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THE PERSPECTIVAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

Blake McAllister

Whether evil provides evidence against the existence of God, and to what degree, depends on how things seem to the subject—i.e., on one's *perspective*. I explain three ways in which adopting an atheistic perspective can increase support for atheism via considerations of evil. The first is by intensifying the common sense problem of evil by making evil seem gratuitous or intrinsically wrong to allow. The second is by diminishing the apparent fit between theism and our observations of evil. The third is by lowering the initial plausibility of theism. I call this "the perspectival problem of evil" and argue that skeptical theism does not fully address it.

Eleonore Stump offers us the following premise:

Imagine an intelligent being Max from a far-distant world in which all sentient beings live only in one very large edifice, outside of which there is nothing at all. None of these beings is ever seriously sick, and none of them ever dies. And now suppose that Max, who has seen nothing else of earth life, is somehow enabled to see a video of events inside a large city hospital on earth, where the Chief of Staff is a surgeon.¹

Stump goes on to describe how differently Max will judge the Chief of Staff than those of us who know and understand sickness, death, medicine, and their places in the larger world. What Max believes to be sadistic torture, we desire for the sake of healing. While Max scoffs at the idea of life outside of the hospital, we orient our entire stay around it. Suffering that Max believes to be gratuitous we consent to in faith and hope. The story illustrates how one's beliefs about God and evil depends to a great extent on which belief-system, or worldview, is operating in the background.

I want to draw attention to the role that experience, broadly construed, plays in the interpretive process. Max not only *believes* the suffering of the patients to be incompatible with a loving Chief of Staff, he *perceives* the situation that way. Procedures which prod and poke seem cruel and heinous to Max in a way that they do not to us. Life outside the hospital seems

¹Stump, "Reply to Draper," 204. See also Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 17–18.



almost comically implausible. The pain he witnesses appears pointless. How things seem (his perspective) and what Max believes (his worldview) are interrelated, each influencing the other in turn. The implication is that one's conclusions about God and evil depend not only on one's worldview but on one's perspective as well.

Part of what makes the problem of evil so intractable is that encountering evil, both suffering it and observing the suffering of others, has the potential to enact precisely the sort of change in perspective that results in an interpretive framework on which suffering constitutes serious evidence against the existence of a loving God—or at least in which the overall plausibility of God's existence is otherwise significantly diminished. This is a largely unacknowledged means by which experiences of evil can generate rational support for atheism.² Even if it is not evil per se that engenders the atheistic perspective, the vital point is that the onset of such a perspective leads to increased support for atheism via considerations of evil. I call this “the perspectival problem of evil.”

I begin by charting out how encounters with evil can shift one's perspective (Section I) and how this can result in increased support for atheism (Section II). This mapping is not only worthwhile in itself, but also holds crucial insights into how one must respond in order to defeat such support. In particular, I will be at pains to show that skeptical theism does not completely cut off the support for atheism generated by the perspectival problem of evil—for some, perhaps, but not for everyone. Thus, skeptical theism may be part of the theist's response, but it cannot be the whole of it. To be clear, this is not an objection to skeptical theism so much as to the pretense that it provides a final and decisive blow to the problem of evil. I hint (in Section III) at what a more complete theistic response needs to look like, and conclude (in Section IV) with how the perspectival nature of rationality should affect our approach to the problem of evil more generally.

1. Perspective Shifts

In this section, I will introduce three important ways in which evil can alter one's perspective. Before doing so, however, I need to clarify the notion of a perspective.

A perspective is a formative and lasting disposition for things to seem a certain way. There is a specific kind of experience or mental state at issue here called “seemings” or “appearances.” Seemings are representational mental states with propositional content. What sets them apart is their phenomenal character, which makes their content feel as though it is true or false.³

²The recent exception is Gellman, “The Experience of Evil and Support for Atheism,” which is discussed below. See also Gellman, “Religious Experience,” for an application of this approach to religious experience.

³Some argue that seemings are beliefs or inclinations to believe rather than experiences of the sort I describe here. See McAllister, “Seemings and *Sui Generis*,” for an overview of the debate and a defense of the experience view.

Seemings come in many varieties: perceptual, memorial, introspective, intellectual (commonly called “intuitions”), and possibly more. For instance, when one intuits that everything is identical to itself, the subject has an intellectual seeming with the propositional content $(\forall x (x = x))$. Furthermore, it presents that content to the subject in a way that makes it feel *true* or representative of the way things really are. Other kinds of seemings have the same structure as intellectual seemings but are accompanied and occasioned by other distinctive kinds of mental states. Perceptual seemings, for example, are prompted by sensations (broadly understood as the sort of mental states involving sensory phenomenology such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile feels).⁴ Thus, the broader perceptual process has a kind of two-step structure: first come perceptual sensations, which then give rise to perceptual seemings.⁵ More often than not, these perceptual seemings will be about the states of affairs that are (non-conceptually) represented in one’s sensations.⁶ Thus, I might receive various perceptual sensations as of a black dog running towards me, which then occasion in me the perceptual seeming that my dog is running over to greet me. Importantly, a stranger may have the same sensations as I do and yet, given the differences in our background information and cognitive habituation, experience a different perceptual seeming. It may seem to him that a non-descript black dog is running towards him, or (if he is skittish) that a vicious black dog is coming to attack him. This last example illustrates just how differently the world can seem to different people, even if they are both interacting with the same concrete state of affairs.

One’s seemings can be systematically oriented in a certain way, disposing one to see the world in light of a particular interpretive framework. Most relevant to us, individuals can come to possess theistic or atheistic perspectives on the world. Generally speaking, things will seem to be as

⁴Some, like Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, argue that perceptual seemings should be identified with sensations (perhaps of a special sort). I side with Tucker, “Why Open-Minded People Should Endorse Dogmatism,” in thinking that seemings should be kept distinct from sensations, though they are closely related in that sensations give rise to perceptual seemings and perceptual seemings may make reference to things presented non-conceptually in sensations. The broader aims of this paper do not, however, depend on the distinction between seemings and sensations.

⁵The relationship between a perceptual *seeming* and a perceptual *experience* will be left open. One could maintain that the perceptual seeming comes after the perceptual experience, or that it just is the perceptual experience, or that it is one component of the perceptual experience along with perceptual sensations. This last theory is called “dual-component theory” in Smith, *The Problem of Perception*. It is most commonly associated with Thomas Reid. See Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*. See Bengson, Grube, and Korman, “A New Framework for Conceptualism,” for a contemporary version of dual-component theory that I find more convincing than Reid’s.

⁶Instead of characterizing those states with sensory phenomenology as non-conceptual representations (e.g., Tye, *Ten Problems of Consciousness*), one might think of them as relational states in which objects are directly presented to one’s awareness (e.g., Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness*).

they would be were God (not) to exist.⁷ For instance, someone with an atheistic perspective might be disposed to have a constellation of seemings and intuitions that align with naturalism: it seems to them that there are no gods, that naturalism is a simpler hypothesis than bare theism, that observed phenomena (even consciousness) can be adequately explained without introducing anything immaterial, that the existence of anything at all is just a brute fact, that there is no great purpose or meaning to reality, that there are no objective moral values or duties, and, of special note, that a loving God would be unlikely or unable to allow the kinds of evils we observe. This describes an especially thorough-going atheistic perspective, but it is entirely possible and common for people to have an atheistic perspective with respect to some areas but not others.

My contention is that encountering evil can shift one into an atheistic perspective, pervasively or with respect to a particular area. I take this to be a fairly uncontroversial empirical claim—one that most of us have witnessed in ourselves or others and that is consonant with our general understanding of how the human mind functions. That being said, we would do well to see if psychology can offer us anything to confirm or disconfirm our hypothesis.

To begin, many psychological studies have observed a correlation between negative life events and the loss or lessening importance of religious belief.⁸ Add to this that suffering personal misfortune and hearing about the suffering of others are two of the most common reasons put forwards by apostates to explain their loss of belief.⁹ This is not to say that *most* people change their religious beliefs in response to negative life events (most don't), or even that the dampening of religious beliefs is the most common alteration undergone. Indeed, as many or more people see an *increase* in religiosity as a result of negative life events—a phenomenon

⁷Interestingly, De Cruz (“Cognitive Science of Religion and the Study of Theological Concepts”) and De Cruz and De Smedt (“How Do Philosophers Evaluate Natural Theological Arguments?”) find “a robust correlation between perceived strength of natural theological arguments and religious belief” (De Cruz and De Smedt, “How Do Philosophers Evaluate Natural Theological Arguments?”, 139). The proclivity to fall into theistic or atheistic perspectives on the world would aptly explain these findings.

⁸E.g., Aten et al., “Predictors of God Concept and God Control After Hurricane Katrina”; Ben-Ezra et al., “Losing my Religion”; Bierman, “The Effects of Childhood Maltreatment on Adult Religiosity and Spirituality”; Falsetti, Resick, and Davis, “Changes in Religious Beliefs Following Trauma”; Fontana and Rosenheck, “Trauma, Change in Strength of Religious Faith, and Mental Health Service Use Among Veterans Treated for PTSD”; Gall et al., “A Longitudinal Study on the Role of Spirituality in Response to the Diagnosis and Treatment of Breast Cancer”; Krause and Hayward, “Humility, Lifetime Trauma, and Change in Religious Doubt Among Older Adults”; Seimarco et al., “Religiosity and Mental Health”; Walker et al., “Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality During and After Childhood Abuse.”

⁹Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale, *The Nonreligious*. This is not to say that such reasons are predominant. The most common factor cited in this study was a kind of “acquired incredulity” (ibid, 96) in which their religious belief simply stopped seeming true. (Although it would not surprise me if the onset of this acquired incredulity sometimes had to do with seeing or suffering evil).

illuminated by the work of Kenneth Pargament and others on how religious beliefs are used to cope with or make sense of suffering.¹⁰ This is not inconsistent, of course, with my initial observation that negative events *also* have a significant potential to result in the loss of religious belief. The fact is that negative events are *polarizing*—they have a much greater tendency than most other kinds of events to send people in one direction or the other, to bolster religious beliefs or dismantle them.

Psychologists are still developing an understanding of precisely *how* suffering leads to the loss of religious belief. Unsurprisingly, the causes are manifold and complex. For instance, while intellectual theorizing surely plays some role,¹¹ there is also evidence that negative emotions, such as being angry with God or perceiving him as cruel or distant, can be an important factor in this process. Studies show that undergoing suffering can lead to negative feelings towards God¹² and that such feelings are often a significant factor in non-belief.¹³ My only sticking point here is a moderate one: that the story of how suffering leads to non-belief is generally more complex than people observing suffering, reasoning through the philosophical problem of evil, and changing their beliefs accordingly.

What role do appearances play in this more complex story? A recent study sought to isolate this very thing.¹⁴ The study tracked the God images (how one *experiences* God) and God concepts (what one *believes* about God) of undergraduate students at six months and twelve months after undergoing religious or spiritual struggles (RS struggles) such as those caused by suffering. Researchers found that by six months students *perceived* God more negatively, but held largely the same religious beliefs. By twelve months, however, those who perceived God negatively also *believed* more negatively. Thus, RS struggles “predict less benevolent experiences with God six months later, which, in turn, predict less benevolent theological doctrine of God six months after that.”¹⁵ Interestingly, researchers found that RS struggles were “not directly associated with people’s theological/doctrinal understanding of God across the time points,” but were *indirectly* associated with less benevolent God concepts via less benevolent God images.¹⁶ This indicates is that, “the changes to one’s theology

¹⁰Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*.

¹¹Apostates generally identify intellectual reasons as the most important (though not the exclusive) factor in their loss of belief (e.g., Bradley et al., “The Reasons of Atheists and Agnostics for Nonbelief in God’s Existence Scale”).

¹²E.g., Exline et al., “Anger Toward God.”

¹³E.g., Bradley, Exline, Uzdevaines, “Relational Reasons for Nonbelief in the Existence of Gods.” Interestingly, Bradley et al., “The Reasons of Atheists and Agnostics for Nonbelief in God’s Existence Scale,” found that negative relational reasons for non-belief (such as being angry at God) correlated more highly with citing the problem of evil as a cause of non-belief than did intellectual reasons.

¹⁴Van Tongeren et al., “Religious and Spiritual Struggles Alter God Representations.”

¹⁵Van Tongeren et al., “Religious and Spiritual Struggles Alter God Representations,” 230.

¹⁶Van Tongeren et al., “Religious and Spiritual Struggles Alter God Representations,” 228.

happen over time and are a result of how one experiences God differently as a result of RS struggles."¹⁷

While the psychological literature in this area is nascent,¹⁸ it should come as no surprise to anyone human or familiar with humans that suffering can alter how things seem to the person. Forgive me, then, for going beyond the literature and identifying three specific ways in which suffering can alter one's perspective. Obviously, these claims are open to (dis)confirmation as further data rolls in.

The first tendency of note is evil's ability to change the way one feels about evil itself. In particular, witnessing some evil can incite the kinds of experiences emphasized by Trent Dougherty and Jerome Gellman in which it seems to the subject that an instance, kind, or pattern of evil is morally impermissible for God to allow.¹⁹ There are two kinds of "impermissibility appearances" corresponding to the two ways in which an allowance might be impermissible. First, it can seem that evil is gratuitous.²⁰ Such an intuition tacitly concedes that allowing such evil *might* be permissible if there was some greater good or worse evil suitably connected to it, but insists that such things are absent.²¹ These "gratuitous evil appearances," as we might call them, have received increasing attention in the literature.

¹⁷Van Tongeren et al., "Religious and Spiritual Struggles Alter God Representations," 231.

¹⁸Van Tongeren et al., write, "This study is the first, to our knowledge, to contribute to our understanding of how these RS struggles predict the way people experientially relate to and doctrinally view God over time" ("Religious and Spiritual Struggles Alter God Representations," 231).

¹⁹See Dougherty, "Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism," and "The Common Sense Problem of Evil," and Gellman, "A New Look at the Problem of Evil," and "A Surviving Version of the Common Sense Problem of Evil." In the lattermost, Gellman seems to misinterpret Dougherty on how evil is experienced. Gellman interprets Dougherty as saying that the subject experiences a *poignant* evil and then quickly infers that this evil is gratuitous. As an alternative, Gellman suggests that subjects (at least sometimes) experience evil *as gratuitous*. The gratuitousness of the evil is embedded in the content of the experience itself rather than coming downstream from the experience via inference. Dougherty's claim, however, has always been the same as Gellman's. On Dougherty's account, the subject has a seeming with the propositional content (this evil is gratuitous). Thus, the gratuitousness of the evil is a part of the representational content of the experiential state.

²⁰Note that the truth conditions of "it appears to S that p" is just S's possession of a seeming with the propositional content p. This is different from how Wykstra uses that phrase in his CORNEA principle: "On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim 'It appears that p' only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her" (Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering," 85). It should be of little controversy that evil can seem gratuitous in the former sense (and that one is entitled to claim this), even if there is a second sense of that phrase for which Wykstra's principle holds true.

²¹Some people question whether it can appear to you that something is absent (e.g., whether it can appear to you that there is no elephant in the room). Maybe it can only appear to you that something is *present*, from which you must infer an absence (e.g., it appears to you that there is a room with tables and chairs in it, but it does not appear to do you that there is elephant, thus you infer that there is no elephant in the room). On the account of seemings given above, this worry is clearly misguided. There is no reason why a seeming

Tragically less attention has been given to the appearance that some evil is *intrinsically wrong* for God to allow. For instance, upon encountering someone who has been allowed to suffer “consciousness-shattering horror without a clue as to why,” it may seem that this is something that is never moral to permit.²² Just as killing an innocent human may seem wrong, damn the consequences, so allowing certain kinds of suffering may seem inherently wrong no matter what greater good may come of it. Suffering oneself, or observing it in others, can increase the intensity or frequency of these impermissibility appearances.

Encountering evil can also affect how well theism seems to fit with the patterns of evil and suffering that we observe. For example, take Richard Swinburne’s claim that God’s preventing cancer would have deprived us of the opportunity to freely perform the great good actions needed to strive against it and perhaps one day eliminate cancer.²³ This may seem to someone to be a great good indeed, one worth allowing diseases like cancer to secure . . . until that person’s loved one is diagnosed. What once seemed “worth it” now seems far too high a cost.

The reach of evil extends even farther than this, however. Encountering evil can bring about the kind of pervasive atheistic perspective described above, and the onset of this perspective will often result in the adoption of a matching system of beliefs—a phenomenon Gellman calls “noetic reconstruction,” i.e., “a new, extensive, systematic, modification of a person’s noetic content.”²⁴ Regarding the power of evil to trigger noetic reconstruction, Gellman writes,

[Noetic reconstruction] can be from a sudden switch, to “seeing” things in a radical new way, or result from the appearance of deep noetic discontent An atheistic conversion experience can be the cause of noetic reconstruction by giving rise all at once to a radical ingression into one’s noetic framework so that one sees life and reality in a wholly new way. Alternately, it can cause radical disruption of one’s noetic framework, issuing into noetic discontent that then issues in noetic repair along atheistic lines.²⁵

The crucial point for us is that experiencing evil can incite a radical new way of seeing things, an atheistic perspective, that results in the adoption of an atheistic worldview.²⁶

might not have the propositional content (x is absent) or (there is no x here) or anything at all, for that matter. Even with respect to perceptual seemings, there is no reason why perceptual sensations might not trigger a perceptual seeming with the proposition content (there is no elephant in this room). The debate about whether there can be appearances of absence are, in my estimation, only of concern for those who identify seemings and sensations. For it is a controversial question whether absences can be represented in perceptual sensations.

²²Dougherty, “The Common Sense Problem of Evil.”

²³Swinburne, *Is There a God?*, Ch. 6.

²⁴Gellman, “The Experience of Evil and Support for Atheism,” 107.

²⁵Gellman, “The Experience of Evil and Support for Atheism,” 107.

²⁶Gellman outlines several causal pathways that evil might take in revising one’s worldview (“The Experience of Evil and Support for Atheism,” 107–108), but that level of detail is unnecessary for our current purposes.

Finally, note that this general sort of perspective shift can be brought on by other kinds of experience besides that of evil. For instance, becoming the mentee of a brilliant and charismatic naturalist (if only through books) might, through one's interactions, result in the shift towards an atheistic perspective. Thus, the conclusions I draw about the epistemological effects of such shifts, will apply equally well to situations in which something other than evil serves as the trigger.

2. *The Perspectival Problem of Evil*

Return now to the problem of evil. There are of course many formulations of the problem,²⁷ each of which calls for a different sort of treatment. Our reasoning must nonetheless proceed through certain recognizable stages. We begin with the evidence that purportedly poses a problem for theism. Let us call it "the evidence of evil." We then make an assessment of how well the evidence of evil fits with theism.²⁸ We then take into account all of our *other* evidence, including the intrinsic plausibility of theism, before reaching our final position. In this section, I will show how encountering evil can affect each of these stages in ways that pose a threat to theism. It is this tendency for evil (and other life experiences) to produce a perspective on which observed evils constitute serious evidence against God's existence that gives rise to the perspectival problem of evil.

The discussion will proceed from an internalist point of view: roughly, the factors considered relevant for justification or rationality will be limited to those the subject is aware of within his or her first-person point of view. Ideally, we could discuss *both* internalist and externalist approaches to these issues, but doing so simply isn't feasible given the space available. By way of terminology, I will often talk about the *rational support* that evil provides for atheism. As I use the term here, S has justification for believing p if and only if S has sufficient rational support for p. Gaining rational support for p does not guarantee justification, but it does tend towards it: if the total balance of rational support tips enough in favor of p, then believing p is justified.

2.1. *Impermissibility Appearances*

The evidence of evil will be different for each person if only for the mundane reason that no two people know about exactly the same evils. But

²⁷E.g., Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence"; Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism"; Draper, "Pain and Pleasure."

²⁸In Mackie's logical problem of evil, the evidence of evil consists in the existence of any evil whatsoever, and we must assess whether that evidence is logically compatible with theism. (Mackie says they're not). In Rowe's evidential problem of evil, the evidence of evil consists in our observations of evil, and we must assess whether these observations are likely to be compatible with theism (Rowe says observed evils are probably gratuitous and, accordingly, probably incompatible with theism). In Draper's probabilistic problem of evil, the evidence of evil consists in observed patterns of pleasure and pain, and we must assess whether these patterns are more likely given theism or the hypothesis of indifference (Draper says they are more likely given the latter).

even if we had observed all and only the same evils, our evidence would still not be the same. This is because different people can construe the same state of affairs in different ways. What seems this way to one will seem that way to another. Thus, when it comes to the problem of evil, not only do people assess the evidence differently, they are assessing different evidence! The onset of an atheistic perspective can affect how one experiences evil, thereby altering the evidence of evil that one sets out to evaluate.

An important instance of this general effect is that the shift towards an atheistic perspective can intensify impermissibility appearances.²⁹ Some think these appearances provide immediate rational support for believing that the observed evils are impermissible.³⁰ Obviously, if the existence of morally unallowable evils is admitted into the evidence of evil, then this would provide rational support for atheism.

The controversial point here is whether impermissibility appearances really do provide one with rational support for their content. Dougherty points out that, given a principle like phenomenal conservatism (often called a “common sense epistemic principle” in light of its association with the common sense epistemological tradition of Chisholm, Moore, and Reid), such appearances provide *prima facie* justification for believing that the observed evils are impermissible.³¹

Phenomenal conservatism (PC) If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p.³²

Gellman argues that the same is true given Swinburne’s principle of credulity (a principle closely related to PC and the common sense epistemological tradition).³³ Dougherty calls the power of impermissibility

²⁹This is not the only way in which one’s perspective can significantly affect the evidence of evil. For instance, the same evil may appear more heinous or cruel or random from one perspective than from another, adding content to the evidence of evil that is harder to square with the existence of a loving God.

³⁰If the relevant seeming is a gratuitous evil appearance, then things may be slightly trickier. This is because, granting van Inwagen’s point in *The Problem of Evil* that some gratuitous evils are unavoidable, the gratuitousness of an evil does not entail its impermissibility. Nevertheless, the gratuitousness of an evil will still greatly lower the probability of its permissibility. Furthermore, the existence of certain kinds or magnitudes or frequencies of gratuitous evil will still be morally non-allowable, even granting van Inwagen’s point, and gratuitous evil appearances can provide rational support for believing that those specific conditions obtain.

³¹Dougherty, “Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism.”

³²Huemer, “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,” 30. A more moderate version of phenomenal conservatism that only guarantees some level of rational support for the content of seemings (but perhaps not a level of rational support sufficient for justification) would still pose a problem for the theist.

³³See Gellman, “The Experience of Evil and Support for Atheism,” 100–102. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, contains his principle of credulity. Swinburne addresses phenomenal conservatism and religious experience in “Phenomenal Conservatism and Religious Experience.”

appearances to provide immediate and non-inferential rational support for the existence of evils incompatible with God “the common sense problem of evil.” Thus, a key element of the perspectival problem of evil is an intensification of the common sense problem of evil, as the shift towards an atheistic perspective can make impermissibility appearances stronger, more frequent, and more resilient.

Earlier I identified two kinds of impermissibility appearances: appearances of gratuitousness and appearances of intrinsic wrongness. Their differences are relevant for the following discussion, and so I will treat them in sequence, beginning with the former.

Given PC, gratuitous evil appearances are clearly a potential source of support for atheism. There have been two main responses to this, both from skeptical theists. Skeptical theists are theists who endorse something like the following principle and take that endorsement to undermine the rationality of believing in the existence of gratuitous evils (particularly via a noseum inference):

ST – 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.³⁴

Skeptical theists support *ST* in many ways, including by appeal to the following sorts of skeptical theses:

ST1 – We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

ST2 – We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.

ST3 – We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods and the permission of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.³⁵

Reflection, the skeptical theist maintains, shows such theses to be exceedingly plausible. These, in turn, support *ST*.

The first skeptical theist response is to concede that gratuitous evil appearances initially provide rational support for the existence of pointless evils, but argue that learning *ST* defeats this initial support.³⁶ The second is to deny PC, arguing that, in light of *ST*, gratuitous evil appearances do not provide even initial rational support for believing their content.³⁷ I will have something to say about both of these responses, starting with the former.

³⁴Draper, “The Skeptical Theist,” 176.

³⁵Bergmann, “Commonsense Skeptical Theism,” 11–12.

³⁶Matheson, “Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism”; Rutledge, “Perspectival Skeptical Theism.”

³⁷Bergmann, “Commonsense Skeptical Theism”; Senor, “Skeptical Theism, CORNEA, and Common Sense Epistemology”; Tweedt, “Defusing the Common Sense Problem of Evil.”

Matheson argues that if one comes to believe in ST, even with modest confidence, then one will have an undercutting defeater sufficient to remove all of the rational support provided by gratuitous evil appearances. To see why, note that having a gratuitous evil appearance is akin to “a person, upon seeing Mount Everest, claiming that it seems that Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the universe.”³⁸ A moments reflection should convince the subject that this appearance ought not be trusted—one isn’t in a position to compare the height of Mount Everest, towering though it may be, to all of the other mountains in the universe. ST gives us similar reasons for doubting the appearance that nothing could justify an observed evil.³⁹ Thus, Matheson is correct that learning ST will diminish the support provided by gratuitous evil appearances; however, it may not always eliminate it entirely.⁴⁰ In essence, even if we think ST x likely, that still leaves $1-x$ chance that we *are* in a position to judge such matters and, thus, that our appearances can be trusted. The lower x is, the greater the potential that one still possesses some degree of increased rational support for believing the content of his or her gratuitous evil appearances.

To illustrate the point, consider a situation in which you are asked to search the room for a certain kind of bug called “maybe-see-ums.” You search the room thoroughly, and it seems to you that there are no maybe-see-ums. You thereby gain some rational support for believing that there aren’t any maybe-see-ums in the room. You then find an info sheet listing facts about maybe-see-ums, including that they cannot be seen with the naked eye. Does this counter the rational support provided by your seeming? It depends on how much you trust the info sheet. If you see that it’s published by an expert entomologist, then all (or almost all) of the rational support provided by that seeming will be effectively countered. If you see that it’s an elementary school project written in crayon perhaps it only partially counters the rational support provided by your seeming—after all, maybe the report is wrong and you *would* be able to see the maybe-see-ums if they were there. The point is that the defeat of one’s rational support is not an all or nothing matter. The same is true with respect to gratuitous evil appearances and skeptical theism. If we are only somewhat skeptical of our abilities to judge whether God has reasons for allowing evil (the lower the probability of ST), then some of the initial rational support provided by our gratuitous evil appearances can still get through.

Regarding the probability of ST, one possibility worth considering is whether gratuitous evil appearances in and of themselves can give one reason to doubt ST. Consider a potential Moorean response to external world skepticism. It seems to the subject that there is an external world. The external world skeptic seeks to undermine any justification this

³⁸Hendricks, “How to Be a Skeptical Theist and a Commonsense Epistemologist,” 350.

³⁹See the scathing and powerful critique of gratuitous evil appearances (and those who champion them) in Hudson, *A Grottesque in the Garden*, 122–124.

⁴⁰Dougherty, “Further Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism,” 336–339.

external world seeming might provide by putting forward something analogous to ST:

Ex-ST – Humans are in no position to judge directly that an evil deceiver is unlikely to be manipulating them into falsely believing in an external world.

The Moorean responds, “Well, I obviously know that there’s an external world, so I know I am not being deceived. Hence, I must be in a position to judge that an evil deceiver is unlikely to be manipulating me. Thus, *Ex-ST* is false.” Bergmann makes this sort of move with respect to God’s reasons in response to Wilks.⁴¹ Bergmann claims we can know immediately, as a matter of common sense, that we have hands, and from that we can infer that God does not have a sufficient all-things-considered reason for deceiving us about this. It follows that we must be in a position to directly judge God’s reasons in this instance at least. If this Moorean response is effective, then it’s not immediately apparent why someone couldn’t do the same with a strong enough appearance of gratuitous evil, saying to oneself, “I obviously know that this evil is gratuitous, so I know that there is no morally justifying reason to allow it. Hence, I must be in a position to judge that God is unlikely to have a morally sufficient reason for permitting this evil. Thus, *ST* is false.” From the inside, this reasoning mirrors Bergmann’s reasoning exactly. Such a Moorean strategy may be flawed, but at the very least it puts pressure on those skeptical theists who favor a Moorean response to skepticism.

If one does not favor the Moorean response, then how is one to defend against external world skepticism and *Ex-ST*? A predominant response is that, in building a case for *Ex-ST*, the skeptic manages to establish only the *possibility* that we are being deceived—that we cannot absolutely rule out the possibility of deception. The skeptic does not show that there is any *plausibility* that we are wrong. And the mere possibility of error is insufficient to establish that we are in no position to judge the matter at hand. There is a principle here—that the plausibility of error is required to undermine our confidence in our ability to discern something—which we can call “the plausibility requirement.” One might object to skeptical theism along the same lines. One could concede that the skeptical theists’ arguments for *ST* show that possibly there are reasons beyond our ken which could morally justify God’s allowing observed evils. But it is much less clear that these arguments establish that plausibly there are reasons which could morally justify God’s allowing observed evils. In other words, it is not evident that the plausibility requirement has been met.

This is especially true of those who accept the condition, endorsed by Stump and many others, that morally justifying goods must accrue primarily to the sufferer.⁴² For then, whatever other cosmic goods beyond our ken

⁴¹Bergmann, “Commonsense Skeptical Theism,” 27 and Wilks, “Skeptical Theism and Empirical Unfalsifiability.”

⁴²Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*. See also the position of Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, that for God to count as loving towards someone, it must be the case that he defeats their suffering, where defeat requires at minimum ensuring that one’s life is on the whole worth living.

may be made available by human suffering, God must also use that suffering to bring about goods for the human victims—a domain with which we are much more familiar. To see why this is important, notice that one can endorse ST1-ST3 above without being committed ST1*-ST3*:

ST1* – We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods *for humans* we know of are representative of the possible goods for humans there are.

ST2* – We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils *for humans* we know of are representative of the possible evils for humans there are.

ST3* – We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible goods *for humans* and the permission of possible evils *for humans* are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods for humans and the permission of possible evils for humans.

Limiting our focus to human goods can give one increased confidence in his or her grasp of the relevant domain and, in turn, increased assurance in his or her ability to make judgments concerning the gratuitousness of suffering, thus lowering confidence in ST.⁴³

To sum up, in order to justify ST, the skeptical theist needs to establish the plausibility of error in assessing the gratuitousness of evil, not just its possibility. But there is reasonable disagreement about whether the skeptical theist has met this burden. There are many more arguments for and against ST that would need to be considered in assessing its overall likelihood, and this is not the forum to survey those arguments. Suffice it to say that ST is not rationally uncontestable, and there may even be those for whom the probability of ST is not particularly high. This leaves the door open for gratuitous evil appearances to continue to provide some level of rational support for the existence of gratuitous evils.

The second way of responding to gratuitous evil appearances promises to prevent gratuitous evil appearances from providing any rational support at all. This strategy maintains that gratuitous evil appearances do not provide even *initial* rational support for believing in the existence of gratuitous evils. This requires one to deny PC, at least with respect to gratuitous evil appearances. Denying PC is a cost as there are, in my judgment, good reasons for endorsing PC.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, even if we drop PC, it does

⁴³Bergmann, in "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," in a response to similar observations made in Rowe's "The Empirical Argument from Evil," claims he finds ST1* (and, we can extrapolate, ST2* and ST3*) plausible for the same kinds of reasons he endorses ST1-3. Of course, it's not clear that all rational people must agree with Bergmann here. At the very least, one might reasonably find ST1*-3* significantly *less* plausible than one finds ST1-3, thereby creating greater opportunity for partially undefeated gratuitous evil appearances.

⁴⁴See, e.g., Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* and "Phenomenal Conservatism and the Internalist Intuition"; Tucker, "Why Open-Minded People Should Endorse Dogmatism"; and McAllister, "Restoring Common Sense."

not immediately follow that gratuitous evil appearances fail to provide rational support for believing in the existence of gratuitous evils. Indeed, it is relatively uncontroversial among non-skeptical folk that, in general, learning that something seems to be the case will give one some rational support for believing that it is the case.⁴⁵ (This better be true! Try doing philosophy, or engaging in any rational discipline for that matter, without relying on the way things appear). So, we need some reason to think that appearances of gratuitous evil are an exception to the general rule.

Michael Bergmann provides one possible reason. Bergmann insists that we cannot “just see directly,” as a matter of common sense, that some evil is gratuitous (or even probably so).⁴⁶ Now, it is perfectly clear that one can “see directly” that some evil is gratuitous in the sense that one can have a seeming with this content—a fact Bergmann surely would not deny. What Bergmann does deny is that these seemings provide rational support for their content such that one can justifiably base a basic belief on them. But why? Bergmann is happy to concede that other seemings, such as the appearance that I have hands, can rationally support basic beliefs in their content. Given Bergmann’s proper functionalism and Reidian commonsensism,⁴⁷ the answer is likely that the only seemings which can rationally support basic beliefs are ones produced by the proper functioning of our reliably truth-aimed faculties operating in an appropriate environment,⁴⁸ and gratuitous evil appearances don’t meet those criteria. This proposal is not acceptable to the internalist, since it appeals to factors of which the subject might not be aware—namely, the casual origins of the seeming. Of course, if the subject learns that his or her gratuitous evil appearances are not produced by properly functioning faculties, then this would provide an undermining defeater for the rational support provided by that appearance. But the causal origins of the seeming cannot be used to block initial rational support from occurring in the first place. If one does opt for the defeater route, we must circle back around to the conclusions of our previous discussion: namely, that the defeat of this initial support may only be partial depending on how probable ST is on the subject’s evidence.

Chris Tweedt offers a more internalist-friendly reason to think that gratuitous evil appearances do not provide any rational support for believing

⁴⁵Explanationists, for instance, can maintain that, in ordinary evidential situations, the best explanation of the fact that it seems to you that *p* includes the truth of *p*. (There is, however, an important difference between how seemings provide evidence on PC and how they do so on explanationism. For PC, seemings themselves immediately move one into a position in which it is rational to believe their content, absent defeaters. On explanationism, updating on the proposition (it seems that *p*) provides inferential support for *p*). For an externalist approach to seemings, see Bergmann, “Externalist Justification and the Role of Seemings.”

⁴⁶Bergmann, “Commonsense Skeptical Theism,” 19.

⁴⁷See Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness* and “Reidian Externalism,” respectively.

⁴⁸See Bergmann, “Externalist Justification and the Role of Seemings,” section 2.2.

their content. Tweedt proposes a modified version of Stephen Wykstra's CORNEA principle:

Reformulated CORNEA – Evidence E that is new to S (incrementally) supports hypothesis H only if it is the case that if H were false, E would more likely be different.⁴⁹

The necessary condition on confirmation should be understood in terms of conditional epistemic probabilities rather than counterfactuals.⁵⁰ Thus, we can reformulate Tweedt's Reformulated CORNEA as follows (where "P(E|H & B)" means the epistemic probability of evidence E given hypothesis H and background evidence B):

Re-reformulated CORNEA – E (incrementally) supports H only if $P(E|H \& B) > P(E|\sim H \& B)$

Applied to appearances of gratuitous evil, the basic idea is that the proposition ⟨it seems that there are gratuitous evils⟩ will confirm that there are gratuitous evils only if the existence of these appearances is more likely given the existence of gratuitous evils than their non-existence. Even more simply, say there weren't gratuitous evils. Would you still be just as likely to have appearances of gratuitous evil? If so, then those appearances don't rationally support the existence of gratuitous evil.

Let us assume that Reformulated CORNEA is true. Even granting this principle, it is not at all obvious that gratuitous evil appearances don't support the existence of gratuitous evils. The key is whether $P(E|H \& B) > P(E|\sim H \& B)$, where E = ⟨it seems that there are gratuitous evils⟩ and H = ⟨there are gratuitous evils⟩. The skeptical theist will try to argue that, "We're so severely cognitively limited and in the dark about God's reasons for allowing evil, the relations between various goods and evils, and so on that even if there weren't any gratuitous evil, we would be just as likely to have the same experiences of poignant evil."⁵¹ But this line of thought is highly contestable. Given ordinary human background evidence, wouldn't it be more likely to appear that there are gratuitous evils if those kinds of evils really existed? After all, if gratuitous evils are out there, then it's not unlikely that one runs into them and recognizes them as such, especially if they are ubiquitous as they are likely to be on naturalism. So, appearances of gratuitous evil should be expected to happen with some regularity. But if there aren't any gratuitous evils, one wouldn't necessarily expect to have regular appearances of gratuitous evil. At least, one might reasonably expect such appearances to be *less* frequent than in a world with actual gratuitous evil. To bolster the point, consider: if every single evil had a greater purpose to it, then shouldn't we expect to discover justifying reasons more often than in a world full of

⁴⁹Tweedt, "Defusing the Common Sense Problem of Evil," 401.

⁵⁰Tweedt, "Defusing the Common Sense Problem of Evil," 401–402.

⁵¹Tweedt, "Defusing the Common Sense Problem of Evil," 403.

gratuitous evils?⁵² In which case we should expect gratuitous evil appearances to be less common were there no gratuitous evils. Skeptical theists might manufacture counters to this line of reasoning; nevertheless, this seems a plausible representation of the conditional probabilities given a fairly common set of background evidence.⁵³ If so, then $P(E | H \& B) > P(E | \sim H \& B)$ for those with that sort of background evidence. These people will continue to receive rational support from gratuitous evil appearances.

Let us now turn to appearances of intrinsic wrongness—when it seems to the subject that it is intrinsically wrong for God to allow some instance, kind, or pattern of evil to occur. In accordance with PC, such appearances provide rational support for the existence of impermissible evils. Even apart from PC, the general rule is that its appearing that *p* provides some reason to believe that *p*. Part of what makes appearances of intrinsic wrongness different, and more formidable, than gratuitous evil appearances is that there is no surveying of greater goods or worse evils for skeptical theists to challenge. Instead, the inherent impermissibility of an action (or inaction, rather) is intuited, presumably by whatever faculties standardly produce moral intuitions, and our general ability to intuit such moral principles should not be denied. In fact, skeptical theists have special reason to affirm this ability as it is helpful in warding off moral skepticism. For instance, part of Bergmann's response to charges that skeptical theism leads to moral skepticism is to argue:

Some actions are intrinsically morally wrong, regardless of their consequences. If some action *appears* to be intrinsically morally wrong, regardless of its consequences, there's no reason to think that a skeptical theist can't, on that basis, reasonably believe that it is morally wrong.⁵⁴

In the same way, then, appearances of intrinsic wrongness may lead one to reasonably believe that certain evils are intrinsically wrong for God to allow.

How might the skeptical theist respond? Bergmann's response is to argue, for any of the evils we have observed, that appearances of intrinsic wrongness do not rationally support their content. He does not wish to undermine our moral intuitions generally, but only to challenge whether

⁵²Evils can appear to have a point when they actually do not (see, e.g., Nietzsche's *Human, All Too Human*, §108). My point is just that, plausibly, it is overall more likely to appear as though there is a purpose to evil if there really is one.

⁵³We must keep in mind that we are looking at what one should reasonably expect given the evidence available to him or her. Thus, the mere fact that it is *possible* for evils to seem gratuitous when they are not on a large scale does not counter the claim that one should *expect* gratuitous evil appearances to be less frequent when there aren't any genuinely gratuitous evils. Even if that possibility were, in fact, one's actual situation, it wouldn't change what is reasonable for one to expect unless one gains evidence to that effect.

⁵⁴Bergmann, "Commonsense Skeptical Theism," 26.

in this case we are really in a position to see that allowing such evils is intrinsically wrong. He begins by proposing the following:

P1 – For every instance of horrific suffering that we know to have occurred, there are possible states of affairs that are significantly worse than it or possible states of affairs that are outweighing greater goods.

If we grant P1, then we should also be able to imagine a scenario in which the suffering we know of is necessary to prevent some significantly worse state of affairs or to attain some outweighing greater good—a scenario that, given ST3, for all we know is true. Thus, P1 naturally leads to P2:

P2 – For every instance of horrific suffering that we know to have occurred, although it is an intrinsically bad state of affairs, it is not intrinsically wrong to permit it, regardless of the consequences.

Such considerations, if correct, would show that appearances of intrinsic wrongness are in this context misguided.⁵⁵ If it is wrong for God to permit an evil, it is because there is no morally justifying reason, and the skeptical theist's skepticism about our grasp of potential morally justifying reasons comes back into play.

Bergmann's reasoning is plausible, but not incontestable. Let us first draw a distinction between scenarios in which suffering is permitted to prevent a worse state of affairs and those in which suffering is permitted to attain some greater good. We can go ahead and grant that if God was faced with the decision between allowing something bad and allowing something far worse, then it would not be intrinsically wrong for him to allow the lesser evil; however, the application of this principle to God's allowance of suffering is suspect. For most in the Christian tradition, at least, God needn't have created anything at all. Thus, God is never in the situation of choosing between allowing the Holocaust and allowing something even worse, for he always has the morally permissible option of just not creating. So while it *is* possible to imagine states of affairs much worse than any of the sufferings we have observed, it may still be the case that the allowance of those sufferings is wrong in any possible circumstance (because allowing worse states of affairs is, for God, never absolutely necessary for eliminating suffering).⁵⁶ If intrinsic wrongness is to be ruled out, it must be on the basis of outweighing greater goods. The

⁵⁵Put aside whether such considerations are supposed to defeat the initial support provided by appearances of intrinsic wrongness or to prevent them from providing any rational in the first place. The upshot is largely the same, the main difference being the same one observed with gratuitous evil appearances: allowing for initial support leaves open the possibility of merely partial defeat.

⁵⁶Allowing suffering might still be necessary for eliminating some worse evil in a conditional sense. For instance, it might be the case that one cannot eliminate suffering X without allowing some worse state of affairs Y *and forsaking some greater good Z*. That is, if we want Z, then we cannot eliminate X without bringing about Y. But this just goes to my larger point that we will eventually need to appeal to an outweighing good to justify the allowance of suffering.

problem is that one can maintain, with some plausibility, that some of the horrors we have witnessed are so terrible that the idea of an outweighing good simply doesn't come into consideration at all—there are some transactions you never make no matter what the potential return. This is, as Dougherty points out,⁵⁷ one of the intuitions elicited so poignantly by Ivan in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*:

Tell me straight out, I call on you—answer me: imagine that you yourself are building the edifice of human destiny with the object of making people happy in the finale, of giving them peace and rest at last, but for that you must inevitably and unavoidably torture just one tiny creature, that same child who was beating her chest with her little fist, and raise your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears—would you agree to be the architect on such conditions? Tell me the truth.⁵⁸

The intuition is echoed in Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" and seems to be shared by many. It insists that no matter how great a good might result, it is intrinsically wrong to achieve that result, to "raise your edifice," on the tears of an innocent child. Thus, while greater goods may result from suffering, they cannot be said to *outweigh* that suffering as P1 asserts, and so the basis for P2 is removed.

To be clear, I am not endorsing this objection to Bergmann's reasoning (in fact, I reject it). My point is that there are sure to be individuals who can reasonably reject P1 and P2 in the way I have outlined. And such people will, I submit, receive rational support for the existence of impermissible evils when it seems to them that allowing some instance or kind of suffering is intrinsically wrong. Skeptical theism alone cannot prevent it.

2.2. How Well Does God's Existence Fit with Evil?

Let us put aside impermissibility appearances and focus on the evidence of evil more broadly. Whether the evidence of evil provides rational support against theism depends on how well that evidence fits with theism and how this compares to the fit between that evidence and atheism.⁵⁹ The fit between theism and the evidence of evil, however, can be influenced by

⁵⁷Dougherty, "The Common Sense Problem of Evil."

⁵⁸Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 245. It is actually unclear whether Ivan himself has the intuition that God's allowance of suffering is intrinsically wrong. There is a case to be made that it does not seem to him that the suffering of children is unjustified (he apparently concedes that it is); nonetheless, he emotionally construes God's allowance of suffering to be heinous. It may be this emotional barrier that motivates his rebellion rather than the belief that God's allowance is intrinsically wrong. See Colgrove, "The Emotional Impact of Evil."

⁵⁹This notion of "fit" is intended to be neutral between theories of epistemic support. For instance, if one is a Bayesian, then one is welcome to understand "theism's fit with observed evils" to be referring to the conditional probability of theism given our observations of evil. Or if one is an explanationist, then one is welcome to understand "theism's fit with observed evils" to be referring to how good of an explanation theism provides for our observations of evil.

one's perspective. Specifically, the shift towards an atheistic perspective can diminish the fit between theism and the evidence of evil for a subject, thereby increasing the rational support that that evidence provides for atheism. Here the perspective does not change the evidence but rather the significance of the evidence.

There are at least two ways in which this might occur. First, the fit between theism and observed evils can differ from subject to subject depending on their background evidence. As Paul Draper says, "the plausibility of an interpretation is relative to the beliefs of the interpreter."⁶⁰ Remember Stump's story of Max and the hospital. The conclusions one should draw about evil and suffering depend to a great extent on which interpretive framework is operating in the background.

To give a more familiar example, whether the evidence of evil fits well with the existence of a loving God depends dramatically on what love is. If love pursues the wellbeing of the beloved, and one holds a desire-satisfaction theory of wellbeing, then a loving God would seek to maximize the desire-fulfillment of his creatures as far as he could. Our desires are better satisfied in a heavenly paradise, so there is little reason to create even a temporary epoch of human suffering. On this sort of worldview, the evidence of evil might constitute serious evidence against the existence of a loving God. On the other hand, if your background evidence provides for a morally richer world—one in which human wellbeing is objective, requiring one to freely forsake worldly desires, adorn oneself with virtue, and be transformed into the likeness of a sacrificial God—then a temporary epoch of human suffering in which we are given opportunities to prepare for eternity makes more sense. On this worldview, the evidence of evil may be no evidence against God at all. The upshot is that evil might provide rational support for atheism given one set of background evidence but not another. Thus, shifting the background evidence via a broader change in perspective can move one into a position where the evidence of evil supports atheism in a way it didn't before.

Note that this kind of reinterpretation of the evidence is perfectly compatible with the position that epistemic support relations are objective and necessary. It is likewise compatible with Feldman's uniqueness thesis, which maintains that a body of evidence can rationally support "at most one attitude towards any particular proposition."⁶¹ It may well be that there is only one reasonable way to weigh the significance of evils vis-à-vis theism given a particular body of evidence. The current point is just that a shift in perspective can embed the evidence of evil within a larger evidential context that proves more hostile to theism.⁶²

⁶⁰Draper, "Comments," 198.

⁶¹Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements," 148.

⁶²Even objective Bayesians, for instance, are happy to acknowledge that $\frac{P(E|H \ \& \ B1)}{P(E|\sim H \ \& \ B1)}$ can be higher or lower than $\frac{P(E|H \ \& \ B2)}{P(E|\sim H \ \& \ B2)}$.

That being said, it is increasingly common to maintain that multiple doxastic attitudes can fit the same total body of evidence—a position known as epistemic permissivism.⁶³ On permissivism, the non-evidential attitudes of the subject have some influence on what her total body of evidence rationally supports, and plausibly, a shift in perspective can alter those non-evidential attitudes in a way that threatens theism. Tweedt shows how this might play out in our assessments of evil given different forms of permissivism.⁶⁴ Thus, permissivism, if true, allows changes in perspective to result in additional support for atheism by altering how the subject *weighs* her evidence.

While permissivism may be compatible with the position that epistemic support relations are objective, permissivism goes especially well with a more subjective view. Richard Foley's theory of inferential support provides a representative example. According to Foley, evidence E makes it epistemically rational for subject S to form some doxastic attitude X towards a hypothesis H if and only if X satisfies S's deepest epistemic standards in the pursuit of truth—that is, if and only if S would form attitude X towards H on the basis of E after engaging in fully conscientious reflection.⁶⁵ There is no guarantee, of course, that two subjects will have the same deep epistemic standards or reach the same conclusions upon meeting those standards. It will depend, among other things, on how things seem to each subject. This is especially true with respect to intricate issues like God and evil. On such views, the evidence of evil might provide rational support against theism for one subject but not another depending on one's perspective.

As an attempt to block support for atheism, the skeptical theist may argue that the fit between theism and the evidence of evil is inscrutable given the complexity of the issues and our rather poor epistemic position with respect to them. This skeptical theist maneuver may not work if support relations are subjective in the way that Foley maintains. If after conscientious reflection, including reflection in light of skeptical theist considerations, the subject would still increase her confidence in atheism, then that is what is rational for the subject to do. Skeptical theism has no way to appeal this verdict. If support relations are objective, then the skeptical maneuver faces other challenges. One is that the evidence of evil might still provide objective support against God's existence even if we

⁶³Permissivism thus denies Feldman's uniqueness thesis. On permissivism, see Jackson and Turnbull, "Permissivism, Underdetermination, and Evidence," and Schoenfield, "Permission to Believe."

⁶⁴Tweedt, "Taking a New Perspective on Suffering." Tweedt uses the word "perspective" in a different sense than I do. However, as far as I can tell, one's perspective in my sense will directly affect one's perspective in Tweedt's sense. This is because *what the subject makes of the evidence* (a notion at the core of Tweedt's conception of a perspective) will be heavily affected by how things seem to that subject—e.g., how well the evidence seems to fit with God's existence; how salient certain items of data seem to be; whether the absence of suffering seems like a reward or one's due; etc.

⁶⁵Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality and Working without a Net*.

grant the claims of inscrutability. For if support relations are truly objective (the standard view is that they are necessary, logical relations) then their existence doesn't depend on our ability to discern them. Thus, the evidence of evil could be evidence against God even if we can't appreciate it as such. The skeptical theist may insist that evil only provides support against God if the subject can *appreciate* the poor objective fit between the evidence of evil and God's existence. Even if this point is conceded (and it would not be by all), there is still the problem that skeptical theism itself can be more or less plausible. As one's confidence in ST goes down, one's confidence in assessing the fit between evil and theism goes up. So, once again, there is room for some individuals to receive support for atheism, even if that level of support is diminished by the skeptical theist's considerations.

We thus have another way for an atheistic perspective to increase support for atheism. By either changing one's larger body of evidence, or else changing how one weighs that evidence, the shift towards an atheistic perspective can lead one to reinterpret the evidence of evil in a way less favorable to theism.

2.3. *The Background Plausibility of Theism*

The third way in which the shift towards an atheistic perspective can increase rational support for atheism is by moving the subject towards a broader atheistic worldview on which God's existence becomes increasingly implausible to begin with. To illustrate the point, consider how Bayesians calculate the probability of a hypothesis H after updating on evidence E:

$$P_{new}(H) = P(H|E) = \frac{P(E|H)P_{old}(H)}{P(E)}$$

The prior or initial probability of the hypothesis—its probability given the background evidence—must be taken into account when calculating the probability of that hypothesis in light of new evidence. Neglecting to do so is to commit the base rate fallacy. Nothing here is specific to Bayesianism either. The basic idea is plausible to all: If you know that q increases or diminishes the plausibility of p, you cannot tell how plausible p ends up being unless you know how plausible it was to begin with. This is, for instance, why explanationists count fit with the background evidence, or initial plausibility, as an explanatory virtue.

The shift towards an atheistic perspective can lower the initial plausibility of God's existence by altering the subject's background evidence. For illustration, let us introduce a subject named "Ivan" who, after being haunted by the suffering of innocent children, transitions to the pervasive atheistic perspective described in Section I. Ivan's intuitions now

systematically align with naturalism. It seems that there aren't any gods, that naturalism is far simpler than theism, that observed phenomena can all be explained naturalistically, and so on. Not only would Ivan's assessment of the intrinsic plausibility of naturalism go up (due to its seeming simpler than once thought), but certain arguments for theism are also no longer convincing while confirmation of naturalism is more forthcoming. All this settles into Ivan's background evidence such that, when Ivan gets around to reflecting on the significance of the observed evils, the starting plausibility of theism is much lower than it otherwise would have been.

This is a form of what Gellman calls "mediated support for atheism" which, though caused by experiences of evil, is working in the background so to speak, apart from any theorizing about evil specifically.⁶⁶ Accordingly, this is a form of rational support that skeptical theism cannot undercut, at least not directly.

2.4. *A Potential Defeater*

I have explicated three ways in which the transition to an atheistic perspective can generate support for atheism. It is worth asking, as the reflective atheist will surely do, whether this shift in perspective can be trusted. The fact that this shift in perspective stems from encounters with evil exposes it to a number of worries. The atheist might ask himself or herself: Is this perspective shift driven by emotional trauma rather than insight? Am I simply angry with God for letting my loved ones suffer? If so, this might give the atheist an undermining defeater for the rational support arising from his or her change in perspective.

This challenge is not as decisive as the theist might hope. The first thing to note is that, given internalism, these challenges can diminish the rational support stemming from one's newfound perspective only if the subject has evidence of them. A second caveat is that the subject's support for atheism is diminished only to a degree proportional to one's evidence for the objection. It's not an all-or-nothing matter. To fully do away with the rational support provided by this shift in perspective, the subject would need to have strong evidence that it could not be trusted. Such evidence is a difficult thing to provide. For some subjects, of course, it might be obvious that their newfound atheistic perspectives cannot be trusted. Perhaps it is plain that the perspective stems from a kind of emotional rebellion. But this is certainly not the case for all subjects who undergo such shifts in perspective. To the contrary, it seems to some that they have been awakened to the true state of things.⁶⁷ The misleading lens of wishful thinking has been cast aside to reveal the bleakness of reality undistorted—or so it seems to them. If further reflection only confirms this understanding of their atheistic perspective, then they seem justified in continuing to trust that perspective other things being equal. In still many more cases, the

⁶⁶Gellman, "The Experience of Evil and Support for Atheism."

⁶⁷Gellman, "The Experience of Evil and Support for Atheism," 109–111.

origins of the perspective are unclear. This would give the subject reason to be somewhat suspicious of his or her new perspective, but it would not push him or her to dismiss it altogether.

It should also be noted that the relevant sort of perspective shift—one on which evil comes to constitute serious evidence against God—is not always triggered by encounters with evil. Consider a student who begins questioning his childhood theistic beliefs after entering college and studying alternative worldviews. After reading several naturalistic philosophers, the naturalistic worldview begins to seem increasingly intuitive until, one day, he finds himself with a strong atheistic perspective. The student may have very little reason to suspect that this perspective shift was the result of anything other than rational reflection.

To summarize our discussion thus far, I argued that encountering evil can shift one towards an atheistic perspective, and that doing so can provide additional support for atheism by intensifying the common sense problem of evil, by changing one's interpretation of the evidence of evil (making it fit less well with theism), and by diminishing support for theism within one's larger worldview. The ability of perspective shifts to generate support for atheism in these ways is the perspectival problem of evil.

3. *The Limitations of Skeptical Theism*

What if you are a theist concerned to counter the perspectival problem of evil in others? As the previous discussion makes apparent, it is going to be very hard to prevent the subject from having adequate reason to abandon theism if one's atheistic perspective remains in place. Any strategy that leaves the subject's perspective untouched and merely tries to defeat the justification provided by that perspective is a symptomatic treatment. It may temporarily diminish the subject's rational support for atheism (some of it), but it won't address the source of the problem, allowing the atheistic perspective to solidify its grip on the mind. What is needed is a response that can combat the perspective shift itself—one that can halt the transition to an atheistic perspective or even move one towards a theistic perspective.

The fact of the matter is that skeptical theism just isn't very good at this. It was never meant to be. This is not a flaw with skeptical theism so much as an inherent limitation. By highlighting our ignorance, it tries to prevent one's newfound perspective from providing evidence against God's existence; but acknowledging our ignorance does little to alter the perspective itself. Skeptical theism may have *some* neutralizing effect on one's perspective, for instance, by pointing to the fact that different perspectives can lead to such different and such radically misguided evaluations of evil (think of Max).⁶⁸ But, of course, this same point could be made

⁶⁸This was helpfully pointed out by a reviewer and in conversation with J. Caleb Clanton.

with respect to a great many substantive issues on which there is disagreement—disputants hold different perspectives, at least one of which is seriously mistaken—yet that generally will not (and should not) stop them from seeing and judging things as they do.

This is not to say that skeptical theism is false, or that it should not be a part of the theist's overall response. It may undermine more traditional attempts to disprove God on the basis of evil. It may even be partially successful in addressing the perspectival problem of evil by reducing the level of rational support provided against God's existence. I consider myself a skeptical theist, for what it's worth. What I am saying is that it cannot constitute the *entirety* of the theist's response to the problem of evil, not if one wishes to prevent evil from rationally leading people away from belief in God.

What would a more complete response look like? One that has the potential to prevent or reverse the underlying perspective shift. I hope to detail which kinds of responses are effective in this regard (and why) in another forum, but the key is this: A more complete response should (i) invite the subject to *enter into* a theistic perspective when considering evil, allowing a theodicy or defense to be presented in the most charitable light,⁶⁹ or (ii) foster personal knowledge of God to serve as grounds for faith in his goodness.⁷⁰

4. *The Problem of Evil Reconsidered*

Attention to the perspectival problem of evil has other important implications for how we conceive of the problem of evil more generally, two of which I will draw attention to here.

First, consider how we typically frame debates about evil: *Do observed patterns of pain and suffering provide evidence against the existence of a loving God?* This is the wrong question, or at least a misleading one. It conveys that there is a non-person-relative answer—that a simple “yes” or “no” is possible. Instead, we must ask whether the evidence of evil provides evidence against the existence of a loving God *for an individual*, given his or her particular worldview and perspective. Evil might disconfirm God for some but not others. Further dialogue must then continue from a broader purview. We must reorient our focus on which perspectives, and corresponding worldviews, are more likely to be true than others, assessing them for simplicity and elegance, internal coherence, fit with our other

⁶⁹This is what I believe Stump is trying to achieve through her analysis of Biblical narratives in *Wandering in Darkness*. See her detailed account of how narratives communicate knowledge involving mirror neurons, second-person experiences, and non-propositional knowledge of persons (Ch. 3–4). For a more intuitive explanation of entering into a perspective, see the notion of “looking along” the beam (as opposed to merely “looking at” it) in Lewis, “Meditation in a Toolshed.”

⁷⁰For an account of faith and how it might affect one's perspective towards God, see McAllister, “The Perspective of Faith” and “The Partiality of Faith.”

⁷¹Graham Oppy, “Problems of Evil,” is already moving the conversation in this direction.

evidence, and other explanatory virtues.⁷¹ Of course, the reader will not be surprised to discover that one's assessment of these various worldviews will be inextricably pervaded by one's own perspective. There is no view from nowhere. The point is that our efforts at discovering the significance of the evidence of evil must proceed on a more global level.

Second, contemporary work on the problem of evil has paid relatively little attention to the traumatic effects of evil,⁷² preferring to focus exclusively on whether observed patterns of evil and suffering are inconsistent with, or provide evidence against, the existence of God. The reason that the psychological effects of evil are set aside is because they are seen as matters of pastoral rather than philosophical concern.⁷³ This familiar distinction between the pastoral and the philosophical problems of evil is a helpful one. Nevertheless, the perspectival problem of evil shows that the pastoral and the philosophical are more interrelated than commonly recognized. For it is precisely the sort of existential crisis falling under the scope of the pastoral problem that is liable to instill an atheistic perspective in the individual, placing him or her in a position in which the philosophical problem becomes especially trenchant. Thus, philosophers may have difficulty gaining traction with respect to the philosophical problem of evil until the pastoral problem has been addressed, and not necessarily because those listening are irrational, but because those people experience the world in such a way that prevents them from appreciating the cogency of the considerations presented.⁷⁴ If a perspective shift is needed, however, then skeptical theism alone is poorly suited to the task.⁷⁵

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⁷²Though see Colgrove, "The Emotional Impact of Evil," and Panchuk, "The Shattered Spiritual Self."

⁷³Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 63–64.

⁷⁴That doesn't necessarily make it the philosopher's task to address the pastoral problem head-on—many of us are, by our own admission, ill-equipped for such work. See, for instance, Peter van Inwagen's self-assessment in *The Problem of Evil*, 10.

⁷⁵Thanks go to Caleb Clanton, Adam Green, Scott Harrower, Eleonore Stump, Chris Tweedt, David Worsley, and the audiences at the Evangelical Philosophical Society and Christian Scholars Conference for comments or discussions on this paper. Thanks also go to the students at Hillsdale College in my Collegiate Scholars course on Stump's *Wandering in Darkness*, where the idea for this paper was first fleshed out.

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