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Who Knows!

A Cartesian Response to the Evil-God Challenge

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Abstract: According to the Evil-God challenge, there is an epistemic symmetry between the hypothesis of a Good God and the reverse hypothesis of an Evil God. Hence, belief in a Good God is no more reasonable than belief in an Evil God. Several persuasive responses have been offered to this challenge, but in this paper I focus on one that, to my mind, is underdeveloped in the literature; namely that the Evil God hypothesis casts serious doubt on the reliability of our cognitive faculties, while no comparable thing can be said of the Good God hypothesis, in any case not to the same degree of plausibility. Assuming an apparently innocuous rationality principle, this breaks the supposed symmetry between the two hypotheses and gives the theist reason enough to justifiably prefer the latter.

Keywords: Evil God challenge, Divine goodness, Philosophy of religion, Skepticism, Stephen Law

> *The atheist shall never be free of this doubt unless he recognizes that he has been created by a truthful God who doesn't have it in him to be a deceiver.*
> René Descartes, Answer to the IV of the Sixth Objections

1. [The Evil-God] Challenge Accepted!

According to Stephen Law's (2010) influential Evil-God challenge,[1] the most common theistic arguments leave underdetermined God's moral character, lending equal evidential support to a Good God (GG) and a wholly malevolent Evil God (EG). If this wasn't enough, any and all theodicies that a GG believer might use to explain why GG would allow evil in the world can be successfully

[1] See Asha Lancaster-Thomas (2018a, 2018b) for a helpful summary of the history, development, and responses to the argument.

mirrored to obtain reverse theodicies that will explain with equal plausibility why EG would allow goodness in the world. There is, thus, an epistemic symmetry between both hypotheses, meaning that theists are expected to abandon belief in GG, either because of the (supposedly obvious) unreasonableness of belief in EG or because of the still unsolved task of providing a symmetry breaker that would justify belief in GG but not in EG.

Building on the literature around this topic, Ben Page and Max Baker-Hytch (2020) have argued that the EG challenge rests on three symmetry sub-theses:

> (A) Intrinsic symmetry: the concept of an all powerful, all knowing, all evil deity is about as intrinsically plausible and coherent as the concept of an all powerful, all knowing, all good deity.
> (B) Natural theology symmetry: natural theological evidence (e.g. the apparent 'fine-tuning' of the universe; phenomenal consciousness; religious experience; and objective moral values and duties) lends roughly equal support to GG and EG alike.
> (C) Theodicy symmetry: most of the significant theodicies that try to explain why a GG might allow such a tremendous amount of evil can be 'mirrored' with about as much plausibility so as to yield reverse theodicies that try to explain why an EG might allow such a tremendous amount of goodness (Page & Baker-Hytch 2020, 490).

As it happens, challenges to all three symmetries have been raised, and Page and Baker-Hytch argue persuasively that none of the symmetries actually hold. As regards to intrinsic symmetry, for instance, several arguments have been proposed to the effect that the concept of an EG is internally inconsistent, or else incompatible with several plausible metaphysical thesis about the relationship between good and evil. (If the privation theory of evil is true, for instance, and evil is a kind of non-being, then a maximally evil being would seem to be maximally impossible).

Natural theology symmetry is broken by many arguments that do actually purport to establish God's moral character, and that can't be easily reversed. These being controversial even among theists –a point emphasized by Law (2010: 365)– does not seem to be sufficient to undermine the response, for what is not controversial in philosophy?[2] Also, not all available evidence seems equally expected under both hypotheses: Rad Miksa (2022) has argued that, given his maximal possessiveness (understood as the reluctance to share anything with others), EG would most likely not create anything at all. But if this is the case, then arguments for a creator of the universe (such as the fine-tuning or Kalam arguments) actually do lend stronger support to GG rather than to EG, contrary

[2] Certainly not the Evil God challenge.

to the evil-god challenger's initial contention. Psychophysical harmony (Cutter & Crummett, forthcoming) also appears to be immensely unexpected under the EG hypothesis.

Finally, theodicy symmetry also breaks down because, supposing EG wants to create, he would want to maximize evil, and it seems he could easily achieve that *without* creating free creatures and risking moral goods being realized. On the flip side, it isn't that clear that GG could maximize goodness without creating free creatures and thus risking moral evil to appear in the world.

To my mind, then, the Evil God challenge, though certainly interesting and worthy of consideration and response, has already received several persuasive answers. Still, one apparently obvious strategy to meet the challenge is, to my knowledge, underdeveloped in the literature. Indeed, it seems pretty straightforward that one can argue, in a Cartesian fashion, that the EG hypothesis seriously undermines the reliability of our cognitive faculties, transforming radically skeptical scenarios from mere (and dismissible) logical possibilities to plausible and even very likely realities. But no comparable skeptical threats attach to the GG hypothesis. Thus, this may be enough to break the (alleged) symmetry and rationally prefer the latter over the former. Such is the response I wish to develop further.[3]

Which of the three symmetries identified by Page and Baker-Hytch does this response target? That is an interesting (though tangential) question. If one takes the reliability of our cognitive faculties as a given (as *data* to be explained), then this response would target natural theology symmetry: it would not be true that all the evidence is roughly equally accounted for by GG and EG, since the evidence of our cognitive faculties being reliable would be more expected if our creator were perfectly good than if he were perfectly evil. If, instead, one does not take the reliability of our cognitive faculties as a given, but more like a precondition of rationality, then rationality considerations would move us to prefer the GG hypothesis instead of the EG hypothesis, likewise breaking the supposed symmetry. In this case, the response developed here would be distinct from most responses to the evil-god challenge, because it would come at it from

[3] Although I have not seen this approach developed to the extent that I will pursue, some considerations in Miller (2019) overlap with my general project. In his 2019 paper, Callum Miller briefly notes that GG and EG relate to each other as realism to skeptical hypothesis (such as Descartes's demon). Even though the evidence underdetermines the theories (i.e., skeptical or conspiratory hypotheses can always accommodate the data), most people find it simpler and more reasonable to take appearances as reliable guides to reality and hence prefer realist theories to skeptical ones. But ordinary people overwhelmingly take religious experiences and miracle claims as confirmatory of the idea that God is good. To suppose, on the face of that evidence, that God is actually evil would be akin to putting forward some grand deception conspiracy theory, forcing us to go against appearances for no substantial reason. Hence, GG should be preferred over EG. I thank an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to Miller's paper.

a different angle that is not purely evidential or theoretical, but more practical or axiological in nature.[4] Be that as it may, let's move into the specifics.

2. The Anti-Skepticism Principle

I take it that the following is an intuitively obvious, or at least initially plausible, rationality principle: "All else being equal, we should prefer the hypothesis that leads us to radical skepticism less." Call this the Anti-Skepticism Principle.[5] Suppose two hypotheses, H1 and H2, *prima facie* explain equally well the same set of data. Let's stipulate that simplicity considerations don't move us to prefer one over the other. However, H2 has the implication that very likely you are a brain in a vat and that all your beliefs about the external world are in fact wrong. On the other side, H1 has no such implication. I take it that this is sufficient reason to rationally prefer H1 over H2.

Going a bit further, suppose that radical skepticism is an open possibility both under H1 and H2. However, imagine that, under H2, the probability of your cognitive faculties being radically unreliable is of the order of 95%, whereas under H1, such a probability drops to 5%. Even if H1 leaves *some* room for radically skeptical scenarios, I take it that the fact that these are far more expected under H2 is reason enough to prefer H1 over H2, all else being equal. Indeed, it seems that no one should want to make radical skepticism as probable or more probable than not, at least if such a thing can be avoided without any other major setbacks. And having available an alternative hypothesis with the same explanatory power, no simplicity drawbacks and either no or less skeptical implications is precisely what one should be looking for. Hence, one should prefer H1 over H2.

Here are some examples of something very much like the Anti-Skepticism Principle being implicitly deployed in philosophical and scientific discussions. In 1896, physicist Ludwig Boltzmann proposed a theory according to which our observable universe was produced by a random thermal fluctuation within a larger Universe eternally in a state of heat death. Further discussion uncovered a skeptical implication of Boltzmann's theory; namely, that if it were true, the most probable (and hence numerous) observers within the universe would be so-called

[4] It would be a kind of pragmatic response to the challenge, like others that have already been issued in the literature (for instance, Scrutton 2016). Or else, as suggested by an anonymous reviewer, it could be taken as a *reductio* of the EG hypothesis, maybe creating a new symmetry sub-thesis focused on absurdity. In this case, the EG hypothesis would lead to absurdity in a way not replicable for the GG one, which should count as an asymmetry.

[5] It seems to me that even if not all things are equal, rationality should move one to prefer those hypotheses with less skeptical implications. Even if some explanatory power is gained in the process (or theoretical complexity reduced), skeptical threats appear to be too high a price to pay for these benefits. Still, the stated principle will be sufficient for my argument.

Boltzmann brains, popping out of the lifeless void while hallucinating a universe like the one we believe we inhabit. This produces what Sean Carroll (2020) has called "cognitive instability": if, suddenly, Boltzmann brains outnumber regular observers in the probability space, it becomes more and more plausible that *I* am a Boltzmann brain, hallucinating everything around me. This was taken as reason enough to abandon Boltzmann's theory and is usually taken as decisive to rule out other cosmological models with the same implication (again, see Carroll 2020). Indeed, if satisfactory cosmological models that pose no skeptical threat are available, why on Earth would a rational enquirer want to stick to the hypothesis that puts heavier pressure on the reliability of his or her own cognitive faculties? Given the availability of other options, that just seems an irrational move to make.[6]

Take also Alvin Plantinga's influential evolutionary argument against naturalism (EAAN).[7] According to this argument, naturalism implies that evolution is unguided, and unguided evolution undermines the reliability of our cognitive faculties, for in such a case they are not the product of a process interested in truth, but in survivability. One way to understand the argument would be to take it as stating that, unless willing to abandon evolution, one should prefer any other metaphysical hypothesis besides naturalism that does not lead to the same skeptical implications. Hence, if the options are reduced to naturalism and theism, one should prefer theism over naturalism. Since virtually all responses to the argument try to question that naturalistic evolution has such skeptical implications, this suggests that the felt force of the Anti-Skepticism Principle is driving the conversation.

I take this principle to be pretty self-evident in itself. In fact, I know of nobody who, faced with two hypotheses, would want to claim that (i) H1 and H2 are theoretically equivalent (no explanatory or simplicity considerations move us to favor one over the other); (ii) H1 has no radical skeptical implications; (iii) H2 has some radical skeptical implications; but still, (iv) H2 is just as reasonable as H1. *If truly all else is equal*, but H2 makes radical skepticism more probable than H1, this seems to be reason enough to prefer H1 over H2. Indeed, why wouldn't it be?[8]

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[6] Maybe one could even go further than this and claim that it is preferable *not* to embrace the hypothesis that makes skeptical scenarios more plausible, *even if* no better hypothesis is currently available. Best to keep looking, one might think. This seems plausible to me, but once more, the weaker Anti-Skepticism Principle suffices for my purposes.

[7] See Plantinga (2011, 307-350) for the most up-to-date version of the argument and Slagle (2021) for an excellent exposition and defense of it.

[8] Again, see Miller (2019, 14-16) for some considerations regarding the simplicity of non-skeptical theories.

3. Evil God's Skeptical World

The *ceteris paribus* clause of the Anti-Skepticism Principle is relevant to this discussion because the Evil God challenge is already predicated on the assumption that "all things are equal" between the GG and EG hypotheses. Both GG and EG, it is said, are equally internally consistent, all available natural theology evidence underdetermines whether GG or EG exists, and any theodicy for GG has an equivalent reverse-theodicy for EG. Indeed, the force of the challenge *depends* on everything else being equal and deflates if such epistemic symmetry is broken.

As I have said above, I do in fact think that the symmetry breaks down at multiple levels. For my argument to work, though, we can suppose that all previous symmetries hold. We can imagine that a given person, Smith, has arrived at the conclusion that there exists an all-powerful, all-knowing, personal creator of the universe, but then ponders what to think about such a creator's moral character. Is the creator perfectly good or perfectly evil? Smith is unsure: all his evidence is compatible with both hypotheses. So, what must he believe? What I am advising Smith to consider is whether one of the two options would cast (either it alone or more than the other) an intolerable doubt over the reliability of his cognitive faculties and then escape like hell from such a hypothesis and run into the arms of the other.[9]

Now, is there any reason why the EG hypothesis should make us doubt the reliability of our cognitive faculties? Here, we are faced with the difficulty that "thus far no one has offered a substantive account of EG's psychology" (Page & Baker-Hytch 2020, 504). Still, once a little thought is put into the psychology of a wholly evil being, I believe skeptical scenarios stop being mere logical possibilities and start to look suspiciously as plausible live options—even becoming more likely than not. Let's assume EG is as likely as GG to create something else, and specifically personal creatures like us (if this assumption is not granted, the symmetry needed for the EG challenge to go through has already

[9] For simplicity's sake, and to be consistent with the Evil God challenge, we assume GG and EG are the only two viable hypotheses of the Creator on offer. Arguably, one could come up with other theories, such as a less than perfectly good deity. Miller (2016), however, has argued that it is simpler to possess a property to an unlimited degree than to a finite degree, so simplicity considerations would cut against such "less than perfectly x" deities. Maybe others could try to introduce the third option of an Indifferent God. Arguably, though, an Indifferent God would not create anything, or else would create with no interest in view, and hence would be ruled out as a hypothesis of the Creator by Kalam and fine-tuning arguments. Also, as pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, given an Indifferent God, Plantinga's EAAN and similar arguments could come into play, since humanity's cognitive faculties would have come about via some unguided process not aimed at truth. Hence, even the Indifferent God Hypothesis could have radically skeptical implications.

broken down). Now, how likely is it that EG would give us cognitive faculties that reliably track truth, or create us in mostly non-skeptical scenarios? Not much, I contend. Presumably, EG would enjoy lies and thrive manipulating people, hence radical skepticism should seem like candy to his eyes.[10] He would thus likely find amusement in creatures being radically mistaken in their deepest beliefs about the world and could use this to inflict on them greater pains and sufferings when temporarily removing the skeptical curtain from their eyes. In fact, the following appears to be a live possibility under the EG hypothesis.

EG creates one single person, Smith, and puts him in an eternal loop of torture and skeptical scenarios. During skeptical time, EG messes with Smith's cognitive faculties so that he believes he is living a normal life, having meaningful relationships with his friends, spouse, and children, and making a difference in the world through his actions. EG rejoices in Smith's gullibility, and at the appointed hour he stops the charade, reveals the truth to Smith and tortures him for an indefinite amount of time, enjoying not only Smith's physical pain, but also his psychological suffering at knowing all the good things he cherished in life were a despicable lie. After that, Smith gets his memories erased and the cycle starts again, over and over for all eternity.

EG can get creative with this. Maybe sometimes he does create other real people and allows Smith to genuinely connect with them. But this only for a moment: after that EG traps these other people in endless cycles of suffering, severing the link between their minds and their bodies, and making these act mechanically in a way that is indistinguishable from everything being normal (EG makes epiphenomenalism true for Smith's companions). This way, when EG lifts the curtain, Smith will have to deal with the psychological torture of knowing that, when he kissed his children good night and they kissed him back, they were actually being tortured to death on the inside. Maybe EG makes it so that each kiss of Smith multiplied his children's pain by a thousand, which would be even more psychologically unbearable.

This seems like a terrible position to be in, indeed. No one, I take it, would want to exist in such a world. But EG, we must remember, deeply hates and despises anything he creates. We must think it plausible, then, that EG would

[10] Actually, Law himself appeals to EG's deceitful nature in order to make EG symmetrical to GG with regards to certain natural theological evidence. He writes: "Do the arguments from miracles and religious experience provide better evidence for a good god rather than they do an evil god? Suppose that the evil-god hypothesis is true. This malignant being may not want us to know of his existence. In fact, it may help him maximize evil if he deceives us about his true character. An evil and omnipotent being will have no difficulty duping human beings into believing that he is good" (Law 2010, 362). I thank an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to this quote.

want to put his creatures in these kinds of scenarios.[11] The only moments EG would want for a creature's cognitive faculties to be generally reliable would be during torture time, to get the desired physical and psychological effects. In any other moment, skeptical scenarios could be part of his long-term plan of maximizing evil, and they sure seem like a twisted tool to do so.

Are there any comparable reasons to think GG might want to place us in skeptical scenarios? I don't think so. GG would presumably value truth and the hopeful and meaningful pursuit of it through scientific and philosophical inquiry, which spawn so many other goods like the camaraderie and mutual intellectual assistance between truth-enquirers. But these require generally reliable cognitive faculties, so GG would want us to have them. Presumably, GG would value beauty, imbue its creation with it and want us both to discover it and learn to appreciate it deeply. But this also requires us to have generally reliable cognitive faculties and not being trapped in radically skeptical scenarios, hence GG would promote that. Presumably, GG would value love and would want us to have loving relationships both amongst ourselves and with Him. But this too requires us to have generally reliable cognitive faculties, in order to genuinely connect and interact with other people and GG.

In fact, if we found out that we were being radically deceived by some deity, we would find it extremely hard to trust such a being ever again (as already happens to us with regular deception by regular people). We would rightly feel used, manipulated, and exploited. If GG was such a deity, he would certainly have a lot of work ahead of himself to persuade us of his perfectly good character, if that could even be achieved (which I think can be questioned: would the doubt ever disappear completely?). Hence, putting us in radical skeptical scenarios would seriously threaten our relationship with GG. But presumably, GG wants us to have a loving and trusting relationship with him, as children to a parent. Hence, he would not be inclined to radically deceive us.

We see, then, that GG has plenty of reasons to create us with reliable cognitive faculties and avoid putting us in radical skeptical scenarios. EG, on the other hand, appears to have enough reasons to put us in skeptical scenarios, either perpetually or intermittently. And, importantly, the only times EG appears to have overriding reason for allowing us not to be radically deceived are those in which we suffer horrendously with no end in sight.[12] If this is so, the reliability of

[11] And, of course, as an anonymous reviewer notes, being omnipotent, EG could do this an infinite number of times for an infinite number of people. Or near-infinite, if you quibble about the possibility of actual infinities.

[12] Though maybe even this is too generous for the EG hypotheses, as it seems that EG could inflict on us tremendous amounts of pain while almost all our cognitive faculties are being radically deceived. Smith, for instance, could be having the unpleasant experience of being tortured by a terrifying race of spider-looking aliens without any of those nasty creatures actually being there to torture him: the whole thing is happening just inside Smith's mind. He's still

our cognitive faculties is deeply compromised under the EG hypothesis, especially if we don't find ourselves in deeply horrendous scenarios (which is the case with almost all of us almost all of the time). But nothing comparable takes place under the GG hypothesis: on the contrary, under this hypothesis the confidence we may have in our cognitive faculties is apparently strengthened because of their ultimate origin in a perfectly good deity that loves truth, despises deception, and wants what is best for us.

In the end, why would GG give us generally reliable cognitive faculties? Because, presumably, GG loves us, and having generally reliable cognitive faculties is good for us, and when you love someone, you want what is good for them. But why on Earth would EG want to give us generally reliable cognitive faculties if he can avoid it? EG *hates* us with all his heart! But then, the apparent epistemic symmetry between EG and GG is broken and the Anti-Skepticism Principle kicks in: if truly everything else is equal, we should prefer GG over EG.

4. Objections

4.1. Objection 1

As said above, I consider the Anti-Skepticism principle plausible enough—it seems eminently true that, "All else being equal, we should prefer the hypothesis that leads us to radical skepticism less". Hence, for the remainder of the paper I will consider objections to the second piece of my response: that the GG hypothesis leads us to radical skepticism less than the EG hypothesis.

One objection an evil-god challenger could make on this front may go like this: "Assuming GG exists, he has already allowed humanity to be radically mistaken about the world lots of times before, and presumably for good reasons. Why think, then, that GG cannot have a good reason for giving us unreliable cognitive faculties or systematically putting us in radical skeptical scenarios? Absent any answer here, GG may have as many skeptical implications as EG, balancing the scales once more."

To this, I think we can give several persuasive answers. First, we have already explained the reasons GG would presumably have for giving us reliable cognitive faculties and avoid putting us into radical skeptical scenarios: namely, that these conditions seem to be required for pursuit of truth, appreciation of beauty, and loving relationships to be possible on our part, and GG, being perfectly good, would want his creatures to be able to do these things. On the flip

radically deceived about his surroundings, but both his pain and his terror are real (and deeply gratifying to EG). If this is so, why would EG even need to give his creatures reliable cognitive "windows" to the external world? It seems that any evil he wants, he can achieve while simultaneously getting a kick out of radically deceiving people.

side, the only times EG might have sufficient reason for allowing our cognitive faculties to function properly would be while we were suffering tremendously, either at his hands or at other people's. But then, under EG I have strong reason to suspect the deliverances of my cognitive faculties whenever I am not suffering miserably. And this suffices to break the symmetry between the two hypotheses, since most of the time I am not suffering miserably.

Second, notice how those other times that we have been radically mistaken about the nature of things involved a kind of error which at least in principle could be dispelled with time and intellectual progress, as we take it to have happened in history (for instance, regarding the age of the universe or the movement of Earth and its place in the Solar system). Since the overcoming of some errors, even radical and entrenched ones, is part of the intellectual journey, these don't seem to be entirely unexpected under the GG hypotheses. However, notice that allowing for *superable* errors requires our cognitive faculties to be generally reliable, and capable, with time and joint effort, of overcoming error and recognize truth.

The radical skeptical scenarios that we are envisioning, though, are not amenable by scientific or philosophical exploration. There is no amount of progress or refinement in the use of our cognitive tools that could lead us to discover that they are essentially deficient, or that the universe began five minutes ago with appearance of age,[13] or that everyone else is a philosophical zombie, or else screaming of pain inside despite smiling and acting normal on the outside. Notice that, in our envisioned Smith scenarios, the only times Smith learns about his views of the world being radically mistaken come about because of EG's own action of breaking the illusion: these are errors that no intellectual effort on the part of Smith could have overcome in principle. *These* are the radical errors that deeply trouble us when considering radical skepticism as a possibility. And *these* are the radical errors that are more expected under EG than under GG, as I have argued above.

[13] There is another potential symmetry breaker here. Indeed, why would EG go through all the trouble of creating a universe like ours and waiting for billions of years for intelligent beings to appear? Why wait so long? If EG truly wants to maximize evil, and this requires intelligent beings to suffer in several ways, it seems much more likely that he would just create them on the spot. On the contrary side, GG wants to maximize goodness, and while this plausibly requires the existence of intelligent beings, maximizing beauty also contributes to the maximization of goodness because beauty is good. Hence GG has reason to create an exuberantly beautiful universe that has been developing according to regular laws and that will be susceptible to investigation once intelligent creatures progress to the adequate level of scientific refinement. Once more, EG gives one reason to be deeply skeptical about what science tells us regarding the age of the universe, while no comparable implication follows from GG.

4.2. Objection 2

A second objection might read like this: "Maybe GG has some unknown reason to allow us to be radically deceived. Maybe through this he can achieve some superior good which is unknowable by us, and he will compensate us accordingly in an afterlife. Hence, EG and GG are still on a par."

Two responses are in order. First, the theist might argue that this is not possible since it would amount to a kind of manipulation and instrumentalization of persons which is incompatible with perfect goodness. This seems indeed plausible –in any case, if the permission of radical skepticism is incongruent with any moral character, we certainly would expect it to be so for perfect goodness, and not at all for a maximally evil person. If asked "Why would the Creator not allow us to be radically deceived?", the answer "Because He is perfectly good" appears to be intelligible and appropriate indeed. If someone answered instead "Because He is perfectly evil", I contend most of us would be at a loss trying to understand the logic of the situation.

But second, and maybe more importantly from a dialectical point of view, the theist might concede this is a broadly possible thing for GG to do, but still claim that the previous reasons make it highly unlikely, or at least significantly less likely than EG putting his creatures in radical skeptical scenarios. And this suffices to break the symmetry between the two hypotheses. Remember, to prefer H1 over H2, we don't strictly need H1 to have *no* skeptical implications: we just need radical skeptical scenarios to be less plausible under H1 than under H2. And this is the case here: Even if GG may have some unknown reason(s) to favor radical skepticism, and EG some unknown reason(s) to not favor radical skepticism, it is still true that the *known* reason(s) strongly suggest that GG would be significantly less likely to favor radical skepticism than EG.

Additionally, in pushing this objection, the evil-god challenger may go the full skeptical theist route and claim that we can have no grasp on divine psychology, and hence that we cannot draw any conclusions about what a GG or an EG would be more inclined to do. However, this would significantly reduce the EG challenge's target, since no theist is necessarily compelled to embrace such a radical form of skeptical theism, and many do already reject it.[14] Hence, anyone besides the radical skeptical theist would be free to evaluate whether GG or EG would be more likely to put their creatures in skeptical scenarios, and I have argued such considerations don't look good for EG. Additionally, it seems the Evil-God challenge is predicated on the assumption that we *do* have at least some sufficient grasp on divine psychology—that is why the possibility of the Creator being evil should worry us. If, instead, we truly can't have any grasp on divine

[14] See, for instance, the characterization of *positive* skeptical theism and its distinction from *negative* skeptical theism in DePoe (2017).

psychology, I at least don't see why settling God's moral character should even matter. Maybe God is maximally evil but, still, the way he is inclined to operate is indistinguishable from what a perfectly good deity would do, for some unknown and inscrutable reason. Who knows!

In any case, here is an analogy that might help one to be skeptical of such full-blown skeptical theism. Suppose you are starving to death stranded in a labyrinth full of deadly traps (the mad philosopher from the trolley problem is responsible). You are then offered two exit maps. The first one, you are told, was drawn by an omnibenevolent deity that wants the best for you; the second, by an omnimalevolent one that hates you with all his being. Which map would you grab? If the one drawn by an omnibenevolent deity, you presume to have some grasp on divine psychology. And hence, as I have argued, you should likewise think it more probable that GG, and not EG, would fashion our cognitive faculties in a generally reliable way and would not systematically put us through radical skeptical scenarios.

This objection, however, is important, and helps us to see another intuitive difference between EG and GG's dispositions towards radical deception. Namely, that while GG would need some kind of strong overriding reason in order to *allow* for radical deception (again, assuming this is possible for an omnibenevolent being), the opposite seems true of EG —EG would need some kind of strong overriding reason *not to engage* in radical deception towards his creatures. After all, radical deception seems, on its face, a more fitting and natural thing to pursue for EG: the intrinsic character of radical deception appears to make it more desirable as a course of action the more an agent becomes morally deficient. Hence, it seems that, if EG can achieve his ultimate goal of maximizing evil while taking advantage of any opportunities to radically deceive his creatures, he would do so.

In other words, if EG can achieve his goals *and* radically deceive his creatures along the way, he would be most inclined to do so: and thus, radical deception would be among the things EG would strive to include as much as feasibly possible in his ideal evil world. If there is an option to sprinkle some radical deception on everybody's pie, he would go out of his way to do so. Being omnipotent, one should assume the opportunities for EG to do this without compromising his overall goals would multiply to infinity. Hence, if we thought EG existed, our confidence in being radically deceived at any moment should go up almost 100%.[15]

[15] This answers a point by John M. Collins, who writes: "Keep in mind […] that we are not considering Descartes's demon, bent single-mindedly on deception, but rather an evil god bent on evil in its various forms. Granted, deception is, typically, one kind of moral evil. But it is not at all clear that evil-god's promotion of evil in the world requires either that perception be a poor guide to reality, or that evil-god lie to us" (Collins 2019, 95). I take it that I have responded to this

The opposite, instead, appears true when considering GG. It seems that GG would presumably not enjoy manipulating the creatures whom he so deeply loves, so he would naturally refrain from doing so in any way he could. While for EG, radical deception takes the character of an *end in itself* (something which EG would want and pursue even if no further evil followed from it), from the standpoint of GG either (i) radical deception is an impossible object of desire or else (ii) radical deception takes the character of an extreme *means*, justifiable exclusively as a last resort in desperate situations. Hence, assuming it were even possible for GG to radically deceive people, he would certainly strive to accomplish his goals without having to resort to such a method or resorting to it as little as possible. It makes no sense to think of GG allowing some radically skeptical scenario just for the pleasure of it, but the same appears eminently plausible when considering EG. So, if there is a way *not* to resort to radical deception and still achieve his ultimate goals, or even maybe achieve them in a less than complete way if that allows him to avoid turning to such despicable means, GG would be most inclined to do so. And if some radical deception was somehow mysteriously unavoidable, GG would certainly want to reduce it as much as possible, both in scope and duration. But again, being omnipotent, we should assume that the opportunities of GG finding himself in such a conundrum would drop almost zero.

In the end, even if radical deception is a live possibility under GG (which is contestable, as said above), I think these considerations make it much more expected on EG than on GG, since EG would get out of his way to have as many of it as possible, while the contrary would be true for GG. Radical skepticism, then, is a bigger threat given EG than GG: we should think EG was radically deceiving us, unless we had good reason to suppose he wasn't, and we should think GG was *not* radically deceiving us, unless we had good reason to suppose he was. Again, which deity would you really trust the best if he spoke to you? I bet the natural and intuitive response for many people would be GG.

4.3. Objection 3

Let's consider a third objection, which goes as follows: "You have said that reliable cognitive faculties are required for us to pursue several goods, such as

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last sentence throughout my paper –radical deception indeed seems as temptingly desirable as anything could be, given EG's goal of maximizing evil in the world. The point now is that, even if EG is not "bent *single-mindedly* on deception", deception most likely is among the things EG would want to achieve. Thus, if EG can pursue "evil in its various forms" while also radically deceiving as many people and as much as possible along the way, he would certainly do so. Indeed, why wouldn't he? (I thank an anonymous reviewer for calling my attention to Collins' quote).

truth, the appreciation of beauty, and genuine love relationships. And thus, because GG would want us to pursue these goods, it is expected that he will give us reliable cognitive faculties. However, EG would value the opposite of all those things, and these also require the reliability of our cognitive faculties. So EG equally predicts that our cognitive faculties will be generally reliable and has no more skeptical implications than GG."[16]

Again, I think we can say several things in response. First, I'm not sure GG's motive for the pursuit of truth can be relevantly mirrored by the EG hypothesis. What would it be that EG would value as opposite to the pursuit of truth? The pursuit of falsehood? And what would that consist of? Maybe in the pursuit of lying? Lying does not require generally reliable cognitive faculties: it only requires the ability to speak contrary to one's thoughts. Hence, EG could achieve this goal *without* giving us generally reliable cognitive faculties or having to avoid putting us in radical skeptical scenarios, and thus he would plausibly do so (indeed, why wouldn't he?). Is it, instead, the pursuit of error? But then, how is the pursuit of error helped by us having generally reliable cognitive faculties? On the contrary, it would seem this goal is best achieved by radically deceiving us.

Now, maybe EG would value the appreciation of ugliness and genuine hatred relationships, and *these* require generally reliable cognitive faculties. Or do they? It does not seem so to me. These goals could be achieved simply by restricting the reliability of our cognitive faculties to the recognition of ugliness and the knowledge of people we hate. To take the latter as an example, EG could make us be radically mistaken about the reality or well-being of the people we love (again, trapping them in some kind of internal mental prison), while allowing us to have genuine evil relations with the people we hate. Or else, he could one day swap the people we love and the people we hate (again, severing all top-down connection from mind to body), so that we benefit our worst enemy and hurt our best friend.

Again, it seems that for any evil EG wants his creatures to pursue, he can achieve this goal while simultaneously putting us in radical skeptical scenarios. If he wants us to bring harm to other people, he can do so while radically deceiving us about the people we are harming. Or else, he can trap us in cycles of radical deception and cognitive reliability, allowing us to genuinely pursue evil with reliable cognitive faculties and throwing us into radical skeptical scenarios when we tried to do good. Or another live option, EG may allow a certain number of people to reliably inhabit a real world, while condemning an equal or greater number to radical skepticism. That is, even if EG would want some people, for some reason, to have reliable cognitive faculties, it seems it

[16] As John M. Collins writes, "appearance being a fairly good guide to reality seems required for people to pursue various evils, just as it is required for them to effectively pursue goods. (A brain-in-a-vat can neither help nor harm anyone)" (Collins 2019, 95).

would still maximize evil on the whole if, in addition to any bad thing those people might freely accomplish, others were being radically deceived in the process.

In the end, *even if* EG would promote the reliability of our cognitive faculties when it comes to the things we despise or the evils we pursue, radical skepticism would still be a very live option regarding all the things we love and cherish or the good actions we intend to perform. I see no comparable mirror strategy applicable to GG, not only because, as has already been said, radical deception seems incongruent or at least in tension with omnibenevolence, but also because GG would likely respect freedom as an end in itself, wanting us to take responsibility of our actions and make a difference in the world. But to do so, we need to inhabit a real world and be properly cognitively connected to it.

4.4. Objection 4

A fourth objection that comes to mind says this: "You have claimed that, if GG radically deceived us and we found out, we would find it very difficult to trust him ever again. But then, suppose EG reveals to Smith during torture time that he had been radically deceived in some way —for example, that while he lived his illusory regular life, his children were actually being tortured in hell. Why should Smith believe anything EG says? But then, it's as if radical deception deceives its own purpose, since it undermines any trust Smith should have in EG's words. Hence, EG would not be inclined to radically deceive Smith."

Sure, Smith cannot trust EG's words, and maybe that plays into the psychological torture part. Either his children were a total illusion or else they were being tortured when he kissed them good night, or maybe something even more horrendous is true that EG has still to uncover. Either option is psychologically devastating, and the radical doubt may add more desperation to the picture, to EG's delight. Even so, I imagine it would be hard to think properly in the midst of extreme physical torture, so Smith may very well not stop to realize that he cannot trust anything EG says. Any of these results appears as a win for EG, and hence something to look forward to.

Also, consider that EG is not bound by any desire to have genuine, free, loving, and trusting relationships with his creatures. Hence, he could easily go a step further with his manipulation tactics and give Smith a strong, irresistible, and seemingly interior psychological conviction that EG is trustworthy, despite all the evidence to the contrary. Nothing comparable seems fitting for GG.

4.5. Objection 5

A final objection reads: "There are many places in the Bible where God acts in deceitful ways and either praises or approves acts of deception, as in *Exodus* 1: 15–21 or *1 Kings* 22: 23. And the God of the Bible is supposed to be perfectly good. Hence, it's not that far-fetched that a Good God could radically deceive us".

This objection targets Judeo-Christian theists, and then only those who are inerrantists, and then only those who stick to a particular interpretation of the relevant texts. That is a narrow target, indeed; our Smith need not worry about it. Maybe Smith can take the objection as a reason not to be a Jew or a Christian, or an inerrantist Jew or Christian, or an inerrantist Jew or Christian that interprets the relevant texts in a way consistent with the permission of radical skepticism. That is fine.

In any case, it does not seem difficult to interpret these texts in a way consistent with everything that has been argued here. In the famous *Exodus* passage, God need not be approving of the midwives having *lied*, but only of their praiseworthy disposition to protect Hebrew women and their newborn boys. *1 Kings* 22, where God is described as sending a deceiving spirit into the mouths of a foreign nation's prophets, could simply be read as an anthropomorphic description by the scriptural author that does not properly distinguish between God directly deceiving other nations and God allowing other nations to be deceived, and that, hence, need not be accepted in all its crude details. And similar strategies will apply to other texts. Additionally, none of these seem really analogous to the kind of deception that troubles us about radical skeptical scenarios —thus, what was said about superable errors in response to Objection #1 would apply here as well.

Finally, remember that the point is not necessarily that GG could not possibly deceive us in a radical way, but that radical skepticism appears to be much more likely under EG than GG. Even if sometimes GG can act in deceitful ways or praise acts of deception (which is a disputed interpretation of the texts), that by itself does not affect the previous points of this article. If a possible means, radical deception would be a last resort for GG, but a tempting amusement for EG, of which EG could not have enough. Thus, radical skepticism is much more expected under EG than under GG, which, applying our Anti-Skepticism Principle, is enough to break the symmetry between the two hypotheses.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have focused on an underdeveloped response to the famous Evil-god challenge. I have argued that the hypothesis of an Evil God, much like Descartes's evil demon, casts serious doubt on the reliability of our cognitive

faculties. If moved to create, an Evil God would have plenty of motivation to mess with his creatures from time to time or even continually, putting us in radically skeptical scenarios. The same cannot be said of a Good God. Very plausibly, a Good God would value the pursuit of truth, the appreciation of beauty and the forming of genuine love relationships, but all these things require our cognitive faculties to be generally reliable. Additionally, it is plausible that putting intelligent creatures in radically skeptical scenarios would be a kind of manipulation unworthy of a perfectly good being.

Hence, if we thought EG existed, our confidence in us being radically deceived at any given time should be almost 100%, while nothing comparable happens by thinking that GG exists —on the contrary, it seems that we should think the likelihood of radical deception almost drops to zero. And so, assuming a pretty plausible rationality principle, the epistemic symmetry between EG and GG still breaks down, even granting all else is equal. The truth of radical skepticism is more expected under EG than under GG, and this alone gives the theist enough reason to prefer GG over EG, *pace* the evil-god challenger[17].

> *It is unfair to Descartes to call his appeal to God's credibility frivolous. Indeed, only if we assume a God who is morally our like can 'truth' and the search for truth be at all something meaningful and promising of success. This God left aside, the question is permitted whether being deceived is not one of the conditions of life.*
> F. Nietzsche, Writings from the Late Notebooks, 36[30]

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