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David O'Connor, GOD, EVIL, AND DESIGN: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

David Basinger

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have a hard time convincing a skeptic without at least attempting to meet Baker's challenge, but that doesn't mean her Christian beliefs are epistemically flawed. I am persuaded that Plantinga's argument demonstrates that it is epistemically possible that an ideally situated (epistemically speaking) Christian could be fully rational, justified, and warranted in her beliefs about God even if she does not meet the challenge embedded in Baker's expanded *de jure* objection. (It's another question completely whether there exist any ideally situated Christians. And it is on this point, I suggest, that Plantinga's religious epistemology should be pressed.)

In conclusion, while I'm inclined to think that there is some problem with a Christian that does not (or will not) meet Baker's challenge in any way, why assume that the problem is epistemic? What if instead the problem is theological (or maybe practical)? In other words, suppose that a person's beliefs are warranted (in Plantinga's sense) but that she doesn't meet Baker's challenge. Her problem is a failure to follow through on the Great Commission, to seek to present her beliefs in a persuasive fashion to her unbelieving friends. This failure, however, doesn't obviously suggest that her Christian beliefs are epistemically flawed; the problem might instead be found in her understanding and application of Christian beliefs.

God, Evil, and Design: An Introduction to the Philosophical Issues, by David O'Connor. Blackwell Publishing, 2008. Pp. 225. $25.00 (paper)

DAVID BASINGER, Roberts Wesleyan College

The focus of this book—the problem of evil—has been discussed by philosophers for the past two thousand years. It is a pleasant surprise, accordingly, to find a treatment of this issue from a new perspective, as is the case with *God, Evil, and Design.*

O'Connor's discussion of the relationship between God and evil focuses on two questions. The first is "whether the idea of God squares with the fact that many terrible things happen for no apparent reason, or whether that fact is good reason to think there is no God" (p. 7). The second is "whether, all things considered, the good as well as the bad, it is reasonable to conclude that God [exists and] is the original source and cause of the universe" (p. 8).

We are invited by O'Connor to conduct our consideration of these questions behind a "veil of ignorance." Specifically, we are invited to suspend any personal religious beliefs when considering the relationship between evil and God's existence and also to pretend to know nothing about religion or philosophy when considering God as a possible cause for our universe. O'Connor grants that stepping behind the veil in this sense is not easy. But it is possible, he contends, and can enable us to conduct a neutral, unbiased investigation.

O'Connor rightly notes that the question of whether evil renders belief in the concept of God unreasonable actually requires consideration of two more specific questions: (1) whether simultaneous belief in God and evil is logically impossible and (2) whether belief in God in the face of evil, even if not self-contradictory, is improbable, given the evil we experience.

The focus of O'Connor's discussion of the logical possibility of God's existence, given evil, is the well-known debate between J. L. Mackie and Alvin Plantinga. After reviewing for us Mackie's contention that the simultaneous existence of both a good, omnipotent God and evil is logically impossible if we assume, as we must, that a good, omnipotent being will eliminate evil completely, O'Connor concludes that Mackie fails to prove a contradiction between the idea of God and the fact of evil because Mackie does not rule out the possibility of some additional relevant fact that would make it possible for God and evil to co-exist. O'Connor then considers and ultimately concurs with Alvin Plantinga's stronger claim that simultaneous belief in the existence of evil and God can be established as possible because it is possible that God created a world containing persons with freedom that cannot be controlled by God (libertarian freedom), that the misuse of this freedom is the cause of evil, and that this world, even with this evil, is on balance good.

This still leaves us with the need to determine whether the amount and types of evil we experience render God's existence improbable. But before discussing this variation of his first question, O'Connor invites us to consider his second question: Whether it is reasonable from behind the veil to believe that God is the ultimate cause of all. As O'Connor sees it, there are basically three explanatory hypotheses for the remarkable order, regularity, and complexity we undeniably experience in the natural realm: (1) the chance hypothesis, which postulates that this is the only universe and that both natural order and the initial conditions at the Big Bang are due to chance; (2) the multiverse hypothesis, which postulates that this universe is only one of many, thus increasing the chance of the evil we experience coming about; and (3) the design hypothesis, which postulates that our universe, including the initial conditions at the Big Bang, exists by intentional design.

O'Connor acknowledges that all three hypotheses face significant difficulties. But he focuses his discussion on those difficulties facing the design hypothesis, which include the problem of positing a non-physical ultimate cause, the problem of how God can actualize divine intentions if humans possess libertarian freedom, and the problem of understanding how a world designed by a good God could have the amounts and types of evil we experience. His "behind the veil" conclusion is that, while the world as we experience it might give us some reason to assume that the ultimate cause of all is outside of the natural order, the idea of God as this ultimate cause "would not come up as the overall best explanation," given the evil we experience (p. 107).

We then return to the question of whether God's existence is probable, given evil. Specifically, O'Connor asks us to consider from behind the veil whether the fact that evil makes the belief that God is the ultimate cause of our world improbable offers us a rational basis for believing that God probably does not exist. He first reviews Paul Draper's attempt to show that, all things considered, the belief that there exists a God who is responsible for a world with so much evil is quite unreasonable and William Rowe's argument that none of the allegedly justifying reasons for evil offered by theists even remotely justifies the number of types of horrific evil we experience and thus that there quite probably is no God. O'Connor then assesses sympathetically responses by Stephen Wykstra and Peter van Inwagen, who both argue in some fashion that we aren't in possession of an objective standard for "excess evil" in relation to which we can say that the amount of evil we experience counts against the existence of God. His conclusion, though, is that since this skeptical line of defense renders God virtually indefensible and may well undercut the concept of morality theists want to affirm, this line of reasoning does not defeat the claim that, "judging from the facts of the world, the existence of God is or seems improbable" (p. 168).

Nor, O'Connor maintains, do the attempts by theists such as Richard Swinburne and John Hick to explain the occurrence of evils in our world fare any better, as their appeal to human freedom doesn't explain why a good God would grant freedom without restraint or exception, given the horrendous evils human freedom can and does produce, and their appeals to an afterlife don't justify evils experienced in this life.

So where does O'Connor believe all this leaves us? What we found while behind the veil, he maintains, is that although our experience of seemingly pointless evil doesn't render God's existence impossible, "the facts of evil in the world [are] strong enough evidence to make it improbable that there is a God." And we found that an open investigation does not support the belief in a perfect supernatural creator as "the best explanation of the origin and nature of our universe" (p. 213).

But what if we come out from behind the veil and assess the situation as believers? What we have discovered behind the veil, O'Connor tells us, is enough to discredit attempts by "evidentialist" theists to demonstrate on the basis of objective data that God exists as the creator of all. However, this does not necessarily mean, he concludes, that a person cannot justifiably believe in the existence and creative activity of God. For it may be the case that the believer is sincere in reporting experience of the divine and "so long as the believer does not suppose this counts as evidence, it can ground the believer's religious outlook, and perhaps enable it to withstand even strong evidence pointing the other way" (p. 221).

Overall, I find O'Connor's work impressive. He is a very clear, accessible writer. His approach is comprehensive in that it covers all the important issues. And his discussion of the key figures and perspectives is unfailingly complete and fair. I do, though, have three significant concerns.

First, the freewill defense O'Connor outlines is based on the assumption that God has granted humans "full-time libertarian freedom," by which he seems to mean that God has decided to grant all persons libertarian freedom all the time "without constraint or exception." My understanding is quite different. As I see it, while all freewill theists do believe that God cannot both grant a person freedom and control the outcome of its use, most freewill theists believe God has retained the right to withhold freedom from any given person in relation to any given decision at any time. This does, of course, rightly leave the freewill theist open to the important question of why a good God has not chosen more frequently to exercise this veto power. But it also allows for the possibility of interventive divine activity in our world—for example, through intervention in our lives in response to prayer—in a way that gives God more control over how the world runs, including more control over the ultimate outcome of things in relation to evil, than O'Connor believes to be the case.

Second, O'Connor's invitation to step behind the veil of ignorance—to pretend that we aren't theists or nontheists or pretend we don't know anything about religion or philosophy—seems to me both unrealistic and unhelpful. I agree completely that we should consider all points of view, including those differing from ours, as openly and honestly as possible. But the idea that we can actually suspend belief for the sake of analysis seems to me quite inconsistent with contemporary theories of belief formation, which hold that how we understand and interpret new information is *always* pre-volitionally shaped significantly by our basic beliefs about the world, including any basic religious or moral beliefs that have been formed by our interaction with the socio-cultural settings with which we have had contact. If this is correct, then the assumption that stepping behind the veil will give us neutral, unbiased information is a dangerous myth in that it can unjustifiably give more rational credence to the results of our deliberations than is deserved.

This brings us to my greatest concern: O'Connor's basic epistemic assumption that we can in some meaningful sense determine objectively whether certain perspectives about God and the relationship between God and evil are reasonable. I have argued and continue to believe, rather, that in relation to any significant metaphysical or moral issue on which there are competing explanatory hypotheses, there exist no objective, non-question-begging criteria apart from self-consistency for determining whether any given perspective is in fact the most reasonable. And if this is so, then O'Connor's implicit contention that believers must add faith to reason to remain believers in the face of evil while nonbelievers can rely solely on reason is misguided. It is rather the case that theists and nontheists alike must choose by "faith" among competing self-consistent options with respect to God and evil, with none of the self-consistent choices bringing with it, in principle, greater objective, neutral support.

Nevertheless, I still recommend this book highly for anyone with an interest in the topic.