

A Refutation of Skeptical Theism

David Kyle Johnson

The evidential problem of evil suggests that our awareness of the existence of seemingly unjustified evils reduces the epistemic probability of God's existence. Arguments to this effect have been most famously and successfully championed by William Rowe.¹ His defense of the argument has developed over the years, but the basics of the argument itself have remained consistent—as have the criticisms. For example, his argument has always been subjected to some version of what has come to be known as the “skeptical theist's objection.” As the defenses of Rowe's argument changed, so too did the applications of skeptical theism, but the basic idea has remained the same: the fact that something seems to be an unjustified evil is no reason to think that it is an unjustified evil. Since God may have justifying reasons to allow evil that are beyond our ken, our awareness of an evil, and the fact that it seems unjustified, cannot reduce the probability of God's existence.

I will argue that skeptical theism is a movement doomed to fail. Contrary to the claims of skeptical theists, our awareness of seemingly unjustified evils increases the probability that unjustified evils exist and lowers the probability of God's existence. Consequently, skeptical theism cannot succeed as a defense against Rowe's evidential problem of evil. This will not show that atheism is, all things considered, true or more rational than theism; to establish that, a wealth of other arguments and supposed evidence for God's existence would need to be considered. But, after I identify an ambiguity in the skeptical theist's position, I will show that skeptical theism fails to establish that seemingly unjustified evil does not reduce the epistemic probability of God's existence. No matter how skeptical theism is clarified to deal with the identified ambiguity, it will be undeniable that after the existence of an evil is identified, and it seems clear that there is no justifying reason to allow that evil, the epistemic probability that the evil is justified, and that God exists, drops.

The evidential problem of evil and the skeptical theist's response

Rowe considers real evils that are seemingly unjustified, such as (E1) a helpless fawn suffering for days from terrible burn injuries (acquired in a naturally caused forest fire) before finally dying alone in the forest and (E2) the rape, beating and murder by strangulation of a five-year-old girl. He argues that no good we know of justifies a tri-omni (i.e., an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good) being, like God, to allow such evils to occur.² If it

seems that no such justifying reasons exist, Rowe argues, it is most likely that they do not. So, since God would not allow such evils to occur without a justifying reason, it is more likely that God does not exist.

A few words of clarification are in order.

First, Rowe is not offering a deductive proof against God's existence. Rowe would admit God's existence is logically possible. He is suggesting that evils, such as E1 and E2, make God's existence less probable. Further, he is not dealing in objective probabilities, but epistemic probabilities. He presents an argument about what happens to a rational person's degree of confidence that God exists upon the consideration of evils such as E1 and E2. Rowe argues that realizing that such evils occur, for the rational person, must reduce one's confidence that God exists. It is an argument about epistemic probabilities.

Second, in order for a good to justify an evil, (a) that good must outweigh the evil in question (i.e., the good must counterbalance or defeat the evil) and (b) allowing that evil (or some equivalently bad evil) has to be a logically necessary condition for that good's existence.³ If the good did not outweigh the evil, or if it could have been brought about in some other logically possible less evil way (God, after all, can do anything that is logically possible), then the evil cannot be justified in the name of that good.⁴ Such a good cannot be a *justifying reason to allow that evil*—what I will call, a “JuffRE” (pronounced “Juff-ree” like “Jeffry”).⁵

Third, Rowe does not intend to restrict the list of “goods we know of” to a list of goods that we know have occurred or will occur. If a good is conceivable, it is a good we know of. However, if such a good doesn't occur, it can't be said to have justified an evil. So merely imagining a good that fulfills the criteria above for some evil is not enough reason to suppose that there is a good we know of that justifies that evil.⁶ Rowe argues that for such evils as E1 and E2, it doesn't seem that such a good exists. They are, what we will call, *seemingly unjustified evils* (i.e., “SUEs”). The existence of SUEs has rarely been challenged by theists.

Some may think that Rowe's argument has already been defeated and is irrelevant. It has not and is not. For example, Rowe personally and successfully refuted Alvin Plantinga's 1998 critique of his argument.⁷ In addition, Rowe's argument still appears and is debated and defended in textbooks⁸ and peer-reviewed encyclopedias.⁹ In fact, in a 2007 book-long treatment of Rowe's argument and relevant objections, Nick Trakakis concluded that “the only rational course of action left for the theist to take is to abandon theism and convert to atheism.”¹⁰ Of course other's, such as Howard-Snyder and Bergmann continue to criticize Rowe's argument, but as we shall see, their arguments fail.

It has also been suggested by some¹¹ that Rowe has abandoned earlier versions of his argument in favor of later versions. This is not accurate either. As Trakakis (2007) makes clear,¹² the basic moves in Rowe's argument have always remained the same, and the argument has always involved an inference from something like (\mathcal{P}) to something like (\mathcal{Q}):

(\mathcal{P}) It seems that there is no justifying reason for God, if he exists, to permit E1 and E2.

(\mathcal{Q}) There is no justifying reason to permit E1 and E2.

In addition, Rowe has consistently thought that the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) is inductively strong; he has never wavered on this point. (Rowe has maintained, we might say, that SUEs reduce the probability that JuffREs exist.) What has changed is two things: First, Rowe changed the manner in which he defended the strength of this inference.¹³ Most notably, in 1996, Rowe became less enamored with his previous defenses of this inference,¹⁴ and offered a defense rooted in Bayes' Theorem—Bayes' Theorem being the definitive method for determining epistemic probabilities. Second, in that same article, Rowe presented an additional argument that derived the improbability of God's existence directly from (\mathcal{P}), that bypassed (\mathcal{Q}) altogether.

The latter move is probably what made some think Rowe abandoned the (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) inference, when in fact he was simply offering another, more direct, route to his ultimate conclusion. (I am not concerned, here, with that argument.) The former move made the strength of the (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) inference quite clear to those who understand Bayes, but it excluded those who do not from the conversation. Fortunately, he rearticulated the Bayesian defense he made in 1996, in 2001(a), with a less mathematically complicated example. It is this example that I will modify a bit later to make my argument clear.

Because the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) has been a constant in Rowe's argument, so too have criticisms of it. Most notable in this regard are the criticisms of skeptical theists. They admit (at least for argument's sake) that attempts to justify God's permission of SUEs are inadequate, and thus such evils do *seem* unjustified—there seems to be no JuffREs for such evils. However, they insist, we are not forced to conclude from this that the probability of God's existence is reduced because we are not forced to conclude that there are no JuffREs for SUEs—even though we cannot detect any. Why? Because the fact that *we don't see 'em, don't mean they ain't there*. Stephen Wykstra pioneered this objection in 1984 and 1986, and it has been developed since, most notably by Howard-Snyder and Bergmann in 2004, when they directly challenge Rowe's Bayesian defense of the

inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}). But the thesis of the skeptical theists has always remained the same: our inability to detect explanations for evil is no reason to think such explanations don't exist. SUEs cannot count as evidence against God's existence because justified reasons to allow SUEs might be beyond our ken.

It is important to note that the skeptical theist's claim is not simply that SUEs do not establish the *truth of atheism*.¹⁵ The skeptical theist's claim is bolder—that SUEs do not count as evidence against God's existence *at all*. In other words, even if we set all reasons for belief in God aside, and thus begin with pure agnosticism and therefore assume that God's existence is just as likely as it is not (i.e., if we set our prior probability for God's existence at 50%),¹⁶ after we consider any of, or all of, the SUEs in the world, the probability of God's existence will not have changed. It will still be 50%. In short, SUEs do not decrease the likelihood of theism to *any degree*.¹⁷

I will argue, however, that no matter how it is (or has been) developed or clarified, the skeptical theists' conclusions cannot be defended; skeptical theism is a movement destined to fail. If one agrees, as skeptical theists do, that God would not allow any evil without a justifying reason for doing so,¹⁸ then one cannot deny that the fact that there seems to be evil with no justifying reason reduces the probability of God existence. To show this is the case, first I will identify an ambiguity in the skeptical theists' position. Then, with a slight modification of the example Rowe used to explain and defend the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) in 2001(a)—I chose this example for the sake of those unfamiliar with Bayes' Theorem—I will show that no matter how a skeptical theist clarifies that ambiguity, it is mathematically undeniable that the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) is inductively strong, that SUEs do raise the probability that unjustified evils exist and lower the probability of God's existence.¹⁹

Identifying an Ambiguity in Skeptical Theism

Atheists and skeptical theists agree that God would not allow evil for no good reason—that is, God would not allow an evil that does not have a JuffRE, as “JuffRE” is defined above. Thus, if God exists, for any given evil in the world, there must be a justifying reason for it. In addition, atheists and skeptical theists alike admit that after an extensive search for such reasons, not many have been found; there are a great many SUEs. Of course, as theists who agree that God would not allow evil without a justifying reason, skeptical theists insist that such reasons exist—we simply don't see them because they are beyond our ken.²⁰ But this raises two very important questions which, to my knowledge, have gone unasked and unanswered.

First, if a JuffRE for a SUE exists, why does it exist? Is it a good that just exists, naturally, on its own, and thus would exist regardless of whether God exists to bring it about? Or is it a good God creates or brings about? If it is something that exists naturally, on its own, so, it would merely be something God recognizes but does not create; consequently, God's existence would be irrelevant to whether or not that good exists. If it is something that God creates, then that good could not exist unless God exists and thus God's existence is directly relevant to whether or not that good exists.

To clarify the difference, consider this example. Suppose God is considering whether to stop WWII by preventing the invasion of Poland by giving Hitler a heart attack. (We will assume, for the sake of the example, that would be sufficient to prevent the war). Why did God fail to do this? Is it because he recognized that some greater good would naturally flow out of the war that could not occur unless the war occurred? For example, did God realize that WWII would unite humanity such that we would (on our own) bring about a worldwide peaceful government that stops all wars 1000 years earlier than any other possible scenario? If so, this would not be a greater good that God brings about himself, yet the fact that WWII would, naturally, produce this good would still be a justifying reason for God to allow WWII to occur. Notice that such a good could still exist even if God did not; thus, God's existence is irrelevant to whether or not such a good exists. In fact, if such a good exists but God does not, the evil of WWII is still "justified"—it brought about a greater good that couldn't be had any other way—it's just that, without God, most likely no one would actually know that it was justified. Alternatively, however, God may have refrained from giving Hitler a heart attack because he realized that allowing WWII was the only way to make possible some good that he himself would have to accomplish. For example, perhaps the only way to form a world government is by God directly controlling the leaders of Israel to unite the world, but the only way for Israel to be reinstated as a nation is to allow a near Jewish genocide in WWII.²¹ If so, this would be a greater good that God brings about himself, that justifies him in allowing WWII to occur. Clearly God's existence is directly relevant to whether or not such a good exists.

Ultimately, then, if one believes that an evil must have a justifying reason, one is left to wonder:

(1) For any given evil, is God's existence relevant to the probability of the existence of that evil's JuffRE?

Second, if a JuffRE is beyond our ken, why is it beyond our ken? Is it because it is God's reason and God is not fully understandable? Or is it *merely* our limited nature that makes it undetectable?²² If a SUE is (contrary to how it seems) actually justified, does it seem unjustified because its greater good is simply the kind of thing that humans cannot detect? Or, does God's existence—or the fact that it is God's reason—make it undetectable? Is it the kind of thing that we wouldn't see anyway, even if God didn't exist? For example, if it is some distant natural future consequence of the evil, we would be unable to see it simply because we lack the ability to see into the future. Or, would God's non-existence somehow make it detectable? Might God, perhaps, obscure the JuffREs from our vision? Might God's existence make it harder to see than it would otherwise be? Might it be undetectable because God envisioned it? All in all, if one believes that an evil must have a justifying reason, one wonders:

(2) *For any given evil, is God's existence relevant to the detectability of its JuffRE?*²³

Although one might ask these questions generally, we will ask them about individual SUEs and their supposed JuffRE. After all, some SUEs might have a naturally existing JuffRE, others might have a divinely created one. Some might be undetectable merely because of human limitations, others not. Regardless, as far as I know, I am the first to make and ask about these distinctions, and even though some skeptical theists say things that might commit them to one answer or another, none have taken any explicit stance on them. For any given evil, a skeptical theist might say yes to both questions, yes to neither, or yes to one and not the other.

What I will now show is that, regardless which of the four available options a skeptical theist takes—and for any given evil, they must and can only choose one—skeptical theism cannot rescue theistic belief from the threat of seemingly unjustified evil. Regardless of how the skeptical theist answers questions (1) and (2) about any particular evil, it will be mathematically undeniable that (\mathcal{P}) does provide inductive evidence for (\mathcal{Q}) (i.e., the fact that it doesn't seem that an evil has a justifying reason raises the probability that it is unjustified) and that SUEs do reduce the probability of God's existence. The skeptical theist's argument that SUEs do not count as evidence against God's existence *at all* shall thus be refuted.

To make my case, I will consider each option in turn. We are engaged with the skeptical theist here in working with epistemic probability, and I will carefully break down how the assumptions of each option sets up

our prior epistemic probabilities. I will then examine how the evidence of the existence of an evil, and the fact that it doesn't seem to have a justifying reason, affects our degree of belief in the existence of an unjustified evil and the existence of God. When doing so, I will begin, as the skeptical theist suggests, by setting reasons for belief in God aside—i.e., by assuming that the probability of God's existence is 50%. Then I will show that after calculating the initial probabilities dictated by the option under consideration, and then updating those probabilities after considering the existence of an evil that, upon consideration, doesn't seem to have a justifying reason, (\mathcal{P}) does inductively support (\mathcal{G}) and the probability of God's existence drops. This will not show that atheism is more rational than theism, *all things considered*—nor is that the thesis of my paper. But it will show that the skeptical theist cannot successfully defend their assertion that (\mathcal{P}) does not inductively support (\mathcal{G}) or that SUEs do not reduce the probability of God's existence.

Option 1: God's existence is relevant to both the existence and undetectability of JuffREs

Considering option 1

Theists and atheists may think that JuffREs would not exist unless God exists; after all, wouldn't one expect a universe without God to be cold and indifferent? Likewise, if God does exist, one might expect him to produce a good out of every evil.²⁴ But, whatever the reason, the theist could assume that God's existence would make the existence of JuffREs likely, and his nonexistence would make JuffREs impossible.²⁵ Furthermore, one may believe JuffREs are undetectable because they are God's reasons. This certainly makes sense if God produces greater goods out of evils; if God is personally bringing them about, they may very well be beyond our ken. But again, whatever the reason, the theist could think that it is God's incomprehensibility that makes JuffREs undetectable. And, of course, one may think that this applies to certain evils but not to others.

This is essentially the answer that many theists think the book of Job provides; God has and even produces reasons for making Job suffer (he was proving a point to "the adversary"), and Job is in no position to question the reasons of the creator of all things, because God's reasons are beyond Job's comprehension. This also seems to be the option that Wykstra endorses when he says, "...the outweighing good at issue is of a special sort: one purposed by the Creator of all that is, whose vision and wisdom are therefore somewhat greater than ours..."²⁶

However, if skeptical theists embrace this option, they will be sorely disappointed. If God's existence is relevant both to the existence of a particular SUE's JuffRE and that JuffRE's detectability, then the existence of that SUE reduces the probability of God's existence.

Let me explain by borrowing and modifying the example William Rowe used in 2001 that clarifies and simplifies his Bayesian defense of the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}). Suppose there is a 50% chance that your friend Smith is coming to a costume party that you are attending; suppose also that if he does not attend the party, he will not be costumed. But also suppose that it is more likely than not that if he does attend he is going to wear a "perfect costume" that would make his presence at the party undetectable. How likely? It doesn't matter; as long as it is more likely than not, our final conclusion about how the evidence affects our belief will not change.²⁷ But, to make the math easy, let us say that it is 3 times more likely than not. So, if he attends the party, there is a 75% chance Smith will wear the perfect costume. In this scenario, the probabilities are as follows (notice that the probability of Smith being at the party and the probability of Smith being costumed is 50%).

(A) Smith is at the party but not perfectly costumed = 12.5%

(B) Smith is at the party perfectly costumed = 37.5%

(C) Smith is not at the party (and not costumed) = 50%

Suppose you then look around the party and verify that no one looks like Smith. You have thus falsified (A), but when you update your probabilities (by taking the probabilities of the falsified hypothesis and dividing it among the remaining ones) you get the following:

(B) Smith is at the party perfectly costumed = 43.75%

(C) Smith is not at the party (and not costumed) = 56.25%.

Even though you would likely not see him if he were at the party, your inability to detect Smith at the party still lowers the probability that he is costumed and that he is at the party. Both were 50% likely; now both are only 43.75%.

In the same way, suppose we—as the skeptical theist suggests—lay aside reasons for belief in God, and thus consider the probability of his existence to be 50%. Given the option we are considering, if God does exist, then it is more likely than not that the relevant JuffRE of any one evil is undetectable.²⁸ (For simplicity and consistency, let us assume that it is 3 times more likely.²⁹) But, of course, on this option, if God does not exist, the

JuffRE does not exist at all. Given these suppositions, we would lay out our initial probabilities like this (notice that the probability of God's existence and the probability that there is a JuffRE is 50%):

(D) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, and it is detectable = 12.5%

(E) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is not detectable = 37.5%

(F) God does not exist (and neither does the relevant JuffRE)³⁰ = 50%

The mere observation of the relevant evil does not affect our probabilities, but when we recognize that the evil has no detectable JuffRE—that is, when we recognize that it is indeed a SUE—we must update our probabilities. Hypothesis (D) is falsified, and we divide its probability among the remaining ones.

(E) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is not detectable = 43.75%

(F) God does not exist (and neither does the relevant JuffRE) = 56.25%

So, even though you would likely not detect God's reasons for allowing the evil in question if he existed, your inability to detect such reasons still lowers the probability that the relevant JuffRE exists and also lowers the probability of God's existence (both from 50% to 43.75%). In turn, the probability that there is indeed an unjustified evil and that God does not exist are both raised (from 50% to 56.25%). So, given this option, (\mathcal{P}) does inductively support (\mathcal{Q}) and SUEs do count as evidence against God's existence. And this is the case, regardless of how much more likely God's existence makes our inability to detect the relevant JuffRE; in fact, as long as it is at least possible for the JuffRE to be detectable, the same conclusions follow.³¹ Thus, embracing this option is not compatible with the skeptical theist's claims.³²

Considering the impossibility of detectability

But of course, to avoid this consequence, the skeptical theist might suggest that God's existence would indeed make the detectability of the relevant JuffRE impossible. If so, it seems the skeptical theist's conclusion would follow.³³ If Smith will definitely wear a perfect costume if he comes to the party, not seeing him at the party is no reason to think that he is not costumed or not there. Likewise, it seems, if God's existence guarantees the undetectability of the relevant JuffRE, then not seeing such a reason is no reason to conclude it is not there and thus is no reason to conclude that God doesn't exist. But this is going to be a very hard suggestion for the skeptical theist to defend.

We are engaged in epistemic probability—figuring probability based on what we know. How could one justifiably claim to know that the JuffRE of a single SUE was not only undetectable, but not even possibly detectable? What background information makes this 100% likely? For any given SUE, it would seem that we simply wouldn't know enough about the SUE and JuffRE in question to draw such a certain and definitive conclusion. (It would certainly be difficult to maintain that the JuffREs of all SUEs are impossible to detect.) After all, haven't theists declared to have found JuffREs for a host of evils that, at one point, seemed to be unexplained? Isn't that what the free will defense and the soul making theodicy are all about? Doesn't that entail that it is at least possible that the JuffRE of any given evil, even a SUE, is within our grasp? And what about theists who have actually proposed JuffREs for the evils that the skeptical theist maintains still seem unjustified, like Richard Swinburne (1998). The skeptical theist would have to conclude, not only that Swinburne's theodicy fails, but that his entire project was ill-advised from the start—the task was impossible. This seems wrong if for no other reason than the fact that at one point in the past, *why God allowed any evil at all* seemed perfectly inexplicable. The skeptical theist—at that time—would have had to insist that the entire impending centuries-long project to provide a theodicy was misguided from the start. This seems a bit much.

Wykstra himself admits that it is not impossible to detect JuffREs; and he does so in the same paragraph, quoted above, where he seemingly endorses the option currently under consideration. “If such goods as this exist, it might not be unlikely that we should discern some of them; even a one-month old infant can perhaps discern, in an inarticulate way, some of the purposes of his mother in her dealings with him.”³⁴ This is a problem of course because, as we have seen, this option only works if you think that detecting JuffREs is impossible. Wykstra seems to endorse this option, but also that the detection of JuffREs is not impossible, in the same breath.

One might read Wykstra, however, as saying something different. Maybe he thinks that the relevant JuffRE is impossible to detect only if the evil in question does not have a theodicy he finds convincing. If it does, then its JuffRE is not impossible to detect; however, for every evil that doesn't, detecting one would be impossible. However, if this is what Wykstra means, he loses his credibility.³⁵ Recall, on this option, if a SUE's JuffRE is undetectable, it is because of God's incomprehensibility. For the skeptical theist to assume that God's incomprehensibility happens to come into play when, and only when, one can't detect a JuffRE—well, that makes the skeptical theist's position ad hoc, non-falsifiable and thus unreasonable. By that logic, you could never think that Smith was ever absent from any party that you attended; even though you never saw him at any party again,

you would never be able to conclude that he was not at a party you were attending because, even if you didn't see him, you would assume that it was guaranteed that he would have worn the perfect costume to that party. The reason you don't see Smith could never be because he wasn't there—even if, in reality, he is not. In the same way, if the theist tries to take this way out, the reason we don't see a JuffRE could never be because it wasn't there—even if, in reality, it is not. In short, if the skeptical theist tried to take this way out, they would be deciding, after the fact, which JuffREs were impossible to detect; this would just be an ad hoc excuse to save their theory that would entail that nothing could ever count as evidence against it—which would also make it unfalsifiable and thus irrational.

Another possible problem is this: It seems to me that the only way to consistently conclude that a JuffRE is impossible to detect, when God's existence is relevant to its detectability, is to think that comprehensibility regarding anything about God is impossible—and that would lead to religious agnosticism. Don't get me wrong; it could be that God's reasons for allowing an evil are incomprehensible yet other parts of God are not. However, if someone thinks that any aspect of God can be comprehended, then mustn't that person think that it is at least possible, to some degree, that God's reason for allowing an evil are comprehensible—even if it is in fact incomprehensible?³⁶ Even if I am wrong about this, the pervious objection is still devastating—but I don't think I am. Further, even if I am wrong, I am fairly certain that, to maintain any information about God—that he is the triune creator of the universe, who created the universe because he is all-loving, and sent his son to die on the cross for our sins, because he is both just and forgiving, etc.—but then, maintain, that for some inexplicable reason that a particular part of God (in this case, his reasons for allowing a specific evil) is impossible to comprehend...well, that is disingenuous at best, and logically incoherent at worst.

All in all, when considering this option, in order for the theist to maintain that evil cannot count as evidence against theism *at all*, it must be impossible (not merely improbable) that we can detect God's JuffREs.³⁷ This doesn't seem to be a position the skeptical theist could defend and to my knowledge none have tried.

The impossibility of knowing whether it is impossible

The skeptical theist is most likely to suggest not that it is impossible to detect the relevant JuffRE, but that whether or not it is possible to do so (and if it is, how probable it is) is simply unknowable. “We don't know it is impossible,” they might say, “but we also don't know that it is not impossible—and, without

that knowledge, we can't determine whether evil counts as evidence against theism." In fact, this seems to be exactly what Howard-Snyder and Bergmann (2001) suggest in their response to Rowe's Bayesian defense of the (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) inference. They point out that Rowe merely "assumes that $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ is less than 1." (Here " $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ " is the probability of there being no detectable justifying reason for God to allow evil, assuming *God exists* and *the background knowledge atheists and theists share*.) If Rowe does not assume this, they argue, his conclusion does not follow. Yet, they point out, Rowe gives no reason for thinking it is less than 1. But even though they have provided no good reason for thinking that it is 1, this doesn't mean, they suggest, that we have good reason for thinking that it is *not* 1.

They are mistaken. And with such a suggestion, the skeptical theist—although unwittingly—actually makes their argument weaker. Our inability to know how probable our *ability to detect the JuffRE of a SUE* is does not prevent us from completing our probabilistic calculations. When one is engaged in figuring epistemic probability, as we have been, and comes across a value that one does not have any information on, one does not simply throw up one's hands and say the calculations are impossible. Epistemic probability calculations are based on what you know, so if you do not know anything about how probable something is, you simply say it is just as likely as it is not—because, given what you know, *it is* just as likely as it is not. You thus assign it a value of 50% and move on. We did this with God's existence at the beginning of our calculations. We ignored all evidence we thought we might have for or against his existence, effectively erasing any evidence we had regarding the probability of God's existence. But this did not keep us from placing a value on it. Erasing this evidence actually gave us good reason to assign it a specific value; since we knew nothing, we concluded that—given what we know (i.e., nothing)—God's existence is just as likely as it is not. We thus simply assigned it a value of 50% and moved on. No trickery; no question begging. This is just what you do when you are working with epistemic probabilities. In the same way, if the skeptical theist thinks that we know nothing about how improbable God's existence makes our ability to detect the JuffRE of a SUE, then we should assign the term that represents that possibility a value of 50%. Given what we know, it is just as probable as it is not. But, doing that is actually going to make SUEs an even greater threat to God's existence. Once we assign our new prior probabilities, and after we update them given the evidence of a SUE, it will turn out that God's existence goes from 50% to 37.5% probable (it only went to 43.75% before) while the existence of unjustified evils and God's nonexistence goes from 50% to 62.5%

probable (they only went to 56.25% before).³⁸

One might object that I am begging the question here. Skeptical theism, one might argue, is synonymous with the position that we should be agnostic about $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ —about whether or not it is possible to detect the relevant JuffRE; to insist that we assign it a definite probability is to beg the question against the skeptical theists. But this is incorrect. First of all, this position is not synonymous with skeptical theism—it certainly is not an assumption with which it began. It was developed later, after Rowe developed his Bayesian defense of the (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) inference. Secondly, even if this position was synonymous with skeptical theism, to beg the question I would have to be assuming without argument that this assertion is false. I have not. I have argued that it is false. I have argued that such agnosticism is not an option when dealing with epistemic probabilities. If we were dealing with objective probabilities, the demand to be agnostic about a value could be reasonable. However, it is impossible to be agnostic about the epistemic probability of something. Everything has a probability given what you know; in fact, propositions about which we know nothing are the easiest to which to assign probabilities—they get 50%. And since we are dealing here with epistemic probabilities, one cannot insist on agnosticism about a value. That is against the rules. It would be like someone insisting we remain agnostic about the validity of a particular use of modus tollens when engaged in deductive argumentation.

Lastly, it's not clear that such a demand would actually rescue theistic belief in the first place. Howard-Snyder and Bergmann argued that Rowe's Bayesian defense of the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) wouldn't work if he assigned $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ the value of 1. This is not exactly right. I will attempt to explain why without getting too deep into the Bayesian details.

If the prior probability of $(P/G\&k)$ is changed to 1, then—because this gives us new knowledge—other prior probabilities in the Bayesian equation will have to change: namely, the prior probability of God's existence. Just like us, Rowe began by assigning the prior probability of God's existence— $\Pr(G/k)$ —a value of 50%. However, if it is guaranteed that God's reasons for allowing evil are undetectable, then the prior probability of God's existence must drop. Why? Because, this guarantee gives us new knowledge about God that we did not have before. It suggests the existence of a very specific kind of tri-omni being, one that we know has undetectable JuffREs. But, by definition, the hypothesis that “a tri-omni being exists and that being has undetectable JuffREs” must be less probable than there mere hypothesis “a tri-omni being” exists. The

probability of conjunctions are less likely than their individual conjuncts.³⁹ A tri-omni being with no detectable JuffREs has to share the 50% possibility granted to the mere existence of a tri-omni being with the other possible tri-omni beings that have some detectable JuffREs.⁴⁰ In other words, our prior knowledge that God's reasons are guaranteed to be undetectable would lower our prior confidence that God exists because the existence of a tri-omni being with guaranteed undetectable reasons is less likely than the mere existence of a tri-omni being that may or may not have detectable reasons. And, given such priors, once the calculations are done, God's existence will still be below 50%.⁴¹

Interestingly enough, assigning a value of 1 to $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ would allow the theist to deny the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{C}). As we saw before, if it's guaranteed that JuffREs are undetectable then not seeing them is no reason to think they are not there. But assigning a value of 1 to $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ still lowers the probability of God's existence by lowering the prior probability of God's existence; the outcome of Bayesian inference will still assign a value of less than 50% to God's existence. So, assigning $\Pr(P/G\&k)$ a value less than 1 lowers the probability of God's existence; assigning it a value of exactly 1 lowers the probability of God's existence. So the issue of whether or not we can be agnostic about its value is moot; if it doesn't matter what value we assign it, the skeptical theist cannot hide behind our inability to know its exact value to protect their conclusion.

All in all, it is clear that, on this option, skeptical theism fails.

Option 2: God's existence is relevant to the existence of JuffREs, but not their undetectability

Once again, and for reasons similar to those given above, one might think God's existence is necessary for the existence of JuffREs—perhaps, because God produces them. But, one may think that it is merely our limits as human beings that make the JuffREs of SUEs undetectable. I have to admit, it would seem strange to me if one were to endorse this option. After all, if God is responsible for producing JuffREs, then God's existence would seem highly relevant to whether they are detectable. I suppose one might suggest that God produces goods that are just beyond our comprehension, but if we had evolved in a slightly different way, they would be detectable to us. But the fact that this seems strange to me is not reason to think that it seems strange for everyone. So, for the sake of completeness—to make sure all bases are covered—let us ignore the strangeness of this option and consider whether or not this option would actually let skeptical theists defend their conclusions.

Once again, if God's existence determines the existence of the relevant JuffRE, then if God does not exist, neither does the relevant JuffRE. But if God's existence is irrelevant to whether or not the JuffRE is detectable, then even if God exists, it is just as likely as not that we would detect the relevant JuffRE. That being the case, we would lay out the initial probabilities like this (notice that the probability of God's existence and the probability that there is a JuffRE is 50%):

(G) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, and it is detectable = 25%

(H) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is not detectable = 25%

(I) God does not exist (and neither does the relevant JuffRE) = 50%

Again, the mere existence of the evil in question does not falsify anything. However, when we recognize that the evil has no detectable JuffRE—that is, when we recognize that it is indeed a SUE—we must update our probabilities; (G) is falsified and its probability is redistributed among the remaining hypotheses, leaving us with the following:

(H) God exists, so does the relevant JuffREs, but it is not detectable = 37.5%

(I) God does not exist (and neither does the relevant JuffRE) = 62.5%

So, even though we might not detect God's reasons for allowing the evil in question, if he existed, our inability to detect such a reason still lowers the probability that such a reason exists (from 50% to 37.5%), thus supporting the inference from (*P*) to (*Q*), and raising the probability that the evil is unjustified and that God does not exist (from 50% to 62.5%). In short, SUEs count as evidence against God's existence. And, these conclusions follow even if one believes that God's nonexistence would only make the nonexistence of the relevant JuffRE less likely than its existence.⁴² Thus, this option does not allow the skeptical theist to defend their conclusions.

Option 3: God's existence is irrelevant to the existence of JuffREs, but not to their detectability

To my eyes, this is the strangest of the options. It is not necessarily strange to think that the existence of JuffREs has nothing to do with God's existence. After all, JuffREs might simply be greater goods that naturally arise out of evils; and it could be that all evils have greater goods that arise from them. But, if that is true, to think that our ability to detect such goods has anything to do with God's existence seems strange indeed; surely God could detect them, but if they are merely goods that arise from evils, why would God's existence make them any harder for us to detect? Why would his nonexistence make it easier? Does God somehow stand in the way so we can't

see them? Is he distracting us? If so, why? However, again, the fact that I find this option strange does not entail that everyone does. So, for the sake of completeness and fairness, let us consider it.

On this option, if God exists, the existence and nonexistence of the relevant JuffRE is equally likely; however, our ability to detect it is not. If God and the relevant JuffRE exists, it is more likely that the JuffRE is undetectable. (For simplicity, again, we will say 3 times more likely.) If God does not exist, then the existence of the JuffRE is equally likely; for the first time, the relevant JuffRE might exist even though God does not exist. However, our ability to detect the JuffRE is not equally likely; if God does not exist, it is more likely that the JuffRE is detectable. (Again, we will say 3 times more likely.) Thus, we lay out the probabilities like this (notice that the probability of God's existence and the probability that there is a JuffRE is 50%):

- (J) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, and it is detectable = 6.25%
- (K) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 18.75%
- (L) God exists, but the relevant JuffRE does not = 25%
- (M) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, and it is detectable = 18.75%
- (N) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, yet it is undetectable = 6.25%
- (O) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 25%

Recall, we are actually considering two pieces of evidence—the fact that the evil in question exists, and the fact that it doesn't seem to be justified. Before the first observation did not falsify any hypothesis; now it does. So, we will have to take each in turn. First, the observation that the evil exists falsifies (L).⁴³ Our probabilities update as such:

- (J) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, and it is detectable = 11.25%
- (K) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 23.75%
- (M) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, and it is detectable = 11.25%
- (N) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, yet it is undetectable = 23.75%
- (O) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 30%

Notice that the probability of there being a JuffRE rose (from 50% to 70%). This is because the occurrence of the evil ruled out the possibility of God not allowing the evil in question because there wasn't a justified reason for doing so.⁴⁴ However, the probability of God's existence still dropped (from 50% to 35%). Next, when we look around and see that there is no detectable justifying reason to allow the observed evil, we must update our

probabilities again; (J) and (M) are falsified and their collective probability is distributed among the remaining hypotheses.

(K) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 31.25...%

(N) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, and it is undetectable = 31.25...%

(O) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 37.5...%

Although the mere existence of the evil initially raised it, the fact that it doesn't seem that the evil in question is justified lowers the probability that it is; the probability of there being a JuffRE goes from 70% to 62.5%. Thus, Rowe's inference from (*P*) to (*Q*) is supported. Further, the probability that God exists drops yet again (from 35% to 31.25%). In short, this option cannot support the claims of the skeptical theists; on this option, (*P*) does provide inductive support for (*Q*) and SUEs lower the probability of God's existence. And the theist is forced to this conclusion regardless of how much more undetectable God's existence makes the relevant JuffRE—this time, even if it makes it impossible.⁴⁵ Thus, this option does not allow the skeptical theist to defend their conclusion.

Option 4: God's existence is irrelevant to both the existence of JuffREs and their detectability

This option, I believe, is as viable as the first. After all, it seems to make sense that JuffREs would merely be greater goods that naturally arise out of evil, and if this is the case, it would also make sense that our ability to detect JuffREs is only limited by our own abilities—in this case, our ability to detect greater goods that arise out of evils—not by God's existence. Of course, God could see these greater goods, if he existed, and preserving such goods would be a justifiable reason for him to allow evil. But for whatever reason the skeptical theist embraces this option, the skeptical theist will not be able to defend their conclusion.

On this option, the existence of the relevant JuffRE is just as likely on theism as atheism, and whether or not that JuffRE is detectable is just as likely as not, regardless of whether the relevant JuffRE exists. So we can lay out our probabilities this way:

(P) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, and it is detectable = 12.5%

(Q) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 12.5%

(R) God exists, but the relevant JuffRE does not = 25%.

(S) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, and it is detectable = 12.5%

(T) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, yet it is undetectable = 12.5%

(U) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 25%.

Once again, we must take each observation in turn. First, the observation of the relevant evil in the world falsifies

(R) (for the same reason it falsified (L) in option 3). When we update our probabilities we get:

(P) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, and it is detectable = 17.5%

(Q) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 17.5%

(S) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, and it is detectable = 17.5%

(T) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, yet it is undetectable = 17.5%

(U) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 30%.

Once again, the mere existence of the evil raises the probability of the existence of the relevant JuffRE, for the same reason it did in option 3 (from 50% to 70%). But, the probability of the existence of God drops (from 50% to 35%). When we consider the fact that we can detect no JuffRE for the evil in question, we must update our probabilities again. (P) and (S) are falsified leaving us with:

(Q) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 29.166666...%

(T) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, yet it is undetectable = 29.166666...%

(U) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 41.66666...%.

Once again, although the mere existence of the evil initially raised it, the fact that it doesn't seem that the evil in question is justified lowers the probability that it is; the probability of there being a JuffRE goes from 70% to 58.33333...%. Thus, Rowe's inference from (P) to (Q) is supported. Further, the probability that God exists drops yet again (from 35% to 29.16666...%). In short, this option cannot support the claims of the skeptical theists; on this option, (P) does provide inductive support for (Q) and SUEs lower the probability of God's existence. Thus, not even this final option allows the skeptical theist to defend their claims.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The skeptical theist wants to conclude that SUEs cannot count as evidence against God's existence because, they think, we aren't forced to conclude that JuffREs for SUEs don't exist because our inability to detect JuffREs is no reason to think they are not there. However, the skeptical theist is not clear as to why such reasons would exist or why they would be undetectable. As we have seen, when we examine the possible answers the skeptical theist could give to these questions, it is revealed that—in every case—their conclusion is unjustified. We have thus

seen that skeptical theism cannot defend its primary claims that Rowe's inference from (P) to (Q) is not inductively strong or that SUEs are not evidence against God's existence. Skeptical theism fails as a defense of theism against the evidential problem of evil.⁴⁷

Works Cited

- Alston, William. "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," in Howard-Snyder (1996, pp. 97-125).
- Audi, Robert and Wainwright, William (eds.) (1986) *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*. (Cornell University Press.)
- Carrier, Richard. (2012) *Proving History: Bayes's Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus*. (Prometheus Books)
- Carrier, Richard. (2011) *Why I Am Not a Christian: Four Conclusive Reasons to Reject the Faith*. (CreateSpace)
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel & Bergmann, Michael. (2004) "Evil Does not Make Atheism More Reasonable than Theism." In Peterson & VanArragon (2004).
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel. (ed.), (1996) *The Evidential Argument from Evil*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).
- Peterson, Michael & VanArragon, Raymond J. (eds.) (2004) *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell Publishing).
- Plantinga, Alvin. (1998) "Degenerate Evidence and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil." *Nous* 32:4: 531-544.
- Rowe, William L. (1979) "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16: 335-41.
- Rowe, William L. (1986) "The Empirical Argument from Evil," in Audi and Wainwright (1986, pp. 227-47).
- Rowe, William L. (1996) "The Evidential Argument from Evil: A Second Look," in Howard-Snyder (1996, pp.262-85).
- Rowe, William L. (1998) "Reply to Plantinga" *Nous* 32:4: 545-552
- Rowe, William L. (2001a) "Grounds for Belief Aside, Does Evil Make Atheism More Reasonable than Theism" in Rowe (2001c, pp.124-37).
- Rowe, William L. (2001b) "Reply to Howard-Snyder and Bergmann," in Rowe (2001c, pp.155-58).
- Rowe, William (ed.), (2001c) *God and the Problem of Evil*. (Malden, MA: Blackwell).
- Swinburne, Richard. (1998) *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press)
- Tooley, Michael. (2010) "The Problem of Evil", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2010 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2010/entries/evil/>>.
- Trakakis, Nick. (2005) "The Evidential Problem of Evil." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, URL= <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-evi/>>.
- Trakakis, Nick. (2007) *The God Beyond Belief: In Defence of William Rowe's Evidential Argument from Evil*. (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer Publishers).
- Wykstra, Stephen J. (1984) "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16: 73-93.
- Wykstra, Stephen J. (1986) "Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil," in Howard-Snyder (1986, pp.126-50).

¹ See Rowe (1979, 1986, 1996, 2001a, 2001b).

² Rowe seems to accept a traditional view of God's knowledge and providence, one akin to Molinism. God has full knowledge of the future and what every free person would do in every circumstance. This, I believe, is the view most generous to skeptical theism. If, for example, one accepts Open Theism, and thus maintains that God does not know the future and allows libertarian freedom to have full rein, it would be much harder for God to have reasons to allow evil that are beyond human comprehension. Without full knowledge of the consequences of an evil, or how humans will react to that evil, it would be much more difficult to identify greater goods that might make horrendous evils like E1 and E2 justified. If God cannot know what kind of consequences such evils will have, it seems that he should just determine whether to allow them based on their own merits—and clearly, by their own merits, they should not be allowed. Open theism does make a free will theodicy for the evidential problem more easily defensible, but the free will theodicy does not help the skeptical theist defend their position (and it cannot deal with natural evil, such as E1). So that we are considering the strongest case for skeptical theism we can, I will be assuming a Molinistic view of God's providence and knowledge. It should be noted, however, that

granting Molinism does not allow the theist to solve the problem of evil without skeptical theism. It does make available more possible reasons to allow evil—God may have allowed Hitler to invade Poland because he knew, given how all possible free creates would react, that it would lead to a greater good. (This is how Plantinga uses Molinism in his free will solution to the logical problem of moral evil.) But it does not effectively deal with the evidential problem of evil, or either version of the problem of natural evil. Skeptical theists admit that, even if Molinism is true, some evils seem unjustified; they simply claim that, because God may have reasons to allow evil that are beyond our grasp, such evil cannot reduce the probability of his existence. Molinism gives God more knowledge and thus perhaps raises the probability that he has reasons we can't comprehend, but that does not solve the evidential problem nor does it affect the logic of the argument I will present about why skeptical theism fail—why the fact that God may have reasons we can't understand does not prevent seemingly unjustified evil from reducing the probability of God's existence.

³ Peter van Inwagen has argued that God could allow evil that, he suggests, does not have such a justifying good. For example, God may allow evils that are “chancy” and not a part of anyone's plan. According to van Inwagen, such evils are compatible with God's existence because God might permit them in the name of upholding some morally adequate “general policy,” such as not ever interfering with human free will. Although I am hesitant to consider the general policy of not interfering with human free will morally adequate, following the lead of William Alston (1996, p. 101) I would consider upholding morally adequate general policies to be in the category of greater goods specified above (that is, I would consider them to have satisfied conditions (a) and (b)). I would thus, unlike van Inwagen, not consider them gratuitous. However, I think it is worth pointing out that a deity that universally upholds general policies such as “never interfere with free will,” “never interfere with course of human events” or “never interfere with the natural order,” cannot be the Christian God; the Christian God is believed by most Christians, and the Biblical authors, to do all three of these things on a fairly regular basis. Such a deity is most akin to the deist God. Thus, I would not expect the skeptical theist to endorse such goods as JuffREs. For more on van Inwagen's argument, and problems with it (especially as a reply to Rowe's argument), see Trakakis (2007, chapter 12).

⁴ So, for example, an eternity of bliss in heaven cannot justify the rape and murder of an innocent five year old. Although that might be a good that outweighs the evil in question, that evil is not necessary for that good to exist. There are certainly other less evil ways for a child to die and enter into the eternal bliss of heaven.

⁵ It's important to note that a JuffRE may or may not be detectable by humans.

⁶ Rowe (1996) makes this point clear, in Howard-Snyder's 1996 book, on page 264.

⁷ Rowe did so in the same issue of *Nous* in which Plantinga's argument was published. It's also worth noting that Plantinga's argument was criticizing Rowe's direct inference from (\mathcal{P}) to God's non-existence, not his defense of the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) that I am about to introduce and about which I am primarily concerned in this paper.

⁸ See, for example, Peterson and vanArragon (2004)

⁹ For example, see Tooley (2010) and Trakakis (2005).

¹⁰ Trakakis (2007, p. 341).

¹¹ Nick Trakakis (2007) quotes two philosophers, Alvin Plantinga and Jeff Jordan, to show that they share this misconception on page 68.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p 69.

¹⁴ See, for example, the defenses offered in 1979 and 1986.

¹⁵ After all, the theist could admit that SUEs reduce the probability of God's existence, but still argue that there is other outweighing evidence for God's existence that makes it more likely. But to make that argument, one would have to present the outweighing evidence, and that is outside the scope of skeptical theism and thus outside the scope of this paper.

¹⁶ It is important to note that setting belief in God aside, and thus beginning with a prior probability for God's existence at 50%, is something that both sides of the debate agree should be done when dealing with this issue. Both sides have done it, and neither side has objected. (See Rowe (2001a) and Howard-Snyder & Bergmann (2004).) Since the issue is merely whether evil will reduce the probability of God's existence at all, it actually doesn't matter what prior probability you assign to God's existence. As long as it goes down, after considering the evidence, then the evidence does reduce its probability.

¹⁷ Both Wykstra (1984) and Howard-Snyder and Bergmann (2001) state this thesis specifically.

¹⁸ Although this is not necessarily a tenet of skeptical theism—skeptical theism is, after all, simply a denial of the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q})—as theists, skeptical theists agree that God would not allow evil without a justifying reason for doing so. In fact, it is this assumption that motivates skeptical theism. If one accepted that God could allow evil that has no justifying reason (i.e., gratuitous evil), then one could grant the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) but still argue that E1 and E2 do not decrease the probability of God's existence. Why? Because, if God could allow gratuitous evil, then God's existence does not entail the nonexistence of unjustified evils, and so SUEs would not be incompatible with the hypothesis that God exists. Interestingly enough, some theists (such as John Hick, Peter van Inwagen, Michael Peterson and Keith Yandell) have defended this position. Such “gratuitous theists” often do so because of skeptical theism's inadequacies. However, since I am only concerned here with the success of skeptical theism, an evaluation of gratuitous theism is beyond the scope of this paper and considering its possible truth will take us beyond our present goals. Given what I will show, the skeptical theist cannot maintain that E1 and E2 does not reduce the probability of God's existence without also embracing gratuitous theism, but

gratuitous theism would make defending skeptical theism unnecessary. Thus I will assume that the skeptical theist rejects gratuitous theism. After all, what I am concerned with is the success of skeptical theism on its own; I am not concerned with refuting gratuitous theism or a combination *skeptical/gratuitous theism* hypothesis. However, for a refutation of gratuitous theism, and its ability to deal with Rowe's argument, I encourage the reader to see Trakakis (2007, Ch 12).

¹⁹ My argument may also establish that Rowe's inference directly from (\mathcal{P}) to God's non-existence is also strong, but I am not interested in defending that conclusion specifically. I am only interested in defeating the skeptical theist's claim that the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) is not strong and that SUEs don't reduce the probability of God's existence at all.

²⁰ Of course, one does not need to be a theist to endorse the skeptical theist's argument—to deny the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}). But I would hesitate to call an atheist who denied that inference a "skeptical theist." Nevertheless, such a philosopher would not be committed to the existence of JuffREs. However, even if JuffREs don't exist, since skeptical theism is suggesting that they may be beyond our ken, one still wonders whether God's existence *would be* relevant to their existence or detectability. This still raises the questions I am about to mention, which is my only goal here.

²¹ This example is only meant to clarify the difference between a good that exists naturally and one that God himself brings about. Obviously, this is not a greater good in Rowe's sense; if God can directly control the leaders of Israel, he can directly control anyone and establish the Nation of Israel without WWII.

²² It's important to clarify what I mean by "detectable." Something is detectable if it is the kind of thing we would see (i.e., be aware of) upon close examination or careful consideration. I will set aside here the possibility of a justifying reason being detectable but going undetected. (Alston (1996, p. 109) points to this possibility.) A paper exploring the consequences of this possibility would be interesting, but exploring it here would take us too far off track. After all, skeptical theists already agree that there are evils with no detectable justifying reasons; that is what motivates their argument.

²³ One might also make some further distinctions. If our limits make them undetectable, is it because we cannot conceive of them, or because we cannot see if a conceivable outweighing good actually came to fruition? And, in either case, is our difficulty a result of the fact that we have limited information—or, is it the case that even if we had full information, we still couldn't detect the outweighing goods. It would be interesting to see a full exploration of these issues, but I believe they are ultimately irrelevant to my conclusion, so I will ignore them for simplicity's sake.

²⁴ Although, I admit, there are some difficulties here. Recall, in order for a good to be a justifying reason to allow an evil, not only does that good have to outweigh that evil, but allowing that evil has to be the only way to accomplish that good. And it's hard to imagine a situation in which the only way an all powerful being could only bring about a particular good was by allowing some particular evil. But I will grant the possibility for argument's sake; showing that it is possible only presents a difficulty for the skeptical theist.

²⁵ I will consider the possibility that God's existence only makes JuffREs unlikely below.

²⁶ Wykstra (1984 p. 155)

²⁷ In fact, if it is possible at all that he will not wear the perfect costume, our conclusion will not change. I'll deal with the possibility of a 0% chance that he doesn't wear the perfect costume, if he attends the party, below.

²⁸ When I am say "the relevant JuffRE," I am talking about the JuffRE of the SUE about to be considered. Of course, I cannot name what that JuffRE is—it is undetectable. However, even though we have not yet considered the evil in question, we can still know the probability that it will have a JuffRE given the assumptions laid down by the option in question.

²⁹ In fact, as long as we assume that it is at least possible that the JuffRE is detectable, the same conclusions will follow. I will consider the impossibility of JuffRE detection below.

³⁰ We could divide this hypothesis further. Even though God does not exist, and thus neither does the relevant JuffRE, it could still be true that the relevant JuffRE would be detectable if it existed. So, we could say that:

(F') God does not exist, neither does the relevant JuffRE, but the JuffRE would be detectable = 25%

(F'') God does not exist, neither does the relevant JuffRE, but the JuffRE would be undetectable = 25%

But our inability to detect the relevant JuffRE, when it doesn't exist, tells us nothing about whether or not it is detectable. Perhaps we don't see it because it is undetectable, but perhaps we don't see it because it is not there. Thus the evidence we are considering does not falsify either hypothesis, so separating them out does not affect our conclusion. For simplicity then, and so it matches up with the example, now and later I will collapse into one hypothesis hypotheses that both (a) suggest that JuffREs don't exist and (b) also match in regard to what they say about God's existence.

³¹ Even if the initial probabilities are (D) = 1, (E) = 49, and (F) = 50, after updating, theism will only be 49.5% likely, and atheism will be 50.5% likely. Not a significant difference, but it still shows that an evil, and our inability to detect a JuffRE, does raise the probability that there is no JuffRE (thus supporting the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q})) and does count as evidence against theism.

³² In addition, these same conclusions follow if you reject our previous assumption that God's existence, and nonexistence, *guarantees* the existence, and nonexistence, of JuffREs—and instead assume that God's existence, and nonexistence, merely makes the existence of JuffREs more or less likely. This gets a bit complicated, but if God's existence makes both the existence of a JuffRE and its detectability 3 times more likely, the initial probabilities would break down like this:

(d) God exists, but the relevant JuffRE does not = 12.5%

(e) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, and it is detectable = 9.375%

(f) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 28.125%

(g) God does not exist, the relevant JuffRE does, but it is undetectable = 3.125%

(h) God does not exist, the relevant JuffRE does, and it is detectable = 9.375%

(i) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 37.5%

For brevity, I will forgo the details; the reasoning is similar to what we will see in options 4. The end result is the falsification (d), (e), and (h), leaving us with the following end result:

(f) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 38.541666...%

(g) God does not exist, the relevant JuffRE does, but it is undetectable = 13.542666...%

(i) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 47.908333...%

For the same reasons as it does in option 4, the updating shows us that (\mathcal{P}) does provide inductive support for (\mathcal{Q}) and that SUEs make God's existence less likely (it drops from 50% to 39%). And, again, this holds true, no matter how much more detectable God's existence makes JuffREs.

³³ Although, in light of observations I make at the end of the next section, this is not necessarily the case. Although this move might allow the skeptical theist to criticize Rowe's inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}), it may not successfully defend theistic belief.

³⁴ Wykstra (1990 p.155)

³⁵ I charitably interpret Wykstra as not meaning this.

³⁶ In other words, if one part of God is comprehensible in this world, wouldn't there be a possible world in which any other part of God, like his reasons for allowing an evil, is comprehensible, even if it is not comprehensible in this world? It seems to me that only if all aspects of God are incomprehensible in all possible worlds could one maintain that a certain part of God is not comprehensible in any possible world.

³⁷ In fact, as we will see in the next sub-section, even this may not allow the skeptical theist to rescue their conclusion.

³⁸ Perhaps an easier way to think about this last point is this: Our ability to detect the JuffREs of SUEs being impossible is the only way that evil doesn't count as evidence against God's existence. But if we haven't a clue about how probable such an ability is, we should assign each probability an equal chance. It's just as likely that it is impossible, as it is that it is 99% possible, as it is that it is 98%...on down to 1%. So, given what we know, there is only a 1/100 chance that our ability to detect the JuffRE of a SUEs has the probability it needs to justify the skeptical theist's conclusion. Thus, we should conclude that it does not have the probability it needs, and thus that SUEs do lower the probability of God's existence.

³⁹ Unless, of course, unlike in this case, the probably of one of the conjuncts is 1.

⁴⁰ For the skeptical theist to demand that their new God with guaranteed undetectable JuffREs be granted a probability of 50% would beg the question against their critics. This is certainly not the value which it would be assigned given the background knowledge about which both atheists and theists agree.

⁴¹ This point was best made by Richard Carrier in his lecture "Bayes' Theorem: Key to the Universe" at Scepticon 4 (Nov 19th & 20th, 2011). This talk can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHIz-gR4xHo>. Richard Carrier is an expert on Bayes and has authored quite a few books and articles about the relevance of Bayes' Theorem to religious matters. See Carrier (2011, 2012).

⁴² This reasoning involved here is the same as the analogous point from the first option.

⁴³ One might wonder here why (L) was originally included as an option. Doesn't the impossibility of God allowing gratuitous evil rule this out before we even assign the probabilities? No. Ruling out gratuitous evil rules out the possibility of God co-existing with an evil that has no JuffRE; it does not rule out the mere possibility of God co-existing with no relevant JuffRE. There is a possible world in which God exists but the justifying reason to allow an evil does not: the possible world in which God does not allow that evil to occur. Recall, these are the probabilities that we assign before we observe the evil *and* realize that there is no detectable justifying reason to allow it. Before we know the evil in question has occurred, it is perfectly possible that God exists but no justifying reason to allow that evil does. In fact, we would never observe that evil if that were true. Thus, (L) must be included in our initial calculations and the fact that we observe the evil shows us that (L) is false.

⁴⁴ This however does not falsify Rowe's inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}). Recall, that is an inference from the fact that an evil seems to be unjustified to the fact that it is; we have not yet considered what the fact that the evil seems to be unjustified does to the probably that it is unjustified. That is the next step.

⁴⁵ Given this option, if God's existence made JuffRE detection impossible, we would get the following probability distributions:

(k) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 25%

(l) God exists, but the relevant JuffRE does not = 25%

(m) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, and it is detectable = 18.75%

(n) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, yet it is not detectable = 6.25%

(o) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 25%

The observation of the evil would falsify (l) leaving us with:

(k) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 31.25%

(m) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, and it is detectable = 25%

(n) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, yet it is undetectable = 12.5%

(o) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 31.25%

Like before, the probability of there being a JuffRE rose (from 50% to 68.75), yet the probability of God's existence dropped (from 50% to 31.25). Then, the fact that we cannot detect a JuffRE for the evil in question falsifies (m) and we get:

-
- (k) God exists, so does the relevant JuffRE, but it is undetectable = 39.58333...%
 - (n) God does not exist, but the relevant JuffRE does, yet it is undetectable = 20.83333...%
 - (o) God does not exist and neither does the relevant JuffRE = 39.58333...%

Again, although the mere existence of the evil initially raised it, the fact that it seems that the evil in question is unjustified lowers the probability that it is (from 68.75 to 60.4166...); Thus, Rowe's inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) is still supported. Since God's existence makes the JuffRE impossible to detect, but God's non-existence does not, the probability of God's existence does rise (to 39.58333...) when we realize there is no detectable JuffRE; but it does not rise above the initial starting point of 50%. Thus, even if God's existence made JuffRE detection impossible, the inference from (\mathcal{P}) to (\mathcal{Q}) would be strong and the existence of a SUE would still lower the probability of God's existence.

⁴⁶ It's worth noting that this option presents another problem. If our inability to detect JuffREs is merely the result of our limits, and whether there are JuffREs has nothing to do with God's existence, then we must admit that we actually cannot tell, objectively, whether anything that seems evil actually is evil. Take the Holocaust, for example. Given this option, for all we know, there was an undetectable JuffRE that arose from it, and it actually was a (all things considered) good thing. In short, this option renders our objective evaluations of good and evil vacuous.

⁴⁷ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers, and William Irwin and Greg Bassham, for their extremely helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.