Human and Divine Moral Reasons: A Skeptical Theist’s Response to Sharon Street

Abstract: In her work on the problem of evil and the skeptical theistic response, Sharon Street argues that the claims of classical theism undermine our knowledge of morality. With the aim of avoiding the crippling normative skepticism that Street argues is the necessary consequence of theism, I explore how we might distinguish axiological and deontic moral reasons to act based on Philip Quinn’s Divine Command Theory of ethics. I grant to Street that a large degree of skepticism regarding value is a likely consequence of theism but argue that such axiological skepticism is neither inconsistent with theism nor practically problematic.

1. **Introduction**

Sharon Street has recently developed a new formulation of the problem of evil, putting forth a formidable challenge to theists. Her argument proceeds roughly as follows: if God is omnipotent and perfectly morally good, then God always acts for morally good reasons and God is capable of intervening to prevent morally bad events. Other things being equal, it is morally impermissible to fail to prevent morally bad events when one has the capacity to do so. However, it is clear that many events occur which, according to our common sense understanding of morality at least, are morally bad events.

For example, our common sense morality tells us that the deaths of innocent victims in drinking and driving crashes are unequivocally horrendous moral events. According to statistics that Street cites, someone dies approximately every 53 minutes in the United States due to drinking and driving (Street, 2014). If our moral intuitions are correct, permitting such evils to occur when one has the capacity to do so is morally impermissible. Yet, Street claims that it is a consequence of the classical conception of theism that everything ultimately happens for good reasons. So, if God only acts perfectly morally, his reasons for acting (or in this case, failing to act) must be not only beyond our understanding but utterly opposed to our common sense moral intuitions. Therefore, goes the worry, either an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God does not exist, or our common sense moral intuitions are fundamentally misguided. Street argues that skepticism about our common sense moral intuitions—as she calls it, “normative skepticism”— is “(i) implausible, (ii) practically paralyzing, and (iii) undermining of theism itself.” Because the consequences of theism are unacceptable, Street argues that we should reject theism (Street, 2014).

The force of Street’s argument lies in its challenge to “skeptical theism,” which is a response to the problem of evil stating (roughly) that, given our highly limited epistemic perspective, we should hardly be surprised to find ourselves ignorant of God’s reasons for permitting evil. According to the skeptical theist, it is not remotely strange to think that an omniscient God may very well work things out for the best without our having any idea how this might be done. So, a skeptical theist would agree with Street that we are ultimately hopeless judges of what God’s reasons are for permitting evil. Street argues, however, that this agreement reveals wider problems. She is a part of the camp which contends that the skeptical theist cannot successfully restrict her skepticism to skepticism about God’s ultimate reasons for acting but must face a broader skepticism about her own moral reasons. If we think that there really is a good reason for the apparent moral horror of a drinking and driving fatality, then we would see no moral reason why we should intervene to prevent it. Thus, Street argues, this belief that everything happens for a reason leads us to a sort of moral paralysis.

I will defend the skeptical theist from the objection that skepticism about God’s reasons necessarily entails complete normative skepticism. One promising way for a theist to get around Street’s concerns is to deny that God’s reasons for acting are in the same category as ours. This would be, in Street’s terminology, a state of affairs in which a type of agent-relative reasons obtain. Agent-relative reasons are those which provide a good moral reason for one agent (i.e. God) to act (such as to permit evil) while not providing moral reasons for other agents (i.e. humans) to act. By distinguishing between deontic and axiological moral reasons, we can hold that ignorance of God’s reasons—which, I argue, are likely axiological on the most fundamental level—need not undermine our confidence in our own moral responsibilities, which are deontic in nature. Thus, we can maintain confidence in the deontic properties of particular acts even if we may be uncertain of the axiological properties of particular events. Consequently, skeptical theism may still entail a more limited normative skepticism regarding value, but this is not nearly as problematic for a theist as the complete normative skepticism that Street argues is the necessary consequence of theism.

In what follows, I do not argue that it is in fact true that God’s moral reasons are axiological and that ours are deontic. Indeed, it would be contrary to the spirit of skeptical theism to attempt to provide an account of divine moral reasons. Rather, my objectives are twofold. First, I hope to establish the *plausibility* of the distinction between divine axiological reasons and human deontic reasons. Second, I argue that the following conditional relationship holds: if it is the case that God’s reasons are of a fundamentally distinct nature from our own, then skepticism about God’s reasons does not entail crippling skepticism about our reasons. To clarify, my aim is not to definitively refute all of Street’s argument. Street raises a host of problems regarding the viability of theistic epistemologies, which, for reasons I will later explain, I will not address. Instead, I largely set such epistemic questions aside. My sole purpose is to identify a plausible state of affairs in which thoroughgoing normative skepticism is not a consequence of theism in order to refute Street’s claim that theism *necessarily* entails normative skepticism.

1. **Deontic Reasons and Divine Commands**

To examine what it means to distinguish between axiological and deontic moral reasons, and to do so within a theistic context, let us turn to Philip Quinn’s model of divine command theory.[[1]](#footnote-1) I will adopt Quinn’s definition of deontology:

As it is usually understood, deontology works with three main concepts: rightness, wrongness, and obligation... Right actions are permissible; they are actions that, ethically speaking, it is all right to perform…Actions are wrong if and only if they are not right... Actions are obligatory if and only if not performing them is wrong. Obligatory actions may be thought of as actions that are demanded or required by ethics; they are actions whose performance is ethically necessary...Obligation and wrongness are matters of duty. Doing one's duty consists of performing obligatory actions and not performing wrong actions. In effect, therefore, deontology is a system of requirements, permissions, and prohibitions governing actions (Quinn, 2007).

However, Quinn asserts that deontology constitutes only part of the broader subject of ethics. In Quinn’s view,

Ethics also covers the axiological domain whose fundamental concepts are goodness and badness. Many things other than actions—for example, persons, habits, and motives—are correctly described as good or bad. Hence, the axiological domain does not coincide with the realm of deontology...Ethics thus has the option of offering separate accounts of deontology and of axiology (Quinn, 2007).

Having made the distinction between axiology and deontology, Quinn argues that divine commands occupy the realm of deontology. Quinn posits that God’s will provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for the deontic character of moral requirements.[[2]](#footnote-2) So for Quinn, God’s commandments deal with matters of duty; they do not tell us what is good, but only what is right, wrong, and obligatory.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Let us assume from this point on that it is the case that our moral reasons are most fundamentally grounded in the deontology of divine commands. My central argument against Street is that this scenario—a state of affairs in which our moral reasons are essentially deontic and categorically distinct from God’s reasons—is indeed plausible. I will here lay out the groundwork of the defense of this claim. I argue that it is reasonable to think that these moral reasons for action (to perform right and obligatory actions and to avoid performing wrong actions) are sufficient to generally provide us with the necessary information about how we should act. In our practical moral reasoning, we do not need to know that it is *bad* to murder, only that it is *wrong* to murder. Moreover, if we understand divine commands to be such that moral rightness (or permissibility) is a property of any action that God does not prohibit, then deontic moral reasons are applicable to every decision that we make. It may be that we would not possess knowledge of all divine commands, as it seems plausible that God would issue commands of which we might be unaware. In principle, however, if God’s commands are applicable to every situation, then deontic reasons are too. Those deontic reasons—of rightness, wrongness, and obligatoriness—of which we possess knowledge do in fact seem to constitute a significant part of our common sense moral reasoning. If deontic reasons are applicable to every situation, they should be considered sufficient moral reasons to guide our actions. In one way to frame the distinction between deontology and axiology, deontic properties are predicated of actions, while axiological properties are predicated of events or abstract concepts. So, in order to avoid the paralyzing skepticism about morality that concerns Street, we do not necessarily need to preserve much knowledge of axiology, but only knowledge of deontology.

1. **Axiology and God’s Reasons**

While we might conceive of our moral reasons in deontic terms, how then should we view God’s moral reasons? Again, I look to Quinn’s divine command theory for an answer as to how this might be done. Drawing on the work of William Alston, Quinn suggests that we should give an account of God’s ethical goodness that falls outside of the deontic domain of divine commands. For Quinn, instead of consisting in deontology, God’s perfect moral goodness is axiological and rooted in God’s nature and character. Quinn’s reasoning for his preference for this model is principally that it provides a satisfactory response to the Euthyphro Dilemma: by limiting what God can will to the restraints of God’s nature, it addresses the concern that God can arbitrarily will something morally reprehensible (Quinn, 2007). However, I argue that it also has substantive explanatory benefits both in terms of positing a coherent framework for how God might act and in terms of explaining how God’s reasons might fundamentally differ from ours.

 In a divine command theory like Quinn's, in which the deontic nature of moral requirements depends on God's will, stating that God's action is right just because it corresponds with commands which are expressions of God's will has no explanatory power. That is, God can only act according to his will, so it is trivially true to say that God's reasons are deontic. By contrast, an axiological account of God's reasons offers a more substantive explanation. In this account, we might suppose that God’s reasons are always such that God will act for the good because it is an essential part of God’s nature that God would do so. While the fact that God acts according to God’s nature might be a necessary consequence of the assumptions that God is perfectly good and thus can only will the good, this is a more substantive explanation than the deontological explanation of the analytic truth that God only acts according to God’s will.

If God’s reasons are fundamentally axiological in a divine command theory, this also gives us the advantage of being able to subordinate deontology to axiology, which helps us draw a distinction between God’s reasons and our reasons. If God’s nature is such that God’s will is always directed toward the good, God’s will must indeed be directed to the good in accordance with God’s nature. So, the formulation of divine commands and the accompanying deontology ultimately would be expressions of the good that God necessarily wills. Thus, this offers the basis for an account of moral reasons that are agent-relative. Since by God’s nature, God acts for the good, one aspect of deontology might then be an expression of God’s will for how other beings, who do not by their nature act necessarily for the good, might act for the good. That is, for deontic reasons to provide any independent or substantive reasons for action, the reasons they provide must be reasons for moral agents other than God, so it is more fruitful to conceive of deontic reasons as being applicable to humans instead of God. So, this produces a significant distinction between God’s moral reasons and humans’ moral reasons.

To demonstrate how this might work, let us consider another of Street’s examples:

A drunk driver traveling seventy miles an hour the wrong way on a highway struck a limousine that was carrying six family members home from a wedding that had taken place earlier that day. In the crash, a seven-year-old girl, who had been a flower girl at the wedding, was decapitated. The limousine driver was also killed on impact, and the flower girl’s five-year- old sister, father, and maternal grandparents were critically injured (Street, 2014).

Suppose that a bystander witnessed the drunk driver take a ramp the wrong way onto the freeway and had the power to call the police to apprehend the drunk driver before he could hit the limousine. Recall, for a moment, the principle that, “other things being equal, it is morally impermissible to fail to prevent morally bad events when one has the capacity to do so.” In deontic terms, we would consider it obligatory for the bystander to call the police and prevent the accident. Regardless of the ultimate goodness or the badness of the results of the accident, it seems that it would be consistent with her moral duties for the bystander to intervene and prevent an action that is clearly wrong. So, the obligatory deontic nature of the responsibility to prevent the accident provides the moral reasons for the bystander to intervene.

 By contrast, if God’s reasons are axiological, God would have completely different reasons to intervene or not intervene. If God’s nature is such that God can only will the good, then God’s reasons are not about the rightness, wrongness, or obligatoriness of permitting such an event to occur. Rather, God’s reasons compel God to act in the way that is for the best. Of course, one of the central theses of skeptical theism is that we are in the dark about what this ultimate good is, so we can only speculate about its nature. One possibility, as Street discusses, is that God might permit this crash to occur because it averts an even worse occurrence. Alternatively, it is at least conceivable that other possible goods (e.g. familial solidarity or an enhanced appreciation for life) might result from an apparent tragedy.

These possible reasons may seem to suggest that God’s axiological reasons must be consequentialist in nature. While that might be the most plausible interpretation of God’s axiological reasons (and it might be the interpretation that least conflicts with our common sense understanding of value), it is not impossible that God’s axiological reasons include bringing about more immediate goods which are entirely outside of our comprehension. However, the precise nature of God’s axiological reasons need not concern us. The central point I wish to make is that, due to the moral imperfections of our nature and the limitations of our epistemic state regarding axiology, God’s axiological reasons might be in a category which is a) epistemically inaccessible to us, b) not directly applicable to us, and c) both causally and normatively anterior to our deontic reasons (that is, axiological reasons could cause, and sometimes override, deontic reasons).

So, if we describe God’s reasons as essentially axiological and God’s will for human actions as providing deontic moral reasons, this is a scenario involving agent-relative reasons, in which we can be ignorant of God’s axiological reasons without being skeptical of our own deontic reasons. It is important to note that axiological skepticism does not necessarily entail skepticism of the existence of value or disvalue in the world, since the argument that God’s reasons are axiological presupposes that there is a genuine good. In fact, the axiological skeptic might still be permitted to have some confidence in abstract goods (a point I will later defend). Rather, the implication of axiological skepticism is just that we cannot make claims about whether any particular event is good or bad.

1. **Axiology in Skeptical Theism**

Let us now consider how this account of axiological skepticism relates to the broader literature on skeptical theism. To be sure, skeptical theists do not generally profess to be axiological skeptics about all particular cases of value.  For instance, in his formulation of skeptical theism, Michael Bergmann states that the skeptical theist will affirm the following theses:

ST1: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible goods we know of are representative of the possible goods there are.

ST2: We have no good reason for thinking that the possible evils we know of are representative of the possible evils there are.

ST3: We have no good reason for thinking that the entailment relations we know of between possible good and the permissions of possible evils are representative of the entailment relations there are between possible goods and the permission of possible evils.

ST4: We have no good reason for thinking that the total moral value or disvalue we perceive in certain complex states of affairs accurately reflects the total moral value or disvalue they really have (Bergmann, 2012).

It is clear that Bergmann does not argue that we should be skeptical about our common sense understanding of apparent goods and evils. Rather, he thinks that the skeptical theist ought to admit ignorance of other possible goods and evils and the overall relationship between them. The implication of his fourth thesis, however, is what I deem to be the most significant claim of skeptical theism: that we are completely ignorant of the ultimate good.

 My argument is not that Bergman is necessarily wrong to say that we can still preserve our faith in a limited knowledge of the axiological properties of particular events. However, because he tries to preserve common sense understandings of the relative value of particular occurrences, Bergman is more susceptible to the criticisms of Street and others who argue that skeptical theism entails a more complete normative skepticism. Bergmann could perhaps satisfactorily defend his view by distinguishing between God’s axiological reasons and our axiological reasons for permitting particular events. However, making this distinction could be tricky, and I will not attempt to do so here. Rather, I reduce the axiological commitments of the skeptical theist in order to make the skeptical theist’s position more defensible against Street’s objections. In other words, my view has the advantage of permitting the skeptical theist to appeal to the category distinction between deontic and axiological reasons in order to overcome some of Street’s concerns, a distinction to which Bergman cannot appeal if he wishes to preserve knowledge about value.

**5. Responses to Objections to Axiological Skepticism**

It might be objected that it would be strange to think that God would leave us in the dark about axiological reasons, and thus that axiological skepticism comes at too high a cost for the theist to endorse. However, I offer what I take to be several plausible responses to this objection. If we only grant Bergman’s fourth thesis—that we are indeed ignorant of the ultimate good—I contest that it really is not strange to think we are ignorant about value in a more general way.

Apart from the nature of divine commands, as was considered in section two, the vast disparity in wisdom between humans and God provides one reason why we might not be surprised by our ignorance about axiology. Consider the frequently used analogy which likens the relationship between God and humanity to that of a parent and a child. In the parent-child relationship, the parent might tell a child that stealing is wrong without appealing to any sort of ultimate reasons. It may be the case that the parent *cannot* provide reasons for the child because the child lacks the capacity to grasp the reasons, or it may be that the parent *does not* provide the child with these reasons because such knowledge is not necessary for the child to act rightly. From the limited perspective of the child, all she knows is that stealing is wrong because her parents tell her that stealing is wrong. Just as in Quinn’s model, this need not entail any particular relationship of causality or supervenience, but merely the conferral of epistemic justification. Because the child trusts in the superior wisdom and knowledge of her parent, her parent’s statement that stealing is wrong provides an epistemically sufficient reason for the child to believe that it is obligatory that she not steal. Thus, despite ignorance of axiological reasons, the child is still justified in believing that she has the moral requirement not to steal. And if we grant that the child is justified in holding this belief that stealing is wrong—and acting in accordance with this belief—when it comes from a fallible but generally reliable source of knowledge, surely humans have even better reason to believe we are justified in believing and acting according to propositions revealed from an omniscient being (putting aside for the moment any other epistemological concerns we might have about theistic ethics).

In addition, it could be the case that some things which are conceivably goods necessarily require ignorance about ultimate value. For example, in the Christian tradition, faith is often understood as one of the greatest goods accessible to humans in this life. One of its central components is commonly thought to be assent to (or sometimes trust in) a proposition despite epistemic uncertainty regarding the proposition’s truth. If the problem of evil were easily resolvable simply by appeal to our knowledge of God’s ultimate reasons, then faith in God’s omni-benevolence would lack the component of “belief despite epistemic uncertainty.” So, it might be thought that ignorance about God’s ultimate reasons is a necessary condition for faith in God’s perfect goodness. I am not making the claim that a skeptical theist should assert that faith is indeed a good which necessarily requires ignorance of God’s ultimate reasons. Rather, I wish to point out that it is plausible that skepticism about God’s reasons could be necessary to bring about some goods.

Of course, one might now object that skepticism about value would prevent us from identifying goods such as faith. But here, let me clarify what I mean by axiological skepticism. Suppose that we are epistemically justified in believing claims given through divine revelation, and we believe that God has revealed to us that faith is a good. If this is the case, then prima facie we should accept this axiological claim. Moreover, I do not think that belief in the axiological properties of “abstract goods,” like faith, would be threatened by Street’s argument in the same way that knowledge of the axiological properties of events would be. Faith, at least as it is commonly understood, is not reducible to an event. It is much easier to identify that abstract virtues such as faith are good than it is to identify the goodness or badness of any particular event that is causally related in complex and incomprehensible (from our perspective) ways to the broader state of affairs in the universe. Street’s challenge, however, concerns our ability to label particular events as good or bad, and accordingly concerns our inability to properly act to bring about good events and prevent moral horrors. So, our axiological assessment of goods that are not immediately connected to our actions to bring about a certain state of affairs is not directly threatened by Street’s critique. The axiological skepticism that a skeptical theist needs to concede to Street is then just the more limited skepticism regarding the axiological properties of particular events.

Likewise, we might be concerned with the consequence of axiological skepticism that we would also lack knowledge of what evil is. If this is the case, it might be thought that we cannot even be certain that there really is a problem of evil. However, when I use the term axiological skepticism, I do not mean that we should be complete skeptics about the existence of value or disvalue. If it is revealed to us that faith is a good, it might also be revealed that the lack of faith is an evil. However, again we can distinguish between evil in the abstract and evil as a moral property of particular events. Thus, it still may be the case that we cannot say with confidence whether any particular event is good or bad. So, we can be axiological skeptics without denying the existence of evil.

In a sense, the implication of my argument is that we do possess a great deal of knowledge about axiology. If we suppose that God permits everything for a good reason, then we know that everything that happens is ultimately for the best. However, this does not commit us to the claim that every particular event is good but only to the claim that the composite result of all events that occur is good. If we recall Bergmann’s discussion of the entailment relations between possible values and disvalues, we can say that it may well be the case that bad events do occur, but that they are somehow causally connected to a broader chain of events which is ultimately good. So, making this distinction between particular goods and the overall good permits a skeptical theist to consistently hold both that everything happens for God’s good axiological reasons and that we are ignorant of the goodness or badness of any single, isolated event. Consequently, I assert (against Street’s view) that axiological skepticism is not inconsistent with the theism.

I will now return to the objection that axiological skepticism endangers our practical moral reasoning. If it is the case that axiological skepticism undermines our common sense judgments about the value of apparent goods such as giving money to help victims of a famine, we might still find this conclusion unacceptable and thus be tempted to reject axiological skepticism. I concede that axiological skepticism comes at a high price. However, at least pragmatically, it is not as devastating as might initially be thought. Suppose that God commands that we give money to help victims of natural disasters. If this is the case, then this apparent good of giving money for disaster relief can also be understood as having a significant deontic component. That is, even if we cannot confidently posit that a particular act of giving money is a good, we could still conceive of the particular action in terms of rightness or obligatoriness. It seems quite likely that an all-loving God would command that we give money and command that we would act toward the attainment of what we would typically conceive of as goods. This does not mean that giving money would be good in virtue of being commanded by God; the command itself would only entail deontic obligatoriness. However, as I previously discussed, if God is perfectly loving and good and God’s will as expressed through deontology is necessarily directed toward the good, then it seems likely that at least some divine commands would coincide with the good. Thus, it would not be surprising if acting according to our deontic moral reasons would actually contribute to bringing about the good. So again, I emphasize that even if we lack confidence about the goodness or badness of particular actions, we can still have sufficient knowledge of deontic moral reasons to know how we should act.

It is indeed the implication of axiological skepticism, though, that we cannot conclude with certainty (to return to Street’s example of an apparent evil) that it is evil that a drunk driver traveling the wrong way on a highway kills or critically injures six family members returning from a wedding. However, just as a lack of knowledge of particular goods does not threaten our conviction that certain actions are right or obligatory, ignorance of the axiological properties of the *event* does not undermine our belief that the *action* of the drunk driver was wrong. To return to one of Street’s scenarios, if we saw a clearly drunk driver with two children in the back seat turn the wrong way onto a highway, it would still be clear to us that it is morally obligatory for us to call the police to stop the drunk driver. So because axiological skepticism regarding evil is no more of a danger to our deontic moral reasoning than axiological skepticism regarding good is, it also presents no more of a threat to our practical moral reasoning.

Even if it is granted that axiological skepticism is acceptable in practical terms because deontic reasons can serve as generally effective guides in our practical moral reasoning, there might still be the concern that the claim that axiological reasons do not apply to us is metaphysically problematic. That is, it might be thought that even if God’s commands are solely about deontology, that does not mean that no axiological reasons apply to us. Consider Street’s distinction between evidence-relative and fact-relative reasons:

Suppose that unbeknownst to you or anyone else, if you deliberately stick out your foot and trip the pedestrian next to you on the sidewalk, you will, as a matter of fact, save her life by preventing her from being hit by a car a short time afterward. Suppose, however, that there is no evidence available to you or anyone else that this is the case. Regarding such a scenario, we may say that, unbeknownst to you, you have overwhelming reason in the fact-relative sense to trip the person (the reason in question being that doing so will save her life). At the same time, since all the evidence available to you suggests that tripping her would be nothing but an act of gratuitous harm, you have overwhelming reason in the evidence-relative sense not to trip the person (Street, 2014).

An axiological skeptic is committed to the claim that our limited perspective makes it impossible to assess the fact-relative axiological reasons regarding tripping the pedestrian, by extension rendering evidence-relative reasons useless if they can be of no help in discerning fact-relative reasons. However, if we accept Quinn’s view that axiology does not directly depend on God’s will in the same way that deontology does, presumably there are still axiological facts about the event of the person’s tripping. Even if God’s commands (e.g. that is morally wrong to gratuitously harm pedestrians by deliberately tripping them) do not provide us with axiological reasons to act, it seems reasonable to think that, as long as there are axiological facts about the event, there must also be fact-relative axiological reasons. So, even if we are ignorant of them in the fact-relative sense, is it really plausible to say that these axiological reasons would not apply to us? Moreover, if axiological reasons do apply to us, might we be concerned that ignorance of these reasons would threaten our ability to bring about the good?

 While I will not address this concern fully, I will offer one brief response to this second question. I think it is a defensible position that our moral reasons for action are only those which God has commanded, so that our moral reasons would be exclusively deontic. However, if one found this unsatisfactory and thought that it is the case that there are indeed fact-relative reasons for us to act a certain way—that we should act for the good, and not just according to duty—I would question whether this would truly matter in an assessment of our moral reasoning. In our practical moral reasoning, evidence-relative reasons are the only reasons that we can take into account. The consequence of axiological skepticism is that we cannot take evidence-relative axiological reasons into account in our practical reasoning. So, even if it were the case that fact-relative reasons do apply to us, we can only take deontic moral reasons into account in our practical reasoning. However, I maintain that an inability to act according to relevant axiological reasons of which we are unaware really is not deeply problematic.

As I have previously noted regarding the possible good of giving to charity, it is reasonable to expect that, if God’s commands are grounded in God’s will and God wills the good, acting according to our deontic reasons is likely to promote the good. In the evidence-relative sense, knowledge of deontic properties of actions could be the best indicators we have that acting in a certain way will promote the good, even if it does not necessarily indicate that any particular event is good. If it is wrong to gratuitously trip someone, it is likely the case that tripping someone is also bad. While this may sound like some sort of rule-utilitarianism, my argument is not that we should act in accordance with deontic reasons *because* this provides us with the best chance to promote the good. Rather, I want to avert the concern that our ignorance of axiological reasons is likely to cause us to act “badly.” So, if my defense of the plausibility of axiological skepticism has been successful, we should be neither surprised that God would leave us largely in the dark about axiological reasons nor overly concerned that axiological skepticism would inhibit our practical moral reasoning.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. **More Objections: Street’s Epistemic Concerns**

Street would object here that there are already a host of epistemic problems associated with any claims to knowledge of divine commands. If she accepted my argument up to this point, she would say that I have achieved my aim of establishing the plausibility of an agent-relative scenario, in which God’s reasons for acting would be relative to God and not applicable to us. She would still maintain, however, that my response faces serious epistemic concerns. Street begins with the assumption that God, being vastly more knowledgeable than any human, would have good reason to communicate our moral responsibilities clearly and unambiguously to us, whether this is through “a ‘voice of conscience,’ private religious experience, or an innate moral sense with which we are born.” She notes, however, that God typically does not communicate to people in clear and unambiguous terms. Thus, we must reject the initial premise and conclude that God must not have reasons to communicate with us about morality. So, if we cannot know about morality by looking to what God says, then we are left with normative skepticism. The only option left to the theist, Street argues, is to appeal to shared common sense moral intuitions as being God’s communication to us. However, the rest of Street’s argument has been dedicated to establishing that “everything we have seen so far is that moral common sense is no guide whatsoever to what God would or wouldn’t do with regard to any matter.” Street thus asserts that any theistic moral epistemology is deeply problematic (Street, 2014).

Because of the scope of her criticisms of theistic epistemologies, I will not attempt to respond to Street here. I will instead note that while Street’s epistemic concerns present legitimate challenges to theists, there is nothing about the particular agent-relative scenario I have developed that would render it more susceptible to Street’s objections than most other theistic moral epistemologies would be. Street’s concerns deal principally with how God might communicate moral knowledge to people in any situation in which agent-relative reasons hold and we cannot "learn about reasons by looking at what God permits" but must learn about reasons by “what God says” (Street, 2014). However, most attempts to develop a theistic moral epistemology do not advocate learning about morality by looking at the state of affairs that God has permitted to occur. Instead, they recognize that the world is imperfect, so some other source of knowledge is necessary. According to this definition, most theists would subscribe to some view that emphasizes agent-relative reasons. Thus, Street's objections would apply to essentially any theistic moral epistemology. While Street’s various challenges may problematize the agent-relative scenario in which God’s reasons are axiological and ours are deontic, her criticisms are too broad to be satisfactorily dealt with here. Again, my aim is not to provide a complete refutation of Street’s argument, but to provide a plausible solution to some of the problems she has raised.

1. **Conclusion**

I have argued, contrary to Street’s view that complete normative skepticism is the price of theism, that if a scenario holds in which moral reasons are agent-relative, then ignorance of God’s reasons does not necessarily undermine whatever epistemic confidence we would otherwise have in our own moral reasons for action. Assuming that it is the case that our knowledge of our own deontic reasons for actions is otherwise reliable, I have defended the view that by drawing a categorical distinction between our reasons and God’s reasons—with God’s reasons being axiological and ours deontic—we can identify a plausible scenario in which moral reasons are agent-relative. If this scenario obtains, then while we may still be forced to concede some axiological skepticism, we can maintain faith in our deontic moral reasons.

This more limited account of normative skepticism is able to address each of Street’s central concerns regarding the compatibility of theism and knowledge of moral reasons. I have argued that limited axiological skepticism is neither implausible nor inconsistent with the truth of theism. Moreover, as long as we preserve confidence in our deontic moral reasons, axiological skepticism is not practically paralyzing. Therefore, I reject Street’s conclusion that the presence of unexplainable evil in the world entails the consequence that theism is false.

Works Cited

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1. Of course, the deontic/axiological distinction can also be made in natural law theories or other theories of ethics. I only look at Quinn’s divine command theory for the sake of space and because it makes God’s relationship to moral reasons clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quinn’s description of the relationship between God’s command and deontology is as follows:

(P1) For all actions A, (i) A is morally right (permissible) if and only if God does not command that A not be performed; and (ii) if A is morally right (permissible), what makes A morally right (permissible) is it not being the case that God commands that A not be performed;

(P2) For all actions A, (i) A is morally wrong if and only if God commands that A not be performed; and (ii) if A is morally wrong, what makes A morally wrong is God's commanding that A not be performed; and

(P3) For all actions A, (i) A is morally obligatory if and only if God commands that A be performed; and (ii) if A is morally obligatory, what makes A morally obligatory is God's commanding that A be performed (Quinn 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Quinn notes that this formulation does not commit him to the view that God *causes* actions to be wrong by prohibiting them, but only that God’s commandments necessarily reflect the will of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Another objection to axiological skepticism could be that it runs contrary both to established theological and philosophical conceptions of God and Christian ethics. If this objection refers to the strands of Catholic theology that provide the basis of the concepts of God held by many analytic philosophers today this may well be true. I suggest, though, that axiological skepticism has some precedent, particularly within the Lutheran tradition. This is demonstrated especially in the thought of Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I will not defend this claim at length, and I acknowledge that the concept of axiology in contemporary analytic philosophy is largely foreign to the (in many ways anti-metaphysical) theological frameworks of Luther and Bonhoeffer. Nonetheless, something akin to various sorts of axiological skepticism can be found in their writings. We might point first to Luther’s conception of the *deus absconditus* (the hidden God). God’s nature and God’s will are ultimately hidden from humans and often at odds with human reason. Indeed, for Luther, God’s hiddenness is manifested in God’s governance of the world, and we cannot expect to be able to understand God’s reasons for acting (and not acting) in the world. Moreover, Luther entire theology of sin and justification seems to suggest that our common sense understandings of what constitutes good and evil action from humans are completely off base (see, for example, his 1518 *Heidelberg Disputation*). In a related but somewhat different vein, Bonhoeffer, whose thought is more directly relevant to our interest in deontic reasons, stresses in *Discipleship* that Christians’ sole concern ought to be with *simple obedience* to the commands of Jesus. Illustrating this most clearly in an earlier lecture, Bonhoeffer explains that, “Simple obedience is unaware of good an evil. It simply consists in following Jesus and in doing what he commands as something that is self-evident” (*Testament to Freedom* 95, DBW 17:117-18). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)