

λογοι

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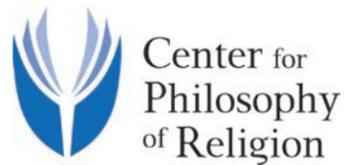
In This Issue:

Skeptical Theism and Sensible Evidentialism

What Is Forgiveness?

Intellectual Humility for Everyone?





In This Issue

Meet the Center Staff 1

Life at the Center 2

Residential Fellows 4

Skeptical Theism
and Sensible Evidentialism 6

When Is Seeing Nothing
Evidence of Nothing? 8

Socially Extended Evidence 12

Skeptical Theism & Theology ... 16

What Is Forgiveness?

Does God Only Forgive Us
if We Forgive Others? 20

Quirks of God's Forgiveness ... 24

Intellectual Humility
for Everyone? 28

About Logoi

Logoi is the annual magazine published by the University of Notre Dame's Center for Philosophy of Religion. It includes a yearly glimpse into life at the Center, along with cutting-edge articles, interviews, and other content in philosophy of religion and philosophical theology.

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Greetings from the University of Notre Dame! I write those words for the last time as Editor of *Logoi*. I am stepping away from my current role at the Center, and stepping into more teaching-centric responsibilities at Notre Dame. It has been a fantastic experience working with a great team on a wonderful annual publication.

I am once again pleased to introduce the latest issue of our Center magazine, *Logoi*. Over the years, *Logoi* has allowed us to give our readers a glimpse into the Center's vibrant intellectual and social life, and to feature cutting-edge content in philosophy of religion and philosophical theology. Here is a brief look at what you'll find inside this issue.

As you can see on the next page, members of our staff continue to teach, research, write, and enjoy life in the greater South Bend area.

The Center's weekly rhythms include work-in-progress discussion groups, pub nights, and lunches together on campus, among other activities. Our timeline for the year (page 2) provides a sense of what life at the Center is like for our residential fellows.

Speaking of fellows, we have a wonderful group of scholars at the Center. Joining us this year are Khaled Anatolios, Andrew M. Bailey, Meredith Trexler Drees, Déborah Marber, Andrew Peterson, and Katherine Sweet. Emily Lehman joins us as a visiting graduate student researcher. You will find more about them and their research starting on page 4.

The centerpiece of this issue is a series of essays on two exciting topics: first, three essays in honor of philosopher Stephen Wykstra ("Skeptical Theism and Sensible Evidentialism"), followed by two essays on the subject of forgiveness ("What Is Forgiveness?"). The first topic is introduced by *Logoi* Co-Editor Johnny Waldrop. It includes selections by Justin P. McBrayer, Timothy Perrine, and Jonathan C. Rutledge. The second set of essays on forgiveness includes pieces by Grace Hibshman and Andrew Peterson.

Last, but certainly not least, we are excited to announce that Associate Director Laura Frances Callahan recently received a grant from the John Templeton Foundation for her project "Intellectual Humility and Oppression." It will fund interdisciplinary research and discussions for philosophers and psychologists working on topics at the intersection of intellectual humility, privilege, and oppression. We hope you enjoy our interview with Laura about her project.

Thank you for your continued support of the Center for Philosophy of Religion.

Yours,

Joshua W. Seachris

Co-Editor, *Logoi*
Program Director, Center for Philosophy of Religion
Assistant Teaching Professor of Philosophy
University of Notre Dame

Meet the Center Staff



Michael Rea (Director) is Rev. John A. O'Brien Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, where he has taught since 2001. He is also an Honorary Professor in the Logos Institute for Analytic & Exegetical Theology at the University of St. Andrews. His research focuses primarily on topics in philosophy of religion, analytic theology, metaphysics, and feminist philosophy. He has written or edited more than fifteen books and over fifty articles, and has given numerous lectures in the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, Russia, China, and Iran, including the 2017 Gifford Lectures at the University of St. Andrews.



Laura Frances Callahan (Associate Director) is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. She is interested in questions such as: How are we responsible for our beliefs—especially our moral and religious beliefs? What are the distinctive desiderata for such beliefs (know-how? understanding?), and what does forming these beliefs virtuously involve? How do social roles and interpersonal relationships shape these epistemic responsibilities? And how do such roles and relationships shape our ethical responsibilities? She has published in a range of journals, including *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Episteme*, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, and *Faith and Philosophy*. Laura received her PhD from Rutgers University in the spring of 2019 and her BPhil from Oxford University in 2015. She is a native Hoosier and received an undergraduate degree in philosophy and math from Indiana University Bloomington.



Joshua W. Seachris (Program Director) is Assistant Teaching Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame and Managing Editor of the *Journal of Analytic Theology*. He has written or edited four books and a number of journal articles on life's meaning, the problem of evil, death, and Confucius. His forthcoming book, *What Makes Life Meaningful? A Debate* (Routledge 2023), is an extended debate with Thaddeus Metz (University of Pretoria) on the nature of meaningful life, and whether meaning requires God. He was born and raised in south central Kansas, and misses the wide open prairies. He and his wife, Sarah, have three boys: William, Owen, and Evan.



Joyce Zurawski (Administrative Assistant) has been the administrative assistant in the Center since 2007. She enjoys meeting new fellows each year and helping them acclimate to Notre Dame. She also enjoys assisting with conferences for the Center, especially when they are held in wonderful places like Colorado, Key Largo, Oregon, Arizona, and Lisbon! In her free time, Joyce enjoys the outdoors, amateur photography, beachcombing, and traveling; including trips to visit her two children, who, after graduating from Notre Dame and Saint Mary's, now live on opposite coasts of the country! During the summer months, Joyce and her husband spend as much time as possible boating and fishing at their home in Michigan.



John William Waldrop (Graduate Assistant) is a third-year PhD student in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. For the 2022-23 academic year, Johnny served as the graduate assistant in the Center for Philosophy of Religion. His research interests are in epistemology, metaphysics, and the philosophy of religion. He has articles published or forthcoming in *Faith and Philosophy*, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, and *Analysis*. He received his bachelor's degree in philosophy from Calvin College in 2019 and spent a year at the University of California, Irvine, before coming to Notre Dame. When he's not doing philosophy he enjoys reading and participating in various activities at church.

Life at the Center

In the fall of 2022, we welcomed a new group of fellows to the Center, excited for a year together.

2022

September 2

Friday Discussion Group

“Lessons from Commonsensism for Religious Epistemology”

(Guest talk by Mike Bergmann)

September 9

Friday Discussion Group

“Anticipating and Mitigating Unhelpful Self-Blame in Christianity’s Turn to the Social Dimensions of Depression”

(Guest talk by Jessica Coblentz)

September 16

Friday Discussion Group

“Might All Be Saved?”

(Center Fellow Andrew M. Bailey and guest Bradley Rettler)

September 21–25

Workshop

Non-Ideal Philosophy of Religion

(Sisters, Oregon)

September 23

Friday Discussion Group

“Forgiveness Divine”

(Center Fellow Andrew J. Peterson)

September 30

Friday Discussion Group

“Living Well with Others”

(Center Fellow Katherine Sweet)

October 7

Friday Discussion Group

“The Problem of Empathic Resistance”

(Center Fellow Déborah Marber)

October 28

Friday Discussion Group

“God, Gluts, and Evil”

(Philosophy Department faculty member Jc Beall)

November 4

Friday Discussion Group

“Sacrifice and the Sublime: The Resurrection of a Suffering Servant”

(Center Fellow Meredith Trexler Drees)

November 11

Friday Discussion Group

“Pretense and the Motivational View of Belief”

(Center Fellow Déborah Marber)

November 18

Friday Discussion Group

“Critical Reconstruction Method and the Logical Problem of Evil: A Study Among the Chewa People of Malawi”

(Guest talk by Grivas Muchineripi Kayange)

December 2

Friday Discussion Group

“Against Brute Cosmology”

(Guest talk by Joshua Thurow)

2023

February 3

Friday Discussion Group

“The Epistemic Value of Inquiring with Others”

(Center Fellow Katherine Sweet)

February 10

Friday Discussion Group

“Blame and Blameworthy Presentation: A (Mostly) Ecumenical Account of Blame”

(Guest talk by Jada Twedt Strabbing)

February 17

Friday Discussion Group

“The Problem of Divine Personality—Chapter 1”

(Center Fellow Andrew M. Bailey)

March 3

Friday Discussion Group

“Having Loved Them, He Loved Them to the End”

(Center Fellow Andrew Peterson)

March 24

Friday Discussion Group

“Martin Luther King Jr. on Radical Love as Revolutionary Imitation of Christ: A Nonviolent War for the Soul of America”

(Guest talk by Emily Dumler-Winckler)

March 31

Friday Discussion Group

“‘My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me?’ Jesus’ Cry of Doxological Contrition”

(Center Fellow Khaled Anatolios)

March 31–April 1

Colloquium

Kant’s Moral Vision as Affirmative Religion

(Notre Dame)

April 14

Friday Discussion Group

“A Conditionally Final Account of Epistemic Value”

(Center Fellow Katherine Sweet)

April 28

Friday Discussion Group

“Love, Consolation, and the Ego in Iris Murdoch”

(Center Fellow Meredith Trexler Drees)

May 4

End of the Year Party

South Bend Cubs Game at Four Winds Field

May 5

Friday Discussion Group

“Imagination as an Intellectual Virtue”

(Center Fellow Déborah Marber)

June 2–4

Workshop

Interdisciplinary Workshop on Intellectual Humility

(Chicago)

June 30–July 1

Conference

Iris Murdoch, Transatlantic Ties

(Online)

July 31–August 5

Workshop

Pilgrimage Workshop on Transformation & Growth

(Peak District of England)

Residential Fellows

Every year, the Center welcomes researchers from around the world to spend time in residence at the University of Notre Dame. Adding to a group of over 250 past research fellows, it has been our privilege to host the following scholars this year.



Khaled Anatolios

Khaled Anatolios is the John A. O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. He is the author of *Deification through the Cross: An Eastern Christian Theology of Salvation* (Eerdmans), *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Baker Academic), and other books and articles. He is interested in all aspects of the theology of the early Church, with special emphases on the Trinitarian, Christological, and soteriological doctrines of the Greek fathers and Augustine; early

Christian biblical exegesis; and the development of theological methodology in Patristic and medieval theology. A particular focus of his work is the engagement between early Christian theological reflection and contemporary theological concerns. His current book project attempts a presentation of biblical narrative as foundational for Trinitarian and Christological doctrine.



Andrew M. Bailey

Andrew M. Bailey is Associate Professor at Yale-NUS College in Singapore, where he teaches and does research on money, metaphysics, and philosophy of religion. Recent and forthcoming works include a case for bitcoin (*Resistance Money*, with Bradley Rettler and Craig Warmke), a short monograph on divine and human natures (*Monotheism and Human Nature*), and articles in defense of the view that we're living human animals.

While at the Center, Bailey is writing a book with Bradley Rettler on whether God has a personality. Reality seems at times arbitrary; a God with personality could make good sense of that apparent truth. And adopting the view that God has a personality—complete with particular, sometimes peculiar, and often seemingly unexplainable preferences—can make good sense, too, of various important problems: divine silence, apparently unanswered petitionary prayers, otherwise inexplicable divine choices about who is saved or damned, and more. But problems arise here too, and the view that God has a personality has revisionary implications across a range of topics, including the task of inquiry itself. If God has a personality, then reality does too, and so to understand reality, one must come to know a strange and untamed God.



Meredith Trexler Drees

Meredith Trexler Drees is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Kansas Wesleyan University. She is also Director of Experiential Learning and the Wesleyan Journey Program. Her areas of specialization include Iris Murdoch, Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, ancient philosophy, aesthetics, and ethics. She has additional interests in Kant's theory of religion, C. S. Lewis, Simone Weil, and feminist theology.

While at the Center, she is working on a manuscript that is a subsequent development to her recent book, *Aesthetic Experience and Moral Vision in Plato, Kant, and Murdoch: Looking Good/Being Good*. This new manuscript centers around a Kantian-inspired version of Iris Murdoch's moral vision, where her Idea of Perfection is fleshed out as the perfect person—the personified idea, Jesus, taken as a prototype (*Vorbild*); that is, as a real empirical embodiment of Kant's archetype (*Urbild*), or idea of moral perfection. She is considering how this move might shed light on underappreciated aspects of Murdoch and Kant, including the relationship between Jesus, sublimity, and self-sacrificial love; an apparent juxtaposition between Jesus and Lucifer in Kant's philosophy; the question as to whether forgiveness is possible without God; belief in Jesus' divinity; and the relationship between *Achtung* and pride. Kant's affirmation of religion is the main area of life that can be revolutionized through a Murdochian kind of moral vision. By empowering us to call upon the divine archetype just as Jesus did, this vision gives us not only hope but also power.



Déborah (Deb) Marber

Déborah (Deb) Marber joined Notre Dame's Center for Philosophy of Religion from the Department of Philosophy at the University of Bristol (UK), where she worked as a lecturer in metaethics and is an Honorary Research and Teaching Associate until 2024. Her research sits at the intersection of ethics, (social) epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language. She is especially interested in the relationship between believing, imagining, and intentional action. She graduated with a PhD in philosophy from the University of St Andrews in June 2021. Her project this year, "The Moral and Epistemic Virtue of Imagination in the Age of Anxiety," aims to investigate the idea that the imagination is a virtue that contributes to both our moral and epistemic well-being. The first part of her project will build on the idea that the imagination is a skill, and accounts which tie virtues to skills to inquire whether the imagination may be a moral and epistemic virtue, or whether it merely contributes to other virtues without itself being one. The second part of her project will draw from philosophy and from studies in positive psychology to investigate the ways in which learned constraints on the imagination and imaginative resistance may hinder our epistemic and moral well-being. The aim of this project will be to explore whether and how a virtuous imagination may help us combat epistemic and moral harms (e.g., anxiety, depression, misinformation, etc.) prevalent in our age of rapid socio-technological change.



Andrew Peterson

Andrew Peterson earned a BA at Hope College and an MDiv and PhD from Princeton Theological Seminary. He has taught since 2017 in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Rowan University and has also offered classes at Princeton Theological Seminary and the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen. His areas of specialization are Christian systematic theology, Christian ethics, moral philosophy, and philosophy of religion.

This year he is finishing his first book, *The Justice of Grace*. In Jesus's sacrificial embrace of his gruesome torture and execution, early modern Protestants found ideals that shaped their understanding of how to address grievous injustice. Peterson's book examines these Protestant accounts of Jesus's saving death and shows that they face significant theological and practical objections. The sort of sacrifice Christ offers for our redemption exalts the intrinsic value of suffering and suggests God conflates punishment and restitution. Theologically, this leaves underdetermined the work that God's forgiveness and Christ's sacrificial love play in returning sinners to friendship with God.

What then? *The Justice of Grace* contends that this theological inheritance is deeply troubled but worth redeeming. To do so, Peterson offers constructive accounts of God's forgiveness and Christ's sacrifice drawn together in conversation with womanists, medieval scholastics, contemporary moral philosophers, and contemporary Protestant theologians. These constructive interventions add up to a compelling constructive Christology, and the project concludes by putting these insights to work, demonstrating how they offer practical ideals which can better serve Christian communities by helping them to live well.



Katherine Sweet

Katherine Sweet received a PhD in philosophy from Saint Louis University in 2022. She was previously a dissertation fellow on the Theology, Science, and Knowledge Project, funded by the John Templeton Foundation and University of Missouri–St. Louis. She works on questions in epistemology, ethics, and philosophy of religion. Her current project is focused on building an account of human flourishing and the virtues that is compatible severe intellectual impairment. In developing such an account, she is studying ways in which

people with intellectual disabilities acquire virtues and how interpersonal relationships affect the development of virtue. For instance, in one paper she details an account of the good life in which the foundation for the development and practice of the virtues is the ability to recognize potential and actual value in others. Reciprocal valuing of others on this basis serves as the sort of loving relationship essential to a good human life. In another paper, she argues that intellectual honesty is a virtue primarily motivated by care over the epistemic goods of others, care which is developed over time via the recognition of the value in another person. Concern over the epistemic goods of others is a way of valuing them for their own sake; it thus plays an important role in the development of close relationships. The result is a feedback loop between love and intellectual virtues such as honesty, and an irreducibly interpersonal concern for truth that takes the form of concern over the value of another's intellect.



Skeptical Theism and Sensible Evidentialism

Co-editor of Logoi, John William Waldrop, reflects on the continuing impact of his friend and mentor, Stephen Wykstra.

Stephen Wykstra was educated at Hope College and at the University of Pittsburgh. He spent most of his career teaching at Calvin College (now Calvin University) in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He got his start in the history and philosophy of science, though he is best known for his subsequent contributions to the philosophy of religion. A central debate in the field has to do with the existence of evil and its relationship to the existence of God. His 1984 paper “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance’” transformed this debate. The position staked out in that paper came to be known as “skeptical theism.” Steve helped to continue the conversation in the decades to follow; now numerous monographs and edited volumes, in addition to multitudinous journal articles, have been devoted to discussing skeptical theism.

Along the way, Steve also wrote on adjacent topics, including the epistemology of religion. In the late 1980s, Steve was an important critic of the emerging school known as “Reformed epistemology,” mainly championed by his fellow Michiganders William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Long before the current buzz around social epistemology, Steve argued that Reformed epistemology didn’t give the communal aspects of religious knowledge their due; in this, Steve was ahead of his time. In 2013–14, he continued to develop his communitarian ideas in epistemology as the Alvin Plantinga Fellow in the Center for Philosophy of Religion.

Steve’s work is an inspiration to many working in the philosophy of religion; his writing is insightful, meticulously argued, and philosophically rich. To those who know him, though, this is just scratching the surface. As a person, Steve sticks out for his irrepressible inquisitiveness and almost breathless commitment to the truth; in a time when monikers like “the profession” are applied to academic philosophy with increasing frequency and fittingness, Steve remains a philosopher’s philosopher. And more noteworthy, perhaps, is Steve’s unreserved care for his colleagues in the discipline.

This feature on the work of Steve Wykstra is one small way of honoring his contributions—both scholarly and personal—to the philosophy of religion. What follows are three short, appreciative essays on Steve’s work. In the first, Justin P. McBrayer summarizes Steve’s groundbreaking work on skeptical theism. Along the way, McBrayer situates Steve’s earliest work on the topic in local historical context. The second essay, written by Timothy Perrine, introduces themes from Steve’s work on religious epistemology. Finally, an exploratory essay by Jonathan C. Rutledge applies insights from skeptical theism to questions about reasons for divine action.



When Is Seeing Nothing Evidence of Nothing?

Justin P. McBrayer

Suppose you think that there is no extraterrestrial life; every living thing in the universe is right here on planet Earth. It seems fair to ask you why you think that's true. Believing that there's nothing out there isn't some kind of appropriate default position. If you think there are no alien life-forms, then you need a reason for that belief.

It's the same with God. Some people think there is a God. Some people think there is not. Those who think there's no God need a reason for that belief. It's not as if atheism is an appropriate default position. (At best, agnosticism is the default.) But what kind of reason could be marshaled as evidence that God isn't there?

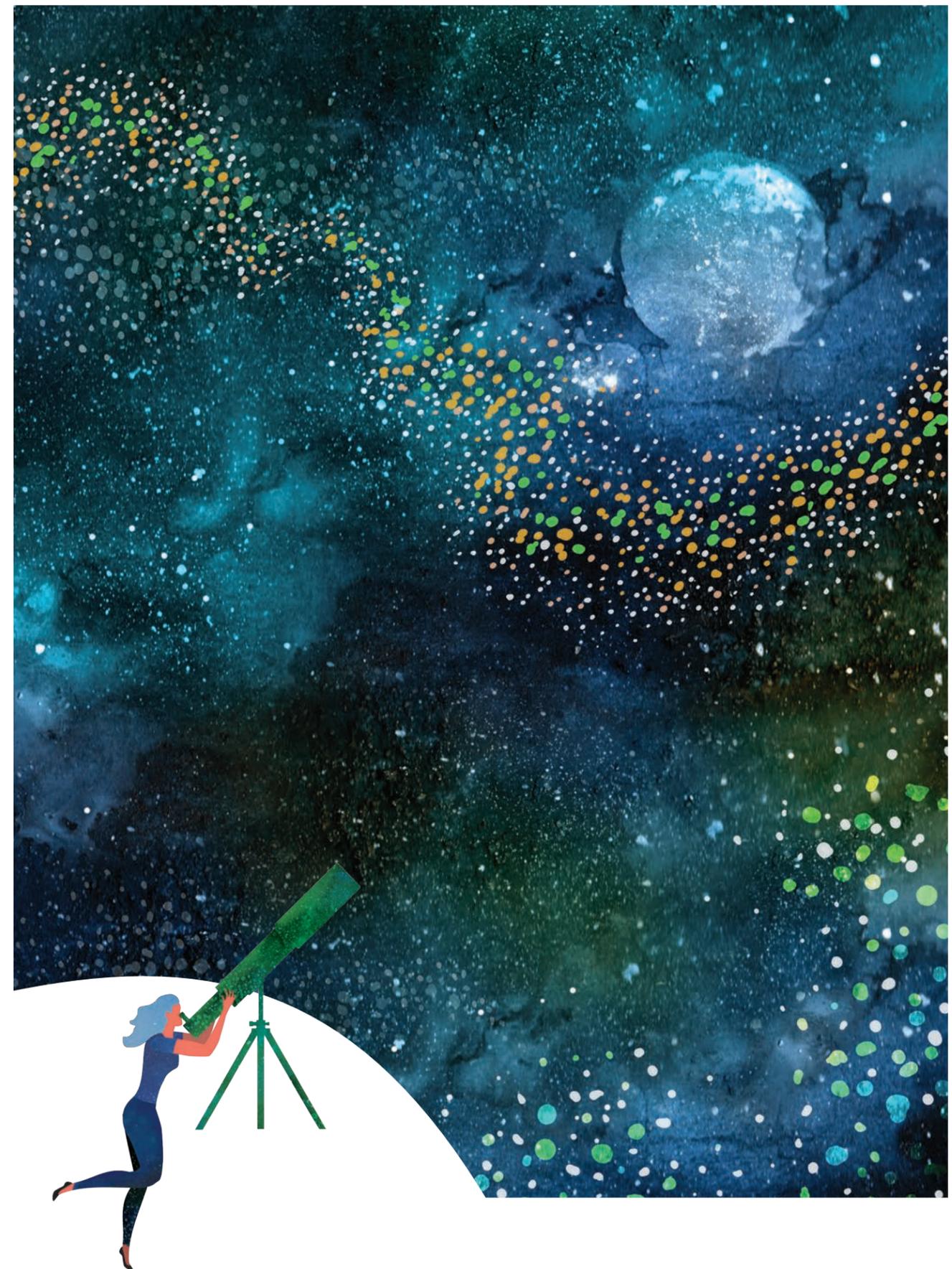
For centuries, the most significant reason on philosophical tap was the fact that the world is not a very pleasant place. Many thinkers have concluded that the existence, distribution, or type of evil faced by conscious creatures is an adequate reason to think the world isn't governed by a perfectly good and perfectly powerful being like God. If God exists, evil would not exist. But evil does exist. And so, God doesn't.

Historically, theists have not been impressed with this line of argument. The central objection is that it's logically possible that both God and evil exist at the same time. For example, suppose there was some really great good that required the existence of evil. In that case, even a perfectly good being would al-

low that particular evil to exist. That means it's possible to have both God and evil. In turn, that means not just any sort of evil counts as serious evidence for atheism. Only pointless evil can do that. And the history of philosophy is filled with theistic explanations for why evil isn't pointless: it's a necessary condition for significant free will; it builds character; evil teaches important lessons, and so forth.

But the argument from evil got a boost in the 1970s when philosopher William Rowe formulated a version of the argument that sidestepped this standard rebuttal.¹ Rowe opens his paper by conceding that God and evil can coexist. Yet, he argues, this is unlikely. This shift from what's *possible* to what's *probable* made for a stronger, so-called "evidential," argument from evil. The existence of evil in our world doesn't show that it's impossible for there to be a God, but it makes it highly unlikely.

Rowe thinks the odds of God's existence are low because we have inductive reason to think that at least



“It seems like there are some cases in which our not seeing something is good evidence that it’s not there, and yet there are other cases in which our not seeing something is no evidence at all. If you walk into a room and see no elephant in it, it’s reasonable to conclude that there isn’t an elephant there on the basis of what you see. On the other hand, if you look at your hand and see no germs, it’s not reasonable to conclude that your hands are germ-free on the basis of what you see.”

some of the evils in our world are pointless. Consider his classic example: lightning strikes in a distant forest, ignites a fire, and traps a lone fawn who burns to death over the course of several days. Rowe concludes that “So far as we can see, the fawn’s intense suffering is pointless.”² It’s not the result of a free action, no one’s character gets improved by it, other forest creatures learn nothing from it, and so on. In short, we can’t identify *any* good connected to this suffering or see how it precludes an evil equally bad or worse. And so, probably, there is no such good.

Given that horrible evils like the case of the fawn happen by the thousands each day, it is overwhelmingly likely that at least *some* of them are pointless. And since pointless evil is evidence against the existence of God, it is likely that God doesn’t exist.

Or so the argument goes.

The philosophical community immediately took notice of Rowe’s new formulation of a classic philosophical knot. Former critiques of the problem of evil fell flat. Theodicies from Aquinas to Descartes didn’t seem to apply to the fawn in the forest. And

the work of Plantinga and others showing that God and evil might coexist missed the point. Was Rowe’s formulation of the argument sound?

Steve Wykstra didn’t think so, and he pressed this case in the early 1980s.³ The central problem was that Rowe’s formulation of the argument had an unsupported assumption.

Think of some particular evil in your life. How can you know that it’s pointless? Rowe’s advice is to go with what we see: if, as far as we can tell, the evil is pointless, then it probably is. Our *not* seeing a compensating good is a reason for thinking that it’s not there. This method isn’t fail-safe, of course. We might be mistaken. But our not seeing something is a pretty good reason for thinking it’s not there.

Wykstra was skeptical. It seems like there are some cases in which our not seeing something is good evidence that it’s not there, and yet there are other cases in which our not seeing something is no evidence at all. If you walk into a room and see no elephant in it, it’s reasonable to conclude that there isn’t an elephant there on the basis of what you see. On the oth-

er hand, if you look at your hand and see no germs, it’s not reasonable to conclude that your hands are germ-free on the basis of what you see.

To sort the two cases from one another, Wykstra proposed a Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access, and in line with analytic philosophers’ penchant for corny acronyms, dubbed the principle CORNEA:

On the basis of cognized situation S, human H is entitled to claim “It appears that P” only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if P were not the case, S would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her.

Put more colloquially, what you see is evidence for some fact only if it’s reasonable to think that what you see would change when the fact changed. In the case of the elephant, it’s reasonable to think that if there were an elephant in the room, you’d see it. In the case of the germs, it’s not reasonable to think that if there were germs on your hand, you’d see them. That’s why your failing to see something is evidence in the first case and not the second. We can now apply this lesson to Rowe’s argument from evil. Does the fact that we see no point to an evil give us good reason to think there really is no point? Well, that depends on whether you think the point would be more like an elephant or a germ. Wykstra argues that it’s more like a germ: there’s no reason to think that we would be aware of a compensating good even if it existed. We are pretty limited beings with a dim grasp of the goods and evils in our world. The upshot is that the “appears” claim that Rowe makes in the reformulated argument fails

to provide even *prima facie* evidence that a given evil is pointless. The evidential argument from evil fails.

The position staked out by Wykstra has come to be known as *skeptical theism*. The position walks a tightrope between affirming God’s existence (theism) on the one hand and yet denying that humans can come to know that evils are pointless (skepticism) on the other. Forty years of literature have fleshed out the strengths and weaknesses of this family of responses to the argument from evil.

This isn’t to say that Wykstra’s initial formulation of the response is perfect. (I’m on record as a critic.) But his essay shone a spotlight on an interesting and pressing question: when is seeing nothing evidence of nothing? Or, as the question is sometimes put in epistemology, when is the absence of evidence, evidence of absence?

Answering that question is important not just for debates in philosophy of religion (concerning the argument from divine hiddenness, for example) but also for everyday matters like wondering whether not seeing side effects of a vaccine is evidence that there aren’t any. The question also brings us right back to where this essay began: is not seeing alien life evidence that it’s not there? Until we can answer that question, we’re in no position to endorse the evidential argument from evil.

1 William L. Rowe, “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 335–41.

2 Rowe, 337.

3 Stephen Wykstra, “The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance,’” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 16 (1984): 73–94.



Justin P. McBrayer is Professor of Philosophy at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, working in philosophy of religion, epistemology, and ethics. His most recent book, *Beyond Fake News* (Routledge), offers a technological and market-based explanation for the ubiquity of fake news and epistemic guidance on how to avoid it. Learn more about his work at justinmcbayer.com.



Socially Extended Evidence

Timothy Perrine

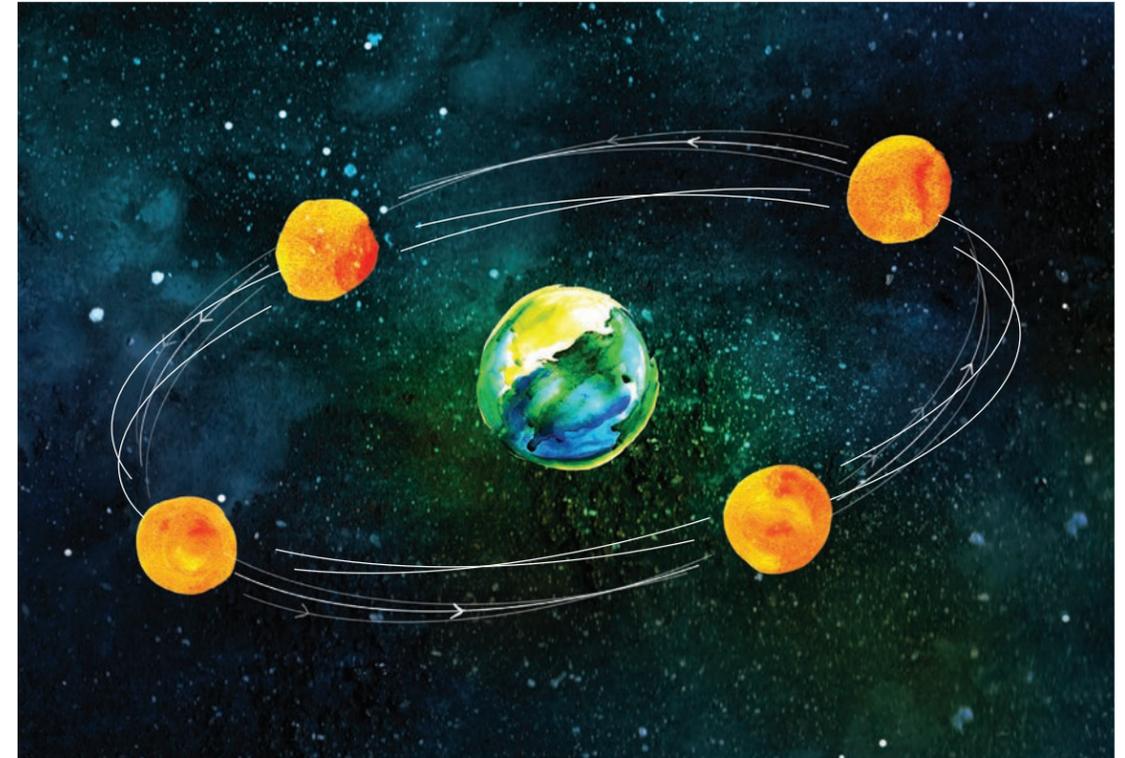
I'll be honest. I believe some things that are a little unusual, a little odd. I mostly believe these things because I was taught them as a child. My teachers told me it was important to learn these unusual things, and so I did. I never really tried to shore up those beliefs—I never tried to construct a proof or run an experiment or spend weeks at a university library carefully sifting through research. And later, as an adult, I learned that many of the people who originally proposed these beliefs have a dubious intellectual heritage.

At this point, you might think that I'm being irresponsible, and my beliefs, even if true, couldn't rise to the level of knowledge. There's a long history in philosophy of maintaining that knowledge and justified belief *require* one to provide careful argumentation and proof. And here I am confessing that I can't do that for these beliefs. You might also think that I, personally, am being irresponsible. Surely as I got older I should have shored up these beliefs, done more research, done more work.

One such belief is that the earth revolves around the sun, rotating as it does. This belief is a little unusual and odd. Historically most humans have not believed this. And it doesn't fit my experience. Most days I don't travel that far, and yet it seems the sun

moves around *me*, circling high in the sky. And some of the defenders of these beliefs had some dubious reasons. (Kepler famously thought that studying the number of geometric solids could provide insight to the number of planets!) Despite all this, I don't think there's something improper or bad about me and my beliefs. And I think Stephen Wykstra, in a sequence of papers, tells us why.

Wykstra assumes that we have certain cognitive abilities that allow us to know things in an immediate way. For instance, through certain perceptual capacities, I know that the leaves outside are rustling; by memory, I know that I had potatoes for breakfast; through introspection, I know that my right hip is hurting; and so on. We know these things without



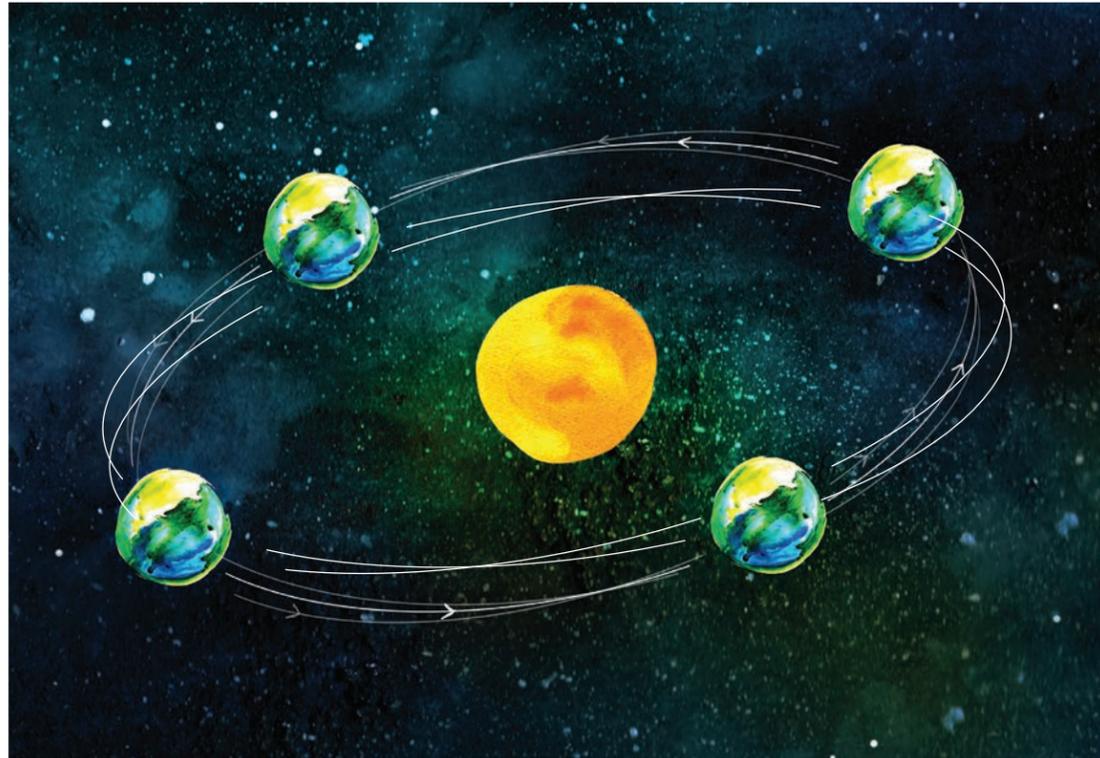
evidence—or, at least, without evidence as it is traditionally construed: a set of non-inferred beliefs that we infer things from.

Additionally, Wykstra assumes that we also know things through testimony, relying on others. In fact, probably *most* of our knowledge is based on testimony. My knowledge of what's happening in other countries, or in history, is often based on testimony. But even knowledge of myself is based on testimony—I know my birthday by relying on my parents' say-so, and I know my current medical condition by relying on the doctor's say-so. Relying on the testimony of others isn't essentially problematic or defective; in fact, relying on the testimony of others is essential if we want to know much of anything about the world.

Let's return to my belief that the earth revolves around the sun. Wykstra doesn't think we have certain cognitive abilities that allow us to know that in an immediate way. (Our minds don't have immediate access to complex astronomical facts; we're too small for that.) Rather, the belief that the earth revolves around the sun is, to use his phrase, "evidence essen-

tial." If we are to know that the earth revolves around the sun, then we need evidence. However, Wykstra doesn't think that this evidence is essential for *everyone* who believes the earth revolves around the sun. Some persons need evidence that the earth revolves around the sun—the experts—but others of us can know this through testimony, by relying upon the say-so of others. Thus, while it is true that I, personally, have never investigated the evidence for my belief that the earth revolves around the sun, I don't have to because others already have. And by relying on them, and whatever evidence they have collected, I can know the earth revolves around the sun.

Wykstra's proposals about evidence and knowledge are "communitarian" and thus "externalist." Whether I know that the earth revolves around the sun depends upon the activities of others in my community. If they gathered sufficient bodies of evidence to support the belief, then I may know. By contrast, if they have been quite lackluster—basing their reasoning on guesses, hunches, or dubious analogies involving Platonic solids—then I won't know. For then the evidence they



have gathered is not sufficient for them to know and, by extension, not sufficient for me to know. Thus, the normative status of my belief—is it knowledge or not?—depends on something external to me. It depends upon others.

So Wykstra thinks that some claims are “evidence essential,” but that the evidence can be had by our communities and not necessarily by each member of that community. Many of his examples of evidence-essential beliefs are from the sciences. Insofar as most of us know the earth revolves around the sun, there are electrons, aluminum conducts electricity better than steel, and so on, it is because we belong to a community that has this evidence. But one of his most interesting applications of these ideas is to religious belief.

Some philosophers raise a simple evidentialist objection to religious belief: in order for people to reasonably believe in God, they must have evidence that there is a God; but there is not sufficient evi-

dence that there is God; thus, people aren’t reasonable in believing in God and so do not know there is a God. Some philosophers have responded to this objection by challenging the first part. For instance, my grandmother was a full-time nurse who raised four children while also volunteering extensively at her church and in her community. For her to reasonably believe in God, does she have to—in addition to everything else on her plate—brush up on the most recent work on the cosmological argument or become an expert in historical scholarship about the New Testament? Such a requirement seems excessively burdensome—a standard for reasonableness that seems too high.

Wykstra agrees that such a requirement is too demanding. But he doesn’t agree that this has much to do with the specific topic at hand—religious belief. It would be equally problematic to say that my belief that the earth revolves around the sun is reasonable only if I, myself, kept up with the astronomical evidence. This evidentialist objection demands too much.

But Wykstra thinks there is an evidentialist objection in the neighborhood that is much more sensible. This objection contends that belief in God is “evidence essential” in the sense described above. For my grandmother to be reasonable or to know that there is a God she *herself* need not carefully investigate the evidence. But she does need to belong to a *community* that has the relevant evidence. But, the objection goes, our communities do not have such evidence. Thus, people like my grandmother are not reasonable and do not know there is a God. Wykstra himself didn’t endorse this objection; he merely urged that if there is an evidentialist objection to religious belief, this is the most sensible version of it.

Wykstra’s discussion of evidentialism is interesting for a further reason. Some critics of religious belief—Richard Dawkins comes to mind here—lambast the way that people form and maintain their religious beliefs. Religious people believe what they do because they were taught it as children; they don’t have arguments for their beliefs; they listen to purported experts without consulting the evidence those people have; etc. But, as Wykstra’s discussion brings out, these kinds of complaints overreach. Virtually anyone in modern society forms beliefs in these ways. Your beliefs about history, geography, basic chemistry,

“For my grandmother to be reasonable or to know that there is a God she herself need not carefully investigate the evidence. But she does need to belong to a community that has the relevant evidence.”

the founding of the government, and so on, are likely formed in the exact same way. This kind of objection to religious belief is not sensible because it easily extends to many of our beliefs formed through testimony. Of course, Wykstra’s ideas don’t show that *every* evidentialist objection to religious belief fails. But they do suggest that a proper evidentialist objection can’t get off the ground without first considering the evidence *entire communities* can marshal. For it is evidence available to the community, and not merely available to the *individuals* in the community, that plays a role in determining reasonable belief and knowledge.

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Skeptical Theism & Theology

Jonathan C. Rutledge

Skeptical theism is the view that humans have reason to doubt their reliability in determining whether apparently pointless evils are actually pointless. If true, the view threatens to undermine—rather unsurprisingly—any argument from evil that relies on inferences from claims of the form “that appears pointless” to “that is pointless.” Ever since Stephen Wykstra highlighted this argumentative move in the literature, such inferences have come to be called noseiums.¹

Skeptical theists have most often argued against the legitimacy of these *noseium* inferences in the context of the argument from evil by appealing to the limitations of human cognition. For example, skeptical theists focus on the possibility that we know less about the realm of value than is assumed in arguments from evil and use that as fodder for an argument that undermines the relevant *noseium* inference.

To see how this might go, consider someone who claims that there is no possible point or purpose for some particular evil: simply put, the evil is pointless. Skeptical theists, when faced with such claims, point out (pun-intended) that claims about what *could not possibly* be the case are very demanding claims to establish. That is, they require a representative awareness of the vast space of possible worlds—ways the world might have been—

that probably eludes the limited cognitive capacities of creatures such as ourselves. If that’s your evidential basis for thinking that some evils are pointless, so says the skeptical theist, then your argument just isn’t up to snuff.

One concern that continues to plague this sort of skeptical theistic maneuver, however, is that it plausibly commits skeptical theists to additional, worrisome forms of skepticism. If the skeptical theist’s skepticism is sufficiently strong to undermine the *noseium* inferences in arguments from evil—so the objection goes—then it plainly leads to other forms of skepticism: moral skepticism, skepticism about other minds, skepticism about the external world, and so on. Whether such an objection can be made to stick remains to be seen, of course, but there is no doubt that it puts skeptical theists in an uncomfortable position.

In the hopes of sidestepping this issue, I propose that we consider whether theology has the resources to give someone a reason to doubt their reliability in predicting how God might act, as skeptical theists think, but by appealing to a reason not grounded in a lack of moral knowledge for humans. How might this go? Well, perhaps moral considerations, such as promoting the welfare of creatures, serve as reasons for God *in a different way* than they serve as reasons for creatures. And if the normative force of such moral reasons shifts when considered from the perspective of God, then there will be space for a skeptical theist-like response to arguments from evil without committing us to moral skepticism. What might this look like?

In recent work on the nature of divine holiness, Mark Murphy has defended the claim that God has requiring reasons of holiness to *not* relate to creatures.² Requiring reasons are reasons to act that constrain rational action in the following way: if someone has a requiring reason to do something but chooses not to do it, then that person is irrational (at least in the absence of countervailing reasons). Thus, if God has requiring reasons to refrain from entering into relations with creatures, then unless God has countervailing reasons to engage creatures in the relevant way, God will, as a perfectly rational being, choose not to relate to them. For otherwise God would be irrational, which is, of course, totally absurd.

According to most theistic religions, there are many ways in which God has chosen to relate to creatures. First and foremost, God has *created* them. But not only this, God sustains all creation in existence and, if one is to believe the claims of the Christian scriptures at least, has gone so far as to assume a created nature and suffer death. Assuming Murphy is correct about God’s holiness giving him requiring reasons *not* to do these sorts of things, then when we include theological data to the contrary (that is, data that tells us God *has* done these things), we are left with a normative puzzle concerning what sorts of countervailing reasons God might have to engage with creatures.

“Whether such an objection can be made to stick remains to be seen, of course, but there is no doubt that it puts skeptical theists in an uncomfortable position.”

And this brings us back around to the argument from evil. The sorts of considerations that might explain God’s relating to us in various ways make assumptions about God’s *reasons* for acting: namely, that they arise out of a concern for creaturely welfare. Skeptical theists agree that God has such reasons for action, and skeptical theists certainly appear to think the normative force of these welfare-based reasons is the same for both God and human beings. Let’s assume they are right about all this and assume that the normative force of welfare-based reasons is also of the requiring sort.³ What can we say, then, about our epistemic reliability in predicting how God will act given this background?

Well, on the background just sketched, we are assuming that God has requiring reasons to not engage with creatures—grounded in his holiness—and other requiring reasons to promote creaturely welfare—perhaps grounded in morality, love, or some other such thing. Given that promoting creaturely welfare is a way of engaging creatures, then, God has inconsistent reasons; that is, God has reason to do something and reason to not do that same something; reason to engage creatures and reason to *not* engage creatures.

But where might skeptical theism come into the picture? Recall that as I defined skeptical theism at the top of the article, it’s the thesis that we have reason to doubt our reliability in determining when apparently pointless evils are actually pointless. But such

“What accounts for the failure to ascertain the normative force of God’s reasons, even while there is no such failure in accounting for the normative force of human reasons? It is this: God is perfectly holy and human beings are not.”

versions of skeptical theism trade on the plausible assumption that humans are unable to identify all the relevant sorts of goods that guide God in deciding how to act, which lands them in the troubling waters of moral skepticism. Moving away from that assumption in how one states the skeptical theistic view, however, allows us to frame skeptical theism in an importantly different way. We might instead think of skeptical theism, for instance, as the view that humans have reason to doubt their reliability in determining the overall normative force of God’s reasons for action—indeed, even if they know what the normative force of those reasons are *for themselves*.

What accounts for the failure to ascertain the normative force of God’s reasons, even while there is no such failure in accounting for the normative force of human reasons? It is this: God is perfectly holy and human beings are not. Consequently, God has re-

quiring reasons of holiness that are countervailing to his requiring reasons to promote the welfare of creatures. Humans do not have countervailing reasons of the holiness sort, and thus, cannot avoid irrationality by acting in accordance with them. In this way, a dose of skepticism about human access to divine deliberation is maintained, and so the evidential argument from evil remains undermined—albeit with a different emphasis than more traditional forms of skeptical theism. But now, no human moral skepticism seems to be implied, and so the most pressing objection to skeptical theism is also undermined.

Obviously, questions remain about this form of skeptical theism. Is it aptly called “skeptical theism”? Even if it sidesteps the moral skepticism objection, does this version of skeptical theism avoid other problematic forms of skepticism? If God sometimes has sufficient reason to not promote the welfare of creatures, can someone of this persuasion reasonably *trust* God to work for their good? I don’t claim to have adequate answers to these concerns, nor do I have space to address them here. But given how deeply entrenched divine holiness is within many religious traditions, a skeptical theism which draws from that theological well has some realistic chance of moving the debate forward.

- 1 Stephen J. Wykstra, “Rowe’s Noseeum Arguments from Evil.” In *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, edited by Daniel Howard-Snyder (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996): 126–150.
- 2 Mark C. Murphy, *Divine Holiness and Divine Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2021).
- 3 Here I deviate from the conclusions defended in Murphy’s book; for an argument in favor of this deviation, see Jordan Westling and Jonathan C. Rutledge, “God of Holy Love: Toward an Agapist Alternative to Mark Murphy’s Holiness Framework for Divine Action” (MS available on request).



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In His Own Words

Stephen Wykstra on skeptical theism, sensible evidentialism, and the means of knowledge

“Rowe, I have allowed, is right in claiming that a wholly good God must be “against” suffering in this sense: such a being would allow suffering only if there were an outweighing good served by so doing. Rowe is also correct in seeing that such goods are, in a great many cases, nowhere within our ken. The linchpin of my critique has been that if theism is true, this is just what one would expect: for if we think carefully about the sort of being theism proposes for our belief, it is entirely expectable—given what we know of our cognitive limits—that the goods by virtue of which this Being allows known suffering should very often be beyond our ken. Since this state of affairs is just what one should expect if theism were true, how can its obtaining be evidence against theism?”

“The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance,’” p. 91

“What, then, is wrong with saying that such instances of suffering are disconfirming evidence against theism? Is not the situation parallel to, say, the initial disconfirmation of Copernicus’s theory by the absence of observable stellar parallax? (To preserve his theory in the face of this, Copernicus was led to say that the stars were immensely more distant than anyone had any good reason to believe.) The difference is this. The absence of observed stellar parallax required Copernicus to add a postulate to his theory. The observed sufferings in the world do require us to say that there are outweighing goods connected to them that are entirely outside our ken, but this is not an additional postulate: it was implicit in theism (taken with a little realism about our cognitive powers) all along. If we have realized the magnitude of the theistic proposal, cognizance of suffering thus should not in the least reduce our confidence that it is true. When [cognizance] of suffering does have this effect, it is perhaps because we had not understood the sort of being theism proposes for belief in the first place.”

“The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of ‘Appearance,’” p. 91

“God’s design plan for us entails an incarnational epistemology paralleling his incarnational ontology: he intends our knowledge of God to take ordinary flesh even as God himself did. By the resurrection and other “visible works” of Jesus, God means the gospel to engage the ordinary faculties of fallen humans like Agrippa. On the model, this adds a dimension of epistemic accountability to our response, for it now behoves [sic.] us to reflectively ponder and wrestle with the gospel proclamation using our ordinary cognitive powers. At the same time, God provides the Holy Spirit to those who would receive this proclamation, in part by working in a synergistic concurrence with these ordinary belief-forming processes. On the new model, the Gospel proclamation does not “swing free” from our ordinary ways of knowing historical events. Instead, it derives a crucial part of its warrant from the fact that the resurrection and other evidencing “visible works” of God came within the perceptual access of Jesus’ followers, and within the testimonial access of those coming after them.”

“Not Done in a Corner’: How to Be a Sensible Evidentialist about Jesus,” p. 103

“Jesus came, Paul says in Ephesians 2:18, that through him we might “have access in one Spirit to the Father.” This access, and the love which is poured upon us in the Spirit, has an experiential and noninferential dimension and might make its own extremely weighty contribution to the warrant of our beliefs. [. . .] An externalist approach opens the possibility that inferential evidence, discerned as we use our minds in reasoning about God or electrons, engages more than our capacity for rational insight into support-relations. It suggests that it is not only our heart that has reasons of which reason does not know. Perhaps our reasoning does as well.”

“Externalism, Proper Inferentiality, and Sensible Evidentialism,” p. 118



What Is Forgiveness?

Does God Only Forgive Us if We Forgive Others?

By Grace Hibshman

Christian accounts of forgiveness face the challenge of making sense of Christ's teachings on forgiveness like this one: "And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive [aphiemi] him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive [aphiemi] you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive [aphiemi], neither will your Father in heaven forgive [aphiemi] your trespasses" (Mark 11:25–26, NKJV).

It's hard to make sense of this passage because it is hard to understand why Christians always must *aphiemi* if God will not. If what it means to *aphiemi* someone their sin is to regard them as though they were blameless instead of guilty, then it might make sense that God would not *aphiemi* everyone, but then it's hard to see why Christians ought to *aphiemi* everyone. It is usually morally inappropriate, not to mention dangerous or simply unfeasible, to regard an unrepentant offender as though she were blameless. If what it means to *aphiemi* is to for-

bear punishment or be reconciled, we run into similar problems. Alternatively, if what it means to *aphiemi* is something minimal, like wishing the other well, then it makes sense that Christians ought to always *aphiemi*, but then it's hard to see why God would not sometimes. How could an omnibenevolent God not wish one of his creatures well? So, whatever it means to *aphiemi*, it is hard to avoid the implication that either it is so demanding that sometimes Christians should not *aphiemi* or it is so basic that God always will.



“This does not mean that we have a Christian obligation to overlook or discount our neighbor’s sin. We should take their sins seriously and hold them accountable for their sins, just as we should take our own sins seriously and hold ourselves accountable. The point is not that we as Christians should disregard or dismiss the sins of our neighbor, but that while doing so, we should construe ourselves as primarily occupying the same fundamental standing as our neighbor.”

Most English Bibles translate *aphiemi* in a passage like Mark 11:25–26 as to “forgive,” but in other passages translate it other ways, including to permit, allow, suffer, leave, yield up, forsake, remit, put away, and, perhaps most surprisingly, to divorce. Setting to one side whether these things are the same as forgiveness, it is helpful to understand *aphesis* (the noun corresponding to the verb *aphiemi*) as roughly letting go of someone’s offense in the sense of not counting it against their standing in the relationship. As I will explain, this interpretation allows us to explain the discrepancy in passages like Mark 11:25–26 between our having to always grant our neighbor *aphesis* but God sometimes not granting it to us.

If I ran a red light, it would be strange for me to get mad at my husband for his running a red light ten minutes later. When we are reminded that we occupy the same moral standing as our neighbor, as it is when we commit the exact same sin as our neighbor, we intuitively recognize the hypocrisy of counting it against their standing in their relationship with us. There is something similarly hypocritical (albeit less obviously so) about our counting *any* of our neighbor’s sins against their relational standing. Of

course, some offenses are graver than others, but all sins contribute to the collective web of sin in which we all are entangled, and, as co-sinners, we all occupy the same fundamental standing before God. So, there is a sense in which we are all perpetually in an extended, less intuitive version of the case of the hypocritical, red-light-running wife, which explains why Christ would command us to always *aphiemi*.

This does not mean that we have a Christian obligation to overlook or discount our neighbor’s sin. We should take their sins seriously and hold them accountable for their sins, just as we should take our own sins seriously and hold ourselves accountable. The point is not that we as Christians should disregard or dismiss the sins of our neighbor, but that while doing so, we should construe ourselves as primarily occupying the same fundamental standing as our neighbor.

Unlike us, God does not occupy an analogous position to the hypocritical, red-light-running wife. God is sinless and so God must transform us into a new creation free from sin in order to not count our transgressions against our standing in our relationship with him. Plausibly, God can only do this if we cooperate

with him by surrendering to his love, receiving his grace, and striving toward union with him; we cannot do these things while being hypocritically hard-hearted toward our neighbor, like the wife who gets mad at her husband for doing the same things she does. So, plausibly, cooperating with God’s attempt to *aphiemi* us of our sins includes learning to *aphiemi* others their sins, which explains why God can only *aphiemi* us our sins if we are willing to *aphiemi* others theirs.

The parable of the unmerciful servant illustrates this theology of forgiveness. In the parable, a servant begs his master to give him more time to pay off an unpayable debt. In response, the master forgives (*aphiemi*) him his debt. Upon being forgiven, the servant goes out and tries to collect a pittance that his fellow servant owes him. He violently insists, even when his debtor begs for more time. The master consequently grows angry and throws the unmerciful servant in prison. Christ concludes, “So My heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive [*aphiemi*] your brother or sister from your heart” (cf. Matt. 18:35, NKJV).

The master freely remits the unmerciful servant’s debt even though the servant does nothing to merit this mercy. The servant’s debt continues to be remitted only so long as the servant extends analogous mercy to his debtors. In a similar way, God unconditionally strives to remit our sins and bring us into union with him. The continued remission of our sins is conditional only on our cooperation with God’s attempts, cooperation which includes our willingness to *aphiemi* the sins of others. God’s *aphesis* of our sins far exceeds in generosity our *aphesis* of our neighbor’s sins, just as the debt that the king remits far exceeds the debt that the unmerciful servant ought to remit but does not. The *aphesis* we grant others is a passing on of the *aphesis* God has granted us, just as the money that the unmerciful servant lent to his neighbor was presumably money that he acquired on loan from the master. What makes him unmerciful is that having passed on the king’s generosity to one in need and having been mercifully released from the same position of need as his neighbor, he rescinds the king’s generosity for himself. As a result, he can no longer enjoy any of it.



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The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11–32

In one of the most recognized stories from religious tradition, we see the power of forgiveness.

11 And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. 14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

17 “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” 20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ 22 But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

25 “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ 28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ 31 And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”



What Is Forgiveness?

Quirks of God’s Forgiveness

By Andrew Peterson

Forgiveness and religion often come packaged together. Indeed, they can be hard to separate. This stems from the belief that God is both the ultimate giver of forgiveness and the enabler of our own acts of forgiveness. But in the intervening centuries, Christians and other religious peoples have found forgiveness to be fraught. Our social practices of forgiveness are diverse, and our understandings of forgiveness are contested. Who should forgive, in what circumstances, and for what reasons? And what exactly is it that someone does when they forgive?

A variety of philosophical accounts aim to tackle these difficulties, and the proposals are as diverse as the practices and popular understandings they track. Some philosophers see forgiveness as essentially a change in one’s emotions toward a wrongdoer—the giving up of angry, vindictive, or retributive feelings. Others think of forgiveness as the foregoing of a due punishment. Some prefer to align it closely with reconciliation or love, while others deny that either of these is essential for forgiveness at all. Some suppose that it must be earned; others suppose that it is most properly a free and gracious gift. Still others doubt that these various proposals are really in conflict, since they resist the idea that these proposals are competitive.

One strain of philosophical reflection I find promising draws its inspiration from Joseph Butler and P. F. Strawson. It broadly regards forgiveness as one way of overcoming the blaming attitude a victim rightly holds toward their wrongdoer. When someone wrongs another, the victim is right to blame the wrongdoer. And this means adopting a negative judgment against that act and the wrongdoer who performed it. This attitude is essentially interpersonal; it takes the form of a victim’s claim against a wrongdoer that *you* ought not to have done this to me. Forgiveness addresses this claim, this attitude. To forgive is to address this blaming attitude not by diminishing it, but by overcoming it for the right reasons.

“When someone wrongs another, the victim is right to blame the wrongdoer. To forgive is to address this blaming attitude not by diminishing it, but by overcoming it for the right reasons.”

Does this way of understanding forgiveness hold promise for theists? Can it help explain what God is up to when God forgives sins? Perhaps. It has some obvious promise but also some drawbacks that are less commonly addressed. Insofar as God is understood as sharing interpersonal relationships with others, this model seems promising. When I sin against God by disobeying one of God’s laws, God is well-positioned to forgive me. But this sort of interpersonal case doesn’t cover some of the most popular cases of God’s forgiveness. The Hebrew Bible frequently depicts God as forgiving not just individuals but groups. Sometimes God forgives a group by forgiving a representative individual, just as God sometimes condemns a group on the basis of their representative’s behavior. Christians often claim something even stranger. Many have wanted to say that God can forgive the wrongs we do to one another, even when God is not in any direct sense the party that is wronged.

All of this raises difficult questions about God’s authority or standing to forgive. Recall that the sort of blame that forgiveness aims to overcome originates from a victim’s unique perspective. Victims can forgive because they can blame wrongdoers in a unique way. Their blaming attitude is addressed directly to the wrongdoer on their own behalf. Philosophers have generally been skeptical that third parties are capable

of forgiving, and for good reason. Imagine stumbling upon an altercation at the grocery store. Insults are hurled, perhaps fists too. When the dust settles, some uninvolved bystander declares the instigator forgiven. Something about this intervention seems perplexing, presumptive, and potentially dangerous. *They* cannot forgive. They lack the authority to do so. By forgiving anyway, don’t they add insult to the victim’s injury?

If this intuition is right, then it’s not immediately obvious why the same wouldn’t hold true for God. At the very least, theists need to make sense of and morally defend God’s authority and standing to forgive in cases where God is not the victim. The stakes are already high; a victim’s ability to reassert and defend their moral worth is on the line. But these stakes are amplified if, as many Christians also claim, God is by nature impervious to being harmed. A God who dwells in imperturbable, self-generating perfection will be especially susceptible to being seen as offering insensitive forgiveness. If forgiveness seems to cost God little but comes at serious expense to victims, forgiveness begins to look like an unpromising or unbecoming means for the salvation of the world.

What then? Are these sorts of forgiveness impossible? Or can they be made socially and morally coherent? I think there are at least some provisional reasons to hope they might be defended. What is at issue in these hard cases where a third-party offers forgiveness is whether *any* sort of representational authority can generate an entitlement to forgive. Many philosophers doubt this is possible. But like forgiveness, our practices of representational authority are likewise diverse and contested. We disagree, for example, about who is entitled to make end-of-life decisions for another, or who should make decisions for minors in cases where the obvious candidates are incapacitated.

The question for theists is whether God’s representational authority can have the right quality and character to license God to forgive in another’s stead. What might accomplish that? Some of God’s omniproperties might help here. If God perfectly under-

stands the nature of a wrong, the harms done to the victim, the risks forgiveness might pose to the victim’s well-being, and so on, we will be less skeptical of the moral quality of God’s intervention than we were of the grocery store bystander. If God is perfectly capable of restoring a victim’s wholeness and dignity and publicly commits to doing so, we may similarly be less skeptical of some risks and costs that forgiveness might entail.

On the other hand, if God’s self-generating perfection makes God seem alien and insulated from harm, the omni-properties seem unlikely to be decisive. So it might help for God to put some skin in the game, perhaps literally, as Christians claim. It might help for God to sustain a covenantal relationship with Israel and to willingly be held to the demands of its intimacy. So too it might help for God to take on a human

nature and become vulnerable to the sort of suffering and loss victims experience. These would help give God’s representational authority the hallmarks of the most high-flying sorts of representational authority our human practices share, since we tend to think representational power scales with intimacy and empathy.

Even taken together, these aren’t decisive reasons to think that God’s third-party forgiveness is easily defensible. No, God’s forgiveness, at least its quirkiest kinds, remains among the most difficult and fraught sort of forgiveness imaginable. But these reasons are, I think, a start. And as a start, I think they provide some hope that an account of God’s forgiveness is possible, even one that aims to explain and defend the most extravagant and odd claims theists make about the forgiveness God employs to heal and repair our broken world.



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Intellectual Humility for Everyone?

*Center Associate Director and Assistant Professor of Philosophy
Laura Frances Callahan was recently awarded a large grant from the John Templeton Foundation for an interdisciplinary research project to study intellectual humility, specifically in contexts of oppression. Logoi co-editor John William Waldrop interviewed her to learn more about the project.*

JW: What is intellectual humility, and why is it important?

LC: There are different theories of what intellectual humility is—philosophers and, to a degree, psychologists are still trying to figure it out. One reason people are interested in intellectual humility is that it sounds like the kind of thing we all probably need more of to help us combat problems like polarization in society. It's a problem when I'm so sure about my beliefs and so confident in my own smartness and shrewdness and originality that I'm not able to give your beliefs their due. What I lack in that scenario is not humility about myself generally but humility about myself as a believer, as a thinker.

JW: What got you thinking about intellectual humility?

LC: I was thinking about humility partly for purely accidental reasons: someone asked me to review a book on faith and humility. When I started digging into the literature on humility, I found it fascinating. Humility is in a class of “lowly” virtues that also includes mercy and forgiveness. One might think that it's suspicious to recommend these virtues to people very broadly. These are traits that powerful people might want subjugated people to have in order to stay in power; indeed, these traits have been abused throughout history and are abused even now. And yet, they're central virtues in the Christian tradition. Sometimes non-Christians also latch onto these traits as especially beautiful or important parts of human morality. Since I'm an epistemologist, of course I wanted to think about humility not just as a moral excellence, but also as an intellectual excellence.

JW: What do you think intellectual humility is?

LC: I think intellectual humility is *freedom from distraction by the intellectual ego*. I'm thinking of intellectual humility as essentially negatively defined, in relation to the vice of intellectual pride. And I'm thinking of vicious intellectual pride as pride that distracts us, that takes away some of our intellectual energies and focus from intellectual tasks like reasoning, listening, following an argument, or evaluating evidence. For example, sometimes we do those things less well because we get distracted thinking about how an argument reflects on our own beliefs, or about whether a person in the conversation is appropriately respecting us. I think there's a vice of intellectual pride that always manifests in this tendency toward distraction. Intellectual humility is freedom from that kind of distraction. It's the ability to think better.

JW: Earlier you mentioned power and the ways people can abuse intellectual humility in others. Is that the connection with contexts of oppression? What's particularly interesting about contexts of oppression?

LC: This connects to what I said earlier. Humility can seem like a terrible thing to recommend to people who are in contexts of oppression; opponents of humility sound plausible when they say calling humility a virtue is just a way for oppressors to keep the oppressed down. Reflection on contexts of oppression and marginalization thus casts doubt on whether humility (or intellectual humility) is a virtue, or whether it's a virtue for all people as opposed to a highly context-dependent virtue. Some theorists write that humility or intellectual humility are only primarily virtues for the privileged. That's a natural conclusion to come to when you're paying attention to the experiences of people in contexts of oppression and marginalization, and yet this also connects to what I said about the Christian tradition. I still think that humility is a central human virtue—a virtue that is valuable in each and every life where it's found.

So, you have to tell a more revisionary story about what intellectual humility is in order to see it as the kind of thing that could be valuable in all social contexts. I think that my no-distraction account achieves that, and I argue as much. In general, a methodological commitment of the project is paying close attention to the experiences of people across a variety of social contexts as we're thinking about what intellectual humility is and about its value.

JW: The project will involve psychologists as well as philosophers. Can you say a bit about that? What do you hope will come from an interdisciplinary approach?

LC: I'm really excited about this aspect of the project. Psychologists are doing interesting studies measuring intellectual humility and its correlations with various educational interventions or personality traits in ways that I think are instructive for the philosopher trying to think about these issues from the armchair; they are also usefully informed by rigorous thinking about how to define intellectual humility in the first place. That's where philosophers can bring something to the table.

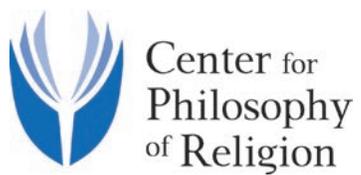
This is already clear: I think intellectual humility is valuable. I hope it can help counter polarization in society. If we're going to increase intellectual humility, we need empirical research into how it can be cultivated. It's one clear thing a philosopher might want from a psychologist, right? But we can't measure interventions designed to increase intellectual humility well if we don't have the right measure of it, if we haven't defined as a parameter something that is actually valuable or worth increasing.

JW: Last question: you've already said a bit about this, but what do you think the philosophy of religion angle is here? What will the kind of engagement that the Center facilitates bring to the table?

LC: Gosh, I'm excited for this. In the philosophy of religion and in theology there is a wealth of scholarship on humility and the lowly virtues, which have been central in the Christian tradition but also other religious traditions. Interestingly, these virtues are typically prescribed universally, to all people, and even ascribed to God and Jesus.

There's also a tradition of thinking about the aspect of humility that people can display in relation to God, not primarily in relation to other people. Because of this focus on humility in relation to the transcendent, the philosophy of religion brings a distinctive perspective on what's valuable about humility.

I'm excited to see how religious thought might re-illuminate contemporary discussion of the lowly virtues, which clearly gained societal influence through religious movements but have largely been considered as secular moral virtues in recent philosophy and psychology.



Notre Dame's Center for Philosophy of Religion promotes work in philosophy of religion, philosophical theology, and in related fields through fellowships, conferences, grants, and strategic public engagement initiatives.

