

Are Skeptical Theists Really Skeptics? Sometimes Yes and Sometimes No

Justin P. McBrayer

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abstract: Skeptical theism is the view that God exists but, given our cognitive limitations, the fact that we cannot see a compensating good for some instance of evil is not a reason to think that there is no such good. Hence, we are not justified in concluding that any actual instance of evil is gratuitous, thus undercutting the evidential argument from evil for atheism. This paper focuses on the epistemic role of context and contrast classes to advance the debate over skeptical theism in two ways. First, considerations of context and contrast can be invoked to offer a novel defense of skeptical theism. Second, considerations of context can be invoked to undermine the two most serious objections to skeptical theism: the global skepticism objection and the moral objection. The gist of the paper is to defend a connection between context and contrast-driven views in epistemology with skeptical views in philosophy of religion.

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The great source of our mistake in the subject of God, and of the unbounded “license to suppose” that we allow ourselves, is that we silently think of ourselves as in the place of the supreme being, and conclude that he will always behave in the way that we would find reasonable and acceptable if we were in his situation.

~David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* §11

1. The Argument from Evil & Skeptical Theism

The argument from evil is the most plausible argument for atheism. Where ‘God’ is a maximally honorific title describing a perfect being, and where ‘gratuitous evil’ is any evil that is not necessary to secure some compensating good or prevent some evil equally bad or worse, a simple version of the argument from evil is as follows:

- (1) If God exists, there is no gratuitous evil.
- (2) But there is gratuitous evil.
- (3) Therefore, God does not exist.

The most plausible defense of the minor premise in this argument appeals to the fact that for a great many evils that we are familiar with, no matter how hard we try, we cannot see how such evils are necessary to secure some compensating good or prevent some evil equally bad or worse (*aka* the “noseeum” inference).

Skeptical theism refers to a family of views, each of which joins the metaphysical claim that God exists with an epistemic claim about why we should be skeptical of the inference in the argument from evil. Such skeptical theists insist that the fact that we cannot see a compensating good for some instance of evil does not provide a reason for thinking that there is no such good. In other words, we lack the ability to determine whether any given instance of evil is genuinely gratuitous. If the epistemic

portion of skeptical theism is true, the most plausible defense of the minor premise in the argument from evil is a failure.

Skeptical theism is experiencing something of a renaissance in recent years, and its particular brand of skepticism has been applied to other issues in philosophy of religion, including the argument from divine hiddenness (e.g. McBrayer and Swenson, forthcoming). As with all forms of skepticism, skeptical theism is controversial. Some have suggested that skeptical theism implies a general and radical skepticism (the global skepticism objection) or that skeptical theism implies a worrisome sort of moral skepticism or that it reasonably leads to moral paralysis (the moral objection).

So are skeptical theists really skeptical? Sometimes yes, and sometimes no. Better yet: skeptical theists should be skeptical when thinking about the problem of evil and less skeptical in other scenarios. A principled defense of this answer can be made by appealing to recent work in epistemology that draws on the importance of context and contrast classes. Appealing to context and contrast-driven views in epistemology advances the debate over skeptical theism in two ways. §2 invokes context and contrast classes to offer a novel defense of skeptical theism. §3 invokes context and contrast classes to undermine the two most serious objections to skeptical theism, namely the global skepticism objection and the moral objection. §4 handles some objections. The gist of the paper is to defend a connection between context and contrast class views in epistemology with skeptical views in philosophy of religion: the truth of the former provides a theoretical explanation for the truth of the latter.

2. A Novel Defense of Skeptical Theism

Skeptical theism is the conjunction of two claims, a metaphysical claim and an epistemic claim. The former is that God exists and the latter is that our not seeing a compensating good for some instance of evil is no reason for thinking that there is no such good. It is the skeptical component that matters here. The literature contains three independent defenses of the skeptical component of skeptical theism: arguments from analogy, arguments from complexity, and arguments from inductive sampling (see

McBrayer 2010).¹ Whether any of these defenses is any good is beyond the scope of the present paper. Instead, this section offers a defense of skeptical theism that does not appeal to the resources of these three standard defenses. But before doing so, it's important to see the role that context and contrast have played in recent analytic epistemology.

2.1 Context in Epistemology

Many of the leading general views in philosophy of language and epistemology are driven by context. As an example of the former, consider the semantic view widely known as contextualism. As an example of the latter, consider the epistemic view known as interest-relative invariantism. This section briefly explains each view.

According to contextualism, context determines the proposition that is expressed by a sentence like 'S knows that *P*' (DeRose 2009). On this view, the truth conditions of knowledge ascriptions vary with context, though whose context matters varies with the different accounts of contextualism.² One major reason for accepting some form of contextualism is its ability to solve skeptical paradoxes while still giving skepticism its due. The basic idea is that context affects whether or not it's true that a particular person knows something (e.g. DeRose 1995). Consider arguments like the following where 'K' is the knowledge operator and 'BIV' is the brain-in-a-vat skeptical hypothesis:

(4) K(I have hands)

(5) K(I have hands) \rightarrow K(\sim BIV)

¹ For an example of an argument from analogy, see Plantinga 1988; Wykstra 1984, 1996. For an example of an argument from complexity, see Alston 1991; Durston 2000. For an example of an argument from inductive sampling, see Bergmann 2001, 2009.

² There are at least two distinct flavors of contextualism. According to one view, the semantic value of 'knows' varies with the context of the knowledge attributor. On this view, Frank and I might both speak truly when (describing the very same occasion) he utters 'George does not know he has hands' and I utter 'George knows he has hands' on account of the fact that (owing to different contexts of utterance) we are expressing non-contradictory propositions. According to the second view, the semantic value of 'knows' is held fixed, and whether people actually know things varies according to which contexts they are in. On this view, Frank and I could not both be speaking truly about George. Thanks to Kenny Boyce for making this clear.

(6) Thus, $K(\sim BIV)$.

But many people are convinced that the conclusion is false, i.e. $\sim K(\sim BIV)$. But these same people are also convinced that the premises are true. The contextualist solves the puzzle as follows. We start out with (4) true, because it's an ordinary context. Then when we get to (5), BIV hypothesis is salient and the context shifts, so by the time we get to (6), (4) is no longer true. That explains why we don't have a valid argument with true premises but a false conclusion: (4) and (6) never have incompatible truth values in the same context at the same time.³

And while the motivation for contextualism is more or less the same for all defenders of the view, the actual mechanism that describes how and why the standards for knowledge are raised and lowered by attributor context vary widely. One of the first and (in my view) best contextualist accounts is that of David Lewis (1996). Lewis' view is that S knows that P just in case S can rule out all of the possibilities that not- P . In other words, it makes no sense for someone to assert that they know that P even though they admit that it is possible that not- P . However, Lewis' view is not a skeptical one since he thinks that the scope of 'all' is contextually restricted. In ordinary contexts, S knows that P just in case S can rule out all of the *ordinary* possibilities that not- P . However, in a skeptical context, the standards are raised to include not just ordinary possibilities but all logical possibilities. The gist is that some possibilities are properly ignored in some contexts and not others. The real work is determining the rules for when a possibility is properly ignored, and when it needs to be taken into account. For our purposes, the rule of attention is will be important: if a possibility is attended to, it cannot be properly ignored. For example, when the skeptic brings up the possibility that we are brains-in-vats, we cannot properly ignore this possibility. Thus, if we cannot rule it out, we must concede that—in the present context—we don't know that we're not brains-in-vats.

³ Thanks to Trent Dougherty for making this presentation much clearer.

Next, consider the view known as interest-relative invariantism. According to this view, context affects the standards for knowledge or justified belief. For example, whether or not *S* knows that *P* may depend on *S*'s pragmatic context, i.e. what's at stake for *S* in being right or wrong (Fantl and McGrath 2009). One major reason for accepting such a view is that it makes sense out of the intuitive idea that if one knows that *P*, it is reasonable for one to act on *P*. Recalling that Frankfurt is the capitol of Kentucky might be sufficient for you to justifiably believe this claim in the midst of a game of trivia, but it won't be enough to justify your belief if your life depends on it.⁴

There are several versions of interest relative invariantism on offer. By far the most popular are those of Hawthorne (2004) and Fantl & McGrath (2009). Each shares a common core principle: knowledge is the norm of practical reasoning. According to this norm, if *S* knows that *P*, it is rational for *S* to rely on *P* in deliberations about what to do. However, as noted above, it's obvious that whether it is rational to rely on something depends greatly on contextual factors. According to Hawthorne, "these factors will thus include (some or all of) the attention, interests, and stakes of the subject at that time," (157). One of these factors is obviously that of stakes--you may believe your car is parked in the parking lot, but it may be irrational to bet your life on it. Another important factor is described by Hawthorne as salience: if *S* thinks that *P*, but a certain counterpossibility is salient to *S*, then *S* does not know that *P* (159). This factor functions in a way isomorphic to Lewis' rule of attention with one exception: while the rule of attention was a feature of the attributor's context that affected the truth of the knowledge attribution, the salience factor is a feature of the subject's context that affects whether or not she knows (or has justified belief).

2.2 Contrast in Epistemology

Just as contextualism and interest-relative invariantism invoke context to make linguistic and/or epistemological distinctions, contrast-driven epistemologies invoke contrast classes to make epistemic

⁴ The standard example of this kind of pragmatic concern is made evident in the infamous train cases. See Cohen 1999; Fantl & McGrath 2002.

distinctions. The basic idea is that one doesn't have epistemic reasons, justified belief, knowledge, etc. *simpliciter*. Instead, all claims of reasons for belief are relative to contrast classes—all of the reasons that we have are always reasons for one thing as opposed to another. There is no such thing as a just plain *reason*. The most basic species of this genus is the view known simply as contrastivism. Some philosophers defend a contrastivism about knowledge. For example, according to Schaffer 2004, "knowledge is a ternary relation of the form K_{spq} , where q is a contrast proposition," (p. 77). Jones doesn't know that he is eating spaghetti. Rather, he knows that he eating spaghetti as opposed to eating snails. But he doesn't know that he is eating spaghetti rather than being a brain-in-a-vat. Others focus not on knowledge but on justified belief or reasons more generally. For example, according to Sinnott-Armstrong 2008, "Someone, S , is justified out of a contrast class, C , in believing a proposition, P , when and only when S is able to rule out all other members of C but is not able to rule out P ," (p. 259).

Like contextualism and interest-relative invariantism, contrastivism is often endorsed for its ability to solve various puzzles. In fact, some philosophers see contrastivism as a sort of silver bullet for philosophical disputes from epistemology to ethics to the science of explanation:

The benefits of contrastivism come not from picking sides in ancient disputes. The benefits come, instead, from clarifying issues and showing how to make progress and avoid useless squabbles. Contrastivists dissolve rather than solve traditional philosophical issues. (Sinnott-Armstrong 2008, p. 258)

But even if we just stick to epistemological concerns, the benefits of contrastivism are easily illustrated. Consider again the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis. Our current evidence gives us good reason to believe that we have hands as opposed to being amputees, but it does not give us good reason to believe that we have hands rather than being BIV's. Or consider Dretske's infamous mule case. The father at the zoo is justified in believing that the zebra-looking creature in front of him is a zebra as opposed to a giraffe. He is not justified in believing that the zebra-looking creature in front of him is a zebra as opposed to a

cleverly-disguised mule. Many philosophers find these results intuitively plausible. Hence, all reasons are reasons to believe one thing as opposed to another.

The important feature of contrastivism is that whether or not someone knows or is justified in believing a claim depends crucially on the scope of the contrast class. This is because whether or not one knows or is justified in believing a claim depends on whether or not one's evidence is adequate to rule out the alternatives. In contrast classes with only a few, modestly defined alternatives, our evidence is often sufficient to rule things out. For example, Jones's evidence is such that he knows that he is at work as opposed to at home. But in what we might call a radical or extreme contrast class, ever more skeptical scenarios are introduced with the result that our evidence is impotent to rule them out. For example, Jones's evidence is such that he doesn't know that he is at work as opposed to being a brain-in-a-vat. That's because his evidence can't rule out the possibility that he is a brain-in-a-vat.

2.3 Using Context and Contrast to Defend Skeptical Theism

Context and contrast-driven epistemologies can be used to defend skeptical theism. The idea is roughly this: the context or relevant contrast class in which we're considering the problem of evil is one in which we are not justified in believing that our evidence rules out the possibility that the evils in our world are non-gratuitous. The possibility that God might use evils for purposes beyond our ken functions as a skeptical scenario or requires a reason against an extreme contrast class.

Consider first Lewis' form of contextualism. Suppose an agnostic were considering the force of the argument from evil. According to Lewis' view, this person would know that an evil is gratuitous only if she can rule out all of the possibilities that the evil was actually necessary to secure some compensating good (or prevent some evil equally bad or worse). And recall the rule of attention: if a possibility is attended to, it cannot be properly ignored. Since the person in question is wondering about the existence of God, she is clearly paying attention to the possibility that there is a God and that he may well know about all kinds of goods, etc. that are beyond her ken. Thus, in order to know that a

particular evil is gratuitous, the person in question must be able to rule out the possibility that there is some good beyond her ken that only God knows about. But surely she can't do this. Thus, she does not know that any evil in particular is gratuitous.

Or consider interest-relative invariantism. According to this view, whether *S* knows that *P* depends on how much is at stake in whether or not *S* is right about *P*. When there is a great deal at stake, the standards for knowledge go up. Well, what's at stake in the debate over the existence of God? As Pascal rightly noted, quite a lot. This is the prudential force that underlies his (infamous) wager. Similarly, Thomas Nagel (2001) writes that even though he is an agnostic he hopes that God doesn't exist. This is because if he were to find out that God existed, this fact would have radical implications for his life and how he sees the world. And given the standard conceptions of God that pair his existence with an afterlife and potential punishment for humans, the stakes get even higher. Thus there is more at stake for us in the issue of God than virtually anything else.

Given that the stakes are so high in the debate over the existence of God, is an agnostic justified in believing that some actual evil is gratuitous? No. Because—within the context of the debate over the existence of God—settling the question of gratuitous evils has enormous practical consequences. If he's wrong about the existence of gratuitous evil, then the conclusion that God doesn't exist will not be supported. And having a false belief about the existence of God is—from a prudential standpoint—a really bad thing.⁵

And it's not just the stakes that matter. Recall Hawthorne's principle of salience: if *S* thinks that *P*, but a certain counterpossibility is salient to *S*, then *S* does not know that *P*. As in the case of contextualism, the counterpossibility on this occasion is that our cognitive and moral faculties are not up to the job of determining what God would or wouldn't do. And given the salience of this possibility, we are in no position to conclude that a given evil is gratuitous.

⁵ This claim is contentious; see objection #4 below.

Thus, appealing to these context-driven epistemologies is a way of defending skeptical theism. Where 'S' ranges over all subjects and 'E' ranges over all instances of apparently gratuitous evil, the case linking the two might be put in a simple syllogism as follows:

- 7) If S knows that E is gratuitous, then S knows that E is not necessary for the realization of a compensating good or the prevention of an evil equally bad or worse.
- 8) But, given the relevant context, S doesn't know that E is not necessary for the realization of a compensating good or the prevention of an evil equally bad or worse.
- 9) Therefore, given the relevant context, S doesn't know that E is gratuitous.⁶

(7) is true by appeal to definition. (8) can be defended by appealing to the contextual elements noted above. Even if one can know that an evil is gratuitous in ordinary contexts, considering the argument from evil places one in a different context, notably one in which the uneliminated possibility of justifications becomes salient. And, in this context, (8) is true. Thus it follows that in the context of considering the soundness of the argument from evil, (9) is true as well.

Contrastivism yields a similar result. The crucial question is whether the person considering the argument from evil can rule out the possibility that an omniscient being has reasons for allowing evils that we cannot detect. And just as our reasons or evidence are not good enough to rule out skeptical hypotheses, so, too our reasons or evidence are not good enough to rule out this hypothesis. Thus, for the person considering the argument from evil, her evidence does not justify her belief that the evils in our world are gratuitous as opposed to non-gratuitous.⁷ And since she is not justified in believing *that* claim, then she is not justified in believing the minor premise of the argument from evil.

⁶ Thanks to Trent Dougherty for making this syllogism explicit.

⁷ A contrastivist might allow, however, that the person considering the argument from evil is justified in believing that the relevant evils are not explained by any reason that we know of. In other words, she is justified in believing that the evils are gratuitous *rather than* necessary for some goods that we know of. But this premise will be too weak to generate a conclusion about the existence of God. This is because the argument from evil proposes to rule out a possibility—namely, the possibility that God exists. And once we add this possibility back to the relevant contrast class, the premise concerning the weaker contrast class is irrelevant. An example makes this apparent: as a novice watching a chess match with Gary Kasparov, I am justified in believing that his most recent move is

The punch line is this: those who are attracted to these sorts of context-driven or contrastivist epistemologies should be amenable to the skeptical theistic response to the argument from evil.

3. Context, Contrast, and Two Objections to Skeptical Theism

As noted at the outset, skeptical theism faces no shortage of objections. Two of the most prominent objections are as follows. According to the global skepticism objection, if we are skeptical about whether our inability to see a compensating good provides us with a reason to believe there is no compensating good, then by parity of reason we are committed to all sorts of crazy, wide-ranging skeptical conclusions. According to the moral objection, if we are skeptical about whether our inability to see a compensating good provides us with a reason to believe there is no compensating good, then by parity of reason we are committed to being global moral skeptics or we are somehow unable to engage in moral deliberations about what we ought to do in any given case. The two objections are similar in that each is an argument from false implication. Each objection insists that skeptical theism implies a more general kind of skepticism that is somehow objectionable. But just as appeals to context and contrast classes offer a novel defense of skeptical theism, so, too do they offer novel responses to each objection.

3.1 Responding to the Global Skepticism Objection

The global skepticism objection claims that consistent commitment to skeptical theism requires consistent commitment to global skepticism or, at least, a very nearly global skepticism. To motivate the objection, recall that in the argument from evil, defenders of the noseum inference reason as follows: after thinking hard about the matter, we can think of no reason or justification for allowing some of the evils we see in the actual world. Therefore, it is likely that there is no such reason. Skeptical theists attempt to block this inference by insisting that the mere fact that we cannot think of a

pointless *rather than* necessary for some good *that I know of*. But this fact alone won't allow me to conclude that Gary Kasparov is not good at chess.

reason or justification is NOT (in this case) a good reason for thinking that there is no such reason or justification.

Pushing this line, objectors have claimed that skeptical theists ought to be skeptical about each of the following empirical claims:

- the earth is more than 100 years old (Russell & Wykstra 1988; Russell 1996, 2004)
- there is an external world (Gale 1996)
- there are no tricky leprechauns who are constantly deceiving us (Bernstein 1998)

The idea, of course, is that each of these empirical claims relies on a noseum inference that is parallel to the one the skeptical theist objected to when it comes to the argument from evil. For example, our evidence makes it reasonable to believe that there are no tricky leprechauns constantly deceiving us because we can't find any. Skeptical theists thus face a dilemma. If noseum inferences are bad, then the skeptical theist is right about the failure of the problem of evil, but she can't know that there are no tricky leprechauns who are constantly deceiving us. If noseum inferences are good, then it is reasonable to believe that there is an external world, but, so, too is it reasonable to believe that there are gratuitous evils.

How might the skeptical theist who accepts the kinds of context and contrast-driven views noted above respond to this challenge? She should agree about these skeptical implications but shrug her shoulders in indifference. This is because an appeal to contexts and contrast classes solves (or, as Sinnott-Armstrong puts it, "dissolves") these skeptical worries. In high-stakes scenarios—when skeptical scenarios are salient, when there is a lot at stake for our practical interests, etc.—then the objector is right. The skeptical theist doesn't know that there is an external world in that context. But, of course, neither does anyone else. In everyday contexts—when skeptical scenarios are not salient, when there is little at stake for our practical interests, etc.—then the objector is wrong. The skeptical theist knows that there is an external world in those contexts just as everyone else does.

The contrastivism move is similar. The skeptical theist has a reason to think that she has hands as opposed to being an amputee. So does everyone else. The skeptical theist doesn't have a reason to think that she has hands as opposed to being a brain-in-a-vat. And neither does anyone else. So the skeptical theist can insist that when facing the argument from evil, being justified in believing the minor premise places us in a contrast class that is too extreme. No one has evidence that rules out the possibility that there are goods beyond our ken that justify God in allowing certain evils in our world. Hence, no one has reason to believe that the evils in our world are gratuitous rather than non-gratuitous.

This type of response to the objection faces two worries. First, it might seem that embracing this sort of skepticism is at odds with what we might think of as "the complete theistic package."⁸ If we have to be skeptical about whether or not there is an external world in some contexts (or against some contrast classes), then shouldn't we also be skeptical about whether or not there is a God in some contexts (or against some contrast classes)? If not the existence of God, how about other theistic claims such as claims about religious experiences, miracles, or divine revelation? The professional literature reflects a general worry about skeptical theism's implications for theistic belief and practice (Beaudoin 1998, 2005; Bergmann 2009; Gale 1996; Laraudogoitia 2000; Maitzen 2009; Rowe 2006; Wilks 2004, 2009), and there isn't the space to fully address the worry here. However, this much may be said on behalf of the response considered here: the skeptical theist who adopts the kind of context and contrast-driven views discussed here can limit her skepticism in ways that make theistic practice unobjectionable. On the one hand, such a skeptical theist must grant that she doesn't know that God exists when she is in the philosophy classroom considering various atheistic counter-possibilities. But on the other, she can know that God exists when she is at church on Sunday with fellow believers. And this seems good enough.

⁸ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* for raising this objection.

Second, it might seem that this sort of response simply amounts to biting the bullet. The skeptical theist must grant that there are a great many non-theistic propositions which, in at least some scenarios, we are not justified in believing. For example, endorsing the context and contrast-driven views of epistemology imply that in some scenarios (or against some contrast classes) we don't know that there is an external world. But this result is one that the skeptical theist who accepts these views shares with all of those who endorse context or contrast-driven epistemologies. Whether the cost is too high won't be considered here.

3.2 Responding to the Moral Objection

Like the global skepticism objection, the moral objection insists that skeptical theism implies a false result. The idea is that skeptical theism is somehow at odds with either moral deliberation (Almeida & Oppy 2003; Fales 1992; Hasker 2004; Maitzen 2009; Pereboom 2004; Piper 2007; Russell 1996) or moral knowledge (Jordan 2006, Russell 1996, Schnall 2007, Trakakis 2003) or both. The objection is roughly as follows: if we are never in a position to tell whether or not God has a reason for allowing a particular *prima facie* evil, then we are never in a position to tell whether or not we should allow a particular *prima facie* evil. For all we know, the occurrence of that evil is necessary for the existence of some compensating good. So anytime the skeptical theist is faced with the opportunity to intervene in what looks like a terrible tragedy (e.g. rape, genocide, etc.), her skepticism prevents her from engaging in moral deliberations and ultimately moral action. She ought to be agnostic about whether or not it is a good thing to intervene to stop the tragedy.

Skeptical theists have sought to block this implication with a variety of different moves (e.g. Adams 1986, Alston 1996; Bergmann 2001, 2009; Bergmann & Rea 2005; Durston 2006; Schnall 2007), but the resources of context and contrast provide an independent response to the objection. Consider the contextual response. A skeptical theist may respond to the moral objection as follows: in everyday circumstances we are able to rule out all of the live alternatives for whether or not an evil is gratuitous.

When I see a small child drowning in a pond, the possibility that he is the next Hitler is not a live possibility for me in that context. Thus, I'm not ordinarily confined to moral skepticism.

However, in skeptical contexts where we focus our attention on far-flung possibilities (i.e. the possibility that God needed this particular instance of suffering in order to achieve some great good), we cannot rule out all the live alternatives, and thus we should be moral skeptics in that limited context. Thus, just as in the debate with the global skeptic, the skeptical theist can have her cake and eat it, too. Everyday contexts are consistent with both moral knowledge and action because what is salient in such a context can be effectively ruled out. However, consideration of the argument from evil and the kinds of defenses offered by skeptical theists places us in a different context where the standards for justified belief go up. Thus I can know that I morally ought to save the drowning child while out in the woods and yet—when back in the classroom—remain agnostic about the claim that God needed the child to drown in order to accomplish some great good.

4. Objections

As with anything controversial, there are a variety of ways to challenge the application of context and contrast-driven epistemologies to a contentious view in philosophy of religion. Here are five brief objections with brief replies.

Objection #1: Context and contrast-driven views in epistemology are false. So even if there is a connection between such views and skeptical theism, this doesn't help the skeptical theist's case.

Reply: There isn't the space to defend the truth of context and contrast-driven views here. But the crux of this paper is that there is an interesting connection between such views and skeptical theism. Hence, my thesis is NOT that such views are true (I haven't defended that claim). Instead, my thesis is a conditional one: IF one finds context and contrast-driven views in epistemology

independently plausible, then one should find skeptical theism plausible. *Vice-versa*, IF one finds the skeptical theistic response to the argument from evil independently plausible, then appealing to context and contrast-driven views in epistemology offers a theoretical explanation for the plausibility of that response.

Objection #2: Context and Contrast-driven views in epistemology are almost solely about *knowledge* rather than other epistemic concepts like justification. So at best such views show that no one is in a position to *know* the premises in the argument from gratuitous evil. But that much has been conceded by Rowe (1979) and others who purport to show not that we can know that certain evils are gratuitous but only that it is reasonable to believe that they are or that we are justified in believing that such evils are gratuitous.⁹

Reply: Two things should be said here. First, it isn't true that context and contrast-driven views are solely about knowledge. Many make explicit reference to related epistemic notions like reasons for belief, justification, etc., e.g. Sinnott-Armstrong's (2008) version of contrastivism. Second, if the considerations offered by such views show that things like context can undermine knowledge, the very same moves can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to show that things like context can undermine justification. For example, on Hawthorne's view, the salience of certain counterpossibility to *p* can be cashed out in terms of evidence that I am mistaken about *p*. Such evidence can undermine my justified belief that *p*. The gist is that it would be quite strange if issues of context could affect whether or not I know something without affecting whether or not it is reasonable for me to believe something.

Objection #3: For all you've said, atheists may still be justified in believing that God doesn't exist noninferentially.

⁹ Thanks to Dugald Owen and to an anonymous reviewer for the *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* for raising this objection.

Reply: That's correct. However, if what I've said here is correct, what may be the very best argument for atheism fails (in at least its most plausible form—an evidential argument from evil employing a noseum inference). That's no small feat.

Objection #4: Some of the moves in the interest-relative discussion hinge on the stakes being high when considering the existence of God, but that is contentious. For example, God's not likely to punish us for our nonbelief. In that case, the stakes are not raised. Or perhaps God will reward those who pursue difficult religious inquiry assiduously or courageously and being a skeptical theist stultifies such inquiry.¹⁰ In that case, the stakes are, indeed, raised, but we have a reason to make an inference instead of remaining agnostic. In either case,

Reply: Issues of stakes are closely tied to issues surrounding Pascal's Wager. Hence, objections to the wager will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, here. While there is no room to treat the issue fully here, notice that, the stakes may be high for reasons totally disconnected to issues of the afterlife. For example, perhaps knowing God is very good for our personal well-being. Some important philosophers of religion have argued for precisely that claim. For example, the inference from divine hiddenness to atheism requires the claim that believing in God is so important that God would have ample reason to ensure that everyone had evidence of God's existence (e.g. Schellenberg 1993). The gist is that this particular objection to skeptical theism comes at a cost: if we say that the stakes aren't high in order to avoid skepticism about the argument from evil, this same move will undercut the motivation for the argument from divine hiddenness.

Objection #5: The reply to the moral objection seems strained. Suppose you just left a Bible study where you talked about the story of the binding of Isaac. This appears to be a skeptical sort of context—God has strange reasons that we can't access that sometimes affect what we should and shouldn't do. You then come upon a mugging in an alley. Should you help?

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* for raising this objection.

Reply: Good objection. It seems very strained to say that the Christian theist who contemplates the mind of God is in a *worse* epistemic position vis-à-vis the average person. If anything, we should expect that going to a Bible study would put the theist in a better epistemic position to do the right thing, etc. My reply is as follows. It seems very strained to say that the philosophy student who takes a course in ethics is in a *worse* epistemic position vis-à-vis the average person. If anything, we should expect that attending an ethics course would put the student in a better epistemic position to do the right thing, etc. However, it appears that context and contrast-driven epistemologies have similar implications in both cases. Suppose a college student just left an ethics class where the professor was discussing the evolutionary objection to moral realism. Moral nihilism is a live possibility for such a person. Hence, according to context and contrast-driven views in epistemology, such a person does not know whether she morally ought to do anything at all. So my reply to objection #5 is as follows: whatever contextualists, contrastivists and others say about such cases will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the Bible study case.

In short, the objections to the central moves to the arguments of this paper are answerable. And if the thesis is correct, it moves us another step forward in understanding the viability of skeptical theism.

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