**We are Not in the Dark: Refuting Popular Arguments Against Skeptical Theism**

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**Abstract:** Critics of skeptical theism often claim that if it (skeptical theism) is true, then we are in the dark about whether (or for all we know) there is a morally justifying for God to radically deceive us. From here, it is argued that radical skepticism follows: if we are truly in the dark about whether there is a morally justifying reason for God to radically deceive us, then we cannot know anything. In this article, I show that skeptical theism does not entail that we are in the dark about whether (or for all we know) there is a morally justifying reason for God to deceive us. And hence arguments against skeptical theism that make use of this assumption fail.

**. 1. Introduction**

It is often claimed by skeptical theists and their critics that skeptical theism entails that we are in the dark about whether there is a morally justifying reason for evil (or ordinary) events obtaining.[[1]](#endnote-1) This has led many to object to skeptical theism on the grounds that it invites either radical or moral skepticism. In this article, I show that skeptical theism--at least in itself--does not entail that we are in the dark about whether there are morally justifying reasons for evil (or ordinary) events obtaining, and that skeptical theists should not concede this to their critics. The significance of this is that the most popular arguments against skeptical theism rest on a false premise and therefore fail. Critics of skeptical theism, therefore, must head back to the drawing board. The upshot of this is that skeptical theism, one of the most powerful responses to arguments from evil, remains intact.

**2. The Problem of Evil and Skeptical Theism**

Arguments from evil purport to show that an instance, the totality, or the pattern of evil entail that God (at least probably) does not exist.[[2]](#endnote-2) Such arguments often rely on what is called a “noseeum inference,” in which its proponent infers from our (supposed) lack of knowledge of a morally justifying reason for (an instance, the totality, or the pattern of) evil, to the conclusion that there (at least probably) is no such reason. And from there, it is inferred that--since God would not allow evil if there were no morally justifying reason for it[[3]](#endnote-3)--God (at least probably) does not exist.[[4]](#endnote-4) The term “skeptical theism” refers to a variety of positions that have been developed in response to arguments from evil. While skeptical theism comes in many varieties,[[5]](#endnote-5) what unites skeptical theists is their affirmation of monotheism and their rejection of the noseeum inference: skeptical theists, for reasons that vary, argue that a lack knowledge of a morally justifying reason for evil does not make it probable that there is no such reason.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In this article, I will be concerned exclusively with Michael Bergmann’s version skeptical theism--though, what I say applies to other forms of skeptical theism as well. Therefore, I will take a skeptical theist to be a monotheist who endorses the following theses advocated by Bergmann (2001; 2009; 2012; 2014):

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

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

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

ST4: We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have. (Bergmann 2012, pp. 11-12)

Skeptical theists argue that ST1-4 render the noseeum inference unjustified: ST1-4 make it such that our lack of knowledge of a morally justifying reason for evil does not entail or make it probable that there is no such reason.[[7]](#endnote-7) Therefore, arguments from evil that rely on such an inference fail.[[8]](#endnote-8) (While I think ST1-4 are true and everyone ought to endorse them, I will not argue that here. The interested reader can consult Hendricks (2020a) for an argument for skeptical theism.)

**3. Skeptical Theists and Their Critics**

When explaining their position and why it undermines (certain) arguments from evil, skeptical theists often say either that “we are in the dark” about morally justifying reasons for evil (or ordinary) events, or that “for all we know” there is a morally justifying reason for evil (or ordinary) events.[[9]](#endnote-9) For example, Bergmann says that “we are seriously in the dark about whether the possible goods, evils, and entailments between them are likely to contain the makings of a potentially God-justifying reason to permit [an instance of horrendous evil],” (2009, p. 379) and that “[a] healthy appreciation of ST1-ST4 should convince us (whether we’re theists or nontheists) that we are largely in the dark about the realm of [entailment relations between goods and evils].” (2012, p. 24) Similarly, Hud Hudson says that “[i]n general, [skeptical theists] argue either that we have no good reason to believe (*or else that we are in the dark about whether*) the goods we are aware of are representative of the goods that there are,” (2014, p. 150) and “[i]f there really is a morally obligating reason for deceiving me, then I am deceived, for [God] always does what he ought. If there is no morally justifying reason for God to deceive me, then I am not deceived, for He never does what He ought not. If there is a morally justifying reason for God to deceive me, then either I am or am not deceived depending on His other purposes. Pitifully*, I am utterly in the dark about which of those three antecedent conditions is satisfied*.” (2017, pp. 72-73, emphasis mine)

Other times, skeptical theists suggest that ST1-4 entail that *for all we know* there is a morally justifying reason for allowing an evil (or ordinary) event. For example, Michael Rea, responding to a critic of skeptical theism, says that “[i]t is part of [one’s] skeptical theism to say that, *for all she knows*, some good beyond her ken justifies God in permitting that suffering,” (2013, p. 499, emphasis mine) and Daniel Howard-Snyder says, in reply to a critic, “and yes, *for all I can tell*, there is a reason that would justify my non-intervention in [an instance of horrific suffering].” (2014, p. 306, emphasis mine)[[10]](#endnote-10) So, skeptical theists have characterized their position as entailing that we are in the dark about morally justifying reasons, or that for all we know there is a morally justifying reason for evil (or ordinary) events.

Perhaps due to the propensity of skeptical theists to describe us--on account of skeptical theism--as being in the dark about morally justifying reasons (or for saying that, for all we know, there are such reasons for evil (or ordinary) events), critics have often made similar claims when attacking skeptical theism. For example, Bruce Russell says “[the skeptical theist holds] that, *for all we know*, there are [morally justifying reasons] beyond our ken which would justify God in deceiving us about creating the universe 100 years ago . . .,” (1996, p. 196, emphasis mine) and concludes that the ‘for all we know’ clause entails that we do not know that the world is more than 100 years old. Stephen Maitzen, arguing that skeptical theism entails skepticism about morality, says that “[b]ut if deception is ever good, all things considered – imagine deceiving a murderer about the location of a potential victim – then presumably a good God could deceive us, and if we’re as clueless about God’s true purposes as skeptical theism says we may be, then *for all we know* radical deception on God’s part represents the height of goodness.” (2013, pp. 459-460, emphasis mine) He concludes that the skeptical theist’s skepticism entails that we cannot claim knowledge of moral truths and that we should be in a state of moral paralysis: if, for all we know, there are morally justifying reasons for God radically deceiving us about morality, then we do not have knowledge of the ethical truths we ordinarily claim to know. Stephen Law, arguing that skeptical theism entails radical skepticism, says that:

[o]rdinarily, 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, pp. 290-291, emphasis mine)

Since Law thinks that this is precisely the situation that skeptical theists are in--for all skeptical theists know, God has a good reason to deceive them--he argues that skeptical theists have an undercutting defeater for their claims to (commonsense) knowledge, and thus that we lack such knowledge. Stephen Wilks says that “[i]f, *for all we know*, there might be some god-justifying reason for all the evil we see around us, why might there not be one for systematic, even comprehensive deception on the part of God?” (2013, p. 475, emphasis mine) Wilks thinks that the antecedent entails that one cannot affirm that there is no morally justifying reason for God systemically deceiving us, and that global skepticism ensues from this. Finally, Richard Gale, in arguing that skeptical theism entails moral paralysis or skepticism, says “[s]hould we be horrified at the brutal rape and murder of a child? Should we have tried to prevent it or take steps to prevent similar incidents in the future? Who knows? *For all we can tell* it might be a blessing in disguise or serve some God-justifying reason that is too “deep” for us to access . . .The result of this moral skepticism is paralysis of the will, since we can have no reason for acting, given that *we are completely in the dark* whether the consequences of our action is good or bad.” (2007, p. 67, emphasis mine)

Thus, both skeptical theists and their critics have claimed that, on account of skeptical theism, there are *for all we know* morally justifying reasons for evil (or ordinary) events that have obtained, or that *we are in the dark* about whether there is such a reason. While skeptical theists have used these claims (about being in the dark, etc.) to undermine arguments from evil, their critics have used them to try to undermine skeptical theism by arguing that it entails radical skepticism or moral skepticism.

**4. We are not in the Dark**

So, skeptical theists affirm that skeptical theism entails that we are in the dark about whether (or that for all we know) there is a morally justifying reason for God allowing some event (E).[[11]](#endnote-11) As we saw above, critics of skeptical theism argue that this means that we are in the dark about whether (or that for all we know) God has a reason for deceiving us about E, and that this leads to radical skepticism or moral skepticism.[[12]](#endnote-12) Is this characterization accurate? Before we weigh this charge, it is crucial to understand what the “for all we know” and “in the dark” clauses amount to. The clauses, as I will understand them, essentially amount to the claim that there being a morally justifying reason for God to permit or deceive us about E is consistent with everything that we know.[[13]](#endnote-13)

So, are skeptical theists committed to the “for all we know” or “in the dark” clause?[[14]](#endnote-14) Recall ST1-4. What about those theses would entail that one is in the dark about whether there is a morally justifying reason for God permitting E or deceiving us about E obtaining? Nothing, so far as I can see. Indeed, there are (at least possible) cases in which we are positively not in the dark about whether there is a morally justifying reason for God permitting (or deceiving us about) E. For example, suppose that the externalist about knowledge is right. More specifically, let us suppose that proper functionalist accounts of knowledge are correct:[[15]](#endnote-15) S knows p if and only if (a) S believes p, (b) p is true, (c) S’s belief that p was formed by properly functioning cognitive faculties that were successfully aimed at truth, and (d) S is situated in an appropriate cognitive environment.[[16]](#endnote-16) Finally, let us suppose S’s belief that E (that is, that E obtained) was formed in such a way that it meets conditions (a)-(d). Call S’s belief that E obtained ‘B’. If all this is true, then B amounts to knowledge, and it is therefore not consistent with what S knows that God has a morally justifying reason for deceiving her about E.[[17]](#endnote-17) However, this is consistent with her adhering to ST1-4: that B amounts to knowledge and that it is therefore not consistent with what S knows that there is a morally justifying reason for God deceiving her about E does not entail that her knowledge of goods, evils, and their entailment relations is *representative*. (The same is true for the opposite: if S believes that there is a morally justifying reason for God deceiving her about whether E obtained and her belief meets conditions (a)-(d), then she *knows* that there is such a reason. But, of course, this does not entail that her knowledge of goods, evils, and their entailment relations is representative.) And hence skeptical theism does not entail that for all S knows there is a morally justifying reason for God deceiving her about E.

To make this clearer, suppose (contrary to fact) that Mount Baker is the tallest mountain in the universe. Suppose further that while on a tour of Washington, S’s guide tells her that Mount Baker is the tallest mountain in the universe. Now, S has not travelled the world let alone the universe, so she has no good reason to think that the mountains that she knows of are representative in respect to height of those that there actually are. However, her belief could nevertheless satisfy conditions (a)-(d) and thus amount to knowledge, and therefore mean that she is not in the dark about whether there is a mountain taller than Mount Baker. (Again, the same is true for the opposite: if S believes that Mount Baker is not the tallest mountain in the universe, her belief can amount to knowledge despite her knowledge of mountains not being representative.) How it is with Mount Baker, so it is with morally justifying reasons: we can have knowledge of events (or moral truths) and therefore not be in the dark about whether there is a morally justifying reason for God deceiving us about them, despite having no good reason to think that our knowledge of morally justifying reasons is representative.[[18]](#endnote-18)

So, the fact that it is not consistent with the skeptical theist’s beliefs that there is a morally justifying reason for God deceiving us about whether E obtained does not entail that her knowledge of goods (etc.) is representative, and hence is compatible with affirming ST1-4. This shows that the skeptical theist need not concede that for any event E, we are in the dark about whether there is a morally justifying reason for God deceiving us about it. In other words, if the skeptical theist *knows* that, for example, there is an external world, then it is not true that she is in the dark about whether there is a morally justifying reason for God deceiving us about there being an external world. That is, it is not consistent with what she knows that there is a morally justifying reason for our being deceived about our perceptual experiences. (True, if her belief about the external world were based on an inference from her not knowing of a morally justifying reason for God to deceive us about it to the conclusion that he did not deceive us about it, then she would be in the dark. But her belief does not have this basis. And hence she need not concede that she is in the dark.)[[19]](#endnote-19) Indeed, it appears that the only reason she has for conceding that she is in the dark is if she puts aside her apparent knowledge of the external world--but why should she do that? Again, affirming ST1-4 is compatible with affirming that there is no morally justifying reason for God deceiving us about there being an external world, so it is not as though her skeptical theism pressures her toward doing this. Absent a compelling reason to put her knowledge of the external world (or any other event) aside, she has no reason to concede that we are in the dark about morally justifying reasons in respect to deception about the external world (or anything else).[[20]](#endnote-20) Similar things can be said about moral beliefs: if the skeptical theist knows, for example, *I should intervene to stop immoral action X* (Call this ‘P’), then it is not consistent with what she knows that (she is not in the dark about whether) there is a morally justifying reason for her to not intervene to stop X. Since skeptical theism is compatible with her knowing P, it appears that the only reason she has for conceding that she is in the dark about whether there is a morally justifying reason for not intervening to stop X is if she puts her apparent knowledge of P aside. However, her skeptical theism does not force her to do this. So, absent a compelling reason to put her knowledge of P aside, she has no reason to concede that she is in the dark about whether there is a morally justifying reason for not intervening to prevent X.

**5. Refuting Skeptical Arguments Against Skeptical Theism**

Perhaps one would respond by saying that the issue I have addressed in this article is trivial: we all know that skeptical theists do not mean that we are actually in the dark about whether there is a morally justifying reason for God deceiving us about (or permitting) E.

This reply is mistaken, for the use of language is not trivial here. If skeptical theists really do not mean that we are in the dark, then they ought to refrain from saying it; to persist in using such language only obfuscates the skeptical theist’s position. More importantly, to use such language leads many to put forth unsound arguments against skeptical theism. For example, in the above quotes Gale, Russell, Law, Maitzen, and Wilks all put forth arguments that skeptical theism entails radical or moral skepticism. The radical skepticism arguments (Russell, Law, and Wilks) have the following general structure:

*The Radical Skepticism Argument*

(1) If, for all we know, there is a morally justifying reason for God to deceive us about an event E, then we do not know that E obtained.

(2) Skeptical theism entails that for all we know, there is a morally justifying reason for God to deceive us about any non-trivial event.

(3) Therefore, skeptical theism entails that none of our beliefs about non-trivial events amount to knowledge.[[21]](#endnote-21)

As we have seen above, premise (2) is false: skeptical theism does not entail that, for all we know, there is a morally justifying reason for God to deceive us about non-trivial events. This is because skeptical theism is compatible with our knowing e.g. that there is an external world, in which case it is not true that for all we know there is a morally justifying reason for God to deceive us about there being an external world. And hence *The Radical Skepticism Argument* rests on a false premise and therefore fails.

Similar to radical skepticism arguments against skeptical theism, moral skepticism arguments (Gale and Maitzen) have the following general structure:

*The Moral Skepticism Argument*

(4) If, for all we know, there is a morally justifying reason for us to allow an apparently immoral action (e.g. murder) to happen, then we should not intervene.

(5) Skeptical theism entails that, for all we know, there is a morally justifying reason for us to allow apparently immoral actions (e.g. murder) to happen.

(6) Therefore, skeptical theism entails that we should not intervene to prevent or stop apparently immoral actions.

It should be clear, however, that premise (5) is false: skeptical theism does not entail that for all we know there is a morally justifying reason for allowing apparently immoral actions. This is because skeptical theism is compatible with one knowing e.g. *I should intervene to prevent this murder*.[[22]](#endnote-22) And if S knows *I should intervene to prevent this murder*, then it is not consistent with what she knows that there is a morally justifying reason for not intervening. And hence *The Moral Skepticism Argument* rests on a false premise and therefore fails.

We have seen that *The Radical Skepticism Argument* and *The Moral Skepticism Argument* are based on a misunderstanding of skeptical theism. Therefore, the above objections by Gale, Russell, Law, Maitzen, and Wilks all fail. Indeed, many other arguments against skeptical theism seem to make use of premises like (2) and (5), and therefore also fail.[[23]](#endnote-23) I conclude that the most popular objections to skeptical theism have no force whatsoever. They rely on a misconception of skeptical theism, which leads their proponents to affirm a false premise. And hence critics of skeptical theism need to head back to the drawing board.

**6. Conclusion[[24]](#endnote-24)**

We have seen that we are not in the dark on skeptical theism: ST1-4 do not entail that we are in the dark about morally justifying reasons. We also saw that many (most?) arguments against skeptical theism rest on this misunderstanding and therefore fail. I hope to have added some clarity to the debate surrounding skeptical theism with this article. By doing away with these popular objections, perhaps some more interesting ones will emerge.

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1. By “ordinary events,” I just mean non-evil events. Skeptical theists usually focus on evil events whereas critics of skeptical theism usually focus on ordinary events. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For different statements of the argument from evil, see e.g. J.L. Mackie (1955), William Rowe (1979), Paul Draper (1989), and Michael Tooley’s contribution to Tooley and Plantinga (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. While it is often assumed that God and gratuitous evil (evil for which there is no morally justifying reason) are incompatible, this assumption has been rendered dubious by recent powerful arguments put forth by Peter van Inwagen (2006), William Hasker (2008), and Justin Mooney (2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The most famous version of this argument can be found in Rowe (1979). The term “noseeum inference” is owed to Wykstra (1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For different types of skeptical theism, see e.g. Alston (1991), Andrew Cullison (2014), Perry Hendricks (2019), Hud Hudson (2014), and Stephen Wykstra (1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Different skeptical theists reject the noseeum inference for different reasons. For example, Stephen Wykstra (1984) rejects it on account of an epistemological principle he calls ‘CORNEA’ and Michael Bergmann (2001) rejects it on account of several skeptical theses (detailed below). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. A referee wonders whether the conjunction of monotheism and ST1-4 is sufficient to qualify as a version of skeptical theism. Above, I suggested what unites different versions of skeptical theism is the fact that they all affirm monotheism and reject the noseeum inference used in (some) arguments from evil. On this view of skeptical theism, the conjunction of ST1-4 and monotheism qualifies as a version of skeptical theism, since these theses are held to undermine (certain) noseeum inferences. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. I will not defend this thesis (i.e. that ST1-4 undermine the noseeum inference used in arguments from evil) here, for (a) this is not relevant to the subject of this article and (b) I do not have the space for it. I refer the reader to Bergmann (2001), (2009), and (2012) and Hud Hudson (2014) and (2017) for defenses of this thesis. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The events referred to are typically instances of evil. However, we need not restrict the scope of such statements to evil events--they apply, if at all, to (almost) any event. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Howard-Snyder here is not defending skeptical theism. Rather, he is defending a position that he calls “Agnosticism.” However, Agnosticism is near enough to skeptical theism for my purposes. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. E will refer to an event in general--it is not necessarily an evil event. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Notice: skeptical theists talk about God having a morally justifying reason to permit E, whereas critics of skeptical theism talk about God having a morally justifying reason for *deceiving* us about E or about a moral proposition. Below, I will try to accommodate both terms as much as possible by referring to God having a reason to permit E and a reason to deceive us about E. In cases in which I refer only to permission or deception, the reader can assume what I say applies to both. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Strictly speaking, a morally justifying reason for E does not entail that God permits (or causes) E, for there could be other reasons he has for not permitting (or causing) it. So, let us understand a morally justifying reason to be a morally *obligatory* reason, meaning that if there is a morally justifying reason or God to permit (or cause) E, then he is obligated to, and therefore does, permit (or cause) it. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For colloquial purposes, I will take the ‘in the dark’ and ‘for all we know’ clauses to be synonymous. However, I recognize that they are distinct: the former is a stronger claim. However, it should be obvious how my reply below applies to both clauses. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. My choice of externalism and proper functionalism here is arbitrary; everything I say here could be said about internalist or non-proper functionalist externalist theories of knowledge as well. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. For more on proper functionalism, see e.g. Bergmann (2006), Kenneth Boyce and Alvin Plantinga (2012), and Plantinga (1993a), (1993b), and (2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. By our characterization of morally justifying reasons above (see n. 13), that S has knowledge of E entails that there is no morally justifying reason for God deceiving her about it. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. I gesture at this point in Hendricks (2018a). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Perhaps there are some theists who hold their belief about there not being a morally justifying reason for God to deceive us about there being an external world on the basis of a noseeum inference. If there are, then my reply is not available to them. However, I know of no such individuals, so I will ignore this complication. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Perhaps--but not necessarily--the skeptical theist does not *know that she knows* that there is an external world. But it is hard to see why that would matter. And if it did, it is hard to see how skeptical theism prevents her from knowing that she knows, and if it is not her skeptical theism that is doing the work here, then this is not a problem unique to skeptical theism. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *The Radical Skepticism Argument*, along with *The Moral Skepticism Argument* (see below), is clearly oversimplified, but the fact is that all the above arguments (from Gale, Russel, Law, Maitzen, and Wilks) endorse something like premise (2) and premise (5). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. This is because, again, it is consistent with ST1-4 that one’s belief that *I should intervene to prevent this murder* satisfies the relevant conditions for knowledge (see the proper functionalist conditions (i.e. (a)-(d)) above). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See e.g. Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy (2003), Hasker (2010), Jimmy Licon (2013), David O’Connor (2014), Andrew Moon (2017), and Wielenberg (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Note the difference between my defense of skeptical theism and Bergmann’s: Bergmann (2012) does not object to the ‘for all we know’ clause, which I have argued should not be granted. Instead, he uses Moorean commonsense epistemology to stave off excessive skepticism. Whether his defense is successful is contentious, and I will not comment further on it here. For other replies to skeptical objections to skeptical theism, see e.g. Rea (2013) and Hendricks (2018b) and (2020b). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Please note the corrections to your references section for future submissions. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)