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Trent D. Dougherty

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FURTHER EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS CONCERNING SKEPTICAL THEISM

Trent Dougherty

I defend the position that the appearance of a conflict between common-sense epistemology and skeptical theism remains, even after one fully appreciates the role defeat plays in rational belief. In particular, Matheson's recent attempt to establish peace is not fully successful.

When I wrote "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism" (hereafter ECCST, this journal 25.2 [April 2008]: 172–176) I was hoping for some creative, clear attempts at resolving the tension I noted. I am pleased that, with Jonathan Matheson's "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism: A Response to Dougherty" (this issue), just that has happened. However, below I state briefly why I still think there is tension between commonsense epistemology and skeptical theism.

In ECCST, I claimed that even if one found skeptical theism quite plausible, this wouldn't automatically mean that one's impression of the extreme gratuitousness of evil didn't give one a *pro tanto* reason to believe that there is no God. The reason I gave was that one's confidence in skeptical theism might not be high enough to counterbalance a strong impression of the unjustifiability of some description of evil.

Matheson offers a simple analogy to illustrate how he thinks I am mistaken. The analogy applies a theory of defeat he offers. The analogy is supposed to support the following proposition: Even if my impression of unjustifiability is very strong, as long as I am justified in believing some proposition that is an undercutting defeater for that impression, then all the justificatory force of that impression is removed.

Here, I explain why I think he is mistaken, and illustrate it with a common fallacy from the literature in cognitive science involving probability reasoning. I suggest further that defeat talk is misleading and that the best policy is to model the present situation probabilistically. When this is done, we see that Matheson has made a mistake.

I. A Preferred Principle

First, though I wished to remain as neutral as possible on the nature of commonsense epistemology in ECCST, since I am in the defensive posture

here, it is fair for me to work from my preferred version of the view, the one I find most plausible. In ECCST, I mentioned several principles of commonsense epistemology which all tried to capture the same intuition. However, I illustrated the tension by reference to one very simple principle: Huemer's principle of phenomenal conservatism.[1] I did not there quibble with certain problems I have with this formulation, but Matheson's reply makes them salient. In short, I endorse Earl Conee's suggestion that commonsense epistemology should be captured by something weaker.[2] Thus I endorse the following principle as best capturing commonsense epistemology.

Reasons Commonsensism (RC): If it seems to S that p, then S thereby has a *pro tanto* reason to believe p.

My rejoinder will be made in reference to this principle.

II. Differing about Defeaters

Matheson's for the most part admirably clear paper is an application to ECCST of a particular theory of epistemic defeat via an analogy. I'll attack both parts. First, there are problems with this theory of defeat. Matheson distinguishes between two theories of defeat: a normative account and a doxastic account. Here is the bottom line.

Normative Defeater Skeptical Theism (NDST) claims that [the skeptical theist's skeptical theses have their] defeating power when one is *justified in believing [them]*. . . . In contrast, *Doxastic Defeater Skeptical Theism* (DDST) claims that [they] can perform this defeating task *simply by being believed*.[3]

Matheson defends only NDST. Both these theories are about half right. That is, though neither being justified nor being believed is sufficient for defeat, both are necessary. Being believed isn't sufficient because people might believe something for completely irrational reasons. This can result in being incoherent, but the mere fact that someone happens to believe something that makes p less likely doesn't defeat p. It is likely for this reason that Matheson doesn't defend DDST.

But, by the same token, justification isn't sufficient. Frege presumably knew things which made the naive comprehension axiom objectively unlikely. But he was still justified in accepting the axiom until he became

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[1]Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 99.

[2]See Earl Conee, "First Things First," in Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 15n8.

[3]Though Matheson refers to "normative defeaters" and "doxastic defeaters," he never provides a definition. The best I can do with Matheson's statement that "*Normative defeaters* are propositions that render the subject less justified in believing some proposition when one is justified in believing them (regardless of whether they are true or believed)" is this: d defeats p for an individual S if d is justified for S and is such that for any S (variable) if d is justified for S then p is less justified for S than it would be were d not justified for S. I find that less than perspicuous. Presumably, for example, he intends this to hold only so long as d itself is undefeated for S. See Matheson, "Response to Dougherty," 325.

aware of the connection.[4] Thus I think more plausible than either theory is a *Normative-Doxastic theory of defeat*: d must be both justified and believed to serve as a defeater.[5] And so, given RC, one won't have a defeater from the skeptical theist until her skepticism is sufficiently convincing.

I am, however, inclined to think talk of defeat is utterly misguided, especially talk of undercutting defeaters, which is the variety Matheson relies upon. In my view, we acquire reasons according to (RC) and these reasons taken together constitute our total evidence. This evidence may be positively or negatively relevant to a given proposition, and this to varying degrees. Thus for a range of propositions we have their probability on our total evidence and that is the end of the story. To see how this applies to Matheson's setup, consider what should be a paradigm example of so-called undercutting defeat.

Let q be the true proposition that S gives testimony with content p. This is a reason for me, at t1, the time of my hearing the testimony, to accept p, since I'm aware that S is generally reliable. But then I learn, at t2, d: that in spite of his general reliability, S is known to be unreliable when it comes to p-type matters. In defeat language, d defeats the support q gives to p.[6] But what can this mean? What has been defeated? Certainly not the connection between my original evidence (captured in E1 below) and p. Consider the following two sets of evidence.

E1: S said "p" & S is generally reliable.

E2: E1 & S is unreliable concerning p-type questions.

E1 characterizes my evidence at t1, and E2 characterizes my evidence at t2. At t1 my total relevant evidence supported p. At t2 it did not. But what is it that has been defeated? Not my justification at t1! Justification, Matheson will agree, is a synchronic matter. My transition from being justified in believing p to not being so is a diachronic matter. And even at t2 E1 supports p. Its support for p is an objective relation it bears (as Matheson agrees) at all times if at any time. It doesn't fail to bear that relation just because it's part of a larger body of evidence such that that larger body of evidence doesn't bear that relation. If there is defeat, then there is something that is defeated. But there is no viable candidate for anything that has been defeated. Thus talk of defeat is simply misguided and what remains is just what, at any given time, is the probability of a target proposition on one's total evidence.

So I have offered two ways to resist Matheson's application of his defeater theory to my dilemma for skeptical theists concerning common

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[4]I simply can't tell whether this fits with or is at odds with Matheson's views about "linking evidence" in his "Conciliatory Views of Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence," *Synthese*, forthcoming.

[5]Though he doesn't say it, I take it that Matheson has in mind a propositional justification defeater.

[6]Chisholm's account of defeat seems similar but importantly different in ways I won't go into. See his *Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 55.

sense epistemology. First, I find his theory of defeat implausible. If I were going to adopt a theory of defeat, I'd adopt neither the doxastic nor the normative theory but rather a combined normative-doxastic theory. Second, I eschew the usefulness of "defeat" talk altogether and simply look at the probability for a given subject at a given time of a target proposition on their total evidence. And we'll see that, when modeled probabilistically, it's clear that "defeaters" don't always defeat.

III. Seeing Through the Tinted Glasses Example

The conclusion of the previous section leads me to consider a serious and important error Matheson makes. He claims, "[An] undercutting defeater can be a full defeater even when the on-balance justification that one has for it is less than the on-balance justification one would have otherwise had for the proposition whose justificatory status is being undercut. For instance a proposition enjoying .8 on-balance justification could be fully defeated by an undercutting defeater which comes to enjoy only .7 on-balance justification." The error isn't necessarily that this is false, but thinking that it generalizes to the case at hand. The fact is, it all depends on how one's total evidence shapes up.

Matheson's idea seems to be that we are justified in believing anything that is more likely than not.[7] So in the scenario he gives, we are justified in believing the defeater, since it is .7 probable. And since we are justified in believing it, according to Matheson, it does its work of undercutting the support we have for the target proposition which actually had a higher measure than that of the defeater. But this model turns out to be incoherent. For if we assume that the target proposition came into the scenario at 50/50 odds, its probability remains over .5 (the math for this will be reviewed below) and, according to Matheson, we may believe it even though, according to Matheson, its only source of justification has been undercut. He is explicit that undercutting defeat here is *full* epistemic defeat.

We can see the problem with this line of thinking at an intuitive level. In the scenario he gives, what I should think is that there is a .7 chance that my apparent .8 degree of support is no good. But of course there's some doubt about whether my support has been undercut, so there's a good chance that that support is good after all. How much this lowers the probability of the target propositions completely depends on the numbers. On some sets of values I will no longer be justified in believing and on others I will. This further illustrates the difficulties of thinking in terms of "defeat" rather than total probabilities. There just are no helpful generalizations one can latch onto with "defeat."

We can also see the problem with a common example from cognitive science. Suppose a subject S is chosen at random from a population where approximately 10 percent steal from work. So it is .9 probable that she doesn't steal. However, she is asked during a lie-detector test which is

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[7]See, for example, Matheson, "Response to Dougherty," 6n10.

80 percent accurate whether she steals; it says she's lying when she says she does not steal. We now have evidence undercutting her testimony. I have a reliable source that says she's lying and the proposition that she's lying *entails* that her testimony is false, so if I was certain of it, I'd have a full, undercutting defeater.

When asked in tests, many respondents think this means we are no longer justified in believing her testimony. However, this is just a fallacy—the base-rate fallacy—and the odds are still better than 2:1 that S is innocent. This illustrates that direct evidence is not the only evidence, and that it's total evidence that counts. Epistemic justification must take into account one's total perspective.

IV. Application

Let the following assignments hold.

G = There is gratuitous evil; O = I have an overwhelming impression as of the extreme gratuitousness of evil; S = The conjunction of the skeptical theist's skeptical theses.

If we substitute these values into the theorem of total probability[8] and put O into the background knowledge—since we're considering the argument from the standpoint of an individual who has this impression—then we get the following formula.

$$Pr(G/O) = Pr(G/S\&O)Pr(S/O) + Pr(G/{\sim}S\&O)Pr({\sim}S/O)$$

The theorem of total probability tells you the probability of a proposition under any (mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive) set of circumstances. Here, we partition the possible circumstances into two (mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive) possibilities: S is true or S is false. The left summand of the equality says how probable G would be for one if one learned that S were true (assuming O)—Pr(G/S&O)—and contains a "weight" which indicates how probable S is for one.[9] The right summand does the same for ~S. By weighting and summing, this theorem will give us the total probability of G (assuming O) given our perspective. If one side is weighted more than another—as we'll assume here in a moment using Matheson's numbers— there's a human tendency—demonstrated in the cognitive science literature and illustrated well by the base-rate fallacy—to ignore the other side. But, as we'll see, even if the scales tip in favor of S, there is still a chance that ~S is true, and that possibility of error must be added in to give us the total probability. Now let's assign some numbers to the parts of the equation.

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[8]For a simple illustration of how to apply the theorem of total probability, see Ian Hacking's *An Introduction to Probability and Inductive Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[9]One important truth which the Bayesian approach reminds us of—and I think skeptical theists tend to gloss over this in their writings—is that arguments are assessed from the perspective of an individual. There's no such thing as a generic defeater. One has to acquire a defeater by believing it or being justified in believing it or something like that. Likewise, the skeptical theist's skeptical theses will not be equally obvious to everyone.

Pr(G/S&O) = a

We'll begin by assigning this value to a constant for the purposes of the math. It represents the prior probability that there are gratuitous evils. This is so because we are assuming that S is a full undercutting defeater for O. S completely screens off any evidential force of O with respect to G. Thus Pr(G/S&O) = Pr(G).

Pr(S/O) = Pr(S) given independence = .7 for illustration.

There is no reason to assume any relevant relation between S and O. I'll use Matheson's numbers for the sake of argument, but I must say that for me this value would be much lower, probably somewhere in the neighborhood of .33. I do think that a consideration of human cognitive limitations is important and can blunt to some degree the impact of O, but there is as yet no clear argument from specifics of human cognitive limitation to the specific skeptical theses which have been advanced.

Pr(G/~S&O) = quite high = .8 for illustration.

I'll use Matheson's numbers for the sake of argument, but I must say that for me this value would be much higher, probably somewhere in the neighborhood of .95.

Pr(~S/O) = Pr(~S) given independence = .3

This is just an application of the obvious theorem:

Pr(~S/O) = 1–Pr(S/O).

The above assignments give us the following result.

Pr(G/O) = .7a + (.3)(.8)

For example, if[10] a = .5, then Pr(G/O) = .35 + .24 = .59.

The thesis of ECCST was that "skeptical theism does not look very plausible from the perspective of a common sense epistemology" (172). So I'm not committed to thinking that Pr(S) is at all high. I did say that Matheson's

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[10]This is a good value to assess from for two reasons. First, it follows dialectical suit with Rowe, who in his writing on the problem of evil always grants .5 to the proposition that God exists when that is the proposition he is arguing against. It only seems fair to at least begin the evaluation in similar fashion. Also, if we are assessing it from a state of otherwise ignorance—and recall that this value is equivalent to the pure prior probability—it seems an appropriate application of the Principle of Indifference, which is not always subject to Bertrand's Paradox. For a recent defense see Paul Bartha and Richard Johns, "Probability and Symmetry," *Philosophy of Science* 68 (2001): 109–122. And, after all, there's nothing in the skeptical theist's skeptical theses to suggest that it is *unlikely* that there are gratuitous evils. On the contrary, as Bergmann is fond of saying, we are largely "in the dark" about such things ("Commonsense Skeptical Theism," in *Science, Religion, and Metaphysics: New Essays on the Philosophy of Alvin Plantinga*, ed. Michael Rea and Kelly James Clark [Oxford University Press, forthcoming]). Thus it would be inappropriate to assign Pr(G/S & O) too low a value. There's simply nothing in skeptical theism that even purports to make it unlikely that there are gratuitous evils.

key thesis—ST1[11]—is quite plausible. And partial confidence in it "might even reduce the extent of our confidence in the negative intuition"[12] (175). This is perfectly compatible with probability assignments well below .5. I continued the passage quoted at the beginning of this paragraph: "[so] anyone who finds common sense epistemology plausible and is attracted to skeptical theism has some work to do to show that they can form a plausible whole" (172). Being attracted to skeptical theism does not entail believing it or even believing it to be very close to .5 probable. And part of the work I did not mention is precisely making ST1 seem attractive to those to whom it seems offensive to common sense. Ignoring my other evidence regarding ST1 is like ignoring the base-rate in the polygraph case.

In fact, a natural extension of my argument is to add that there are various other propositions which are—to speak with Matheson—"defeater defeaters" for ST1 which have immediate justification for some. The first premise of my argument was that if common sense epistemology is correct, then it is relatively easy to justifiedly believe that there is gratuitous evil (172). I illustrated this by appeal to the direct impression of gratuity, but that was only one example. There are many others. Consider just four.

> **PWR:** An omniscient and omnipotent being isn't going to be stuck in the position to choose between the holocaust and something (approximately)[13] as bad or worse.

> **Anti-ST1a:** A loving God would *want* us to understand, and an all-powerful God *could* make us understand God's reason(s) for permitting so much evil.[14]

> **Anti-ST1b:** God's concept of goodness is neither exactly like ours nor shockingly different from ours.[15]

> **~ST1:** Humans are in a position to judge that an omnipotent and omniscient being would be unlikely to have a morally sufficient reason to permit the evils we find in the world.

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[11]Matheson's ST1: Humans are in no position to judge directly that an omnipotent and omniscient being would be unlikely to have a morally sufficient reason to permit the evils we find in the world.

[12]Thus I'm willing to budge. But my point is just that the skeptical theist should too. I think it is unreasonable for someone not to put some credence in skeptical theism, but I also think it's unreasonable to expect that this natural humility would totally neutralize the problem of evil. I'm arguing for a moderate position here.

[13]I say "approximately" because I think van Inwagen's No Minimum argument shows that there is bound to be a modicum of gratuitous evil. See his *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (Cornell University Press, 1995), chaps. 3 and 4, and his *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), chap. 6.

[14]There is also a version of this which focuses on God's nature as loving parent. See Rowe on page 130 of "An Exchange on the Problem of Evil," in *God and the Problem of Evil*, ed. W. Rowe (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 124–136.

[15]For a wonderful defense of this, see that modern apostle of commonsense C. S. Lewis's beginning to chapter 3 of *The Problem of Pain* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001).

According to RC, if any or all of these propositions seem true, then one has reason to believe them. If one is convinced, then one is justified in believing them.[16] PWR shows there are *multiple* lines of support for the gratuity of evil, which is probabilistically very important.[17] Anti-ST1a and Anti-ST1b show that there are propositions which could be immediately justified and which tell against ST1. Finally, one could simply find ~ST1 immediately plausible (perhaps in virtue of but not inferred from belief in the previous two propositions). These are further illustrations of the truth of the first premise of my argument in ECCST. These meditations have made me more convinced of the conclusion.

V. Conclusion

In reply to my concerns about the consistency of the skeptical theist maneuver and commonsense epistemology, Matheson offered a theory of defeat and an analogy. My rejoinder has four movements. First, I gave two reasons to reject the theory of defeat. The first was that the most plausible theory of defeat is not one he considers. One must be aware of defeating information to have its defeating effect, even for justification defeaters. Also, I gave reasons for thinking that defeat talk is, in general, misleading at best. I suggested that, instead, the only relevant concepts we need in this case are those of reasons and probability (with the latter rising and falling in proportion with the former). I offered analogies which more directly parallel my case and showed—via illustrations from cognitive science and common sense testimony—that whether countervailing information destroys justification completely depends on the total perspective of the individual in question, in particular of the probability on their total evidence of whatever proposition we are interested in. Finally, I pointed out that one's total evidence—given the most plausible form of commonsense epistemology—can easily include items which keep one from finding the skeptical theist's skepticism too plausible (even while recognizing some insights).

This leads to an important lesson about dialectics: you can't defeat an argument someone gives just by explaining why you're not convinced. Atheists have given arguments from evil. It's one thing for a skeptical theist to assert that they are totally convinced of a set of skeptical theses and that if the atheist were totally convinced of them too, then they shouldn't be an atheist. It's quite another to give a defense of the skeptical theses. Without that step there is simply explanation of disagreement. There is something intuitive about skeptical theism, about the idea that our judgments about God's ways should be tentative and bathed in humility. Yet

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[16]Note that this does not assume a general internalist epistemology, for RC states only a sufficient condition. Even Plantinga seems to accept it as a sufficient condition. See *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2001), 100–102.

[17]For an example of just how strikingly important this is, see Tim McGrew and Lydia McGrew, "On the Historical Argument: A Rejoinder to Plantinga," *Philosophia Christi* 8 (2006): 23–38.

for some, this intuitive idea does not seem to have the same weight as the overwhelming impression of the gratuity of the profusion of inscrutable evil. Those people await arguments that the intuitive humility makes sufficiently probable that we should overturn our judgments about evil. In short, they await a theodicy.

Baylor University