

COMMONSENSE SKEPTICAL THEISM¹

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[pre-print; published in *Science, Religion, and Metaphysics: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, eds. Kelly Clark and Michael Rea (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 9-30.]

Commonsensism takes commonsense starting points seriously in responding to and rejecting radical skepticism. Skeptical theism endorses a sort of skepticism that, according to some, has radical skeptical implications. This suggests that there is a tension between commonsensism and skeptical theism that makes it difficult for a person rationally to hold both. And yet many who endorse the skeptical theist's skepticism also claim or would want to claim allegiance to commonsensism. In this paper I'll argue that there is no tension between commonsensism and the skeptical theist's skepticism.

In section I, after briefly defining commonsensism and skeptical theism, I'll explain why there is no tension between these two positions. In section II, I'll consider the view that common sense itself tell us what skeptical theists think we have no good reason to believe, namely, that there are no God-justifying reasons for permitting certain horrific evils. I'll argue that this view is mistaken and I'll offer an explanation for why this mistake is so tempting. In the third section, I'll show how the points made in sections I and II provide material for responding to some objections to skeptical theism found in the recent literature. In the final section, I will issue a challenge to those who object to the skeptical theist's skepticism.

¹ I'm very pleased to be presenting this paper in honor of Alvin Plantinga. His philosophical writings are brilliant, field-defining, and full of wit, all of which makes them both hugely beneficial and a great pleasure to read. Even more impressive and meaningful to me, however, is the manner in which he has modeled in his own life, in multiple ways that I think about often, how someone with a career in philosophy can be a faithful Christian.

I. Combining Commonsensism with the Skeptical Theist's Skepticism

It's very easy to see how commonsensism can be combined with *some* sorts of skepticism. This is because commonsensism doesn't assert that humans are omniscient. Instead, it allows, indeed insists, that there are many things that humans don't know even if there are also many things that they do know. There's nothing remarkable about a view that says we know some things and we don't know others. This double claim is itself the epitome of common sense. So the question before us is whether the skeptical theist's skepticism is among the varieties of skepticism that are consistent with commonsensism. In answering this question, it will be helpful to start with more careful definitions of both commonsensism and the skeptical theist's skepticism.

A. Defining Commonsensism and Skeptical Theism

G.E. Moore begins his paper, "A Defence of Common Sense,"² by listing a number of things he and the rest of us know are true: that we have bodies that are extended physical objects located near the surface of the earth, that many other extended physical objects exist and (like our bodies) have existed for many years, and that we have had thoughts and feelings and dreams and imaginings of many different kinds. In short, he lists many perceptual, memory, and introspective beliefs that he and others have had and says they are *clear cases* of knowledge. Taking Moore's lead and elaborating upon it a little, I propose that we think of commonsensism as follows:

Commonsensism: the view that (a) it is clear that we know many of the most obvious things we take ourselves to know (this includes the truth of simple perceptual, memory, introspective, mathematical,

² G.E. Moore, 'A Defence of Common Sense,' in *Philosophical Papers* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959).

logical, and moral beliefs) and that (b) we also know (if we consider the question) that we are not in some skeptical scenario in which we are radically deceived in these beliefs.

My elaboration adds to Moore's list of obvious things we know simple mathematical, moral, and logical beliefs (e.g., $2 + 2 = 4$, it's morally wrong to torture children for amusement, and if either A or B is true and B is false then A is true).³ It also includes the claim that we know we aren't deceived in some radical skeptical scenario in believing the things listed. This latter claim shows how commonsensism differs from contextualism, contrastivism, and denials of closure, each of which tries to combine clause (a) from the definition of commonsensism with the denial of clause (b).⁴ (Radical skepticism differs from all these views insofar as it denies the knowledge claimed in (a) *and* the knowledge claimed in (b).)

In order to explain what skeptical theism is, it will be helpful to understand the context in which it originated. Some arguments from evil for atheism go something like this:

1. For some actual evils we know of, we can't think of any God-justifying reason for permitting them.⁵
2. So probably there aren't any God-justifying reasons for permitting those evils.
3. If God existed, he wouldn't permit those evils if there were no God-justifying reason for permitting them.
4. Therefore, probably God does not exist.⁶

³ I'm not sure these added claims are ones Moore himself would want to add to the list of obvious things we know. In particular, I'm doubtful that Moore (an ideal consequentialist) would want to say we know many obvious moral truths (since according to him these depend on total consequences and we're often, maybe always, in the dark about these). But I want to focus on a kind of commonsensism that takes certain moral truths as obvious. My reason for wanting this focus is that one popular objection to skeptical theism claims that it conflicts with our knowledge of obvious moral truths. Thus, by thinking of commonsensism as broad enough to include obvious moral truths, I'm trying to make things more challenging for myself.

⁴ For an explanation and defense of contextualism, see Keith DeRose, 'Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense' in John Greco and Ernest Sosa (eds.) *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999); for an explanation and defense of contrastivism, see Jonathan Schaffer, 'From Contextualism to Contrastivism', *Philosophical Studies* 119 (2004); see Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1981) for an explanation and defense of denying closure.

⁵ A God-justifying reason for permitting an evil E is, as you might guess, a reason for permitting E that would justify God, if God existed, in permitting E. We can describe a God-justifying reason roughly as follows: a good state of affairs G—which might just be the prevention of some bad state of affairs E*—counts as a God-justifying reason for permitting an evil E if and only if (i) G's goodness outweighs E's badness and (ii) G couldn't be obtained without permitting E or something as bad or worse. For further refinements, see Michael Bergmann, 'Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil', in Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), n. 3.

⁶ This argument is intended to capture the summary of some of his earlier arguments that Rowe gives in William Rowe, 'The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look' in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed. *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 262-3.

The inference from 1 to 2 is a noseum inference: it says of God-justifying reasons “we don’t see ’em so they probably ain’t there”. The skeptical theist’s response is that this particular noseum inference isn’t a good one: the fact that humans can’t think of any God-justifying reason for permitting an evil, doesn’t make it likely that there are no such reasons; this is because if God existed, God’s mind would be far greater than our minds so it wouldn’t be surprising if God had reasons we weren’t able to think of. The skepticism here has to do with our lack of certain kinds of knowledge of what God’s reasoning is or would be like.

With that background in mind, we can see that skeptical theism has two components: a skeptical component and a theistic component. These components are detachable so that an agnostic or an atheist could endorse the skeptical theist’s skepticism. The skeptical theist’s skepticism (detached from the theism) includes as a main ingredient the endorsement of skeptical theses such as the following:

The Skeptical Theist’s Skeptical Theses

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

ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.

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

ST4: We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have.⁷

Two brief clarificatory comments: First, as William Rowe emphasizes, possible goods are abstracta—good states of affairs that could obtain.⁸ Thus, if we set aside concerns about God

⁷ The skeptical component of skeptical theism also includes the view (which can reasonably be endorsed by both theists and nontheists) that skeptical theses like ST1-ST4 undermine the noseum inference from 1 to 2 mentioned in the previous paragraph.

⁸ Rowe, p. 264.

being a necessary being if he exists at all, atheists can agree that the beatific vision is a possible good, despite the fact that they think it isn't an actual good since it entails God's existence.

Likewise, possible evils are bad states of affairs that could obtain. Second, a sample of Xs can be representative of all Xs relative to one property but not another. To say a sample of Xs is representative of all Xs relative to a property F is just to say that if n/m of the Xs in the sample have property F, then approximately n/m of all Xs have F. In ST1-ST3 what we are interested in is whether our known sample of possible goods, possible evils, and entailment relations between them is representative of all possible goods, possible evils, and entailment relations there are *relative to the property of figuring in a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting the inscrutable evils we see around us.*⁹

B. Are they in Tension?

In light of these more careful statements of commonsensism and the skeptical theist's skepticism, we can ask ourselves again whether it is problematic to combine the knowledge claims of the former with the knowledge disavowals of the latter. It will help to focus on an imagined nontheist commonsensist named Sally who is an *agnostic*¹⁰ and yet endorses the skeptical theist's skeptical theses, ST1-ST4. Because she's a commonsensist, Sally thinks many of the most obvious perceptual, memory, introspective, logical, mathematical, and moral beliefs she has count as knowledge. But she also thinks her knowledge has its limits and that there are many things she doesn't know. She thinks there are many facts about the physical universe of which

⁹ The *inscrutable* evils we see around us are those that many thoughtful theists and nontheists agree are ones for which we can't think of a God-justifying reason.

¹⁰ The benefit of focusing on an agnostic is that it helps us to keep separate the reasons for and against the skeptical theist's skepticism from the reasons for and against her theism.

she is ignorant—facts about what is happening at the subatomic level or in distant galaxies or on other planets in our solar system or even across the city or behind a nearby closed door. There is much about what others are thinking or feeling that she doesn't know, much of her own past that she can't remember, and many logical, mathematical, and moral truths about which she is in the dark. None of these claims to ignorance seems the least bit in tension with her commonsensist knowledge claims.

Now suppose Sally goes on to add that among the things she thinks she doesn't know are certain facts about the possible goods and evils there are. In particular, she has no idea how likely it is that the possible goods, evils and entailments between them that she knows of are representative of the possible goods, evils, and entailments between them that an omniscient being would take into account when considering whether to permit evils. Likewise, for certain of the more complex possible goods and evils she knows of, she has no idea how likely it is that the total value or disvalue she perceives in them accurately reflects the total value or disvalue that an omniscient being would see in them. These claims about human ignorance also seem highly plausible. Are they in tension with Sally's commonsensist knowledge claims?

Here is a way in which they might be in tension. Perhaps Sally claims to know, of some act, that it would be morally wrong for her to perform it. Her main reason for thinking that the act would be wrong is that she can see that the immediate result of the action would be enormous harm to a child and she has no reason for thinking any significant good will come from it. But perhaps (because of considerations like those mentioned in ST1-ST4) she also thinks that she has no idea how likely it is that the consequences of the act would, in the long run, be for the best—for all she knows it might be *highly likely* that the long run consequences of performing the act would be much better than the long run consequences of her refraining from it; then again, for all

she knows, this might be *highly unlikely*. She really has no idea what the remote connections might be between this act and other possible goods and evils. Now we have a possible tension: as a matter of common sense, Sally thinks she knows it's wrong to perform the act because of its harmful consequences (the immediate ones she can foresee); and yet, because she accepts ST1-ST4, she also thinks she has no idea whether or not its ultimate consequences are likely to be for the best overall. Does this skepticism about ultimate consequences threaten her moral knowledge?

It needn't. Suppose Sally also reasonably holds the following view about morality:

M: Some actions are *intrinsically* wrong (i.e., wrong regardless of their consequences). But for some other actions, our judgments about their consequences matter much more, morally speaking. For these latter actions, we morally *ought* to (a) consider (for an appropriate length of time) the consequences we can reasonably expect of performing them and of the live alternatives to performing them, (b) refrain from performing them if the reasonably expected consequences of performing them seem significantly worse than the reasonably expected consequences of one of the live alternatives, and (c) perform them if the reasonably expected consequences of performing them seem significantly better than the reasonably expected consequences of each of the live alternatives.¹¹

Can a person reasonably hold M? There don't seem to be any compelling objections to M that make it any more problematic than other standard but controversial views in ethics (and objectors to skeptical theism haven't, to my knowledge, offered or relied on any such objections). Can M be coherently combined with Sally's agnosticism (about theism), her commonsensism, and her endorsement of the skeptical theist's skepticism? Again, there don't seem to be any good reasons for thinking it couldn't be (and objectors to skeptical theism haven't, to my knowledge, argued that this combination would be incoherent). But then the

¹¹ M says that, for some actions we consider, we morally ought to do what is mentioned in (a), (b), and (c). This obligation could be viewed as a prima facie duty, which could be overridden in a particular case by a stronger competing prima facie duty. In addition, when considering the value of the reasonably expected consequences, one might also have to consider whether certain possible consequences that are reasonably viewed as unlikely are so bad that the small risk of their occurrence makes the reasonably expected value of the action low overall; this can be so even if the value of the most likely consequences of the action is reasonably viewed as greater than the value of the most likely consequences of each live alternative. I've left these qualifications out of M to simplify it and make it closer to describing what actually goes on in the moral choices people make in such cases (especially when they haven't got a lot of time to decide what to do). My thanks to Paul Draper and Patrick Kain for helpful discussions about M.

alleged tension mentioned in the previous paragraph disappears. If Sally rationally endorses M,¹² then it is no problem for her to combine her confidence in the wrongness of an act (based on her comparative evaluation of the reasonably expected consequences of performing it and of the live alternatives to performing it and her views about what she ought to do in light of that) with her professed ignorance of its ultimate long term consequences.¹³

C. What Else Can a Skeptical Theist Know?

It will be helpful to consider what other things Sally (a commonsense agnostic) can know, despite endorsing the skeptical theist's skepticism.¹⁴ I've already noted that, if she rationally endorses M (or even if, in practice, she seems to tacitly take for granted something like M), it's plausible to think she knows obvious moral truths about actions that are morally right or wrong for us to perform because of what the reasonably expected consequences of them and their alternatives would be. In addition, there will be nothing in ST1-ST4 that will keep her from knowing (perhaps via moral intuition) certain moral truths about what is intrinsically wrong, regardless of the consequences.

Stepping outside of the realm of moral knowledge, consider the many obvious things that Sally knows via perception, introspection, and memory. Take for example her knowledge that she has hands. Given Sally's commonsensism—in particular, clause (b)—she knows, in addition to the fact that she has hands, that she's not a handless brain in a vat being deceived into thinking

¹² Or even if she doesn't endorse M but she rationally forms beliefs in accord with M and has no good reason to think that doing so is a bad way of forming her beliefs or that it conflicts with ST1-ST4, which she endorses.

¹³ For God, the reasonably expected consequences of performing an action and of the alternatives to performing that action match what these consequences would in fact be—or at least this is so if foreknowledge and middle knowledge are possible.

¹⁴ If Sally, a commonsense agnostic who endorses the skeptical theist's skepticism, can know these things, it seems that a commonsense skeptical theist can too.

she's got hands.¹⁵ And similarly, she knows that if God exists, then God doesn't have an all-things-considered good reason for making it seem that she has hands when in fact she doesn't. She knows this despite her endorsement of ST1-ST4, which place pretty significant constraints on our knowledge of what God's reasons might be. By endorsing ST1-ST4, Sally is committing herself to the view that we don't know, *just by reflecting on possible goods, possible evils, the entailments between them, and their seeming value or disvalue*, what God's reasons might be. But it doesn't follow that we have no way *at all* of knowing anything about what reasons God might have for doing things (if God existed). We know that if an act is intrinsically wrong regardless of the consequences, a morally perfect being like God would have an all-things-considered good reason not to do it. We know that we exist and so we know that, if God exists, he didn't have an all-things-considered good reason for permanently annihilating us before now. In general, for all the things we commonsensically know to be true, we know that God (if God exists) didn't have an all-things-considered good reason to make them false.

To sum up, it's obviously not a problem for a commonsensist to combine her claims to knowledge with claims to ignorance, for commonsensism includes the view that we have knowledge and it denies that we are omniscient. In combining commonsensism with the skeptical theist's skepticism, two main questions arise:

Q1: What sorts of ignorance are consistent with commonsensism?

Q2: What sorts of knowledge are consistent with the skeptical theist's skepticism?

¹⁵ This feature of commonsensism causes some to reject it. It contributes to "the problem of easy knowledge" because we can so easily know, simply by inferring it from the fact that we have hands, that we aren't brains in vats or victims of an evil demon. (See Stewart Cohen, 'Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 65 (2002).) I won't take the time here to discuss this problem or responses to it. I will simply note that the alternatives seem to be skepticism (which denies that we know we have hands) or the views according to which we know we have hands but don't know we aren't handless brains in vats (contextualism, contrastivism, and denials of closure). Those who, like me, think all of those alternatives are problematic will be interested in defending commonsensism in the face of the problem of easy knowledge.

In response to the first question, I've argued that the skeptical theist's skepticism—like skepticism about many mathematical, logical, moral, historical, and scientific claims—is consistent with commonsensism. And in response to the second question, I've argued that it is consistent with the skeptical theist's skepticism to claim knowledge of (a) obvious moral truths about the wrongness of acts if their reasonably expected consequences seem terrible, (b) the wrongness of an act that is seen to be intrinsically wrong, (c) God's having an all-things-considered good reason (if God exists) not to perform certain acts (i.e., those that are seen to be intrinsically wrong) and (d) God's not having an all-things-considered good reason (if God exists) to make false the things we commonsensically know to be true. Thus, an agnostic like Sally can use the skeptical theist's skepticism to resist the noseem inference in the argument from evil (given above in section I.A), all the while endorsing commonsensism.

II. "A Perfectly Loving God Wouldn't Permit *That*"

A. A Challenge for Commonsense Skeptical Theism

Commonsensists think they know that God (if God exists) doesn't have an all-things-considered good reason to make false the things they know, as a matter of common sense, to be true. After all, they know that these things *weren't* made false and yet God (if he exists) would have made them false if he had an all-things-considered good reason to do so. Thus, for example, they know, as a matter of common sense, that they haven't been annihilated, so they know that God didn't have an all-things-considered good reason to annihilate them. Now why can't a defender of the argument from evil for atheism make a parallel move by appealing to common sense in a

similar way? Why can't she say, of some particularly horrific evil, that she knows, as a matter of common sense, that a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit *that*, and so she also knows that God didn't have an all-things-considered good reason to permit it? She hasn't arrived at this conclusion by way of a noseem inference, where she (a) tries hard to consider possible goods, evils, and entailments between them, (b) fails to see how they could feature in any good reason for permitting the evil in question, and (c) concludes, on the basis of her failure to see this, that there is no such reason. Instead, she carefully considers some terrible instance of suffering and thinks that she can just see directly, as a matter of common sense, that a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit that. And on that basis she knows that God (if God exists) has no all-things-considered good reason to permit such suffering. Or, to put the point more modestly, she can just see directly that a perfectly loving God is *unlikely* to permit the suffering in question and so she knows that God is *unlikely* to have an all-things-considered good reason to permit it.¹⁶

The main claim being considered here is that (i) the skeptical theist's skepticism targets the use of a noseem inference to derive the premise that some actual evils are pointless¹⁷ but (ii) a defender of the argument from evil can defend that premise by noting that she can just see directly, as a matter of common sense, that a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit the evil in

¹⁶ Alvin Plantinga mentions a view like this in his *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 484 when he says:

Something like this, I think, is the best version of the atheological case from evil. The claim is essentially that one who is properly sensitive and properly aware of the sheer horror of the evil displayed in our somber and unhappy world will simply see that no being of the sort God is alleged to be could possibly permit it. This is a sort of inverse *sensus divinitatis*: perhaps there is no good antitheistic argument from evil; but no argument is needed. An appeal of this sort will proceed, not by rehearsing arguments, but by putting the interlocutor in the sort of situation in which the full horror of the world's suffering and evil stands out clearly in all its loathsomeness. Indeed, from the atheological point of view, giving an argument is counterproductive here: it permits the believer in God to turn his attention away, to avert his eyes from the abomination of suffering, to take refuge in antiseptic discussions of possible worlds, probability functions, and other arcane. It diverts the attention from the situations that in fact constitute a defeater for belief in God.

He concludes (see Plantinga, pp. 485-93) that it is false that the proper response to an awareness of the sheer horror of evil is to believe God could not (or would not) permit it.

¹⁷ They're pointless just in case it's false that God has an all-things-considered good reason to permit them.

question; and it is on that basis that she concludes that the evil is pointless. She can then use the premise that the evil is pointless in an argument for atheism, noting that if a perfectly loving God exists, there would be no pointless evils. Just as it is consistent with the skeptical theist's skepticism to say that we can know, of some act known to be intrinsically wrong regardless of the consequences, that God wouldn't perform it, so also (according to these defenders of the argument from evil) it is consistent with the skeptical theist's skepticism to say that we can know, of some particularly horrific evil with which we are familiar, that God wouldn't permit it (or would be unlikely to do so). In each case we are supposed to know this fact directly, as a matter of common sense, and not on the basis of a noseum inference. The objector concludes that the skeptical theist is mistaken insofar as she thinks we can't know, of some of the actual evils with which we are familiar, that a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit them.

B. Response

What shall we make of this objection? What shall we make of the claim that we can just see, without any argument or noseum inference, that a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit *that*? Let me respond by turning to an example having to do with cancer treatment. Consider the suffering associated with tumor-removal surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy. Would a good and loving parent permit a child to undergo such suffering? Well, it depends. If there is some worse evil and the parent can see no way to prevent that worse evil other than to permit the treatment-caused suffering, then a good and loving parent will permit—indeed arrange for—the treatment-caused suffering to occur. What does this simple familiar example show us? It shows us that if we are asking whether a good and loving parent would permit her child to suffer some

evil E, the answer is “it depends”. It depends, first of all, on whether it is intrinsically wrong, regardless of the consequences, for the parent to permit E.¹⁸ If it is, then a perfectly good and loving parent who knows this wouldn’t permit it (if she could prevent it). Suppose, though, that permitting E is not intrinsically wrong. Then it depends on whether the parent reasonably thinks she *has to* permit E in order to avoid some worse evil or obtain some outweighing greater good. If she does reasonably think this (especially if she knows this with certainty), then it seems at least plausible that a good and loving parent would permit E.¹⁹

Now let’s return to the case of God and horrific suffering. I would like to propose two claims for your consideration. The first claim is this:

P1: For every instance of horrific suffering that we know to have occurred there are possible states of affairs that are significantly worse than it or possible states of affairs that are outweighing greater goods.

I don’t think anyone takes seriously the suggestion that, for some particularly horrific suffering we know to have occurred, it is *impossible* for there to be any worse suffering. Likewise, it seems very implausible to think that it is *impossible* that there are things so good that their goodness outweighs the badness of the worst sufferings we know of. Here’s the second claim:

P2: For every instance of horrific suffering that we know to have occurred, although it is an intrinsically bad state of affairs, it is not intrinsically wrong to permit it regardless of the consequences.

Consider some instance of horrific suffering and suppose it was clear that permitting it was the only way to avoid a state of affairs that is *far* worse (or the only way to bring about a state of affairs that is *far* better) than that horrific suffering. If that were clear, would it be intrinsically wrong for God to permit that horrific suffering? Given the similar structure of this case and the

¹⁸ Relatedly, it might depend on whether the parent has the right (in virtue of her relationship with the child) to decide to permit the child to undergo that degree of suffering for the purpose in question. If she doesn’t have that right, then perhaps it is intrinsically wrong for *her* to permit it, even if it isn’t intrinsically wrong for it to be permitted.

¹⁹ In fact, if the mother decided *not* to give the child the needed cancer treatment because the child was pleading not to undergo it, many (including, perhaps, the child’s father and the authorities) would think the mother was being unloving.

cancer-treatment case, it seems not. In both this case and the cancer-treatment case, some sort of suffering is permitted in order to avoid something much worse, something that is rightly hated to a much greater degree. But this is just to say that P2 seems true. We know from the cancer-treatment case that permitting suffering in order to avoid something that is much worse isn't intrinsically wrong. And there doesn't seem to be any particular degree of suffering or harm, among the actual degrees of suffering or harm we know of, that it is intrinsically wrong to permit no matter what the consequences, even for the sake of avoiding *much greater* suffering or harm.²⁰

So suppose you think both P1 and P2 are true. Then you have the resources for a response to the challenge to commonsense skeptical theism laid out in section II.A. For if you endorse P1 and P2, then the reasonable thing for you to think, of each instance of horrible suffering you know of, is that a perfectly loving God would permit it only if he *has* to permit it (or something as bad) in order to avoid some worse evil or obtain some outweighing greater good. You can't say you know that it is intrinsically wrong for God to permit it regardless of the consequences since, by accepting P2, you've agreed that it isn't intrinsically wrong. Thus, it seems that in order for you to reasonably believe, of any particular instance of known horrific suffering E, that a perfectly loving God wouldn't (or would be unlikely to) permit it, you would have to reasonably believe of E that:

P3: It's false or unlikely that there is some possible worse evil that could be avoided by God (or some possible outweighing good that could be obtained by God) only if E or something as bad were permitted.

One way to arrive at such a conclusion is via a noseenum inference—you can't think of any such goods or evils, so probably there aren't any. But we've already seen good reason, based on the

²⁰ Nor does there seem to be any particular degree of suffering or harm, among the actual degrees of suffering or harm we know of, that God (if he existed) would not have the *right* (in virtue of being a person's divine loving creator) to decide to permit a person to undergo for the sake of avoiding *much greater* suffering or harm.

skeptical theist's skepticism, to reject such noseem inferences. Another way to arrive at proposition P3 is by knowing that there is no possible worse evil and no possible outweighing good. But, by accepting P1, we've ruled out that option too. Is there some other way you could reasonably come to believe P3? Can you just see directly that it's *false* that some worse evil or outweighing greater good is appropriately related to the horrific suffering in question? That doesn't seem to be a part of common sense. Nor does it seem to be a part of common sense that it is *unlikely* that some worse evil or outweighing greater good is appropriately related to the horrific suffering in question. Recall the skeptical theist's plausible point that there may, for all we know, be many unknown possible goods and evils and many unknown possible entailment relations between them.

A thoughtful person who reasonably accepts P1 and P2 will, therefore, refrain from concluding, of *any* particular instance of horrific suffering we know of, that a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit *that*. Notice how things are different when it comes to thinking about brains in vats. Both theists and nontheists can agree that it is perfectly reasonable to think you know, as a matter of common sense, that you have hands and also that you aren't a handless brain in a vat. It is perhaps not clear how you know you aren't a handless brain in a vat, but it is nevertheless reasonable to think that you know it, even if you think ST1-ST4 are true. But things are different with P3. It is not reasonable to think you can just see, as a matter of common sense, that P3 is true. Both theists and nontheists can reasonably agree with ST1-ST4, P1, and P2. And given ST1-ST4, P1, and P2, both theists and nontheists should agree that we just don't seem able to reasonably believe P3, either directly or via a noseem inference.

C. Theory of Error

How then do I explain the temptation to think, of some particularly horrific evil, that a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit *that*? I think it's not uncommon to be tempted to think this and that something about this thought seems sensible and morally right, even obligatory. I'll try here to explain why I think we feel tempted to think this, despite the fact that it's a mistake.

To this point, I haven't given actual examples of horrific suffering. The worst examples (and the ones that most tempt us to think a loving God wouldn't permit them) are too painful to consider in vivid detail. But consider the abduction, enslavement, mutilation, and repeated raping of a young Sudanese teenage girl named Aluel Mangong Deng over a period of several years by Sudanese government soldiers.²¹ Even if we only read about this in the newspaper and ponder it, it is hard to take. How much worse if we know the person, if she is a dear loved one, and we know of these events or even see them happening but are powerless to help? The suffering of the *victim* seems beyond comprehension. But even the distress one of *us* would feel, if we knew that our beloved wife or daughter or sister or mother were going through this, also seems to be too much to imagine or bear. When a consideration of this sort of horrendous evil becomes particularly real or vivid, as it does on occasion, a natural reaction is a feeling of being overwhelmed by the horror of it and of being filled with hatred for the evil acts and often for the perpetrators of them. This is accompanied by an incredibly strong conviction that deep hatred for these evil actions is the only possible response for any person with even a minimal level of

²¹ She is quoted as saying: "I was enslaved five years ago during a raid on my village, Agok. I tried to run away from the soldiers, but they caught me and threw me to the ground. I struggled to get away, so they held down my hands and feet and cut my throat and chest with a knife. As I grew faint, one of them named Mohammed raped me then and there. That night, I was again raped by different men. They came one after another. This also happened to other women, and even to young girls. It took about 30 days before we reached Poulla, north of Babanusa. This kind of rape happened just about every day along the way." See Nat Hentoff, 'Gang Rape in Sudan,' *The Village Voice*, 6 February 2001. Retrieved 24 April 2010 <http://www.villagevoice.com/2001-02-06/news/gang-rape-in-sudan/>.

moral decency. And this leads to a strong inclination to think that anyone (including God) who knows of such evil acts and could prevent them but doesn't is failing morally by failing to hate these acts with the appropriate intensity. This is the sort of thing that I suspect is often behind the thought that "a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit *that*". At least this is what seems to be going on in my own mind when I find myself tempted by that thought.

But although I wholeheartedly approve of and share the empathy for the victim, the extreme hatred of the cruelty, and the belief that there is something extremely morally wrong with a person who knows of such evils but doesn't hate them to the point of being very strongly motivated to prevent them, I think that it is a mistake to think we can see that a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit these instances of horrific suffering. The problem is that we have no good reason to deny that *our* perspective, when we contemplate these horrors, might differ significantly from a *perfectly loving God's* perspective (even though both we and God hate such suffering intensely and are strongly motivated to prevent it). Moreover, we have no good reason to deny that if we were able to have God's perspective on the horrific suffering in question, we might wholeheartedly approve of his permission of it. Let me explain why I say these things.

In a case where a parent allows her cancer-ridden child to suffer the miseries of risky tumor-removal surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy, we think it's morally permissible to do so because of the good that the parent can achieve only by permitting that suffering. We have a grasp of both evils (the evil of the treatment-induced suffering and the evil of early death by cancer) and we think that although the former is a bad thing, permitting it is morally justified if it is necessary in order to avoid the latter. But in the case of the horrific suffering we see around us, we have no grasp of any worse evil that we think *cannot* be avoided without

permitting that sort of horrific suffering—and, likewise, we have no grasp of any greater outweighing good that we think *cannot* be achieved except by permitting such suffering.

It is natural for humans to be much more motivated to prevent some horrific suffering, E, presented to them in a vivid fashion than they are to avoid some possible event with no details imagined except the bare stipulation that it is worse than E. When we contemplate and are overwhelmed by some actual horrific evil E that we know of, the only evil we have before our minds is E. Given that, it's no wonder we can't find the least bit of sympathy for permitting it. Without having vividly before our minds something we hate *even more* (something we think can be avoided only by permitting E), it's not easy to empathize with a decision to permit E. However, if we were able to hold vividly before our minds both the horrific suffering E that we see *and* a much worse, far more hated evil (one we think we can avoid only by permitting E), I think we would feel about the permission of the horrific suffering E that we see just as we do about the permission of cancer treatment.

But it's not just that we haven't got any clear picture of a worse alternative before our minds (one we think can be avoided only by permitting some horrific suffering like E). It's also that in contemplating E, we may be nearing the limit of our ability to take in horrific suffering. It is plausible that even if there are evils much worse than E, our psychologies make us incapable of fully taking in the horror of them. A highly sensitive and sheltered child might be unable to imagine horrors worse than tumor-removal surgery. Even thinking about such surgery might be almost more than the child can bear: taking in a vivid portrayal of such suffering might be at the upper limit of her ability to comprehend suffering, so that being vividly exposed to any worse horrors would just feel like more of the same to her, and leave her equally shocked and emotionally overwhelmed. But normal adults can take in and understand horrors much worse

than such surgery. In the same way God, if God exists, would be able to take in and understand horrors far worse than the ones that feel overwhelming to us. Perhaps on some objective scale of badness, the horrors of cancer treatment are at level 10 and the horrors of the long-term enslavement and raping of Sudanese girls and of the Nazi treatment of Jews in the Holocaust are between 85 and 100. And perhaps the ability of humans to take in such suffering and accurately assess its badness tops out when the horrors reach the 100 or 200 or 500 level. Perhaps being exposed to vivid portrayals of things that are objectively more horrifying than that, causes us to be overwhelmed and to begin to shut down emotionally and cognitively. Even so, things would be otherwise with God. God, if he exists, would be able to take in and accurately evaluate horrors at a level of one million and beyond, horrors we can't imagine and are not capable, psychologically, of taking in. And if God were to permit some evil on the level of 100 or 500 because he knew that that was the only way to prevent some evil on the level of one million, no morally decent person would object to that any more than they would object to a parent's choice to let her child undergo painful treatment for cancer.

My theory of error, then, is this. Sometimes, when we are exposed to a vivid portrayal of some actual instance of horrific suffering E, we are tempted to think that a perfectly loving God wouldn't permit E. I think it is a mistake to think that we can see that this is true or even likely. The reason we make this mistake is, first, that we have only that evil, E, vividly before our minds with no worse evil (seen to be avoidable only by permitting E) grasped in any detail at all. The vivid image persuades and motivates; the mere possibility of a worse evil, without any details added, can't compete in terms of arousing our sympathetic appreciation of a choice to avoid it. Second, in grasping E vividly, we are already nearing the limit of the amount of horror we are

able to take in, which tempts us to think that nothing could be more hateful than E is. But our inability to take in greater horrors is not a good indication of how bad horrors can be.

Notice that on this theory of error, it's not the case that we hate the horrific suffering we see more than it should be hated. Perhaps we see only part of its hatefulness and don't hate it as much as it deserves to be hated (maybe we aren't even capable of that). Nor is it the case, on this theory of error, that God doesn't care about the horrific suffering we see and hate. God, if he exists, hates it as it deserves to be hated, which might be far more than we are capable of comprehending. It's not our hatred of it that is misguided. It's our *ranking* of its despicableness. Because we can't take in horrors much worse than these, we are tempted to think they are the *most* despicable or close to it. As a result, we are tempted to think a perfectly loving God couldn't be motivated to permit them. But it may be, for all we know, that although God hates them even more than we do, he hates other things to a far greater degree (things we simply can't hate as they deserve to be hated because we can't comprehend how horrific they are). In that case, the horrific sufferings we know of, though they may be more despicable than we think they are, would be ranked fairly low in terms of despicableness, *when compared with* the other more hateful things God considers.²² And if those other more hateful things couldn't be prevented without permitting the horrors we see (or things as bad or worse), then it would make sense for a loving God to permit the horrors we see, just as the loving parent permits her child to undergo cancer-treatment because that's the only way the parent knows of to avoid the worse evils associated with death by cancer. Moreover, if all of this were so and we were enabled to have God's perspective on the matter, we ourselves would wholeheartedly affirm God's choice to

²² Why, you might ask, would such horrors exist as live possibilities even, given that a perfectly loving God is the source of all being? One epistemic possibility is that in order to have the goodness of people made in God's image—goodness that may be far greater than we are psychologically capable of appreciating—there must be the live possibility of horrors that are also more than we are able to take in.

permit the horrors we see around us.²³ Given ST1-ST4, these epistemic possibilities are things we have no good reason to think are even unlikely if God exists. An atheist or agnostic could easily admit as much.²⁴

III. Recent Objections to the Skeptical Theist's Skepticism

I will now turn to a few recent objections to the skeptical theist's skepticism and show how the considerations in the first two sections of this paper can be used to reply to them.

A. Dougherty

Trent Dougherty presents an argument for thinking that commonsense epistemology is in conflict with the skeptical theist's skepticism.²⁵ But commonsensism, as I defined it in section I.A above, is different from what Dougherty calls 'commonsense epistemology'. Dougherty defines commonsense epistemology as roughly equivalent to Michael Huemer's Phenomenal Conservatism, a view according to which seemings or appearances provide prima facie justification for our beliefs.²⁶ It is probably not unusual for those who endorse Phenomenal Conservatism to also endorse commonsensism as I've defined it in the text. But many who

²³ Again, it's worth noting that even if a human would not have the right to decide on her own to permit such horrific suffering in another human (not even for the sake of some greater good), a perfect God who created all people *would* have that right.

²⁴ I could have made the points in this subsection by speaking of outweighing greater goods, which could be obtained only by permitting the horrific suffering E. The reason I focused, instead, on a worse evil—one that could be avoided only by permitting E—is that the motivational structure of that example is more similar to the cancer-treatment case, which helps us (I think) to appreciate how things might seem from God's perspective.

²⁵ Trent Dougherty, 'Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism,' *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008).

²⁶ See Michael Huemer, 'Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007).

endorse commonsensism will reject Phenomenal Conservatism.²⁷ Consequently, even if Dougherty did show that skeptical theism is in serious tension with Phenomenal Conservatism (and I don't concede that he has shown this), he wouldn't thereby show that skeptical theism is in tension with commonsensism (as I've defined it).

More importantly, in finding a conflict between the commonsense perspective and the skeptical theist's skepticism, Dougherty says that we have a "strong intuition concerning some evils that there could not possibly be anything to justify this".²⁸ I've explained in section II.C why we might be tempted to think this (mistakenly) of some horrific evils we see. But I've also explained, in section II.B, why thinking this is a mistake. First, it doesn't seem that we (reasonably) have a strong intuition that God could not possibly exist or that the following principles mentioned in section II.B are false:

P1: For every instance of horrific suffering that we know to have occurred there are possible states of affairs that are significantly worse than it or possible states of affairs that are outweighing greater goods.

P2: For every instance of horrific suffering that we know to have occurred, although it is an intrinsically bad state of affairs, it is not intrinsically wrong to permit it regardless of the consequences.

On the contrary P1 and P2 seem true. So the only way we could reasonably have the strong intuition Dougherty mentions is if we reasonably had a strong intuition that there could not possibly be any *entailment relations* between these evils we know of and some other possible goods and evils that would justify God in permitting the evils we know of in order to avoid a worse evil or obtain an outweighing greater good. But we don't seem to have a strong intuition that there *couldn't possibly be* any such entailment relations. A healthy appreciation of ST1-ST4 should convince us (whether we're theists or nontheists) that we are largely in the dark about the realm of such entailment relations.

²⁷ For my own objections to Phenomenal Conservatism, see Michael Bergmann, 'Externalist Justification and the Role of Seemings' (unpublished).

²⁸ Dougherty, p. 174.

B. Jordan

Jeff Jordan argues that the skeptical theist's skepticism leads to moral skepticism, which makes it objectionable.²⁹ Here is one of his main complaints:

According to skeptical theism we have no good reason to think that the goods, evils, and connections between goods and evils, with which we're acquainted are representative of the possible goods, possible evils, and possible connections there are. So, for all we justifiably believe, the evils with which we're acquainted could be connected with very great goods, such that they are in fact good ATC [i.e., all-things-considered]. If the way things appear to us (their apparent moral status) is not a reliable guide to the way things really are (their objective moral status), then by affirming [ST1-ST3], the skeptical theist has lost the appearances. Just as external world skeptics contend that we're not justified in accepting the reliability of how things seem, the skeptical theist contends that, for all we justifiably believe, the way things morally seem may be systematically misleading.³⁰

But this is to ignore the fact that the skeptical theist's skepticism can reasonably be combined with the following view mentioned in section I.B:

M: Some actions are *intrinsically* wrong (i.e., wrong regardless of their consequences). But for some other actions, our judgments about their consequences matter much more, morally speaking. For these latter actions, we morally *ought* to (a) consider (for an appropriate length of time) the consequences we can reasonably expect of performing them and of the live alternatives to performing them, (b) refrain from performing them if the reasonably expected consequences of performing them seem significantly worse than the reasonably expected consequences of one of the live alternatives, and (c) perform them if the reasonably expected consequences of performing them seem significantly better than the reasonably expected consequences of each of the live alternatives.

Jordan says that a state of affairs is bad ATC just in case it is intrinsically bad and its intrinsic value combined with the intrinsic value of its consequences is bad overall.³¹ The skeptical theist will concede that she can't know *just by reflecting on possible consequences of an intrinsically bad state of affairs* that it is, in Jordan's sense, bad ATC. So, given that very often such reflection is all we have to go on in evaluating the ATC goodness or badness of a state of affairs, the skeptical theist will concede that we often don't know whether a state of affairs is bad ATC.

²⁹ Jeff Jordan, 'Does Skeptical Theism Lead to Moral Skepticism?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72 (2006).

³⁰ Jordan, p. 414.

³¹ Jordan, p. 407.

But, contrary to what Jordan says in the passage quoted above, it doesn't follow that "the way things appear to us (their apparent moral status) is not a reliable guide to the way things really are (their objective moral status)". This is because there are appearances of moral status other than a state of affair's appearance as, in Jordan's sense, bad (or good) ATC. There is, for example, an action's appearance as morally wrong. According to M, some actions are intrinsically morally wrong, regardless of their consequences. If some action *appears* to be intrinsically morally wrong regardless of its consequences, there's no reason to think that a skeptical theist can't, on that basis, reasonably believe that it is morally wrong. Likewise, according to M, some actions are wrong for us to perform if their reasonably expected consequences seem to us significantly worse than the reasonably expected consequences of each of the alternatives to performing them. Again, if some action *appears* to meet this condition, there's no reason to think that a skeptical theist can't, on that basis, reasonably believe that it is morally wrong for us to perform it. Thus, the skeptical theist might be agnostic about whether some horrendous evil she can prevent (such as a child's abduction from a supermarket by a sinister looking man) is bad ATC, in Jordan's sense. But it might still be perfectly clear to her that she morally ought to prevent it because it's clear to her that the reasonably expected consequences of permitting the abduction seem far worse than the reasonably expected consequences of preventing it. So the skeptical theist hasn't "lost the appearances" of the act's moral status (as morally wrong). Moreover, there's no pressure for her to concede that the way things morally seem (in terms of moral rightness or wrongness) may be systematically misleading. Jordan's mistake seems to arise from thinking that appearances of an action's status as morally right or morally wrong must be tied to appearances of a state of affair's goodness or badness ATC (in Jordan's sense).

C. Wilks

Ian Wilks considers an imagined theist he calls ‘the eccentric theist’ who claims “that God has created a sub-10,000 year world [i.e. our planet earth] orbited by the sun, with pink elephants”.³² When objectors point out that we have compelling evidence that the earth is more than 10,000 years old, that it orbits the sun (not vice versa), and that the earth is not populated with pink elephants, the eccentric theist responds by noting that we are unable to fathom God’s reasons: for all we know, God has good reasons to deceive us with misleading evidence against the eccentric theist’s claims, despite their truth. The eccentric theist concludes from this that the supposedly compelling evidence against her views is worthless. Wilks then claims that skeptical theists must accept the reasonableness of such a response by the eccentric theist because it involves the same sorts of moves that the skeptical theist makes. The skeptical theist might respond by saying:

“We have more reason to think that God would create the earth after the fashion described by our best science than otherwise”. But in this response we see a reversal. The skeptical theist is now attaching probative force—having just denied it—to what we have more reason to think God would do.³³

Wilks concludes that the skeptical theist must accept the reasonableness of the eccentric theist’s defense of her views about a young earth orbited by the sun and populated with pink elephants. And if the skeptical theist does this, then, according to Wilks, “theism comes off looking less rational than it did before the defense ... [and] one might as well spare the effort of dispute and simply pronounce belief in God to be irrational”.³⁴

³² Ian Wilks, Ian (2009), ‘Skeptical Theism and Empirical Unfalsifiability’, *Faith and Philosophy* 26 (2009), 74.

³³ Wilks, p. 74.

³⁴ Wilks, p. 76.

Here's how a commonsense agnostic who endorses the skeptical theist's skepticism could respond: "The problem with Wilks' line of reasoning is that it fails to distinguish different ways of knowing what God's reasons are (if God exists). One way is by reflecting on the possible goods, possible evils, and entailments between them that we know of and, on that basis, trying to determine what potential reasons God has (if he exists) for permitting or doing certain things. This approach is problematic given that ST1-ST4 are true. But, as was noted above in section I.C, there are other ways. For example, if I know that p is true, then I know that God (if he exists) didn't have an all-things-considered good reason for making p false. In this particular case, I know that the earth is older than 10,000 years, that it orbits the sun (not vice versa), and that the earth is not populated with pink elephants. Hence, I can conclude that God (if he exists) didn't have an all-things-considered good reason for making it falsely seem that way: given that things are that way, they don't *falsely* seem that way." Notice that someone endorsing the skeptical theist's skepticism can, in this way, claim to know something about what reasons God has or lacks (if God exists). These reasons can't be known merely by reflecting on what goods, evils, and entailments between them there might be; given ST1-ST4, that method won't work. But they can be known in other ways, such as concluding from our knowledge of p that God didn't have an all-things-considered good reason to make p false.³⁵

Wilks also argues that skeptical theists are committed to the following general claim:

U: Every claim about God is empirically unfalsifiable.³⁶

From what I've said thus far in the paper, it will be easy to guess my response. I won't get into the details of Wilks' argument for the conclusion that skeptical theists are committed to U. I'll

³⁵ At this point, proponents of the argument from evil might be tempted to make a similar move, claiming that we can just see directly that God wouldn't permit the horrific suffering we see around us, and concluding from that something about God's reasons. See section II.B and II.C for my response to this move.

³⁶ Wilks, pp. 64-71.

simply give a counterexample to it. Consider this claim about God: *God exists and had an all-things-considered good reason to permanently annihilate my house last week.* A skeptical theist can sensibly believe that *that* claim about God can be empirically falsified—one need only verify empirically that my house was not permanently annihilated last week. Hence U is mistaken.

IV. A Challenge to Opponents of the Skeptical Theist's Skepticism

One thing opponents of the skeptical theist's skepticism rarely do is acknowledge the plausibility of ST1-ST4. This is a problem for them. For, independently of theism, ST1-ST4 seem highly plausible. Moreover, ST1-ST4 seem to imply that we cannot reasonably infer the second of these two claims from the first:

1. For some actual evils we know of, we can't think of any God-justifying reason for permitting them.
2. So probably there aren't any God-justifying reasons for permitting those evils.

What opponents of the skeptical theist's skepticism typically try to do is show how the skepticism embodied in ST1-ST4 commits one to some other unpalatable skepticism. But those who support the skeptical theist's skepticism (whether theists or nontheists) keep coming back to the fact that the following two claims seem highly plausible:

- (A) ST1-ST4 are true.
- (B) If ST1-ST4 are true, then the inference from 1 to 2 (just mentioned above) is not a good inference.

I find that whenever I read objections to the skeptical theist's skepticism, I can't get around the extreme plausibility of (A) and (B). Given that, I'm very doubtful that the implausible skepticism supposedly implied by the skeptical theist's skepticism really is implied by it.

My challenge, then, to opponents of the skeptical theist's skepticism is, first, to help those who endorse it to see what's wrong with (A) or (B) and, second, to explain why (A) and (B) seem true if they aren't. This is something I have not seen attempted in the literature; instead

objectors merely argue that implausible skepticism of some sort follows from the skeptical theist's skepticism. Taking up this challenge persuasively would, I think, go a long way toward bringing an end to support for the skeptical theist's skepticism.³⁷

Postscript

My thanks to Steve Wykstra for his insightful and probing comments, also published in this volume. In them, he presses the charge that skeptical theists will have to agonize over many obvious moral decisions in the same way that Sally will understandably agonize over the choice in Wykstra's train track case.³⁸ This is a problem for skeptical theism because it's contrary to common sense that we should agonize in that way over obvious moral decisions (such as the decision whether to remove an infant from the road when we can see traffic coming and no one else is around to help the baby). This convinces me that I need to change my formulation of M. When I initially formulated it, I had in mind cases like the baby case but not cases like the train track case. Here's how I would like to revise M so that it handles the train track case:

M*: Some actions are *intrinsically* wrong (i.e., wrong regardless of their consequences). But for some other actions, our judgments about their consequences matter much more, morally speaking. For these latter actions, we morally *ought* to (a) consider (for an appropriate length of time) the possible consequences we can reasonably connect with performing them or with the live alternatives to performing them, (b) refrain from performing them if, in light of these considerations, the reasonably expected value of performing them seems significantly lower than the reasonably expected value of one of the live alternatives, and (c) perform them if, in light of these considerations, the reasonably expected value of performing them seems significantly higher than the reasonably expected value of each of the live alternatives.

³⁷ Thanks to Jeff Brower, Paul Draper, Dan Howard-Snyder, Patrick Kain, Trenton Merricks, and Michael Rea for comments on earlier drafts. For additional comments, thanks also to audience members at the following venues: the Western Conference of the Society of Christian Philosophers at Fort Lewis College in October 2009; the Alvin Plantinga Retirement Celebration at the University of Notre Dame in May 2010; and the Epistemology Brown Bag at Northwestern University in May 2010.

³⁸ See Steve Wykstra's comments, in this volume, for a description of the train track case.

Clause (a) now focuses on consequences reasonably connected with the acts, not just those reasonably expected. And clause (b) and (c) focus now on reasonably expected value in light of the consequences in focus in clause (a). The expected value of an act (in cases where consequences matter) is determined by considering both the likelihood and the goodness or badness of its possible consequences mentioned in clause (a).³⁹

Which consequences of an act can we “reasonably connect with” it and which not? I’ll just mention some examples of each:

1. *We can reasonably connect a consequence with an act if one of the following is true:*
 - a. We can see that the consequence is somewhat likely.
 - b. We can’t see how likely it is to be a consequence (so we don’t think it’s likely) but we have some grasp of what it is like and some idea of how it could be a consequence.
2. *We cannot reasonably connect a consequence with an act if one of the following is true:*
 - a. We can see that the consequence is extremely unlikely.
 - b. We have no idea how likely it is to be a consequence (so we don’t think it’s unlikely) and we have no grasp of the consequence and no idea how it could be a consequence (and this ignorance seems escapable only by something akin to a miraculous revelation).

Notice that, in 1b cases, it seems that thinking about such possible consequences might be of help and so they ought not to be ignored whereas, in 2b cases, it seems that thinking about such possible consequences won’t be helpful at all and that ignoring them is permissible and even advisable.

In the baby case, the possible negative consequences of rescuing the baby are acknowledged but ignored by the skeptical theist because they are of the 2b variety. It’s important to notice that they are appropriately ignored even though they aren’t viewed as unlikely (as in 2a). In the train track case, the possible negative consequence of leaving to get help (i.e., the train-caused death) is of the 1b variety. That’s why reasoning in accord with M* allows the skeptical theist to ignore the remote unknowable possibly negative all-things-

³⁹ Notice that M* (like M) doesn’t tell you what you ought to do in *all* possible circumstances. It just tells you what to do in some of those circumstances. Thus, sometimes when you’re behaving in accord with M*, it’s clear what you ought to do; other times it’s not.

considered consequences of rescuing the baby from the road while also allowing Sally to agonize over the possibility of the train-caused death if she leaves the child and goes for help.

In the final paragraph of his comments, Wykstra takes two stabs at articulating a presumption of commonsense that skeptical theists allegedly can't preserve. In comparing those two stabs, it looks like Wykstra thinks that in preserving commonsense, skeptical theists need to equate *that which objectively ought to be done* with *that which in fact has the best overall consequences*. But this seems to ignore the point I make in section III.B in response to Jordan. Moreover, it strikes me as quite implausible to think that equating those two things is a dictate of commonsense.