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Skeptical Theism and the "Too Much Skepticism" Objection

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The recent literature on the problem of evil has focused on two kinds of "apparently gratuitous suffering": that of nonhuman animals dying alone and in great pain, and that of children victimized by various forms of abuse.[1] Suffering like this does not seem to have any point, or purpose. It is hard to imagine how an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly loving being could be justified in allowing such suffering. It is hard to imagine how the cost of preventing it might be the loss of some important greater good or the permission of something equally bad or worse. Consequently, it is widely held that reflection on suffering like this provides evidence that some of the suffering in our world is gratuitous.

We do not have to turn to the extreme sufferings of children and animals to find fodder for discussion, however. Most people, even as adults, have experienced suffering that does not seem to have any justifying purpose. Even if we can sometimes see great goods that have come out of our sufferings, none of us, I submit, can see with clarity that there are goods both great enough and strongly connected enough to our sufferings to justify an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good and loving being in permitting every single moment of every painful experience that we have ever endured as adults. Suffering that does not seem to serve any suitably greater good is ubiquitous.

Let us assume that all suffering is intrinsically evil, even if it contributes to great goods. Let us say that an evil is gratuitous if, and only if, there is no God-justifying reason for permitting it. Let us furthermore assume that there is a God-justifying reason for permitting some evil only if there is a good to which it contributes such that its contribution to that good would suffice to justify an all powerful, all knowing, perfectly good and loving being in permitting the evil. Finally, let us assume that *avoiding evils equally bad or worse* might be among the goods to which an evil contributes.[2] Let E be the proposition *that our*

1 I put "apparently gratuitous suffering" in scare quotes because part of what is contested in this debate is precisely the claim that the suffering in question *appears* to be gratuitous (cf. Wykstra 1984).

2 These are standard assumptions in the literature. I am not sure that I wish to endorse all of them, but taking issue with them here would unnecessarily complicate the discussion.

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world contains gratuitous evil. There are, then, two ways in which reflection on an instance of suffering might support E. (a) Perhaps we can just see directly that the suffering in question is gratuitous, without even bothering to speculate about what sorts of goods might justify it.[3] (b) Perhaps, after speculating about what sorts of goods might justify it, we can justifiably infer from our failure to detect a God-justifying good that the suffering is, or is probably, gratuitous.

There are several well-trodden routes from the claim that E is probably true or that we have evidence sufficient to justify belief that E is true to the conclusion that there is no God. Following standard convention, let us call these arguments, collectively, the "evidential problem of evil." Skeptical theism is a response to the evidential problem of evil which opposes both (a) and (b). There are two components to skeptical theism: theism and a skeptical thesis. Insofar as the skeptical thesis is separable from theism, the skeptical theist's *strategy* for addressing the evidential problem of evil – namely, endorsement of the skeptical component – can be adopted by theists and nontheists alike (cf. Bergmann 2009, 375).

As I shall characterize it, the central skeptical thesis of skeptical theism – the view that skeptical theism puts forth (at any given time) as a response to the evidential problem of evil – is this:

> (ST): No human being is justified (or warranted, or reasonable) in thinking the following about any evil *e* that has ever occurred: there is (or is probably) no reason that could justify God in permitting *e*.[4]

ST leaves open the possibility that an evil might someday occur about which we can justifiably think that it is gratuitous.[5] Obviously enough, however, any decently principled defense of ST will imply that, if the world carries on pretty much as it has to date, with more or less the same sorts of evils continuing to occur, human beings will never be in a position to think justifiably about some evil that it is gratuitous.

The most prominent objection against skeptical theism is that the skeptical theses typically adduced in support of ST have ramifications that range far more widely than skeptical theists hope or should tolerate: they lead to skepticism about various aspects of commonsense morality, about divine honesty and goodness, about the evidential value of religious experience, and much else besides. There are, in the literature, multiple ways of defending this objection. My view is that none is successful. I do not, however, see any way of establishing that conclusion outright – that is, without considering and responding to each particular defense on its own terms. Since space limitations preclude me from attempting to take them all on at once, I shall restrict my focus to the (multiple and various) defenses

3 Cf. Dougherty (2008, especially section III) and Gellman (1992).

4 I assume (for ease of exposition) that the variable "*e*" ranges over aggregates of evils – for example, the murder of twelve innocent victims, say, or even all the evil that has ever occurred – as well as individual evils. ST implies that skeptical theism is a view whose precise content changes over time (as new evils are added to the history of the world). Still, I think it is faithful to what skeptical theists actually say in response to the evidential problem. Note, too, that ST could, in principle, be accepted by someone who takes herself to be in possession of a theodicy. Whether a theodicy is available is one question; whether anyone is in fact justified in thinking of some actual evil that it is probably gratuitous is a wholly separate question.

5 Henceforth, for convenience, I use "justifiably" to mean "justifiably, warrantedly, or reasonably."

of this objection that appear in Chapters 30–32 of the present volume (i.e., the chapters by Stephen Maitzen, Ian Wilks, and David O'Connor). Several of my replies will apply to similar arguments that have appeared elsewhere in the literature; but I do not pretend that anything I say here will lay *all* defenses of the objection to rest.

My chapter unfolds as follows. In the first section, I characterize skeptical theism more fully. This is necessary in order to address some important misconceptions and mischaracterizations that appear in the essays by Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor. In the second section, I describe the most important objections they raise and group them into four "families" so as to facilitate an orderly series of responses. In the four sections that follow, I respond to the objections.

What Is Skeptical Theism?

Skeptical theism has been characterized in various different ways. Let me begin with three examples.

In the article that introduced the term "skeptical theist," Paul Draper (1996) suggests (without offering an explicit definition) that a skeptical theist is someone who invokes a limited skeptical thesis in order to defend theism against the evidential problem of evil. The two theses under discussion in his article are these:

$ST1_D$: Humans are in no position to judge directly that an omnipotent and omniscient being would be unlikely to have a morally sufficient reason to permit the evils we find in the world.

$ST2_D$: Humans are in no position to compare theism's ability to explain certain facts about good or evil to some other hypothesis's ability to explain those facts.

In his contribution on the topic to the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, Michael Bergmann offers a somewhat different characterization. He describes skeptical theism as a view with two components: theism and a skeptical component. The latter, he says, is:

> . . . best explained as an endorsement of some skeptical theses, among which these three are prominent:
>
> $[ST1_B]$ We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.
>
> $[ST2_B]$ We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.
>
> $[ST3_B]$ We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.
>
> (Bergmann 2009, 376)

$ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ might plausibly be thought to lend support to $ST1_D$ and $ST2_D$, but the former are neither individually nor jointly equivalent to either the latter, or to their conjunction.

In his contribution on this topic to the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Justin McBrayer (2010) characterizes skeptical theism as theism plus the following thesis:

$ST1_M$ We should be skeptical of our ability to discern God's reasons for acting or refraining from acting in any particular instance. In particular . . . we should not grant that *our* inability to think of a good reason for doing or allowing something is indicative of whether or not *God* might have a good reason for doing or allowing something.

Again, Bergmann's skeptical theses and Draper's might be thought to lend support to $ST1_M$. But McBrayer's thesis is not equivalent to any of those others, nor is it equivalent to a conjunction of any of them. These are by no means the only characterizations of skeptical theism in the literature either.

So experts diverge to some extent on the question as to what, exactly, skeptical theism is. Moreover, neither Draper, Bergmann, nor McBrayer has identified a thesis to which *all* skeptical theists as such can be expected to agree and with which all opponents of skeptical theism can be expected to disagree. For example, I count myself a skeptical theist, but I reject $ST1_M$ because I think that we do have ways of discerning God's reasons for acting on some particular occasions. (Scripture, e.g., tells us that one of God's reasons for becoming incarnate was love for the world.) Similarly, it is easy to imagine a skeptical theist accepting some of the theses, $ST1_D$, $ST2_D$, and $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$, without accepting all of them. It is also easy to imagine someone accepting (say) $ST2_D$ or $ST1_B$ while at the same time maintaining (in opposition to skeptical theism) that we can *see* directly that certain evils are gratuitous. By contrast, my own characterization offers a thesis (namely, ST) to which all skeptical theists will agree and with which all opponents of skeptical theism will disagree.

Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor all focus on $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ as somehow lying at the heart of skeptical theism. I will concede this for the sake of argument. But, in light of the foregoing, I think that it is more accurate to think of them as comprising an important part of a typical *defense* of skeptical theism rather than to take their conjunction as *part* of skeptical theism. But let us set this quibble aside for now. Even having done so, it seems that all three authors are laboring under serious (albeit, in some cases, rather common) misconceptions as to the nature of skeptical theism. I will single out four for consideration.

First: Maitzen (Chapter 30) says that $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ are "couched in broadly consequentialist terms, or at least they presuppose justifications couched in those terms" (Maitzen 2013, 449). He talks on the same page about the "strongly consequentialist flavor" of $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$. Nor is he alone in making this association. Wilks also associates skeptical theism with consequentialism, though instead of finding it in $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$, he declares it to be a thesis that operates "in the background" (Wilks 2013, 458). But these claims are mistaken. The only hint of consequentialism in either skeptical theism itself or in $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ is the supposition that consequences are sometimes relevant to the moral status of an action. But, as Michael Bergmann argues (ironically, in a paper with which both Wilks and Maitzen are evidently familiar), "non-consequentialist ethical theories have no trouble allowing for considerations of consequences to play a role in moral decision-making" (Bergmann 2009, 380).

Second: According to Wilks (Chapter 31), skeptical theism is a "stalemating technique" whose "aim is to establish a confounding factor against the evidence of evil, and make that evidence inadmissible in debate over the existence of God" (Wilks 2013, 458). Note first that Wilks's characterization of skeptical theism as a "stalemating technique" uncharitably implies that the skeptical theist, as such, has abandoned the pursuit of truth in favor of simply stalling discussion. It also confuses *replying to someone's argument* with *trying to end the debate with neither party having "won."* More importantly, this characterization reflects confusion about the aims and content of skeptical theism. Skeptical theism does not deny of any

actual evidence that it is admissible. Moreover, depending on one's views about the nature of evidence, skeptical theists might even be happy to concede that reflection on certain kinds of suffering does, after all, provide evidence that our world contains gratuitous evil, albeit highly defeasible evidence. What the skeptical theist denies is that our awareness of (or reflection on) any actual or hypothetical instance of evil constitutes *evidence sufficient to justify* belief that our world contains gratuitous evil.

Third: Wilks also claims that the "core of skeptical theism" is "the thesis that we may not be aware of all the goods and evils there are, so we may not always be able to discern the reasons that justify God's actions and permissions" (Wilks 2013, 458). He seems, furthermore, to think that this thesis implies that "[w]e should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to do or permit" (Wilks 2013, 458). Again, there are problems on multiple fronts. Skeptical theism is a controversial thesis, but the thesis that Wilks calls the *core* of skeptical theism is a platitude that should be affirmed by anyone. It is platitudinous that we human beings *may* not be aware of all of the various types (or tokens) of goods and evils there are; it is likewise platitudinous that we *may not always* be able to discern the reasons that would justify a divine being's actions and permissions. More importantly, it does not follow from these obvious truths – nor must skeptical theists affirm – that we should be skeptical about *any* claim to know what would be evil for God to do or permit. Most of us, skeptical theists included, think that it would be evil for God to do the following: *permit horrendous suffering for absolutely no reason whatsoever*. Indeed, if the skeptical theist had reason to doubt this claim, she would likely have a different reply to the evidential problem of evil. Nor is there any obstacle to a skeptical theist affirming (say) that it would be evil for God to permit a hundred people to be burned alive in a furnace just so that another person could enjoy the pleasure of a warm bath.

Fourth: In O'Connor's essay (Chapter 32), we find the striking claim that it is a "basic tenet" of skeptical theism "that we have no good reason to think that either our concepts or measures of goodness in human persons are representative of those applying to infinite, non-human persons" (O'Connor 2013, 474). I assume that this is simply a failed paraphrase of $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$. If it is not, then I cannot see why he would attribute it to a skeptical theist. But it is important to see *why* it fails as a paraphrase. $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ claim that we have no good reason to think that our *sample* of possible goods, possible evils, and the relations among them is representative with respect to the property of being apt for justifying God's permission of evil. They do not claim (or imply) that our *concepts and measures* of goodness fail to represent (or be a representative sample of) the concepts and measures of goodness that apply to infinite, nonhuman persons. Goods and evils are one thing; concepts and measures of good and evil are another. The claim that O'Connor puts in the mouth of a skeptical theist is far more radical than what the skeptical theist herself affirms.

The Too-Much-Skepticism Objection

We are now ready to consider the too-much-skepticism objection. The core objection, again, is that the skeptical theist's skepticism is infectious – it ramifies throughout her belief system, undermining a wide variety of beliefs about God, value, and other matters. Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor each defend this core general objection by arguing for some more specific version of it. Skeptical theism is the nominal target of the objection; but in the chapters by Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor, it seems that the real target is something more

in the neighborhood of $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$. As noted earlier, I will concede for the sake of argument that an attack on $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ amounts to an attack on skeptical theism itself; but we should bear in mind that strictly speaking, it is not skeptical theism that is the target of these essays but these other theses instead.

The most important objections presented in the essays by Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor are sensibly grouped into four families, as follows:

Global Skepticism

(A) Skeptical theism "is implicated in skepticism of the extremist sort," posing "a general problem about the possibility of knowing anything at all" (Wilks 2013, 466, 459; cf. Maitzen 2013, 446–447).

Skepticism about Divine Commands and Values

(B) Skeptical theism implies that "we have no good reason to think that [terrible evils like the abduction, brutalization, and murder of a child] are sins" (O'Connor 2013, 470).

(C) Skeptical theists have no good reason for believing that "what they regard as God's 'thou shalt not' commands are unrestrictedly forbidding certain actions as sins" (O'Connor 2013, 470).

(D) Skeptical theists cannot take themselves to be able to "identify God's commands, resolve questions about their relative importance, or apply them to [their] actual circumstances" (Maitzen 2013, 451).

(E) Skeptical theism induces doubt about divine goodness and about our understanding of divine values (Maitzen 2013, 453; O'Connor 2013, 471–472).

Skepticism about (Other) Knowledge of God

(F) Skeptical theism undermines our ability to "[take] particular goods as signs of God's presence," and to "[see] things and events in the world around us as manifestations of God" (Wilks 2013, 460).

(G) Skeptical theism undermines the belief that human suffering is *not* gratuitous. (O'Connor 2013, 453–454)

(H) Skeptical theism precludes the warranted attribution of divine purposes to mundane events, thereby undermining belief in miracles and certain natural theological arguments (O'Connor 2013, 478–479).

Skepticism about Our Obligation to Prevent Harm

(I) Skeptical theism leads to skepticism about our *obligation to prevent harm*, and so it also leads to a kind of moral paralysis (Maitzen 2013, 451–453).

In the next four sections, I will present the reasons given by Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor for thinking that theses (A)–(I) are true. My ultimate conclusion will be that none of these claims has been shown to be true and so the different versions of the too-much-skepticism objection as defended by Maitzen, Wilks, and O'Connor, are failures.

Global Skepticism

Let us begin with the global skepticism objection (Chapter 31). This is by far the most ambitious of the objections. But as Wilks has formulated it, there is some question as to

what exactly the objection is supposed to be. What does it mean to say that skeptical theism is "implicated" in an extreme form of skepticism? What does it mean to say that skeptical theism poses "a general problem about the possibility of knowing anything at all?" Here are some possibilities, none equivalent to the others:

(i) Endorsing skeptical theism automatically provides one with an undefeated defeater for all of one's beliefs.
(ii) Endorsing skeptical theism automatically provides one with an undefeated defeater for most of one's beliefs.
(iii) Skeptical theism implies that every person (whether a proponent of skeptical theism or not) has an undefeated defeater for most of his or her beliefs.
(iv) Proponents of skeptical theism who reflect rationally on its content and consequences have an undefeated defeater for most of their beliefs.

There are others we might add to the list as well.

Maitzen gestures at a similar objection, but he likewise refrains from stating it outright. Instead, what one finds in his chapter are remarks like "skeptical theism implies radical skepticism" (Maitzen 2013, 446) – a claim which he attributes to Bruce Russell (1996) and then goes on to defend without restating – and "theism threatens our knowledge" (Maitzen 2013, 447). My guess is that both Maitzen and Wilks are getting at something like (iv), which I will henceforth refer to by the label "SKEPTICISM." The objection I take them to be raising, then, is simply that SKEPTICSM is true.

Wilks provides the most detailed argument for the claim that skeptical theists are stuck with some kind of radical skepticism. What follows is my best attempt at charitable and faithful reconstruction (treating SKEPTICISM as the intended conclusion).

Let "DH" be the "Deception Hypothesis" – the hypothesis that we have come to be deceived (either by divine design or divine permission) in systematic and comprehensive ways. Let "reflective skeptical theists" be just those skeptical theists who have rationally reflected on the content and consequences of skeptical theism. Then:

3.0. If skeptical theism is true, then God exists.
3.1. If God exists, then God has the power to bring it about that DH is true.
3.2. If 3.0 and 3.1 are true, then reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally deny that God exists and has the power to bring it about that DH is true.
3.3. Therefore, reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally deny that God exists and has the power to bring it about that DH is true. (From 3.0–3.2.)
3.4. Reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally affirm that it would be evil for God to bring it about that DH is true.[6]

6 According to Wilks, skeptical theism implies that we "should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to do" (Wilks 2013, 458, 461). It is only by supporting something like 3.4 that this remark is of relevance to Wilks's ultimate conclusion. So that is why I take 3.4 to be part of Wilks's argument. It is perhaps worth noting that this claim is also of relevance to 3.1. For if one could know that it is evil for God to bring about the truth of DH, then one would have reason to deny that God is *able* to bring about the truth of DH, and, on some ways of understanding the relation between divine ability and divine power, this would imply that God lacks the power to bring about the truth of DH. Obviously, questions about the nature of omnipotence would then arise; but pursuing that issue would take us too far afield.

3.5. If one can neither rationally deny that God exists and has the power to bring it about that DH is true nor rationally affirm that it would be evil for God to bring it about that DH is true, then one cannot rationally dismiss DH as impossible.
3.6. Therefore: Reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally dismiss DH as impossible. (From 3.3–3.5.)
3.7. If skeptical theism is true, it is not absolutely unreasonable to believe that God has brought it about that DH is true for some justifying reason beyond our ken.[7]
3.8. If 3.7 is true, then reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally dismiss DH as absolutely unreasonable to believe.
3.9. If skeptical theism is true, then one cannot rationally dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that God has a justifying reason for bringing it about that DH is true.
3.10. If 3.9 is true, then reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that God has a justifying reason for bringing it about that DH is true.
3.11. Therefore, Reflective skeptical theists cannot rationally dismiss DH as absolutely unreasonable to believe, nor can they dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that God has a justifying reason for bringing it about that DH is true. (From 3.7–3.10.)
3.12. Citing evidence against DH presupposes the falsity of DH (since any proposition that might be cited as evidence against DH will be a proposition about which we might be deceived).
3.13. If one cannot rationally dismiss DH as impossible or absolutely unreasonable to believe, and if one cannot rationally dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that God has a justifying reason for bringing it about that DH is true, and if citing evidence against DH presupposes the falsity of DH, then one has a defeater for most of one's beliefs.
3.14. Therefore: Reflective skeptical theists have an undefeated defeater for most of their beliefs. (From 3.6, 3.11–3.13.)

7 By "absolutely unreasonable" I mean "unreasonable for any subject, regardless of what else she may believe." So, to cast 3.7 in other terms: if skeptical theism is true, then it is at least possible for someone reasonably to believe DH. I attribute 3.7 to Wilks because he invokes the following premise from Bruce Russell *en route* to his conclusion:

> 3.7a. "If it is not reasonable to believe that God [has] deceived us, for some reason beyond our ken [with respect to the age of the universe], it is not reasonable to believe that there is some reason beyond our ken which, if God exists, would justify him in allowing all the suffering we see" (Wilks 2013, 462; cf. Russell 1996, 197).

As Wilks goes on to observe, there is nothing special about the age of the universe: one might replace "the age of the universe" in the antecedent with just about any proposition about which it is possible for us to be deceived. Moreover, he seems to think that skeptical theism commits one to rejecting the consequent of 3.7a. (We might question this. But never mind that for now.) Given this, skeptical theism implies, for any proposition *p* about which human beings can be deceived:

> 3.7b. It is false that it is not reasonable to believe that God has deceived us with respect to *p*.

This does not imply that it is *reasonable for us* to believe that God has deceived us with respect to *p*. What follows is just that it is *not absolutely unreasonable* to believe that we are so deceived. If that is true, then 3.7 is true.

As I have reconstructed it, the argument is valid. Thus, I shall focus my critical remarks on the premises – specifically, premises 3.4, 3.7, 3.9, and 3.13. Before turning to criticism, however, I wish to make two preliminary observations.

First, premises 3.7, 3.9, and 3.13 employ the notion of justifying reasons. I have employed this notion because Wilks does so in his own presentation of the argument (cf. note 6). But we should bear in mind that doing so represents a subtle shift in the topic of conversation. ST and $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ are all theses about what human beings can justifiably believe about the space of possible goods and evils. Goods and evils are interestingly connected with reasons, but it is controversial at best to identify them with reasons. According to some philosophers, for example, to call something a reason for action is to say something about its relationship to the relevant agent's motivational structure; but calling something a good does not necessarily carry such implications. The significance of this fact in the present context is just this: There seems to be very good reason for thinking that skeptical theism implies that we cannot dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that there is some good capable of justifying God in bringing about DH. But, by virtue of the difference between justifying *goods* and justifying *reasons*, 3.9 does not obviously follow from this claim. Further argument would be required, which argument Wilks has not provided.

The second observation is that the premises that invoke the notion of justifying reasons omit any distinction between *pro tanto* reasons and *decisive* reasons. *Pro tanto* reasons for doing something are considerations that weigh in favor of doing it. *Decisive* reasons settle rational deliberation in favor of a particular course of action.[8] So, since God is maximally rational, God has decisive reason to do *x* if, and only if, God actually does *x*. Given this, the term "justifying reason" in premises 3.9 and 3.13 cannot sensibly be interpreted as meaning *decisive justifying reason*. For if we do interpret it that way, then 3.9 entails that it is a consequence of skeptical theism that we cannot dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that DH is true. But that claim is not at all obviously true, nor has Wilks argued that it is true. Thus, "justifying reason" must be interpreted in this argument as meaning *pro tanto justifying reason*. Doing so renders premise 3.9 more plausible. (More exactly: it renders 3.9 more plausible on the assumption that 3.4 and 3.7 are true.) But it raises other problems that shall become apparent later in this section.

I turn now to critical remarks. In connection with 3.4, 3.7, and 3.9, all I shall say is this: Wilks has not argued, nor is there any obvious reason to believe, that the following propositions are inconsistent:

3.15. Theism, ST, and $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ are all true.
3.16. It would be evil for God to bring it about that DH is true, and this fact can be known to be true on the basis of rational intuition.

That is, there is no clear way of deriving the denial of 3.16 from the proposition that (a) God exists, (b) we cannot be justified in believing of any actual evil that it is gratuitous, and (c) we cannot tell whether the sample of possible goods, evils, and connections among them of which we are aware is representative. But this is precisely what would have to be derived in order to defend any of 3.4, 3.7, or 3.9.

8 Cf. Murphy (2006: 413). Murphy, in turn, follows Raz (1979).

Bear in mind here that the denial of DH is, like the denial of any other radical skeptical hypothesis, a perfectly rational starting point. If it were not so, everyone would face insurmountable skeptical threats.[9] But from the denial of DH, we can deduce that God lacks decisive reason to bring it about that DH is true. This comports well with our independent intuition that it would be evil for God to bring it about that DH is true. Thus, there is no reason to think that our intuition on this score is challenged by the recognition that our sample of possible goods, evils, and connections among them might not be representative.

That said, I think that some skeptical theists will not wish to affirm what 3.4 says they cannot rationally affirm, and some will also want to accept the claims that 3.7 and 3.9 say that skeptical theism implies. Moreover, though Wilks himself has not defended 3.4, 3.7, and 3.9, I think that most philosophers will take *at least one* of those premises to be defensible. So, to my mind, the really interesting question here is whether 3.13 is true. I think that it is not.

Suppose we concede the following (which is just a slightly clarified version of the antecedent of 3.13 specified to a particular subject, S):

3.13a. (i) S cannot rationally dismiss DH as impossible or absolutely unreasonable to believe; (ii) S cannot rationally dismiss as false or unlikely the claim that God has a *pro tanto* justifying reason for bringing it about that DH is true; and (iii) citing evidence against DH presupposes the falsity of DH.

Now, what follows? It seems to me that if anything here implies that S has a *defeater* for most of her beliefs, it is 3.13a(ii), and this by way of implying that she has a defeater for her (tacit or explicit) belief that DH is false. 3.13a(i) implies that the defeater cannot itself be defeated by S's rationally coming to the belief that DH is impossible or unreasonable to believe; and 3.13a(iii) implies that the defeater cannot be defeated by evidence. So the next question to ask is whether 3.13a(ii) *really* implies that S has a defeater for most of her beliefs.

Let me pause to note that Wilks and Maitzen both seem to think that the answer is "yes." In discussing Bergmann's "commonsensist" view that we know via commonsense that we are not victims of radical skeptical scenarios, Wilks argues that there is a difference between the skeptical theist's position vis-à-vis DH and her (and everyone else's) position vis-à-vis more familiar skeptical scenarios. For most skeptical scenarios, we can dismiss as false or unlikely the hypothesis that there is a being willing and able to enact them, but, according to Wilks, the skeptical theist already admits the existence of a being who is *able* to bring about the truth of DH, and she cannot dismiss as false or unlikely the hypothesis that this being is also *willing* to bring it about. This difference, he thinks, is sufficient to plunge the skeptical theist into radical skepticism. But that consequence follows only if 3.13a(ii)

9 Wilks might concede this much but insist that the skeptical theist's skepticism precludes her from taking DH as a starting point. But, of course, that is a thesis that would have to be supported by argument, as it is hardly self-evident.

A more interesting move would be to concede the point and then to ask why it does not apply to skeptical theses like $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$. That is, why are we not entitled to take the denials of *those* theses as perfectly rational starting points? Since this question is *not* raised by Maitzen, O'Connor, or Wilks, and since it has (in my opinion) been adequately addressed elsewhere (Howard-Snyder 2009, 25–28), I shall simply refer the reader to that discussion.

implies that S has a defeater for most of her beliefs. Maitzen, in presenting an argument very similar to Wilks's, gestures at the same point (which seems to be the very crux of his argument):

> [If] fraud and deception are . . . consistent with God's perfection, [then] we can rule them out only by presuming that God can have no morally sufficient reasons for committing them. (Wilks 2013, 447)

This seems likewise to presuppose that 3.13a(ii) implies that S has a defeater for most of her beliefs. But I think that we can see clearly that 3.13a(ii) does *not* imply that S has a defeater for the belief that DH is false. If it does not imply this, then it also does not imply that she has a defeater for more ordinary beliefs.

Consider the following case: You have just been diagnosed with cancer. A doctor whom you do not know very well (so not *your* doctor) tells you that if you maintain a healthy lifestyle and are diligent about your treatments, your chances of beating the cancer are very good. You have no independent information on this topic (and no opportunity to get independent information any time soon), and you have no reason to suspect that this doctor is deceiving you. So you believe her and you go home feeling quite good. Still, upon reflection you realize that you cannot tell how likely it is that she would have a *pro tanto* justifying reason to deceive you about your chances of beating the cancer. You can imagine some reasons a doctor – even a highly virtuous doctor – might have for deceiving you. You have heard that there are correlations between optimism about survival and increased survival rates, for example. But you have no idea whether such correlations apply to your case, nor do you even have any idea whether your sources of information on this topic are reliable, nor do you have any clue whether or to what extent such considerations would weigh, in her estimation, in favor of deceiving you. Furthermore, you realize that *pro tanto* reasons come very cheaply: any consideration in favor of doing something, no matter how weak, constitutes a *pro tanto* reason for doing it. So, you reflect, *obviously* you can have no clear idea how likely it is that the doctor has a *pro tanto* reason for deceiving you. Do you now have a defeater for your belief that this doctor is telling you the truth (or for your belief that your chances of beating the cancer are good, so long as you follow the relevant advice)? No. Clearly you do not. It is perfectly rational for you to dismiss the doctor-deception hypothesis on the grounds that you have no good reason to think that it is true.

Or consider this case: You go to the supermarket and discover that they are out of your favorite kind of beer. You ask the store clerk where else in town you might find some. She says that she has checked everywhere within a 10-mile radius and nobody else carries it. (It is a special import.) You find that plausible; it fits your experience. But, upon reflection, you realize that you have no idea what the likelihood is that she has a *pro tanto* justifying reason for deceiving you on this topic. You do not know her at all – you just met her today. So you have no idea how considerations of loyalty to her place of employment (say), or the desire to appear more thorough in her beer-searching than she really has been, would weigh against whatever propensities toward truth-telling she might have. And, again, you recognize that *pro tanto* reasons come cheaply. Do you now have a defeater for your newly acquired belief that no one else carries your favorite brand of beer? Again, you do not. You are rationally entitled simply to dismiss the clerk-deception hypothesis on the grounds that you have no good reason to think that it is true.

As a general rule, we are justified in believing the testimony of others in the absence of defeaters that either rebut their testimony or cast doubt on their reliability. So, as a general

rule, we are justified (absent defeaters) in dismissing both the hypothesis that the testifier is deceiving us *and* the hypothesis that she has a *decisive reason* for deceiving us. But, again, *pro tanto* reasons come cheaply. So our ignorance of other people's values, desires, particular needs and circumstances, and so on means that we often will have no idea how likely it is whether they have *pro tanto* reasons for deceiving us or for doing all manner of other bad or crazy things. Knowing this, it is not rational simply to *dismiss* the hypothesis that testifiers whom we do not know have *pro tanto* reasons for deceiving us. Nor, however, should we think that our inability to dismiss this hypothesis constitutes a defeater for our presumption that they are in fact telling the truth. For if it did constitute such a defeater, we would almost never be justified in trusting testimony.

What goes for the earlier cases goes likewise for the divine case. Grant that $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ imply that we cannot dismiss as false or unlikely the hypothesis that God has a *pro tanto* reason for deceiving us in significant ways. Still, for the sorts of reasons just given, this in no way implies that we cannot dismiss as false or unlikely the hypothesis that DH is true; nor does it supply us with a defeater for our presumption that DH is probably false; nor, therefore, does it supply us with a defeater for more ordinary beliefs grounded in our trust in sense perception, testimony, reason, and the like.

Skepticism About Value

Both Maitzen and O'Connor give arguments for the conclusion that skeptical theism poses a problem for our beliefs about putative divine commands: we cannot know exactly what God means by them, we cannot know what God intends for us to do in response to them, and we cannot know what, if anything, they reflect about divine values. For O'Connor, this skepticism about divine commands also induces skepticism about what counts as sin. Furthermore, he thinks that skeptical theists face problems in believing that God is good. I will discuss each of these arguments in the order listed.

First, divine commands. In sum, O'Connor's argument runs as follows: (i) Philosophically informed, reflective, and otherwise rational theists will think that our understanding of the content and normative force of God's commands comes only from one or more of the following sources: religious experience, scripture, church teaching, or reason. However, (ii) what they will know about religious experience provides them with an undefeated defeater for the belief that religious experience is a reliable source of information about God's intentions, values, or commands.[10] Furthermore, (iii) *skeptical* theists have an undefeated defeater for the view that church teachings and scriptural texts, and human reason are reliable sources of information about God's intentions, values, or commands. Reason is ruled out because (iv) skeptical theism implies that human moral judgments and moral

10 O'Connor says simply that philosophically minded skeptical theists will have "good reason to hesitate" before taking religious experiences at face value and so "may, plausibly, become less than quite confident about believing that [their] own purported revelation experiences are truly experiences of a divine being or of a supernatural surrogate" (O'Connor 2013, 471). These remarks fall somewhat short of the stronger claim in (ii). However, replacing the stronger claim with these remarks leaves the skeptical theist with an easy reply. She might well have "serious reasons to hesitate" and even to be less than "quite confident" that her religious experiences are experiences of God. But all of this is consistent with the claim that philosophically minded skeptical theists can ultimately be rational in taking their religious experiences to be transparently intelligible communications from God.

values are not reliable indicators of divine values and commands.[11] Scripture and church teaching are ruled out because each is the product of human attempts to interpret putative divine communication, and (v) skeptical theism implies that that we have no good reason to believe that such attempts will reliably succeed.[12] Therefore, (vi) skeptical theists have an undefeated defeater for the belief that they understand the content and normative force of God's commands, and so (vii) they have no good reason to think that "what they regard as God's "thou shalt not" commands are unrestrictedly forbidding certain actions as sins" (O'Connor 2013, 470–472).

There are two general (and related) problems with this argument. The first is that, as we have already seen (in the first section of this chapter), O'Connor has confused skeptical theism with more radical claims about divine transcendence. Were he correct in his understanding of skeptical theism, premises (iv) and (v) – the ones that report what skeptical theism *implies* – might be quite plausible. As it stands, however, there is no obvious reason for thinking that those premises are true. That is, there is no obvious reason for thinking that ST or $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ imply what O'Connor says that skeptical theism implies. Which brings us to the second problem: O'Connor has offered no argument in support of premises (ii), (iv), or (v). This is startling in light of the absolutely crucial role these premises play in establishing his final conclusion. But there it is anyway.[13] He seems to think that the truth of these claims is just obvious, and this despite the fact that (e.g.) philosophers like William P. Alston (1991) and Alvin Plantinga (2000) have devoted hundreds of pages to rebutting (ii), and despite the fact that most skeptical theists believe the denials of (iv) and (v).

Highlighting these two problems constitutes sufficient rebuttal to O'Connor's argument. But I think it will be instructive to pause to consider the profile of a *particular* (fictional) skeptical theist so that we can see more clearly the argumentative burden that O'Connor

11 He writes: "it is a basic tenet of [the skeptical theist's] skeptical defense that we have no good reason to suppose that actual or possible goods, evils, and the entailment relations between them, as we are aware or can conceive of them, are representative of such things to God, no matter how good and bad the goods and evils respectively are to us or how inconceivable to us a justification for certain actions and kinds of actions may be. So, on the basis of that, she has no good reason to think that, when it comes to the particular circumstances of a particular homicide, theft, abduction, or sexual abuse of a child, or even when it comes to considering such things in the abstract, how she or the rest of us may see them is representative of how they are in the eyes of God" (O'Connor 2013, 472).

12 He says: "given . . . skepticism about supposing that possible goods, evils, and entailment relations between them, as we are aware of those things, are representative of such things to God, it is only a small step to justifiably thinking that, by virtue of the same gap between human and divine cognition that drives [the first sort of skepticism, one] also has no good reason to think that how she interprets supposed experiences of, or communications from, God is representative of their meaning in the mind of God or of what God . . . intends her to understand by them" (O'Connor 2013, 471).

13 A casual glance at the remarks quoted in note 11 might lead one to think that premise (iv) is defended by argument. In fact, however, those remarks simply report (inaccurately) a basic tenet of skeptical theism and an alleged consequence of that tenet. There is no argument for the claim that skeptical theism (or the alleged basic tenet thereof) implies the consequence in question. Roughly the same is true of premise (v) and the remarks quoted in note 12. As for premise (ii), on p. 471, O'Connor(2013) notes some facts awareness of which he takes to constitute a defeater for beliefs formed on the basis of religious experience: for example, facts about the "*prima facie* appalling actions carried out by people, while supposedly inspired by personal experience of the voice or will of God" or about (the dangers of?) "wishful thinking, emotional need or projection, personification, [etc.]". But he offers no argument for the conclusion that awareness of such facts *inevitably* supplies one with a defeater for beliefs formed on the basis of religious experience, or for belief that one's own religious experience is a reliable source of information about divine intentions, values, or commands.

faces. Moreover, it is instructive not only in relation to the argument we are presently considering, but also in relation to other arguments by Maitzen, O'Connor, and Wilks that I shall consider later in the chapter. Thus, we shall have cause to refer back to this profile when we consider those arguments later on.

In presenting the profile, I shall fill in a variety of background beliefs and circumstances that I think make some difference in our overall assessment of the subject's rationality. The profile presupposes that premises (ii), (iv), and (v), as well as some additional premises that show up in later arguments, are all false. My expectation is not that readers will take the profile to refute these premises; rather, it is that they will see that more detailed and careful argumentation is required to establish them. The premises whose falsity I shall presuppose are intuitively appealing, it seems to me, only when one is not sufficiently attentive to the variety of ways in which the moral, religious, and philosophical beliefs of skeptical theists can be acquired, combined, and *prima facie* justified. I expect that readers will find my description of the profiled subject to be psychologically plausible; I also expect that they will *not* regard her as manifestly irrational. But the fact is that, if the arguments considered in this section and the next are correct, the person I shall describe *must* be irrational. The challenge, then, for the proponents of those arguments is to show why she is irrational. I do not think that this challenge has been met. Along the way, I shall explain why.

Consider Lucy, a Christian who has come to hold a wide variety of beliefs about God and God's commands in a way that is quite common for reflective Christians. She has listened to the testimony of respected authorities, read the Bible from cover to cover, and reflected on the nature, love, and goodness of God over the course of many years during Bible studies, church services, and her own personal times of prayer and meditation. In reflecting on these things, she has attended carefully to how all of her various sources portray God's love and goodness, and she has also attended to how well (and not) these portrayals comport with her own intuitions about love and moral perfection. Religious experience has entered the picture too. Like many theists, she has had a number of what we might call "low-grade" religious experiences: the feeling of blessed assurance that she is loved and forgiven by God, the strong sense of God's presence in the world and to her in particular, and so on. She believes these experiences to be veridical and, although they do not carry much content about the particular nature of divine love and goodness, they serve to reinforce in her the conviction that God is loving and good.

In forming all of these beliefs, she takes it for granted that her moral intuitions are generally (though far from perfectly) reliable, that she has a fair bit of moral knowledge, and so on. But she also takes it for granted that God's goodness far outstrips her own, that her moral intuitions are biased in many ways by her own self-interested desires, and that (as she has learned to her chagrin over and over throughout her life) she is subject to moral "blind spots" and, in particular, to errors (sometimes serious ones) about what might justify what. In this, her condition is no different from that of virtually any other morally decent – indeed, even morally excellent – person. She knows this, and she does not find in this knowledge any reason to think that fallible human beings like herself are doomed to the abyss of radical moral skepticism.

So far so good. There is nothing obviously irrational in Lucy's overall set of beliefs; nor is there any clear reason for thinking that she is wrong to reject moral skepticism. Now suppose she *adds* to this belief set ST, and $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$. That is, she becomes a skeptical theist. Suppose further that she adds these beliefs partly on the basis of her own keen awareness

that no good she knows of seems even close to sufficient to justify a perfectly loving God in permitting the severe psychological and sexual abuse that she herself suffered at the hands of a neighbor when she was a child. In adding ST and $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$, she does not moderate any of her other moral beliefs, because she takes those to be independent of her assessments about how representative her sample of possible goods, evils, and connections among them might be. Indeed, she realizes that it takes a great deal of moral knowledge even to *sort* her sample of states of affairs into the categories of *possible good* and *possible evil*. It also takes a great deal of moral knowledge to reach the judgment (as she has) that no known good is sufficient to justify God in permitting all of the suffering we see in our world (or even all of her own). She has therefore not come to question her sorting procedure, nor has she come to question any of the other moral knowledge she has. She simply realizes that for all she knows, her sample might be comparatively small and strongly biased – perhaps in the direction of *human* goods and evils, perhaps in the direction of *humanly graspable* goods and evils, perhaps in the direction of *relatively superficial* goods and evils, and so on.

Now, let us ask: Does she have "serious reasons to hesitate" before thinking that she has good reason to take her religious experiences at face value? Should she become "less than quite confident about believing that her own purported revelation experiences are truly experiences of a divine being"? Premise (ii) says that the answers to these questions are both affirmative. But O'Connor has said nothing that supports this verdict (see again notes 10 and 13), nor is it plain from the description of the case that the questions should be answered affirmatively. Does she have good reason to doubt her reflective interpretations of her own religious experiences? Premises (ii) and (v) imply that the answer is yes. But, again, neither anything that O'Connor has said nor anything manifest in the description of the case seems to support an affirmative answer. (Cf. notes 10, 12, and 13.) So if premises (ii) and (v) are true, it is not at all obvious that they are.

What about Lucy's own moral judgments? Suppose she is thinking now about whether it is permissible to divorce her husband. She finds in scripture the claim that "God hates divorce," which she takes to be evidence that God does not generally permit divorce – at least not for the reasons why *she* would be getting a divorce. But her moral intuitions tell her that divorce for those reasons is entirely permissible. After digging into the scriptures, she finds that the waters in the neighborhood of this question are quite murky. So she finds herself with reason to doubt that "God hates divorce" implies what it seems to imply. On the other hand, she realizes all too well that she has a strong personal stake in having the "verdict of scripture" come down in favor of the permissibility of her divorce. She will feel much less conflicted about the course of action she is considering if she can convince herself that God does not object. So, in other words, she realizes that her interpretation of scripture might be tainted by self-interest. She also realizes that her intuitions might be so tainted as well. Does she now have reason to doubt that her own moral judgment about the moral status of divorce is "representative of its moral status in the eyes of God"? Yes, of course. This is not because she is a skeptical theist, however. It is because of a prior belief that partly grounds her skeptical theism – namely, the belief that she is morally fallible and subject to bias, and that God is not morally fallible.

But she still does *not* seem to have any reason to question beliefs like "God detests murder" or "God disapproves of adultery." Again, as a skeptical theist, she thinks that her sample of possible goods, evils, and connections between them is biased. She recognizes that she is fallible in other ways, and that self-interest and other factors sometimes cloud her moral judgment. But she has not given up thinking that she is nonetheless *pretty good*

at distinguishing goods from evils, and moral intuition screams out to her – wholly in accord with the voice of scripture – that murder and adultery are wrong, and that God therefore disapproves of them. Do ST, or $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$, even so much as suggest that her beliefs here are irrational? They do not. At any rate, O'Connor has given no argument for the conclusion that they do. (Cf. notes 11 and 13.) So premise (iv) stands in need of substantial defense as well.

Maitzen also offers an argument from skeptical theism to skepticism about divine commands. The first part of the argument, with which I shall not take issue, proceeds as follows (note that I am paraphrasing, not quoting):

> We find apparently conflicting commands in the scriptures of the different theistic traditions. None of these putative revelations is self-authenticating; so theists must decide which to take as genuine. Moreover, within the scriptures of each tradition, we find commands (e.g., to avoid mixed-fiber clothing or to stone disobedient children) that adherents of the relevant tradition regard as having been superseded by other commands or as being for other reasons inapplicable or not reflective of genuine divine preferences about the behavior of contemporary human beings. In order to decide which to take as genuine, we must determine which to take as most likely expressing God's will and intentions. Therefore, identifying God's genuine commands requires human insight into God's reasons and intentions. (Maitzen 2013, 451–483)

Let us grant the subconclusion. Let us further grant (as Maitzen seems to affirm) that just as human insight into God's reasons and intentions is needed in order to *identify* God's commands, so too it is needed to "resolve questions about their relative importance, or apply them to our actual circumstances" (451). Then:

4.0. One can identify God's genuine commands, resolve questions about their relative importance, or apply them to one's actual circumstances only if one has human insight into God's reasons and intentions.

At this point, Maitzen introduces a further premise, followed by a rhetorical question:

4.1. One has human insight into God's reasons and intentions only if one "independently understand[s] the realm of value [i.e., understands it in a way not dependent upon our prior beliefs about the content of God's commands] well enough to tell which acts and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command" (Maitzen 2013, 452).

4.2. "How then can we understand the realm of value well enough to tell which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command and yet, as skeptical theists insist, not understand that realm well enough to tell which cases of horrific suffering a perfect being would be at all likely to permit?" (Maitzen 2013, 452).

I assume (but am not certain) that the question is supposed to function as if it were equivalent to the following conjunction:

4.3. If skeptical theism is true, then (a) we do not understand the realm of value well enough to tell which cases of horrific suffering a perfect being would be at all likely to permit; *and* if (a) is true, then (b) we cannot understand the realm of value well enough to tell which actions and omissions a perfect being would be likely to command.

Replacing 4.2 with 4.3 introduces no additional problems into Maitzen's argument, and it has the virtue of rendering valid his inference to the following conclusion:

4.4. Therefore: "[If skeptical theism is true, then] we can't identify God's commands, resolve questions about their relative importance, or apply them to our actual circumstances . . ." (Maitzen 2013, 451).

Still, the argument is unconvincing, for there is no reason to think that either 4.1 or 4.3 is true. Consider Lucy. Is her understanding of the realm of value *independent* of her views about what God has commanded? Apparently not. Her moral beliefs are intimately connected to her religious upbringing. Indeed, we may speculate that (like many Christians) she grew up thinking that moral value is grounded somehow in divine preferences and commands. Does it follow from this that she "lacks the requisite insight to identify God's genuine commands"? Hardly, and this for two reasons.

First, Maitzen has not ruled out the possibility of reliably arriving at beliefs about divine commands via routes other than reflection on facts about value. Suppose Christianity is true, and suppose the Christian scriptures are – when properly understood – reliable sources of information about divine commands. Suppose further that careful, prayerful attention to the scriptural texts themselves and to the vast body of commentary on those texts within the Christian tradition will resolve many, even if not all, questions about which putative commands in scripture are genuine and which are merely apparent, and about which are still applicable and which are not. Many Christians, including some who are skeptical theists, will affirm these suppositions, and Maitzen has given no argument for the conclusion that they are false. But if they are true, then (*contra* Maitzen) someone like Lucy may very well *not* "lack the requisite insight to identify God's genuine commands."

Second, it seems clear that all one really needs in order to discern some facts about what a perfect being would be likely to command is *knowledge that there is at least one type of act that is morally wrong*. But so far as I can tell – and so far as Maitzen has argued – there is no reason to think that one can have such knowledge only if one's grasp of the realm of moral value is *independent* of one's beliefs about God's reasons and intentions.

Likewise, premise 4.3 has little to recommend it either. Suppose Lucy considers her belief that the commands in the Decalogue are indeed God's commands, and suppose she asks herself whether it is likely that a perfect being would issue a command prohibiting (say) murder. Moral intuition says that murder (the killing of someone for no justifying reason) is wrong, and she cannot imagine a perfect being approving of murder. So she reasons that it is indeed likely that a perfect being would issue such a command. Neither ST nor $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ raise any obstacle to these thoughts on her part; nor does her acceptance of those theses supply her with a defeater for the belief that it is likely that God would prohibit murder. Indeed, it does not even supply a defeater for her more "speculative" beliefs, for example, that it is likely that God would not approve of one person's severely abusing another. She acknowledges that her sample of possible goods, evils, and connections among them may not be representative; she is likewise firmly of the conviction that we cannot be justified in believing (for example) that the abuse she suffered as a child is gratuitous. But these beliefs of hers obviously do not constitute evidence that God might approve of murder or abuse. So they do not defeat her justification for believing that it is likely that God would prohibit murder and abuse.

Maitzen acknowledges a further possible reply to his argument: namely, that a skeptical theist might insist that, even if we do not have *representative* knowledge of the realm of value, we nevertheless know *enough* (independently of our beliefs about divine commands, I take it) to discern at least a few divine commands. This is an attack on premise 4.1. Obviously I have chosen to address that premise in a different way; but it is worth noting that even this objection is stronger than Maitzen gives it credit for being.

In reply to the objection, Maitzen says:

> [a]ccording to [skeptical theism], we lack what it takes even to *estimate the likelihood* that some compensating good justifies a perfect being's permitting [the instance of suffering under consideration in his paper]. . . . By the same token, we can't estimate the likelihood that some reason lying beyond our ken turns what seems to us a diabolical command into just the thing a perfect being would tell someone to do in the particular circumstances. (Maitzen 2013, 452–453)

Strictly speaking, the first quoted sentence here is false: skeptical theists do not deny (for example) that one who believes that God exists and would not permit gratuitous evil can reasonably infer from these beliefs that there is no gratuitous evil. But set this aside for now. Still, it is hard to see why one should think that the truth of the second sentence follows. Again, suppose that Lucy considers the question of whether God might *command* the sort of abuse that she suffered as a child. It is part of her skeptical theism to say that, for all she knows, some good beyond her ken justifies God in *permitting* that suffering. So, she might reason, perhaps there is some good beyond her ken that would justify God in *commanding* the abuse that led to her suffering as well. Still, this is not evidence that God *did* command the abuse she underwent; it is not evidence that God *would* ever command that sort of abuse; it is not evidence that God even *might* issue a general command that people engage in that sort of abuse. Is it at least evidence that God might, at some point, *once* command someone to engage in that sort of abuse? No; not even that. For even if there is some good that might *justify* God in commanding that sort of abuse, Lucy has no evidence whatsoever that the good in question is one that God might desire to bring about. (Cf. the "Global Skepticism" section.) At best, then, Lucy has evidence only for what she already takes herself to know – namely, that God would, under some circumstances, permit the abuse that she suffered. So it seems that even if we grant the first part of Maitzen's reply, the second (and crucial) part simply does not follow.

The final two objections to be considered in this section are O'Connor's claims that (a) skeptical theism implies that we cannot identify any actions as sins, and (b) skeptical theism implies skepticism about divine goodness and divine values. The first argument can be dismissed immediately, since its central premise is just the conclusion (viii) that I have already shown to be unsupported. The second argument runs as follows:

4.5. "My believing that somebody is a morally good person requires my believing him to be good according to the standards of moral goodness that I myself accept" (O'Connor 2013, 473).

4.6. "The basic tenet of [skeptical theism], namely, that we have no good reason to think that either our concepts or measures of goodness in human persons are representative of those applying to infinite, non-human persons" implies that the skeptical theist "has no good reason to suppose she understands what she believes about divine goodness" (O'Connor 2013, 474) and "has no good reason to think that she would recognize divine goodness as goodness" (O'Connor 2013, 475).

4.7. Therefore: A skeptical theist cannot reasonably believe that God is good.

Let premise 4.5 pass. The main problem with the argument is that 4.6 is false (as we have already seen in the first section). We might ask, however, what happens if we replace premise 4.6 with a premise that really *does* state a basic tenet of skeptical theism. Suppose, for example, we replace 4.6 with 4.8:

4.8. Skeptical theism affirms both ST and $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$.

Now does the conclusion follow? It does only if the following premise is also true:

4.9. The conjunction of ST & $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ implies that we have no reason to believe that God counts as good according to standards of goodness that we ourselves accept.

But 4.9 is false. Again, consider Lucy: Her standards of goodness are standards that she has drawn from scripture, moral intuition, and testimony from people she admires and respects. Her belief that God is good (according to standards that she accepts) is grounded in scripture, religious experience, testimony, and intuitions about the nature of perfection. Does her belief that her *sample* of possible goods, evils, and connections among them may not be representative somehow count against any of this? I cannot see that it does, and O'Connor has not argued that it does. What about her belief that human beings cannot be justified in saying of actual horrendous evils (like her own childhood suffering) that they are gratuitous? *This* belief actually seems to presuppose that God is good according to standards of goodness that we ourselves accept. Of course, she does believe that there may be something wrong with her standards – she is morally fallible. But in the course of defending premise 4.5, O'Connor concedes that we might reasonably believe of someone that she is morally good even if we do not think that she is good according to *all* of our moral standards. All that is required is that there be some significant overlap between our standards of goodness and the standards to which she conforms.

Skepticism About (Other) Knowledge of God

O'Connor and Wilks both claim that skeptical theism generates problems for certain other beliefs we might have about God. O'Connor, for example, says that it undermines our reasons for thinking that our sufferings are not gratuitous, it undermines our ability to have a relationship with God, it deprives us of any basis for attributing purposes or reasons for action to God, and it undermines belief in miracles, as well as belief in crucial premises of certain natural theological arguments. The problem, however, is that *all* of these objections are predicated on the success of his argument for the conclusion that skeptical theists have defeaters for their beliefs about God's goodness and about the contents of God's commands. As we have already seen, however, those arguments are not successful, and so these conclusions likewise are left unsupported. In light of this, I shall focus attention in this section on Wilks's argument.

According to Wilks, skeptical theism undermines our ability to "[take] particular goods as signs of God's presence," and to "[see] things and events in the world around us as manifestations of God" (Wilks 2013, 460). Why should this be so? As I understand it, his argument runs as follows :

5.1. If skeptical theism is true, then "we should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to do" (Wilks 2013, 458).
5.2. "If we should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be evil for God to do, then it seems we should also be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be *good* for God to do" (Wilks 2013, 459).
5.3. Therefore: If skeptical theism is true, we should be skeptical about any claim to know what it would be good for God to do.
5.4. Consequences of both goods and evils can run contrary to appearances: *prima facie* good events can have very bad consequences, and *prima facie* evil events can have very good consequences.
5.5. Therefore "we have equally little reason to suppose that we can discern their actual standing as good or evil on the basis of properties internal to them" (Wilks 2013, 460).
5.6. If we should be skeptical of any claim to know what it would be good for God to do, and if we have equally little reason to suppose that we can discern whether an event is good or evil on the basis of properties internal to it, then we have "no reason to think we see in a particular good a sign of God's presence any more than we have reason to think we see in a particular evil a sign of his absence"[14] (Wilks 2013, 460).
5.7. Therefore: if skeptical theism is true, "we have no reason to think we see in a particular good a sign of God's presence any more than we have reason to think we see in a particular evil a sign of his absence."

The conclusion here is not quite the same as O'Connor's conclusion that skeptical theism implies that we have no reason to think that we can see God's purposes in particular events or claim any knowledge of God's values. But obviously there are similarities. Like O'Connor, Wilks takes his conclusion to have untoward implications for skeptical theists' acceptance of the argument from design.

We saw in the first section of this chapter that premise 5.1 is false. So the argument to 5.3 is unsound. There is no independent reason to accept 5.3 either. So I reject that claim. Those, like me, who reject consequentialism will also reject the inference from 5.4 to 5.5. Wilks says that consequentialism "operates in the background" of skeptical theism, so (presumably) he thinks that skeptical theists are bound to accept that inference. But, as we have already seen, that claim rests on a misconception.

Finally, premise 5.6 is also false. Suppose you endorse for good reasons the view that it is part of the human design plan to have experiences as of the presence of God when we experience certain kinds of phenomena – a sublime vista, communion with fellow believers, and so on. Suppose, furthermore, that you have some such experiences. You will then have good reason to think that you see in some particular phenomenon a sign of God's presence, and if the phenomenon in question is, in fact, good, then (whether you recognize it as good or not) you will have good reason to think that you see in some particular *good* a sign of God's presence. Moreover, you will have this reason even if you accept all of the premises of Wilks's argument.

14 Wilks does not explicitly affirm 5.6; rather, the quoted material in this premise is part of his overall conclusion. I have supplied premise 5.6 simply in order to render the argument valid.

Moral Paralysis

I turn finally to Maitzen's moral paralysis objection. In defending this objection, Maitzen takes an argument by Almeida and Oppy (2003) as his springboard. In short, Almeida and Oppy argue that if you think (as the skeptical theist does) that there might be some great good that can justify God in permitting some evil, then you should also think that there might be some great good that can justify *you* in permitting the same evil. But if you think this, then you cannot sensibly think that you *ought* to intervene to prevent the evil in question. I have already replied to this argument in an article co-authored with Michael Bergmann (Bergmann and Rea 2005). Maitzen's goal here is to rebut that reply, arguing that even if skeptical theists can somehow *justify* intervention to prevent some evil, they cannot sensibly take themselves to be *obligated* to prevent it.

Before presenting Maitzen's argument, I should note that even if the argument were sound, I am not sure that the conclusion would be all that damaging. It is well known that belief in a general obligation to prevent suffering yields highly counterintuitive conclusions. Peter Unger (1996), for example, reasons quite persuasively from the principle that

> (U1) If we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, it is wrong for us not to do so. (Unger 1996, 8; cf. Singer 1972.)

to the conclusion that

> (U2) On pain of living a life that's seriously immoral, a typical well-off person, like you and me, must give away most of her financially valuable assets, and much of her income, directing the funds to lessen efficiently the serious suffering of others. (Unger 1996, 134)

But U2 seems to me (and most other people, I think) to be false. Thus, by rebutting Maitzen's argument here, I do not intend to sign on to the presupposition that the denial of his conclusion is part of "commonsense" morality.

The core of Maitzen's argument is the following analogy, which I quote at length:

> Imagine that a well-armed tribesman walks into a jungle field hospital and sees someone in strange garb (known to us as the surgeon) about to cut open the abdomen of the tribesman's wife, who lies motionless on a table. It certainly looks to the tribesman like a deadly assault, and thus he sees good reason to attack the surgeon and no particular reason not to. But suppose that the tribesman also believes that strangely garbed magicians (known to us as surgeons) travel around who miraculously save dying people by cutting them open. As a result, he occurrently believes "If this is one of those life-saving miracles, I shouldn't expect to know it." The incision is about to happen, and clearly there's no time to investigate before acting. Given his beliefs, does it follow that he *ought* to attack the surgeon, i.e., that he would be wrong to refrain? I think not. At most what follows is that he *may* attack the surgeon, even at the cost of preventing his wife's life-saving appendectomy: we get at most permission rather than obligation. Skeptical theism asks us to admit that we occupy the same position with respect to the realm of value that the tribesman occupies with respect to modern medicine: we shouldn't expect to see how it works. Yet skeptical theists such as Bergmann and Rea claim to preserve, despite their skepticism, our ordinary moral *obligation* to intervene in such cases. . . . Their claim is correct only if the tribesman is obligated to attack the surgeon. (Maitzen 2013, 456)

So, in short, it is the tribesman's "legitimate self-doubt" (Maitzen 2013, 456) that mitigates any obligation he might have had to intervene, and Maitzen's idea is that skeptical theists are likewise subject to such legitimate self-doubt when confronted with serious suffering or evil that they are in a position to prevent. Thus, like the tribesman, they have no obligation to intervene either.

Moreover, Maitzen goes on to argue that the (typical theistic) belief that "someone exists who can make this suffering turn out for the best even if I don't intervene" (Maitzen 2013, 450) mitigates whatever obligations we might have to intervene to prevent serious harm. For suppose we have such a belief. Then, says Maitzen, "[w]e ought . . . to feel less obligated (or less clearly obligated, if obligation doesn't come in degrees) to prevent and relieve suffering than we would feel if we didn't believe in such a potential guarantor of a good outcome" (Maitzen 2013, 451). Here, then, it is not *skeptical* theism that causes the problem, but simply *theism* (in conjunction with an otherwise ordinary set of beliefs about morality).

Maitzen notes that one reply that can be made by skeptical theists – and that has been made to Almeida and Oppy's version of the moral paralysis argument – is that divine commands can ground our obligations to intervene to prevent serious suffering. But, says Maitzen, this reply is unworkable, partly because skeptical theism induces skepticism about the content and application conditions of putative divine commands (as seen earlier), but also because (a) there is no explicit command in scripture to intervene to prevent serious harm, and (b) if we try to derive the obligation from God's other commands, we presuppose insight into God's assumptions in issuing God's commands – insight "skeptical theism says we have no right to think we possess" (Maitzen 2013, 454).

There are two points I wish to make by way of reply.

First, suppose we pursue the line of reply that appeals to our knowledge of divine commands (or, more broadly, divine values). Maitzen is correct that we find in scripture no explicit command to intervene with preventive measures when we encounter someone who is about to cause grievous harm to another. But that does not mean that scripture is wholly silent on the matter. We are told to love our neighbors as ourselves; we are enjoined to help the poor, show compassion to those who are sick and suffering, visit people in prison, care for orphans and widows, and so on. The prophet Micah says,

> He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
> and what does the LORD require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with your God?
> (Micah 6:8, New Revised Standard Version)

None of this can very well be done without intervening somehow in the lives of others, and it seems clear that those who refuse to intervene in the lives of others are doing something wrong. None of this entails (say) that we are obligated to prevent a kidnapping when we see that it is about to occur and are able to prevent it at little risk or cost to ourselves. But it seems clearly to constitute evidence in favor of the view that we have such an obligation.

The question, then, is whether believing in such an obligation on the basis of evidence like this presupposes insight into God's assumptions in issuing such commands that "skeptical theism says we have no right to think we possess." If it does, Maitzen has not shown

that it does. As we saw in the section entitled "Skepticism about Value," it simply does not follow from ST and $ST1_B$–$ST3_B$ that we cannot sensibly assume that we understand at least some of the putative divine commands we find in scripture, nor does it follow that we cannot get some reasonably clear and action-guiding understanding of God's values from scripture.

Second, consider Maitzen's claim, toward the end of the quoted passage, that "[s]keptical theism asks us to admit that we occupy the same position with respect to the realm of value that the tribesman occupies with respect to modern medicine: we shouldn't expect to see how it works." This claim is, of course, absolutely crucial to his argument-by-analogy. If the skeptical theist is not in the same position with respect to the realm of value that the tribesman occupies with respect to modern medicine, then the analogy is bad and the argument fails.

But it should by now be clear that it is simply not true that skeptical theism asks us to admit that our position in relation to the realm of value resembles the tribesman's position with respect to modern medicine. The tribesman has *no understanding whatsoever* of modern medicine. Indeed, he is worse off even than most elementary school children in the United States. For, after all, children do not usually regard successful surgeries as "life-saving miracles," nor are they typically so ignorant and obtuse as to worry that those undergoing surgery are being *assaulted* by their physicians. So to say that the skeptical theist asks us to admit that our position in relation to the realm of value resembles the tribesman's position with respect to modern medicine is to say that the skeptical theist asks us to admit that we are mostly clueless about the realm of value – we understand very little of it at all and, indeed, are inclined to reason rather stupidly about it. But as we have seen multiple times now in this chapter, that is not what the skeptical theist says. So, it seems to me, Maitzen's argument by analogy fails.

One might object, however, that I am still failing to address the basic point of Maitzen's argument. The core worry is something like this: Skeptical theists maintain that we are in a position of *some significant* ignorance with respect to the realm of value. Moreover, skeptical theists typically also think that unknown goods justify God in permitting all manner of horrendous things to happen to his creatures.[15] Given these two commitments, it seems (says the objector) that skeptical theists should also acknowledge that unknown goods, evils, and relations among goods and evils might justify *us* in permitting kidnappings and other serious evils. And if we do acknowledge this, then (the objection continues) it seems that we should be significantly less confident about our obligations to intervene than commonsense morality says that we should be.

My own answer to this objection is that just as God's obligations depend to some extent upon what God knows, so too our obligations depend to some extent upon what we know. True enough, there might be goods, evils, and relations among them such that *if we knew about them*, we would revise some of our beliefs about how or whether we ought to intervene in various kinds of circumstances. But there is no reason to think that awareness of this fact should make us any less confident in our views about what we ought (or are obligated) to do in light of what we *actually* know (Cf. Bergmann and Rea 2005; Bergmann 2009, 2012). More exactly: I can see (and Maitzen has given) no reason for thinking this

15 Typically, but not necessarily, since one *can* be a skeptical theist while thinking either that some evils are gratuitous (and that this is not inconsistent with the existence of God) or that all evils are in fact justified by facts about known goods, known evils, and known relations among goods and evils.

that does not somehow depend on controversial moral or epistemological principles that skeptical theists as such are free to reject (Cf. Howard-Snyder 2009). Thus, absent further argument laying out the operative moral and epistemological principles and then somehow tying them to skeptical theism, the objection that skeptical theism undermines confidence in commonsense beliefs about our obligations to intervene is a failure.

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