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BOOK REVIEWS

God and Inscrutable Evil: In Defense of Theism and Atheism by **David O'Connor**. Rowman and Littlefield, 1997. Pp. xiii and 273. \$63.00 (Cloth); 23.95 (Paper).

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In this book, David O'Connor carefully and fairly argues that both atheists and theists should recognize that each other's views on God's existence can be justified. His focus is inscrutable evil (evil for which we can discern no justification). He argues that the atheist's awareness of the existence of such evil lends support to her atheism and contributes to the justification of that view. Nevertheless, he thinks this same awareness on the part of the theist needn't make her theism irrational.

In explaining how this can be so, O'Connor identifies two frameworks within which to examine the argument for atheism from the existence of inscrutable evil. The first is the framework of what he calls 'the standard model'. According to this first framework, we are able "to compare, in terms of inscrutable evil, the condition of the actual world to how the world would be if God did not exist" and on the basis of such a comparison, draw a justified conclusion "as to which of the two sides has the stronger evidence and so the better of the argument about theism and inscrutable evil" (229). The second is the framework of what he calls 'skeptical theism'. According to it, our failure to discern any God-justifying reason for an evil does not provide evidence for thinking there is no God-justifying reason for that evil (185). Now, as I understand him, O'Connor suggests (230-31) that the reason both the atheist and theist can be justified in their beliefs and yet recognize that the other is also justified is this. Given the standard model one is justified in accepting atheism, while given the skeptical theist's framework one is justified in accepting theism, or at least inscrutable evil poses no threat to theistic belief that is otherwise justified. Unfortunately, there are no *decisive* considerations that are telling for both atheists and theists in support of either the standard model or the skeptical theist's framework. Recognition of these two points should, he thinks, lead to the *détente* he recommends.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part (chapters 2-8), he stays within the standard model. In that context, he proposes what he calls 'a reformed logical argument from evil'. His main purpose in presenting this argument is to show that the best currently available responses (those by Hasker, Plantinga, Schlesinger, Swinburne and van Inwagen) to arguments *like* his fail to successfully defend theism against his reformed logical argument. He then uses this failure as a premise in

what he calls 'an indirect empirical argument from evil'. That indirect argument goes like this: since theism is a theory that must be defended against an argument such as his reformed argument if it is to be justifiably believed and since the best available defenses fail, we have, in the context of the standard model, "good reason, if we are either agnostics or theists to begin with, to move toward atheism" (178).

Let's take a closer look at his reformed logical argument from evil. O'Connor divides evils into the following three kinds: moral evils, natural evils resulting from natural processes alone (NERNP) and natural evils *not* resulting from natural processes alone (NE~RNP). NE~RNP are evils to which free moral agents have contributed in nonmoral ways (e.g., accidentally knocking a cat off a high balcony and thereby terrifying and killing it). His reformed logical argument (10-12) can be outlined as follows:

1. There is *seeming* NERNP (above some level n).¹
2. *Seeming* NERNP (above level n) is gratuitous.²
3. Gratuitous evil is inconsistent with orthodox theism (OT).
4. Therefore, OT is false.³

O'Connor begins his defense of this argument by considering (in chapter 3) Hasker's and van Inwagen's objections to premise 3. His treatment of Hasker is excellent. But since Hasker tries to explain why there is a God-justifying *reason* for permitting gratuitous evil (i.e., evil for the permission of which there is no justifying reason) it isn't too surprising that O'Connor is able to identify errors in Hasker's argument. Van Inwagen does not attempt to identify a God-justifying reason for the existence of gratuitous evil. His point is that chance evil is compatible with the existence of God (chance evil is evil for which there is no reason at all and, hence, no God-justifying reason). But O'Connor takes van Inwagen to be conceding that although gratuitous evil and God are compatible, not just any amount of gratuitous evil is compatible with the existence of God. So O'Connor sidesteps van Inwagen's objection to premise 3 by reformulating it (and premise 2) to say:

- 2*. *Seeming* NERNP (above level n) is *too much* gratuitous or pointless evil.
- 3*. *Too much* gratuitous or pointless evil is inconsistent with OT.

With these revisions in place, O'Connor sets out (in chapter 4) to defend premise 2*. He first explains what he means by OT. OT is a theistic worldview according to which (among other things) God allows certain amounts of evil so that he can obtain the following good:

- G: having free creatures that can develop morally and spiritually into beings who can freely love and serve God (78).

Then O'Connor appeals to a point conceded by those who grant the plausibility of Plantinga's free will defense (86-88). The point is that

there is a possible world in which God is able to obtain G without permitting any *genuine* NERNP (i.e., a world in which all seeming NERNP is caused by Satan and his cohorts). This possibility doesn't show that God could have obtained G without permitting any *seeming* NERNP. But once you grant it, it is a short step to granting that it is possible for God to have obtained G without creating Satan (or any other free creature capable of being responsible for all *seeming* NERNP). This is exactly the possibility O'Connor draws to our attention later in the book when discussing Plantinga's defense (124-26). Thus, O'Connor relies on the above considerations to establish

P: God could have obtained G without permitting any *seeming* NERNP.

And from this he infers that

Q: *All* seeming NERNP is gratuitous.

For van Inwagen reasons, he allows that a certain amount of seeming NERNP may be consistent with OT. But seeming NERNP above some level *n* is *too much* gratuitous evil. This conclusion is his premise 2*.

What should we make of O'Connor's reformed logical argument? O'Connor claims to show that the *best available defenses* (Plantinga's, Schlesinger's and Swinburne's) fail when applied to this argument. But even before considering those defenses and O'Connor's reply to them, I think we can see that his reformed logical argument is seriously flawed. Let's grant him premises 1 and 3*. This still leaves premise 2*. And, unfortunately, it is pretty clear that O'Connor's defense of premise 2* doesn't work. For notice that in defending premise 2*, O'Connor made the inference from P to Q. From the fact that seeming NERNP is not necessary for achieving G, he concluded that such evil is gratuitous. But what if seeming NERNP is necessary for some *other* reason? What if the divine plan includes the securing of outweighing goods *other than G*, goods that can be secured only by allowing seeming NERNP above level *n*? In saying that the divine plan includes the securing of G, OT is not committed to saying that it includes the securing of no other goods. O'Connor takes himself to have identified a kind of evil that is incompatible with OT. But what he's shown (at best) is that seeming NERNP above level *n* is inconsistent with a version of OT that insists that the *only* reason God would allow such evil is to obtain G. And that is not a very widely held version of OT (I know of no one who endorses it).

In the remainder of part one (chapters 5-7) O'Connor considers how the defenses he mentions fare when applied to the reformed logical argument. I don't have much to say about his discussion of the Swinburne and Schlesinger defenses. What he says there seems eminently sensible. But his discussion of Plantinga in chapter 6 is the weakest part of the book. The reader's suspicions that there is trouble ahead are roused upon reading O'Connor's account of the property Plantinga calls 'transworld depravity'. Like many others, O'Connor seems to seri-

ously misunderstand what that property is.⁴ When he formulates it in his own words (122) he shows no sensitivity to the fact that counterfactuals are involved. And he says that Plantinga's claim is that it is possible that transworld depravity is an *essential* property of every creaturely essence with morally significant freedom. But Plantinga explicitly insists that he is claiming only that it is possible that it is an *accidental* property of all such essences.⁵ Furthermore, O'Connor takes Plantinga to be *denying* Mackie's claim that there is a possible world in which all free creatures always freely do what is right. But, again, Plantinga explicitly insists that he is granting that possibility.⁶ So O'Connor appears to have failed to appreciate the intricacies of Plantinga's free will defense. Fortunately, the bulk of his discussion of Plantinga does *not* depend on a correct understanding of the details of that defense.

However, the troubles in chapter 6 do not end there. It is in this chapter that O'Connor argues that there is a world (actualizable by God) that has no seeming NERNP and in which God secures the good G. The world in question is one in which God obtains G without permitting the existence of Satan or any other being capable of causing all seeming NERNP (125-26). This shows, says O'Connor, that a Plantinga-style defense does not succeed in defending the compatibility of seeming NERNP and OT. But a slight modification of Plantinga's free will defense (which, as O'Connor acknowledges, must be modified if it is to even *apply* to the reformed logical argument) will do the trick. Suppose that the outweighing good that God wants is not merely G but:

G*: having a *sufficient variety of kinds of* free creatures that can develop morally and spiritually into beings who can freely love and serve God.

And suppose that each creaturely essence with morally significant freedom is (contingently) transworld depraved.⁷ Then, assuming that having angelic beings of Satan's kind (or other beings capable of causing seeming NERNP) is entailed by G*, we can say that O'Connor's reformed argument succumbs to a Plantinga-like defense. For, given the above suppositions, in order to obtain G* God had to make a transworld depraved being capable of being morally responsible for seeming NERNP. O'Connor has done nothing to show that this isn't so - that God could secure G* without allowing for seeming NERNP. And it is no part of OT to deny that G* is one of the goods God wanted to obtain.

But there is no need for the theist to identify a good like G* in order to resist O'Connor's arguments. It is enough for the defender of OT to point out, as I did earlier, that O'Connor has done nothing to show that *every* outweighing good that God thinks is worth securing can be secured in a world in which he permits no seeming NERNP. But this is what O'Connor would have to do if he is interested in attacking the most plausible versions of OT (since they don't claim that G is the *only* good that God seeks to obtain by permitting evil). Thus, it looks like the two main arguments of part one - the reformed logical argument and the indirect empirical argument which relied on its success - fail. And

this isn't a problem that can easily be avoided. As far as I can tell, it can be avoided only by focusing on versions of OT that claim to give an *exhaustive* list of the outweighing goods that provide God with reasons for allowing evil (O'Connor himself seems to focus on a version of OT whose purportedly exhaustive list contains only G). But the problem is that almost no one endorses such versions of OT.⁸

Let's turn now to part two of the book (chapters 9-11). Here he considers the problem of evil within the skeptical theist's framework. According to the skeptical theist, our failure to discern a God-justifying reason for the evil we observe (e.g. seeming NERNP) provides *no compelling reason* for thinking there is no God-justifying reason for such evil. As I understand the thread of O'Connor's argument in these chapters, he first makes an important concession to the skeptical theist. In making this concession, he is conceding that theism can be rational even for well-informed believers. Then he identifies some considerations that he thinks make it reasonable for the atheist to reject the skeptical theist's framework and to stick with the framework of the standard model instead. Given that these considerations can be rationally compelling for the atheist without being rationally compelling for the theist, he arrives at his conclusion that both theism and atheism can be justified. I will argue that the considerations that, according to O'Connor, support a rejection of the skeptical theist's framework do not in fact support such a rejection. Given the concession O'Connor makes to the skeptical theist it appears that atheists and theists alike have every reason to endorse the main ingredients of the skeptical theist's framework (which doesn't include theism itself).

What is the concession that O'Connor makes to the skeptical theist? He recognizes our limitations when it comes to discerning the sorts of reasons God might have for doing what he does. Thus, he concedes (208) that

R: We have no good reason to expect that if OT were true we would be able to discern God-justifying reasons for the evils that are permitted.⁹

I think this concession is extremely plausible. I also think it provides decisive support for the skeptical theist's framework (though not for theism itself).

Let's consider the various considerations that O'Connor says count against the skeptical theist's framework. First, there is the problem of divine silence. It is one thing, says O'Connor (208-9), to acknowledge that it is *not* reasonable to expect to be able to discern God's reasons for allowing the evil we see. But, given that God is like a loving parent, it is reasonable, assuming OT, to expect that God will somehow communicate to us (i) that despite the fact that we can't discern his reasons for allowing the evils we see, there are reasons and (ii) that he still loves and cares for us.

The thing to recognize here is that the problematic consequences of divine silence in the face of inscrutable evil are just further instances of

inscrutable evil. It is certainly possible that God has a reason not only for allowing some inscrutable evil but also for refraining from giving us the assurances of his love that O'Connor thinks we should reasonably expect. The question we need to ask ourselves is this: If there were God-justifying reasons for divine silence in the face of inscrutable evils, is it reasonable to expect that we would be able to discern what those reasons are? It seems to me that once again we should recognize that we have no good reason at all for expecting such discernment on our part. Thus, the sensible theistic response to the problem of divine silence is simply to point out that it is just another example of inscrutable evil and then to appeal to R (the plausibility of which O'Connor has already conceded).

O'Connor goes on to mention (219-22) two hidden costs of the skeptical theist's position. One is that the skeptical theist will need to be even-handed in her skepticism. O'Connor's prediction is that this even-handedness will result in "a serious curtailment of traditionally significant intellectual dimensions of theism" (220). After all, some access to divine intentions is required in order to pursue parts of natural theology, moral theology and perhaps even philosophical psychology and anthropology. The main thrust of this point can and should be conceded to O'Connor *with qualification*. For the fact that we can't discern God-justifying reasons *if he hasn't revealed them to us* doesn't in the least require a skepticism about our ability to discern what God *has* revealed to us. And while one should be even-handed in one's skepticism, it isn't obvious in advance exactly what things even-handedness will require one to be skeptical about in the other arenas O'Connor mentions. So although there may well be limitations to these traditional intellectual pursuits by theists, it isn't at all clear that even-handed skepticism will result in a "serious curtailment" of them.

The other cost he mentions is that skeptical theism prevents us from calling theism an empirical theory (221). I take the point here to be that insofar as one rejects the standard model, one is rejecting theistic evidentialism. But there is a strong and growing tradition in contemporary philosophy of religion that aligns itself with what has come to be called 'Reformed Epistemology'. And one of the main theses of this tradition is that we should reject evidentialism (a rejection which, contrary to popular belief, doesn't require opposition to the goal of finding good theistic arguments). So, for many theists, this supposed cost isn't a cost at all. And in any case, it's hard to see how it is sensible, in response to this supposed cost, to reject R. R seems eminently plausible and if it leads us away from evidentialism, so much the worse for evidentialism.

The final consideration O'Connor mentions as one that makes it rational for the atheist to reject the skeptical theist's framework is that the standard model has a far better "fit with our initial (strong) intuition that those facts of evil for which we can discern no God-justifying reason count heavily against OT" (231). But why can't the atheist, in light of the extreme plausibility of R, simply recognize that although this intuition is strong it is mistaken? After all, the strength of this intuition seems to depend almost entirely on the assumption that if there were God-justify-

ing reasons for the evils we observe, we would be able to discern what those reasons are. And that assumption, as tempting as it is for both theists and atheists alike, is mistaken insofar as it conflicts with R.

In sum, although I applaud O'Connor's forthrightness in recognizing the plausibility of R for both the theist and the atheist alike as well as his efforts at establishing a *détente* between theists and atheists writing in the philosophy of religion, I don't think he identifies an adequate reason for the atheist to reject R. And by failing to do that, he fails to achieve one of the goals he sets for himself in part two of the book (that of showing that the atheist can rationally reject the skeptical theist's framework).

God and Inscrutable Evil is a very important contribution to the current discussion of the problem of evil. Despite the fact that I find O'Connor's defense (in part two) of the atheist's rejection of the skeptical theist's framework unconvincing and that I think the two main arguments in part one are fatally flawed, I highly recommend the book. It is eminently fair, quite comprehensive and, for the most part, very insightful in its arguments and criticisms.¹⁰

NOTES

1. Seeming NERNP may or may not be genuine NERNP.
2. Gratuitous evil is evil *the permission of which* isn't necessary for achieving some greater good or preventing some worse evil.
3. When O'Connor presents his argument, he speaks only of NERNP, not *seeming* NERNP. But later (e.g. 133), he refers to seeming natural evil that is caused with evil intent by free moral agents like Satan as NERNP. So we are forced to either (i) redefine NERNP (as "evil that is *either* natural evil resulting from natural processes alone *or* seeming natural evil that is in fact moral evil intentionally caused by nonhuman free moral agents") or (ii) formulate the argument in terms of seeming NERNP. I've chosen the latter option since evil intentionally caused by a creature like Satan seems more appropriately referred to as moral evil than as natural evil of a certain kind.
4. See my "Might-Counterfactuals, Transworld Untrustworthiness and Plantinga's Free Will Defense", *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 336-51, section 4 where I mention other examples of this sort of confusion.
5. See *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 188.
6. See his "Self-Profile", *Alvin Plantinga*, James Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, eds. (Dordrecht: D. Reidel: 1985), p. 47.
7. See *The Nature of Necessity* p. 188 for Plantinga's definition of transworld depravity.
8. Perhaps O'Connor thinks that, according to the standard model, OT is *committed* to identifying some exhaustive list of the goods that provide God with reasons for permitting evil (perhaps even a list containing only G). But if *that's* what the standard model entails, then it is relevant only to versions of OT that hardly anyone endorses - the standard model just isn't applicable to discussions of any widely held version of OT. This sort of consideration raises doubts about how standard the standard model is.
9. There are (as William Rowe reminds me) at least two possible readings of R. On the first reading, 'discern' means *discern on our own*; on the second it means *discern on our own or with the aid of divine intervention*. In what follows, I proceed on the assumption that O'Connor accepts R on both

readings. I, like O'Connor (as I understand him), think R is extremely plausible on both readings. However, there are those who find R plausible on the first reading but not on the second. I don't have the space here to defend the plausibility of R on the second reading. Let me just say that to reject R on that second reading, it seems one would need a reason to think there is no good that (a) includes the *permission* of all inscrutable evil but doesn't include divine intervention of the kind that would make it possible for us to discern reasons for the permission of such evils and (b) is greater than any other obtainable good that doesn't include such things or other things as bad. But we don't have a reason to think there is no good like this. Our inability to identify such a good certainly doesn't provide us with such a reason.

10. My thanks to Dan Howard-Snyder, Bill Rowe and Linda Zagzebski for their comments on earlier drafts.

Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy by **Jennifer A. Herdt**. Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xiv and 300. Cloth \$59.95

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Jennifer Herdt's fascinating book is a study of the concept of sympathy in Hume's moral philosophy. So why this title? What makes Herdt's discussion unique is that she examines this central notion in Hume's moral theory in the context of religion and its divisive effect on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century society. Her thesis is that when Hume's moral theory is studied within the tradition of natural law from which it is descended, it becomes evident that Hume replaces divine revelation in previous moral frameworks with the workings of natural sympathy. Generally, the argumentation of this book is historical; that is, Herdt defends various claims concerning the philosophical development of Hume's moral philosophy by appealing to the ideas and current events to which he is reacting. Herdt's interpretation appeals to a breadth of Hume's writings, including the critical essays and *The History of England*. Consequently, readers should not come here looking for an analytic study of the arguments in Hume's ethics; rather, they should expect an interpretation in a broad, historically-informed setting. At the same time, Herdt's discussion leads to some interesting claims about the content of Hume's moral theory that I will later address here.

The purpose of Herdt's plan is clear: She wants to reject the approach to Hume that has mainly seen him as concerned with epistemology, and substitute for it an interpretation that sees Hume as concerned in his work with achieving a social outcome—namely, peace and prosperity. Then, she claims, Hume's political essays and the *History* form a unified corpus with his other very famous works (Preface, xiii). Herdt explains that her book, to which it is well worth devoting some time, is designed to defend eight claims.

(1) Hume's project is best understood in the context of natural law, but it is more radical than the other natural law theorists. They purport