

**Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer, eds. *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. xx+337 pp. \$120.00 (hbk); \$31.95 (paper).**

Alan R. Rhoda  
Christian Theological Seminary

Since its initial proposal in a 1984 paper by Stephen Wykstra, what Paul Draper subsequently dubbed “skeptical theism” has emerged as one of the more popular (and controversial) responses to the evidential problem of evil. In its original versions, skeptical theism holds that, given human epistemic limitations, no one is justified in believing of *any* evil that it is gratuitous, or such that God, if He exists, “would *not* have an all-things-considered sufficient reason to allow” it (vii). As such, skeptical theism purports to offer a *sufficient* response to the evidential problem of evil—sufficient in the sense that, if skeptical theism is correct, then there is no need for the theist to offer even the most minimal, partial theodicy or present independent supporting evidence for theism in order rationally to maintain theistic belief in the face of the evils we witness.

This collection on skeptical theism features twenty-two specially commissioned essays grouped into four parts. According to the introduction, Part One (7 essays) concerns the general epistemology of skeptical theism; Part Two (6 essays) focuses specifically on the viability of Wykstra’s CORNEA defense of skeptical theism; and Parts Three (6 essays) and Four (3 essays) explore the implications of skeptical theism for theism and morality, respectively.

The dominant focus of Part One is the relevance of non-inferential models of justification, particularly phenomenal conservatism, for skeptical theism. The basic worry here is that even if skeptical theism succeeds in blocking *inferences* from “these evils seem gratuitous” to “some evils are gratuitous”, if belief in the existence of gratuitous evils can be *non-inferentially* justified, at least for persons who have the relevant experiences, then skeptical theism isn’t a sufficient response to the evidential problem of evil after all. This worry is forcefully pressed in various ways by Jon Matheson (Chapter 1), Trent Dougherty (Chapter 2), and Chris Tucker (Chapter 4). Tucker’s specific target is Michael Bergmann’s version of skeptical theism, which is centered around four skeptical theses. In Chapter 6, E. J. Coffman offers a rebuttal by leveraging Bergmann’s fourth skeptical thesis, which Tucker had set aside as non-essential. For his part, Matheson retrenches by defending a “weak” version of skeptical theism that is person-relative. Roughly, his contention is that persons who accept the skeptical theist’s claims about our epistemic limitations therein have an undercutting defeater for the belief that some evils are gratuitous. In response to Matheson, Dougherty uses a Bayesian analysis to argue that what matters

is the relative strengths of the relevant seemings—the apparent plausibility of the skeptical theist’s epistemic claims versus the apparent gratuitousness of certain evils. He concludes that, for probably most people (who tend not to be much impressed by theoretical “philosophy crap” (25)), skeptical theism isn’t going to be a sufficient response to the evidential problem of evil.

The other three essays in Part One are somewhat more general in focus. John DePoe’s essay (Chapter 3) develops a nice contrast between traditional “negative” skeptical theism that emphasizes our epistemic limitations vis-à-vis God’s reasons for permitting apparently gratuitous evils and a “positive” skeptical theism that attempts to offer plausible reasons why God might permit there to be apparently gratuitous evils. The latter approach aims to supplement rather than supplant theodicy in response to the problem of evil. For introductory philosophy of religion courses, DePoe’s essay would make a wonderful read alongside classic authors like Rowe and Hick. Chapter 5 by Todd Long amounts to a defense of negative skeptical theism or what he calls “minimal” skeptical theism. Unfortunately, as Coffman points out, Long’s version of skeptical theism remains vulnerable to Tucker’s phenomenal conservatism objection. Moreover, Long’s argument frames the evidential problem of evil as presupposing our ability to grasp God’s reasons for permitting *all* the evils in the world. But he never explains why the atheologian must presuppose anything so strong. Why isn’t it enough that there be *some* evils for which it is unreasonable to think that God, if He exists, could have good reasons for permitting? Finally, Chapter 7 by Nick Trakakis presents an interesting and historically informed discussion of the dual importance of both epistemic humility and dogmatism in the Christian tradition. Unfortunately, his paper seems out of place in this volume, since he makes no attempt to tie his discussion to the problem of evil.

The six essays in Part Two purportedly (according to the volume’s introduction) focus on the viability of Wykstra’s CORNEA defense of skeptical theism. In reality, though, only the first essay (by Kenneth Boyce) maintains that focus. Boyce defends CORNEA against the charge that it leads to global skepticism by combining it with a “modestly anti-skeptical, anti-dogmatist” (114) epistemology that permits us to trust the deliverances of our basic belief-forming faculties in the absence of specific defeaters. The next essay, by Michael Almeida, develops a complicated modal and probabilistic argument against versions of skeptical theism (like Bergmann’s) which hold that we have no good reason for believing that “the actual realm of value is vastly different from the values we know about” (116).

The heart of Part Two is an extended exchange between Paul Draper (Chapters 10 and 12) and Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wykstra (Chapter 11), with neutral commentary by Lara Buchak (Chapter 13). The whole exchange, including Buchak’s commentary, is top-notch and, in my opinion, worth the price of the book. Draper’s first essay disambiguates several versions of CORNEA’s core and argues that, even if Wykstra’s skeptical theism successfully rebuts Rowe-style evidential arguments from evil, it is ineffective against Hume-style arguments according to which the actual suffering we witness is far less likely if theism is true than if one of its worldview competitors (e.g., naturalism) is true. Perrine and Wykstra’s chapter responds to several of Draper’s earlier papers defending Hume-style arguments from evil. They present a nuanced discussion of “theory versioning” and consider specifically

whether the falsification of “naïve theism” by the problem of evil counts against an epistemically modest or “diffident” theism. They conclude that it does not. Draper’s second essay, in direct response to Perrine and Wykstra, clarifies the Humean argument and presses the point that, in comparison with naturalism, evil not only counts against naïve theism, but against theism generally, and therefore against more nuanced versions of theism. Buchak’s chapter brilliantly caps off the exchange by contrasting two different procedures of updating credences in response to new information—updating by conditionalization versus updating on an indicative conditional (while keeping the probability of the antecedent fixed). She vividly illustrates both updating procedures noting plausible situations in which one or the other is intuitively more appropriate. The upshot of the Draper and Perrine/Wykstra exchange turns, she argues, on which of the two updating procedures is more contextually appropriate.

Part Three focuses on the theistic implications of skeptical theism. It opens with a lively exchange between J. L. Schellenberg (Chapter 14) and Michael Bergmann (Chapter 15). Schellenberg argues that even if skeptical theism provides *theists* with an adequate defense against problems of evil and hiddenness, it doesn’t prevent *non-theists* from reasonably finding in such problems good reasons for non-belief. Moreover, Schellenberg argues that, by parity of reasoning, if (Bergmann’s) skeptical theism be accepted, then various theses associated with “skeptical atheism” should also be accepted, with the result that, just as skeptical theism undermines arguments for atheism, so also skeptical atheism undermines arguments for theism. Bergmann responds that his skeptical theism isn’t nearly as skeptical as Schellenberg takes it to be by clarifying that its applicability is limited to *inductive generalizations* from the sample of the realm of value that we understand to the whole realm of value that God (if He exists) would understand. So understood, Bergmann argues, skeptical theism cannot be used to validate anything as wide-ranging as the skeptical atheism that Schellenberg proposes. (As an aside, while I think Bergmann gets the better of this exchange, I think his framing of Rowe-style arguments from evil as inductive generalizations misconstrues the structure of the realm of value. Unlike a space of structurally isomorphic units, like marbles, that can be sampled independently of the rest of the space, the space of goods, evils, and their entailments is more like a complex, nested hierarchy in which certain, fundamental goods ramify throughout. In relation to a hierarchical conception of the realm of value in which at least some of the more fundamental goods, like love, are significantly within our ken, Bergmann’s skeptical theses can seem rather implausible. At the very least, this issue needs more serious consideration by both Bergmann and his critics than it has gotten.)

The remaining four essays in Part Three are stand-alone. Wes Morriston (Chapter 16) compares the predictions of skeptical theism with those of “skeptical demonism,” which countenances a perfectly evil God who permits goods for ultimately malevolent reasons that are beyond our ken, and argues that both hypotheses fail for comparatively equal and opposite reasons. Erik Wielenberg (Chapter 17) questions whether Christian theists can have warranted confidence in their future salvation by exploring the possibility of morally permissible divine deception. He argues, first, that in certain situations *we* can have morally sufficient reasons for deception and, second, that plausibly God could sometimes be in

relevantly similar situations—Wielenberg supports this latter thought by reference to several scriptural passages in which God is, arguably, depicted as having been deceptive. Andrew Cullison (Chapter 18) proposes and defends what he takes to be two new versions of skeptical theism, one based on reflections about epistemic disagreement with a “normative superior” and the other based on van Inwagen’s claim that there is no minimum amount of evil necessary to serve God’s purposes. Finally, Kevin Timpe (Chapter 19) proposes that a committed theist’s trust in God, despite apparent divine silence in the face of human suffering, can be maintained by liturgical acts that experientially reinforce the belief that God is loving and cares deeply for His creatures.

Finally, Part Four contains three essays on skeptical theism’s implications for morality. The first two essays (Chapters 20 and 21) feature an exchange between Stephen Maitzen and Daniel Howard-Snyder on whether “Agnosticism,” Howard-Snyder’s term for his preferred version of agnosticism about the inference from the inscrutability to the gratuitousness of evil, falls prey to the moral skepticism objection. Maitzen argues that “commonsense morality,” because of its “mixture of consequentialist and non-consequentialist elements” (284), unambiguously endorses both key premises of the objection. Howard-Snyder’s forceful rebuttal argues that Maitzen’s version of commonsense morality is subject to decisive counterexamples and that Agnosticism is fully compatible with more plausible versions of commonsense morality.

Last, but not least, Ted Poston’s essay (Chapter 22) argues for “the consistency of skeptical theism with a broadly evidentialist approach to the justification of theism” (308). To this end he helpfully distinguishes between two notions of inscrutability. One holds that an evil is inscrutable if we can determine that all reasons for divine permission we can think of are inadequate. The second says an evil is inscrutable if we can’t determine whether all reasons for divine permission we can think of are inadequate. It’s not clear why Poston doesn’t consider a third, disjunctive notion of inscrutability that combines the other two, but regardless, Poston offers several epistemic considerations in favor of the second construal, noting ways in which limitations on our knowledge can make it difficult for us to assess the adequacy of reasons for divine permission of evils and stressing that none of these limitations supports a broad skepticism about value.

In summary, I highly recommend this collection of essays edited by Dougherty and McBrayer on the skeptical theist response to the evidential problem of evil. The volume maintains a balanced mix of contributions from both theist/non-theist and pro-/anti-skeptical theism scholars, and despite an unusually large number of typographical infelicities for an Oxford volume (about one-per-page on average), the contributions are generally of high quality and significantly advance the discussion on issues of relevance. This volume is arguably the most significant edited collection on the problem of evil since Howard-Snyder’s *The Evidential Argument from Evil*.<sup>1</sup> It offers clear evidence that, under pressure from critics, skeptical theism has become much more diverse in recent years, with newer versions generally being more

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).

epistemically moderate, more targeted in the scope of their skepticism, more perspectival, and/or more willing to see skeptical theism as supplementing rather than replacing theodicy and positive theistic evidences as part of a full-fledged theistic response to the evidential problem of evil. These are all welcome developments to my mind. This collection should be required reading for specialists in philosophy of religion. I think some of the essays are also accessible enough to be suitable for use in undergraduate courses. Finally, while the volume is oriented much more toward philosophers than theologians, I expect that theologians will find at least a few of the essays (especially those by Trakakis, Wielenberg, and Timpe) of considerable value.