

Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil

MICHAEL BERGMANN
Purdue University

For twenty years now, William Rowe has been defending an evidential argument from evil.¹ Here's his 1996 summary of that argument:

(E1 is the case of a fawn trapped in a forest fire and undergoing several days of terrible agony before dying. E2 is the case of the rape, beating, and murder by strangulation of a five-year old girl.)

P: No good we know of justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting E1 and E2;
therefore [it is probable that],

Q: no good at all justifies an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting E1 and E2;
therefore [it is probable that],

not-G: there is no omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being. (262–63)²

Recently, however, Rowe has concluded that his attempt to defend the inductive inference from P to Q in the above argument is “weak” and “inadequate”. It is inadequate, he says, because its adequacy requires what he hasn't given us, namely, a “reason to think it likely that the goods we know of... are representative of the goods there are”. Instead of trying to provide us with such a reason, he has decided to “abandon this argument altogether and give what [he] believe[s] is a better argument”.³ This new “better” argument, along with skeptical theism, will be the focus of this paper.

Before turning to that new argument, let's consider the stance Rowe seems to have taken toward skeptical theism. What is skeptical theism? It has two components—a skeptical component and a theistic one. The skeptical theist's theism is just the traditional monotheistic view that there exists an omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly good being. It is the skeptical theist's skepticism that

needs explaining. Rather than attempt a precise definition of her skepticism, I'll simply list here *some* of the skeptical theses that are plausibly associated with it. We can call these 'the skeptical theist's skeptical theses':

- ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible⁴ 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.⁵

Our focus will, for the most part, be on ST1 but having all three skeptical theses before our minds gives us more of a feel for what skeptical theism is.⁶

Each of these three skeptical theses has an initial ring of plausibility that is due to an awareness of our cognitive limitations and the vastness and complexity of reality (cf. Alston 1991, 109). It just doesn't seem unlikely that our understanding of the realm of value falls miserably short of capturing all that is true about that realm.⁷ One can recognize this even if one is not a theist. For an acceptance of the skeptical theist's skepticism can easily be divorced from an acceptance of her theism. Rowe, for example, appears to have *some* sympathy for the above skeptical theses—at least for ST1. He believes that his defense of his original evidential argument from evil is successful only if ST1 is false. And instead of undertaking to show that ST1 is false, he abandons the original argument for a new one. This doesn't show that Rowe is committed to accepting ST1, but it suggests that he recognizes its plausibility. At the very least, it appears that the challenge presented by skeptical theism to Rowe's original evidential argument from evil has contributed to his decision to propose a new evidential argument in its place. Furthermore, he seems to think that his new evidential argument from evil doesn't require him to refute the skeptical theses mentioned above. In the first section of the paper, I will argue that Rowe's new evidential argument *does* depend on a rejection of those skeptical theses and, therefore, that his new argument suffers from the same problem that afflicts his original argument. Then, in the second and longer section, I will defend the skeptical theist's skepticism against objections by Michael Tooley, Bruce Russell and others, thereby supporting my contention that to rely on a rejection of it constitutes a weakness in an argument.

I. Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil

A. The Argument

Rowe's original argument proceeded by moving from P to Q and then from Q to \sim G. With his new argument he tries to move directly from P to \sim G. Sup-

pose we let k be our background knowledge. This will include information that is available to both nontheists and theists who have thought about the problem of evil (so, for example, it includes an awareness of evils such as $E1$ and $E2$ as well as an awareness of many goods). But it doesn't include either G or $\sim G$ or P or $\sim P$. Rowe wants to determine whether someone whose knowledge consisted of k would, upon learning P , have a reason for $\sim G$. One way to decide this question is to find out whether $\Pr(G/P\&k)$ is less than $\Pr(G/k)$. If it is, then P is a reason for $\sim G$ (for a person whose background knowledge is k) since P makes G less likely than it would be otherwise.

How could one go about determining whether $\Pr(G/P\&k)$ is less than $\Pr(G/k)$? Rowe proposes that we rely on Bayes' Theorem, which tells us that:

$$\frac{\Pr(G/P\&k)}{\Pr(G/k)} = \frac{\Pr(P/G\&k)}{\Pr(P/k)}.$$

From this we can see that if $\Pr(P/G\&k) < \Pr(P/k)$ then $\Pr(G/P\&k) < \Pr(G/k)$. So if we can determine that $\Pr(P/G\&k) < \Pr(P/k)$, we will have learned that P is a reason for $\sim G$ since it makes G less likely than it would be otherwise.

But how can we tell whether $\Pr(P/G\&k) < \Pr(P/k)$? Very easily says Rowe. First, we need to take note of the fact that, as Rowe understands P , it is entailed by $\sim G$. If there is no God, then no good we know of justifies God in permitting anything since there is no God to be justified (264–65). And if $\sim G$ entails P , $\Pr(P/\sim G\&k) = 1$. Second, we need to recognize that according to the rule of elimination:

$$\Pr(P/k) = [\Pr(G/k) \times \Pr(P/G\&k)] + [\Pr(\sim G/k) \times \Pr(P/\sim G\&k)].$$

From these observations, our conclusion follows as a matter of simple arithmetic and a couple of seemingly harmless assumptions. Let $m = \Pr(G/k)$ and $n = \Pr(P/G\&k)$. The seemingly harmless assumptions are that both m and n are less than one. Here's the simple arithmetic (beginning with substituting m and n and the values we already know into the above instantiation of the rule of elimination):

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(P/k) &= mn + [(1-m) \times 1] \\ &= mn + [(1-m) \times \{n + (1-n)\}] \\ &= mn + (1-m)n \times (1-m)(1-n) \\ &= [m + (1-m)]n + (1-m)(1-n) \\ &= n + (1-m)(1-n). \end{aligned}$$

Given our assumptions, the product $(1-m)(1-n)$ must be greater than 0. Since $n = \Pr(P/G\&k)$, this proves that $\Pr(P/G\&k) < \Pr(P/k)$. And, as we noted above, this has the result that $\Pr(G/P\&k) < \Pr(G/k)$. So it looks as if Rowe is right that P lowers the probability of G and that P is, therefore, a reason for $\sim G$.⁸

Notice however that, according to Bayes' Theorem, the closer $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is to 1, the larger the ratio of $\Pr(G/P\&k)$ to $\Pr(G/k)$. And the larger that ratio, the less significant P is as a reason for $\sim G$. Rowe recognizes this and insists that he is concerned not just with the question of whether P supports $\sim G$ but also with "the degree of support P provides for $\sim G$ " (270). He concedes (274) that if $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is sufficiently high, then P does not provide a significant degree of support for $\sim G$. In response to this worry, Rowe offers a critique of an argument by Stephen Wykstra for the conclusion that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is extremely high. And on the basis of his rejection of Wykstra's argument he concludes that "we are justified in concluding that we've been given no good reason to think that if God exists the goods that justify him in permitting much human and animal suffering are quite likely to be beyond our ken" (276).

B. An Objection to Rowe's New Argument

The problem with Rowe's argument is that he doesn't clearly address the concern that P fails to provide *significant* support for $\sim G$.⁹ He seems to think that, in response to this worry, he needs to show only that we have no good reason to think $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is high (this is what he argues for in response to Wykstra). But that isn't true. What he needs to show is that we have good reason to think $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is *not* high. Otherwise, he hasn't shown us that P significantly lowers the probability of G. At most he has shown that we've no good reason to deny that P significantly lowers the probability of G. But I take it that his aim is to show that P counts significantly against G, not merely that, *for all we know*, P counts significantly against G. So Rowe needs to give us a reason for thinking that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is not high. If he doesn't, then even if we grant his point that $\Pr(G/P\&k) < \Pr(G/k)$, we aren't forced to concede that his new evidential argument from evil presents a *significant* objection to theism. For *that* concession depends on the assumption that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is not high.

Although Rowe doesn't seem to be aware that the success of his new evidential argument depends on his showing that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is not high, he is not without resources for a response. For there are at least two arguments in his published work that can be thought of as supporting that conclusion. And one of these arguments occurs in the context of his discussion of $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ though he does not suggest that it shows that that probability is not high. But, as I will argue below, the problem with these arguments is that their success depends on a rejection of one or more of the skeptical theist's skeptical theses. And this is something Rowe seemed to want to avoid when he switched from his original evidential argument from evil to his new one. Thus, even if we think of his new evidential argument as being supplemented by these two arguments for the conclusion that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is not high, we may conclude that his new evidential argument from evil suffers from the same weakness that afflicted his original argument. That weakness is its unsupported rejection of the extremely plausible skeptical theses proposed by skeptical theists.

Two claims in the previous paragraph need to be defended. One is that the two published arguments of Rowe's that could be thought of as supporting the

conclusion that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is not high depend for their success on a rejection of one or more of the skeptical theist's skeptical theses. I will defend this claim in section I.C. The other is that the skeptical theses that Rowe needs to reject are extremely plausible. In section II I will defend this claim and expose the weaknesses of several published objections to ST1.

C. Two Arguments that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is not High

Here's the first argument of Rowe's that could be viewed as support for denying that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is high:

If we do apply the parent analogy, the conclusion about God that we should draw is something like the following: When God permits horrendous suffering for the sake of some good, if that good is *beyond our ken*, God will make every effort to be consciously present to us during our period of suffering, will do his best to explain to us why he is permitting us to suffer, and will give us special assurances of his love and concern during the period of the suffering. Since enormous numbers of human beings undergo prolonged, horrendous suffering without being consciously aware of any such divine presence, concern, and explanations, we may conclude that if there is a God, the goods for the sake of which he permits horrendous human suffering are more often than not goods we know of. (276)

Suppose we conceded that the conclusion of this argument could be derived from k . Then k would enable us to conclude that if God exists, it is likely that we would know of the goods that justify permission of E1 and E2. From this we could reasonably conclude that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is not high.

This sort of argument has been called 'the argument from divine silence' since one of its crucial premises is that much human suffering is not accompanied by any comforting communication from God.¹⁰ We can state this premise as follows:

- (1) If God exists and the goods that justify God in permitting E1 and E2 are beyond our ken, then it is likely that we would not have divine silence (i.e., it is likely that we would at least have assurances of God's love and of the fact that there *is* a good that justifies God in permitting such horrendous evils even though we don't know what that good is).

As Rowe points out, the plausibility of (1) has to do with an analogy theists like to employ—the analogy between God and human parents. If the goods for the sake of which human parents permit their child to suffer are beyond the ken of the child, the parents make every effort to let their child know that she is loved and that there is a good reason for the permitted suffering though that reason is beyond the child's ken.

Unfortunately, premise (1) depends on a prior rejection of ST1. To see this, consider why it is that people accept (1). It begins with a recognition of the plausibility of:

- (2) If God exists and the goods that justify God in permitting E1 and E2 are beyond our ken, then either
- (a) we wouldn't have divine silence
- or
- (b) there is some good that justifies God in permitting divine silence.

Then the proponent of (1) assumes that (2)(a) is much more likely than (2)(b). But to assume that, the proponent of (1) must think that it is likely that

- (3) No good justifies God in permitting divine silence.¹¹

But how could a proponent of (1) come to any reasonable conclusion about how likely it is that there is no such good? She could rely on

- (4) No good we know of justifies God in permitting divine silence.

But the inference from (4) to the likelihood of (3) is basically the same as the inference from P to the likelihood of Q. Consequently it too seems to depend on a rejection of ST1; it too seems to take for granted that the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are.¹² So this way of supporting the conclusion that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is not high doesn't avoid what Rowe seems to want to avoid—namely, reliance on a rejection of the skeptical theses of the skeptical theist.¹³

Let's turn to the other argument of Rowe's that can be thought of as supporting the conclusion that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is not high:

In the first place, unless we are excessively utilitarian, it is reasonable to believe that the goods for the sake of which [God] permits much intense human suffering are goods that either are or include good experiences of the humans that endure the suffering. I say this because we normally would not regard someone as morally justified in permitting intense, involuntary suffering on the part of another, if that other were not to figure significantly in the good for which that suffering was necessary. We have reason to believe, then, that the goods for the sake of which much human suffering is permitted will include conscious experiences of these humans, conscious experiences that are themselves good. Now the conscious experiences of others are among the sorts of things we do know. And we do know the beings who undergo the suffering. So if such goods do occur we are likely to know them. (1986, 244)

The idea here is this. If a good that would justify God in permitting E2 (the case of the little girl) must include conscious human experience and we are likely to be familiar with the goods that include conscious human experience, then we are likely to know of any good that would justify God in permitting E2. Now suppose that both that conditional and its antecedent were a part of k. Then

we might think that it is also a part of *k* that we are likely to know of any good that would justify God in permitting E2. This makes it reasonable to think that $\text{Pr}(P/G\&k)$ is not high.

This argument seems to depend on a rejection of the following skeptical thesis:

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.

This skeptical thesis is fairly similar to ST1. And it is plausible for the same sorts of reasons (to be discussed in section II). Thus, I think it fair to throw ST1* in with the other skeptical theses and conclude that this second way of supporting the conclusion that $\text{Pr}(P/G\&k)$ is not high also fails to avoid relying on a rejection of one of the skeptical theses endorsed by the skeptical theist.

This concludes my defense of the claim that Rowe's new evidential argument, even if supplemented by one or both of the arguments considered in this subsection, involves a rejection of the skeptical theist's skeptical theses. Thus, his new evidential argument from evil is inadequate in the very same way Rowe thinks his original argument is inadequate.

II. In Support of the Skeptical Theses

Before looking at some objections to the skeptical theist's skeptical theses, I want to underscore their *prima facie* plausibility. Let's focus first on ST1:

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

The claim here isn't that we have good reason for thinking that the goods we know of *aren't* representative of the goods there are. Rather, the claim is that we have no good reason to oppose the suggestion that the goods we know of are representative of only a minor portion of the goods there are and that many (or even most) of the goods beyond our ken are far greater than and significantly different from any of the goods with which we are familiar. (Of course, given *k* alone, we have no good reason to endorse this suggestion either.) Notice that the skepticism recommended by ST1 is extremely modest and completely appropriate even for those who are agnostic about the existence of God.¹⁴ It is just the honest recognition of the fact that it wouldn't be the least bit surprising if reality far outstripped our understanding of it. There is nothing bold or dogmatic or even theistic about ST1. Nor is it excessively skeptical.

Similar remarks apply to ST2 (which has to do with the possible evils there are). And, as I said earlier, they also apply to ST1* (which has to do with the

possible goods there are that involve conscious human experiences). After all, what reason do we have to think that our current familiarity with conscious human experience (both actual and possible) provides us with much information about *all* the possible goods there are involving conscious human experience?¹⁵ The fact that the goods we know of might not be representative of the goods there are is, in itself, a reason to be open to the suggestion that the conscious human experiences with which we are familiar might not be representative of the conscious human experiences there are. For it may be that enjoyment of goods that are very different from those with which we are familiar would lead to conscious experiences that are very different from—and far more enjoyable than—those with which we are familiar. Furthermore, it wouldn't be at all surprising if our powers for comprehending and appreciating goods are currently but *contingently* limited—perhaps even extremely so. Who's to say in what ways those powers could be increased (and still be *our* powers)? If they could be dramatically increased then, even if they never are, there may well be *possible* conscious experiences we have never dreamed of.

The idea isn't just that we don't know for certain that the possible positive conscious human experiences we are aware of are representative of the possible positive conscious human experiences there are. Rather, it is that we don't even have a good reason to think that this is likely. Consider someone who has experienced no greater pleasure than the temporary absence of pain. Suppose that no one has ever told her of a more pleasant experience and that she cannot even imagine one. That person would be *mistaken* to conclude that the possible positive conscious experiences she is aware of are representative of the possible positive conscious experiences there are. She would also be *unreasonable* to draw such a conclusion for she has no good reason to endorse it. But the very same point applies to us. True, our actual experience and imagination include more than hers do when it comes to positive conscious experience. But we really have no idea whether or not our experiences, like hers, are only a very small and unrepresentative sample of the possible positive conscious experiences there are.

A natural response here (on the part of those who recognize the plausibility of ST1 and ST1*) is to say "Perhaps there are goods unknown to us that are so great that their occurrence outweighs the horrendous evils that humans experience. Nevertheless, the permission of the horrendous evils that occur around us isn't in any way *necessary* for the obtaining of such goods". But how could one know *that* if the goods in question aren't even known to us? Furthermore, that response seems to involve a rejection of ST3. For though it is true that we often aren't *aware of* any entailment relations between the permission of evils involving human suffering and possible goods involving conscious human experience (or any other goods for that matter), we can't, if we accept ST3, infer from that that *there are no* such entailment relations. If we could be reasonably confident that our modal intuiting enabled us to canvass all or most of modal space or that the region of modal space we have canvassed was representative

of the rest of it (with respect to the existence of the entailment relations in question), then perhaps we could safely reject ST3. But it doesn't look as if we can be reasonably confident of such things. This isn't to say that we can never be reasonably confident in any of the things we believe on the basis of modal intuition. Far from it. It's just to say that a failure to identify an entailment relation of a certain kind isn't always a good indication that there is no such entailment relation. This is a fairly modest variety of modal skepticism.¹⁶

Thus, initially at least, ST1, ST2, ST3 and ST1* appear to be extremely plausible theses. They merely assert that we lack good reasons for thinking certain questionable things. Until such reasons are given, the sensible thing for both the theist and the nontheist to do is to accept these skeptical theses.¹⁷

A. Objection 1: Tooley's Argument

Let's turn now to some reasons that have been proposed for rejecting ST1. They are, it seems to me, quite unimpressive. The weakest of the three I will consider is proposed by Michael Tooley. Both Rowe and Daniel Howard-Snyder take Tooley's argument to be offered as support for the conclusion that the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are.¹⁸ In fairness to Tooley, it may be that Rowe and Howard-Snyder are mistaken in interpreting him as arguing against ST1. And that may explain why Tooley's argument fails so completely to lend support to the conclusion that ST1 is false. On the other hand, given that *that* conclusion is just the sort of conclusion that Tooley needs in the context in which his argument appears, it is also understandable that Rowe and Howard-Snyder have interpreted him as they have. I will first lay out the context of Tooley's argument and then explain why his argument fails.

Tooley is considering a way of determining whether God would be justified in permitting some evil E. It requires one to examine each possible good there is and to make a judgment about whether E is both outweighed by and such that its permission is required for the obtaining of that good.¹⁹ He calls this way of making this determination 'the first route'. And he wants to consider whether our having the actual limited moral knowledge we do (instead of being morally omniscient) prevents us from taking the first route. He first argues that it is extremely problematic to think that there are moral properties whose moral significance is inaccessible to us. For example, he says that it is "extremely problematic" to think that a *familiar* good-making property of states of affairs could fail to be appreciated as such.²⁰ Thus, he rejects the idea that there are good states of affairs with which we are perfectly familiar but whose goodness is completely unknown to us. And from this he concludes that if our limited moral knowledge were to prevent us from taking the first route, it would have to be due to there being good states of affairs with which we aren't familiar—i.e., goods that are unknown to us—rather than to there being familiar states of affairs whose goodness is unknown to us. He makes this point more generally as follows:

But epistemic accessibility [i.e., the idea that if a state of affairs with which we are familiar is good, we can tell that it is good] means that if it is true that some particular property is morally significant [and such that it prevents us from taking the first route], the property must be one with which we are not acquainted. Is it possible that there are such properties? Yes, that is certainly possible, and because it is, it is possible that there are basic moral truths [e.g., truths such as *G is a possible good state of affairs*] of which we have no knowledge. But is that possibility sufficient to block the first route? No, it is not. (1991, 114)

Notice that he agrees that there may be moral properties with which we are unacquainted. This suggests that there may be good-making properties of states of affairs with which we are unacquainted (or, to put it more plainly, there may be goods we don't know of). But if he is suggesting that there may be goods we don't know of, how can he say that this possibility doesn't block the first route? After all, we can't very well examine those goods we don't know of to see if they justify God in permitting some evil E.

So, before we even get to Tooley's argument, we are left with unanswered questions that make it difficult for us to discern what that upcoming argument is intended to establish. Does he think there may be possible goods we don't know of? If he does, then why isn't that sufficient to block the first route which requires us to examine each good there is and make certain judgments about it? If he doesn't, then why does he confess that there may be moral properties with which we are unacquainted? A natural place to look for answers to these questions is Tooley's argument—the one that Rowe and Howard-Snyder had in mind—which he gives in the three paragraphs immediately following the passage quoted above. And one natural set of answers to expect is the one Rowe and Howard-Snyder think Tooley seeks to give: that there are possible goods we don't know of and that this doesn't block the first route because the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are.

But if we look to Tooley's argument for this answer—or any answer—to these questions, we will be disappointed. The argument focuses on the alleged fact that for the last few thousand years, humans haven't discovered any new good-making properties. The conclusion is summed up like this:

The thrust of the argument, in short, is that the discovery of a new property which is morally significant in itself is an extremely rare occurrence. That being so, [it is unlikely that] new morally significant properties will be discovered. (1991, 115)

In other words, Tooley has given us an argument for the conclusion that it is unlikely that we will discover goods previously unknown to us. But even if his argument succeeds in establishing this conclusion²¹ it simply fails to address the crucial question I mentioned in the previous paragraph, namely, Does Tooley think there *are* goods we don't know of? More importantly for our purposes,

this conclusion doesn't seem to have any bearing on whether the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are (contrary to what Rowe and Howard-Snyder reasonably expect from Tooley). It tells us only that the goods we currently know of are representative of the goods likely to be discovered by us. But no reason is given for thinking that the goods likely to be discovered by us are representative of the goods there are.

We can put this same criticism another way (without imputing to Tooley any views on the representativeness of goods known to us). To take the first route, says Tooley, involves forming a judgment about each of the goods there are. And he seems to acknowledge that our actual moral knowledge may be limited in the sense that there may be goods beyond our ken. But he thinks this creates no problem for those taking the first route. For it is highly unlikely that we would ever discover any of the goods that are now beyond our ken. But so what? Are our dismal prospects for future improvement supposed to make us optimistic about our ability to make informed judgments about each of the goods there are? I can't see how. This is a very puzzling and unpersuasive line of reasoning. As an argument against ST1, it is quite underwhelming.²²

B. Objection 2: Russell's "Blue Crow" Argument

The next argument against ST1 that I want to look at is proposed by Bruce Russell:

... the view that there are reasons beyond our ken that would justify God, if he exists, in allowing all the suffering we see [is] like the view that there are blue crows beyond our powers of observation. Once we have conducted the relevant search for crows (looking all over the world in different seasons and at crows at different stages of maturity), we are justified in virtue of that search in believing there are no crows beyond our powers of observation which are relevantly different from the crows we've seen. If after the relevant search we weren't justified in believing that, then we would have to remain skeptical about all generalizations about crows. What else could we do that would justify us in believing there are no crows beyond our powers of observation that are relevantly different than the crows we've seen? How else could we be justified in believing that there are no very shy, very cunning, very able crows that are blue but hide whenever we try to look for them? Similarly, once we've conducted the relevant search for moral reasons to justify allowing the relevant suffering (thinking hard about how allowing the suffering would be needed to realize sufficiently weighty goods, reading and talking to others who have thought about the same problem), we are justified in believing that there are no morally sufficient reasons for allowing that suffering. (1996, 197)

Finding no blue crows after looking all over the world in different seasons and at crows at different stages of maturity justifies the belief that there are no blue crows we haven't observed.²³ Likewise, says Russell, discovering no God-justifying goods after an intellectual search for God-justifying goods (one that

involves thinking hard and talking to others who have thought hard about the question) justifies the belief that there are no God-justifying goods beyond our ken. That, more or less, is the argument. Is it convincing?

No, for obvious reasons that have been drawn to our attention by Alston and Howard-Snyder.²⁴ If we search for blue crows in Indiana and find none, that is a good reason to believe there are no blue crows in Indiana only if (i) our visual apparatus is capable of detecting blue crows and (ii) the search covered a representative part of Indiana (representative with respect to the crow population that is). In Russell's blue crow case, conditions of both sorts are satisfied. But, in the case of identifying possible goods, we have no reason to think that conditions of either sort are satisfied. We know that all blue crows will be blue and large enough for us to see with the naked eye. But we don't have any good reason to think that all or even most goods can be discovered via an intellectual search conducted by humans. (It's true, as Russell points out (1996, 198–99), that an intellectual search is just the sort of thing that reveals possible goods to us. But this is no reason to assume that all goods (or even a representative portion of them) can be discovered by humans via such a search.) Likewise, because we know the size and geography of Indiana we are able to select representative parts of Indiana to be searched. But we don't know the "size" of the realm of possible goods and so we are completely in the dark about whether or not the sort of intellectual search we are capable of will discover a representative sample. So Russell's "blue crow" objection to ST1 also seems to be quite unimpressive.

C. Objection 3: Skeptical Theism Leads to Inappropriate Skepticism

The third of the three objections to ST1 that I want to consider is given by several authors.²⁵ Its main idea is that skepticism with respect to whether the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are leads to other objectionable kinds of skepticism. For example, according to Russell (1996, 196–97), if one accepts ST1, then one ought to be skeptical about whether the earth is more than 100 years old. After all, for all we know, God exists and had some good reason for creating an old-looking earth 100 years ago. Similarly, according to Gale (1996, 208–9), if one accepts ST1 then one ought to be skeptical about the existence of the external world. After all, for all we know, there is an evil demon making it seem to us like there is an external world when in fact there isn't.

This sort of objection to ST1 is more impressive than the other two just considered but it is still rather weak. The assumption behind both Gale's and Russell's formulations of the objection is that it would be ridiculous to have the doubts they mention. They expect us to see that it wouldn't be sensible to take the possibility that God exists and had good reasons for making an old-looking earth 100 years ago as a reason to have serious doubts about the earth being more than 100 years old. Likewise, they expect us to see that it wouldn't be

reasonable to take the possibility that there exists a Cartesian demon out to deceive us as a reason to have serious doubts about the existence of the external physical world. I have no problem with these expectations. I agree with Russell and Gale that the doubts they mention in their two examples aren't sensible doubts. But the reason the doubts they mention aren't sensible is that the beliefs they concern are rationally held with a very high degree of confidence and the possibilities mentioned are ones we (rightly) find it very difficult to take seriously as grounds for doubts. Now contrast those beliefs with the belief that, *because you have tried your best to think of what possible goods there are, you have a fairly good idea of what possible goods there are*. Is that belief sensibly held with anything like the degree of confidence with which one properly believes that the earth is more than 100 years old or that there is an external world? Certainly not. And what about the possibility that the goods we know of aren't representative of the goods there are? Is that a possibility—like the possibility that we are being radically deceived by a Cartesian demon or that God made an old-looking earth 100 years ago—that is difficult to take seriously? Again, certainly not. My discussion at the beginning of section II in support of ST1 makes it plain that it is very easy and sensible to take that possibility seriously.

If we want a skeptical thesis parallel to ST1, we should consider the following hypothesis about possible external world constituents. Let's say that a possible external world constituent is, roughly, something physical (vs. something ghostly or spiritual or abstract) whose existence is compatible with the actual (vs. currently believed) laws of nature.²⁶ Now consider

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.

H is more like ST1 than is the Cartesian demon hypothesis. And the skepticism encouraged by H is far easier to take seriously than is the skepticism recommended by the Cartesian demon hypothesis. No one would suggest that acceptance of H forces us to be skeptical about the existence of the external world or the past. Why then should acceptance of ST1 force us to be skeptical about such things? Furthermore, even if one finds H doubtful, this won't show that ST1 is doubtful. For our doubts about H (if, indeed, we have any) arise because the source and extent of our knowledge of the external world is extremely impressive—much more so than the source and extent of our knowledge of the realm of value, of what goods there are and what they are like.

The persuasive force of this third objection to ST1 (if it has any at all) depends entirely on the false assumption that it is *excessively skeptical* to have any serious doubts about whether the goods we know of are representative of the goods there are.²⁷ Those proposing this third objection appeal to our reasonable disapproval of excessive skepticism and then try to get us to disap-

prove of ST1 on the grounds that it involves excessive skepticism. But having doubts about the representativeness of the goods we know of is *not* excessively skeptical. The possibility that the goods we know of aren't representative of the goods there are is a live possibility, one that we are sensible to consider and take seriously.²⁹ It is not remote and far-fetched in the way the Cartesian demon and the 100-year-old earth possibilities are. It's not as if the skeptical theist, in proposing ST1, is grasping at straws and trying to create doubts where there is no reason to have doubts. Similar remarks apply to ST1*, ST2 and ST3.

In the interest of fairness, I would like to take the time to say what I think is right about this third objection to the skeptical theist's skepticism and to consider a slightly more plausible development of it. What's right about the objection is its demand that skeptical theists be consistent in their skepticism instead of applying it only when it suits their agenda. That is a perfectly legitimate demand. My only complaint is with the charge that consistency requires the skeptical theist to be doubtful about the earth being more than 100 years old or about the existence of the external world. For there doesn't seem to be any good reason to think the skeptical theist *must* extend her skepticism to these matters. What those who propose this sort of objection to skeptical theism owe us is a clear account of how it is that the skepticism involved in skeptical theism *commits* the skeptical theist to some objectionable sort of skepticism.

A more plausible attempt to provide such an account—i.e., more plausible than the attempts discussed above—appears in Russell's 1996 (197–98). He asks us to consider a case where a human onlooker (we'll call him Stan) observes an evil like E1 or E2 and refrains from intervening. To avoid needless objections to Russell's argument, let's beef the story up by saying that Stan can easily intervene and that he can see no serious harm that would come to him as a result of his intervening to prevent the evil in question. Russell says that if one endorses the skeptical theist's skeptical theses, then one should be agnostic about whether Stan's inaction is wrong. For suppose we are skeptical enough to admit that there may well be some good which outweighs the evil of E1 and E2 and which can be achieved only if God refrains from preventing E1 and E2 (or something as bad or worse). Then, says Russell, we should also admit that there may be some good that outweighs E1 and E2 and which can be achieved only if *Stan* refrains from preventing E1 and E2.

The natural first reaction to this way of defending the third objection is to say "Even if we can't tell whether there is an outweighing good in Stan's case, we *can* be sure that it isn't what is motivating him since it is reasonable to think that he, like us, can't see what that good might be. But in the case involving God, our inability to tell whether there is an outweighing good leaves us in the dark about whether there is a morally adequate motivation for divine inaction since God, being omniscient, would have such a motivation if there were such a good. So although we can be reasonably sure that Stan's inaction is unjustified, we should remain agnostic about whether divine inaction would be unjustified."

tified". Russell anticipates this objection. (1996, 198) It is based, he says, on a misunderstanding. He wants to evaluate actions, not persons or their motives. As far as I can tell, he wants to consider whether or not:

- A: There is some good G such that (a) it outweighs the evil permitted by Stan's inaction, (b) the permission of that evil is necessary for the obtaining of G and (c) were G appropriately²⁹ to motivate Stan's inaction, his inaction would be justified.

If there is such a good, then, says Russell, there is some *justifying reason* for Stan's inaction even if Stan or his motives should be evaluated negatively due to the fact that his inaction is not motivated by this or any other justifying reason. However Russell also says that accepting the skeptical theist's skepticism forces us to admit that we aren't justified in believing that Stan "did something wrong in failing to intervene". (1996, 197) Thus, it seems as if Russell thinks agnosticism about A leads to agnosticism about:

- B: Stan's inaction is wrong.

So we can summarize his argument as follows: The skeptical theist's skepticism leads to agnosticism about A which leads to agnosticism about B. But agnosticism about B is excessive and unreasonable. So the skeptical theist's skepticism is also unreasonable.

Some philosophers have responded to Russell's argument by pointing out that agnosticism about A doesn't lead to agnosticism about B.³⁰ That seems to me to be an eminently sensible response. If we know Stan lacks an appropriate motivation for permitting such evil when he could easily prevent it, then we can know his inaction is wrong even if we have no idea whether or not A is true. But let's try to run with the argument a little. Let's say that the truth of A would result in Stan's inaction having *some* kind of positive moral status. We won't deny that his inaction is wrong in the sense that its motivation is morally inadequate. We simply want to say that, if A is true, there exists a *justifying reason* for Stan's inaction in the sense that the consequences of that inaction are, on the whole, better than the consequences of his intervention. Of course Stan isn't in possession of this justifying reason which is why we rightly judge him and his motives to be immoral. But this doesn't change the fact that, if A is true, his *inaction* can be positively evaluated in the sense that we can say it has a justifying reason. In light of these remarks, Russell can restate his case by saying that agnosticism about A leads to agnosticism about

- C: There exists no (known or unknown) justifying reason for Stan's inaction.³¹

This enables him to sidestep the charge that agnosticism about A doesn't lead to agnosticism about B. Unfortunately, he thereby loses his punchline. For agnosticism about C, unlike agnosticism about B, is entirely reasonable. Given our ignorance about what possible goods there are and about which goods require Stan's inaction we simply have no idea whether or not C is true.

So Russell is faced with a choice. He can argue that the skeptical theist's skepticism leads to agnosticism about A which leads to agnosticism about B. If he does, the reasonable response is to point out that agnosticism about A doesn't lead to agnosticism about B. Or he can argue that the skeptical theist's skepticism leads to agnosticism about A which leads to agnosticism about C. We can allow that agnosticism about A leads to agnosticism about C. But just as we are sensibly agnostic about whether A is true, we are also sensibly agnostic about whether C is true.³² Thus, Russell's "moral skepticism" defense of the third objection to the skeptical theist's skepticism fails.

In sum then, the problem with Rowe's new evidential argument from evil is that he needs—but doesn't seem to recognize that he needs—to support it with an argument for the conclusion that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is not high. Without such an argument, he hasn't shown that P provides us with a *significant* objection to theism. But not just any such argument will do. It can't be an argument that relies on a rejection of the skeptical theist's very plausible skeptical theses (as Rowe himself seems to recognize when he abandons his original argument). Or, if it does, it needs to be accompanied by an additional argument showing that one or more of these skeptical theses is false. And this additional argument needs to have a *lot* more going for it than do the usual arguments presented for that conclusion.³³

Notes

¹See Rowe 1979, 1984, 1986, 1988, 1991 and 1994.

²Unless otherwise noted, page numbers given in the text are to Rowe 1996.

³The quotations in the last three sentences are all from Rowe 1996, 267.

⁴A possible good or a possible evil is a good or evil the occurrence of which is metaphysically possible. In wording the skeptical theses in this way I am following Rowe's lead when he makes the focus not actual goods or even future goods but rather "goods that we have some grasp of, even though we have no knowledge at all that they have occurred or ever will occur". See Rowe 1996, 264.

⁵These entailment relations detail at least some of the constraints on obtaining goods and avoiding evils that are placed on even an omnipotent and omniscient being. A standard example of such an entailment relation is the one holding between the good of having free creatures and the permission of the evil of freely doing what is morally wrong. In speaking of the permission of a possible evil, I am not speaking of its being morally permissible but of its occurrence intentionally *not* being prevented by someone capable of preventing it.

⁶For some critical discussion of skeptical theism see Draper 1996 and O'Connor 1997. Proponents of skeptical theism in some form or other include William Alston 1991 and 1996, Alvin Plantinga 1988, Peter van Inwagen 1991 and Stephen Wykstra 1996.

⁷Which isn't to say that it *seems likely* that our understanding of that realm is miserably incomplete. These remarks are not meant to serve as anything like a proof of the skeptical theses in ques-

tion. They are offered only as a very brief initial explanation of the prima facie plausibility of these theses. See section II of this paper for a more thorough defense of them.

⁸But see Plantinga's objections to this argument in his 1998. See also Rowe 1998 for a reply.

⁹Though I can't take the time to explore this here, I also think that P itself is problematic from the skeptical theist's perspective. It should be replaced with

P*: No good we know of *is known by us* to justify an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being in permitting E1 and E2.

But to infer P from P* is to reject ST3 (or something like it). It is to assume we have a good idea of the possible ways in which permitting an evil can play an essential role in the obtaining of some good. See Alston 1996, 323–35, Howard-Snyder 1996a, 295 and note 13 and Plantinga 1998, 534 for more on this.

¹⁰For more on this sort of argument, see Schellenberg 1993.

¹¹It is important to recognize that the unlikelihood of (2)(b)—and, therefore, the likelihood of (3)—is not supported by the (supposed) fact that, at best, a very small proportion of possible goods are goods of the kind mentioned in (2)(b) or (3). For it might be very likely (given k) that there *are* goods of that kind even if Pr(x is a good of that kind/x is a good) is very low.

¹²The above comments help us to see that divine silence is just a further instance of inscrutable evil. Thus, the skeptical theist's response to the argument from inscrutable evil can be applied, without any alteration, to the problem of divine silence. See Alston 1996, 321 for similar remarks.

¹³Rowe seems to show some recognition of this difficulty with the argument in his 1996, 285 in note 35. Perhaps this is why he doesn't explicitly propose it as a defense of the conclusion that Pr(P/G&k) is not high.

¹⁴Unless they are moral antirealists in the sense that they think *being a good* supervenes in some way on human evaluative activities. For the purposes of this paper, I will be ignoring that antirealist view as well as the view that there simply are no such things as goods.

¹⁵Of course we know *some* things that are true of *all* conscious experiences. We know that all of them will be either extremely pleasant or not. But this doesn't give us much information at all about *how pleasant* a conscious human experience can be. The familiar experiences that we think of as extremely pleasant sensory and emotional experiences may be so much less pleasant than other possible human conscious experiences (ones with which we aren't familiar) that we are, in an important sense, completely in the dark about how pleasant a conscious human experience can be.

¹⁶See van Inwagen 1998 for an attempt to clarify the moderate nature of the *sort* of modal skepticism endorsed by ST3. See also my discussion below (section II.C) of the charge that endorsing ST3 leads to a more radical sort of skepticism—a sort that the skeptical theist will want to resist.

¹⁷For more in this vein, I strongly recommend Alston 1996, section V where he discusses some useful analogies in support of skeptical theism.

¹⁸Rowe (1996, 267 and note 17) takes Tooley's argument to be proposed in support of the conclusion that most goods are known to us. And he takes this conclusion to support a rejection of ST1. Howard-Snyder (1996a, 296 and note 16) takes Tooley's argument to be proposed in support of the conclusion that it is unlikely that there are goods other than the ones we know of. This also lends support to a rejection of ST1.

¹⁹He describes this way of reasoning in his 1991, 110.

²⁰Tooley 1991, 113–14. My lack of comment on this argument should not be taken as an endorsement of it.

²¹For reasons to think it doesn't succeed, see Howard-Snyder 1996a, 296–97.

²²My dismal appraisal of *this* argument of Tooley's should not, of course, be taken to imply anything (negative or positive) about his argument in support of what he calls (1991, 112–13) 'the second route'. For his purposes in that paper only one of those two arguments needs to be successful.

²³Does that sort of search justify the belief that there are no blue crows "beyond our powers of observation"? I don't think so. How could checking for crows using our powers of observation tell us anything about whether there are any crows *beyond* our powers of observation? And what counts

as a being a crow that is beyond our powers of observation? Are "very shy, very cunning, very able crows that are blue but hide whenever we try to look for them" beyond our powers of observation? I don't think so. If crows of that sort would, upon being placed in our line of sight at close range, be as visible to us as ordinary crows are when so placed, then they aren't beyond our powers of observation. If anything counts in support of the conclusion that there are no blue crows beyond our powers of observation it is reflection on the kind of thing a blue crow would be (e.g. something blue with such and such approximate dimensions) and the kind of thing we are capable of observing. It is because of these sorts of concerns that I speak of "blue crows we haven't observed" rather than, as Russell does, of "blue crows beyond our powers of observation".

²⁴See Alston 1996, 319 and Howard-Snyder 1996a, 292.

²⁵See Gale 1996, 208–9; O'Connor 1997, 220–21; Rowe 1986, 244 and Russell 1996, 196–98.

²⁶Notice that I didn't require that its existence be compatible with both the actual laws of nature *and* the actual past (including the actual initial conditions of the Big Bang).

²⁷Russell's argument *illegitimately* gets some of its persuasive force by getting us to focus on the following plausible claim:

If (a) we can't tell *by thinking and talking with others about the goods we know of* that there are no goods beyond our ken that would justify God in permitting the evils we observe then (b) we can't tell *by thinking and talking with others about the goods we know of* that there are no goods beyond our ken that would justify God in creating an old-looking earth 100 years ago.

I say this is an illegitimate means of obtaining persuasive force for his objection because although this claim is plausible, it doesn't adequately support Russell's conclusions. For the skeptical theist faces no embarrassment in accepting (b). The conditional claim Russell needs in order to create a problem for the skeptical theist is something like:

If (a) then (c) we can't reasonably believe that the earth came into existence more than 100 years ago.

But the above plausible claim yields this last conditional only if (b) implies (c). And the skeptical theist is under no rational obligation to think that (b) implies (c). Certainly Russell has done nothing to show that the skeptical theist is under such an obligation.

²⁸This is so even if we aren't reasonable in thinking that this possibility actually obtains. The fact (assuming it is a fact) that we *aren't* reasonable in thinking a possibility obtains doesn't imply that we *are* reasonable in thinking that possibility *doesn't* obtain.

²⁹For G to *appropriately* motivate Stan's inaction, Stan would have to be aware of (a) and (b) and refrain from intervening because of this awareness.

³⁰See Alston 1996, 321 and Howard-Snyder 1996a, 292–93.

³¹This way of stating Russell's case seems in keeping with his claim (1996, 198) that

The question at issue is whether we must be unable to judge that there are *no justifying* reasons for human nonintervention if we are unable to judge that there are none for Divine nonintervention.

³²Perhaps Russell will insist that agnosticism about A is unreasonable. But that is just to insist (without reason) that the considerations mustered in support of the skeptical theist's skepticism at the beginning of section II are without weight. For those very same considerations show that we should be agnostic about A.

³³My thanks to Martin Curd, Evan Fales, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Richard Otte, Michael Rea and Stephen Wykstra for comments on earlier drafts. Special thanks to William Rowe for his comments on this paper and for his generous participation in lengthy discussions out of which the paper grew. Thanks also to audience members and to my commentator, Daniel Howard-Snyder, for their comments on a version of this paper presented at the 1999 Eastern APA meeting in Boston.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to the School of Liberal Arts at Purdue University for a semester's leave which provided me time to work on this paper.

References

- Alston, William. 1991. "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition." In *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5, *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. James Tomberlin. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co. Reprinted in Howard-Snyder 1996b. Page references are to reprint.
- _____. 1996. "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil." In Howard-Snyder 1996b.
- Draper, Paul. 1996. "The Skeptical Theist." In Howard-Snyder 1996b.
- Gale, Richard. 1996. "Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil." In Howard-Snyder 1996b.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel. 1996a. "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil." In Howard-Snyder 1996b.
- _____. (ed.). 1996b. *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- O'Connor, David. 1997. *God and Inscrutable Evil: In Defense of Theism and Atheism*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 1988. "Epistemic Probability and Evil." *Archivo di filosofia* 56.
- _____. 1998. "Degenerate Evidence and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil." *Noûs* 32: 531–44.
- Rowe, William. 1979. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16: 335–41.
- _____. 1984. "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to S.J. Wykstra." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16: 95–100.
- _____. 1986. "The Empirical Argument from Evil." In *Rationality, Religious Belief and Moral Commitment*, eds. Robert Audi and William Wainwright. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- _____. 1988. "Evil and Theodicy." *Philosophical Topics* 16: 119–32.
- _____. 1991. "Ruminations about Evil." *Philosophical Perspectives* 5: 69–88.
- _____. 1994. "William Alston on the Problem of Evil." In *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faiths*, ed. Thomas Senior. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- _____. 1996. "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look." In Howard-Snyder 1996b.
- _____. 1998. "Reply to Plantinga." *Noûs* 32: 545–52.
- Russell, Bruce. 1996. "Defenseless." In Howard-Snyder 1996b.
- Schellenberg, J.L. 1993. *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Tooley, Michael. 1991. "The Argument from Evil." *Philosophical Perspectives* 5: 89–134.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 1991. "The Problem of Evil, The Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence." In *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5, *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. James Tomberlin. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co.
- _____. 1998. "Modal Epistemology." *Philosophical Studies* 92: 67–84.
- Wykstra, Stephen. 1996. "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil." In Howard-Snyder 1996b.