

COMMONSENSE, SKEPTICAL THEISM & DIFFERENT SORTS OF *CLOSURE OF INQUIRY*  
DEFEAT

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Trent Dougherty argues (*contra* Jonathan Matheson) that when taking into consideration the probabilities involving skeptical theism (ST) and gratuitous evils, an agent may reasonably affirm both ST and that gratuitous evils exist. In other words, Dougherty thinks that assigning a greater than .5 probability to ST is insufficient to defeat the commonsense problem of evil. I argue that Dougherty's response assumes, incorrectly, that ST functions solely as an evidential defeater, and that, when understood as a closure of inquiry defeater, ST may still defeat reasonable belief in gratuitous evils, even in the face of strong evidence that gratuitous evils exist.

In this paper, I argue that whenever an agent assigns a credence greater than .5 to skeptical theism, then S likely has a defeater for reasonably believing that there are gratuitous evils on the basis of an evil which *seems* gratuitous to S, even if the proposition that there are gratuitous evils *remains* on-balance probable<sup>i</sup> for S. Or to put it more loosely, when skeptical theism is more probable than not for S, then S will not be able to rationally believe that there are gratuitous evils, even if her evidence on-balance supports the existence of gratuitous evils. In order to see how this could be the case, we must diligently keep separate our epistemology of belief from our understanding of the nature of evidence. When we accomplish this, it becomes much easier to see how the notion of defeat functions differently within each domain.<sup>ii</sup>

I proceed as follows. In **section 1**, I introduce the background themes of an ongoing debate between Trent Dougherty and Jonathan Matheson concerning the following thesis: someone who assigns a credence greater than .5 to skeptical theism *cannot* consistently endorse the commonsense argument from evil against the existence of God. Matheson affirms this thesis while Dougherty dissents. Before entering into the debate itself, however, it will be necessary to engage in a bit of scene-setting, including developing the commonsense problem of evil, which allegedly renders skeptical theism powerless. In **section 2**, I introduce Matheson's argument, along with the notion of a *fully undercutting defeater*, that skeptical theism can indeed serve as a response to the commonsense problem of evil so long as it is wedded to a plausible theory of epistemic defeat. Then in **section 3** I expand on Dougherty's reply to Matheson. What we learn in this section is that Dougherty's complaint concerning Matheson's argument fundamentally spawns from a dissatisfaction with Matheson's theory of epistemic defeat. That theory does not accommodate the obvious need for *partial evidential defeaters*, which at least in some cases, can be used to demonstrate that the thesis under dispute (i.e. that someone cannot rationally assign a credence greater than .5 to both skeptical theism and the existence of gratuitous evils) is false<sup>iii</sup>.

My own discontentment with the work of the above authors springs from a similar worry; namely, that their theories of epistemic defeat are, at least, incomplete. In **section 4**, then, I present a different sort of epistemic defeater (i.e. a *closure of inquiry undercutting defeater*) that I think better establishes the conclusion at which Matheson aims; namely, that when someone thinks skeptical theism is more likely than not, then they cannot rationally affirm the existence of gratuitous evil. My view, in brief, is that there are *non-evidential*, but still epistemic, defeaters which can undermine reasonable belief. The probabilistic defeaters in play between Dougherty and Matheson, however, are merely evidential defeaters, and so, if the relevant sort of defeat

would better be construed as a non-evidential closure of inquiry defeater, then even the probability function of the agent described by Dougherty (in section 3) will not suffice for reasonable belief in the existence of gratuitous evils. Finally, in **section 5**, I attempt to motivate the existence *closure of inquiry* defeaters and their applicability to the debate under question.

### I. *The Debate – Commonsense Epistemology & Skeptical Theism*

Commonsense epistemologists endorse various theses, depending on the particular philosopher, all of which bear a family resemblance to each other in virtue of awarding some degree of positive epistemic status to individual-centric seemings. One such thesis, Phenomenal Conservatism, is a paradigmatic token of this thesis-type.

PC: if it seems to S that p, then S is *prima facie* justified in believing p.<sup>iv</sup>

Skeptical theists are those who claim that our cognitive capacities give out, fail to fully capture, or run out of steam when faced with judgments concerning the landscape of all-things-considered value and its connection with seemingly gratuitous suffering encountered in the world. That is, skeptical theists claim,

ST: human agents simply aren't in a position to determine how likely or unlikely it is that a given instance of *apparently* gratuitous evil is *actually* gratuitous.<sup>v</sup>

Skeptical theists then go on to claim that the truth of ST undercuts the crucial inference in the evidential problem of evil from "there are no possible reasons of which we are aware that would justify God in permitting *that* evil" to "there are no possible reasons that would justify God in permitting *that* evil". This inference is known as a noseeum inference<sup>vi</sup>, and ST tells us that the noseeum inference at issue in the problem of evil falters due to the possibly unrepresentative nature of our experiences of *apparently* gratuitous suffering. That is, it would

be wholly unsurprising were such apparent gratuitousness largely misleading concerning the actual gratuitousness of the evils in the world.

The tension between PC and ST, however, becomes obvious at this point. Suppose that S, rather than *indirectly* inferring that some evil is unjustified due to her inability to see any reasons for permitting *that* (token) evil (i.e. by noseeum inference), were to appeal *directly* to PC and claim, “*that evil seems unjustified*” (henceforth, I refer to this claim which reappears throughout as ‘O’). Then since as originally construed<sup>vii</sup> ST only applies to noseeum *inferences*, it would fail as a response to this sort of *direct attack* against theism.<sup>viii</sup> In such a case, PC would confer immediate *prima facie* justification on the belief that “*that evil is unjustified*”<sup>ix</sup> (henceforth, I refer to this claim as ‘P1’). So unless the truth of ST, or belief in ST, is sufficient to defeat the *prima facie* justification for belief in P1 without relying on the presence of a noseeum inference, then PC’s truth will in some cases ground (for some individuals) a very powerful and rationally held version of the evidential problem of evil.

## II. *ST as a Fully Undercutting Defeater (Matheson)*

Jonathan Matheson has recently defended the view, following Michael Bergmann, that ST can indeed defeat the reasonability of belief in P1 on the basis of O, and he accomplishes this by supplementing ST with a particular theory of epistemic defeat according to which ST functions as a fully undercutting evidential defeater.<sup>x</sup> This type of defeater can be understood as follows. Let *e* be one’s evidence for proposition *p*, such that the probability of *p* given *e* is greater than the probability of *p* on one’s background knowledge alone<sup>xi</sup> (i.e.  $\Pr[p | e] > \Pr[p]$ ). If this probabilistic relationship holds, then let us say that *e* *evidentially supports* *p*. A proposition *d<sub>full</sub>*, then, will be a *fully undercutting evidential defeater* if it calls into question this evidential support relation such

that the probability of  $p$  given the conjunction of  $e$  and  $d$  reverts to the probability of  $p$  on one's background knowledge alone (i.e.  $\Pr[p | e \ \& \ d_{full}] = \Pr[p]$ ).

In addition to the above condition for a fully undercutting defeater, Matheson claims that the amount of *prima facie* justification conferred on some target proposition,  $p$ , by a seeming for  $S$  can be undercut by  $d$  so long as  $S$  is *on-balance justified* (i.e. would assign a greater than .5 credence) in believing  $d$ , even if  $d$  is overall less justified than  $p$  for  $S$ . Consider Matheson's own illustration:

Smith has been accused of a crime, and you are aware of some, but not all, of the evidence against Smith. You are then told that the evidence you have is just as likely to be representative of the total evidence as it is likely to be unrepresentative. Suppose further that you reflect on this evidence and it strongly *seems* to you that Smith is guilty, and given PC, you thereby acquire *prima facie* justification for believing Smith is guilty. But you are also on-balance justified in believing that your evidence is as likely representative of the total evidence as it is unlikely. Thus, your seeming is fully undercut by these considerations concerning the representativeness of your evidence sample, and this is true, even if the seeming resulted in a .9 credence of Smith's guilt when you were only, say, .6 confident of your ignorance concerning the sample's representativeness.<sup>xii</sup>

Thus, Matheson's point is clearly this: he thinks that *whenever* someone is on-balance justified in believing an undercutting defeater, then this defeater *fully* undercuts the epistemic support relation at which it is directed<sup>xiii</sup>. And this will remain true, even if the justification conferred on  $p$  by  $e$  (i.e. the evidential seeming) is *greater* than one's justification for believing the undercutting defeater. To see how this works in the case of skeptical theism, recall the following propositions:

O: that evil *seems* gratuitous

P1: that evil *is* gratuitous

ST: human agents simply aren't in a position to determine how likely or unlikely it is that a given instance of *apparently* gratuitous evil is *actually* gratuitous.

Suppose an agent assigns ST a probability of .6, and suppose further that the evidential support conferred on P1 by O for this agent is initially .9. Matheson is claiming this: assuming that the agent under question is aware that ST is a defeater for the evidential connection between O and P1, then she will be irrational if she continues to believe P1 on the basis of O, for that evidential basis is *fully* undermined by ST. Of course, the success of Matheson's argument depends on the plausibility of his theory of undercutting defeat, a theory which, I think, cannot stand up against critical scrutiny. Let us, then, turn to an alternative understanding of epistemic defeat which includes the possibility of *partially* undercutting defeaters for cases such as the one above.

### III. *Partial Evidential Defeat & Running the Probabilities (Dougherty)*

In a series of two articles<sup>xiv</sup>, Trent Dougherty responds to Matheson's theory of defeat and argues that it fails to accommodate our intuitions in cases of epistemic defeat. First, Dougherty points to a natural intuition concerning the relationship between one's comparative confidences in P1 and ST.

[N]ote that the more convinced you were that your moral intuition about the intrinsic impermissibility of some particularly horrendous evil was accurate [i.e. P1], the more this would call into question the accuracy of your intuition that the skeptical theses were true [i.e. ST].<sup>xv</sup>

Thus what Dougherty suggests, contrary to what we've seen Matheson claim, is that the degree of confidence we assign to P1 ought to increase as our degree of confidence in ST decreases (i.e. they are inversely related). And this is contrary to Matheson because on his view a decrease in one's degree of confidence in ST will affect the degree of confidence one assigns to

P1 only when the credence given to ST falls *below* the threshold of on-balance justification (e.g.  $\approx .51$ ). In other words, Dougherty suggests that we should allow for a sort of *partial evidential defeat*<sup>xvi</sup>, even when we are on-balance justified in believing the relevant proposition. To put this more formally,  $d_{\text{partial}}$  will *partially undermine* the evidential support relation between  $e$  and  $p$  just when the following are both true for some agent:

- (i)  $\Pr[p | e \ \& \ d_{\text{partial}}] < \Pr[p | e]$ , and
- (ii)  $\Pr[p | e \ \& \ d_{\text{partial}}] > \Pr[p]$ <sup>xvii</sup>

That is, for Dougherty, we will have a *partially* undercutting defeater just in case an agent's credence for  $p$  given the evidence and relevant defeater falls (i) *below* their credence for  $p$  given *merely* the evidence and (ii) *above* their credence for  $p$  on background knowledge alone.

If we allow that ST might be an undercutting defeater fitting this description, it is worth asking whether it can be demonstrated that the probabilistic relations holding between O, P1 & ST might allow for an agent to be on-balance justified in believing ST while also providing on-balance support in believing P1 given O. If we begin with the following instance of the Theorem of Total Probability<sup>xviii</sup> (Step 1 of the proof below), the answer is, demonstrably, yes:

### Key Terms

O: that evil *seems* gratuitous.

P1: that evil *is* gratuitous.

ST: human agents simply are not in a position to determine how likely or unlikely it is that a given instance of *apparently* gratuitous evil is *actually* gratuitous.

### Proof

1.  $\Pr[P1 | O] = \Pr[P1 | ST \ \& \ O]\Pr[ST | O] + \Pr[P1 | \neg ST \ \& \ O]\Pr[\neg ST | O]$

Now assume that the truth of ST renders O evidentially irrelevant to P1, such that  $\Pr[P1 | ST \& O]$  becomes simply  $\Pr[P1]$ . Moreover also assume, which seems reasonable, that the probability of ST is independent of O, such that  $\Pr[ST | O]$  simply equals  $\Pr[ST]$ . In this case, we can simplify the theorem to the following:

$$2. \Pr[P1 | O] = \Pr[P1]\Pr[ST] + \Pr[P1 | \neg ST \& O]\Pr[\neg ST]$$

Next, assuming (i) that apparently gratuitous evils very likely are gratuitous on the supposition of  $\neg ST$  (ii) that the prior probability of P1 can reasonably be set at .5 via an assumption of the principle of indifference<sup>xix</sup>, and (iii) that reasonable agents might assign credences of .6 to  $ST^{xx}$  – we get,

$$3. \Pr[P1 | O] = (.5)(.6) + (.95)(.4) = .3 + .38 = .68$$

Thus, claims Dougherty, it is demonstrably false that *anytime* someone is on-balance justified in believing ST, they will not be on-balance justified in believing P1 given O. Why? Because the above probability assignments describe a possible and coherent probability function for the theses under question, and that probability function represents someone who *is* on-balance justified in believing ST while they further *remain* on-balance justified in believing P1 given O. However, while victory seems close at hand for Dougherty, I believe Matheson's contention can be exonerated if we consider an assumption underlying this entire debate; namely, that while ST is intended to function as an undercutting defeater, it need not be a defeater of the support relation. Such defeaters are *evidential* in nature, and I believe that Dougherty is correct to think that a theory of evidential defeaters ought to admit of partial defeat. However, I also claim that there are *non-evidential*, but still epistemic, defeaters and that, in most instances, ST functions as just such a defeater. In the next section, we see how non-



evidential epistemic defeaters might provide an alternative path to roughly the same results at which Matheson originally aimed.

#### IV. *A Conciliatory Suggestion: Closure of Inquiry Defeaters*

At this point, it is helpful to note a particularly important feature concerning undercutting defeaters; namely this: they are *meta-evidential* in character. That is, an undercutting defeater provides us with a reason to doubt the *quality* of our evidence in some respect. In the case of *full* evidential defeat, our evidence is shown to no longer connect to the world *at all* in the way we originally thought. In the case of *partial* evidential defeat, on the other hand, we simply recalibrate the degree to which we take our evidence to support the proposition under question.

Why, however, must we assume that meta-evidential defeaters of this sort can only affect the evidential support relation in the two ways we've already discussed (i.e. as partially or fully undermining evidential support relation defeaters)? If in fact there are other types of epistemic defeaters that are meta-evidential in character, then perhaps ST could function as such a defeater. I submit that this is often the case.

The sort of defeater I have in mind is a *closure of inquiry* defeater.<sup>xxi</sup> Such defeaters, on my view, do not affect the evidential support relation at all *qua* closure of inquiry defeater. Rather, they defeat the reasonability of believing some target proposition on the basis of one's evidence, *no matter how strong or compelling the evidence*. Consider once again Matheson's illustration from section 2. There we supposed that Smith had been accused of a crime and, moreover, that the following were true of you as a member of the jury:

- (a) you were aware of *some*, but not all, of the evidence against Smith,
- (b) Smith very strongly seemed guilty when you considered that evidence, and

(c) you thought it more probable than not that your evidence was qualitatively bad in the following respect: *it was as likely representative as it was unrepresentative of all the evidence there was concerning Smith's guilt.*

Matheson claimed that (c) served as a fully undercutting support relation defeater for the connection between your evidence (i.e. (a) & (b)) and the proposition *that Smith was guilty*. However, suppose we acknowledge Dougherty's point that the *evidential undercutting power* of (c) ought to diminish as our *confidence* in (c)'s truth diminishes. In such a case, then someone in this situation could reasonably believe that Smith was guilty even if they assigned a credence greater than .5 to the truth of (c). Indeed, this was the upshot of the probabilistic proof in the previous section.

However, as it seems to me, while Dougherty is correct concerning how one should judge the strength of the evidential support relation under consideration, he is mistaken to think that someone could reasonably believe *that Smith is guilty* merely on the basis of having a sufficiently high credence after undergoing a Bayesian-style update on the evidence and putative defeater. The reason he is mistaken is that the truth of (c) in this instance might provide, in addition to some modicum of evidential defeat, a *closure of inquiry* defeater. In that case, regardless of the strength of the agent's evidence, she cannot, so long as a closure of inquiry defeater is present, reasonably believe *that Smith is guilty*. Rather, in order to move to a state of reasonable belief *that Smith is guilty*, she will need some further reason, due either to subsequent reflection concerning her own trustworthiness in evaluating evidence or to additional evidence gathering, to close off inquiry. Thus, the presence of a closure of inquiry defeater prohibits an agent from moving from *evidence* that some proposition is true to reasonable belief in that proposition.

However, even if we acknowledge that *closure of inquiry* defeaters are sometimes present in deliberative contexts, we need further reason to think they might arise in the case of skeptical theism. Consequently, in the next section we consider two ways in which closure of inquiry defeaters might arise for an agent and determine whether either of these conditions for closure of inquiry defeat accurately describe the context concerning ST.

#### V. *Motivating Closure of Inquiry: The Gathering and Evaluation of Evidence*

Two features of a situation that tend to give rise to closure of inquiry defeat are (i) the expectation that further evidence gathering will lead to evidentially significant discoveries concerning what one should believe & (ii) a live or momentous realization that one may not be reliable or trustworthy when it comes to assessing the significance of evidence within a particular domain of inquiry. Let us consider each of these features in turn, beginning with an example to illustrate closure of inquiry defeat due to the need to engage in further evidence gathering.

##### The Need for Further Evidence Gathering: The Lottery Paradox & Closure of Inquiry

Suppose an agent S knows that she has a ticket in a fair one-million ticket lottery. Thus, she believes that the probability that her ticket will win is  $1/10^6$ . If there is a threshold for how probable a proposition must be (on one's background knowledge) before one may reasonably believe it, then S's belief that her ticket will *lose* surely surpasses that threshold easily (i.e. it has a probability of .999999). However, if S proceeds to believe that her ticket will lose, then she should go on to do a number of other things, such as give away her ticket or ignore the announcement of the winning numbers from the news that evening. But many such persons do *not* perform these actions, and importantly, no one thinks *not* performing these actions is unreasonable or revealing of an underlying epistemic malady within the agent's cognitive

system. But if S does not throw away her ticket, it seems to reveal that she does not *believe* her ticket will lose, for a losing ticket has no value for ordinary people, and S is not treating this ticket as if she believed it had no value. Rather, she treats her ticket in accordance with a belief that it will *probably* lose (i.e. a type of ticket that has *some* value, even if only very little). Thus, the live chance that her ticket is a winner prevents her from reasonably closing off inquiry, believing that it's a loser, and acting accordingly.

Now suppose rationality required that S believe her ticket would lose, contrary to the previous paragraph's contention, due to her ticket's exceedingly high probability of being a loser. Next consider the reasoning S would give in support of this belief. S would cite the extreme likelihood of her ticket losing, and on this basis, form the belief that her ticket would lose. But this same reasoning would equally support her forming the belief of any ticket in the lottery that it would lose. And so, a principle of the form *whenever one believes that p is extremely probable one ought to form the belief that p* would allow for the rational acceptability of someone who believes of each ticket in the lottery that it will lose and, what is more troubling, a proposition with which the first set of beliefs is inconsistent; namely, that some ticket will win.<sup>xxii</sup> This implication (i.e. that the reasonable set of propositions to believe in some cases will form an inconsistent set) may or may not turn out to be as implausible as it seems at first blush, but briefly analyzing the paradox will enable us to see some implications for rationality and the debate concerning skeptical theism's evidential significance outlined above.

In short, the lottery context forces us to reconsider the following question:

Under what circumstances is it reasonable to believe *p* given that one reasonably believes that *p* is probable (or highly probable)?

At least one reasonable response to this question is this: person S can reasonably believe  $p$  on the basis of her highly confirmatory evidence that  $p$  is true when she no longer expects further evidence gathering to significantly affect what would be rational for her to believe. In the case of the lottery, S knows there is at least one ticket in the lottery that will win, and for all she knows, she is holding that ticket. To determine whether or not she is in fact holding a winner, all she needs to do is engage in a further bit of evidence gathering by checking the numbers on her ticket against the numbers announced on the nightly news. And so, her reasonable expectation that further evidence gathering could alter what proposition her evidence supports gives her a *closure of inquiry* defeater that leaves her evidence entirely unchanged but nevertheless prevents her from reasonably believing that her ticket is a loser.<sup>xxiii</sup>

If we apply this to the case of skeptical theism, then, we have the following: person S can reasonably believe *that there is gratuitous evil* on the basis of the world's *seeming to contain gratuitous evil* only when she no longer expects further evidence gathering concerning the question of whether there is gratuitous evil to significantly affect the reasonability of the proposition her evidence currently supports. That is, if S does not expect to learn anything new by continuing to gather evidence, then she will be able to reasonably believe *there are gratuitous evils* on the basis of her experience of apparent gratuitous evil. But importantly, *until she reaches such a point*, she will not be able to reasonably believe that there are gratuitous evils.

*Objection* Someone might worry that in the case of skeptical theism there is simply no further evidence gathering at all that would result in learning something new about what the total evidence available supports. While I'm not convinced this is true, I am willing to concede the objection as likely accurate for most people faced with the question of whether there is gratuitous evil in the world. As a result, if most people find themselves thinking that it is highly

unlikely that further evidence gathering would result in any new information of evidential significance, then they will not have any sort of closure of inquiry defeat. And consequently, they will be able to reasonably believe *that there is gratuitous evil*, even if they think ST is on-balance probable. However, the second way in which someone might acquire a closure of inquiry defeater is, I think, much more difficult to avoid in the case of skeptical theism.

#### Disagreement: The Undermining of Epistemic Self-Trust & Closure of Inquiry Defeat

The notion of epistemic self-trust has become a popular topic in epistemology as of late<sup>xxiv</sup> and though I cannot address the importance of epistemic self-trust in full detail here, I aim to say enough to demonstrate its relevance to the question at hand. Importantly, one's degree of epistemic self-trust plays a vital role in understanding the phenomenon of epistemic disagreement. In particular, when two individuals disagree about some proposition but additionally take each other to be epistemic peers, they find themselves faced with a dilemma between continuing to trust their own assessment of the evidence or to defer to their interlocutor. Thus the object of defeat in such cases is not really an agent's evidence, but rather, an agent's degree of epistemic self-trust.<sup>xxv</sup>

Let us begin, then, with a straightforward example of epistemic disagreement:

You and a colleague decide to go to lunch to discuss some departmental policies. Additionally, you agree to split the lunch bill in half rather than worry about the precise costs of each person's meal in order to make things simpler. Unfortunately, when you and your colleague calculate the amount owed by each person, you come to different conclusions. You say, "It looks like we both owe \$12.48," but your colleague demurs and claims instead that you both owe \$12.58. What should you believe, and what is your evidence, once you've realized there's disagreement over the owed lunch bill amount?<sup>xxvi</sup>

To some extent, of course, this case is under-described, for perhaps you have many colleagues given to deceiving you about lunch bill costs, in which case, you should dismiss their disagreement as misleading. But let us stipulate that you and your colleague are equally competent and thorough when it comes to basic arithmetic as well as unwavering champions of honesty in scenarios such as the one above. Moreover, suppose you are aware of these facts and are aware that they accurately describe your colleague as well. Given these stipulations, (i) what is your evidence *that you owe \$12.48*, and (ii) what should you believe on the basis of that evidence given that your colleague disagrees with you?

Concerning the question about the *content* of your evidence, there are two reasonable responses. The first response is this: the evidence you have is precisely what it was prior to hearing about the contrary conclusion of your colleague. It consists of a perceptual experience of your lunch receipt, your memory of the itemized dollar amounts which you added together yourself, etc.<sup>xxvii</sup> And importantly, in this instance, given that your evidence has not changed in *content*, then it presumably supports (evidentially) the proposition *that you owe \$12.48* to precisely the same degree it did prior to hearing your colleague's disagreement. In other words, whatever sort of defeater disagreement cases of this sort involve, that defeater is neither a fully nor a partially undercutting *evidential* defeater, for the evidence hasn't changed. The second plausible response to the question about the content of your evidence after hearing from your colleague is this: your colleague's utterance *does* give you evidence; namely, it gives you evidence that the proposition previously supported by your evidence (i.e. *that you owe \$12.48*) is false. However, given either of these responses to the first question—i.e. that the content of your evidence is unchanged or that it is changed only slightly—the same answer applies to the question concerning how to *respond* to your evidence.

That answer is this: surely it would be rational for you to withhold your belief *that you owe \$12.48* for the lunch bill. But the reason withholding would be appropriate on the basis of your evidence *after* confronting disagreement when it was not appropriate *before* confronting disagreement is that despite whatever the evidential *content*, the *quality* of your evaluation of the evidence (or rather, what you've *made* of the evidence<sup>xxviii</sup>) has been called into question. That is, in light of the disagreement, you have a reason to doubt that you have accurately assessed the implications of the evidence in your possession, and thus, you cannot responsibly believe *that you owe \$12.48* on the basis of your earlier evaluation of the evidence.

So what must you do in this case to close off inquiry properly and go on to believe whichever proposition is supported by your evidence after subsequent reflection? Because you trust that your colleague is as reliable as you are in basic arithmetic, you reassess the evidence in your possession. You look to see if you forgot to carry the one when adding your bill, and then, your next belief will depend on what you learn when reassessing the evidence. Suppose, for instance, that you come to the same conclusion as you did before the disagreement; that is, suppose you *still* come to a total lunch bill of \$12.48, rather than \$12.58. At that point, closure of inquiry will be permissible precisely because you will have vindicated your original assessment of the evidence. Or in other words, you will have successfully demonstrated your trustworthiness in that instance as a reliable arithmetician.

But let us reflect yet *more* carefully on this case. As I mentioned earlier, epistemic self-trust has become central in many epistemological disputes, especially in cases of epistemic disagreement. One reason, among many, that epistemic self-trust is so important is that it can serve as the object of defeat. Indeed, for many philosophers, the reason closure of inquiry defeaters are dismissed is that closure of inquiry defeaters do not seem to exist in the first place.



Proponents of this sort of view might argue, for instance, that for there to be a *type* of epistemic defeater, there must also be an *object* of defeat appropriately related to the epistemic realm. But the only obvious object of epistemic defeat available, so these philosophers might allege, is evidence. Therefore, there are no *non-evidential* epistemic defeaters. As a result of such an argument, this blind spot to *non-evidential* objects of epistemic defeat produces an additional blind spot to the plausibility and presence of closure of inquiry defeaters.

What we have in this case, then, is an example of *non-evidential* defeat, and we know that some such defeat is in play since a reasonable change from belief to withholding concerning the proposition *that you owe \$12.48* is present without a *significant* corresponding change in the evidence. Contrary to the argument of the previous paragraph, moreover, it does not seem obvious to me at all that the only available object of defeat in such cases is evidence. Rather, as this case of disagreement, and many other cases besides, surely shows, our degree of epistemic self-trust can become the target of defeat, and whenever this happens, the type of defeater involved prevents the propriety of closing off inquiry concerning the proposition under question. And this may take place, even if the evidence one has seems compelling from the first-person perspective.

In summary, then, there are two potential sources for closure of inquiry defeat. In the first instance, whenever we have a reasonable expectation that engaging in future evidence gathering practices could reveal a piece of significant evidence regarding what proposition we should believe, then we may be faced with a closure of inquiry defeater. This is, arguably, the sort of defeater in play when considering the lottery paradox. In the second instance, whenever one's degree of epistemic self-trust is threatened, whether by disagreement or by some other source (e.g. when confronting the ways in which heuristics warp judgments of various sorts<sup>xxix</sup>),

then one may again face closure of inquiry defeat. Such defeat can be fended off by either (i) completing whatever further evidence gathering is necessary or (ii) reflectively reevaluating one's epistemic self in light of the defeat. But until subsequent evidence gathering and/or reflection occurs, closure of inquiry will not be rationally permissible.

### Closure of Inquiry and Skeptical Theism

Let us, then, return to the puzzle faced earlier concerning the defeating power of skeptical theism, and recall again the theses with which we are concerned:

O: that evil *seems* gratuitous.

P1: that evil *is* gratuitous.

ST: human agents simply are not in a position to determine how likely or unlikely it is that a given instance of *apparently* gratuitous evil is *actually* gratuitous.

By the end of section 3, we saw that evidential defeat comes in degrees, such that even when an agent finds herself assigning a credence greater than .5 to ST, she can nevertheless rationally assign a credence greater than .5 to P1 on the basis of O as well. That is, for such an agent, belief in ST is insufficient to defeat belief in the existence of gratuitous evil.

But as we have just seen in the previous section, ST need not function as a mere evidential defeater. It is possible, even plausible, that ST functions additionally as a defeater for closure of inquiry. Why is this the case? Consider the second source of closure of inquiry defeat.

According to the second source of closure of inquiry defeat described above, anytime one has a reason to doubt one's degree of epistemic self-trust with respect to assessing the significance of evidence in a particular domain, then one has a defeater for closure of inquiry. Consider ST which states that the epistemic position from which we acquire our evidence

concerning the existence of gratuitous evil is highly unreliable. In other words, if ST is to be believed, *both* the evidence we have gathered concerning gratuitous evil *and* our ability to assess its implications for the way the world is are radically deficient. Thus, so long as we find ourselves assigning a credence of .51 or higher to the truth of ST, it seems likely that we are faced with, in addition to whatever evidential defeaters are in play, a closure of inquiry defeater concerning the reasonability of believing P1 on the basis of O. Thus, even if O is strong evidence for P1 from the perspective of some individual, they may nevertheless be irrational if they *believe* P1 on the basis of O, for to admit of rationality here would betray a lack of appreciation for the importance of non-evidential, but still epistemic, defeat.

#### VI. *Conclusion*

I have argued that the thesis of skeptical theism provides not only an evidential undercutting defeater for belief in the existence of gratuitous evil but a closure of inquiry defeater as well. As a result, even though Dougherty is correct to allow that ST might only admit of *partial* evidential defeat (*contra* Matheson), and that even after accounting for such defeat a rational agent could have evidence which on the whole supports the proposition that there are gratuitous evils, it does not follow that such an agent can rationally *believe* in the existence of gratuitous evils. For such an agent has a compelling reason to distrust her ability to assess the evidence concerning the evidential argument from evil, a reason which prohibits her from closing off inquiry.<sup>xxx</sup>

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## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> A terminological note: I take evidential relations to be, at bottom, logical probabilistic relations holding between propositions. As a result, I use the terms ‘evidential’ and ‘probabilistic’ as interchangeable terms of art throughout. I also use ‘belief’ and ‘assent’ interchangeably, but clarity in the article is not, I think, compromised.

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Richard Foley, *Working Without a Net*.

<sup>iii</sup> Rebutting defeaters are not going to be relevant to the discussion above. As I prefer to construe a rebutting defeater,  $d_R$  is a rebutting defeater for  $p$  if it is evidence for  $\neg p$ . See (1) John Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* & (2) John Pollock and Anthony Gillies, “Belief Revision and Epistemology”.

<sup>iv</sup> See Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* for a defense of this principle. Also see the collection Chris Tucker, *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism* for an extensive discussion of the proper formulation and viability of similar principles, including an in-depth analysis of such objections as the *cognitive penetration problem* (Ibid., 225-289).

<sup>v</sup> The following represent some prominent skeptical theists who would endorse ST: (a) Peter van Inwagen, “The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air and the Problem of Silence,” (b) Michael Bergmann, “Commonsense Skeptical Theism,” & (c) Michael C. Rea, “Skeptical Theism and the “Too Much Skepticism” Objection.”

<sup>vi</sup> Stephen Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance’” gives us the name on the basis of a small insect in the Midwest region of the US called a noseem.

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<sup>vii</sup> The attentive reader will notice that ST is formulated in such a way that it can deal with the sort of direct attack I discuss in the text. However, earlier versions of ST were utilized to undermine inferences, which is my reason for including the qualifier ‘as originally construed’ in the text above. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out to me.

<sup>viii</sup> Bergmann, “Commonsense Skeptical Theism”.

<sup>ix</sup> I’m using ‘unjustified’ and ‘gratuitous’ interchangeably here. Nothing hinges on this.

<sup>x</sup> He defends this thesis in two places. See (i) Jonathan D. Matheson, “Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism: a Response to Dougherty,” & (ii) Jonathan D. Matheson, “Phenomenal Conservatism and Skeptical Theism.”

<sup>xi</sup> I’ve suppressed the typical ‘k’ or ‘b’ for background knowledge for readability above.

<sup>xii</sup> See Matheson, “Phenomenal Conservatism and Skeptical Theism” 8 for the full case. I paraphrase his discussion for the sake of brevity.

<sup>xiii</sup> A clarification brought to my attention by an anonymous reviewer: The phrase ‘at which it is directed’ is important since it is possible for there to be multiple lines of evidence (i.e. multiple evidential support relations) concerning a proposition. Consequently, if the evidential support relation between  $e$  and  $p$  is defeated by an undercutting defeater,  $d$ , there may still be other lines of evidence in support of  $p$  (e.g.  $e_2$ ,  $e_3$ , etc.). In such a case, it’s possible that  $p$  be reasonably believed on the basis of  $e_2$  and  $e_3$  despite an agent losing the evidential support from  $e$ .

<sup>xiv</sup> Trent Dougherty, “Further Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism,” & Trent Dougherty, “Phenomenal Conservatism, Skeptical Theism, and Probabilistic Reasoning.”

<sup>xv</sup> Dougherty, “Phenomenal Conservatism, Skeptical Theism, and Probabilistic Reasoning” 25.

<sup>xvi</sup> An anonymous referee helpfully pointed out that the text above might be misleading concerning Matheson’s views on partial undercutting defeaters. It’s not that there are no such defeaters on Matheson’s account, but rather, that whenever the credence one assigns to such a

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defeater is on-balance justified (i.e.  $\approx\text{Pr}[p] > .5$ ), then it will be a *fully* undercutting defeater.

Dougherty's account, then, differs insofar as he allows for partial defeat with on-balance justified propositions.

<sup>xvii</sup> When commenting on an earlier version of this paper presented at the 2016 Pacific Division Meetings of the *American Philosophical Association*, Glenn Ross suggested that the core problem in this debate is to be found in the "attempt to export a theory of defeat from a traditional epistemology of defeasible reasoning as rational changes in *full belief* to a Bayesian epistemology of *partial belief* revision by conditionalization." In the end, I believe my position is in accordance with this spirit insofar as I take evidential undercutting defeaters to undermine the strength of one's *evidence* rather than some sort of degree of belief. Closure of inquiry defeaters, on the other hand, arise out of an epistemology of *belief* rather than an understanding of the formal nature of evidence. This type of defeater is introduced in section 4.

<sup>xviii</sup> I am following Dougherty, "Further Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism" 336-8, very closely. In fact, I follow him exactly here with the mere exception of changing a few of the probability assignments and substituting 'P1' for his 'G' & 'ST' for his 'S'.

<sup>xix</sup> For discussion of the principle of indifference, see Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification*, chapter 4. Mark Murphy also pointed out to me that invoking the principle of indifference here is a bit tricky, and plausibly, could use an argument for justification. I think he's probably right about this. However, since I'm following Dougherty's version of this argument and *he* invokes indifference, I've opted to forgo a defense of invoking the principle. Moreover, establishing my thesis that ST can function as a *closure of inquiry*, rather than as an evidential support relation, defeater doesn't necessitate that I fix this difficulty with the principle of indifference. Or at least, so it seems to me.

<sup>xx</sup> And of course, any subjectivist Bayesian would be friendly to such an assignment.



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<sup>xxi</sup> Jonathan Kvanvig, *Rationality and Reflection: How to Think About What to Think*. See pages 115-119 for a brief discussion concerning closure of inquiry undercutting defeaters and the epistemology of testimony/disagreement. I owe much of my understanding of epistemic defeat to Kvanvig's work.

<sup>xxii</sup> For it can be simply stipulated that she knows that there's one ticket that wins out of the million.

<sup>xxiii</sup> As an anonymous referee has suggested, it is worth pointing out that I'm aware my proposed solution to the lottery paradox is controversial; however, in any case, it still suffices to explain this particular way in which someone might acquire a closure of inquiry defeater. Consequently, even if I'm wrong about the lottery paradox, so long as there are cases where further evidence gathering is expected by an agent to improve his or her evidence in significant ways, closure of inquiry defeaters will remain relevant.

<sup>xxiv</sup> See, for instance, (1) Linda Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*, (2) Richard Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others*, & (3) William P. Alston, *Beyond Justification: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation*.

<sup>xxv</sup> I'm fully aware that this is a controversial claim. However, I attempt to demonstrate that this claim is true via example in what's to follow.

<sup>xxvi</sup> See David Christenson, "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News," 196 for a similar case, which is quoted in Kvanvig, *Rationality and Reflection*, 114. The upshot of the case is much closer to Kvanvig's position than Christenson's. I differ, however, by distinguishing between types of closure of inquiry defeat and identifying the object of defeat here.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Or if we're more careful, your evidence consists fundamentally in the propositions encoded by such mental states as those listed above.

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<sup>xxviii</sup> See Kvanvig, *Rationality and Reflection*, chapter 4 for this banner-like way of putting the point.

<sup>xxix</sup> For an accessible and well-written introduction to several of the relevant heuristics and biases I have in mind, see Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*.

<sup>xxx</sup> I would like to thank Linda Zagzebski, Wayne Riggs, Glenn Ross, Marilyn Piety & two anonymous referees for helping me to think through this debate more carefully. This paper is much better as a result of their input. Also, thanks to Mark Murphy for pointing out a parallel discussion by Joseph Raz in the literature on practical reasons that has enabled me to think more broadly about the applications of the view of epistemic rationality and defeat undergirding this article.