

Trent Dougherty and **Justin P. McBrayer**, eds. *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*. Oxford University Press 2014. 368 pp. \$120.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199661183); \$31.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780198757399).

A drop of cleaning agent falls into the centre of a bucket that is filled with oily water. The drop hits the surface; a ripple spreads outward. The solution laps against the rim. In a moment, the oil is gone; clear liquid remains.

There seems to be some kind of tension between God existing and having the attributes we normally take him to have and the existence of certain kinds of evils. Various arguments (falling under the collective banner of *The Problem of Evil*) seek to exploit this apparent tension. Here's one such argument:

1. There exist horrendous evils that God would have no justifying reason to permit.
2. God would not permit horrendous evil unless God had a justifying reason to permit it.
3. There is no God. (251)

One might think that horrendous evils of this sort are like the globs of oil in the bucket. If God were in the world, they wouldn't be—at least, not for long.

Why accept premise one? Because there are horrendous evils and it is hard to see how God could have any justifying reason to permit them. An inference: *if I can't see them, then they aren't there*. Skeptical theists typically reject such inferences. Opponents push back. Enter our debate.

This volume features twenty-three essays, all of which are new and all of which relate to skeptical theism in one way or another. The essays are fairly balanced between established and up and coming scholars. The volume comes equipped with a helpful 'analytic table of contents' that provides abstracts of each essay. There is no introduction and the preface is short and to the point; it does not feature any commentary. Fortunately, many of the essays respond (in one way or another) to other essays in the volume.

Skeptical Theism is divided into four parts. Graham Oppy (Review of *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews: An Electronic Journal*, 2014) has already written a nice review of this book so I shall limit my focus to those essays that his review does not address.

Part one includes an exchange between Jonathan Matheson and Trent Dougherty concerning whether skeptical theism is consistent with commonsense epistemology. Also included in part one is an exchange between Chris Tucker and Todd Long, as well as a chapter by E.J. Coffman in which Coffman replies to Tucker and Long. Concluding part one is a standalone chapter by N.N. Trakakis that discusses an apparent tension between two strong traditions in Christian thought: first, that we should be humble in a particular way; second, that we should be dogmatic in a particular way (it is a little unclear what these ways are supposed to be.)

It seems that the basic thought behind Trakakis' proposed resolution is this: the supposed tension arises from thinking about knowledge in a mistaken sort of way. We often think of

knowledge as something that we ‘earn’, but if we were to instead think of knowledge (or at least, knowledge of doctrinal truths) as something *given* to us, then it would become easier (Trakakis argues) to see how the two traditions might be reconciled. Trakakis: ‘knowledge of divine matters’ has a humbling effect on the knower—or at least, it ought to (99).

Setting aside worries about the proposed resolution, it is not clear that there is a real tension here. Nor is it obvious that we should be dogmatic in the way that Trakakis has in mind (whatever that is).

Part two of the book centres on CORNEA (the ‘Conditions of Reasonable Epistemic Access’ principle). It contains a nice exchange between Paul Draper, Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wykstra, and Lara Buchak. The arguments are somewhat complex and resist compression. Oppy devotes a considerable amount of space in his review to discussing the essays in this section, so I shall pass over part two without much comment—other than to point out that Buchak’s essay is of high quality.

The essays in part three are mostly standalone ones, but the chapters by Erik Wielenberg, Andrew Cullison, and Kevin Timpe are loosely connected. In his interesting essay, Wielenberg considers cases of divine deception. He argues that there is a weighty *prima facie* case against the following thesis (T): ‘God’s testimony that all who believe in Jesus will have eternal life provides recipients of that testimony with a knowledge-sufficient degree of warrant for the belief that all who believe in Jesus will have eternal life’ (236). Why? One reason, Wielenberg argues, is that there seem to be cases of divine deception in Scripture. For instance, in John 7:6-10, when Jesus is said to have told his followers that he will not attend the Festival of Booths, but then attends anyway (243).

Let us suppose that (T) is true. Moreover, suppose that (T) enjoys some kind of special status, such that, if (T) is false, Christianity rests on a mistake. If so, then it seems that Wielenberg’s argument generalizes to most (perhaps all) of the things that Christians are said to know as a result of divine revelation. But surely there are limits. Consider: ‘God is triune’, ‘You shall one day be resurrected’, or ‘Jesus is God’. It seems that these are not the sorts of things that God would deceive us about. This is because of their significance. So it seems that there is a relevant difference between deception in cases such as these, and deception in the case of, say, Jesus deceiving his followers about whether he would attend the Festival of Booths.

However, let us set aside that concern. In his essay ‘Two New Versions of Skeptical Theism’—perhaps one of the best chapters included in this volume—Andrew Cullison initially discusses a problem that others (e.g. Hud Hudson, ‘The Father of Lies?’ in *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion Volume 5* (ed. Jonathan Kvanvig), Oxford University Press, 2014, 117-32) have noted: namely, that (classical) skeptical theism threatens to ‘undermine *all reasoning* about what God will or won’t do’ (250, original emphasis). Suppose, for example, you were to think that God will keep his promises. But ‘if you embrace skeptical theism, you seem committed to being skeptical about whether or not God will keep promises... for all you know, God could have a reason to break his promise that is also beyond your ken’ (250). (Notice that the concern raised for Wielenberg’s argument seems less forceful in this case.) Cullison calls this the *Reasoning about God* problem.

Cullison argues that classical skeptical theism has, at its core, something like the following claim: 'For all I know, there are possible goods that outweigh the bads, and so I should be skeptical about the thesis that there are no goods that outweigh these bads' (256). He then motivates and defends a version of skeptical theism that features the following 'revised crucial claim': 'Evidence that some event E is an unjustified horrendous evil, is not evidence that no one (including possible normative superiors) has weightier evidence that E is not an unjustified horrendous evil' (256). (Roughly, a normative superior is a person who is superior to you in all matters both moral and epistemic.) The above claim, if true, would give 'us a reason to suspend judgement about the first premise of the problem of evil' (256). (That is, the version of the problem presented earlier in this review.) Moreover, Cullison argues, this first new version of skeptical theism (unlike its classical predecessor) does not succumb to the Reasoning about God problem.

Enter the second new version. This version gives us a reason to be skeptical about the *second* premise of the problem of evil. Putting a twist on an argument from Peter van Inwagen ('The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence', *Philosophical Perspectives* 5, 1999, 135-65), Cullison argues that we should be skeptical about the *denial* of the following claim: 'For any amount of pain and suffering which serves God's purposes there is some lesser amount of pain and suffering that would also serve God's purposes' (261).

If the above claim is true, then it 'seems that it would [be] permissible for God to simply pick a world and create it knowing that some of the evil in that world will be gratuitous' (261). It seems that proponents of the problem of evil must deny this claim; by remaining skeptical about its denial, theists can resist the argument. This second new version of skeptical theism (like the first version) also avoids the Reasoning about God problem, argues Cullison.

Concluding part three of this book is Kevin Timpe's essay, 'Trust, Silence, and Liturgical Acts', in which he considers the following problem for skeptical theists (which he calls the *Lack of Trust* problem): if skeptical theism 'were true and a satisfactory response to the evidential problem of evil, then it would undermine our trust in God' (266). Timpe seems to have in mind cases in which a person endorses skeptical theism. However, he never explains why endorsing skeptical theism might threaten to undermine a person's trust in God.

Nevertheless, let us assume that the Lack of Trust problem is a serious one. In response, Timpe argues that God provides many religious believers with certain resources (for example, access to the Eucharist) for maintaining their trust in God despite their inability to discern why God would allow particular evils to occur. Such resources, Timpe argues, allow such believers to maintain their trust in God despite their commitment to skeptical theism. Suppose this is true. It remains unclear why the Lack of Trust problem is supposed to be a special problem for skeptical theists. It seems that the same sort of worry would arise for many non-skeptical theists.

Finally, let us turn to part four. In 'Agnosticism, Skeptical Theism, and Moral Obligation', Stephen Maitzen responds to Daniel Howard-Snyder's influential essay 'Epistemic Humility, Arguments from Evil, and Moral Skepticism' (*Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion, Volume 2* (ed. Jonathan Kvanvig), Oxford University Press, 2009, 17-57). Originally, Howard-Snyder had considered and rejected an objection to a form of skeptical theism. According to this objection, skeptical theism (or at least, one version of it) leads to moral skepticism. In a nutshell: suppose that

a horrendous evil were to begin to unfold in front of us, and we could easily intervene to stop it. If we should be in doubt as to whether there is a reason that would justify God's non-intervention in this case, then it seems that, similarly, we should be in doubt about whether *we* should intervene. But it's false that we should be in doubt about whether we should intervene. So goes the objection (294).

Howard-Snyder's original response to the objection involved drawing a distinction between those moral theories that 'posit right- and wrong-making features of an act that should leave us in doubt about its moral status' (*Moral Inaccessibilist* theories) and those that 'posit right- and wrong-making features of an act that should *not* leave us in doubt about its moral status' (*Moral Accessibilist* theories) (294, emphasis added). Inaccessibilists will deny one premise of the argument; accessibilists the other premise. Thus, we are in a position to resist the objection (298).

Maitzen argues that Howard-Snyder's rejoinder fails; Howard-Snyder responds. Although Howard-Snyder's essay is of very high quality, there are some concerns about Maitzen's essay. Howard-Snyder notes a few serious misrepresentations. Here's one: '[Maitzen] says that, in the course of my argument, I distinguish consequentialist and non-consequentialist theories and he represents my argument as relying on that distinction (283)... I drew no such distinction, however; and my argument does not rely on it' (301, citation in original, formatting changed).

There is, of course, much more to be said about this chapter and the other chapters in this volume. (Unfortunately, I could not discuss all of them.) Skeptical theism seems to represent a promising way forward for the theist; I am happy to announce that many of the chapters in this volume advance the discussion in interesting ways. Some of those chapters will undoubtedly serve as useful seminar material for graduate or advanced undergraduate courses in philosophy of religion. I recommend this book to anyone interested in the topic of skeptical theism.

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