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**Skeptical Theism Unscathed: Why Skeptical Objections to Skeptical Theism Fail**

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**Abstract:** Arguments from evil purport to show that some fact about evil makes it (at least) probable that God does not exist. Skeptical theism is held to undermine many versions of the argument from evil: it is thought to undermine a crucial inference that such arguments often rely on. Skeptical objections to skeptical theism claim that it (skeptical theism) entails an excessive amount of skepticism, and therefore should be rejected. In this article, I show that skeptical objections to skeptical theism have a very limited scope: only those who reject certain (apparently) popular epistemological theories will be threatened by them.

1. **Introduction**

Skeptical theism is a popular response to evidential arguments from evil—it is thought by many to block a crucial inference that such arguments often rely on. However, many critics have claimed that skeptical theism entails an unacceptable amount of skepticism. In this article, I first lay out a popular articulation of skeptical theism, and explicate three arguments against it: two that claim that skeptical theism entails skepticism about divine revelation and one that claims that it entails global skepticism. My project in this article is to show that those who hold certain epistemological views (namely, externalism, phenomenal conservatism, or Alstonian epistemology) have reason to reject all three arguments. More specifically, phenomenal conservatives and Alstonian epistemologists have reason to reject the first two arguments, and externalists have reason to reject all three arguments. Furthermore, I argue that those who hold the above epistemological positions will likely reject other skeptical arguments against skeptical theism, meaning that such objections are doomed to have a narrow scope. So, the goal of this article is largely conditional: *if* one is an externalist, phenomenal conservative, or Alstonian epistemologist, *then* she can reject arguments leveled against skeptical theism. Since these positions appear to be relatively popular, it follows that the skeptical arguments mentioned above have a very limited scope. Thus, if proponents of these arguments wish to widen their scope, they must couple them with an additional argument for the truth of the epistemological framework they are using, which is no small task. The outlook for skeptical objections to skeptical theism, therefore, is bleak.

1. **The Nature of Skeptical Theism**

Logical arguments from evil purport to show that there is a contradiction between the existence of evil and the existence of God; such arguments claim that if God exists, then there cannot be evil. However, logical arguments from evil have fallen out of popularity recently,[[1]](#endnote-1) and contemporary defenders of arguments from evil have mainly focused on *evidential* versions of them.[[2]](#endnote-2) The evidential argument from evil comes in many flavors, but, for the purposes of this article, we may state it as follows:

1. For some actual evils E we know of, we cannot think of any morally justifying reason for permitting them.
2. Therefore, probably, there are not any morally justifying reasons for permitting them.
3. If God exists, he would not permit E if there were no morally justifying reason for permitting them.[[3]](#endnote-3)
4. Therefore, probably, God does not exist.[[4]](#endnote-4)

‘Skeptical theism’ denotes a variety of positions that have been developed in response to different arguments from evil.[[5]](#endnote-5) In this article, I will be interested in a particular version of skeptical theism: the skeptical theist that I am interested in is a theist that rejects the inference from (1) to (2)—she does not think that our inability to think of a morally justifying reason for E makes it probable that there is no such reason. This is because she embraces the following theses:

Skeptical Thesis 1 (ST1): We should be in doubt about whether the goods we know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are.

Skeptical Thesis 2 (ST2): We should be in doubt about whether each good we know of is such that the necessary conditions of its realization we know of are all there are.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The truth of ST1 and ST2 are thought to render the inference from (1) to (2) dubious: since we should be in doubt about whether the goods and their necessary conditions of realization that we know of are representative of the goods and their necessary conditions of realization that there are, we cannot infer from our lack of knowledge of a morally justifying reason for E that there probably is not one. To make this clearer, we may think of our attempt to locate a morally justifying reason for permitting E like searching for a rabbit in a garden.[[7]](#endnote-7) If we search part of the garden and come up empty handed, then, if we are confident in our ability to recognize and detect rabbits and that that part is representative of the whole garden, we can infer that there (at least probably) are not any rabbits in the garden. However, if we have reason to doubt that the part of the garden we have checked is representative of the whole garden and/or our ability to recognize and detect rabbits, then we are not warranted in inferring that there are not any rabbits in it; that is, if we have reason to doubt that the contents of the garden that we have checked resemble the contents of the whole garden, our coming up empty handed in our search is scant evidence for there being no rabbit in the garden.[[8]](#endnote-8) More abstractly, if we have found no x in our sample S *and* we have reason to doubt that S is representative in respect to x, then our not finding x in S is not good evidence for there being no x at all. Since, skeptical theists argue, this is the position we are in—we have reason to doubt that the goods that we have searched through for a morally justifying reason for E are representative of the goods that there are (etc.)—the inference from (1) to (2) is blocked, and the evidential argument from evil fails.[[9]](#endnote-9)

**2.1 The Scope of Skeptical Theism**

The scope of skeptical theism, then, should be clear: it undermines certain types of inductive inferences, often called ‘noseeum inferences,’[[10]](#endnote-10) like the one contained in the evidential argument from evil as stated above. However, it would be too quick to draw from this that there are no arguments from evil that are immune to skeptical theism: arguments from evil that do not make use of a noseeum inference may well be immune to criticisms stemming from skeptical theism as characterized above. Indeed, Michael Bergmann says that skeptical theists

‘don’t claim that their skeptical theses undermine all arguments from evil… [skeptical theism is] used by the skeptical theist to target inductive inferences from God-justifying reasons we can think of…to the conclusion that there are no God-justifying reasons for permitting the evils we know of…*But this doesn’t show that* all *arguments from evil rely on inductive inferences…*’ (2014: 210, emphasis mine)

So, in principle, it is possible to construct an argument from evil that is immune to skeptical theism; any argument that does not (implicitly or explicitly) make use of a noseeum inference will (at least arguably) be untouched by skeptical theism.[[11]](#endnote-11) However, while such arguments are indeed possible, it does not follow from that possibility that anyone is (or, more modestly, that many people are) justified in accepting them. For example, some arguments from evil rely on the claim that it *seems* (in a phenomenal conservative sense, explained below in section 4.3) that there is gratuitous evil, and that since God would not allow gratuitous evil, this seeming justifies the conclusion that God does not exist (see e.g. Trent Dougherty (2008) and (2014)). While such an argument is possiblyjustifiedvia phenomenal conservatism, I have argued elsewhere (2018a) that it is nevertheless *implausible* to suppose many (if any) people have this type of justification; while such arguments might be available to some persons, they will likely be few and far between. And, furthermore, I have argued (ibid.) that even when skeptical theism’s scope is understood to only encompass arguments from evil that rely (implicitly or explicitly) on a noseeum inference, that its scope is still wide. So, the fact that skeptical theism does not undermine all arguments from evil does not do much for the atheist cause, nor is it a strike against skeptical theism, for, again, it never purported to undermine all arguments from evil.[[12]](#endnote-12)

**2.2 Other Skeptical Theisms**

As I stated prior, I will restrict my attention to the skeptical theism consisting of an affirmation of theism and an affirmation of ST1 and ST2. However, it is worth mentioning that other types of skeptical theism challenge arguments from evil in a different way. To take just one example, Stephen Wykstra argues that a certain epistemological principle renders the inference from (1) to (2) dubious. The principle is:

CORNEA: ‘On the basis of cognized situation *s*, human *H* is entitled to claim ‘It appears that *p*’ only if it is reasonable for *H* to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if *p* were not the case, *s* would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her.’ (1984: 85)

There has been much debate surrounding the plausibility of CORNEA. However, I will not discuss its merits and demerits here.[[13]](#endnote-13) Rather, I simply note that insofar as CORNEA is compatible with externalism, phenomenal conservatism, or Alstonian epistemology (all explained below), my solutions to skeptical objections to skeptical theism will be available to its proponent. The same, of course, can be said for all other skeptical theisms: insofar as they are compatible with externalism, phenomenal conservatism, or Alstonian epistemology, my solutions to skeptical objections to skeptical theism will be available to their proponents.[[14]](#endnote-14) Thus, while I have restricted my focus to just one form of skeptical theism in this article, the strategy I outline will (potentially) be available to skeptical theists of many stripes.

1. **Skeptical Objections to Skeptical Theism**

While the skeptical theses of skeptical theism are rarely *directly* challenged,[[15]](#endnote-15) it is often alleged that skeptical theism entails a form of skepticism that is unacceptable.[[16]](#endnote-16) Many have argued that skeptical theism entails skepticism about divine revelation and global skepticism. In this section, I will explicate three arguments that skeptical theism entails these forms of skepticism.

**3.1 Divine Testimony and Divine Deception**

Erik Wielenberg and Hud Hudson have put forth distinct arguments for the thesis that skeptical theism entails that we must give up knowledge claims about our beliefs that are predicated on divine revelation alone.[[17]](#endnote-17) Let us begin with Wielenberg’s argument. Wielenberg claims that if our only source of justification for a belief is divine testimony, we accept that God is permitted to deceive us if he has reasons to do so, and we are in the dark about whether he has such a reason, then our belief does not amount to knowledge. Since he thinks that skeptical theism entails that the antecedent is true, he claims its adherents are committed to the consequent. He puts the argument as follows:

‘(5) If skeptical theism is true, then, for any divine assertion that p, we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God's act of intentionally asserting that p when p is false has beyond-our-ken justification.

(6) If, for any divine assertion that p, we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God's act of intentionally asserting that p when p is false has beyond-our-ken justification then we do not know p if p has word-of-God justification only[[18]](#endnote-18) (unless we have good reason for thinking that, even if God has some justification for lying about p, God doesn't act on that justification).

(7) So, skeptical theism implies that we do not know any proposition that has word-of-God justification only (unless we have good reason for thinking that, even if God has some justification for lying, God doesn't act on that justification).

(8) We do not have good reason for thinking that, even if God has some justification for lying, God doesn't act on that justification.

(9) Therefore, skeptical theism implies that we do not know any proposition that has word-of-God justification only.’ (2010: 513)

Now, Wielenberg states that he does not think that this argument is sound. Rather, he says that he thinks it is as plausible as the skeptical theist’s reply to the noseeum inference used in evidential arguments from evil. Thus, if it fails then so does skeptical theism.

Similarly, Hudson says that if there is a morally justifying reason for deceiving us about a piece of divine revelation K,[[19]](#endnote-19) God could deceive us about it. He then asks

‘Do we have a guarantee that God would not deceive us about whether K is true? Well, not if our being deceived about K is the kind of bad state of affairs for which there exists a compensating good or morally justifying reason. If there is a compensating good or morally justifying reason for such deception, God’s essential perfect goodness is not in any way impugned by the deception—on the contrary, it may be morally obligatory to so deceive us.

‘Do we know that there is no such compensating good or morally justifying reason in this case? There’s the rub. . . apparently not, if we are among those who adhere to the skeptical theist’s defensive maneuver for undercutting arguments from evil to atheism. It would seem that consistency would require us to claim ignorance here as before, and for more or less the same reasons, too.

‘Consequently, our claim to knowledge seems to be threatened: We cannot without reservation trust such divine pronouncements...And once we have lost this particular kind of trust in the testimony, it cannot be the source of testimonial knowledge.’ (2014a: 154).

The only way to retain (or attain) knowledge ofK in light of the above considerations, says Hudson, is if we have positive reasons for trusting God’s testimony in respect to K. That is, Hudson endorses the *reductionist* view of testimonial knowledge. The reductionist holds that for S to know p on the basis of R’s testimony, S must have positive reasons for trusting R in respect to her testimony that p. (The non-reductionist denies this.[[20]](#endnote-20)) However, Hudson continues:

‘I am not relevantly similar to [God to get positive reasons for trusting his testimony in respect to K]. I am not well-positioned to get good evidence from perception, memory, induction, and the like relevant to a judgment of reliability on this…And I am a hopeless judge of what is at stake—cosmically speaking—if I and my fellows are not deceived in some comprehensive, irresistible, and undetectable fashion. Indeed, I am quite utterly in the dark on that matter…’ (2014a: 161).

Hence, due to skeptical theism, we are not capable of meeting the reductionist conditions for knowledge in respect to divine testimony, and therefore do not have knowledge of any of our beliefs based on such testimony. Hudson’s argument appears to take the following form:

1. For any belief that we have based solely on God’s testimony, if that belief amounts to knowledge, then we have positive reasons for trusting God with respect to that instance of testimony.
2. We do not have positive reasons for trusting God in respect to any instance of testimony.
3. Therefore, no belief we have based solely on God’s testimony amounts to knowledge.

Premise (10) follows from Hudson’s reductionist position about testimonial knowledge, and premise (11) is entailed by the following claims that Hudson assents to in the passages quoted above: (a) God can deceive us if there is a morally justifying reason for doing so, (b) skeptical theism prevents us from being assured that there are no such morally justifying reasons, and (c) God and humans are so different that we (humans) cannot rely on induction, perception, and the like for producing positive reasons for trusting God in respect to any instance of testimony.

I will henceforth refer to (5)-(9) as ‘Wielenberg’s argument’ and to (10)-(12) as ‘Hudson’s argument.’

**3.2 Global Skepticism**

While Wielenberg’s argument and Hudson’s argument are enough to make many skeptical theists uncomfortable with their position, some philosophers have argued that an even more radical skepticism than that of Wielenberg’s argument and Hudson’s argument results from skeptical theism: global skepticism, they claim, ensues. For example, Ian Wilks says that

‘If, for all we know, there might be [a morally justifying] reason for all the evil we see around us, why might there not be one for systemic, even comprehensive deception on the part of God?’ (2014: 462)[[21]](#endnote-21)

He thinks that if we cannot offer a negative reply to that question (i.e. deny the possibility of systemic divine deception), that global skepticism results. He says that theists typically dismiss the possibility of systemic deception on the grounds that God, since he is perfectly good, would not systemically deceive us—or, perhaps, would not deceive us at all. However, once it is accepted that God can deceive us while remaining perfectly good, this reply will no longer suffice.[[22]](#endnote-22) But how are we to understand the phrase ‘for all we know’? I suggest that we ought to refrain from understanding it in the colloquial sense: it seems wrong to think that skeptical theists are committed to the view that it is consistent with what we know that there is a morally justifying reason for systemic deception. This is because there is no good reason for the skeptical theist to concede this point from the outset; her skeptical theism does not obviously entail this at all: the only thing that skeptical theism obviously entails is that noseeum inferences are blocked. But that we cannot perform (certain) noseeum inferences does not entail that it is consistent with what we know that God systemically deceives us—or, if it does, it is not obvious that it does, and the skeptical theist should not concede this until it is shown that this is so.[[23]](#endnote-23) Thus, to avoid attributing to Wilks a claim that is either false or question begging, I suggest that we should understand the claim that ‘for all we know, there is a morally justifying reason for systemically deceiving us’ as meaning ‘we are not able to noseeum inference our way to the conclusion that there is no morally justifying reason for systemically deceiving us.’ While this interpretation may seem unnatural, it appears to fit most charitably with Wilk’s argument: he is arguing against a type of skeptical theism that makes use of theses similar to ST1 and ST2 (it is most similar to Bergmann’s skeptical theses, see e.g. Bergmann (2001)), and those theses certainly do not (at least obviously) entail that it is consistent with what we know that there is a morally justifying reason for systemic deception, but they do entail that we are not able to make the above noseeum inference. Further, Wilks says that anyone ‘who believes [that God exists, and could bring about such deception by willing it] should regard extreme deception as implausible only to the extent that it would seem implausible for the being to will it.’ (2013: 465) Now, due to our skeptical theism, we cannot noseeum inference our way to the conclusion that it is implausible to think that there is a morally justifying reason for systemic deception, and this—thinks Wilks—is sufficient to generate global skepticism: if we cannot noseeum inference our way to the conclusion that God probably does not have a reason for deceiving us systemically *and* if he had a reason he would cause such deception, our commonsense beliefs do not amount to knowledge.

Stephen Law makes a similar claim, saying

‘Ordinarily, perhaps I'm prima facie justified in believing, and indeed can be commonsensically considered to know, that there is an orange before me given that is how things visually appear. But if I learn there is a God who has complete control over my perceptual experiences, and that, for all I know, this God has good reason both to generate a false impression of an orange and indeed deceive me about the external world more generally, then this discovery appears…to supply me with an undercutting defeater for my belief that there is an orange on the table.’ (2015: 290-291)

He concludes that, in the same way he does not know that there is an orange in from of him, the skeptical theist does not have knowledge of her perceptual beliefs.[[24]](#endnote-24) (Again, and for the same reasons, I will understand ‘for all [we] know…’ to mean ‘we are not able to noseeum inference our way…’) We may put Law and Wilk’s argument as follows:

1. If a being has the power to deceive us about our belief B and we are not able to noseeum inference our way to the conclusion that he (probably) does not have a morally justifying reason to deceive us about B, then our belief B does not amount to knowledge.
2. God has the power to deceive us about B[[25]](#endnote-25) and we are not able to noseeum inference our way to the conclusion that he (probably) does not have a morally justifying reason to deceive us about B.
3. Therefore, B does not amount to knowledge.

I will refer to this as the global skepticism objection to skeptical theism (GSO).

**3.3 Prospects of attacking Wielenberg’s argument, Hudson’s Argument, and GSO**

We have seen three skeptical arguments against skeptical theism. How should a skeptical theist respond to these arguments? There are several ways available. One way is to simply accept the conclusions of the arguments: we should accept skepticism about divine testimony and global skepticism. While this route may not be satisfying, it is certainly a possibility for those who consider skeptical theism to be non-negotiable. Another way to respond is by denying the possibility of divine deception: if God cannot deceive us, then Wielenberg’s argument, Hudson’s Argument, and the GSO will fail. This reply strikes me as implausible—though, I will not argue for this here. I will simply assume that it fails.[[26]](#endnote-26) What I propose to do is to show that *if* one accepts certain epistemological views, *then* she has reason to reject the arguments, and hence Wielenberg’s argument, Hudson’s argument, and the GSO should not trouble skeptical theists who hold said views. Since these epistemological positions appear to be popular, the scope of the anti-skeptical theist’s arguments is quite narrow: they will only apply, if at all, to those who do not affirm the above mentioned epistemological positions.[[27]](#endnote-27)

1. **Externalism, Phenomenal Conservatism, Alstonian epistemology, and Divine Deception**

In this section, I will briefly outline several epistemological positions. I am brief since the purpose of articulating these positions is not to convert anyone to them; rather, I merely seek to show that those who accept these positions have reason to reject Wielenberg’s argument, Hudson’s argument, and the GSO.

**4.1 Externalism**

Epistemologists can roughly be divided into two camps: internalists and externalists.[[28]](#endnote-28) Let us say that knowledge is warranted true belief, where ‘warrant’ denotes that property (whatever it is) that turns true belief into knowledge.[[29]](#endnote-29) Internalists (very roughly) hold that for S to know p, she must (at least potentially) be aware of that which warrants her (true) belief that p. Externalists deny this: they hold that as long as S’s belief was formed in the right way,[[30]](#endnote-30) she knows p; whether she is (actually or potentially) aware the fact that her belief was formed in the right way does not matter. In this article, I will use a particular brand of externalism to challenge Wielenberg’s argument, Hudson’s argument, and the GSO: Alvin Plantinga’s proper functionalism. We may state it as follows:

Proper Functionalism: S knows p if and only if (i) S believes p, (ii) p is true, (iii) her belief was formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties successfully aimed at producing true beliefs, and (iv) she is in an appropriate epistemic environment.

While proper functionalism represents just one subsection of externalism, the points that I make can be made with (nearly) any version of externalism; my choice of proper functionalism is arbitrary.[[31]](#endnote-31)

**4.2 Alstonian Epistemology**

William Alston (1991b) argues that if a doxastic practice meets certain conditions, that beliefs produced by it are justified. While he gives both an internalist and externalist account of justification, I will exclusively focus on the former.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Alston (1991b) goes to pains to show that all arguments for the reliability of sense perception (SP) suffer from epistemic circularity; they will all, when pushed far enough, be forced to assume the reliability of SP. Hence, if beliefs produced by SP are to be justified, it cannot be on the basis of an argument to the effect that SP is a reliable doxastic practice.[[33]](#endnote-33) This forces us to look for elsewhere for justification for beliefs produced by SP. Alston eventually concludes that ‘a belief is…justified…provided it stems from a socially established doxastic practice that is not discredited by the total output of such practices.’ (1991b: 182) Thus, a belief produced by a doxastic practice that does not have any non-circular arguments in its favor can still be justified. A doxastic practice is socially established, according to Alston, if it has been practiced for a non-negligible amount of time by a community of persons, and a doxastic practice is not discredited by its total output if it (the doxastic practice) is not massively incoherent. Since SP meets the conditions listed above, it follows that beliefs formed by way of SP are justified.

I will call this form of justification *Alstonian justification*, and will call those who endorse it *Alstonian epistemologists.*[[34]](#endnote-34) We may state Alstonian justification as follows:

Alstonian Justification: S’s belief that p is justified if it was produced by a doxastic practice which (a) is socially established and (b) is not massively incoherent.

**4.3 Phenomenal Conservatism**

Phenomenal conservatism is a view about justification that comes in many different forms. For the purposes of this article, I will follow Michael Huemer’s understanding of phenomenal conservatism, which can be put as follows:

Phenomenal Conservatism: If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p (Huemer 2007: 30).[[35]](#endnote-35)

What is crucial here is that seemings—should one accept phenomenal conservatism—provide non-testimonial *justification* for p. That is, if it *seems* to S that p, then S is (to some degree) justified in believing p in the absence of defeaters. So, phenomenal conservatism makes justification easy to come by: for S to acquire justification for believing p, she need not do any work: so long as it seems to her that p is the case (and she lacks defeaters for this seeming), she is justified in her belief.[[36]](#endnote-36)

**4.4 Wielenberg’s Argument**

Recall the following propositions from Wielenberg’s argument:

(5) If skeptical theism is true, then, for any divine assertion that p, we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God's act of intentionally asserting that p when p is false has beyond-our-ken justification.

(6) If, for any divine assertion that p, we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God's act of intentionally asserting that p when p is false has beyond-our-ken justification then we do not know p if p has word-of-God justification only (unless we have good reason for thinking that, even if God has some justification for lying about p, God doesn't act on that justification).

(9) Therefore, skeptical theism implies that we do not know any proposition that has word-of-God justification only.

In what follows, I will first argue that phenomenal conservatives have reason to reject premise (5). After this, I will show that externalists have reason to reject premise (6), and that those who endorse Alstonian epistemology can accept (9), but that they will (or should) not affirm that there are *any* propositions that have word-of-God justification only, and hence the group that is targeted by Wielenberg’s argument is empty. Finally, I will argue that Wielenberg’s argument and the skeptical theist’s response to arguments from evil are not on par. Hence, contra Wielenberg, the unsoundness of Wielenberg’s argument does not impugn skeptical theism.

Consider the consequent of premise (5), which states: *we lack justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God's act of intentionally asserting that p when p is false has beyond-our-ken justification*. Call the proposition *it is unlikely (or false) that God’s act of intentionally asserting that p when p is false has beyond-our-ken justification* ‘E.’ Suppose S is a skeptical theist, an adherent of phenomenal conservatism, that it seems to her that E is the case, and that she does not have a defeater for her seeming. If this is possible, then it is possible for the antecedent of (5) to be true and its consequent false, in which case premise (5) is false—or, at least, the adherent of phenomenal conservatism will reject premise (5). Therefore, the skeptical theist that adheres to phenomenal conservatism should reject premise (5), and Wielenberg’s argument along with it. Perhaps, however, Wielenberg would argue that S has a defeater for her seeming that E and hence does not have justification for believing it. It is unclear just how this argument would go: does ST1 and ST2 somehow defeat one’s seeming? It is not clear why they would. Indeed, the usual example of one having a defeater for her seeming is when she knows that the process that produced it is not reliable. For example, when one sees a stick bent in the water and it seems to her to be bent, she has a defeater for her seeming since she knows that her seeming is not reliable in that environment. But it does not appear that ST1 and ST2 leave the skeptical theist in a situation like this: she does not, in virtue of her skeptical theism, have reason to think that the processes responsible for forming her seeming in respect to E are in fact unreliable—her seeming that E is not, after all, based on a noseeum inference. So, it does not appear that skeptical theism defeats this justification. There is more to be said here, but I leave it to Wielenberg and his defenders to say it: his argument, as it currently stands, will be rejected by adherents of phenomenal conservatism, so it is up to him to show that skeptical theism somehow defeats phenomenal conservative justification. (Moreover, I simply know of no good reason for thinking that phenomenal conservative justification is defeated in this case, so I am unable to stand up for Wielenberg here.)

Let us now consider externalism and premise (6). The reason externalists should reject premise (6), I contend, is that the proper functionalist conditions for knowledge (i.e. (i)-(iv)) are *obviously* compatible with the truth of the antecedent of (6) and the falsity of its consequent; that is, it is no doubt possible that S’s belief that p (that is based on testimony) is formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties (etc.) thus amounting to knowledge *and* that S lacks justification for believing that it is false or unlikely that God, who testified that p, has morally justifying reasons for deceiving her.[[37]](#endnote-37) Hence externalists should reject premise (6) and Wielenberg’s argument along with it.

Finally, let us consider Alstonian epistemology and (9). Let us say that the Christian doxastic practice (CDP) is the practice of forming beliefs on the basis of the Bible. Does CDP have Alstonian justification? Let us check. CDP is, no doubt, socially established—it has been practiced for centuries by many people. Hence CDP satisfies (a). Further, CDP, I take it, is not massively incoherent—though there are disagreements about interpretation of passages, it does not amount to disagreement significant enough to merit the label ‘massively incoherent’ (or, if it does, it is not obvious that it does);that is, the so-called ‘mere Christianity’ of C.S. Lewis (2015)—the essential doctrines of Christian theism (e.g. the divinity of Jesus, his resurrection, salvific plan, etc.)—is widely agreed on by Christians, and this gives credence to the thesis CDP is not massively incoherent.[[38]](#endnote-38) Hence (b) is satisfied by CDP. Therefore, CDP satisfies (a) and (b) and thus beliefs produced by it have Alstonian justification.

So where does this leave us in respect to (9)? From this it follows that beliefs produced by CDP do not have word-of-God justification only: they also have Alstonian justification. Thus, all beliefs formed on the basis of the Bible will (at least) have Alstonian justification. Hence, Wielenberg’s assumption that the proposition (and others like it) that *all who believe in Christ will have eternal life* (2010: 512) has word-of-God justification *only* is false, and hence Christian skeptical theists who embrace Alstonian epistemology have no reason to think that Wielenberg’s argument threatens any of their biblical beliefs. But then what beliefs is Wielenberg’s argument supposed to threaten? So far as I can see, the only other plausible candidates are those beliefs formed on the basis of religious experience (what Alston calls ‘Christian mystical practice’ (CMP)). However, Alston (1991b) has convincingly argued that beliefs formed by CMP have Alstonian justification.[[39]](#endnote-39) And hence beliefs formed by way of CMP are also not vulnerable to Wielenberg’s argument. Are there any other candidates for beliefs that have word-of-God justification only? It does not appear that there are any—and even if there are, the scope of Wielenberg’s argument is still significantly, if not critically, narrowed. Hence the group that Wielenberg’s argument targets is empty; the argument is rendered toothless—at least for Alstonian epistemologists.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Now, Wielenberg does not claim that his argument is sound. Indeed, he says that ‘I do not claim that [my argument] is sound. Instead, I claim that [my argument] is at least as plausible as [the skeptical theist’s response to the argument from evil].’ (2010: 514) Call this latter claim *the symmetry thesis*. If this is right, then we have actually played into Wielenberg’s hands: by showing Wielenberg’s argument to be unsound and hence implausible, we have thus rendered the skeptical theist’s response to arguments from evil (following Wielenberg, I will call it STQ) implausible. He characterizes the skeptical theist’s response as follows:

(16) ‘We don't know how complete our axiological knowledge is.

(17) So, we do not know how likely it is that God's act of permitting E has beyond-our-ken justification.

(18) Therefore, E's inscrutability does not justify the claim that E is (or is likely to be) gratuitous (i.e. the noseeum inference fails)’ (2010: 511)

It is not at all clear why Wielenberg thinks the symmetry thesis is true, and there is not any reason that I can see that we should think it is true. Thus, since it is not clear what his reasons are, I will not examine his positive reasons for thinking STQ and skeptical theism’s plausibility is symmetric. Rather, I will (briefly) argue that there is a key dissimilarity between Wielenberg’s argument and STQ which renders symmetry thesis false and, more importantly, that STQ does not accurately characterize skeptical theism, and hence even if the symmetry thesis is true it is innocuous.   
  
 A key dissimilarity between STQ and Wielenberg’s argument is in the target of each argument: STQ does not target *basic* beliefs.[[41]](#endnote-41) Rather, the target of STQ is the noseeum inference of evidential arguments from evil.[[42]](#endnote-42) However, the target of Wielenberg’s argument is the theist’s *basic* (testimonial)beliefs.[[43]](#endnote-43) Hence STQ and Wielenberg’s argument have different targets, which seems to show that they are sufficiently different to render the symmetry thesis false.

A more fundamental problem with the symmetry thesis is that STQ does not accurately represent skeptical theism. That is, we have taken skeptical theism in this article to be the conjunction of theism with ST1 and ST2. But skeptical theism, as understood this way, does not make use of the inference from premise (16) to (17): it is an *inference blocker*, not an inference itself. More importantly, skeptical theists who are externalists will reject the inference from premise (16) to (17), and therefore skeptical theism cannot be identical to STQ. This is because the proper functionalist conditions for knowledge (i.e. (i)-(iv)) are obviously compatible with accepting (16) and rejecting (17): if one accepts (16), her belief that it is unlikely that God’s act of permitting E has beyond-our-ken justification (i.e. ~(17)) can still satisfy conditions (i)-(iv) and hence amount to knowledge. Hence, the skeptical theist that adheres to externalism will reject STQ, and hence skeptical theism is not the same as STQ. In other words, since skeptical theism is compatible with externalism, it is compatible with the denial of (17) and hence is distinct from STQ. So even if the symmetry thesis is correct, it does not spell trouble for skeptical theism: it merely spells trouble for STQ, which is a whole different position.

We saw above that STQ and Wielenberg’s argument are not symmetrical in the way that he claims they are. However, there may be different, more problematic issue of symmetry lurking in the area. For consider: the skeptical theist can *know* that e.g. *there is no morally justifying reason for God deceiving me about X.* However, if the skeptical theist can know that, it seems to follow that an atheist who accepts ST1 and ST2 can know e.g. *there is no morally justifying reason for this instance of evil* (i.e. this evil is gratuitous). And hence we have a troubling instance of symmetry: if the skeptical theist can know that there is no morally justifying reason for her being deceived, then the atheist can know that there is no morally justifying reason for some instance of evil.[[44]](#endnote-44) I have no qualms with this claim of symmetry: it is no doubt true that it is possible for an atheist (or theist)[[45]](#endnote-45) to accept ST1 and ST2 and yet know that some instance of evil is gratuitous.[[46]](#endnote-46) But this is not a problem for skeptical theism: skeptical theists have never claimed that ST1 and ST2 undermine just any belief or argument about evil. Rather, skeptical theism is, again, thought to be an *inference blocker*: it blocks noseeum inferences that (certain) arguments from evil rely on. There are some arguments from evil that do not rely on such inferences, e.g. Dougherty’s ‘commonsense’ argument from evil referred to in section 2.1. Skeptical theism does not touch these arguments. Similarly, skeptical theism does not touch *beliefs* that are not predicated on a noseeum inference—and this is true whether it is the theist’s belief that there is a tree in front of her or the atheist’s belief that some instance of evil is gratuitous. That skeptical theism does not undermine all arguments or beliefs about evil is not a strike against it since, again, it never claimed to do so.[[47]](#endnote-47) So, this symmetry is not troubling: it does not conflict with any claim the skeptical theist makes. In other words, this instance of symmetry does not undermine the skeptical theist’s response to arguments from evil: that beliefs about gratuitous evil can possibly amount to knowledge does not prevent skeptical theism from undermining noseeum inferences that (certain) arguments from evil rely on. And hence this revised symmetry thesis poses no threat to skeptical theism.[[48]](#endnote-48)

I conclude, therefore, that (a) we have reason to think that the symmetry thesis is false—the reasons we have given for thinking Wielenberg’s argument is unsound do not apply to skeptical theism, (b) even if the symmetry thesis is not false, it does not threaten skeptical theism: it only threatens STQ, and (c) even if the symmetry thesis is revised in such a way that it allows one to accept ST1 and ST2 while knowing that an instance of evil is gratuitous, this is not a strike against skeptical theism. Thus, the failure of Wielenberg’s argument does not impugn skeptical theism: externalists, phenomenal conservatives, and Alstonian epistemologists can reject Wielenberg’s argument while simultaneously endorsing skeptical theism.

**4.2 Hudson’s Argument**

Recall that the Hudson’s argument relied on the following two premises:

1. For any belief that we have based solely on God’s testimony, if that belief amounts to knowledge, then we have positive reasons for trusting God with respect to that instance of testimony.
2. We do not have positive reasons for trusting God in respect to any instance of testimony.

In this section, I will show that non-reductionists about testimonial knowledge will reject premise (10), I then argue that adherents of externalism have reason to reject premise (10), that adherents of phenomenal conservatism may reject premise (11), and that adherents of Alstonian epistemology may reject premise (11).

Let us begin with premise (10). Premise (10) is just a specific instance of the reductionist view of testimonial knowledge. Thus, those who do not adhere to reductionism about testimonial knowledge will reject it. Non-reductionists regard testimonial knowledge as rather easy to come by: if S believes B on the basis of R’s testimony, S does not need positive reasons to trust R in respect to her testimony that B: it just needs to be formed in the right way. Thus, non-reductionists will reject premise (10) and hence will reject Hudson’s argument. Since non-reductionism appears to be quite popular, this will significantly narrow the scope of persons affected by Hudson’s argument[[49]](#endnote-49)

If one embraces externalism then, I contend, she has reason to reject premise (10). To see why, consider again Plantinga’s proper functionalist epistemology:

Proper Functionalism: S knows p if and only if (i) S believes p, (ii) p is true, (iii) her belief was formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties successfully aimed at producing true beliefs, and (iv) she is in an appropriate epistemic environment.

To see why this gives the adherent of externalism reason to reject premise (10), consider the following: suppose S holds a belief that p on the basis of God’s testimony, and that she has no positive reasons for trusting God in respect to his testimony that p. Suppose further that S’s belief is true, that it was produced by proper functioning cognitive faculties that were successfully aimed at truth, and that her belief was formed in an appropriate epistemic environment. Ifthat is the case then—contra premise (10)—S’s belief amounts to *knowledge* by externalist standards*.* Hence externalists ought to reject premise (10).[[50]](#endnote-50)

On to premise (11). The skeptical theist who adheres to phenomenal conservatism has (or could have) reason to reject premise (11). Here is why. Suppose, for example, that she believes p on the basis of divine testimony alone, that God seems to her to be a reliable testifier in respect to p, and that she does not have a defeater for her belief. If this is the case, then premise (11) is false. In other words, skeptical theists can have positive reasons for trusting God as a testifier via phenomenal conservatism, and, since there are no doubt skeptical theists who have such positive reasons for trusting God, premise (11) is false. Hence, those who endorse skeptical theism and adhere to phenomenal conservatism ought to reject premise (11). Perhaps one would object that skeptical theism provides S with a defeater for her seeming. This objection has already been addressed in our discussion of Wielenberg’s argument, so I will only briefly make two points here. Firstly, Hudson never addresses the prospects of phenomenal conservative justification and whether skeptical theism is compatible with it; rather, he claims that skeptical theism precludes us from gaining evidence from perception, memory, and induction. That is, Hudson is silent on whether skeptical theism undermines phenomenal conservative justification. So I will leave it to Hudson and his defenders to show why (if at all) skeptical theism threatens phenomenal conservative justification. And secondly, as mentioned previously, phenomenal conservative justification is very easy to obtain,[[51]](#endnote-51) and skeptical theism does not appear to be the sort of thing that acts as a defeater for it: it does not appear that ST1 and ST2 give us reason to doubt that our seeming was produced reliably. Indeed, it is for this reason that Tucker (2014) claims that skeptical theism is not skeptical enough, since, as mentioned in section 2.1, it does not undermine arguments from evil that are grounded in phenomenal conservative seemings. So, the prospects of skeptical theism defeating phenomenal conservative justification are not promising. I leave it to detractors to show that this pessimism is unwarranted.

So, the adherent of phenomenal conservatism has reason to reject premise (11). But there is another epistemological position that entails the falsity of it. Recall Alstonian justification:

Alstonian justification: S’s belief that p is justified if it was produced by a doxastic practice which (a) is socially established and (b) is not massively incoherent.

Now, let us consider the general resurrection thesis in the Christian tradition. This is a belief formed within CDP. And, as we saw earlier, CDP has Alstonian justification: it is socially established and not massively incoherent. Thus, beliefs produced via CDP have Alstonian justification. Since CDP is the practice of forming beliefs by way of God’s testimony through the Bible, it follows that we have Alstonian justification for such beliefs. And if that is the case, then we do have positive reasons for trusting God in respect to his testimony through scripture; that is, for any belief predicated on the Bible,[[52]](#endnote-52) we have positive reasons for trusting God in respect to that belief since beliefs produced via CDP have Alstonian justification. Hence the Alstonian epistemologist should reject premise (11) and hence should reject Hudson’s argument.

In this section, we have seen that if one adheres to non-reductionism, phenomenal conservatism, externalism, or Alstonian epistemology, that she ought to reject (at least) one premise of Wielenberg’s argument and Hudson’s Argument. We also saw that, contra Wielenberg, Wielenberg’s argument is not symmetric with skeptical theism, and hence the failure of Wielenberg’s argument does not impugn skeptical theism. Therefore, I conclude that if the skeptical theist is an externalist, phenomenal conservative, non-reductionist, or Alstonian epistemologist, then she is left unscathed by these arguments: the scope of Wielenberg’s argument and Hudson’s argument has been limited to only those who do not affirm the above epistemological positions.

1. **Externalism and the GSO**

So, Wielenberg’s argument and Hudson’s Argument fail, but what about the GSO? Recall that the GSO relied on the following premise:

1. If a being has the power to deceive us about our belief B and we are not able to noseeum inference our way to the conclusion that he (probably) does not have a morally justifying reason to deceive us about B, then our belief B does not amount to knowledge.

This premise, I contend, ought to be rejected by externalists.And what of Alstonian epistemologists and phenomenal conservatives? Should they reject this premise of the GSO as well? As it stands, Alstonian epistemology and phenomenal conservatism do not have anything to say about this argument. This is on account of their referring to *justification*, not warrant (i.e. that which turns mere true belief into knowledge). However, if one framed the GSO in terms of justification, advocates of these positions would have reason to reject the argument. (Or, if one takes justification (of the phenomenal conservative or Alstonian epistemologist kind) to be sufficient, when conjoined with other conditions, for knowledge, then her epistemology may give her reason to reject the GSO.) None of this is to say that Alstonian epistemologists and phenomenal conservatives ought to accept the GSO; rather, it is that their position does not *explicitly* conflict with one of the GSO’s premises. Therefore, I will not discuss how their views relate to the GSO.[[53]](#endnote-53)

To see why externalists should reject premise (13), consider yet again Plantinga’s proper functionalist epistemology:

Proper Functionalism: S knows p if and only if (i) S believes p, (ii) p is true, (iii) her belief was formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties successfully aimed at producing true beliefs, and (iv) she is in an appropriate epistemic environment.

Now, suppose that S holds a belief B and recognizes that she is not able to noseeum inference her way to the conclusion that God does not have reason to deceive her about B. Suppose further that S’s belief is true, that it was produced by proper functioning cognitive faculties that were successfully aimed at truth, and that her belief was formed in an appropriate epistemic environment. Ifthat is the case then the proper functionalist will hold that S’s belief amounts to *knowledge.* Hence externalism renders premise (13) false, and the GSO a failure; skeptical theism does not entail global skepticism—at least, for externalists.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Law anticipates this reply and rejects it. To understand why, we will have to look at the analogy he uses to argue for the GSO. His tells the following story:

‘Suppose I see what appears to be an orange on the table in front of me. Let’s assume I…can be considered commonsensically to know, that there’s an orange there. But suppose I then discover the following. Someone – call him Olly – possesses a holographic projector capable of producing entirely convincing-looking visual appearances onto the table in front of me. Now suppose the probability that Olly is using his projector is inscrutable to me. Suppose, for example, that I learn Olly has an urn of balls. Prior to my observing the table, Olly selected a ball at random from this urn. If the ball was black, Olly projected an entirely convincing-looking holographic image of an orange onto the table. If Olly selected a non-black ball, he placed a real orange on the table. I have no clue concerning what proportion of balls in Olly’s urn are black. For all I know, all the balls are black, none are black, 50% are black, etc. I can’t reasonably assign any probability to any of these hypotheses. Thus I remain in the dark about whether Olly placed a real orange, rather than a holographic image of an orange, on the table.’ (2015: 289-290)

Law thinks that in such a situation he ought to withhold belief about the orange, even if he has knowledge. He also thinks that the above story is analogous to the case that the skeptical theist thinks we are in. The skeptical theist recognizes that God would (or, at least, could) cause us to have false perceptual experiences—he could deceive us about our surroundings—if he has a morally justifying reason for doing so, and that she cannot noseeum inference her way to the conclusion that God has no such reason.[[55]](#endnote-55) Hence, in the same way that Law should withhold belief in whether he is seeing an orange, the skeptical theist should withhold her perceptual beliefs.[[56]](#endnote-56) In response to the externalist reply, he claims that, regardless of whether S’s belief was produced in the proper functionalist manner above (i.e. whether or not the skeptical theist’s perceptual beliefs amount to knowledge), the skeptical theist *should* give up her perceptual beliefs. The ‘should’ here, says Law, pertains to what she should *logically* do. He says the skeptical theist ‘should embrace skepticism about the external world in the sense that this is what her skeptical theism logically requires of her.’ (2015: 297) It is not exactly clear what ‘logically requires’ amounts to—this is certainly not a case of a skeptical theist not applying a rule of inference. But it appears that Law thinks that it is just obvious that the skeptical theist should give up her perceptual beliefs, and that the skeptical theist is guilty of an *epistemic sin* for not accepting this conclusion.

There are (at least) four replies to the charge of epistemic sinfulness that the skeptical theist can make use of here. Firstly, she could point out that Law has granted (for the sake of argument) that she has knowledge of her perceptual beliefs, and that she is content with that—if she has *knowledge* of her perceptual beliefs, why should it matter that she has committed an epistemic sin?[[57]](#endnote-57)In other words, she can content herself with knowledge and ignore Law’s objection.[[58]](#endnote-58) This would force Law to withdraw his grant if his argument is to have any force—though, for the above reasons, the argument will still be rejected by externalists. Secondly, she may show that Law’s analogy is false. Thirdly, she can note that one can make use of Alstonian justification or phenomenal conservatism to contest the charge of epistemic sinfulness: supposing that the skeptical theist has either Alstonian or phenomenal conservative justification for her belief, it is plausible to suppose that she is not guilty of an epistemic sin: her justification (via Alstonian epistemology or phenomenal conservatism) absolves her of her (epistemic) sin. And fourthly, she can deny that, when properly understood, our beliefs in Law’s ‘Olly story’ are defeated. While I maintain that the first reply is sufficient, I will not elaborate on it here. Rather, I will only (briefly) elaborate on second, third, and fourth replies.

**5.2 Law’s Analogy is False**

Recall that in Law’s analogy, whether Olly will deceive us about there being an orange depends on what color of ball he draws from the urn. He claims that in such a situation, one’s knowledge of the orange (*if she has knowledge*) is unreasonable,[[59]](#endnote-59) and so proper functionalists about knowledge, which he is explicitly targeting, are not left unscathed by his argument; though we may have proper functionalist *knowledge* that there is an orange in front of us, our knowledge does not absolve us of our epistemic sinfulness. The problem with Law’s analogy is that no proper functionalist, and few externalists, will accept that the conditions for knowledge are met in such a situation.[[60]](#endnote-60) For recall that proper functionalists hold that for S to know p she must, among other things, be situated in an appropriate epistemic environment. But, of course, an environment in which the truth of one’s belief is contingent on a random process, such as drawing a ball from an urn, is not an appropriate epistemic environment; whether one’s belief is true depends on chance, and that is not an appropriate epistemic environment.[[61]](#endnote-61) Hence, even if believing that there is an orange in front of us in Law’s analogy is epistemically sinful, it should not trouble proper functionalists, since they would not ascribe us knowledge in such a scenario. Any good form of externalism will have a similar condition that does not ascribe knowledge in Law’s analogy and will thus be able to avoid the charge of epistemic sin.

Law anticipates a reply similar to this, and claims that our belief depending on Olly drawing a ball from the urn is inessential: he can amend his example to say not that we are ‘in the dark’ about the number of black balls in Olly’s urn, but that we cannot noseeum inference our way to the conclusion that Olly does not have a morally justifying reason to deceive us about the orange.[[62]](#endnote-62) He says ‘[w]hat generates the intuition of defeat is the fact that I’m in the dark about the probability of it being a real orange rather than a deceptive image that Olly placed on the table.’ (2015: 292) Law shows courage here: your average person cannot tell what generates the intuitions of others from the armchair. Apparently, Law is not your average person: from his armchair, he can see what generates everyone’s intuitions about defeat in the Olly story. An impressive feat, no doubt! Sadly, I must report that, Law’s courage aside, he is incorrect about origin of intuition of defeat in the Olly story—at least in my case. For what troubles me about the Olly story is *not* that I am not able to noseeum inference my way to the conclusion that Olly has a morally justifying reason for deceiving me. Rather, what troubles me is that there is a random process that is responsible for whether my belief is true: if the truth of my belief is accidental in the manner of Olly and his orange, then believing there is an orange in front of me might be epistemically sinful. I do not have the courage Law does, so I will not claim to know what generates the intuition of defeat for all other persons. Rather, I simply note that others who share my position will not be moved and will regard Law’s analogy as false.[[63]](#endnote-63) There is more to say, of course, but I will stop here. I conclude that those who do not share Law’s intuition need not worry about the charge of epistemic sinfulness.

**5.2 Alstonian Justification and Phenomenal Conservatism to the Rescue**

Next, recall that Law claimed that what ‘generates the intuition of defeat is the fact that I’m in the dark about the probability of it being a real orange rather than a deceptive image that Olly placed on the table.’ (ibid.) Let us, for the sake of argument, grant that it is true that there is an intuition of defeat here and that it is produced by our being in the dark about the probability of the orange on the table being real rather than a hologram. Even if all this is granted, there is a way for skeptical theists to avoid defeat here. Earlier, we saw that Alstonian justification can provide justification for beliefs formed by a socially established doxastic practice that is not massively incoherent. (See section 4.2.) Alston (1993) has argued at length that our beliefs formed by way of sense perception have Alstonian justification. But if this is true, then a skeptical theist that adheres to Alstonian epistemology need not concede that she is ‘in the dark’ about the probability God deceiving her about her perceptual experiences. She can appeal to the Alstonian justification that her beliefs based on sense perception enjoy as reason to think that she is *not* in the dark about whether she is being deceived: her Alstonian justification gives her positive reason for thinking she is not being deceived about her perceptual beliefs. Additionally, a skeptical theist that adheres to phenomenal conservatism need not concede that she is ‘in the dark’ about the probability of God deceiving her: if it seems to her that e.g. there is an orange in front of her, then she has justification for thinking there is an orange in front of her, and this gives her (some) reason to think that she is not ‘in the dark’ about the probability of God having a reason to deceive her. This same strategy can be applied to other beliefs: if it seems to S that p, then S is not (at least necessarily) in the dark about the probability of her being deceived about p. There is more to be said here, but the general point should be clear: externalists can make use of Alstonian and phenomenal conservative justification to reject the thesis that we are ‘in the dark’ about the probability of God deceiving us about some belief, in which case Law’s analogy is irrelevant—or, at least, its scope has become limited. In other words, a skeptical theist that endorses Alstonian epistemology or phenomenal conservatism need not concede that Law’s analogy holds for us, in which case she can reject the charge of epistemic sinfulness, and may regard his analogy as false.

**5.3 There is No Defeat**

A final problem with Law’s charge of epistemic sinfulness is that, when properly interpreted, there is not a defeater involved in Law’s story about Olly. Again, he says that what ‘generates the intuition of defeat is the fact that I’m in the dark about the probability of it being a real orange rather than a deceptive image that Olly placed on the table.’ (ibid) However, for the same reasons that we should not understand the ‘for all we know’ clause in the colloquial sense, we should not understand the ‘in the dark’ clause in its colloquial sense:[[64]](#endnote-64) skeptical theism does not (at least obviously) entail that we are in dark about the probability of God having a morally justifying reason for some action, since it (skeptical theism) is compatible with our knowing that there is no such reason for God to perform some action.[[65]](#endnote-65) This is because, again, skeptical theism is an inference blocker: it blocks noseeum inferences and does not (at least obviously) threaten beliefs that are not based on noseeum inferences. Thus, to avoid attributing to Law a thesis that is either false or question-begging, I suggest that we should read the quote as saying that what ‘generates the intuition of defeat is the fact that I’m [not able to noseeum inference my way to the conclusion that] the probability of it being a real orange rather than a deceptive image that Olly placed on the table [is low].’ However, understood in this charitable way, our belief that there is an orange on the table does not appear to have a defeater: the fact that we cannot noseeum inference our way to the conclusion that the probability of our being deceived is low does not itself entail that our belief is defeated. This is because we might have other reasons for thinking that the probability of our being deceived is low. For example, if we take ourselves to know that there is an orange on the table, we have reason to regard the probability of our being deceived as very low indeed. Or perhaps we have testimonial reason for thinking that the probability of Olly deceiving us is low. Or perhaps we have Alstonian or phenomenal conservative justification for thinking it is low. The list goes on. There are many ways (aside from using a noseeum inference) to know (or justifiedly think, or have reasons to think) that the probability of Olly (or God) deceiving us is low, in which case our inability to noseeum inference our way to the conclusion that the probability of our being deceived is low does not necessarily provide us with a defeater. And hence, in its current form, we have no reason to think that the story of Olly involves a defeater: the story involving Olly is compatible with us knowing (or justifiedly believing, or having reason to believe) that there is a low probability of Olly (or God) deceiving us. And hence the Olly story is not an example of a case in which one has (at least necessarily) a defeater, and the charge of epistemic sinfulness leveled at the skeptical theist is groundless.

In conclusion, we have seen that externalists should reject premise (13), and that there are multiple problems with Law’s ‘epistemic sinfulness’ rejoinder. Therefore, the GSO, I contend, is not successful and should be rejected by externalists.

1. **Lessons Learned**

What we have seen thus far is that skeptical arguments against skeptical theism will only have bite if the person they are directed at holds very specific epistemological views: an externalist, phenomenal conservative, or Alstonian epistemologist need not worry about them.[[66]](#endnote-66) (Moreover, I also showed that non-reductionists will reject Hudson’s argument.) I suspect that this will be true for (almost) any skeptical argument directed against skeptical theism: those who hold the above (apparently) popular epistemological positions will more than likely reject at least one premise of the anti-skeptical theist’s argument, in which case the argument will fail—or, at least, have a limited scope. That is, it seems clear that externalism ensures that a skeptical theist’s beliefs can amount to knowledge, and that Alstonian epistemology and phenomenal conservatism can provide skeptical theists with justification for their beliefs. Therefore, for an anti-skeptical theist argument to have a wide scope, it needs to be coupled with an argument in support of its proponent’s epistemological framework. Thus, the workload of the anti-skeptical theist has been (perhaps more than) doubled, and the outlook for skeptical objections to skeptical theism arguments is quite bleak.[[67]](#endnote-67)

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1. For example, Peter van Inwagen says that ‘it used to be widely held that evil…was incompatible with the existence of God: that no possible world contained both God and evil. So far as I am able to tell, this thesis is no longer defended’ (1991: 135), William Alston says that ‘[i]t is now acknowledged on (almost) all sides that the logical argument [from evil] is bankrupt’ (1991: 29), and Trent Dougherty says that ‘[i]n the late 1970s, a consensus began to emerge that Alvin Plantinga…had buried the so-called “logical problem of evil”’ (2011: 560). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For different statements of the evidential argument from evil, see e.g. William Rowe (1979), Paul Draper (1989), and Michael Tooley’s contribution to Tooley and Plantinga (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Premise (3) can no longer be taken for granted. Van Inwagen (2006), Meghan Sullivan (2013), Daniel Rubio (2018), and William Hasker (2008) have put forth powerful challenges to it. For an overview of the debate about theism and gratuitous evil, see Klaas Kraay (2016a) and (2016b). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I have taken this formulation (making only a few minor adjustments) from Bergmann (2012: 11). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For different types of skeptical theism, see e.g. Alston (1991), Bergman (2012), Andrew Cullison (2014), Kirk Durston (2000), Perry Hendricks (2019), Hud Hudson (2014a), and Stephen Wykstra (1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I have taken these theses from Daniel Howard-Snyder (2009: 18)—though, he calls them ‘Agnostic Thesis 1’ and ‘Agnostic Thesis 2’ and distinguishes them from Michael Bergmann’s (2001) skeptical theses. I have chosen Howard-Snyder’s theses over Bergmann’s since they are stronger than his, and, therefore, if my defense of these theses against the objections below is successful, then it will also be successful for weaker theses such as Bergmann’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. To be clear, rabbits are supposed to be morally justifying reasons in this analogy *only insofar* as our lack of knowledge of them is not evidence for their absence. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This analogy is owed to Hudson (2011) and (2014a). For a more complete defense of this normative premise, see Bergmann (2001), (2009), and (2012) and Hudson (2014a), (2014b) and (2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. I have been brief here since the subject of this article is skeptical objections to skeptical theism, not whether skeptical theism suffices to undermine the inference from (1) to (2). For more elaborate defenses of that thesis, see the authors cited in the above footnote. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. This term is owed to Wykstra (1996). For the sake of simplicity, I will be using ‘noseeum inference’ to refer to any inductive inference from the x’s that we know of to the x’s that there are. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. One possible candidate is Draper’s argument (1989). See Bergmann (2009) and Draper (2013) for an exchange on whether the argument succumbs to skeptical theism. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This latter point is important to keep in mind. For even if one does not find my case convincing in (2018a) that the scope of skeptical theism is not narrow despite it being restricted to arguments from evil that rely on a noseeum inference, this is not a strike against skeptical theism as I have construed it, *for it never claimed to apply to arguments that do not rely on such an inference.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For a recent discussion of the principle, see Kenneth Boyce (2014), Paul Draper (2014), and Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wykstra (2014), all contained in Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer (2014), and see also McBrayer (2009) for a powerful critique of CORNEA. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For an overview of different skeptical theisms, see Justin McBrayer (2010) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Though, see Michael Tooley (1991) and Matthew A. Benton, John Hawthorne, and Yoaav Isaacs (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See e.g. Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy (2003), Richard Gale (1996), Hudson (2014a) and (2017), Stephen Law (2014) and (2015), Jimmy Licon (2013), Stephen Maitzen (2014) and (2015), David O’Connor (2014), Bruce Russell (1996), Ian Wilks (2014), and Wielenberg (2010) and (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. However, Hudson offers several routes for the skeptical theist to respond—though, he does not find them satisfying. And, to be clear, Hudson is a skeptical theist himself, and treats this issue as a type of puzzle. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. A proposition has word-of-God-only if our only reason for believing it is that God told us that it is true. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Where Kis alleged knowledge by divine revelation alone—our only reason for believing Kis divine testimony. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. There is much more to say on reductionism and non-reductionism. However, I do not have the space to say it here. Thus, I will simply direct the reader to Jennifer Lackey’s (1999) and (2003) and Elizabeth Fricker’s (2006) fine articles on the subject. See also Lackey and Sosa (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. In this quote, he is explicating and defending an argument put forth by Richard Gale (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Wilks argues that such deception is permissible for God if there is a morally justifying reason for him to do so, and that skeptical theists cannot rule out that there is such a reason. (Hudson, Law, and Wielenberg all accept this thesis as well, sometimes citing biblical passages in support of their view.) I will grant that such deception is possible—though, of course, some disagree (see e.g. John DePoe (2017) and, of course, Descartes (1641/2006)). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For example, suppose that externalism (explained in section 4.1) is the correct view of knowledge. Suppose further that my belief ‘there is a chair in front of me’ is true and was formed in the right way, meeting the conditions of your favorite externalist theory of knowledge. If that is the case, then that there is a morally justifying reason for systemic deception is *not* consistent with what I know, since I know that there is a chair in front of me. (Or, at least, if there is such a reason, it is not consistent with what I know that God has acted on that reason.) And hence, the skeptical theist need not concede the ‘for all we know’ clause—though, regrettably, they often times use this phrase. In my view, this is a mistake, and at any rate I do not concede it. The same is true for phrases like ‘we are in the dark about whether God has a reason for…’: the skeptical theist need not make this concession for the same reasons she need not concede the ‘for all we know’ clause. For more on this issue, see Hendricks (MS). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Or for most of her beliefs *simpliciter*. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. B may be substituted with (almost) any belief humans have. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. This assumption is unproblematic, for it actually strengthens the anti-skeptical theist’s position. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Of course, there have been other replies to skeptical arguments against skeptical theism, most notably Bergmann’s (2009) and (2012) articles in which he uses Moorean commonsense epistemology to defend skeptical theism and Michael Rea (2013) which offers a wide-ranging commentary on such arguments. I will neither defend nor critique those replies here—my project is, and arguments are, independent of whether those replies succeed or fail. However, it is worth noting several differences between Bergmann’s response and my own: (a) Bergmann (2012) focuses on commonsense epistemology, which is more narrow in scope than my project here: I argue that one’s belief—commonsense or not—can amount to knowledge even if she is a skeptical theist; (b) Bergmann does not explicitly interact with the global skepticism objection that I do, since they were published after his (2009) and (2012), nor does he interact with Wielenberg’s argument or Hudson’s argument; (c) I address at length the issue of Stephen Law’s charge that skeptical theism entails that externalists can only have *unreasonable knowledge* whereas Bergmann does not; and (d) I explicitly examine the role of different theories of knowledge and justification when considering these objections to skeptical theism, whereas Bergmann stays at a higher-up level. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. These categories are not exhaustive, see Bergmann (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. This definition is taken from Plantinga (1993a) and (1993b). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Externalists do not agree what ‘the right way’ is. Some, e.g. Goldman (2008) think the right way is for a belief to be reliably produced. Others (e.g. Plantinga (1993b) and Bergmann (2006)) think that the right way involves proper function. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. For defenses of proper functionalism, see e.g. Bergmann (2006), Kenneth Boyce and Alvina Plantinga (2012), Boyce and Andrew Moon (2016), and Plantinga (1993a), (1993b), (1993c), and (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Justification should not be conflated with warrant. Justification is (usually) regarded as insufficient for knowledge, and some philosophers even hold that it is not necessary for knowledge (e.g. Audi (2006) and Plantinga (1990), (1993a), and (1993b)). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Let us say that a doxastic practice is reliable if it produces mostly true beliefs. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. One might be inclined to call this Alstonian *internalism*. Internalism about justification parallels internalism about warrant: internalists hold that for S to be justified in believing p, S must be (at least potentially) aware of that which justifies her belief that p. While Alston’s criteria for justification is not explicitly internalist, it appears that (a) and (b) are ‘internalist friendly’, to say the least. Additionally, Alston self-labels this view as internalist. However, a helpful referee points out that—Alston’s self-labeling aside—Alstonian epistemology is not necessarily internalist, since S might not (even potentially) be aware that (a) and (b) hold for her beliefs. Hence why I omit the word ‘internalism’ in describing Alstonian justification. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. See also Chris Tucker (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. For issues surrounding phenomenal conservatism, see Tucker (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. This is not limited to the truth of Plantinga’s version of proper functionalism. The same result will ensue on (almost) any other version of externalism, e.g. reliablism. The same is true for my other examples involving externalism. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Of course, there are no doubt conflicts in beliefs. However, see Alston (1991, 184-225) for comments on conflicts within the Christian mystical practice, which are applicable to CDP. Suffice it to say that those who make use of CDP share a core set of beliefs, in spite of having many less significant beliefs that conflict with each other. I reiterate that it is, at the very least, not obvious that CDP is massively incoherent. I do not have a criteria for ‘massively incoherent’ in mind; rather, it just appears that CDP does not merit the label: there is agreement enough amongst its practitioners. There is more to say here, but I will stop for the sake of brevity. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. I do not have the space to defend this here, so I again refer the reader to Alston (1991b). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. A referee points out an interesting implication of Alstonian epistemology: the view that I’m attributing to Alston entails that ‘we can start with a body of bad testimony for some propositions, *p*, *q*, etc..., and then, while that testimony does not confer justification for *p*, *q*, etc. to the *first* generation of recipients, if these recipients then go on to make a doxastic practice out of accepting the testimony, their descendants will end up with Alstonian justification for believing *p*, *q* etc.’ (quote from referee) I do not dispute that this follows from Alstonian justification: since there is no reliability condition for Alstonian justification, this result seems to follow. Now, if one we to learn that our justification in fact stemmed from an unreliable or otherwise bad practice, as mentioned above, this would be troubling. But so long as this is not the case—so long as we do not know or have good reason to think our beliefs do stem from an unreliable or bad practice—it does not seem like much of an issue. But perhaps the worry expressed here is more due to the fact that the first generation of recipients lack (Alstonian) justification, but that later generations do not. I do not share the intuition that this is troublesome, so I see no issue here. However, those that are inclined to view this as troublesome may have reason to reject Alstonian justification. I will not defend Alstonian justification against this problem here, since it is not my purpose to offer a defense of any particular epistemological view. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. I take a belief to be basic just in case it is not held on the basis of another belief or inference. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Wielenberg points out in his article that skeptical theism is not to be identified with the rejection of noseeum inferences. Rather, that rejection is the implication of the skeptical theses. This is true enough. However, it is important to point out (again) that skeptical theism does *not* purport to undermine one’s basic or phenomenal conservative justified beliefs about evil, and skeptical theists have not claimed that it does (Bergmann 2014: 210-212); that is, skeptical theists do not rule out that one may have a basic or phenomenal conservative justified belief that there is gratuitous evil. For more on this, see section 2.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. This assumes, which is somewhat controversial, that beliefs predicated on testimony are basic (see e.g. Audi (2006) and Graham (2006) for a defense of this). Those who do not share this view may proceed to my other criticism of the symmetry thesis; I do not have the space to provide an argument for this view here.

    In addition to basic (testimony) beliefs, the target of Wielenberg’s argument is also beliefs the skeptical theist has that are predicated on a noseeum inference. The skeptical theist, I think, can happily grant that Wielenberg’s argument hits this target—though, I do not know of any skeptical theists (or theists *simpliciter*) who hold their beliefs about divine revelation on the basis of a noseeum inference. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Indeed, this is precisely the worry a referee raises. He or she says: ‘why isn’t it just...obvious that an individual's belief that there is no God-justifying reason for permitting some evil can be formed in the appropriate way even if (ST1) and (ST2) are true as it is that an individual's belief in *p* can be formed in an appropriate way on the basis of testimony even if one accepts Wielenberg’s skeptical theses about testimony?’ [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. I include theists here since a skeptical theist that is convinced that God’s existence is compatible with gratuitous evil and believes that there is gratuitous evil can (possibly) know that there is gratuitous evil. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Briefly, this is because ST1 and ST2 are compatible with the belief *this evil is gratuitous* meeting one’s favorite criteria for knowledge, e.g. proper functionalism. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. See again section 2.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. It is also worth remembering the dialectic situation: the skeptical theist is responding to *arguments* from evil that purport to show atheism is true. If an atheist claims to know that there is gratuitous evil but does not try to show that everyone should accept that there is gratuitous evil, then the dialect situation has dramatically shifted. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Perhaps it is possible for Hudson to construe his argument in a way that does not rely on reductionism by revising it to say that e.g. S can know p on the basis of R’s testimony only if S does not have a defeater for her belief based on R’s testimony. Since he frames it in terms of reductionism, I will not extensively explore this option here. Rather, I will confine myself to a single point: it is not clear that skeptical theism provides one with a defeater for her testimonial belief (Hudson does not argue that it does, rather he argues that skeptical theism precludes us from gaining sufficiently positive reasons for trusting God in respect to his testimony), and hence it is not clear, on this non-reductionist understanding of the argument, that skeptical theists are in trouble. Hudson would need to spell this out further. Moreover, for the same reasons that it is dubious to think that ST1 and ST2 defeat phenomenal conservative justification, it is also dubious to suppose that they act as a defeater for our (divine or otherwise) testimony beliefs. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. A quicker way to say this is as I did above: the compatibility of externalist knowledge with the truth of the antecedent of premise (10) and the falsity of its consequent is sufficient to render it false by externalist standards. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. See Tucker (2011) for how this fact—that phenomenal conservative justification is easy to obtain—makes it such that one can have an evidentialist version of reformed epistemology—the view that (roughly) it is relatively easy to have knowledge of God, or, more technically, that belief in God can be properly basic. (For more on reformed epistemology, see Plantinga (2000), Moon (2016), and Blake McAllister and Trent Dougherty (2018).) [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Or, for that matter, any belief produced by sense perception or mystical experience. For a defense of this, I again refer the reader to Alston (1991b). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. That said, we will see later how Alstonian justification and phenomenal conservatism can help the externalist ward-off the GSO. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Again, a quicker way to show this is by pointing out the compatibility of externalist knowledge with the truth of the antecedent of premise (13) and the falsity of its consequent. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Of course, it is far from clear whether all skeptical theists will accept that God *could* systematically deceive us—modal skeptics like Peter van Inwagen (1998) might very well deny (or remain agnostic about) this. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. The skepticism that (allegedly) results from GSO extends beyond perceptual beliefs. I speak only of perceptual beliefs for the sake of simplicity. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Though, it is not at all clear that she is guilty of any epistemic sin. If she does not find Law’s argument convincing, is she really epistemically guilty here? [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. I suggest something similar in Hendricks (2018b). [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. He takes the concept of unreasonable knowledge from Lasonen-Aarnio (2010), and seems to favor the view that knowledge is not actually had by the subject in his analogy or by skeptical theists. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Wielding this objection, Law has proper functionalists specifically in mind. See Law (2015: 297). [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Not all chance rules out externalist knowledge, e.g. if I by chance draw the number 5 from a hat and see that the number is 5, I know that I drew a 5. But the type of chance in Law’s analogy certainly rules out knowledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Again, see section 3.2, footnote 23, and section 5.3 for justification for translating ‘in the dark’ to ‘we cannot noseeum inference…’. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Of course, everyone’s intuitions differ, and this is especially true in abstract cases like Law’s. So, perhaps some will still find Law’s analogy convincing. I have no control over others’ intuitions about such cases, so I will not waste my time intuition-proselytizing here. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. See footnote 23 and Hendricks (MS) for more on this. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Briefly, this is because a skeptical theist’s belief that ‘God has no morally justifying reason for deceiving me about x’ can meet the proper functionalist conditions for knowledge detailed above, in which case she is not in the dark about the probability of God having a morally justifying reason for deceiving her about x. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. And there are likely more epistemological positions that are immune to such arguments. I do not pretend to have provided an exhaustive list here. (Indeed, I suspect internalists have no reason to accept them either.) [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Thanks to Brett Lunn and Hud Hudson for comments or conversations on this article. And thanks especially to G.L.G.–Colin Patrick Mitchell– for particularly insightful comments. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)