

The parent–child analogy and the limits of skeptical theism

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Abstract I draw on the literature on skeptical theism to develop an argument against Christian theism based on the widespread existence of suffering that appears to its sufferer to be gratuitous and is combined with the sense that God has abandoned one or never existed in the first place. While the core idea of the argument (that the existence of a certain sort of suffering casts doubt on the existence of God) is hardly novel, key elements of the argument are importantly different from other influential arguments against Christian theism. After explaining that argument, I make the case that the argument is untouched by traditional skeptical theism. I then consider (DePoe’s, in: *Skeptical theism: new essays*, 2014) positive skeptical theism, arguing that while DePoe’s view might provide a response to my argument, it entangles the theist in worries about divine deception. Because traditional skeptical theism and DePoe’s positive skeptical theism constitute the most promising extant strategies for answering my argument, the argument constitutes a serious challenge for the Christian theist. My overall aim, then, is to draw on various strands of the skeptical theism literature to present a challenge for all Christian theists, not just those in the skeptical theist camp, while at the same time revealing some important limitations of skeptical theism.

Keywords Skeptical theism · Evil · Rowe · Wykstra · Bergmann · DePoe

Introduction

Many evils in the world present themselves to those with the requisite concepts as *gratuitous*—that is, as being such that there is no reason that would justify an omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect God in permitting them. Putting things

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a bit more precisely, we can say that *intellectual appearances* or seemings in Michael Huemer's sense (2005, pp. 101–106) that a particular evil is gratuitous are common.¹ Presumably there is no necessity in this; it might have been the case that evil typically does not present itself to us as gratuitous and does not present itself to us as not gratuitous, just as, for example, when I perceive a table from across the room, the table does not present itself to me as the sort of thing God has good reason to permit to exist nor does it present itself to me as the sort of thing God does not have good reason to permit to exist. Similarly, and perhaps somewhat more relevantly, our pleasures do not typically present themselves to us as gratuitous and they do not typically present themselves to us as not gratuitous. However, the plain fact is that evil often does present itself to us gratuitous.² One consequence (and indication) of this important fact is that in the extensive and ever-growing literature on the evidential version of the problem of evil and the skeptical theist response to that problem one finds significant disagreement about whether it is ever reasonable for us to believe that our world contains evil that is *actually* gratuitous but one finds wide agreement on the fact that our world contains plenty of evil that *appears* to be gratuitous.³

Of particular importance to the present essay is the fact that many human beings routinely experience intense and prolonged suffering that seems to them to be gratuitous while at the same time feeling that God has abandoned them in their suffering or that God never existed in the first place. Such experiences are by no means limited to non-believers; Mother Teresa and C.S. Lewis are just two prominent examples of Christian theists who have undergone such suffering. Mother Teresa suffered from a deep crisis of faith during roughly the last forty years of her life. At one point she wrote to a spiritual advisor that “I just long and long for God—and then it is that I feel—He does not want me—He is not there. ... Sometimes—I just hear my own heart cry out—‘My God’ and nothing else comes. The torture and pain I can’t explain” (Kolodiejchuk and Teresa 2007, p. 2). Lewis experienced a similar (though much shorter) crisis while grieving the death of his wife. Lewis wrote:

Meanwhile, where is God? ... [G]o to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean? (2009 [1961], pp. 17–18).

¹ Note that evils can seem gratuitous in this sense even to those whose considered judgment is that there are no gratuitous evils (contra Benton et al. 2015, 21), just as, for example, a stick submerged in water can appear bent even when one believes that it is straight.

² Indeed, as Dougherty (2008) notes, “the sense that there are horrendous gratuitous evils is, for many of us, *overwhelming*” (p. 175).

³ I am *not*, of course, suggesting that it is uncontroversial that we are entitled to claim that there appears to be gratuitous evil in the sense of ‘appears’ governed by Wykstra’s CORNEA (1984, p. 85); *that* claim is controversial. Again, my claim is the weaker claim that intellectual seemings that evil (or particular evils) is (or are) gratuitous are widespread.

In this essay, I draw on the literature on skeptical theism to develop an argument against Christian theism based on the widespread existence of the sort of suffering just described. While the core idea of the argument (that the existence of a certain sort of suffering casts doubt on the existence of God) is hardly novel, key elements of the argument are importantly different from other influential arguments against Christian theism. After explaining that argument, I make the case that the argument is untouched by traditional skeptical theism. I then consider John DePoe's (2014) positive skeptical theism, arguing that while DePoe's view might provide a response to my argument, it entangles the theist in worries about divine deception. Because traditional skeptical theism and DePoe's positive skeptical theism constitute the most promising extant strategies for answering my argument, the argument constitutes a serious challenge for the Christian theist. My overall aim, then, is to draw on various strands of the skeptical theism literature to present a challenge for all Christian theists, not just those in the skeptical theist camp.

Skeptical theism

Skeptical theism has, as its name suggests, a skeptical component and a theistic component. While standard formulations of skeptical theism identify the theistic component as the claim that the God of Perfect Being Theology (an essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect creator and sustainer of the universe) exists, in this essay I take the theistic component of skeptical theism to be the claim that the *Christian* God exists. The Christian God, as I understand it here, has all the attributes of the God of Perfect Being Theology as well as some distinctively Christian attributes, for example being Triune, having become incarnate and subsequently crucified and resurrected, and so on. I make this stipulation because (a) the target of the argument I will advance is Christian theism, (b) the main contemporary proponents of skeptical theism are Christian philosophers, and (c) it would needlessly complicate matters to have two conceptions of God in play in the discussion that follows. Accordingly, throughout the rest of this essay 'God' should be understood to mean the Christian God as defined above.

It is less clear how best to characterize the skeptical component of skeptical theism but a common theme among proponents of skeptical theism is that we are not in a good position to assess the completeness of our own axiological knowledge. Michael Bergmann's prominent formulation (2001, 2009, 2012, 2014) has it that the core of the skeptical component is the claim that we have no good reason for thinking that the goods, evils, and entailments between good and evils that we know of are representative of all goods, evils, and entailments between them. Howard-Snyder's (2009) slightly different formulation has it that "we should be in doubt about whether the goods we know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are" (18).⁴ As a first draft of the skeptical component of skeptical theism, then, consider the following:

⁴ The differences between Bergmann's and Howard-Snyder's formulations are not important here but for a helpful discussion of them, see Howard-Snyder (2014, pp. 296–298).

(SC1) It would not be surprising if there are possible goods, evils, and entailments between good and evil that are beyond our ken (but not beyond the ken of an omniscient God).⁵

Skeptical theism arose in contemporary philosophy in response to a particular kind of argument against the existence of God, the so-called “evidential argument from evil”. Although the basic elements of the evidential argument and the skeptical theist’s response to it have been rehearsed in the literature many times, it is worth examining them one more time for reasons that will emerge shortly. Rowe’s (1979) original and influential formulation of the evidential argument from evil goes roughly as follows: there are instances of intense suffering that are *inscrutable* (i.e. such that, despite having given the matter some thought, we can see nothing that would justify God in permitting them)⁶; so, probably those instances of suffering are gratuitous; therefore, probably, God does not exist. The argument employs the inference (often called the “noseeum inference”) from the existence of inscrutable evil to the probable existence of gratuitous evil. Skeptical theists claim that the noseeum inference fails; according to them, the truth of the skeptical component of skeptical theism means that the presence of inscrutable evil in the world is no indication at all (or at best a very weak indication) of the existence of gratuitous evil.⁷

Although Rowe’s official argument focuses on the existence of inscrutable suffering of any kind, in the course of defending that argument he offered a specific example of inscrutable suffering—the now-famous case of a fawn that is trapped in a forest fire, “horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering” (1979, p. 337). What seems not to have been explicitly recognized in the skeptical theism literature is the significance of the distinction between the two following sorts of arguments⁸:

General evidential argument: There are inscrutable evils; so, probably there are gratuitous evils; therefore, probably God does not exist.

Specific evidential argument: Specific evil E is inscrutable; so, probably specific evil E is gratuitous; therefore, probably God does not exist.

⁵ Though (SC1) does not correspond exactly with either Bergmann’s or Howard-Snyder’s formulation, I think it is close enough for present purposes and is slightly less cumbersome than their formulations. Whenever I consider variations on (SC1) below I provide corresponding variations using Bergmann’s and Howard-Snyder’s terminology in the notes.

⁶ A distinction that is sometimes blurred in discussions of skeptical theism is the distinction between *inscrutable* evils and *apparently gratuitous* evils. An evil is *inscrutable* for a given person just in case that person, having given the matter some thought, can see no good reason that would justify God in permitting the evil. An evil is *apparently gratuitous* for a given person just in case it seems to that person that the evil is gratuitous. To see the distinction between inscrutable and apparently gratuitous evils, notice that it is possible for someone to know *that* there is a good reason for the existence of a given evil without knowing *what* that reason is. In such a case, the evil in question might be inscrutable but not apparently gratuitous for that person.

⁷ The differences among skeptical theists on this particular point won’t matter for my purposes, but for a helpful discussion of such differences see Dougherty (2014, p. 1.2).

⁸ Although some have come close—e.g. Schellenberg (2006) [1993], pp. 90–1 and Coffman (2014).

Corresponding to these two kinds of arguments are two kinds of noseem inferences—a *general* noseem inference from (a) there are some inscrutable evils or other to (b) probably, there are some gratuitous evils or other and a *specific* noseem inference from (c) evil E is inscrutable to (d) probably, evil E is gratuitous.

The distinction between these two kinds of evidential arguments and noseem inferences is important because the general noseem inference is undermined by a more modest version of skepticism than is required to undermine noseem inferences of the specific variety. The implicit assumption underlying the general noseem inference is something like this: if there were no gratuitous evils, there wouldn't be any inscrutable evils either. That is a rather strong claim; it says that if there were God-justifying reasons for permitting all the evils in the world, then *all* such God-justifying reasons would be within our ken. I grant that (SC1) is strong enough to cast doubt on that assumption and hence (SC1) undermines the general noseem inference: if it wouldn't be surprising if there are goods, evils, and entailments between them beyond our ken, then our failure to see justifying reasons for God's permitting all the evils of the world is little indication that no such justifying reasons exist. But (SC1) does not similarly undermine noseem inferences of the specific type. To see this, consider the claim that (SC1a) it would not be surprising if there are possible goods, evils, and entailments between good and evil that are beyond the ken of human beings (but not beyond the ken of an omniscient God) *but it would be surprising if any such possible goods, evils, or entailments had anything to do with fawns*.⁹ And now consider the following argument:

The Bambi argument: The suffering of Rowe's fawn ("Bambi") is inscrutable; so, probably Bambi's suffering is gratuitous; therefore, probably God does not exist.

The Bambi argument employs the *Bambi noseem inference*: Bambi's suffering is inscrutable, so probably Bambi's suffering is gratuitous. That inference rests on the implicit assumption that if Bambi's suffering weren't gratuitous, it probably wouldn't be inscrutable. (SC1a) supports rather than weakens that claim, and hence (SC1a) supports rather than undermines the Bambi noseem inference and so supports rather than refutes the Bambi argument. Since (SC1) is compatible with (SC1a), it follows that (SC1) fails to undermine the Bambi argument. Because the skeptical component of skeptical theism is supposed to be robust enough to undermine not just the general evidential argument but also arguments of the specific type (like the Bambi argument), (SC1) does not adequately capture the skeptical component of skeptical theism. What is needed is a stronger claim, like the following:

⁹ Following Bergmann's formulation: we have no good reason for thinking that the goods, evils, and entailments between them within our ken are representative of all goods, evils, and entailments between them *but we do have good reason for thinking that none of the goods, evils, or entailments between them beyond our ken have anything to do with fawns*. And following Howard-Snyder's formulation: we should be in doubt about whether the goods we know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are *but we should be confident that none of the goods there are is connected with the suffering of fawns*.

(SC2) Every actual instance of inscrutable evil, E, is such that it would not be surprising if there are possible goods, evils, or entailments between good and evil that are beyond the ken of human beings (but not beyond the ken of an omniscient God) that would justify God in permitting E.¹⁰

Proponents of skeptical theism often present the skeptical component as being a modest claim that all reasonable parties to the debate ought to accept (see e.g. Bergmann 2001, p. 279). However, while that might be true of (SC1), it is far from clear that it is true of (SC2). After all, what (SC2) says is that every actual inscrutable evil is such that it would not be surprising if it were not gratuitous, a claim that atheists can hardly be expected to find uncontroversial.¹¹ More importantly, as I show in the next section, there is good reason to think that (SC2) is false.

The parent–child analogy

A prominent theme in Christian thought is the alleged analogy between the relationship between parents and children on the one hand and God and humans on the other. Dougherty (2012, 2014) has examined the role of this analogy in the debate between proponents and critics of skeptical theism. Dougherty’s discussion reveals that proponents of skeptical theism tend to appeal to one aspect of the parent–child relationship whereas some critics of skeptical theism appeal to a different aspect of that same relationship. Parents often do things for reasons that are beyond the ken of their children; defenders of skeptical theism often appeal to that aspect of the parent–child relationship. For example, in the first contemporary exposition and defense of what has come to be known as skeptical theism, Stephen Wykstra suggests that God’s “wisdom is to ours, roughly as an adult human’s is to a one-month-old infant’s” (1984, p. 88).¹² Therefore, claims Wykstra, “if we think carefully about the sort of being theism proposes for our belief, it is entirely expectable—given what we know of our cognitive limits—that the goods by virtue of which this Being allows known suffering should very often be beyond our ken” (1984, p. 91).

At the same time, however, loving parents generally try to avoid allowing their children to endure prolonged and intense suffering without letting their children

¹⁰ Following Bergmann’s formulation: every inscrutable evil E is such that we have no good reason for thinking that there isn’t some good, evil, or entailment between good and evil beyond our ken that would justify God in permitting E. And following Howard-Snyder’s formulation: every instance of inscrutable evil E is such that we should be in doubt about whether there is some good beyond our ken that would justify God in permitting E. Let’s say that x has F = x is an inscrutable evil such that it wouldn’t be surprising if there are hidden goods, evils, or connections between them that would justify God in permitting x. (SC1) says that some x or other is F; (SC2) says that all xs are F. From (a) some x or other is F it of course does not follow that (b) Bambi’s suffering is F.

¹¹ Benton, Hawthorne, and Isaacs make a similar point in their 2015, p. 27.

¹² As Michael Almeida points out, Wykstra’s mention of a one-month-old infant probably overstates things a bit: “Infants haven’t the slightest idea that their parents are rational, mammalian, or conscious. ... But we would like to credit ourselves with knowing that God is at least conscious, rational, and good” (2014, p. 126).

know what the point of the suffering is.¹³ That is at least partly because, as Dougherty points out, “[o]ne’s not understanding why one’s suffering is occurring is a constituent, perhaps the key constituent, of one’s overall suffering which makes it almost unbearable at times” (2012, p. 21). One might think that if a loving parent is unable for some reason to explain to her child the point of the suffering, she will at least try to comfort her child with her presence or let her child know *that* there is a good reason for the suffering (even if she cannot explain what that reason is). At the very least, a loving parent will try to avoid allowing her child to endure prolonged and intense suffering that seems to the child to be gratuitous while at the same time feeling that his parent has abandoned him or never existed in the first place.¹⁴ Yet the plain fact is that human beings routinely endure prolonged and intense suffering that seems to them to be gratuitous while at the same time feeling that God has abandoned them or never existed in the first place (call this “apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment”). Consider, then, the following argument:

The argument from apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment

1. A loving parent would never permit her children to experience prolonged, intense, and apparently gratuitous suffering together with a sense she has abandoned them or never existed in the first place if she could avoid doing so.
2. If the Christian God exists, then the God-human relationship is relevantly like the parent–child relationship.
3. So, if the Christian God exists, then He never permits humans to experience apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment if He can avoid doing so (from 1 and 2).
4. But if the Christian God exists, then He does permit His children to experience apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment when He could avoid doing so.
5. Therefore, the Christian God does not exist (from 3 and 4).¹⁵

¹³ William Rowe (2001, pp. 298–299, 2006, p. 87) makes some remarks along similar lines.

¹⁴ The claim I advance here is distinct from the claim criticized by Long (2014, p. 68); his criticism does not apply to this principle.

¹⁵ One important way that this argument differs from the argument in Dougherty (2012) is that Dougherty’s target is skeptical theism only (he argues that the theistic component casts doubt on the skeptical component) whereas my target is both skeptical theism and Christian theism. Though my argument bears some affinity to the argument from divine hiddenness (Schellenberg 2006 [1993] and Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002) or divine silence (Rea 2009), it is importantly different from that argument. One way to see that the two arguments or problems differ is to follow van Inwagen’s (2002) strategy for distinguishing the problem of divine hiddenness and the problem of evil, i.e. to demonstrate that the problem of apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment could arise in a world in which there is no problem of divine hiddenness. Van Inwagen points out that the problem of divine hiddenness could arise in a secular utopia that was free of suffering; such a world would also be a world in which the problem of apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment does not arise. Furthermore, imagine a world in which God has provided clear evidence of His existence to everyone by way of signs and wonders or divine revelation or religious experience or philosophical argument. It might be the case that many people in such a world are nevertheless subject to episodes of apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment. That this is so is illustrated by the case of C.S. Lewis, who believed that God had provided clear evidence of His existence (evidence that Lewis took himself to possess) and yet experienced an episode of apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment. As Lewis’s case demonstrates, it can *seem* to

The first premise of the argument is offered as an intuitively plausible claim about the nature of parents who love their children. Part of what it is to love one's children is to want to spare them from the particularly disturbing and isolating type of suffering described in (1).¹⁶ The second premise is simply an assertion of the alleged analogy between the parent–child relationship and the God–human relationship. The first two premises do not entail the third; rather, the idea is that the truth of (1) and (2) means that (3) is probably true as well. The stronger the analogy is between the parent–child relationship and the God–human relationship, the more (1) and (2) together support (3). Of course, analogies are just analogies so it would be silly to think that the God–human relationship corresponds perfectly with the parent–child relationship. For example, it would be absurd to argue against the existence of the Christian God on the grounds that if He existed He would teach all of His affluent American children how to drive when they reach the age of fifteen. However, many theists who appeal to the parent–child analogy plainly think that it provides us with at least some guidance about how God is likely to interact with us. As Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser point out, “one’s operative analogies can make a big difference in what one expects of a perfectly loving being” (2002, p. 8). An obvious illustration of that point in the present context is the skeptical theist’s appeal to the analogy to support her claim that God’s reasons for action will often be beyond our ken. And John Hick and C.S. Lewis both accuse some critics of Christianity of failing to take the parent–child analogy seriously enough and of thinking of relation between God and humanity as more like the relation between pet-owner and pet (Hick 2010 [1966], p. 257) or the relation between indulgent grandfather and grandchild Lewis (2001 [1940], pp. 31–32). According to Hick and Lewis, recognizing that God is more like a loving father than a pet-owner or indulgent grandparent provides a more accurate understanding of how God interacts with us. What all of these thinkers accept is the view that an accurate analogy between the God–human relationship and some other relationship can provide guidance regarding God’s treatment of us. I agree and would add that while a wide range of analogies have been used to shed light on God’s relationship to humanity, the parent–child analogy is not merely one analogy among many. Rather, it is a central and prominent analogy that lies at the heart of much Christian thought. I suggest furthermore that the desire to avoid permitting one’s children to experience apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment is a central element of the parent–child relationship. Therefore, premises (1) and (2) strongly support (3), though they do not entail it. The fourth premise is based on the plausible claims that

Footnote 15 continued

one that God never existed even while one *believes* that God exists. Importantly, an adequate solution the problem of divine hiddenness is not necessarily also an adequate answer to the argument I have advanced here because to explain why God does not do more to make His existence obvious is not necessarily sufficient to explain why He does permit apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment.

¹⁶ There are many different types of horrendous suffering in our world. I do not claim that this type of suffering is the most horrendous (or even that it is always horrendous); rather, I claim that it is a type of suffering that loving parents find particularly troubling for their children to experience—and so, by analogy, it is a type of suffering that a loving God would find particularly troubling for humans to experience.

apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment occurs and that an omnipotent being could prevent all such apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment.

Because the argument does not employ any sort of noseeum inference, on the face of things at least skeptical theism provides no response to it.¹⁷ While the argument does employ certain claims about what God would not do, the argument's proponent (me) seeks to establish those claims not by way of inductive generalization from the apparent absence of any justification for apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment but rather by drawing on the parent–child analogy. This use of analogical reasoning rather than inductive generalization is an important difference between this argument and Rowe's evidential argument. Therefore, the skeptical theist who thinks that skeptical theism makes trouble for this argument owes us an explanation of how skeptical theism might afford a response to the argument. Here is one putative such explanation that is worth considering: skeptical theism entails that (g) it would not be surprising if there were some hidden good(s), evil(s), or connection between them that would justify God in permitting apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment and the truth of (g) undermines the inference from (1) and (2) to (3).

There are a number of important points to be made about that line of argument. First, (SC1) does not entail (g) and hence (SC1) is too weak to support such a response.¹⁸ Second, reflection on the parent–child analogy seems to support something like the following claim:

(SC1b) It would not be surprising if there are possible goods, evils, and entailments between good and evil that are beyond the ken of human beings (but not beyond the ken of an omniscient God) *but it would be surprising if any such possible goods, evils, or entailments were to justify God in permitting apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment and God were to permit apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment on the basis of such justification.*¹⁹

While loving parents often do things for reasons their children don't understand, I submit that there is nothing in our knowledge of the parent–child relationship to

¹⁷ On skeptical theism's ineffectiveness in addressing other contemporary arguments from evil, see Draper (2014a,b), Tucker (2014), and Schellenberg (2014, 191–196).

¹⁸ Here is another possible formulation of the skeptical component of skeptical theism that does not entail (g): we have no good reason for thinking/we should be in doubt about whether: our knowledge of goods, evils, and the connections between them indicates that there is nothing that could justify God in permitting apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment. It is one thing to claim that *nothing in our knowledge of good, evil, and the connections between them* gives us reason to believe p; it is something else to claim that *nothing at all* gives us reason to believe p.

¹⁹ Following Bergmann's formulation: we have no good reason for thinking that the goods, evils, and entailments between them within our ken are representative of all goods, evils, and entailments between them *but we do have good reason for thinking that none of the goods, evils, or entailments between them beyond our ken would justify God in permitting apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment (and that even if they did God wouldn't act on such justification).* And following Howard-Snyder's formulation: we should be in doubt about whether the goods we know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are *but we should be confident that none of the goods there are would justify God in permitting apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment (and even if they did God wouldn't act on such justification).*

support the claim that parents could find themselves justified in permitting their children to experience apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment (and be motivated to act by such justification) and that there is much in our knowledge of that relationship to support the claim that loving parents simply do not treat their children in such a way.²⁰ To the extent that the parent–child analogy supports (SC1b), it supports rather than undermines the argument from apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment. Finally, while (SC2) does entail (g), there is little reason to accept (SC2). Since the parent–child analogy supports (SC1b) and (SC1b) is incompatible with (SC2), the parent–child analogy tells against rather than for (SC2).²¹

It appears, then, that the traditional sort of skeptical theism advanced by Wykstra, Bergmann, and Howard-Snyder (among others) provides no response to the argument from apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment and that the parent–child analogy to which skeptical theists (and indeed Christian theists of all stripes) often appeal supports that argument. In light of the popularity of skeptical theism as a response to non-deductive arguments from evil, this is an important result. There is, however, a different response to the argument found in the skeptical theism literature that is worth considering. That response is the topic of the next section.

DePoe's positive skeptical theism

DePoe (2014) has recently proposed an explanation for God's permission of apparently gratuitous suffering in defending what he calls *positive skeptical theism*. Drawing primarily on the work of John Hick, Paul Moser, and Richard Swinburne, DePoe proposes that there are some important goods that God can bring about only if He makes room for a certain degree of uncertainty on the part of human beings about His existence; such goods require *epistemic distance* between us and God. The goods in question are “a genuine, loving response to God in faith” and “some of the greatest human acts of love and compassion” (DePoe 2014, pp. 38–39). Furthermore, claims DePoe, God's introduction of apparently gratuitous evils into the world is an essential part of God's method of producing the requisite epistemic distance between us and Him (DePoe 2014, p. 40).²² To the extent that DePoe's

²⁰ I would be not at all surprised if some sufficiently creative philosopher were able to imagine a case in which a parent would be justified in permitting her child to experience apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment. However, I suspect that the circumstances of any such case would be such as to occur very rarely or never in the course of a typical parent–child relationship. If that is correct, then my argument can survive the existence of such cases if it is modified as follows: in premises (1) and (3), replace ‘never’ with ‘rarely’; in premise (4), replace ‘does permit’ with ‘routinely and regularly permits’.

²¹ One attempt to support skeptical theism that does not appeal to the parent–child analogy is Alston 1996. However, as Dougherty points out, “Alston's religious tradition—Christianity—is emphatic that God is analogous to a loving Father, so it is hard to see how members of that tradition ... can distance themselves from it” (2012, p. 24, n. 5).

²² This aspect of DePoe's account strikes me as dubious; couldn't God create epistemic distance simply by hiding or remaining silent, just as proponents of the problem of divine hiddenness claim that He does? But I will not pursue that criticism here.

proposal is plausible, it makes trouble for the argument from apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment by highlighting an important disanalogy between the parent–child relationship and the God–human relationship: human beings can attain their full potential within the God–human relationship only if epistemic distance exists between them and God whereas epistemic distance between children and their parents is not required for children to attain their full potential within the parent–child relationship. Furthermore, if DePoe is right, then epistemic distance between us and God requires God’s permission of apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment and hence apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment actually contribute to our flourishing. In this way, positive skeptical theism may undermine the inference from (1) and (2) to (3) in the argument from apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment.

It is widely held by theistic and non-theistic philosophers alike that if God exists, then there are no evils that are actually gratuitous because God ensures that the only evils that exist are ones that He has good reason to permit to exist.²³ Accordingly, I take that claim as an assumption.²⁴ Thus, on DePoe’s account, God brings it about both that (a) no evils are gratuitous and (b) many evils seem to many of us to be gratuitous. Consequently, DePoe’s positive skeptical theism implies that if God exists, then He has set things up so that at least many of us are subject to systematically misleading appearances about the true nature of much of the world’s evils and hence, to that extent, God is a deceiver. On DePoe’s account, God creates epistemic distance not merely by remaining to some degree hidden or silent; as DePoe emphasizes, a central element of positive skeptical theism is the idea that God intentionally brings it about that there are evils that appear to be gratuitous but are actually not gratuitous. As DePoe puts it, “the appearance of gratuitous evil is the most effective way to create this epistemic distance” (2014, p. 38).

Many theists will find positive skeptical theism’s implication that God deceives us unacceptable as it is widely believed that deception is incompatible with moral perfection. Such theists cannot avail themselves of DePoe’s positive skeptical theism to answer the argument from apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment and are, as far as I can see, left with no reply to that argument. Suppose, however, that divine deception is compatible with divine moral perfection, perhaps for the sorts of reasons I have given elsewhere (Wielenberg 2010, 2014). In that case, the claim that God engages in widespread deception about the nature of much of the evil in the world is grist for the mill of a certain objection that has been raised against traditional skeptical theism. The objection, roughly, is that skeptical theism leads to skepticism about divine revelation by suggesting that just as God may have hidden reasons for permitting inscrutable evils, He may similarly have hidden reasons for deceiving us (see Beaudoin 2005; Wielenberg 2010, 2014; Hudson 2012). The worry is that “skeptical theism implies that, for all we know, God’s word constitutes not divine revelation but rather a justified, divine lie” (Wielenberg 2010, p. 520). Hudson describes the resulting predicament this way:

²³ But for one important dissent from the majority opinion, see van Inwagen (2003).

²⁴ DePoe, at any rate, appears to make this assumption (2014, pp. 39–40).

We cannot without reservation trust ... divine pronouncements—even if we simply help ourselves to the background assumptions that God exists, that God is essentially omniscient and essentially perfectly good, that God has provided us with his testimony, and that we have interpreted that testimony aright. And once we have lost this particular kind of trust in the testimony, it cannot be the source of testimonial knowledge (2012, p. 154).

This is a result that most Christian theists are likely to find unacceptable. While the worry about whether we can trust divine revelation arose in the context of traditional skeptical theism, it seems to me that it is a worry for DePoe's positive skeptical theism, for the following reason. Everything else being equal, the fact that a person has deceived us in one way makes it more reasonable for us to believe that the person deceives us in other ways as well. For example, were I to discover that, for justifying reasons beyond my ken, my parents had secretly implanted into my eyes contact lenses that systematically distort the apparent colors of objects I see, it would be reasonable for me to be more skeptical than I otherwise would be about the various things they told me to be true. After all, if they had good but hidden reason for deceiving me with respect to colors, might they not have good but hidden reason for deceiving me in other ways as well? Similarly, recognizing that God causes us to experience misleading appearances about the true nature of many of the evils in the world makes it reasonable for us to be more skeptical than we otherwise would be about the things God tells us.²⁵ Thus, while DePoe's positive skeptical theism suggests an interesting response to the argument from apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment, in so doing it entangles the theist in worries about divine deception—and that constitutes at least a strong *prima facie* reason for Christian theists to be reluctant to embrace DePoe's view.

Conclusion

The moral of the story I have told here is that traditional skeptical theism is either too weak to address the argument from apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment (as in the case of SC1) or is implausible in light of the alleged analogy between the parent–child relationship and the God-human relationship (as in the case of SC2). DePoe's positive skeptical theism suggests an interesting response to the argument but runs afoul of worries about divine deception. Furthermore, the problem with DePoe's positive skeptical theism points to a significant potential pitfall for any theistic attempt to answer the argument.²⁶ While I can hardly claim to

²⁵ On DePoe's account, God's reasons for deceiving us must remain hidden for if we come to grasp those reasons, the requisite epistemic distance between us and God collapses. For example, if I realize that a given evil only seems gratuitous to me because God wants me to be able to act more heroically by sticking to my guns in the face of such evil, any additional challenge (and hence any additional heroicism in my action) vanishes.

²⁶ Some readers might be tempted by the following line of reasoning: any adequate response to the argument from apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment will imply that God intentionally creates evils that seem gratuitous but are not and hence will imply that God is a deceiver. However, while DePoe's positive skeptical theism implies that God intends to deceive us in order to create epistemic

have established that the argument from apparently gratuitous suffering and abandonment is decisive, I do hope to have revealed some important and previously unrecognized limitations of skeptical theism as well as advanced a formidable and at least somewhat novel challenge not just to skeptical theism but to Christian theism as well.²⁷

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Footnote 26 continued

distance, another possible kind of response would claim that something about the God-human relationship requires the existence of apparently gratuitous evils but implies only that God *permits* (without *intending*) our deception. According to such a response, God would intend X and X would entail that we are deceived, but God would not intend the deception itself. I leave it to theists to work out the specifics of this sort of response.

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