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A Skeptical Theist View

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Philosophers, I once heard Nicholas Wolterstorff say, should tell more stories.

What is now called skeptical theism emerged within the discipline of philosophy in the early 1980s. It arose in response to the new "*evidential* problem of evil"—a new style of argument for atheism arising after the collapse of what we now call the "*logical* problem of evil."[1] Philosophers William Rowe and Paul Draper have been key workers on the evidential problem, with Rowe pioneering new paths and Draper taking them in a new direction. The rise of "skeptical theistic" responses is often associated with William Alston, Peter van Inwagen, Alvin Plantinga, and myself. The dialectic between evidential atheology and skeptical theism, because of its increasing connections to other perplexing issues in current mainstream philosophy, has become a rich and lively one.

So-called skeptical theism—like the evidential problem of evil to which it responds—comes in many versions, and it is still evolving. What unites all versions, as I see it, is a twofold claim. First, there is the claim that *if* the God of theism exists, we humans should not expect to see or grasp very much of

[1] To a first approximation, "logical versions" of the problem of evil tend to rely on the claim that for an *omnipotent* God, there can never be an outweighing good that makes it "needful" for God to allow evil: omnipotence would always have an evil-free plan B by which such a good could be achieved equally well. In his free will defense, Alvin Plantinga, deepening the insights of Augustine and Aquinas, uses modal logic to argue that this seriously underestimates the "things" falling outside the scope of omnipotence. (Omnipotence not only can't create logically impossible worlds, but also can't create—or weakly actualize—some worlds that are logically *possible*.) Rowe's new "evidential problem of evil" fully absorbed this Plantingian lesson, recognizing that even an omnipotent God can get stuck, as it were, between a rock and a hard place.

God's purposes for divine actions—including the divine actions of allowing or even causing events that bring much of the horrific suffering around us. Second, there is the claim that if the first claim is true, then much of what otherwise looks like strong evidence against theism isn't very strong at all.

To discern the strengths and limits of skeptical theism we will thus need to grapple with some of the new evidential arguments for atheism: these are its *discipline* context. But the roots of philosophical views often go deeper than these arguments, extending to other contexts. When we philosophers write for other philosophers in the professional journals, we often keep the deeper roots hidden—even from ourselves. In this there can be considerable loss. This might mean we philosophers should not just write for the philosophical journals; it might also be why Wolterstorff calls for more stories.

I am here not writing just for fellow philosophers. I will expose some of the deeper roots. And I will tell some stories.

THREE ROOT STORIES

The roots of skeptical theism are both personal and biblical-theological. In his book *Lament for a Son*, Wolterstorff himself tells a powerfully relevant story. I will draw on his story shortly.

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But first, a story from another person, whom for now I will just call Art. Art writes:

> There are two days in 1963 of which I have detailed memories. The first is November 22. Of events on that day—how we learned that President Kennedy had been shot—almost every American my age has clear memories. The second day, only three weeks later, was December 15. Of some events on that day, perhaps only two people now living have clear memories.
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> It was Sunday, and it was his forty-second birthday. As usual in our small village of Martin, we walked to church that morning. Nancy says that he held the hand of our little sister, Beth, and skipped to church with her. But after church he didn't feel well. When I came downstairs after changing clothes, Nancy said that Mom had taken him to Dr. Pone's office. I had the usual fourteen-year-old boy's hunger pains, and the three of us started eating

without them. I remember Mom's great roast pork that day, and the mashed potatoes with her wonderful gravy.

As we ate, the siren of the fire department—a hundred feet from our house—began to wail. I thought nothing of it—a fire somewhere, I figured. Only Nancy made the connection: the siren also blows for the resuscitator—and no fire trucks had come roaring out. Yet, between bites, I sang the four title words—"Another Man Done Gone"—from a haunting song on a new Johnny Cash album. Nancy looked at me sharply.

A short time later, Mom came through the door. "Come here, children," she said, gathering us in her arms. And then: "Your father has died."

So tell me, you who know, tell us: why did God take our father then—leaving our thirty-eight-year-old mother to raise her three children alone? In taking him, what was God's purpose exactly? Or did God not "take" him but merely "permit" his death? And this, perhaps, not for any "exact" purpose, but only a general one: because—you might say—it was needful for God's having a world with stable laws, causing rain to fall (when the conditions are right) on the just and the unjust alike, and causing heart attacks to fall (when the conditions are wrong) on young fathers as well as old ones. Is this why?

Tell us, you who know. When you're done, Nancy and I have more things for you to explain.

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Alongside the struggle evident in Art's story, we can with profit juxtapose some of Nicholas Wolterstorff's reflection on the problem of evil. A good place to start is his moving memoir *Lament for a Son*, written after his son Eric fell to his death while clambering up a steep slope in Austria.[2]

In one passage, Wolterstorff addresses the view that death is God's "normal instrument" for when "we've lived out the years He has planned for us." "All of you there, I'll send some starlings into the engine of your plane. And as for you there, a stroke while running will do nicely."[3]

Challenging this view, Wolterstorff writes:

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[2]Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987). Related philosophical and theological reflections include Wolterstorff's "Suffering Love," in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), and his "The Wounds of God: Calvin's Theology of Social Justice," *The Reformed Journal* 37, no. 6 (June 1987): 14-22.

[3]Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 66.

> The Bible speaks instead of God's *overcoming* death. Paul calls it the last great enemy to be overcome. God is appalled by death. My pain over my son's death is shared by his pain over my son's death. And yes, I share in his pain over *his* son's death.
>
> Seeing God as the agent of death is one way of fitting together into a rational pattern God, ourselves, and death. There are other ways. One of these has been explored in a book by Rabbi Kushner: God too is pained by death, more even than you and I are; but there's nothing much he can do about it.
>
> I cannot fit it all together by saying, "He did it," but neither can I do so by saying, "There was nothing he could do about it."[4]

So God didn't *take* Eric's life, actively causing his foot to slip; but neither was God—the God who, as Nick writes later, raised Jesus from death—helpless to prevent it. But if God did not cause it, and was not helpless to prevent it, is there some satisfying explanation of why God, so to speak, just *watched?* Wolterstorff writes:

> Job's friends tried out on him their explanations. . . .
>
> I have read the theodicies to justify the ways of God to man. I find them unconvincing. To the most agonized question I have ever asked, I do not know the answer. I do not know why God watched him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess.[5]

How then does Nick fit it all together? He writes:

> I cannot fit it together at all. I can only, with Job, endure. I do not know why God did not prevent Eric's death. To live without the answer is precarious. It's hard to keep one's footing.
>
> I can do nothing else than endure in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries. I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and resurrecter of Jesus Christ. I also believe that my son's life was cut off in its prime. I cannot fit these pieces together. I am at a loss.[6]

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In 1979 the *American Philosophical Quarterly* published a little paper that would launch the evidential problem of evil—Bill Rowe's "The Problem of

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[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid., 67-68.
[6]Ibid., 67.

Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism."[7] As it happens, that same year I also took my first teaching job, at the University of Tulsa, having just gotten my PhD from Pittsburgh in "HPS"—the history and philosophy of science.

The HPS Department at Pitt was an exciting place for a country boy from Hope College to do graduate work. My professors were part of a dynamic movement seeking general models of scientific rationality that fit with, and illuminated, the history of real science. And their own work as historians of science was convincing them that *worldviews*—including the many-stranded Christian worldview—had played key positive roles in the conceptual revolutions of modern science. My professors recognized and appreciated these roles.

But none of them—so far as they let on to me, anyway—had ever felt any personal resonance with Christian faith, and several were militant atheists. My dissertation adviser, Larry Laudan, is without doubt the most charismatic atheist I've ever known. He didn't, as I recall, offer much evidence for his atheism. But as I worked under him, I found myself feeling—and fighting—a strong pull toward atheism.

The struggle had a dimension I could not put words to. At that time I did not know any professionally active Christian philosophers—potential mentors on how to be a Christian and philosopher—with whom to try to give voice to the struggle. I remember sitting in the lobby of a hotel at my first American Philosophical Association meeting, watching Alvin Plantinga and William Alston walk by, desperately wanting to get to know them. But I was awkward—still am. I did not know how—could not find courage enough—to just go up and nervously introduce myself.

At about that time, I happened on Rowe's *American Philosophical Quarterly* paper. In it I found a lucid and forceful expression of *evidence* that might reasonably pull one toward atheism. I became somewhat obsessed with his argument: something, somewhere, seemed amiss in it. Worrying out the

[7] William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335-41; Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance,'" *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16, no. 2 (1984): 73-83; William Rowe, "Reply to Wykstra," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 16, no. 2 (1984): 73-83. The Rowe-Wykstra-Rowe exchange is reprinted in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Page citations refer to this volume.

argument in my Introduction to Philosophy class at Tulsa, I had a eureka moment—a crucial insight about where the argument went wrong. A year later I was able to test out the insight in conversation with Rowe, as part of his six-week National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar at Purdue.[8] It held, and I worked out the nitpicky details in several papers. Over the coming decades, Rowe would work at new versions of his argument, and I would work at evolving my basic response to keep up. It continued to hold.

These two men—Laudan and Rowe—were important philosophical conversation partners in my early career. Part of me, I came to feel, was looking to such men for a kind of father. How often, I wonder, do some of us—awkward young philosophers—look for mentors and models from a yearning to earn the privilege of truly knowing and being known by older philosophers we look up to? And how much, I began to wonder, might we be pulled by such "nonrational" factors toward one worldview and away from another? Not long after, in an effort to fight fire with fire—to balance out, I hoped, the nonrational factors—I introduced myself to some leading Christian philosophers.

In this way providence widened my circle of conversation partners and sometimes-mentors. For me and others I've known like me, relationships with such men are important. Yet they remained, almost always, philosophical fathers only. Even as I sit with them and analyze whether human suffering is evidence against theism, rarely do I learn of their real struggles or brokenness, nor they of mine. And understandably so. Few—even among our real fathers, but especially in the world of professional philosophers—feel able to share, to bear, neediness or brokenness in that way. Nor we with them.

So we plow on, cultivating our fields of analysis. Until, perhaps, we fall.

ROWE'S NO-SEE ARGUMENT

As our paradigm example of the new evidential problem of evil, let's grapple with Rowe's classic 1979 paper. Like some of his later papers, it begins by asking us to reflect on a concrete instance of suffering in our world. I will supply an instance of my own, which I saw in a newspaper—perhaps the *Tulsa Tribune*—soon after reading Rowe's 1979 paper. A mother in California,

[8]For amusing bits of that story from Rowe's point of view, see the opening of his "Friendly Atheism, Skeptical Theism, and the Problem of Evil," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 59 (2006): 79-82.

holding her baby daughter in her arms, was riding an intercity bus. The bus blew a tire, and a steel cable from the tire ripped its way through the tire well and floor of the bus. Spinning, it wrapped around the baby's foot, jerking the infant through the jagged hole in the floor, to be mangled beneath the wheels.

Such examples are important, infusing lived experience into otherwise pale arguments. In the early 1980s, as a new father, I could gut-wrenchingly imagine how such an event would shatter a parent's heart. "What possible purpose," we can imagine a parent screaming at God, "could require you to allow a horrific event like this?" Or perhaps just to move, as did the young widow of my first story, into a prolonged Stoic numbness: "Thy will be done, O God, not my will; your ways are not our ways; I give you back my husband. But . . . how can I ever trust you with those others I so love—my children?" In either sort of response we might, like Job, remain in conversation with God. But we might also find ourselves in intellectual trial, doubting God's very existence.[9]

Rowe's "evidential problem of evil" helps us see how this can happen. His argument has two strands. The first is empirical, reaching as it were from below; the second, more conceptual, reaches down from above.

The first strand begins from experience. In this world we find many occurrences of horrific suffering for which we—like the mother on the bus—*see no* good that makes it needful for the theistic God to allow the event. That this is so is hard to contest. It's clear, after all, that we see no outweighing good requiring us to let that infant girl die beneath the bus wheels: had you or I been on the bus and somehow foreseen that event about to happen, *we* would without hesitation have intervened, pulling the mother and child out of that particular seat. Is it not equally clear that we see no outweighing good making it needful for *God* (whose omniscience and omnipotence would make it so much easier) to refrain from intervening? We thus get Rowe's first premise—the *See-No* premise, or, for short:

> *C-No*: For many events of horrific suffering in our world, we *see no* "Outweighing Good" (making it needful for an all-powerful and all-knowing God to allow the event to happen).[10]

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[9]By "God" I—like Rowe—will mean the God of traditional theism, an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good-and-all-loving Person who created, sustains, and providentially governs our world. The evidential arguments from evil aim solely to support the claim that this *theistic* God does not exist.

[10]My free paraphrase.

But what, inferentially, does this premise give us? In particular, from *seeing no* such outweighing good, can one inferentially get to there *being no* such outweighing good? In other words, from *See-No* can we get to Be-No, or for short (with a nod to Eminem and B Real):[11]

> *B-No*: For many events of horrific suffering in our world, there *be no* "Outweighing Good."

Now C-No of course does not *prove* the truth of B-No. But might it not be *serious evidence* for its truth? Rowe thinks so and in an important series of papers has sought to articulate why. His seminal 1979 paper relies on how we rightly *reason from appearances*. Such reasoning rests on a general principle of rationality that Richard Swinburne calls "the principle of credulity."[12] If, due to the input from some cognitive situation, it *appears* (or *seems*) that things are a certain way, this is serious prima facie evidence that things are that way.[13] Looking at the sky, my wife rightly says, "It appears that we're going to get some heavy rain." This being so, she has serious evidence it is going to rain—she goes back and gets her umbrella. We distinguish two steps in such cases. First, there is a process whereby input from a perceptual or cognitive situation entitles one to an epistemic "appears" claim.[14] Second, there is the step of taking this appears-claim as *serious* prima facie evidence that probably things *are* as they appear to be.[15]

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[11]As in Eminem's "Love the Way You Lie" ("wasn't ready to be no millionaire") or (with B Real) his "9-1-1."

[12]Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 254-71. On corrections to Swinburne's account, see Wykstra, "Humean Obstacle," section 2.3.

[13]The principle uses *appears* in what Roderick Chisholm calls its "epistemic" sense, as distinct from its phenomenological and comparative senses. For more detail see Wykstra, "Humean Obstacle," 152-55.

[14]In Wykstra, "Humean Obstacle," sections 2.1 and 3.2, I give various examples to show that appears-claims can represent nonbasic beliefs grounded in inferential processes every bit as much as basic beliefs grounded in, for example, perceptual processes. Early Reformed epistemology, while broadening our notion of properly basic beliefs, has for the most part remained stuck in an internalist and strong-foundationalist conception of properly inferential beliefs. For my own effort to get unstuck see "Externalism, Proper Inferentiality, and Sensible Evidentialism," *Topoi* 14 (1995): 107-21.

[15]In other papers—Wykstra and Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wykstra ("Skeptical Theism, Abductive Theology, and Theory Versioning," in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, ed. Trent G. Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014])—I have unpacked this notion of "serious evidence" (or "strong evidence") via the notion of "levering evidence." E is levering evidence for P just in case; were one starting out being "agnostic" or fifty-fifty about P, coming to learn E would be weighty-enough evidence to make it reasonable to believe or accept P. Data that is serious or strong evidence in this sense is of course still open to being defeated on gaining yet more data.

Rowe's first strand is thus a two-step inference. He begins from a See-No premise:

> C-No: We see no outweighing good making it needful for the theistic God to allow this instance of horrific suffering.

He then urges that this, on reflection, entitles us to an intermediate step that:

> Seems-No: There *doesn't seem* (or appear) to be any such outweighing good.

And it is by this route that Rowe (by tacit use of a principle of credulity) thus gets to:

> B-No: Probably, there *be no* outweighing good making it needful for the theistic God to allow this instance of horrific suffering.

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Suppose we accept this inference to B-No. What does this give us? It gives us, Rowe argues, reason to believe that probably God does not exist. Here enters the second strand of Rowe's case, which begins—from above—with reflection on the theistic concept of God as a *wholly good* being. For a wholly *good* being, Rowe argues, would find any instance of horrific suffering, considered *in and of itself*, as an evil—that is, as something that is considered in and of itself undesirable, or of negative value—a *dis*value. A wholly good being, in other words, can neither find positive value in horrific suffering for its own sake nor be merely neutral or indifferent toward it: taking it in and of itself, she must be *against* it. And that means that she—not just God, but *any* wholly good being—will *allow* such horrific suffering only when this *is needful for*—serves an essential role in—promoting or bringing about an outweighing good of some kind. Rowe does not spend much time on this premise, perhaps because it is fully accepted by many thoughtful theists, both past and present. About that Rowe is surely right.[16] Eleonore Stump, endorsing St. Thomas's views in this area, puts it this way:

[16]While my own approach, like Stump's, accepts this premise, other theistic philosophers have rejected it. Some—Marilyn Adams and James Sterba, for example—see it as fundamentally wrongheaded, as harboring a consequentialist ethics that in their view is fundamentally at odds with a Christian view of God. Others—Peter van Inwagen, for one—think it is just oversimplified, failing to reckon with possibilities of intrinsic vagueness, assuming instead that there is some sharp "cutoff point," known to God, about exactly which—and how many—instances of horrific suffering God needs to allow to promote some outweighing good.

> Many of the constraints on theodicy that are insisted on by contemporary philosophers also operate in Aquinas's theodicy. On Aquinas's views, if a good God allows suffering, it has to be for the sake of a benefit that outweighs the suffering, and that benefit has to be one that, in the circumstances, cannot be gotten just as well without the suffering: the benefit has to *defeat* the suffering. If *per improbabile* something other than suffering—conversations with God, for example—could have brought Samson to the final redemption he has in his story, then, on Aquinas's views, in the story God would not have been justified in allowing Samson's suffering.[17]

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From the two strands, then, we get the final stage of Rowe's No-God Argument:

> No-God 1: If the theistic God exists, then this God—being all-good—allows one of his creatures to undergo horrific suffering only if doing so is needful for the sake of some outweighing good or goods.
>
> No-God 2: For some instances of horrific suffering, there *are* no such outweighing goods.
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> No-God 3: So the theistic God does not exist.

This final stage is a *deductively valid* argument: *if* both premises are true, then the conclusion—that God does not exist—must be true. The only question is whether we have—through the two strands of reasoning by which Rowe supports each premise, or in some other way—adequate reason to think both premises are true. To the extent that we do, we have good reason to think that God—the all-powerful, all-knowing, and wholly good God of traditional theism—does not exist.

BRIDGE

How might we compare Rowe and Wolterstorff? Both wrestle with the same ancient "Why?" question, as it arises in the face of concrete, life-shattering events. Both hold that there must—if the theistic God exists—be an answer: a wholly good God would allow such events only if doing so is

[17]Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2010), 378.

needful for some outweighing good. Both are unable to find an answer, to see any such good, to—in Wolterstorff's words—"fit it all together." Again, Wolterstorff writes: "To the most agonized question I have ever asked, I do not know the answer. I do not know why God watched him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess."

In this, however, Wolterstorff remains in fraught dialogue with God, even in God's hiddenness. The challenge, for him, is one of *enduring*—enduring "in the face of this deepest and most painful of mysteries."[18] He resists the inference to there being no point and (hence) no God. To be sure, he feels the pull of that conclusion. But he finds, we will see, resources sufficient to resist it. Those resources will hinge on his sources of conviction that God *is* real—and that if this is so, there must *be* some way it all fits together, even when he cannot see it.

And Rowe's position—espousing what he calls "friendly atheism"—allows for this. While arguing that apparently pointless suffering is strong evidence for atheism, Rowe also avers that it is, like all probabilistic evidence, *defeasible*: it might in some cases be neutralized, even outweighed, by opposing evidence. And such evidence might be indirect: if someone has strong enough grounds for believing God exists, this might—by what Rowe calls the G. E. Moore shift—be indirect evidence that apparently pointless suffering does have a point, despite the No-See data to the contrary. Rowe's contention is that this data is weighty evidence, so weighty that it will take *a lot*, on the other "theistic" pan of the balance, to neutralize or outweigh it.

But *is* Rowe right about this? And is hoping to "outweigh" it really the only—or best—evidential response? Here enters skeptical theism.

THE TWOFOLD CORE OF SKEPTICAL THEISM

So-called skeptical theism, I said earlier, claims two things. The first claim is that *if* God does exist, we humans should not expect to see or grasp very much of this God's purposes. The second is that once we take measure of this, we can see that many things that might seem to be strong evidence against God aren't strong evidence at all.

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[18]Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 67-68.

Taking cues from Wolterstorff, we can find both claims expressed in the book of Job. It was Job's friends, Wolterstorff says, who "tried out on him their explanations."[19] Job—like Wolterstorff—finds their answers unconvincing. While refusing to renounce God—to "curse God and die"—Job is eager to bring before God himself the complaint that he's being treated in a shoddy way. But when Job finally gets that chance, God's reply is stern:

> Who is this that darkens counsel
> By words without knowledge?
> Now gird up your loins like a man,
> and I will ask you, and you instruct Me!
> Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
> Tell Me, if you have understanding. (Job 38:2-3 NASB)

God goes on at some length in this vein—rubbing Job's nose, as it were, in the fact that creating and sustaining the universe is no mean feat. And God then puts a question back to Job: "Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it." And Job's reply: "Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth" (Job 40:2, 4 NASB).[20]

This isn't likely to impress many philosophers. Laying one's hand on one's mouth—in order, I suppose, having shut it to keep it shut—is not our usual métier. And the speech that the author gives to God is, on first reading, not likely to impress many of us. For one thing, we know that our spinning earth doesn't really have foundations, so God seems to need some remedial tutoring on basic astronomy. More deeply, we might see in it a mere appeal to power and hear in it too many fallacies for which we've got Latin names at the ready.

But the author of this ancient book, if behind us in his physics, has much to teach us. Read prayerfully and with the help of good scholarship, the book gives us a narrative in which God neither silences Job nor gives him some single answer, but rather meets him through a complex process that honors

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[19]Ibid., 67.

[20]And the ancient author, I think, clearly has Job *getting* that this bears on those complaints he was so eager to voice before God. In thinking God had no good reason for allowing the horrific events that have befallen him, Job realizes he has been rash (Job 42:3): "I have spoken of great things which I have not understood, things too wonderful for me to know."

his questions and seeks to restore Job's trust. I will return to some of this complexity. But one "moment" in it, I suggest, is a skeptical-theistic moment. In it, God brings Job and us to a crucial question: *If* our evolving physical universe *is* the creation of one God, an "I am" whom this tradition calls only Yahweh, will there not be a certain, let us say, *disproportionality* between Yahweh's mind and the mind of any of us? The first claim of skeptical theism is exactly this disproportionality thesis—for short, DISPRO:

> DISPRO: If such a being as God does exist, what our minds see and grasp and purpose in evaluating events in our universe will be *vastly less* than what this being's mind sees and grasps and purposes.

Now here I'd like to register a mild complaint against whomever, with the disproportionality thesis in mind, coined the term *skeptical theism* for our (and Job's) position. In philosophy, to be a "skeptic" is to adopt a stance that certain things we ordinarily tend to think we know (or, perhaps, believe strongly and with confidence) are things we *don't* really know (or should *not* have much confidence about). A skeptic about the external world thus thinks that, contrary to ordinary opinion, we don't really know that the ordinary physical world of dogs and cats and tables and chairs really exists. (For all we know, the skeptic will say, it might all be part of "the matrix.") But in affirming DISPRO, is the skeptical theist (or Job) affirming something contrary to our ordinary suppositions?

I don't think so. It's not, after all, that there's some widespread ordinary supposition that we humans can see and grasp *pretty much everything* that God (if God exists) can; it's not that only a few philosophers—those *skeptical theists*—suggest that this is a bit overweening. To the contrary, anyone who reflects a moment on the matter will recognize that if there is a mind that created and sustains this universe, this mind has a vastly greater scope than a human mind. So far as DISPRO goes, a more apt term for our position might be *sensibly humble* theism, and a more apt term for the denial of DISPRO might be *insanely hubristic* theism.[21] It would, alas, take a Prince to change our name to "the Approach Formerly Known as Skeptical Theism." I will settle for adding the occasional prefix: *so-called* skeptical theism.

[21]Since it is a conditional claim, it puts the question to theists and nontheists alike.

The second claim of so-called skeptical theism is that if the first claim is true, then many evidential arguments that might seem to weigh heavily against theism do not come to much. Could this be so for the evidential arguments of Rowe, in response to whom my own skeptical theism arose? Of these Alvin Plantinga remarks: "These new arguments of Rowe and Draper are subtle and sophisticated; many deep and interesting topics come up in considering them."[22]

Can some of these arguments really run afoul of something so jejune as the above conditional theistic humility? It's not that they do so in any way that is (for me, anyway) *obvious*. But that's usually the case with "subtle and sophisticated" arguments by smart people: when such arguments have a fundamental problem—some premise or inferential step that is irremediably flawed—the exact location and nature of that problem is often far from obvious.

It is for this reason that I've set out Rowe's 1979 reasoning in some detail. For where, in it, is the fundamental problem? The problem is not obvious. Indeed, we theists shouldn't think it obvious that it must *have* some fundamental problem. Even if theism is true, it's entirely possible, even likely, that we'll encounter *some* data that, for a period of time at least, is serious prima facie evidence against it. This regularly happens for scientific theories we've come to regard as true. During such periods, our best course is simply to acknowledge the problem and ask whether the negative evidence is outweighed by our overall positive evidence/grounds for the theory.

But Rowe's 1979 argument, as I came to see it, *does* have a fundamental problem. And that problem does arise from its conflict with that first "sensibly humble" claim of skeptical theism. The exact location of the problem, however, is subtle and surprising, and is tightly bound up with one of those topics in philosophy that is—as Plantinga put it—"deep and interesting."

ON AVOIDING THE EVILS OF APPEARANCE

The relevant topic in this case was the epistemology of the "appears" idiom. A key premise of Rowe's argument uses the term *appears*, and that same

[22]Plantinga continues, we should note: "Upon close examination, however, they fail, and fail resoundingly." Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 391. Plantinga's entire chapter here is the best treatment I know of that combines a skeptical theist sensibility with lucid analysis of the many-sided problem of evil.

term (and its cognate *apparently*) runs throughout his paper. Here the term *appears* is serving, as we say, an "epistemic" function, and for this reason it came also to figure heavily in mid-twentieth-century epistemology. Now, in ordinary language, *appears* and its cognates (*apparently*, *seems*, etc.) have a variety of functions, and real people are able to correctly apply these with little effort. But here, as so often, our ordinary idioms can suffer a certain disorientation when applied to nonordinary topics, and it takes considerable reflection to straighten out the confusions.

■ ■ ■

Consider again, then, Rowe's inferential movement. Put concisely, the inference moves from

No-God 2.1 We *see no* point for horrific event E.

to the further claim that

No-God 2.2 So, there *doesn't appear to be* any point for E.

and from this, to yet further claim that

No-God 2.3 So, probably, there *is no* point for E.

Now here it is tempting to think that if there is any fundamental problem, it will be in the move from 2.2 to 2.3. No-God 2.2 looks—on, as it were, first appearance—like a very innocuous claim; it seems to be little more than a paraphrase of No-God 2.1. But reflection shows that appearances here are deceiving. A first thing to see is that in this context "doesn't appear to be" is using "doesn't" in what we might call its ordinary involuted sense. If someone tells you, in a suitable sharp tone, "I don't believe you're telling the truth!" they are not usually saying "I don't have any belief" about the matter. They are saying "I believe you are not telling the truth." So also here, I've argued, close reflection shows that when Rowe asserts No-God 2.2, he is really saying, "There *appears to not be* any point for E." This is a bolder claim than we might first have thought. And it means that the movement from 2.1 to 2.3 is really from

No-God 2.1 We *see no* point for horrific event E.

to the further claim that

No-God 2.2 So, there appears to be no point for E.

to the yet further claim

No-God 2.3 So, probably, there *is no* point for E.

We can now start to see that the movement from 2.1 to 2.2 is by no means trivial. For some things, it is of course a perfectly legitimate inference. If I casually look around a classroom and see no horse in the room, it is entirely reasonable for me to assert, "It appears that there is no horse in the room." But for other things, it's not legitimate at all. If I look casually around the classroom, for example, and see no flea in the room, am I rationally entitled to say, "It appears there is no flea in the room"?

Or think of it this way: you are in a health clinic getting your daily methadone shot, and the health worker drops the hypodermic needle on the floor. She picks it up off the floor, does a close visual inspection of it for contamination, and says—what is incontestably true—"I see no hepatitis or other viruses on this needle." She pauses and then adds, "So, it *appears that* there are no hepatitis or other viruses on the needle—and so it is *apparently* virus-free!" She then adds, as she puts the needle in the syringe and begins to inject you, "So, probably, it is virus free."

Now, in this series of inferences, where has her biggest mistake occurred? It is (or so I have come to think) in the very first move—from "I *see no* viruses on the needle" to "There *appear to be no* viruses on the needle." That move would be very strong for some things (for from seeing no *dog hair* on the needle, say), less strong for others (seeing no *dirt* on the needle), and absurdly weak for others (seeing no *viruses* on the needle).

■ ■ ■

"Doesn't appear" inferences, we've just seen, differ greatly in inferential strength, ranging from very strong to absurdly weak. Our question must be where Rowe's inference falls on this continuum. Here it would help enormously to have some criterion, some test, that we could use on any such inference to gauge its strength. If we think about the cases considered above, one such test suggests itself. For normal, unaided human

vision at close range, some things belong to sorts that are quite seeable; dog hairs or fleas much less seeable; and viruses not seeable at all. (Put a bit more precisely, for a certain sort of exercises of unaided human vision, this is so. From a Boeing 727 at thirty thousand feet, horses on the ground are not seeable at all.) What suggests itself is that the *more* some sort of thing is (for a certain exercise of some cognitive faculty) "seeable," the stronger is the inference from not seeing the thing (given a certain exercise of one's cognitive powers) to a "doesn't appear" claim of the sort involved in Rowe's argument.

Based on this general idea, my earliest published response to Rowe proposed a general criterion for evaluating inferences to appears-claims. I called it CORNEA—a somewhat unprincipled acronym for *the Condition Of ReasoNable Epistemic Access:*

> CORNEA: On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim "it appears that p" only if the following condition is met: *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.*[23]

We can see how CORNEA works by applying it, first, to the needle scenario. Here the health worker's "cognitive situation" is *doing a careful visual inspection of the needle and seeing no viruses on it.* She makes the claim "*It appears that (p) no viruses are on the needle.*" CORNEA says she is entitled to this only if the above italicized clause is met in the needle case—only if, that is—

> it is reasonable for her to believe that given her cognitive situation, if there were viruses on the needle, the doctor's perceptual experience (or "cognized situation") would likely be different than it is.

But this is clearly not reasonable for her to believe, given the limits of unaided human visual perception. While entitled to say that she *sees no* germ on the needle, she is not—according to CORNEA—entitled to infer the appears-claim. Her visual evidence of seeing no germs is, after all, just what she should expect—given that germs by their nature are unlikely to fall

[23] Wykstra, "Humean Obstacle," 85.

within the limits of human visual perception—if there *were* germs on it. Germs or no germs, we'd expect the needle to look the same way.

CORNEA thus seems to fit and illuminate our intuitions about this and many other cases in which we make appears-claims of an epistemic sort.

■ ■ ■

The issue is, then, what verdict it yields when applied to Rowe's inference from No-God 2.1 to No-God 2.2. Is the italicized condition in CORNEA satisfied for this inference?

Here is where the Disproportionality Thesis comes in. Is it at all reasonable to think that if there were a justifying good for a particular evil, then we would likely discern it? In my 1984 paper, I noted that the outweighing good at issue here is "of a special sort: one purposed by the Creator of all that is, whose vision and wisdom are therefore somewhat greater than 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."[24]

I then related this to CORNEA: "But if outweighing 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."[25]

But if this is correct, then Rowe's See-No inference is faulty at its very first step. From seeing no point for some horrific event, we should not assert that it doesn't appear to serve any point. One should not speak of the data of "apparently pointless suffering." One who does so—if CORNEA's condition is not satisfied—is akin to the health worker who, on eyeballing the needle closely and seeing no germs on it, asserts that "there don't appear to be any germs on it" and who avers that the needle is "apparently virus-free."[26]

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[24]Ibid., 155.

[25]Ibid., 88.

[26]Ibid., 89. This crucial point continues to be regularly lost on—or resisted by—otherwise able readers, who treat the CORNEA critique as if it grants (or should grant) the claim that there are evils that are *apparently* pointless, resisting only the conclusion that they are *really* pointless. Failure to distinguish the relevant sense of *appears* might be involved here. Cf. Stephen J. Wykstra and Timothy Perrine, "Foundations of Skeptical Theism: CORNEA, CORE, and Conditional Probabilities," *Faith and Philosophy* 29, no. 4 (2012): 375-99.

NEW DIRECTIONS FOR SO-CALLED SKEPTICAL THEISM

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to every type of evidence that might seem to count strongly against belief in God. In its first phase, we've seen, so-called skeptical theism relies strongly on what I've here called "conditional theistic humility"—an affirmation that *if* the theistic God does exist (that is, if mere theism is true), then it is pretty unsurprising that the divine purposes for God's "actions" will often be beyond our ken. This conditional, modest as it is, removes the sting from *some* evidential arguments that might otherwise seem lethal to theism.

But the "some" is crucial here. In its first phase, so-called skeptical theism takes what we might term a "minimalist" approach to evidence evaluation. It asks what is to be expected from "mere theism"—the theistic hypothesis taken, so to speak, straight up—no mixers, no chasers. In both philosophical and personal contexts, I am convinced, this approach has an important place. But to discern that place we must also discern its limits.

In the philosophical context of meeting Rowe-style arguments, a minimalist approach is especially prudent. It will help little to show that Rowe's data is expectable if we expand mere theism by adding to it *further* auxiliary hypotheses devised solely, as it were, to accommodate his data.[27] For while the expanded hypothesis will now fit his data, it is also now more complicated and top-heavy than before. In our personal journeys, too, there are contexts in which, setting to one side doctrinal accretions, we need to think freshly about mere theism compared with its chief alternatives. While "minimalist," such an approach might honor the momentous character of a first step into mere theism.

But to everything there is a season. Once theism has in our personal belief-space come to fill even a mustard-seed-sized volume, it will want to grow. New questions and new possibilities will beckon for exploration. In philosophical contexts, too, some evidential challenges require an approach that is "expansionist" rather than "minimalist." Rowe-style arguments from

[27] For a retrospective on the roots of the minimalist response, see the section "Rowe's First Dagger" in my "Suffering, Evidence, and Analogy: Noseeum Arguments versus Skeptical Gambits," in *Philosophy Through Science Fiction*, ed. Ryan Nichols, Fred Miller, and Nicholas Smith (New York: Routledge, 2009), 179-81.

evil are narrowly "inductive" in character, but there is an evidential case for atheism that can also—and I think better—be given "abductive" formulation, so as to compare theism and its worldview alternatives in terms of explanatory power.[28] Such reasoning about worldview hypotheses will use evidential norms that are relevantly similar to those norms by which, in the doing of science, we use data to evaluate scientific hypotheses. What will such norms look like? Here, even for the doing of science, we have a methodological embarrassment of riches (or perhaps tower of Babel). Among both philosophers of science *and* reflective scientists, there is considerable diversity about how to articulate the norms for rational theory appraisal. If anything is clear, however, it is that scientific insight arises from an approach that is "expansionist" rather than "minimalist."

A broadly Lakatosian approach, I've recently argued, has much to offer us here.[29] On this view, rival theoretical conceptions—a wave conception of light versus a particle conception, for example—function as "hard cores" that are, while not themselves testable (they are too vague for that), put to use as "hard cores" of rival investigative research programs. Each program seeks to "expand" its pet conception into a "best version," by a sustained exploration of various auxiliary claims that can be grafted onto the core conception so as to give that conception more explanatory power and more empirical testability. And in Lakatos's "methodology of scientific research programs," the ongoing evaluation of theories has a strongly "diachronic" component, for each research program will generate a series of "versions" of the core theory, and part of the evaluation involves a norm-governed evaluation of this series—a diachronic or "video" evaluation of how the unfolding of the core conception over time, rather than just a synchronic "snapshot" evaluation of any specific version at one time.

A Lakatosian approach, I think, has much to offer our thinking about the evidential evaluation of rival worldview conceptions. On such an approach,

[28]Paul Draper has done much to advance an abductive approach (and to chafe at the idea that skeptical theism is relevant to it). Here see his essays in Dougherty and McBrayer, *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, and those cited in the bibliography to that volume.

[29]I speak of a "Lakatosian" approach because Imre Lakatos's insights, since his untimely death in 1974, have been steadily enriched by others, melding them with ongoing work in Bayesian probabilism and formal epistemology. Cf. Perrine and Wykstra, "Skeptical Theism, Abductive Atheology, and Theory Versioning," 151.

what I've called "mere theism" would be treated as the hard core of a worldview research program, as would the core conceptions of other worldviews. Within each research program, these core conceptions would be fleshed out, by worldview research programs, into successive "theory versions," to be evaluated by norms akin to Lakatosian norms, but with due adjustments reflecting the differences between scientific theories and the leading worldview theories. In seeking to flesh out worldviews into their best versions, such worldview inquiry would not dismiss modes of access other than the scientific, including putative witness to divine revelation and divine illumination within theistic traditions, with their impressive commonalities and their problematic contrasts. It would, over time, evaluate the rival worldviews in terms of their diachronic track record, both in heuristic fruitfulness in theoretical insight into our world, but also—what also falls in the province of worldviews—toward practical wisdom in living out one's life prudently but passionately within it.[30]

THE CONSISTENCY QUESTION

I'm suggesting the above as a new direction—a second phase—of skeptical theism. This suggestion is likely to cause raised eyebrows. To some, I expect the new direction will seem quite unrelated, even alien, to so-called skeptical theism. To others, it might seem to contradict its very essence.

For two reasons, I don't see it this way. First, as noted above, *skeptical theism* is a bit of a misnomer: epistemic humility is not, in the philosophical

[30]The relation between scientific and worldview (or metaphysical) research programs needs more attention that I can give it here. But the philosophy of science of Lakatos—like that of Karl Popper, which it seeks to supersede—contains seeds of a fruitful relation between the two sorts of theorizing. Such a relation is nicely telegraphed by the final two paragraphs of the 2010 entry on "panpsychism," by William Seager and Sean Allen-Hermanson, in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2015 edition, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/. While granting that a worldview like panpsychism cannot be put to a decisive empirical test, they write: "Nonetheless, metaphysical views form an indispensable background to all science. They integrate our world views and allow us to situate our scientific endeavors within a larger vista and can suggest fruitful new lines of empirical enquiry (as the example of Fechner's psychophysics illustrates). In particular, panpsychism accords with an approach that rejects physicalist reductionism at the same time as enjoining the search for neural correlates of consciousness, and it sees, or wants to see, a fundamental unity in the world which emergentism denies. Thus it is not a doctrine at odds with current empirical research. It has always been and remains impossible to resist metaphysical speculation about the fundamental nature of the world. As long as there has been science, science has informed this speculation and in return metaphysics has both helped to tell us what the point of science is and paved the way for new science."

sense, a form of skepticism. Moreover, what so-called skeptical theism asks of us is conditional theistic humility: it asks us, at bottom, to think very seriously about what is to be expected *if theism is true*—about what possibilities are *integral* to theism. The same holds for any worldview core: if the *generic* worldview is true, then it is true in some more specified *versions* (and not in others). Consider, for example, a materialist/naturalist worldview that, put generically, says this: "All that exists, at bottom, is *matter*." If this worldview is true, it might be true on a version that says this matter has existed eternally, *or* on a version that says matter has existed only for a finite period of time. Both possibilities are integral to naturalism, and a naturalistic research program will seek to flesh both out so as to discern which, over time, yields the most empirically and theoretically progressive program. The same holds for other leading worldviews—theistic, panpsychist, and so on. Because the conditional epistemic humility enjoined by so-called skeptical theism reflects an underlying commitment to *integral* theorizing, it is a natural complement to what I am calling "the second phase" of skeptical theism.

What of the second worry—that there is here an actual contradiction? This arises, I think, from arguments that skeptical theism, in its peculiar applications of conditional theistic humility, must logically drive us to more extreme forms of skepticism. The arguments here are too varied and complex to be treated in any detail. But their general thrust, to a crude zero-eth approximation and in "toy" form, might perhaps be put as follows. Suppose, the critics say, skeptical theism is right: all those plentiful and apparently pointless horrific evils are allowed by God because this serves some fabulous outweighing goods that God alone can see and grasp. If we admit that, says the critic, must we not also admit that, for all we know, there might be similar outweighing goods for the sake of which this God has allowed us to be deceived—*Matrix*-style—every time we use our physical senses? And must we not admit that, for all we know, our moral judgments that certain evils are to be prevented by us (by, say, calling 911) are in fact events that God wants to happen for the sake of some hidden outweighing good? And must we not admit that what things we rightly take to be "disclosed" by God through divine revelation are in fact false but taught to us by God for the sake of outweighing goods that God alone can grasp?

If I thought any of these things follow from the core claims of so-called skeptical theism, I would be worried. But I am not: I think that in fact they do not follow at all. Do I mean that I can spot weaknesses in each and every argument given by critics? No. In fact, I can't. But that doesn't worry me much, either. For it just seems to me obvious that conditional theistic humility about *how much* or how *often* we humans should expect to see or grasp the purposes of any God capable of creating and sustaining our universe is entirely *compatible* with holding that we are nevertheless *capable* of seeing and grasping a great many truths about God and God's purposes. It seems obvious enough to convince me that any argument to the contrary has gone wrong somewhere, even if I cannot say exactly where.

If this strikes you as somehow rash, perhaps an analogy will help. We—you and I—are, I imagine, fully convinced that the number of stars in the universe *vastly* exceeds what we are able to see. Nevertheless, we take this as perfectly compatible with our conviction that, when gazing up at a dark sky on a clear night, we are able (at least with a pair of corrective eyeglasses) to see a very goodly number of them. Now suppose we were to learn that there are a number of sophisticated arguments that these two things are incompatible—that if we want to keep one of the two convictions, we must abandon the other. We would surely—and rightly—judge that each argument has gone wrong somewhere, and we would judge this even if we could not, for some or all of them, say exactly where.

The parallel strikes me as complete. "For now," says St. Paul, "we see in a mirror dimly, but then [we shall see] face to face" (1 Cor 13:12 NASB). In its minimalist phase, skeptical theism says only that God's purposes—if the theistic God exists—vastly exceed what we are able to see. In positing conditional theistic humility as something having a claim on any reasonable person and thus as a constraint on evidential arguments against theism, it engages in "negative apologetics." In its *constructive* phase, skeptical theism seeks to explore whatever fraction of God's mind and heart to which we might have progressive access, bringing this into relation with discernible features of our world and our lived experience of it, and any sources of divine disclosure that have rightful claims on our assent. This constructive phase—also a mode of integral theism—uses reflection on our world and ourselves to learn more about God, and reflection on God to get deeper insight into

ourselves and our world. In the interim period between St. Paul's "now" and "then," a *constructive* skeptical theism can thus be at once both epistemically humble and passionately investigative—seeking more light, while fully expecting that light to bring surprising revisions, to leave a great many things seen in a mirror dimly, and to leave many more not seen at all.[31]

RESOURCES UNDER TRIAL

And in this interim period, *some* pieces of counterevidence might seriously count against theism, as against *each* of the leading rival worldview theories. That is how incomplete evidence has regularly worked for even our best scientific theories. Why not for worldview theories as well?

Thus it was, perhaps, for Wolterstorff, who, unable to "fit it all together"—unable to "even guess" God's purpose—acknowledges that "to live without the answer is precarious. It is hard to keep one's footing."[32] And a few pages later:

> I am at an impasse, and you, O God, have brought me here. From my earliest days, I believed in you. I shared in the life of your people: in their prayers, in their work, in their songs, in their listening for your speech and their watching for your presence. For me your yoke was easy. On me your presence smiled.
>
> Noon has darkened. As fast as she could say "He's dead," the light dimmed. And where are you are in this darkness? I learned to spy you in the light. Here in this darkness I cannot find you. . . .
>
> Will my eyes adjust to this darkness? Will I find you in the dark—not in the streaks of light which remain, but in the darkness? Has anyone found you there? . . . Or in the dark, is it best to wait in silence?[33]

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[31]Here I must respectfully disagree with Eleonore Stump, who sees a sharp opposition between skeptical theism and the magnificent project she undertakes in her *Wandering in Darkness*. Stump's brief contrasts of her position with our approach (e.g., 13-14; 408) might suggest to readers that, on our approach to human cognitive limitations, humans are precluded from having *any* access to *any* of God's reasons for allowing suffering. Not so, as this paper endeavors to make clear. Closer to the mark are earlier writings in which Stump affirms that skeptical theism, without precluding our efforts to discern God's purposes, can serve important roles in "taking up the slack" when no account seems adequate. It's also worth noting how Stump herself, in her final pages, hedges her own claims. She thinks that her Thomistic account might well capture—in a "general way"—the *full* range of goods for which horrific suffering is, by God, allowed and guided to afflict any given "fully functional adult human being." But she also explicitly refrains (476) from taking a stand on whether these goods explain the *full* panoply of horrific suffering in our world, including as it does sentient beings who are not fully functional adult humans.

[32]Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 67.

[33]Ibid., 69.

Wolterstorff does not lose faith; he remains in conversation with God. But one senses his worldview has entered a new period of trial. "Faith," he writes,

> is a footbridge that you don't know will hold you up over the chasm until you're forced to walk out onto it.
>
> I'm standing there now, over the chasm. I inspect the bridge. Am I deluded in believing that in God the questions shouted out by the wounds of the world has its answer? Am I deluded in believing that someday I will know the answer? Am I deluded in believing that once I know the answer, I will see that love has conquered?[34]

If there is genuine intellectual trial here, it is no wonder. Unable to see why his God would allow Eric's fall and all the other wounds of the world, Wolterstorff knows that if there is no God—if it is all a sound and a fury signifying nothing—then loved ones regularly falling to their death, or getting crushed in senseless accidents, is *exactly* what one should expect. And as a good Bayesian will tell you, this must count, to *some* degree, as evidence that counts against theism.

It makes sense, then, when a few pages later Wolterstorff writes: "Why don't you just scrap this God business, says one of my bitter suffering friends. It's a rotten world, you and I have been shafted, and that's that."[35]

But here Wolterstorff is not left speechless, with no reason for the hope that is within him:

> I'm pinned down. When I survey this gigantic intricate world, I cannot believe that it just came about. I do not mean that I have some good arguments for its being made, and I believe in the arguments. I mean that the conviction wells up irresistibly within me when I contemplate the world. The experiment of trying to abolish it does not work. When I look at the heavens, I cannot manage to believe that they do not declare the glory of God. When looking at the earth, I cannot bring off the attempt to believe that it does not display his handiwork.
>
> And when I read the New Testament and look into the material surrounding it, I am convinced that the man Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead. In that I see the sign that he was more than a prophet. He was the Son of God.[36]

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[34]Ibid., 76-77.
[35]Ibid., 76.
[36]Ibid.

Thus it is that despite being quite unable to see how it all fits together, Wolterstorff resists sliding to Rowe's conclusion. I am struck by the role of Jesus here. Every worldview finds something in our experienced world to pick as the "best window" affording what it takes as a glimpse of the heart of reality. A naturalist like Peter Atkins finds the window in his beloved second law of thermodynamics, in which he sees a guarantee that the last word on life will be death—the entropy-death of the entire physical universe. Wolterstorff fixes his eyes elsewhere. He does not know the answer as to why God "just watched Eric fall." But in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, he finds ample ground to endure—to believe that "in God the question shouted out by the wounds of the world has its answer," and that for Eric's death, "someday I will see the answer"—and will also, in that day, "see that love has conquered death."[37]

I am struck, too, that in finding that resource in Jesus, Wolterstorff seems to deviate just a little from that Reformed epistemology that treats our access to such things as properly basic belief, rather than evidentially grounded. His conviction about Jesus seem to focus on the witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, and it arises, he says, "when I read the New Testament *and look into the material surrounding it.*" There is, I would like to hope, at least a trace of evidentialism in how Wolterstorff describes the resources sustaining his faith under trial.[38]

BEYOND ANSWERS

We must not, I've argued, expect there to be any one-size-fits-all answer to every parcel of counterevidence that seems to count against theism. Neither should we expect, when in the midst of life-rending events, to find in skeptical theism much balm for grief, or even much help in just enduring. To the contrary, the "theistic" part of skeptical theism, especially if we are in a living theistic tradition, will have given us *expectations* of God as our heavenly Father, and our journey will have brought us, in some measure, to care about things that God cares about. All of this can make our grief and suffering a source not just of grief but of much else—of intellectual questions, of course,

[37]Ibid., 77.

[38]Cf. Stephen Wykstra, "'Not Done in a Corner': How to Be a Sensible Evidentialist About Jesus," *Philosophical Books* 43, no. 2 (2002): 81-135.

but also of directing toward God our theistically driven disappointments, protests, even accusations. Theism, if I might so put it, is not for sissies.[39]

Earlier I urged that conditional theistic humility is one important "moment" within the complex narrative of Job's climactic encounter with God. But we—we philosophers, especially—must resist the temptation to reduce this ancient text to a "single-answer" book.[40] Lindsay Wilson's recent book *Job*, weaving many strands of recent Job scholarship into his own treatment, brings into focus how Job's "strong words of protest addressed to God" seem "to sit most awkwardly with his earlier piety." And Wilson then raises an important question: "Can true faith include such statements, accusations, and protests, or has Job overstepped the boundaries of genuine piety?"[41]

As I read Wilson, a fundamental lesson of Job is that such protests are indeed part of genuine faith and piety. When God draws close to Job, his words—"Gird up your loins like a man" (Job 38:3 NASB)—are not meant to make Job cower or silence him. Rather, they exhort Job to stay in bold conversation—even as God pushes back. Recent scholars thus find in this wisdom book a form of "protest wisdom"—in which such protests, as Wilson puts it, "are not seeking to dishonor or denigrate God, but to bring Job's legitimate concerns and questions before his creator. . . . In this sense, Job belongs with the Teacher as boundary rider, not huddling around the central religious community, but listening to the challenges and questions posed by the world."[42]

But if Job is a "boundary rider" for the community, he is also on a journey in his own relationship with God. And at some level he realizes this. Throughout the book, Wilson observes, it is Job alone who prays. Unlike his four friends—Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and, entering late as a young man's voice, Elihu—it is Job alone who, in the dialogues, talks "not only about God but *to* God." And this reflects his realization that it is "the loss of his former

[39]No insult intended: some of my best friends are sissies.

[40]I am deeply indebted to my theology colleague John Schneider for giving me a kick in the pants and some useful pointers that led me to incorporate a larger view of Job.

[41]Lindsay Wilson, *Job* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 249.

[42]Ibid., 297. Wilson's discussion of protest wisdom here draws on William S. Morrow, *Protest Against God: The Eclipse of a Biblical Tradition*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), and on Anson Laytner, *Arguing with God: A Jewish Tradition* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1990).

personal relationship with God that is Job's chief lament."[43] In Job's climactic encounter with God, Wilson notes, God thus "does not respond to each of Job's accusations, apparently understanding that Job's deepest need was not to have an intellectual answer to his many questions."[44] Neither answering Job's questions nor squelching them, God means Job to remain in conversation. And God's long list of questions seems meant not to intimidate but to intimate to him a deeper perspective on the richness of aims that are part of God's relations—gently dialogical *personal* relations, as Eleonore Stump perceptively explains—to other parts of creation.[45]

Now such intimations, as Wilson says and we skeptical theists will second, do not come close to putting Job in an intellectual position to see God's motives in allowing the events that Job and his loved ones horrifically suffered. The prologue, of course, locates these motives in God's transactions with Satan, in which issues about divine honor seem to be at stake. But in the narrative, Job gets no glimpse at all of this—and any glimpse that we might think we get (as readers of a sacred text) serves mostly to bring out how, even with divine revelation, our knowledge of such things falls short of completeness. So, in that divine encounter, I take Wilson to be right in saying that God's intimation of larger purposes is in service not of a theodicy but of enabling Job "to trust God in a new way." Above all, perhaps, Job learns that God had not abandoned him. He was not alone.

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And Job's friends, for all their limitations, are also, I think, a positive part of this process. Here I return to the story told by "Art," who, some might have guessed, is "Artsky W. Evets," a somewhat inverted alter ego of Steve Wykstra who occasionally makes philosophical appearances. Each year in deep winter, my sister Nancy and I talk on the phone about that mid-December Sunday in 1963 when John Richard Wykstra's heart stopped beating. Lately we've found ourselves recalling details of how, that afternoon as well in the days and weeks to follow, the people from the

[43]Wilson, *Job*, 370. In this last clause Wilson is quoting R. Norman Whybray, *The Good Life in the Old Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 139.
[44]Wilson, *Job*, 370.
[45]Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 188.

Martin Reformed Church came by to be with us. They shook our hands, hugged us, sat with us; they offered their support and their cupcakes and their casserole dishes. A few would stumble out words like "God's ways are mysterious" or "His ways are not our ways." They did not, however, offer long theistic discourses, skeptical or otherwise. And rightly so. For what made a difference, I now realize, was not what they said but that they were there. In the loss of my father, they were tokens, signs—small incarnations, as it were—of God's presence with us. The body of Jesus had been broken for us. The body of Christ was being broken with us. We were not abandoned. We were not alone.

It hasn't always *felt* that way. On the scale of human sufferings, the loss of a still-young father is by no means at the "horrific" end. But my dad was a quiet and complex and still-in-progress man. He left me with much to treasure, but the severing of our relationship, even as I was entering the trials of early adolescence, made for its own complexities and ambiguities. Had he lived longer, some of these might have resolved themselves in ways less fraught for those I most love.[46]

Yet, in the visits of those church folks in Martin, and in the considerable string of father figures and big brothers who, along various stretches of my path since then, have walked with me, I now see, though in a mirror dimly, seeds and signs and semaphores. Seeds of grace-gifted healings come since and yet to come. Signs of someday seeing face-to-face, in Wolterstorff's words, how "in God the question shouted out by the wounds of the world has its answer." Semaphores of that new "access to the Father" that in Christ, as St. Paul says to the Ephesians, has come to those who were far away and to those who were near (Eph 2:17). An access, I dare to hope, in which all our human father-failings might yet find healing and forgiveness, and in which our human father-hungers might yet find their final fulfillment. So if asked on this day how I myself most seek to expand and confirm theism, my answer in Christ would be: I expand it thus.

[46]Then again, maybe not.