Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 16 | Issue 1 Article 14

1-1-1999

Peter van Inwagen, GOD, KNOWLEDGE & MYSTERY: ESSAYS IN PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY

Frances Howard-Snyder

Daniel Howard-Snyder

goods" for the good life, yet insist that the social order that best promotes them is totalitarian. Stoics in pursuit of *apatheia* tend to depreciate the need for the physical, psychological, and social goods Kekes sees as essential to any reasonable account of the good life. They also insist that the emotions and virtues prized in a Christian conception of wisdom ought to be suppressed. In short, the "human point of view," as Kekes calls it, does not offer a sufficiently objective content to stave off radically incommensurable accounts of moral wisdom and justice. The differences among different virtue traditions jeopardize the prospects for agreement and cooperation that Kekes's account of justice requires.

I found Kekes's book melancholy, at times even grim in its tone, taking on some of the coloration of the Greek tragedies from which he draws so many lessons. "The fact remains," he writes "that permanent adversities may ruin a life no matter how much moral wisdom the person living it has" (p. 223). And when these forces overwhelm us and others we care about, we are supposed to draw comfort from knowing that we did what we could to resist them. Our misfortune is "just the accident of having stumbled into the path of the blind, impersonal, indifferent juggernaut of the natural world" (p. 223). Kekes's book provides a clear contrast to Christian and other religious accounts of moral wisdom, and for that reason contributes importantly to what I hope is a growing literature on the subject.

Due to a typesetting error in our July 1998 issue, the following review was not included in its entirety. The complete review follows below. The Editors sincerely regret the error.

God, Knowledge & Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology, by Peter van Inwagen. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995. Pp. 284. $17.95.

FRANCES & DANIEL HOWARD-SNYDER, Western Washington University & Seattle Pacific University

This volume collects nine essays published by Peter van Inwagen between 1977 and 1995. Part I features, among other things, modal skepticism with respect to ontological arguments and arguments from evil. Part II addresses certain tensions Christians may feel between modern biology, critical studies of the New Testament, and the comparative study of religions, on the one hand, and Christian orthodoxy, on the other. Part III deploys a formal logic of relative identity to model the internal consistency of the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. In what follows, we summarize and reflect on five essays.[1]

"Ontological Arguments" focuses on valid arguments by that name which claim or imply that a necessary, concrete being is possible. But how are we to tell whether necessary existence (N) is compatible with concreteness (C)? Conceptual analysis won't do, says van Inwagen; for, firstly, the compatibility of N and C is not a conceptual matter and, secondly, even if it were, analysis would help no more than it would help settle whether '7777' appears in the decimal expansion of π. Perhaps we should believe N is compatible with C anyway, since the possibility is not conceptually pre-

cluded; but, says van Inwagen, that's like arguing that we should believe that three-foot-thick sheets of iron could be transparent to visible light since the possibility isn't conceptually precluded—which is absurd. More plausibly, perhaps we *may* rationally believe that N and C are compatible, even though it is false that we *should*. This is Plantinga's line: without argument, we rationally believe that *there is a possible world in which unsurpassable greatness is exemplified* (which is just N and C reved up with perfection) provided we still find it compelling upon examining objections. These conditions are insufficient for rational belief, argues van Inwagen (35-41). That was in 1977. In 1985, Plantinga wrote: "I hope sometime soon to reply to van Inwagen".[2] Thirteen years later, we are still waiting.

Van Inwagen concludes that, barring special revelation, we can't tell whether a necessary, concrete being is possible. This skepticism about extra-mundane modal matters—an affront to many, a breath of refreshing candor to others—permeates the book. Lest it be dismissed as yet another heroic attempt by a theist to save his theism, we note that van Inwagen embraced it long before he became a Christian, he deploys it fairly and, he offers good reason for it (11-14, 19-21, 30-41, 79-86).

In "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," van Inwagen sketches a picture of God's relation to the world according to which elementary particles exist and have their causal powers because and only because God holds them continuously in existence and constantly supplies them with these powers. Occasionally, God may *miraculously* supply these particles with different causal powers simply by "decree". How might chance fit into this picture? An event which is due to chance, says van Inwagen, is one which "is without purpose or significance;...not part of anyone's plan; it serves no one's end; and it might very well not have been" (50). This seems odd. For if this is what chance is, you would not expect van Inwagen to classify events brought about by free human choices as chance events, which he does. This may not matter, however. For he is mainly concerned with events that are not part of *God's* plan, and free human choices fit that description. "God's plan" is the sum total of what God has decreed, excluding decrees issued in response to events that are not part of His plan. Within this picture, two sources of chance other than human free choice might arise: natural indeterminism and the initial state of the world. The latter idea is this: if two possible initial states of the universe—X and Y—could have served God's purposes equally well, then He decrees "Let *either* X *or* Y be,"one of which results. Van Inwagen rejects the alternative—God's either decreeing "Let X be" or decreeing "Let Y be"—because if X and Y were equally satisfactory to God, then, if He chose X rather than Y, His choice would be entirely arbitrary; but "I find it wholly incongruous to suppose that the Divine Nature contains anything remotely resembling a coin-tossing mechanism" (59). We don't see the alleged incongruity. Which perfection would be sullied if God were, by nature, disposed to decree arbitrarily between equally satisfactory states of affairs?

Van Inwagen speculates that much is due to chance, incuding much suffering. By itself, this does not solve the so-called problem of evil, but it does have the following moral: "Do not attempt any solution to this problem that entails that every particular evil has a purpose, or that,

with respect to every individual misfortune,...God has some special reason for allowing it." (65). This has important implications for arguments from evil that appeal to *particular* horrors. For example, William Rowe and Bruce Russell argue that since God must have a reason to permit *this* fawn's or *this* child's suffering (or something comparably bad) and there is no such reason, God does not exist. Critics tend to question the second premise, but van Inwagen rejects the first. God need have no special reason to permit a particular horror, provided He has a general reason to permit a good deal of suffering. To suppose otherwise is like supposing that even if a commander has a general reason to permit his soldiers to suffer, he must have a special reason to permit *that* soldier's suffering. No one has replied to this point. That's understandable, however. Contrast the rhetorical power of "There is no reason for God to permit *this* fawn's being burned or *that* girl's being brutalized" with "There is no reason for God to permit a good deal of horrific suffering".

"The Magnitude, Duration, and Distribution of Evil" offers a general reason for God to permit human suffering: God created us in His own image, rational and capable of loving Him. This love, our highest good, is impossible without the ability to withhold it. So to fit us for love of Himself, God gave us the power to reject Him. And that's what our ancestors did, thereby ruining themselves morally and intellectually. They began to harm one another and lost their aboriginal power to protect themselves from the potentially destructive forces of nonhuman nature. This condition—their wickedness and helplessness—has persisted through all the generations, being somehow hereditary.

One worry here is that God Himself exhibits the best sort of love and yet God can do no evil. But then, freedom to love and essential goodness are compatible; thus, God could have achieved the highest good for His creatures without permitting evil.[3] In response, one might distinguish love at its best in an essentially good divine being from love at its best in a creature made for love of God, and then argue that while the latter requires the ability to withhold love, the former does not, and hence that the worry is logically invalid. We've yet to see this line of thought worked out. Also, that wickedness is *somehow hereditary* is puzzling, especially if we think of it as genetic. It is not a *natural consequence* of a parent's free choice that her child be genetically disposed to behave similarly. To this, van Inwagen replies that "it is possible to construct models of the Fall according to which its hereditary aspect is due to the effects of unaltered genes operating under conditions for which they were not 'designed'—namely, conditions attendant upon separation from God." Unfortunately, he leaves this tantalizing suggestion undeveloped.

A more substantial worry is this: "How could evil of such types and quantity and duration and distribution be necessary for God's plan of Atonement? Or, if all this evil is *not* necessary for God's plan, why does He not eliminate most of it and make do with that residue of evil that is really necessary?" (103). These questions presuppose that *there is* a minimum amount of evil required for God's purposes. But this is false, says van Inwagen. For any amount of evil that would have served God's pur-

poses, slightly less would have done the job. Thus, if God's purposes required the permission of evil, we cannot insist that He should not have allowed any more than was necessary for those purposes. In that case, God cannot be criticized for not getting by with slightly less evil, even though slightly less would have sufficed.

This is an ingenious and puzzling idea. In the general introduction to Part I, van Inwagen extrapolates, saying that goods are vague. Why believe that? He writes: "No doubt the fact that some goods are vague—I should think that just about all of them are—is a consequence of the fact that just about all the concepts we employ outside formal logic and pure mathematics are vague" (16, n4). But the fact that *our* concepts are vague does not imply that *things* are vague; nor does it imply that the goods God desires are vague. Our concepts are vague because we cannot perceive fine gradations of difference, a defect God lacks.

This stuff about vagueness does not get to the heart of the argument from evil anyway, as van Inwagen acknowledges. For suppose God's purposes require the permission of a good deal of horrific evil but no precise amount; still, if His purposes could have been achieved with a lot less suffering, then He would not have permitted so much. Why, then, so much rather than *a lot* less? Because, says van Inwagen, an essential part of God's plan is for us to perceive that a natural consequence of our attempting to order our lives on our own is a hideous world. Were God to intervene, God would deceive us about the hideousness of our living unto ourselves and He would remove the only motivation we have for turning to Him.

We don't see it. For even if, for the reasons mentioned, God must permit most of the natural consequences of our fallenness and hence a great deal of suffering, we cannot see why God must permit so much rather than a lot less. What would count as *a lot* less? Well, a world without genocide would do. Suppose God prevented our considering genocide, ever. Would we be unable to see our hideousness? Would we lack the requisite motivation to turn to Him? We can't see why. Our hideousness would still be apparent in the vast panoply of nongenocidal activities we engage in. But wouldn't God be deceiving us about the natural consequences of our ordering our lives? Yes. But some deception is worth it. Think of the matter this way: suppose that unbeknownst to us, God would prevent an all-out global nuclear war, even if a natural consequence of our fallen condition were an ability to do it. Should we accuse Him of wrongful deception? No. We should fall to our knees and thank Him for His great kindness.

"The Problem of Evil, the Problem of Air, and the Problem of Silence" takes on an evidential argument from evil which goes like this.[4] Let 'S' stand for a proposition describing in detail the amount, kind, and distribution of evil in the world, and let 'HI'—the Hypothesis of Indifference—stand for the claim that neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by nonhuman persons. Independent of theodicies, the epistemic probability of S on HI is much higher than it is on theism. Since theodicies do not significantly raise the epistemic probability of S

on theism, it is prima facie more rational to believe HI than theism. To defeat this argument, one must have better reason for theism, much better than that provided by the argument for preferring HI to theism.

Van Inwagen denies that the only two viable responses are to give theodicies or to give reasons for theism. A third is this: argue that since we are in no position to assign any epistemic probability to S on theism—not even a probability-range like 'high' or 'low' or 'middling'—we are in no position to make the comparative judgment that S is more likely on HI than on theism. To defend this claim, van Inwagen develops a "defense," a story which entails S, is unsurprising given theism, and true "for all anyone knows." Since van Inwagen thinks his theodicy for human suffering can fill the role he assigns to a defense, the story he tells here focuses on the suffering of "the brutes". Here's the gist of it:

> 1. Every possible world that contains higher-level sentient creatures either contains patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those recorded by S, or else is massively irregular.
> 2. Some important good depends on the existence of higher-level sentient creatures; this good is of sufficient magnitude that it outweighs the patterns of suffering recorded by S.
> 3. Being massively irregular is a defect in a world, a defect at least as great as the defect of containing patterns of suffering morally equivalent to those recorded by S.

(A *massively irregular* world is a world in which the laws of nature fail in a massive way. Two states are *morally equivalent* if there are no morally decisive reasons for preferring one to the other.)

Do we have any reason to reject this story? We would if we had reason to think that there are possible worlds that are not massively irregular and which contain higher-level sentient creatures but which contain *a lot* less animal suffering than S describes. But, for all we know, it is metaphysically impossible for there to be sentient life without allowing for an amount of suffering morally equivalent to that described by S.[5]

One might object that even if massive irregularity in a world is a grave defect, God could have prevented *one* awful case of suffering without massive irregularity resulting. Thus there are two worlds: the actual world and another which is just like it but which lacks that instance of suffering. So van Inwagen's proposition 1 is false. This argument presupposes that the two worlds are *not* morally equivalent, that there is a morally decisive reason to prefer the second world. "But surely," the objector persists, "there *is* morally decisive reason for God to prefer the second; after all, it has one less instance of horrible suffering; moreover, the defect of massive irregularity is avoided." This won't do, says van Inwagen. There is no sharp line between a world that is massively irregular and one that is not. So there is no minimum number of cases of animal suffering that God could allow to guarantee a world that is not massively irregular. So for *any* particular instance of animal suffering E, if God had prevented E, massive irregularity would not have ensued. But, God does not thereby have morally decisive reason to prevent E. For if He did, then

He would have morally decisive reason to prevent *every* case of animal suffering, and He would thus have morally decisive reason to bring about a massively irregular world, which presupposes that the pattern of actual animal suffering is a greater defect in a world than massive irregularity—but this last proposition is, for all we know, false.[6]

"Genesis and Evolution" starts by describing two extreme but popular views about the relationship between Genesis and evolution. The first, that of "genesic literalists," is this: "The planet earth came into existence about six thousand years ago, when God created it in a series of six twenty-four-hour days.... Any appearance to the contrary in the geological record is due to a worldwide flood that occurred about 4,500 years ago; the geological distortions caused by that vast deluge created phenomena that the clever and perverse have—like someone finding internal evidence of Baconian authorship in *Hamlet*—interpreted as showing that the earth is not thousands but thousands of millions of years old...."[7] The second, that of the 'saganists', is entirely naturalistic and disparages religion. Impatient with both, van Inwagen believes that the Bible is divinely inspired; still, one ought not to interpret the early chapters of Genesis literally. This position has a respectable history—including Augustine, Jerome and Gregory of Nyssa—forestalling the saganistic claim that Christians have simply shifted their ground in response to Darwinism.

But can the Bible be the revealed word of God if it makes so many elementary mistakes? Van Inwagen argues that Genesis is right about the important things like the fact that God created everything and that the sun and stars are simply creatures and not objects of worship, and wrong about relatively minor details. He insists that being wrong (even drastically wrong) about the age of the universe is of little significance. Why, one might object, should God be wrong about *anything*, even relatively minor details? Well, consider the options: God could have communicated a perfectly accurate detailed account of creation, or He could have communicated a highly abstract account which left out scientific detail and inaccuracies. The first would be inaccessible to most humans throughout the ages and so would not serve its purpose, i.e. to set the stage for the narrative of God's covenant relationship with Israel. The second would not be vivid and concrete enough to make much of an impression on its readers. Moreover, for God to have ensured that the Bible was free of error, He would have had to dictate a story to the early Israelites that was utterly at variance with every model provided by their own culture and every other culture we know of.

Van Inwagen's view implies that God intended readers of Genesis to interpret it literally, but that He didn't mind them thereby acquiring false beliefs. Why not say instead that God intended readers (some, at least) to interpret it figuratively? Elements of Genesis 1-3 should suggest to someone who doesn't have an ax to grind that it is intended figuratively. In that case, God could have communicated important truths about the world and our relation to it and its Creator without intending to misinform us at all.

Saganists venture out of their domain to derive from their scientific views implications about God, ethics, and the meaning of life. So it is fit-

ting that a philosopher should return the favor. In the second half of the essay, van Inwagen raises doubts about natural selection as the sole mechanism for the genesis (or differentiation) of phyla and other broad taxa. The theory of evolution implies that there should be many examples of intermediate forms between two distinct biological classes. We find none, however, between, say, fish and amphibia, and none but ambiguous examples between any pair of supposedly related classes. Darwin's own views implied that we would discover a large number of intermediate forms after the sort of extensive investigation we have seen in the last 100 years. In the absence of such discoveries, some biologists—e.g., Gould—now claim that species are basically very stable and that evolution of a new species takes place relatively quickly in a localized environment under pressure from extreme conditions. This view, "punctuated equilibrium," predicts that fossils of intermediate forms would be very rare.

Van Inwagen objects. First, a statistical problem: "Even if there were few enough intermediates between fish and amphibians for it to be highly improbable that we should have found any of their fossils, it could nevertheless be highly probable that we should have found fossils of intermediates between *some* two classes" (148). Moreover, it seems impossible that any series of small enough intermediate steps between, say, fish and amphibians could contain members each of which was an organism with an evolutionary advantage. There are, then, two possibilities: an intelligent being has been guiding evolution, or there is some "yet undiscovered mechanism that does the same thing—perhaps not as efficiently as an intelligent being, but efficiently enough" (151). Finally, it is questionable whether the biological basis for the unlearned cognitive capacities of human beings evolved by natural selection from nonhuman primates. Our paleolithic ancestors—say, thirty thousand years ago—had the same cognitive capacities as we. The saganist says those capacities evolved from the ancestors of our paleolithic ancestors. But what quality or set of qualities could have both constituted the biological basis for the likes of theoretical physics *and* conferred an evolutionary advantage? A natural candidate is "intelligence"; but, says van Inwagen, there is no such thing as intelligence *simpliciter*. The quality that enabled Thomas Mann to write great novels would not, with a different education, have enabled him to discover the general theory of relativity.

"Non Est Hick" begins with an extended parody of a popular picture of the world religions derived from John Hick. This picture has it that the religions agree on essentials, such as the claim that human beings are all striving towards a divine reality which is somehow beyond the reach of human thought and language. This striving is largely an attempt to free ourselves of self-centeredness and achieve 'reality-centeredness'. Of course, these different religions disagree about the details, but that is exactly what you'd expect given the different socio-economic conditions in which they arose.

Van Inwagen believes that this picture is so fundamentally skewed that it isn't worth his time to explain why. Like other forms of relativism

and so-called tolerance, this story about religion is offered to orthodox theists as the only rational, modern and sophisticated approach to the variety of religious belief. Van Inwagen undertakes to show Christians a more reasonable response to religious diversity.

He starts with the traditional account of God as personal and perfect in love and power, who created human beings in His image—which meant giving them freedom and the capacity to know Him. Crucial to this account is the Fall. We freely turned away from God and as a result are somehow ruined. He compares our condition to that of a large modern city which has been lifted several yards into the air and then dropped. Almost all of the buildings are in ruin, although some—entirely by chance—are more habitable than others. We are like the buildings. What traces of our original intellectual, moral and spiritual capacities we retain is largely a matter of chance. That we retain any spiritual capacities at all explains the phenomenon of religion. These capacities are distributed randomly throughout humanity. There is no reason (thus far) to suppose Christians have a better handle on the truth than members of other religions.

Van Inwagen argues that, unlike other religions or nations or institutions, the people of Israel and the Church were deliberately created by God. As such, the Church is radically unlike other religious institutions. It is part of the Enlightenment agenda, he says, to deny this. He thinks it is unique because the Church has been the single most important influence in the formation of modern Europe, and modern Europe is absolutely unique in a number of good and bad ways. No other society produced science, the rule of law, the independent judiciary, universal suffrage, the concept of human rights, near-universal literacy, world wars, hydrogen bombs, and worldwide colonialism. "If a tree bears unique fruit, then it is probably a unique tree."

He anticipates an objection: "Well, isn't it fortunate for you that you just happen to be a member of this 'unique instrument of salvation'. I suppose you realize that if you had been raised among Muslims, you would make similar claims for Islam?" (213). He does realize it; but he notes that all interesting beliefs are like this. If we had been born and educated differently, we very likely would not have held them. But we retain those beliefs, and in many cases, justifiedly. Is this arrogance? Van Inwagen responds: "...[I]f I am to be charged with arrogance, it had better not be by the authors of the picture of world religions that I outlined at the beginning of this essay. Any of them that flings a charge of arrogance at me is going to find himself surrounded by a lot of broken domestic glass. I may believe that everything the Muslim believes that is inconsistent with what I believe is false. But then so does everyone who accepts the law of the excluded middle or the principle of non-contradiction. What I do not do is to inform the Muslim that every tenet of Islam that is inconsistent with Buddhism is not really essential to Islam. (Nor do I believe in my heart of hearts that every tenet of Islam that is inconsistent with the beliefs of late-twentieth-century middle-class Anglo-American professors is not really essential to Islam.)"

The essay ends: "If we are Christians we must believe that salvation

has not come to humanity through Confucius or Gautama or Mohammed. We must believe that the salvation of humanity began with events that were quite unrelated to the lives and teachings of these men. We must believe that it began when some women standing outside a tomb were told, 'He is not here'" (216).

These are excellent essays. They are at once orthodox and original, reaffirming old truths and invigorating them with powerful arguments and vivid word-pictures. They are hard-headed, honest and profoundly serious, yet frequently witty and occasionally hilarious.

Van Inwagen dedicates the collection to Alvin Plantinga with the following inscription:

> A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid.
> Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel,
> but on a candlestick;
> and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.
> — Matthew 5:14, 15

It lives up to its inscription.

NOTES

1. Some readers will be disappointed that much of van Inwagen's other writing in the philosophy of religion is omitted. Happily, however, Westview Press will soon publish it.
2. See Plantinga, "Self Profile," in *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), 97, n33.
3. We discuss this in "The Christian Theodicist's Appeal to Love," *Religious Studies* (1993), 185-92.
4. Paul Draper, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Nous* (1989), in ed. Daniel Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996), 12-29.
5. See the essays by Draper and van Inwagen in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 175-92 and 219-34.
6. See Bruce Russell, "Defenseless," *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 200-201. On page 205, n12, Russell says the claim that there is no minimum number of cases of animal suffering that God could allow to guarantee a world that is not massively irregular is "irrelevant" to his objection. We just showed how it is relevant. See also van Inwagen's remarks on pages 234-35.
7. Thus van Inwagen puts into the mouth of the genesiac literalist words analogous to those of Stratfordians—literary theorists who hold the orthodox view of the the authorship of *Hamlet*—that a glover's son from Stratford was its author. An apt analogy, although perhaps a little hard on the genesaic literalists, who are not quite as naive and dogmatic as the Stratfordians. For more on this important matter, see Charlton Ogburn, *The Mysterious William Shakespeare* (Maclean, Virginia: EPM Publications, Inc. 1984), Richard Whalen, *Shakespeare: Who was He?* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger: 1994), and Joseph Sobran, *Alias Shakespeare* (New York: Free Press, 1997).