10-1-2022

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A HOLISTIC RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Jonathan Fuqua

The four standard theistic responses to the evidential problem of evil are theodicy, Reformed Epistemology, natural theology, and skeptical theism. It's somewhat common for theists to combine Reformed Epistemology and skeptical theism or natural theology and theodicy. An insufficiently appreciated possibility is that of combining all four of these positions into a more holistic response to the evidential problem of evil. The chief hurdle to doing this is that it seems that skeptical theism isn't compatible with either natural theology or theodicy. This first appearance, however, is misleading. And, interestingly, certain theists have implicitly put forth a holistic response to the problem of evil. In this paper, I sketch out how one can combine all four of the standard theistic responses to the evidential problem of evil so as to yield a holistic response to the problem of evil. The focus will be on reconciling skeptical theism with natural theology and theodicy.

1. Introduction

Proponents of evidential arguments from evil argue that the facts of evil are good evidence against the existence of God.[1] There are four standard theistic responses to such arguments that are prevalent in the contemporary literature on the problem of evil. First, some theists give theodicies, stories intended to show how God can be justified in allowing the evil

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[1] In my view, the most potent version of the evidential argument from evil is to be found in Draper, "Pain and Pleasure." It is commonly believed that Pike's "Hume on Evil" and Plantinga's *The Nature of Necessity* have defused the logical problem of evil. Draper, himself a non-theist, says that "logical arguments from evil . . . are rejected by the vast majority of contemporary philosophers of religion" and that "most philosophers nowadays believe" that the logical incompatibility of God and evil "cannot be shown" (see Draper, "The Problem of Evil," 335). For an overview of the logical problem of evil, see Howard-Snyder, "The Logical Problem of Evil." It must be noted, however, that the logical problem of evil has not completely gone away. For a new presentation and defense of the logical problem of evil, see Schellenberg, "A New Logical Problem of Evil," and Sterba, *Is a Good God Logically Possible?* For a response to Sterba, see Feser, "The Thomistic Dissolution of the Logical Problem of Evil."

appealed to in the evidential argument under consideration.[2] A second response is Reformed Epistemology, according to which theists enjoy, or can enjoy, non-inferential justification for belief in God such that belief in God can be justified even if theism might be unable to gain any positive justificatory status from its ability to explain some body of data.[3] A third theistic response is that of the natural theologian, who argues that any negative evidence against theism that is provided by the data of evil is outweighed by the positive evidence for theism to which the premises of natural theological arguments appeal.[4] A fourth response is skeptical theism, the core claim of which is that we are not in a position to say how likely the facts of evil are given theism.[5]

The thesis of this paper is that these four responses are not inconsistent with each other. In the literature on the problem of evil, it is common to take one of these responses and develop it in some level of detail. This focused approach has the benefit of allowing us to see just how helpful (or not) a particular response to evidential arguments from evil can be. It has the dialectical demerit, however, of tempting us to forget that in actual practice many theists combine two or more of the four standard responses. It also has the demerit of hindering us from seeing just how beneficial it can be to combine multiple responses into a more holistic response to the problem of evil. Theists thus typically employ a subpar strategy in their published responses to evidential arguments from evil by focusing on just one of the four standard responses. In this paper, I sketch a holistic response to the problem of evil.

Many theists in the past, as well as today, have employed two or more of the four standard theistic responses. According to Rudavsky, skeptical theism has roots in Isaiah, Job, Paul, Plotinus, John Scotus Eriugena, Maimonides, Aquinas, and Descartes.[6] But, of course, some of these also did

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[2]See Murray, "Theodicy," for an overview of the project of theodicy. The most influential big picture theodicy projects in the contemporary literature are probably those of Hick's *Evil and the God of Love*, Swinburne's *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, and Stump's *Wandering in Darkness*.

[3]For an overview of Reformed Epistemology, see Bergmann, "Rational Religious Belief Without Argument" and "Reformed Epistemology." See also Moon, "Recent Work in Reformed Epistemology." Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* is of course the most extensive, influential, and important presentation of the Reformed Epistemology project. For a recent defense of Plantinga's religious epistemology, see McNabb, "Warranted Religion."

[4]An example of the natural theology response is provided by Swinburne's *The Existence of God*. For more cutting-edge natural theology, see Craig and Moreland, *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*; Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God*; and Walls and Dougherty, *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God*. For an overview of the terrain, see Baker-Hytch, "Natural Theology and Religious Belief."

[5]For overviews of skeptical theism, see Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," McBrayer, "Skeptical Theism," and Dougherty, "Skeptical Theism." My characterization of skeptical theism follows Draper's characterization of the core claim of skeptical theism; see Draper, "The Skeptical Theist," 176.

[6]Rudavsky, "A Brief History of Skeptical Responses to Evil." For an in-depth look at Descartes's skeptical theism, see Robinson, "Descartes's Sceptical Theism."

natural theology, chief among them Aquinas and Descartes. Aquinas also did theodicy[7] and, if Plantinga reads him correctly, also accepted the Reformed Epistemological view that it is possible to have non-inferentially justified belief that God exists. So, it may well turn out that Aquinas himself utilized all four of the standard responses. And it certainly looks to me as if Plantinga has made use of Reformed Epistemology, natural theology, theodicy, and skeptical theism.[8] In short, I think some theists have been implicitly employing a holistic or cumulative case approach; it would be good to know if they are onto something. Of course, such a holistic response can work only if each individual response is successful. Unfortunately, I cannot defend each response here; my goal is simply to argue for their compatibility. My task here is a second-order one: to argue for the feasibility of a holistic response to the problem of evil.[9]

2. Reformed Epistemology, Natural Theology, and Theodicy

In this section, I argue for the compatibility of Reformed Epistemology, natural theology, and theodicy. Reformed Epistemology is the view that theistic belief is or can be non-inferentially justified, that, as Bergmann puts it, "belief in God—like the belief that I had orange juice for breakfast or the belief that there's a ball in front of me—can be properly basic."[10] Natural theology is typically thought of as the activity of producing arguments for God's existence.[11] Natural theologians do assume—and seek to show—that there is inferential justification or propositional evidence for theism. Natural theology *qua* activity is compatible with Reformed Epistemology derivatively, in the sense that the assumption which natural theologians make—that there is propositional evidence for theism—is consistent with Reformed Epistemology.

Reformed Epistemology and natural theology are sometimes thought of as rivals.[12] Reformed Epistemologists are sometimes suspicious of the thought that theism should be understood as an explanatory hypothesis,

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[7]See Stump, "Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job."

[8]See the relevant chapters in Plantinga's books *The Nature of Necessity* and *Warranted Christian Belief* and his papers "On Being Evidentially Challenged" and "Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa.'"

[9]Thanks to a referee for some helpful comments on how to think about the nature of the project of this paper.

[10]Bergmann, "Rational Religious Belief Without Argument," 538.

[11]Thus:

> Natural theology is the practice of philosophically reflecting on the existence and nature of God independent of real or apparent divine revelation or scripture. Traditionally, natural theology involves weighing arguments for and against God's existence, and it is contrasted with *revealed theology*, which may be carried out within the context of ostensible revelation or scripture. (Taliaferro, "The Project of Natural Theology," 1)

[12]This is probably due, at least in part, to Plantinga's paper, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology."

a suspicion that seems uncongenial to natural theology.[13] When Reformed Epistemologists voice this suspicion, they typically also argue that theistic belief can be properly basic whether or not it enjoys the kind of propositional evidence championed by the natural theologian.[14] This latter notion was, in fact, one of the main points of Plantinga's 1967 book, *God and Other Minds*, in which he argued that belief in God, like belief in other minds, can be rational even if it can't be established by philosophical proofs.[15] Additionally, a natural theologian may, if she likes, endorse the "hyperevidentialist" view that if a theist has justified theistic belief, that is because she has inferential support for that belief.[16] Such hyperevidentialism is obviously incompatible with Reformed Epistemology.

Fortunately, Reformed Epistemology and natural theology are not, contrary to these initial appearances, incompatible. First, suspicion, or even denial, that theism is an explanatory hypothesis is consistent with affirming the possibility of inferential support for theistic belief. This is an instance of the more general principle that one can have non-inferential as well as inferential support for a proposition that one does not construe as an explanatory hypothesis. I might enjoy non-inferential justification for the view that nonconsensual sex is wrong and also have an argument that it is wrong without thereby understanding that proposition to be an explanatory hypothesis. Similarly, rejection of the idea that theism is an explanatory hypothesis does not, by itself, entail rejection of the natural theology view that theism can enjoy inferential justificatory support.

Second, a natural theologian needn't endorse hyperevidentialism. It's entirely possible for a proposition to enjoy inferential and non-inferential support, to have both propositional and non-propositional evidence in its favor. There is no reason a natural theologian cannot say that theism has both kinds of justificatory support. Plantinga and Swinburne, the two most prominent contemporary advocates of Reformed Epistemology and natural theology, respectively, apparently concur. Plantinga, after all, is known not only for developing a proper functionalist version of Reformed Epistemology, but also for developing a modal version of the ontological argument. Plantinga, additionally, is on record as saying that the fine-tuning argument offers "mild support" for theism.[17] He has also, of course, developed about two dozen arguments for theism in his "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments."[18] Plantinga has been careful to point out that the

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[13]For a critical discussion of the idea that God's existence should be treated as an explanatory hypothesis, see Holley, "On Treating God's Existence as an Explanatory Hypothesis."

[14]The most fully developed Reformed Epistemology currently on offer can be found in Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

[15]See Plantinga, *God and Other Minds.*

[16]This term comes from Dougherty and Tweedt, "Religious Epistemology," 548ff.

[17]Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 224.

[18]See Plantinga, "Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments." For a recent collection of essays on Plantinga's two dozen (or so) theistic arguments, see Walls and Dougherty, *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God*.

proper basicality of theistic belief is fully compatible with its also enjoying support from theistic arguments, and in the preface to a revised edition of *God and Other Minds*, written in 1990, he takes a much more optimistic attitude toward natural theology than he did in 1967.[19] Swinburne also argues that it is possible for religious believers to enjoy non-inferential justification for theistic belief, suggesting that natural theology is, however, needed for those believers who are aware of atheistic arguments or who have "no experiences of the apparent presence of God."[20] Like Plantinga and Swinburne, I conclude that there is no inconsistency between Reformed Epistemology and natural theology.[21]

This compatibility strengthens the theist's response to the problem of evil. Assume that Reformed Epistemology is correct and that belief in God can be non-inferentially justified. Assume also that there isn't any, or any significant, propositional evidence for theism. Assume further that some evidential argument from evil really does offer good propositional evidence against theism. The Reformed Epistemologist will likely follow Plantinga here and argue that theism can be both improbable on our propositional evidence and justified on our non-propositional evidence.[22] Now, let's make some contrary assumptions: that there is no good non-propositional evidence for theism, that some evidential argument from evil really does offer good propositional evidence against theism, but that there are some good natural theological arguments for God's existence. In this case, while theism might not be probable with respect to our non-propositional evidence, and improbable with respect to one part of our propositional evidence, the natural theologian will say that theism is more probable than not (or probable enough to be rationally believed) given our total propositional evidence. Now, if Reformed Epistemology and natural theology are both correct, then the theist can say that theism has good non-inferential and inferential support, thus responding to the problem of evil by citing two lines of justificatory support rather than just one.

This dual response to the problem of evil would be even stronger if the theist could add theodicy to the mix. Let's assume that there are some good theodicies so that the only question is whether theodicy is

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[19]Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 179.

[20]Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 90. Swinburne's case for the possibility of noninferential justification for theism proceeds on the basis of his Principle of Credulity, which says that if it seems to S that *p*, then probably *p*. Applied to theistic belief, we get the result that theistic seemings produced by religious experiences give us good evidence for theism. See Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 292–327. For a sustained epistemological defense of this sort of view, using the resources of phenomenal conservatism, see Tucker, "Phenomenal Conservatism and Evidentialism in Religious Epistemology," and McCain, "Evidence and Religious Belief."

[21]For more sustained arguments for this, see Sudduth's articles "Reformed Epistemology and Christian Apologetics" and "Revisiting the 'Reformed Objection' to Natural Theology." Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God*, contains a developed religious epistemology which explicitly includes roles for both Reformed Epistemology and natural theology.

[22]See Plantinga, "Reply to Tooley's Opening Statement," 154–155.

compatible with Reformed Epistemology and skeptical theism. Follow-
ing Scott Coley, let's make a distinction between weak theodicy (typically
called "defense") and strong theodicy (typically called "theodicy").[23]
A weak theodicy, or defense, is an explanation for some evil E which appeals
to some God-justifying reason R and says that, for all we know, R holds
and would justify God (if God exists) in permitting E. A strong theodicy
says that R does hold and that it justifies God (if God exists) in permit-
ting E. A strong theodicist assumes that we have an ability to sometimes
identify those goods which would justify God in allowing certain evils.
Obviously, this is not incompatible with either the claim that (i) we have
non-inferential justification for belief in God or (ii) we have inferential jus-
tification for belief in God. The weak theodicist makes a weaker assump-
tion, namely that we have an ability to identify those goods which, if they
obtain, would justify God in permitting certain evils. Clearly, this claim
doesn't conflict with Reformed Epistemology or natural theology either.
If there is a good strong theodicy out there, then the theist can argue that
theism is non-inferentially justified and enjoys propositional support from
both natural theology and theodicy. And if there is a good weak theodicy
out there, the theist can say that theism enjoys non-inferential justification
and inferential justification (from natural theology), and that, owing to
weak theodicy, we can't say whether E is propositional evidence against
theism or not. So, combining Reformed Epistemology with natural theol-
ogy and theodicy gives the theist a stronger response to the problem of
evil than she would have with any one or two of these alone. Now, I'm not
saying that there are any good theodicies. All I'm saying is that these three
options are compatible, and that if they all work, the theist who combines
them has a stronger response to the problem of evil than the theist who
only uses one or two of these strategies.[24]

3. Skeptical Theism Plus Natural Theology Plus Theodicy

You can endorse everything I've said so far without thinking that the the-
ist's overall epistemic situation is a very good one. For you might think
that theism gets *some* support from non-inferential sources, *some* from
natural theology, and *some* from theodicy, but that the total evidence still
favors some non-theistic hypothesis over theism. For instance, it might
be that there are some evils for which we have no theodicy and that the
negative evidence provided by these evils swamp the positive epistemic
support provided to theism by Reformed Epistemology, natural theology,

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[23]See Coley, "Skeptical Theism is Incompatible with Theodicy."

[24]It is interesting to note that Reformed Epistemologists and natural theologians have
both combined their favored approach to the justification of theistic belief with theodicy.
Plantinga, for instance, has defended a theodicy in his 2004 paper "Supralapsarianism, or
'O Felix Culpa'"; Swinburne has done the same in his 1998 book *Providence and the Problem
of Evil*. Plantinga and Swinburne, then, seem to be committed to the compossibility of Re-
formed Epistemology, natural theology, and theodicy.

and theodicy. Skeptical theism, if applicable to the arguments from evil that appeal to these evils, could help with this problem.

One potential problem for skeptical theism, however, is that it looks to be incompatible with certain natural theological arguments. Wilks argues, for instance, that skeptical theism assumes that we are unable to say that any apparent evils are all-things-considered evil and hence not justified by some greater good.[25] But if we cannot say this about evils, then we cannot say this about goods. And if we cannot say that certain goods are all-things-considered good, then we cannot say whether God would bring about such goods. Wilks points out that this kind of skepticism would undermine the design argument, for on this kind of skepticism we wouldn't be able to say whether the goods produced by an orderly universe would be the sorts of things God would want to bring about.[26]

A second potential problem for skeptical theism is that it looks to be incompatible with theodicy. Coley explains why: any possible good G that a theodicist might appeal to as an explanation for why God allows some evil E will fall prey to the following skeptical theist claim: there might be a good G* that is much greater than G and which entails the prevention of E. If a theodicist is giving a strong theodicy, and she's saying she knows of a good G that really would justify God's permission of E, then skeptical theism will tell her that G might be outweighed by G*, which entails the prevention of E. And if this theodicist is giving a weak theodicy (or a defense), and she's saying she knows of a possible good G which would justify God's permission of E, then—says Coley—she's just doing what the skeptical theist does, and her position reduces to that of the skeptical theist. In short, weak theodicy, on Coley's telling, is just a version of skeptical theism, which happens to be incompatible with strong theodicy.

So far, then, it looks like skeptical theism is incompatible with both natural theology and theodicy. The basic reason for this seeming incompatibility is that natural theology and theodicy appear to require the following assumption: we are in a position to know (or at least justifiedly believe), at least in part, which things God would likely allow or produce in the world. Call this the "likelihood assumption."[27] Skeptical theism, however,

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[25]Wilks, "The Structure of the Contemporary Debate on the Problem of Evil."

[26]See Wilks, "The Structure of the Contemporary Debate on the Problem of Evil." Wilks doesn't make his case on this point in terms of goods and evils being all-things-considered good or evil. This is how Bergmann reconstructs Wilks's argument, and in my presentation of Wilks I follow Bergmann's reconstruction. See Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," 398.

[27]The natural theologian, making the likelihood assumption, argues that certain goods are quite likely on theism and hence that their existence is evidence for theism. The theodicist, making the likelihood assumption, argues that certain goods which God is likely to allow or produce logically require certain evils or their permission, and hence that the existence of these evils is not unlikely on theism (and may in fact even be likely on theism). See Anderson, "Skeptical Theism and Value Judgments," for a good argument that the distinction between an evil and its permission is (sometimes, at least) important. The basic point is that it may be the case that an occurrence of an evil is all-things-considered bad, but that its

rejects the likelihood assumption and tells us that we are not in a position to know (or justifiedly believe) what God would allow or bring about in the world, thus undermining natural theology and theodicy. As Cullison puts it, skeptical theism seems to imply that "any attempt to reason about what God would do is in jeopardy."[28] Following Cullison, let's call this the "Reasoning about God Problem," or the "RAG problem" for short. Given the RAG problem, it looks like the theist will have to choose between two incompatible responses to the problem of evil, one which includes natural theology and theodicy, and has room for Reformed Epistemology, and the skeptical theist response, which also has room for Reformed Epistemology but not for theodicy and natural theology. In the remainder of this section, I will outline two possible responses to this dilemma, one concessive and one non-concessive.

3.1. The Concessive Response

The concessive response concedes that skeptical theism and theodicy are incompatible, but denies that skeptical theism is incompatible with natural theology. A theist who adopts this response will be able to utilize the resources of Reformed Epistemology, skeptical theism, and natural theology, but not the resources of theodicy. The compatibility of skeptical theism, natural theology, and Reformed Epistemology falls short of the claim I am ultimately aiming for here, but it's an option worth pausing to take note of.

As Wilks himself points out, skeptical theism does not make trouble for *all* natural theological arguments.[29] The reason is that not all natural theological arguments involve predicting that there is some good that God would likely bring about and thus that theism is more likely given this good. Some versions of some natural theological arguments, such as the standard approach to the fine-tuning argument, do indeed involve making likelihood assignments, i.e., saying that we can know or justifiably believe propositions about how likely some good or evil would be given theism. Perhaps such arguments are out-of-bounds, given skeptical theism. Many other natural theological arguments, however, don't involve any likelihood assignment and thus don't require the likelihood assumption. Many of Plantinga's two dozen or so theistic arguments, for example, do not involve any likelihood assignment at all. The ontological and cosmological arguments don't require any likelihood assignment, nor does the moral argument. In general, the traditional, classical versions of the arguments of natural theology are best thought of as metaphysical demonstrations of the existence of a necessary being who serves as the ground of existence rather than as abductive-style arguments to the effect that theism better

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permission is not. It may be the case that God's permission of an evil is necessary for some outweighing good even if the occurrence of that evil is not.

[28]Cullison, "Two New Versions of Skeptical Theism," 250.

[29]Wilks, "The Structure of the Contemporary Debate," 317–318.

predicts certain facts than rival hypotheses.[30] Even the contemporary version of the fine-tuning argument can be articulated without presupposing the likelihood assumption. William Lane Craig's version of that argument, for example, involves positing three possible explanations for the fine-tuning—chance, necessity, or design—and then ruling out chance and necessity, leaving design as the only plausible, or even possible, explanation standing.[31] I'm not here endorsing (or even articulating) any such arguments; I'm simply noting that many of the traditional arguments of natural theology look to be fully compatible with skeptical theism in that they don't require making predictions about God's behavior and thus don't require the likelihood assumption.

This is a good place to point out that it's not clear that natural theological arguments which say that some good is more likely on theism than on some nontheistic hypothesis, such as naturalism, really do require the likelihood assumption. If they don't, then probabilistic natural theology may well be out of the woods. Poston argues that our inability to say whether some evil is gratuitous or not in no way imperils our knowledge that certain things have value.[32]

Using Swinburne's examples, Poston argues that we know, for instance, that consciousness and freedom are valuable. Following Poston, let H stand for "humanly free creatures exist," T for theism, and N for naturalism. Given the value of consciousness and freedom, we can say that the likelihood of H given T is not too low. We can also say that the likelihood of H given N is low.[33] Thus, we can say that H is evidence for theism over and against naturalism. Poston does concede—to Beaudoin[34]—that the goods of consciousness and freedom "might also realize a disastrous consequence that lies beyond our comprehension." However, it could also be that these goods lead to "unconceived felicitous consequences." In the end, then, these "unconceived values wash out," leaving us with our original judgment that H is more likely on theism than on naturalism.[35]

Poston's claim that the "unconceived values wash out" is not special pleading for the theist. Poston is making essentially the same move that

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[30]There are also moral arguments which don't involve likelihood assignments. Wolterstorff, for example, argues that there is no adequate secular grounding of human rights and then suggests that, given the existence of human rights and the existence of a plausible theistic grounding of such rights, we have a reason to believe theism. See Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 361ff.

[31]See Craig, "Design and the Anthropic Fine-Tuning of the Universe."

[32]See Poston, "Skeptical Theism within Reason."

[33]According to Poston:

Naturalism doesn't predict the existence of humanly free creatures. 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." ("Skeptical Theism within Reason," 319)

[34]See Beaudoin, "Evil, the Human Cognitive Condition, and Natural Theology."

[35]Poston, "Skeptical Theism within Reason," 321.

Draper makes in his Bayesian argument from evil. One of the premises in this argument is that naturalism predicts "the data of good and evil" better than theism does.[36] Draper concedes that "we should not be able to expect to discern potentially God-justifying reasons for allowing the evils we find in the world."[37] However, he does not think that this undermines his ability to say that the data of good and evil are more likely on naturalism than on theism. Our situation is this: we know that (i) the world's evils are bad and thus that God would have a reason to prevent them, (ii) there might be God-justifying reasons for the world's evils unknown to us, and (iii) there could be reasons unknown to us for God to not create a world containing the data of good and evil. Draper argues that, in this situation, "it is the known reasons that must break the tie"—i.e., that our knowledge of the badness of the world's evils still gives us a reason to think that those evils are less likely on theism than on naturalism.[38] In other words, when I know that there might be unknown God-justifying reasons for preventing some evil E, and also that there might be unknown God-justifying reasons for allowing E, I can still say that E is less likely on theism than naturalism—for "it is the known reasons that break the tie." Poston makes this move, essentially, when he argues that our unconceived reasons against bringing about humanly free creatures and our unconceived reasons for bringing about humanly free creatures "wash out," leaving us with our original judgment that God has a good reason to bring about humanly free creatures.[39]

3.2. Non-Concessive Responses

I want to now argue that there are ways of combining skeptical theism with both natural theology and theodicy. The core claim[40] of skeptical theism is the following:

> Skeptical Theism: We are not in a position to say how likely the facts of evil are given theism.

One possible reason for thinking that skeptical theism is true is simply that we are beings with limited cognitive ability.[41] Given our cognitive

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[36]Draper, "Explanation and the Problem of Evil," 72.

[37]Draper, "Explanation and the Problem of Evil," 79.

[38]Draper, "Explanation and the Problem of Evil," 77.

[39]I've discussed Poston's views in a section on concessive responses because it suited my dialectical purposes to do so, but I should note that this does not mean that I think that Poston himself would endorse the concessive response over the non-concessive response. As a referee points out, Poston's views in fact seem to fall into the non-concessive camp. I agree and thank the referee for helping to clear up any confusion on this point.

[40]As Bergmann notes, skeptical theism has a theistic component and a skeptical component. A nontheist could embrace the skeptical component without embracing the theistic component. So, weirdly, a nontheist can be a skeptical theist, of sorts. See Bergman, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," 375.

[41]For more on our cognitive limitations, and how those prevent us from being in a position to see why God would allow the particular evils he does (if he exists), see Alston, "The

limitations we have good reasons to be very humble when thinking about the likelihood of some instance of evil given theism. Consider, in this vein, Bergmann's skeptical thesis, ST4:

> ST4: We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have.[42]

Call this "state of affairs skepticism." Anyone who endorses state of affairs skepticism has a good reason to think that she is in no position to affirm the reliability of her seeming that some instance of evil E is not part of a larger complex state of affairs which is overall good and which defeats E. State of affairs skepticism seems quite plausible, at least in this respect: our cognitive limitations are such that it is very difficult, perhaps even impossible, for us say whether the value we seem to perceive in a complex state of affairs accurately reflects the total value in that state of affairs, or in some larger, even more complex state of affairs in which the state of affairs under consideration is a part. So, for example, I can see that S's having cancer is bad, but I can't see that S's having cancer isn't part of a larger complex state of affairs that is overall good and defeats the badness of S's having cancer. If I am aware of my own cognitive limitations on the matter, then I have a defeater for any seeming to the effect that God's allowance of S's having cancer is unlikely: if S's having cancer is in fact part of a larger complex state of affairs in which it is defeated by some good G, and if God strongly desires that G be brought about, then it may be quite likely that God would allow S's having cancer.

It should be obvious, though still important to take note of, that state of affairs skepticism is not incompatible with Reformed Epistemology's claim that we can have non-inferential justification for theistic belief, nor with the natural theologian's claim that we can have inferential justification for God's existence—the ontological and cosmological arguments, for example, are unaffected by the sort of skepticism at play in Bergmann's ST4. ST4 does, promisingly, seem to undercut arguments from evil that appeal to tokens or instances of evil, for we cannot say whether any given token of evil is or is not part of a larger complex state of affairs which is overall very good and which defeats the token evil in question. But does ST4 allow for theodicy?

If we make a distinction between tokens of evil and types of evil, we might open a path to combining skeptical theism and theodicy by arguing that we can be skeptical theists about arguments from evil that appeal to tokens of evil while offering theodicies in response to arguments from evil that appeal to types of evil. The basic idea is that while we may be in a position to say which *types* of evil-requiring goods God would allow

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Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition"; Howard-Snyder, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil"; and Poston, "Skeptical Theism Within Reason."

[42]Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," 379.

or produce in a world, we cannot say, of any token instance of evil, how likely that particular token is given theism. So, we can make rough likelihood assignments about types of evil, but not about tokens of evil. On this approach, I may be able to offer a theodicy for animal suffering in general without being able to explain why God allowed Rowe's fawn to suffer and die in that forest fire. This approach opens the door to combining skeptical theism with full-bore probabilistic natural theology: skepticism about tokens can be combined with the non-skeptical thought that God would likely allow or bring about certain types of goods in a world, such as a world governed according to laws of nature, or a world with rational creatures who can appreciate beauty, and so on.

This approach to combining skeptical theism with theodicy and natural theology makes use of the following idea:

> Token Skepticism: Having an explanation for a type of evil does not entail having an explanation for a token of that type.

By combining token skepticism and skeptical theism we get a view we can call "token skeptical theism." As I read van Inwagen's Gifford Lectures on the problem of evil, he endorses token skepticism.[43] Someone who embraces token skepticism is free to endorse or reject the idea that God would allow gratuitous evil.[44] If a token skeptical theist embraces the compatibility of theism and gratuitous evil, then she can say, in response to an argument from evil that appeals to a particular instance of evil E, that E may well, for all we know, be gratuitous. So, if E is Rowe's fawn suffering and dying in a forest fire, this token skeptical theist can reply that E's possible gratuitousness is not incompatible with theism. And on the assumption that gratuitous evil is compatible with theism, it will be very difficult to say how likely E is on theism, thereby providing a response to a probabilistic argument from evil that says that E, while perhaps compatible with theism, is very unlikely on theism. Of course, it may initially seem to us that E isn't very likely on theism. But once we realize that we are in no position to say how likely particular tokens of evil are on theism, because having an explanation for E-type evils doesn't entail having an explanation for any particular E-type token of evil, we gain a defeater: our seeming that E isn't likely on theism loses its justificatory juice (and this holds even if that seeming persists).

I should note what is perhaps obvious: namely, that the view that gratuitous evil is compatible with theism in no way implies the much stronger and implausible view that theism is compatible with all evil being gratuitous. Rather, the idea would be that some evil is permitted for the sake of a greater good and yet that God is morally justified in permitting other

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[43]See van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil.*

[44]For defenses of the compatibility of theism and gratuitous evil, see Hasker, "The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil," and Howard-Snyder and Howard-Snyder, "Is Theism Compatible with Gratuitous Evil?"

evils even though no greater good necessitates them (nor are such evils necessary for the prevention of an even worse evil). If something like this were true, then it would open the door to the following sort of view. If we can't think of a God-justifying reason for some evil, then maybe that evil is gratuitous. But we can think of a God-justifying reason for some evils, hence some evils can be explained and some cannot. You might think that this is, in fact, a decent approximation of our actual cognitive situation on these matters: we can explain some but not all evils, and our inability to explain all evils is due in part to the fact that our world contains gratuitous evils. The possibility that some evils may be gratuitous while others are not helps to explain why the compossibility of theism and gratuitous evil does not render skeptical theism superfluous. Evils that we cannot explain may be gratuitous or they may have explanations that lie beyond our ken. Gratuitous evils are not thereby unjustified, we should note; so, a skeptical theist retort is not superfluous here: "I don't know of a theodicy that covers evil E," a theist might say. "It may be that E is explained by a good that lies beyond my ken, or it may be that E is justified even though it is gratuitous. Either way, my inability to explain E does not imply that it is unjustified."

But, of course, a token skeptical theist doesn't have to endorse the compatibility of theism and gratuitous evil. A token skeptical theist who rejects gratuitous evil can say that any seeming that God would not allow E because E is apparently gratuitous is defeated by the realization that we aren't in a position to say that E is gratuitous. I might have a good explanation for E-type evils without having a good explanation for E itself, assuming token skepticism. E isn't explainable by my theodicy for E-type evils, but it might be explainable by some other theodicy, maybe one I'm currently not aware of. I can't say that E is gratuitous simply because I'm not aware of any good, God-justifying explanation for it. In light of the foregoing, I am likely to be in the dark about the likelihood of E given theism. If I have a good theodicy for E-type evils, then I won't be in the dark about them even if I'm in the dark about E itself: skeptical theism about tokens seems to fit comfortably with theodicy about types.

What if the atheologian in question, instead of claiming that E is gratuitous, argues in Draper-style that E is unlikely on theism but not on some alternative hypothesis? Here, a token skeptical theist, who rejects gratuitous evil, can simply say that we aren't in a position to say how likely tokens of evil like E are on theism due to the fact that explaining a type of evil doesn't imply explaining all instances of that type—and that, again, this holds even if we have a good theodicy for E-type evils in general. Of course, it may well be that having a theodicy for E-type evils raises the probability of E itself. But that, of course, doesn't in turn imply that we can say how likely E is on theism. Perhaps the best we can say here is that, in light of our theodicy for E-type evils, E itself isn't too unlikely on theism. Given token skepticism, it may well be that E is explained by some theodicy other than the one we have for E-type evils in general, one which is

beyond our ken. In any case, the general idea here is that, since a theodicy for a type of evil doesn't necessarily account for every token of that type, arguments from evil that appeal to a particular instance of evil will run headlong into the token skeptical theist's claim that we are not very good at judging the likelihood of tokens of evil.[45]

One crucial question here is whether we should embrace token skeptical theism in the first place. Maybe it's not a very good view. As I indicated above, a full articulation and defense of the view isn't possible here, but it's worth noting that there may well be an asymmetry here between explanations of non-agential happenings and explanations of agential happenings. If I've got an explanation for why, in general, water freezes when it gets below a certain temperature, then it looks like I've got an explanation of any particular instance of water freezing. Here, in the non-agential realm, it looks like having an explanation for a type may well entail having an explanation for every token of that type. The same may not be said, however, for happenings in the agential realm. I may correctly surmise that you let your daughter stay up late on Friday nights because she doesn't have school the next day. However, that explanation may not hold for every single Friday night. Perhaps this Friday you planned on putting her to bed early because she has somewhere to be early the next morning, but due to some medicine she took, which makes it difficult to sleep, you're letting her stay up late this Friday night.

Skeptical theisms based on token skepticism sit well with the idea that probabilistic natural theology arguments are, properly understood, really about types of goods rather than tokens of those types. Recall Poston's H—*humanly free creatures exist*. Theists (or some of them, anyway) think that H is not too low given theism due to the intrinsic value possessed by consciousness and freedom. What such theists think, properly understood, is that God would likely bring about a world containing things of a certain type; theists don't think that God would bring about any one particular humanly free creature, or *homo sapiens* specifically. So, for instance, *my* existence is not something anyone would predict as likely given theism, but the existence of beings like me does seem—or so the argument could go—likely given theism. The same line of thinking, i.e., of thinking

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[45]I intend what I am saying to be compatible with the claim that, in some cases, having an explanation for a certain type of evil might entail having an explanation for every token of that type. Suppose, for instance, that animals do not feel morally relevant pain and also that animal pain is in general quite biologically useful; in such a case, God would have good reasons to allow animal pain and no good reason not to. It might then follow, at least on the assumption that there is no other morally sufficient reason to eliminate or minimize animal pain, that we have an explanation for animal pain in general that covers every instance of animal pain. Though I think this view is plausible, I am not endorsing it, but am merely calling it to our attention as a potential example of the possibility of having an explanation for a type of evil that covers every token of that type. For a recent argument against the idea that animals do indeed feel morally relevant pain, see Miller, "Do Animals Feel Pain in a Morally Relevant Sense?"

about what God would allow or bring about in terms of types rather than tokens, seems to apply to how theists are thinking (or should be thinking) when they do theodicy. In offering the free will theodicy as an explanation for moral evil, for example, the theist isn't saying that any one particular token of morally bad action is necessary to secure the good of free will in general. Rather, theists are arguing, or should understand themselves to be arguing, that a good of a certain type necessitates God's allowance of evils of a certain type. In sum, when giving probabilistic natural theological arguments, the theist is best understood as arguing that it's likely that God would actualize a world with certain types of goods; and when giving a theodicy, the theist is best understood as arguing that goods of a certain type require the permission of evils of a certain type. This more holistic approach seems to offer an answer to Cullison's RAG problem: we can reason fairly well about the types of things God would allow or bring about, but not very well about which particular tokens of those types God would allow or bring about.

Another worry about a version of the holistic response based on token skepticism is that it is based on a misunderstanding of theodicy, for no theodicist—someone might argue—claims to have good explanations for all the particular tokens of evil we are confronted with.[46] Whether this is true for any given theodicist will depend in part on whether that theodicist thinks that a theodicy for every type of evil explains every token of that type. The worrier here seems to assume that no theodicist has ever made that assumption, but I doubt whether that is true or not. In personal conversation with me, both Plantinga and Swinburne argued that having a theodicy for a type does entail having an explanation for every token of that type. Also in personal conversation, Draper suggested the opposite, arguing that having a theodicy for a type does not entail having a theodicy for every token of that type. Given this, as well as the paucity of explicit discussion of the matter, it is likely that the worrier's assumption on this score may well be false. Critics of theodicies sometimes respond to theodicies by pointing out that a proposed theodicy doesn't explain all the facts of evil. Laura Ekstrom, for example, says the following:

> [O]ur experiences of, and awareness of, facts about evil in the world provide awfully good reason to doubt that a hybrid case will succeed in covering the full range, distribution, and intensity of evils. It seems especially unreasonable to think that the pain endured by all sentient non-human animals by way of neglect, abuse, torture, disease, and natural disaster can be justified by a hybrid theodicy that draws on the values of free will, punishment, character- building, and connection with God.[47]

Ekstrom's complaint seems to presuppose or at least be consistent with the idea that a theodicy for a type doesn't cover every token of that type.

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[46]Thanks to a referee for helping me see the need to address this issue.

[47]Ekstrom, *God, Suffering and the Value of Free Will*, 94–95.

I think, then, that the matter is a contested one and thus that the objector here is not justified in claiming that no theodicist claims to have good explanations for all the particular tokens of evil we are confronted with.

But regardless of what theodicists do or do not assume about the scope of their theodicy projects, it remains open to the atheologian to make arguments from evil that appeal to types or tokens. And of course it remains open to a critic of theodicy, someone such as Ekstrom, to complain that extant theodicies don't explain all the facts about evil. So, in response to atheological arguments from evil in general, it is good for the theist to have at her disposal responses to both types of argument, and thus it is important to distinguish them and to note the possibility of offering a skeptical theist reply to arguments from evil that appeal to tokens and to offer a theodicy reply to arguments from evil that appeal to types. And in response to complaints about the explanatory inadequacy of a theodicy, it can be very useful to make use of the holistic response described here by replying with skeptical theism about tokens and theodicy about types.

Other sorts of non-concessive holistic responses seem possible, at least in principle. Let me briefly outline, without developing, three of them. For starters, you might simply think that we can explain some but not all evils. For example, perhaps you are persuaded by Stump's theodicy and thus think we can explain the suffering of fully functional adult human beings but also that we currently have no good explanation for the suffering of sentient beings, human or otherwise, that fall outside the scope of this theodicy. Or perhaps you propagate what Ekstrom refers to as a "hybrid theodicy," in which you offer different theodicies for different evils; even with a hybrid theodicy on hand, however, you might still think that you cannot explain every type of evil, or at least every token of every type.[48] You might also think that, in virtue of having good inferential and/or noninferential reasons to believe that God exists, and that God would not allow an evil without having a justifying reason for doing so, that God does have such reasons and thus that your inability to think of them is not evidence that they aren't there. This move would be a version of what Rowe refers to as the "G. E. Moore shift." The skeptical theism here would be based on the fact that you have good reasons to think that God exists and would not allow pointless evil. It could of course be helpfully

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[48]Ekstrom:

> This raises the question of the plausibility of a hybrid theodicy or a bundle case. Perhaps a theist could argue that, for some cases of evil, the God-justifying reason for causing or allowing them is punishment, whereas with other cases of evil, the God-justifying reason for allowing them is the preservation of created beings' power of libertarian free will, whereas in other cases of evil, the God-justifying reason for causing or allowing them is temporally extended character development, and in other cases of evil, the God-justifying reason for causing or allowing them is that they provide avenues to knowledge of, and intimacy with, God. (*God, Suffering, and the Value of Free Will*, 91)

I should note that Ekstrom does not here endorse this approach herself.

buttressed by reflections on the limitations of human cognition in general but also on the fact that you do have some explanations for some evils. The skeptical theist bit in all this is, of course, the thought that an inability to think of a God-justifying reason for evil E is no reason to think that there is no such reason. Is it even reasonable to demand that theists be able to produce explanations for *every* evil, or the exact amount of evil, and so on? In how many domains of inquiry, for example, can we explain every factum that is, in principle, explainable? To demand universal explanations in this case seems like overkill, given our cognitive limitations; more strongly, it seems like special pleading on behalf of religious skepticism.

Another possibility is that of being a skeptical theist *qua* generic theism but a theodicist *qua* religious theism. So, suppose you endorse the view that we have good inferential and/or noninferential reasons to think that God exists. *Qua* generic theist, you might say that we aren't able to explain why God allows evil but that this is no reason to think that there aren't any such explanations at all. One reason for denying that we have the ability to predict God's behavior, *qua* generic theists, is that you might not think of God as a well-behaved moral agent, that is, as someone who is subject to and perfectly follows the same moral law that govern us. Without denying divine goodness, you might take the line that that goodness does not consist in being a well-behaved moral agent and thus that your ability to predict divine behavior is not particularly strong. In their own ways, Brian Davies, Mark Murphy, and Edward Feser have all recently given arguments against the view that we should think of God as a well-behaved moral agent.[49] But you might not be *just* a generic theist, for you—like Davies, Murphy, and Feser—might also be a religious theist, that is, an adherent to a theistic religion that posits divine revelation. You might then say that, given the additional resources provided by divine revelation, we can offer good theodicies for evil. So, if the atheologian wants to attack generic theism and you are content to operate just with the tools provided by natural reason, you might respond by combining Reformed Epistemology, natural theology, and skeptical theism. On the other hand, if the atheologian wants to attack a specific version of religious theism, the one you advance, you might then reply by combining Reformed Epistemology, natural theology, and theodicy, bringing in the additional resources made available to you by your faith tradition.

Yet another option involves making a distinction between non-comparative probability judgments ("X is unlikely [likely] given theism") and comparative ones ("X is more likely [unlikely] on naturalism than on theism").[50] Skeptical theism might rule out non-comparative probability judgments, meaning we can't say how likely (full stop) fine-tuning is, given theism, nor can we say how likely (full stop) some evil

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[49]See Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil*, 84–105; Murphy, *God's Own Ethics*, 106–116; Feser, "The Thomistic Dissolution of the Logical Problem of Evil."

[50]Thanks to a referee for pointing out the possibility of this version of the holistic response.

E is given theism. But this seems compatible with being able to say that fine-tuning, say, is more likely on theism than naturalism. I may not be able to say how likely it is that the U.S. Congress will declare war on X, but I know that it is more likely that they will declare war on X than it is that Vice-President Harris will declare war on X (for the simple reason that vice-presidents don't have the authority to declare war). The ruling out of non-comparative probability judgments also seems compatible with saying, in Draper-style, that some evil E is more likely on, say, the hypothesis of indifference than it is on theism. So, this version of the non-concessive holistic response allows the theist to wield skeptical theism against non-comparative likelihood judgments of the sort, "evil E is evidence against theism because it is unlikely given theism"; in reply, the skeptical theist will argue we are in the dark about the likelihood of E given theism. Draper-style comparative arguments from evil would have to be met with another response, but there's no in-principle reason to think that one or more of the other elements of the holistic response couldn't be brought in for that job.

4. Conclusion

The holistic response to evil would not be a silver bullet. There is no guarantee that theists will be able to come up with good theodicies; no guarantee that the arguments of natural theology work; no guarantee that skeptical theism can be defended from the serious objections which have been leveled against it, such as that it implies too much skepticism; and no guarantee that we really can have noninferential justification for theistic belief. Theists will still have to do—or, rather, keep doing—the hard work of defending each of the four standard responses to the problem of evil. However, the result reached here is not insignificant. If the four standard theistic responses to the problem of evil are in fact compatible, then, so long as each one is defensible in its own right, it suggests that the theist has at her disposal a powerful, holistic response to what is perhaps the most serious objection to God's existence.

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