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Book Review: The Triumph Of God Over Evil: Theodicy For A World Of Suffering

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Triumph of God over Evil: Theodicy for a World of Suffering, by William Hasker. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008. Pp. 225. \$20 (paper)

Problems of Evil and the Power of God, by James A. Keller. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2007. 176 pp. \$100 (Cloth)

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One might slightly revise an ancient saying: of the writing of books on the problem of evil there is no end. The two books under review exemplify this contention, each well done, each adopting a different critical stance: one defending a mostly traditional theistic theodicy, the other critiquing such and replacing it with a Process Theology view.

Writing in his typically lucid style, William Hasker develops his view of the reasons God may have for permitting pain and suffering (evil). He sets his agenda by reiterating traditional distinctions between defenses and theodicies (he is writing a theodicy), the philosophical and existential problems of evil (he is addressing the philosophical problem), and classical and open theism (he is an open theist, according to which God is temporal, unchanging in God's nature and character but in dynamic relation with the world, profoundly affected by events, and omniscient in a way that is consistent with God's ignorance of the future free acts of agents).

Hasker develops what may be termed a standard free will defense/theodicy. In chapter 3 he endorses Plantinga's free will defense against the deductive argument from evil, with the caveat of avoiding the middle knowledge component of Plantinga's argument. In chapter 4 he responds to the objection that God did not create the best of all possible worlds by reiterating Adams's (and others') contention that the requirement that God create the best of all possible worlds entails the logically impossible, since for any world God chose to create, there could be a greater one. Rowe's contention that for any world God created God had to create a better one in order to protect his moral goodness is plainly inconsistent with the notion of what is logically possible. Hasker also endorses Morris's contention that the goods of alternative possible worlds are incommensurable. From his open theism, he stresses that God's choice was for



a “broad world type” rather than for prearranged or specific scenarios, so that what devolves is a surprise (and risk) to us and to God.

In chapter 5 Hasker develops a theodicy for natural evil. He brings together the contention that it is good that there is a world, complex and evolving, with the view that it provides creaturely autonomy for sentient beings. This scenario means that natural evil will be not only possible but inevitable. One objection to this scenario is that we can imagine a natural world with different laws that will result in less evil. Hasker rejects this; we might think that we can imagine such, but whether this conception is coherent and the conceived natural world would actually result in less evil is far beyond our ken. Indeed, the information on the fine tuning our universe required for sentient life suggests that other world systems with natural constants that have sentient creatures are quite unlikely. But, one might ask, what about Heaven? Here Hasker resorts to the skeptical response that we really don’t know enough about what Heaven might be like to use this as an objection or to construct a response to it. We are left merely to “idle speculation.”

In chapter 6 Hasker develops the free will theodicy for moral evil. Though some evils may be accounted for in terms of soul-making or punishment for sin, the primary emphasis falls on the conjunction of five theses: the world contains persons who are intelligent and free, such a world offers the potential for good, alternative worlds without these features would not offer a comparable potential, constant divine intervention would undermine the structure needed for significant human moral actions, and it is good that God created such a world that made human society possible.

For critics perhaps the most disputable section of the book is Hasker’s treatment of what he terms Rowe’s Requirement: that a moral being would prevent the occurrence of serious evil unless that action would lose a greater good or create some equal or greater evil. Hasker argues that the Requirement conflicts with another principle, namely, that God desires that humans fulfill moral obligations, especially by assuming a major responsibility for the welfare of others (he restricts it to human beings, but as Keller points out, to respond to Rowe’s example of the suffering fawn, Hasker would have to extend it more broadly to nonhumans). If God as good is obligated and expected to prevent all gratuitous evil, we would have no incentive to engage in moral activity on behalf of others. To Rowe’s response that though the class of gratuitous evils cannot be eliminated, God could eliminate individual evils that are unnecessary (which in turn means that there are no gratuitous evils; all evils would serve some greater good), Hasker replies that this position undermines the requirement for moral action, since the person contemplating an immoral action would know that God would bring good out of it anyway or would not permit it to happen. The point here is that evils that are not particularly required for the greater good of moral action but whose

possibility is necessary for this greater good are justified, and this is sufficient to mitigate Rowe's objection.

Unfortunately, Hasker does not say anything at this point about miracles. Since his discussion is couched in biblical thought, and since miracles form a central piece for understanding Jesus' ministry, one might expect a discussion of the miracles God, through Jesus, used to eliminate evils. If many evils, especially natural evils, are gratuitous, is there any reason why at least more of them are not miraculously eliminated, albeit leaving some for our moral improvement? That is, could not God eliminate or mitigate those about which we really cannot do anything anyway but which are particularly horrible? Hasker does contend that no general principle can be formulated to cover the relevant moral requirements that moral beings act with regard to such evils, for such principles would lead either to the requirement of eliminating all or all gratuitous evils. Yet one might wonder whether, since the miracles of Jesus appear without moral disenfranchisement worries, God at least could do more to remove the graver gratuitous evils without infringing on Hasker's moral requirement principle. It is here, as we shall see, that Keller wishes to drive home his critique.

In the final chapter Hasker turns to the triumph of God over evil. He explores various options and rejects those that harken to Rowe's Requirement that there be triumph over all evil. He suggests that the triumph will be in a "world of fulfilled human lives, free from suffering, death and evil, permeated with the knowledge and love of God" (p. 224). The suffering people have experienced will be "engulfed in the experience of intimacy with God," where God expresses his forgiveness of us. Evil will no longer be able to oppose the good. But this brings atheologians back to their question: if this can be done in the future, why could it not have been accomplished in the past? Why does the triumph of God over evil take so long, especially when, according to Christian theology, it was to have been finished on the cross? Indeed, instead of things getting better, things seem to be getting worse: the examples of horrendous evils Hasker appeals to are of recent occurrence. So though he refused earlier to say much about the "heaven objection," his treatment of triumph in the final chapter reinvigorates that very objection.

James Keller's views on the problem of evil are almost the contrary of Hasker's. Whereas Hasker constructs what he takes to be a successful theodicy, in his closely reasoned dialectical work Keller undertakes a critique not only of the free-will/soul making theodicy, but of a more broadly conceived problem of evil. After Keller undertakes to show that the evidential problem of evil persists, he expands his conception of evil to include the "evils" of divine hiddenness, injustice of miracles, and any particularistic account of revelation viewed as communicative. Keller painstakingly sets forth to show that classic Christian theism fails, largely because it neither provides reason for its views nor resolves what he considers to be outstanding difficulties.

In chapter 2 Keller concentrates on the soul-building and free-will theodicies, focusing particularly on Hasker's arguments presented elsewhere. Keller develops three objections. First, a God who stands by and allows the evils present in the world must be accounted a guilty by-stander. Hasker's reply is that preventing all gratuitous evils would remove human motivation for moral action. But, Keller argues, a revealing God could inform us about God's policy of evil-prevention and thus provide motivation for human moral action. "They might realize that God is permitting some potentially gratuitously evil situation to develop in order to give them the chance to make a correct moral decision to prevent the occurrence. They might know that if they did not do the morally correct thing, God would prevent the evil, but they still would have failed to do their moral duty" (p. 13).

Second, the soul building theodicy treats the victim as a means to someone else's good. He rejects Eleonore Stump's contention that all suffering is potentially beneficial to the person who suffers, for at times too much suffering, let alone death, occurs. He sees that the only way out is for the theist to claim that God has a general policy of not preventing any evils, which would rule out the theist's belief in miracles. After considering whether God could make changes in the laws of nature, Keller worries about animal suffering, since in this case there is no moral development in sight. Chapter 2 provides a formidable contrast to Hasker. The nub of the issue concerns the extent to which God, without removing significant moral agency, can intervene in the world to prevent the worst evils. Keller argues that ultimately the theist has to hold that God must adopt a hands-off policy in order to reconcile evil with God's goodness, which conflicts with the conception of an engaging God espoused by Hasker's theism.

In chapter 3 Keller takes up the problem of divine hiddenness as a form of the problem of evil. Although God's nature might be obscure, there is no reason why God's will must be so. Keller thinks that, even granting the noetic effects of sin, God could "overcome the blindness caused by human defectiveness, either by repairing the defect or by making things about God even more obvious, or both" (p. 35). And if the divine hiddenness is treated as a punishment for sin, it certainly is not effective in any utilitarian way to restore humans or encourage them to leave their sinfulness; revelational clarity would suffice much better. Since we lack voluntary control over our beliefs, divine hiddenness works to decrease rather than increase belief.

In chapter 4 Keller takes up miracles, which played such an important role in chapter 2, and which I suggested above constitutes a weak element in Hasker's careful treatment. The essence of his argument concerns God's justice: should God fail to distribute miracles equally or at least according to need, God is unjust. The fact that God does not owe us anything does not contravene the fact that since God has unlimited resources and we have great need, God could meet those needs and failure to do so hardly comports with a benevolent God. Keller distinguishes between epistemic

and practical miracles. Regarding the former, which are meant to bring us to God, Keller argues that a just God has to make equally clear the grounds for believing the original miracles so that persons living later could believe. Otherwise, those who come later are in no position to assess the authenticity of the miracle accounts. With regard to practical miracles, Keller contends that there are no cases of unambiguous miracles of healing. The data simply are unclear. In effect, Keller's contention is that there are no grounds for believing in miracles, for God should have made known to us more clearly that the alleged miracles really occurred. As might be expected, this provides the grounds for his subsequent skeptical treatment of revelation in chapter 6. Without attesting miracles, we have no reason to think that scriptural writers (in any religion) convey God's word. The Bible contains errors, unclear doctrines, unclear ecclesiology, inaccurate phenomenal accounts, and fails to distinguish clearly when various types of language are being employed. Swinburne's appeal to church authority fails to rescue the case for revelation: why should we think that the authority rests in the Church—and which Church? Keller's main thesis is repeated in response to both Swinburne and Plantinga: "If God has wished to make known such propositions, it is surely plausible to think that God would have identified and certified them clearly" (p. 104).

Keller contends that "the only truly good grounds for regarding some propositions as divinely revealed would be obvious miracles supporting their having that status" (p. 109). But authenticating belief is precisely what some New Testament writers claim. For example, the author of John's gospel contends that this was precisely the point of the miracles he records. Hence, given Keller's conditions, he cannot conclude that "there is no good reason to suppose that the biblical writers themselves were the recipients of supernaturally communicated revealed truths of significance to humans in general" (p. 109). He responds that nonetheless miracles do theists no good in their quest for revelation, because they did not witness the miracle. But that Keller does not have any evidence does not entail that there is or was no evidence. Keller's response is a restatement of his general argument, namely, that God should be clearer at least to him and to many others, and that this is a version of the problem of evil.

As an alternative Keller opts for a manifestation account of revelation: God is "manifested in various events, and in some events God's character is more clearly revealed than it is in other events" (p. 110). But this is as much, if not more, problematic than the communication account of revelation. What events manifest God's character? As Hume suggested, unless we already know something about God's character, the finitude and evil in the world might "manifest" a different character than, for example, traditional or Process Theism suggests. Keller suggests that discriminating manifestational events really does not matter, since different revelations would manifest different things. Christians can accept their Bible because they "experience (what they take to be) salvation in a tradition for which

the Bible is the original written source" (p. 110). However, this does not mean that there is any such thing as salvation, that God wants them to be saved, or that they need to be. They just need to think that they are satisfied with this account, and God can "cause them to feel confidence about the beliefs." Of course, this feeling of confidence is as, if not more, subject to delusion than the communication account, since in this revelation nothing has been communicated—"there are no propositions for which we have clear, divine certification that they are revealed" (p. 111)—and there are no ways to distinguish God-caused confidence from delusional confidence. We are left to "work out" our own religious beliefs.

Following on his extensive criticism of the major aspects of traditional theism—largely on the ground that given the traditional theists' conception of God, God could be expected to do more: remove or prevent evils, make God and God's will for humans invariably plain, certify miracles so that there is no doubt that they convey the message God wants or are really suspensions of natural law, or make God's revelations unambiguous and certified—Keller in the final chapter lays out his own Process theological position to resolve the problems his book raises. According to Keller, God's omnipotence must be radically reconceived to function only to provide "a graded range of possibilities for what the new occasion can become" (p. 136). New actual occasions do not consciously decide between these possibilities, but given the causal conditions and possibilities they become one thing rather than another, and as such are partly self-determining, though at the same time greatly limited by their past. God's role is "to sustain the overall orderliness of nature and also provide a source of novelty within this overall order" (p. 137). God does this without unilateral, efficient-cause intervention. Rather, God lures actual occasions to novelty and change within their possibilities. Not only do actual occasions have some or limited freedom of self-determination, but conscious beings have significant freedom because of "occasions in the brain that comprise the mind."

Keller uses this to construct his responses to views where he deems that the traditional theist has failed. With regard to the traditional problem of evil, Keller notes that actual entities experience evil because God evokes natural processes that proceed because of their pasts. Since God cannot bring about unilateral change, he is unable to affect the process besides providing periodic luring impulses to do the good. As such, God is not a guilty bystander nor does God make others victims. But, one might ask, why isn't God more effective in luring actual entities to do the good? Keller responds that "God is always doing all God can to make the universe as good as it can be" (p. 142). But, the theist might respond, what evidence is there that God is doing God's best? It might seem not very evident, given Keller's earlier objections that appeal to the prevalence of horrendous evils, that this is the case. Indeed, Keller's affirmation that things are on the whole more good than bad strikes a very different pose from that afforded earlier (p. 15). Though Keller notes that only God is in a position

to know that God is doing God's best, it would seem that God could by some manifestation let us know this.

Keller's response is that God cannot communicate to us directly, for God's influence on individuals is preconscious. But why must it be preconscious? Why cannot the lure be conscious? After all, God has "wishes" that individuals move in a certain direction. Indeed, Keller goes on to suggest that God can be involved in "certain events in a special way . . . that involve an especially clear manifestation of God and God's will" (p. 145). But if propositional revelation is unclear, it would seem that manifestational revelation would be equally if not more unclear, for how would one know that an event conforms to God's will for an individual? How would actual occasions know that God has lured them to some thought or feeling they would not have otherwise had, for they do not know what the "otherwise" is?

As Keller holds the feet of the theist to the fire, so the theist might return the favor. For one thing, Keller frequently complains that theists have no evidence for their claims about how and when God intervenes in human affairs, for example, in revelation and miracles. But the theist might respond that Keller has no evidence that God's role is to sustain orderliness and provide a source of novelty. Why cannot orderliness be merely a result of efficient causation (viewed according to so-called natural laws) and novelty be the product of random mutation causing variation at times sustained by the environment? As Keller notes, non-theists can ignore Process accounts of miracles and will miss nothing (p. 146).

Second, if actual occasions can be efficient causes and unilaterally effect changes, why cannot God be such a cause? Keller allows the actual occasions that compose billiard balls to unilaterally cause other balls to move (p. 139). But if this is consistent with the freedom or power inherent in all actual occasions, why would the comparable divine action be incompatible? Why must divine causal order differ from that exercised by other causes? Whitehead himself countenances the consistency of efficient causation and self-creative determination (*Process and Reality* [1929], p. 75). If God has desires and purposes, one would think that possessing efficient causation, as other actual entities apparently do, would be a better way of responding at least to natural evil.

Perhaps most problematic is Keller's contention that what God and God's will are like "are human reconstructions" (p. 144). But if so, then we have little to go on to authenticate Keller's account of God and God's wishes or activity. That is, we have little reason to think that this is the way God is, if God exists at all. To say that "this is what one would expect if God . . ." turns out to be quite post hoc: we create a god to fit our expectations.

Much more can be said about these rich treatments of the problems of evil. Both deserve careful reading and critical interaction, including where they function point-counterpoint. And, as one would expect, others will take up the cudgel, for in the writing of books on the problem of evil there is no end.