

SKEPTICAL THEISM AND THE CREEP PROBLEM

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ABSTRACT: Skeptical theism is the view that human knowledge and understanding are severely limited, compared to that of the divine. The view is deployed as an undercutting defeater for evidential arguments from evil. However, skeptical theism has broader skeptical consequences than those for the argument from evil. The epistemic principles of this skeptical creep are identified and shown to be on the road to global skepticism.

KEYWORDS: problem of evil, skeptical theism, total evidence skepticism, global skepticism

Introduction

Skeptical theism is deployed to undercut evidential arguments from evil. It is the view that when we consider the problem of evil, we have no good reason to believe that our conception of goods, evils, and relevance relations between them are representative of what God would consider when He permits, what seem to humans, gratuitous evils. Our view is that skeptical theism has a problem with what we call *skeptical creep* – namely, that the skeptical consequences of the view spread beyond the domain of the evidential problem of evil to theology, moral knowledge, and then at last to become a global skeptical problem. Theological and moral skeptical creep has been widely noted. Our objective is to show that a particular dialectical requirement for justification is behind the skeptical theist's challenge, and this requirement yields the creep phenomenon not only extending to theological and moral knowledge, but also to knowledge in general.

1. Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil

Skeptical theism is, in its primary instance, a dialectical view. The fact of gratuitous evils, or better put, cases of *prima facie* senseless suffering, is a problem for traditional theism. How could a God worthy of the name permit them? And so an evidential version of the argument from evil arises. It can be stated roughly as follows:

1. There are instances of evil that God could have prevented without losing some greater good or failing to prevent some greater evil.

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2. If God exists, He would prevent instances of evil unless He could not do so without losing some greater good or failing to prevent some greater evil.
3. *Therefore*, God does not exist.¹

The matter of import is what justification we have in believing the first premise. There appear to be many cases of suffering that confirm it, where we cannot, for all our attempts, arrive at a sufficiently satisfying reason for why God would permit them. Call the move from the breadth of what seems to be senseless suffering and our inability to think of what would justify it to Premise 1 *the inference*. Its basic form is:

Since we humans cannot discern a justifying reason for God to allow evils, there is none.

This is where skeptical theism plays its dialectical role. Skeptical theism is the view that we humans are significantly cognitively limited. We are so limited, especially in comparison to the divine, *the inference* is manifestly fallacious. Small children, by analogy, may hold that there is no good reason for shots or rules against eating crayons, but there clearly are. The fact that they cannot come up with them on their own is itself not a good reason to hold there are no reasons. And we, limited and fallen creatures we are, are more like children before God. His ways are not our ways, we are reminded. And so, given the way theists conceive of the gap between God's intellectual powers and ours, there are presumably many, many things He conceives and knows that we humans are in no position to know or even understand. In light of the gulf between ourselves and God, it should come as no surprise that there are events that we cannot see reason for, but for God there is perfect reason.

Notice that skeptical theism, in fact, is a reply to two coordinate problems for theism. On the one hand, it is a reply to the first-order problem of evil—that there *only seems to us* to be senseless suffering. On the other hand, skeptical theism handles the second-order problem of the long track record of failed theodicies—in particular that failed theodicy is *our* failure to understand God, not God's failure to be just. Both the fact of evils we can't see reason for and the consistent failure of theodicies seem to be evidence against theism, but the skeptical theist's move is to show that this commitment is not justified. The result,

¹ This is a modified version of the evidential argument from William Rowe and is widely glossed as the basic form of the argument. We have provided an antecedent in premise 2 to make the argument more obviously valid. See William Rowe, "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 1-11.

then, is that skeptical theism's prime dialectical role is that of being a defeating consideration for a crucial premise in the argument from evil. It requires that we be skeptical about our capacities to determine what considerations would warrant God permitting evils. And as a consequence, the failure of theodicy is, too, rendered inert as evidence against theism—it is perfectly consistent with a traditional notion of God.

2. Skeptical Theism's Dialectical Role

Skeptical theism's dialectical role is to provide a defeating reason for our justification for believing that there are no reasons warranting God's allowing evils on the basis of there not being any we can access. The operative question is *what epistemic principle yields that defeat?*

Taking Bergmann's version of skeptical theism as exemplary, the core of skeptical theism is the three-part commitment:

- (ST) We have no good reason for thinking that the (i) possible goods, (ii) possible evils, and (iii) entailment and permission relations between goods and evils that we know of are representative of all the possible goods, evils, and permissibility relations there are.

According to skeptical theists, ST provides defeat for *the inference*. As Bergmann puts it, “we can't use our failure to think of a God-justifying reason for permitting horrendous evils... to conclude that it is unlikely that there is such a reason.”²

The question, again, is how ST defeats *the inference*. At the core of ST is the relation of *representativeness*. This relation can be strict or approximate. Approximate representative samples give us information about a target class with an acceptable margin of error. So if sample A is representative of class B, then if x percent of A is F, then *approximately* x percent of B is F. Strict representativeness, however, has no margin of error. So, assuming strict representation, if x percent of A is F, then *exactly* x percent of B is F. This distinction of kinds of representativeness is important for the skeptical theist, because *the inference* requires the percentages of zero percent to be identical between the sample and target classes. So the more modest version of *the inference*

There are no known God-justifying reasons for evil

Therefore, there are *approximately* no God-justifying reasons for evil.

² Michael Bergmann, “Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. T. Flint and M. Rea (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 378.

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would be unacceptable, because it only takes one instance to defeat the argument. Rather, what's necessary is the more strictly representative relation:

There are no known God-justifying reasons for evil

Therefore, there are *exactly* no God-justifying reasons for evil.

ST is a defeater for the evidential argument from evil only if *the inference* requires strict representativeness; which it seems, it must.³ We can, then, state the principle that yields the defeat as follows:

(D) If S infers n (exactly no B are F) from m (no A are F), then S has justification for n only if S has reason to hold sample A is strictly representative of class B.

Again, given our assumptions about the cognitive gulf between God and humans, we do not have reason to hold that the justifying reasons we know to fail are strictly representative of all the possible God-justifying reasons. And so *the inference*, it is held, is defeated.

The problem is that D seems exceedingly strong; moreover, it does not reflect ST's dialectical deployment. D is too strong, because it seems to prohibit *any* negative generalization (e.g., inferring that there are no cats in my office from a survey of where I usually see them); moreover, it fails to reflect the fact that ST is being deployed against an atheist's argument to a theist. This is because the theist will have a commitment to the great cognitive gap between humans and God. So it fails to be dialectical, in the sense that it doesn't meet its argumentative opponents where they are in the process of exchange. What's necessary is that the argument from evil be directed against well-founded notions of what God would be intellectually in comparison to us. Let's modify D to be appropriately weaker and more dialectical:

(D') If S infers n (exactly no B are F) from m (no A are F), then S has justification for n only if S has reasons that would rebut well-founded challenges that S does not have reason to believe A is strictly representative of B.

Consider that the point of arguments from evil is to target *the theist's* conception of God, not the atheist's. The argument from evil is supposed to be an argument that the God of the believers doesn't exist. So if the theist has a notion of God that is itself well-founded (which we will assume here for Anselmian reasons) and which defeats the belief that the atheist's sample of God-justifying reasons is

³ See Chris Tucker's discussion of representativeness in skeptical theological arguments for a similar analysis: "Why Skeptical Theism isn't Skeptical Enough," in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. T. Dougherty and J. McBrayer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 45-61.

representative, then the atheist's argument is not justification-affording for the relevant conclusion. That is, the atheological argument fails to be sufficiently *dialectical*, because the theist holds that God is considerably better off cognitively with regard to the relevant reasons up for consideration. This is exactly what Bergmann means to express with ST. The skeptical theist, then, defeats the inference by using D' *in conjunction with an appeal to the great cognitive gap between human minds and the divine mind.*

So D', with the dialecticality rider of the great cognitive gap, allows the skeptical theist to introduce their "well-founded challenge" of a God who is vastly cognitively superior to us: God's reasons, on the theist's conception, far exceed ours, and so *the inference* is defeated. More specifically, the induction that comprises *the inference* (which supports premise 1 of the evidential argument from evil) is undercut by an appeal to the gulf between the capacities and contents of God's mind and those of human minds. Notice that this gulf makes it so that there is little hope for justifying strict representativeness. If we grant that D' in conjunction with the appeal to the great cognitive gap defeats *the inference* that would be because *the inference* is one instance of a broader kind of theologically-inductive inference—one that is also defeated by D' in conjunction with the appeal to the great cognitive gap—which is that humans have an adequately representative sample of God's reasons for doing anything. Why would God, say, make our bodies so smelly or our elbows so ridiculous looking? Surely anyone who tries to answer that question, even with a plausible reason accessible to our minds, makes an error of presumption similar to that of *the inference*. We may have a reason available, but we do not have access to all of God's reasons, and so we have no reason to believe that our available reasons (if we have any) are strictly representative of God's reasons.

So the lesson of D', as we see it, is that it defeats *the inference* only because the dialectical requirement embedded in D' allows the skeptical theist to appeal to a substantive conception of the divine (and, thereby, to the great cognitive gap). *The inference*, then, is just one instance of a broader human presumption when reasoning about God's reasons and plan. Let us call the broader, more general category into which *the inference* fits a *theological induction*. The *negative* version of the theological induction takes the basic form:

Since we humans cannot discern a justifying reason for God to do X or allow X, there are no such reasons.

For the skeptical theist, the presumptiveness behind making such an induction is that our access to the reasons must be strictly representative, and we have no reason to suppose they are. Correspondingly, prohibitions on the thought

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that we have strictly representative samples of God's reasons extends to the positive case of attributing our reasons to God as justifying for Him, too. Call this the *positive* version of the theological induction, and it takes the following form:

Since humans can discern a justifying reason for God to do X or allow X, God's reason is that reason.

If we think it possible for God to have a broader set of reasons than we have access to, perhaps even extending to reasons we cannot fathom, then both the positive and negative inductions will be unfounded. *The inference* behind the evidential problem of evil is simply a special case of (negative) theological induction, and under the skeptical theist's view, no theological induction (positive or negative) is justified or acceptable. In this way, the insight behind skeptical theism is the same as the insight behind the objection to petitionary prayer—we do not know better than or even as well as God as to what should or should not be the case.

3. Skeptical Creep: Undercutting Moral and Theological Knowledge

A regular concern about skeptical theism is that it yields skeptical consequences wider than simply those on the question of whether we know the reasons why God would allow evils. Two domains of particular importance are regularly identified: moral and theological knowledge. In short, as the reasoning goes for the moral case, if God has inscrutable reason to allow what seem to us to be horrendous evils, then He may have reason to allow massive error about moral norms. The theological worry is that if God has good reason to allow toddlers to die in a rush of tsunami seawater, then he could very well have reason to permit priestly lies about the nature of salvation, the origin of evil, or His role in creation. The simple fact that we cannot think of reasons why He would do so is not reason to say that He does not have such reasons. And, in fact, us thinking of reasons for His veracity are themselves also undercut by the problem of theological induction, too. Again, the fact that we can think of reasons for God to do something does not mean that those are God's reasons or that God does not have access to defeating reasons for them. And that fact that we can think of reasons for God to do something does not mean that He has a reason to do that. Again, that is the lesson of both positive and negative theological inductions. Rational support for revealed and natural theological traditions, when put under rational scrutiny of this kind, evaporates.

The creep problem begins with the observation that skeptical theism provides defeaters for an important range of our moral knowledge as it relates to God's decisions. Once this range is defeated, the defeating conditions migrate to

other considerations beyond only God's decisions. Take any two cases of mundane moral evil, perhaps consistent child abuse that results in death. One is in the past, the other is currently transpiring. Nothing, to our knowledge, distinguishes the two, and we know for sure, assuming theism is true, the former must be justified for God to have allowed it. But what about the latter, the one happening now? Assuming time isn't a morally relevant feature, the latter, too, is justified. Or at least, we have no reason to hold it isn't. If this is the case, our ordinary moral judgment is not a reliable source of what is and what is not justified.⁴ Skeptical theism, then, yields moral skepticism.

Skeptical theism provides dialectical defeaters for certain inferences from what we take to be the best of our (admittedly limited) knowledge. In the theological case, the inference is that we can think of no good (or undefeated) reason for God to deceive us (or allow us to be deceived) about his nature, so there is no reason.⁵ In the moral case, the inference is that we can think of no good reason in the relevant cases of evil for God to allow evil, so we've inferred there is none. But, recall, the ST theses have run that the goods, evils, and relevance relations between them that we know provide us no justification for thinking they

⁴ This argument parallels Almeida and Oppy's dilemma for the skeptical theist, since in the everyday cases of judging whether to interfere, we either *should* trust our judgment of what should be done all things considered (and so our knowledge should be representative) or if it is not representative, we *should not trust* our judgment. See Michael Almeida and Graham Oppy, "Skeptical Theism and Evidential Arguments from Evil," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81 (2003): 506. The former option is not skeptical, and the latter is plenty skeptical, but morally objectionable in a way that the skeptical theist should find worth rejecting. Others who have run versions of the moral skepticism argument are William Hasker, in *Providence, Evil, and the Openness of God* (New York: Routledge, 2004), Jeffrey Jordan, in "Does Skeptical Theism lead to Moral Skepticism?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72 (2006): 403-17, Stephen Maitzen, in "Skeptical Theism and God's Commands," *Sophia* 46 (2007): 237-43, and Aikin and Ribeiro, in "Skeptical Theism, Divine Commands, and Moral Skepticism," *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 3 (2013): 77-96.

⁵ For versions of the theological skepticism argument, see Wes Morriston's "Skeptical Demonism," in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Dougherty and McBrayer, 221-234; Erik Wielenberg's "Divine Deception," in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Dougherty and McBrayer, 236-248; and John Park, "The Moral Epistemological Argument for Atheism," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (2015): 121-142. Further, Gale saw very early on in these discussions that "defensive skepticism" in theodicy destroys all the objects of faith and love in unclarity. See Richard Gale, "Some Difficulties in Theistic Arguments from Evil," in *The Evidential Problem of Evil*, ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 206-218. Ireneusz Ziemiński argues that the consequences are ultimately blasphemous for theists: "The Problem of God's Existence: In Defence of Scepticism," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7 (2015): 143-163.

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are strictly representative of all of them. In turn, *the same defeating reason posed for evidential atheists can be posed for theologians and moralists*. Simply, they all commit their own versions of the fallacious theological induction. And so the skepticism in skeptical theism creeps beyond its domain into theology and moral judgment.

4. From Skeptical Theism to Global Skepticism

The skeptical theist's basic strategy of applying D' to yield defeat has been this: frame premise 1 of the argument from evil (viz., "There are instances of *prima facie* gratuitous evil that God could have prevented without losing some greater good or failing to prevent some greater evil") as being based on a purportedly representative sample of supporting reasons, which we have labelled *the inference* (viz., *Since we humans cannot discern a justifying reason for God to allow evils, there is none*). Now, according to the atheologian, the reasons surveyed in the sample provide appropriate justification for the claim in premise 1. But, according to the skeptical theist, what's required for appropriate justification, given the dialectical context, is that the atheologian must have reason to hold that—or at least have rebutting reasons against well-founded challenges to the claim that—the reasons available in the sample are appropriately *representative*. And, for the skeptical theist, these sampled reasons must be *strictly* representative: the atheological claims to *discern* zero reasons for God to have allowed evils, but premise 1 expresses the idea that *there are no reasons* for God to have allowed evils. So, as we put it earlier, *the inference* requires the percentages of zero percent to be identical between the sample and the target classes. But the skeptical theist then appeals to the great cognitive gap between human minds and the divine mind. Might not God have reasons we have no access to? Consequently, the requirement is that the atheologian must have some reason, from his or her limited evidence, to think that the sample evidence is strictly representative of the *total evidence*. J.L. Schellenberg has identified the inclination to make this demand as *total evidence skepticism*:

[T]otal evidence skepticism is the claim that, for any proposition expressing a belief . . . of ours, we have reason to be in doubt, or skeptical, about whether the total evidence supports that proposition.⁶

So, were our available evidence to support premise 1, for all we know, the total evidence (which God has) may not.

⁶ "Skeptical Theism and Skeptical Atheism," in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Dougherty and McBrayer, 199.

Notice that Schellenberg's notion of total evidence skepticism tracks the skeptical theist's appeal to *the reasons God would have* quite exactly: skeptical theists hold that we cannot know what reasons God (an *omniscient* being) might have for permitting evils. In other words, we cannot know whether the reasons *we* have relating to the possible permission of evils are a strictly representative set of the reasons an *omniscient* being would have: namely, all-the-reasons-there-are, i.e., the "total evidence" regarding permission of evils. So, the skeptical theist's strategy is to use D' in conjunction with an appeal to the great cognitive gap to challenge *the inference*, thereby undercutting the atheologian's justification for premise 1 of the argument from evil. As we noted above, the skeptical theist holds that D', in conjunction with an appeal to the great cognitive gap, defeats *any* theological induction regarding God's reasons, positive or negative.

But D', in conjunction with an appeal to the great cognitive gap, provides a path to global skeptical creep. First, consider that if all of our induction-based beliefs had to pass the total evidence requirement in order to be justified, then arguably very few of those beliefs would pass and, hence, very few of our ordinary induction-based beliefs would be justified. For how could we establish that the evidence we do possess for any such belief is *strictly representative* of the total evidence? If the skeptical theist's appeal to the great cognitive gap is indeed a "well-founded challenge" (as required by D'), it would seem to defeat all beliefs that *derive from* or *rely upon* any inductive reasoning, not just theological inductions. This class of beliefs seems potentially very large.

Of course, D' only requires one to rebut *well-founded challenges* (concerning whether the evidence one has is strictly representative of the total evidence) to the induction. The trouble for skeptical theists is that most of the founding analogies for the godhead are those that do not guarantee that we will always have epistemically adequate access to the total evidence of *any* relevant domain of inquiry, whether induction-based or not. This is an important point, because it puts theological induction at the core of all of our foundational and inferential knowledge, and so, makes the fallaciousness of the induction a defeating condition. Consider that God is regularly analogized to a parent, and it is a standard practice for parents to shield children from many, many hard and uncomfortable truths. And so, children will have skewed samples of what the world is like, precisely because their parents have manipulated their evidence for the sake of *not* being representative of the total evidence. Or consider another analogy, that God is like a ruler or king. Again, it is a standard truth of rulers and kings that they manage their image in ways that project them in their best lights, that they keep many background issues out of the public eye, and that there are

matters that are managed so that the populace is happily ignorant of them. For sure, these manipulations are beneficent by hypothesis, but they are manipulations nevertheless. A final analogy would be that with an artificer or creator. Many products of skilled craftspeople are deceptively simple—they are designed to interface with us in ways that make them seemingly easy to understand, but in fact they are considerably more complex than our simple exchanges reveal them to be. And so, the world, our own minds, and the perceptual relations between our minds and that world, and the *a priori* justification supported by what we take as our understanding, are products of God that are designed to appear simple to us, but could in fact be cleverly crafted illusions that cover over massive complexity. In fact, they can even be complete misrepresentations of what's actually the case, as one might think that the 'close door' button on an elevator actually makes the door close faster instead of merely seeming to. We, on this well-founded analogy between God as expert craftspeople, understand very little. Our point here, again, is to show that, given the well-founded analogies between God and parents, monarchs, and craftspeople, D'-based challenges to *any* of the beliefs of the skeptical theist—whether induction-based or not—appear to be dialectically well-founded. And so, given their inability to rebut those challenges, skeptical consequences follow, but this time, they appear global.

5. Trying to Dam the Creep

Presumably, if skeptical theism generates global skepticism with respect to *all beliefs*, then skeptical theism fails to play any useful dialectical role for the theist. Showing that we are not justified in accepting premise 1 of the argument from evil because we are not justified in accepting *any claim whatsoever* presumably counts as a disastrous dialectical backfire for the skeptical theist.

To avoid this result, the skeptical theist might seek to limit the application of D' to certain cases. For example, if D' is the correct epistemic principle for evaluating *the inference* and *only the inference*, then worries about global skepticism evaporate. But this is not a very promising line of response. Consider what motivated D' in the first place. The thought was that, considering the limitations in our evidence, God might have reasons we don't, or even can't, know or understand: there is a great cognitive gap between God's mind and ours. So drawing conclusions about all of the reasons from our limited sampling of reasons is presumptuous and unjustified (so says the skeptical theist). But, as we pointed out in section 4, this reasoning need not be inherently theistic. The reasons God would have are, given His omniscience, simply all the reasons there are. So to compare our limited evidence to God's evidence (as skeptical theism invites us to

do in the case of undercutting the atheological argument) is exactly the same as comparing our limited evidence to the total evidence. This means that the skeptical theist's motivation for D' can be translated into theistically-neutral language very simply: considering the limitations in our evidence, the total evidence might contain reasons we don't, or even can't, know or understand, and this reflection is an undercutting defeater for any belief, whether induction-based or not. Now, the skeptical theist's own motivation for enforcing this total evidence requirement is either persuasive or not. If it's *not* persuasive, then the skeptical theist's appeals, via D', to the great cognitive gap are not adequately motivated and can be dismissed. If, on the other hand, this motivation *is* persuasive, it leads to a global skepticism for the skeptical theist.

Suppose that in response the skeptical theist says, "Yes, considering the limitations in our evidence, the total evidence might contain reasons we don't, or even can't, know or understand. So drawing conclusions about all the reasons from our limited sampling of reasons does not give us any guarantee that our beliefs or conclusions will be correct. Still, since we can do no better when deciding what to believe, we must make do and accept such *prima facie* justifications for our beliefs." This may or may not be the right response to make to total evidence skepticism. But even if it is, it won't help the skeptical theist, since this type of response would leave premise 1 as *prima facie* justified, which is the most the atheologian ever claimed for it. So to avoid leaving premise 1 unscathed, the skeptical theist would need some respectable ground for treating premise 1 *differently* from other kinds of claims. And, as we've shown above, this doesn't seem plausible. The skeptical theist's motivation for embracing D' came from making humbling comparisons between our reasons and the reasons God might have, but we have shown that this point can be detheologized and translated into the total evidence requirement. Further, it seems that well-founded notions of God's nature are perfectly amenable to extending D' well beyond the moral reasoning in theodicy cases. Thus, attempts to dam the creep fail.

As a final strategy of creep-resistance, a skeptical theist might seek to *differentiate* the beliefs they wish to maintain (distinguished from the atheologian's premise-1 claim) by advancing a common-sensist view regarding a broad class of beliefs. This is, in fact, how Michael Bergmann replies to the Schellenbergian skeptical argument. Bergmann argues that, even with the total evidence requirement, many beliefs remain immune to skeptical jeopardy: "It's true that I don't have reflective access to the total evidence bearing on whether I exist or on whether I have hands or on whether I had orange juice for breakfast

today or whether $2+2=4$ or whether I'm in extreme pain,"⁷ Bergmann admits. However, according to Bergmann, "in each of these cases I have knowledge or reasonable belief from which I can infer certain facts about the total evidence bearing on these propositions. For example, I can reasonably believe the total evidence supports the claim that $2+2=4$. I reasonably believe this even though I don't have reflective access to the total evidence bearing on that claim."⁸ The success of this approach as an anti-skeptical strategy depends on what Bergmann calls the "epistemic force" of the claim in question (e.g., $2+2=4$ or that one had orange juice for breakfast). Bergman holds that from that epistemic force of the claim, one is able to make inferences about the status of the total evidence:

The point is just that from the reasonable belief that p , one can infer that the total evidence does not include a successful proof that p is false (since if p is true, the total evidence supports p , in which case it does not include a *successful* proof that p is false).⁹

So, on Bergmann's view, the requirement of total evidence does not provide a successful undercutting defeater for the kinds of beliefs targeted by a global skeptical creep, because those targeted beliefs enjoy sufficient, intuitively-available "epistemic force" to repel any such skeptical assault. As Bergmann sees it, the defeat a requirement like D' has for *the inference* is that D' is a requirement for *inductions*, but the epistemic force of the cases Bergmann has in mind are not instances of induction, but rather cases of non-inferential justification or intuition. Yet, as we've already argued, D' *does no work at all for the skeptical theist without the appeal to the great cognitive gap*. And it is that appeal to the great cognitive gap that is the bull in the china shop for the skeptical theist. As we put it before, once one accepts the existence of the great cognitive gap, one no longer has any guarantee that one will always have epistemically adequate access to the total evidence of *any* relevant domain of inquiry, whether induction-based or not. And we have well-founded theological reasons (from the parent, monarch, and craftsperson analogies earlier) to hold that there are defeaters for a wide range of these non-inferentially justified beliefs. To hold that the reasons we have implies that there are no reasons that run counter seems as manifestly impertinent as *the inference*.

⁷ Michael Bergmann, "Theism and Total Evidence Skepticism" in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, eds. Dougherty and McBrayer, 209-220.

⁸ Bergmann, "Theism and Total Evidence Skepticism," 215.

⁹ Bergmann, "Theism and Total Evidence Skepticism," 217.

By our lights, Bergmann's common-sensist line seems out of step with precisely what is *skeptical* about skeptical theism. The kind of *epistemic humility* which seems to drive skeptical theism in its retort to atheological presumption and hubris does not seem to fit well with Bergmann's casual confidence in the "epistemic force" of his beliefs.¹⁰ In other words, Bergmann's epistemic claims appear bold given the scope of challenges consistent with skeptical theism's appeal to the great cognitive gap. Again, recalling our analogies from the previous section, if God is like a parent or a monarch or an artificer, then there may be *many* things we think are simple, things which we will think we have no problem understanding, but which are, in fact, complex and significantly different from what we believe them to be, indeed perhaps even such as to be beyond our understanding. Appearances may be managed, evidence curated, functions engineered.¹¹ For the sake of argument, we can even concede that any ignorance or false beliefs humans are subjected to could all be for the good, but that point does not undercut the skeptical worry that *a beneficent god might allow such ignorance or false beliefs as products of intuition or common sense*. Thus, those simple Moorean cases Bergmann reviews, by our lights, are all in the same boat as those *prima facie* justified commitments driving the atheological argument from evil. Let us grant that they have initial epistemic plausibility, but in light of the well-founded commitments to what God's role would be, were He to exist, those beliefs are not *ultima facie* justified for the skeptical theist, because they do not, given the cognitive gulf between us and God, provide skeptical theists with any grounds for supposing they enjoy epistemically adequate access in the relevant domains.

Notice, further, that it seems open to the atheologian to take Bergmann's line of argument as a cue and apply it to the premises for the evidential argument from evil. One might say, e.g., that there is *significant epistemic force* for the thought that *there's no excuse for allowing some particular evils*, or that *some evils*

¹⁰ See, for example, Todd Long's case for "an epistemic position of humility before God" in "Minimal Skeptical Theism," in *Skeptical Theism; New Essays*, eds. Dougherty and McBrayer, 71.

¹¹ We also hasten to add that there is a good deal of literature on whether the gods lie to and deceive humans full-stop. It seems that there is Biblical reason to think so, as it seems that God intentionally sends delusions (2 Thessalonians 2:11); and God sends prophets that He has deceived (Ezekiel 14:9). Further, it seems that gods, qua gods, are perfectly capable of and willing to deceive humans. Homer's gods, the Norse gods, and so on, in fact, provide unique reasons for skepticism in light of their inclinations and abilities. See Michael Forster's account of the Homeric reasons for skepticism in "Homeric Contributions to Skepticism," in *Skepticism: Historical and Contemporary Inquiries*, eds. G. Anthony Bruno and A. C. Rutherford (New York: Routledge, 2018), 7-23.

are clearly gratuitous. The problem of evil literature is replete with stories that seem to us to fit the bill, possessing the same kind of initial epistemic plausibility as Bergmann's cases. So what is to prevent the atheologian from then running the Bergmann-style argument that, since there's reason to hold premise 1 is true, we can legitimately infer that there's reason to hold that there are no defeaters in the total evidence? Surely it is reasonably intuitive to say that some things that have happened are so bad, *there's no excuse* for allowing them, and that thesis is true not as a matter of induction, but as a matter of assessing the kind of bad that has transpired. That is, there's a difference between saying that there is no reason that could justify some evil because one has surveyed a set of reasons and they fail and saying there is no excuse for some evil because the evil is so intuitively egregious—to try to justify it would fail to honor the wrong done. That's the epistemic force of the atheologian's view that there aren't God-justifying reasons for those evils. Of course, we think the skeptical theist will respond that the atheologian's Bergmann-style epistemic force argument fails because of the well-founded notion of what God is supposed to be, viz. a being so inconceivably cognitively superior to us that we are not justified in relying on what seems initially epistemically plausible to *us* as a guide to what's ultimately true. But, again, given that same well-founded commitment and the resulting position of epistemic humility, we have argued that the cases Bergmann highlights are subject to the same response. All of the instances require a background of theological induction, which *ex hypothesi*, is unfounded. Creep ensues.

6. Conclusion

The epistemic principle to which skeptical theists implicitly appeal, when deployed in conjunction with their appeal to the great cognitive gap between humans and God, proves to be problematically demanding and thereby generates global skepticism. We think that skeptical theists will likely find the broader skeptical consequences of their view unpalatable. For their part, they would surely wish to keep a good deal of their theological and moral views in place, and they most certainly would blanch at global epistemic collapse. As such, the creep problem for skeptical theism is a form of 'proves too much' objection to a dialectical opponent. Of course, such arguments depend on our interlocutors actually holding that the broadening skepticism *is* too much. But if our arguments convert the skeptical theist into a broader kind of skeptic, we (who are both sympathetic with the skeptics) might say this is a fortuitous conclusion.