

## BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

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**Trent Dougherty and Justin P. McBrayer (eds.): *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*. Oxford University Press 2014, 337pp.**

The problem of evil is a big topic in philosophy of religion, and skeptical theism is a big topic in the debate over the problem of evil. The problem of evil in general and skeptical theism in particular are especially hot research projects right now. This edited volume on skeptical theism is indeed timely.

The problem of evil is a problem of understanding how a perfectly good God could allow for the existence, quantity or quality of evil. The usual reply has been in terms of theodicy: proposing God's reasons for allowing evils. Skeptical theism instead invokes our cognitive limitations to defuse the problem. *Very roughly*: we should not expect — or, at least, cannot tell whether we should expect — to understand the reasons an infinite being would have for allowing evils. Slightly more precisely, the problem could be framed as the following atheistic argument: There are evils God has no reason for permitting; if God exists, then there would be no such gratuitous evils; therefore, God does not exist. The first premise has been supported by a 'noseeum' inference: We have not discovered such reasons; therefore, there probably are none. Skeptical theism could then be framed as questioning the noseeum inference: given the cognitive gulf between us, God might very well have reasons we have not discovered.

But things are not nearly so simple: skeptical theism can be qualified in various ways, supported in various ways, and challenged in various ways. That work is the substance of this volume. Indeed, as it turns out, there are quite different ways of framing skeptical theism and its target.

Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer have brought together new essays from preeminent contributors on the topic as well as newer lights. There are 22 contributions in total. The contributions are uniformly original and in-

sightful. Some are groundbreaking. The volume is comprehensive and balanced. It does not advertise itself as a 'debate book', along the lines of some popular series. But much of the volume consists in debates between the contributors. While most of the chapters can be read independently, the volume as a whole has an excellent synergy.

It has four parts. There is no real introduction. There is an analytic table of contents with chapter abstracts, but these are hard. However, so long as they have enough background in philosophy, readers new to the topic aren't thrown into the deep end; the chapters usually begin with the relevant basics.

Part 1 addresses various epistemological problems. It opens with a debate between Jonathan Matheson and Dougherty over the compatibility of phenomenal conservatism and skeptical theism. Very roughly, phenomenal conservatism states that things are probably as they appear to be. Should we then conclude, contrary to skeptical theism, that apparently unjustified evils are probably unjustified? Other general epistemological questions are taken up by the subsequent chapters by John DePoe, Chris Tucker, Todd Long, and E.J. Coffman. Part 1 concludes with a more theological chapter by Nick Trakakis exploring how Maximus the Confessor reconciles the apparently paradoxical emphasis on both dogma and humility within the Christian tradition.

Part 2 focuses on the epistemological principle of 'CORNEA' in particular. Very roughly, CORNEA states that our not having discovered something (such as God's reasons) is evidence for it not being there only if we would have expected to discover it were it there. Kenneth Boyce focuses on CORNEA to defuse the threat of skeptical theism turning into global skepticism: Might God have reasons we have not discovered to deceive us systematically about the external world? Next is a chapter by Michael Almeida carefully framing a couple of problems of evil, and disputing the relevance of skeptical theism as well as the scope of our cognitive limitations. This is followed by an extended exchange between Paul Draper, on the one hand, and Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wykstra, on the other, over the power of skeptical theism. Their disagreement is finally diagnosed by Lara Buchak.

Part 3 addresses theological problems with skeptical theism, and includes some of the most diverse contributions to the volume by J.L. Schellenberg, Michael Bergman, Wes Morriston, Erik Wielenberg, Andrew Cullison and Kevin Timpe. The chapters by Morriston and Cullison are among the most

impressive in the volume. Drawing upon Hume's insights about the mixture of goods and evils we discover, Morrision parodies skeptical theism with skeptical demonism to reject each. Skeptical demonism is the hypothesis that the world is run by a malicious demon with diabolical reasons we have not fathomed for allowing some goods. Curiously, in the final substantive footnote Morrision remarks that:

Plausible arguments for saying that an omnipotent and omniscience being must be perfectly benevolent are in short supply. But the following argument for rejecting demonism seems promising to me. Suppose it is necessarily true (all else equal) that one ought to promote the welfare of others. Then an *omniscient* being would know that this is so, and would (if we can assume a fairly modest version of moral internalism) have at least *some* inclination to promote the good of creatures. But a perfectly malicious demon would have no such inclination. It follows that the Demon (as defined above) does not exist (p. 234).

Does not the argument Morrision finds 'promising' make for just the sort of argument he finds in 'short supply'? Perhaps he means as much. But the argument seems to me to be the way skeptical theists much go against skeptical demonists. Contrary to an omnipotent an omniscient God, an omnipotent and omniscient demon is impossible. But a less than omnipotent and omniscient demons must be a more arbitrarily limited kind of being, and thus have a lower intrinsic probability than an omnipotent and omniscient God. The probability of theism — skeptical or not — on the mixture of goods and evils there are will then be higher than that of demonism — skeptical or not.

Cullison's chapter answers a theological problem developed in the previous chapter by Wielenberg: Just as God might have reasons we have not fathomed for allowing other evils, might he not have such reasons for deceiving us in religious contexts — when he makes promises or reveals religious truths? Cullison develops two ways for skeptical theists to avoid the problem, one of which is an original kind of skeptical theism that questions not whether there is reason for God to allow some evil but whether God might allow the evil even where there is no such reason.

Finally, part 4 addresses moral problems about skeptical theism. The first chapter by Stephen Maitzen is also among the best in the volume. The chapter develops the threat of moral paralysis posed by skeptical theism: If there are

reasons we have not fathomed for which God allows evil, might there not be such reasons favouring our not intervening to prevent evil either? The chapter engages with Daniel Howard-Snyder, who is given a right of reply. Howard-Snyder points out some misinterpretations, but I wonder whether Howard-Snyder properly interprets Maitzen: no evidence is provided that Maitzen relies on an implausible principle imputed to him (p. 303). The final chapter in the volume by Ted Poston addresses the threat skeptical theism poses for natural theology: If we're so much in the dark about God's reasons, can we invoke such reasons to show why God would bring certain phenomena about, and thus use such phenomena to confirm theism? Poston carefully frames a version of skeptical theism that allows for this.

I predict that some of the chapters will become classics in the literature on skeptical theism in particular and on the problem of evil in general. The chapters by Cullison, Maitzen and Morrison are at once accessible and powerful. The volume has only a general bibliography at the end, rather than a bibliography for each chapter. I presume that the anthologies will figure out a way to reprint the chapters with their individual bibliographies.

Reviewing such a volume is maddeningly frustrating. Given the number and intricacy of the contributions, I have no idea how to more informatively summarize the volume. Given the breadth and depth of the contributions, I have no big idea that was not addressed. So I will just conclude with simple endorsement. The volume will be of interest to anyone working on philosophy of religion in general and on the problem of evil in particular. Subsequent research on the problem of evil must take this volume into account. But it will interest those working beyond philosophy of religion too. Much of the debate about skeptical theism connects with topics in ethics and, especially, epistemology.