

Skeptical Theism within Reason

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Abstract

The evidential argument from evil moves from inscrutable evils to gratuitous evils, from evils we cannot scrutinize a God-justifying reason for permitting to there being no such reason. Skeptical theism challenges this inference by claiming that our inability to scrutinize a God-justifying reason does not provide good evidence that there is no reason. The core motivation for skeptical theism is that the cognitive and moral distance between a perfect being and creatures like us is so great we shouldn't expect that we grasp all the relevant considerations pertaining to a God-justifying reason. My goal in this paper is to defend skeptical theism within a context that allows for an inverse probability argument for theism. These arguments are crucial for an evidentialist approach to the justification of theism. I aim to show that there is a natural way of motivating a skeptical theist position that does not undermine our knowledge of some values.

This world contains inscrutable evils, evils that when we carefully consider them we cannot see why an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good being would permit them to occur. A popular move is that the existence of inscrutable evils makes it reasonable to believe that there are gratuitous evils, evils that no reason at all justifies God in permitting the evils. This inference is a *noseeum inference*; because we do not see any justifying reason for permitting certain evils, there is not any justifying reason.

Skeptical theism questions the noseem inference at the heart of the evidential argument from evil. Skeptical theists claim that because the data we possess and our ability to mine the data are both quite limited in comparison

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with the cognitive powers of a perfect being, we should be skeptical about our ability to limn the possible reasons a perfect being may have for permitting evil. For all we know, there might be goods or evils (and/or entailments between goods, evils, and permissions) we don't know about that justify a perfect being in permitting horrendous evils. Because we are in this skeptical situation, the existence of inscrutable evils does not make it reasonable to believe that there are gratuitous evils.

A powerful criticism of skeptical theism centers on its alleged skeptical implications regarding our knowledge of value and morality. First, some argue that the skeptical theist's skepticism cuts both ways. If it undermines the evidential argument from evil then it also undermines positive arguments for the existence of God.¹ Richard Swinburne rightly stresses the importance of our ability to make reasonable judgments about what kinds of states of affairs are valuable in order to determine what kinds of states of affairs a perfect being has reason to bring about.² Second, some argue that a skeptical theist's skepticism is inconsistent with knowledge of our moral obligations.³

My aim in this chapter is to argue for the consistency of skeptical theism with a broadly evidentialist approach to the justification of theism. An evidentialist approach to theism requires that we can make reasonable judgments about what kinds of states of affairs a perfect being will bring about. This, in turn, requires that we can make reasonable judgments about the value of some states of affairs. Thus, I will argue for a view which endorses agnosticism about the noseum inference together with some knowledge of value. I will not discuss the application to moral principles, but the argument that skeptical theism is consistent with knowledge of some values can be parlayed into an argument that skeptical theism is consistent with knowledge of defeasible moral principles. Since, as I argue, skeptical theism doesn't undermine some values, it follows—*mutatis mutandis*—that skeptical theism does not undermine defeasible moral principles.

The resulting position offers a good contrast to the popular reformed epistemology espoused by many skeptical theists. These theists argue that the belief that there is a perfect being is properly basic and that the main threat to the rationality of this belief is the problem of evil. Consequently, they take the main goal of skeptical theism to undermine the power of evil to defeat theistic belief. Once the threat from the problem of evil is removed, theistic belief may enjoy its status as properly basic. By contrast, I hold that theis-

¹(Beaudoin 1998)

²See (Swinburne 2004, 112-123)

³This argument has received careful attention by (Bergmann and Rea 2005; Bergmann 2012; Howard-Snyder 2009).

tic belief is justified only if it is held on the basis of good evidence and that, while the problem of evil is an initial threat to theism, reflection on the kinds of considerations skeptical theists offer shows that the duration, extent, and magnitude of evil should not change one's situation with respect to what one's evidence indicates apropos the proposition that there is a perfect being.

I begin to argue for this evidentialist position by presenting a brief explanation of skeptical theism, focusing on the specific skeptical propositions. In the second section I explain the reasons skeptical theists have for being skeptical about our ability to determine theodical questions.⁴ In the third section I explain the role of value considerations in Swinburne's evidentialist approach to theism and I defend the coherence of this approach with the reasons given in the second section. In the final section I examine John Beaudoin's argument that skeptical theism undermines inverse probability arguments for theism.

1 What are skeptical theists skeptical about?

Skeptical theism aims to undermine the inference from inscrutable evils to gratuitous evils by providing reasons for thinking that we should be skeptical about whether this inference is good. Skeptical theism differs from more ordinary forms of skepticism. A normal kind of skepticism calls into question our knowledge about some broadly defined class of beliefs. For instance, there are skeptics about the past, about other minds, about the external world, and about the future. Other forms of skepticism are more local. For example, one might be a skeptic about whether the bird in yonder marsh is a Wilson's Plover. Or, one might be a skeptic about whether the Provost's decision to incentivize online teaching will increase faculty willingness to teach online courses. As I shall be urging, skeptical theism should be understood as a more local kind of skepticism in contrast to a more global skepticism.

Consider, for instance, one way to motivate skeptical theism by way of a more general global skepticism. This kind of skeptical theism assumes skepticism about the future consequences of an action. It then argues along the following lines. A person knows that an action is valuable only if she knows that, on balance, its future consequences are better than any of its competitors. But, since no one knows the future consequences of an act, no one knows that an act is valuable.

Skeptical theists do not argue this way and if they did, it would be a mistake. Rather skeptical theists focus on the specific theodical issue of whether there is a reason that justifies a perfect being in permitting inscrutable evils.

⁴This section relies heavily on Alston's excellent article (Alston 1991).

Skeptical theists are skeptical about our ability to make reasonable judgments about this proposition, not because of general skeptical arguments about value or morality, but rather because of the difficulties attending this specific proposition.

Occasionally, skeptical theists can sound as if they are endorsing a general value skepticism. Michael Bergmann, for instance, writes, “It just doesn’t seem *unlikely* that our understanding of the realm of value falls miserably short of capturing all that is true about that realm.”⁵ Consider one of Bergmann’s skeptical theist theses.

[ST1] We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are with respect to the property of figuring in a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us.⁶

This is often given in abbreviated form as “[ST1] We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are,” which does sound as if there’s a general value skepticism in the neighborhood. I contend, however, that there is a much more natural way to motivate skeptical theism without relying on any principles that raise a general skepticism about value. The key to my solution is to recognize that the inscrutability thesis is ambiguous. The claim that there are evils that we cannot scrutinize a God-justifying reason for permitting is ambiguous between,

(Inscrutability 1) There are evils that we have surveyed all the reasons we are aware of pertaining to divine permission and we have found them inadequate.

(Inscrutability 2) There are evils that we have surveyed all the reasons we are aware of pertaining to divine permission and we are unable to determine whether they are adequate.

Inscrutability 1 and Inscrutability 2 offer different explanations for our inability to scrutinize God-justifying reasons. Inscrutability 1 holds that the explanation lies in the fact that each of the reasons offered for divine permission *is* inadequate. Inscrutability 2 holds that the explanation lies in the fact that we are *unable to determine* the adequacy of the reasons. In both cases, the evils are inscrutable: we are unable to know whether there’s a God-justifying reason for permitting those particular evils. The explanations of this fact differ. We are unable to know either because the reasons we are aware of *are*

⁵(Bergmann 2001, 279) emphasis added

⁶(Bergmann 2012, 11-12)

inadequate or because we *can't determine* whether the reasons we are aware of are inadequate. The following section defends Inscrutability 2 by considering seven skeptical problems pertaining to our ability to determine the adequacy of reasons for divine permission.

2 Conceived defenses and unconceived defenses

A defense is an epistemologically possible story in which God and evil coexist. There are extant defenses that have been formulated and investigated, and there are defenses which have yet to be formulated and investigated. Let us call the first class of defenses *conceived defenses* and the second *unconceived defenses*. Skeptical theism can be motivated by a skepticism about certain details of the conceived defenses.⁷ The conceived defenses posit facts for which we are unable to know whether those facts obtain. This inability is principled; in our present epistemic position, many of these facts are not accessible to us. Crucially, these facts do not threaten the truth of either defeasible value claims or defeasible moral principles. Yet, equally important, our lack of knowledge about these facts prevents us from determining the adequacy of the theodical reasons offered. In the following, I develop and defend these claims. I begin with a list and explanation of skeptical problems, and then I illustrate the problems by examining two representative defenses.

2.1 Skeptical problems with conceived defenses

A defense is a story and stories have details. What makes for a good story is the intricacy of the characters, the goals to be achieved, and the interactions between psychologically compelling characters. A good story often leaves crucial issues to be guessed at or leaves crucial questions unanswered. Likewise, a good defense will leave many issues open and, depending on how the details are filled out, the defense may fall apart. But, as I shall contend, many of the details are such that we are not in a position to determine which way the details should be filled out. Below I offer seven skeptical problems that threaten our ability to scrutinize God-justifying reasons.

⁷I gleaned this response from a close reading on Alston's superb essay (Alston 1991). Many of the skeptical problems I formulate below are generalizations of points Alston makes in that essay. The development of Alston's essay I suggest is entirely of my own making. I do not know whether Alston would have approved this way of developing skeptical theism.

First, there is *the complexity problem*. Human beings face significant cognitive limitations in reliably assessing intricate situations. There are limits to the amount of information a person can hold before the mind. A defense posits some good or right that, together with other facts, may justify God in permitting evil. To determine the adequacy of a defense one must fully grasp the good, together with the arguments that it *is* a good, that *would* justify a perfect being, the arguments against that, enough moral theory to understand the relevant permissions and entailments between facts and permissions, and then understand all the relevant facts on the ground. Many of the relevant facts on the ground are such that we should be skeptical about our ability to determine them. But supposing we can settle all these questions, the complexity problem is that we have reason to think that due to the complexity of this issue, we should be skeptical about our ability to reliably judge an intricate situation.

Second, there is *the Cartesian problem*. We have some first-person privileged access to our own mental states. We lack this access to the mental states of others. While we can often know what another person is experiencing, we know little of another person's higher-order mental states apart from testimony. There can be crucial moral differences between two individuals that are not recognizable at the level of behavior. It is only an internal difference that, perhaps, no one else knows about which makes the moral difference.

Trent Dougherty and I have argued that⁸ though inferences from behavior might reasonably implicate certain beliefs and desires, they will ordinarily not provide insight into higher-order states such as whether the individual believes his beliefs and desires to be objectionable or desires to have certain beliefs and desires. Yet both one's degrees of confidence and one's higher-order states are surely factors relevant to the assessment of moral character. To illustrate this, consider a contrast between two individuals who exhibit identical actions and have the same course-grained mental profile but form a marked contrast with respect to the finer-grained and higher-order considerations.

Brutal Bart

Brutal Bart goes into his former workplace (where he was recently fired), shoots his old boss, takes the petty cash fund, and runs. Bart believes he has a right to the money since he'd worked there for a full year without a raise. He desired to shoot his boss and take the money and believed he could get away with it. He has certitude that his boss forfeited his life when he fired him and no reservations about what he has done.

⁸The next several paragraphs are from (Poston and Dougherty 2008, 325-26)

Reluctant Ralph

Ralph goes into his former workplace (where he was recently fired), shoots his old boss, takes the petty cash fund, and runs. Ralph believes he has a right to the money since he'd worked there for a full year without a raise. He desired to shoot his boss and take the money and believed he could get away with it. However, Ralph is just barely convinced he has a "right" to the money since he sees that his Boss had a legitimate grievance with him. In fact, when he thinks about it, he believes his desire to do this is one he should not have and in fact desires not to have this desire. After he has done it, he deeply regrets it, believing it to have been a wicked act and desiring that he could undo his wrong.

This contrast represents the possibility of undetectable mental bases of moral character which provide reason to doubt our ability to make the kinds of judgments necessary to certain defenses. One popular defense is the soul-making defense which appeals to goods of character, and argues that these goods are valuable but only available or considerably more probable on the condition that certain evils exist. One primary objection to this is that if God had soul-making as a goal then the evils people are exposed to make it *less* likely that they develop, for example, courage. Certain evils diminish a person's self rather than developing it. Yet the success of this objection turns on our ability to detect particular kinds of mental states for which we often lack evidence.

A third skeptical problem with conceived defenses is *the prediction problem*. We do not know the future states of a person or how a person will develop over time. Many of the great world religions maintain that there is life after death. If there is, we know very little about how a particular person will respond and develop in this state.⁹ But even apart from the possibility of life after death, we know little about how a person will change over time. Some defenses, such as the soul-making defense, posit that some evils occur because they are required or probabilistically relevant to valuable traits of character. One objection to this defense is that people do not respond in character-building ways to some evils. But the full defense is permitted to appeal to future states, and we lack significant knowledge about the relevant future states.

A fourth skeptical problem is *the playbook problem*. When watching a football game, we sometimes rightly complain that the wrong play was called. On third and three a strong running team decided to call for a long pass. We complain that they should have called a toss sweep because we know the

⁹For an intriguing possibility see (Lewis 2001)

playbook well enough to know what the relevant options are. But when it comes to figuring out what a perfect being should do instead of what actually occurs, we lack knowledge of which options are metaphysically possible given certain goals. Some object to the free will defense that if God wanted a world with free creatures then he could have done so with significantly less pain and suffering. But this assumes that we know that the relevant options are indeed in the divine playbook. But a divine playbook is a book of complete worlds. It is the book on all the metaphysically possible total states of affairs. It does not follow that a complex state of affairs is metaphysically possible because each of its component states of affairs are metaphysically possible. It may be that any world similar to ours in positive value contains a world with similar or worse evils. Because we don't know the book of worlds, we aren't in a position to fully determine the adequacy of the free will defense.

A fifth skeptical problem that afflicts our ability to determine the success of the conceived defenses is *the deception problem*. Many objections in the problem of evil argue that there is no person centered reason for permitting evil. A person centered reason is a reason for permitting an evil that appeals to the good of a person. The person may be the sufferer, the perpetrator, or the onlooker. Many of these objections argue that the evil is unnecessary for some good or not probabilistically relevant for some good. If God wanted Jones to trust in him, he could have achieved this goal in a much less painful manner. But this assumes that Jones would have responded in a desirable way given much less pain. We like to think this is true for us and others, but what justification do we have for this? People often forget past failures and take a rosy-eyed view of human nature. If self-deception is genuine, then it afflicts our ability to properly assess what the evidence indicates with respect to whether there's a God-justifying reason for permitting evil.

The sixth skeptical problem is *the Goldilocks' problem*. We don't know what kind of suffering is just right for the purposes of various goods. We know that sometimes pain is necessary for a good. You cannot run a marathon unless you are willing to suffer. How much suffering is just right for running a marathon? It depends on how much you desire to run a marathon and how much suffering you're willing to endure. Objections to theism from evil often argue that an evil is too horrible for various person-centered goods. A perfect being could have secured those goods with less suffering. But apart from the playbook problem, we face the problem of determining the probabilities of success for each relevant option - goal combination. Suppose God wanted significantly free creatures with true virtue. What's the best way of achieving this goal? The best way is the one for which there's no better way. And to know that there's no better way is to know all the relevant ways and the probabilities of

success for each way. But we don't have this knowledge.¹⁰ Because we lack this knowledge, we are not in a position to determine whether the porridge is too hot or too cold.

The last skeptical problem I will mention is *the estimation problem*. Several objections to theism proceed like this. God could have prevented the worst $n\%$ of evils, but this evil is among the worst; consequently, there's no God. The claim that a particular evil is among the worst $n\%$ of evils can be understood as the worst $n\%$ of *actual* evils or the worst $n\%$ of *possible* evils. For the objection to go through it is required to be the worst $n\%$ of *possible* evils; that an evil is the worst of *actual* evil is a trivial relational property. One must claim that the worst actual evils are really bad. One way of doing this is that it's in the $n\%$ of worst possible evils. But do we know what are among the worst possible evils? Was Hurricane Katrina among the worst possible hurricanes? Arguably, no. Do we know what the worst possible hurricane is? Perhaps, we can imagine one that is much, much worse, but our imagination is significantly constrained by laws of nature.¹¹ It's epistemically possible that a perfect being has prevented the worst $n\%$ of possible horrors.

2.2 Two examples

Let us look at two defenses to see how the above skeptical problems arise in context. My discussion of these two defenses closely follows William Alston's (Alston 1991) discussion of skeptical problems afflicting our assessment of these defenses.

2.2.1 Eleonore Stump's natural evil defense

Eleonore Stump suggests that the purpose of natural evil may be to fix our wills heavenward. Stump writes,

Natural evil—the pain of disease, the intermittent and unpredictable destruction of natural disasters, the decay of old age, the imminence of death—takes away a person's satisfaction with himself. It tends to humble him, show him his frailty, make him reflect on the transience of temporal goods, and turn his affections toward other-worldly things, away from the things of this world. No amount of

¹⁰This knowledge doesn't require that we know each and every way. Rather it requires that we know all the relevant ways and know that this way (the purported objector's way) is better.

¹¹The energy in hurricanes come from the heat in the ocean water. When imagining the worst *possible* hurricane we must canvas all the relevant possibilities, possibilities in which the ocean's temperatures are much much warmer including perhaps worlds in which the boiling point of water is above 100 degrees C.

moral or natural evil . . . can *guarantee* that a man will seek God's help. If it could, the willing it produced would not be free. But evil of this sort is the best hope, . . . and maybe the only effective means, for bringing men to such a state.¹²

One can object to Stump's suggestion along multiple dimensions: natural evils are among the worst possible evils, people do not and will not respond effectively to these evils, there are options available to a perfect being that would have been more successful, people do not need these kind of evils to fix our wills heavenward, and this amount of suffering is too much. Each of these objections is undermined by our lack of knowledge. We often do not know how people respond inwardly to instances of natural evil, do not know the future development of persons, do not know what other means are available to a perfect being, and do not know whether our attempts to judge the relative successful of the different options are reliable. In short, we cannot determine whether Stump's suggestion is adequate because it depends on details we are not in a position to assess. Thus, some natural evils are inscrutable in sense 2; there are natural evils that we cannot determine whether Stump's natural evil defense is adequate.¹³

2.2.2 Marilyn Adams's martyrdom defense

Marilyn McCord Adams suggests that martyrdom "is an expression of God's righteous love toward the onlooker, the persecutor, and even the martyr himself."¹⁴ Focusing on the benefits of martyrdom to the martyr Adams remarks,

The threat of martyrdom is a time of testing and judgment. It makes urgent the previously abstract dilemma of whether he loves God more than the temporal goods that are being extracted as a price . . . The martyr will have had to face a deeper truth about himself and his relations to God and temporal goods than ever he could in fair weather . . . The time of trial is also an opportunity for building a relationship of trust between the martyr and that to which he testified. Whether because we are fallen or by the nature of the case, trusting relationships have to be built up by a history

¹²(Stump 1985, 409)

¹³The claim that a defense is adequate runs together two issues. First, whether the defense is adequate to the facts on the ground. Second, whether the defense is morally adequate. This distinction opens up the possibility that a defense can be morally adequate—if the facts are like the defense requires then the defense does offer a morally adequate reason for divine permission—without being factually accurate. My response pushes skepticism about the relevant facts on the ground.

¹⁴(Adams 1986, 257) This discussion is heavily influenced by Alston (Alston 1991, *passim*)

of interactions. If the martyr's loyalty to God is tested, but after a struggle he holds onto his allegiance to God and God delivers him (in his own time and way) the relationship is strengthened and deepened.¹⁵

Adams suggests that other suffering has redemptive potential by extrapolation from martyrdom. Suffering from natural evil, for example, may be an opportunity for the sufferer to face a hard truth about himself: does he love comfort and ease more than he loves God? Moreover, Adams' defense extends to goods to the onlooker. Adams explains,

For onlookers, the event of martyrdom may function as a prophetic story, the more powerful for being brought to life. The martyr who perseveres to the end presents an inspiring example. Onlookers are invited to see in the martyr the person they ought to be and to be brought to a deeper level of commitment. Alternatively, onlookers may see themselves in the persecutor and be moved to repentance. If the onlooker has ears to hear the martyr's testimony, he may receive God's redemption through it.¹⁶

Additionally, Adams suggests that martyrdom may be redemptive for the persecutor. She explains,

First of all, the martyr's sacrifice can be used as an instrument of divine judgment, because it draws the persecutor an external picture of what he is really like—the more innocent the victim, the clearer the focus . . . In attempting to bring reconciliation out of judgment, God may find no more promising vehicle than martyrdom for dealing with the hard-hearted.¹⁷

The adequacy of each of these suggestions depends on the details of the facts on the ground that we don't know. We don't know a person's inward or future response and the full range of options together with their probabilities.

William Alston extends Adams's remarks on the possible redemptive consequences of martyrdom to the case of Sue. This case concerns the brutal rape and death of a young girl at the hand of her mother's boyfriend. Alston claims that there may be significant goods to the onlookers of Sue's suffering. He explains that even if we cannot see these kinds of benefits, we remain ignorant of the inward responses of people and how these responses may affect future outcomes. Furthermore, Alston contends that we are in a poor position to

¹⁵(Adams 1986, 259)

¹⁶(Adams 1986, 257)

¹⁷(Adams 1986, 258)

judge whether God had more effective means to evoke an optimal response among free creatures, many of which may be particularly stubborn. Apart from this knowledge, we are not in a position to make a firm judgment about whether Sue's suffering is gratuitous.¹⁸

2.3 Conceived defenses and skepticism about value

I have gone on at length to stress that there are multiple reasons for thinking that the conceived defenses face significant skeptical problems. In attempting to answer the specific theodical question of whether there are reasons that justify a perfect being in permitting horrendous evils, we lack relevant data about a person's inward and future response, face complexity far greater than we can handle, suffer the difficulty of determining which conceptual possibilities are genuinely metaphysically possible, face ignorance of the full range of metaphysical possibilities and ignorance about the probabilities of success for genuine options, face concerns about self-deception, and lack the ability to determine the worst possible evils.¹⁹

These skeptical problems, however, do not claim that we should be skeptical about natural judgements about value. The deception problem, for instance, is an epistemic problem about our ability to reach accurate judgments about ourselves. The Cartesian problem is an epistemic problem about the paucity of information we have concerning the higher-level attitudes of an individual and their future states. This is all compatible with our ordinary, natural judgments about what kinds of things are valuable, and to that extent, it is compatible with thinking that a perfect being will bring about certain kinds of states of affairs and prevent others. If that is correct then there is a solid basis for inverse probability arguments for theism. I expand on this theme below.

3 Value considerations & the explanatory power of theism

My aim in this section is to argue that (Inscrutability 2) is consistent with positive evidence for the existence of God. For the purposes of this argument I

¹⁸(Alston 1991, 52). Paul Draper has argued against a similar proposal on the grounds that the connection between suffering and sanctification is merely causal and an omnipotent being has the power to bring sanctification about directly. First, it may not be possible to bring the same individual to sanctification without enduring suffering. Second, the sanctification may not be as valuable without the suffering.

¹⁹Part of this list comes from (Alston 1991, 59-60)

assume that we understand evidence in terms of probability. One proposition, e , is evidence for another proposition, p , just in case $\Pr(p|e) > \Pr(p)$. This assumption is not without some motivation; new evidence for p gives us more reason to believe p , which suggests that p is more probable given the new evidence. Furthermore, I assume that the confirmation of a theory is a relational manner depending on the theory's existing competitors. The main advantage of this relational approach of confirmation is that it allows us to ignore the difficulties posed by unconceived theories, difficulties that occur when one requires that confirmation depend on the relation of a theory to its negation. I will thus work with the relative odds form of Bayes's theorem which states

$$\frac{\Pr(H_1|e)}{\Pr(H_2|e)} = \frac{\Pr(H_1)}{\Pr(H_2)} \times \frac{\Pr(e|H_1)}{\Pr(e|H_2)}$$

I take naturalism to be the main competitor to theism. For the sake of argument, I assume that $\frac{\Pr(\text{theism})}{\Pr(\text{naturalism})} \approx 1$, which means that theism (henceforth 'T') and naturalism (henceforth 'N') have roughly the same prior. Thus, I shall be concerned to argue that (Inscrutability 2) is consistent with there being some evidence, e , such that $\Pr(e|T) > \Pr(e|N)$. This judgment requires showing that there's some proposition we have more reason to expect is true given theism than given naturalism. If this judgment is correct then, together with the above assumptions, it follows by the relative odds form of Bayes's theorem that e gives us more reason to think that theism is true than that naturalism is true.

For the sake of this argument, let us take the relevant evidential proposition to be H : *humanly free creatures exist*. Human beings are free creatures of limited knowledge, power, and goodness. To argue that we have more reason to expect H if theism is true than naturalism, I will argue that H realizes some value that a perfect being can reasonably be thought to be concerned to bring about whereas H doesn't have any value for naturalism and naturalism doesn't lead us to expect H . What value might that be? According to Swinburne, the existence of humanly free creatures realizes the values of consciousness and freedom. Consciousness is itself valuable, and the ability to freely act in light of one's beliefs is also valuable.²⁰ Because a perfect being will bring about the best act if there is one, and will satisfy otherwise, we can expect that a perfect being will seek to realize valuable states of affairs. However, there are many different, incompatible, yet valuable states of affairs. Thus, unless we have some reason of dividing up the space of possibilities in a favorable way it doubtful that one can simply move from the value of H to the judgment that theism predicts H .

²⁰(Swinburne 2004, 118)

Swinburne argues that there is a principled way of dividing up the relevant possibilities.²¹ He starts by partitioning substances into inanimate and animate substances. Among the animate substances, he distinguishes between creatures of habit and free creatures, and then among the free beings, there are divine (or perfect) free beings and non-divine (or imperfect) free creatures. These four classes of beings realize values to different degrees. A perfect free being possesses supreme value, whereas the value of an inanimate substance is less than the value of an animate substance. Furthermore, because conscious free creatures are more valuable than creatures of habit, we can reconstruct a scale of value on which the

$$V(\text{divine beings}) > V(\text{non-divine free creature}) > V(\text{animate creatures of habit}) > V(\text{inanimate substances}).$$

This value ranking is supported by natural judgments about the relative values of consciousness and free choice. If those judgments are accurate then we have a sound basis for thinking that a divine being has more reason to bring about animate creatures than merely bringing about inanimate creatures, and more reason to bring about humanly free creatures than merely a world containing inanimate substances and creatures of habit. Thus, there's an argument from theism to a world filled with a plurality of value. A perfect being will bring about valuable states of affairs to the extent it is consistent with his character. Thus, $\Pr(H|T)$ is not very low.

What about the value of $\Pr(H|N)$? Naturalism doesn't predict the existence of humanly free creatures.²² Why? There is nothing about the content of the naturalist hypothesis that predicts H. Value considerations pertaining to H play no role whatsoever in naturalism's ability to account for H. According to naturalism, H is the result of blind processes working over millions of years. It's very surprising that H would be true given naturalism. Thus the value of $\Pr(H|N)$ is very low, much lower than the value of $\Pr(H|T)$. Consequently, it follows from the relative odds forms of Bayes's theorem together with our initial assumptions that $\Pr(T|H) > \Pr(N|H)$. We, therefore, have some evidence for classical theism that is consistent with (Inscrutability 2).²³

I have argued thus far that *if* our natural value judgments are accurate then there is good reason to think that the relevant probabilities needed for an inverse probability argument exist. These skeptical reasons don't undermine

²¹(Swinburne 2004, 118)

²²I set aside the problem of old evidence. We can reason about the explanatory power of a theory with respect to known facts. Einstein's theory is made probable by the precession of the perihelion of Mercury even though that fact was already known.

²³One important caveat about the argument to this point is that I have given no reason for thinking that theism is more probable on all the evidence than naturalism.

the defeasible claims that consciousness and freedom have value. As such, it doesn't undermine the claim that a perfect being has a reason to bring about conscious beings and free beings. However, it does put some pressure on our ability to assign a very high value to $\text{Pr}(H|T)$. Given that we cannot see all possible ends with God's decision to actualize H we are not in a position to claim that $\text{Pr}(H|T) \approx 1$. Yet the argument that H is evidence for theism doesn't require this. It only requires that we are in a position to argue that the relevant ratio $\frac{\text{Pr}(H|T)}{\text{Pr}(H|N)}$ favors theism. I've argued that this is the case. Given the immense value of humanly free creatures there is a natural presumption that a perfect being can be expected to bring about humanly free creatures. To be sure, whether a perfect being brings about humanly free creatures depends on a very delicate and complicated judgment about overall value. While we may not have firm judgments on just how likely it is that God brings about human persons, it is not unreasonable to think that the existence of human persons is more likely on theism than on naturalism. A skeptical theism which endorses (Inscrutability 2) is not committed to any general value skepticism and as such it is well positioned to argue that there are still considerations which favor theism over naturalism.

Kenny Boyce and Philip Swenson have both objected that my argument at this point is undermined by the same considerations I gave to undermine the evidential force of inscrutable evils.²⁴ If H is evidence for theism then we must reject the following inscrutability thesis: we have surveyed all the reasons we are aware of pertaining to God actualizing H and we are unable to determine whether they are adequate. If this thesis is true then H isn't evidence for theism.

Two points mitigate this challenge. First, the argument that H is evidence for theism assumes that we can make a comparative judgement to the effect that there is more reason for H on theism than on naturalism. As such we do not need a very strong argument for H from theism; rather we only need the comparative claim that theism provides more support for H than naturalism. Second, while there are legitimate skeptical concerns about our ability to justifiably judge that there are gratuitous evils, there are not legitimate skeptical concerns about our ability to justifiably judge that consciousness and freedom have immense value. As such, a perfect being has a reason to bring about H. The question then is one about how much reason a perfect being has. But we needn't wade into these turbulent waters; for given the first point, the primary issue is whether there is *enough* reason to support the comparative claim that there is more support for H from theism than from naturalism.

²⁴Personal conversation

4 Epistemic probability & Beaudoin's objection

I've argued that skepticism theism can be defended by arguing for (Inscrutability 2) on the basis of skepticism about details of the conceived defenses. Furthermore, I've argued that this does not undermine some inverse probability arguments for theism. I now consider a recent objection by John Beaudoin. I will argue that my approach sidesteps the issues that Beaudoin raises.

Beaudoin argues that the combination of skeptical theism and van Inwagen's conception of epistemic probability undermines inverse probability arguments for theism.²⁵ On van Inwagen's conception of epistemic probability, judgments about the epistemic probability of a proposition require that one can make judgements about the real, objective chance that p is true.²⁶ In some cases, we are able to make these kinds of judgements—the real, objective chance that a die will land on an even number greater than 3. But in other cases, we are not in a position to determine objective chances. Suppose, for example, I have drawn a number from 1 to 100. Refer to that number as n . I then put n black balls in an urn and $100-n$ white balls in the same urn. What is the probability that a black ball is selected from the urn?²⁷ Van Inwagen contends that this question lacks an answer.²⁸ Given the information one has to go on, one cannot make a reasonable judgment about the objective chance that a black ball is chosen. It could be 5%, 35%, or 90%; any answer is just as good as another.

Van Inwagen then applies this account of epistemic probability to the claim the existence of inscrutable evils makes it probable that there are gratuitous evils. Van Inwagen argues that this probabilistic judgment depends on our ability to judge how likely inscrutable evils are on theism. He claims that we are not in a position to estimate the objective chance that a world containing inscrutable evil is a theistic world because we are not in a position to judge the proportion of theistic worlds containing inscrutable evils relative to all the theistic worlds. The reasons here are similar to the ones we considered in section 2. We don't know crucial matters of detail involved in estimate this proportion.

Beaudoin argues that a consequence of adopting this move is that it undermines the crucial kinds of claims involved in an inverse probability argument for theism. In particular, it would imply that we cannot judge that

²⁵(Beaudoin 1998, 413)

²⁶see (van Inwagen 1998, ch. 5)

²⁷see (van Inwagen 1998, 74) for this example.

²⁸(van Inwagen 1998, 74)

$\Pr(H|T) > \Pr(H|N)$. Beaudoin reasons that anything the theist appeals to as a good that God may bring about, that good might also realize a disastrous consequence that lies beyond our comprehension in which case God will not bring about that good.²⁹ Beaudoin is right that we are not in a position to assign $\Pr(H|T)$ a value close to 1. But this does not imply that we can not judge that there's more reason to think that theism predicts H than than naturalism predicts H. For all we know, there are unconceived felicitous consequences to realizing H that lie beyond our powers of discovery. Our evidential situation with unconcieved matters is perfectly symmetrical. Thus, the unconceived values washout. As I've argued the reasons we possess support the claim that there's more reason to expect H given theism than naturalism, and skepticism about the conceived defenses do not undermine that. The upshot of this response is that Beaudoin is wrong to think that it's a consequence of van Inwagen's conception of probability undermines our justification for thinking that $\Pr(H|T) > \Pr(H|N)$.

5 Conclusion

Beaudoin argued that skeptical theist face a dilemma: either evil is evidence against God's existence or considerations of value do not provide evidence for God's existence.³⁰ I've argued that this is a false dilemma. One need not advance skepticism about value to support skeptical theism. Skeptical theism can be defended by (Inscrutability 2). This has the advantage of leaving intact positive arguments for God's existence from considerations of value. In the end, evidentialism is compatible with skeptical theism.

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²⁹(Beaudoin 1998, 413)

³⁰(Beaudoin 1998)

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