Recently Trent Dougherty has claimed that there is a tension between skeptical theism and common sense epistemology—that the more plausible one of these views is, the less plausible the other is. In this paper I explain Dougherty’s argument and develop an account of defeaters which removes the alleged tension between skeptical theism and common sense epistemology.

Trent Dougherty has recently laid out a project for anyone who is attracted to both skeptical theism and common sense epistemology. Dougherty argues that there exists a tension between these two views. In particular Dougherty claims that, “the theorist who would like to combine common sense epistemology with skeptical theism has some work to do.”¹ In what follows I hope to answer Dougherty’s challenge. I will briefly explain skeptical theism and common sense epistemology, and then proceed to show that the truth of common sense epistemology would not show that skeptical theism is implausible.

What Is Common Sense Epistemology?

Dougherty characterizes common sense epistemology as the claim that “experiences, inclinations to believe, appearance states and the like are sufficient to justify the beliefs they give rise to.”² Central to common sense epistemology is the claim that we are prima facie justified in believing that things are the way that they appear. It is important to note, however, that such justification can be subject to defeaters.³

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²Ibid., 174. It is important to note here that the common sense epistemologist is committed only to the claim that such states provide prima facie justification for the corresponding beliefs. While Dougherty recognizes this claim, it is not evident in this quoted passage. In addition, a common sense epistemologist need not maintain that each of these types of states provides prima facie justification for the corresponding beliefs, but only that at least some of these members does so.

³This fact is recognized by Dougherty, whose paradigm examples of common sense epistemology principles claim that appearance states provide only prima facie justification.
I will follow Dougherty in focusing on Michael Huemer’s Phenomenal Conservatism (PC) and will take it as an epistemic principle representative of common sense epistemology.\(^4\) Huemer’s claim is that seemings\(^5\) provide *prima facie* justification for what seems true. More formally,

**PC:** If it seems to \(S\) as if \(P\), then \(S\) thereby has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that \(P\).\(^6\)

We can also add to PC the claim that the stronger the seeming, the greater the *prima facie* justification provided for the proposition that seems true. This further claim will allow us to distinguish between various degrees of justification that an individual has for believing different propositions which come from seemings.\(^7\)

**What Is Skeptical Theism?**

Evidential arguments from evil typically claim that the evidence regarding the existence of evil in the world supports the denial of God’s existence, at least as God is traditionally understood. William Rowe has notably given the following version of the argument:

1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

2. An omnipotent, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.

Therefore,

3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being.\(^8\)

The term ‘skeptical theism’ refers to a family of defenses to such an argument that has become increasingly popular in the contemporary debate.\(^9\)


\(^5\)While perceptual seemings are a kind of seeming, Huemer does not intend for his thesis to be limited to perceptual seemings. Heumer also gives non-perceptual examples of seemings such as memorial seemings and rational insights or intuitions. See Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, 99–100.

\(^6\)Ibid., 99.

\(^7\)Dougherty also fills out PC in this way. See Dougherty, “Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism,” 174.


\(^9\)William Alston, Michael Bergmann, Daniel Howard-Snyder, Alvin Plantinga, and Stephen Wykstra are examples of contemporary defenders of skeptical theism.
What is common to defenses in this family is that they are skeptical about whether we can be justified in believing (I), at least once we have appreciated human cognitive limitations. If the skeptical theist is correct, then the first premise of Rowe’s argument is left unmotivated and the rationality of theistic belief is defended.

Members of this family of defenses can differ as to why (I) is left unmotivated, but reference to human cognitive limitations is essential to this defense. Paul Draper, for instance, formulates the skeptical theist thesis as follows:

ST1: Humans are in no position to judge directly that an omnipotent and omniscient being would be unlikely to have a morally sufficient reason to permit the evils we find in the world.\(^{10}\)

While skeptical theists claim that ST1, or something similar, leaves premise (I) unjustified, they can differ as to how ST1 accomplishes this task. Justificatory Skeptical Theism (JST) maintains that the mere truth of ST1 has the consequence that we cannot gain even prima facie justification for believing that a certain evil is gratuitous. In contrast, Defeater Skeptical Theism (DST) claims that while we might be able to become prima facie justified in believing (I) even if ST1 is true, ST1 can in some way defeat this justification.\(^{11}\) DST can further be divided into species depending upon the kind of defeater ST1 is taken to be. Normative defeaters are propositions that render the subject less justified in believing some proposition when one is justified in believing them (regardless of whether they are true or believed). Doxastic defeaters are propositions that render the subject less justified in believing some proposition when one believes them (regardless of whether they are true or one is justified in believing them).\(^{12}\)

Accordingly, Normative Defeater Skeptical Theism (NDST) claims that ST1 has its defeating power when one is justified in believing ST1—that ST1 is effective as a normative defeater. In contrast, Doxastic Defeater Skeptical

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\(^{11}\)One’s prima facie justification for believing (I) has typically been thought to come from one’s inability to think of any justifying reasons for all of the world’s evils. However, as we will see, common sense epistemology provides an alternate route of justifying an individual in believing (I). According to skeptical theism, ST1 in some way defeats the prima facie justification one gains for believing (I) on the basis of such evidence.

\(^{12}\)So, these defeaters are distinguished by their possession conditions. Normative defeaters are possessed when one is on balance justified in believing that the proposition is true, whereas doxastic defeaters are possessed simply in virtue of being believed. My distinctions here parallel those of Jennifer Lackey, “Non-reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony,” Nous 37 (2003): 706–723. These first two types of defeaters are propositions which, when possessed, reduce the on-balance justification one has for believing a proposition. There is also a third category of defeaters, namely factual defeaters. These defeaters are true propositions that prevent an on balance justified belief from being an item of knowledge. I ignore this third category since my focus is on justification, not knowledge. For more on factual defeaters see Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxon, “Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief,” Journal of Philosophy 66 (1969): 225–237; Peter Klein, “Knowledge, Causality, and Defeasibility,” Journal of Philosophy 73 (1976): 792–812.
Theism (DDST) claims that ST1 can perform this defeating task simply by being believed—that ST1 is effective as a doxastic defeater. My interest in this paper is showing that there is no tension between skeptical theism and common sense epistemology, at least provided that skeptical theism is understood as NDST.

What Is the Problem?

Suppose that PC is correct. If so, then any individual to whom it seems that there are gratuitous evils in the world will be prima facie justified in believing that there are gratuitous evils in the world. By a ‘gratuitous evil’ I mean the kind of evil referenced in the first premise of Rowe’s argument. Plausibly, it seems to many that there are gratuitous evils. So, given the truth of PC, such individuals are prima facie justified in believing that there are gratuitous evils, and are thus prima facie justified in accepting (1). Since the skeptical theist’s project was to block one’s justification for accepting this premise, it is here that the tension between skeptical theism and common sense epistemology arises.

In particular, Dougherty finds a problem for the common sense epistemologist who wants to be a skeptical theist due to both the power and the persistence of the relevant seeming. First, Dougherty notes that the appearance of the existence of gratuitous evil in our world is powerful—it very strongly seems to many that there are gratuitous evils in the world. Second, Dougherty notes that the appearance of the existence of gratuitous evils does not simply disappear once one considers one’s own cognitive limitations. He claims, “[f]or those for whom horrendous evils appear obviously gratuitous, it is highly unlikely that reminding them that they are finite and fallible is going to erase the strong impression, horror even, at apparently gratuitous evils.”

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13 Combinations of these views are possible as well. For instance, there can be versions of skeptical theism which allow for ST1 to act as a normative or doxastic defeater.

14 Although I will not examine in detail the relationship between PC and JST, I will briefly note why PC does make JST implausible (see note 16). I will also not be considering whether PC makes DDST implausible in the body of the paper. There are two reasons for this. First, if there are doxastic defeaters, then the DDST response will work for roughly the same reason that the NDST response will work. I will note these parallels in the notes. Second, I do not think that there are any doxastic defeaters. For more on the inability of mere beliefs (i.e., unjustified beliefs) to defeat one’s propositional justification, see James Pryor, “What’s Wrong With Moore’s Argument?” Philosophical Issues 14 (2004): 349–378.

15 More formally, we can understand a gratuitous evil as follows:

An event E is a gratuitous evil just in case (i) E is an evil, (ii) there is no greater good G which requires E or an equally bad evil, and which justifies E.

16 It should be readily apparent that this consequence of PC is incompatible with JST. The conjunction of PC and the (contingent) empirical facts of certain seeming states entails that individuals who experience such seeming states are prima facie justified in believing (1). JST claimed that the mere truth of ST1 had the consequence that no one is even prima facie justified in believing (1) on such grounds. Thus, there does appear to be an incompatibility between these two claims—either PC or JST has to go.

17 Dougherty, “Epistemological Considerations Concerning Skeptical Theism,” 175.
The power and persistence of such a seeming is problematic, according to Dougherty, since “for the skeptical theist to provide a defeater for our hypothetical individual the skeptical theist’s considerations will have to wipe away the initial appearance of gratuity or else those considerations will have to have to generate a stronger appearance of truth” and “[i]t’s hard to see how there could be any general considerations that could do that.”

Here is where I depart from Dougherty. Dougherty has saddled the skeptical theist with a burden she need not bear. To see why this is so, it will be helpful to turn our discourse again to defeaters.

**Defeaters Distinguished**

Roughly, defeaters mitigate the justificatory effect of bits of evidence. Their defeating effect can be either partial or full. It will be partial when the target proposition remains on balance justified, but becomes less on balance justified than it was previously, and it will be full when the target proposition is rendered on balance unjustified by the defeater. Defeaters are also distinguished by how they go about their defeating task. Rebutting defeaters defeat one’s justification for $p$ by way of supplying evidence against $p$, whereas undercutting defeaters defeat one’s justification for $p$ without providing evidence against $p$. Undercutting defeaters typically accomplish their task by attacking the connection between some bit of evidence and $p$. For a rebutting defeater to be a full defeater, it must provide as much support against $p$ as the original evidence gave for $p$. However, an undercutting defeater does not need to be as justified as the proposition whose justificatory effect it is defeating in order for it to be a full defeater. An undercutting defeater will be partial when one remains on balance justified in believing that there is an epistemic support relation between one’s evidence and the target proposition, though that relation is less strong than had been supposed. An undercutting defeater will be full when

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18Ibid.


20That is, an undercutting defeater can be a full defeater even when the on-balance justification that one has for it is less than the on-balance justification one would have otherwise had for the proposition whose justificatory status is being undercut. For instance, a proposition enjoying $.8$ on-balance justification could be fully defeated by an undercutting defeater which comes to enjoy only $.7$ on-balance justification. The undercutting defeater must be on balance justified, but it can still be a full defeater when its level of on-balance justification is less than the level of on-balance justification one would have had for the target proposition absent the defeater.

21This could happen in two ways. First, the defeater could claim that though the evidence in fact supports $p$, it supports $p$ less than had been supposed. Second, the defeater could claim that there is no support relation between the evidence and $p$, but have the *prima facie* justification for it (the defeater proposition) be defeated by the *prima facie* justification for believing there is such a support relation between the evidence and $p$. In this latter case, the (partial) undercutting defeater for $S$’s *prima facie* justification for believing $p$ is a defeated rebutting defeater for the claim that there is a support relation between $S$’s evidence and $p$. Nevertheless, it is a partial undercutting defeater for the *prima facie* justification given to $p$ from $S$’s evidence supporting $p$ since it makes $S$ less justified in believing $p$ than $S$ other-
one is on balance justified in believing that the epistemic support relation between one’s evidence and the target proposition is lacking altogether.

For instance, suppose that it seems to Smith that the table in front of him is red. According to PC, this provides Smith with *prima facie* justification for believing that the table in front of him is red. Suppose further that Smith has a memorial seeming that he put on red tinted glasses that make everything look red. On its own, this seeming is not evidence for or against the proposition that the table that Smith is looking at is red. However, this bit of evidence does give Smith a normative defeater that fully undercuts the support that Smith enjoyed for the proposition that the table in front of him is red on the basis of its seeming red. Upon having this memorial seeming Smith is no longer justified in believing that the table in front of him is red (at least not on the basis of its seeming red).\(^22\)

We can summarize this story as follows:

S1: it seeming to Smith that the table is red

S2: it seeming to Smith that he is wearing red tinted glasses

C1: the table is red.

S2 gives Smith *prima facie* justification for believing that he is wearing red tinted glasses and this gives Smith an undercutting defeater for the support that S1 gave to C1 for Smith. Assuming that the justification Smith has for believing the content of S2 is not itself defeated, and the only justification Smith had for believing C1 came from S1, Smith is no longer on balance justified in believing C1.\(^23\) For this defeater to be partial, it would have to claim that the support relation between S1 and C1 still existed but was simply weaker than had been supposed or the defeater itself would have to be defeated.\(^24\) However, in our case, the undercutting defeater would have been without S gaining any evidence against p. It is also worth noting that in this latter case, the undercutting defeater would have been full had it not itself been defeated. For more of such cases of defeat see my, “Conciliatory Views of Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence,” *Episteme* 6.3 (2009): 269–279.

\(^22\)This is not to say that Smith does not have *prima facie* justification for believing that the table is red. Smith *does* have such *prima facie* justification by way of it seeming to him that the table is red. However, this *prima facie* justification has been fully defeated for Smith, so Smith is not on balance justified in believing that the table is red.

\(^23\)The parallel case which would be relevant for the DDST would have S2 be Smith’s belief that he is wearing red tinted glasses (whether or not this belief is supported by Smith’s evidence), and that this belief (even if unjustified) would, if undefeated, provide a full undercutting defeater for S1’s support of C1.

\(^24\)For instance, Smith could gain a partial undercutting defeater for S1’s support for C1 by becoming on balance justified in believing that his color perception, though reliable, is less reliable than that of most, or that it was unlikely, though more likely than he had supposed, that there was a red light shining on the table. Upon becoming on balance justified in believing either of these propositions, Smith would continue to be on balance justified in believing that the table in front of him was red, but would be less justified in so believing than he was before he became justified in believing one of these defeaters. Alternatively, Smith could gain a partial undercutting defeater for S1’s support for C1 by becoming *prima facie* justified in believing that there is no support relation between S1 and C1, where this *prima facie* justification is outweighed by Smith’s evidence that there is a support relation between S1 and
completely undermines the support relation between S1 and C1, and as such, if it is itself undefeated it is a full undercutting defeater.

Let us pause and examine what it took for S2 to justify Smith in believing a full undercutting defeater of S1’s support for C1. It will be important to consider both the power and persistence of the relevant seemings. Let us suppose that the perceptual seeming S1 is a much stronger seeming than the memorial seeming S2. Suppose the table strikes Smith as being red very forcefully, and much more forcefully than it seems to Smith that he put on red tinted glasses. Nonetheless, if it does seem to Smith that he put on red tinted glasses, and the prima facie justification provided by this seeming is itself undefeated, then Smith is not on balance justified in believing that the table in front of him is red on the basis of its seeming red. Importantly, S2 need not be as strong a seeming as S1 to accomplish this defeating task. Our story shows us that an undercutting defeater can be full even when one’s on-balance justification for believing the defeater is comparatively weaker than the original on-balance justification one had for the target proposition. In fact, it seems that no matter how much stronger of a seeming state S1 is in comparison to S2, S2 would still give Smith prima facie justification for believing that he is wearing red tinted glasses, which if undefeated would give Smith a full undercutting defeater for the justification that Smith has for C1 by way of S1.

Now, let us suppose that even after it seems to Smith that he put on red tinted glasses, it still seems to Smith that the table is red. Here we are supposing that the seeming state S1 is persistent. We might imagine Smith saying, “that table sure seems red” even after exclaiming “I put on glasses that make everything look red.” However, even though its seeming to Smith that the table is red ontologically survives the defeater, this does not show that Smith is still on balance justified in believing C1. According to our story, it seems to Smith that he put on glasses that make non-red objects look red, and it also still seems to Smith that the table in front of him is red. It would be a mistake to claim that Smith should believe that the table is red since it still seems to him to be red. This is so, because it also seems to him that its seeming to be red is not evidence of it being red. If the prima facie justification provided by S2 is undefeated, then S2 has its epistemological effect even if S1 ontologically survives S2. So neither the power nor the persistence of a seeming state indicates that the prima facie justification it provides for believing its content has not been fully defeated.

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C1. If the prima facie justification for believing that there is no support relation made Smith on balance less justified in believing that S1 supports C1 (though he is still on balance justified in believing this), then Smith would be on balance justified in believing p on the basis of S1, though less so than Smith would have been without having the undercutting defeater.

25Were the relevant defeater a rebutting defeater, then for it to also be a full defeater, the seeming state S2 would have to be at least as strong as S1. However, when the relevant defeater is an undercutting defeater, this is not so. In fact S2 can be much weaker than S1 yet still have a full defeating effect.

26One might worry at this point that if this is so, then PC no longer provides a response to the skeptic. If the power or persistence of its seeming to me that I have hands does not
Returning our discussion to the compatibility of skeptical theism and common sense epistemology, we can make use of these features of defeaters. Recall that Dougherty claimed that the tension between skeptical theism and common sense epistemology arose since the seeming that there are gratuitous evils was both powerful and persistent. However, as we have seen, neither of these features of a seeming state shows that its justificatory impact has not been fully defeated.

These findings are applicable to our problem since the skeptical theist can claim that the seeming truth of ST1 provides one with a full undercutting defeater for the *prima facie* justification provided by its seeming that there are gratuitous evils in the world. We can draw an analogy between the skeptical theist’s claims and our story of Smith as follows:

- **S1**: it seeming to S that there are gratuitous evils in the world.
- **S2**: it seeming to S that ST1 is true.
- **C1**: there are gratuitous evils in the world.

So, for the same reasons that the story of Smith was compatible with PC, NDST is compatible with PC. It may be that S1 provides S with *prima facie* justification for C1, and it might be that S1 is a much stronger seeming state than S2, and it may be that S1 persists even after S experiences S2. However, as we have seen, neither the power nor the persistence of S1 is a reason to doubt that S2 on balance justifies S in believing a full undercutting defeater for the support S1 gives to C1 for S. Rather, it seems that if the *prima facie* justification S gets from S2 is itself undefeated, and S1 is the only evidence S has for C1, then S is no longer justified in believing C1 upon experiencing S2.27 As we have seen, this is so regardless of how render my *prima facie* justification for believing that I have hands immune from defeat, then how is the rationality of my external world beliefs to remain in place in the face of skeptical challenges? However, the PC response to the external world skeptic does not rely on either the power or the persistence of its seeming to us that the external world is a certain way. According to PC, the external world skeptic fails to render our beliefs about the external world unjustified since she fails to provide us with *any positive reason* to think that her skeptical hypothesis is true or that we are in fact mistaken. The external world skeptic offers only the mere possible truth of her skeptical hypotheses in an attempt to demonstrate that we lack knowledge about the external world. Huemer explicitly notes that were the external world skeptic to produce evidence that we are radically deceived brains-in-vats (or that some other skeptical hypothesis were true), then our *prima facie* justification for our external world beliefs would be undercut. So, everything that has been said here is consistent with the common sense epistemologist’s response to skepticism. See Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, 183.

27Better still, this result is achieved so long as all of S’s *prima facie* justification for C1 would be undercut by S2, whether or not that evidence is composed entirely of S1. For instance, S2 would also fully undercut one’s justification for believing (I) which could come from one’s inability to find justifying reasons for every evil (Rowe’s favored route of motivating this premise). Even if an inability to find justifying reasons for every evil provides *prima facie* justification for believing (I), if one is also on balance justified in believing ST1, then for similar reasons such support for (I) would also be fully undercut by ST1. In this
much stronger of a seeming state S1’ is in comparison to S2’ and whether S1’ ontologically survives S2’. This undercutting defeater is not merely partial when it is itself undefeated since it is not claiming that S1’ provides some support, though less than had been supposed, for C1’. Rather, when S is on balance justified in believing ST1, it is a full undercutting defeater for the support S1’ gave to C1’ for S since it completely undermines the support that S’ gives for C1’.

**Conclusion**

So, common sense epistemology does not entail the implausibility of NDST. Though the seeming state that there are gratuitous evils in the world may be both powerful and persistent, this does not show that the support it gives to (1) cannot be fully undercut by the seeming truth of skeptical theism. In fact, common sense epistemology seems to make plausible, and even support, the NDST understanding of skeptical theism.\(^{28}\)

\[^{28}\]There remains the question of how common the relevant seeming state is (e.g., seeming states like S2’). NDST, unlike JST, is effective in defending the rationality of theistic belief only for those who are on balance justified in believing ST1, or something similar. So, to the extent that individuals are not currently on balance justified in believing ST1, common sense epistemology saddles the skeptical theist apologist with the task of getting such individuals on balance justified in believing ST1.

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