

Skeptical Theism and the Threshold Problem

Yishai Cohen

ABSTRACT In this paper I articulate and defend a new anti-theodicy challenge to Skeptical Theism. More specifically, I defend the THRESHOLD PROBLEM according to which there is a threshold to the kinds of evils that are in principle justifiable for God to permit, and certain instances of evil are beyond that threshold. I further argue that Skeptical Theism does not have the resources to adequately rebut the THRESHOLD PROBLEM. I argue for this claim by drawing a distinction between a weak and strong version of Skeptical Theism, such that the strong version must be defended in order to rebut the THRESHOLD PROBLEM. However, the skeptical theist's appeal to our limited cognitive faculties only supports the weak version.

KEYWORDS Anti-theodicy; Bergmann, Michael; Consequentialism; Problem of Evil; Rowe, William; Skeptical Theism

1. INTRODUCTION

Evidential arguments from evil often rely on an inference such as the following:

THE INFERENCE: If, after thorough analysis, we can't think of any God-justifying reasons for some instance of horrific evil, then there probably aren't any such reasons.

The defender of the argument from evil then affirms the antecedent of THE INFERENCE and thus affirms the consequent.¹ Theodicians deny the

1. For a summary of that argument, see William Rowe, "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996): 262–63.

antecedent of the conditional by attempting to provide plausible God-justifying reasons for the various evils exemplified in our world. God cannot prevent all the relevant evils, they will say, if God is to allow human persons to act freely with great responsibility, or if they are to have the ability to display higher-order goods such as courage, self-sacrifice, and compassion, or if the world is not to exhibit massive irregularities in virtue of constant divine interventions, and so forth. But lately the more popular strategy has been to evince skepticism about THE INFERENCE by appealing to our cognitive limitations. This strategy is often labeled “Skeptical Theism.” While being skeptical about The Inference is more fashionable among theists than non-theists, (hence, skeptical theism), theoretically a theist, agnostic, and atheist can all affirm the epistemological claim that we should be skeptical about The Inference. So, I will proceed by understanding Skeptical Theism (henceforth “ST”) as the following epistemological claim:

ST: Given our cognitive limitations, we should be skeptical of our ability to detect God’s reasons for permitting evil in the world.

If ST is true, then we should be skeptical about THE INFERENCE. Arguments for ST may be grouped in four categories: arguments from analogy, complexity, alternatives, and enabling premises.² There is an increasingly growing body of literature concerning the objection that ST entails, among other things, unacceptable forms of skepticism. However, there is a further problem ST confronts that I articulate in this paper, viz. the THRESHOLD PROBLEM.

In Section 2 I articulate the THRESHOLD PROBLEM, and defend it by highlighting the costs of rejecting its claims. In 3 I show how its claims do not conflict with ST’s assertion that our cognitive faculties are considerably limited. In 4, I distinguish between two versions of ST—one weak, the other strong—where the latter must be affirmed in order to counter the evidential force of evil against theism. However, while an inference from the weak version to the strong version of ST is warranted only within a subset of all possible epistemic circumstances, according to a proponent of the THRESHOLD PROBLEM, our epistemic circumstances are not within that subset. Lastly, in 5 I provide a concrete example where a skeptical theist, Michael Bergmann, seems to argue for the weak version, though in

2. For an overview of these arguments see Justin McBrayer, “Skeptical Theism,” *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 7 (2010): 611–23.

the end he seems to assume the strong version. This implicit shift or inference presupposes without argument that our epistemic circumstances are within that relevant subset, and thus is unwarranted.

2. THE THRESHOLD PROBLEM

I will label the kind of evil with which I will be concerned “Horror.” The evils that fall under the category of Horror consist of the horrific suffering of an innocent child. I focus on evils of this kind for the following reason: if there are any persons to whom God cannot be justified in permitting horrific suffering, surely innocent children are among them. For, children are persons who do not yet have full responsibility for their actions that cognitively mature adults do, and thus they are not deserving of any serious punishment. Moreover they are especially vulnerable—both physically and mentally—to the evils of this world. In order to get a better sense of the evils in mind, it is unfortunately necessary to provide a few examples. There is William Rowe’s often cited case in the literature of the rape, beating, and murder by strangulation of a five-year old girl,³ the imprisonment and torture of Falun Gong children by the Chinese government,⁴ and the “medical experiments” the Nazis performed on children, to name just a few. It is astonishingly horrific evils of this kind that we ought to have in mind when considering the actual world’s worst evils. Now, a proponent of the THRESHOLD PROBLEM (henceforth just “THRESHOLD”) asserts the following two claims:

THRESHOLD: (i) There is a threshold to the kinds of evils that are in principle justifiable for God to permit, and (ii) instances of Horror are beyond that threshold.

Before I attempt to defend THRESHOLD, what follows are some remarks concerning how we ought to think about the nature of evil in relation to unjustifiability.

First, the number of children suffering is irrelevant to an evil being unjustifiable. Rather, what is relevant is the kind of evil an individual child

3. William Rowe, “Evil and Theodicy,” *Philosophical Topics* 16, no. 2 (1988): 119–32.

4. Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, “China: Treatment of children of Falun Gong practitioners; Whether Children of Falun Gong Practitioners are Subject to Sanctions, Including Reduced Access to Education and to Health Care,” Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, accessed November 30, 2013, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/48d2237fc.html>.

undergoes. If a parent is justified in permitting one of their children to undergo a particular kind of evil, then there is no reason to think that that parent could not be justified in permitting their second child to undergo the same kind of evil. Why? Because, unless there is reason to think that the specific details in the circumstances concerning the first child which are absent in the case of the second child is relevant to the reason that justifies the parent's permission of the first child's suffering, then there is no reason to think that the morally sufficient reason that the parent has to permit the first child to suffer could not also apply to the second child. *Mutatis mutandis* for the third, fourth, fifth . . . and *n*th child. Taking their cue from C. S. Lewis,⁵ Joshua Seachris and Linda Zagzebski make a similar point by affirming the following principle:

PRINCIPLE OF REPEATABLE REASONS: If person *A* has a sufficient justifying reason to permit *p* in situation *s*, then *A* has a sufficient justifying reason to permit states of affairs relevantly similar to *p* in situations relevantly similar to *s*.⁶

So, if there are evils which God cannot be justified in permitting, we ought to look at evils of certain kinds that an individual suffers, such as instances of Horror. Note that I am not saying that a case where two people suffer rather than one (where the suffering each endures is of the same kind) is not an instance of a greater evil; I am not claiming that the numbers "don't count."⁷ However, it is a greater evil when the suffering of the two are considered collectively. But there is no reason to think that unjustifiability applies at the level of collective evils given the plausibility of the PRINCIPLE OF REPEATABLE REASONS; if there is no limit to how evil a world can be simply by adding a painful headache to a new individual whose life is good overall, then there should be no limit to how much collective evil God can permit. So, the notion of unjustifiability is relevant only at the level of an individual who suffers.⁸

5. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 116.

6. Joshua Seachris and Linda Zagzebski, "Weighing Evils: the C. S. Lewis Approach." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 62, no. 2 (2007): 86. Typography slightly modified in the quotation.

7. John Taurek defends a claim I am *not* committing myself to here, viz. that there is no moral significance to the *number* of people in cases of conflict where one can prevent a harm from befalling only one of two groups. See John Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6, no. 4 (1977): 293–316.

8. Marilyn McCord Adams makes a similar distinction in the vicinity with respect to goods that God is interested in bringing about with respect to creation: God is interested

Second, there are many factors that will partly determine whether a state of affairs is unjustifiable, such as the kind, degree and duration of the suffering, the psychological character of the person that bears upon what they are able to endure, and so on. When one begins to think of all of the potentially relevant factors, the complexity of the matter quickly becomes apparent. As a result, it is unclear that all evils can be compared to one another in a simple, linear fashion such that they all stand in the “worse than” or “equal to” relation to one other.⁹ Still, if one has the intuition that instances of some of the world’s actual evils are unjustifiable, surely instances of Horror—including the examples mentioned above—are among them. So it is not necessary to perfectly carve out the boundary between justifiable and unjustifiable evils.

Third, I am not committing myself to the threshold or cut-off point between justifiable and unjustifiable evils being sharp or vague; neither option precludes clear cases of unjustifiable evils. However, there is a worry that each option is unintuitive, which in turn gives us reason to think that there isn’t any such distinction to be made, and thus that there are no unjustifiable evils. The reasoning here has a similar structure to arguments from vagueness for unrestricted composition, which I will now illustrate.¹⁰ Consider an ordinary composite object and begin to distance all of its parts away from each other ever so slightly. The proponent of restricted composition holds that (at least in some cases) once the parts of the composite object are spread out across the universe, it is determinately the case that the relevant composite object no longer exists. So, there must be a cut-off point between composition and no composition, and thus that cut-off point is either sharp or vague. But a sharp cut-off point is implausible; a minuscule increase in the distance of the parts of the object from each other shouldn’t make the difference between composition and no composition, or existence and non-existence. On the other hand, a vague cut-off

in producing both “global goods” and “goodness to individual created persons.” Similarly, I am making a distinction in the case of evils that God permits with respect to creation: “global or collective evils” and “individual evils.” See Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 29.

9. Derek Parfit likewise argues that we should not think of the normative truths as being so precise such that we can always devise a “linear model” and place, e.g., the goodness of something on a one-dimensional line or scale, and thus compare it with any other good. See Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 555–59.

10. See David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 212–13; Mark Heller, *The Ontology of Physical Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 68–119; Theodore Sider, *Four-Dimensionalism: An Ontology of Persistence and Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 120–39.

point is also implausible; a vague cut-off point between composition and no composition entails metaphysical vagueness, a position which many reject. Thus, since there clearly are composite objects, we should embrace unrestricted composition rather than restricted composition.

An analogous argument might be made against (i), which goes as follows. On the one hand, a miniscule increase in, e.g., the intensity or temporal duration of the relevant evil shouldn't make the difference between a justifiable evil and an unjustifiable evil. On the other hand, a vague cut-off point between a justifiable evil and an unjustifiable evil certainly seems to entail a form of metaphysical vagueness (which, recall, is a view many reject). For, on a realist account of morality, the indeterminacy of the justification of God's permitting an evil would arguably amount to neither linguistic nor epistemic vagueness. At least, I am willing to concede this point for the sake of argument. Thus, since there clearly are justifiable evils, should we similarly reject that there is any such threshold, and thus that there are any unjustifiable evils at all? Whatever one thinks of the argument above in favor of unrestricted composition, and its similarity to the argument just presented against the possibility of unjustifiable evils, I think we can safely conclude that there must be something wrong with this argument against the possibility of unjustifiable evils. I explain why in the form of a *tu quoque*.

The same problems arise for a distinction that everyone accepts, viz. between justified and unjustified evils. If Jill, the mother of five year old Jimmy, warns Jimmy many times over not to jump off his bed, Jill is justified (let us suppose) in permitting Jimmy to jump off and potentially mildly scratch his knee in order to learn the consequences of his irresponsible action, even if she could have prevented Jimmy's jump. But if Jill warns him many times over not to jump off a roof of a tall building, if she were able to prevent Jimmy's jump, Jill would clearly not be justified in permitting him to jump off and thus become paralyzed or worse. Now, either the mark between justification and the lack thereof is sharp or vague. That is, either at some point adding, e.g., a mere inch to the height of Jimmy's jump makes the difference between Jill being justified in permitting Jimmy to jump or adding a mere inch entails that it is indeterminate whether Jill is justified in permitting Jimmy to jump.¹¹ Regardless, it is not debatable as to whether Jill is justified in permitting Jimmy to jump off a bed or a tall

11. I am implicitly assuming here that if the cut-off point is vague, there is a determinate point at which it becomes indeterminate whether Jimmy's mom is justified in permitting Jimmy to fall. This assumption is only for the sake of maintaining a simpler dialectic, and is not crucial to my overall point.

building; Jill is obviously justified in the former case (we may suppose), and clearly not justified in the latter case. So, we can conclude that there must be something wrong with the argument above against (i), viz. that there is a threshold to the kinds of evils that are in principle justifiable for God to permit. For, whatever one thinks with respect to cut-off point between justified and (merely) unjustified evils, the same can be said with respect to the cut-off point between justifiable evils and unjustifiable evils.

Fourth, a number of theists have recently defended the compatibility of theism and gratuitous evil, i.e. evils such that if God were to prevent them, no greater goods would be lost, or no greater evil would arise as a result.¹² While this may well be correct, it is not relevant to THRESHOLD. Gratuitousness is one thing, and justification is another. When theists argue that gratuitous evil is compatible with theism, the conclusion is supposed to be that God is justified in permitting gratuitous evil. So much for my remarks on the nature of evil in relation to unjustifiability. Before I attempt to defend THRESHOLD, I will now identify the proponents of the “anti-theodicy” approach to the problem of evil (an approach of which the THRESHOLD proponent is a member) and attempt to articulate their overall approach to the problem of evil.

The THRESHOLD proponent naturally fits within the “anti-theodicy” framework according to which it is objectionable—at least epistemically and perhaps even morally—to affirm that there are God-justifying reasons for the world’s worst evils. Such anti-theodacists essentially agree with Ivan Karamazov’s thought that no good, not even the “whole world of knowledge,” can justify the horrific suffering of an innocent child.¹³

12. See William Hasker, “The Necessity of Gratuitous Evil,” *Faith and Philosophy* 9, no. 1 (1992): 23–44; Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Michael L. Peterson, “Lewis and the Necessity of Gratuitous Evil,” in *C. S. Lewis as Philosopher: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty*, ed. David Baggett, Gary R. Habermas, and Jerry L. Walls (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 175–92.

13. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), ch. 5.4. For a defense of the anti-theodicy position, see e.g. R. F. Holland *Against Empiricism: On Education, Epistemology and Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), ch. 15; Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); D. Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); David Burrell, *Deconstructing Theodicy: Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008); Nick Trakakis, “Theodicy: the Solution to the Problem of Evil, or Part of the Problem?,” *Sophia* 47, no. 2 (2008): 161–91; Andrew Gleeson, *A Frightening Love* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). For a recent overview of the anti-theodicy literature, see Nick Trakakis, “Antitheodicy,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 363–76.

Like many anti-theodiscists, the THRESHOLD proponent rejects at the very least a simplistic consequentialist logic of weighing costs and benefits in order to determine whether or not God is justified in permitting some evil, or at least certain kinds of evils such as instances of Horror. While it is possible for an instance of Horror to be extrinsically good insofar as it stands in certain relations to other states of affairs, it is not possible for its extrinsic goodness to somehow outweigh Horror's intrinsic badness, and thus be overall good. According to the THRESHOLD proponent, affirming the "overall goodness" of something as intrinsically evil as the horrific suffering of a child is simply wrongheaded. Evils like Horror just aren't the sorts of things that can be "outweighed" by some good state of affairs.

Notice that nothing that has been said so far precludes the THRESHOLD proponent from adopting a number of forms of consequentialism. The only condition that must be incorporated into such a theory is the lexical priority (where some normative considerations are qualitatively or categorically superior than others) of the absence of instances of Horror over any quantity of other goods.¹⁴ Moreover, the lexical priority at hand can be understood in either a deontological or a consequential form, according to which the two theories are extensionally equivalent with respect to which actions are right, while differing with respect to why they are right. For, almost any reasonable non-consequentialist theory can be consequentialized, according to which the deontological status of an act is completely determined by the reasons an agent has for preferring its outcome over other outcomes.¹⁵ Hence, one cannot object to an anti-theodicy view by simply stating that it is incompatible with consequentialism full stop.

Most theists will not be willing to adopt a completely unqualified form of consequentialism with no notions of lexical priority anyway. For instance, most theists would, on either theological or philosophical grounds, want to reject that it is ever permissible for God to lie or do something as terrible as, say, becoming incarnate and sexually assaulting an innocent person, no matter what good consequences could come about as a result. In other words, many theists would want to affirm the lexical priority of

14. For a discussion of lexical priority see John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 38; Michael Huemer, "Lexical Priority and the Problem of Risk," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 3 (2010): 332–51. If the reader is wondering whether I hold to the implausible view that there is a lexical priority of the absence of unjustifiable evils like Horror over the absence of yet worse evils, I address this concern in the next section.

15. See Douglas W. Portmore, "Consequentializing," *Philosophy Compass* 4, no. 2 (2009): 329–47.

the absence of such states of affairs over the instantiation of any good states of affairs. So, most theists, like the anti-theodist, are already committed to rejecting forms of consequentialism that are not qualified with any notion of lexical priority. With the framework of the THRESHOLD proponent and more generally the framework of the anti-theodist in place, I now turn to defend THRESHOLD.

Not everyone will share the anti-theodist's intuitions. But here is an intuition a greater majority of us should find plausible: if instances of Horror are justifiable, it is simply because there is no threshold—there just aren't any evils that are in principle unjustifiable for God to permit. Why? Because it is implausible to suppose that there is a threshold to the sorts of evils that are in principle justifiable for Her to permit, but that the torture of an innocent child is not beyond that threshold. If the torture of an innocent child is not above the threshold, then what is? We should at the very least agree that it is a cost to affirm (i) but deny (ii). So, my support for (ii) hangs significantly on supporting (i), viz. that there is such a threshold. And, there is indeed good reason to affirm (i), as I will now argue.

There are three very serious costs to rejecting (i). The first relies on a pre-theoretical intuition while the latter two highlight certain logical consequences that follow from accepting ST but denying (i). First, suppose Hannah finds herself in a futuristic world where mad scientists, instead of tricking brains in vats, choose to manipulate the brains of children by horrific and torturous methods—methods consisting of unfathomable suffering (moreover, suppose these children's brains persist for thousands of years by nourishment through yet unknown scientific means). Hannah and others are fully aware of this situation, but are unable to do anything about it since these mad scientists are conducting their experiments light years away from any non-mad scientists. So, the horrendous suffering of these children persists for thousands of years. Surely if one imagines one's child in such circumstances, the question of whether the intrinsic badness of this state of affairs can be outweighed in virtue of somehow being extrinsically good borders on the absurd. But the theist who rejects (i) accepts that there is a possible world where God is justified in permitting one's child to undergo such suffering at the hands of these mad scientists. For, to reject (i) is to reject that there are any unjustifiable evils—evils such that there is no possible world where God is justified in permitting them. But to affirm that a loving God could be justified in permitting that is indeed counterintuitive.

Here is the second cost to rejecting (i). Perhaps one wishes to reject (ii) and yet maintain the sensible position that evils like Horror constitute at

least some evidence against theism. Unfortunately, skeptical theists will not be able to make this more modest claim. Why? Because according to ST the goods beyond our ken that, in conjunction with the necessary goods to which theodicies appeal, suffice to justify God in permitting Horror are just that—they're beyond our ken.¹⁶ If some good is beyond our ken, then there is no way to assess the likelihood that that good is actualized. Consequently, the skeptical theist must hold that instances of evil like Horror constitute no evidence against theism at all. Rowe has argued for a similar point:

[I]f human life were nothing more than a series of agonizing moments from birth to death, [the skeptical theist's] position would still require them to say that we cannot reasonably infer that it is even likely that God does not exist.¹⁷

Michael Bergmann responds to this objection by providing a case that would constitute evidence against theism.¹⁸ If we hold to the plausible principle that God has an obligation to guarantee that the life of the sufferer has a life that is good overall, then the total life of someone that consisted purely of horrible suffering would count as strong evidence against theism.

Bergmann's response is inadequate because we do not need to know the total life of a sufferer in order to know that the relevant suffering constitutes evidence against theism. Hannah doesn't need to know whether or not the child who is suffering at the hands of the mad scientists for thousands of years will have an afterlife in order to know that that kind of

16. While I will not assume that the goods to which theodicians often appeal have been shown to be either incoherent or coherent yet unexemplified (if there is no libertarian free will, then the problem of evil indeed seems insurmountable), I do assume that such goods, while perhaps necessary, are not sufficient to constitute a God-justifying reason. While full-fledged theodicians would obviously disagree with this claim, my concern here is not to show why proposed theodicies cannot be the full story regarding God's morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil. Rather, I will be working within the framework of skeptical theists who, so far as I can tell, reject that theodicies are the full story. After all, they're skeptical theists, not theodicians. I know of no one in print who claims to be able to bear the burden of providing both a successful theodicy as well as a defense of skeptical theism.

17. William Rowe, "Skeptical Theism: A Response to Bergmann," *Noûs* 35, no. 2 (2001): 297–303, at 298.

18. Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical theism and the Problem of Evil," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 390.

suffering counts as evidence against theism. But according to Bergmann, since Hannah doesn't know whether or not the earthly life of the child is the child's total life, she cannot reasonably affirm that that kind of suffering constitutes even some evidence against theism. But surely Hannah is justified in thinking that the child's suffering renders some evidence against theism. Likewise, surely instances of Horror constitute some evidence against theism, even if we don't know the total life of the child undergoing the relevant suffering.

Third, even if the skeptical theist could rationally hold that instances of Horror constitute some evidence against theism, she cannot say that worlds like Hannah's—worlds that consist of much worse evils—constitute greater evidence against theism than the actual world's evils. Why? Because there is no reason to think that the greater the evil, the less likely it is that the relevant good beyond our ken would be exemplified. But intuitively, we want to say that if the actual world were like Hannah's world, we would have stronger evidence against theism. So why is it that the greater the evil, the greater the evidence against theism? The THRESHOLD proponent can provide an answer: the greater the evil, the higher one's credence should be in thinking that the relevant evil is beyond the threshold of justifiable evils.

I have pointed out to what lengths the skeptical theist must go to reject (i)—lengths I suspect many theists will not be comfortable to go. Thus, if my previous comments are correct, since there are very serious costs to rejecting (i), there are likewise costs to rejecting (ii) since the only reasonable way to reject (ii) is by likewise rejecting (i).

3. ACKNOWLEDGING OUR LIMITED COGNITIVE FACULTIES

The THRESHOLD proponent can grant the skeptical theist that our cognitive faculties are limited to a significant extent while maintaining that instances of Horror are in principle unjustifiable. How so? The THRESHOLD proponent—upholding the lexical priority of the absence of instances of Horror over any quantity of other goods—*starts* with the question of whether some state of affairs is so intrinsically evil that it is beyond the threshold of justifiable evils, *irrespective* of ways in which that state of affairs might be extrinsically good. But then what will the THRESHOLD proponent say, e.g., about the status of counterfactuals like these?

COUNTERFACTUAL C: Were God to prevent x (an instance of Horror), some state of affairs y which is worse than x would occur.

If the THRESHOLD proponent grants that our cognitive faculties are indeed limited, then she apparently cannot assert that C is false; she can't rule out that some state of affairs y which is worse than x would occur as a result. But in that case, THRESHOLD becomes implausible. Intuitively, for any state of affairs x , no matter how intrinsically bad it is, if there is some worse state of affairs y that counterfactually depends on x 's being prevented, then permitting x in order to prevent y *does* seem justified.

In response to this worry, the THRESHOLD proponent need not in fact determine the truth value of C. All that she must hold is that C is either false or *vacuously* true. If C is not false, it is only vacuously true because it has an impossible antecedent, and thus has no bearing upon x being in principle unjustifiable. Why might the antecedent of C be impossible? Because if x is unjustifiable, and y is intrinsically worse than x , then y is likewise unjustifiable. And, if y is unjustifiable, then God will guarantee that y not occur. In order to guarantee that, God must guarantee not to be placed in a situation where God must prevent x from occurring in the first place (Note that I assume here that the prevention of x does not consist solely in x 's absence. Rather, something further must be true, such as that in order to prevent x , it must be objectively probable that x will occur. If one's conception of prevention is different, I leave it to the reader to flesh out the details of a response in a similar vein¹⁹).

If God's permission of x (and y) is truly unjustifiable, then given God's omniscience, God knows what to do in order to guarantee that no such evil occurs. And, given God's omnipotence, God *can* and thus *will* guarantee that no such evil occurs whether this means creating worlds where it is nomologically impossible for agents to impose such evils, or whether this means creating no worlds with free agents at all, and so forth.²⁰

19. Intuitively, the people of Los Angeles didn't prevent additional car crashes by going to bed at their usual evening hours, as opposed to staying up all night and driving around the city. So a simple counterfactual analysis of prevention won't work. Perhaps it must be objectively probable that x will occur in order for it to be possible to prevent x . More extravagantly, perhaps it must be true at some time that x *will* happen, but then the future changes—at some later time it is no longer true that x will happen. For further discussion of the nature of prevention and its relation to time, see Patrick Todd, "Geachianism," in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jonathan L. Kvanvig, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 222–51.

20. Even if open theism is true and God does not know how the future will exactly pan out, God still knows what must be done in order to guarantee that certain states of affairs never obtain. See e.g. Gregory Boyd, "Neo-Molinism and the Infinite Intelligence of God," *Philosophia Christi* 5 (2003): 187–204.

More concretely, even if *per impossible* God's prevention of the Falun Gong children's horrific abuse by the Chinese government would subsequently result in an even more horrific instance of suffering of some other innocent children, God would not thereby permit the Falun Gong children's suffering in order to avoid the intrinsically worse state of affairs. Rather, God will do *whatever* is necessary in order to not allow for the possibility of the Falun Gong children's suffering in the first place. Thus, there will be no prevention because there will be nothing to prevent. To repeat, since the THRESHOLD proponent affirms the lexical priority of the absence of instances of Horror over any quantity or quality of other goods, the THRESHOLD proponent starts with the question of whether permitting the Falun Gong children's suffering is so intrinsically bad that is beyond the threshold of evils that are in principle justifiable. It is *this* question that is morally relevant, *not* the question of whether their suffering would be extrinsically good insofar as it contributed in axiological value to some larger state of affairs (or whether the prevention of their suffering would result in some equally bad or worse state of affairs). To think that the latter question is the relevant one seems, frankly, to illustrate a failure in taking such suffering seriously.

4. WEAK AND STRONG SKEPTICAL THEISM

I have argued that THRESHOLD is compatible with the claim that our cognitive faculties are considerably limited. While there very well may be goods (as well as evils, and entailment relations between them) beyond our ken, they have no bearing on states of affairs like Horror being unjustifiable. This compatibility highlights an important distinction between two different versions of ST—one weak, the other strong—whereby the THRESHOLD proponent will gladly accept the former, but certainly not the latter:

Weak ST: We should be skeptical as to whether the God-justifying reasons we know of *for some of God's possible actions or inactions in the world* are representative of the possible God-justifying reasons there are.

Strong ST: We should be skeptical as to whether the God-justifying reasons we know of *relative to the ones that would, together with goods we are aware of, justify God's permitting instances of the worst kinds of actual evil* are representative of the possible God-justifying reasons there are.

The THRESHOLD proponent can certainly grant that given our cognitive limitations, Weak ST is true. But given what else she holds, an inference from Weak ST to Strong ST will not be warranted, as I will now illustrate.

Recall Hannah's epistemic situation, where she finds herself in a world consisting of mad scientists who are responsible for the unimaginably horrific suffering of children for thousands of years. Hannah should have no difficulty accepting Weak ST. There very well may be all sorts of reasons beyond Hannah's ken for some of God's possible actions or inactions in the world. Should she likewise find Strong ST plausible? No. Hannah may not know everything there is to know about morality. But one thing she does know is that for God to permit such suffering at the hands of such mad scientists is in principle unjustifiable. By contrast, consider Max who also accepts Weak ST. Max finds himself in a world of relatively milder evils, where the worst evils consist of such states of affairs as painful headaches, toothaches, the difficulties that go along with a decaying body, and so forth. In Max's world, there are no evils that come close to either instances of Horror, let alone the sorts of evils that are in Hannah's world. Nor is there the nomological possibility of any such evils occurring. Perhaps in this case an inference from Weak ST to Strong ST *is* warranted. After all, since Max believes that there may be God-justifying reasons beyond his ken for some of God's possible actions or inactions, Max can't rule out that such reasons play a primary role in justifying God's permission of the worst (albeit still relatively mild) evils in his world. For, Max cannot affirm with great confidence that the permission of such evils is in principle unjustifiable.

So, everyone should accept Weak ST. But these two cases illustrate that an inference from Weak ST to Strong ST is warranted only within a subset of all possible epistemic circumstances. And, according to the THRESHOLD proponent, our epistemic circumstances are *not* within that subset. That is, our epistemic circumstances are sufficiently similar to those of Hannah, since instances of Horror appear to be beyond the threshold of evils that God is in principle justified in permitting.

5. HAS STRONG SKEPTICAL THEISM BEEN MOTIVATED?

I have argued that while the THRESHOLD proponent can wholeheartedly accept Weak ST, she will nevertheless find Strong ST implausible. I will now look at Michael Bergmann's defense of ST, and show how, to all appearances, he first defends Weak ST, but then ends up affirming Strong ST. Arguably, Bergmann implicitly shifts from Weak ST to Strong ST be-

cause he thinks that either that all possible kinds of evils are justifiable, or that no actual evils are beyond the threshold of justifiable evils. This is a concrete example where he and other skeptical theists ought to justify this assumption. Here are the theses Bergmann defends:

- 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.²¹

Bergmann argues for these by focusing on our cognitive limitations, as many skeptical theists do. At first glance, it wouldn't be difficult to interpret ST1–3 along the lines of Weak ST rather than Strong ST when Bergmann makes remarks such as these:

Notice that the skepticism recommended by ST1 is extremely modest and completely appropriate even for those who are agnostic about the existence of God. It is just the honest recognition of the fact that it wouldn't be the least bit surprising if reality far outstripped our understanding of it. There is nothing bold or dogmatic or even theistic about ST1. Nor is it excessively skeptical.²²

Bergmann's claim that ST1 is extremely modest and completely appropriate would only seem to be warranted if he was thinking along the lines of Weak ST. More importantly, like Weak ST, ST1 has no qualification to the actual world's worst kinds of evils, as is present in Strong ST. That is, all ST1 seems to be saying is that may be some goods beyond our ken, *not* that such goods can play the role of justifying God in permitting the actual world's worst evils. But later on, he implicitly assumes that ST1–3 is to be interpreted along the lines of Strong ST. I will now lay out this implicit assumption. Bergmann defends the following additional ST thesis:

21. Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Noûs* 35, no. 2 (2001): 279. I note that I am not paraphrasing these theses. Rather, I am borrowing Bergmann's exact phrasing.

22. *Ibid.*, 284.

ST1*: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of that involve conscious human experience are representative of the possible goods there are that involve conscious human experience.²³

Bergmann then considers and responds to an objection to ST1* which goes as follows:

A natural response here (on the part of those who recognize the plausibility of ST1 and ST1*) is to say “Perhaps there are goods unknown to us that are so great that their occurrence outweighs the horrendous evils that humans experience. Nevertheless, the permission of the horrendous evils that occur around us isn’t in any way necessary for the obtaining of such goods.” But how could one know that if the goods in question aren’t even known to us? Furthermore, that response seems to involve a rejection of ST3.²⁴

Bergmann’s response to the objection to ST1* indicates that he *is* affirming Strong ST after all. For, the way he is implicitly characterizing ST1* is such that not only might there be goods beyond our ken that involve human conscious experiences. Rather, for all we know, those goods *outweigh actual instances of horrendous evil* (and perhaps such evils are necessary for the exemplification of such goods). This is the very line of reasoning that the THRESHOLD proponent rejects, and for good reason if my previous remarks concerning the costs of rejecting THRESHOLD are correct.

Let me be clear that I have no quarrels with the plausibility of ST1* when construed along the lines of Weak ST. For all I know, there are all kinds of conscious experiences that are qualitatively distinct from anything I’ve ever experienced, and which may play a role in justifying some of God’s possible actions or inactions in the world. Hannah should likewise hold the same position; so she should also endorse a weak version of ST1*. But again, Hannah should not find a strong version of ST1* at all plausible since she has excellent reason to think that the worst kinds of evils in her world are in principle unjustifiable. Likewise, the THRESHOLD proponent also finds a strong version of ST1* implausible given the unjustifiability of instances of Horror.

23. *Ibid.*, 284. I note that I am not paraphrasing this thesis. Rather, I am borrowing Bergmann’s exact phrasing.

24. *Ibid.*, 285.

Other defenses of ST—including one by Bergmann himself²⁵—make their endorsement of Strong ST explicit from the start.²⁶ However, it will not help to argue directly for Strong ST (rather than make an inference from Weak ST to Strong ST) if one *merely* tries to argue for the position that there are goods (and evils and entailment relations) beyond our ken. For, it does not help to argue that there are goods beyond our ken if there is good reason to think that no epistemically possible good can outweigh instances of evil such as Horror, as THRESHOLD proponents think. In other words, skeptical theists must do more than appeal to our limited cognitive faculties in order to refute THRESHOLD.

As mentioned in the beginning of the paper, there are four kinds of arguments for ST: arguments from analogy, complexity, alternatives, and enabling premises.²⁷ I cannot even begin to adequately address those arguments here. But in suggestion of my claim that arguments for ST do not support Strong ST, consider what Hannah should think of each argument in turn. Hannah finds herself in an unimaginably horrific world, and thus has excellent reason to think that some of those horrific evils in her world are unjustifiable. She should not be moved at all by such arguments insofar as they support Strong ST. Likewise, the THRESHOLD proponent holds that our epistemic circumstances are sufficiently similar to Hannah's such that arguments for ST should not lead us to think that Strong ST is true. Rather, the THRESHOLD proponent has only been given reason to think that Weak ST is true.

25. In Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil," 377 it is clear that he means to endorse Strong ST when he says the following: "What we are interested in is whether our sample of possible goods, possible evils, and the entailment relations between them . . . is representative of all possible goods, possible evils, and entailment relations there are *relative to the property of figuring in a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting the inscrutable evils we see around us*. Although the property is not explicitly mentioned in (ST1)–(ST3), it is representativeness relative to that property that (ST1)–(ST3) are speaking of."

26. In Michael Bergmann and Michael C. Rea, "In Defence of Sceptical Theism: A Reply to Almeida and Oppy," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 2 (2005): 242, it is also clear from the outset the thesis being defended is Strong ST. For, after repeating ST1–3, they say they are interested in the following: "[W]hether our sample of possible goods, possible evils, and entailment relations between them (i.e., the possible goods, evils, and relevant entailments we know of) are representative of all possible goods, possible evils, and entailment relations there are *relative to the property of figuring in a (potentially) God-justifying reason for permitting the evils we see around us*. Although that property is not explicitly mentioned in ST1–ST3, it is representativeness relative to that property that ST1–ST3 are speaking of" [emphasis added].

27. Again, see McBrayer, "Skeptical Theism" for an overview of such arguments.

6. CONCLUSION

While most of the current literature is fixed upon whether ST leads to unacceptable forms of skepticism, I have tried to articulate a further problem, viz. the THRESHOLD PROBLEM which consists of the following two plausible claims,

THRESHOLD: (i) There is a threshold to the kinds of evils that are in principle justifiable for God to permit, and (ii) instances of Horror are beyond that threshold.

While I do not expect to have changed the skeptical theist's mind, I have tried to articulate and defend THRESHOLD by highlighting the costs of affirming ST and rejecting either (i), (ii), or both. Moreover, I have shown that the THRESHOLD proponent can grant the skeptical theist our cognitive faculties are considerably limited which in turn gives us a reason to affirm Weak ST, but no good reason to affirm Strong ST. Finally, as I suggested in the case of Bergmann, skeptical theists seem to have wrongly assumed either that an inference from Weak ST to Strong ST is warranted or that an appeal to our cognitive limitations alone is sufficient to establish Strong ST. I conclude that it is time for skeptical theists to address THRESHOLD directly, and adequately address the consequences of denying its claims. Let me be clear that I do not consider myself to have successfully defended an argument for atheism. Rather, all I have tried to show is that ST alone does not have the resources to undercut the plausibility of (i) or (ii). For all that I've said, there may be other theistic treatments of evil that can adequately rebut THRESHOLD. For instance, one might advocate a non-anthropomorphic conception of God that is theologically revisionary in an attempt to undercut many of the fundamental assumptions often employed in the problem of evil literature concerning the relationship between God and moral justification.²⁸ While I find this approach promising, I must set it aside for another endeavor.²⁹

28. See, e.g., Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (London: Continuum, 2006). A less theologically revisionary theistic treatment of evil among the many that cannot be addressed here and which may provide a more adequate response to the THRESHOLD proponent is that of Michael J. Almeida, "Theistic Modal Realism?" in Kvanvig, *Oxford Studies*, vol. 3, 1–15. Almeida argues for theistic modal realism, according to which God is justified in permitting a person to undergo undeserved suffering even if God could have prevented the suffering without a loss of some greater good or preventing some equal or worse evil. Why? Because it is impossible for God to improve the lives of every person in every world since, given the principle of plenitude, there *are* worlds in which persons endure undeserved suffering that is preventable. I reject "extreme" modal

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realism—theistic or non-theistic—on metaphysical rather than moral grounds. But those grounds take us beyond the scope of this paper.

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