," in *Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas Flint and Michael C. Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 374-5 & Bergmann, "Commonsense Sceptical Theism," 11.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984) 155-6, Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," 129 and 143-4 & Stephen Wykstra, "Does Skeptical Theism Force Moral Skepticism? Hesitations Over Bergmann's Defense," in *Reason, Metaphysics, and Mind: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, eds. Kelly James Clark and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 31 and 37 for a few examples of this. Additionally, see the critique of Bergmann in Wykstra, "Does Skeptical Theism Force Moral Skepticism?" where additional worries of separating the skeptical and theistic components of skeptical theism are introduced. In Howard-Snyder, "Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism," 20 we are met with a complaint that 'skeptical *theism*' is in fact a very poor name on account of an endorsement of theism being inessential to one's inclusion in the class of skeptical theists. Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Agnosticism, the Moral Skepticism Objection and Common Sense Morality," in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 293-300 further elaborates on this theme.

than one's own admission of cognitive limitation in the realm of value. The following are *some* representative theses of the skeptical theses Bergmann takes to be true.

- ST1 We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
- ST2 We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
- ST3 We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.
- ST4 We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have.<sup>67</sup>

There is some debate surrounding whether all the above theses must be

included, specifically ST4, in order for Bergmann's skeptical program to succeed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> (ST4) is first introduced in Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," and becomes part of Bergmann's regular presentation of these skeptical theses in "Commonsense Sceptical Theism," 12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," 9. Theses like ST1-ST4 are only some skeptical theses Bergmann thinks are reasonable to hold. He explicitly claims that there are probably a large number of such theses, and suggests additional theses. Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," 284 introduces (ST1\*) – "We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of that involve conscious human experience are representative of the possible goods there are that involve conscious human experience" – and later adds (H) – "We have no good reason for thinking that the known possible external world constituents are representative of the possible external world constituents there are" (*Ibid.* 290). In general, I will drop the S4 thesis for ease of exposition. See Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil, 379, E. J. Coffman, "Replies to Long and Tucker," in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 80-4, Tucker, "Why Skeptical Theism: *New Essays*, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer, Coxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 80-4, Tucker, "Why Skeptical Theism: *New Essays*, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 63-75 for discussion regarding the importance of including S4 in Bergmann's list of theses.

Rather than enter into this debate in my further discussion of Bergmann, I will simply restrict my focus to the first three skeptical theses (i.e. ST1-ST3). This will not affect my criticisms of Bergmann, which come later in this chapter. Moreover, and more importantly, it will make the following sections much easier to read. But enough of this aside. Let us now consider the particular ways in which Bergmann understands these theses.

First, notice that Bergmann puts ST1-ST3 in terms of *possible* goods, evils and the entailment relations between them. By possible goods, evils and entailment relations between them, Bergmann means to refer to abstract states of affairs which may or may not be instantiated in the actual world.<sup>89</sup> Now, the significance of this point (i.e. that the possible goods, evils and entailment relations between them are abstract entities in the actual world) should not be missed, for it is intended to address a worry deriving directly from William Rowe. Rowe insists in several places<sup>10</sup> that whatever goods one might appeal to in attempting to explain God's permission of evil in the actual world, they must

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> One might object to this understanding of goods as *abstract states of affairs*. That is all well and good, so long as the reader keeps in mind that this objection is not relevant to the dissertation at hand. I am strictly providing an explication of Bergmann's position, to which I will later object. I hereby accept any objections to Bergmann's (or for that matter Alston's or van Inwagen's) version of skeptical theism which are good ones as further reason to doubt that the program succeeds. Thus, such objections will only help, not hinder, my argument.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Notice that even if God does not exist, there may still be possible morally sufficient reasons for God to have permitted certain evils had God existed. If that were the case, then the evidential argument could still be undermined, even if its conclusion were in fact true. And of course, the skeptical component of skeptical theism ought to be able to undermine the inference involved in the argument from evil, even if the theistic component is mistaken.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Cf. William Rowe, "Evil and Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 119-132; Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil"; and Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil."

be goods which are *part* of the actual world. And of course this is a reasonable expectation, but it does not mean that these goods must *now* be exemplified. Indeed, these goods may not even be exemplified until long in the future, perhaps even posthumously as in the case of an afterlife of everlasting bliss. It would be strange indeed to rule out such possible goods from consideration in the argument from evil simply on the basis that they have not *yet* been exemplified. Such a claim would undermine any justification of an action that depends on the exemplification of future goods, such as a parent depriving their child of some immediate good requiring money for the sake of saving for a college education or cultivating a virtue. Such a view does not merit consideration in the current context.

Secondly, it is important to recall from my brief discussion in chapter one that goods are representative with respect to having a particular property. For instance, a random sample of my first-year college students will be representative of all college students in the world with respect to the property of *having attended some university or other*. However, this same sample will not be representative of all college students in the world with respect to the property of *having attended the University of Oklahoma*. This is because *all* of my students have attended the University of Oklahoma, but less than 1% of all the college students in the world have attended that particular university. Thus, when we look at a sample of goods, evils or entailment relations to see if they are representative of all the goods, evils or entailment relations there are, we are looking to see if they are representative with respect to a certain property; namely, the property of *"figuring in a (potentially) God justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us."*<sup>11</sup>

Now, consider Rowe's inference from *P* (i.e. no good state of affairs we know of is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*) to *Q* (i.e. no good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*). Surely to make that inference, one must presuppose the falsity of at least (ST1) and (ST3). But if those theses are plausibly true, and indeed true on the basis of common sense<sup>12</sup>, then anyone who has considered Bergmann's theses cannot justifiably infer *Q* from *P*. They should, so Bergmann claims, refrain from assigning any probability to *Q* whatsoever. In other words, they ought to adopt an agnostic attitude with respect to the truth of *Q*, even if *P* is true.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> This quotation as well as both of these clarificatory points can be found in Bergmann & Rea, "In Defence of Skeptical Theism," 242.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Bergmann, "Commonsense Sceptical Theism," 12-3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> I should add that there is a further requirement that needs to be met which would violate (ST3). One must not only know that all the goods one is aware of are representative of the goods there are with respect to not potentially justifying God's permission of *Bambi* or *Sue*. One must also know that none of the goods of which one is aware is a good which *would* potentially justify God's permission of *Bambi* or *Sue*. In other words, Rowe should acknowledge that a good's potentially justifying God's permission of *Bambi* or *Sue*. In other words, Rowe should acknowledge that a good's potentially justifying God's permission of *Bambi* or *Sue*. See Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil" & Bergmann, "Commonsense Sceptical Theism, 19-23 for a similar point.

Of course, whether or not (ST1)-(ST3) are plausible theses will require further scrutiny, which we will turn to momentarily. But before doing so, let us move on to Alston's preferred path to skeptical theism.

## 2. Alston's Skeptical Inventory

William Alston is best known for his foundational work in the epistemology of religious experience entitled *Perceiving God*<sup>14</sup>. His contributions to philosophy in general are both wide-ranging and of first-class quality, encompassing such subjects as the significance of religious language<sup>15</sup>, the nature of faith<sup>16</sup>, a realist theory of truth<sup>17</sup> and many others. However, it was not until 40 years into his illustrious career that Alston finally turned his attention fully to the argument from evil. In his article "The Inductive Problem of Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition" Alston lists a number of limitations of the human cognition which render philosophical theorizing rather daunting. Let us now turn to an explication of this paper, which develops Alston's skeptical theistic program. I begin with his list of limitations which is worth quoting in full:

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991a) argues that religious experience should be understood as perception of God and that such perceptions can provide epistemic justification for some religious beliefs.
 <sup>15</sup> William Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> William Alston, "Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith," in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: Philosophy of religion Today*, eds. Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996b): 3-28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> William Alston, A Realist Conception of Truth (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996c).

1. *Lack of Data*. This includes, inter alia, the secrets of the human heart, the detailed constitution and structure of the universe, and the remote past and future, including the afterlife if any.

2. *Complexity greater than we can handle*. Most notably there is the difficulty of holding enormous complexes of fact-different possible worlds or different systems of natural law-together in the mind sufficiently for comparative evaluation.

3. Difficulty of determining what is metaphysically possible or necessary. Once we move beyond conceptual or semantic modalities (and even that is no piece of cake) it is notoriously difficult to find any sufficient basis for claims as to what is metaphysically possible, given the essential natures of things, the exact character of which is often obscure to us and virtually always controversial. This difficulty is many times multiplied when we are dealing with total possible worlds or total systems of natural order.

4. *Ignorance of the full range of possibilities.* This is always crippling when we are trying to establish negative conclusions. If we don't know whether or not there are possibilities beyond the ones we have thought of, we are in a very bad position to show that there can be no divine reasons for permitting evil.

5. *Ignorance of the full range of values*. When it's a question of whether some good is related to E [i.e. some evil] in such a way as to justify God in permitting E, we are, for the reason mentioned in 4, in a very poor position to answer the question if we don't know the extent to which there are modes of value beyond those of which we are aware. For in that case, so far as we can know, E may be justified by virtue of its relation to one of those unknown goods.

6. *Limits to our capacity to make well-considered value judgments*. The chief example of this we have noted is the difficulty in making comparative evaluations of large complex wholes.<sup>18</sup>

Before meditating on what in particular distinguishes Alston's defense of

skeptical theism from Bergmann's defense, let us take the time to explain how

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," 120.

these six limitations, which I will call *the Inventory* following Dougherty<sup>19</sup>, are used in such a defense in the first place.

First, notice that considerations brought up by one type of limitation in *the Inventory* may very well be brought up by another limitation as well. For instance, it is clear that in many cases where it is intractably difficult for us to determine what is metaphysically or logically possible (i.e. item 3 in *the Inventory*), this difficulty only contributes to our overall ignorance of the scope and space of possibility (i.e. item 4 in *the Inventory*). Suppose, for instance, that the question is put to me regarding whether free will of the Libertarian variety is possible, and suppose that determinism (i.e. the thesis that for any event S occurring at any time *t*, *S* is strictly implied by the conjunction of the past history of the world up to t and the causal laws of that world) is both true and incompatible with Libertarian free will. If we take determinism to imply constraints on metaphysical possibility, then only one world will be metaphysically possible with respect to each set of causal laws and initial conditions of the universe. However, when assessing such possibility claims, we deliberate as if the *possibilia* we are considering have not been constrained in such a way, partly due to our ignorance of whether or not determinism is indeed true. But its truth radically limits the scope and space of possibility (i.e. item 4 in *the Inventory*), such that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Dougherty, "Skeptical Theism," Section 3.1.

determining what is metaphysically possible is simply beyond the abilities of creatures like us in such a situation (i.e. item 3 in *the Inventory*).

Second, items 2 and 6 of *the Inventory* call attention to our cognitive ceiling when dealing with both the comparison of and individual assessment of possible worlds, as well as other complex wholes. Take for example two conceptually possible worlds (perhaps they are even metaphysically possible), the null creation (i.e. the possible world in which God, and only God, exists because God refrained from creating) and the closest world to the actual world in which God created a physical universe of some sort.<sup>20</sup> Which of these worlds is of greater overall value? Clearly, it is hard for us to say, partly due to our inability to put a number on the value of the latter world, but also due to our inability to determine whether or not such worlds are even commensurable in the first place. Maybe they are, and maybe they are not. But no reasonable basis from the human standpoint seems available to justify a value judgment one way or the other.

Consider yet another example of our inability to reliably compare the values of different possible worlds inspired by C. S. Lewis.<sup>21</sup> Some philosophers

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> I'm attempting to avoid question begging by formulating the options in this way. A theist would of course take the closest possible world to the actual world in which God creates a physical universe to just be the actual world. But of course, an atheist would disagree with this assessment. There are issues regarding whether God's existence is necessary if God exists at all, or that God's non-existence is necessary if God fails to exist at all. For an interesting discussion regarding how to evaluate such differences in one's background knowledge regarding theism, see Richard Otte, "A Theistic Conception of Probability," *Faith and Philosophy* 4.4 (1987): 427-447. <sup>21</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (HarperOne, 2001). Joshua Seachris and Linda Zagzebski, "Weighing Evils: The C. S. Lewis Approach," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 62.2 (2007): 81-88 develop the account that I will here relate very briefly.

approach the argument from evil by assuming that evils suffered by different individuals are straightforwardly additive; that is, they assume that for any world W, there is some quantity which correctly sums up the amount of evil experienced by all sufferers in W. However, notice how counterintuitive it is to think that experiences of pain are additive in the way just suggested. Suppose that ten different individuals suffer x units of pain when visiting the dentist. Then suppose on a different day that one individual suffers 10x units of pain all at once at the dentist. If pain is additive, then both days should be judged equally disvaluable, but our intuitions do not accommodate such a judgment. Instead, the pain that ought to be most troubling is the most pain experienced by a single person, not the aggregate of all pain suffered by any persons. If this is true then consider the task of determining which of the following worlds are better or worse in terms of overall value:

W<sub>1</sub> consists of ten thousand persons each suffering one unit of pain.

W<sub>2</sub> consists of a single person suffering ten thousand units of pain.

W<sub>3</sub> consists of a billion people each suffering one unit of pain.<sup>22</sup>

The idea that  $W_2$  is not any different in terms of disvalue than  $W_1$  seems preposterous, and thus, it seems that pain is not straightforwardly additive (to repeat what was already said above). However, does this commit us to thinking

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Seachris and Zagzebski, "Weighing Evils," 84. I replace their use of 'turps' with 'units of pain' for consistent usage in my own text. I also relabeled the worlds. My  $W_n$  = their  $W_{n+1}$ , and I leave out their  $W_1$  and  $W_5$ .

that W<sub>3</sub> is clearly no worse than W<sub>2</sub>? If we are honest, we must admit that it's hard to say. It's not as if adding more sufferers who suffer less than at least one other person at a world makes *no difference* to the value of that world. Where's the breaking point of value then? Again, it's hard to say. Cases like this, and other less superficial cases especially, demonstrate that when we attempt to compare the overall value of different worlds, we are often, if not always, out of our league. Thus, it seems that Alston is correct to claim that there are a number of human cognitive limitations (i.e. *the Inventory*) which must be overcome before a plausible evidential argument from evil can be developed.

Given that *the Inventory* illustrates that humans are simply out of their depths when considering many questions of a metaphysically esoteric nature, how can such a list be applied to the evidential argument from evil in particular? In this case, it should be fairly clear that inferring Q – no good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting *Bambi* or *Sue* – from *P* – no good state of affairs we know of is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting *Bambi* or *Sue* – requires humans to overcome the very limitations identified by Alston in *the Inventory*. But if Alston is correct that such limitations cannot be overcome in the case of evil, then Rowe's argument from evil cannot succeed.

Although Bergmann and Alston share a number of similarities in their motivations of skeptical theism, their accounts are different in important ways. For instance, Bergmann, in listing and defending the truth of ST1-ST3, takes upon *himself* the burden of proof in the argument from evil. Alston, on the other hand, places the burden of proof on the *atheologian* by scrupulously documenting a number of significant obstacles to be overcome if Rowe's evidential argument is to succeed. Importantly, then, Alston emphasizes that it is not a general skepticism that renders Rowe's inference problematic (as Bergmann seeks to demonstrate), but rather, "the peculiar difficulties…for a certain very ambitious negative existential claim."<sup>23</sup>

This concludes the second of three expositions of contemporary skeptical theistic programs. Let us now turn to the third and final exposition which focuses on the work of Peter van Inwagen. His defense of skeptical theism rests fundamentally on an extreme form of modal skepticism, which is, in this author's opinion, both the most developed, and consequently, most formidable version of skeptical theism considered in this chapter.

# 3. Van Inwagen's "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence" (A Special Skeptical Program)

One promising way of understanding van Inwagen's defense of skeptical theism is as an elaboration of three of the items from Alston's *Inventory*; namely,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," 102.

those dealing with our ignorance of the total value and space of possible worlds (i.e. items 3, 4 and 5). Van Inwagen offers the following heuristic thought experiment as a guide to delimiting the extent of our modal competencies in the world:

> Many of our modal judgments are analogous to judgments of distance made by eye. That is, they are analogous to judgments of the sort that we make when - just on the basis of how things look to us - we say things like, "That mountain is about thirty miles away" or "It's about three hundred yards from that tall pine to the foot of the cliff." Such judgments are not, of course, infallible, but in a wide range of circumstances they can be pretty accurate. There are, however, circumstances - circumstances remote from the practical business of everyday life - in which they are not accurate at all. People had no idea about how far away the sun and the moon and the stars were till they gave up trying to judge celestial distances by eye and began to reason...Analogously, I should say, we are able to discern the modal status of some propositions in a way that, like our intuitive judgment of distance, is "non-inferential." I know that it is possible that - that there is no intrinsic impossibility in its being the case that - the table that was in a certain position at noon [could have] been two feet to the left of where it in fact was.<sup>24</sup>

However, as van Inwagen points out, having modal knowledge regarding

practical matters hardly implies that we have modal knowledge in any situation whatsoever. In the previous section I discussed one example of this regarding Libertarian freedom and determinism, but there are many other examples of human modal ignorance. To use one of van Inwagen's own examples, it is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Van Inwagen, "Modal Epistemology," 70-1, italics added. Van Inwagen has offered elaborations of his modal skepticism in several place, though the quoted paper contains the best developed material. For other reflections, see especially Peter van Inwagen, "ontological Arguments," *Nous* 11.4 (1977): 383-386, Peter van Inwagen, "Review: The Coherence of Theism by Richard Swinburne," *The Philosophical Review* 88.4 (1979): 670-672 and Peter van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5: *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. J. Tomberlin (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1991): 159.

unclear to us whether or not it is possible for there to be transparent iron.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, even if someone thought that they were able to imagine an object that fit the description of being transparent iron, it remains highly questionable whether or not such an object is possible. Has this person really imagined transparent iron? That is, have they imagined in addition to the image before their mind a chemical structure which matches that of iron in the actual world with alterations enabling it to be transparent without transforming the compound itself into a different type of substance? Van Inwagen fails to see *how* a human being could imagine such a thing, and suggests that surely, in order to reasonably believe that what one seems to imagine in this scenario can act as a guide to possibility requires that one can affirmatively answer that question. Thus, van Inwagen thinks that we should be skeptical as to whether or not transparent iron is possible, and moreover, that our modal intuitions regarding the possibility of transparent iron ought not to even count as evidence for that possibility.<sup>26</sup>

But then, van Inwagen's application of this modal skepticism to the evidential argument can be easily illustrated in argument form as follows:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Van Inwagen, "Modal Epistemology," 71.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> One might worry that there are differences in degrees of the competency of modal intuitions, relative to individual cognizers, just as there are differences in degrees of noticing experience (e.g. being appeared to three-speckledly as opposed to justifiably believing one is being appeared to forty-eight speckledly by some hen). See a discussion of this analogous issue in Ernest Sosa, "Privileged Access," in *Consciousness; New Philosophical Essays*, ed. Quentin Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Pres, 2003): 273-292 and Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004): 199-218.

- 1. We should be skeptical about inferences made on the basis of modal intuitions involving 'circumstances remote from the practical business of everyday life'.
- 2. The inference from *P* to Q in the evidential argument from evil is one based on modal intuitions involving 'circumstances remote from the practical business of everyday life'.
- 3. Therefore, we should be skeptical about the inference from *P* to Q in the evidential argument from evil.<sup>27</sup>

Now, before proceeding into the next section of the chapter in which I show each of the above authors' acceptance of the No Weight Thesis (i.e. the claim that the existence of evil bears no evidential weight with respect to the truth of Theism), it is worth commenting on some worries regarding this argument from van Inwagen.

In this simplified version of van Inwagen's argument, both premises (1) and (2) rely on an unclear understanding of when something is 'remote from the practical business of everyday life'. Indeed, it is unclear how one might go about demarcating the boundary between modal intuitions about everyday practical matters and those remote from such matters. Van Inwagen, as we saw above, does not provide any precise boundary, but rather, he offers examples which he takes to fall clearly on the remote-from-daily-life side of the demarcation. As Trent Dougherty notes, how remote one's modal intuitions are from everyday practical concerns comes in degrees, and it is plausible that there simply is no

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> See Dougherty, "Skeptical Theism," section 4.1 for a similar version of this argument applied to a Draper-style evidential argument, as well as a number of critical notes on van Inwagen's position.
non-vague boundary for such considerations.<sup>28</sup> But then, it seems that a proponent of the evidential argument from evil may reasonably demur from van Inwagen's judgment that (2) is true. After all, our experiences of evil and predictions of what sorts of evil a loving person would allow seem very much entwined with everyday practical matters. Thus, even someone who adopts van Inwagen's position of modal skepticism may reasonably deny that the inference from *P* to *Q* in a Rowe-style evidential argument from evil is 'remote from the practical business of everyday life' (i.e. they can reasonably deny premise (2)).<sup>29</sup>

There is also a further, and to my mind devastating, complication regarding how we should evaluate premise (1).<sup>30</sup> Notice that (1) is an articulation of a principle of modal epistemology, and plausibly, such principles are remote from the concerns of everyday practical life. But if that is true, then premise (1) commits us to being skeptical about any inferences we make which rely on premise (1), *including the inference from (1) and (2) to (3)*. Thus, van Inwagen's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Ibid., 4.2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> One route to denying (2) in the literature might derive from Dougherty, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism," and the discussion surrounding whether or not one can have immediate *prima facie* justification that some evil one is currently experiencing is morally unjustified. Dougherty relies on Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," for a view that bears similarities to the phenomenal conservatism of Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). This way of denying (2), however, permits one to rely on modal intuitions in cases which are *remote* from everyday practical life as well. So it's not obvious how persuasive such an account would be on its own. For development of this view, see Dougherty, "Skeptical Theism."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Dougherty, "Skeptical Theism," section 4.2 mentions this worry briefly; however, the development of this objection and the dilemma presented below is my own.

argument relies on a principle that serves as self-referentially undercutting defeater for his own argument. Needless to say, this is problem.

Perhaps I am not being sufficiently charitable to van Inwagen. Maybe premise (1) is sufficiently close to the concerns of everyday practical life to permit the inference in his argument. But in that case, one should immediately return to my previous criticism of premise (2), that is, the premise that claims that the inference from *P* to *Q* in the argument from evil is based on modal intuitions involving 'circumstances remote from the practical business of everyday life'. If van Inwagen's premise (1) escapes the self-referential worries above because we decide it's close enough to everyday practical concerns to render his argument valid, then notice that the inference from *P* to *Q* will also be valid just in case the considerations pertaining to evil in that argument are at least as relevant to everyday practical concerns as premise (1). And I submit that if premise (1) remains blameless, then the considerations pertaining to evil in Rowe's argument remain blameless as well, rendering premise (2) false. Consequently, van Inwagen is stuck with a dilemma: either i) premise (1) cannot satisfy its own requirements and thus prohibits his argument from going through (i.e. it is selfundermining) or ii) premise (1) satisfies its own requirements but premise (2) ends up being false. Either way, his argument cannot succeed.

Even if van Inwagen's modal skepticism fails, it is easy to see why skeptical theism entices so many philosophers working on the problem of evil. Bergmann's theses and Alston's inventory, for instance, demonstrate that establishing a successful evidential argument plausibly requires denying commonsense skeptical principles and overcoming a number of intimidating cognitive limitations. These two accounts of skeptical theism alone are sufficient to give any reasonable person significant pause before declaring the evidential argument a success.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, I believe that all three of the above skeptical theist programs fail, and I will argue this in the following sections. Before turning to these objections, however, I want to lay out more precisely how my argument will proceed. **Sections 1-3** were largely expository, simply laying out the motivations for skeptical theism found in the writings of Bergmann, Alston and van Inwagen.<sup>32</sup> **Section 4.1** will continue briefly in the spirit of exposition. In that section, I will argue that *in addition* to the motivating considerations explored in the first three sections, all three philosophers endorse a further thesis, the *No Weight Thesis*<sup>33</sup> (*NW*), which is both (a) philosophically controversial and (b) *not* entailed by their skeptical theist motivations. And importantly for my purposes, since NW is not entailed by skeptical theism, one can defend versions of skeptical theism that reject NW.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Indeed, these considerations are sufficient for at least a closure of inquiry defeater to temporarily form. For an explanation of *closure of inquiry* defeat, see chapter 5.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> The last portion of the van Inwagen section is an exception since I advanced an argument that I think counts decisively against van Inwagen's skeptical theist position as a whole.
<sup>33</sup> Dougherty, "Skeptical Theism," section 1.2.

The fact that NW and skeptical theism are separable is serendipitous for me since I think that NW is false while maintaining that there is merit to the skeptical theistic enterprise. In **section 4.2** I will return to van Inwagen's modal skepticism (i.e. the most developed defense of something like NW) and offer some alternatives to NW. Given that the principle articulating van Inwagen's modal skepticism fails, as I argued above, it is open to his opponents to adopt any of a number of epistemic modal realist accounts inconsistent with endorsement of NW. Finally, in **section 5**, I will develop two more arguments against versions of skeptical theism which endorse NW. I will show that NW versions of skeptical theism lead first, to global skepticism, and second, to the breakdown of moral deliberation. Then, given that it is reasonable to believe that global skepticism is false and that moral deliberation is possible, we should reject NW skeptical theism. So let us now turn to consideration of NW.

### 4. The No Weight Thesis

#### 4.1 Endorsements of the No Weight Thesis

The preceding explications of skeptical theism are separable from what has been recently dubbed the *No Weight Thesis*. The fundamental claim of this thesis is:

No Weight Thesis (NW) – the existence of evil bears no evidential weight with respect to the truth of Theism.

While I take skeptical theism as a family of views to be separable from NW, each of the above authors endorse this radical thesis (Alston perhaps less

explicitly) in their work. Bergmann, for example, repeatedly affirms that there is no rational basis for denying any of his skeptical theses<sup>34</sup>, and when writing in conjunction with Michael Rea (i.e. another proponent of Bergmann's theses), tells us that "we cannot sensibly assign any likelihood to the truth of" claims purporting that various evils disconfirm theism.<sup>35</sup> This theme is carried over to his more recent defenses of skeptical theism:

Sometimes, when we are exposed to a vivid portrayal of some actual instance of horrific suffering E, we are tempted to think that a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit E. I think it is a mistake to think that we can see that this is true or even likely...Given ST1-ST4, these epistemic possibilities are things we have no good reason to think are even unlikely if God exists.<sup>36</sup>

Alston tells us the evidential argument from evil<sup>37</sup> succumbs to the same

fate as its 'lamented deductive cousin' (i.e. the logical argument from evil), that is, total failure, and that "[i]t is surely the better part of wisdom to acknowledge that we are groping in the dark" when attempting to assess the evidential merit of evil given our ineptitude in dealing with the conceptual territory laid out in *the Inventory*.<sup>38</sup> To clarify even further, in his self-described role as the 'clean-up hitter' at the closing of Howard-Snyder's volume on the evidential argument

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> For example, see Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," 287-8 where he denies that Michael Tooley's arguments provide any basis for denying ST1 and offers similar reflections on the blue crow argument of Paul Russell.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> While Bergmann and Rea, "In Defence of Skeptical Theism," 246 uses this language in an example concerning abduction, it is clear that they intend it to be analogous to the case of horrendous evils.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Bergmann, "Commonsense Sceptical Theism," 23-4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Alston prefers 'inductive' to 'evidential'.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," 121; Alston, "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on the Evidential Argument from Evil," 318.

from evil, Alston tells us "that our failure [to discern any reasons God has for permitting evil(s)] is *no indication* of their nonexistence."<sup>39</sup> Thus, evil bears no evidential weight for cognizers like us on Alston's view.

And van Inwagen, after outlining his extreme modal skepticism (briefly surveyed above) tells us that "the evidential argument from evil cannot get started"; indeed, he goes so far as to deny that the considerations pertaining to evil "attain to the status of evidence" favoring theism over naturalism. And since it is surely minimally essential to the evidential argument from evil that evil comes out as evidence of some sort, even weakly supporting evidence, "the evidential argument from evil fails".<sup>4041</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Alston "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on the Evidential Argument from Evil," 320-1 (italics added). It's unclear how firmly Alston affirms NW. For instance, in (Ibid., 325), he claims "'We can't discern a reason' does not provide strong support for 'There is no such reason.'" Notice what this line does not say, namely, that 'We can't discern a reason' provides *no support* for 'There is no such reason. However, when combined with the previous statement, I think it is clear that this is Alston's intent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*, 163 & 171.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> Other authors have also expressed support for NW, such as Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," 148, who alternatively formulated NW as arguing that alleged appearances of evil do not even amount to "prima facie evidential support". Howard-Snyder, "Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism," offers an account which is very similar in spirit to Bergmann's skeptical theses, and thus, I will not treat it as a separate view. This is also true of Michael C. Rea, "Skeptical Theism and the "Too Much Skepticism" Objection," in The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil, eds. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2013): 482-506, although his paper provides much of the material relevant to the final critical section of this chapter on the problem of ST and further implausible skeptical commitments. I should mention, however, that Howard-Snyder, "Agnosticism, the Moral Skepticism Objection and Common Sense Morality," goes to great lengths to distinguish his view from Bergmann's view. Howard-Snyder only requires that in the case of the argument from evil, we have reason to doubt that the inference from P to Q is a good one. He does not go on to claim that skeptical theses like Bergmann's are true, which might commit us to much more than reasons to doubt the inference in the case of evil. Indeed, I think Howard-Snyder is right in this regard, and thus, I think he's wise to distance himself from Bergmann's more general skepticism.

Given that each of the above authors endorse NW, then, it is important that we appreciate the strength or, if Wykstra is to be believed, radical nature of NW. To endorse this thesis amounts to an implicit acknowledgement that what is judged by many (most?) philosophers to be a very awkward fit between the existence of God and the sufferings of this world is wildly mistaken.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, as we see in vivid detail when considering van Inwagen's modal skepticism, this aspect of NW is grounded in a denial that humans have reliable intuitions in some areas of modal reflection (i.e. reflection on what is necessary and possible). Thus, it is worth considering whether there are independent reasons for trusting our modal intuitions that go beyond everyday practical matters. If such reasons are available, then they ought to reduce our confidence in the truth of NW to some extent.

# 4.2 Modal Epistemology & the No Weight Thesis

Now, an endorsement of NW is at bottom a claim about philosophical methodology, perhaps grounded in a thorough-going empiricism.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, one

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Granted, the authors in question seem aware of this implication. For instance, Bergmann, "Commonsense Sceptical Theism," 20-23 provides a theory of error to explain why so many people are misled. His explanation consists in a not too outrageous suggestion that humans have their psychological limits when it comes to the amount of suffering they can be acquainted with while remaining emotionally stable. When we get to such a limit, he speculates, perhaps we cease to be able to even conceive of the possibility that there is any possible evil worse than the one we are currently becoming acquainted with.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Much of my thinking in this section has been shaped by Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Son, 2008). Thanks to Robert Koons for bringing its relevance to this topic to my attention. Other works with interesting discussions relevant to this topic include several of the papers in Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne, *Conceivability and Possibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002) – see especially the introduction to that volume, as well as the pieces by Bealer, Chalmers and Ernest Sosa – Stephen Yablo, "Is Conceivability a

can see it as a response, or partial response, in the empiricist spirit to a family of related questions: i) What can we conclude from our ability to conceive of some state of affairs? ii) To derive any claim to knowledge or reasonable belief of what is possible, need we conceive simultaneously everything about some possible world, or would something less be sufficient?<sup>44</sup> iii) Assuming we can obtain modal knowledge or reasonable belief, how can we determine or ground the source of such beliefs?<sup>45</sup>

Van Inwagen admirably emphasizes many hurdles of modal contemplation which motivate his skeptical responses to these and other similar questions. To do so, he provides us with an outline of what an attempt to conceive of the moon's being made of green cheese would look like:

> I think that anyone who thinks he can imagine that the moon is made of cheese has a very sluggish imagination: the active imagination demands a pasture for the antecedently necessary thousands of thousands of millions of cows, demands a way to preserve a piece of cheese in broiling heat, freezing cold, and vacuum for thousands of millions of years...Only a philosopher of

Guide to Possibility?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53.1 (1993): 1-42; George Bealer, "Modal Epistemology and the Rationalist Renaissance," in *Conceivability and Possibility*, eds. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Peter Murphy, "Reliability Connections Between Conceivability and Inconceivability," *Dialectica* 60.2 (2006): 195-205; Jonathan Ichikawa and Benjamin Jarvis, "Thought-Experiment Intuitions and Truth in Fiction," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 142.2 (2009), & E. J. Lowe, "What is the Source of Our Knowledge of Modal Truths? *Mind* 121 (2012): 919-950.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Recall the transparent iron example from van Inwagen, "Modal Epistemology," 71 where he asks us if we can imagine transparent *iron*, with the same chemical structure along with whatever else is supposed to be essential to an object's being iron.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> This type of question ought to be familiar to anyone who has dealt in epistemology at some level. Traditional sources of justification/knowledge include perception, intuition, memory, testimony or credulity, etc.

very little imagination would think he could imagine the moon being made of green cheese.<sup>46</sup>

In this brief thought-experiment, van Inwagen attempts to support the idea that at least *in some cases*, the appearance of a modal intuitions can be misleading, such that either i) what we take to be grounding those intuitions (e.g. imagination or conceivability) simply is not present (i.e. whatever conditions are necessary for legitimate conceivability or imaginability fail to be met) or ii) if it is present, we ought not take it as evidence for the propositional content of those intuitions. Thus, one way of understanding van Inwagen's point is that a particular application of NW is supported by this thought-experiment:

(NW\*) the existence of our modal intuitions regarding the possibility of a moon made out of green cheese bear no evidential weight with respect to whether or not such a scenario is indeed possible.

And if NW\* is rendered plausible by such considerations, then van Inwagen would take similar considerations, which arise in discussions of the evidential argument from evil, to render NW plausible as well (although, of course, my remarks at the end of section 3 would call into question the legitimacy of such an inference). Van Inwagen is not immediately entitled to inferring the plausibility of NW from NW\*, however, for even if what van Inwagen states in the above quotation is accurate, questions pertaining to the plausibility of NW\* remain. For instance, he seems to assume that the products of a 'sluggish

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Van Inwagen, "Ontological Arguments," 671-672.

imagination' do not possess any relevant positive epistemic status, but this assumption is indeed controversial. Consider an example, the Dismissive Physicist, in discussions over evidentialism about justification (i.e. the thesis that one's degree of justification for some proposition supervenes on, or is determined by, one's evidence).<sup>47</sup>

*The Dismissive Physicist* – Suppose that following a presentation on some research in quantum physics, Professor Blue conducts a typical Q&A session. During this Q&A, Professor Red, an equally credentialed physicist, offers a brilliant demonstration of the falsity of Professor Blue's interpretation of the data. All other physicists present in the room clearly see that Professor Red is correct, yet Professor Blue, who couldn't be less interested in Professor Red's opinion on the matter, chooses to ignore the entire demonstration by Professor Red. Thus, everything Professor Red said was as gibberish to Professor Blue who maintains belief in the tenability of her thesis.

Clearly in the Dismissive Physicist example above, Professor Blue exhibits a sluggish mind (i.e. at least on one interpretation of sluggishness). However, according to many ardent defenders of evidentialism, Professor Blue is justified in her belief in the tenability of her thesis on quantum mechanics.<sup>48</sup> This is because the evidence set of Professor Blue has not changed as a result of Professor Red's demonstration, and let us assume, prior to Professor Red's demonstration, Professor Blue had sufficient evidence to justify the acceptance of her thesis.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> And indeed, given that van Inwagen's interlocutor in the above quotation, Richard Swinburne, is himself an evidentialist with Bayesian inclinations, such an example is particularly relevant.

<sup>48</sup> Conee and Feldman, *Evidentialism*, 89-90.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Clearly, there are deeper questions which I cannot address here, which concern evidentialism as an acceptable thesis generally, such as *What counts as evidence*? *Is there anything wrong epistemically with Professor Blue that does not hinge on justification? How might the distinction between synchronic and diachronic justification change one's evaluation of the example*? Responses to many such

Thus, counterintuitive as it might be, van Inwagen's reflections would benefit from an argument in defense of the claim that sluggishness of mind implies no relevant epistemic merit whatsoever.<sup>50</sup>

Additionally, it is not clear that van Inwagen's ascription of mental sluggishness to someone who claims to be able to imagine the moon being made of green cheese is accurate. The adequacy of such an ascription depends on the details of the case. For instance, one might, *a la* Plantinga, suggest that the contents of human modal intuitions are (and I will use Plantinga's terminology here) warranted when they result from properly functioning modal intuition (i.e. that is, truth-directed modal intuitions working as a designer, evolution or God, intended them to function). And surely it is possible, for all we know, that in many cases where all we have to go on are our modal intuitions, then they have

questions can be found in Ibid. and Trent Dougherty, *Evidentialism and Its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011a). To put my cards on the table, I hesitate to endorse a full-blown evidentialist epistemology due to worries that either (a) it will be trivially true and uninteresting philosophically, which would occur were evidence simply defined as anything taken into account by an individual in assessing the truth of a proposition, or (b) it will fail to adequately explain the phenomena of testimony and disagreement. See Jonathan Kvanvig, *Rationality and Reflection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) for some worries along these lines, as well as my discussion of epistemic disagreement in chapter 4 of this dissertation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> I should note that Conee and Feldman, who offered their own version of *The Dismissive Physicist,* would acknowledge that Professor Blue exhibits a sluggish mind. They are not thereby endorsing epistemology with a tin ear to bad epistemic practices like Professor Blue's ignoring Professor Red. They would locate Professor Blue's epistemic failures in terms of either practical failings, moral failings, or failure of diachronic rationality. Thus, allow me to reiterate, I am *not* suggesting that they endorse an epistemology of sluggish-mindedness. Rather, I suggest that they demonstrate that there are multiple dimensions by which one might accrue positive epistemic status for beliefs (in this case, synchronic epistemic justification). And it is consistent with this account that success along one dimension be accompanied by failure along many others.

been well designed. Thus, it would seem odd to call such intuitions sluggish when they are the results of a properly functioning modal intuition capacity.

Indeed, there is now a vast literature (see footnotes. 43, 53 & 54 in this chapter) dedicated to defending modal realism (i.e. the thesis that modal propositions are the sorts of things that can be known)<sup>51</sup> along with different naturalistic models of how humans can know or reasonably come to believe modal propositions. One typical algorithm for developing such a position is to first identify some domain in which we humans clearly have knowledge or reasonable belief, and then, to either identify modal knowledge with or reduce it to a special case of that uncontroversial domain of knowledge. Timothy Williamson, for example, takes modal knowledge to be an instance of counterfactual knowledge which we use in everyday deliberation.<sup>52</sup> Other accounts, often expressing dissatisfaction with Williamson's proposal, include reducing modal knowledge to knowledge of fiction<sup>53</sup> or knowledge of essences<sup>54</sup>. George Bealer's *Modal Reliabilism*, which my Plantinga-inspired version above

<sup>51</sup> Let me emphasize that this is an epistemological modal realism and not the sort of *ontological* modal realism endorsed by Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*. In using 'modal realism' here, I am following the examples of my predecessors, e.g. Anand Vaidya, "The Epistemology of Modality," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2011 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <a href="http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entires/modality-epistemology/">http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entires/modality-epistemology/</a>, Section 1 <sup>52</sup> For reasons having to do with backtracking conditionals introduced by Keith DeRose, "The Conditionals of Deliberation," Mind 119.473 (2010): 1-42. I am pessimistic about the hope of grounding deliberation in subjunctive (i.e. counterfactual) conditionals as Williamson suggests. This worry will be present in the background of the next chapter, though I will apply these worries to a different portion of the skeptical theist discussion.

<sup>53</sup> Ichikawa and Jarvis, "Thought-Experiment Intuitions and Truth in Fiction".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Lowe, "What is the Source of Our Knowledge of Modal Truths?"

modifies in order to account for familiar pitfalls in epistemology<sup>55</sup>, takes our modal intuitions to be "a basic source of evidence" so long as there is a sufficient correlation between the deliverances of modal intuition and truth. Thus if Bealer's correct, we need not identify the *mechanism* by which we arrive at modal intuitions for them to serve as evidence of what is possible so long as the correlation with truth is satisfied.

So what is the fundamental insight behind these modal realist accounts, and how does this insight bear on our discussion of the NW thesis? Well, recall what I briefly mentioned previously; namely, that the case of God and evil is not as clearly remote from everyday practical matters (i.e. van Inwagen's boundary marker) as is the case of whether or not the moon is made of green cheese. Thus, even if our modal intuitions do indeed break down with respect to determining whether or not it is possible for the moon to be made of green cheese,<sup>56</sup> that need not entail anything about their reliability with respect to tracking whether or not evil counts as evidence against the existence of God. First, if any of the modal realist accounts above are plausible or true, then it will be incumbent upon us to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> See Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): chapter 9. There Plantinga asks us to consider a person S who has a brain lesion that reliably causes them to form the belief that *they have a brain lesion*. It seems to Plantinga that such a belief, while both reliable and true, is not warranted enough for knowledge, and his diagnosis of the problem is that there is a need for a proper function condition on knowledge. For additional criticisms of Reliabilism focusing on the value problem for the constituents of knowledge, see Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003b): chapter 4 and Linda Zagzebski, "The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good," *Metaphilosophy* 34 (2003): 13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> To be transparent, I suspect that our modal intuitions indeed *do* break down in the green cheese case.

attend more carefully to our modal intuitions pertaining to evil as evidence. But secondly, even if van Inwagen's rule of demarcation between the modal intuitions we can trust and those we cannot (i.e. modal intuitions concerning everyday practical matters) is accurate, relevance to everyday practical matters admits of degrees. And while the moon being made of green cheese seems to have little relevance to practical concerns, questions about evil seem more relevant to everyday practical matters. Thus, van Inwagen's own guide to determining which modal intuitions are trustworthy leaves room for denial of NW, such that the problem of evil might retain its evidential bite.

# 5. Skeptical Explosion

In the previous section (i.e. section 4), I built upon my attack of van Inwagen's modal skepticism (found at the end of section 3) to show that his endorsement of NW was unmotivated. And given that his motivations for endorsing NW failed, I suggested that it was open to philosophers to adopt one of the many forms of epistemological modal realism, which could form a theoretical basis for rejecting NW. Thus, at the end of section 4, we were left with no motivation for accepting NW and some possible motives for rejecting it. However, as of yet I have not offered any motivation going the other way; that is, I have not offered any positive reason to think NW is false. In this section, I will address this lacuna in my argument with two arguments directed against NW: i) an argument that NW commits one to global skepticism, spawning from worries about divine deception, and ii) an argument that NW commits one to an extreme value skepticism. Consequently, if my arguments succeed, we will have sufficient motivation for rejecting, and no motivation for accepting, the NW thesis.

Before turning to the particular skeptical arguments I have in mind, allow

me to explain the general schema for the family of skeptical arguments of which

they are members:57

1. If person *S* endorses a *No Weight Thesis* form of skeptical theism (i.e. NWST), then skeptical theism serves as an undercutting defeater<sup>58</sup>, *D*, for some subset of their whole system of beliefs,  $B_S$  (premise).

2. If *S* is an epistemically rational agent, then *S* will either give up NWST (i.e. *D*) or the problematic subset of her belief system,  $B_S$  (premise).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> See Rea, "Skeptical Theism and the "Too Much Skepticism" Objection," for a similar explanation of these arguments.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> An undercutting defeater can be characterized in the following way: d is an undercutting defeater for proposition p relative to background evidence e if the conjunction of e and deliminates whatever propositional confirmation there was for p on the background information of *e* alone. An example of this type of defeater would be the following: suppose I am following a map of Yellowstone, which tells me that nearest exit is slightly north of my current position. Thus, I have evidence that the exit is to the north of where I am located. But then, my companion points out that I am looking at the map upside down, causing me to acquire a defeater for my belief that the evidence I previously acquired from the map was reliable. So, this undercutting defeater, d, tells me something about my previous evidence for p, namely, that it is misleading evidence and does not confirm what I previously took it to confirm. For more on the notion of defeaters, see, John Pollock, Contemporary Theories of Knowledge (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986), John Pollock and Anthony Gillies, "Belief Revision and Epistemology," Synthese 122 (2000): 69-92, James Beilby, Naturalism Defeated?: Essays on Plantinga's Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism, ed. James Beilby (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), Michael Bergmann, Justification Without Awareness (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Alvin Plantinga, Where the Conflict Really Lies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) & Kvanvig, Rationality and Reflection. I develop a more complete account of undercutting defeat in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

3. It is less reasonable to cease accepting  $B_S$  on the basis of skeptical theism than it is to simply reject D (premise).

4. Therefore, the most reasonable response to D is to reject it (from 1-3).<sup>59</sup>

Members of this family of objections are differentiated primarily on the basis of what they include in  $B_S$  (i.e. the domain of beliefs undercut by D). As some of my interlocutors prefer to divide the skeptical argument landscape, the relevant subsets of *S*'s system of beliefs represented by  $B_S$  are i) *all* of *S*'s beliefs, ii) *S*'s beliefs about divine commands and values, iii) *S*'s access to knowledge of God through natural theology and miracle accounts, and iv) *S*'s beliefs about moral obligations.<sup>60</sup> While this taxonomy has its merits<sup>61</sup>, I prefer to frame the problem of implausible skepticisms instead by focusing on what I think are the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> A brief aside: I'm skeptical that the notion of an *epistemic duty* makes much sense, not so much on account of doxastic voluntarism requirements, but rather, because of my tendency to think rationality, which hangs on epistemic duty, issues forth from an egocentric predicament for human beings. See Richard Foley, The Theory of Epistemic Rationality (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), Roderick M. Chisholm, Theory of Knowledge (3rd Edition) (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), Jonathan Kvanvig, "Divine Hiddenness: What Is the Problem?" in Divine Hiddenness: New Essays, eds. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 149-163, Conee and Feldman, Evidentialism, 112-34 and Kvanvig, Rationality and Reflection for discussion surrounding these issues. Notice then, that if one rejects the notion of epistemic duty, then there is no obligation for a rational agent to choose the most reasonable response (assuming there is such a perspective-independent most rational response) to an epistemic dilemma. Perhaps there are epistemic virtues such as epistemic courage, if we consider the situation described in the above argument, which motivate an agent to continue searching for a defeater-defeater of D. One might contend that such virtues should be built into a rationality function, such that a response cannot be deemed rational without considering how a person of such-and-such character would react in the situation, but that is not obvious, and thus, an argument would be needed. See Jason Baehr, "Evidentialism, Vice, and Virtue," in Evidentialism and Its Discontents, ed. Trent Doughert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 88-100 for such an argument.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Rea, "Skeptical Theism and the "Too Much Skepticism" Objection," 487.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> E.g. Rea distinguishes between value skepticism in general and theologically specific forms of such skepticism.

two most *fundamental* forms of skepticism implied by skeptical theism; namely, skepticism of divine honesty, which would entail global skepticism, and value skepticism. These forms are fundamental in the following way: global and theological skeptical problems are reducible to skepticism about divine honesty (i.e. divine honesty subsumes (i), (ii) & (iii) of the above taxonomy), while value skepticism retains its own plausibility, even if skepticism about divine honesty can be successfully ruled out by a skeptical theist.<sup>62</sup> Thus as I have already noted, in this section, I will begin with the problem of divine deception and then turn to the problem of moral paralysis (i.e. value skepticism). Lastly, I will conclude the chapter by once again calling attention to the relevance of these implausible skepticisms to our discussion of the *No Weight Thesis*.

#### 5.1 Divine Deception: Warding Off One's Evil Demons

Suppose a secret service officer, Jenny, were approached by a would-be assassin, Wesley, and asked, "Where is President Gump?" Jenny knows President Gump's whereabouts – President Gump is in the room next door – and further knows that she only has two actions to choose from: i) either Jenny tells Wesley the truth and President Gump is consequently assassinated, or ii) Jenny says that President Gump has recently left for a vacation in Switzerland (i.e. Jenny lies) and Wesley consequently leaves the President unharmed.

What should Jenny do if indeed (i) and (ii) are known by her to be the only

available actions? Clearly, she should opt for (ii) because the disvalue of allowing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> One reason to think this is true can be derived from Bergmann's contention that theism is entirely separable from the skeptical theses he endorses. If that's correct, then it would be odd for the truth or falsity of theism to entail anything about the truth or falsity of value skepticism. After all, to Bergmann's mind, skepticism and theism are *independent* matters.

the assassination of President Gump is greater than the disvalue of lying when lying is a necessary means to preventing the assassination. Thus, although lying is *prima facie* morally wrong, the moral wrongness can reasonably be defeated by further features of the state of affairs from which the lie arises. In other words, dishonesty is *sometimes* justified on the basis of consequences which are both outweighing and for which the dishonesty is a necessary condition.<sup>63</sup>

Now let us apply this example by analogy to the relationship between a rational human agent and God. Generally, God is thought to communicate with humans in a variety of forms: religious experience, prophets, Scripture, providentially ordering the world such that an individual receives communication from God via wholly naturalistically explainable means (e.g. perhaps God intentionally wired humans as evolution psychologists would have us believe, perhaps with a Hyperactive Agency Detection Device<sup>64</sup>), etc. Any of these forms of communication can be used to convey either truths or falsehoods, and importantly, as the assassination case reveals, the consequences of dishonesty in cases of communication can sometimes render lying morally permissible if not obligatory.<sup>65</sup> And if such a scenario is possible with respect to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> See Hud Hudson, "The Father of Lies?" in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion, Volume 5*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014a): 147-166 for examples of situations similar to my own.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> See Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, chapter 5 and C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): 89-98 for some interesting suggestions in this regard.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> One might object to the claim that lying is sometimes permissible, but my argument does not hinge on lying *per se*. Deception by means of communicating truths would lead to the same sorts of worries, and thus, for anyone worried about the idea that God can tell a lie, simply replace that

us, it seems *prima facie* possible that God could face a similar situation which called for morally permissible deception. So, is there any reason available to skeptical theists to rule out the possibility of divine deception in cases of divine communication?<sup>66</sup>

The most prominent such reply to this worry by a skeptical theist comes from Michael Rea. I will not reproduce the argument here, but instead, I will turn my attention to a premise of Rea's argument which he takes to represent the anti-NWST's position (i.e. my position).

*Crucial Premise* If NW skeptical theism is true, it is not absolutely unreasonable to believe that God has brought it about that [Divine Deception] is true for some justifying reason beyond our ken.<sup>67</sup>

Rea's contention that this premise is central to anti-NWST is puzzling.

Anyone arguing against NWST on the basis of a skeptical argument such as this

one is asking us to take the same doxastic attitude with respect to Divine

with misleading truths instead. See Erik Wielenberg, "Divine Deception," in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 241-4 for a nice defense of such misleading truths or deception found in various scriptures.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> This problem has been raised by several authors. See Erik Wielenberg, "Sceptical Theism and Divine Lies," *Religious Studies* 46 (2010): 509-523; Ian Wilks, "The Global Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, eds. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2013): 458-467; Stephen Maitzen, "The Moral Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, eds. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2013): 444-457; Hudson, "The Father of Lies?"; and Wielenberg, "Divine Deception".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Rea, "Skeptical Theism and the "Too Much Skepticism" Objection," 489. This discussion is between Rea and Wilks, in the recent *Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*. To make it easier to follow, I will simply take over for Wilks, "The Global Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism," in this discussion rather than attempt to copy his every dialectical move as if it were my own. Indeed, I think he fails to press the primary issue overlooked by Rea, which I intend to bring out in this section. Moreover, I should add that Rea is not explicitly addressing NW skeptical theism as I use it here, although I think it is clear, given his general affirmation of Bergmann's form of skeptical theism, that NWST is in fact what he has in mind.

Deception that we take with respect to the inference from *P* to *Q* in Rowe's evidential argument. That is, if skeptical theism makes it unreasonable to assign any probability to the claim that *there are gratuitous evils*, then it will likewise make it unreasonable to assign any probability to the claim that *Divine Deception* is true. Their claim is fundamentally one of parity between the inference in the evidential argument and any argument against the possibility of divine deception. As a result, contrary to Rea's understanding, we should construe someone arguing against NWST on the basis of the possibility of Divine Deception as claiming that it *is* absolutely unreasonable for someone to believe that God has systematically deceived us. And furthermore, we should understand them to be claiming that it is absolutely unreasonable for someone to believe that God has *not* systematically deceived us. There simply is no basis on which one could either believe or disbelieve Divine Deception. Rather, it is an undefeatable skeptical hypothesis, and so, we should reformulate the Crucial Premise as:

*Repaired Crucial Premise (RCP)* If NW skeptical theism is true, then Divine Deception is a skeptical hypothesis to which we can assign no probability.<sup>68</sup>

Now we can ask if (*RCP*) is true or plausible. One possible reason for denying (*RCP*) would be that there is some sort of *a priori* incoherence involved in positing a perfect being for whom it is possible to lie. For instance, perhaps

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Except perhaps the interval [0, 1].

honesty is a great-making property, and a being greater than which none can be conceived would possess the most superlative of all great-making properties. Then, surely this being would not be given to deception. There are a number of worries with such an argument. First, is it not plausible that even an honest person in certain circumstances might lie to avoid acting in a way that is inconsistent with other virtues they possess? For instance, why should we think that Jenny, in the assassination example above, is exhibiting a lack of perfection by lying to Wesley? One plausible interpretation of her motives for acting is that they sprung out of a dutiful concern for the well-being of the President, which just is something akin to the virtue of charity. Surely this is a perfection any theism worth its salt would include in its list of God's attributes. Second, why think that a perfect being possesses the maximal degree of all great-making properties? Plausibly there is no maximal degree of some properties, such as aseity (i.e. God's attribute of self-existence), or even if there is, perhaps the greatest conceivable being cannot instantiate the maximal degree of all such properties. Perhaps instantiating all such properties to the maximum degree is impossible, and thus, a perfect being must instead instantiate some maximal and coherent balance of all such properties.<sup>69</sup> These considerations and our

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> My comments here reveal my tendency to reject "Classical Theism" which is characterized generally by an emphasis on the importance of divine simplicity (i.e. the doctrine that there are no distinctions in God). See Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays in Neoclassical Metaphysics* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1962) and Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984) for a discussion of the alternative conception of theism, which he labels neotheism. Donald Wayne Viney, "The Varieties of Theism and the Openness of God: Charles

fundamental moral intuitions derived from the assassination case, then, make it difficult to see why it would be *impossible* for the Divine Deception hypothesis to be true.

However, Rea does offer us an insight in his defense of skeptical theism to the fundamental skeptical theist response to worries of Divine Deception. He tells us,

Bear in mind here that the denial of [Divine Deception] is, like the denial of any other radical skeptical hypothesis, a perfectly rational starting point. If it were not so, everyone would face insurmountable skeptical threats.<sup>70</sup>

Indeed, this seems true. A rejection of Divine Deception is a rational

starting point for most people, but the question is whether such a starting point

is plausible for skeptical theists, and particularly, for skeptical theists who

endorse NW. I hereby submit that Rea and other skeptical theists who endorse

NW are committed to the following dilemma:

- <u>Either</u> Skeptical Theism prevents the inference from *there appear* to be gratuitous evils to there are gratuitous evils (henceforth, 'the Inference') or the Inference is permissible.<sup>71</sup>
- 2. Skeptical Theism prevents *the Inference* only if inferences made on the basis of value judgments which fail to knowingly and

Hartshorne and Free-Will Theism," *The Personalist Forum* 14 (1998): 199-238 further discusses the contributions of Hartshorne and suggests that there is a sort of continuum of positions that are possible between classical theism and neo-theism. I tend toward a species of what Viney calls free will theism for various reasons.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Rea, "Skeptical Theism and the "Too Much Skepticism" Objection," 491.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Howard-Snyder, "Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism," and Howard-Snyder, "Agnosticism, the Moral Skepticism Objection and Common Sense Morality," use '*The Inference*' to designate a different inference than the one from *P* to *Q* in Rowe's argument. I alert the reader to this in hopes that they will not confuse the two different uses of that name.

representatively account for all the facts (including whether or not God is a deceiver) are unjustified.

- 3. But, ruling out Divine Deception requires us to make an inference on the basis of value judgments which fail to knowingly and representatively account for all the facts (including whether or not God is a deceiver).
- 4. So, if Skeptical Theism prevents *the Inference*, then it also prevents ruling out Divine Deception (from 2 & 3).
- 5. Therefore, <u>either</u> Skeptical Theism prevents ruling out Divine Deception <u>or</u> *the Inference* is permissible (from 1 & 4).

Notice, now, that if this argument succeeds, the upshot is that No Weight Skeptical Theism is forced to choose between two options, both of which they have reason to resist. If they take the first horn of the dilemma, then they cannot rule out divine deception. If they take the second horn of the dilemma, then the argument from evil succeeds. Again, neither of these two options will be happily accepted by No Weight Skeptical Theists, but the force of my argument makes it clear that they *must choose*.

But let us look at the argument more closely. Premise (1) is indubitable, premise (2) is simply an articulation of the No Weight Skeptical Theist's explanation for why the evidential argument from evil completely fails, and premises (4) and (5) are simply implications of the preceding premises. So it seems that the skeptical theist who hopes to escape the dilemma I've proposed must find some basis on which they can reasonably reject premise (3). Suppose that the basis they offer is what Rea suggests above; namely, that the rejection of Divine Deception is an epistemological starting point which is necessary if we are to avoid skepticism. In that case, however, a further question can be asked. What justifies such an epistemological starting point? Surely the answer is something along the lines of, "Well, we philosophers just have the intuition that it is a good epistemological starting point." If this is the response, then parity seems to demand that the skeptical theist allow for others to differ on the basis of such intuitions as to what gets privileged as an epistemological starting point. Perhaps our intuitions in the case of evil should get the same sort of epistemic presumption that our intuitions in the Divine Deception case receive. Whatever the case, if skeptical theists allow non-skepticism in one instance (i.e. Divine Deception), they should be open, on pain of methodological consistency, to nonskepticism in other instances (i.e. the evidential argument from evil). However, if they are open to such non-skepticism, then these skeptical theists will be committed to denying the No Weight Thesis, which I suggest is both an admirable and preferable option.

#### 5.2 Value Skepticism: How Not to Heal a Moral Paralytic

So the upshot of the previous section was, essentially, that NWST entails that divine deception cannot be ruled out. But since it is reasonable to believe that we are not so deceived, NWST is false.

In this section, I will offer a similar argument. If someone accepts NWST, then they are committed to an extreme form of value skepticism that prevents us from engaging in moral deliberation. However, it is clear that we are able to deliberate legitimately about our moral actions. Therefore, NWST is false.

My primary interlocutor in this section will be Michael Bergmann, whose defense of skeptical theism you'll recall consists in a defense of the following skeptical theses:

- ST1 We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
- ST2 We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
- ST3 We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

Many authors besides myself have argued that ST1-ST3 commit Bergmann to a very troubling form of value skepticism, such that anyone who affirms those theses will be prevented from acting in many moral contexts. The following *reductio* argument to moral paralysis summarizes the general idea:

- 1. If Bergmann's ST1-ST3 are true, then we are unable to reliably judge the *all-things-considered* value of natural events.
- 2. If we cannot reliably judge the *all-things-considered* value of natural events, then we are morally paralyzed (i.e. we cannot obtain a good reason to act one way or another in moral contexts).
- 3. Therefore, if Bergmann's ST1-ST3 are true, then we are morally paralyzed (from 1 & 2).

- 4. But it is absurd to believe that we are morally paralyzed (Premise).
- 5. Therefore, it is not the case that Bergmann's ST1-ST3 are true (from 3 & 4).

One might be initially inclined to deny premise (1) in this argument, that is, one might deny that Bergmann is committed to denying the reliability of our *all-things-considered* judgments of the value of natural events. Some opponents of the sort of skeptical theism advocated by Bergmann defend such a response<sup>72</sup>; however, Bergmann baulks at pursuing this escape route. Indeed, Bergmann seems to endorse the truth of premise (1) when he states (italics are mine):

[In] cases where it is important for us to be guided by considerations of possible good and bad consequences of our actions, we aren't morally bound to do what *in fact* has the overall best consequences (since we typically can't determine that). What is relevant are *the likely consequences* we have some reason to be confident about after a reasonable amount of time and effort aimed at identifying the expected results of our behavior. If, after such consideration, a particular course of action seems to clearly maximize the good (or minimize the bad) among the consequences we're able to identify and we non-culpably and reasonably take ourselves to have no overriding consequences-independent obligation to refrain from that action, then that action is a morally appropriate one for us to perform.<sup>73</sup>

Given that Bergmann thinks neither that we can reliably determine the all-

things-considered value of a natural event in a moral context nor that we are

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> David J. Anderson, "Skeptical Theism and Value Judgments," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 72 (2012): 27-39.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," 392.

"morally bound to do what *in fact* has the" greatest *all-things-considered* value, it is clear that he does not deny premise (1) in the above argument. Rather, he prefers to deny premise (2), which claims that the avoidance of moral paralysis is possible only if we can act on the basis of *all-things-considered* reasons. In his denial of this premise, Bergmann seems to me to be making the correct move. After all, only the most committed consequentialist would think that someone can be negatively evaluated morally for failing to act on *all-things-considered* reasons when deciding what to do in any and all moral contexts. Thus, I do not fault Bergmann for resisting premise (2) full stop. Unfortunately, similarly to my criticism of Rea in the previous section, this rejection of premise (2) commits him to endorsing *the Inference* in the evidential argument from evil. And it is to this unpalatable commitment for Bergmann that we now turn.

Recall that the evidential argument from evil as Rowe presents it has the following form:

(*P*) No good state of affairs we know of is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*.

#### Therefore:

(*Q*) No good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*.

In order for someone to reasonably come to believe Q on the basis of P in this argument, the skeptical theist requires the following principle be satisfied by the atheologian:

All-Things-Considered Condition (ATCC) – one can draw the inference from P to Q only if the possible good states of affairs of which one is aware are representative of all the possible good states of affairs there are.

However, the truth of ST1-ST3 entails that the atheologian's knowledge of the realm of value falls quite short of satisfying *ATCC*. Consequently, the inference from P to Q fails if ST1-ST3 holds. However, let's look closely at a form of the moral paralysis objection which I take to be parallel to Rowe's evidential argument from evil.

 $(P^*)$  No good state of affairs we know of is such that person *S* is morally justified in permitting the ritual sacrifice of a child before her eyes.

Therefore:

 $(Q^*)$  No good state of affairs is such that person *S* is morally justified in permitting the ritual sacrifice of a child before her eyes.

Now, typically we permit the inference from  $P^*$  to  $Q^*$ , and we do so for good reason. To deny this inference amounts to permitting a horrendous evil, and in light of such a repugnant consequence for *not* permitting the inference, Bergmann wavers. He says that in such situations, the inference is indeed permissible, however, it is permissible because we need not act on the basis of *all-things-considered* reasons in such moral contexts. Instead, *some-things-considered* reasons are sufficient. But notice, then, that what Bergmann is actually doing is denying that *ATCC* holds in the moral case (more precisely: a principle parallel to *ATCC* with the focus on moral contexts), while simultaneously endorsing it with respect to the Rowe-style evidential argument from evil. Thus, he seems to be of two minds with respect to *ATCC*, and were he to be consistent with how he treats *ATCC* in both the inference from *P* to *Q* and the inference from *P*\* to *Q*\*, then either he would accept the consequence of moral paralysis by accepting *ATCC* in both contexts, or he would accept the legitimacy of Rowe's inference in the evidential argument as a result of denying *ATCC* in both contexts. So the fundamental question Bergmann needs to answer is this: are there any good reasons to think *ATCC* will apply in the epistemic context used in the evidential argument from evil while it does not apply in the moral context?

One immediate worry about trying to answer this question is that it is controversial whether the distinction between the moral and epistemic realms is a legitimate one. For instance, Linda Zagzebski has argued in *Virtues of the Mind*, as well as some other works, that this distinction has no basis in reality, and she uses this claim to justify bringing considerations in ethics over to help map the terrain of epistemology.<sup>74</sup> But Bergmann has not offered any reason to think that these realms are distinct; thus, some explanation is needed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996): xiv.

But suppose we accept for the sake of argument that the epistemic and moral realms are indeed distinct realms. Even in this case, we still need a nonarbitrary reason to think that ATCC applies in the moral decision-making context while not applying in the more purely epistemic context. However, this project seems hopeless for the following reason: when deciding what one morally ought to do, one must first go through deliberation about the values of the states of affairs involved in one's decision. This period of deliberation, however, is unavoidably epistemic in that it requires one to determine what is *most reasonable* for one to believe about the value of the states of affairs at hand. But notice that this deliberation which precedes the decision about how one should act is no different in any relevant respect than the deliberation which precedes the decision about what one ought to think. And importantly, it is the deliberation which precedes the decision about *what one ought to think* that undergirds the inference in Rowe's evidential argument from evil. The deliberative element in the moral decisionmaking context and the deliberative element in the evidential argument from evil are precisely parallel. Thus, it seems that there is no relevant difference between the two cases to which Bergmann might appeal to justify applying ATCC in one context but not the other.

Thus in summary, my argument can be represented in a parallel way with the dilemma I presented Rea in the previous section:

1. <u>Either</u> Bergmann's Skeptical Theism prevents *the Inference* or the *Inference* is permissible.

- 2. Bergmann's Skeptical Theism prevents *the Inference* only if inferences made on the basis of all-things-considered value judgments are unjustified.
- 3. But, if inferences on the basis of all-things-considered value judgments are required to justify *the Inference*, then all-things-considered value judgments are also required to justify inferences in moral contexts.
- 4. So, if Bergmann's Skeptical Theism prevents *the Inference*, then it also prevents inferences made in moral contexts (from 2 & 3).
- 5. Therefore, <u>either</u> Bergmann's Skeptical Theism prevents inferences made in moral contexts, or *the Inference* is permissible (from 1 & 4).

This argument is generalizable to anyone who accepts No Weight Skeptical Theism, and again, the upshot is that anyone who endorses such a position must *choose* between permitting *the Inference* in the evidential argument and an extreme moral skepticism. Given that there are weighty reasons to reject such an extreme form of moral skepticism—whether practical, epistemic or otherwise—I submit that we should accept *the Inference*, which entails the falsity of No Weight Skeptical Theism.

#### 5.3 Implausible Skepticisms and the No Weight Thesis

I have directed two implausible skepticism objections toward skeptical theism. Is there any reason to think that they are generalizable in any way? It seems that they are generalizable, at least, for any skeptical theist who endorses NW, as I've emphasized throughout the chapter. The reason I say this is that any skeptical theist who endorses NW with respect to the evidential argument from evil will also be committed to endorsing a form of NW in the Divine Deception and Value Skepticism cases:

> No Weight Thesis for Deception & Value Skepticism (NW-DV) – our intuitions regarding the disvalue of deception or the value of any given state of affairs bear no evidential weight with respect to the truth of Divine Deception and Value Skepticism.

My general diagnosis of sections 4 and 5, then, can be summarized as follows: i) NW implies NW-DV (Section 5), ii) NW requires controversial and problematic theses in modal epistemology (Section 4), and iii) no independent motivations for NW have been offered by skeptical theists. Furthermore, as I suggested previously, there is no clear essential connection between the skeptical theist's intuition and the radical NW thesis, and so, even if the above skeptical theist accounts all fail, so long as their failure resides in their endorsement of NW, there remains room for a defense of skeptical theism which denies NW. In the next chapter I will turn to one such form of skeptical theism that rejects NW, developed over the last thirty years by Stephen Wykstra. Rather than relying on generalizable skeptical theses or an implausible extreme modal skepticism as the authors of this chapter, Wykstra develops an epistemic principle which applies to negative existential claims of the sort that Rowe seeks to establish. Although problems remain for Wykstra's account, over the course of the next three chapters, we will see how the shortcomings of Wykstra's epistemic principle can be overcome.

# <u>Chapter 3</u> *The Epistemic Principles Approach*

William Rowe developed his first *evidential argument from evil* in 1979. Shortly thereafter, Stephen Wykstra advanced the first version of his now familiar CORNEA (i.e. Condition on Reasonable Epistemic Access), a principle of rationality which, so Wykstra alleged, if true undermined Rowe's argument from evil.<sup>1</sup> After conceding that Wykstra's principle might have some merit, Rowe chose to advance new versions of the *evidential argument from evil* that he thought sidestepped Wykstra's worries.<sup>2</sup> Although the development of Rowe's argument is interesting, I noted in the previous chapter that there are not any substantive modifications in the argument from evil's development which require our attention here since CORNEA, once it has been more fully elaborated, may be applied to each version of Rowe's argument without loss of plausibility.<sup>3</sup> As a result, in what follows I will work primarily with a simpler form of Rowe's argument from evil as a test for Wykstra's skeptical theistic response.

We will proceed as follows. First, I will state and identify the intuition undergirding CORNEA as it was originally presented by Wykstra and explain how CORNEA functions as a response to Rowe's argument. Of course, were

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> As Stephen Wykstra, "In Memoriam?" manuscript delivered at the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Philosophy of Religion Conference, Baylor University (2009) tells it, a prototype version of CORNEA was produced during his time at an NEH Seminar at Purdue in 1982, but we will begin our investigation with the official 1984 version of CORNEA.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Though I am not so sanguine about this myself.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument" & Trakakis, *The God Beyond Belief* for a defense of this claim.

CORNEA a *false* epistemic principle, serious objections to Rowe's argument would not depend upon it. Thus, in the second section, we will turn our attention to the question of CORNEA's truth as an epistemic principle. Although CORNEA is built upon an intuition regarding rationality which seems clearly correct, formulating the principle in such a way that it avoids counterexample proves difficult. Chisholming away<sup>4</sup> at CORNEA, then, will constitute much of the work of this chapter. Eventually, however, we will arrive at the most perspicuous version of CORNEA to date, one which shifts away from interpreting CORNEA as dependent on the truth of a subjunctive conditional. Although this final form of CORNEA successfully avoids the objections surveyed earlier in the chapter, I will conclude with two general worries about CORNEA's relevance to the argument from evil. First, even if we can develop a promising version of the CORNEA principle, skeptical theists following Wykstra's lead will still need to offer positive reasons for us to think that the principle is violated by Rowe's argument from evil. Until this has been shown, there is little reason to think that the intuition beneath skeptical theism applies to the argument from evil. Second, if CORNEA is a principle of rationality, then determining whether believing the conclusion of the argument from evil is reasonable will require grappling with all epistemic factors relevant to rational belief and not merely

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The process of Chisholming a principle derives from the practice of Roderick Chisholm. Roughly, it is the practice of proposing a principle, offering a counterexample, revising the principle to accommodate the counterexample, and repeating the process until the most perspicuous principle possible has been discovered.

probabilistic, or evidential, considerations. Responses to these two worries will occupy us in the subsequent chapters.

# 1. Condition On ReasoNable Epistemic Access

#### 1.1 CORNEA: Inspiration and Explanation

Suppose that as a result of the upcoming flu season, you have temporarily overcome your fear of needles and made your way to the doctor's office. Abruptly, the door swings open, revealing a nurse with flu shot in hand and seeming a bit too eager for your liking. Immediately, she glances at the point of the needle, exclaims, "looks like there aren't any germs this time!" and grabs your arm. Survival instincts kick in and you object, "What do you mean no germs this time? You can't know that just by looking at the needle!"

Indeed, in such a situation, the patient seems obviously correct. The nurse has made an inference that she had no business making; namely, she inferred that because she saw no germs on the point of the needle there were *in fact* no germs on the point of the needle. Of course, were she to have glanced in the room and claimed "looks like there aren't any elephants in the room this time," we would have been quick to agree with her (assuming there really weren't any elephants in the room). Perhaps such a comment would have struck us as odd, given that we had no reason to expect an elephant to take up residence in a doctor's office in the first place, but we could hardly object that there was no evidential support for the proposition *there are no elephants in this room* gained by the nurse's brief glance. The *evidential* difference between germs and elephants in this case, however, can be captured by saying that elephants would have a very high see-ability, relative to our cognitive capacities, while germs would not have a high see-ability. In fact, germs arguably have *no see-ability* relative to normal human perceptual capacities, and so, when making a *noseeum inference* (i.e. 'I no see'um, so they ain't there') like that of the nurse in the above example, Wykstra suggests we apply the following principle, which he originally branded CORNEA:

(CORNEA) On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim 'It appears that p' only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her.<sup>5</sup>

The first feature of CORNEA to note is that as Wykstra presents it,

CORNEA is only intended to be a necessary condition on when it is permissible

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," 152. There are a number of worries with this principle as stated. I will bring out some of these issues in the text and later footnotes as they are mentioned by authors from which I draw. One point that I would like to bring out here in particular, however, is that being 'entitled to claim' something is not clearly an *epistemic* constraint. As anyone who is familiar with the discussion concerning warranted assertibility knows, to say that epistemic norms contain linguistic social norms in part constitutes a substantive philosophical thesis in need of defense. Fortunately, Wykstra is primarily concerned with the epistemic dimension of this claim, so we can at least bracket off linguistic (or even moral) norms, allowing that when they are factored in, they may defeat H's entitlement to claim "It appears that p".
to claim that 'it appears that p'. This notion of appears, as Wykstra takes pains to emphasize, is intended in a special epistemic sense<sup>6</sup>, which spawns originally from the work of Richard Swinburne. Wykstra quotes Swinburne's explication of at least two conditions which must be met to permissibly assert "it appears that p'':

If I say 'the ship appears to be moving', I am saying [1] that I am inclined to believe that the ship is moving, and [2] that it is my present sensory experience that leads me to have this inclination to belief.<sup>7</sup>

In this passage Swinburne claims that in order to permissibly assert "it appears that p", it is necessary that (i) one's cognized situation is such that one is *inclined* to believe that p and (ii) there is a *causal connection* between one's perceptual experience and one's inclination to believe that p.<sup>8</sup> It seems clear that Wykstra agrees with Swinburne that the relevant cognitive situation in their two principles is one in which an agent is *inclined* to believe that p. However, Wykstra is dissatisfied with Swinburne's analysis in two ways. First, he criticizes Swinburne's restriction of the principle to *sensory* appearances since a principle which appealed to *conceptual* appearances seems no less commonsensical.<sup>9</sup> This criticism is especially pertinent in the context of the *EAE* where the inference

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004): 246.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Trakakis, The God Beyond Belief, 78.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," 154.

under question is *based* on conceptual appearances rather than sensory ones.<sup>10</sup> Second, Wykstra suggests that Swinburne's two conditions ought to be augmented by the following *Taking Condition:* 

*Taking Condition (TC)* – H is entitled to claim that it appears that p on the basis of cognized situation s only if it is reasonable for H to take it that there is an evidential connection between p and s.<sup>11</sup>

The need for an agent to be able to reasonably take there to be an evidential

connection (i.e. not merely a causal one) between their cognized situation and the

proposition which they are inclined to believe can be illustrated by the following

example:

Suppose that Genevieve suffers from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder to such an extent that every time she leaves her house and begins to pull out of her drive way, she is inclined to believe that she forgot to lock her front door. Suppose that she continues to incline towards believing this, even on occasions in which she has rechecked the front door multiple, perhaps twenty, times. She has learned that such inclinations are inevitable for her, but suppose further that she receives a revelation from a Supreme Being in which the Supreme Being reveals that Genevieve is infallible<sup>12</sup> with respect to locking doors when she leaves the house (i.e. she never *actually* forgets to lock the door). The next morning, she exits the front door again and begins to pull out of the driveway in her car. As she does, she is again inclined to believe that she has forgotten to lock the door. However, now she knows these inclinations are misleading and does not take them to be evidence that she has *in* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Wykstra does note that a principle regarding conceptual appearances may not be as plausible as one regarding sensory appearances; however, since Rowe is appealing to such conceptual appearances, Wykstra grants him the modification for the sake of argument (Ibid., 154). For defenses of a principle in the spirit of Swinburne which explicitly allows for conceptual appearances, see Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> This formulation and label of the 'Taking Condition' was first introduced by Howard-Snyder, "Seeing Through CORNEA," 27.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Notice that Genevieve need not be *essentially* infallible, but just never makes (or will make) a mistake in the actual world.

*fact* forgotten to lock the front door. Thus, she ignores her inclinations and simply drives to work.

In this case, if Swinburne's principles were sufficient to render a belief reasonable for an agent, then Genevieve would be justified in believing that she had forgotten to lock her front door, despite knowing her inclinations to believe such a thing were misleading. When combined with *TC*, however, the principle predicts exactly what we think it ought to predict in Genevieve's case, and thus, *TC* is a reasonable emendation to Swinburne's principle. Furthermore, this emendation is encoded in CORNEA, which we can bring out by considering a principle that is fairly similar to CORNEA but with a slight difference in emphasis. That is, this principle focuses on the need for the agent to take there to be an evidential connection involved between the inclination they have to believe something and the truth-indicative nature of that inclination:

*Discernible Difference Principle (DDP)* – It is reasonable for H to take it that there is an evidential connection between p and s only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, were p false, s would likely be discernibly different to H in some way.<sup>13</sup>

Now, when I said above that *TC* was encoded in CORNEA, I meant the following: Cornea requires that one satisfy *DDP*, and in satisfying *DDP*, one further satisfies an important necessary condition for satisfying *TC*. Notably,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Ibid., 28.

*DDP* directs us to Wykstra's fundamental objection to Rowe's argument from evil. Recall the version of *EAE* I considered in the previous chapter:

(*P*) No good state of affairs we know of is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*.

Therefore:

(*Q*) No good state of affairs is such that an omnipotent, omniscient being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting *Bambi* or *Sue*.

As Wykstra points out, the inference from P to Q is paradigmatic of a typical *noseeum* inference. It involves a movement from the claim that *we see no morally sufficient reasons for God's permission of Bambi or Sue* to the claim that *there are no morally sufficient reasons for God's permission of Bambi or Sue*. But why think that God's reasons for permitting a given evil are the sort of things which possess high see-ability? Do we have reason to think a difference in the presence of morally sufficient reasons for the permission of such evils would be discernible for creatures like us? Or put another way, do we satisfy DDP when considering God's possible reasons for the permission of evil? Wykstra thinks that we do not satisfy DDP in this case, largely due to the intuitive force of the analogies (e.g. the Parent Analogy) we considered at the end of the first chapter.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, he seeks to defend the truth of CORNEA in hopes that its discernible difference requirement can prevent Rowe's inference from P to Q.

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 14}$  ...and will assess more critically in chapter four.

Although there are some well-known worries about this principle, which we will turn to shortly, Wykstra does explicitly endorse it.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, there are two important points to note prior to continuing our discussion. First, as Wykstra acknowledges, *DDP* has an internalist construal apparently inspired by Roderick Chisholm. This is important to see, especially since CORNEA is a constraint on *rationality* rather than a constraint on knowledge or some other epistemic state of greater epistemic value, such as understanding. Second, the last portion of *DDP* includes a subjunctive conditional, which opens CORNEA up to both misunderstanding and criticism. These two features of CORNEA alone can account for much of its criticism and development since debuting in Wykstra's 1984 article, and now that we understand CORNEA's intuitive appeal for opponents of Rowe-style evidential arguments, let us turn to the criticism CORNEA has received.

#### 1.2 CORNEA: Criticism and Clarification

Truly, the idea that horrendous and gratuitous evils do not count as even *prima facie* evidence against the existence of God<sup>16</sup> seems implausible, and indeed,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> See especially Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," 154; Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," & Stephen Wykstra, "CORNEA, Carnap, and Current Closure Befuddlement," *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2007): 87-98.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," 148 explicitly argues for this strong claim, as did the authors surveyed in the previous chapter (see Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition"; Van Inwagen, "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence"; Alston, "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on the Evidential Argument from Evil"; Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil*; Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument"; Bergmann and Rea, "In

the subsequent attention CORNEA has received in the literature testifies to its apparently radical nature. In the previous chapter, we saw that any version of skeptical theism which adopted such an extreme view of evil's evidential impotence (i.e. via an endorsement of the No Weight Thesis) was bound to fail. CORNEA need not be understood to have such an extreme voice, which will become clear as we consider the criticisms that follow. Let us begin, then, with Bruce Russell's early criticism of CORNEA, where he points out that CORNEA plausibly commits its adherents to external world skepticism.

Suppose I am sitting in a chair and perceive that I am doing so. Thus, I can justifiably claim that it *appears* I am sitting in a chair. The truth of this proposition entails that I am not a brain in a vat, but suppose that I were a brain in a vat. Were I a brain in a vat, would my evidence be discernibly different in some way? It would not be discernibly different, for my experience would be identical to what it is now. So, if CORNEA is true, it seems, I cannot assert even the most basic appearance claims.<sup>17</sup>

Defence of Skeptical Theism"; Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil"; Bergmann, "Commonsense Sceptical Theism". In Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," 137 & 148 fn. 14, he calls this strong claim "reckless". In that paper, Wykstra develops the notion of *levering evidence*, a type of evidence to which, so Wykstra argues, Rowe's examples of apparently gratuitous evil do not belong. This slightly weakened understanding of CORNEA as a type of undercutting defeater will be more fully understood by the end of this chapter.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Russell, "The Persistent Problem of Evil, 132-3. Wykstra offers a response to this objection which relies on Carnap's by/on distinction, by which Wykstra simply means that hypothesis H can be made more probable *by* evidence E without being probable *on* E alone. Applied to Russell's example, the hypothesis that I am a brain in a vat could plausibly be made less probable *by* one's appearing to have a hand without being made probable *on* that evidence alone. And of course, other information in one's background beliefs will be relevant to assessing whether or not a hypothesis is probable *on* some evidence when conjoined with one's total evidence. This response, while perhaps successful as a rebuttal, is not, to my mind, alone sufficient to respond to Russell. I will explain how this response connects with my own project in section 2.2 below.

While this objection from Russell does indeed seem problematic, one might think that it rests on the following implausible *Transmission Principle*:

*Transmission Principle (TP)* – If, given some evidence e, I am justified in believing some proposition p, and I know that p entails q, then given e I am also justified in believing q.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately for Russell, TP is false, which can be seen easily in the

following example:

Let 'e' be that Alice has been declared guilty by five reliable witnesses who were present for her alleged crime and that Alice's own story has been demonstrated to be fraught with holes and contradictions.

Let 'p' be *Alice will be convicted*.

Let 'q' be the trial will not be cut short due to Alice's unexpected death.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly e renders p reasonable to believe, p entails  $q^{20}$ , but e does not render q reasonable to believe. Consequently, the Alice case serves as a counterexample to *TP*. Sufficient evidence for reasonably believing p is not necessarily sufficient evidence for reasonably believing anything entailed by p. And since Russell's argument depends on the truth of this transmission principle, his argument fails.

However, this imagined objection seems to miss Russell's point, which is that CORNEA plausibly entails *TP*. Russell seems to agree that such a transmission principle is false, a claim he relies on in his argument against

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Bruce Langtry, "Eyeballing Evil: Some Epistemic Principles," *Philosophical Papers* 25 (1996): 130.
<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Assuming no resurrection of Alice is in the offing.

CORNEA. And so, in other words his argument amounts to the following: given i) *TP*'s clear falsity when applied to skeptical scenarios and ii) its being entailed by CORNEA, an application of *modus tollens* commits us to a rejection of CORNEA.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, Russell's objection to CORNEA remains unscathed by such a rejoinder.

To better understand why this response to Russell fails, then, let us consider a similar complaint lodged against CORNEA by Daniel Howard-Snyder. He claims in "Seeing Through CORNEA" that a necessary condition for the truth of *DDP* is that the following principle be true:

*Subjunctive Condition (SC):* There is an evidential connection between what H has to go on in claiming 'so far as I can tell, p' and p only if, given H's cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, were p false, what H has to go on would probably be discernibly different in some way by H.<sup>22</sup>

Howard-Snyder then offers a well-known skeptical counterexample to *SC*. Suppose that you have taken your son to the zoo in broad daylight, you both have 20/20 vision, and you have no reason to think you are not looking at a zebra in the zebra exhibit. However, unbeknownst to you, the zookeeper enjoys tricking her guests by disguising donkeys as zebras, especially since it allows her to express her other hobbies of painting and animal cosmetic surgery. Suppose

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> As I mentioned in fn. 17, Wykstra, "CORNEA, Carnap, and Current Closure Befuddlement," addresses this worry in much fuller detail. But as I mentioned there, I do not think Wykstra's discussion in that paper presents the best response to Russell's criticism.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Howard-Snyder, "Seeing Through CORNEA," 30. Langtry, "Eyeballing Evil," 131 rephrases this principle slightly, but they are logically equivalent. I prefer the former representation.

further that the zookeeper is very good at these disguises, such that from where you stand with your son, the donkey is indeed indistinguishable from a real zebra. Surely only a skeptic would deny that there is *some* evidential connection between your cognized situation, including the use you've made of your faculties, leading you to claim that 'so far as I can tell, that's a zebra' and the proposition *that's a zebra*. And this evidential connection surely holds despite the fact that the subjunctive conditional involved in this application of *SC* would not be satisfied (i.e. since the closest possible world in which *that's a zebra* is false is the actual world, nothing is discernibly different in any way to you). Thus, concludes Howard-Snyder, *if* CORNEA entails *DDP*, *DDP* entails *SC* and *SC* is false, as demonstrated by the zebra/donkey counterexample, *then* CORNEA fails.<sup>23</sup>

The spirit of Howard-Snyder's objection to CORNEA is similar to Russell's, but his articulation of *SC* helps direct us to a more satisfying reply, which comes in two parts. First, consider a more generalized version of both *DDP* and *SC*:

(*DDP*<sup>\*</sup>) It is reasonable for person H to believe that there is an evidential connection of type T between A and B only if it is reasonable for H to believe that condition K is fulfilled.

(*SC*<sup>\*</sup>) There is an evidential connection of type T between A and B only if condition K is fulfilled.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Howard-Snyder, "Seeing Through CORNEA, 35.

Consider the following case in which an instance of *DDP*\* can be satisfied without legitimizing an inference to an instance of SC\*: 'It is reasonable for H to *believe that* missing Christmas cookies (i.e. A) is evidence that Santa Claus exists (i.e. B) only if *it is reasonable for H to believe that* Santa Claus exists (i.e. B is true)' to 'missing Christmas cookies is evidence that Santa clause exists only if Santa Claus exists'.<sup>24</sup> Whereas Howard-Snyder's replacement for the variable K involves the requirement that a certain subjunctive conditional be true, I chose to replace variable K instead with a requirement that B be true. But clearly, there can be an evidential connection between missing Christmas cookies and the existence of Santa Claus, even when Santa Clause fails to exist. So not just any way of filling in variable K above entitles us to infer *SC*\* from *DDP*\*. Thus, what we need from Howard-Snyder in response is a reason to think that there is something special about his subjunctive replacement for K, and lacked by my straightforward truth condition, which does entitle us to infer SC from DDP in this context. No suggestions have been offered by Howard-Snyder; however, even if he could propose something in response, there remains a deeper problem with how he characterizes *DDP*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> See Langtry, "Eyeballing Evil," 131-2 for an example using other minds. I think the one I used is more intuitive. Also, if you're having difficulty reading the difference between the two sentences above, pay close attention to whether or not the clause 'it is reasonable to believe that' is included in the portion of the sentence you're reading. That clause is dropped in the inferred conditional.

Recall the necessary condition in *DDP* which includes the subjunctive locution: "given H's cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, were p false, what H has to go on would probably be discernibly different in some way by H."<sup>25</sup> The qualifier 'probably' is not otiose here. Consider again Howard-Snyder's zebra/donkey counterexample to *SC*, which shares the 'would probably' qualification with *DDP*. Howard-Snyder assumes that the truth-semantics of this conditional are identical to one of the form 'were p false, what H has to go on *would in fact* be discernibly different in some way by H'.<sup>26</sup> But it is consistent with our assessment of the former conditional that what we judge *would probably* be the case fail to in fact be the case, while it is inconsistent with our assessment of the latter conditional that what we judge *would* be the case fail to be in fact the case.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, Howard-Snyder's objections to CORNEA are really targeted at the wrong type of conditional.

## 2. Perrine & Wykstra - The Indicative Model

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Howard-Snyder, "Seeing Through CORNEA, 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Note how the response to Wykstra in William Rowe, "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra," *International Journal of Philosophy of* Religion 16 (1984): 95-100 states CORNEA without the 'probably' in place: "If someone claims that it appears that S is not P, that person is entitled to that claim only if she has no reason to think that if S were P things *would* strike him pretty much the same..." (Ibid., 96).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> This second objection to Howard-Snyder can be found in Langtry, "Eyeballing Evil," 132. See Robert Merrihew Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1977): 113-4 for an early discussion of 'would' and 'would probably' conditionals and see Kvanvig, *Destiny and Deliberation*, 160 for further reflection on how these two grammatically differentiable types of conditionals may function in deliberative contexts.

At this point, it is necessary to digress into an investigation of conditional logic prior to offering a fuller response to the criticisms of CORNEA above. The reason for this is that at a fundamental level, confusion regarding i) what kind of conditional is involved in CORNEA and ii) what semantics is best for that kind of conditional is, as I have already pointed out, responsible for much of the principle's criticism. In what follows I will first develop an account of the logic of indicative and subjunctive conditionals, explaining both how to identify them at a more basic grammatical level and the differences between them with respect to their truth-conditions. Second, I will demonstrate by way of example that a grammatically subjunctive conditional does not always function as a logically subjunctive conditional (i.e. a conditional that can be evaluated on the basis of the usual subjunctive conditional semantics). I will argue that CORNEA is constituted by such a conditional, that is, a conditional that is grammatically subjunctive but functions as an indicative conditional semantically. As an immediate consequence, any of the above objections which presuppose that CORNEA is composed of a logically subjunctive conditional will fail. Once I have introduced the necessary conditional logic, I will apply my alternative way of understanding CORNEA to the examples above and offer it up as a friendly amendment to the work on this epistemic principle.

#### 2.1 Subjunctive & Indicative Conditional Logic: The Basics

A conditional is a statement expressed in English in the form 'if A, then C', where 'A' represents the clause contained in the antecedent of the conditional and 'C' represents the clause in the consequent. In some recent work on conditional logic, conditionals have been divided into two general categories employed to categorize the types of conditionals used in the English language: i) indicative conditionals (represented by 'A  $\rightarrow$  C') and ii) subjunctive conditionals (represented by 'A > C'). There is a third type of conditional, the material conditional (represented by 'A  $\supset$  C'), which is truth-functional and defined as true in all cases except when A is true and C is false. The reason the material conditional is not given its own category is that it fits into the indicative conditional category. However, the way in which material conditionals fit into the indicative conditional category will depend on what else one's theory says about their relationship to indicatives more broadly. Generally, theories of indicative conditionals will say either i) that  $A \rightarrow C$  is equivalent to  $A \supset C$  or ii) that the material conditional only appears in English usage in special cases of the indicative conditional.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> The circumstances under which an indicative conditional is equivalent to the material conditional are complicated, but in brief, whenever an agent utters 'A  $\rightarrow$  C' and assigns a very high probability to A, perhaps even 1, then we can plausibly evaluate the indicative as a material conditional. For more on this sort of case, see Jonathan Bennett, *A Philosophical Guide to Conditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 133-4 where he gives a quick proof of this, borrowing from Ernest Adams, *The Logic of Conditionals* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1975): 3-4.

In this discussion, I will assume at least two things: (a) the conditional of interest in CORNEA is not a material conditional and (b) the indicative conditional is not reducible to the material conditional (which amounts to a rejection of the first relationship between the two conditionals mentioned above).<sup>29</sup> Thus, I will only concern myself with an understanding of the different ways in which we can identify and evaluate 'A  $\rightarrow$  C' (i.e. the indicative) and 'A > C' (i.e. the subjunctive).

In English, it is easiest to identify whether or not an indicative or subjunctive conditional is being used by looking at the grammar. The indicative conditional usually follows a grammatically paradigmatic *Did-did* form<sup>30</sup>, while

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Perhaps you've realized that this paragraph begs the question against Gricean and Jacksonian analyses of indicative conditionals, which (unsuccessfully to my mind) reduce indicatives to the material conditional plus some pragmatic considerations (i.e. conversational implicature and conventional implicature, respectively). For these accounts, see H. P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989): 58-87 and Frank Jackson, *Conditionals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Although I'd love to present a full argument against both positions, this is not the place. Fortunately, a number of counterexamples to Grice have been presented that are in my opinion successful (see especially Frank Jackson, "On Assertion and Indicative Conditionals," (1979), and Bennett, *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals*, 38-44) has persuaded me that Jackson's account likewise fails.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Also common is an indicative Does-Will form (Ibid., 13-19), which some authors (see V. H. Dudman, "Classifying "Conditionals": The Traditional Way is Wrong," *Analysis* 60 (2000): 147) use to argue for the Relocation Thesis, which is the claim that in addition to 'would' conditionals, conditionals of the Does-Will form should be included in the subjunctive category. The details of this argument are intricate and interesting, so for the intrepid reader, see Bennett, *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals*, 350-5). For my part, I reject the Relocation Thesis.

the subjunctive follows the subtly different *Had-would* form.<sup>31</sup> Consider the following two sentences:

(Indicative) If Booth *did* not shoot Lincoln, then someone else *did*.

(Subjunctive) If Booth *had* not shot Lincoln, then someone else *would* have.

Now, although grammatically we can easily differentiate between the two types of conditionals, consider the difference the grammatical changes make to our intuitive judgments about the truth values of each conditional. The indicative conditional seems clearly true to anyone who can reasonably entertain it, while the subjunctive will be either intuitively false or indeterminate (unless the one doing the evaluating is some sort of conspiracy theorist). Thus, if our intuitions are to be believed in this example, the way in which we evaluate the two conditionals comes apart in some cases. So let us turn to the semantics of subjunctives followed shortly by a fuller account of indicatives.

Following the basic Lewis-Stalnaker semantics of subjunctive conditionals<sup>32</sup>, we have the following analysis (let ' $\alpha$ ' represent the actual world, and let an A-world be a possible world at which the antecedent is true):

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> I owe this introduction of the two types of conditionals to the admirably lucid introduction found in Bennett, *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals*, 7-11. Also, what is truly distinctive of subjunctives is the placement of 'would' in their consequent since 'had' in the antecedent could be replaced by other words such as 'were'. Consider the following two sentences for instance:

*Had-Would* If Starbucks *had been* closed today, I would have stayed home.

*Were-Would* If Starbucks *were* closed today, I would have stayed home.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> I should note that some authors prefer to use the term 'counterfactual' (see David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973)), when dealing with

A > C = C obtains at every member of some class W of A-worlds such that every member of W is *closer to*  $\alpha$  than is any A-world not in W.<sup>33</sup>

Less precisely, but more intuitively, this can be read: A > C is true if, and only if, C is true at all the A-worlds most like the actual world. How are we to understand this formula for determining the truth-value of A > C? Unsurprisingly, there are a number of complications in the formula that have yet to be worked out to the satisfaction of most philosophers. First, it is not clear that there will always be either a single closest A-world or even a set of closest Aworlds. If no such closest world or set of worlds exists for some particular conditional's antecedent, then what value should that conditional receive? Second, what variables go into determining the closeness relation that holds between the actual world and other possible worlds? For instance, must we assume that the past histories of each world are identical prior to the time designated by the antecedent of the conditional (i.e. T<sub>A</sub>) or is it permissible for the pasts to be radically different so long as their respective histories converge in some way on similar states of affairs at TA? Since the answers to this second question and the former question would take far too long to explore, I note them

subjunctive conditionals. I prefer to resist this designation since it seems to imply that all such conditionals are *contrary to fact*. However, there are subjunctive conditionals with both a true antecedent and a true consequent. Such conditionals can hardly be legitimately called *counter*factual, or at least, so I say. See also Nelson Goodman, "The Problem of Counterfactual Conditionals," *The Journal of Philosophy* (1947): 113-128 who reserves 'counterfactual' for subjunctives with false antecedents and false consequents, 'factual' for when they are both true, and 'semi-factual' for ones with false antecedents but true consequents. These distinctions, however, are cumbersome, so I will ignore them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Bennett, A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals, 165.

only as complications worthy of further research by those more competent than myself. For our purposes here, intuitive judgments of similarity will suffice.<sup>34</sup>

So let us apply the above formula for determining when A > C is true to *lf Oswald hadn't shot Kennedy* (A), *then someone else would have* (C). Intuitively, we should consider a number of reasonably close possible A-worlds, changing what we know about  $\alpha$  minimally such that things like the causal laws of the worlds we are considering are basically the same as  $\alpha$ 's. When we do this and do not assume the truth of any sort of conspiracy theory<sup>35</sup>, the A-worlds we consider are ones where Oswald does not shoot Kennedy because either the Secret Service thwarts his attempt, a gust of wind or an unforeseen hiccup sends the bullet off its intended trajectory, another (unfortunate) individual steps in front of the bullet's path or something of the like. And since at those worlds, no one else is working in conjunction with Oswald to bring about Kennedy's demise, C is false (i.e. no one else did shoot Kennedy at the A-worlds under consideration).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Again, for the interested reader, see Bennett, *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals*, 152-301 for a thorough account of the complications that arise in subjunctive conditionals. Also, Lewis's *Counterfactuals* is an indispensable classic for those working in this area, as is Robert C. Stalnaker, "A Theory of Conditionals," *Ifs* Springer Netherlands (1981a): 41-55.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> As a biographical note, I've been told in conversation with Gabriel Garfield that since the fiftieth anniversary of the Kennedy assassination, conspiracy theories are becoming more popular amongst interested Kennedy dilettantes. Some of these theories include possible mafia connections and corruption in the Johnson administration. I happily assume the falsity of such theories in assessing these conditionals, but should they end up being an obstacle to the reader, simply find a similar assassination case in history for which no conspiracy theories exist and plug it in.

When it comes to indicative conditionals, there are a number of ways in which they diverge from the evaluation of subjunctives. In general, however, it is agreed that the Ramsey Test provides the best attempt to understand what someone's utterance of  $A \rightarrow C$  means. The Ramsey Test proceeds as follows:

Ramsey Test – In order to determine whether  $A \rightarrow C$  is acceptable (assertible) for someone in a particular information state I<sup>36</sup>, add A to I with Pr[A] = 1. If the information state which results from this addition now reflects a high conditional probability for C given A (i.e. the Pr[C|A] is high), then  $A \rightarrow C$  is acceptable (assertible).<sup>37 38</sup>

Notice a couple of interesting points we can take away from the Ramsey test. First, it does not tell us the conditions under which  $A \rightarrow C$  is *true*, but rather, those under which it is acceptable. And importantly, when we consider CORNEA, whether or not  $A \rightarrow C$  is acceptable for any person may be sufficient

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> The details of defining an information state need not derail us. Generally speaking, a speaker's information state is the set of propositions that constitute a person's background knowledge. Of course, no one brings *all* of the propositions they are disposed to believe to bear on considering the conditional probability of some further proposition, so the relevant information state would reflect this fact about our limited agents. Were an agent omniscient and noticingly aware of their expanse of knowledge, however, the information state would affirm or deny any proposition.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Bennett, in *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals*, prefers the term 'acceptable' as opposed to 'assertible'. Henceforth, I will stick to 'acceptable' since that word can be relativized to information states, which presumably don't assert things.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> There's a further complication in running the Ramsey Test brought into the discussion by Richmond Thomason. Consider the following indicative conditional: 'If my business partner is cheating me (A), I will never realize that he is (C)' (see Ibid., 28-30 and Bas C. van Fraassen, "Critical Study: Brian Ellis, Rational Belief Systems," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 10 (1980): 503) for discussions of these). If we think of the Ramsey test as looking to see what an individual would believe when adding Pr[A] = 1 to their belief system, then whenever someone adds A to their belief system, they would surely assign a very low, perhaps zero, probability to C. A better way of understanding the test for these examples, however, is as reflecting your Pr[C] on the *supposition* that A is true. This way of modeling the Thomason examples does not require one to believe A and then evaluate C, but simply entertain how A's truth would affect the probability of C.

to get us what we need without having to concern ourselves with its truthconditions. Indeed, this is especially fortunate since on my preferred theory of indicative conditionals, they do not have truth-conditions.

The second interesting point we can take away from the Ramsey Test concerns cases when an individual judges that Pr[A] = 0. In such instances, were a person to actually try and alter the rest of their beliefs and degrees of belief in accordance with the new Pr[A] = 1, it is unclear what new information state would result. This feature of the Ramsey Test has been labeled *zero-intolerance* because the psychological difficulty of defining what new information state one enters into when the original state assigns probability zero to A mirrors a similar result in the formal definition of conditional probabilities. This formula is labeled originally by Alan Hájek as the Ratio Formula:

Ratio Formula –  $Pr[C | A] = Pr[A \& C] \div Pr[A]^{39}$ 

Notice that according to the Ratio Formula, anytime Pr[A] = 0, the formula is undefined. So when someone runs the *Ramsey Test* on an agent whose information state reflects that the Pr[A] = 0, their inability to determine how to change their other beliefs can be explained as a simple reflection of the conditional probability Pr[C|A]'s being formally undefined in that particular instance. This insight, then, leads us to a general formula, called *the Equation*,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Technically speaking, Alan Hájek, "What Conditional Probability Could Not Be," *Synthese* 137.3 (2003): 273 calls this the "Ratio Analysis" while Bennett, *A Philosophical Guide to Conditionals*, 52 replaces 'analysis' with 'formula'.

which formally represents the Ramsey Test along with the insights just mentioned.

The Equation –  $Pr[A \rightarrow C] = Pr[C | A]$ , where Pr[A] > 0.40

Notice that the left-hand side of the Equation does not have 'A  $\rightarrow$  C', but rather, 'Pr[A  $\rightarrow$  C]'. Thus, it is not obviously an analysis of the indicative conditional. But it is at least an analysis of the probability of an indicative conditional.

Importantly, I should also note that The Equation has come under attack by the likes of Lewis, Hájek and others with some ingenious proofs demonstrating the following<sup>41</sup>: if the Equation is true, then for all indicative conditional probabilities of the form  $Pr[A \rightarrow C]$ , those probabilities are simply equivalent to Pr[C]. Thus, if the Equation is true, then no learning by way of conditionalization can occur. But that's absurd! Therefore, so these philosophers

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> According to Ibid., 58, where I derive my formulation with a few minor differences regarding symbols because of personal preference, the Equation has also been called 'Stalnaker's Hypothesis' since it was introduced in Robert C. Stalnaker, "Probability and Conditionals," *Ifs* Springer Netherlands (1981b): 107-128. However, Ernest Adams, Richard Jeffrey and Brian Ellis seem to have all used the formula prior to Stalnaker's paper, so it's unclear who deserves the credit. I follow Bennett in ignoring name attributions in the main text.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> For a number of such triviality or incoherence proofs against the Equation, see Ernest Adams, *The Logic of Conditionals*, 34-5; Ian F. Carlstrom and Christopher S. Hill, "Review of Adams's *The Logic of Consitionals*," *Philosophy of Science* 45 (1978): 156-7; David Lewis, "Probability of Conditionals and Conditional Probability," *Ifs* Springer Netherlands (1981): 129-47; Simon Blackburn, "How Can We Tell Whether a Commitment has a Truth Condition?" in *Meaning and Interpretation*, ed. C Travis (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986): 218-20; Alan Hájek, "Probabilities and Conditionals – Revisited," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 18 (1989): 423-428; Alan Hájek, "Triviality on the Cheap?" in *Probability and Conditionals: Belief Revision and Rational Decision*, eds. Ellery Eelss and Brian Skyrms (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Dorothy Edgington, "On Conditionals," *Mind* 104 (1995): 275-6.

suggest, we should reject the Equation. Despite their force, however, the success of these proofs hinges on at least two assumptions: i) embedded indicative conditionals (e.g.  $A \rightarrow (B \rightarrow C)$ ) are permissible and ii) indicative conditionals represent propositions.

Though I would like to have a developed response to the Lewis and Hájek proofs (although note that a response is unnecessary for the current project of reinterpreting DDP as a logically indicative conditional), I can at least hint at a possible escape route. Theorists such as Adams and Edgington have developed No Truth Value accounts of indicative conditionals, where an assertion of  $A \rightarrow C$ is simply an expression of a very high conditional probability for Pr[C|A], and nothing more.<sup>42</sup> Such a view amounts to a rejection of the second assumption in the Lewis and Hájek proofs claiming that indicative conditionals represent propositions. This view further implies a plausible rejection of the embedding assumption as well since any inclusion of a non-truth-functional part in an otherwise truth-functional construction leads to logical confusions. To see this clearly, consider trying to determine the truth value of the following sentence: Bethany is the owner of a Bichon Frisée named Rosalind or which way is the gas station? Independently, we understand both disjuncts of this sentence, the first of which is either true or false and the second of which is neither because it is not truth-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> See Edgington, "On Conditionals", E. Adams, *The Logic of Conditionals*, and Ernest Adams, Probabilistic Enthymemes," *Journal of Pragmatics* 7 (1983): 283-295.

functional. But when we attempt to assign true or false to the *entire* disjunction, we are at a loss since it no longer seems to be the kind of thing that has a truth value. Thus, in cases where a non-truth-functional sentence is embedded in a truth-functional construction, the resulting claim lacks overall truth-functionality.<sup>43</sup> Thus, given that indicative conditionals are not truth-functional because, by hypothesis, they are not propositional, they cannot be embedded *salve veritate* in otherwise truth-functional constructs.

Despite the intrigue and theoretical utility, I am not confidently inclined to deny that an utterance of  $A \rightarrow C$  expresses a proposition. However, as I stated earlier, solving the Lewis and Hájek problem is unnecessary for the current project. We can summarize what we've discovered up to now about indicative conditional semantics and apply that to *DDP* without solving all the remaining difficulties in the semantics. That the Ramsey Test should be central to any serious theory of indicative conditionals is basically uncontroversial, and so if we focus simply on when *DDP* is *acceptable* for an agent rather than trying to determine whether or not *DDP* is true, CORNEA can be vindicated without taking on extra theoretical baggage in indicative conditional semantics.

#### 2.1 Rereading CORNEA (Phase 1) – Why Read DDP as an Indicative?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Not to mention that anyone who actually did use non-truth-functional statements in such a way would be violating all sorts of pragmatic linguistic norms.

Now that we have a better idea of how to think through the semantics of subjunctive and indicative conditionals, we can return to CORNEA in hopes of determining which semantics ought to be applied to it. More precisely, however, the principle of most interest to us is *DDP*, which as I suggested above, is entailed by CORNEA. Thus, if *DDP* serves badly as a guide to reasonable belief, then CORNEA will only inherit this blunder. Recall, then, *DDP* with the relevant conditional labeled as '*crux*':

*Discernible Difference Principle (DDP)* – It is reasonable for H to take it that there is an evidential connection between p and s only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, (*crux*) were p false, s would likely be discernibly different to H in some way.<sup>44</sup>

Now focusing on *crux*, recall that the guide to categorizing indicative and subjunctive conditionals in general relied on grammatical features of the conditional. Indicatives, I claimed, typically conformed to a *did-did* conditional structure while subjunctives typically followed the *had-would* form. Were we to merely follow this grammatical guideline, then *crux* clearly ought to be included as a subjunctive and evaluated accordingly. That is, in order to determine the truth of *crux* in a given case, one would simply intuit some reasonably close possible ¬p-worlds, minimally change what one knew about  $\alpha$  and see whether s is true or false at those worlds. The worry about this process, as I pointed out

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Howard-Snyder, "Seeing Through CORNEA," 28. The 'crux' label comes from Stephen Wykstra and Timothy Perrine, "Foundations of Skeptical Theism: CORNEA, CORE, and Conditional Probabilities," *Faith and Philosophy* 29 (2012): 377, and their principle CORE is essentially the same as *DDP*, but with an added emphasis on their notion of levering evidence.

in discussing both Russell and Howard-Snyder's objections above, is that if the correct semantic understanding of *crux* treats it as a logical subjunctive, then *crux* would lead to widespread skepticism.<sup>45</sup> But since many of our beliefs are reasonable, and understanding *crux* in this way would be inconsistent with their reasonability, then either *crux* is false or we are simply misunderstanding it. Yet are there any examples of grammatical subjunctives that are in fact logical indicatives to which *crux* bears any relevant similarity?

Fortunately, there are a number of examples of conditionals that indeed fit the bill. First of all, Stalnaker calls attention in his article "Indicative Conditionals" to 'subjunctive non-counterfactual conditionals' such as the following: "If the butler had done it, we would have found just the clues which we *in fact* found". <sup>46</sup> Stalnaker's commentary on this conditional is enlightening:

Here a conditional is presented as evidence for the truth of it antecedent. The conditional cannot be counterfactual, since it would be self-defeating to presuppose false what one is trying to show true.<sup>47</sup>

Essentially, Stalnaker's point is that this conditional, which is meant to be helpful in determining whether the butler really committed the murder, is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> See Justin P. McBrayer, "CORNEA and Inductive Evidence," *Faith and Philosophy* 26.1 (2009): 77-86 and Justin P. McBrayer, "Are Skeptical Theists Really Skeptics? Sometimes Yes and Sometimes No," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 72.1 (2012): 3-16 for some relevant counterexamples – a lottery example and an example inspired by enumerative induction cases – that necessitate eschewing the subjunctive understanding of the principle.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Robert C. Stalnaker, "Indicative Conditionals," in *Conditionals*, ed. Frank Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991): 146, italics are mine.
<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 146.

acceptable for us despite its resistance to being analyzed by the standard Lewis-Stalnaker semantics for subjunctives. Stalnaker prefers to offer an explanation of the difference between this indicative and standard subjunctives in terms of pragmatics instead of semantics, but as I have suggested above, the most plausible understanding of indicatives indeed rests in their radical difference in semantics.<sup>48</sup>

Consider also that in contexts of deliberation, we often use grammatically subjunctive conditionals to express logically indicative thought processes.<sup>49</sup> Take this example from Robert Adams's paper against the possibility of God's possessing middle knowledge (i.e. the doctrine that God can know the truthvalues, prior to creating the world, of subjunctive conditionals concerning what free creatures would freely choose to do in any given circumstances) where David inquires of God whether or not leaving Keilah to avoid the pursuit of King Saul is a good idea:

[T]he propositions which may be true by virtue of correspondence with the intentions, desires and character of Saul and the men of Keilah are not (1) [-if David were to stay in Keilah, Saul *would* besiege the city-] and (2) [-if David were to stay and Saul were to besiege the city, the men of Keilah *would* surrender David to Saul-] but

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> See Jackson, *Conditionals*, 7. Moreover, Robert C. Stalnaker, *Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (1984) recognizes the difficulties with his own earlier account of the difference between subjunctive and indicative conditionals. It's now unclear precisely how to characterize his view, but at the very least, he seems to have admitted that the subjectivity of indicatives renders them much harder to square with a truth-functional theory.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> See R. Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," 113-4 and Kvanvig, *Destiny and Deliberation*, 160.

(5) If David stayed in Keilah, Saul *would probably* besiege the city.

(6) If David stayed in Keilah and Saul besieged the city, the men of Keilah *would probably* surrender David to Saul.

(5) and (6) are enough for David to act on, if he is prudent; but they will not satisfy the partisans of middle knowledge.<sup>50</sup>

Although Molinists (i.e. proponents of the middle knowledge doctrine of God) usually take this scriptural reference to count in favor of middle knowledge, Adams suggests that the subjunctives which constitute this middle knowledge could have been adequately replaced with a type of conditional differentiated from subjunctives by a 'would probably' (or 'would likely') locution. And in terms of deliberation, we never require that we know for *certain* whether or not our bringing about the truth of the antecedent of some conditional will guarantee the truth of its consequent before we choose to act. At most what is required, rationally speaking, is that we have a *reasonably high degree of belief* that bringing about the truth of the antecedent will result in the truth of the consequent.<sup>51</sup> But this reasonably high degree of belief is captured by the Ramsey Test of indicative conditional semantics quite nicely, and thus, I submit that in contexts of deliberation or when dealing with conditionals that include locutions

<sup>50</sup> This quotation from R. Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," 111 can be found more fully quoted in Kvanvig, *Destiny and Deliberation*, 160. The italics are my own addition.
<sup>51</sup> The lottery and preface paradoxes counsel that, technically speaking, more is needed than a high degree of belief. See Richard Foley, *Working Without a Net* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Jonathan Kvanvig, "The Epistemic Paradoxes," *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge Vol. 7, 1998): 211-214, Richard Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) and chapter 5 of this dissertation for elaboration.

such as 'would probably', 'would likely' or 'would have in fact been the case', we

should evaluate them as indicative conditionals rather than as subjunctives.

2.2 Rereading CORNEA (Phase 2) – Revamping DDP & SC

Recall that in the first half of this chapter we saw that Howard-Snyder and Russell were committed to the claim that *DDP* entailed the subjunctive condition *SC*. Here is that condition again to refresh our memory.

*Subjunctive Condition (SC):* There is an evidential connection between what H has to go on in claiming 'so far as I can tell, p' and p only if, given H's cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, were p false, what H has to go on would probably be discernibly different in some way by H.<sup>52</sup>

However, as we saw in the immediately preceding section, the way in which one semantically evaluates a 'would probably' conditional ought to be as a logical *indicative* and not a subjunctive. So let us alter *SC* in such a way that we can offer in its place an indicative condition, in which we will let 'E' represent the proposition that *that evil is unjustified* as entertained by person P and 'H' represent the hypothesis that P's cognitive faculties are discerning when it comes to tracking justificatory reasons for the permission of evils.

*Indicative Condition (IC):* There is an evidential connection between what P has to go on in claiming 'so far as I can tell, E' and E only if  $\neg E \rightarrow H$  is acceptable for P.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Howard-Snyder, "Seeing Through CORNEA," 30.

Now for  $\neg E \rightarrow H$  to be acceptable for P just is, following the Ramsey test, for  $\neg E \rightarrow H$  to be acceptable relative to the information state represented by P, which I will call I<sub>P</sub>. So if we run the Ramsey test for this conditional on I<sub>P</sub>, for  $\neg E$  $\rightarrow H$  to be acceptable, it needs to be the case that when Pr[ $\neg E$ ] = 1 is added to I<sub>P</sub>, the resulting updated information state, call it I<sub>P</sub>\*, will assign a high conditional probability to Pr[H| $\neg E$ ]. Considered on this indicative model, Wykstra's contention against Rowe can be revised: there is no reasonable information state (short of omniscience) for which  $\neg E \rightarrow H$  is acceptable.

Let us apply a generalized form of *IC* to Howard-Snyder's skeptical worries to see how this way of understanding the conditional in *DDP* avoids his objection. Let 'E\*' represent the proposition *that is a zebra*. Let 'H\*' represent the hypothesis that the utterer's cognitive faculties are sufficiently discerning between zebras and non-zebras. And then ask whether or not the indicative conditional  $\neg E^* \rightarrow H^*$  is acceptable relative to the utterer's information state I<sub>U</sub>. When the utterer adds  $\neg E^*$  to their information state, do they reasonably assign a high conditional probability to  $\Pr[H^* | \neg E^*]$ ? Presumably they do assign such a high conditional probability. There's no reason to think that failure to distinguish between zebras and non-zebras in this one case renders the utterer's cognitive capacities unreliable with respect to picking out zebras generally. This is just an unfortunate situation where their fallible capacities fail them. To help see better what is happening in this case, notice that the conditional probability  $Pr[H^* | \neg E^*]$  can remain reasonably high for the utterer *on* their total evidence of cognitive reliability while *by*  $\neg E^*$ , H<sup>\*</sup> is rendered less probable (i.e.  $Pr[H^*] > Pr[H^* | \neg E^*]$ ). Wykstra introduces this *by/on* distinction to deal with objections to CORNEA in a number of places<sup>53</sup>, but what is helpful about *IC* is that it enables us to see why such a distinction is legitimate to invoke as a response to philosophers who take *DDP* to entail *SC* rather than *IC*. The fundamental mistake made by these authors is not a lack of appreciation for the *by/on* distinction, but rather, failing to see that it should apply in the case of CORNEA. They miss this because they take CORNEA to entail the subjunctive condition, and thus, are attacking a false epistemic principle.

### 3. The Positive Project – Finding Adequate Motivations

Suppose that *IC* indeed represents the best way to interpret the epistemic intuition undergirding CORNEA. Even if this is true, there nevertheless remains a lacuna in Wysktra's skeptical theistic program; namely, we need some positive

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Wykstra, "CORNEA, Carnap, and Current Closure Befuddlement," develops the *by/on* distinction more fully than in his other works since his goal in that paper is to deal with the problem of closure for CORNEA found in Andrew Graham and Stephen Maitzen, "CORNEA and Closure," *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2007): 83-86. This objection is reducible, in my opinion, to the problems discussed already in the text above, which explains why I do not address it separately. For more discussion by Wykstra of the by/on distinction (or as he sometimes prefers, the distinction between static and dynamic evidence), see Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," and Wykstra, "In Memorium?".

argumentation for thinking that Wykstra's contention against Rowe's argument is *true*. That contention was

Wykstra's Contention (WC) – there is no information state represented by a human agent relative to which  $\neg E \rightarrow H$  is acceptable (i.e. for which  $Pr[H|\neg E]$  is high).

It seems that it is open to Rowe to respond to Wykstra by pointing out that WC needs to be independently motivated. To think that we are *never* in a situation for which we satisfy WC seems implausible on the face of it. Indeed, Rowe could concede that sometimes, or even most of the time, WC is true. But if there is at least one case in which it does not hold, then for that individual, evil will constitute evidence against God's existence.

This leaves us with at least three questions which I hope to answer in the next chapter. First, *what, if any, positive reasons do we have for thinking that WC is true?* Wykstra attempts to motivate acceptance of WC by providing an analogical argument, known as the *Parent Analogy*, which calls into question the reasonableness of inferring that God has no reason for permitting some evil from our failure to see such a reason. I will argue that this analogy fails to provide generally sufficient motivation for the acceptance of skeptical theism. The second question remaining to be addressed is this: *what is required of a skeptical theist to motivate acceptance of WC?* Must we require that proper motivations for one agent to accept skeptical theistic considerations be compelling motivation for any other agent in similar evidential circumstances? Our discussion of epistemic

perspectives at the close of the next chapter will be especially relevant to such questions. And lastly, *are there any necessary conditions for rationality aside from WC that might be supported by skeptical theistic intuitions*? Evidential considerations clearly lie at the heart of the argument from evil, but it is at least controversial that evidential considerations exhaust the relevant determinants of epistemic rationality. Chapter five will explore other such determinants as well, enabling us to obtain a clearer view of the ways in which skeptical theism might be rationally accepted.

# <u>Chapter 4</u> Proper Motivations & The Parent Analogy

In the previous chapter, I led CORNEA through a proverbial fire of counterexamples until what remained was a refined and plausible form of CORNEA. This newly formulated principle of rationality, as I pointed out, could not by itself establish skeptical theism as a response to the problem of evil. At best, the indicative conditional construal of CORNEA could only establish the following conditional: *If the inductive inference at the heart of the argument from evil violates IC, then the conclusion of the argument from evil will not be rationally believable.* But simply establishing the truth of this conditional was a far cry from establishing that the conditional's *consequent* was true. In order to establish the truth of the consequent, then, we need to also determine whether or not the antecedent was true, or at least, might be reasonably believed to be true by some agent.

This chapter is dedicated, then, to an evaluation of the most prominent argument that might be used to establish the reasonability of believing the antecedent of the above conditional. That argument, which has been primarily developed by Stephen Wykstra, is known as the *Parent Analogy* (henceforth, '*PA*'). *PA* is an analogical argument which proceeds from the claim that *our relationship to God is analogous to a child's relationship to a loving parent* to the conclusion that our inability to see any morally sufficient reason for God to permit an evil does not constitute strong evidence against, possibly, God's

having such a reason. Thus, we will begin with an explication of the structure of analogical argumentation; that is, we will consider the proper form of such arguments, various ways to positively and negatively evaluate them, and what is required for two arguments from analogy to be inconsistent with one another.

Once we have a thorough structure before us concerning analogical argumentation, then, I will turn my attention to the development of PA. Wykstra uses PA to motivate the acceptance of skeptical theism as a defeater for the problem of evil, but several criticisms to his argument have surfaced. I will develop and rebut the most important of these criticisms, due primarily to William Rowe and Trent Dougherty, resulting in the appearance of exoneration for *PA*. This freedom is short-lived, however, for I argue that there are deeper issues with PA; namely, (i) the *expected* distribution of evil suggested by the strength of *PA*'s conclusion fails to match up with reality, and, more importantly, (ii) construing such analogies as motivations which would compel an ideally rational person to withhold belief concerning the argument from evil's conclusion (without reference to that person's own evaluation of the evidence and degree of epistemic self-trust) fails to appreciate the perspectival nature of rationality.

I will save a fuller explanation of the perspectival nature of rationality for the next chapter. However, I will close with a brief reflection on what this deeper criticism of *PA* reveals about the nature of the debate concerning skeptical theism as it has been presented in the literature. Briefly, this debate has paid insufficient attention to (i) the perspectival nature of epistemic rationality at issue in the argument from evil in particular and (ii) non-evidential varieties of epistemic defeat. But again, a full exploration of these issues must wait until we have come to understand the primary reason offered in favor of thinking that the inductive inference at the heart of the argument from evil violates IC; that is, *PA*. Let us turn first, then, to the logic of analogy.

# 1. Analogical Arguments

Analogies have been employed in a number of disparate academic areas (e.g. history of science, legal reasoning & philosophy).<sup>1</sup> Despite the prevalence of such analogies, very little has been written by analytic philosophers on analogical reasoning.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, when evaluating an argument from analogy, much care should be taken to determine which sorts of responses are appropriate in a given context.

I propose that chief among the questions yet to be sufficiently addressed concerning the logic of analogy are (i) the desiderata of a successful analogical

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For a nice catalogue of examples, see Paul Bartha, "Analogy and Analogical Reasoning," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL =

<sup>&</sup>lt;a href="http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/reasoning-analogy/">http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/reasoning-analogy/</a>, section 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> A number of scholars from a variety of academic disciplines, including a few philosophers, can be found contributing to this volume: Henrique Jales Ribeiro, *Systematic Approaches to Argument by Analogy*, (New York: Springer, 2014). In personal correspondence, however, it was suggested to me by James Hawthorne that a reasonable explanation for *why* philosophers tend not to write on analogical reasoning is that analogical arguments just aren't the sort of argument that fit into a well-defined formal model.

argument and (ii) the epistemic strength of the conclusion of such arguments. In what follows, I will begin with a simple presentation of analogical reasoning. Then, I will address both the various dimensions of appraisal for analogical arguments and types of responses one might offer against an argument from analogy.

In general, analogical reasoning takes on the following form<sup>3</sup>:

- 1. *S* is similar to *T* in certain (known) respects.
- 2. *S* has some further property *Q*.
- 3. Therefore, *T* also has property *Q*.

In this presentation, *S* and *T* represent the source domain and the target domain, where, for ease of presentation, a domain consists of objects and properties. This way of representing the logic of analogy is typically *inductive* since one is identifying a *set of properties* that holds in both domains, identifying a *further property*, *Q*, known to belong to the source domain, and ending with the suggestion that the properties held in common enable us to reasonably infer that *Q* is a member of the target domain without *guaranteeing* that *Q* is member of that domain.

There are at least four ways in which an argument from analogy can be better or worse. First, it can appeal to more or fewer respects in which *S* and *T* are similar. Thus, a greater number of shared respects of similarity, *all-things*-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Following Bartha, "Analogy and Analogical Reasoning," 2.2.

being-equal, results in a stronger argument. Second, the conclusion of the argument can vary in strength from establishing, for instance, the mere epistemic possibility that Q is in T (i.e. the target domain) to it being *probable* that Q is in T. And as one should expect, weaker conclusions constitute stronger analogical arguments. Thirdly, arguments from analogy are strengthened by considering respects of similarity between S and T which are *relevant* to inferring the further property. For example, suppose there are two cars, A and B, and you know that A gets good gas mileage. But then you notice A and B are similar with respect to color and overall shape, and thus, you suggest that B will also get good gas mileage. This inference is inferior to an argument in which you replace the features of color and shape with engine-type and *Consumer Reports* score. And of course, the reason for this is that the latter features are *relevant* to whether or not a car gets good gas mileage, while the former features (i.e. color and shape) are not. <sup>4</sup> Fourthly, an analogy may be worse if some property belonging to Sundermines the further property, Q, identified in the conclusion. Suppose, for example, that someone argues that car B gets good gas mileage because of its similar color and shape to A. And suppose further you notice that car B's engine is inferior to car A's. This *disanalogy* between the qualities of the cars' engines undermines the analogical inference.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See Trakakis, *The God Beyond Belief*, 119-20 for this example with some minor differences.
Now, how do these various dimensions of evaluation interact? First, an analogical argument may fair very well along one or more dimensions of evaluation while failing altogether due to another dimension. For instance, suppose two children share a number of properties in common such as hair color, 20/20 vision, etc. Even if the set of shared features is very large, it would be foolhardy to infer that the children have, for instance, the same name.<sup>5</sup> The obvious reason for the illegitimacy of such an inference is that, like the car case above, the properties the children have in common are *irrelevant* to the proposed analogical inference. Second, the conclusion of analogical arguments may drastically affect the plausibility of the target inference. Consider the possibility of taking a vacation to a country with which you are unfamiliar, say, France.

Your friend, who is quite the world traveler, knows that you loved your stay in England, and so, they offer the following analogy. Both England and France have hotels, historical sites, and the most charming of citizens. You loved your stay in England, partly on account of these three features. Therefore, you would love a vacation in France.

If your friend offers this analogy as a *guarantee* that you'll love a vacation in France, then she is rather dim. Suppose you don't know the language, and not knowing the primary language drastically reduces your enjoyment of a country. Or perhaps it's true of you, for all we know, that at any time t, *were you to attempt to enter France at t, you would contract a non-fatal but seriously uncomfortable disease of some sort.* This would of course be a very unfortunate counterfactual for you if

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ibid., 119.

it were true, but what's important to notice is that ruling out its truth would be best for your friend's analogical argument to succeed if a *guarantee* is what she's aiming for.

And of course, there's the other extreme. Perhaps we could take the argument as one in support of the mere epistemic possibility that you will enjoy a vacation to France. After all, in this case, the argument would surely succeed. However, this would be unexpected, especially when we consider that *no argument was needed* in order to establish that conclusion. Of course you *might* love vacationing in France! This is obvious, and as Paul Grice's maxim—*Be Informative*!<sup>6</sup> – rightly counsels, we should not attribute the flouting of such basic linguistic norms to others, all-things-being-equal, as we would be doing were we to interpret your friend in this way.

Thus, the most charitable interpretation of your friend's analogical argument is to take her conclusion as probable, or perhaps at least more probable than it would have been prior to considering the properties she mentioned.<sup>7</sup> And in this context of deliberating about where one should spend their vacation time, such an argument (with the identified sort of conclusion) would be appropriate.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Grice, Studies in the Way of Words, 22-40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> I'm assuming here that your friend is *really* trying to come up with an *argument*. Were this a straightforward *telling* from your friend, the appropriate reaction would likely not be to consider what your friend as *probable*, but rather, to simply believe it. This would be to treat it as a type of deliberative evidence, a discussion which I am not entering into above. See Linda Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012): chapter 3 for more on this.

But this sort of argument would be inappropriate or uninformative in other contexts. We shall return to this thought soon in our evaluation of Wykstra's *PA*, but let us now turn to its development in order that we might identify the best version of his analogical argument for skeptical theism.

### 2. Wykstra's Parent Analogy

Since Wykstra's article "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering", the parent analogy has become a central component in many defenses of skeptical theism, and as a central component, it is unsurprising that it faces several objections from various authors. In what follows, I begin with an explication of the *Parent Analogy*, followed with some early objections originating from William Rowe's work. In Wykstra's 1996 article, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil", *PA* was revised and expanded to meet some of Rowe's criticisms, but this expanded version of PA faces further criticisms from Trent Dougherty. Once I have completely traced the parrying involved with the expanded *PA*, I will present my own evaluation of it; namely, that if *PA* is used as an *analogical argument* against the evidential problem of evil in support of the epistemic principles approach to skeptical theism, it will not suffice, in and of itself, to serve as a defeater in the context of the evidential argument from evil. Establishing this conclusion will require a discussion of the nature of disagreement and my favored theory of rationality, called *perspectivalism*.

#### 2.1 Wykstra's Presentation

Let us begin, then, with Wykstra's original statement of *PA*.

A modest proposal might be that [God's] wisdom is to ours, roughly as an adult human's is to a one-month old infant's. (You may adjust the ages and species to fit your own estimate of how close our knowledge is to omniscience.) If such goods as this exist, it might not be unlikely that we should discern some of them: even a one-month old infant can perhaps discern, in [his] inarticulate way, some of the purposes of his mother in her dealings with him. But if outweighing goods of the sort at issue exist in connection with instances of suffering, that we should discern most of them seems about as likely as that a one-month old should discern most of his parents' purposes for those pains they allow him to suffer — which is to say, it is not likely at all.<sup>8</sup>

In order to analyze an analogical argument, as I stated earlier, it is imperative to identify at least four basic parts of any analogical argument: (i) the source domain (*S*), (ii) the target domain (*T*), (iii) properties claimed to be shared in common between the source and target domains (*P*), and (iv) the further property or properties to be inferred (*Q*). And from the above paragraph, it seems clear that Wykstra's analogical argument can be expressed as follows.

- 1. A one month-old child's grasp of her parents' reasons for permitting suffering (*S*) *is similar to* our grasp of God's reasons for permitting evil (*T*) in the following respects (*P*): (a) we are very epistemically limited, though not *entirely limited*, with respect to God as the child is with respect to her parents, (b) we lack a well-articulated awareness of many goods, evils & the relations between them just as a child lacks a well-articulated awareness of many goods, evils and the relations between them, & (c) we are dependent on an agent that is looking out for our flourishing, as is the child.
- 2. Oftentimes, a one month-old child's grasp of her parents' reasons for permitting suffering has the further property of *being very unlikely to reveal her parents' reasons for permitting suffering* (*S* has *Q*).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," 155-6.

3. Therefore, our grasp of God's reasons for permitting evil has the further property of *being very unlikely to reveal God's reasons for permitting suffering* (*T* has *Q*).

In short, Wykstra claims that because we are in such similar epistemic circumstances with respect to God as a one month-old child is with respect to her parents, then just as the child's grasp of her parents' reasons for permitting suffering is deficient, so will our own grasp of God's reasons for permitting suffering be deficient. Reasoning along these lines is hardly uncommon to find among religious persons who affirm, following Scriptural passages such as Isaiah 55:8-9<sup>9</sup>, that God's cognitive abilities (i.e. thoughts and ways) are far superior to our own. From this affirmation of God's omniscience, then, a word of caution routinely arises to avoid negative judgments of God's providential activities, a judgment for which our own cognitive abilities are allegedly ill-suited.

Despite its intuitive appeal, however, this commonplace analogical argument has its shortcomings, and following the methods of criticizing analogical arguments given above, many complaints have been lodged against it. We begin with two forms of criticism, offered by William Rowe.

# 2.2 Rowe's Response

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Isaiah 55:8-9 reads:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

According to Rowe, there are two lines of attacking *PA*. First, there is a fundamental disanalogy that holds between the source and target domains weakening the analogy's strength, and second, a fairly compelling *counter-analogy* can be offered which more accurately describes the actions of loving parents in cases of inscrutable suffering than the original parent analogy. And importantly for Rowe's case, this counter-analogy carries with it allegedly atheistic implications.

Beginning with the disanalogies, Rowe points out that when we consider the cognitive capacities of one month-old infants (e.g. source domain), they lack a certain property; namely, *having an array of evaluative concepts along with the know-how for applying those concepts.*<sup>10</sup> Call this property 'C'. Rowe's contention, then, is that  $\neg$ C holds of one month-old children and that the very lack of C explains, in large part, the reason a one month-old child fails to grasp her parents' permission of her suffering (i.e. Q). Yet, if  $\neg$ C largely explains why Q holds of the source domain, and  $\neg$ C fails to hold of the target domain, then, there is a good reason to doubt that Q holds of the target domain. And thus, *PA* is severely undermined.

While this objection does undermine the original *PA* if we assume the child is one month-old, altering the age of the child in the appropriate way can

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Rowe, "The Evidential Argument From Evil," 275.

allay this objection. James Sennett, for instance, has reframed *PA* with just this in mind:

The goods my ten year-old daughter knows of are in no way a relevant inductive sample of the goods I know of. This fact causes conflict and consternation between us at times, and may even drive her to the conclusion that some of my decisions and actions, which bring what she discerns as evil into her life, cannot possibly serve any good purpose – a conviction as inescapable to her mind as is  $Q^*$  to Rowe's mind. This fact is due to my daughter's developmental status, which prevents her from perceiving or conceiving the evidence that would defeat the support her observations give to her conclusion that I am causing her evil for no good purpose.<sup>11</sup>

The relevant property lacked by Sennett's daughter in this ten year-old

rendition of *PA* is not *C*, but a different property, *C\**, *having an array of evaluative concepts, the know-how for applying those concepts and an accurate appreciation of the value of various interrelated states of affairs*. Whereas a one month-old child lacks *C\** because the child fails to have sufficiently robust concepts to begin with<sup>12</sup>, a ten year-old clearly possesses the concepts. She will simply lack a sufficient degree of understanding relating to the appreciation condition of the value of some state of affairs. And although fully mature adults certainly have a greater degree of accurate appreciation of value than a ten year-old, it would be unsurprising to find that many, if not all, adults fall short of perfect appreciation. And insofar as an adult falls short of perfect appreciation of the value of various

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> James F. Sennett, "The Inscrutable Evil Defense Against the Inductive Argument from Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (1993): 226.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Although, I must say, it's not clear to me why we should think such young children lack concepts entirely or at which point the vague definition of a concept has been sharply defined sufficiently to make it count as a real concept.

interrelated states of affairs, they will lack *C*\* to that degree. As a result, Rowe's first objection via disanalogy fails to undermine the appropriately modified *PA* employed by Wykstra.

Yet Rowe has a more powerful objection to *PA*. Rather than rest his case on such a meager disanalogy, he suggests that there is a parallel *counter-analogy* that has at least as much epistemic pull as Wykstra's *PA*. Moreover, Rowe presents his counter-analogy as inconsistent with *PA*, and consequently, he claims that it would be inconsistent to endorse *both* analogies. I will return to this latter claim momentarily (primarily because *I think it is false* as will become clear when we consider the intended strength of Wykstra's analogical conclusion in section 2.4), but first, let's look at *Rowe's Counter-Parent Analogy* (*RCPA*).

- I. A ten year-old child's relationship to her parents when undergoing suffering knowingly permitted by her parents ( $S^*$ ) is similar to our relationship to God when undergoing suffering knowingly permitted by God ( $T^*$ ) in the following respects ( $P^*$ ): (a) we are very epistemically limited, though not *entirely limited*, with respect to God as the child is with respect to her parents, (b) we lack a well-articulated awareness of many goods, evils and the relations between them just as a child lacks a well-articulated awareness of many goods, evils and the relations between them, & (c) we are dependent on an agent that is looking out for our flourishing, as is the child.
- II. Oftentimes, a ten year-old child's relationship to her parents when undergoing suffering knowingly permitted by her parents includes the properties of (i) having the dependent party intimately aware of the love and concern of the parent and (ii) having the dependent party aware of assurances of the necessity of the evil for some good, assurances given by the parent ( $S^*$  has  $Q^*$ )

III. Therefore, our relationship to God when undergoing suffering knowingly permitted by God includes the properties of (i) having the dependent party intimately aware of the love and concern of God for them and (ii) having the dependent party aware of assurances of the necessity of the evil for some good, assurances given by God ( $T^*$  has  $Q^*$ ).<sup>13</sup>

But now consider whether the conclusion of *RCPA* is true. Many people experience horrendous suffering without either any reported sense of awareness that God is concerned for them or any explicit assurances given to them by God that the evil they suffer is necessary for some great enough good.<sup>14</sup> Thus, if it is reasonable for us to think about our relationship to God, who knowingly permits us to undergo suffering, as analogous to our relationship to loving parents, who also knowingly permit us to undergo suffering, then it is reasonable for us to believe the conclusion of *RCPA*. With this bit of reasoning, then, Rowe can offer a counterargument to Wykstra. Let 'A' represent the proposition that a workable analogy is available from the relationship between loving parents and their children to the relationship between us and God; let 'P' mean that PA is the most reasonably believed analogy and 'R' mean that RCPA is the most reasonably believed analogy; and lastly, let 'S' mean that the acceptance of skeptical theism is motivated. In that case, we can represent the argument formally as follows:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> See Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil," 276 & Rowe, "Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism, and the Problem of Evil," 199-200 for his two primary statements of RCPA.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> One might think that God *has* offered at least his presence to those who would seek it in the form of the Eucharist or some forms of church liturgy. Such things may not constitute any *assurance* that one's earthly experiences of evil are not gratuitous, however, and if so, they won't rebut both of Rowe's claims. For interesting considerations of this problem, see Rea, "Narrative, Liturgy, and the Hiddenness of God," and Timpe, "Trust, Silence, and Liturgical Acts".

No Motivation Argument

1.	$A \lor \neg A$	LEM
2.	$A \to [(P \lor R) \And \neg (P \And R)]$	(Rowe's claim that <i>P</i> and
		R are exclusive)
3.	R	(Rowe's intuition)
4.	$R \rightarrow \neg S$	
5.	$A \rightarrow \neg S$	(by 2-4)
6.	$\neg A \rightarrow \neg S$	(premise)
7.	$\neg S$	Disj. Syllogism (1, 5, 6)

Stated informally, the argument claims: either the relationship between a child and her parents is analogous to our relationship to God, epistemically speaking, or it is not analogous (1). If it is analogous, then the conclusion of either *PA* or *RCPA* is reasonable to believe, but not both (2). If it isn't analogous, then skeptical theism is unmotivated (6). The conclusion of *RCPA* is far more reasonable to endorse than the conclusion of *PA* (3). Therefore, either we should endorse the conclusion of *RCPA*, which leaves skeptical theism unmotivated, or we should deny that there is a workable analogy available, which likewise leaves skeptical theism unmotivated. Therefore, whether or not our relationship to God is analogous to the relationship between loving parents and their children, skeptical theism will be unmotivated.

In this (Rowe's) argument, the premises up for dispute are (2), (3), (4), and (6). Although one might be inclined to reject premise (2), if we admit that *PA* and *RCPA* are incompatible, then there's little reason to think it false. And while premises (4) and (6) appear questionable as well, Wykstra's response to Rowe focuses on providing reason to reject premise (3). What reason might be offered?

Wykstra's reason comes in the form of expanding *PA*, such that the resulting new analogy, *Revised-PA*, becomes on-balance at least as reasonable as *RCPA* to believe. As a result, Wykstra thinks that we should at least be agnostic concerning the truth of premise (3), or perhaps we should endorse the even stronger claim that premise (3) is false.

## 2.3 Wykstra's Revised Parent Analogy

In *Revised-PA*, Wykstra retains the original source and target domains (i.e. *child-parent relationships* and *God-human relationship*, respectively), but he expands upon the properties possessed by the source domain, properties which are explanatorily connected to Q (i.e. being very unlikely to reveal her parents' (or God's) reasons for permitting some evil). To say that these properties are explanatorily connected to *Q* is just to say that for any state of affairs, *x*, which possesses the relevant properties – 'G' for goodness, 'A' for ability & 'I' for intelligence – the probability that x has Q is greater on the assumption that x also has G, A, & I than the probability that x has Q on the assumption of our background knowledge devoid of *x* possessing *G*, *A* & *I*. Moreover, whereas the emphasis of the original parent analogy assigned properties to the child in the source domain, Revised-PA assigns those properties to the guardians involved in the source and target domains. Thus, we are now in a position to state *Revised-PA* (leaving the age of the child unstated for the reasons given earlier).

1\* The state of affairs of a parent permitting the suffering of their child (*S*) *is similar to* the state of affairs of God permitting our suffering

(*T*) in the following respects (*P*): (a) as a guardian's degree of goodness, *G*, increases, the more likely they are to make arrangements concerning *future* goods for the benefit of their dependents; (b) as a guardian's ability, *A*, increases, the more likely it is that they will be able to bring about whatever future-oriented arrangements for their dependents they have made; & (c) as a guardian's degree of intelligence, *I*, increases, the more likely it is that the sorts of future goods they plan for will be either unnoticed or underappreciated (in terms of value) by their dependents.

- 2\* Oftentimes, the state of affairs of a parent permitting the suffering of their child has the further property of *not being entirely understood as morally permissible to the child, despite in fact being morally permissible* (*S* has *Q*).
- 3\* Therefore, oftentimes the state of affairs of God permitting our suffering has the further property of *not being entirely understood as morally permissible to us, despite in fact being morally permissible (T* has *Q*).

In essence, Wykstra's reasoning is as follows. The greater some guardian's

degree of goodness, ability, intelligence, the more likely it is it that the guardian will permit current suffering which is necessary for goods in the future. And the greater the disparity of intelligence of the guardian over and above the dependents, the more likely it is that these future goods will be obscure to (i.e. unnoticed or underappreciated by) their dependents. Moreover, we see this state of affairs playing out in rather mundane ways regularly, as when a parent allows their child to fail at a sport for the sake of developing tenacity or when they withhold current luxuries from their children for the sake of saving for a college education. The children often fail to appreciate the importance of such matters, but such failed appreciation on the part of a child hardly makes us doubt the goodness and wisdom of the parent. At this point, it is worth reminding ourselves how the *Revised-PA* constitutes a direct response to *RCPA*. First, recall that *RCPA* was presented against *PA* as a counter-analogy whose conclusion was more reasonable to believe than *PA*'s on the basis of the similarities holding between the source and target domains. Thus, at the logical point of dialectical development when *RCPA* was introduced against *PA*, their respective conclusions were understood as competing for the status of *most reasonable analogical inference*. The next step in Rowe's argument was to make a case for the superiority of *RCPA* (i.e. premise (3) in the *No Motivation Argument*), which if successful would render the application of skeptical theism to the argument from evil entirely unmotivated.

Next on the dialectical scene was Wykstra's *Revised-PA*, which was introduced to bolster the probability one would assign the original conclusion that God's reasons for permitting some evil would likely be obscured from our limited cognitive view. The only way in which Wykstra's response can succeed, then, is if the comparative probability between *Revised-PA* and *RCPA* is either on par or favors *Revised-PA's* conclusion. But now, how should we go about determining the comparative probabilistic weights involved with these competing analogical arguments?

Reflecting on both analogies might evoke a sense of *aporia* concerning the debate. Independently of the facts on the ground (e.g. whether or not people *actually do* experience God's love more intimately when confronted with

inscrutable suffering), both analogical arguments have some intuitive appeal. So how ought a person assign probabilities to the competing analogical conclusions? Are we stuck with mere conflicting intuition at this point?

It seems to me that we are *not* stuck with mere conflicting intuition here, but to see this, we must turn our attention to a more recent player in the discussion. Through the course of the next section, then, a fundamental lapse of understanding will be revealed; namely, that premise (2) of Rowe's argument should be rejected. Premise (2) claims that *Revised-PA* and *RCPA* are inconsistent<sup>15</sup>, but as we will see, this is false on account of (i) the intended strength of the conclusion Wykstra originally argued for and (ii) the sets of evils to which *Revised-PA* and *RCPA* apply. Let us turn to this discussion.

## 2.4 Dougherty's Response

In "Reconsidering the Parent Analogy: Unfinished Business for Skeptical Theists," Trent Dougherty argues that the disagreement between Wykstra and Rowe ought to be understood as a disagreement concerning which of the following incompatible theses are rendered more probable by *Revised-PA*:

*Obscurity* If the world is made by an omnipotent, omniscient God, then it is highly likely that if evil is permitted, most of the goods for the sake of which it is permitted will be obscure to humans.

*Transparency* If the world is made by an omnipotent, omniscient God, then it is highly likely that if evil is permitted, then most of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> ...and exhaust the space of reasonable analogies to be drawn.

the goods for the sake of which it is permitted will be transparent to humans.  $^{16,\ 17}$ 

Next, Dougherty draws our attention away from the general analogy and asks that we simply think about how an increase in the properties shared by both domains in the original analogy (i.e. goodness, intelligence & ability) relate to Obscurity and Transparency. Intuitively, it seems correct to claim that as the properties of goodness, intelligence and ability increase in degree for a caretaker, so the likelihood that the caretaker will plan for and ably achieve future goods, which will be obscured by the cognitive limitations of their dependents, increases. However, it is likewise intuitive to think that as the properties of goodness, intelligence and ability increase in the caretaker, so will their ability to make clear the aims of their future plans to their dependents. Indeed, at the extreme we would expect, prima facie, that an omniscient being would know precisely the way to communicate the value and necessary connection of the future goods for which they are planning to their dependent. Thus, we have conflicting intuitions: as the properties of goodness, intelligence and ability increase for a caretaker, the probability of both Obscurity and Transparency increase. As Dougherty emphasizes,

The central problem for Wykstra's [i.e. the skeptical theist's] expanded defense of the Parent Analogy is that even if it is true that ability to plan for the future will increase in proportion to the scale

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Dougherty, "Reconsidering the Parent Analogy," 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Dougherty calls this *Strong Transparency*. It is the thesis he is concerned with in the article, and although he states it as, "the goods for the sake of which it is permitted will *usually* be transparent to humans," I prefer to replace 'usually' with the, to my tastes, more lucid 'most' (Ibid., 20; italics mine). In either case, at least 50% seems to be the intended meaning.

of the three properties he mentions, the probability of *Transparency* will *also* increase in proportion to the scale of those three properties. (Or at least it is at least as plausible that the latter will as that the former will.) This completely undercuts the usefulness of the Parent Analogy to support *Obscurity*. For the more benevolent a being, the more they would *want* sufferers to understand the reasons for which they are permitted to suffer. And the more wisdom they had, the more likely they would *know how* to do it. And the more power they had, the more likely they would be *able* to make it happen.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, since *Revised-PA* equally supports both transparency and obscurity, and since it's impossible for both theses to be true, *Revised-PA*'s support for skeptical theism is entirely undermined. *Revised-PA* must offer comparative support in favor of *Obscurity* over *Transparency*, and if it fails, then skeptical theism will no longer be a viable option, or so Dougherty argues. Despite the perspicuous presentation of the argument, there remain several points of contention with Dougherty's understanding of Wykstra and Rowe's debate.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Dougherty's criticism of Wykstra contains two fatal flaws, the second of which will be addressed momentarily. The first flaw is that while *Obscurity* approximates a thesis at which *Revised-PA* aims, it is not quite on target. *Obscurity* requires that *most* sufferings are inscrutable while Wykstra's contention set the bar lower, requiring only that *many* sufferings be inscrutable to us. The closest thesis to *Obscurity* we find in Wykstra's work says, as follows:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Ibid., 23. Ibid. 22-23 outlines two other criticisms of PA, but as mentioned in the portion I quote above, these other criticisms aren't central to Dougherty's concerns.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Not the least of which includes questions concerning whether having to be agnostic between the two theses would be admissible.

(2) It is likely that the goods for which O [i.e. an omni-God] permits *many* sufferings are beyond our ken.<sup>20</sup>

The difference between *most* and *many* in the conclusion's strength is significant. What number of evils which belong in the source domain of *Revised-PA* would have to possess inscrutability in order to justify an inference to the conclusion that likely *most* evils in the target domain would be inscrutable? The answer: at least one more than half of the members of the set (i.e. greater than 50%). On the other hand, if we take the intended strength of the conclusion to be *many*, rather than *most*, the number required decreases significantly. It would be nice to think of at least two dozen (or so...)<sup>21</sup> familiar types of situations within the source domain where the evils under question are inscrutable, but that would be sufficient to establish the conclusion. Therefore, since Dougherty misidentifies the conclusion strength of *Revised-PA*, his argument against it falters.

The second fatal flaw of Dougherty's argument is his failure to see that *RCPA* and *Revised-PA* can be used to apply to different sets of evils: either (a) the set of *all* suffering or (b) its proper subset, the collection of all *inscrutable* suffering.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," 140; italics are mine; the premise numbering is Wykstra's.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> For the phrase, see Alvin Plantinga, "Appendix: Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments," in *Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Dean-Peter Baker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 203-228 for the inspiration.

From what we have discussed so far, *Revised-PA* seems to fit well as an application to the set of *all* sufferings, but what of Rowe's *RCPA*? Here is what Rowe says,

We know that when a good, loving parent permits her child to suffer severely in the present for some outweighing good the child cannot comprehend, the loving parent then makes every effort to be consciously present to the child during its period of suffering, giving special assurances of her love, concern, and care. For the child may believe that the parent could prevent her present suffering. So, of course, the parent will be particularly careful to give her child special assurances of her love and concern during this period of permitted suffering for a distant good the child does not understand.<sup>22</sup>

In his use of the phrase 'some outweighing good *the child cannot comprehend*' (italics mine), Rowe clearly has in mind the set of all inscrutable sufferings. These are instances of suffering that may or may not be gratuitous, but which, either way, are not *recognized* as gratuitous (i.e. necessarily leading to the possibility of some greater good or warding off the possibility of some evil at least as bad). Understood in this way, Rowe's *RCPA* does not even respond to Wykstra's *Revised-PA* because the former is concerned with the distribution of a property in the set of *inscrutable evils* while the latter is concerned with the *distribution* of a *non-*inscrutable suffering.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil," 130-1.

Perhaps a different example which exhibits the same formal argumentative structure would be helpful in seeing the fallacy committed above. It would be unsurprising, for instance, to find that many token representatives  $(x_1, \ldots, x_n)$ , chosen from among *all* swans, are white (Wx). Take a proper subset of the set of all swans, namely, the set of all Australian swans. It would be unsurprising in this new case to find that most token representatives  $(y_1, \ldots, y_n)$ , chosen from among that proper subset, are black (By). But surely, to argue that the distribution of some property in the subset  $-\exists y_1 \exists y_2 \exists y_n [By \& By_1 \& By_n \& \neg (y \exists y_1 \exists y_2 \exists y_n [By \& By_n \& \neg (y \exists y_n \exists$  $= y_1 \vee y_1 = y_n \vee y = y_n$ ), where the domain is Australian swans – undermines the justification in holding that the other (and incompatible) property is distributed in some way among representatives of the original set  $= \exists x_1 \exists x_2 \exists x_n [Wx \& Wx_1 \&$ Wx<sub>n</sub> &  $\neg$ (x = x<sub>1</sub> ∨ x<sub>1</sub> = x<sub>n</sub> ∨ x = x<sub>n</sub>)], where the domain is *all* swans – is mistaken. I take Rowe's argument, understood as a response to Wykstra's use of *Revised-PA*, to be formally analogous, and thus fallacious.

But now, if we reconsider Dougherty's interpretation of the arguments, he assumes that Rowe and Wykstra are discussing the same set of evils. This assumption is mistaken, and thus, Dougherty is attacking a straw man, rather than Wykstra.

However, seeing Wykstra and Rowe as discussing different types of evils to begin with calls into question our earlier assumption that Wykstra's *Revised-PA* was a *response* to Rowe's *RCPA*. Perhaps there remains, though, a way to reconstrue Wykstra's *Revised-PA* in light of these two findings—(the earlier misidentifications of the conclusion's strength and the set of evils to which the analogy was meant to apply)—such that it becomes intelligible as a *response* to Rowe. Suppose the properties *goodness, ability* and *intelligence,* which *Revised-PA* cites, can be applied to instances of *inscrutable* suffering (rather than *all* suffering) with the aim of showing that the following thesis is probably false:

(Assurance) Most instances of inscrutable suffering—which are permitted by good, able and intelligent caretakers—are accompanied by special assurances of love for suffering dependents.

(Assurance) seems to be the thesis Rowe is interested in defending on the

basis of RCPA, and so, arguing for the denial of (Assurance) would be reasonable

for Wykstra. However, if we return again to Wykstra's original thesis, he does

not need to argue against (Assurance). All that is needed to defend skeptical

theism is a defense of a weaker claim that is consistent with (Assurance):

(Insecurity) Many instances of inscrutable suffering—which are permitted by good, able and intelligent caretakers—are *not* (or are not recognized as being) accompanied by special assurances of love for suffering dependents.

Assuming nothing more is needed to motivate skeptical theism then, a successful defense of (Insecurity), via *Revised-PA*, will be enough to allay Rowe's concerns. In fact, the defender of skeptical theism will have room to *concede the truth* of (Assurance) to Rowe since it is consistent with (Insecurity). Even if more than half (i.e. *most*) of the instances of inscrutable suffering in the world that are

permitted by non-divine caretakers include assurances, it will remain possible for many of them, for one reason or another, to be unaccompanied by such assurances. As a result, we can see that contrary to Dougherty's contention, endorsing *Revised-PA* is not incompatible with an endorsement of *RCPA*, and thus, *Revised-PA* cannot be so easily dismissed.<sup>23</sup>

#### 2.5 *Possible Redemption for the Parent Analogy?*

In this section, I will demonstrate that despite this initial victory against Rowe and Dougherty, *Revised-PA* does not provide sufficient motivation, in itself, for admitting the relevance of skeptical considerations to the evidential argument from evil. To that end, let us turn to my response on behalf of the atheologian who doubts the truth of skeptical theism.

As we just saw in our discussion of Dougherty's view, *Revised-PA* can be applied as an analogical argument regarding the set of inscrutable evils just as *RCPA* was applied to that set. However, when we do this, the strengths of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> What is crucial to defending (Insecurity) is identifying instances of suffering which are inscrutable from the perspective of the sufferer but which are neither accompanied by assurances of love for the dependents under question nor lacking of a morally sufficient justification for the caretaker's behavior. Consider parents who cannot offer their assurances of love to a child in surgery and are held away from the child for their own safety. Or consider, rather, cases where an individual simply doesn't want such assurances of their own free will. This might be direct rejection of the assurances as a result of not wanting to be loved for some reason (e.g. intense shame over past behavior) or rather, it might be that the only reaction such a person would have to the assurances would be to run away from the source of the assurances. It's also worth pointing out that arguing for (Insecurity) does not preclude positing the presence of *past* assurances in the life of an individual. What's under scrutiny, by Rowe's account, are assurances of love contemporaneous with the suffering in question. But so long as there are past assurances of a sufficient strength, the lack of present assurances may not be morally expected in the first place. Rowe assumes that no such past assurances would be posited by the agent dealing with the inscrutability of the evils under question. These points, I think, potentially constitute in part a plausible defense of (Insecurity), though much more work would need to be done.

conclusions argued for by each respective analogy render the conclusions consistent with one another. This fact goes some way in illuminating the *aporia* arrived at earlier; that is, our state of befuddlement concerning how to construe Rowe's *RCPA* as a *response* to Wykstra's *Revised-PA*. Dougherty superficially eased this dissonance by both (i) misidentifying the strength of the conclusion involved in the *Revised-PA* and (ii) misidentifying the set of evils with which *Revised-PA* was concerned (i.e. *all* versus *merely inscrutable* evils). We then corrected the first error (i.e. by changing 'most' to 'many') and reappropriated *Revised-PA* so that it applied to the correct set of evils, even if that was not Wykstra's original intention. The result, however, was that Wykstra and Rowe's theses – and supporting arguments – were not incompatible with one another, as surprising a result as any given that they saw themselves as disagreeing with each another.

Thus, we are left with at least two salient options. According to the first option, we could attribute infelicity of clear expression to Wykstra, claiming that his intended conclusion was that *most of the sufferings of dependents permitted by their guardians have the property of being inscrutable*, despite his explicit use of the word 'many' in writing. This seems to have been Dougherty's strategy, likely due to an attempt at conscious hermeneutical charity. Second, we could attribute infelicity to Wykstra or Rowe (i.e. either or both) by maintaining that they simply failed to see that their responses to one another were grounded in a misunderstanding of the others' argument. This is my preferred (in the alethic and non-desiderative sense of 'preferred') view. Although I am not sure whether the infelicity should actually be attributed to Wykstra or Rowe rather than to their interpreters, as Dougherty demonstrates, such a misunderstanding remains in the literature, and thus, constitutes a blind spot in the discussion.

Having brought this blind spot within view in the preceding sections, I propose that we analyze Wykstra's employment of *Revised-PA* more closely (i.e. we will consider it as applied to *all* evils with the conclusion that *many* such evils will be inscrutable to us). Suppose, as has been argued, that his intended conclusion has always been merely that *many of the sufferings of dependents* permitted by their guardians (i.e. parents or God) have the property of being inscrutable. In the case of parents and children, this seems true. Many children, for example, exhibit underestimation of the importance of various future goods as expressed here: "I just don't understand why they think saving for college is so important! I need a new bike to compete in the race on Saturday, and that \$1,000 budgeted for college savings would be so much more useful if it went to a new bike." Similarly, children may not understand the unavoidability of some pains associated with goods as expressed here by a hypothetical five-year old (with elevated reasoning capacities): "If my parents knew I was going to get hurt at some point when learning to ride a bike, why did they talk me into it? Losing all of my front teeth hardly seems worth it." Such examples are not uncommon, and thus, lend support to Wykstra's contention that finding many instances of inscrutable suffering involving God as caretaker would be unsurprising.

But even if Wykstra's analogical argument works, is the conclusion itself strong enough to motivate skeptical theism to the extent necessary to account for the actual distribution of evils we find in the world? In short, the answer is no. The quantity of inscrutable evils in our world seems to far outrun the amount of inscrutable evils Wykstra's analogical argument would lead us to expect. It's as if Wykstra's analogy should lead us to expect no more justification than is sufficient for claiming that *many* evils are inscrutable. But rather than having our expectations met, we find that the quantity of inscrutable evils justifies a stronger claim; that is, that *most* evils are inscrutable. The better atheological point against Wykstra, then, is this: skeptical theism will function as a strong defeater for the evidential argument from suffering only if it is not the case that most of the suffering we encounter in the world is *not* inscrutable (i.e. can be seen as necessary for some good or the prevention of some at least as bad evil). But most instances of suffering we encounter *are* inscrutable. Therefore, skeptical theism does not function as a strong defeater for the evidential argument from suffering. To put this more formally:

1. If Wykstra's analogy works, then it is false that most evils<sup>24</sup> are inscrutable.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> There's significant room for modification in this argument. One might reappropriate the analogy to particular types of evils, such as horrendous evils. In that case, even if this argument isn't compelling when dealing with evil in general, it may become stronger as one varies the type

- 2. But most evils are inscrutable.
- 3. Therefore, Wykstra's analogy fails.

How should a skeptical theist respond to this criticism of *Revised-PA*? There are two general strategies which I think are promising. First, the skeptical theist might object that there is a fundamental problem in treating analogical arguments in the way described above (i.e. by identifying a few properties shared in common between two domains, and then, seeing whether some further property holds). The complaint, I take it, would be that while analogies are not so precise in formulation, this lack of formal argumentative rigor is not indicative of argumentative weakness. Rather, any precise argument that focuses on only a few properties involved in the analogy leaves out something important, such that no formal analogical *argument* is as plausible as the analogical *insight* on which it is based.

We find a similar claim by C. Stephen Evans concerning arguments for the existence of God.<sup>25</sup> He argues that although the various formal versions of natural theological arguments for God's existence are of philosophical interest, they are less plausible *as reasons for theistic belief* than the experiences on which they are based. For instance, he tells us that overwhelming experiences of our contingency or moral guilt underlie the Cosmological and Moral Arguments for the existence of God. And since these experiences are more plausible as reasons

of evil under question. Indeed, this strategy is similar to strategies employed by atheologians routinely when dealing with other versions of the problem of evil. <sup>25</sup> Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*.

for theistic belief, he suggests that we would do well to attend to these features of the human experience if we hope to uncover a natural sign directed heavenward (i.e. as opposed to dabbling with the formal arguments that have become familiar to us). The skeptical theist, then, could be taken to claim that the analogy provides a more plausible reason to endorse skeptical theism than the distracting analogical arguments which are based on the original analogy. "The formal arguments obfuscate the issue", they might say.

The second strategy to reject the argument above is straightforward. The skeptical theist should consult her own acquaintance with the quantity of inscrutable evil in the world, and perhaps she will find that, in her own experience, it is *false* that most of the evil she has encountered has been inscrutable. This seems clearly possible, and if this represents someone like Wykstra's understanding of the quantity of evil in the world, then it seems that they may indeed have a strong reason to think that skeptical theism is true.

But then it's equally clear that I don't have such a reason when I consult my past experience of the world. Thus, we have an instance of straightforward epistemic disagreement regarding the truth of premise (2), which is important for determining whether skeptical theism ought to serve as a defeater for the crucial inference in the argument from evil. When I consult my past experience, premise (2) seems plausible, but when Wykstra<sup>26</sup> consults his past experience, premise (2) seems false. Are we both irrational here, or does one of us have the upper hand?

In my view, the only way to truly understand the disagreement involved in this debate is to enter into meta-epistemology by engaging directly with theories of epistemic rationality and defeat before applying them to the case of skeptical theism. The reason is that the difference in past experiences of evil between Wykstra and myself amounts to a difference in epistemic perspective. And in this case, the difference is one of having different evidence. But if two persons differ with respect to the evidence they have, then surely that will have important implications for what is rational for them to believe on the basis of their evidence. Thus, taking into account the epistemic perspective, including evidence, of someone entertaining skeptical theism will be crucial for determining what is rational to believe.

One's evidence, however, does not exhaust one's epistemic perspective. In the next chapter, then, we will focus our attention on a perspectival theory of rationality where we discern (i) the evidential dimensions of epistemic rationality, (ii) non-evidential constituents of an epistemic perspective & (iii) how such features of a theory of rationality pertain to the theory of epistemic defeat.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> I have not consulted Wykstra on this, but pretend as if I had for the sake of the example. I'm sure there is someone that would fit the description: *having a past experience of the evils of the world that is such that it is false that most of them are inscrutable.* 

## Chapter 5

Perspectival Skeptical Theism: Epistemic Perspectives, Closure of Inquiry Defeat & Reasonable Disagreement

#### 1. Introduction

Skeptical theism is the view that our cognitive limitations *give us a reason to doubt* our reliability when it comes to determining whether the evils we encounter in the world are gratuitous. Or put another way, skeptical theism is the view that awareness of our cognitive limits *defeats* the reasonability of believing that we have really encountered gratuitous evil.

Of course, discussions of skeptical theism do not stop here. We may have a defeater, after all, for trusting our experiences of apparently gratuitous suffering, but *having* a defeater and *knowing what to do about* a defeater are two entirely different things. Thus, in addition to their attempts to convince us that we have a reason to doubt our reliability when it comes to seeing the gratuitousness of evil, skeptical theists also prescribe various reactions to the presence of such a defeater.

On the one hand, there are the extreme reactions of adherents to the *No Weight Thesis*. That thesis, as we saw in chapter 2, claimed that the presence of a skeptical theistic defeater rendered our experiences of gratuitous suffering evidentially impotent. That is, proponents of the *No Weight Thesis* claimed that once we had accepted that we had a reason to doubt the reliability of our experiences of apparently gratuitous suffering, we could no

longer reasonably treat those experiences as pieces of evidence for the reality of gratuitous suffering in our world. As I argued later in chapter 2, requiring such a strong reaction to the presence of a defeater leads to further untenable skeptical consequences, and as a result, we rejected the *No Weight Thesis*.

As we turned our attention to other versions of skeptical theism in chapter 3, we considered a more plausible prescription, by Stephen Wykstra, concerning how to react to the presence of a skeptical theistic defeater. In that chapter, I presented CORNEA, a principle describing the conditions under which we could take ourselves to likely have reasonable epistemic access to different sorts of evidence. The original principle succumbed to counterexamples fairly easily, however. And so, we were forced to modify the principle with the hope of arriving at a more plausible version. We succeeded in identifying such a principle, which made use of the logic of *indicative* conditionals in order to avoid objections which assumed that we needed to interpret CORNEA using a *subjunctive* conditional semantics. Even with our improvements to CORNEA, however, it was still only a principle concerning our access to *evidence*.

While this focus on mere evidence might seem entirely licit at first glance, it is not so innocent as it seems. If one adopts an *evidentialist* theory of epistemic rationality, according to which epistemic rationality supervenes on (i.e. is determined by) propositional evidence, then of course principles of rationality will be exhausted by evidential considerations. But *evidentialism* is very controversial.<sup>1</sup> And so, a latent assumption of evidentialism governing a large portion of a body of literature is quite surprising.<sup>2</sup>

Now, although I cannot know for sure the reasons for this assumption in the literature, I can hazard a guess. Once Alvin Plantinga's *free will defense* dealt the apparent death blow to the logical argument from evil, William Rowe introduced the *epistemological problem of evil*. This name did not stick, but 'epistemological' was quickly replaced with 'evidential', and such a rechristening of the argument plausibly betrayed an assumption that there

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For contemporary discussion of evidentialism, see Conee and Feldman, *Evidentialism*; Dougherty, Evidentialism and Its Discontents; Kvanvig, Rationality and Reflection, chapters 4 & 5; and Kevin McCain, Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2014). Evidentialism is really a general schema that can be stated: S is epistemically justified in believing proposition P if and only if P fits S's evidence. Questions concerning the nature of evidence, the *fittingness* relation & when one *has* evidence are answered in different ways by different evidentialists. Moreover, the above definition is really of *propositional justification*. For *doxastic justification*, which is assumed to be a necessary condition for knowledge, evidentialists also include a requirement of proper basing. There are various psychological and causal theories of proper basing-see Kvanvig, Rationality and Reflection, Appendix for a good discussion of competing accounts of the basing relation, as well as Jonathan Kvanvig, "Justification and Proper Basing," in The Epistemology of Keith Lehrer, ed. Erik Olsson (Dordrecht: Kluwer Publishing Company, 2003a): 43-62 for a sustained argument against any causal account of the basing relation and McCain, Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification, 84-116 for a defense of an interventionist causal account - and so, differences on an account of this basing relation will also result in variations on an evidentialist theory. In this chapter, I will assume the basics of evidentialism found in the work of Feldman and Conee. My own view on such things is that the basing relation cannot be entirely causal, but it likely has many causal exemplifications when it comes to basic beliefs. Once an agent engages in reflection, however, I believe that doxastic accounts must be included for an adequate account of basing.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> This is not to say that evidence is epistemically unimportant or to say that there are no nonevidentialist contributors to the skeptical theistic debate. Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil" & Alvin Plantinga, "Degenerate Evidence and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Noûs* 32 (1998): 532-544 are exceptions to this trend of dealing with merely *evidential* matters in skeptical theism. However, even the non-evidentialists among the skeptical theists tend to treat evidence as the only possible object of defeat when it comes to epistemic rationality. *This assumption* is what I will eventually reject.

was nothing more to the epistemological realm than evidence. Calling this assumption into question is part of the aim of this chapter.

After noting the importance of non-evidential considerations at the end of chapter 3, we turned in chapter 4 to question whether or not the *Parent Analogy* would suffice to provide *all persons* with a skeptical theistic defeater for believing that there are gratuitous evils. I argued that the *Parent Analogy* failed in this regard, and the reason for this failure was important for theories of epistemic rationality. That reason was that different people come from different *perspectives*, and changes in perspective affect evaluations of epistemic rationality. Although in chapter 4 I primarily identified different perspectives by pointing to different sets of evidence, non-evidential factors should also be accounted for when distinguishing between different epistemic perspectives. I will identify such non-evidential factors through the course of this chapter.

My argument in this chapter, then, is roughly as follows. Adequate theories of epistemic rationality must meet the following acceptability constraints inspired by the shortcomings of previous chapters. That is, they must include a model of epistemic rationality and defeat which:

(A) permits varying degrees of *evidential* defeat (from chapter 2)(B) allows for non-evidential epistemic determinants of reasonable belief to also become objects of defeat (from chapter 3), and

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(C) identifies which factors, in addition to one's evidence, are constitutive of an epistemic perspective (from chapter 4).

Since the skeptical theist accounts other than my own fail to accommodate at least one of the three above constraints, they are inadequate. But the *perspectival* theory of epistemic rationality I will develop satisfies all of the above constraints. And therefore, it should be preferred to its competitors.

My version of skeptical theism will not stand simply on its comparative superiority to competitors, however, for there are additional points in its favor. First, it will make room for reasonable disagreement between those who think their experiences of gratuitous evil *are* reliable indicators of the presence of gratuitous evil & those who deny the sufficiency of such evidence for reasonable belief in the existence of gratuitous evil. In other words, there will be room for convinced atheists to reasonably disagree with the staunchest *No Weight Thesis* proponents. Second, my version of skeptical theism will allow for a full spectrum of reasonable responses to the argument from evil between those who take evil as strong evidence against God's existence and those who deny its status as evidence at all. And third, epistemic self-trust, which has increasingly been recognized as an important part of any theory of epistemic rationality<sup>3</sup>, will assume a privileged position

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See Foley, Working Without a Net; Keith Lehrer, Self Trust: A Study of Reason, Knowledge, and Autonomy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Foley, Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others; William Alston, Beyond Justification: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation (Ithaca, NY:

in the theory of defeat. That privileged position will make it a crucial arbiter from an epistemic perspective of (i) what counts as a defeater and (ii) what the objects of defeat will be in each case.

This chapter, then, will be composed of two parts, the first of which will be concerned with development of my *perspectival* theory of rationality and the second of which will be concerned with *applying* that theory to cases of epistemic defeat. I will proceed as follows. I begin in section 2 by delineating two normative dimensions of evaluation concerning epistemic rationality: *perspectival rationality* and *ideal cognitive rationality*. I then identify *perspectival* rationality as the dimension of evaluation with which we will be primarily concerned. Then in section 3 we will consider three ways in which skeptical theists have erred epistemically, with varying degrees of culpability, when responding to the argument from evil. First, they sometimes inelegantly switch from the *perspectival* dimension of rationality to an *ideal cognitive* dimension, and this error becomes especially poignant when considering what epistemic principles an agent endorses, as well as her accepted theory of epistemic defeat. Second, skeptical theists are not always careful to highlight the importance of an agent's background beliefs for determining the strength of the evidence from evil. And third, as discussed above, skeptical theists largely ignore *non-evidential* determinants of epistemic rationality.

Cornell University Press, 2005); Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*; & Kvanvig, *Rationality and Reflection* for a number of significant contributions to the literature on epistemic self-trust.

Keeping these three common errors in mind, then, will enable us to avoid similar pitfalls in our own development of a theory of epistemic rationality and defeat.

It is in **section 4** that we will turn to the development of our theory of rationality and defeat. In some ways, it is simpler to begin with a theory of epistemic *defeat* since what is being defeated in cases of epistemic defeat reveals some of what must be included in a full theory of epistemic rationality. Thus, I will begin with my theory of defeat. I will first address the role of undercutting *evidential* defeaters (which I call *evidential support relation defeaters*) since such defeaters are the most commonsensical.<sup>4</sup> I then introduce the lottery paradox to illustrate the presence of *closure of inquiry* defeaters; that is, defeaters of the reasonableness of closing off inquiry concerning some proposition. A number of factors contribute to the acquisition of closure of inquiry defeaters, including prudential and moral factors. However, since I will be developing a theory of *epistemic* rationality, I will identify some

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> I will, in this part of section 4, draw from a debate in the skeptical theism literature between Jonathan Matheson and Trent Dougherty. If I thought there was no more to epistemic defeat than the defeat of evidential relations, then I'd declare Dougherty the winner of this debate, as will become clear. I don't think this, which in part explains why I also don't think Dougherty is the winner of the debate. On my view, neither author has a wide enough understanding of epistemic defeat, and so, both incorrectly assess the situation. To see this debate and its development, see (i) Dougherty, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism"; (ii) Dougherty, "Further Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism"; (iii) Matheson, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism: A Response to Dougherty"; (iv) Dougherty, "Phenomenal Conservatism, Skeptical Theism, and Probabilistic Reasoning"; & (v) Matheson, "Phenomenal Conservatism and Skeptical Theism".

distinctively *epistemic* conferrers of closure of inquiry defeat in subsection 4.4. This will conclude the first part of the chapter.

With our *perspectival* theory of epistemic rationality and defeat in hand, we will then turn in section 5 to an application of our theory. First, I will present an interesting case study from the cognitive psychology literature on the reliability of employer intuitions concerning the future success of job candidates. The intuitions of interest will be those formed on the basis of personal job interviews, and in short, it turns out that our intuitions in such cases are very unreliable.<sup>5</sup> However, it is enlightening to consider what a reasonable reaction to learning about such studies would look like for potential employers who have conducted such interviews. Should they give up trust in their intuitions? Should they diminish the influence of those intuitions? Are there ways to self-monitor such that one can maintain trust in those intuitions despite the findings of these empirical studies? We will answer each of these questions, and in so doing, push the apparent reasonability of epistemic self-trust to its limit. At the end of this section, we will determine that there are six different epistemically rational options available to one who encounters the data of these studies, and which option one takes will largely be a function of one's degree of epistemic self-trust.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* for a similar development of this model for epistemic rationality. See Robyn Dawes, *House of Cards* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) for a summary of the empirical studies to which I appeal.

Up to this point in the chapter, skeptical theism will have taken a back seat to the development of our theory of rationality, but after applying that theory to the personal interviews case in section 5, we will finally be ready to return in **section 6** to skeptical theism. The function of the epistemic defeater involved in the case of skeptical theism is formally parallel to the epistemic defeater involved in the personal interview case. I will draw these parallels explicitly and discuss the implications for skeptical theism. In short, this chapter will end with an answer to the following question:

# What rational responses to the defeater of skeptical theism are available to reasonable individuals?

The brief answer is this: *it all depends on the relevant individual's degree of epistemic self-trust.* Such an answer is, of course, insufficiently informative at this point. For the more fully illuminating and satisfying answer, however, the reader will simply have to wait. Let us begin, then, with the development of a proper theory of epistemic rationality.

# 2. Two Types of Normative Evaluation in Rationality

Suppose that you are taking a road trip north with two different highways available to you, HWY-1 and HWY-2. Google Maps tells you that neither route is meaningfully faster or shorter than the other, and so, you simply choose to take HWY-1 arbitrarily.<sup>6</sup> This decision, as it turns out, was

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> After initially writing this section, I was told about a new iPhone app, called *Waze*. Apparently utilizing this app would have solved the difficulty proposed above. So if you find yourself in a similar situation to the hypothetical character in the text above, given that you've
an unlucky one since you run into bumper to bumper traffic. Out of frustration, you exclaim, "I should have taken HWY-2! If only I had known..."

In such a case, this exclamation points to two different ways in which one might evaluate one's decision to take HWY-1: (i) evaluating oneself with respect to the best overall decision if one had had all the relevant information and (ii) evaluating oneself with respect to permissible decisions given how things seemed *from one's perspective*. The former dimension of evaluation describes normativity when discussing what an *ideal cognitive agent* with all the relevant details would have done in such a situation. Such a dimension of evaluation is legitimate and helpful in some contexts; however, when dealing with what we as *fallible* and *limited* epistemic agents ought to do or think, the second dimension of evaluation is the most pertinent. This is because we often recognize that we fall short of the *ideal* in a number of ways, but recognizing this does not lead us to deride each other for such failure. Failing to live up to ideal cognition is understandable. Indeed, failure in this context is even expected, and that is why we need a dimension of rationality that is perspectival. Actions and beliefs which fall short of the ideal dimension can still be intelligible, even if not infallible.

now been made aware of Waze, you will no longer avoid irrationality for getting stuck in traffic in the way described above.

When it comes to skeptical theism, the thesis that human cognitive capacities are unable to reliably track whether or not there are morally sufficient reasons for which someone might rightly permit inscrutable evils to occur, the dimension of evaluation at issue is not the one of an *ideal cognizer*, but rather, the *perspectival* dimension. That is, the relevant dimension of evaluation is one which asks what we ought to think about God's existence given our admittedly *partial* evidence and *fallible* evaluation of it. As a result, any version of skeptical theism which calls an agent irrational because her evidence fails to match up to an *ideal cognizer's* evidence inelegantly, and uncharitably, mixes two different dimensions of evaluation. No atheologian presents the evidence of evil at their disposal as constitutive of *ideal* evidence. Rather, they present such evidence as sufficient for reasonable belief, despite being partial and inconclusive.

Indeed, such an approach to evidence is familiar in fallibilist epistemology. Consider, for instance, our ascriptions of rationality to the denizens of evil-demon worlds. For the victims of an evil demon, there is no *guarantee* of getting the truth, even with perfect cognitive practices. But this possibility of falling short of truth should not eliminate the possibility of their status as epistemically rational.<sup>7</sup> Why? Because their epistemic practices and evidence are indistinguishable from our own, and we ascribe rationality

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Or perhaps, if I'm more careful, I would say that they are *at least as epistemically rational* as their non-demon-world counterparts.

largely on that basis. So if the basis for the denizens of evil-demon worlds concerning belief formation is indistinguishable from our basis for the beliefs we form, and that basis is sufficient for our rationality in some cases, then in the parallel demon-world cases, it should sufficient as well, despite the fact that demon-world inhabitants miss out on the truth.

The case of skeptical theism is parallel. Atheologians acknowledge the possibility of falling short of the truth. However, they also claim that even if their evidence ends up being entirely misleading, it is still *evidence* for the reality of gratuitous evil. And thus, using that evidence is entirely rational for the atheologian, so long as she has no plausible and convincing reason to think her evidence is misleading. And thus, because she is working from admittedly partial information, she is working within the *perspectival* dimension of epistemic rationality.

# 3. A Few Too Often Neglected Components of Rationality

### 3.1 Evaluations of Putative Defeaters & Principles of Rationality

These reflections on the importance of perspectival rationality for skeptical theism bring to light an important difficulty with the *No Weight Thesis*. The *No Weight Thesis*, as presented in chapter 2 is a thesis which evidentially undercuts the inference involved in the argument from evil *for all* 

*individuals* who have considered skeptical theism.<sup>8</sup> In other words, according to *No Weight Thesis* proponents, the *defeating power* of skeptical theism holds whether or not one is fully convinced of the skeptical theistic defeater in question.<sup>9</sup>

But surely one's own judgments concerning the legitimacy of a potential defeater should be accounted for in determining how *strong* the defeating power will be. If I am 100% convinced that I'm in an evil demon world, for instance, it would be irrational of me to take my perceptual experiences at face value. But if I'm much less convinced of this (e.g. say I'd assign its truth a probability of .3), then it would be irrational of me to treat my perceptual experiences as evidentially irrelevant. In other words, my judgments on the plausibility of a putative defeater for my reliability in gathering evidence within some domain should be included when evaluating my rationality.

In addition to considering judgments from my perspective concerning the plausibility of the presence of a defeater for the quality my evidence, it is important to consider what principles of epistemic rationality and defeat I (or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> There is a bit of an in-house disagreement concerning whether or not skeptical theism needs to have been *entertained* for it to have this defeating power for an individual. I take it as obvious that if we are considering *perspectival* rationality, the potential defeater of skeptical theism can *only* function as a defeater if entertained *in some sense* internal to the agent. I deny that it needs to be an entirely conscious entertaining of skeptical theism, due to difficulties of access internalism (e.g. infinite regress problems).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> For some interesting considerations on this *objectivist* construal of epistemic defeat, see Jonathan Kvanvig, "Subjective Justification," *Mind* (1984): 71-84.

some other epistemic agent might) endorse. Consider, for instance, two agents, Carter and Colson, with the same evidence for the existence of a red table. Agent Carter is convinced that epistemic defeat is *full* whenever she would assign at least a .6 probability to the truth of a putative defeater.<sup>10</sup> Agent Colson, on the other hand, thinks that defeat is only *partial* unless he would assign a probability of approximately 1 to the truth of a putative defeater. Thus, the primary disagreement between Carter and Colson concerns the conditions under which a putative defeater becomes an *actual* defeater.

Next, suppose that an anonymous and never-before-encountered informant testifies to Carter and Colson that there are red lights shining on *the white table* so as to make it appear red. They are not given any explanation for why the room is set up in such a misleading way, but Carter and Colson are unconcerned to come up with an explanation for the posited deception at this point. Instead, they simply begin to deliberate concerning whether their experiences *as of a red table* in the room can be reasonably treated as evidence that *the table is red* in light of this new information. See **TABLE 1** for a comparison of Agents Carter and Colson.

IADLE I				
	Agent Carter	Agent Colson		
Evidence	Red-table seeming	Red-table seeming		

**FABLE 1** 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Matheson, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism" endorses something close to this theory of the function of defeaters.

Putating Defeator (a	There are red	There are red	
proposition)	lights shining on	lights shining on	
	the white table	the white table	
	Testimony of	Testimony of	
Source of Defeater	unknown	unknown	
	informant	informant	
Assigned Probability of	.62	.7	
the Defeater's Truth			
<b>Required Minimum</b>	.6	≈1	
Probability of Defeater			
for Full Evidential Defeat			

In the situation described with Agents Carter and Colson, both characters are identical with respect to evidence, the putative defeater for the reliability of their evidence & the source of the defeater. The only relevant difference as described is how convinced of the truth of the defeater the agent must be in order to discount their evidence in its entirety. That is, the only difference is what is necessary for the defeater under question to *fully* undermine their evidence. They disagree about what principles of epistemic defeat are correct, but neither person seems irrational. Yet disagreements about the correct principles of epistemic defeat, and epistemic rationality for that matter, are both common and reasonable. Moreover, they partially constitute an epistemic perspective, and so, they must be accommodated when evaluating the rationality of an agent.

The lesson here, then, is that a fully perspectival evaluation of rationality, as expressed in section 2, must draw on *all* aspects of a perspective. In addition to pieces of evidence (i.e. propositions one believes or is disposed to believe if appropriately prompted), a perspective includes the probabilistic, or perhaps more coarse-grained<sup>11</sup>, weightings one assigns pieces of evidence, as well as what weightings are necessary or sufficient for full or partial evidential defeat (more on this in sections 4.1 & 4.2).

What's more still, however, is that epistemic agents can attend to their own principles of rationality or defeat and call those very principles into question (e.g. imagine that Colson reflects on his requirement that near certainty of a defeater's truth is necessary for *full* defeat and decides that this would be too demanding; and consequently, he adopts a new set of epistemic principles). Allowing for such a possibility is plausibly required for consistency within any fallibilist epistemology, for after all, even if one has apparently conclusive evidence within a fallibilist epistemology for some proposition, it's always possible that one might be mistaken. And this is no less true when the proposition in question concerns the principles of epistemic rationality one has previously endorsed.

### 3.2 Background Beliefs & Their Effect on Evidential Relevance

Another difficulty one runs into when surveying the literature on skeptical theism is how to account for the way in which an agent's background knowledge and beliefs alter the *strength* of their evidence. Skeptical theists of the *No Weight* variety do not comment on this aspect of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> The sort of course-grained weightings I have in mind would be: (i) beyond reasonable doubt, (ii) *prima facie* plausible, or any of the other Chisholmian distinctions found in Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*.

evidence since they deny that evil is evidence of God's non-existence in the first place. However, there are examples of skeptical theists who are sensitive to this relationship between evidence and an agent's background beliefs.

It is worth spelling out such a view more fully to see what sorts of factors ought to be included (and excluded) under the rubric of 'evidential dimensions of epistemic rationality'. To this end, then, let us consider a phase of Stephen Wykstra's skeptical theism in which we find a well-developed treatment of the evidential considerations involved in the argument from evil.

In "Rowe's Noseeum Argument from Evil", Stephen Wykstra poses the question of whether or not the evidence of evil has 'levering power' for all individuals; that is, whether or not the evidence of evil would move all reasonable people from one doxastic state to another (i.e. from belief to withholding, withholding to disbelief, or belief to disbelief). The answer to this question, he tells us, is no, and the reason for this is that according to the Keynesian "relevance quotient" found in Bayes' Theorem, different people faced with the same evidence will, because of differences in background beliefs, often treat the same evidence with different degrees of evidential significance.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Wykstra, "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," 145-7.

So what is Wykstra getting at exactly? It is this. The *strength* of a piece of evidence, E, for or against some hypothesis, H, from the perspective of an individual (i.e. its importance or relevance for determining what to believe) will vary with respect to that person's prior probability assignments for the hypothesis under question.<sup>13</sup> Consider Bayes' Theorem:

$$Pr[H|E] = Pr[H] \times \underbrace{\left(\underbrace{\frac{Pr[E|H]}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} P[E|H_n] \times P[H_n]}\right)}_{\text{Relevance Quotient}}$$

Let us apply this to the case of the argument from evil. If we assume that there are only two live hypotheses<sup>14</sup>, T and N (i.e. for theism and naturalism<sup>15</sup>) and let the relevant evidence, E, be some token-evil witnessed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> There is a complication here concerning a view in probabilistic logics called *Likelihoodism*. According to this view, the inclusion of prior probabilities when measuring evidential strength is impermissible in some contexts because of the highly subjective nature of prior probabilities. Likelihoodists, however, will grant the permissibility of prior probabilities in contexts in which *individuals* are attempting to determine what to believe. What they dislike is an epistemic *community*, such as the scientific community, appealing to prior probabilities to justify claims concerning evidential strength. See James Hawthorne, "Inductive Logic," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2012 Edition*), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <a href="http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lgoc-inductive/#3.4">http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/lgoc-inductive/#3.4</a> for a good and brief discussion of Likelihoodism, along with some reasons to think the view is false, even in communal contexts, having to do with the importance of plausibility arguments in favor of particular prior probability assignments.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> There are many who would question the plausibility of this assumption, myself included. However, getting things precise isn't important for illustrating Wykstra's point, and so, I will go ahead and make the simplifying assumption.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> I'm not sure how to fill out *naturalism* in a way that is entirely illuminating. So-called naturalists disagree on a huge number of philosophical theses just as theists disagree on many philosophical theses, and so, I judge that attempts to identify naturalism with, for instance, the denial of libertarian freedom or a commitment to non-reductive materialism overreach a bit. See Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 318-20 for an attempt to justify the sorts of identifications I have in mind.

by two people, Kit and Kat, we can determine the *strength* of E by using the following equation:

$$\Pr[T|E] = \Pr[T] \times \left(\frac{\Pr[E|T]}{(\Pr[T] \times \Pr[E|T]) + (\Pr[N] \times \Pr[N|E])}\right)$$

Now, as I mentioned above, the strength of the evidence will depend on the prior probabilities assigned to T and N by Kit and Kat. Let us say, then, that Kit, who squarely believes in the existence of God, assigns T a prior probability of .99, while Kat, who is a square non-believer<sup>16</sup> in the existence of God, assigns T a prior probability of .5. Furthermore, suppose that Kit and Kat also agree about how expected E is on both T and N, such that the relevant probability assignments are:

TABLE 2	Pr[T]	Pr[N]	Pr[E T]	Pr[E N]
Kit	.99	.01	.2	.6
Kat	.5	.5	.2	.6

When we plug in these probability assignments above for Kit (i.e. the believer in theism), we get:

$$Pr_{KIT}[T|E] = Pr_{KIT}[T] \times \left(\frac{.2}{[.99 \times .2] + [.01 \times .6]}\right)$$
$$Pr_{KIT}[T|E] = .99 \times \left(\frac{.2}{.204}\right)$$
$$Pr_{KIT}[T|E] = .97$$

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Wykstra uses the term 'square non-believer' for this sort of individual. I substitute 'square agnostic' for his term to avoid ambiguity since a non-believer could be either agnostic or an atheist.

When we consider Kat's probability assignments (i.e. the non-believer in theism), however, the evidence is much more significant:

$$Pr_{KAT}[T|E] = Pr_{KAT}[T] \times \left(\frac{.2}{[.5 \times .2] + [.5 \times .6]}\right)$$
$$Pr_{KAT}[T|E] = .5 \times \left(\frac{.2}{.4}\right)$$
$$Pr_{KAT}[T|E] = .25$$

So on the assumption that Bayes' Theorem is correct, we can see quite clearly that the strength of evidence should vary depending on the prior probabilities of the hypotheses under question. In this case, were *Kit* to update her probability assignment for theism on evidence E, in accordance with Bayes' Theorem, then she would weaken her credence in T by .02 (i.e. from .99 to .97). However, were *Kat* to update, she would weaken her credence in T by .23 (i.e. from .5 to .25). Thus, this example shows that one's prior probabilities must be taken into account in determining what one should believe regarding theism when confronting various evils, for the prior probabilities which constitute one's epistemic perspective will affect the strength and significance of one's evidence.

### 3.3 Other Neglected Epistemic Factors: Non-Evidential Ones

Despite the importance of attending to an agent's (i) evaluations of putative defeaters, (ii) assessments concerning correct principles of rationality and (iii) assignments of prior probabilities when determining what she should believe, such assignments still largely amount to *evidential*  considerations of rationality. But as I stated at the beginning of this section, there are important *non*-evidential considerations that need to be accounted for when determining what is epistemically rational to believe.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the above example from Stephen Wykstra serves as an illustration of how, despite sometimes attending to some features of an epistemic perspective (and thus, not succumbing entirely to the common shortcoming of many skeptical theists discussed in the previous section), skeptical theists still only attend to evidential considerations, which leave out important aspects of a theory of epistemic rationality. Before revealing more about these *non-evidential* aspects of rationality, however, it is worth seeing how far attention to merely evidential dimensions of rationality can get us. It is when evidential considerations give out that non-evidential considerations most naturally emerge.

The next section, then, will contain a fuller development of perspectival rationality which begins with merely evidential considerations.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> See Plantinga, "Epistemic Probability and Evil" and Plantinga, "Degenerate Evidence and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil" for some reflections on the importance of background knowledge and non-propositional grounds for belief. I do not mean to endorse Plantinga's understanding of the relationship between grounds and evidence by mentioning his work here, however. Unlike Plantinga, it doesn't seem to me that experience (e.g. memorial experience or perception) gives one non-propositional evidence. For how can such non-propositional mental states transfer justification to *propositional* ones? It seems to me that this transfer can be easily understood on a fully propositional account of the contents of experiences, for such states justify if, and only if, the propositions encoded in the relevant mental states indeed bear the appropriate support relations to each other. On a nonpropositionalist account, however, these relations seem to me unintelligible. Thus, I should not be understood as endorsing some sort of Plantingian non-propositional epistemic states when I say that there are non-evidential, but still epistemic considerations, pertaining to epistemic rationality.

In sections 4.1 and 4.2, I will develop an account of *evidential* defeaters, using an example from a debate in skeptical theism. This debate is driven, at bottom, by a disagreement about the nature of evidential defeaters, and I will illustrate by the end of section 4.2 that evidential defeat, because it should often be construed as partial, cannot suffice to remove the rationality of believing in the existence of gratuitous evils (something which might be argued by atheologians in the evidential argument from evil).

Thus, if evidential considerations exhaust the determinants of epistemic rationality, skeptical theism will be a much less hard-hitting response to the argument from evil than most of its proponents have previously thought. However, there are non-evidential defeaters that might nevertheless stave off reasonable belief in the existence of gratuitous evils. By way of the lottery paradox, then, I will introduce this type of non-evidential defeater, which I call a *closure of inquiry* defeater (section 4.3). As I demonstrate, *closure of inquiry* defeaters carry the potential to undermine reasonable belief in a proposition, even when that proposition is confirmed (or even highly confirmed) by one's evidence.

Pointing out that there *are* non-evidential defeaters, however, is insufficient for establishing that they are *epistemic*. As a result, I will argue in section 4.4 that the considerations I have in mind are indeed epistemic, as opposed to pragmatic or moral. The most crucial epistemic item of defeat in

these cases will often involve at least a temporary undermining of one's epistemic self-trust. As a result, if epistemic self-trust can be shown to play an important role in a philosophical debate, such as the debate in which skeptical theism is to be found, then there will be potential for epistemic *closure of inquiry* defeaters to undermine reasonable belief.

# 4. A Perspectival Theory of Epistemic Rationality

Let us begin, then, by asking how the thesis of skeptical theism might function as an evidential defeater for someone who is already *on-balance justified* in believing that it (i.e. skeptical theism) is true.<sup>18</sup> We begin in such a situation because it embodies the most obvious case in which skeptical theism can serve as a defeater for an agent. Once we understand the various sorts of evidential defeat, then, we will broaden our conception of defeat to include non-evidential defeaters. But for now, since the non-evidential defeaters I have in mind are best understood in *contrast* with evidential defeaters, we begin our discussion with evidential defeat.

Let the thesis of interest in skeptical theism be expressed as follows:

ST: human agents simply are not in a position to determine how likely or unlikely it is that a given instance of *apparently* gratuitous suffering is *actually* gratuitous.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> It will not be necessary for the purposes of this chapter for me to choose a side on whether *propositional justification* or *doxastic justification* is more fundamental, or whether they are independent notions. I simply register here my preferred position: *propositional justification* is fundamental, and *doxastic justification* can be defined as merely propositional justification plus proper basing. For more on this, see chapter 2 of Kvanvig, *Rationality and Reflection* as well as the article "Evidentialism" in Conee and Feldman's *Evidentialism*.

Now suppose our agent, who is on-balance justified in believing ST, encounters an evil the apparent gratuitousness of which is entirely overwhelming. Through this experience, the agent comes to believe,

P1: *that* evil seems gratuitous.

Suppose further that this agent also holds to some form of *phenomenal conservatism*, such as

PC: if it seems to S that p, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing p.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, our agent receives immediate *prima facie* justification for the proposition that

P2: *that* evil is gratuitous.

So far so good, except that now a tension emerges within our agent's doxastic processes because she realizes that her belief in ST calls into question the *ultima facie* justification of her belief in P1. Or put alternatively, ST serves as some sort of defeater for the justification of her belief in P2. In order to understand the situation at hand, then, we must determine the specific type of defeater ST is and, consequently, what effect it should have on the other

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> See Huemer's *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* for a defense of this principle. Also see the collection Chris Tucker, *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) for an extensive discussion of the proper formulation and viability of similar principles, including an in-depth analysis of such objections as the *cognitive penetration problem* (Ibid., 225-289). It's also possible for a number of more externalist theories of justification to work here, but given the lack of data concerning our modal reliability with these questions (see chapter 2 of this dissertation), PC is a more apt starting point.

propositions our agent is considering. We begin with the notion of an undercutting defeater.

#### 4.1 Support Relation Undercutting Defeaters

An undercutting defeater is meta-evidential in character. That is, such a defeater is *about* the quality of one's evidence. Let *e* be one's evidence for proposition *p*, such that the probability of *p* given *e* is greater than the probability of *p* on one's background knowledge  $alone^{20}$  (i.e. Pr[p | e] > Pr[p]). A proposition *d* will be an undercutting defeater, then, if it calls into question the quality of one's evidence<sup>21</sup>, *e*, such that the probability of *p* given the conjunction of *e* and *d* is less than the probability of *p* given *e* alone (i.e. Pr[p | e & d] < Pr[p | e]). If the probability of *p* given the conjunction of *e* and *d* is equal to the probability of *p* on one's background knowledge alone (i.e. Pr[p | e & d] = Pr[p]), then we can say that *d* **fully** undercuts the evidential support relation holding between *e* and *p*. Whenever the probability of *p* given the conjunction

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> I've suppressed the typical 'k' or 'b' for background knowledge for readability above.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> If we consider the effects of a rebutting defeater as compared with a partial undercutter, one might worry that they aren't different types of defeaters if all we pay attention to is how probabilities are affected. However, the proposition providing an undercutting defeater in one context will not provide *evidence* for the negation of some proposition. For instance, if the undercutter states, the evidence we have for the existence of extra-terrestrial life on the basis of our olfactory capacities is unreliable in the extreme, it will undercut any olfactory experiences we take from our perspective to confirm the proposition that there are extra-terrestrials. However, for those of us lacking such evidence, upon considering the undercutting defeater, nothing is undercut. But more to the point, we do not thereby acquire evidence that there is *not* extra-terrestrial life. If we were to acquire evidence for the negation of that proposition, then we would be dealing with a rebutting defeater rather than an undercutting one since rebutters are fundamentally just pieces of evidence for the negation of a belief we hold. I will say no more about rebutting defeat since it is not the sort of defeat at issue with skeptical theism.

of e and d remains greater than the probability of p on one's background knowledge alone, but also less than the probability of p given e alone, then we can say that d **partially** undercuts the evidential support relation holding between e and p.

Recall the example in section 3.1 wherein Agents Carter and Colson were both appeared to red-table-ly (let this appearance be evidence, *e*, and let the proposition that there is a red table be the target proposition, *p*). They were then given information by someone with whom they had had no previous interaction. What they were told was that the table before them was actually a white table with red lights shining on it to deceive people into thinking that the table was red (let this new information be an undercutting support relation defeater, *d*). Let us suppose (and this is a slight modification) that Agent Carter completely trusts this informant, treating the testimony as perfectly reliable. Suppose that Agent Colson, on the other hand, has learned to be less trusting in these situations, and so, he thinks the chance that the information is reliable is about .7. The difference here between Agent Colson and Agent Carter's trust in the reliability of the informant should be factored into their confidence in the quality of their evidence. Agent Carter, then, because she thinks the informant is *perfectly* reliable, acquires a *full* defeater for the evidential connection between her experience of a red table and her belief that the table is red. In other words, she no longer considers the proposition that there is a red table more probable given that she is being appeared to red-table-ly (i.e. for her  $\Pr[p | e & d]$  is simply the same as  $\Pr[p]$ ). Agent Colson, on the other hand, is unconvinced that the red-table appearance is misleading despite thinking that it is still likely that the informant is reliable (i.e. there's about a 70% chance that the informant is reliable on Colson's estimation). Thus, he merely reduces the evidential support he would ascribe to the relationship between his red-table appearance and the proposition that there is a red table (i.e. for him  $\Pr[p | e &$  $d] < \Pr[p | e]$  but it also remains the case that  $\Pr[p | e & d] > \Pr[p]$ ). In other words, whereas Agent Carter, upon learning of d, receives a *fully* undercutting support relation defeater, Agent Colson, upon learning of d, receives only a *partial* undercutting support relation defeater.<sup>22</sup>

With this distinction between partial and full undercutting probabilistic support relation defeaters in hand, then, let us consider two questions. First, if we try to form our beliefs in such a way that we match up our confidences in various propositions with the probabilistic relations they bear to one another, is it possible for someone whose evidence on-balance supports skeptical theism to nevertheless have evidence which on-balance supports the existence of gratuitous evils? I will show this is in fact possible by simply assigning a coherent probability function to a hypothetical agent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Thus, this distinction between partial and full defeat accommodates the desired components of rationality laid out in section 3.1.

below. The second question to consider, is whether the probabilistic support relations of one's evidence exhaust the determinants of reasonable belief. As I've already made clear above, other non-evidential factors related to one's perspective come into play when determining whether a person is believing in an epistemically rational way. I will address this question more fully once I've dealt with the first.

# 4.2 Implications for Including Partial Evidential Defeat in One's Theory of Defeat

Can it be demonstrated that the probabilistic relations holding between P1, P2 & ST might allow for on-balance support in believing ST while also providing on balance support in believing P2 given P1? If we begin with the following instance of the theorem of total probability (Step 1 of the proof below), the answer is, demonstrably, yes.<sup>23</sup>

### Key Terms

P1: *that* evil seems gratuitous.

P2: *that* evil is gratuitous.

ST: human agents simply are not in a position to determine how likely or unlikely it is that a given instance of *apparently* gratuitous suffering is *actually* gratuitous.

Proof

1.  $Pr[P2|P1] = Pr[P2|ST \& P1]Pr[ST|P1] + Pr[P2|\neg ST \& P1]Pr[\neg ST|P1]$ 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> I am following Dougherty, "Further Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism," 336-8, very closely. In fact, I follow him exactly here with the mere exception of changing a few of the probability assignments and substituting 'P2' for his 'G', 'P1' for his 'O' & 'ST' for his 'S'.

Now assume that the truth of ST renders P1 evidentially irrelevant to P2, such that Pr[P2|ST & P1] becomes simply Pr[P2]. Moreover also assume, which seems reasonable, that the probability of ST is independent of P1, such that Pr[ST | P1] simply equals Pr[ST]. In this case, we can simplify the theorem to the following:

# 2. $Pr[P2|P1] = Pr[P2]Pr[ST] + Pr[P2|\neg ST \& P1]Pr[\neg ST]$

Next, assuming (i) that apparently gratuitous evils very likely are gratuitous on the supposition of  $\neg$ ST, (ii) that the prior probability that there are gratuitous evils can reasonably be set at .5 via an assumption of the principle of indifference<sup>24</sup>, and (iii) that reasonable agents might assign credences of .6 to ST<sup>25</sup>–we get,

# 3. $\Pr[P2 | P1] = (.5)(.6) + (.95)(.4) = .3 + .38 = .68$

Thus, it is demonstrably false that *anytime* someone is on-balance justified in believing ST, they will not be on-balance justified in believing P2 given P1. Why? Because the above probability assignments describe a possible and coherent probability distribution for the theses under question, and that probability distribution involves someone who *is* on-balance justified in believing ST while they further *remain* on-balance justified in believing P2 given P1. Thus, if an advocate of skeptical theism allows, as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> For discussion of the principle of indifference, see Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) chapter 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> And of course, any subjective Bayesian would be friendly to such an assignment.

seems reasonable, that one's confidence level in ST might result in ST's serving as only a *partial* support relation defeater, then on-balance support in believing ST will not be sufficient to fully defeat the inference in the evidential argument from evil in every case. Thus, there may be individuals who rationally deny God's existence despite accommodating the intuitions put forth by skeptical theists by taking the implications of those intuitions to require only a *partial support relation defeater*.

However, this case leads to a natural question of what other sorts of epistemic defeaters might be in play. If all that matters epistemically is evidence and one's probability assignments on the basis of evidence, then the above demonstration seems sufficient to considerably weaken the defeating power of skeptical theism. However, if we broaden our understanding of epistemic defeat, it will become clear that even when evidence *highly* supports a proposition, such as the proposition *that there are gratuitous evils*, having such evidence is insufficient for reasonably believing that proposition.

### 4.3 The Lottery Paradox: Closure of Inquiry Undercutting Defeaters

The lottery paradox provides an excellent illustration of how one might have a defeater for reasonably believing a proposition on the basis of one's evidence without also having a defeater which undermines one's probabilistic evidential support for that proposition. In this case, the undercutting defeater in question does not defeat evidential support, but rather, the reasonability of closing off inquiry concerning the target proposition.

The Lottery Paradox Suppose an agent S knows that she has a ticket in a fair one-million ticket lottery. Thus, she believes that the probability that her ticket will win is  $1/10^6$ . If there is a threshold for how probable a proposition must be (on one's background knowledge) before one may reasonably believe it, then S's belief that her ticket will *lose* surely surpasses that threshold easily (i.e. it has a probability of .999999). However, if S proceeds to believe that her ticket will lose, then she should go on to do a number of other things, such as give away her ticket or ignore the announcement of the winning numbers from the news that evening. But many such persons do *not* perform these actions, and importantly, no one thinks not performing these actions is unreasonable or revealing of an underlying epistemic malady within the agent's cognitive system. But if S does not throw away her ticket, it seems to reveal that she does not *believe* her ticket will lose, for a losing ticket has no value for ordinary people, and S is not treating this ticket as if she believed it had no value. Rather, she treats her ticket in accordance with a belief that it will *probably* lose (i.e. a type of ticket that has *some* value, even if only very little). Thus, the live chance that her ticket is a winner prevents her from reasonably closing off inquiry, believing that it's a loser, and acting accordingly.

Now suppose rationality required that S believe her ticket would lose, contrary to the previous paragraph's contention, due to her ticket's exceedingly high probability of being a loser. Next consider the reasoning S would give in support of this belief. S would cite the extreme likelihood of her ticket losing, and on this basis, form the belief that her ticket would lose. But this same reasoning would equally support her forming the belief of any ticket in the lottery that it would lose. And so, a principle of the form *whenever* one believes that p is extremely probable one ought to form the belief that p would allow for the rational acceptability of someone who believes of each ticket in the lottery that it will lose and, what is more troubling, a proposition with which the first set of beliefs is inconsistent; namely, that some ticket will win.<sup>26</sup> This implication (i.e. that the reasonable set of propositions to believe in some cases will form an inconsistent set) may or may not turn out to be as implausible as it seems at first blush, but briefly analyzing the paradox will enable us to see some implications for rationality and skeptical theism.

The lottery context, then, forces us to reconsider the following question:

Under what circumstances is it reasonable to believe p given that one reasonably believes that p is probable (or highly probable)?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> For it can be simply stipulated that she knows that there's one ticket that wins out of the million.

If we assume that in the lottery paradox an agent sometimes acts reasonably when she opts to not believe *p* despite having a belief that *p* is highly probable, then there must be some sort of defeater present which prevents one from forming the belief under question. The defeater is clearly *not* a support relation undercutting defeater since the probability assignments involved in the lottery are straightforwardly set (and invariantly so). They are specific statistical probabilities, and so, there's no change in evidential relations present. Instead then, it seems that the best explanation of the scenario involves defeaters of a different sort; namely, closure of inquiry defeaters.

Now, for an undercutting defeater, *d*, to be a closure of inquiry defeater, it must simply undermine the reasonability of concluding *p* on the basis of one's evidence, *e*, without itself affecting the epistemic support relation which holds between *e* and *p*. Thus, for a closure of inquiry defeater, the probability of *p* given *e* will be the same as the probability of *p* given the conjunction of *e* and *d* (i.e.  $\Pr[p|e] = \Pr[p|e & d]$ ). Such undercutters, then, do not undermine the probabilistic support relation at all.<sup>27</sup> Rather, they merely construct a barrier to believing the target proposition on the basis of one's evidence. And as the lottery paradox illustrates, it is possible to have a closure

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> This is not to say that the same proposition cannot undermine *both* closure of inquiry and the support relation. Rather, that proposition will simply serve as two *types* of defeaters. Thus, it will simply defeat the support relation *qua* support relation undercutter and defeat closure of inquiry *qua* closure of inquiry undercutter.

of inquiry defeater, even if one's evidence is very good for believing the target proposition.

# 4.4 Conferrers of Closure of Inquiry Defeat & the Centrality of Epistemic Self-Trust

Despite the plausibility of the existence of closure of inquiry defeaters, more must be said about them. For our purposes, which eventually (in section 6) involve applying this perspectival theory of epistemic rationality to skeptical theism, recognition of the existence of closure of inquiry defeaters is not enough. We also need to know (a) the contexts in which closure of inquiry defeaters arise and (b) whether or not they are *epistemic* in nature. And in the lottery paradox, if one can identify the factors which give rise to closure of inquiry defeat, then there will be fodder for an argument that either the context of skeptical theism is one in which closure of inquiry defeaters do not emerge or the skeptical theistic defeaters in question have nothing to do with the epistemic realm; that is, that such defeaters are merely moral or prudential.

Such a strategy might seem promising initially, especially when only considering the lottery paradox, for in the paradox it is plausible that high *practical* stakes are really what prevent the reasonability of closing off inquiry. For example, suppose we were to learn that the agent with the lottery ticket

was Donald Trump<sup>28</sup>, and moreover, that this lottery would only be awarding \$10 to its winner. If Trump threw away the ticket and explained his action by claiming, "that ticket's not a winner, and besides, it wouldn't make a difference if I won anyway," we would not call his epistemic rationality into question. But in the case of *most* people participating in lotteries, the practical stakes are much higher. Their life, at least by their own estimates, would be much better if they won. And so, this difference between the Trump-version of the lottery paradox and normal versions indicates that practical stakes often function as conferrers of closure of inquiry defeat.<sup>29</sup>

However, given that our goal is to identify distinctively *epistemic* conferrers of closure of inquiry defeat (i.e. not pragmatic ones), we would do well to entertain other potential sources of closure of inquiry defeat. Consider, for instance, the dual goals of epistemic inquiry: obtaining truth and avoiding error.<sup>30</sup> Each epistemic agent must deliberate about the degree of risk they are willing to take on in their pursuits of truth. At the extremes there is, on the one hand, the Pyrrhonian skeptic who values avoiding error to such an extent

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Just in case you don't get the reference, Donald Trump is a multi-billionaire.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> To be fair, this scenario is under-described. One might say that Trump doesn't believe the ticket will lose in this case, but that it is prudentially permissible for him to act on the partial information that his ticket will probably lose. This interpretation, then, favors my view that what defeats closure of inquiry can be epistemic in nature by avoiding a potential pragmatic encroachment model of closure of inquiry defeat.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> I do not mean to commit myself to epistemic value monism, where truth is seen as the only epistemic value. In fact, I deny this. See Linda Zagzebski, "Epistemic Value and the Primacy of What We Care About," *Philosophical Papers* 33.3, 2004b): 353-377 and Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* for similar positions to my own.

that she holds no beliefs, and there is, on the other hand, the person suffering from doxastic prodigality, believing every proposition whatsoever with reckless abandon and no concern for being duped. Between these less palatable extremes exist various ways of weighing the risk of false beliefs. Indeed, there will be potentially as many different epistemically rational agents as there are epistemically rational ways to weigh the dual goals of inquiry, and it seems clear on this model that under some circumstances, one epistemically rational weighting might permit reasonable belief on the basis of evidence which is insufficient for reasonable belief for an agent with a different weighting.

Consider the following *Rain Case* from Thomas Kelly as an illustration of this point:

Suppose that the evidence available to me is just barely sufficient to justify my belief that it will rain tomorrow: if the evidence was even slightly weaker than it is, then I would be unjustified in thinking that it will rain. Suppose further that you have the same evidence but are slightly more cautious than I am, and so do not yet believe that it will rain tomorrow. It is not that you are dogmatically averse to concluding that it will rain; indeed, we can suppose that if the evidence for rain gets even slightly stronger, then you too will take up the relevant belief. Is there some guarantee, given what has been said so far, that you are being less reasonable than I am? –I doubt it.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Thomas Kelly, "Peer Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence," in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 121 ft. 10.

The *Rain Case* illustrates well the possibility of having two reasonable individuals with different degrees of epistemic risk they are willing to incur. And so, if the *Rain Case* describes a truly possible scenario involving two rational individuals with different degrees of epistemic risk tolerance, then even if the Pyrrhonian skeptic or doxastic prodigal embody irrational attitudes to take concerning the risk of error in forming beliefs, there clearly remains a range of reasonable, yet inconsistent, attitudes in between. These different attitudes are part of one's epistemic make-up, and consequently, they should be accommodated within a fully perspectival theory of epistemic rationality.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the difference between two agents' reasonable degree of epistemic risk tolerance sometimes provides a context in which a closure of inquiry defeater might emerge. For in our example concerning the reasonability of believing that it will rain tomorrow, the degree of evidence sufficient for reasonable belief *that it will rain* tomorrow for one agent was insufficient for the other. Thus, in cases where the evidence falls short of an agent's degree of epistemic risk tolerance, a closure of inquiry defeater will prevent reasonable belief for that agent. And it will not be until the degree of epistemic risk dips below the threshold of acceptable risk for an agent that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> See chapter 5 of Kvanvig, *Rationality and Reflection*, for a discussion of epistemic optionality in synchronic rationality and various factors that might contribute to the presence of a range of rational beliefs one might adopt on the basis of the same evidence.

closing off inquiry will become appropriate. Thus, this situation describes what is ostensibly an *epistemic* conferrer of closure of inquiry defeat.

Someone might object, however, that unless we already have reason to think that an agent's degree of epistemic risk tolerance is itself epistemically rational, then no differences between agents in this respect will represent differences in *epistemically* rational perspectives. It will certainly constitute differences in perspective, but we still need a further reason to think the difference is *epistemic*. In order to respond to such an objection, we need to explain how a difference between agents with respect to accepted epistemic risk tolerance results from an even more fundamental component of the epistemic self; namely, epistemic self-trust.

Epistemic self-trust grounds the reasonability of an agent's degree of epistemic risk tolerance. This is because choosing to accept some degree of epistemic risk just is an exercise in trusting the reasonability of one's epistemic self. But why should we allow epistemic self-trust a place in a theory of rationality in the first place?

In attempting to answer this question, many epistemologists present epistemic self-trust as simply inescapable given the reality of epistemic circularity. The phenomenon of epistemic circularity can be put thusly:

*Epistemic Circularity* – it is impossible to justify relying on one's cognitive capacities in forming beliefs without appealing to

those very same capacities, or their deliverances, at some point in one's attempts to justify them.

This might be construed as a problem for the justification of all our cognitive capacities in general<sup>33</sup>, or it might be a problem for particular cognitive capacities as well (e.g. perception or memory)<sup>34</sup>. Either way, however, the argument from epistemic circularity to the reasonability of epistemic self-trust seems to be roughly this: given that we have no ultimate way of justifying our belief-forming practices, we are backed into an epistemic corner, such that the only way to move forward is to ground one's justification by treating self-trust as epistemic bedrock. And thus, self-trust is necessary if we are to function rationally given that we realize that we are working in a non-ideal epistemic environment.

While the point of the previous paragraph is well-taken concerning the connection between epistemic circularity and epistemic self-trust, there are less pessimistic ways to argue for the presence of self-trust in one's theory of rationality. First, the above argument for self-trust only claims that trust is reasonably present in a *non-ideal* cognitive state. But it would be odd to think of self-trust as appropriate *only* when engaging in non-ideal, or perspectival, rationality. For when dealing with an *ideal* agent, certain questions of rationality seem most naturally answered by an appeal to the appropriate

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> See Foley, Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> See Alston, *Beyond Justification*.

degree of self-trust for such an agent, which would be strange were self-trust irrelevant to the evaluation of ideal cognitive agents. For example, should a cognitively ideal agent ever defer to the beliefs of other agents? Surely not, for such an agent, if truly ideal, would have a perfect grasp on reality, and any agent of that sort should have a maximal degree of epistemic self-trust.

Secondly, and in a similar vein, it seems false to think that self-trust can only be reasonably exercised as a fallback position when one has no other options – e.g. options such as relying on an infallible deductive proof of one's own reliability. For example, I trust my spouse's fidelity. However, it isn't as if I had no trust in my spouse's fidelity until I had discovered that I had no *proof* of her fidelity. Lack of proof is not plausibly a necessary condition on trust. Indeed, to think of trusting one's spouse in this way (i.e. only if one is aware of a lack of proof of their fidelity) is to get things precisely backwards.<sup>35</sup> And neither would I withdraw my trust in my spouse were I to discover an indisputable proof of her fidelity. Consider, for instance, how odd it would sound were I to respond to my spouse, if she asked me whether I trusted her fidelity, with the following: "Well, I did until a few seconds ago. I just learned of a deductive proof of your fidelity, and so, I no longer trust you. I mean, I did trust you, but now I have *proof* of your fidelity! So I don't need to trust you anymore." Such a response is precisely the wrong way to respond. If

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> I'm following Zagzebski, Epistemic Authority, 38-43 here.

anything, trust would be strengthened by such a proof. For such relationships, then, trust seems more appropriate as a *starting point*, rather than a refuge into which one must retreat.

Epistemic self-trust seems to be justified in the same way. It is not as if we immediately retreat into self-trust upon discovering the phenomenon of epistemic circularity. Rather, we *begin* by trusting our cognitive reliability and the judgments we make using our cognitive capacities. Then, once we have encountered the phenomenon of epistemic circularity, we might reason, from the first-person perspective, in the following way:

I have pre-reflective epistemic self-trust, but epistemic circularity gives me a reason to distrust my epistemic self. So, I have a reason to trust myself and a reason *not* to trust myself. The only way for me to evaluate this clash of reasons for and against self-trust is by continuing to trust my epistemic self since *I* am the one who must do the evaluating. So my only options seem to be either (i) to stop forming doxastic attitudes at all (i.e. a skeptical and epistemically debilitating response to circularity) or (ii) to continue trusting my epistemic self. But option (i) amounts to a raising of the epistemic white flag. So, I should go with option (ii). And as a result, epistemic self-trust can be rationally maintained after considering the phenomenon of epistemic circularity.

Let us take stock, then, on what we've learned. We began this section with the aim of determining what the conferrers of closure of inquiry defeat might be. First, we saw that practical stakes can provide such defeaters, and we saw that differences in degrees of accepted epistemic risk could provide a context for closure of inquiry defeat as well. However, since one's degree of accepted epistemic risk is grounded in trusting oneself, we needed to determine whether self-trust could be *epistemically* rational. And if we could show this, then we would have established that closure of inquiry defeaters which resulted from differences between agents in degrees of accepted epistemic risk were *epistemic* defeaters. I think the previous discussion has sufficed to establish this much. However, there is one other way in which epistemic self-trust is connected to closure of inquiry defeat; namely, by being the very object of defeat in some cases.

The example above regarding a rational response to the phenomenon of epistemic circularity provides a case in point. Consider what happens when we learn of the phenomenon of epistemic circularity. We don't acquire evidence that we are in fact unreliable cognizers. Admittedly, evidence might lead us to contemplate the defeater in question, but the defeater is not itself *evidence*. Rather, the defeater exists at the meta-level; that is, it concerns our reliability as gatherers and evaluators *of* evidence. It gives us a reason to decrease our trust in ourselves, perhaps to the extent that we simply cease to trust our cognitive self altogether. However, what's important to see is that, after becoming aware of these defeaters, it's necessary to indulge our epistemic selves in trust at least long enough to determine how to react. That is, as reflective agents, we reflectively ascend and make our previous degree of self-trust and the meta-level defeater the objects of our reflection. Then we sort out how to recalibrate our trust in ourselves in light of the defeater, all the while indulging in continued epistemic self-trust at the reflective level, and then we assume a new epistemic perspective, partly constituted by this updated degree of epistemic self-trust.

Now, all of this is fairly theoretical at this point, but it is now time to take theory to practice. In section 5, I will introduce a case from cognitive psychology in which we find ourselves faced with a meta-level defeater that fundamentally undermines our self-trust. A further question concerning such meta-level defeaters is this: *what sort of defeater* (i.e. support relation or closure of inquiry) *is acquired when the object of defeat is one's self-trust?* The answer, so I say, is that it all depends on one's reflective judgments concerning the defeater. We will see, then, the six possible reasonable reactions to the presence of a defeater for self-trust, including construing it as a defeater for closure of inquiry.

Upon completing this application of my theory of epistemic rationality and defeat to the cognitive psychology case, I will finally, in section 6 return to the discussion of skeptical theism. The case of skeptical theism parallels nicely the case that I provide in section 5, and so, at the end of section 6, I will draw out these parallels to illustrate as perspicuously as I can the implications of our discussion for a new, and more plausible, form of skeptical theism.

# 5. Personal Interviews: an empirical model of meta-evidential defeaters

#### 5.1 *Personal Interviews: the empirical case*

Recall that undercutting defeaters are meta-evidential defeaters, or alternatively put, they present themselves as evidence *about* the quality (whether good or bad) of our evidence for a given proposition. We can acquire these sorts of defeaters in a number of different cases, some of which are quite near to us, practically speaking, and others of which are much more remote. In this section, we will consider a case which falls in the former category of being practically nearby. This will provide a formal structure of epistemic defeat with which we can familiarize ourselves, and in the next section, we will apply that formal structure to the case of skeptical theism. But let us first turn to some empirical studies concerning the unreliability of intuitions we form on the basis of personal interviews conducted with potential job candidates.

*Personal Interviews* In recent years the relevance of certain sorts of heuristics and biases to a theory of rationality has come to the attention of epistemologists. While there are a number of different cases, the following case concerning problems for trusting one's intuitions in personal interviews is especially illuminating:

> In a wide range of studies, short personal interviews, typically one hour, have been proven unhelpful in improving the accuracy of predictions about the future accomplishments or

behavior of the interviewees. One of the studies involves medical school admission committees that conducted personal interviews of applicants to supplement statistical and other impersonally gathered data about the applicants (MCAT scores, grad point average, class rank, quality of undergraduate institution, etc.). The task for the committees was to predict future success in medical school as measured by the grades the students would receive...The conclusion of these studies is that personal interviews do not improve predictions of future accomplishments or behavior. They did not help the interviewers identify who would become successful in medical school (as measured by grades)...Indeed, far from improving predictive performance, the interviews actually worsened the accuracy of the predictions made.<sup>36</sup>

Now, suppose that you are required by your superior to conduct onehour interviews for potential medical school students and that you learn of the studies described above. You cannot get out of conducting the interviews, but nevertheless, you are free to decide how to factor your intuitions concerning each candidate's potential into your overall assessment of them. Can it be rational to include your intuitions in your overall evaluations, even after hearing that such intuitions are unreliable? Or rather, are you *required* to take such findings as an epistemic defeater of some sort?

# 5.2 Special Classes & Self-Monitoring

Although our initial reaction might be to discount our intuitions from personal interviews entirely, there may be ways for a rational person to develop a good reason for including their intuitions in their overall

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Foley, Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others, 55-6.
assessment of a candidate. They can do this, for instance, if they are careful to engage in some sort of reasonable self-monitoring.<sup>37</sup>

One such attempt at self-monitoring involves seeking out a special class to which you belong that is immune to the errors identified in the personal interview studies. For instance, when considering the base-rate fallacy<sup>38</sup>, if an agent belongs to the class of economists trained in game theory, then they can maintain trust in their ability to make good probabilistic judgments. The reason is that there are studies conducted on economists as a group which demonstrate their general immunity to the base-rate fallacy.<sup>39</sup> The difficulty in applying such a method to personal interview cases, however, is that we do not know of any such specially protected class. Thus, it would be difficult to offer much reason in support of the claim that one belonged to a protected class.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Ibid., 63-76 contains further details of how one might develop this case in support of a particular theory of epistemic rationality.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> The base-rate fallacy is routinely committed in the following example: suppose that there is some population 99% of which is cancer-free and 1% of which has cancer. Suppose further that everyone in the population is required to take the same cancer-screening test. The statistical results are as follows: (i) if someone has cancer, the test gets it right 80% of the time; (ii) if someone does not have cancer, the test gets it right 90% of the time. Suppose you belong to that population and are told you have cancer after going through the test. What's the probability that you have cancer? Most people tend to think it's 50-50, but in reality, the probability is very low, approximately 7%. The explanation for the mistake seems to be that most people ignore the initial size of the populations; that is, the base-rate. Hence, that is why it is called the base-rate fallacy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Richard Larrick, J. Morgan and Richard Nisbett, "Teaching the Use of Cost-Benefit Reasoning in Everyday Life," *Rules for Reasoning*, ed. Richard Nisbett (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1993): 259-278.

There are other ways to self-monitor to which one might appeal. Perhaps, for example, the empirical studies identify certain factors that account for the unreliability of our intuitions from personal interviews. Thus, if we can successfully block those factors from influencing our intuitions, then we will have eliminated the worry about the reliability of those intuitions. The difficulty with such an approach, however, is that unless we have reason to think that we know of most, the most significant, or even all of the factors accounting for our unreliability, we will lack sufficient reason to reintroduce our intuitive judgments into our overall assessment of the potential medical school candidates.

Consider a practical analogy with smoking. Suppose you want to live a healthy life, but enjoy smoking, which seems to detract from one's overall health. If you didn't know any of which of the constituents of the activity of smoking contributed to decreased health, then you would simply not smoke. But suppose further that you happen upon a reputable study which reveals a few particular factors involved in the activity of smoking. These factors detract from your overall health, but as the study explains, they can be controlled for (i.e. removed) without hindering the pleasure one gets from the activity.<sup>40</sup> No claim is made to have identified most, the most significant or all of the negative health concerns constitutive of smoking. Only some of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> One might think of e-cigarettes as a recent attempt to accomplish this goal.

those concerns have been identified as eliminable. Even in the face of such a study, it would be practically irrational for you to take up smoking in the revisionary manner the study describes. Why? Well, given that you were unwilling to smoke if no negative health factors had been identified and eliminated, it seems practically irrational for you to engage in this modified form of smoking. After all, you want to be healthy, and for all you know, the factors which have been controlled for are insignificant compared to the contribution of the possible remaining factors to your potential decrease in health. Thus, engaging in this revised form of smoking, under the circumstances, would be practically irrational.

The personal interview cases seem analogous. Perhaps you identify a few factors that contribute to certain biases which skew your intuitions in unreliable ways and are able to control for them.<sup>41</sup> Even then, you will not have reason to think you've controlled for most, or even the most important, factors contributing to unreliability in personal interview cases. Thus, just as it seems practically irrational in the smoking case to nevertheless engage in a monitored form of smoking, so in the interview case, it seems irrational to trust one's intuitions even after controlling for a few of the negative factors

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> And of course, there's always the ostensibly intractable difficulty of tacit biases that remain elusive to one's most sincere and critical self-reflection.

involved unless one also knows that one has controlled for *all* or the *most significant* negative factors.

#### 5.3 Self-Trust as a Primary Determinant of Defeat (Six Options)

Let us go ahead and stipulate what seems to be independently well supported; namely, that the above methods of self-monitoring are unavailable in the personal interview case. If such methods are unavailable, is it epistemically irrational to trust one's intuitions in personal interview cases?

Although it might seem to stretch credulity to its limits, even under conditions such as these, it can nevertheless be rational to trust one's intuitions. As I hinted at the end of section 4, whether or not one acquires some sort of epistemic defeater when entertaining the implications of these empirical studies depends largely on one's degree of epistemic self-trust, trust which serves as a starting point of rational epistemic reflection.

As I highlighted in my defense of the epistemic relevance of self-trust, an inescapable feature of human cognitive life is our inability to provide nonquestion-begging arguments for the reliability of our cognitive capacities (i.e. the phenomenon of epistemic circularity). This feature of the human predicament has been highlighted much in recent epistemology<sup>42</sup>, and insofar

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> See (i) Foley, Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others; (ii) Alston, Beyond Justification, & (iii) Zagzebski, Epistemic Authority.

as we are permitted to trust our cognitive faculties to get us epistemically off the ground in the hopes of reaching our dual cognitive goals of getting truth and avoiding error, we have reason to trust our cognitive capacities, even when challenged by undercutting defeaters such as the one involved in the personal interview case.

Now recall from sections 4.1-4.3 that there are *three* different types of epistemic defeaters with which we are concerned, two of which are evidential and another which prevents the reasonability of *believing* a proposition on the basis of one's current evidence (see **TABLE 3** below to refresh your memory).

Dejeulers		
Full Support Relation Defeaters	Where $d_{Full}$ is a full support relation undercutter, $e$ is one's evidence before acquiring $d_{Full}$ , and $p$ is the target proposition, then the following is true: (i) $\Pr[p   e \& d_{Full}] = \Pr[p]$	
Partial Support Relation Defeaters	Where <i>d<sub>Part</sub></i> is a partial support relation undercutter, and the rest is the same as above, then the following is true:	
	(i) $\Pr[p \mid e \ & d_{Part}] < \Pr[p \mid e],$ and (ii) $\Pr[p \mid e \ & d_{Part}] > \Pr[p]$	
Closure of Inquiry Defeaters	Where $d_{Col}$ is a closure of inquiry undercutter, and the rest is the same as above, the following will be true:	

**TABLE 3 -** Various Undercutting

 Defeators

(i) (ii)	$\Pr[p \mid e \ \& \ d_{Col}] = \Pr[p \mid e],$ and Even if $(\Pr[p \mid e] \approx 1), p$ cannot be reasonably believed.

Since the type of defeater one will acquire depends on one's degree of epistemic self-trust and reflections concerning that putative defeater, it will be helpful to spell out examples of how someone might reason when faced with the defeater. There are six such rational options concerning the defeater involved in personal interviews:

(Option 1) No Defeater

(Option 2) Closure of Inquiry Defeater

(Option 3) Full Support Relation Defeater

(Option 4) Partial Support Relation Defeater

(Option 5) **Both** Closure of Inquiry **and** *Full* Support Relation Defeater

(Option 6) **Both** Closure of Inquiry **and** *Partial* Support Relation Defeater

Let us briefly reflect on each option in turn for the personal interviews case. In each option, for the sake of keeping everything more concrete, let the agent in question be 'Mark'. Additionally, the proposition that Mark initially believes—just before confronting the information about his unreliability in personal interview cases (i.e. the epistemic defeater of some sort)—is *Polly is the best med school candidate.* He believes this proposition on the basis of his

personal-interview intuitions (i.e. his evidence), but then, considers what to make of this new information concerning his unreliability.

(Option 1) Suppose Mark discounts the putative defeater entirely, and so, does not acquire a defeater of any sort. In this case, then, we can assume that Mark has a very high degree of epistemic self-trust. As a result, Mark also has a high degree of confidence in the quality of his skills concerning the gathering and evaluation of evidence. Is this rational? Well, given that one's degree of epistemic self-trust serves as an epistemic starting point as illustrated above, Mark is acting in an epistemically rational manner. For consider the alternative from Mark's perspective. The studies concerning his unreliability seem simply absurd from his perspective. So if the studies seem entirely absurd from Mark's perspective, how could it be rational from his perspective to take them seriously? In this case, then, Mark exemplifies a sort of Moorian<sup>43</sup> attitude with respect to the putative defeater.

(Option 2) On this option Mark *does* acquire an epistemic defeater on the basis of the personal interviews: a closure of inquiry defeater. However, from his perspective, his evaluations of the evidence remain untouched. That

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> This adjective derives from G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World," *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Collier Books, 1962): 144-148, where G. E. Moore argues against a skeptical argument akin to the following: (I) if you know that you have hands, then you've ruled out any possibility to the contrary. (II) But you can't rule out all such possibilities. (III) So, you don't know that you have hands. Moore looks at the conclusion of that proof and thinks that the proposition that *I know I have hands* is clearly more plausible than the skeptic's conclusion, and so, he rejects the conclusion on that basis.

is, he still thinks that Polly is *probably* the best med school candidate, but from his perspective, the evidence is insufficient for believing and acting on his earlier belief; namely, that she *was* the best candidate. As a result, he must resume inquiry concerning the best med school candidate by pursuing more evidence and withholding his ultimate judgment concerning who the best candidate is until a later date. At this later date, then, if all goes well, closure of inquiry will become, from his perspective, appropriate.<sup>44</sup>

(Option 3) In this scenario, upon learning of the empirical studies concerning his unreliability, Mark acquires a full support relation defeater for his original belief that *Polly was the best candidate*. Importantly, Mark does not go on to believe that Polly is *not* the best candidate, but rather, simply takes his intuitions to be evidentially irrelevant to answering that question. Moreover, this option represents a case where further inquiry, from Mark's perspective, appears unlikely to reveal anything new or useful in coming to assess the other evidence he has concerning the best med school candidate (e.g. MCAT scores, etc.). As a result, assuming Mark has no other closure of inquiry defeaters concerning the evidence he does have for who the best

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> It should be clear as well that to close of inquiry is to defeat the closure of inquiry defeater. This defeater-defeater is acquired by engaging in activities that provide oneself with further reasons, from one's perspective, to trust oneself. Thus, self-trust serves as a defeater-defeater of closure of inquiry defeaters.

candidate is, he can reasonably believe the evidence he has, disregarding the personal interviews, is reliable and form reasonable beliefs on that basis.

(Option 4) This scenario is very similar to (Option 3) except that Mark does not think the defeater is so serious as to defeat all the evidential strength holding between his intuitions in personal interviews and his judgment that *Polly is the best med school candidate*. Instead, some degree of intellectual humility leads Mark to decrease his confidence in that judgment. But despite this, he still thinks it unlikely that further evidence gathering would change his now recalibrated judgment concerning who the best candidate is. In other words, the defeater is a partial support relation undercutter that prompts Mark to recalibrate his initial evaluation of the various candidates slightly, but in recalibrating, he has, from his perspective, sufficiently taken the empirical studies into account. And thus, he is still able to form a reasonable belief on the basis of his recalibrated evaluation of the evidence.

(Option 5) In this scenario, Mark initially takes the empirical studies to decisively undermine the evidential support relation. That is, he no longer takes his intuitions in the personal interviews to be evidence that Polly, or any other individual, is the best medical school candidate. However, in addition from Mark's perspective, the empirical studies do not seem entirely incontrovertible. It's a live possibility from his perspective that his intuitions can be shown to be reliable eventually. As a result, he begins to gather new information about the studies in question, perhaps investigating whether there are significant factors which skew his intuitions that might be controlled for. The hope, then, is that he might be able to better assess the evidential significance of his intuitions at a later date.

(Option 6), like (Option 5), represents Mark as acquiring two types of defeaters on the basis of the empirical studies. First, he receives a partial support relation undercutter, likely reflected in his uncertainty of the truth of the empirical studies. Second, he receives a closure of inquiry defeater, which compels him to gather further evidence before reasonably believing the proposition he'd previously believed; namely, that *Polly was the best med school candidate*.

As can be clearly seen in the cases above, perspectival epistemic rationality allows for rational optionality (i.e. there is a multiplicity of rational doxastic attitudes which one can permissibly form when faced with a defeater like the one above), even for multiple individuals dealing with the same evidence. This is because there are a number of non-evidential, but epistemically relevant, factors built into one's perspective that contribute to a full theory of epistemic rationality. And the *personal interview case* above demonstrates how variations in self-trust might lead to six different rational theoretical options for epistemic agents who are confronted with the same meta-evidential defeater. None of these reactions seems irrational from the perspective of the individual described, even if the reaction would be irrational *to us*. This is because we each work from within our own epistemic perspective when considering how someone ought to respond to the empirical studies.<sup>45</sup> But if we take the epistemic rationality in question to be first-person, perspectival, rationality, then it is clear that there are several options available to epistemically responsible and reasonable agents, like Mark in our example above.

In the next section, then, I will show how this model of rationality and defeat provides a number of rational options for anyone confronted with skeptical theism as a meta-evidential defeater for the quality of their evidence concerning the argument from evil. I then close with a reflection on how this optionality can be used to explain what is right about the competing intuitions involved in the problem of evil: (i) that evil is obviously evidence of some sort against God's existence, and (ii) that the quality of our evidence in the argument from evil is insufficient for the argument from evil to be persuasive.

## 6. Skeptical Theism: Learning One's Lessons

6.1 Explicating the Formal Process

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Moreover, each of us will reside in a place on the continuum of epistemic rationality which falls short of cognitive ideality. This is consistent, then, with some individuals residing closer to (further away from) cognitive ideality than others. So, the point, then, is that rationality is a function of the standards corresponding with one's location on the continuum of rationality, even if some of those standards are actually mistaken from the ideal standpoint.

The *personal interviews* case provides a nice example of how an undercutting defeater might alter the noetic system of a rational person. In order to apply that same formal process to the question of skeptical theism, we should first walk through the three basic logical steps involved in defeat: (i) Defeater Admission, (ii) Determination of the Defeater-Type & (iii) Defeater Resolution.

- STEP-1 *Defeater Admission* The person entertaining the *putative* defeater determines whether or not the defeater is given admission into her noetic system.
- STEP-2 *Determination of Defeater-Type* The person entertaining the now *actual* defeater determines whether or not it gives her reason to recalibrate her original assessment of the evidence, either fully or in part, or to simply inquire further while withholding belief.
- STEP-3 *Resolution* The person in question adjusts her doxastic system, giving up beliefs or degrees of belief as necessary, to accommodate the perceived force of the defeater.

A few brief comments on these steps is in order. First, at STEP-1 an

epistemic agent is forced to reflect on her degree of epistemic self-trust. If her self-trust is especially high, then she may reflectively ignore the putative defeater in question and leave her noetic system basically unaltered. However, if she does admit the defeater into her noetic system, she could do so for a number of reasons. First, the defeater might simply seem true from her perspective. And of course, if the defeater seems true to her, then she will at the very least think it best to inquire further about it. Second, there might be a more robust argument presented to her – empirical, analogical,

conceptual, or otherwise—which convinces her that the putative defeater needs to be dealt with by alterations in her noetic system.<sup>46</sup>

After admitting a defeater, the agent in question must also determine what sort of defeater she is dealing with (i.e. STEP-2). In other words, she determines whether or not the defeater, in order to be resolved, requires a recalibration of her assessment of the evidence or simply further inquiry. In the former case, then, she judges that the defeater is a support relation defeater (either partial or full) and in the latter case, she determines that the defeater is a closure of inquiry defeater. She might also judge that the considerations which give rise to the defeater defeat *both* the support relation and closure of inquiry, in which case, the agent will face two defeaters.

Finally, at STEP-3 her noetic system is altered in the ways deemed appropriate by the reflection at the previous steps. Now, the word 'reflection' might appear to indicate that such an account of defeat is overly demanding, psychologically speaking. After all, much of this process often occurs below the level of consciousness, and reflection might be construed as an entirely *conscious* activity. This objection fails, however, since nothing in my account requires that the agent be able to consciously access the process involved. I

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> There are other ways a defeater might be admitted into someone's noetic system, such as through some form of epistemic salience. Work in the epistemology of the emotions would be relevant here. See Ronald De Sousa, "Epistemic Feelings," *Mind and Matter* 7.2 (2009): 139-161 and Alessandra Tanesini, "Virtues, Emotions, and Fallibilism," *Ashgate Epistemology and Mind Series* (2008): 67-81 for some interesting considerations in this regard.

think agents often do deliberate in this more intellectualized way, with varying degrees of sophistication. But all my account needs is for agents to be representable as responding to putative defeaters in the way described above.

Now that we have the formal process of undercutting defeat in hand, here are the parallel parts for the cases of defeat found in the personal interview case and skeptical theism:

	PROPOSITION BELIEVED	EVIDENCE	DEFEATER
PERSONAL INTERVIEWS	Polly is the best candidate	Intuitions from the interview	The proposition that interview
CASE			intuitions are unreliable
SKEPTICAL THEISM	God does not exist	Experiences of apparently gratuitous evils	The proposition that humans cannot reliably track gratuitous evil

Notice that as I have presented the defeaters above, they are propositions. My reason for doing this is to emphasize an important distinction between *reasons to admit* a defeater and the defeater itself. In the personal interviews case, the defeater involved was the proposition that our intuitions are unreliable for predicting the future success of job candidates. The reason to admit this defeater, on the other hand, was that there were a number of empirical studies which seemed to support its truth. Skeptical theism is different when it comes to the *reasons to admit* its putative defeater. There are no empirical studies that have called into question our reliability in tracking gratuitous evil in the world, nor are there likely to be any. This sort of reliability just doesn't seem amenable to empirical investigation. But does that mean that no one has a reason to admit skeptical theism as a defeater into their noetic system?

As indicated at STEP-1 (*Defeater Admission*), however, we saw that there were at least two fundamental reasons for which someone might admit the defeater of skeptical theism. For many individuals, the idea that we are unreliable in tracking gratuitous evil may just seem right. And if so, it is reasonable for them to admit the defeater into their noetic system. In addition, there are analogical arguments (i.e. the *Revised Parent Analogy*) and conceptual arguments (e.g. Alston's *Inventory*) that might be convincing for some.<sup>47</sup> In either case, such individuals will quickly find themselves at STEP-2, sorting out their noetic system in the way they deem appropriate. And thus, skeptical theism truly functions in a parallel way to the *personal interviews* case.

6.2 Assessing the Options

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> I also think there's room for a form of the classical *consensus gentium* argument grounded in recent work concerning epistemic disagreement that could give someone a reason to adopt the skeptical theistic defeater. See Linda Zagzebski, "Epistemic Self-trust and the Consensus Gentium Argument," in *Evidence and Religious Belief*, eds. Kelly James Clark and Ray J. VanArragon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011): 22-36 for some thoughts on this classic argument and the importance of epistemic self-trust to a plausible new version of it.

So once again, let us consider the different possible combinations of defeat that represent epistemically rational responses to ST as an undercutting defeater.

(Option 1) No Defeater

(Option 2) Closure of Inquiry Defeater

(Option 3) Full Support Relation Defeater

(Option 4) *Partial* Support Relation Defeater

(Option 5) **Both** Closure of Inquiry **and** *Full* Support Relation Defeater

(Option 6) **Both** Closure of Inquiry **and** *Partial* Support Relation Defeater

(Option 1) represents the noetic system of an agent who has such a high degree of self-trust that ST provides no defeat whatsoever. The evidential relation between the apparently gratuitous evils she has experienced (whether directly or vicariously) and the existence of God remains unmoved, and although such a position is very unlikely to describe most deeply reflective individuals considering the argument from evil for the first time, it is unsurprising to find a number of individuals in this sort of doxastic position after gathering and weighing more evidence over a period of time.

(Option 2), on the other hand, seems like a reasonable description of many who have considered ST as a defeater. Perhaps they are stuck with a fuzzy credence for ST or simply cannot determine whether it applies to the case of evil. For them, evil maintains its evidential force entirely (i.e. the probabilistic support relation is unaffected), but the evidence becomes insufficient for reasonable belief in God's non-existence.

(Option 3) represents the doxastic state of someone who construes ST in the same way as Bergmann, Alston and van Inwagen; that is, as undermining entirely the evidential force of evil against God's existence. Thus, for some individuals, it can be epistemically rational to disregard evil entirely when considering the evidence in favor of and against theism. In other words, there is room for a restricted form of the No Weight Thesis, although someone whose doxastic state fits this description will still need to say something about avoiding the skeptical implications I pointed to in chapter 2.<sup>48</sup>

(Option 4) represents a cognitive agent with a high degree of epistemic self-trust but who is compelled, on sufficient reflection, to recalibrate the evidential strength of their experiences of evil. This agent recognizes that ST should be accounted for in some way, and so, she judges that recalibration is sufficient to account for the margin of error indicated by ST. This partial

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> One way they might avoid the skeptical implications is by adopting my particular theory of rationality which allows for different responses on structurally similar cases that deal with different domains, such as moral or pragmatic. Another response, which may be less satisfying, would be to point to the practical stakes involved in moral cases, and use those to justify making the ampliative leap to believing that some state of affairs ought to be prevented by them.

defeat from ST will be more or less significant depending on how much recalibration is required and where the agent's credence level began.

(Option 5) describes an agent who considers ST to fully undercut the support relation. However, she also remains open to the possibility of a defeater-defeater in the future which would reduce her confidence in ST. Such an option may be merely theoretical, however, since plausibly what best explains why someone would acquire a closure of inquiry defeater in most instances is a lack of full confidence in ST, and anyone who is less than fully confident in ST will likely only acquire a partial support relation defeater (although this would depend further on some of the considerations about the principles of rationality endorsed from an agent's perspective discussed in section 3.1).

(Option 6), then, seems to represent a more modest response to ST. This individual acquires a closure of inquiry defeater, and thus, is open to more evidence before concluding that God does not exist<sup>49</sup> on the basis of her experiences of evil. But at the same time, her degree of confidence in ST suffices to partially undercut the support relation as well. So depending on her recalibration of the evidence given this defeater, she may still assign a fairly high probability to the proposition that God does not exist on the basis

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Or alternatively, that there are gratuitous evils.

of her evidence, but she will not also be able to reasonably believe that proposition on that basis.

So where does this leave us with skeptical theism? The perspectival treatment of skeptical theism I have developed has a number of strengths that are worth bringing out. To begin with, it accommodates a number of *apparently* inconsistent intuitions with its inclusion of closure of inquiry defeat. For example, it can make sense of those who take evil to be evidentially irrelevant to God's existence (i.e. the *No Weight* Skeptical Theism of Option 3), while it can also make sense of those who, from an entirely different perspective, are unable to shake the intuition that evil is evidence of God's non-existence (i.e. as reflected in Options 1, 2, 4 and 6). In other words, perspectival skeptical theism allows for the possibility of reasonable disagreement.

On the other hand, perspectival skeptical theism brings new demands to the debate concerning the reasonableness of belief in the non-existence of God. Presenting apparently gratuitous evil as evidence for God's nonexistence, according to this view, is not sufficient for reasonable belief. For the possibility of closure of inquiry defeat requires more than looking at evidence. It requires a reassessment of the reasonability of one's degree of epistemic self-trust and one's reliability in determining the implications of the evidence one has. As a result, perspectival skeptical theism demands more of those seeking to respond to skeptical theistic intuitions, assuming they seek to do so in an epistemically responsible manner.

### 7. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to build up a theory of epistemic rationality and defeat with a perspectival orientation, and then, to apply it to skeptical theism. This allowed us to see where epistemic propriety had been ignored by previous accounts of skeptical theism in a number of ways. By and large, skeptical theists have (i) paid insufficient attention to many of the perspectival dimensions of rational belief, including perspectival evaluations of both the *strength* of evidence and the correct principles of rationality and defeat [section 3.1], (ii) underappreciated the effects of background beliefs (e.g. the prior probabilities assigned to competing hypotheses) on evidential relevance [section 3.2], (iii) ignored the presence of *closure of inquiry* defeaters [section 4.3], (iv) said little or nothing concerning the relevance of epistemic self-trust to rationality [section 4.4] and (v) left little or no room for rational disagreement concerning skeptical theistic defeaters. Perspectival skeptical theism, however, suffers from none of the above shortcomings, and therefore, ought to be strongly preferred to its competitors.

# <u>Chapter 6</u> A Retelling of the Argument from Evil

### 1. An Evidential Argument Redux

The evidential argument from evil, in its simplest form, can be expressed as follows:

- 1. If God were to exist, then there would be no gratuitous evil.
- 2. There is gratuitous evil.
- 3. Therefore, God does not exist.

The crucial premise of this argument is premise (2), which claims that there are some evils which are not necessary (i) for obtaining any greater good, (ii) for preventing any worse evil or (iii) as pre-conditions for the instantiation of other great goods. Usually, defense of this premise is accompanied by an appeal to various examples of seemingly terrible evils. Common examples include such things as the Lisbon earthquake, the cases of *Bambi* and *Sue* from chapter 1, or for those interested in raising difficulties for particular religious traditions, one might include the prospect of an eternal hell. All such cases, at first (second & third) glance, appear morally unjustifiable. Such considerations, then, constitute a brief summary of the evidential case of the atheologian in support of premise (2).

Theists with the desire to maintain intellectual respectability, then, must respond in some way to this argument. Most often, the primary strategy has been to attack premise (2) by constructing a description of a possible world which includes affirmations of God's existence and the existence of the sorts of evil at issue (save their being gratuitous). By constructing such possible world descriptions, the theist (or perhaps just some objective evaluator of the argument) is providing reasons to think that premise (2) is *false* (i.e. by showing the consistence of God's existence and the existence of *apparently* gratuitous evil). This is the strategy of defense and theodicy.

There is a subtle difference between offering a theodicy and offering a defense; namely, when offering a theodicy, one presents possible world descriptions as descriptions of the *actual* world. That is, theodicists claim to have the truth about the matter concerning the morally sufficient reasons God has for permitting the various evils in question. In the case of defense, however, such possible world descriptions are simply presented as true, *for all we know*. That is, such descriptions are consistent with what we take ourselves to know about the world, and they are treated as more or less plausible, depending on how well the more speculative propositions composing the possible world description under question fit with the background beliefs of a given epistemic perspective. As a result, a defense which persuades one person that the evidential argument does not succeed may be entirely unmoving for another person.

So the strategies of defense and theodicy are aimed at constructing hypotheses which conflict with the atheistic hypothesis that God (i.e. following the Anselmian conception) does not exist. Thus, both are aimed at changing the ways in which we evaluate the evidence of evil and its implications for the truth of the matter concerning God's existence. An alternative response which argues that we cannot assess the evidential significance of evil *at all* is due to the traditional skeptical theist, which I have called the No Weight Skeptical Theist (henceforth, 'NWST').

According to NWST, the projects of defense and theodicy are misguided to begin with because they assume humans have a better handle on the realm of value than is actually the case. But theodicists and defenders are too optimistic by the lights of NWST's. Rather, they should cease looking for morally sufficient reasons for God to permit the evils we find in the world since we are bound to come up empty handed.

Such an admonition cuts against both theodicists and the evidential argument, however, since if humans were really cognitively deficient in this way, then there would be no way to substantiate the truth *or* falsity of premise (2). Thus, although the first strategy of searching for morally sufficient reasons to permit evil is thrown out by NWST, they advance in its place a new skeptical strategy which is thought to entirely remove the evidential relevance of our experiences of evil against the existence of God. In other words, NWST avers that we should be agnostic concerning the truth or falsity of premise (2).

Thus, the skeptical theist's response to the argument from evil is at bottom an epistemic response, which is grounded in a particular theory of epistemic rationality. As a result, if that theory of epistemic rationality is mistaken, then the NWST response to the evidential argument from evil will be unhelpful. But there is something right about the intuition which undergirds NWST; that is, there is an intuition behind skeptical theism that indeed rightly counsels caution when attempting to discern the evidential implications of our experiences of evil. Consequently, even if we reject NWST as a response to the argument from evil, we need not reject the validity of the skeptical theistic intuition which underlies it. Instead it is open to us to reject the theory of epistemic rationality on which NWST is based and put forward an alternative theory of epistemic rationality that, when combined with the basic skeptical theistic intuition, produces a new response to the evidential argument from evil.

*Perspectival Skeptical Theism* accomplishes this very task. Just like NWST, *perspectival skeptical theism* is an epistemic attack on the reasonability of belief in premise (2) of the argument from evil. However, the most crucial difference between these two versions of skeptical theism has to do with what is necessary to enable reasonable belief in the existence of gratuitous evil. NWST presupposes that the skeptical theistic intuition *only* affects the evidential support relation which holds between our experiences of

apparently gratuitous evil and the reality of gratuitous evil. And while *perspectival skeptical theism* allows that the evidential support relation might in fact be defeated, either fully or partially by the skeptical theistic intuition, it does not suggest that this is the only object of epistemic defeat. According to *perspectival skeptical theism*, in addition to the possibility of evidential defeat, it is possible that someone considering the argument from evil might acquire a closure of inquiry defeater. And such a defeater would become relevant whenever the degree of epistemic self-trust of the individual in question was undermined by considering the skeptical theistic intuition.

In addition to the greater degree of plausibility gained from its underlying theory of rationality, there is a fundamental advantage to *perspectival skeptical theism* concerning its relationship to the project of defense. Whereas NWST was intended to replace the project of defense, *perspectival skeptical theism* can be more easily combined with the project in fruitful ways. For even if one doubts that the skeptical theistic intuition should have any effect on one's evaluation of the evidence of evil, one may still acquire a closure of inquiry defeater. Thus, *perspectival skeptical theism* allows for someone to engage with the project of defense, perhaps even determining that no defenses are adequate to overcome the *evidential* significance of evil, while at no point being enabled to reasonably believe that their evaluation of the evidence is sufficient for reasonable belief. As a result, *perspectival skeptical*  *theism* need not serve as an alternative to, or fallback position for, theodicy or defense. Rather, it can supplement such strategies to provide an even more formidable challenge to the soundness of the evidential argument from evil; that is, one which demands of both the theist and atheologian a deep degree of epistemic integrity and self-awareness.

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