

# SKEPTICAL THEISM, ATHEISM, AND TOTAL EVIDENCE SKEPTICISM

Michael Bergmann

[pre-print: published in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer (Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 209-20.

In his “Skeptical Theism and Skeptical Atheism,” John Schellenberg presses a number of interesting objections and challenges to theistic belief, which are supposed to cause special trouble for *skeptical* theists.<sup>1</sup> In this short paper I will not be able to address all of his remarks, but I will address some of the most important concerns he raises. I’ll begin, in section I, by offering some clarificatory comments concerning skeptical theism. In section II, I will evaluate an atheistic argument that Schellenberg finds particularly impressive. In section III, I’ll examine the view Schellenberg calls ‘total evidence skepticism’ and consider its bearing on theistic belief. In the final section I’ll consider whether Schellenberg is right in thinking that skeptical theism commits one to total evidence skepticism and to some of the other skeptical theses he proposes.

## I. Clarifying the Skeptical Theist’s Skepticism

Skeptical theism has a skeptical component and a theistic component.<sup>2</sup> Schellenberg begins his paper by describing the skeptical component of skeptical theism (which can be endorsed by both agnostics and atheists as well as by theists) as the endorsement of the following three skeptical theses:

- S1      We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative, relative to the property of figuring in a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting such things as hiddenness or horrors, of the possible goods there are.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper appears in this volume. Unless otherwise noted, page references are to this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The theistic component is just the traditional view that God, a supreme and perfect personal being, exists.

- S2 We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative, relative to the property of figuring in a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting such things as hiddenness or horrors, of the possible evils there are.
- S3 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, relative to the property of figuring in a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting such things as hiddenness or horrors, of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.<sup>3</sup>

To this description of the skeptical component, which is fine as far as it goes, I would like to add two clarificatory remarks.<sup>4</sup>

First, skeptical theists don't claim that their skeptical theses undermine all arguments from evil. S1-S3 say that we don't have good reason for thinking the goods, evils, and entailments between them (or GEEs) that we know of are representative of the GEEs that there are. These skeptical theses are used by the skeptical theist to target inductive inferences from God-justifying reasons we can think of (by reflection on known GEEs) to the conclusion that there are no God-justify reasons for permitting the evils we know of. Some arguments from evil explicitly rely on such an inference.<sup>5</sup> Others try to avoid relying on such an inference but arguably fail to avoid doing so.<sup>6</sup> But this doesn't show that *all* arguments from evil rely on inductive inferences based on known GEEs. In previous work, I have explicitly refrained from saying that they all do and I'm inclined to think that some don't.<sup>7</sup> So Schellenberg is mistaken when he says (p. 2) that the skeptical theist's skepticism "is supposed to work for just any argument from hiddenness or horrors".<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> As he notes, his S1-S3 include more than my formulation of the skeptical theist's skeptical theses ST1-ST3, but the extra material included in S1-S3 is an accurate statement of how I think they should be understood, so I have no objection to them.

<sup>4</sup> For further clarificatory comments, see Bergmann (2009: 376-81). For an account of skeptical theism that isn't tied so closely to the skeptical theses mentioned here, see McBrayer 2010.

<sup>5</sup> See Rowe (1979, 1988, and 1991).

<sup>6</sup> In Bergmann (2009: 382-5), I contend that arguments from evil proposed by Draper and by Schellenberg fall into this category.

<sup>7</sup> See Bergmann (2009: 381) where I set the question issue aside. And see Howard-Snyder and Bergmann (2004: 23-25) where we note that Tooley's argument from evil seems not to be undermined by the skeptical theist's skepticism.

<sup>8</sup> Schellenberg tells us (pp. 2 & 7) that the skeptical theist's skepticism had better work against *every* argument from evil "if it wants to do important work for theism in philosophy" or be "really powerful as a theistic form of

Second, the skeptical theses support only a limited skepticism about certain kinds of access to God's reasons. (This will be important in section IV.) One way to discover what reasons might be available to God for permitting evils is to reflect on the GEEs that we can think of, trying to piece together from such material potential God-justifying reasons for permitting horrific suffering or divine hiddenness.<sup>9</sup> If, in doing that, one can't think of any God-justifying reasons for permitting such evils, one might inductively infer (from the sample of possible reasons considered) that no reasons for permitting such evils are God-justifying. The skeptical theses tell us that *that* is not a good way to discover reasons God might have for permitting evil because we should have doubts about whether the sample (on which the inductive inference would be based) is relevantly representative. But the fact that we can't tell *just by reflecting on the GEEs that we know of*<sup>10</sup> what God's reasons are doesn't imply that we have no way at all of discovering various things about God's reasons. For example, since I know that I exist, I know that God (if God exists) didn't have an all-things-considered good reason to permanently annihilate me a short time ago (if he did, I wouldn't be here). Likewise, if you knew that some action was intrinsically wrong for anyone to perform, regardless of the consequences, then you could thereby know that a morally perfect being like God would have an all-things-considered

---

reasoning". That seems a rather high standard. If an insight or objection is plausible and useful for undermining many atheistic arguments, that makes it important and powerful. It's true that, as I've mentioned before (see Bergmann [2009: 380-81]), the skeptical theist's skepticism doesn't show that theism is true. But it can do important and powerful work for theism without showing that theism is true; it can do this by undermining a large number of reasons for thinking that theism is false. It seems rather demanding and implausible to say that no important work for theism can be done unless one shows that atheism is false or unreasonable.

<sup>9</sup> The idea here is that, although God hates evil, he would permit it if doing so were not intrinsically wrong or unloving and the overall consequences of doing so were sufficiently positive. Whether the overall consequences of doing so are sufficiently positive will depend, in part, on what possible goods and possible evils there are and on what entailments hold between them.

<sup>10</sup> This italicized phrase refers to the method just described of reflecting on consequences of permitting evils in order to discover (via induction from the reasons we're aware of) whether God has a reason to permit evils that aren't intrinsically wrong to permit.

good reason not to perform such an act.<sup>11</sup> Even if we can't tell these things about God's reasons using the method described at the beginning of this paragraph, that doesn't mean that we can't tell them in other ways.

Another way to put this point is to say that S1-S3 are claiming that we have no *induction-friendly* good reasons for thinking that the GEEs that we know of are relevantly representative of the GEEs that there are. Such reasons (for thinking known GEEs are relevantly representative) are induction-friendly only if they aren't dependent on previous knowledge of the conclusion one is trying to reach inductively (via inference from those known GEEs). So, for example, if we knew on independent grounds (e.g., moral intuition about what is intrinsically wrong, no matter what the consequences) that it was impossible for there to be a God-justifying reason to permit some evil E, and we also knew (by trying) that we couldn't think of any such reason when we reflected on the GEEs we know of, then we'd know that the GEEs we know of *were* representative of the GEEs there are (in terms of whether they feature in a God-justifying reason for permitting E). But this reason for thinking the GEEs we know of are representative of the GEEs there are would not be induction-friendly, because it depends on previous knowledge that there are no God-justifying reasons for permitting E. Hence, this reason couldn't help us *discover*, via induction from the GEEs we know of, that there are no God-justifying reasons for permitting E. The upshot is that, although the skeptical theist's skepticism says that we can't know via inductive inference from known GEEs that there are no God-justifying reasons for permitting the evils that trouble us, it doesn't say we can't discover in some other way whether there are such reasons.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Similar points are made in Bergmann (2001: n. 27), Bergmann (2009: 391), and more extensively in my Bergmann (2012: 14-16).

<sup>12</sup> Nor is it saying that we can discover or that we, in fact, have some other way of knowing that there are no such God-justifying reasons.

## II. Schellenberg's Argument for Atheism

Schellenberg draws our attention to the following argument from evil:

1. People can have endless opportunities to grow ever deeper into God<sup>13</sup> even if God has prevented horrors altogether. (This is because God is infinitely deep and rich and exclusively good.)
2. People who grow ever deeper into God realize their deepest good. (This is because God is unsurpassable greatness personified.)
3. Therefore, people can achieve their deepest good without horrors being permitted. [from 1 and 2]
4. If people can achieve their deepest good without horrors being permitted, then God will not permit horrors. (This is because God is unsurpassably empathetic.)
5. Therefore, God (if he exists) will not permit horrors. [from 3 and 4]
6. But there are horrors.
7. Therefore, God does not exist. [from 5 and 6]

I agree that premise 6 is obviously true. But Schellenberg says (pp. 4-5) that premises 1, 2, and 4 are obviously true too. I beg to differ. Premise 2 is doubtful because it ignores the possibility of people perpetually and asymptotically approaching, without ever reaching, a limit to their depth of growth—where this limit is insufficient for achieving their deepest good. Premise 1 is doubtful because there may be limits to how deep one can grow into God—limits that can be surpassed (for some person or other) only if God permits horrors.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps we can't think of any reason why permitting horrors is required for opportunities to grow ever deeper into God. But given S1-S3, it's not reasonable to conclude from this that we can see (or that it's reasonable to believe) that there isn't, or isn't likely to be, any such reason.<sup>15</sup> After all, it may be that there

---

<sup>13</sup> I'm not sure I know what it means to grow deeper into God. Since Schellenberg doesn't explain it in this paper, I'll just go with what I take to be one natural construal of the phrase—a construal according to which “growing deeper into God” means becoming more like God in moral character, understanding God better, or having an improved and closer interpersonal relationship with God. To grow *ever* deeper is to *always* be improving in one or more of these ways.

<sup>14</sup> Schellenberg argues (2007: 244) that traditional theists are committed to thinking that some humans realize their deepest good without suffering horrors and suggests that this implies that all humans can realize their deepest good without God permitting horrors. But it's not clear that traditional theists are committed to that premise: perhaps all who will eventually enjoy everlasting union with God will also undergo horrific suffering (after death if not before). In any case, even if some humans can realize their deepest good without suffering horrors, it doesn't follow that (a) they can do so without being *permitted* to suffer horrors that they don't in fact suffer or that (b) all humans can realize their deepest good without suffering horrors.

<sup>15</sup> It's possible that Schellenberg would agree with this sentence given that he says (note 4) that it “seems unlikely that S1-S3 can be accepted by the atheist compatibly with his accepting” the atheistic argument under discussion.

are entailment relations we aren't aware of between *inter alia* possible goods (including the good of certain people growing ever deeper into God) and possible evils (including the permissions of horrors). Given our limited grasp of the realm of GEEs, it is implausible that we can just see that this is false or unlikely.<sup>16</sup> Schellenberg suggests (p. 5) that this sort of response is “a case of implausible reaching, which reason alone can no longer be said to support”. On the contrary, I'd say it is just a sensible sober assessment of our capacities for modal insight into the realm of possible goods, evils, and the logical relations between them.<sup>17</sup>

Premise 4 is also doubtful. To see why, consider these questions: Could an unsurpassably empathetic God permit a person S to suffer horrors even if permitting those horrors isn't required for achieving S's deepest good? Could there be a reason that would justifiedly motivate such a God to permit such a thing? I don't see why not. God might permit a person S to suffer horrors in order to achieve some other very great good, perhaps to enable some other person to achieve her greatest good. We can agree that God wouldn't permit S to suffer horrors for that reason if doing so involved God treating S merely as a means. But there's no good reason to think God couldn't do this without treating S merely as a means. Suppose that (a) in permitting S to suffer horrors (in order for God to achieve some purpose other than bringing about S's achievement of her deepest good), God ensures that he can also bring some great good to S out of that permitted suffering, even though that isn't God's reason for permitting the

---

<sup>16</sup> I should emphasize that although I think our grasp of the realm of GEEs is limited, I also think we have a significant grasp of that realm. Thus, I agree with Schellenberg when he says (p. 3) that “we may nonetheless be the recipients of various *specific* insights about value and modality” and (p. 4) that “we should not delight in darkness”.

<sup>17</sup> His reference (p. 5) to Schellenberg (2007: 254-6) doesn't help. In Schellenberg (2007: 256) he says that it's “inconceivable” that a manifestation of God's infinite attractiveness (without the permission of any horrors—which, he thinks, are more likely to embitter us than attract us) would fail to enable a person to progress ever deeper into relationship with God. According to Schellenberg, God's manifestation of his infinite attractiveness (without permitting horrors) “can immediately be seen by us to be the sort of thing capable of” enabling us to achieve our greatest good. In my view, it is remarks like these about what is inconceivable and what we can immediately see, not any doubts about these remarks, that count as implausible reaching.

suffering and that (b) God knows that if S were aware of the relevant facts and S's affections were rightly ordered towards the good, then S would willingly agree to suffer the horrors in question in order to work with God in achieving the purpose God has in mind. Then it's not at all clear that God wouldn't permit S to suffer horrors if those horrors weren't *required* to achieve S's deepest good.<sup>18</sup> Instead, whether God will permit people to suffer horrors (even if this is not required for them to achieve their deepest good), will depend on what GEEs there are, and this is something we can't see just by reflecting on the GEEs we can think of. These considerations give us ample reason to have serious doubts about premise 4.

Notice that in giving these replies to Schellenberg's argument from evil, I didn't rely solely on the skeptical theist's skepticism. That's because his argument relies in places on some moves and premises that aren't undermined by the skeptical theist's skepticism. Unfortunately, some of these other moves and premises fall prey to other objections, in the ways noted in this section.

### III. Total Evidence Skepticism and Theistic Belief

Total evidence skepticism raises skeptical concerns based on worries about our access to the total evidence. The total evidence relative to a proposition is everything (other than the proposition itself) that bears on the truth of that proposition—everything relevant as it would be seen from a God's-eye perspective. The modus operandi of total evidence skepticism (TES) is to point out that we don't have reflective access (i.e., access on reflection alone) to the total evidence relative to some proposition *p* and to claim that, in light of that fact, we are rationally required to

---

<sup>18</sup> See Plantinga (2000: 493-4) for further discussion.

withhold judgment about p. Although this claim might initially seem plausible, the problem is that for *every* proposition p, we lack reflective access to the total evidence relative to p, including the case where p is the proposition that *if we don't have reflective access to the total evidence relative to a proposition, then we are rationally required to withhold judgment about that proposition*. If TES is going to have significant, persuasive, and yet limited skeptical force, it needs to be formulated in a way that makes it clear when our lack of reflective access to the total evidence causes skeptical problems and when it doesn't.

Schellenberg formulates his favored version of TES as follows: “for many a proposition expressing a belief or potential belief of ours, we have reason to be in doubt or skeptical, about whether the total relevant evidence supports that proposition”.<sup>19</sup> An important question for Schellenberg's TES is this: under what conditions does our recognition that we lack reflective access to the total evidence bearing on p rationally require us to be skeptical about whether the total evidence bearing on p supports p? It's clear that Schellenberg thinks that in some cases it does require us to be skeptical (otherwise his version of TES is uninteresting) and in other cases it doesn't. But it is not clear from his paper in this volume what makes for this difference.

In my view, TES does not give rise to a compelling skeptical worry. It's true that I don't have reflective access to the total evidence bearing on whether I exist or on whether I have hands or on whether I had orange juice for breakfast today or on whether  $2 + 2 = 4$  or on whether I'm currently in extreme pain. But in each of these cases I have knowledge or reasonable belief from which I can infer certain facts about the total evidence bearing on these propositions. For example, I reasonably believe that the total evidence supports the claim that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . I

---

<sup>19</sup> The use of “many” make this statement of TES a little vague. Suppose there were 100 or 200 propositions of which this was true. Would that make Schellenberg's version of TES true? Does it matter what those propositions are?



reasonably believe this even though I don't have reflective access to the total evidence bearing on that claim. The reason I can reasonably believe this about the total evidence is that I know that, for any proposition  $p$ , the total evidence bearing on  $p$  supports  $p$ , if  $p$  is true; likewise, it supports  $\sim p$ , if  $p$  is false. From that knowledge, together with my knowledge that it's true that  $2 + 2 = 4$ , I can conclude that the total evidence supports the claim that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . Something similar applies to the claim that *it's false that my current evidential basis for my belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  is without epistemic force*. When I consider it, I reasonably believe that my belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  is a reasonable one. From that I conclude that it's false that its evidential basis is without epistemic force. And from that I conclude that the total evidence supports the claim that *it's false that my current evidential basis for my belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  is without epistemic force*. In his paper in this volume, Schellenberg doesn't say, of any proposition, that he reasonably believes that the total evidence supports it. But since he doesn't find TES to be a compelling skeptical worry across the board, my guess is that he would have no objection to the sort of response to TES that I've outlined here.

How does this bear on theistic belief? Schellenberg's S4<sup>20</sup> suggests that we should acknowledge that we are in the dark about whether the total evidence supports the claim that *it's false that my evidential basis for my belief that God exists is without epistemic force*. I think a rational theist, one whose theistic beliefs are justified in something like the ways suggested by Alston (1991) or Plantinga (2000),<sup>21</sup> could sensibly respond by saying the following: "When I consider the matter, I reasonably believe that my belief that God exists is a rational one. From

---

<sup>20</sup> S4 says:

We have no good reason for thinking that the considerations opposing the epistemic force of religious experience we know of are representative, relative to the property of (potentially) figuring in an undefeatable defeater of religious experience as justification for theistic belief, of the considerations opposing the epistemic force of religious experience there are.

<sup>21</sup> Throughout this paper, when I talk about a rational theist, I'll have in mind someone whose theistic beliefs are justified in this manner.

that I conclude that it's false that its evidential basis is without epistemic force. And from that I reasonably conclude that the total evidence supports the claim that *it's false that my evidential basis for my belief that God exists is without epistemic force.*"<sup>22</sup> In short, a rational theist could respond to Schellenberg's S4 in the same way one responds when defending any rational belief against objections based on TES.

Similar remarks apply to S5,<sup>23</sup> a principle that suggests that we should acknowledge that we're in the dark about whether the total evidence includes successful proofs of atheism. Just as those who rationally believe that there is an external world and that the universe has been around a long time can rationally infer from these propositions that the total evidence (to which they, admittedly, lack reflective access) does not include any successful proofs that there is no external world or that the universe came into existence only 5 minutes ago, so also rational theists can rationally infer that the total evidence does not include any successful proofs of atheism, either from horrors or hiddenness. This doesn't mean one could never come across compelling and persuasive evidence that it's false that there is an external world or that it's false that the universe came into existence only 5 minutes ago (or that atheism is false). I'm not arguing that such things are impossible. The point is just that from reasonable belief that p, one can infer that the total evidence does not include a successful proof that p is false (since if p is true, the total

---

<sup>22</sup> A rational theist might be less sure about what the evidential basis is for her belief that God exists than she is about the rationality of her belief that God exists, just as a person might be less sure about what the evidential basis is for her belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  than she is about the rationality of her belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$ . But even in that case, the theist could rationally conclude that (a) it's plausible to think her belief that God exists is based on religious experience (e.g., on theistic seemings) and (b) if her belief that God exists is in fact based on religious experience, then the total evidence supports the claim that *it's false that the religious experience on which her belief that God exists is based is without epistemic force*. Likewise, the person who rationally believes that  $2 + 2 = 4$  could rationally conclude that (a) it's plausible to think her belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  is based on a mathematical seeming and (b) if her belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  is in fact based on a mathematical seeming, then the total evidence supports the claim that *it's false that the mathematical seeming on which her belief that  $2 + 2 = 4$  is based is without epistemic force*.

<sup>23</sup> S5 says:

We have no good reason for thinking that the arguments from horrors or hiddenness against theism we know of are representative, relative to the property of (potentially) constituting a successful proof that theism is false, of the arguments from horrors or hiddenness against theism there are.

evidence supports  $p$ , in which case it does not include a *successful* proof that  $p$  is false). The rational theist is simply joining the many others who use this style of reasoning in response to TES when she infers that the total evidence does not include any successful atheistic arguments. She is responding to S5 in the way people respond to TES-based worries about as yet unknown successful proofs that there is no external world or that the universe came into existence only 5 minutes ago.

Schellenberg's view, as I understand it, is that a response to TES, of the sort that I have given above, is just fine when it is applied to a belief such as  $2 + 2 = 4$ , but it doesn't work when it is applied to the belief that God exists. Why not? As was mentioned earlier, the answer isn't clear from his paper.<sup>24</sup> But elsewhere he suggests that our beliefs can escape TES only in cases where (a) the evidence for the beliefs is "so strong" that it leaves "no room" for skeptical doubt or (b) the beliefs are "universal and unavoidable," in part because (practically speaking) we can't get started on inquiry unless we "take the plunge" somewhere in trusting our inclinations to believe, even if it's "only where we have to".<sup>25</sup> This proposal gives rise to many questions. For starters, we need to know what precisely it means for there to be no room for skeptical doubt.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, what does it mean to say we can trust our belief inclinations but only when "we have

---

<sup>24</sup> In his paper, he says that beliefs that are "evidently true" (p. 14) escape the force of TES and that "what seems most obvious to us upon reflection should be given a pass" (p. 15). And he seems to think belief in God's existence doesn't escape the force of TES because the experience on which it is based is not "so intense and clear and enduring as to make it impossible ...not to respond to it believingly" (p. 12). He also seems to think (p. 15) that the premises of his argument for atheism, discussed in section II, escape TES (it would, of course, make sense for him to think that, given that he seems to put weight on that argument; but, for the reasons mentioned in section II, it's a mistake to think this of the premises of his argument for atheism). There are hints, in these remarks, of a standard he has in mind, but no clear statement.

<sup>25</sup> The condition specified in (a) is discussed in Schellenberg (2007: 31-32) and the condition specified in (b) in Schellenberg (2007: 169-75). He seems to acknowledge, in the latter passage, that condition (b) might be satisfied when condition (a) is not; that's why he calls it "taking the plunge" when one goes with condition (b) upon being reminded that our basic picture of reality "might be fundamentally flawed" (p. 173).

<sup>26</sup> There is certainly room to ask standard skeptical questions, even regarding the beliefs about which we are most certain (e.g., "couldn't one feel absolutely certain that one sees  $p$ 's truth clearly, even when  $p$  is false?"). Does the fact that one can ask such a question count as having room for skeptical doubt?

to”? In what sense must the beliefs be unavoidable and universal? Answering such questions will help us to get clear on what this principle is saying. But then further questions arise: Is this quasi-Cartesian epistemic requirement plausible? Do Schellenberg’s own beliefs, on which he relies in defending his views, satisfy this requirement? And is he able to formulate a principle stating the conditions under which beliefs escape TES—one such that belief in that principle satisfies the very conditions it specifies? I would say that the answer is ‘no’ to each of these three questions, just as it is if we focus, instead, on parallel questions in connection with Descartes’ rather demanding epistemic requirements. But if that’s right, then there is no compelling reason for thinking that Schellenberg’s proposed principle causes any trouble for the responses given in this section to the TES-based worries that Schellenberg raises for theistic belief.

Unfortunately, I don’t have the space here to examine Schellenberg’s proposed epistemic principle in any detail. So I’ll just say this for now. Schellenberg could insist on a strict Cartesian standard for justification. But given that standard, very few of our beliefs are going to be justified and Schellenberg’s religious skepticism would be uninteresting. Or he could go with some other standard, less demanding than a strict Cartesian one. But then he will need to argue persuasively *both* that theistic belief doesn’t satisfy that less demanding standard *and* that his particular less demanding standard (rather than some other one that the defender of theistic belief finds plausible) is the correct standard. In my view, Schellenberg has not done this, either in his paper in this volume or in his 2007. I expect that theistic philosophers sympathetic to Alston (1991) and Plantinga (2000) will find the background epistemological views espoused by Schellenberg significantly less well-developed and less compelling by comparison.

#### IV. Skeptical Theism and Total Evidence Skepticism

Can a skeptical theist consistently respond to S4, S5, and TES in the way I just recommended in the previous section? Or is Schellenberg right when he says (p. 11) that the skeptical theist's endorsement of S1-S3 rationally commits her to S4 as well?<sup>27</sup> S1-S3 tell us that we can't tell *just by reflecting on the GEEs we know of* that there are no God-justifying reasons for permitting the horrors and hiddenness that are appealed to in atheistic arguments from evil. Does accepting this commit a theist to thinking that she can't tell that there are no all-things-considered God-justifying reasons for allowing her previous belief in God to be based on grounds that are without epistemic force? No. At most, it commits her to thinking that we can't tell *just by reflecting on the GEEs we know of* that there are no God-justifying reasons for allowing her previous belief in God to be based on grounds that are without epistemic force. But, as noted in my second clarificatory remark about skeptical theism in section I, her having that thought is consistent with her knowing about God's reasons in some other way. In particular, a theist might know in the way described in section III that *it's false that the evidential basis for her previous belief that God exists is without epistemic force*; and she can sensibly conclude from this that God did not have an all-things-considered good reason to make it the case that the evidential basis for her previous belief that God exists is without epistemic force.

Similar points can be made about S5. It may be true that we can't tell *just by reflecting on the attempted proofs of atheism that we know of* that the total relevant evidence includes no

---

<sup>27</sup> He also claims (p. 17) that those who endorse S1-S3 are committed to S5, mentioned in the previous note, and S6, which runs as follows:

S6      We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative, relative to the property of consistency with a person being axiologically ultimate, of the possible goods there are.

successful proofs of atheism. But this doesn't mean that we can't know this in some other way. For example, a rational theist could know this in the way described in the previous section—i.e., by inferring from the fact that God exists (something she reasonably believes) that the total evidence does not include any successful proofs of atheism, either from horrors or hiddenness.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, as I've noted before,<sup>29</sup> the skeptical theist's skepticism doesn't itself justify the belief that God exists or the belief that the evidential basis of one's belief that God exists is not without epistemic force or that the total evidence doesn't include any successful proofs of atheism. Agnostics and atheists can accept the skeptical theist's skepticism without accepting these other things. The point is, rather, that the skeptical theist's skepticism is *consistent with* rational belief that God exists and with rational belief that the evidential basis of one's theistic belief has epistemic force and with rational belief that there are no successful proofs of atheism.

Some readers might still have the following lingering worry: If the skeptical theist's skepticism causes no trouble for theistic belief, why does it cause trouble for atheistic arguments from evil? It causes trouble for atheistic arguments from evil that rely (explicitly or implicitly) on inductive arguments from the GEEs we know of to all the GEEs there are, concluding from our inability to discern any God-justifying reasons for permitting a certain evil that it's false or unlikely that there are any such reasons. Nontheists might try, in their atheistic arguments from horrors or hiddenness, to avoid relying on such inductive inferences. They might, for example, suggest that we can just see, of some actual horror or instance of hiddenness that we know of, that it is intrinsically wrong for God to permit it, no matter how beneficial the consequences of

---

<sup>28</sup> Although I don't have the space to go into it here in any detail, similar points could also be made about S6 (which is given in the previous note). The rational theist can reasonably believe that God is a personal being (i.e., a being capable of things such as loving and knowing and acting). From that she can infer that (a) the total evidence supports the view that God is a personal being and that (b) the claim that God is a personal being is consistent with all the facts, including all the facts about what possible goods there are.

<sup>29</sup> See Bergmann (2009: 380-1).

permitting it (for the sufferer or for others). But it's quite implausible to think, of any of the actual horrors or instances of hiddenness that we know of, that we can *just see* (i.e., that we are noninferentially justified in believing on the basis of intuition) that it is intrinsically wrong for God to temporarily permit them, no matter how beneficial the consequences.<sup>30</sup> Given that it's obviously possible for there to be things far worse than the actual horrors and hiddenness that we know of and that God has to us the relationship of divine creator, master, and care-giver to beloved subject and creature, it's not plausible that it would be *intrinsically wrong* for God to permit such suffering, no matter how beneficial it would be for his creatures to avoid far worse horrors.

Or one might think instead that, just as we can have noninferentially justified perceptual or memory or introspective or mathematical beliefs, we can have a noninferentially justified belief that it's false or unlikely that there are any God-justifying reasons for the permission of certain evils. But once one acknowledges that it's false that *temporarily permitting the horrors or instances of hiddenness that we know of is intrinsically wrong (no matter how beneficial the consequences)*, one should admit that God would permit such things if he had a good reason to do so. S1-S3 give us excellent reason to think we can't tell just by reflecting on the GEEs we know of *that it's false or unlikely that there is a God-justifying reason to permit such things*. Nor is it plausible to think we can tell such things intuitively and directly, on the basis of seemings. Given S1-S3 and that it's not *intrinsically wrong* to permit the horrors and hiddenness we know of, one should be doubtful of the reliability of any seeming that it's false or unlikely

---

<sup>30</sup> For example, suppose that temporarily permitting God's hiddenness from a particular human was necessary for (a) making future everlasting union between that person and God possible and (b) avoiding future everlasting separation between that person and God. It's quite implausible to suggest that we can *just see* that permitting divine hiddenness in such a situation would be intrinsically wrong. It is irrelevant whether permitting temporary divine hiddenness *is in fact* necessary for (a) and (b). The point is that if it were necessary, permitting it wouldn't be wrong, which shows that it's not intrinsically wrong. Schellenberg (2002: 47-48) seems to think otherwise. For a discussion of his argument given there, see Bergmann (2009: 382-3).

that there is a God-justifying reason to permit such things. How could minds as inferior as ours tell, intuitively and directly, whether God has good reasons for permitting such things?<sup>31</sup>

## REFERENCES

Alston, William. 1991. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Bergmann, Michael. 2001. "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil." *Noûs* 35: 278-96.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2009. "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil" in *The Oxford Handbook to Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas Flint and Michael Rea. New York: Oxford University Press, 374-99.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2012. "Commonsense Skeptical Theism" in *Science, Religion, and Metaphysics: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, eds. Kelly Clark and Michael Rea. New York: Oxford University Press, 9-30.

Howard-Snyder, Daniel and Michael Bergmann. 2004. "Evil Does not Make Atheism more Reasonable than Theism" in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Michael Peterson and Raymond VanArragon. Blackwell Publishers, 13-25.

McBrayer, Justin. 2010. "Skeptical Theism" in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. James Fieser (ISSN 2161-0002, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/skept-th/>).

Plantinga, Alvin. 2000. *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press.

---

<sup>31</sup> Thanks to Justin McBrayer, Phil Osborne, Michael Rea, and especially Ross Parker for helpful comments on previous drafts.



Rowe, William. 1979. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16: 225-41.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1988. "Evil and Theodicy." *Philosophical Topics*. 16: 119-32.

\_\_\_\_\_. 1991. "Ruminations about Evil." *Philosophical Perspectives* 5:69-88.

Schellenberg, John. 2002. "What the Hiddenness of God Reveals: A Collaborative Discussion" in *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays*, eds. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser. New York: Cambridge University Press, 33-61.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2007. *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Skeptical Theism and Skeptical Atheism" in this volume.