**Penultimate Draft**

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**The Nature of Skeptical Theism: Answering Non-Standard Objections to Skeptical Theism**

Abstract: Skeptical theism is a popular response to arguments from evil. Recently, Matthew A. Benton, John Hawthorne, and Yoaav Isaacs have argued that the theses that ground skeptical theism are either false or limited in scope. In this article, I show that their objections rest on dubious assumptions about the nature of skeptical theism. Along the way, I develop and clarify the ambiguous parts of skeptical theism. The upshot of this is that – once the nature of skeptical theism is made clearer – it is farmore difficult to resist.

**Introduction**

The purpose of this article is twofold. In it, I seek to (1) explicate the nature of skeptical theism, clarifying what the skeptical theses amount to and why we should accept them, and to (2) use this explicated form of skeptical theism to rebut several non-standard objections to skeptical theism. Standard objections to skeptical theism charge the skeptical theist with inviting too much skepticism; skeptical theism, it is claimed, entails radical skepticism, skepticism about divine revelation, or moral skepticism. Much has been written in reply to these objections, and (in my view) they have been satisfactorily answered. However, there have recently been several powerful, non-standard objections that have been put forth by Matthew A. Benton, John Hawthorne, and Yoaav Isaacs.[[1]](#footnote-1) I examine their arguments, and show that they rest on assumptions that the skeptical theist is not committed to. Once these assumptions are dropped, I argue, their objections cease to have any force. Along the way, I clarify the skeptical theist’s position, making clear what she is (and is not) committed to, as well as explicating ambiguous parts of the skeptical theses. Once the nature of skeptical theism becomes clear, its core theses become harder to resist. I conclude that the non-standard objections to skeptical theism fare no better than the standard objections. The upshot of this is that skeptical theism—one of the most powerful response to arguments from evil—remains intact.

1. **Skeptical Theism**

The term “skeptical theism” denotes a variety of positions that have been developed in response to a variety of arguments from evil. The type of skeptical theism that I will be concerned with in this article is that advocated and defended by Michael Bergmann.[[2]](#footnote-2) Before explicating Bergmannian skeptical theism,[[3]](#footnote-3) we need to look at what argument it was developed in response to; that is, we must look at the evidential argument from evil that skeptical theism takes aim at:[[4]](#footnote-4)

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.[[5]](#footnote-5)
4. Therefore, probably, God does not exist.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Responding to this argument, Bergmann has put forth the following theses:

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

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

ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It is claimed that ST1-3 render the inference from (1) to (2) dubious.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is because the inference from (1) to (2) is only warranted, it is claimed, if we have good reason to think that our sample of goods, evils, and entailment relations is representative of the goods, evils, and entailment relations that there actually are. To see this, consider an analogy: suppose that Sam owns a 500 acre strawberry garden, and that she wonders whether there are any rotten strawberries in it. She checks a 5 acre section of her garden and finds no rotten strawberries. Further, suppose that Sam has no reason to think that the rest of the garden resembles the area that she checked; that is, suppose that she has no reason to think that the section of her garden is representative of the whole. If that is the case, then she is unwarranted in concluding, on the basis of an inductive inference, that there probably are not any rotten strawberries in her garden; the fact that she did not find a rotten strawberry in her search hardly suggests that there are no such strawberries in her field. Since our situation in respect to goods, evils, and entailment relations is akin to Sam’s situation in respect to her garden, the inference from (1) to (2) is rendered dubious;[[9]](#footnote-9) ST1-3 render the evidential argument from evil innocuous.

1. **Standard Objections to Skeptical Theism**

It is often alleged that skeptical theism entails an unacceptable amount of skepticism: it entails skepticism about divine revelation,[[10]](#footnote-10) radical skepticism,[[11]](#footnote-11) or moral skepticism or paralysis.[[12]](#footnote-12) Skeptical theists have—in this author’s view—offered powerful, and satisfying responses to these objections, showing that skeptical theism does not entail skepticism about divine revelation,[[13]](#footnote-13) radical skepticism,[[14]](#footnote-14) or moral skepticism or paralysis.[[15]](#footnote-15) Thus, the standard (and most common) objections to skeptical theism have been dealt sufficiently. However, recently, Benton, Hawthorne, and Issacs have put forth new, non-standard objections to skeptical theism. In what follows, I will examine their arguments, showing that their criticism results from an implausible interpretation of the skeptical theses.

1. **Benton, Hawthorne, and Issacs: Representativeness**

Benton, Hawthorne, and Issacs’ (hereafter “BHI”) important article[[16]](#footnote-16) is perhaps the most powerful challenge to skeptical theism in print; skeptical theists ignore it at their own peril. While it addresses many different forms of skeptical theism, I will limit myself to their comments on Bergmann’s version. BHI (rightly) claim that skeptical theists must clarify what property of the goods that we know of is relevant in respect to representativeness in evaluating arguments from evil. However, they argue, the property that Bergmann identifies as being relevant is problematic: they claim that—if the relevant property is the one that Bergmann suggests—the question of whether the goods that we know of are representative amounts to the question of whether there are any unknown goods that justify God in allowing evil. But if this is the case then (i) skeptical theism does not add anything to discussions about arguments from evil, and (ii) the scope of skeptical theism has been critically narrowed. If BHI are correct in thinking that whether the goods we know of are representative is contingent on whether there is an unknown good that justifies God in allowing evil, then (i) follows since the main issue in arguments from evil is whether there is such a good, and this means that talk of ‘representativeness’ is just a new way of talking about an old problem. And (ii) follows since theists who think that they know of a good that justifies God in allowing evil will not endorse ST1-3 (their knowledge of a good that justifies God in allowing evil means that their knowledge of goods is representative in the above sense), and atheists (or even theists) who find arguments from evil to be powerful will not assent to ST1-3 (since, to find the argument powerful, they must think that there is (at least probably) no good that justifies God in allowing evil, and this means that their knowledge of goods is representative in the above sense). In this section, I will argue that BHI’s argument rests on a dubious understanding of what property is relevant in respect to representativeness, and will suggest a more plausible candidate. A happy byproduct of my analysis is that the nature of skeptical theism is made more perspicuous and, I claim, harder to resist.

**3.1 What Skeptical Theism is *Not***

In the previous section, I outlined what skeptical theism is: it is the affirmation of monotheism and ST1-3. However, skeptical theism is often characterized as something more than this: some suggest that skeptical theists hold that we do not know of a good that justifies God in allowing evil. For example, BHI say that “[s]keptical theists are willing to grant that no goods we know of justify horrendous evils.”[[17]](#footnote-17) But this is incorrect. Proponents of skeptical theism are simply not committed to this. Indeed, as Bergmann[[18]](#footnote-18) makes clear, ST3 entails that a good that we know of might justify horrendous evils; that is, there may be some entailment relation that we are unaware of that makes it such that some good G that we know of entails horrendous evils E, and that G is better than E and could not be obtained in any other way. If this is the case, then we do know of a G that justifies E, it is just that we do not recognize it as such. The skeptical theist does not necessarily rule out this possibility. So BHI have mischaracterized skeptical theism; a skeptical theist does not (necessarily) concede that we know of no G that justifies E.

However, perhaps the idea behind this thought is that skeptical theists are willing to grant that no G we know of *is recognized* to justify E; that is, perhaps the suggestion is that skeptical theists are committed to the claim that we do not recognize a G as justifying E. While it is true that many skeptical theists would grant this, it does not logically follow from skeptical theism that we do not know of a G that justifies E and recognize it as such. This is because the skeptical theist might believe that e.g. free will *does* justify E, but she does not believe this on the basis of an inductive inference—perhaps she believes it in the basic way or on the basis of divine revelation.[[19]](#footnote-19) And if this is so, her belief is not undermined by ST1-3; she can accept that there is a G that she knows of and recognizes that justifies E while simultaneously endorsing ST1-3. To make this clearer, consider again the tale of Sam and the strawberry patch from above, but with one twist: Sam, in this case, *sees* and *recognizes* a rotten strawberry in the section of the garden that she checked. If that is the case, then the fact that she has no good reason to think that the section of the garden that she checked is representative is irrelevant; her belief that there is a rotten strawberry in her garden is not undermined by this fact about the representativeness of her search. Similarly, if a person S recognizes (perhaps through divine revelation) that e.g. free will justifies E, then she may simultaneously hold to ST1-3.

More concretely, we may say that if a certain epistemological view is correct, S could *know that* (and therefore recognize that) free will justifies E whilst affirming ST1-3.[[20]](#footnote-20) To make this clearer, we will need to take a brief detour into the murky world of epistemology. Typically, epistemologists are divided into two camps: internalists and externalists.[[21]](#footnote-21) Internalists (very roughly) hold that for S to know p, S must (potentially or actually) have access to that which justifies or warrants her belief that p. Externalism (very roughly) the denial of internalism: for S to know p, she does not need to have access to that which justifies or warrants her belief that p. Rather, so long as the right conditions obtain, S knows that p—she need not know whether such conditions actually obtain. Now, let us consider one specific form of externalism: proper functionalism.[[22]](#footnote-22) Proper functionalists hold that for S to know p, the following conditions must obtain: (a) S believes p, (b) p is true, (c) S’s belief that p was formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties, (d) S’s cognitive faculties were successfully aimed at truth, and (e) S is situated in an appropriate cognitive mini/maxi environment.[[23]](#footnote-23) Let us further suppose that S believes that free will justifies God in permitting E, that this belief is true, and that S’s belief meets conditions (a)-(e). If that is the case, and if proper functionalism is correct, then S will *know* *that*, and therefore recognize that, G morally justifies E. Hence, if externalism is right, then one could embrace ST1-3 whilst knowing of and recognizing a morally justifying reason for E. Thus, the proponent of externalism should not grant that skeptical theism and knowledge (and recognition) of a morally justifying reason for E are incompatible, and therefore her skeptical theism does not (necessarily) commit her to the position that we do not know of a morally justifying reason for E and recognize it as such. So, skeptical theists need not concede that we do not recognize a morally justifying reason for E – or, at any rate, skeptical theists who are externalists need not do so. So, to be clear, skeptical theists are neither committed to the thesis that we know no G that justifies E, nor to the thesis that we do not recognize a G as justifying E.

**3.2 Representativeness: What is the Property?**

Representativeness plays a crucial role in ST1-3, but what is the relevant property in respect to ‘representativeness’ in the theses? Samples can be representative in respect to some properties but not others. For example, the sample of organisms in my household may be representative in respect to the organs that are essential for human life, but they may not be representative in respect to what is essential for life *simpliciter*. Thus, when asking whether the goods (etc.) we know of are representative of the goods there are,[[24]](#footnote-24) the crucial issue is what property is relevant in respect to representativeness. Addressing this issue in respect to ST1,[[25]](#footnote-25) BHI say that “[a]s far as we can tell, the relevant property is failing to justify God for allowing horrendous evils.”[[26]](#footnote-26) However, this seems to be a misinterpretation of Bergmann. The passage of Bergmann’s that they derive the relevant property from is this: Bergmann says that the property of which representativeness is relevant to is “the property of *figuring in* a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting the inscrutable evils we see around us.”[[27]](#footnote-27) While I agree that Bergmann is less than clear on this issue, it seems to me pretty implausible to interpret him as claiming the relevant property in respect to representativeness is *failing to justify God for allowing horrendous evils* (hereafter “F”). [[28]](#footnote-28) There is, so far as I can see, no explicit, non-controversial textual evidence for thinking that F is what Bergmann has in mind. In fact, there is little evidence for any particular interpretation of Bergmann here. Therefore, I will offer what I take to be an alternative, more plausible candidate for the (or, at least, *a*)relevant property in respect to representativeness for ST1.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Bergmann identifies goods with states of affairs, *abstracta*. Hence to talk about goods is to talk about states of affairs. In light of this, the relevant property in respect to representativeness seems to be *value*; the relevant property is the (total) value a state of affairs has (hereafter “V”).[[30]](#footnote-30) V is no doubt consistent with Bergmann’s text—it certainly figures into a morally justifying reason.[[31]](#footnote-31) This is because V is what determines (at least partially) whether G renders an instance of evil is permissible: if V—the total value of a state of affairs—is high enough, then E is permissible (assuming it is connected in the right way to V); V, if it is sufficiently high and cannot be obtained without allowing E (etc.), justifies God in permitting E. Hence V is the (or, at least, a) relevant property in respect to the representativeness of goods. So, we may now state ST1 as follows:

ST1\*: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative *in respect to V* of the possible goods there are.

And we can state ST2 as follows:

ST2\*: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative *in respect to V* of the possible evils there are.

So, V is the relevant property in respect to representativeness in ST1 and ST2. This is important since, as we will see below, much of BHI’s critique of skeptical theism assumes F is the relevant property in respect to representativeness; since they are wrong on this point, their criticism, we will see, fails.

**3.3. BHI’s Non-Standard Objections to Skeptical Theism**

So, BHI identify the relevant property in respect to representativeness as F. From here, they argue that skeptical theism does not add anything to debates about the problem of evil, since whether the goods we know of are representative in respect to F ultimately depends on whether there is a good that justifies God in allowing evil. In their words:

*[T]he question of whether or not the possible goods we know about are representative of the possible goods there are amounts to the question of whether or not any unknown good justifies God in allowing horrendous evils. But the question of whether any unknown good justifies God in allowing horrendous evils is what motivated our investigations into representativeness in the first place! Bergmann’s talk of the representativeness of goods amounts not to a solution but to a repackaging of the original problem.*[[32]](#footnote-32)

This is because if there is no good that justifies God in allowing evil, then our knowledge of goods is representative in respect to F. But if there is a good that justifies God, then, of course, our knowledge is not representative in respect to F. Hence the question really amounts to whether or not there is such a good.[[33]](#footnote-33) Thus, BHI endorse

*The Ontological Thesis*:(A) if there is a morally justifying reason for E, then our knowledge of goods is not representative, and (B) if there is not a morally justifying reason for E, then our knowledge of goods is representative.

*The Ontological Thesis* is true enough if we take, as BHI do, the relevant property in respect to representativeness to be F. But if the relevant property is V, then *The Ontological Thesis* is unmotivated; we have no reason to believe it if the relevant property is V. To see why, consider the following: (p = free will is the greatest good there is, q = free will justifies God in allowing E)

Case 1: p & q

Now, suppose that S believes that free will justifies God in allowing evil. Per Case 1, she is correct. However, Case 1 entails that there are no goods that are greater than free will. Now, suppose we have representative knowledge of all other goods: we know mildly valuable goods (etc.) in addition the most valuable good (i.e. free will). It follows from this that (A) of *The Ontological Thesis* is false: there is a morally justifying reason for E, but our knowledge of goods is representative. And hence we have no reason to accept, and indeed, have reason to reject, (A) of *The Ontological Thesis*. Now consider: (r = there is no morally justifying reason for E, s = our knowledge of goods is not representative.)

Case 2: r & s

Again, understanding V to be the relevant property in respect to representativeness, Case 2 is no doubt possible. Suppose that there is no morally justifying reason for E. Suppose further that there is some good (or many goods) G that is far more valuable than any good that we know, but that it does not justify E (perhaps because it is not connected to E in the right way). In such an instance, Case 2 would be true: there is no morally justifying reason for E, and since we do not know G, our knowledge of goods is not representative. And hence we have no reason to accept, and indeed, have reason to reject, (B) of *The Ontological Thesis* . Thus, we have reason to reject both components of *The Ontological Thesis* and thus we have reason to reject it itself.

But *The Ontological Thesis* is not BHI’s only argument against skeptical theism. They argue that skeptical theism, as construed by Bergmann, has a very narrow scope: many theists and many atheists will not be able to assent to ST1-3. They say:

*So who is this “we” to which Bergmann alludes? The “we” of ST1 cannot include theists who think they have an adequate theodicy to explain the existence of evil. Once you believe that we know of a good which justifies God in allowing evil, the question of whether unknown goods contain the same relative frequency of God justifying goods becomes entirely otiose. The “we” of ST1 also cannot include atheists who think that the evidential problem of evil gives strong reason to disbelieve that there is a God. By believing that the evidential problem of evil is serious such atheists must both believe that they don’t know of any good which defuses the problem and that it is not plausible that an unknown good defuses the problem. So who is the “we” of ST1? Having excluded non-skeptical theists and non-skeptical atheists, it must be populated by various shades of skeptics. But ST1 is supposed to provide an argument for Bergmann’s skeptical stance; it shouldn’t simply be Bergmann’s skeptical stance. But it is.[[34]](#footnote-34)*

BHI, here, claim that the “we” of ST1 is quite restricted. Their reasoning is that if a theist thinks that there is a successful theodicy, then she must think that the goods she knows of are representative. Moreover, they claim, if one thinks that the problem of evil gives her strong reason to accept atheism, she cannot hold that it is plausible to think that there is an unknown good that justifies God in allowing horrendous evil. More exactly, the idea is that an atheist who finds the evidential argument from evil compelling must think that the goods that she knows of are representative. So, BHI defend the following:

*The Epistemological Thesis*: (C) If S thinks that she knows of a morally justifying reason for horrendous evils, then S must also think that the goods she knows of are representative. (D) If S thinks that the evidential argument from evil is powerful, then S must also think that the goods she knows of are representative.

I concede, again, that if we are thinking of the relevant property as F, then (C) and (D) (and hence *The Epistemological Thesis*) are true. However, we have seen that a better candidate for the relevant property is V. Below, I will show that *The Epistemological Thesis* is false for roughly the same reasons *The Ontological Thesis* is false—at least when the relevant property is understood to be V.

Let us first consider (C). To see why (C) is false, first note that if X is a good that justifies God in allowing Y, that it does not follow that there is not a good Z that is greater than X. To make this more explicit, let us say that X has the value of, say, 5, and that Y is an instance of evil. Let us further suppose that X justifies God in allowing Y since it is sufficiently more valuable. It does not (logically or otherwise) follow from this, however, that there is no good Z that has a value greater than 5! Why would it? The fact that X is a morally justifying reason for Y does not tell us about the cap of value for goods. So, suppose that S thinks that X is a successful theodicy; S thinks that X justifies God in allowing evil. It does not follow from this that she must think that there is no good Z that is greater than X – again why would it? - and hence (A) is false: S can both endorse theodicy and the lack of representativeness of her knowledge of goods. (Similarly, just because Mount Baker is taller than Sumas Mountain, it does not follow that Mount Baker is the tallest mountain, nor does it follow that one who thinks that Mount Baker is taller that Sumas Mountain must think that no mountains are taller than Mount Baker. Hence one can accept that Mount Baker is taller than Sumas Mountain while acknowledging that her knowledge of mountains is not, in respect to height, representative. How it is with mountains, so it is with morally justifying reasons and value.)

What about (D)? To see why (D) is false, suppose that an atheist endorses the following thesis:

Phenomenal Conservatism (PC): 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.[[35]](#footnote-35)

If she endorses PC *and* it *seems* to her that all the premises of the evidential argument from evil (see above premises (1)-(4)) are true, then (assuming she does not have a defeater for her seeming) she may well think that the evidential argument from evil is powerful. However, this is compatible with her not thinking that the goods she knows of are representative—she may be persuaded that the goods she knows of are not representative and hence not believe that they are representative (or she may simply lack a belief about whether the goods she knows are representative) all while it continues to *seem* to her that the inference from (1) to (2) (along with the other premises) is correct.[[36]](#footnote-36) So, in this case, S thinks that the evidential argument from evil is powerful *and* does not think that her knowledge of goods is representative. Hence (D) is false—or, at least, an atheist of the above stripe should reject (D). And hence, since neither (C) nor (D) are correct, we should reject *The Epistemological Thesis*.

I conclude, therefore, BHI’s central criticisms of skeptical theism fail, and that this is due mostly to their misidentification of the relevant property in respect to representativeness. Furthermore, we have seen that V is a plausible candidate for the relevant property in respect to representativeness in respect to ST1 and ST2. Once this is accepted, however, it seems quite clear that *everyone* ought to accept ST1 and ST2: that humans have spent small portions of our relatively short existence as a species examining various goods and (supposedly) have not found one that is of high enough value to justify God in allowing evil is not a good reason to think that there our sample of goods in respect to value is representative; there is no good reason to think that the goods that we know of exhaust the scale of value.[[37]](#footnote-37) Thus, the appeal of ST1 and ST2 is not restricted.

**3.4 Taking Stock: Clarifying ST3**

So far, we have seen what skeptical theism *is* and what it is *not*: it *is* the affirmation of ST1-3 and monotheism. It is *not* the thesis that we do not know of or recognize a good that justifies God in allowing evil; skeptical theists need not endorse this view. Finally, we saw that a plausible candidate for the relevant property in respect to the goods and evils listed in ST1 and ST2 is V. However, once we identify V as the relevant property at work in ST1 and ST2, BHI’s objections to skeptical theism melt away. Now, as I mentioned earlier (footnote 28), when Bergmann speaks of the relevant property in respect to representativeness, he is speaking of a conjunction of the relevant property for ST1 and ST2 and the relevant property for ST3. The former, we have seen, is V. But the relevant property in respect to ST3 is far more important: even if G is of far greater value than E, it does not follow that G justifies God in allowing E. What is further needed is that G is connected in the right way with E: for G to justify God in allowing E, it must be that G could not be obtained without E.[[38]](#footnote-38) This is where ST3 comes into play: it prevents us from inferring from our lack of knowledge of a good being connected in the right way to E to the conclusion that there is no such good connected to E. Hence, ST3 does far more important work than ST1 and ST2. So, what is the relevant property in respect to ST3? I suggest that our understanding of V as the relevant property in respect to representativeness for ST1 and ST2 can inform how we should understand ST3. ST3, recall, says:

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

But what is the relevant property in respect to the representativeness of entailment relations that is at play here? I suggest that we think of it as being whether the goods that we know that are connected to E are representative, in respect to V, of the goods that actually are connected to E. To illustrate this, suppose that we know of three entailment relations of E: it is appropriately connected to three separate goods G1, G2, and G3, and that the values of G1-3 are all quite low. The question, then, is whether there are other goods connected with E that are far more valuable than G1-3. ST3 states that we have no good reason to think that G1-3 are representative, in respect to V, of the actual goods connected to E that there are, and hence we cannot conclude from an inductive inference that there is no G connected to E that is a morally justifying reason. This makes ST3 exceedingly difficult to resist: our knowledge of connections between instances of evil and goods is no doubt massively incomplete. And once this is acknowledged, it seems clear that, given the incompleteness of our knowledge of the entailment relations between evils and goods, we have no good reason to think that goods that we know are connected to some instance of evil are representative, in respect to V, of the goods that are actually connected said evil: what possible reason do we have for thinking that it just so happens that the goods that we know that are connected to E are representative in respect to V? So far as I can see, there is none.[[39]](#footnote-39) So, in addition to now having a clearer understanding of ST3, it is now very difficult to resist.[[40]](#footnote-40)

An interesting consequence of our understanding of ST3 is that it appears to render ST1 and ST2 superfluous: ST3 contains the core thesis of ST1 and ST2 (i.e. that we have no good reason to think that the goods that we know of are representative, in respect to V, of the goods that there are), but it puts the thesis in a place that it actually threatens the inference from (1) to (2) in the argument from evil. This is because, again, a G being more valuable than E is insufficient to justify God allowing it: G must be appropriately connected with E to do so. ST3 prevents us from (inductively) inferring that no such G is appropriately connected to E. In light of this, we can restate skeptical theism as follows:

Skeptical Theism: We have no good reason for thinking that the goods and evils that we know are connected to some instance of evil are representative, in respect to V, of the actual goods and evils that are connected to said instance of evil.

Skeptical Theism, as stated above, accurately reflects the nature of ST1-3; there is no need for ST1 and ST2.[[41]](#footnote-41)

1. **Conclusion**

In this article, we have looked at BHI’s non-standard objections to skeptical theism and saw that, once the nature of skeptical theism is clarified, they are unsuccessful. Therefore, I conclude, non-standard objections to skeptical theism are no more successful than standard objections. Thus, the most powerful response to arguments from evil remains intact. Furthermore, we got some clarity on what the skeptical theist’s position is in respect to representativeness in ST1 and ST2: the relevant property is V, not F. Further, what is relevant in ST3 is whether the goods that we know are connected with evils are representative, in respect to V, of the goods that are actually connected to said evils. So, we now have a more complete understanding of ST1-3, and this clarity has made the theses more difficult to resist – or, at least, that is what I argued.[[42]](#footnote-42)

1. Matthew A. Benton, John Hawthorne, and Yoaav Isaacs “Evil and Evidence” in Jonathan Kvanvig (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion: Volume 7* (Oxford University Press 2016), 1-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See e.g. Michael Bergmann “Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil” *Nous*, 35 (2001): 278–296, “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil,” in T. Flint and M. Rea, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009): 375–399, “Common Sense Skeptical Theism” in K. Clark and M. Rea (eds.) *Reason, Metaphysics, and Mind: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, (Oxford University Press 2012): 9-37*,* and “Skeptical Theism, Atheism, and Total Evidence Skepticism” in Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer (eds.)  *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014): 209-220. For different types of skeptical theism, see e.g. William Alston “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 5 (1991): 29-67, Andrew Cullison “Two New Versions of Skeptical Theism” in Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer (eds.) *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* (Oxford University Press 2014), 250-263, Hud Hudson "The Father of Lies?" in Jonathan L. Kvanvig (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion Volume 5*, (Oxford University Press 2014): 147-66, and Stephen Wykstra “The Human Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance’,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 73–94. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hereafter, I will omit “Bergmannian.” All references to skeptical theism should be understood to be *Bergmannian* skeptical theism. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I do not mean to suggest that skeptical theism only undermines this argument, for it has been shown elsewhere that it—or something near enough—undermines other arguments from evil as well, see e.g. Bergmann “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil,” Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann “[Grounds for belief in God aside, does evil make atheism more reasonable than theism?](https://philpapers.org/go.pl?id=HOWGFB&proxyId=&u=https%3A%2F%2Fphilpapers.org%2Farchive%2FHOWGFB.pdf)” in Michael Peterson and Raymond Van Arrogan (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*. (Blackwell 2003): 140-55, and Perry Hendricks “How to be a Skeptical Theist *and* a Commonsense Epistemologist” *Faith and Philosophy* 35 (3) (2018): 345-355. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is worth mentioning that this premise is no longer uncontroversial. For powerful challenges to it see, for example, William Hasker *The Triumph of God Over Evil: Theodicy for a World of Suffering.* (Intervarsity Press Academic 2008), Peter van Inwagen *The Problem of Evil*. (Oxford University Press 2006), and Daniel Rubio "God meets Satan's Apple: the paradox of creation" Philosophical Studies 175 (12) (2018): 2987-3004. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I have taken this formulation (making only a few minor adjustments) from Bergmann (2012: 11). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bergmann “Commonsense Skeptical Theism” 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Since the truth of this thesis—that ST1-3 undermine the inference from (1)-(2)—is not being contested in this article, I will only briefly (and inadequately) defend it below. For a more elaborate defense of it, I refer the reader to Bergmann “Skeptical Theism and Rowe’s New Evidential Argument from Evil,” “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil,” and “Commonsense Skeptical Theism”, Hudson “The Father of Lies?” and *A Grotesque in the Garden* (Xerxes Press 2017), and Perry Hendricks “Sceptical theism and the evil-god challenge” *Religious Studies* 54 (4) (2018): 549-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Again, for arguments for the thesis that this is the situation that we are in—that our situation in respect to goods, evils, and their entailment relations is analogous to Sam’s—see the sources cited above. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Stephen Law “Sceptical theism and a lying God: Wielenberg’s argument defended and developed” *R*[*eligious Studies*](https://www.researchgate.net/journal/0034-4125_Religious_Studies) 51 (2014): 91-109, Hud Hudson "The Father of Lies?", Hudson *A Grotesque in the Garden* (Xerxes Press 2017) (to be clear, Hudson himself is a skeptical theist, and appears to consider skeptical objections to it as a puzzle), and Erik Wielenberg "[Skeptical Theism and Divine Lies,](http://journals.cambridge.org/repo_A79khCWq)" *Religious Studies* 46:4 (2010), 509-523 and “Divine Deception” in T. Dougherty and J. McBrayer, *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* (Oxford University Press 2014): 236-249. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Stephen Law "The Pandora's box objection to skeptical theism." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78 (2015): 285-99, Richard Gale “Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil,” in Howard-Snyder *The Argument From Evil* (Indiana University Press 1996): 206-218, Jimmy Licon “Sceptical theism and the problem of epistemic evil: Why sceptical theism is philosophically costly” *Balkan Journal of Philosophy* 2 (2013): 175-180, Bruce Russell “Defenseless,” in *The Evidential Argument from Evil* edited by Daniel Howard-Snyder (Indian University Press 1996), 193–206, and Ian Wilks “The Global Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism” in McBrayer and Howard-Snyder *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Wiley-Blackwell 2013): 458-456. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy “Sceptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil.” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 496-516, Gale “Some Difficulties in Theistic Treatments of Evil,” Stephen Maitzen “The Moral Skepticism Objection to Skeptical Theism” in McBrayer and Howard-Snyder *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Wiley-Blackwell 2013): 444-457 and “Agnosticism, Skeptical Theism, and Moral Obligation” in T. Dougherty and J McBrayer *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* (Oxford University Press 2014): 277-292, and David O’ Connor “Theistic Objections to Skeptical Theism” in McBrayer and Howard Snyder *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Wiley-Blackwell 2013): 468-481. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bergmann “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil” and “Commonsense Skeptical Theism” and Michael Rea “Skeptical Theism and the “Too Much Skepticism” Objection” in Justin McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Wiley-Blackwell 2013): 482-506. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Bergmann “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil” and “Commonsense Skeptical Theism”, Rea “Skeptical Theism and the “Too Much Skepticism” Objection”, and Hendricks “Sceptical theism and the evil god challenge.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bergmann, “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil” and “Commonsense Skeptical Theism”, Michael Bergmann and Michael Rea “[In Defense of Skeptical Theism: A Reply to Almeida and Oppy](http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~bergmann/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/AJP-with-rea.pdf).”  Australasian Journal of Philosophy 83 (2005): 241-51, Daniel Howard-Snyder “Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism,” in Kvanvig, Jonathan (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 2, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009) and “Agnosticism, the Moral Skepticism Objection, and Commonsense Morality” in Justin McBrayer and Trent Dougherty *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* (Oxford University Press 2014): 293-306 (these articles of Howard-Snyder’s are the definitive reply to the moral skepticism objection to skeptical theism), and Daniel Howard-Snyder and Michael Bergmann “[Grounds for belief in God aside, does evil make atheism more reasonable than theism?](https://philpapers.org/go.pl?id=HOWGFB&proxyId=&u=https%3A%2F%2Fphilpapers.org%2Farchive%2FHOWGFB.pdf" \t "_blank)” in Michael Peterson and Raymond Van Arrogan (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*. (Blackwell 2003), 140-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Evil and Evidence.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Evil and Evidence” 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Some have challenged whether skeptical theism is compatible with basic beliefs or beliefs predicated on divine revelation amounting to knowledge. I have assumed, in this article, that this is not so. This assumption is unproblematic since none of the objections I consider here assume otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. If someone *knows that* free will justifies E, then it follows that she recognizes that it does. (This is different from merely knowing of G: to know that G justifies E is different than merely knowing of G.) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Though, this division is incomplete, see Bergmann *Justification Without Awareness* (Oxford University Press 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. My choice of proper functionalism is arbitrary here. What I say is compatible with other externalist theories of knowledge, e.g. reliablism. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For different statements and defenses of proper functionalism, see e.g. Bergmann *Justification Without Awareness*, Kenneth Boyce and Alvin Plantinga. “Proper Functionalism” in Andrew Cullison (ed.) *The Continuum Companion to Epistemology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2012), 124-141, and Plantinga *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford University Press 1993), *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford University Press 1993), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Hereafter, I will omit “of the goods there are” and simply talk about whether goods are representative. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. BHI focus exclusively on ST1 in their section on Bergmannian skeptical theism. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “Evil and Evidence” 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “Commonsense Skeptical Theism” 12, emphasis mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Part of why this interpretation is implausible is that Bergmann is talking about representativeness *in respect to ST1-ST3*, whereas BHI are talking about representativeness in respect to only ST1. While ST1 and ST2, since they are about goods and evils, will share the same property, ST3 will not since it is about something radically different: entailment relations. So, Bergmann is actually concerned with representativeness in respect to *two* properties: the conjunction of the relevant property in respect to ST1 and ST2 and the relevant property in respect to ST3. Again, since BHI focus solely on ST1 (and by implication ST2), I focus my attention there as well. However, I will later use what we learn about ST1 in this article to illustrate how we should understand relevant property in respect to representativeness in ST3. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For the sake of simplicity, I will usually not mention ST2. However, it should be understood, as I make clear below, that the relevant property in respect to representativeness in ST1 is the same relevant property in ST2. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. A referee suggests that Bergmann’s introduction of ST4 supports my claim here, since it was added seemingly in order to clarify the nature of ST1-3. (ST4 states: 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.) However, it is less than clear to me than ST4 is added for merely clarificatory reasons. But, more importantly, my project here is to offer a plausible candidate for the relevant property in respect to representativeness, not proper Bergmann exegesis. So, I will not pursue this issue further. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Which Bergmann calls a “God-justifying reason.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. “Evil and Evidence” 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. BHI say that it comes down to whether there is an *unknown good* because, they assume, skeptical theists must affirm that no good that we know of is a morally justifying reason. But, as we saw earlier, this assumption is false. Hence why I speak of goods *simpliciter*. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. “Evil and Evidence” 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. # Michael Huemer “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 30-55, 30. For PC applied specifically to religious epistemology, see Chris Tucker). “Phenomenal Conservatism and Evidentialism in Religious Epistemology” in K. Clark and R. VanArragon *Evidence and Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press 2011), 52-76.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Assuming, of course, that accepting ST1-3 do not provide her with a defeater for her PC justification. See Hendricks “How to be a Skeptical Theist and a Commonsense Epistemologist” for more on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. But don’t we know of *infinitely valuable* goods, such as a human having a relationship with God? Perhaps this is so, but some infinities are larger than others, so just because we know of one infinite good, it does not follow that there are not (much) greater goods – perhaps (but not necessarily) involving other creatures. (Perhaps one would object that the goods *must* involve humans. A full-fledged reply to this objection would require a different article. Suffice it to say that there are reasons to doubt this objection (e.g. Hudson *A Grotesque in the Garden*)). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Or, if another evil could bring it about, the evil would be equally bad or worse. (Here I set aside complications that come about on account of vagueness brought up by van Inwagen *The Problem of Evil*. If we countenance vagueness, it makes my explanation more…vague, but it would still be true that G must be connected to E in an appropriate way – it would just be that G would have to be connected with E in *a* right way instead of *the* right way.) Finally, for the sake of simplicity, I am setting aside the fact that E may be justifiable on account of it being the only way of preventing another evil that is far worse than it. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. This, to be clear, is not an inductive inference I am making to the conclusion that there is no such reason. Rather, it is an observation about how things *currently* stand: we currently have no good reason to think that the entailment relations between goods and evils that we know of are representative. Things could change. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. It is tempting to claim the stronger theses that we have reason to doubt that the goods that we know are connected to E are representative, in respect to V, of the goods that are actually connected to E. While I think this is true, I will refrain from (directly) arguing this since it diverges from the original ST1-3 significantly. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. I hold that, at the very least, Skeptical Theism is compatible with Bergmann’s skeptical theses. However, the project of this article has not merely been Bergmann exegesis, so I do not claim that this is how Bergmann’s skeptical theses *must* be understood. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Thanks to Adriane Hendricks and two anonymous referees for comments on this article. And thanks especially to G.L.G.—Colin Patrick Mitchell—for particularly insightful comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)