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**Brian Davies, THE REALITY OF GOD AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

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Gilbert Ryle, William Alston, and others. Her conclusion is that some emotions, such as being horny, seem to require having a body, and so God would not have that emotion (but that does not imply that God could not know what it is like to feel that emotion), but, she argues, emotions such as love, compassion, anger, and jealousy do not require that the experiencer have a body; therefore it is conceivable that an incorporeal being experiences those emotions.

As to the editorial state of *Thinking Through Feeling*, there are more proofreading errors than there should have been, and not just typos. A bigger complaint is about the size of the print. Scrutton’s book is valuable and is part of a valuable series, the *Continuum Studies in Philosophy of Religion*. I would rather see these books in paperback with larger print than in hardback with print of its current size. It is hard enough to struggle with dense, abstract prose without also having to struggle with the size of the print (or is it just me ol’ eyes?). However, my biggest editorial complaint is that it is not always clear what Scrutton’s own position is when she is discussing other authors, which is most of the time. She often seems to be taking a position, or to be about to, but then she doesn’t. The good news is that she does a good job of clarifying her own positions at the end of each chapter and in some chapter summaries, but she needs to be clearer about her own position as she goes along or she needs to develop a way of not making the reader guess as to whether she is taking a position.

*Thinking Through Feeling* contains a helpful bibliography and many useful footnotes. It should definitely become part of the literature discussed by all who are interested in philosophy of emotion and the nature of God or just in philosophy of the emotions. Scrutton is a rich, articulate resource on these topics. I could have spent more time contending with some of her claims and arguments, but my main objective in this review is to alert the community of those who are interested in philosophy of the emotions and the nature of God that there is a valuable new book that should be read, discussed, and responded to.


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Many have thought that evil constitutes a reason to believe that God does not exist, either because the co-existence of God and evil is logically impossible, or because evils of a certain sort make it likely that God does not exist.

What is the logic of this problematic? The answer depends on how other questions are addressed. What sort of thing is God? What sort of thing is evil? How are the two related? Much debate about the problem proceeds
without careful consideration of these questions. Theists and anti-theists agree in accepting some basic sketch of theism, generally thought to be orthodox, and in identifying some clear cases of evil in the world. Anti-theists demand to know how God, supposed to be morally perfect and omnipotent, can be justified in permitting the evils in question; theists reply, on God’s behalf, with various strategies of moral justification.

Brian Davies argues that this customary approach to the relation of God and evil goes seriously astray. Both theists and anti-theists are blamed for conceptual confusions about God and evil. It is time, he thinks, to get back to the “basics.”

This means that we must first address two fundamental questions: (1) Does God exist? and (2) What sort of being is God? There is no chance of discerning the theological significance of evil if we do not first have some clear conception of God’s nature and an understanding of the positive grounds for believing that God exists.

Davies sets the stage in Chapter 1, “The Problem of Evil,” first with a recapitulation of three philosophically distinct arguments from evil, followed by a review of seven prominent theistic responses:

(i) The “We Know that God Exists” Argument, adumbrated by Augustine and Aquinas, according to which good reason to think that God exists constitutes good reason to accept the co-existence of God and evil;

(ii) The Unreality of Evil Argument, associated most starkly and implausibly with Mary Baker Eddy, but more plausibly represented in Thomas Aquinas’ doctrine of evil as privation;

(iii) The Free Will Defense, notably developed by Alvin Plantinga in response to the problem of moral evil;

(iv) The Means and Ends Approach, prominently represented by Richard Swinburne and John Hick, who, in distinctive ways, marshall accounts of goods that necessitate the existence of evils of certain kinds;

(v) The “We Can’t See All the Picture” Argument, where the idea, as William Alston, Peter van Inwagen, and Stephen Griffith have argued, is that we are ignorant of the means at God’s disposal to ensure that all the evil that exists is morally justified by some good purpose;

(vi) an interrogative strategy that asks What kind of world can we expect from God? challenging anti-theistic assumptions about God’s creative possibilities and intentions.

(vii) the God suffers also proposal, invoked by Jürgem Moltmann and Jon Sobrino, but which Davies rules to be unorthodox on their construal of divine suffering.

It emerges, in due course, that Davies endorses versions of (i), (ii), (v), and (vi), and is especially critical of standard versions of (iii), (iv), and (vii).

Davies turns next to the “study of God” that must proceed prior to sorting out God’s relation to evil. Chapter 2, “God the Creator,” is specially concerned with the question “Is there any reason to believe in God?”
Chapter 3, “Identifying God,” takes the question “What should we suppose God to be?”

Davies concentrates in chapter 2 on two versions of the cosmological argument, one in answer to the question, “What accounts (or accounted) for the fact that the universe began to exist?” and the other in answer to the question, “What accounts for the existence of the universe at any time?” (i.e., “How come the universe, whether or not it had a beginning?”). He develops the second argument in greater detail and methodically replies to anticipated objections. The upshot, in either case, is that the universe was created and that it therefore has a Creator. This Creator is God, under the description “whatever it is that makes things to be for as long as they are” (52).

Chapter 3 carries the argument further, through an analysis of what it means for God to be the source of everything other than himself (54). God must be “radically different from anything with which we are acquainted” (54), so that no creature provides an apt model for understanding God. And yet, using analogical reasoning and the via negativa, “we may truly speak of God while using terms (words) that we employ when talking of creatures” (54). This line of reasoning yields two especially important truths. First, as Creator, God is unchanging. Second, God cannot be regarded as a moral agent in any unqualified sense.

Chapter 4, “God’s Moral Standing,” is concerned with the claim, so often made by theists and anti-theists alike, that God, should God exist, is morally good. Davies argues that this claim is mistaken, for to think of God as morally good is to assume that God is a moral agent. Davies denies that God is a moral agent, and grounds his denial, first, in his earlier conclusion that God is Creator, and second, lest his orthodoxy be challenged, in an interpretation of key passages in the Christian scriptures.

Chapters 5 and 6, “How Not to Exonerate God: I” and “How Not to Exonerate God: II,” advise theists against the use of theodicies and defenses that attribute a moral standing to God. Other reasons are emphasized as well. For example, the Free Will Defense is repudiated on the grounds that its conception of God’s relation to human freedom is confused. Davies argues that God (if he exists) could, as some anti-theists have supposed, create de novo free creatures who never sin.

Chapter 7, “Evil, Causation and God,” is taken up with questions about the origin of evil. Here Davies develops and defends the doctrine of evil as privation, which holds that evil is neither a substance nor the property of a thing, and so is not caused to “exist.” Though evil is the absence of some good that should be where it isn’t, evil has no existence as such. So everything that exists is good, and is created by God. This explains why God cannot be considered the cause of any evil. Created beings may bring it about that some evil occurs, acting for something they desire. The bringing about of any evil is always dependent on the possession of properties that are themselves good.
In Chapter 8, “Goodness, Love and Reasons,” Davies is back to considering what it means to call God good, and here relates his earlier conclusions to the love of God and the demand for reasons God has for permitting evil. He purports to show that even if God is not “morally good,” God is metaphysically good. God is the source of all created goods. Because God is not an item in the world he has created, God is not subject to the vicissitudes of time, and so is unchanging. There is, then, no way in which God might “improve.” Since a cause expresses its nature in its effects, and every created existent is good (there being no cause of evil, as such), God’s goodness is exhibited in his work as Creator. In this respect, God is metaphysically perfect. Divine perfection, though it “does not entail moral excellence on God’s part” (202), does entail that God is essentially good.

As for love, God does not love in any sense that would mean that God has emotions. For any being to have emotions, it must be something that can be acted upon and undergo change. Further, though God does will good for his creatures (indeed, he wills them into existence, which is a good), there is no metaphysical possibility of reciprocity of love (in the usual sense) between God and his creatures. As the Creator of every existing good in the world, his love is already expressed in creation. There is no good that God does not create, which could in turn be something that God might respond to in love. God does, however, as the source of good, evoke love for God in his creatures.

Those who remain troubled by the apparent mystery of God’s reasons for allowing the evils there are must consider that God, for whom every act is an act of creating some good thing, does not act for reasons—if that means that God seeks to achieve some desire that God has. For God does not need anything, and so does not have desires.

Chapter 9, “God, Evil and Goodness,” inverts the argument from evil against theism with an appeal to explain the existence of goodness in the world. The last few pages of this chapter direct attention to distinctly Christian doctrines—and in particular the doctrine of the Trinity—to further indicate how God’s goodness and love are manifest in ways that matter to humanity in the face of evil.

In a final Appendix, titled “Is God Morally Indifferent?” Davies acknowledges that God is morally indifferent in any sense that presupposes that God is a moral agent. But he denies that this is any kind of deficiency, since God is not the sort of being who is subject to the moral demands placed upon human creatures whose natures make them proper subjects of such evaluation. God is not indifferent, as if he might behave better than he does if he really cared. There is no question of behaving better with God.

Brian Davies is an able guide to the metaphysics of theism developed by Thomas Aquinas, whom he follows closely on many points. This book is especially valuable for bringing sympathetic exposition of Aquinas to bear on contemporary discussions of the problem of evil. The author boldly objects to the usual terms of debate about God and evil. He is as
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scrupulous in assessing theistic responses to the problem as he is in replies to anti-theists. His key concern is with thinking of God “as an agent subject to moral requirements and, therefore, as intelligibly defensible or impugnable with reference to them” (96). The argument of this book is far more subtle than can be conveyed here. Perhaps we have been too casual in our assumptions about what it means for God to be good, or even in our assumption that we can know what it means. The implications of Davies’s claims about God’s goodness and love for humanity will be shocking to some—more so if they misunderstand the argument. A follow-up volume on the nature of Christian experience of God would be a welcome addition to his fine work in the philosophy of religion.