Editorial preface

Ronald L. Hall

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The evidential argument from evil against theism rests on the premise that there is gratuitous suffering in the world. This is a serious and perhaps devastating argument against the existence of the God of traditional theism. In reply to this argument, the skeptical theist claims that we human beings (limited by our cognitive powers) cannot know, and perhaps cannot even be justified in believing, that this premise is true. If it is plausible that this premise may not be true, then skepticism regarding it is justified and the argument from evil is undermined.

Justin McBrayer proposes a “context and contrast” defense of skeptical theism. This defense is designed to meet the two standard objections to skeptical theism. These objections hold that if skeptical theism were plausible then by parody of reason global and moral skepticism would follow. McBrayer contends that what these objections fail to consider are the contexts and contrasts involved in specific cases. He argues that it makes sense to be skeptical about some claims and it does not make sense to be skeptical regarding others. So even if skepticism were justified regarding the specific claim that there is gratuitous suffering in the world, it would not follow that epistemological and moral skepticism would be ipso facto justified across the board.

In our second essay, David James Anderson uncovers an assumption endorsed by both supporters of skeptical theism and its critics and argues that it is false. For both sides, everything turns on whether or not gratuitous suffering exists. The skeptical theist argues that we are not justified in claiming that gratuitous suffering exists, for indeed, all-things-considered, what may appear to limited human beings as gratuitous may not be. The other side thinks that the existence of gratuitous suffering is obvious and that this fact defeats theism. The key assumption both sides make is that theism will fall if gratuitous suffering exists. Anderson argues that the existence of gratuitous suffering

R. L. Hall (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Stetson University, DeLand, FL, USA
e-mail: ronhall@stetson.edu

does not necessarily defeat theism. This is because there is a distinction between the existence of gratuitous suffering and the gratuitous permission of gratuitous suffering. It might well be that there is gratuitous suffering in the world but theism could survive this. However, theism could not survive if God's permission to allow the existence of gratuitous suffering were itself gratuitous. Indeed, how do we (limited) human beings know that preventing gratuitous suffering would produce a greater good than permitting it? Indeed, intervention might have a worse affect (all-things-considered) than permitting it. This line of defense then allows for the existence of gratuitous suffering but does not concede that it entails atheism since skeptical theism can accept the existence of gratuitous suffering without having to accept the gratuitous permission of it. Skeptical theism is therefore right about this much: even if gratuitous suffering exists, human beings are in no position to judge whether or not it is for a greater good that God sometimes does and sometimes does not permit it.

As Trent Dougherty notes, in our third article, skeptical theists may need to reconsider one standard response to the question of why God would deny human beings the capacity to grasp his rationale for permitting evil. This response is the parent analogy. This analogy has usually been taken to support the inscrutability of God's rationale for permitting evil. Here God's ways are reckoned as just as obscure to humans as the ways of parents are to their children. And clearly, young children are limited in their capacities to understand why their parents punish them, make demands on them, and so forth. So, by analogy, we human beings are limited in understanding the ways of our heavenly father. The idea here is that God's desire to establish a mature relationship of love and trust with his creatures is parallel to the desire that good parents have to establish such a relationship with their children. Of course, achieving this relationship is not easy and may be less valuable if it did not involve serious self-examination, discovery and even suffering. But loving parents hope that the goodness of their intentions will eventually become transparent to their children and that this transparency will advance the relationship of love they seek to have with them. Perhaps we should expect no less transparency from God. In this light, Dougherty contends that the parent analogy does not in fact support the obscurity thesis, as some skeptical theists maintain, but rather supports its opposite, that is, transparency. If this is so, then the skeptical theist needs to question the weight of the parent analogy as a defense of obscurity.

The problem that skeptical theists address in regard to the problem of evil is paralleled by a more general problem of God's hiddenness. Why is God's presence not transparent to human beings? This is an especially puzzling question since it is presumed that God wants to have fellowship with the very human beings he hides from. Travis Dumsday takes on this question of divine hiddenness in our final essay in this issue. He redresses those who think that God's lack of transparency is reason enough for atheism. Indeed he defends God's wisdom in remaining hidden. His thesis is simple: God was wise enough to know that if he revealed himself to everyone in an utterly obvious and convincing way, he would have run into an unintended consequence of provoking creaturely resentment. Avoiding this creaturely resentment was reason enough for God's resistance to transparency.