

Skeptical Theism: A Panoramic Overview (Part I)¹

Luis R.G. Oliveira
University of Houston

Skeptical theism, broadly construed, is an attempt to leverage our limited cognitive powers, in some specified sense, against “evidential” and “explanatory” arguments from evil. Since there are different versions of these kinds of arguments, there are correspondingly different versions of skeptical theism. My goal, over these two papers (Part I and Part II), is to provide a panoramic overview of some central issues in this vast and growing literature. Part I focuses on understanding the different kinds of skeptical theism and their proper targets. Part II focuses on the central challenges facing this family of views. My goal is to be representative without being exhaustive: I will highlight the main flash points in the literature without pretending to take note of everything that has been said about each issue.²

1. Three Versions of the Problem of Evil

J.L. Mackie (1955) is famous for the modern articulation of the so-called *logical* problem of evil: the claim that the central beliefs of classical theism – however the theist chooses to interpret them (c.f., Mackie 1962, 153-4) – are logically inconsistent. Mackie had the following beliefs in mind:

- (a) God is omnipotent
- (b) God is all good
- (c) Evil exists

All three of these are essential to classical theism. Yet what Mackie called “quasi-logical rules” allow us to derive the denial of any one of them from any of the other two.³

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

² For other helpful overviews of this literature, see Bergmann (2009), McBrayer (2010), and Perrine & Wykstra (2017).

³ “These additional principles are that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do” (Mackie 1955, 201).

Much has been said about Mackie's argument, however, and few today think of it as a promising challenge to theism. I will not spend any more time on it here.⁴ At least since the late seventies, the contemporary debate over the problem of evil has focused instead on whether the evil we see in the world makes it *likely* or *reasonable to believe* that God does not exist. Nothing here pertains to the logical inconsistency of theism. What is at stake in these discussions, rather, is the evidential or explanatory import of evil in relation to theism and non-theism. In this section, I identify three different ways to make these arguments more precise.

1.1. Rowe's Original Evidential Argument

William Rowe (1979, 1984) begins his discussion by outlining what he calls "the basic argument for atheism." We can rephrase that argument in the following way:

The Basic Argument for Atheism

P1. There is no *justifying reason* for at least some of the suffering in the world.

P2. If there is even one instance of suffering for which there is no justifying reason, then *God* does not exist.

C. So *God* does not exist.

By *God*, Rowe means the kind of perfect being familiar from classical theism – omniscient, omnipotent, wholly good, etc. And a *justifying reason*, in this case, is some consideration in favor of allowing the relevant instance of suffering that would mitigate its existence: it furthers or respects a greater good; it prevents a comparable or greater evil; preventing it violates some deontological constraint; and so on.⁵

Rowe's (1979) primary contribution to this literature, however, comes in his defense of P1. Here Rowe is too often described as offering an argument based on a particular instance of *apparently pointless evil*, one where we take our inability to produce a justifying reason for that evil as evidence that there isn't one. But this is a mistake. Rowe's argument turns instead on the large amount of, and wide variety of, apparently pointless evil

⁴ See Plantinga (1974) for a thorough treatment of Mackie's argument. For recent discussion of Plantinga's reply, see Otte (2009), Pruss (2012), Speak (2015), Wielenberg (2016), and Oliveira (2022).

⁵ Rowe does not use the notion of a "justifying reason" in his own statement of the argument. That he has this notion in mind, however, is clear from his claims in the preceding paragraph: "Intense human or animal suffering is in itself bad, an evil, even though it may sometimes be *justified* by virtue of being a part of, or leading to, some good which is unobtainable without it... In such a case, while remaining an evil in itself, the intense human or animal suffering is, nevertheless, an evil which someone might be morally *justified* in permitting." (Rowe 1979, 335 my emphasis).

in the world. There is just too much varied suffering in this world for which we see no justifying reason and it is hard to believe that we could be wrong – all of us, for so long – about every single one of these instances.⁶

Consider a key passage, where Rowe (1979, 337-8) describes an instance of intense suffering experienced by a fawn during a forest fire:

But even if it should somehow be reasonable to believe [that there is a justifying reason for] the fawn's suffering, we must then ask whether it is reasonable to believe [that there is a justifying reason for] *all* the instances of seemingly pointless human and animal suffering that occur daily in our world... In the light of our experience and knowledge of the variety and scale of human and animal suffering in our world, the idea that none of this suffering [lacks a justifying reason] seems an extraordinarily absurd idea, quite beyond our belief.

With this in mind, we can reconstruct Rowe's expansion of the basic argument for atheism as what I will call *Rowe's Original Evidential Argument*:

Rowe's Original Evidential Argument

RO1. After careful reflection on our experience and knowledge, we see no justifying reason for many of the varied instances of suffering in the world.

RO2. If, after careful reflection on our experience and knowledge, we see no justifying reason for many of the varied instances of suffering in the world, then it is *prima facie* reasonable to believe that there is no justifying reason for some of all that suffering.

RO3. So it is *prima facie* reasonable to believe that there is no justifying reason for at least some of the suffering in the world.

RO4. If there is even one instance of suffering for which there is no justifying reason, then God does not exist.

RO5. So it is *prima facie* reasonable to believe that God does not exist.

(P1 from the Basic Argument for Atheism, notice, is embedded in RO3.) This argument does not pretend to show that God does not exist. It doesn't even pretend to show that religious believers are unreasonable in *their* beliefs. All that this argument tries to do is show that the existence of too much apparently pointless evil can make it *prima facie* reasonable to reject belief in God, provided one falls under the scope of the "we" in

⁶ Notice the progression of Rowe's (1979, 337) reasoning: from the 8th paragraph (where he introduces his famous fawn example as an instance of apparently pointless suffering), into the 9th paragraph (where he grants that there might be a justifying reason behind the fawn example that we just can't see), through the 10th paragraph (where he suggests that we shouldn't look for a proof for the belief in pointless evil but rather for its rational grounds), to the 11th paragraph (where he finally rests his argument on an inference from the large sample of apparently pointless evil that we see, as we see in the quote appearing here in my main text below).

RO1 and RO2, where “*prima facie*” serves to bracket any potentially outweighing considerations (such as, e.g., powerful arguments for the existence of God).⁷

1.2. Rowe’s Modified Evidential Argument

Under pressure from skeptical theism, however, Rowe (1988, 1991) eventually modified his original approach to expanding the Basic Argument for Atheism. (We will discuss this pressure in section 2 below.) The key modification, in fact, shifted Rowe’s focus from the large sample of apparently pointless evil, taken as a collection, to any *particularly horrendous* instance of it.

We each know of a variety of actual and possible goods – from the lower sensory pleasures to the highest experiences of love. We also know of a variety of circumstances whereby the permission of some evil is justified by its intimate connection to some greater good. But particularly horrendous instances of apparently pointless evils are cases where we can see that *none* of the goods we know of have the intimate connection to those evils that would justify God in permitting them. (I don’t want to dwell unnecessarily on gruesome details; I’m sure the reader can think of cases of the kind I mean.) As far as our knowledge of goods and evils go, and our knowledge of their interconnections, particularly horrendous evils are simply unjustifiable.

Think of a particularly horrendous evil and call it “E”. *Rowe’s Modified Evidential Argument* now goes like this:

Rowe’s Modified Evidential Argument

RM1. No good we know of justifies God in permitting E.

RM2. If no good we know of justifies God in permitting E, then it is *prima facie* reasonable to believe that no good at all justifies God in permitting E.

RM3. So it is *prima facie* reasonable to believe that no good at all justifies God in permitting E.

RM4. If there is even one instance of suffering for which there is no justifying reason, then God does not exist.

RM5. So it is *prima facie* reasonable to believe that God does not exist.

(P1 from the Basic Argument for Atheism, notice, is entailed by the proposition embedded in RM3.) The heart of this argument is RM2. Indeed, the real difference between Rowe’s original and modified argument

⁷ [Omitted for blind review]

lies in the kind of inductive inferences they presume – captured, respectively, by RO2 and RM2. As Rowe (1988, 123-4) now puts it:

We are justified in making this inference in the same way we are justified in making the many inferences we constantly make from the known to the unknown. All of us are constantly inferring from the A's we know of to the A's we don't know of. If we observe many A's and all of them are B's we are justified in believing that the A's we haven't observed are also B's.

In this case, what we have observed is that *all the goods we know of (A's) are incapable of justifying E (B's)*. And Rowe's point, in other words, is that the move legitimized by RM2 is logically isomorphic to familiar and unproblematic inferences like the following:

RM2*. If no iron we know of floats on water, then it is *prima facie* reasonable to believe that no iron at all floats on water.

Neither Rowe's RM2 nor RM2* entail that we could not be wrong about these kinds of judgment, of course. Once again, all that Rowe's argument tries to do is show it can be *prima facie* reasonable to reject belief in God, provided one falls under the scope of the "we" in the relevant premises and has no outweighing considerations.⁸

1.3. Draper's Explanatory Argument

We have so far considered two ways in which our experiences with apparently pointless evils can serve as evidence against the existence of God. The third and last version of the problem of evil I will consider, however, ignores the distinction between "evil" and "apparently pointless evil" altogether. According to Paul Draper (1989, 2009), what we know about the evil in our world stands as evidence against the existence of God, whether or not that evil serves some point.

Draper's argument differs in approach from Rowe's by appealing to the notion of *comparative explanatory power*. Some hypothesis H explains some observation O, we can say, when O is likely or expected under the assumption that H is true. Some hypothesis H₁ explains O *much better* than competing (i.e., incompatible) hypothesis H₂, then, when O is *much more* likely or expected under the assumption that H₁ is true than under the assumption that H₂ is true instead. It will be helpful to be able to state this kind of fact more succinctly in the following way:

⁸ Rowe (1996) modifies his argument once again. I won't consider that modification here but see Bergmann (2001) for discussion. See Rowe (2006) for his final thoughts on the problem of evil, and see Trakakis (2007) for an overview.

$P(O/H_1) \gg P(O/H_2) =_{df}$ “O is *much more* likely under H_1 than under H_2 ”

In these kinds of cases, it will be *prima facie* reasonable to reject H_2 , provided that H_1 is at least as plausible as H_2 to begin with (i.e., aside from O and other evidence).⁹ This way of thinking about theory choice can of course be made much more precise – and Draper himself does just that – but this brief description will be enough for present purposes.

Draper (1989, 331-2) then begins by asking us to consider the following competing hypotheses:

Theism (T): There exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect person who created the Universe.

Hypothesis of Indifference (I): Neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by non-human persons.

Next, Draper (1989, 332) asks us to consider everything we can observe about pain and pleasure in our world and call it “O”. We can now state what I will call *Draper’s Explanatory Argument*:

Draper’s Explanatory Argument

D1. If $P(O/HI) \gg P(O/T)$ and HI is at least as plausible as T to begin with (i.e., aside from O and other evidence), then O makes it *prima facie* reasonable to reject T.

D2. O

D3. $P(O/HI) \gg P(O/T)$

D4. HI is at least as plausible as T to begin with (i.e., aside from O and other evidence).

D5. So it *prima facie* reasonable to reject T.

D1 simply captures the popular approach to theory selection mentioned above. D2 simply records what we observe about pain and pleasure in our world. The central premises in Draper’s argument, then, are D3 and D4. Why should we think they are true?

Draper (1989) defends D3 by focusing primarily on the biological roles of pain and pleasure. As he sums it up later:

⁹ This is compatible with H_2 being more likely than H_1 given our *overall* evidence, making it *overall* reasonable to reject H_1 instead. This is the function of the “*prima facie*” qualification here.

On HI, the fact that other parts of organic systems systematically promote survival and reproduction supports the claim reported by O that pain and pleasure will do the same. But on the assumption that theism is true, the moral significance of pain and pleasure undermines this support. On theism, it would not be surprising at all if pain and pleasure played a fundamentally moral role in the world without also playing the same biological roles that other parts of organic systems play. (Draper 2009, 344)

This central point is then combined, of course, with a discussion of how the other things we observe about pain and pleasure in our world do not undermine this central comparison favoring the explanatory power of HI over T. In defense of D4, on the other hand, Draper (2009, 345) tells us that we either take this kind of judgment as entirely subjective or take it to depend on theoretical virtues like “coherence” and “modesty.” Draper then argues that there is no criticism of D4 either way.¹⁰

2. Three Versions of Skeptical Theism

The three versions of the problem of evil just described are each alive and well. But they face powerful challenges from skeptical theism. In general, skeptical theism is the result of combining what I will call a suitable “epistemic principle” with a suitable “limitation thesis”. The resulting combination – a specific version of skeptical theism – can always be stated as a claim of the following kind: “we are not in a position to reasonably judge that *p*, on the basis of *x*” where judging that *p* on the basis of *x* is (arguably) essential to some version of the problem of evil. This section explores three ways of making these kinds of claim more precise.¹¹

2.1. Wykstra’s CORNEA

Stephen Wykstra (1984) responded to Rowe’s Original Evidential Argument by challenging Rowe’s defense of a central premise. Recall:

RO2. If, after careful reflection on our experience and knowledge, we see no justifying reason for many instances of suffering in the world, then it is *prima facie* reasonable to believe that there is no justifying reason for some of all that suffering.

¹⁰ Draper modifies his argument in Dougherty & Draper (2013). I won’t consider that modification here but see Perrine and Wykstra (2014) for discussion.

¹¹ Some take *theism* as constitutive of skeptical theism. This is obviously a natural choice, given the position’s name and the fact that nearly all its proponents are, indeed, theists. But as we will see below, none of the actual arguments from skeptical theists, the arguments that block the different problems of evil, depend on theism being true or even probably true. So we are here forced to choose between definitional attention to the surface or substantive features of skeptical theism. I choose the latter. For different overall definitions, however, see Bergmann (2009), McBrayer (2010), and Perrine & Wykstra (2017).

According to Wykstra, this claim makes a mistaken assumption about the epistemic function of *appearances* – facts about what “we see” or “don’t see”. Once the relevant subtleties are brought to light, Wykstra tells us, we see that Rowe’s endorsement of RO2 faces unsurmountable difficulties.

Understanding these points in more detail requires first understanding the evidential mechanics underlying RO2. On what we can call its “inductive” defense, Rowe’s reasoning here depends on the legitimacy of the following inference:

The Hidden Empirical Step: We see no justifying reason for an instance of suffering x in the world.

The Hidden Evidential Step: It appears that there is no justifying reason for some suffering in the world.

The expression “appears” here is used in its epistemic sense, the sense that has implications for what is reasonable to believe – as distinct from the “comparative,” “phenomenal,” and “hedging” senses (c.f., Wykstra 1984, 80). When we claim that “it appears that p,” in the epistemic sense, we mean that: (a) we are inclined to believe that p, (b) we have this inclination because of cognized situation s, and (c) we take there to be an evidential connection between s and p (c.f., Wykstra 1984, 85). So if we succeed in establishing that “it appears that there is no justifying reason for some suffering in the world,” in its epistemic sense, then it follows that it is *prima facie* reasonable to believe that there is no justifying reason for some suffering in the world. All it takes from here to support RO2 is the repetition of these steps for “many” of the instances of suffering in the world.

Yet since the epistemic sense of appears has implications for what it is reasonable to believe, it is natural that it should have a governing logic: rational constraints on when and why we can properly infer that *it appears that p* from facts about what we see or don’t see. According to Wykstra (1984, 85), one key principle governing the epistemic sense of appears is what he calls the *Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access* (CORNEA):

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.

The core of CORNEA, in other words, is the claim that you should only *take* a certain experience *as evidence* for p if you could reasonably expect the experience to be different on not-p (c.f., Wykstra 1984, 87). This is where Rowe’s argument goes wrong.

We can now reconstruct Wykstra’s overall argument in the following way:

Wykstra's CORNEA-Based Argument

W1. If Rowe's RO2 is true, then we are in a position to reasonably judge that "it appears that there is no justifying reason for an instance of suffering x", on the basis of seeing no justifying reason for x.

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

W3. It is not reasonable for us to believe that, given our cognitive faculties and the use we have made of them, if there were a justifying reason for instance of suffering x, we would likely see it.

W4. So we are not in a position to reasonably judge that "it appears that there is no justifying reason for an instance of suffering x", on the basis of seeing no justifying reason for x.

W5. So Rowe's RO2 is false.

Wykstra's W4 states a version of skeptical theism. On the one hand, if true, it threatens an argument from evil – Rowe's Original Evidential Argument. (I say "threatens" since it succeeds in blocking Rowe's argument only if W1 is true as well.)¹² On the other, it is entailed by an *epistemic principle* (W2) and a *limitation thesis* (W3). The epistemic principle, in this case, is Wykstra's CORNEA.

Support for CORNEA comes from considering its success with various other cases. For example:

Searching for a table, you look through a doorway. The room is very large – say, the size of a Concord hangar and it is filled with bulldozers, dead elephants, Toyotas, and other vision-obstructing objects. Surveying this clutter from the doorway, and seeing no table, should you say: "It does not appear that there is a table in the room?" (Wykstra 1984, 84)

The intuitive answer, as well as the diagnosis from CORNEA, is "no." Support for the limitation thesis, on the other hand, comes from considering how far greater a perfect God's cognitive powers would be, in comparison to ours:

How much greater? A modest proposal might be that his wisdom is to ours, roughly as an adult human's is to a one-month-old infant's. (You may adjust the ages and species to fit your own estimate of how close our knowledge is to omniscience.) If such goods as this exist, it might not be unlikely that we should discern some of them: even a one-month-old infant can perhaps discern, in its inarticulate way, some of the purposes of his mother in her dealings with him. But if outweighing

¹² It is important to distinguish between two critical questions: (a) is some version of skeptical theism true? and (b) does that version of skeptical theism block some version of the problem of evil? An affirmative answer to the first question does not automatically yield an affirmative answer to the second: If W4 is true, we can say 'yes' to (a); if W4 and W1 are *both* true, we can then say 'yes' to (b).

goods of the sort at issue exist in connection with instances of suffering, that we should discern most of them seems about as likely as that a one-month-old should discern most of his parents' purposes for those pains they allow him to suffer – which is to say, it is not likely at all. (Wykstra 1984, 88)

This has come to be known as “the parent-child analogy.”¹³

2.2. Bergman's Representativeness

The potential soundness of Wykstra's CORNEA-Based Argument does not compromise Rowe's Modified Evidential Argument. The modification, recall, replaced the original emphasis on our “not seeing” justifying reasons for many instances of evil with an emphasis on the following ordinary kind of inductive inference:

RM2. If no good we know of justifies God in permitting E, then it is *prima facie* reasonable to believe that no good at all justifies God in permitting E.

CORNEA has nothing to say about this move.

Yet the skeptical theist is not here without recourse. What is needed, once again, is a suitable epistemic principle and a suitable limitation thesis. And, indeed, for the latter, Michael Bergmann (2001, 279; 2009, 376; 2012, 11-12) has offered the conjunction of the following claims:

- (a) We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
- (b) We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
- (c) 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

“It just doesn't seem unlikely,” Bergman (2001, 279) tells us, “that our understanding of the realm of value falls miserably short of capturing all that is true about that realm.” This is different from claiming that we do not have access to all or most or many of God's justifying reasons. This is a different kind of limitation. Nonetheless, this kind of limitation can give rise to a version of skeptical theism that targets Rowe's Modified

¹³ For discussions of Wykstra's skeptical theism, see Wykstra (1984), Russell and Wykstra (1988), Kraay (2007), McBrayer (2009), Dougherty (2012), Wykstra & Perrine (2012), Draper (2014), Wielenberg (2015), Benton, Hawthorne, & Isaacs (2016), Rutledge (2017), Perrine (2019), and Oliveira (2020).

Evidential Argument. What is missing is simply a plausible epistemic principle that can suit the pairing, something like:

The Representativeness Constraint: If we have no good reason for thinking that the A's we have observed are *representative* (with respect to whether they are also B's) of all the A's there are, then we cannot infer that no A's are B's from the fact that all the A's we have observed so far are not B's.

To say that the A's we have observed are *representative* (in a B-relevant sense) of all the A's there are, is just to say that if n/m of the A's in the sample are B's, then approximately n/m of all A's are B's (c.f., Bergmann 2009, 377).¹⁴ This is, once again, a general epistemic principle. It imposes a constraint on any inductive inference, including the example we considered above:

RM2*. If no iron we know of floats on water, then it is reasonable to believe that no iron at all floats on water.

This inference is adequate only because we do, indeed, have reason to believe that the irons we have observed are representative of all the irons that there are (in relevant senses). Yet the limitations noted by Bergmann just above prevent us from rationally performing this inference when it comes to goods and evils, assuming this epistemic principle is true.

We can now state these points more carefully as *Bergmann's Representativeness Argument*:

Bergmann's Representativeness Argument

B1. If Rowe's RM2 is true, then we are in a position to reasonably judge that "no good at all justifies God in permitting some particularly horrendous evil," on the basis of the fact no good we know of justifies God in permitting it.

B2. If we have no good reason for thinking that the A's we have observed are *representative* (with respect to whether they are also B's) of all the A's there are, then we cannot infer that no A's are B's from the fact that all the A's we have observed so far are not B's.

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

B4. So we are not in a position to reasonably judge that "no good at all justifies God in permitting some particularly horrendous evil," on the basis of the fact no good we know of justifies God in permitting it.

¹⁴ An A can be representative of all A's in one sense but not in others: A randomly selected human is representative of all humans in the *vital organs* sense, but not in the *spoken language* sense.

B5. So Rowe's RM2 is false.

Bergmann's B4 states another version of skeptical theism. On the one hand, if true, it threatens an argument from evil – Rowe's Modified Evidential Argument. (Once again, it *succeeds* in blocking Rowe's argument only if B1 is true.) On the other, it is entailed by an *epistemic principle* (B2) and a *limitation thesis* (B3).¹⁵

2.3. van Inwagen's Modal Skepticism

We have seen two versions of skeptical theism, each targeting a version of the problem of evil. The third and final version I will consider turns on the appropriate scope of our justified modal beliefs. In a series of papers, Peter van Inwagen (1977, 1991, 1998) has argued that most philosophers severely over-estimate that scope. More importantly, van Inwagen has also argued that a correct understanding of our limitations in this regard blocks Draper's version of the problem of evil from going through.

Consider what we can call ordinary modal claims:¹⁶

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

These modal claims are unproblematic. Consider, however, the following claims instead:

- (iii) A naturally purple cow is possible.
- (iv) Transparent iron is possible.

These modal claims, according to van Inwagen, are problematic. One way to see this is to notice how they run afoul of the following constraint:

The Modal Principle: If we cannot imagine a world that we take to *verify* p, then we are not justified in believing that possibly p. (c.f., van Inwagen 1998, 76-81)¹⁷

¹⁵ For discussions of Bergmann's skeptical theism, and/or similar arguments, see, Alston (1991), and Howard-Snyder (2009), Bergmann (2009, 2012), and Hendricks (2020, 2021).

¹⁶ Unless noted otherwise, modal claims in this section are about *metaphysical* possibility.

¹⁷ I should note that van Inwagen himself stops short of explicitly endorsing this principle and this explanation (the core of which he borrows from Yablo 1993). I present it here as the basis of *van Inwagen's* argument for skeptical theism, nonetheless, for two reasons. First, because van Inwagen's skeptical theism appeals to his modal skepticism. Second, because this principle is employed in the closest thing he offers as an explicit argument for his modal skepticism: after simply reporting that he is "convinced that whatever it is that enables us to determine the modal status of ordinary propositions about everyday matters, this method or mechanism or technique or device or system of intuitions or whatever it should be called is of no use at all in determining the modal status of propositions remote from the concerns of everyday life" (1998, 76), van Inwagen proceeds to tell us that he will "close by briefly considering a recent attempt to

For van Inwagen, we can only take some imagined world to verify p if we have imagined a world in such sufficient detail as to rule out the compatibility of $\sim p$ with it. In order to imagine a situation that verifies “there exists a naturally purple cow”, for example, it is not enough to imagine a purple cow in the field, since that world fails to rule out the compatibility of that cow being *unnaturally* purple. And imagining the finer details of the world that would eliminate this and similar metaphysical possibilities is precisely what van Inwagen thinks no one is in a position to reasonably do (see, also, van Inwagen 1977, 382 -386). In general, as he puts it:

Assuming that there are “modal facts of the matter,” why should we assume that God or evolution or social training has given us access to modal facts knowledge of which is of no interest to anyone but the metaphysician? God or evolution has provided us with a capacity for making judgments about size and distance that is very useful in hunting mammoths and driving cars, but which is of no use at all in astronomy. It seems that an analogous restriction applies to our capacity for making modal judgments (van Inwagen 1991, 150)

We can call this van Inwagen’s *qualified modal skepticism*.

Now recall one of the key premises in Draper’s Explanatory Argument:

D3. $P(O/HI) \gg P(O/T)$

Draper’s defense of this premise turned on a comparative judgment about what we would expect to see in the world, given the Hypothesis of Indifference and Theism. On the basis of his qualified modal skepticism, however, van Inwagen (1991, 140) thinks that we are in no position to make *reasonable* judgments about what to expect regarding pain and pleasure if Theism is true, and therefore not in a position to make reasonable comparative judgments about “the relation between the probabilities” of O on T and HI (c.f., van Inwagen 1991, 142). This is for three reasons.

explain the basis of our modal knowledge, and will argue that this account supports modal skepticism. Although I am not perfectly satisfied with this account, I believe it has some very attractive features, and is certainly more sophisticated than any other account of modal knowledge. I will neither attack nor defend this account, but will rather try to explain why I believe that anyone who accepts this account should be a modal skeptic” (1998, 76-77). Moreover, although Yablo offers his view as what would be *sufficient* for prima facie justified modal beliefs, van Inwagen puts it to work as a *necessary* condition on account of his conviction that there are no other methods by which we could acquire the relevant kind of justification: “If Yablo’s general thesis is right, and if *I* am right in my assertion that in the present state of knowledge no one is able to imagine a possible world in which there are naturally purple cows, it follows that (if there is no other source for prima facie justified modal beliefs than the one Yablo puts forward; he has offered this as a sufficient, not a necessary condition for prima facie justification for modal beliefs), no one is even prima facie justified in believing that naturally purple cows are possible” (1998, 78). My statement of this principle makes these nuances more concrete.

First, it is epistemically possible that “every possible world that contains higher-level sentient creatures either contains patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those recorded by S, or else is massively irregular” (cf. van Inwagen 1991, 143). Call this epistemic possibility *the no-utopia thesis*. If the no-utopia thesis is true, however, then O is likely, conditional on Theism. Consequently, the higher the probability of the no-utopia thesis, the higher the conditional probability of O on theism. Second, assigning a low probability to the no-utopia thesis would (at a minimum) require us to reasonably judge “that there were possible worlds – worlds that were not massively irregular – in which higher-level sentient creatures inhabited a hedonic utopia,” (cf. van Inwagen 1991, 145) on the basis of imagining such a world. If we have no good reason to judge that such worlds are so much as possible, after all, then we have no good reason to assign a low probability to the no-utopia thesis. Third, this would be precisely the kind of judgment that runs afoul of the Modal Principle, since none of us has the cognitive capacity to imagine a world that verifies hedonic utopias (cf. van Inwagen 1991, 146-7).¹⁸ And if we cannot assign a low probability to the no-utopia thesis, then we simply cannot reasonably expect anything about pain and pleasure, given Theism, and so cannot reasonably make the comparative judgments required by Draper’s D3.

We can reconstruct *van Inwagen’s Modal Argument* in the following way:

van Inwagen’s Modal Argument

V1. If it is reasonable to believe Draper’s D3, then we are in a position to reasonably judge that “worlds containing higher-level sentient creatures without also containing patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those recorded by O and without being massively irregular” are *possible*, on the basis of imagining such a world.

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

V3. We cannot imagine a world that we take to verify the existence of “higher-level sentient creatures” and the absence of both “patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those recorded by O” and “massive irregularity”.

V4. So we are not in a position to reasonably judge that “worlds containing higher-level sentient creatures without also containing patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those recorded by O and without being massively irregular” are *possible*, on the basis of imagining such a world.

V5. So it is not reasonable to believe Draper’s D3.

¹⁸ Alston (1991, 55) makes a similar point: “The critic typically points out that we can consistently and intelligibly conceive a world in which there are no diseases, no earthquakes, floods, or tornadoes, no predators in the animal kingdom, while all or most of the goods we actually enjoy are still present. He takes this to show that it is possible for God to bring about such a world. But, as many thinkers have recently argued, consistent conceivability (conceptual possibility) is by no means sufficient for metaphysical possibility, for what is possible given the metaphysical structure of reality.”

van Inwagen's V4 states another version of skeptical theism. On the one hand, if true, it threatens an argument from evil – Draper's Explanatory Argument. (But it *blocks* Draper's argument only if V1 is true.) On the other, it is entailed by an *epistemic principle* (V2) and a *limitation thesis* (V3).

3. Conclusion

This paper has distinguished between three versions of skeptical theism (ST):

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

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

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

Each of them, if true, threatens a version of the problem of evil. It is no exaggeration to say that, especially together, they constitute a thriving research program in analytic philosophy of religion.¹⁹ Part II of this panoramic overview, however, focuses on the central challenges facing this family of views.

References

- Alston, William (1991) “The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition,” *Philosophical Perspectives* Vol 5: pp. 29-67.
- Benton, Matthew, Hawthorne, John and Isaacs, Yoav (2016). “Evil and Evidence,” *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion* 7: 1-31.
- Bergmann, Michael (2001). “Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil.” *Nous* 35 (2): 278-296.
- Bergmann, Michael (2009). “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil,” *Oxford Handbook to Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas Flint and Michael Rea (Oxford University Press: 374-99.
- Bergmann, Michael (2012). “Commonsense Skeptical Theism,” *Science, Religion, and Metaphysics: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, eds. Kelly Clark and Michael Rea. Oxford University Press: 9-30.

¹⁹ Skeptical theism is not the only kind of response to the problem of evil that is currently in vogue. In particular, a number of authors have argued, on various different grounds, that the existence of a perfect God is compatible with (and even makes likely) the existence of gratuitous evil. See, e.g., Hasker 1992, Davies 2006, van Inwagen 2006, McCann 2012, Murphy 2017, and Rubio 2019. See Oliveira (2021) and Oliveira (forthcoming) for some discussion of these issues.

- Davies, Brian (2006). *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*. Continuum Press.
- Dougherty, Trent (2012), "Reconsidering the Parent Analogy: Unfinished Business for Skeptical Theists," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 72 (1): 17-25.
- Dougherty, Trent and Draper, Paul (2013). "Explanation and the Problem of Evil." In *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*. Blackwell Publishing
- Draper, Paul (1989). "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Nous* 23 (3): 331-350.
- Draper, Paul (2009). "The Problem of Evil." In *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael Read. Oxford University Press. 332-51.
- Draper (2014), "Confirmation Theory and the Core of CORNEA," In Trent Dougherty & Justin McBrayer (eds.), *Skeptical theism: New essays*. Oxford University Press: 132-141.
- Hasker, William. (1992). "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 9(1): 23-44.
- Hendricks, Perry (2020). "Skeptical Theism Proved," *The Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (6): 2: 264-274.
- Hendricks, Perry (2021). "We are not in the Dark: Refuting Popular Arguments Against Skeptical Theism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 58 (2): 125-134.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel (2009). "Epistemic humility, Arguments from evil, and Moral Skepticism." In *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan Kvanvig. Oxford University Press.
- Kraay, Klaas J. (2007) "Absence of Evidence and Evidence of Absence," *Faith and Philosophy* 24 (2): 203-228.
- Mackie, J.L. (1955). "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (254): 200-212.
- Mackie, J.L. (1962). "Theism and Utopia," *Philosophy* 37 (140): 153-158.
- McBrayer, Justin (2009). "CORNEA and Inductive Evidence," *Faith and Philosophy*. 26 (1): 77- 86.
- McBrayer, Justin (2010). "Skeptical Theism," *Philosophy Compass* 5 (7): 611–623.
- McCann, Hugh (2012) *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*. Indiana University Press.
- Murphy, Mark (2017). *God's Own Ethics: Norms of Divine Agency and the Argument from Evil*. Oxford University Press.
- Oliveira, Luis R.G. (2020). "Sceptical Theism and the Paradox of Evil," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2): 319-33.
- Oliveira, Luis R.G. (2021). "Vagueness and the Problem of Evil: A New Reply to van Inwagen," *Manuscrito - Revista Internacional de Filosofia*, 44 (4): 49-82.
- Oliveira, Luis R.G. (2022). "Defending the Free Will Defense: A Reply to Sterba," *Religions* 13(9).
- Oliveira, Luis R.G. (forthcoming). "God and Gratuitous Evil: Between the Rock and the Hard Place," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*.

- Otte, Richard (2009). "Transworld Depravity and Unobtainable Worlds," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78 (1): 165-177.
- Perrine, Timothy (2019). "Skeptical Theism and Morrision's Humean Argument from Evil," *Sophia* 58: 115–135
- Perrine, Timothy and Stephen J. Wykstra. (2014). "Skeptical Theism, Abductive Atheology, and Theory Versioning." In *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer. Oxford University Press.
- Perrine, Timothy and Stephen J. Wykstra. (2017). "Skeptical Theism," In *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, eds. Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser. Cambridge University Press: 85 – 107.
- Plantinga, Alvin (1974). *The Nature of Necessity*. Oxford University Press.
- Pruss, Alexander (2012). "A Counterexample to Plantinga's Free Will Defense," *Faith and Philosophy* 29 (4): 400-415.
- Rowe, William (1979) "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (4): 335-341.
- Rowe, William (1984) "Evil and the Theistic Hypothesis: A Response to Wykstra," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (2): 95-100.
- Rowe, William (1988). "Evil and Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* 16: 119–32.
- Rowe, William (1991). "Ruminations about Evil," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5: 69-88.
- Rowe, William (1996). "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look." In *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed., Daniel Howard-Snyder. Indiana University Press.
- Rowe, William (2006). "Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism, and the Problem of Evil," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59 (2): 79 – 92.
- Rubio, Daniel (2019). "God Meets Satan's Apple: The Paradox of Creation," *Philosophical Studies* 175: 2987-3004.
- Russell, Bruce and Wykstra, Stephen (1988). "The "Inductive" Argument from Evil: A Dialogue," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (2): 133-160.
- Rutledge, Jonathan (2017). "The Parent Analogy: A Reassessment," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 82 (1): 5-14.
- Speak, Daniel (2015). "Domination and the Free Will Defense," *Faith and Philosophy* 32 (3): 313-324.
- Trakakis, Nick (2007). *The God Beyond Belief: In Defence of William Rowe's Evidential Argument from Evil*. Dordrecht: Springer Publishing.
- van Inwagen, Peter (1977). "Ontological Arguments," *Nous* 11: 375-395.

- van Inwagen, Peter (1991). "The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence," *Philosophical Perspectives* 5: 135-165.
- van Inwagen, Peter (1998). "Modal Epistemology," *Philosophical Studies* 92: 67-84.
- Van Inwagen, Peter (2006). *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford University Press.
- Wielenberg, Erik (2015). "The Parent Child Analogy and the Limits of Skeptical Theism," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78 (3): 301-314.
- Wielenberg, Erik (2016). "Plantingian Theism and the Free-Will Defence," *Religious Studies* 52(4): 451-460.
- Wykstra, Stephen (1984). "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of "Appearance"," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (2): 73-93.
- Wykstra, Stephen J. and Perrine, Timothy (2012). "The Foundations of Skeptical Theism: CORNEA, CORE, and Conditional Probabilities," *Faith and Philosophy* 29 (4): 375-399.
- Yablo, Stephen (1993). "Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53(1): 1-39.