

# Agnosticism, Skeptical Theism, and Moral Obligation

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**Abstract:** Skeptical theism combines theism with skepticism about our capacity to discern God’s morally sufficient reasons for permitting evil. Proponents have claimed that skeptical theism defeats the evidential argument from evil. Many opponents have objected that it implies untenable moral skepticism, induces appalling moral paralysis, and the like. Recently Daniel Howard-Snyder has tried to rebut this prevalent objection to skeptical theism by rebutting it as an objection to the *skeptical* part of skeptical theism, which part he labels “Agnosticism” (with an intentionally capital “A”). I argue that his rebuttal fails as a defense of Agnosticism against the objection and even more so as a defense of skeptical theism.

**Keywords:** God; theism; problem of evil; theodicy; morality; skepticism; skeptical theism; moral skepticism; moral obligation; divine commands

## 1 Evil, Theodicy, and Skeptical Theism

In his influential essay “Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism,” Daniel Howard-Snyder relates the story of Ashley Jones, a twelve-year-old girl “who, while babysitting her neighbor’s children, was raped and bludgeoned to death by an escapee from a local juvenile detention center” in the state of Washington.<sup>1</sup> He uses the phrase “Ashley’s suffering” to denote “the evil done to...Ashley...and what she suffered and lost” as a result of that evil (18).

If God exists as portrayed by traditional monotheism – a being perfect in knowledge, power, and goodness – then why did God let Ashley’s suffering occur? To answer that question on God’s behalf is to offer a theodicy. A theodicy aims to justify God’s permission of Ashley’s suffering on the grounds that such permission (i) achieves some particular outweighing good that not even a perfect being could achieve at less cost, or (ii) prevents some even worse particular outcome that not even a perfect being could prevent at less cost, or else (iii) is an unfortunate side-effect of some good that’s too good to give up (such as unchecked libertarian free will on the part of human agents) and furthermore a side-effect that not even a perfect being could prevent.

In my experience, the most popular theodicies belong to type (iii). By far the most popular token of that type, judging from my experience in front of university classrooms and in front of audiences at both public and academic forums, is one that invokes libertarian (i.e., contra-causal) free will – hereafter, “LFW.” This theodicy claims that the possession of LFW by human agents – crucially, LFW totally unconstrained by God – is a good that’s too good to give up, even if it has the unavoidable side-effect of Ashley’s suffering

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<sup>1</sup> Howard-Snyder 2009: 18. To avoid needless clutter in what follows, further citations of this particular work will give page number only.

at the hands of someone exercising LFW. I frankly don't understand the popularity of this indefensible theodicy, especially among philosophers who ought to know better.<sup>2</sup> Because of its relentless prevalence, I feel justified in singling it out for criticism. It fails on several grounds; space here allows me to mention just four of them.

First, the theodicy assumes that LFW is both a coherent notion and also the only kind of freedom that makes possible the moral agency we value as human beings; both assumptions are highly contentious, to put it mildly. It's far from clear that LFW can be explained coherently and, even if it can, it's far from clear that any morally responsible agent must possess LFW that not even God may ever constrain.<sup>3</sup>

Second, it assumes that LFW has so much intrinsic positive *value* that God would rightly refrain from ever constraining it, an assumption that overstates the value we assign to freedom in general, including LFW if indeed we have it. As Derk Pereboom notes, from the commonsense moral perspective "the evildoer's freedom is a weightless consideration, not merely an outweighed consideration" (Pereboom 2005: 84, citing Lewis 1993: 155).<sup>4</sup> In assessing the escapee's rape and murder of Ashley, our commonsense moral attitude assigns no discernible positive value to the escapee's having freely committed those crimes. Indeed, nothing could be more obvious than the fact that we don't regard a serious wrongdoer's freedom as a value that stands in the way of our preventing his wrongdoing; on the contrary, we often regard ourselves as not just permitted but *obligated* to interfere with the wrongdoer's freedom. Hence the totally hands-off policy that the LFW theodicy attributes to God has no analogue at all in our moral practice.

Third, in claiming that God would never interfere with human LFW, the theodicy runs up against the scriptural portrayal of God as having manipulated human decisions such as Pharaoh's: "The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, so he chased after the people of Israel..." (Exodus 14:8a, NLT). Indeed, according to scripture God may well have a regular *practice* of "hardening hearts" and thereby interfering with human free choice: "So you see, God chooses to show mercy to some, and he chooses to harden the hearts of others so they refuse to listen" (Romans 9:18, NLT). In any case, if God's hardening of hearts is consistent with the inviolable nature of human LFW, then so too would be God's softening the heart of the escapee so that he refrains from raping and killing Ashley.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, there's evidence that the theodicy errs in assuming that our everyday moral judgments care *at all* about the existence of LFW. If we can regard Anglo-American

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<sup>2</sup> For example, when I presented Maitzen 2009 as a colloquium paper at the American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting in 2006, my commentator, a noted philosopher of religion, relied almost entirely on the LFW theodicy in his public response.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Fischer *et al.* 2007, in which Robert Kane's three co-contributors aim telling objections at his libertarian theory of free will. In my judgment, Kane's replies to those objections only highlight the implausibility (arguably, the incoherence) of his theory.

<sup>4</sup> Howard-Snyder wisely doubts that "being free" has intrinsic positive value: "I doubt that my being free [to perform a particular good action] is a state of affairs that is good *in itself*" (23, emphasis in original).

<sup>5</sup> Christian philosopher Peter van Inwagen (1995: 54) declares it to be *obvious* that God's hardening an agent's heart deprives the agent of LFW on that occasion.

criminal jurisprudence as accurately reflecting our commonsense moral practice – if, in other words, the criminal law doesn't war with commonsense morality on this issue – then it's clear that we routinely hold agents morally responsible *without regard* to whether they possess LFW. Juries routinely convict defendants without even asking, let alone ascertaining, whether the defendants' actions were causally determined by prior states of the universe. Likewise judges never, as far as I know, instruct jurors to satisfy themselves of the defendant's LFW before they issue a verdict. One might explain this omission by insisting that the law simply presupposes the defendant's LFW and regards the presupposition as too obvious to need saying. But this explanation misunderstands the law's attitude toward obvious presuppositions. Judges' instructions to juries routinely include platitudes so obvious that only lawyers would bother to make them explicit, such as the admonition that witnesses don't always tell the truth.<sup>6</sup> In such a context, the persistent failure to mention LFW would be inexplicable if LFW were relevant, especially since the libertarian holds that defendants are *blameless* if they lack LFW when they commit the crimes of which they're accused. In short, to the extent to which the criminal law reflects them, our actual moral judgments pay no attention to LFW.

Given the abject failure of this most popular of theodicies, I can understand why skeptical theists don't hold out much hope for the enterprise of theodicy. I share their dim view of its prospects. Skeptical theists don't like our chances of explaining, in any way that would satisfy most reasonable people, why God allowed Ashley to be raped and killed. They recognize that, even after thinking hard about it, we come up empty when we try to identify (i) a particular outweighing good that not even God could achieve without allowing Ashley's suffering; or (ii) an even worse particular outcome that not even God could prevent without allowing Ashley's suffering; or (iii) some good that's too good to give up, of which Ashley's suffering was a side-effect that not even God could prevent.

Skeptical theists, however, don't find it the least bit surprising that we're so bad at coming up with satisfying theodicies. According to skeptical theism, we shouldn't think that our grasp of possible goods and evils, or our grasp of what it takes to achieve those goods and avoid those evils, even remotely approaches God's perfect grasp of these matters, particularly if we can't rule out that people experience goods and evils not just in this life but also in an eternal afterlife. As the skeptical theist Michael Bergmann says, "It just doesn't seem unlikely that our understanding of the realm of value falls miserably short of capturing all that is true about that realm" (Bergmann 2001: 279). Because skeptical theists are theists, they believe that a perfect God exists, and so they believe that God *has* morally sufficient reasons for allowing whatever horrific evils occur. But they say that we have no reason to think we could discover on our own what those morally sufficient reasons are.

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, when the issue of LFW does come up in the criminal law, appellate courts tend to remind trial courts that the issue isn't relevant to criminal responsibility. See, for instance, the much-cited holding in *State v. Sikora*, 44 N.J. 453, 210 A.2d 193 (1965), 202–203: "Criminal responsibility must be judged at the level of the conscious. If a person thinks, plans, and executes the plan at that level, the criminality of his act cannot be denied, wholly or partially, because, although he did not realize it, his conscious [mind] was influenced to think, to plan and to execute the plan by unconscious influences which were the product of his genes and his lifelong environment. [C]riminal guilt cannot be denied or confined...because [the defendant] was unaware that his decisions and conduct were mechanistically directed by unconscious influences."

Indeed, I think skeptical theism denies us any reason to think that we can discover God's reasons even if God ostensibly *tells* us what they are. For deception on God's part isn't automatically wrong, all things considered, and hence skeptical theism allows that God might deceive us for morally sufficient reasons beyond our ken, including when he apparently reveals to us his reasons for allowing some evil or other.<sup>7</sup> In sum, skeptical theism denies us any confidence that we've *ever* managed to identify, by any means, the justification God actually relies on for any of his actions or omissions. For all we know, any justification we entertain, however compelling it might seem to us, is shallower, or at least other, than the justification that actually motivates a perfectly wise God.

Skeptical theism has an obvious implication for well-known versions of the evidential argument from evil. If we have no reason to think we would see God's morally sufficient reasons for allowing some or all of the evil in our world, then our failure to see them – our failure to find a convincing theodicy – isn't itself evidence that God *has* no such reasons (and hence doesn't exist). Now, one might accept that implication but argue that our failure to see God's morally sufficient reasons is nevertheless *best explained* by the non-existence of those reasons even if it's not *evidence* for their non-existence. By the same token, my *seeming* to have hands might be best explained by my *having* hands, even if my seeming to have hands isn't evidence that some undetectable skeptical scenario doesn't obtain instead, such as one in which I'm a brain-in-a-vat being deceived into thinking I have hands.<sup>8</sup>

But I want to focus instead on a different reply to skeptical theism. Many of its critics object that its skeptical attitude toward our grasp of the “realm of value” implies or reflects untenable moral skepticism, or induces appalling moral paralysis, or produces some equally dire result. Howard-Snyder calls this popular objection to skeptical theism “the Moral Skepticism Objection” (18). He aims to rebut the objection by rebutting it as an objection to the *skeptical* part of skeptical theism, which part he labels “Agnosticism,” a label he intentionally capitalizes, presumably in order to distinguish this position from others more commonly called “agnosticism.” I'm unconvinced that he succeeds in defending Agnosticism against the Moral Skepticism Objection, for reasons that I'll detail in Section 3. I'm even less convinced that he succeeds in defending skeptical theism against the objection, for reasons that I'll detail in Section 4. Skeptical theism adds theism to Agnosticism, and the addition makes a difference. If Howard-Snyder's defense of Agnosticism has any use as a defense of skeptical theism against the Moral Skepticism Objection, then the objection shouldn't become even stronger when you add theism to Agnosticism. I'll argue that it does become stronger.

## 2 Howard-Snyder's Defense of Agnosticism

Howard-Snyder describes Agnosticism as holding that “we should be in doubt about” two issues: (a) “whether the goods we know of constitute a representative sample of all the goods there are” and (b) “whether each good we know of is such that the necessary con-

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<sup>7</sup> See Wielenberg 2010 for much more on the relation between skeptical theism and our inability to rule out divine deception.

<sup>8</sup> Russell 1996 defends both of these anti-skeptical claims on the basis of inferences to the best explanation.

ditions of its realization we know of are all [the necessary conditions of its realization that] there are” (18). Thus Howard-Snyder’s Agnostic echoes the skeptical theist’s skepticism about our grasp of “the realm of value.” Indeed, in all essential respects Agnosticism just *is* the skeptical part of skeptical theism.

Howard-Snyder then applies Agnosticism to the case of Ashley’s suffering. “Agnosticism,” he says, “tells us that since we should be in doubt about” (a) and (b), “we should be in doubt about whether there is a reason that would justify God’s non-intervention” in Ashley’s case (19). By our being “in doubt about” (a) or (b), Howard-Snyder means our being “of two minds about it, ambivalent, undecided” (22). The idea is that if we’re in doubt about whether there’s a reason that would justify God’s non-intervention in the face of Ashley’s suffering, then we’re in doubt about whether God had a moral obligation to intervene that God failed to live up to.

Does Agnosticism imply that we should be in doubt about whether God *did* intervene to prevent Ashley’s suffering, despite our overwhelming impression that God didn’t? Does Agnosticism imply that we may have missed God’s intervention? Good questions. Because Howard-Snyder is concerned to defend Agnosticism against the charge that it implies an implausibly strong kind of skepticism, I presume he would reject such a radically skeptical reaction to the claim that God didn’t intervene.<sup>9</sup> But back to the main issue. If we should be *in doubt* about whether there’s a reason that would justify God’s non-intervention (assuming God didn’t intervene), then we shouldn’t accept the conclusions reached by standard versions of the evidential argument from evil: namely, that there *is no* reason that would justify God’s non-intervention and therefore (given that God *has* such a reason *if* God exists) no God.

The Moral Skepticism Objection to Agnosticism that Howard-Snyder then considers is the following three-step argument (19, emphases added):

- (1) If Agnosticism is true, then we should be in doubt about whether *we* should have intervened to prevent Ashley’s suffering [even if we could have done so at no real risk to ourselves].
- (2) We should *not* be in doubt about whether we should have intervened.
- (3) So, Agnosticism is false.

According to the objection, Agnosticism implies that we should be undecided about whether we should have intervened to prevent Ashley’s suffering even if we could have done so at no cost to ourselves, a result that implies implausible moral skepticism on our part, or induces appalling moral paralysis in us, or both. Howard-Snyder’s response is to argue that no type of “moral theory and principle” will make premises (1) and (2) of that three-step argument both come out true, and hence the Moral Skepticism Objection is unsound.

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<sup>9</sup> Although I won’t argue for the point here, it’s not clear to me that Agnosticism can avoid endorsing this radically skeptical reaction. Bergmann 2012 argues that it can.

I want to clear out of the way a tempting rebuttal to the Moral Skepticism Objection that might occur to the reader. It goes as follows. Even if some reason justifies *God* in allowing Ashley's suffering, that alone doesn't make it likely that some reason justifies *us* in allowing Ashley's suffering. For an omniscient God can know, and thereby have, a reason to allow Ashley's suffering even when we comparatively ignorant beings don't know, and thereby don't have, that reason. Because God knows more than we do, the range of reasons that potentially justify God in allowing Ashley's suffering is *greater* than the range of reasons that potentially justify us in allowing it.

As obvious as this rebuttal may seem, it nevertheless fails. Omniscience cuts both ways here. Any reason to think that God's omniscience reveals a greater range of reasons that justify allowing Ashley's suffering is equally a reason to think that God's omniscience reveals a greater range of reasons that *prohibit* allowing Ashley's suffering. An omniscient God can know, and thereby have, reasons to prevent suffering that we comparatively ignorant beings don't know and thereby don't have. Moreover, an all-powerful God will have *ways* of preventing suffering that we comparatively powerless beings lack. Given God's knowledge and power, the legitimate reasons God has to allow suffering are just as likely to be *fewer* than the legitimate reasons we have. It's a commonplace of our moral practice that the less limited the agent, the fewer the justifications we're willing to accept for the agent's permission of suffering. (As the Spider-Man Principle says, "With great power comes great responsibility.") So this tempting rebuttal to the Moral Skepticism Objection is, at best, a wash.

Before proceeding further, let me make a small but important point about the vagaries of English idiom. The statement "We should have intervened" is straightforwardly interpreted as meaning "We were *obligated* to intervene: we were wrong not to intervene or would have been wrong had we not intervened." By contrast, the statement "We should be in doubt about whether we should have intervened" is less clear-cut. It can plausibly be taken to mean (c) "We should be in doubt about whether we were obligated to intervene." But it can also plausibly be taken to mean (d) "We should be in doubt about whether we were *permitted* to intervene: we should be undecided about whether we did something *wrong* by intervening." The Moral Skepticism Objection, as I understand it, concerns only (c) and not (d): the objection alleges that Agnosticism implies (c). Therefore, a successful defense of Agnosticism against the objection must establish either that Agnosticism *doesn't imply* (c) or that (c) isn't *false* even if Agnosticism does imply (c).

Howard-Snyder aims to establish that disjunction. He proceeds by dilemma, dividing theories of moral obligation into two exhaustive categories: roughly, those that say our obligation to intervene *depends on the total consequences of our intervention*, and those that say it doesn't. For convenience, let's call those theories of moral obligation *consequentialist* and *non-consequentialist*, respectively. He argues that consequentialist theories falsify premise (2) of the Moral Skepticism Objection, because they imply that we *should* be in doubt about our obligation to intervene in Ashley's case. After all, how can we know what the *total* consequences of our intervention will be? Presumably, the total consequences of any action ramify indefinitely in space and time, far beyond what any of us can foresee. So if our obligation to intervene depends on how the total conse-

quences of our intervention happen to shake out, then – contrary to premise (2) – we ought to admit that we’re *clueless* about whether we’re obligated to intervene.<sup>10</sup>

Howard-Snyder then argues that non-consequentialist theories, on the other hand, falsify premise (1) of the objection, because they imply that we *shouldn’t* be in doubt about our obligation to intervene in Ashley’s case, even if we acknowledge that we’re clueless about the total consequences of our intervention.<sup>11</sup> Either way, then, the Moral Skepticism Objection contains a false premise. As Howard-Snyder readily concedes, his discussion doesn’t address every possible consequentialist or non-consequentialist theory of moral obligation. Still, he discusses a wide range of them, and he challenges his opponents to specify a moral “theory or principle” on which premises (1) and (2) of the Moral Skepticism Objection both come out true.

### 3 Agnosticism and Commonsense Moral Obligation

While Howard-Snyder’s point is worth making in the debate over skeptical theism, in a way his point isn’t really news. As I see it, the Moral Skepticism Objection to Agnosticism reflects a worry arising from *commonsense morality*, and therefore the objection reflects the *mixture* of consequentialist and non-consequentialist elements that commonsense morality notoriously contains. Commonsense morality apparently holds that, in general, the consequences of our intervention *do and yet don’t* matter to our obligation to intervene: commonsense morality is both consequentialist and non-consequentialist, or neither purely one nor purely the other.

Witness, for example, the judgments elicited from those who ponder the infamous “trolley problem,” in which an agent must bring about the death of one innocent person or else allow five innocent people to be killed.<sup>12</sup> The problem has become infamous because the judgments we tend to make reflect the aforementioned mixture of consequentialist and non-consequentialist elements: the consequentialist’s solution – sacrificing one to save five – is, we say, sometimes morally permissible, perhaps even required, and sometimes morally wrong. Nor can the philosophers who study the problem agree on a principled rationale for our diverse judgments. Indeed, it’s a well-known source of embarrassment in ethics that commonsense morality, being the hodgepodge that it is, supplies counterexamples to every consequentialist or non-consequentialist theory of moral obligation on offer. That’s why neither consequentialists nor their opponents can legitimately claim victory in the age-old debate between them.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I borrow the term “clueless” from Lenman 2000, an article cited favorably by Howard-Snyder (29 n. 20).

<sup>11</sup> Howard-Snyder’s argument contains details and nuances that my brief summary of it ignores, but not, I think, any details or nuances that block my criticism of it.

<sup>12</sup> The *locus classicus* of the problem is Foot 1967, which stands at the head of a large scholarly and popular literature on it.

<sup>13</sup> Consider this analogy: Arguably, no economic *theory* properly so-called (Marxism, free-market capitalism, you name it) captures the attitudes held by the average adult in the developed world about how to run an economy. No economic theory accommodates the hodgepodge of views we might call “commonsense economics”: every theory says something that common sense rejects.

So it shouldn't surprise us if commonsense morality seems to make our obligation to intervene in Ashley's case hinge on the total consequences of our intervention, just as premise (1) of the Moral Skepticism Objection implies, and yet seems *not* to make our obligation hinge on those consequences, just as premise (2) implies. How should we handle this apparent inconsistency? If commonsense morality is in fact self-inconsistent, then *any* theory at all conflicts with it, in which case it's no knock against Agnosticism in particular that it conflicts with commonsense morality. But I think we needn't conclude that commonsense morality is self-inconsistent, and I'll propose a way of resolving the apparent inconsistency, a way that casts doubt on Agnosticism.

I take it as obvious that commonsense morality *does* obligate us to intervene in Ashley's case, particularly if we can intervene at no risk to ourselves. I'll offer a rational reconstruction of this obligation, an explanation of it that gives it a logically consistent basis, but a basis that's incompatible with Agnosticism. I don't make the psychological claim that we actually entertain this rationale when we deliberate about intervening in cases such as Ashley's. On the contrary, in such cases we tend, I think, to act instinctively rather than deliberately and reflectively. Nor need I claim that we explicitly invoke the rationale retrospectively when we reflect on our intervention or non-intervention. I offer it as a rationale that makes the best sense possible of what commonsense morality says is our clear obligation to intervene. If we *were* to go through this reasoning, our thinking would at least make sense.

Our obligation to intervene to prevent<sup>14</sup> the suffering of an individual such as Ashley depends on what we predict will be the *total consequences to that individual* if we intervene or don't intervene. Ordinary language provides evidence that we restrict our focus in this way. For it would be at least odd for us to say that we owed it to Ashley's family or friends to protect her, and still more odd for us to say that we owed it to the universe or to future generations to do so. On the contrary, in circumstances of the kind that Howard-Snyder relates, we say that we owed it to Ashley herself to intervene, or at least that we owed it to her above anyone else.

But at the same time we regard ourselves as obligated to intervene on Ashley's behalf only if we at least implicitly assume that the total consequences for her will be better if we intervene than if we don't. Why do I claim that our obligation depends on this (at least implicit) assumption? Because if we thought that our intervention made, for all we could tell, *no positive difference to her overall welfare*, we could make no sense of our being morally *obligated* to intervene. We might be able to make sense of our being morally *permitted* to intervene, but permission is of course weaker than obligation.

Ordinary language provides evidence for my claim here as well. Imagine someone who intervenes in Ashley's case and thereby manages to stop what surely seems to be the immediate harm that she would otherwise have suffered. Now imagine that Howard-Snyder's Agnostic tells the intervener that his having acted to protect Ashley produced foreseeable consequences for her that bear no known relation to the total consequences for her: for all any of us can tell, Ashley is *worse-off overall* for his having intervened.

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, we also think we're obligated to *relieve* suffering in many cases, but that obligation falls under the heading of prevention for the simple reason that to relieve suffering is just to *prevent* further (or worse) suffering.



How might the intervener reply to the Agnostic? He might well say, to begin with, “I did what any reasonable person would have thought was best for Ashley.” But this language – in particular, the term “reasonable” – is the language of someone seeking *exoneration* for what he did, not the language of someone telling us he did his *duty*.<sup>15</sup> We’re inclined to say that no one can be *faulted* or *blamed* for intervening if he reasonably thought it would benefit an innocent person; this commonplace attitude underwrites Good Samaritan laws that protect interveners from liability if their intervention ends up causing harm. But one’s being blameless for intervening doesn’t at all imply that one was obligated to intervene.

Indeed, if we think the intervener ought to have seen beforehand what the Agnostic now tells him – namely, that his intervention produced foreseeable consequences for Ashley that bear no known relation to the total consequences for her – then we may not even *excuse* his conduct on the grounds that he reasonably believed it to be beneficial. For if you accept what Agnosticism says about the haphazard relationship between the consequences for Ashley that you can foresee and the consequences for her that actually obtain, why should you assign any weight at all to the consequences you can foresee? According to Agnosticism, you should regard the foreseeable consequences as no better than a coin-toss in predicting the total consequences of your intervention. Why intervene on the basis of what you can reasonably discern if you think that what you can reasonably discern bears no reliable connection to what’s really the case? Indeed, I can imagine an Agnostic being motivated to criticize the intervener along these lines: “You say that you saw some reason to intervene and saw no reason not to. But you should have recognized that your failure to see a reason against intervening has *no probative value*: for all you could tell, your intervention did Ashley much more harm than good.”

Alternatively, the intervener might reply to the Agnostic this way: “From what you’ve told me, I now see that by intervening I took a shot in the dark, since the consequences for Ashley that I could foresee don’t at all predict the overall consequences for her. But it was a shot I had to take.” Unlike “reasonable,” the language “had to take” does suggest obligation, but it’s odd language for the intervener to use here: why “had”? Normally, when we think we *had* to take a shot in the dark it’s because we think that taking a shot, while perhaps unlikely to succeed, offered us our *best chance* at success. But the Agnostic objects to thinking this way in Ashley’s case. According to Agnosticism, we have no reason to think that our intervention, our taking a shot in the dark because it *seems* to offer us our best chance to benefit Ashley overall, is *in fact* how it seems to us. For it’s no less probable, given what we know, that our *not* intervening offers us our best chance to benefit her overall.

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<sup>15</sup> Compare Eleonore Stump’s use of “reasonable” here: “God can see into the minds and hearts of human beings and determine what sort and amount of suffering is likely to produce the best results; we cannot.... Therefore, since all human suffering is *prima facie* evil, and since we do not know with any high degree of probability how much (if any) of it is likely to result in good for any particular sufferer on any particular occasion, it is reasonable for us to eliminate the suffering as much as we can” (Stump 1985: 412–413). This passage fails to explain why we’re obligated to eliminate suffering; at most it explains why we’re morally *permitted* to (try to) eliminate suffering even if we think that God might be allowing that very suffering in order to benefit the sufferer.

Most likely of all, however, the intervener will reply to the Agnostic in something like this way: “It’s absurd to say that I only *guessed* that I’d help Ashley overall if I prevented what looked to be an imminent assault on her. You say that the consequences for Ashley of my intervention that I could foresee don’t reliably indicate the overall consequences for her. You say that, for all I can tell, I made her worse-off overall by intervening. But that’s crazy. Of course she’s better-off overall because I intervened. Or at the very least she’s *probably* better-off overall.” I think a response along those lines makes the best sense of his – and our – belief that he was obligated to intervene. But it’s a response that Agnosticism must reject.

On my reconstruction of it, then, commonsense morality accepts premise (2) of the Moral Skepticism Objection, because we know we ought to intervene. But it also accepts premise (1). For Agnosticism tells us we had better *not* rest our obligation to intervene on the assumption that our intervention will help Ashley overall: we should admit that we have no idea whether it will. Instead, according to Agnosticism, if our obligation to intervene stems at all from the consequences the intervention produces for Ashley, then the only consequences that it makes sense for us to regard as relevant are those that we can foresee.

Surely the consequences for Ashley do matter in *some* way to our obligation to intervene; any plausible position accepts that point, and commonsense morality certainly accepts it. Yet Agnosticism says that the consequences we can foresee are “but a drop in the ocean,” as Howard-Snyder puts it (30), a negligible contribution to the total consequences for Ashley. Moreover, all we know about is the drop, and we have no reason to think that the nature of the drop represents the nature of the ocean. If we operated with that Agnostic outlook, I can’t see how we would regard ourselves as obligated to add our drop to the ocean – obligated to make that negligible contribution – rather than merely allowed to add it.<sup>16</sup> Given what Agnosticism sees as the haphazard relation between the overall consequences and the vanishingly small fraction that we can foresee, it makes no sense to take those we can foresee *seriously* enough to ground our obligation on them. Agnostics might reply that “we have some evidence that Ashley will benefit if we intervene and none that she’ll benefit if we don’t intervene. So, given that we ought to follow our evidence, we ought to intervene.”<sup>17</sup> But, again, why are we *obligated* to follow our evidence if we accept the Agnostic claim that our evidence is no better than a coin-toss in predicting whether our intervention will benefit Ashley in the way that really matters, i.e., overall? That’s why I’ve portrayed commonsense morality as confidently assuming that our intervention *will* benefit her overall.

Agnostics may dismiss commonsense morality’s confident assumption as epistemically unwarranted, but they face the challenge of explaining our obligation to intervene in way that doesn’t have us making the assumption. Bear in mind, too, that the scope of the assumption is restricted to the overall consequences of our intervention for Ashley in particular. Because we restrict our focus to the overall consequences for her,

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<sup>16</sup> As David Anderson remarked in conversation, when Agnosticism tells us to intervene (or not) on the basis of foreseeable consequences despite their bearing no known relation to total consequences, it seems to be telling us “how to keep our noses clean,” how to avoid being blameworthy for intervening. Again, however, we can intervene blamelessly without being obligated to intervene.

<sup>17</sup> An anonymous reviewer offered this reply.

we presumably deserve to be *more* confident than we would had our focus included not just Ashley but all the morally significant beings ever affected by our intervention. Nevertheless, I can't see that greater degree of confidence making any difference from the Agnostic's perspective: Agnosticism still says that we can do no better than guess that our intervention will benefit Ashley herself overall. For that reason, I've argued, Agnostics *don't* leave commonsense morality just as they found it.

In sum, I've responded to Agnosticism on behalf of commonsense morality in roughly the way G. E. Moore responds to external-world skepticism on behalf of commonsense knowledge. Commonsense morality tells us we should be confident that we're obligated to intervene in Ashley's case. But commonsense morality also recognizes that we *shouldn't* be confident of that obligation if we think that Agnosticism is true – if we think that, for all we know, we'll do Ashley much more harm than good by intervening. So we shouldn't think that Agnosticism is true. Moore notoriously dismisses the external-world skeptic's conclusion: "You might as well suggest that I do not know that I am now standing up and talking – that perhaps after all I'm not, and that it's not quite certain that I am!" (Moore 1959: 146). I'm suggesting that commonsense morality likewise dismisses the Agnostic's claim that, for all we know, we'll do Ashley much more harm than good if we intervene on her behalf.

#### 4 Adding Theism to Agnosticism

Howard-Snyder argues (42–45) that the Moral Skepticism Objection proves no more effective against skeptical theism – i.e., no more effective against the conjunction of Agnosticism and theism – than against Agnosticism alone. He recognizes that skeptical theism may at least *appear* more vulnerable to the Moral Skepticism Objection, for skeptical theists, unlike non-theistic Agnostics, believe that

there *really is* some reason that justifies God's non-intervention in Ashley's case, ...a reason that God actively used to permit Ashley's suffering, so to speak, and if we have no idea at all what it is, then, for all we can tell, there is a reason for *us* not to intervene.... [43]

But Howard-Snyder replies that here, as elsewhere, we shouldn't trust the appearances. For two reasons, he says, skeptical theism is in fact no more vulnerable to the objection than Agnosticism is.

One of those reasons is his earlier claim that neither consequentialist nor non-consequentialist theories of moral obligation make both premises of the Moral Skepticism Objection come out true, whether or not we include theism in the mix. I conceded that claim and offered in reply a reconstruction of our commonsense moral obligation to intervene in Ashley's case on which we *take for granted* that our intervention will do her more overall good than harm. I don't claim to have provided anything that deserves to be called "a theory of moral obligation," only a reconstruction of our ordinary moral attitude. I have nothing to add here to that earlier discussion.

Howard-Snyder's other reason is that skeptical theists – theists who accept Agnosticism – can "reasonably think God has instructed humankind to prevent suffering in

general and that God permits a lot of it precisely because he intends for us to try to prevent it” (43–44). This divine instruction allegedly overcomes any ambivalence about intervening that skeptical theists might otherwise feel. Elsewhere I’ve criticized at length the notion that skeptical theists can rely on God’s commands for moral guidance, and I won’t repeat all of those criticisms here.<sup>18</sup> But I do want to raise three objections to Howard-Snyder’s claim that skeptical theists can “reasonably think God has instructed humankind to prevent suffering in general and that God permits a lot of it precisely because he intends for us to try to prevent it.”

First, even if skeptical theists can reasonably conclude that God *has* commanded us to prevent suffering in general (a command, by the way, that’s hard to find in the monotheistic scriptures), what does such a command mean? Presumably it doesn’t mean, for instance, that we should prevent all painful childhood vaccinations, for we justifiedly believe that vaccinations *benefit* children overall despite the fact that needles can really hurt when you’re a kid. It must mean, instead, that we should prevent a child’s suffering *unless* we justifiedly believe that permitting the suffering will benefit the child overall. But skeptical theists say that we should never regard ourselves as justified in the belief that what we do will benefit the child *overall*: to regard ourselves as justified in that belief is to presume insight into the total consequences of our action – insight that Agnostics, including skeptical theists, say we have no right to presume. Skeptical theism, therefore, denies us the epistemic self-regard we need to *apply* the command to prevent suffering in general.

My two remaining objections concern the familiar enough suggestion “that God permits a lot of [suffering] precisely because he intends for us to try to prevent it.” First, and in the present context ironically, it doesn’t apply to Ashley’s suffering. According to newspaper accounts, no human agent was realistically in a position to prevent the escapee’s rape and murder of Ashley. The escapee simply failed to return to his halfway house after being allowed out earlier in the day for a routine shift at his job; the five young children Ashley was babysitting were all asleep when the crime occurred. Her case is of course not unusual in this regard. Much suffering occurs in the presence of only a perpetrator and a victim, with no third human agent in a position to prevent anything.

Second, I find it incredible that a being who merits the label “perfect” could permit, or even risk, a child’s horrible suffering precisely so that *we* can try to prevent it from occurring or from continuing. Indeed, no being who deserves to be called even “decent” could do that. Any human agent who acted that way would have to be deprived or deranged. Such treatment of a child can only be regarded as morally intolerable exploitation, even if it’s exploitation on the part of the child’s creator.<sup>19</sup> Any being that exploits innocent children thereby fails to merit the description “perfect” or the title of God. It fol-

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<sup>18</sup> See Maitzen 2007, which Howard-Snyder cites in a footnote to his claim about God’s instructions to humankind (44 n. 47) without indicating that I dispute his claim. In fact, because the footnote simply reads “Cp. Maitzen 2007,” it may give readers the misimpression that I *concur* with his claim.

<sup>19</sup> For defense of this claim, see Maitzen 2009 and 2010b.

lows, then, that God never risks, let alone permits, a child's horrible suffering *in order* to give us a chance to intervene.<sup>20</sup>

More generally, because exploiting children by its very nature implies a defect in the power, knowledge, or goodness of the exploiter, no perfect being can possibly exploit children for *any* reason. Therefore, no perfect God can possibly permit a child to endure suffering (presumably undeserved and unwanted) except as a consequence of something that's necessary for, or optimal for securing, the child's *own* greater good.<sup>21</sup> To apply the point to Ashley's suffering in particular, no perfect God can possibly permit Ashley's suffering unless as a consequence of something necessary for, or optimal for securing, Ashley's greater good. Otherwise, God would be exploiting Ashley for some ulterior purpose. But if God exists then God *did* permit it, or at any rate Agnosticism can't tell us to be in doubt about whether God did, for that would commit Agnostics to a degree of skepticism Howard-Snyder seems concerned to avoid. So it must have been for her own good, all things considered.

In that case, contrary to Howard-Snyder, Agnosticism isn't "at home" (42) with theism. If we believe theism, we should believe that Ashley's suffering was a consequence of something necessary or optimal for her own net benefit, whereas if we're Agnostics we should be in doubt about whether it was. Furthermore, if we believe that Ashley's suffering was a consequence of something necessary or optimal for her own net benefit, then we should be (at least) in doubt about whether we would have been obligated to *prevent* her suffering had we been able to. For if we believe that a vaccination is necessary or optimal for a child's benefit, all things considered (the pain and risks of the vaccination included), then we should be (at least) in doubt about whether we ought to prevent it even though it hurts. That's an understatement, of course: in such circumstances we believe we have no obligation to prevent the vaccination and, if anything, some obligation to bring it about. Recall that Howard-Snyder aims to show that skeptical theism – the conjunction of theism and Agnosticism – should make us no more doubtful about our obligation to intervene in Ashley's case than we are independently of it. Commonsense morality, I argued earlier, leaves us in no doubt about that obligation. Skeptical theism leaves us in serious doubt about it, or worse.

As the vaccination analogy shows, we regard ourselves as obligated to prevent suffering by a child only if we discount (or dismiss altogether, or confidently regard as unlikely) the possibility that the child will be better-off if we *don't* prevent it. Nothing in our experience suggests that children benefit *in general* if allowed to suffer, or at least nothing in our experience suggests that in general we can't tell *when* they benefit if al-

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<sup>20</sup> In correspondence, David Anderson described an "Open Notion of Providence" on which "God freely abdicates control over...rational human agents" such as the escapee, thereby permitting the escapee to rape and kill Ashley. It's a commonplace that some abdications of control are immoral abdications of responsibility. God acts immorally if he abdicates responsibility for preventing Ashley's suffering so that (somehow) *we* become responsible for trying to prevent it.

<sup>21</sup> To be clear, I intend this principle as a constraint on God's permission of such suffering in any possible world, regardless of *our* actions in that world. In Maitzen 2009, 2010a, and 2010b, I defend the principle against objections that it may now occur to the reader to raise. I think the principle extends to any case in which God permits undeserved, involuntary human suffering, but it's clearest in the case of children because of their (absolute or comparative) lack of autonomy. Christian philosopher Eleonore Stump has long endorsed a principle of this sort; see, e.g., Stump 1985, 1990, 2012.

lowed to suffer. I've argued that Agnosticism and skeptical theism turn all of that on its head. Agnosticism tells us we *shouldn't* think we can tell when a child will benefit overall if allowed to suffer. Skeptical theism, because it adds theism to Agnosticism, goes further: it gives us reason to think that a child *must* be better-off, or at least no worse-off, if allowed to suffer. If, despite my argument, that last claim strikes you as too strong to be plausible, the following comparative claim is weaker and hence more plausible: the *worse* a child's suffering, the *more reason* theism gives us for thinking that the suffering must be a consequence of something necessary or optimal for the child's own good, and hence the less reason theism gives us to prevent the suffering. We ought to prevent mild suffering first, extreme suffering later. From the perspective of commonsense morality, that weaker claim is trouble enough.

One last point in closing. Howard-Snyder argues that his rebuttal of the Moral Skepticism Objection shows that Agnosticism comports just as well with naturalism as it does with theism (43). But one reason to think it doesn't is this: theism asserts, while naturalism denies, the possibility that we'll experience goods or evils in an afterlife that lasts forever. According to naturalism, all the goods and evils Ashley will ever experience came to an end with her natural death. Clearly, then, if naturalism is true we have a more reliable grasp of those goods and evils, and of what it takes to achieve the former and avoid the latter, than we do if Ashley's experience of goods and evils continues *post mortem*. Our judgment that intervening to prevent Ashley's rape and murder is good for her overall is therefore also more reliable if naturalism is true than if theism is true. I've argued that our commonsense moral obligation to intervene hinges on that judgment, and so I count this as another reason to regard commonsense morality as more at home with naturalism than with Agnosticism, theism, or their combination.

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