

Skeptical Theism: A Panoramic Overview (Part II)¹

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Skeptical theism, broadly construed, is an attempt to leverage our limited cognitive powers, in some specified sense, against “evidential” and “explanatory” arguments from evil. In general, skeptical theism is the result of combining a suitable “epistemic principle” with a suitable “limitation thesis”. The resulting combination – a specific version of skeptical theism – can always be stated as a claim of the following kind: “we are not in a position to reasonably judge that p , on the basis of x ” where judging that p on the basis of x is (arguably) essential to some version of the problem of evil. In Part I of this overview, I distinguished between three versions of skeptical theism (ST):

Wykstra’s ST: We are not in a position to reasonably judge that “it appears that there is no justifying reason for an instance of suffering x ”, on the basis of seeing no justifying reason for x .

Bergmann’s ST: We are not in a position to reasonably judge that “no good at all justifies God in permitting some particularly horrendous evil,” on the basis of the fact that no good we know of justifies God in permitting it.

van Inwagen’s ST: We are not in a position to reasonably judge that “worlds containing higher-level sentient creatures without also containing patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those recorded by O and without being massively irregular” are *possible*, on the basis of imagining such a world.

There are, however, challenges to all three of these claims, as well as challenges to the particular principles and theses that support them. The latter kinds of challenge directly undermine the arguments we have considered, while the former kinds of challenge identify implausible consequences to the resulting views without indicating exactly where their supporting argument has gone wrong. What almost all of these arguments have in common, however, is their focus on the difficulties of restraining the skepticism that results from accepting a particular limitation thesis, or epistemic principle, or their combination. Skeptical theism of any kind, it seems, threatens unwelcomed skepticism of other kinds as well.

1. Generalized Skepticism: A Challenge to Wykstra’s ST

¹ I’m grateful to Steve Wykstra, Michael Bergmann, Klaas Kraay, Timothy Perrine, Justin Mooney, Perry Hendricks, Joshua DiPaolo, Bob Gruber, and two anonymous referees for comments on earlier drafts.

Wykstra's ST is a claim about our access to God's reasons for permitting suffering. Yet one of the central premises adduced in support of this claim – the general epistemic principle CORNEA – is not particularly about God's reasons for permitting suffering. As such, CORNEA, if true, applies to *any* of God's reasons for which we could rightly say:

W3*. It is not reasonable for us to believe that, given our cognitive faculties and the use we have made of them, if there were a justifying reason for God's ϕ -ing, we would likely see it.

And since the cognitive-gap between us and God is said to be *modestly* estimated as roughly the gap between a human adult and a one-month-old infant (c.f., Wykstra 1984, 88), it is hard to imagine any possible action of God's that we could not substitute for ϕ . Combined with CORNEA, this means that we are not in a position to make any reasonable judgments *at all* regarding what God does not have justifying reasons to do. How worrisome is this?

One possible worry involves God's justifying reasons for lying to us. Few believers take seriously the possibility that God's central pronouncements, promises, and prophecies are flat-out lies. Most believers, in fact, probably don't consider this a possibility at all. How could an all-good God blatantly lie about the things at the very center of, say, the Christian worldview? But, of course, these kinds of considerations are the mirror image of the kinds of considerations related to the problem of evil: how could an all-good God permit such horrific evil? In both cases, the mere fact that we see no justifying reason for God's action (permitting some evil or lying to us) does not put us in a position to judge that God does not indeed have them. If he did, after all, we likely would not see them anyway.

Another possible worry involves God's justifying reasons for deceiving us about the nature of reality. The reasoning here is much the same. In a famous passage from his *Meditations*, Descartes asks:

How do I know that [God] has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now?

The correct answer, if CORNEA and the parent-child analogy are both right, seems to be that Descartes *can't* know. The perception of these deceptions as incongruous with God's character – with God's "goodness," as Descartes puts it – is just another way of saying that we can't see any justifying reasons for God deceiving us in that way. But our not seeing them, once again, does not put us in a position to judge that God does not indeed have them. If he did have justifying reasons for such extreme deceit, we likely would not see them anyway.

There are different versions of these kinds of arguments. We can here produce an overarching version that captures their overall direction:

The Skeptical Challenge to Wykstra's ST

SW1. If we can reasonably (a) trust *God's apparently sincere disclosures*, or (b) both believe in God and trust *our own sense of reality*, then, for some ϕ , we are in a position to reasonably judge that "it appears that there is no justifying reason for God's ϕ -ing", on the basis of seeing no justifying reason for God's ϕ -ing.

SW2. We are in a position to reasonably judge that "It appears that p," on the basis of cognized situation s, only if it is reasonable for us to believe that, given our cognitive faculties and the use we have made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by us.

SW3. For all ϕ , it is not reasonable for us to believe that, given our cognitive faculties and the use we have made of them, if there were a justifying reason for God's ϕ -ing, we would likely see it.

SW4. So, for all ϕ , we are not in a position to reasonably judge that "it appears that there is no justifying reason for God's ϕ -ing", on the basis of seeing no justifying reason for God's ϕ -ing.

SW5. So we cannot reasonably (a) trust *God's apparently sincere disclosures*, or (b) both believe in God and trust *our own sense of reality*.

This argument is structurally similar Wykstra's own argument, yet the conclusion might seem surprising and unpalatable to most theists. To the extent that resisting SW5 requires rejecting SW2 (which is the epistemic principle behind Wykstra's skeptical theism), to that extent Wykstra's skeptical theism and its threat to Rowe's Original Evidential Argument are undermined.²

2. Moral Skepticism: A Challenge to Bergmann's ST

Bergmann's ST, however, does not depend directly on a challenge to our access to God's reasons. His argument, in this way, is more modest than Wykstra's. Nonetheless, the skeptical component of his argument might still be strong enough to cause some undesirable damage. Bergmann's limitation thesis, after all, is a claim that has implications for anyone who is ever interested in determining what is *all-things-considered* good or bad:

² There is a lot more to be said about the relevant issues here. For some discussion, see Piper (2008), Wielenberg (2010, 2014), Segal (2011), Rea (2013), O'Connor (2013), Boyce (2014), Hudson (2014), Law (2015), DePoe (2017), Russell (2018), Hendricks (2020).

B3. We have no good reasons for thinking that the goods, evils, and entailments between good and evils that we know of are representative (with respect to whether some evil is justified) of all goods, evils, and entailments between them.

When deciding how to act, in general, it is not enough to consider one or two of the good-making and bad-making features of the relevant alternative actions. All good-making features of my actions matter, as well as all of their bad-making features. The fact that one alternative will make me happy is certainly a good-making feature to be taken into account; the fact that it disrespects the dignity of other people is no doubt a bad-making feature to be taken into account too. Simply ignoring the latter fact would be a moral mistake. The final value of each of my alternatives, the *all-things-considered* sum of their value and disvalue, is the only real guide to what I morally ought to do. If B3 is true, however, then we are never in a position to make this kind of judgment. If B3 is true, in other words, we suffer from what Jordan (2006, 408) calls “moral myopia.”³ How worrisome is this?

One possible worry here is familiar from just above. To the extent that justifying reasons for action supervene on the overall balance of good-making and bad-making features of the alternative actions, our limited access to the totality of these features entails a limitation in our reasonable judgments about justifying-reasons too. We can thus derive the same skeptical results about God’s possible lying and external world deceit, albeit by a different route. Notice that, strictly speaking, my talk of good-making features and bad-making features of actions has not presupposed any particular moral view, such as consequentialism or deontology. The kind of worries we are discussing can be derived on the basis of any moral view capacious enough to acknowledge conflicts between different kinds of moral considerations.⁴

Leaving God’s reasons aside, however, another possible worry is concerned with the justification of our own moral judgments and with the danger of moral paralysis. If we are never in a position to make reasonable all-things considered value judgments, then we are never in a position to be confident about what we should do, never in a position to think that our judgments of final value are even weakly reliable guides to final value. We are always in precisely the position we are with respect to particularly horrendous evils: we can make judgments on the basis of the good-making features and bad-making features that we know of, and their relations, but we have no reason to presume that these are representative of all the relevant features and

³ Or, as Bergmann (2009, 379; 2012, 12) himself later accepts, “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.”

⁴ Granted, Bergmann (2009, 376) uses talk of “good” and “evil” from within a broadly consequentialist framework (despite noting that his claims apply to any non-consequentialist view that takes consequences seriously *as well*). But I am here drawing on Ross (1930) and expanding Bergmann’s B3 into a claim about good-making features and bad-making features of actions more generally, a claim that is not about consequences *per se*. This expansion is certainly warranted by the same concerns leading him to identify our axiological limitations.

relations to consider. The kind of limitation suggested by Bergmann, in other words, seems to lock us all into a pervasive kind of spineless moral skepticism. Those of us attentive enough to this crippling limitation will simply be unable to ever decide on what to do.

There are again different versions of these kinds of arguments. We can here produce another overarching version that captures their overall direction:

The Skeptical Challenge to Bergmann's ST

SB1. If we can reasonably (a) trust *God's apparently sincere disclosures*, or (b) both believe in God and trust *our own moral sense*, then, for some ϕ , we are in a position to reasonably judge that ϕ -ing is what one should do all-things considered.

SB2. We have no good reasons for thinking that the goods, evils, and entailments between good and evils that we know of are representative (with respect to whether some evil is justified) of all goods, evils, and entailments between them.

SB3. If have no good reasons for thinking that the goods, evils, and entailments between good and evils that we know of are representative (with respect to whether some evil is justified) of all goods, evils, and entailments between them, then, for all ϕ , we are not in a position to reasonably judge that ϕ -ing is what one should do all-things considered.

SB4. So, for all ϕ , we are not in a position to reasonably judge that ϕ -ing is what one should do all-things considered.

SB5. So we cannot reasonably (a) trust *God's apparently sincere disclosures*, or (b) both believe in God and trust *our own moral sense*.

As before, to the extent that resisting SB5 requires rejecting SB2 (which is the epistemic principle behind Bergmann's skeptical theism), to that extent Bergmann's skeptical theism and its threat to Rowe's Modified Evidential Argument are undermined.⁵

3. Unqualified Modal Skepticism: A Challenge to van Inwagen's ST

van Inwagen's ST, finally, says nothing about our limited access to God's reasons or about our limited access to axiological reality. It turns, instead, on what we have called van Inwagen's *qualified* modal skepticism: the claim that while ordinary modal claims are often reasonable, most philosophical modal claims are not.

⁵ There is a lot more to be said about the relevant issues here too. For some discussion, see Russell (1996), Almeida and Oppy (2003), Bergmann & Rea (2005), Jordan (2006), Piper (2007), Schnall (2007), Maitzen (2009, 2013, 2014), Howard-Snyder (2009, 2014), Schon (2010), Anderson (2012), Bergmann (2012), Wykstra (2012), Ribeiro & Aikin (2013), Rancourt (2013), and Hendricks (2020).

Differently from the two previous critiques – where we simply identified potentially damaging consequences of the relevant epistemic principle – the central challenge to van Inwagen’s skeptical theism is a direct challenge to the epistemic principle behind his argument:

V2. If we cannot imagine a world that we take to verify p , then we are not in a position to reasonably judge that possibly p , on the basis of imagining a p -world.⁶

The worry here is that this principle leads to *unqualified* modal skepticism, van Inwagen’s original intentions notwithstanding. If V2 is true, the critic says, then none of our ordinary modal judgments are reasonable either. Part of the worry here turns on what it takes, according to van Inwagen, to truly *verify* p : imagining a sufficiently detailed world that is incompatible with $\sim p$. As van Inwagen notes, correctly, this is very hard to do. The problem is that it might be *too* hard.

Recall the ordinary modal claims we considered in Part I:

- (i) John F. Kennedy could have died of natural causes.
- (ii) The table could have been placed on the other side of the room.

According to van Inwagen, these modal claims are unproblematic. And yet *verifying* the relevant propositions is far from a simple exercise. How could we imagine, coherently, all the required changes to the actual chain of events leading to JFK’s assassination that would produce a world where there was no attempt on his life? How could we imagine, coherently, the physiological details required for imagining a world where the actual attempt failed to fatally wound him? And how could we imagine these and other worlds in ways that make them truly incompatible with $\sim p$? How would any imagined scene of JFK “dying of natural causes” rule out the possibility, for example, that he is instead “dying of poisoning”? Similar concerns can be raised about any ordinary modal claim.

With this concern in mind, we can here produce an argument that targets V2 directly, and, consequently, van Inwagen’s ST:

The Skeptical Challenge to van Inwagen’s ST

⁶ Recall, however, that van Inwagen himself stops short of explicitly endorsing this principle (the core of which he borrows from Yablo 1993). Nonetheless, van Inwagen’s sympathetic discussion of the skeptical consequences of this principle is the closest thing he offers to an explicit argument for the kind of modal skepticism employed in his skeptical theist replies to the problem of evil. See footnote 16 on Part I for a more detailed discussion of this issue.

SV1. If van Inwagen's Modal Argument is sound, then V2 is true as well: if we cannot imagine a world that we take to verify *p*, then we are not in a position to reasonably judge that possibly *p*, on the basis of imagining a *p*-world."

SV2. If V2 is true, then, for all ordinary *p*'s, we are not in a position to reasonably judge that possibly *p*, on the basis of imagining a *p*-world.

SV3. For most ordinary *p*'s, we *are* in a position to reasonably judge that possibly *p*, on the basis of imagining a *p*-world.

SV4. So V2 is false: we can be in a position to reasonably judge that possibly *p*, on the basis of imagining a *p*-world, even if we cannot imagine a world that we take to verify *p*.

SV5. So van Inwagen's Modal Argument is not sound.

This argument presents a direct challenge to the epistemic principle behind van Inwagen's skeptical theism. If the argument is sound, then van Inwagen's skeptical theism and its threat to Draper's Explanatory Argument are blunted.⁷

4. Bayesian Epistemology: A Challenge to All Versions of Skeptical Theism

All three versions of skeptical theism impose substantive constraints on the reasonability of anyone making certain kinds of judgments. These constraints are captured by their respective epistemic principles:

W2. We are in a position to reasonably judge that "It appears that *p*," on the basis of cognized situation *s*, only if it is reasonable for us to believe that, given our cognitive faculties and the use we have made of them, if *p* were not the case, *s* would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by us.

B2. If we have no good reason for thinking that *A*'s we have observed are representative of all the *A*'s there are, then we cannot infer that no *A*'s are *B*'s from the fact that all the *A*'s we have observed so far are *B*'s.

V2. If we cannot imagine a world that we take to verify *p*, then we are not in a position to reasonably judge that *possibly p*, on the basis of imagining a *p*-world.

On a natural reading, these are claims about the necessary conditions for something – a cognized situation, a set of observations, an imaginative exercise – to count as *evidence* for something else – for any *p*, for an

⁷ For discussions of this challenge, see Geirsson (2005) and Hawke (2011). For different challenges to van Inwagen's argument – focusing on the connection between his qualified modal skepticism and the assignment of epistemic probabilities – see Russell (1996) and Draper (2016).

inductive generalization, for a modal claim.⁸ The necessary condition in each case, of course, is the associated limitation thesis *not obtaining*:

~W3. It IS reasonable for us to believe that, given our cognitive faculties and the use we have made of them, if there were a justifying reason for instance of suffering x , we would likely see it.

~B3. We HAVE good reasons for thinking that the goods, evils, and entailments between good and evils that we know of are representative of all goods, evils, and entailments between them.

~V3. We CAN imagine a world that we take to verify the existence of “higher-level sentient creatures” and the absence of either “patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those recorded by O” or “massive irregularity”.

By imposing these constraints, however, W2, B2, and V2 appear to be incompatible with one of the leading ways of modeling evidential relations and their impact on reasonable belief.

According to Bayesian epistemology, some proposition p is “evidence” for some hypothesis H , for some S , just in case the probability of H given both p and S ’s background information b is greater than the probability of H given b alone:

Bayesian Evidence: p is evidence for H iff $P(H/p\&b) > P(H/b)$

On this view, the greater the difference between the two probabilities – the more p raises the probability of H for S – the stronger the evidential support provided by p to H for S . Determining the strength of the support provided by p to H , however, is not enough to determine whether someone is reasonable in believing that H is true (or reasonable in believing that H is probably true, or some such). While the correct relation between rational *degrees of confidence* and reasonable *full belief* is a matter of controversy, some aspects of that relation are less disputed. For example, if my rational degree of confidence in some H is lower than my rational degree of confidence in $\sim H$ – i.e., if $\sim H$ is more probable than H given my background information – then it seems right to say that it is not reasonable for me to believe that H . If minimal relational facts such as these are correct, however, then according to Bayesian epistemology what matters for reasonable belief is not only how much evidential support H gets from p but also how probable H was for S to begin with (that is, how probable H was given S ’s background information alone).⁹

This way of thinking about evidential support and reasonable belief, however, imposes two clear constraints on any suggestion about the necessary conditions for something to count as evidence for something else. The

⁸ See Wykstra (1984, 78-9), Bergmann (2009, 387-8), and van Inwagen (1991, 161).

⁹ There are different versions of Bayesian epistemology. See Titelbaum (2022) for a detailed overview.

first constraint is this: some condition C can only be necessary for some e to count as evidence for some H if C obtaining is also necessary for e to be more expected given H than $\sim H$. This is because $P(H/e \& b)$ will *always* be greater than $P(H/b)$ – thus making e count as evidence for H – when e is more expected given H than $\sim H$. The second constraint is this: some condition C can only be necessary for some e to count as evidence for some H if C obtaining is also necessary for $\sim e$ to count as evidence for $\sim H$. This is because e can only be evidence for H if it is more expected given H than $\sim H$ (as just mentioned): since the probability of ‘ e or $\sim e$ ’, given any H , must always sum up to 1, e can only be more expected given H than $\sim H$ if $\sim e$ is more expected given $\sim H$ than H . Both of these constraints follow from the Bayesian account of evidence, together with the probability calculus. Skeptical theism seems in tension with both.

Given the first constraint, $W2$, $B2$, and $V2$ can only be true if $\sim W3$, $\sim B3$, and $\sim V3$ must obtain in order for evil to be *more* expected given God’s non-existence than given His existence. But this seems false. Whatever else we say about the overall evidential impact of evil on the reasonability of theistic and atheistic belief, it seems clear that evil is more expected in a world not created by God than in a world created by Him, *even if $W3$, $B3$, and $V3$ are true*. Whatever our cognitive limitations, their epistemic effects do not seem to be this strong. What $W2$, $B2$, and $V2$ are saying, after all, is that any particular instance of evil, or any collection of instances of evil, or even all of the evil in all of history combined, are either just as likely given the existence or non-existence of God, or indeed more likely given the existence of God, *if $W3$, $B3$, and $V3$ are true*. If this conditional seems false to you, then Bayesian epistemology tells you that $W2$, $B2$, and $V2$ must be false as well.

Given the second constraint, $W2$, $B2$, and $V2$ can only be true if $\sim W3$, $\sim B3$, and $\sim V3$ must obtain in order for the absence of evil to count as evidence (of any strength) for the existence of God. But this also seems false. Whatever else we say about the evidential impact of evil on the reasonability of theistic and atheistic belief, it seems clear that a world without any evil whatsoever would be evidence for the existence of God, *even if $W3$, $B3$, and $V3$ are true*. Whatever our cognitive limitations, once again, their epistemic effects do not seem to be this strong. What $W2$, $B2$, and $V2$ are saying, after all, is that the removal of any particular actual instance of evil, or of any collection of actual instances of evil, or even the removal of all of the actual evils in all of history combined, should have no rational impact on the probability of the existence or non-existence of God, *if $W3$, $B3$, and $V3$ are true*. If this conditional seems false to you, then Bayesian epistemology tells you that $W2$, $B2$, and $V2$ must be false as well.

With these concerns in mind, we can here produce an argument that targets all three epistemic principles directly and, consequently, all three versions of skeptical theism we have been considering:

The Bayesian Challenge to ST

BC1. If any of the epistemic principles W2, B2, or V2 is true, then some instance of evil e counts as evidence against God's existence, for S, only if one of $\sim W3$, $\sim B3$, or $\sim V3$ is true of S.

BC2. If some instance of evil e is more expected given the non-existence of God than given the existence of God, for S, then e is evidence against the existence of God, for S.

BC3. If the absence of some instance of evil e is evidence for God, for S, then e is evidence against the existence of God, for S.

BC4. One of $\sim W3$, $\sim B3$, or $\sim V3$ being true of S is not a necessary condition for either (a) some instance of evil e to be more expected given the non-existence of God than given the existence of God, for S, or (b) the absence of some instance of evil e to be evidence for God, for S.

BC5. So none of the epistemic principles W2, B2, or V2 are true.

Differently from previous challenges, BC5 is an attack on all versions of skeptical theism we have been considering. The strength of this argument, however, depends partly on one's sympathies towards Bayesian epistemology, and partly on one's intuitive assessment of the offending conditionals behind BC4.¹⁰

Conclusion

Altogether, in parts I and II, I have described three versions of the problem of evil, three corresponding versions of skeptical theism, and four major challenges to these versions. Determining the weight of the evidence from evil against theism now requires a delicate evaluation of the various relative strengths of these considerations. There is also much more else besides to consider.¹¹

One is tempted, in fact, to endorse what might be called *meta skeptical theism*:

Meta Skeptical Theism: we are not in a position to reasonably judge that the evidence from evil undermines theism, on the basis of evaluating the literature on skeptical theism.

Of course, defending such a claim would require identifying a suitable epistemic principle and a suitable limitation thesis. And no doubt worries about wrangling our skepticism away from neighboring pastures

¹⁰ For discussions of versions of this challenge, see Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs (2016), Callahan (2016; forthcoming), Perrine and Wykstra (2017), Anderson and Russell (2021), Perrine (2022), and Climenhaga (forthcoming).

¹¹ At least one more issue is worth mentioning. Some have argued that certain versions of skeptical theism are in tension with "common sense epistemology": epistemology based on principles such as Pryor's (2000) *Dogmatism*, Huemer's (2001) *Phenomenal Conservatism*, and/or Swinburne's (2004) *Principle of Credulity*. The challenge here is structurally similar to the Bayesian challenge: it appeals to the implications of a certain epistemological framework and to the intuitive implausibility favoring skeptical theism over these results. For discussion of this issue, see Dougherty (2008, 2011, 2014), Matheson (2011, 2014), Bergmann (2012), Tweedt (2015), Hendricks (2018), and Perrine (2022).

would again ensue. Note, however, that since (a) the arguments from evil are independent of each other and each sufficient to undermine theism on their own (*prima facie*), and since (b) no version of skeptical theism, properly understood, applies to *all* arguments from evil, it follows that (c) the critical failure of even just one of these versions of skeptical theism is enough for the problem of evil to succeed (assuming there are no other problems with those arguments, anyway). In this sense, the skeptical theist is in a much more tenuous defensive position than the atheologist: the former needs all versions of skeptical theism to be sound while the latter needs only one of them to fail.¹²

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¹² Given the "inductive" defense of RO2, presumed by Wykstra, Bergmann's ST plausibly applies to Rowe's Original Evidential Argument as well. In Oliveira (2020), however, I have argued for a "collective" defense of RO2 instead and argued that this defense is compatible with both Wykstra's ST and Bergmann's ST. That aside, see Bergmann (2009), Perrine & Wykstra (2014), and Perrine (2019) for attempts to extend their versions of skeptical theism into a challenge to Draper's Explanatory Argument – and see Draper (2013, 2014) and Buchak (2014) for critical discussions of those attempts.

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