

Review of Weisberger, A. (1999) *Suffering Belief: Evil and the Anglo-American Defence of Theism*, Toronto Studies in Religion 23, New York: Peter Lang, pp.xvi+245

Perhaps almost all non-theists will agree that ‘the problem of evil’ has some role in their reasons for rejecting traditional Western theism. When they consult their intuitions, non-theists typically do not find it credible to suppose that this is the kind of world which could have been created by an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good being. Moreover, when they review their reasons for non-belief, non-theists typically find that a catalogue of the amounts and kinds of evils which are to be found in the world adds some weight to the case against the existence of such a being.

However, it is one thing to suppose that ‘the problem of evil’ has some kind of justificatory role in non-theistic rejection of theistic beliefs; it is quite another question whether ‘the problem of evil’ poses some kind of insuperable problem for reasonable theistic belief. After all, theists and non-theists typically disagree about the plausibility of belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good being in the light of all of the other relevant evidence (i.e. all of the evidence apart from considerations concerning the amounts and kinds of evils which are to be found in the world)—and they also typically disagree about the truth of various kinds of subsidiary claims which can have a bearing on ‘the problem of evil’, e.g. claims about the compatibility of determinism and freedom. While it seems clearly reasonable for non-theists to allow ‘the problem of evil’ to have some role in their reasons for rejecting traditional Western theism, it is much less obvious that it is reasonable for non-theists to claim that ‘the problem of evil’ raises insuperable difficulties for theists.

In her book, Weisberger argues a case for the stronger claim, i.e. Weisberger argues for the conclusion that ‘the problem of evil’ amounts to a disproof of the existence of the god of traditional Western theism. For various reasons, I think that her case is not quite as strong as she supposes, and that she doesn’t manage to establish that anyone who is both reasonable and fully apprised of the facts about the amounts, kinds, and distribution of evils in the world will deny the existence of the god of traditional Western theism. However, this is not to say that there are no things to admire about her book, which does succeed in making vivid the kinds of difficulties which ‘the problem of evil’ can pose for traditional Western theism.

The structure of Weisberger’s book follows the structure of John Mackie’s deservedly famous paper ‘Evil and Omnipotence’, which was published in Mind in 1955.

Preface

Introduction

1. The Argument from Evil
2. The Concessionary Solutions
3. The Non-Concessionary Solutions: Natural Evil
4. Moral Evil and Soul-Making
5. The Free Will Defence
6. The Final Solution

Conclusion

In the Preface, Weisberger lays her cards on the table: she gives a clear and concise summary of the overall shape of her argument. She announces her belief that the success or failure of the theodicies which she investigates is pivotal for determining the success or failure of the argument from evil. In defence of this controversial claim, she appeals to considerations of burden of proof: it is the theist who is making an 'extraordinary' claim, and hence who faces the burden of squaring this claim with the 'ordinary' facts about the world. Moreover, she claims that to reject this burden of proof is to admit that the 'extraordinary' claim in question is 'unfalsifiable' (and hence, at least by imputation, not deserving of reasonable belief).

In the Introduction, Weisberger begins with a discussion of some of the kinds and amounts of evils in the world. She then turns to a brief discussion of some of the key terms which are used in framing her discussion—'omnipotence', 'omniscience', 'moral perfection', 'God', 'evil'—and then provides a quick summary of the contents of the rest of the book.

In Chapter 1, Weisberger considers issues concerning the proper framing of 'the argument from evil'. After some preliminary observations, Weisberger claims that the proper formulation of 'the argument from evil' is as follows: the claims

1. God is all-powerful.
2. God is all-wise.
3. God is all-good.
4. Such and such amounts and kinds of evils exist.
5. If it is logically possible to eradicate evil without eradicating any possible (overriding) greater good, an all-powerful, all-wise, and all-good being will do so.
6. It is reasonable to believe that it is logically possible for God to eradicate at least some of the evil which exists without eradicating a greater good.

are logically inconsistent, and yet 5., and 6., are claims which it is not reasonable for anyone to give up. There is then a lengthy discussion of the differences between 'logical' and 'evidential' formulations of 'the problem of evil', and a briefer discussion of the issue of burden of proof. (I have made some small changes to Weisberger's formulation of 'the argument from evil'. Even so, there are various ways in which it seems unsatisfactory. Moreover, there are more versions of 'the argument from evil' than is apparent from her taxonomy. However, I shall not worry about these matters here.)

In Chapter 2, Weisberger discusses 'concessionary' solutions to 'the problem of evil', i.e. solutions which give up on at least one of the first four premises. Most of Weisberger's discussion is taken up by consideration of the claim that there really is no evil, since what we call 'evil' is nothing more than privation of good. Other positions which get some discussion include: the view that there is no evil, but only the illusion that there is evil; the view that God is not perfectly good (perhaps because our concept of 'goodness' is inadequate to the characterisation of a divine attribute); and the view that God is not all-powerful. Given the way that Weisberger characterises 'the problem of evil', is it a little odd to call these responses 'solutions'; unless God is supposed to be all-powerful, all-wise and all-good, there is not even the *prima facie* appearance of a problem ...

In Chapter 3, Weisberger discusses ‘non-concessionary’ solutions to ‘the problem of evil’ which hold either that evil is a necessary counterpart of good, or that evil is necessary as a means to (greater) good. As Weisberger points out, these solutions do not seem very plausible, since it does not seem right to claim that evil is a logically necessary counterpart of good, or that evil is logically necessary as a means to (greater) good—and yet it is plainly inadequate for the purposes of theodicy to claim that evil is merely nomologically necessary as a counterpart of good, or that evil is nomologically necessary as a means to (greater) good. (God could have made a world with different laws. If some of those worlds are better than our world, then an all-powerful, all-wise and all-good God would have made one of those worlds instead.)

In Chapter 4, Weisberger discusses ‘non-concessionary’ solutions to ‘the problem of evil’ which hold that the universe is (overall) better with some evil in it than it would be if there were no evil in it. In particular, she focusses on John Hick’s ‘soulmaking theodicy’, and on the supposed virtues of worlds which permit the ‘free development of morally mature agents’. Hick’s views have been well-criticised by Kane, and by Madden & Hare; Weisberger’s discussion here mostly recapitulates these previous criticisms.

In Chapter 5, Weisberger discusses ‘non-concessionary’ solutions to ‘the problem of evil’ which hold, more or less, that it was logically impossible for God to make a world in which human agents always freely choose the good. (If not logically impossible, then at the very least, it was not within God’s power to ensure that God made a world in which every always freely chooses the good.) Weisberger claims that there are at least the following three points on which free will defences can be challenged: (1) it is not clear that free will is so valuable that its value outweighs the costs of the consequent moral evil; (2) it is not clear that there is a decent free will justification of natural evil; and (3) it is not clear that it is logically impossible for God to make a world in which human agents always freely choose the good. The last of these claims has been much-discussed, and is usually linked to lengthy discussion of determinism and agent-causation: Weisberger’s discussion of these matters is very brief, and does not really do justice to the recent literature. (Perhaps her views about this debate are similar to her views on technical discussions of evidential formulations of the problem of evil, viz. that theodicies in question can be seen to be inadequate even if the technicalities are not pursued. However, in both cases, it seems to me that this is questionable: I do not think that ‘free will solutions’ can be properly assessed without detailed consideration of questions about the links between determinism and freedom.)

In Chapter 6, Weisberger discusses one last ‘non-concessionary’ solution to ‘the problem of evil’ which holds that evil is a foreseen but unfortunate byproduct of the ‘natural machinery’ of the world. As Weisberger points out, there are various serious difficulties which confront this suggestion: in particular—as we noted already in connection with some previous ‘non-concessionary’ solutions—it isn’t enough that the actual natural machinery has these unfortunate byproducts; rather, it has to be that any possible ‘natural machinery’ would have these unfortunate byproducts. (For, otherwise, God surely has an obligation to make a world using ‘non-polluting natural machinery’.) Yet non-theists at least will find it hard to believe that there is no

logically possible natural machinery which need not lead to evil as an unfortunate byproduct of its operation.

Perhaps the main fault which I find with the overall line which Weisberger takes lies in her appeals to the burden of proof. It seems to me that the right method here is to formulate the competing views—i.e. theistic and non-theistic theories of the world—and then to ask which one is best supported by the total available evidence. If theists can reasonably suppose that they have lots of evidence which supports the claim that God exists, then they may reasonably believe that there is a solution to ‘the problem of evil’, even if they do not know what that solution is. To insist, that theists have to provide a satisfactory theodicy or else abandon their theism, is to fail to pay proper regard to ‘the principle of total evidence’. Of course, this is not to say that non-theists cannot reasonably suppose that ‘the problem of evil’ helps to sway the weight of total evidence in favour of non-theism—indeed, I started out by claiming that this will very likely be the case—but that seems to me to be a very different issue.

The other important fault which I find with Weisberger’s book is her decision to ignore recent technical discussions of various matters. I do not think that there can be a fully adequate treatment of ‘the problem of evil’ which fails to pay attention to the recent literature on evidential formulations of ‘the problem of evil’, questions about the compatibility of freedom and determinism, and so forth. Of course, this judgement is really consequential on my former judgement: if I thought that her prosecution of ‘the problem of evil’ were fully successful, then I would have no such complaint.

Despite its faults, I think that this book does a good job of presenting a large amount of material which ought to be considered in an assessment of ‘the problem of evil’. It would not have taken too much reworking to make it a very good book indeed.