

## SKEPTICAL THEISM, MORAL SKEPTICISM, AND DIVINE DECEPTION

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**Abstract.** Skeptical theism – a strategy for dealing with so-called ‘evidential arguments from evil’ – is often held to lead to moral skepticism. In this paper I look at some of the responses open to the skeptical theist to the contention that her position leads to moral skepticism, and argue that they are ultimately unsuccessful, since they leave the skeptical theist with no grounds for ruling out the possibility of maximal divine deception. I then go on to argue that the situation is particularly bleak for the skeptical theist, since the most prominent ways of dealing with this pervasive type of skepticism are not available to her. Furthermore, since this pervasive type of skepticism *entails* moral skepticism, it follows that moral skepticism will after all have found a way in ‘through the back door’. In order to solidify my case, I go on to outline and deal with three potential objections.

Skeptical theists attempt to defuse the threat posed to theistic belief by the presence in the world of apparently pointless evil by exploiting the claim that, when it comes to good and evil, the ways of God are mysterious. A familiar problem with this move is that, when it comes to good and evil, the ways of God cannot be *too* mysterious, lest the skeptical theist become engulfed in an all-encompassing moral skepticism.

Now, the skeptical theist has a number of replies at her disposal. In this paper I examine some of these replies, and argue that moral skepticism has a way of ‘slipping in through the back door’. The new challenge for the skeptical theist, then, lies in blocking the back as well as the front entrance. I argue that there are good reasons for thinking that the skeptical theist will not be able to do this. Finally, I go on to outline and deal with three potential objections.

## I.

The core claim of theism can be expressed thus:

- (T) God exists, and is the unique, omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect creator of the universe.

Let us understand by ‘skeptical theism’ (ST) the conjunction of theism with the following claim:

- (S) For all we can tell, there are lots of facts about goods, evils, and the connections between goods and evils, of which human beings are unaware.<sup>1</sup>

(ST) may seem an attractive conjunction of theses. When (T) is combined with relevant facts about human cognitive capacities – i.e. with the fact that we, as opposed to God, are very far from being omniscient – (S) seems naturally to follow. Given the epistemic gulf between humans and God, why should we expect to be aware of very much of what God knows about goods, evils and the connections between them (and *a fortiori* very many of the facts about goods, evils and the connections between them)? As Alvin Plantinga notes, “On the theistic conception, our cognitive abilities, as opposed to God’s, are a bit slim for that” (Plantinga 1996, p. 73).

What’s more, we can note scriptural reasons for viewing (S) as a natural concomitant for many people subscribing to (T). We have, for example, God asking of Job the following question, which presumably is to be answered in the negative: “Do you know the ordinances of the heavens?” (Job 38: 33).<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Isaiah 55: 9: “For [as] the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts”, and Corinthians 1: 20-21: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” Certainly God’s decreeing that Adam may eat the fruits of any tree, except that of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2: 17), seems to imply that at least a degree of ignorance concerning matters of good and evil is our proper condition.

Indeed, without (S) much of God’s activity in scripture would seem not to make sense. Take, for example, God’s command in Genesis 22: 1-2

<sup>1</sup> For variations on this general theme, see Alston 1991, Alston 1996, Howard-Snyder 1996, and Bergmann 2001.

<sup>2</sup> All references to Bible are from the English Standard Version.

that Abraham prepare to kill Isaac, and His prohibitions in Leviticus 19: 19 against wearing garments containing both linen and wool. In the absence of (S) it should strike theists as surprising that a morally perfect God should respectively enjoin and prohibit such things. Given (S), however, we should not be surprised to find God commanding things whose goodness *we* are unable to fathom, or prohibiting things which to *us* seem morally innocuous, which is what we do in fact find. Furthermore, awareness of (S), an entailment of which is that there may well be unthought-of goods that would justify God's commanding killing, and unthought-of evils that would justify God's prohibitions in Leviticus 19: 19, can plausibly be seen as at least part of what compelled the people of the Book to endeavour to obey God's commands, and indeed to refrain from doubting that they are *God's* commands.

These considerations show that, for many with a prior commitment to (T), (ST) seems a natural position to adopt. Now, adopting (ST) provides the theist with a buffer against so-called 'evidential arguments from evil'. The following is representative of the general form of some of these arguments, where an instance of evil is 'pointless' just in case it could have been "prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse" (Rowe 2003, p. 369):<sup>3</sup>

- (1) Pointless evils exist.
- (2) Pointless evils would not exist if God exists.
- (3) Therefore God does not exist.

This argument is clearly valid; the aim of what I shall call the 'evidentialist' is to lend rational weight to each of its premises. Both theists and atheists typically hold that no possible world contains both God and pointless evil – that is, they typically hold that (2) is true.<sup>4</sup> Let us look, then, at how (1) is commonly supported by the evidentialist.

Consider William Rowe's famous example of a fawn, horribly burned in a forest fire and left to die a slow, lingering death. Rowe claims that "[s]o far as we can see, the fawn's suffering is pointless" (Rowe 2003, p.370) – there are no greater goods we can conceive of such that sparing the fawn's

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<sup>3</sup> The following argument represents a stripped-down version of Rowe's argument in Rowe 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Hasker 1992 points out some reasons to view (2) as controversial. (2) gives rise to issues similar to those contained in discussion of the so-called 'logical' argument from evil, from which the evidential argument is commonly distinguished. For an explication of the logical argument, see Mackie 1955.

suffering diminishes these goods, and there are no other evils we can conceive of such that sparing the fawn's suffering would cause these evils to occur. Call an instance of evil 'inscrutable' just in case we are unable to conceive of the goods or evils by dint of which it would have a point. The fawn's suffering is an example of an inscrutable evil.

In order for this to lend rational weight to premise (1), we need some inference to the effect that if E is an instance of inscrutable evil, then we are rationally justified in viewing it as an instance of pointless evil. With this inference in place, we will be rationally justified in accepting (1), and thus, given (2), in denying God's existence.<sup>5</sup> What (ST) does is deny that any such inference from inscrutable to pointless evils will work. In order to see in more detail how (ST) does this, it will be useful to focus on a particular, famous example of (ST).

Stephen Wykstra<sup>6</sup> denies that the inference from inscrutable to pointless evils is a good one on the basis of an epistemic principle he terms 'CORNEA' ('Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access'). This principle holds that a person P is entitled to move from the claim that 'I see no *x*' to the claim that 'it is reasonable to believe that there is no *x*' only if *x* is the sort of thing that, *were* it to exist, would likely be discernible to P. To illustrate: I am not aware of any Buddhists living in my area – I have never met one, or heard from anyone in the area that any Buddhists live there. But, according to CORNEA, I would *not* be entitled to conclude, on the basis of this, that it is reasonable for me to believe that there are no Buddhists living in my area: *were* there Buddhists living in the area, it is not reasonable that I should expect things to seem any different to how they in fact seem. Buddhists generally don't go out of their way to make themselves conspicuous to others, and besides, the area in which I live is very large, and I have only met a very small percentage of its population. Thus, my epistemic position is such that I lack access to the data that would make the presence of Buddhists discernible.

The CORNEA principle, in conjunction with (S), blocks the inference from inscrutable evils to premise (1) above.<sup>7</sup> By CORNEA, such an inference would be reasonable only if there is good reason to think that were the instances of inscrutable evil *not* pointless, they would not be inscrutable –

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<sup>5</sup> Examples of arguments that rely on this kind of inference can be found in Schellenberg 2000, Stone 2003, Tooley 1991, Tooley 2010 and Howard-Snyder 2010.

<sup>6</sup> See also Alston 1991, Alston 1996 and Bergmann 2001.

<sup>7</sup> CORNEA is a particular example of a general skeptical theistic strategy for blocking the path from inscrutable to pointless evils. For the purposes of this paper, nothing much will turn on the intricacies of its formulation.

i.e. were there to be some overriding justification for God's allowing such evils, we would be cognizant of it. But, given (S), it is unreasonable to think that such a condition is met: given what we know of our cognitive limitations, and the fact that God's knowledge so vastly transcends our own, it is reasonable to think that were inscrutable evils *not* pointless, they would *still* be inscrutable (Wykstra 1984, pp. 92-3). Our epistemic limitations are such that we simply may not be privy to the relevant data regarding goods, evils, and the connections between them, that would enable us to make the inference from inscrutable evils to premise (1).

We have already seen that, for the theist, (ST) is a natural position to adopt. When this natural position is combined with the apparently plausible CORNEA principle, it seems that we have an attractive way of blocking the evidential argument adumbrated above.

## II.

However, there are familiar problems with (ST). Let us understand by 'moral skepticism' the following:

(MS) No human is ever rationally justified in believing any moral proposition.<sup>8</sup>

If (ST) is indeed successful in blocking the inference from inscrutable to pointless evils, then it is hard to see why it should not lead to (MS). We can apply a CORNEA-like condition to *any* moral proposition we believe. According to the skeptical theist, one would only be rationally justified in believing such a proposition if it meets such a condition – i.e. if the proposition were false, it would not seem to us to be true, or we would have some reason to doubt its truth. But given (S), why should we suppose that it *does* meet this condition? Given the limitations of our cognitive abilities, as opposed to God's, why should we suppose that even the most powerful intuitions, or the most forceful arguments we can muster in favour of the most apparently obvious moral propositions, license us in rationally believing these propositions? After all, they are merely *our* intuitions, and the most powerful arguments *we* can muster, and we are cognitively limited beings. Thus, if (S) blocks the inference from inscrutable to pointless evils, then it seems also to block *any* inference from the way things seem to us (whether

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<sup>8</sup> This formulation comes from Jordan 2006, p. 408.

on the basis of intuition or argument) to the way it is rational to believe that they are. So in blocking the inference from inscrutable evils to (1), (S) seems to lead to (MS). Since (S) is a component of (ST), it seems to follow that (ST) likewise leads to (MS).

But this would surely be an unacceptable consequence of (ST). The upshot of (MS) is that we are not smart enough or well-equipped enough to rationally determine which actions or states of affairs are good or bad (or indifferent), so it seems that we can have no moral basis for deciding to do one thing rather than another. In other words, (MS) leads to moral paralysis<sup>9</sup>: the inability to determine the moral status of any action leaves me with no idea which action I morally ought to perform in any given situation. Should I rescue the drowning child, if doing so would come at no obvious cost to me or to anyone else? Given (MS), I simply cannot say.<sup>10</sup> But this, obviously, is ridiculous. Thus, it seems important that the skeptical theist should be able to defend herself against the allegation that her position leads to (MS). In the following sections I argue that some of the most apparently attractive options open to (ST) in this regard nonetheless allow (MS) to seep in.

### III.

How might the skeptical theist go about shielding her position from (MS)? Well, the crucial thing to note is that (ST) is a *conjunction* of theses. As Michaels Bergmann and Rea highlight, “skeptical theists, after all, are *theists*” (Bergmann and Rea 2005, p.244), and thus it may well be that the *theistic* element of (ST) serves to constrain its skeptical element.

One initial point to note is that once one accepts (T), the scope of (MS) is thereby *immediately* attenuated. Since (T) refers to God’s *moral perfection*, it might plausibly be maintained that (T) *itself* is a moral proposition. So anyone with a prior commitment to (T) will see themselves as justified in holding at least *this* moral proposition to be true. But it clearly wouldn’t

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<sup>9</sup> I borrow this phrase from Sehon 2010. See also Almeida and Oppy 2003, Jordan 2006, and Maitzen 2009 for related criticisms. Note that moral paralysis need not amount to paralysis *simpliciter*: we may well still have *some* basis on which to decide to perform actions. The crucial problems arise when the decisions at issue are distinctly *moral* ones; the point is that, when this occurs, our beliefs about morality will not justify us in deciding to perform one action rather than another, because these beliefs are not themselves justified.

<sup>10</sup> Howard-Snyder 2010 points out that some versions of consequentialism also apparently lead to this implausible view.

be good enough if this were the *only* moral proposition that the skeptical theist is justified in believing – were this the case, the unacceptable consequence of (MS), that *we* have no moral basis on which to make decisions, would still obtain. We shall therefore have to see what else her antecedent commitment to theism will enable the skeptical theist to salvage.

Now, given the “standard theistic background assumptions” (Bergmann and Rea 2005, p. 245) against which (ST) is usually adopted, it seems that the contention that (ST) leads to a kind of paralysis when it comes to making moral decisions *can* indeed be undercut. Recall the discussion of Genesis 22: 1-2 and Leviticus 19: 19 in section 1. Bergmann and Rea note that “theists very typically believe that God has commanded his creatures to behave in certain ways; and they also very typically believe that God’s commands provide all-things-considered reasons to act” (Bergmann and Rea 2005, p. 245). Thus, the proponent of (ST) can argue that her position needn’t commit her to the kind of moral paralysis seemingly entailed by (MS).

The skeptical theist can also use these standard theistic background assumptions in order to attack (MS) directly. How is this to be done? Firstly, just as it can be argued on the basis of certain scriptural passages that a degree of ignorance concerning matters of good and evil is our proper condition, it can also be argued on a similar basis that, *contra* (MS), we are not in a state of *total* myopia on this issue. After all, Adam *did* consume the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3: 6), implying that mankind thus ingested a certain amount of knowledge in matters to do with good and evil. Furthermore, Romans 2: 14 seems to hold that persons can be led by *reason* to do what morality demands, and Genesis 1: 27 depicts mankind as being created ‘in the image of God’, implying that, rather like the relationship between Plato’s particulars and the Forms, we may very well ‘fall short’ of God’s infinite wisdom, but we nonetheless participate in it. Thus, one could argue that inasmuch as certain scriptural passages license an acceptance of (ST), others license a rejection of full-blown (MS).

Secondly, given that scripture licenses the view that our cognitive capacities are weak in comparison with God’s, but that they are not so weak as to imply that we are totally ignorant about everything, the proponent of (ST) could formulate a notion of justified belief *relative to epistemic position*. Given everything that we *as humans* have discovered about our world and about the consequences of our actions, and given that humans at least to some extent have morality “written on their hearts” (Romans 2: 15), we could be rationally justified in believing, for example, that the drowning of an innocent child *is* a pointless evil (that is, that there are no

goods/evils that *we* are aware of such that preventing it from occurring would diminish/increase them). This itself would seem to give us reason for preventing such a thing, thus further obviating the allegation of moral paralysis<sup>11</sup>. But it would also enable the skeptical theist to retain a degree of skepticism sufficient to undermine the view that it is rational to believe that certain evils are pointless relative to *God's* epistemic position. Thus, Nick Trakakis and Yujin Nagasawa argue that there are “differences . . . between a perfect being and a human being in virtue of their disparate roles” (Trakakis and Nagasawa 2004, p.35), and thus that “the skeptical theist need only hold that it is *God's* purposes or intentions that often elude us” (Trakakis and Nagasawa 2004, p.23).<sup>12</sup> Peter Van Inwagen likewise makes this point, arguing that “for all we know our inclinations to make value-judgements are not veridical when they are applied to cosmic matters *unrelated to the concerns of everyday life*” (Van Inwagen 2003, p. 398 – italics added).

Crucially, the evidentialist's inference from inscrutable evils to pointless evils conflates the ‘cosmic matters’ and the ‘concerns of everyday life’: the evidentialist wants to argue that the inscrutability of certain evils makes it reasonable to believe that such evils are *cosmically* pointless (i.e. pointless relative to God's epistemic position), whereas all she would in fact be entitled to is the claim that they are pointless with respect to the everyday concerns of human beings. She wants to argue that *God* should have prevented such evils, whereas all she would in fact be entitled to is that (in the absence perhaps of divine commands to the contrary) *she* should endeavour to prevent them.

#### IV.

These are the sorts of responses that so-called skeptical theists have given to the sorts of allegations I've discussed, so I hope I will not be going too far astray in using them as the basis for what follows. What I argue is this: regardless of the success of such responses up to this point, they are powerless against the allegation that (ST) leads to a more pervasive type of skepticism. Since this extreme skepticism *entails* (MS), it follows that the responses discussed above will nonetheless allow (MS) to slip in through the back door.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Howard-Snyder 2010, p.48.

<sup>12</sup> For a reply to Trakakis and Nagasawa, see Almeida and Oppy 2005.



What we need to focus on is the issue of *deception*. In particular, let us consider the kind of widespread deception discussed by Descartes in the *First Meditation*. Descartes briefly considers the possibility that God is deceiving him:

“[F]irmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing belief that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now?” (Descartes 2007, pp. 78-79)

Of course, Descartes goes on to conclude that his notion of God is such that “God is supremely good and the source of all truth”, and thus that, whilst it may initially seem that he could be being deceived in this way, such deception cannot originate from *God*.

But the crucial question now is this: given (S), how can we justifiably believe that the kind of widespread deception described by Descartes is not a good thing? Granted that there may be many goods and evils of which we are unaware, what would justify us in believing that widespread deception is not one of these goods, or that refraining from such deception is not one of these evils?<sup>13</sup> Adopting (S) seems to deprive us of any basis on which to make this claim; it seems to deprive Descartes of his license to make the confident assertion that God’s goodness precludes deception. The new problem then is this: (S) seems to imply that we cannot justifiably believe that we are not being radically deceived. Since (S) is a component of (ST), it seems to follow that (ST) implies that we cannot justifiably believe that we are not being radically deceived.

Above I adumbrated some of the responses available to the skeptical theist in safeguarding her position from (MS). We can now ask: are such responses also helpful in defending (ST) against the allegation that it leads to the view that we cannot justifiably believe that we are not being radically deceived? What we find is that they are unhelpful. We saw above that the skeptical element of (ST) is “not deployed in a vacuum” (Bergmann and Rea 2005, p. 244). Other theistic commitments, in particular the typical commitment to the truth of certain scriptural passages, serve to attenuate the scope of (ST)’s skepticism so as to filter out full-blown (MS). But if the skeptical theist *is* to take this line, she shall have to contend with the fact that, at various points, God is presented in scripture as a deceiver. For example, 2 Thessalonians 2: 11 describes God as sending certain people

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<sup>13</sup> The point about refraining will be left implicit in what follows.

a “strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false”. Interestingly, Genesis 22: 1-2, the passage involving Abraham and Isaac appealed to in section 1 to lend support to (S), and in section 3 to obviate the allegation of moral paralysis, may *itself* be an example of divine deception.<sup>14</sup> In the passage, God seems to have created in Abraham the false impression that Isaac is to be killed, by ultimately withdrawing that command.

Indeed, the bible is replete with examples of apparent divine deception – see for example John 7: 8-10; Jeremiah 4: 10; Jeremiah 20: 7 and Ezekiel 14. In order to consolidate my case, I want to mention two more apparent instances. The first occurs in Exodus 3:8, with God commanding Moses to ask the Pharaoh for a three day trip into the wilderness. This request is significantly less than the complete freedom promised to Moses by God, suggesting that Moses has been instructed deliberately to deceive the Pharaoh. A second further example of God apparently being implicated in deception occurs in 1 Samuel 16: 2, with God commanding that Samuel claim to the people of Bethlehem that he has come to sacrifice to God, so as to disguise his true purpose – to anoint a new king. These two examples lead to a further potential line of argument. It might seem that they are not examples of *divine* deception, but of God commanding that *humans* do the deceiving. But it also seems plausible that God issues the commands He does based on the *goodness* of that which He commands<sup>15</sup> – that there should be some goods that would justify God in issuing what seem to us to be morally dubious commands was part of what lent support to (S) in section 1. So it follows from God’s commanding that humans deceive that deception can sometimes be a good thing. It could be objected that this applies *merely* to human deception, but we can now use the view that humans are created *in imago dei* to argue that it likewise speaks in favour of the possibility of *divine* deception.

Given all this, if an appeal to scripture is to be successful in shielding (ST) from (MS), then by parity of reasoning it should also be successful in establishing that deception is the sort of thing within God’s remit. If scripture is to be taken at face-value – and, as we saw above, many defenders of (ST) will feel the attraction of taking it this way – then Van Inwagen seems incorrect when he claims that “it is plausible to suppose that deception

<sup>14</sup> See Wielenberg 2010 for this interpretation of the Genesis 22: 1-2. Wielenberg also discusses the aforementioned passage from 2 Thessalonians.

<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, it could be held that an action’s being good *depends* on God’s having issued a command with regard to that action. This view, however, is implausible. See Shaw 2002.

... is inconsistent with the nature of a perfect being" (Van Inwagen 2003, p. 397)

Having softened the case against the possibility of divine deception, we can turn to the second consideration in favour of limiting (ST) so as to exclude (MS). This was the view that we can justifiably believe moral propositions relative to our epistemic position. The key question now is this: what does our epistemic position tell us about deception? Are there ever any goods *that we are aware of* such that deception would be justified? Well, going back for a moment to 'the concerns of everyday life', it seems clearly to be the case that deception *is* sometimes a good thing; echoing Romans 2: 14-15, in everyday contexts we are often led "by nature" to view deception as such. Consider Robert Nozick's example of the grandmother deceived about the health of her grandson so as to spare her from unnecessary anguish (Nozick 1981, p. 179), or consider the famous (if hackneyed) objection to Kant's strictures against deception: it would surely be good to deceive a potential murderer as regards the whereabouts of her intended victim. So whilst there may be no greater goods we can think of that would justify our failing to save a drowning child at no obvious cost to ourselves or to anyone else, there *are* frequently greater goods we can think of that would justify instances of deception.

Note that even if this *weren't* the case – even if there was *never* anything we could think of that would justify any instance of deception – this would not mean that the proponent of (ST) would be entitled to claim that *God* could not be justified in deceiving us; her commitment to (S), and the aforementioned observations that God sometimes *does* both deceive and command that humans deceive, precludes her from claiming this. The fact that we *can* often think of such justification means that, *even relative to our epistemic position*, deception cannot necessarily be thought of as a bad thing. This will be shown to be important in section 5.

Once all this has been allowed – that both scripture and ordinary moral practice seem frequently to show that deception can be a good thing – we can see that the replies adumbrated in section 3 on behalf of (ST) will not rule out the possibility of divine deception; they encourage the view that divine deception is consistent with God's goodness. Furthermore, since "skeptical theists, after all, are *theists*", they are committed to (T), and hence to God's *omnipotence*. Since God is omnipotent, and deception is consistent with His goodness, we could indeed all be the victims (or benefactors?) of massive and wholesale deception – indeed, we could be deceived about *everything*. Call this 'maximal deception'. (S) ensures that we cannot tell whether or not such maximal deception is a good thing, and thus

(given that God is morally perfect and hence always does what is good) that we cannot judge whether God *is* maximally deceptive.

But if this is the case, then the responses discussed in section 3 won't rule out (MS) after all. The argument is this:

- (4) God is maximally deceptive.
- (5) If God is maximally deceptive, then no human is ever justified in believing any proposition.
- (6) Therefore no human is ever justified in believing any proposition. (from 4 and 5)
- (7) Therefore no human is ever justified in believing any moral proposition. (from 6)

Note how this argument mirrors the evidentialist's argument from (1)-(3): in each case, we have a logically valid argument, and in each case the job of the argument's proponents is to lend rational weight to its first premise. What I've in effect argued is that the skeptical theist's attempts to shield (ST) from (MS) lend rational weight to (4), inasmuch as they lend weight to the view that divine deception is consistent with God's goodness, which in turn allows (S), coupled with the view that God is omnipotent, to show that for all we justifiably believe (4) is true.

(5) is licensed by CORNEA, the very principle that initially seemed so useful to (ST). If God were maximally deceptive, then no proposition we believe would meet this condition: CORNEA holds that belief in proposition *x* is rationally justified for person *P* only if it is reasonable to think that the falsity of *x* would be discernible to *P*. But in the case of divine deception such falsity is obviously not discernible. So if God is maximally deceptive it follows that none of the propositions we believe meet CORNEA.

But if the aforementioned responses on behalf of (ST) encourage the view that, for all we justifiably believe (4) is true, and the skeptical theist's CORNEA principle implies that (5) is true, then it follows that, for all we justifiably believe (6) and hence (7) are true. Thus, it follows that, for all we justifiably believe, (MS) is true. This isn't (yet!) to say that (MS) *is* true (only that, *for all we justifiably believe*, it is) but we can note at this stage that (MS) seems to be creeping in through the back door. This seems to undermine the skeptical theist's attempts, adumbrated in section 3, to safeguard (ST) from (MS).

## V.

How should a skeptical theist deal with this predicament? It follows from the inability justifiably to rule out (4) above that Bergmann and Rea's appeal to divine commands, and Ira Schnall's contention that "revealed theistic religions . . . have a . . . satisfactory solution to the moral problem for skeptical theism" (Schnall 2007, p. 60) will not be enough, since they leave us with no basis for justifiably believing that we are not being deceived as to God's commands and revelations. Furthermore, commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, an anonymous reviewer wrote that "theists typically believe that God has a discernible history with humans, in terms of the revelation of God's character and related matters." What we have seen is that "God's character" is revealed to be such that God is sometimes presented as a deceiver; and, as the passages from Job 38: 33, Isaiah 55: 9 and Corinthians 1: 20-21 referred to at the beginning of this paper indicate, "God's character" is also revealed to be such that His purposes often elude us. I thus argue that the resultant inability on the part of the skeptical theist to rule out (4) renders her unable to appeal directly to the "history with humans" she supposes herself to be able to "discern." So the skeptical theist cannot deal with the predicament *merely* by invoking divine commands,<sup>16</sup> the dictates of scripture, or the supposed 'discernible history' God has with humans.

Perhaps the skeptical theist could deal with the predicament in a similar way to various attempts to deal with contemporary brain-in-a-vat type skepticism. I want in this section to gesture at some reasons for pessimism in this regard.

The 'brain-in-a-vat' (henceforth BIV) is a contemporary variant on Descartes's skeptical hypothesis.<sup>17</sup> The basic idea is this: given all the experiences I am having, I cannot be rationally justified in believing that I am not a mere BIV, being stimulated by super-scientists so as to have exactly these experiences – all my current experiences are consistent with this possibility. But if I cannot be rationally justified in believing *this*, then it seems to follow that I cannot be rationally justified in believing many ordinary propositions, for example that I have a hand, since the falsity of such propositions follows from the BIV hypothesis.

Two popular lines of response are the following:

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<sup>16</sup> See Maitzen 2007 and Piper 2008 for some further objections to the appeal to divine commands.

<sup>17</sup> For a thorough discussion of skepticism in its contemporary guise, see DeRose and Warfield (1999).

- (A) I can be justified in believing many ordinary propositions, so it follows that I can be justified in believing that I am not a mere BIV.
- (B) I cannot be justified in believing that I am not a mere BIV, but this does not imply that I cannot be justified in believing many ordinary propositions.

What I want to do is to argue that it will be difficult for the skeptical theist to apply these types of responses to the argument adumbrated in section 4 above. Obviously I do not have space to discuss *all* the possible strategies that may be open to (ST); what I want to do is to provide examples of (A)-type and (B)-type responses to BIV-type skepticism, and to show how these responses will *not* help (ST).

Let's take (A) first. An example of this type of response comes from James Pryor (2000), building on previous work by G.E. Moore (1939). Pryor argues for *dogmatism*, which is a theory of perceptual justification according to which the mere fact that something seems to be the case – i.e. is represented in perceptual experience as being the case – provides (*prima facie*, defeasible) justification for the belief that it *is* the case. So the fact that I seem to see a hand attached to (what seems to be) my arm provides *prima facie* justification for the belief that I have a hand. Since it follows from my having a hand that I am not a (handless) BIV, my experience as of a hand provides *prima facie* justification for my belief that I am not a BIV. Perhaps the skeptical theist could adopt this strategy, and argue that the fact that many propositions seem to be true justifies me in believing them, and thus in believing that God is not maximally deceptive.

It is obvious that this will not be satisfactory for the proponent of (ST), whose response to the evidential argument from evil involves precisely the *opposite* claim – that the fact that something seems to be the case does *not* in itself provide justification, even *prima facie*, weak, justification (Wykstra 1990, p. 139) for the belief that it is the case. Adopting Pryor's strategy would seemingly license the inference from inscrutable to pointless evils, and since it is the purpose of (ST) to deny such an inference, the skeptical theist cannot adopt Pryor's strategy.

The skeptical theist has a possible line of response here. In section 3 I talked about the notion of justification relative to epistemic position, and claimed that this notion may be open to the skeptical theist in her attempt to shield (ST) from (MS). Given this, perhaps the skeptical theist could after all argue along the lines of (A) – that, relative to her epistemic position, she is justified in believing many propositions (i.e. that (6) is false) and thus,

given (5), that she is justified (relative to her epistemic position) in believing that (4) is false.

There are several problems with this response. Firstly, we saw above that an appeal to certain scriptural passages – for example Genesis 3: 6, Genesis 1: 27 and Romans 2: 14-15 – was what licensed the claim that we can justifiably believe things relative to our epistemic position. In order for these passages to be taken seriously, it must be the case that (4) is false. But then the notion of justification relative to epistemic position will not enable the skeptical theist to use the strategy suggested in (A); she won't be able to argue that her epistemic position licenses her in believing that (4) is false, since (4) must *already* be assumed to be false in order for her to have the scriptural grounds for invoking the notion of justification relative to epistemic position in the first place.

Secondly, even assuming that the notion of justified belief relative to epistemic position *can* be appealed to, the epistemic position of humans is part of what lent rational weight *to* (4), since it is such that deception sometimes seems to be a good thing. It surely seems strange to hold that the very same epistemic position that reveals deception to be a potentially good thing can allow us justifiably to believe that (4) is *false*, since this would allow us justifiably to believe that there is a potentially good action that is not open to a *wholly*-good (and omnipotent) God.

Thirdly, to infer that we can justifiably believe – relative to our epistemic position – that (4) is false, on the grounds that, relative to such a position, (6) is false, would be to undertake the same type of move as the evidentialist, who claims that relative to *her* epistemic position (“in the light of *our* experience” [Rowe 2003, p. 371 – italics added]) (1) is true, and hence, given (2), that she is justified in believing that God doesn't exist. The problem for this was that the evidentialist is conflating the ‘cosmic’ and the ‘concerns of everyday life’; she is arriving at a conclusion about God from premises concerning her own understanding of the world. If the skeptical theist wants to claim that such a move is impermissible, then appeal to the notion of justification relative to epistemic position cannot enable her to use the line of response suggested in (A), since this would likewise be to arrive at a conclusion about God from premises concerning her own understanding of the world. The point was that the epistemic distance between us and God is such that we simply cannot justifiably believe things like (1).<sup>18</sup> By parity of reasoning, I argue, it is such that we cannot justifiably believe not-(4).

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<sup>18</sup> Where (1) is given the relevant ‘cosmic’ gloss; i.e. where (1) is read as ‘there exist evils that are pointless relative to *God's* epistemic position’.

What about option (B)? (B) involves some complicated issues to do with closure,<sup>19</sup> issues I will not be able to discuss fully here. As with (A), we can instead briefly explicate one prominent example of a response to BIV skepticism along the lines of (B), and show why this response is problematic for (ST).

Consider the well-known ‘sensitivity’ requirement for knowledge, according to which P knows that *x* only if, were *x* false, P wouldn’t believe that *x*.<sup>20</sup> Since I have been focusing thus far on *justification* rather than *knowledge*, let us view the sensitivity requirement as a necessary condition for justification. With such a condition in place, it seems that (B) is a viable option as a response to BIV skepticism: my belief that I am not a BIV is not justified because it is not sensitive – were I a BIV, I would still believe that I was not one (the BIV hypothesis is deliberately designed to make its truth indistinguishable from its falsity). But my belief, say, that I have a hand can nonetheless be justified because *this* belief *is* sensitive – were I not to have a hand I wouldn’t believe that I have one. Crucial to this response is that the ‘closest possible worlds’ in which I don’t have a hand are *not* worlds in which I am a BIV; they are worlds in which, for example, I lost my hand in an accident, or was born without it. Since my belief that I have a hand is sensitive throughout the relevant, closest worlds, my belief that I have a hand can be justified, even though I cannot justifiably believe that I am not a BIV.

Is this type of response open to (ST)? Well, it *does* seem like it would be an attractive option, since the sensitivity requirement already seems implicit in the CORNEA principle, which states that the falsity of *x* must be discernible to P in order for P to have a rationally justified belief that *x*.<sup>21</sup> So it seems that if the skeptical theist is willing to embrace CORNEA then she should see (B) as a viable response to the problems adduced in section 4.

But there is a crucial *asymmetry* between BIV skepticism and the ‘maximally deceptive God’ hypothesis discussed above. This asymmetry is such that the ‘sensitivity’ version of (B) – the version that, given her acceptance of CORNEA, is likely to seem most attractive to the skeptical theist – is *unlikely* to be of much use in defending the skeptical theist from the skepti-

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<sup>19</sup> Roughly, the principle that if S knows (or is justified in believing) *p*, and S knows (or is justified in believing) that *p* entails *q*, then S is thereby in a position to know (or justifiably believe) *q*. See Luper (2010) for a full discussion of the issues surrounding this principle.

<sup>20</sup> See Nozick 1981, Dretske 2003 and Dretske 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Graham and Maitzen 2007, p. 83 argue that CORNEA and (B) fail for the same reason: both entail “intolerable violations of closure.”



cism engendered by the maximally deceptive God hypothesis. In order for the ‘sensitivity’ version of (B) to work, it must be the case that the closest possible worlds in which the ordinary propositions I believe are false are *not* worlds in which the skeptical scenario obtains – this is essential if such beliefs are to be sensitive. Now, in the BIV case, it is relatively uncontroversial that such a requirement is met: had I not had a hand, it would not have thereby been the case that I am a BIV. A world in which BIVs *exist*, let alone a world in which *I* am a BIV, seems a very strange one indeed. No sane person believes in the existence of such things; they are not relevant to the assessment of the relevant counterfactuals.

But consider (B) as applied to the argument in section 4. Crucially, the skeptical theist *does* believe in an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect God, and *does* believe that there may well be many facts about good and evil that are beyond our ken, and (as I argued above) *should* believe that deception is within God’s remit. Thus, for the skeptical theist, the possible worlds in which a maximally deceptive God exists should not seem so ‘far out’. Given this, it is much harder to see in the case of the maximally deceptive God hypothesis that our beliefs meet the sensitivity requirement than it would be in the case of the BIV hypothesis. The fact that the skeptical theist *believes* in God, whilst no sane person believes in BIVs, means that (B) will be a problematic option for the skeptical theist.

Now, I argued above that, given the skeptical theist’s ways of dealing with (MS) discussed in section 3, it will follow that for all we justifiably believe (4) is true, and thus that we are not justified in believing not-(4). Since (B) is a problematic option for the skeptical theist, it seems that the fact that we are not rationally justified in believing that God is not maximally deceptive *will* imply that we are not rationally justified in believing any proposition, since the most prominent and initially promising way of disarming this implication – the ‘sensitivity’ version of (B) – runs into problems when applied to (ST). Given this, it is not merely the case that *for all we justifiably believe* (6) and hence (7) are true; given the failure of (B), (6) and hence (7) *are* true! (MS) has well and truly gained entrance through the back door.

## VI.

In order to solidify my argument, I want now to outline and deal with three potential objections. The first is as follows. It could be argued that it does not make sense to say that God could be deceptive. Descartes, as we

observed, claimed that “God is supremely good, and the source of all truth”. It could be argued that it is not God’s *goodness* that precludes His being deceptive – (S) at least seems to render *this* claim unavailable – but His role as the *source of all truth*.

Let me elaborate, this time with reference to George Berkeley. Berkeley claims that “[t]he ideas imprinted on the senses by the Author of nature are called ‘real things’” (Berkeley 2008, p. 95). If this is read as claiming that God’s imprinting ideas on the senses is a necessary and sufficient condition for those ideas constituting reality, then this would seem to imply that divine deception is a logical impossibility. But if divine deception *is* a logical impossibility, then of course (4) will be false, and my argument can’t proceed.

This objection would require that passages such as 2 Thessalonians 2: 11 be reinterpreted, since taking such passages at face value entails that divine deception *is* a logical possibility. Since taking scripture at face value was part of what lent support to (ST) in the first place, this objection might not be particularly attractive to the skeptical theist.

But since scripture *also* seems to hold in places that divine deception *is* impossible (for example, Hebrews 6: 18) at least *some* scriptural claims will inevitably need to be abandoned or reinterpreted. So I don’t want to place too much weight on 2 Thessalonians 2: 11 in dealing with the objection. Suffice it to say that the objection will not enable the skeptical theist to avoid my conclusion. Even if God’s *Himself* being deceptive were impossible, what is surely possible is for God to *allow* deception. So even if *all* deception were to originate with “deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (1 Timothy 4: 1-2), (S) seems to imply that for all we can tell there could be some greater good that would justify God’s allowing the demons to do their dirty work.

Indeed, the scriptural support in favour of God’s allowing deception to occur is even stronger than that in favour of the view that God could Himself be deceptive, since *any* passage in which humans are deceived, even if God Himself is not explicitly implicated in such deception, would count in its favour. Furthermore, passages such as 1 Kings 22 *do* explicitly show God allowing other spirits to deceive. Thus, viewing divine deception as impossible will not aid the skeptical theist’s cause, since she will not be able to rule out the possibility of God’s allowing deception to occur. I argue, therefore, that the first objection fails to dislodge my argument. I am thus content to maintain that divine deception *is* possible, since assuming otherwise goes no way towards aiding the skeptical theist.

But my argument concerned not *mere* deception, but *maximal* deception. The second and third objections take umbrage with this notion. The second objection is along similar lines to the first: is maximal deception even a *coherent* notion? Could even an omnipotent God deceive one about *everything*? Perhaps not: perhaps there are propositions – Descartes’s *cogito* comes to mind – such that it is *impossible* that my belief that they obtain be false.

However, even if instead of *maximal deception* we have merely *the most deception that is logically possible*, I do not think this will substantially affect my argument.<sup>22</sup> My ultimate concern was with *moral* skepticism, and I do not think that any substantive moral propositions are, or follow from, the kind of propositions regarding which it is logically impossible that I be deceived.<sup>23</sup> I say ‘substantive’ moral propositions because there could perhaps be *some* moral propositions, e.g. ‘bad things are bad’, or even ‘God is morally perfect’, regarding which it *is* logically impossible that I be deceived. But the problem is this: “skeptical theists, after all, are *theists*”; given this, the contention that (ST) leads to (MS) is a problem specifically for *theists*, and surely no theist would find it acceptable to hold that the only moral propositions one is justified in believing are *these* types of moral propositions! If moral propositions such as these were the only ones we are justified in believing, then the unacceptable consequence of (MS) – that we are left with no moral basis on which to make decisions – would still obtain. ‘Bad things are bad’, for example, doesn’t tell us specifically *which* actions are bad, and thus it doesn’t tell us which actions to refrain from performing. ‘God is morally perfect’ might well *seem* action-guiding for us inasmuch as it gives us reason to obey God’s commands, but this will only help us if it is assumed that we are not being deceived as to what God’s commands are, and it is this very assumption which, as I claimed at the beginning of section 5, we are not entitled to.

Thus, given that the relevant conclusion – that (ST) leads to a more pervasive moral skepticism than will be acceptable to any theist – can be reached either way, I do not think it behooves the skeptical theist to press the second objection. Therefore I think it safe to stick with the notion of ‘maximal deception’ discussed above.

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<sup>22</sup> Note that one could also argue, as Descartes apparently did, that God is able to do what is logically impossible (Descartes 1970, pp. 236–237). If one allows for this, then both the first and second objections are obviated.

<sup>23</sup> At any rate, the skeptical theist seems unable to deny this, since it seems simply to be a consequence of (S), whose essence is to maintain that humans are fallible when it comes to making moral judgements.

The third objection is as follows: even *allowing* for the view that maximal deception is coherent, one could argue that, since my considerations in favour of the possibility of divine deception were limited to *localized*, isolated instances of deception, they say nothing in support of *maximal* deception. “Skeptical theists, after all, are *theists*”, and (in the words of an anonymous reviewer) “theists typically embrace an understanding of God wherein . . . God deceives *at most in rare and special circumstances*.” It could, in other words, be argued that I was wrong to claim that the types of moves available to the skeptical theist in ensuring that (ST) doesn’t lead to (MS) can also be used in lending weight to the case that, for all we justifiably believe, (4) is true.<sup>24</sup>

This objection would be especially pressing were the first objection to force me to shift from God’s Himself being deceptive to God’s merely allowing deception to occur. I argued above that the first objection leaves room for God allowing that some other being deceive us. But it was God’s *omnipotence* that lent weight to the possibility of maximal deception. According to (T) God *uniquely* instantiates His attributes, and thus no other being could be omnipotent.

But I think that even considering merely localized instances of deception (and not maximal deception), we can still reach the conclusion that no human can ever be justified in believing any moral proposition. In order to bypass the third objection, (4) can be replaced with the following:

- (8) For any proposition *x*, no human is ever justified in believing that God is not deceiving him with regard to *x*.

Alternatively, if the first objection were likewise seen as requiring the relevant shift, (4) could be replaced with:

- (9) For any proposition *x*, no human is ever justified in believing that God is not allowing him to be deceived with regard to *x*.

These are both considerably weaker than (4); they hold merely that *any* proposition I believe is such that I could be being deceived with regard to that proposition, they do not say that I could be being deceived with regard to *every* proposition I believe. According to both (8) and (9), each possible instance of deception would be an isolated, localized instance.

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<sup>24</sup> I am grateful also to Dave Leal for pressing this objection.

We can now investigate whether the same considerations that supported the view that, for all we justifiably believe, (4) is true likewise support (8) and (9). I believe that they do. In support of (8) one could urge the following: "Skeptical theists, after all, are *theists*", so they will believe that God is omnipotent. Thus, for any proposition I believe, it would be within God's power to deceive me with regard to that proposition. (Note further that, as was highlighted in my response to the second objection, it will not behoove the skeptical theist to argue that (8) or (9) are false on the grounds that some propositions are such that it is logically impossible that I be deceived with regard to them.)

Appeal to divine omnipotence will *not* count in favour of (9). In favour of *this* principle, we need merely note that scripture presents deceptive influences as extremely powerful. For example, whether or not it originated from God, the 'delusion' referred to in 2 Thessalonians 2: 11 is described as "strong". Furthermore, Matthew 24: 24 talks of "great signs and wonders" by which people are deceived, and Revelations 12: 9 goes so far as to talk of an evil spirit deceiving "the whole world".

What ultimately lends weight to both (8) *and* (9), however, is this: skeptical theists endorse (S), and (S) ensures that, for any proposition I believe, for all I can tell there is some good that justifies God in either deceiving me or allowing me to be deceived with regard to it. Thus, (S) ensures that any proposition is such that, when I entertain it, for all I can tell I am in a "rare and special circumstance" in which God is deceiving me. From this it seems to follow that (8) or (9) is true. But if either (8) or (9) is true, and we accept the following:

- (10) If, for any proposition  $x$ , no human is ever justified in believing either that God is not deceiving him with regard to  $x$ , or that God is not allowing him to be deceived with regard to  $x$ , then, for any proposition  $x$ , no human is justified in believing  $x$ .

then we can derive (6), and hence (7).

Now, one reason for dealing with the objections at the *end* of this paper was to enable my primary argument to proceed unhindered. Another important reason is that only at this stage do I have the resources to defend (10). The considerations in section 5 against (B) count in favour of this principle; the strategy of (B) is simply to deny principles like (10), and I argued above that the most common and initially promising instance of a (B)-type strategy is highly problematic for the skeptical theist. So, since (8) and (9) bypass the third objection raised in this section, and since (10)

seems sanctioned by the argument against (B) at the end of the previous section, we can see that, even *given* the third objection, we can arrive at (6) and hence (7). Thus, the third objection will not prevent (MS) from gaining entrance to the skeptical theist's building.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued in this paper that some of the most common, and initially attractive, options in protecting (ST) from (MS) nonetheless allow (MS) to slip in, since they are powerless against a more pervasive type of skepticism that entails (MS). This more powerful type of skepticism seems similar to the type of BIV skepticism discussed in contemporary literature, and thus it might seem that the kind of responses adduced in such literature may be available to (ST). But the nature of (ST), and its role as a buffer against evidential arguments from evil, is such that these familiar kinds of responses will be problematic. I thus argue that a more severe skepticism than is desirable seems an unavoidable concomitant of (ST). I argue furthermore that three of the most powerful objections will not prevent me from reaching this conclusion.

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