

Skeptical Theistic Steadfastness

Jamie B. Turner

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Abstract

The problem of religious disagreement between epistemic peers is a potential threat to the epistemic justification of one's theistic belief. In this paper, I develop a response to this problem which draws on the central epistemological thesis of skeptical theism concerning our inability to make proper judgements about God's reasons for permitting evil. I suggest that this thesis may extend over to our judgements about God's reasons for self-revealing, and that when it does so, it can enable theists to remain steadfast amid disagreement with epistemic peers who hold a contrary theistic belief (i.e., atheistic belief). For if we're unable to make proper judgements about God's reasons for self-revealing, then for all we know, God has some reason for not revealing Himself to our apparent epistemic peer. Thus, their epistemic credentials needn't provide reason to reduce one's confidence to such a degree as to no longer uphold one's theistic belief.

1. Introduction

Religious believers and non-believers disagree over the question of whether God exists. Many religious believers disagree on the *nature* of which God exists: Christians believe God is tri-personal, Muslims and Jews believe God is not tri-personal. Yet, it is also the case that many of these religious believers and non-believers appear to be just as intellectually virtuous and evidentially familiar as the other. The presence of religious disagreement between people of similar intellectual virtue and evidential familiarity (i.e., epistemic peers), is often considered by contemporary philosophers to be a potential threat to the epistemic justification or rationality of one's religious beliefs. Let us call this the epistemic problem of religious disagreement. Despite there being substantial disagreement concerning this problem itself,¹ I take it that most philosophers agree that religious disagreement between epistemic peers is at least a *potential* threat to the epistemic justification of one's religious beliefs, even if not an *actual* threat when all is said and done. So, it is a problem that ought to be taken seriously by religious believers.

In focusing on specifically religious disagreement concerning theistic belief, I seek to develop a response to this problem which motivates the idea that a religious believer may remain epistemically justified in upholding their theistic belief despite disagreement with epistemic peers. I develop this response by drawing on the central epistemological thesis inherent in skeptical theism. Roughly, this is the thought that as limited creatures vis-à-vis God we are not well positioned to make judgements about God's reasons for permitting evil. If this thesis is right, I suggest it extends over to our judgements about God's reasons for (voluntary) self-revealing or disclosure, i.e., that we are not well positioned to make judgements about God's reasons for self-revealing. I argue that when skeptical theism extends over in

¹ For an overview of the disagreement concerning the epistemic problem of religious disagreement, Thune, "Religious Belief and the Epistemology of Disagreement". See also Kraft, *The Epistemology of Religious Disagreement: A Better Understanding*, Pittard, "Religious Disagreement", and De Cruz, *Religious Disagreement*.

this fashion, it can enable religious believers to remain steadfast amid disagreement between epistemic peers who hold a contrary theistic belief (i.e., atheistic belief). This is because if we're not well positioned to make judgements about God's reasons for self-revealing, then for all we know, God has some reason for not revealing Himself to our apparent epistemic peer. Thus, their apparent epistemic credentials needn't provide reason to reduce one's confidence to such a degree as to no longer uphold one's theistic belief. I will refer to this view as skeptical theistic steadfastness.

My approach will be as follows. In section 2, I sketch out the main preliminaries of the discussion. This concerns the nature of epistemic peers, a broad overview of responses to the general problem of disagreement between epistemic peers, and the basic epistemic problem of religious disagreement central to this essay. In section 3, I spell out the other main preliminary which concerns skeptical theism. In section 4, by drawing on the above discussion, I develop and outline a basic version of the skeptical theistic steadfast response to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement with respect to theistic belief. Then, in section 5, I consider two key challenges to this basic version outlined in section 4, and argue that given such challenges, if this kind of response to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement is to retain plausibility, it requires modification. In section 6, I conclude.

2. Epistemic Peerhood and (Religious) Disagreement

The issue of disagreement between epistemic peers raises two immediate questions: (a) what an epistemic peer is, and (b) what epistemological implications are to be had when there is disagreement between epistemic peers. In addressing the first of these two questions, I will take epistemic peers to denote roughly the following:

EP: epistemic agents similarly well-qualified—in terms of epistemic virtue and evidential familiarity—to form a judgement with respect to some issue.²

It is important to clarify what is meant here. The sense in which epistemic agents are both similarly well-qualified in terms of epistemic virtue and evidential familiarity, need not imply that they possess the *exact same* degree of virtue or evidential familiarity. For if we were to take EP to refer to epistemic agents who are exact equals in this respect, then this would entail an implausible implication of disagreement bearing *little to no* epistemic impact upon one's beliefs in the actual world.³ This is because in the actual world it is difficult to imagine cases where individuals possess the *exact same* degree or kind of virtue and evidence.⁴

At the same time, epistemic agents being similarly well-qualified does not necessarily mean that epistemic peerhood is to be cast with an overly broad net either. Indeed, if it were the case—that epistemic peers are agents similarly well-qualified in a broad or general sense—then this would entail the implausible implication of disagreement apparently bearing *too much* epistemic impact upon one's beliefs in the actual world. For in this case, it would likely mean that even one's epistemic inferiors are to be treated as epistemic peers (e.g., epistemic agents who are generally as well-qualified but not

² Simpson, "Epistemic peerhood and the epistemology of disagreement," 563.

³ For a similar point, see Lackey, "Taking Religious Disagreement Seriously," 302-303.

⁴ On this point, see King, "Disagreement: What's the Problem? Or A Good Peer is Hard to Find," 253-258.

perhaps on this specific occasion). EP entails, then, that only epistemic agents similarly well-qualified in the relevant sense with respect to the *specific* issue at hand count as epistemic peers.

It is also important to say something about the notions of epistemic virtue and evidential familiarity here. By the former, I roughly mean the sort of virtues that put one in a position to acquire true beliefs: e.g., sound reasoning, accurate perception, intellectual carefulness, truth-seeking, open-mindedness, honesty, humility, courage.⁵ By the latter, I mean familiarity with the evidence that speaks for or against some relevant belief. This may include philosophical arguments, as well as private experiences, reflections, or insights. What matters here is not that one has the exact same evidence but that the epistemic quality of the evidence is roughly on a par. EP as stated and clarified, then, holds epistemic peers to be epistemic agents who display sufficient parity in epistemic virtue and evidential familiarity, such that one peer is generally just as likely to acquire a true belief concerning the issue at hand as is the other.

I turn now to address question (b), regarding the epistemological implications of epistemic peerhood on disagreement. Suppose two epistemic agents S_1 and S_2 are epistemic peers in the sense of EP, both disagree about some issue by forming contrary beliefs that p and that $not-p$, and both are aware of this disagreement. A potential epistemological implication is that S_1 and S_2 should withhold their beliefs or suspend judgement with respect to the issue under dispute. Those who do accept this implication uphold a view referred to as “conciliationism”.⁶ Roughly, according to such a view, S_1 and S_2 ought to be conciliatory toward one another by altering their original beliefs in light of the disagreement. This view encapsulates the idea that in a case of disagreement between epistemic peers, both peers should give something like “equal weight” to the contrary belief formed by their peer given the relative parity or symmetry in epistemic credentials. In contrast to this view, however, the view which we may refer to as “steadfastness” suggests that epistemic peers needn’t reduce their confidence to such a degree as to no longer uphold their original belief and thus may remain steadfast.⁷

The sense in which an epistemic peer *ought* to be conciliatory or *may* remain steadfast is a normative judgement that relates to epistemic justification. I take justification to roughly refer to the thought that S is within her epistemic rights in believing that p ; where S is not flouting any epistemic duties with respect to believing that p (i.e., by willfully ignoring evidence; harking bias or prejudice; inadequately addressing defeaters; insufficiently considering the issue, etc.).⁸ So, defenders of conciliationism may be understood as saying that both epistemic peers would be unjustified—in the sense of failing to believe in accordance with their epistemic rights—by upholding their original belief. In contrast, defenders of the steadfast view can be understood as saying that (one or) both epistemic

⁵ See Roberts and Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology*.

⁶ It is also sometimes referred to as “conformism” or simply as “the equal weight view”. For a prime example of this view, see Christensen, “Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy”.

⁷ This view is also sometimes referred to as “non-conciliationism” or “non-conformism”. For an example of this view, see Kelly, “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement”. We should also note here, though, that between these two opposing views, another takes a middle course, and holds that the extent to which such an awareness could undermine one’s epistemic justification is circumstantial. This is sometimes referred to as a “dynamic” or “total evidence” view. For a discussion of all three perspectives, see Frances and Matheson, “Disagreement”.

⁸ Here I am following Plantinga’s construal of justification in *deontological* terms. On this see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 99-100. For a recent defense of this construal of justification, see McAllister, “Justification Without Excuses: A Defense of Classical Deontology”.

peers may be justified—in the above sense—despite the presence of disagreement in upholding their original belief.

2.1. The Epistemic Problem of Religious Disagreement

Having outlined EP and the broad terrain of epistemological responses to disagreement between epistemic peers, I turn now to consider how disagreement between epistemic peers can play out in the context of religious disagreement. For the purposes of this article, I will be concerned with just one kind of religious disagreement: disagreement concerning theistic belief. With this in mind then, consider the following argument:⁹

- (1) There are people who hold theistic beliefs incompatible with mine, and yet they appear roughly as epistemically virtuous and evidentially familiar as me. (RD-evidence).
- (2) RD-evidence, when considered against the other total evidence I have, speaks against my theistic belief.
- (3) If premises (1)-(2) are true, then I ought to reduce my confidence in my theistic belief to such a degree as to no longer believe it.
- (4) Therefore, I ought to reduce my confidence in my theistic belief to such a degree as to no longer believe it.

Let us unpack this argument. Premise (1) states that with respect to the truth of one's theistic belief, one has epistemic peers who hold beliefs incompatible with one's own (i.e., they hold atheistic belief). This fact is one's RD-evidence. By evidence, I mean some reason broadly construed (i.e., argument, intuition, seeming, etc.) that justifies a certain doxastic attitude taken toward a relevant proposition. RD-evidence, though, is a special kind of evidence, namely, *higher-order* evidence. To see this, consider the following distinction between first-order and higher-order evidence:¹⁰

First-Order Evidence: evidence for some proposition *P* that directly concerns the truth of *P*.

Higher-Order Evidence: evidence concerning one's assessment of the evidence for *P*.

Roughly, then, by first-order evidence I mean evidence which directly bears on the question of whether some proposition is true. By higher-order evidence, I mean evidence about how well one has assessed their evidence for that proposition or how reliable they've been with respect to judging the quality of their first-order evidence for *P*.¹¹ RD-evidence is a form of higher-order evidence because it concerns the extent to which one has properly assessed the relevant evidence for the truth of their theistic belief.

Premise (2) states that one's RD-evidence considered against one's total evidence (i.e., all the relevant first-order and higher-order evidence concerning one's theistic belief), speaks against that belief. RD-evidence, then, acts as a form of *counterevidence* against one's theistic belief. Premise (3) suggests that the combination of premises (1)-(2) mean that one should reduce one's confidence in one's

⁹ The argument presented below is adapted from Katherine Dormandy's presentation of the argument from religious disagreement in her "Religious Disagreement".

¹⁰ See Frances and Matheson, "Disagreement".

¹¹ Pittard, "Religious Disagreement".

theistic belief to such a degree as to no longer believe it, given one's RD-evidence. Hence (4) concludes that one indeed ought to reduce one's confidence in one's theistic belief to such a degree as to no longer believe it. In other words, epistemic justification requires that one ought to reduce one's confidence to such a degree as to no longer uphold one's theistic belief.

This argument from religious disagreement constitutes the basis of what I will refer to as the epistemic problem of religious disagreement. The argument constitutes a potentially significant problem for religious believers who seek to uphold theistic belief. Indeed, if the argument holds, it suggests that religious believers at least potentially face the consequence of having to completely abandon their theistic belief, given dissenting epistemic peers.¹² Nevertheless, it is the purpose of this article to consider how one might resist this argument and hence (4). In other words, it aims to consider how one might remain steadfast, as opposed to being conciliatory, given peer disagreement over theistic belief.¹³

3. Skeptical Theism

As noted at the outset of this essay, the kind of steadfast response to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement draws its inspiration from a view referred to as skeptical theism (ST). So, before moving on to outlining the steadfast response I develop and defend in sections 4 and 5 below, it is imperative that I offer an overview of ST itself.

ST is a view in contemporary philosophy of religion that arose as a response to the evidential problem of evil. Roughly, ST contains both a *metaphysical* thesis and an *epistemological* thesis.¹⁴ The former is the supposition that God—a maximally great being—exists. The latter thesis is that humans are not justified in making all-things-considered judgements about whether God has or does not have morally sufficient reasons for permitting certain evils we find in the world.¹⁵ To be clear, this epistemological thesis concerns *only* human reflection on God's reasons for permitting evil or suffering; it does prohibit any kind of reasonable judgement about God's reasons per se. Nonetheless, it is this second thesis which is most salient for ST. So, for our purposes we can construe ST primarily in terms of its epistemological thesis. Paul Draper states the view succinctly with this primary thesis in mind:

ST: Humans are in no position to judge that God would be unlikely to have morally sufficient reason to permit the evils we find in the world.¹⁶

ST thus construed forms the basis of the skeptical theistic response to the evidential problem of evil. Consider this problem stated as follows:

(5) If God exists, then X state of affairs would probably not exist (where "X" denotes some instance of evil).

¹² Having said that, the same applies for non-believers too.

¹³ For examples of a conciliationist view concerning religious disagreement, see Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreement," and Bogardus, "Disagreeing with the (religious) skeptic". For steadfast approaches, see Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defence of Religious Exclusivism," and Wolterstorff, "The Significance of Inexplicable Disagreement".

¹⁴ McBrayer, "Skeptical Theism," 611.

¹⁵ As McBrayer, *ibid.* 620, points out, the *all-things-considered* qualification is important here because ST does allow the one might be justified in believing that—*other things being equal*—God would not permit a sentient creature to suffer, say. But what ST rejects is that one may be justified in making all-things-considered judgements concerning whether God would permit such evils or not.

¹⁶ Draper, "The Skeptical Theist," 176.

- (6) But X state of affairs does exist.
- (7) Therefore, God probably does not exist.

Proponents of ST respond to such arguments by challenging premise (5). They do so by invoking the epistemological thesis central to ST noted above. As such, they point out that we are not justified to make all-things-considered judgements about the following kind of counterfactual: if God exists, then not-X. Defenders of ST argue that it is reasonable to think that God may cause, enable, or permit X for reasons which may not be accessible to us. Therefore, the move from antecedent to consequent in the above counterfactual is not justified.

Arguably, a central element of ST is its critique of versions of what are referred to as “noseeum inferences.”¹⁷ As McBrayer points out,¹⁸ such inferences roughly adopt the following form:

- (8) As far as we can tell, there are no X’s.
- (9) So, there (probably) are no X’s.

ST does not necessarily suggest that a noseeum inference is invalid per se. What ST does hold, though, is that the noseeum inference can be invalid and indeed is invalid when applied to God’s reasons for permitting evil. Given that the evidential problem of evil often appears to take the form of a noseeum inference, proponents of ST seek to challenge its validity.

But are there any good reasons for accepting ST? Let me sketch out a couple of arguments in favor of ST which will also be relevant for the next section.¹⁹ First, consider the following “argument from analogy” gleaned from William Alston (1996):²⁰

- (10) A novice is insufficiently placed to make judgments about the reasons behind the actions of professionals.
- (11) Our human condition vis-à-vis God is akin to that of a novice and professional.
- (12) Therefore, we are insufficiently placed to make judgements about the reasons behind God’s actions.

The analogy that Alston draws on is between a world chess champion, Karpov, and a complete novice: “Having only the sketchiest grasp of chess, I fail to see any reason for Karpov to have made the move he did at a certain point in the game. Does that entitle me to conclude that he had no good reason for making his move?”²¹ Of course, the answer would be no. When applied to God, this argument from analogy can take an *a fortiori* form too. One might point out that the epistemic distance between us and God is even greater than that of human novices and professionals in chess, for there is an “infinite qualitative distance”—as Kierkegaard famously put it. Hence, if novices are insufficiently placed to make judgements about the reasons why a master professional at chess made X move, then *a fortiori* we are insufficiently placed to make judgements about God’s reasons for acting in a certain fashion.

¹⁷ This phraseology was first coined by Stephen Wykstra. See Wykstra, “Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil.”

¹⁸ McBrayer, “Skeptical Theism,” 611.

¹⁹ For a more recent and thoroughgoing defense of skeptical theism, see Hendricks, *Skeptical Theism*.

²⁰ I am following McBrayer, “Skeptical Theism,” 613, in classifying this argument.

²¹ Alston, “Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on the Evidential Argument from Evil,” 31.

Second, consider the following version of an “argument from enabling premises” gleaned from Alvin Plantinga:²²

- (13) We are only justified in making judgments with respect to God’s having sufficient reasons for permitting evil, providing we have a good reason for thinking that: “if God did have sufficient reasons, then we would likely be aware of them.”
- (14) But we do not have such a reason.
- (15) Therefore, we are not justified in making judgements with respect to God having sufficient reasons for permitting evil.

Simply put, Plantinga states that “there is no reason to think that if God *did* have a reason for permitting the evil in question, we would be the first to know. Something further must be added, if an infirmity worth worrying about is to be uncovered.”²³ In other words, in arguing against God’s existence by way of the evidential problem of evil, one is only justified in arguing as such when one possesses a good reason for thinking that if God had sufficient reason for permitting the relevant instance of evil, then we’d have access to it. Plantinga of course suggests that we lack such reason and hence the evidential problem of evil will likely fall at this epistemic hurdle.

4. Skeptical Theistic Steadfastness

In the above sections, I outlined the central elements needed to piece together the response to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement that this paper aims to develop: the concept of epistemic peers, the epistemic problem of religious agreement, and ST. In what follows, I aim to draw on the central epistemological thesis inherent in ST in developing a response to the epistemic problem. I argue this central epistemological thesis may extend over to God’s reasons for voluntary self-revealing or disclosure. Specifically, the idea is that as limited creatures vis-à-vis God, we are not well positioned to make judgements about God’s reasons for permitting evil, so analogously we are not well positioned to make judgements about God’s reasons for self-revealing. Thus, for all a theist may know amid her peer disagreement over theistic belief, God may have good reason for not revealing Himself to her apparent epistemic peer, enabling the theist to mitigate the impact of RD-evidence and remain steadfast in her theistic belief (by discounting RD-evidence from her total evidence).

4.1. God’s Reasons and Voluntary Self-Disclosure

The view which I’m calling skeptical theistic steadfastness, is captured eloquently in the following quote from George Mavrodes:

Since we do not know just what conditions are sufficient even for seeing a piece of paper, it would not be surprising if we also did not know what is involved in some person’s failure to meet God. Beyond this, however, it seems clear that if Christian theologians are correct then God will be experienced only when He chooses to reveal Himself. The wolf has a little initiative but he will sometimes be outwitted by the careful stalker. God, however, will not be outwitted or compelled. *The failure, then, of*

²² See Plantinga, “Epistemic Probability and Evil”. I am again following McBrayer, “Skeptical Theism,” 614-615, in classifying this argument.

²³ Plantinga, “Epistemic Probability and Evil,” 70.

*one person to apprehend God has very little significance against someone else's positive claim. For it is quite possible that the failure stems from the fact that the man is in some way yet unready for that experience, or from the fact that God—for reasons which we may or may not guess—has not yet chosen to reveal Himself to him.*²⁴

In this quote, Mavrodes makes a point concerning God's act of self-revealing or disclosure and our inability to assess the conditions for such a disclosure.²⁵ The main idea being emphasized seems to be that when God decides to reveal Himself in some way to humans, God does so voluntarily under no compulsion, and given this voluntary nature of God's self-revealing to humans, we are not well placed to judge why God reveals Himself to one person but not another. This idea looks reminiscent to the epistemological thesis present in ST. Recall that according to ST, humans are in no position to judge that God would be unlikely to have morally sufficient reason to permit the evils we find in the world. It seems to me, then, that in following Mavrodes we can make a similar point concerning God's voluntary act of self-revealing: that humans are in no position to judge that God would be unlikely to have sufficient reasons for not revealing Himself to some person. If that's right then, it would also seem to include our inability to discern why God reveals Himself to one person but not another, even where both are conceived as epistemic peers. So, with this in mind, consider the following thesis:

STR: humans are in no position to judge that God would be unlikely to have sufficient reasons for revealing Himself to S_1 but not to S_2 .²⁶

STR captures the thought that given that we're not well positioned to make judgements about God's act of self-revealing, we're not well positioned to judge whether He lacks sufficient reasons for revealing Himself to some person but not some other, despite parity in their epistemic credentials. STR thus draws on the epistemological thesis present in ST, then, by emphasizing our inability to make judgements concerning God's divine activity; but, at the same time, STR also draws additional insight from the idea that God reveals Himself voluntarily, which further contributes to our inability to sufficiently determine the conditions for His self-revealing. In my view, I think that STR could potentially enable a theist S_1 to remain steadfast amid her peer disagreement over theistic belief with a nontheist S_2 .

Before considering how this might work, though, three points require clarification. First, I should say something concerning the sort of persons (S_1 and S_2) that I have in mind here. Such persons are what we might call "reflective" believers/nonbelievers. By that I mean what Phillip Quinn refers to as "intellectually sophisticated adult theists [or atheists],"²⁷ i.e., persons who are aware of contemporary arguments for and against theistic belief, and who would be epistemically negligent for not being aware of such arguments current in our present intellectual culture, given their education and training. Second, I ought to be clearer on the notion of God revealing Himself. By this I mean that God reveals Himself

²⁴ Mavrodes, *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion*, 79. Emphasis mine.

²⁵ Although Mavrodes references "Christian theologians", Jewish, Muslim, and other theologians can perhaps make a similar point. Muslim theologians may, for instance, point toward the following Qur'anic verses in support of this idea: "...God guides whoever He will to his light" (Q. 24:55); "But still God leaves whoever He will to stray, and guides whoever He will: He is the Almighty, the All Wise" (Q. 14:4).

²⁶ By STR as opposed to simply ST, I mean to suggest that ST can be extended to God revealing Himself.

²⁷ Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism," 481.

to a person by imparting upon them a “theistic seeming.”²⁸ Seemings which have theistic propositional content can be triggered in a variety of ways, such as through feelings of gratitude or guilt before God (e.g., “God gave me all this out of His mercy;” “God disapproves of me”), or by experiences of awe and wonder at the splendor of the mountains, oceans, or sky (e.g., “nature reflects God’s beauty”).²⁹ Following Michael Bergmann, though, I also think that theistic seemings may come about through a variety of observations, experiences, testimony, and considerations,³⁰ and where dispositions to have such seemings are retained in memory enabling theistic seemings to emerge upon reflection. Perhaps these considerations or reflections may also include things of a philosophical nature e.g., arguments for and against theism. So, for God to reveal Himself to a person—as I understand it for the purposes of this paper—is for God in some sense to impart an awareness of His presence by way of theistic seemings in any of the above ways.

Third, and finally, insofar as STR draws on the epistemological thesis of ST, it seems plausible to argue for STR itself by drawing on the same arguments in favor of ST, and simply reapplying them to STR. In simple terms, this would be to argue that, first, with respect to the argument from analogy because our condition vis-à-vis God is akin to that of an amateur and professional, then we are in no position to judge that God would be unlikely have sufficient reasons for revealing Himself to S_1 but not S_2 . And second, concerning the argument from enabling premises, that even if God did have sufficient reasons for revealing Himself to S_1 but not S_2 , we have no good reason to think that we’d have access to such a reason. I will assume at least for the sake of argument that these arguments for ST hold up and hence also hold up for STR too.

4.2. Responding to the Epistemic Problem

Given the above, we’re now better positioned to apply the thesis of STR toward responding to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement encapsulated in the argument outlined earlier (see section 2.1.). To be clear, the principal premise of that argument that is the target of this response is the following:

- (2) RD-evidence, when considered against the other total evidence I have, speaks against my theistic belief.

To see how STR enables such a response to this premise, consider the following scenario. Imagine there are two *prima facie* epistemic peers S_1 and S_2 with respect to the truth of theism. Suppose S_1 is a reflective theist who upholds theistic belief based on theistic seemings in the manner suggested above. Let us also postulate that as a reflective theist, S_1 ’s theistic seemings partly come about through her consideration and reflection over arguments for and against theistic belief.³¹ In contrast to S_1 , suppose that S_2 , a reflective atheist, does not have such theistic seemings; instead, she has contrary a-theistic

²⁸ The sort of profound mystical or numinous religious experiences I take to be rare even amongst religious folk. Hence, I set aside this kind of experiential and noninferential evidence for a kind that I think may be more commonplace among reflective theists.

²⁹ Bergmann, “Religious Disagreement and Epistemic Intuitions,” 36. Also see Plantinga, “Is Belief in God Properly Basic?,” 46-47, for the types of propositions related to the examples provided in parentheses.

³⁰ Bergmann, “Religious Disagreement and Epistemic Intuitions,” 37.

³¹ To be clear, it is not that S_1 ’s theistic belief is based on these arguments; S_1 ’s theistic belief is noninferentially grounded in her theistic seemings, but her consideration of such arguments are relevant triggers for her theistic seemings.

seemings which also emerge due to various considerations, experiences, and reflections over some time, and where the area of considerations are akin to those of S_1 . Note that the mere fact they differ with respect to *a/theistic* seemings and belief that doesn't mean they're not epistemic peers. As pointed out earlier, epistemic peerhood (EP) does not require complete symmetry in epistemic virtue or evidence; rather, what matters is that the epistemic quality of the evidence is roughly on a par.³² With the above in mind then, the skeptical theistic steadfast response to premise (2) looks something like this:

STS: Given S_1 's theistic seemings and her justified belief in STR, S_1 needn't take her disagreement with S_2 as RD-evidence that speaks against her theistic belief.

How exactly is this supposed to work? First, suppose that as per her theistic seemings, it seems to S_1 that God exists and hence that God has seemingly made His existence apparent to her. I take it that her believing based on such seemings—which result by way of various considerations overtime—mean that S_1 is *prima facie* justified in upholding her theistic belief (i.e., she is not thereby flouting any epistemic duties). Second, suppose that S_1 justifiably believes STR in virtue of the arguments from analogy and enabling premises applied to STR outlined above. As a result, S_1 seems positioned to justifiably regard her RD-evidence as failing to speak against her theistic belief in any way. For consider the following version of a noseum inference:

- (16) It seems to S_2 that God has not revealed Himself in circumstance C.
- (17) Therefore, God has probably not revealed Himself to me (S_1) in similar circumstance C*.

Given that S_1 justifiably believes STR, she can justifiably believe this inference to be invalid. For as per STR, she will hold that humans are in no position to think it unlikely that God would lack sufficient reasons for revealing Himself to S_1 but not S_2 , despite parity in epistemic credentials and circumstances. So, S_1 will not take parity in epistemic credentials and circumstances as reason to think that God probably did not reveal Himself to S_1 , and hence will reject (17). For by upholding STR, S_1 justifiably believes that she lacks good reason for thinking something like the following conditional holds: “if God exists, then God would have probably revealed Himself to S_2 as He seems to have done to me (S_1), because we share similar epistemic credentials and circumstances”.

Consequently, S_1 can reason that the mere fact that S_2 is her apparent epistemic peer and holds a contrary theistic belief cannot count against her reason for thinking that God does exist and has revealed Himself her. For it could only do so, if S_1 had good reason to affirm the above conditional, where S_2 's similar epistemic credentials would give S_1 reason to think that because God seems to have revealed Himself to S_1 with her epistemic credentials, that precedent and similarity gives her grounds for thinking that He'd likely do the same for S_2 . But as per STR, S_1 has grounds for thinking that she lacks such a good reason. Therefore, the combination of theistic seemings and STR, enables S_1 to remain steadfast in holding to her theistic belief, despite her RD-evidence.

In sum, a skeptical theistic steadfast response of this kind—if successful—would appear to enable a religious believer such as S_1 to remain epistemically justified in upholding their theistic belief by

³² For instance, we might think that the token instances of type “(a/theistic) seemings” are on an epistemic par given their parity evidential weight, despite the difference in propositional content.

mitigating the potential epistemic impact that RD-evidence might otherwise have had on the justification of S_1 's theistic belief.

5. Challenges

The skeptical theistic steadfast response to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement just outlined, although in some sense plausible, is not without its challenges. In the remainder of this article, I will consider two kind of challenges which I think give us some reason to suspect that in the above form, the skeptical theistic steadfast response is not wholly adequate; rather, it needs some further revision and modification. In what follows then, I will consider two key challenges to skeptical theistic steadfastness as outlined above. The first (section 5.1) targets the notion that per STR, S_1 can simply dismiss altogether her RD-evidence as supplied by S_2 . The second (5.2) targets STR itself, arguing that in its current form it is implausible.

5.1. The Steadfastness is Too Bold

Despite what I have said thus far on the positive front, skeptical theistic steadfastness runs up against a serious problem. The problem is that the notion of entirely dismissing the relevance of peer disagreement seems too bold a thesis. This concern has an analogue with some recent objections to skeptical theism. Recall that as outlined in section 3, skeptical theism was said to be a response to the following evidential argument from evil:

- (5) If God exists, then X state of affairs would probably not exist (where "X" denotes some instance of evil).
- (6) But X state of affairs does exist.
- (7) Therefore, God probably does not exist.

This version of the argument is countered by the skeptical theist by arguing that the noseum inference from a relevant instance of evil to God's non-existence is invalid. Recent critics, however, have pointed out several problems with this line of attack.³³ A principal critique is that by responding to this version of the argument from evil this way, skeptical theists imply that no amount of evil can count as evidence against theism. But this is implausible (as we shall see more clearly below). Critics have thus pointed out that a more modest probabilistic version of the argument cannot be sidestepped so easily. This version of the argument runs as follows:

- (5') X state of affairs would be less likely if God exists than if no God exists.
- (6) But X state of affairs does exist.
- (7') Therefore, X is evidence that God doesn't exist.

The way in which some critics of skeptical theism argue that this version of the argument still holds weight despite the attempts of skeptical theists to suggest otherwise, is by explicating evidence for theism along a certain probabilistic model. On this view, some piece of evidence counts as evidence for a hypothesis when it raises its probability. In other words, where $\Pr(H|E) > \Pr(H)$ i.e., where the

³³ See Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs, "Evil and Evidence"; Climenhaga, "If We Can't Tell What Theism Predicts, We Can't Tell Whether God Exists: Skeptical Theism and Bayesian Arguments from Evil"; Draper, "The Problem of Evil"; Anderson and Russell, "Divine Hiddenness and Other Evidence".

probability of H is greater given E than it would have been otherwise. Similarly, a piece of evidence is evidence against a hypothesis when it lowers its probability, i.e., $\Pr(H|E) < \Pr(H)$. But under what circumstances will some evidence count as evidence for/against some hypothesis? Simply where that evidence is more or less likely to occur if the hypothesis is true, i.e., where $\Pr(E|H) > \Pr(E|\sim H)$ or $\Pr(E|\sim H) > \Pr(E|H)$. Given this general view of evidence, an important implication and simple theorem follows: $\Pr(H|E) > \Pr(H)$ if and only if $\Pr(H|\sim E) < \Pr(H)$. In other words, a piece of evidence is evidence for a hypothesis if and only if the lack of such evidence is also evidence against the hypothesis.³⁴

This latter point is crucial in the context of the argument from evil and skeptical theism. To see why, consider that some possible world in which there is a complete absence of evil would seem to considerably raise the probability of the hypothesis of theism, given that such a hypothesis includes the notion that the world is created and sustained by a perfectly loving being.³⁵ If this seems right then, when we take into account the above theorem of probability, the implication seems to be that such an absence of evil would raise the probability of theism if and only if the presence of evil (E) would—at least to some degree—lower the probability of theism (T) i.e., $\Pr(T|\sim E) > \Pr(T|E)$ if and only if $\Pr(T|E) < \Pr(T|\sim E)$. If this is the case, then, premise (5') in the argument above seems to hold, where X = some apparent instance of evil.

At this point a skeptical theist may argue that we are in no position to judge that God would lack a sufficient reason to permit such an instance of evil in the world, so we cannot reasonably assign a probability as to whether some apparent instance of evil counts against the hypothesis of theism. So, we cannot reasonably affirm premise (5'). However, this skeptical theistic response does not seem to work, for even if it is hard to predict the mysterious ways of God, that doesn't mean that evil no longer counts as evidence against theism. In other words, the mere fact that one is ignorant or not certain with respect to why God permits an instance of evil bears little to no evidential significance: the mere existence of evil counts against the theistic hypothesis even if one lacks the expectation that they'd know God's reason for permitting it.³⁶ For as we've just pointed out, the probability of theism clearly seems to be higher where no evil exists at all, which entails that evil counts as at least *some* evidence against theism irrespective of our ignorance of God's ways.³⁷

So, here's the key point: a bold version of skeptical theism in which evil is assigned no weight at all fails, because it cannot plausibly undermine the sort of argument from (5')-(7'). But here then is the rub for a bold version of skeptical theistic steadfastness: attempts to entirely dismiss RD-evidence by assigning it no evidential weight also fail. For it is similarly plausible to think that in some possible world where there's no religious disagreement between peers and everyone believes in God, the probability of theism is raised considerably. But of course, it is raised only insofar as the presence of such disagreement lowers its probability. Suppose then that as per premise (5') X = religious peer disagreement, the sort of bold version of the skeptical theistic steadfastness outlined above seems to fail in its attempt to entirely dismiss (5') in a manner akin to that of the bold skeptical theist. But then in that case, such a move also implies that S_I cannot just brazenly dismiss RD-evidence either because it

³⁴ See Stephens, "A Bayesian Approach to Absent Evidence Reasoning," 61-62.

³⁵ Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs, "Evil and Evidence," 4-6.

³⁶ Ibid. 6-7.

³⁷ As Benton et. al., note, one could respond by arguing that the prior probability that God creates a world with no evil is zero, but this leads to implausible results. For example, in an Edenic world with no evil, with such priors, Adam and Eve would have the strongest possible evidence God does not exist. This is an odd result.

bears at least some evidential weight. This then is the objection: skeptical theistic steadfastness is too bold because the presence of religious peer disagreement between surely does bear at least *some* evidential weight that cannot be entirely dismissed by an appeal to skepticism concerning God's reasons for self-revealing (i.e., STR).

How then might one salvage the skeptical theistic steadfast thesis? Well, although this objection might render implausible the basic or *strong* version of the thesis, it might be possible that a suitably *modest* version has some force. Indeed, it seems to me that it is possible to modify the target of the skeptical theistic steadfast response to peer disagreement in such a way that the thesis retains some force. To do that, though, there are two things that need to be put in order. First, the target of the epistemic problem of religious disagreement encapsulated in the argument above (see section 2.1.) can no longer be premise (2). This is because we have just conceded premise (2). In other words, we have conceded that RD-evidence at least in principle counts against hence theistic belief at least to some degree. So, instead, let us make the target premise (1). Recall that this premise states that "there are people who hold theistic beliefs incompatible with mine, and yet they appear roughly as epistemically virtuous and evidentially familiar as me." It is this fact that constitutes one's RD-evidence. Second, for the response to work with premise (1) now the target, we need to consider the salient aspects of S_1 's (and *mutatis mutandis* S_2 's) total evidence pertaining to their disagreement. It seems to me that the relevant parts of S_1 's total evidence are: (a) evidence directly supporting her belief that God exists, i.e., *p-evidence*; (b) evidence that she formed her theistic belief reliably, i.e., *Rp-evidence*; and (c) evidence about how reliably her peer (S_2) formed their atheistic belief, i.e., *R~p-evidence*.³⁸

A *strong* version of skeptical theistic steadfastness proposes that S_1 's *R~p-evidence* bears no weight at all and so can be entirely dismissed (hence the rejection of premise (2)). We have seen how this version has its problems, though. What a more *modest* version of the thesis can do, however, is draw on STR to soften the blow that S_1 's *R~p-evidence* might otherwise have had. In other words, the fact that S_1 is not suitably positioned to judge whether God has sufficient reasons for revealing Himself to S_1 but not to S_2 , provides her with reason to judge her *R~p-evidence* as low. This in effect would mean that S_1 fails to take S_2 as her epistemic peer, for in judging her *R~p-evidence* as (significantly) low, she can demote S_2 . Thus, she can reject premise (1) of the above argument from religious disagreement. For if S_1 is justified in her skepticism concerning God's reasons for self-revealing, it is reasonable for S_1 to judge her *R~p-evidence* as low. This is because such evidence concerns the extent to which one's peer has done what is epistemically right to put themselves in a position to form a justified belief concerning theism. But skepticism about whether one's peer has done what is epistemically right to put themselves in a position to acquire some theistic seeming or form a justified belief about theism, appears to mean that one's *R~p-evidence* should be regarded as low, even if it does not mean it's as low as 0.³⁹ However, the extent to which STR enables S_1 to be steadfast amid her disagreement now crucially depends on the quality of S_1 's *p-evidence* and *Rp-evidence*. So, let's consider these other pieces of her total evidence.

We have suggested that her *p-evidence* is essentially her theistic seeming grounded in a variety of past observations, experiences, testimony, and considerations. How good is this evidence? Well, that

³⁸ See Bergmann, "Religious Disagreement and Epistemic Intuitions," 33-35.

³⁹ On the explication of evidence outlined above, for evil or peer disagreement to count as evidence against theism it comes rather easy; all that's required is for the probability of theism to be reduced ever so slightly. So, the mere fact that peer disagreement is taken to count against one's theistic belief needn't mean that one should consider it to count significantly.

may depend on the *strength* of the seeming that S_1 has, as the stronger it seems to S that p then, *ceteris paribus*, the more justification S has for believing that p . Having said that, I take it that seemings are only *prima facie* grounds for justified belief and so may be overturned, including by relevant higher-order evidence such as *R~p-evidence*. As a reflective theist, I also suspect that other background beliefs relevant to S_1 's *p-evidence* will come into play, including arguments against theism. So, the quality of S_1 's *p-evidence* may also partially depend on how well she is able to address such arguments. As for S_1 's *Rp-evidence*, much the same can be said here too. For instance, S_1 's *Rp-evidence* may consist of higher-order seemings about how reliably she has formed her theistic belief based on her considerations and ultimately theistic seeming. But again, there is a question concerning the relative strength of that seeming, for such evidence may also include relevant arguments that seek to undercut the grounds upon which one holds theistic belief (e.g., certain debunking arguments). The upshot of this then is that STR may enable S_1 to remain steadfast, but it depends on her total evidence.

5.2. Divine Hiddenness and STR

Another challenge for skeptical theistic steadfastness turns out to be a problem for both the *strong* and *modest* versions of the thesis. This objection states that given what a reflective theist like S_1 believes about God as a whole, she should regard STR at least in its current form as false. To see how, consider that *prima facie* STR seems to render something like the following thought as potentially justified for S_1 : “given God’s nature as a maximally great being, for all I know, God has good reasons for keeping my atheistic peer (S_2) in the dark, so I needn’t worry at all/too much about their apparent epistemic credentials.” However, for traditional theists, such as Christians, Muslims, and Jews, God is believed to be a perfectly loving salvific being who intends on bringing about the salvation of humans in the afterlife. So, these theists—of which we can assume S_1 to be—also have reason to believe that: “God has good reason for *not* keeping my atheistic epistemic peer in the dark given His salvific purposes.” Consequently, STR ought to be rejected by such theists like S_1 , for given what they believe about God as a whole, they are in at least some position to judge whether God has sufficient reasons for revealing Himself to a person like S_2 .

This objection to STR is reminiscent of J.L. Schellenberg’s argument from divine hiddenness.⁴⁰ In simple terms, Schellenberg’s argument looks something like this:⁴¹

- (18) If God exists, then there is no non-resistant, non-belief.
- (19) There is non-resistant, non-belief.
- (20) Therefore, God does not exist.

If Schellenberg’s argument is sound, then STR is false. For in this case, the thought seems to be that we *can* tell whether God would reveal Himself to certain persons given His nature, and so the arguments from analogy and enabling premises which have been suggested to support it are ill-applied. Now, it is not the purpose of this essay to develop a full-blown response to this argument; that’s a task for some other paper. Rather, I want to consider how, in the context of S_1 's peer disagreement with S_2 , S_1 may nonetheless be justified in believing STR despite her beliefs about God’s perfectly loving nature.

⁴⁰ See J.L. Schellenberg, *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy’s New Challenge to Belief in God*.

⁴¹ Perrine, “Skeptical Theism”.

With the above in mind, it seems to me that there are roughly two different routes available to S_1 where she can uphold STR (at least in some sense) and soften the blow provided by RD-evidence: (1) simply persist in her skepticism and dismiss the objection out of hand, or (2) uphold STR along more modest lines. Let us explore these two moves.

First, S_1 could perhaps justifiably uphold STR based on skepticism concerning whether if God exists then there'd be no non-resistant, non-belief. If such skepticism is justified for S_1 , then S_1 can uphold STR with little concern as to whether S_2 is non-resistant. This move has been proposed by Justin McBrayer and Philip Swenson.⁴² They argue that it is reasonable—especially given our epistemic position vis-à-vis God—to be skeptical about whether God would reveal Himself to some person at a given time. In doing so, they suggest that the same tactic is employed by Schellenberg himself, where he states that God may have reasons unbeknownst to us, for only ensuring that humans have *weak* belief in His existence as opposed to *strong* belief in Him.⁴³ According to McBrayer and Swenson, “What a sceptical theist *is* committed to ... is a general scepticism about our knowledge of what God would do in any particular situation. We don't think that atheists or theists can say with any serious degree of confidence why God does what he does or why he would or wouldn't do a certain thing.”⁴⁴ McBrayer and Swenson's reasons for being skeptical appear to be not much more than an appeal to intuition. I think that the sort of intuition they're homing in on, though, is the sort encapsulated by the arguments outlined above from analogy and enabling premises.

One of the issues with this response of simply persisting with one's skepticism about God's reasons for self-revealing or otherwise remaining hidden, is that it may turn into a problem for S_1 , for it may threaten to undermine her *p-evidence* for theism. Indeed, elsewhere McBrayer has noted that a critique of skeptical theism is that it undermines arguments for God's existence.⁴⁵ To see how this might be an issue for S_1 , consider that evaluating the probability of some hypothesis (e.g., theism) involves understanding the predictive power of that hypothesis, i.e., the $\Pr(E|H)$, (E = evidence; H = hypothesis). If STR is true, though, it may threaten our ability to assess $\Pr(E|H)$. For if we are unsure as to the conditions under which God will reveal Himself to some person, then we cannot evidentially confirm the hypothesis of theism by pointing to some piece of data as evidence that God has revealed Himself and hence that He exists.

Now, significantly, we have said that S_1 believes theism by way of theistic seemings; in other words, in an epistemically basic way and not based on some argument or by treating theism as an explanatory hypothesis. So, worries over arguments for belief in God being undermined by skepticism may not apply to theists whose theistic belief is epistemically basic.⁴⁶ However, someone like S_1 may still value natural theology and it may be important for her epistemic justification, all-things-considered, when facing potential defeaters.⁴⁷ S_1 may also require the use of natural theological arguments amid her peer disagreement with S_2 , if her theistic seemings comprising her *p-evidence* and *Rp-evidence* are not sufficiently strong enough to enable her to remain steadfast given her *R-p-evidence*. So, simply

⁴² McBrayer and Swenson, “Scepticism about the argument from divine hiddenness”.

⁴³ Ibid. 143-144.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 145.

⁴⁵ See McBrayer, “Skeptical Theism”.

⁴⁶ See Lovering, “On what God would do,” 97, n. 12.

⁴⁷ For similar points made in this sentence and onwards in this paragraph, see Beaudoin, “Evil, the human cognitive condition, and natural theology,” 414-415.

persisting in one's skepticism by upholding STR in its current form may not be a good epistemic move for S_I .

Perhaps a more plausible move, then, would be to modify STR by granting that we are at least in *some* position to make reasonable judgements with respect to God's reasons for self-revealing. This would at least in part mitigate the worry posed by the divine hiddenness problem which seems to suggest that theists like S_I have good reason to think that God would reveal Himself to non-resistant, non-believers, given His perfectly loving nature and salvific purposes. It would also mitigate the above concern over S_I 's *p-evidence*. A view akin to a modified STR can be seen in following passage from Caroline Franks Davis:

There are ... people who have sincerely striven for experiences of a divine reality by all known methods (e.g., prayer, a virtuous life) and have failed to achieve any perceptual awareness of one. Although we realize that no known techniques can guarantee a perception of divine reality, *we do feel we are justified in having a mild expectation of success in certain cases*. Where those expectations are disappointed, the degree of counter-evidence provided is by no means comparable to that provided by the failure to perceive a chair, *but it must be taken into account*.⁴⁸

What Davis seems to be saying is that although we might not be very well placed to make judgements about the circumstances under which God will reveal Himself, we are reasonably entitled to at least mildly expect God to reveal Himself in certain cases. Specifically, cases in which the relevant person seems to have undertaken the sorts of methods typically thought to be an appropriate means to experience God, such as prayer or being morally virtuous. As such, Davis could be interpreted as offering the following modification on STR:

STR*: humans are not very well positioned to judge that God would be unlikely to have sufficient reasons for revealing Himself to S_I but not to S_2 ; nonetheless, humans are reasonably entitled to mildly expect an instance of God's self-revealing in certain cases.

STR* takes a nod in the direction of Schellenberg without going the full way. In other words, it grants that traditional theists (like S_I) do have reason to think that God would reveal Himself to certain people given what else they believe about God's perfectly loving nature and those people. Yet, at the same time, it does not assume as Schellenberg seems to, that we can rather straightforwardly *see* this to be the case, especially given our nature vis-à-vis God's.

In the previous section, we noted that it appears S_I cannot draw on STR to entirely dismiss RD-evidence/*R~p-evidence*; but nonetheless, may be able to regard such evidence as low. Yet, if drawing on STR made that judgement potentially justified for S_I , one would expect that STR* has less scope to do that than STR. So, although it may be that STR* enables S_I to soften the blow of RD-evidence, I think it may also mean in that S_I at least acquires a "partial defeater," i.e., some reason requiring that S_I ought to hold her belief less firmly, but not sufficient to require that she withhold it completely.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 99. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁹ Plantinga (2000, 362) defines partial defeaters as "defeaters that do not require withholding [some belief] *b* but do require holding it less firmly".

To see this, we need to consider a general circumstance in which partial defeat may ensue. According to Michael Thune, a partial defeater is acquired in the context of peer disagreement when the following two conditions are satisfied: (a) where S_1/S_2 believes or should believe that S_1/S_2 is generally as reliable about some relevant topic, and (b) where it is not obvious to either party in the dispute who (if any) is in an epistemically advantaged position.⁵⁰ Thune thinks that if these conditions are satisfied then partial defeat ensues, because even if S_1/S_2 justifiably believe that they're probably more reliable on this particular occasion—due to some insight denied to their peer—as it is not obvious who is in an epistemically advantaged position, S_1/S_1 still ought to hold their belief less firmly.⁵¹ Thune also thinks that holding that the disagreement entails “full defeat” is not plausible here, because it results in philosophical skepticism and is self-defeating.⁵² It is beyond the scope of this paper to defend Thune's view, but if we assume that it is at least plausibly true, what might it suggest for S_1 's disagreement with S_2 concerning theism, especially given STR*?

Suppose again that S_1 's *p-evidence* are her theistic seemings (as outlined above), and her *Rp-evidence* are relevant higher-order seemings. When S_1 draws on STR (as opposed to STR*), we said that she may justifiably regard her *R~p-evidence* as low. In such a context, it seems that S_1 can remain steadfast without acquiring a partial defeater because condition (a) is not satisfied: S_1 does not have good reason to regard S_2 as roughly epistemically reliable as her, given her belief in STR. However, where S_1 draws on STR* instead of STR, it looks as if conditions (a)-(b) come into play—at least in some capacity. For in this case, S_1 is no longer able to be *completely* skeptical with respect to S_2 's epistemic credentials making her reliable in this context; rather, S_1 ought to at least regard S_2 as being *potentially* as reliable as her, for STR* gives her at least *some* reason to think that God would reveal Himself to S_2 given her similarly epistemically/morally virtuous character (and her evidential familiarity). At the same time, however, S_1 has some reason to be dubious that S_2 is *actually* as reliable as her with respect to acquiring theistic belief through God's self-revealing, because STR* only has it that she has a *mild* expectation that S_2 has put herself in the best epistemic position for God to reveal Himself to her by giving her a theistic seeming. Nonetheless, it thus seems as if condition (a) is at least partially satisfied. However, I think condition (b) is satisfied insofar as STR* still leaves S_1 room to be somewhat skeptical that she has put her own self in the right epistemic position to become aware of God; it does not assure her she has done what is epistemically right to acquire theistic belief due to only a mild expectation of success. Therefore, in drawing on STR*, I think that S_1 may well acquire a low level of partial defeat, but some, nonetheless. However, that means that S_1 can presumably remain steadfast even if not upholding her belief as firmly as before (e.g., her degree of confidence ought to shift from 0.8 to 0.7—plugging in arbitrary figures, but without any required doxastic change).

This result might not be wholly satisfactory for one who hoped a response to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement required neither doxastic nor credence alteration. For it appears to land us with the position that S_1 is unable to *fully* demote S_2 as her peer; but rather, she can do so only in a *partial* sense. Nevertheless, this appears to be all that is required to reject premise (1) and thus needn't mean S_1 that is no longer justified in upholding her theistic belief; on the contrary, she may remain for

⁵⁰ Thune, ““Partial Defeaters’ and the Epistemology of Disagreement,” 364.

⁵¹ Ibid. 368.

⁵² Ibid. 369-372.

the most part steadfast in upholding her belief, and thus reject the conclusion (4) of the argument from religious disagreement.

6. Conclusion

To summarize, I have argued that religious believers who uphold theistic belief could respond to the epistemic problem of religious disagreement by adopting a form of skepticism concerning God's reasons for revealing Himself to some person but not another. I suggested that this line of thinking may enable a theist to resist the force of their RD-evidence prompted by their disagreement with an epistemic peer over theistic belief. The success of this response, however, I have shown to be somewhat limited. For if it is to retain plausibility, it is likely that even whilst softening the impact of RD-evidence, it may mean that for many reflective theists (in the absence of overwhelming evidence for theism), their confidence in their theistic belief requires modest reduction. At the same time, however, this modest reduction may be of little epistemic consequence: these theists may nonetheless remain steadfast and epistemically justified in holding their theistic belief, even if less firmly than before.⁵³

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