**Laura Ekstrom, *God, Suffering, and the Value of Free Will* Oxford University Press, 2021, 238 pp., $99.00 (hbk).**

**(Lightly updated, quotes added.)**

Louise Antony calls Laura Ekstrom’s book “courageous” (backcover). I have no clue what it means for a work of philosophy to be courageous, but Ekstrom’s book is certainly good. And despite the fact that I think there are about a million problems with it, I recommend it to those interested in the problem of evil or skeptical theism: it's well researched and clearly argued—undergraduates as well as professional philosophers will find this book useful. (Well, this recommendation comes with one caveat: the book—through no fault of the author—is priced at $99, which is worth roughly 90 McChickens. I cannot in good conscience recommend any philosophy book over 90 McChickens.) In what follows, I will summarize and comment on Ekstrom’s book. I will have more to say about chapters I personally found interesting (i.e. chapters 1, 2, and 4) and less to say about chapters that I found less interesting (i.e. chapters 3, and 5-8).

In the first chapter, Ekstrom considers a plethora of issues, and lays out different arguments from evil. For example, she considers an argument from pointless evils: if God exists, she says, He would not allow pointless evils. But there are pointless evils. And so God does not exist. The next argument she considers she calls the ‘argument from facts about evil.’ Basically, if God exists, then “certain global facts about evil in our world would not obtain, including the vast amount of suffering, the intensity of suffering in truly horrid cases, and the unfair distribution of suffering.” (pg. 19) However, such facts do obtain. And so, she says, God doesn’t exist. In response to these arguments, she considers several theodicies: a punishment theodicy,[[1]](#footnote-0) a soul-building theodicy, and a free will theodicy. Ekstrom argues that none of these theodicies work in the end: they all leave (at least) some evil unexplained. Additionally, she argues that all three of these theodicies rely on the value of free will.

I will air one minor objection and one minor quibble with this chapter. First the minor objection. *One* way Ekstrom rejects these three theodicies is by showing that each theodicy leaves (at least) some evil unexplained: she argues that punishment theodicies don’t explain all evil,[[2]](#footnote-1) soul-building theodicies don’t explain all evil,[[3]](#footnote-2) and free will theodicies don’t explain all evil.[[4]](#footnote-3) Let’s grant her these points: individually, these theodicies are inadequate. The next step to take is to consider whether they *collectively* explain all evil. It’s plausible, after all, that God has different reasons for allowing different evils: some instances of evil may be explained by one reason, while other instances of evil are explained by another. However, she doesn’t consider this issue in this chapter. Instead, she briefly considers something very much like this issue in chapter 4, on pages 91-95.

Now for my minor quibble. Ekstrom toys with something akin to anti-theodicy: it’s natural, she thinks, to regard theodicy (at least initially) as (at least somewhat) distasteful. She says “[i]t is natural to think that, when bad things happen to good people and when religious believers attempt to console those who suffer with reasons—offering up alleged divine justifications for permitting such things—they ought simply to be quiet.” (pg. 21) Ekstrom is, of course, right on this point: it’s not good to offer theodicy in response to suffering. But it’s also not clear that this is an issue worth addressing in this venue: perhaps some do this on occasion (while I don’t doubt this happens, I’m unsure how frequent this is), but I’m skeptical this is an issue relevant to readers of her book—I’m pretty sure that Richard Swinburne doesn’t hand out copies of *Providence and The Problem of Evil* at the local children’s hospital.

Chapter 2 considers the value of libertarian free will.[[5]](#footnote-4) There are two relevant questions here: is free will valuable? And, if it is, how valuable is it? She considers different possible explanations of free will’s intrinsic value, e.g. that it makes us “mini-creators.” Ekstrom then considers several candidates for free will’s extrinsic value: that it enables the best type of love, moral responsibility, meaningful lives, a sense of self, genuinely good actions, and genuine creativity. Most of these Ekstrom finds wanting.

One major issue here (and similar issues arise elsewhere in this chapter), is Ekstrom’s contention that

[i]f an action’s being committed of the agent’s own free will brings the intrinsic value of acting with free will into the equation of overall value or devalue of the situation involving the harmful act, then a free harmful act will be overall better than a harmful act that does not have added to its disvalue the...value of free will. (2021: 51)[[6]](#footnote-5)

And this, says Ekstrom, is “counterintuitive.” Presumably the thought is that an *agent* having free will is valuable, and this is what (supposedly) justifies God in allowing evil. However, given this understanding, Ekstrom’s “counterintuitive” result doesn’t follow: there’s a difference between *a situation* being more valuable because the *agent* has free will, and *the act* being worse *because* it was performed by a free agent. The former can be more valuable while the latter is worse or more disvaluable (or whatever). And so this “counterintuitive” result is avoided: one can accept that a free evil act is *worse* because it was performed freely while holding that the situation is more valuable since it involves a free agent.

Ekstrom appears to think that it’s of *no* value that victims of the free actions of other creatures were in some sense useful, and that it’s morally repugnant to suggest otherwise.[[7]](#footnote-6) For example, she says that

if you were a threatening person coming after my children with an obvious intent to harm them, *your free will would have absolutely zero value in my calculation over what to do*. And if there were a dozen of you coming after us, *the value of the free will all of you* [sic] *is not more, but still zero*. (2021: 50, both emphases mine).

I’ll just register my contrary intuition: it seems to me clear that being of use is of *some* value. Probably not enough to justify much evil, but it certainly adds some value. Consider: which is worse *for victims of injustice*: suffering that injustice *uselessly* or suffering it and being of some use to others? The former, of course, is worse. In another place, she asks why free will would make saving someone’s life better; she wonders why an agent *freely* saving another’s life would be better than an agent being determined to do so (2021: 65). She says that the explanation *can’t* be free will’s intrinsic value, since she’s considering in this section only extrinsic value. What this tells us, then, is that she should have considered cases like this in the intrinsic section—there seems to be something to the claim that an agent’s (especially self-sacrificial) actions are *better* when done freely than when determined. E.g. if Sally *freely* sacrifices her life to save Karen, it’s better than if she non-freely does so. How much value is added? Who knows. But there seems to be *some* added value. A similar exercise can be run on her examples involving other purported candidates for free will’s extrinsic value.

Finally, it’s worth noting that Ekstrom doesn’t consider whether God might have a duty to provide free will even though its value doesn’t outweigh the bad that comes with it (Mooney 2019, Reitan 2014). If there is such a duty (and it’s sufficiently weighty), then that free will isn’t valuable enough to justify certain evils is insufficient for her purposes.

Chapter 3 considers a divine intimacy theodicy, in which God allows evil so that the sufferer can more intimately relate to him. Ekstrom offers multiple objections to this theodicy. While her objections may show that divine intimacy can’t account for all or even most evil, it still seems plausible to think it can explain *some* evil, which Ekstrom agrees (2021: 90).

Ekstrom considers skeptical theism in chapter 4. This chapter, like Ekstrom’s entire book, has a million problems with it. However, also like Ekstrom’s entire book, it’s good! Her strongest part of this chapter is her attack on the analogies that skeptical theists often rely on to defend their position—she shows that whether these analogies support skeptical theism isn’t as straightforward as some have thought.

Say that an evil is pointless if there is no God-justifying reason for it, and that if there is a God-justifying reason for it, there is *at least* a good logically connected to the evil that outweighs it.[[8]](#footnote-7) She argues that skeptical theism does not undermine arguments from evil because (a) we can directly see that there is pointless evil and (b) skeptical theism is false. I will limit myself to discussing only a few issues with (a) and (b). With respect to (a), while *some* skeptical theists think that no one ever is justified (or whatever) in thinking there is pointless evil, others leave room for this possibility (e.g. Bergmann 2014: 210 and Hendricks 2020b: 56).[[9]](#footnote-8) Additionally, throughout her chapter, Ekstrom provides examples of purportedly clear cases of pointless evil, and makes claims about evils appearing or seeming pointless. However, if we keep before our minds what pointless evil amounts to (i.e. there being no good state of affairs logically connected to it that outweighs the evil), it is hard to maintain this judgment. True, some evils appear *particularly bad*. But it doesn’t seem like there’s no greater good logically connected to it, or worse bad logically connected to its absence. That would be like saying that Mount Baker seems like the tallest mountain on Earth as opposed to saying (much more plausibly) that it seems very tall.[[10]](#footnote-9)

Ekstrom also rejects Bergmann’s skeptical theism which, in effect, says that we have no good reason to think that the goods, evils, and entailment relations we know of are representative of the goods, evils, and entailment relations that there actually are. (Bergmann 2001)[[11]](#footnote-10) Contrary to Bergmann, she thinks we do have a good reason to think that the goods, evils, (etc.) are representative. She says

The good reason is that we are not only observant beings...and imaginative moral beings...but also intelligent persons who think enormously hard about ethical principles, moral dilemmas, and questions about what positive ends could not be brought about in any better way and who make decisions concerning how to act in light of considerations of right and wrong, good and evil (pg. 115).

And she later notes that we don’t know of any (serious) limitations of our ability to assess evil (pg. 117).[[12]](#footnote-11) Her first point is (basically) just that (some) intelligent humans have thought hard about whether there are God-justifying reasons for evil. But this is only relevant if we aren’t limited in our ability to assess evil and its connections to goods. And so her “good reason” amounts to the purported fact that we don’t know of any serious limitation of ours with respect to evaluating evil. However, *not knowing* of a limitation of our ability to assess evil is not the same as having a good reason to think our knowledge of goods, evils, etc. is representative. Moreover, we *know* that we are limited on this subject—we *know* that humans are not great at discerning necessary connections between goods and evils. This is exemplified by Ekstrom’s own discussion of theodicy: there is massive disagreement about what necessary connections there are between goods and evils, and massive disagreement about how (dis)valuable different goods and evils are (see: history). No doubt she thinks her arguments are successful, but—in addition to the fact that they aren’t *clearly* successful—the fact that there is so much disagreement here gives us reason to doubt our capabilities of discerning the relevant connections and values.[[13]](#footnote-12)

In Chapter 5 Ekstrom argues that God’s existence is incompatible with the existence of a hell with a non-zero population. I’ll limit myself to the following comment: arguments about the incompatibility of hell with God would benefit if more focus was given to the nature of atonement. In Chapter 6, she considers Murphy’s (2017) view that God is not essentially morally perfect, and finds it wanting. Chapter 7 considers whether someone not committed to the existence of God can sensibly live a religious life (Ekstrom answers: No). And in chapter 8, Ekstrom briefly reiterates each chapter’s central theses.[[14]](#footnote-13)

**References**

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Rowe, William. (1979). “The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (4): 335-341.

1. Strangely, Ekstrom classifies punishment theodicies as “traditional.” While they do pop up every now and again (and arguably appear in the book of Job, as she notes), it’s hard to see why punishment theodicies should be seen as “traditional.” [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. “There are many instances of pain and suffering that appear for all we can tell to be clear counterexamples” to the view that all evil is justified by punishment, e.g. a child suffering for the actions of her parents. (2021: 24-25). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. “Some instances of surviving harm ourselves bring out the best in us...But not all instances do this. Some cases of suffering are so devastating that they destroy am individuals bilto function” (2021: 27) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. E.g. she notes that some “cases of chronic pain have no known direct connection to human choices…” (2021: 32) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. All references to free will in this review should be understood to be references to *libertarian* free will. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. See also: “if such free will is of positive intrinsic value, then a bad act done with free will is more valuable overall than is a wrong act done without free will” (2021: 51). This is false for the reasons mentioned below. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Ekstrom has communicated to me that she does not mean to endorse such a strong view. Given the context of this quote, this is a (but perhaps not *the*) natural reading of the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Ekstrom (pgs. 13-14) takes this understanding from Rowe (1979) and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. In discussing Bergmann’s skeptical theism, she starts off asking “Why would we think that we are not justified in believing of any instance of evil that it is pointless? One line of support for this thought may be what Bergmann suggests...” (2021: 112) implying that Bergmann’s skeptical theism purports to show that we aren’t justified in thinking any evil is pointless. But he explicitly restricts the scope of skeptical theism to certain types of inference (2014: 210), and also says that it is a mistake to think that “the skeptical theist’s skepticism “is supposed to work for just any argument from hiddenness of horrors”” (2014: 210). And so Bergmann’s skeptical theism―at least by his lights―doesn’t preclude one from having justification for believing evil is pointless or gratuitous. See also her claim that “[t]he skeptical theist who responds to the argument from pointless evil denies both that we are justified in believing that there are pointless evils on the basis of directly seeing their pointlessness and that, given speculation about potential God-justifying reasons and our failure to detect them concerning any particular case of evil, we can justifiably infer that the instance of evil is, or probably is, pointless” (2021: 100). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. I make a similar point in Hendricks 2018: 350 and footnote 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. More exactly, this represents three of the four theses Bergmann defends. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. She also says that if God exists then we are “like God.” (pg. 115). But being like God doesn’t (at least obviously) entail the ability to know the all-things-considered logical consequences of an action. So it’s not clear how this would help her case. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. I develop this point more in Hendricks 2020a. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Thanks to Philip Swenson and Justin Mooney for comments on this. Comments from Laura Ekstrom were also helpful. And thanks especially to G.L.G.—Colin Patrick Mitchell—for particularly insightful comments. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)