

Perry Hendricks: *Skeptical Theism*. Palgrave MacMillan, 2023, 294 + xiii pp. \$99.00 (ebook); \$129.99 (hardcover)

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Skeptical theism is a popular and widely discussed family of responses to arguments from evil. Perry Hendricks' *Skeptical Theism*, based on his dissertation, is the first monograph length defense of skeptical theism. Hendricks spends little time on the historical precedents of skeptical theism or comparing and contrasting the skeptical theistic responses already in the literature. Rather, *Skeptical Theism* systematically defends Hendricks' preferred version of skeptical theism while also touching on a wide range of issues in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion.

The mainstay of skeptical theism are critiques of arguments from evil. Those critiques normally involve some claims in philosophy of religion or philosophical theology about, crudely put, our epistemic access to considerations relevant to God's deliberation and action. After some stage setting in chapter 1, Hendricks uses chapters 2 and 3 to explain and defend his preferred formulation of those claims. He calls them "Axiological Skeptical Theism" (AST) and "Deontological Skeptical Theism" (DST). Both claims are complex to state. AST can be summarized as follows. There is no reason we have that is (i) independent of our beliefs about whether or not God exists, (ii) that is in principle available to everyone, (iii) that is a reason we recognize as a reason for thinking (iv) that the perceived (total) value of some evil resembles its actual (total) value (13-16). Similarly, DST can be summarized as follows. There is no reason we have (i) independent of our beliefs about whether or not God exists, (ii) that is in principle available to everyone, (iii) that is a reason we recognize as a reason for thinking that (iv) the perceived weight of God's reasons resembles the actual weight of God's reasons (13-4, 51-3). Hendricks briefly argues that AST and DST should be our "default" positions. He then devotes the rest of each chapter to defending AST and DST from potential objections.

Hendricks argues that DST is not equivalent to AST. For, he argues, it may be that the weight of God's reasons is not fully determined by the value and disvalue of things. Here Hendricks uses a distinction between justifying and requiring reasons (53-55). For instance, the fact that something is good might *justify* God in bringing it about, without *requiring* God to bring it about. Many extant discussions of skeptical theism focus on something like AST. But, Hendricks maintains, such discussions are incomplete because they neglect something like DST. Consequently, for the remainder of the book, Hendricks separates his discussion of arguments into those that are relevant to AST and DST. (Though, it should be noted, the difference between AST and DST rarely matters to Hendricks' more specific criticisms of arguments from evil or his response to objections.)

In chapters 4 and 5, Hendricks uses AST and DST to criticize a range of arguments from evil. In chapter 4, Hendricks focuses on Noseeum arguments, inspired by William Rowe; equiprobability

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arguments, inspired by Michael Tooley; and Humean arguments, inspired by Paul Draper. In chapter 5, Hendricks focuses on arguments from Atheism that are not arguments from evil such as arguments from divine hiddenness and evolutionary arguments. Hendricks argues that AST and DST undermine all of these arguments for Atheism. A central move is that, in supporting their premises, these arguments make inferences from perceived value to actual value, or the perceived weight to the actual weight of God's reasons. But AST and DST undermine such inferences, thereby undermining the support for the premises of those arguments.

Many critics don't doubt that skeptical theism might undermine various arguments for Atheism; but that's because they regard skeptical theism as an all-consuming skeptical acid, eating away at all knowledge and reasonable belief. Hendricks responds to such charges in chapters 6, 7, and 8. In chapter 6, he argues that skeptical theism does not undermine common sense beliefs about the world, especially if one is a Christian Theist. A central move is that many commonsense beliefs are non-inferential or are inferential but do not use the kinds of inferences used in arguments for Atheism (149, 151, 155). In chapter 7, he argues that skeptical theism is consistent with faith in many (purportedly) revealed truths. A central move here is that faith in certain propositions does not require belief in those propositions (174ff.). In chapter 8, he argues that skeptical theism may undermine arguments for Theism that rely upon determining what God values or what God's reasons might be. However, skeptical theism does not undermine all theistic arguments. A central move is that some arguments for Theism might turn on facts that entail God exists or facts that resemble God (224ff).

Lastly, in chapter 9, Hendricks considers "commonsense" or "phenomenological" arguments from evil. These arguments use general epistemological principles on which certain phenomenological states are sufficient for *prima facie* reasonable or justified belief. Given those principles, if one has a phenomenological state in which, e.g., an evil seems gratuitous, then that is sufficient for one to be *prima facie* reasonable or justified in believing there is gratuitous evil. Thus, defenders of these arguments maintain that people have justification for believing the premise of an argument from evil that is non-inferential, based on an experience as opposed to an inference from other beliefs. Further, since this justification is non-inferential, it may be thought to side-step Hendricks' earlier criticisms of arguments from evil. In response, and perhaps shockingly, Hendricks denies that people have phenomenal states like an evil seeming gratuitous to them or it seeming to one that God lacks a justifying reason for permitting a horrific evil (240-241, 249-250)). But more importantly and plausibly, he argues that even if people had these phenomenal states, the resulting beliefs are not justified or reasonable because they are defeated by considering the ideas and arguments of skeptical theists (242ff., 251).

The book is well-organized, with each chapter having a clear thesis and aim. The chapters fit together and build to create a systematic defense of skeptical theism. As a result, the work is best engaged as a whole; and it would be challenging to excerpt individual chapters to teach in a seminar. The writing can be dense at times, involving a large amount of semi-technical terms and fast-moving argumentation. But advanced undergraduates would be able to understand it with a little guidance. Hendricks' style includes a number of jokes and rhetorical flourishes. Given the

subject matter, some might find them inappropriate, while others may appreciate the attempts at levity.

*Skeptical Theism* contains several useful and novel discussions. First, the idea that God's reasons are not exhausted by what is good and bad is controversial; but it is clearly a coherent idea. So Hendricks does well to separate out an axiological version of skeptical theism and a deontological one. Second, Hendricks dedicates a fair bit of time to responding to equiprobability arguments from evil and developing a novel response in terms of the nature of value. His discussion is welcome as equiprobability arguments from evil are underdiscussed. Third, Hendricks proposes that some theistic arguments might be based on metaethical reasoning about resemblance to God. That's an interesting idea, and it would be worthwhile to explore it especially in contraposition to Philo's criticisms of theistic arguments in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

However, the underlying epistemology of the book could be more fully developed. For instance, Hendricks frames his discussion, and formulations of AST and DST, in terms of "public" and "private" reasons, where the former are reasons that are "in principle, equally available to others" (13) whereas "private" reasons are assimilated to one's own mental states (14). But this distinction is obscure; and how it relates to the publicly formulated arguments he criticizes is unclear. (For instance, if my beliefs are always based on my beliefs or experiences, does it follow that I *never* form beliefs on the basis of public reasons? And, if so, doesn't that make AST and DST, which are formulated in terms of public reasons, irrelevant to what I am reasonable in believing?) Similarly, in chapters 4 and 5, Hendricks argues that AST and DST undermine various arguments from evil; in so arguing, Hendricks is implicitly relying upon some kind of general epistemological principles about when inferences are no longer reasonable. But, for the most part, those epistemological principles are left unarticulated. The neglect of the underlying epistemology leads to a perplexing outcome: the extended discussion of "common sense" or "phenomenological" arguments from evil in chapter 9. For decades, when skeptical theists have criticized arguments from evil, they have relied implicitly or explicitly on epistemic principles for when beliefs are reasonable. Those principles are inconsistent with phenomenal states being sufficient for *prima facie* justification (see, e.g., Wykstra (1984: 84-87), van Inwagen (1991: 150-1), Alston (1996: 317ff.), Bergmann (2001: 285-6, 289); for additional discussion, Perrine (2022: 545-548)). So one might have expected a skeptical theist to have dismissed these arguments quickly—as resting on epistemic principles that skeptical theists have already argued are faulty. No extended discussion needed.

The greatest virtue of the book is its scope. The book covers a huge number of topics in the philosophy of religion. It discusses a wide range of arguments from evil, but other arguments for atheism as well. There are also discussions of natural theology, the nature of faith, and theistic metaethics. As a result, the book is not only a good introduction to the skeptical theism and problem of evil literature; it's a good introduction to analytic philosophy of religion. It could reasonably serve as a primary text in an upper division course in philosophy of religion, anchoring discussions that could split off in different directions.

However, the greatest virtue of the book is also its greatest vice. Because the book covers so many topics, it rarely explores any of the topics in great depth. As a result, readers may feel that the book doesn't make sufficient progress on some entrenched disputes. To provide one example, many have worried that theists who accept DST would be committed to skepticism or moral paralysis about how to act. Hendricks dismisses this objection, in a single paragraph, by claiming that DST is about God's reasons, not ours (68). But it's easy to see how to retool the objection to sidestep the response: theists may not want to interfere with God's projects and plans; theists who accept DST do not know which of their actions interfere with God's projects or plans; so theists who accept DST are led to a skepticism or moral paralysis about how to act. I'm not saying that this objection succeeds. Rather, my point is that Hendricks' discussion of this objection, like several other issues, is too brief to make progress on entrenched disputes.

Of course, in a certain sense, this isn't a deep complaint: one can't write on a wide range of topics, with a detailed discussion of all the topics, while *also* keeping the pages under 300. But it does mean that *Skeptical Theism* may function best as an introduction to the literature on skeptical theism and the problem of evil as opposed to the definitive defense of skeptical theism for which some might have hoped.

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