

The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil

Editor(s):

Chad Meister, Paul K. Moser

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Review

The various manifestations of evil in this world not only threaten our physical and moral integrity, but also give rise to a grave philosophical and theological conundrum, by which men of faith are especially affected. An average churchgoer does not often contemplate the doctrine of transubstantiation or the problem of universals, but he or she is bound to reflect on the universal experience of suffering and injustice, because this particular fact, in the garb of the argument of evil, represent probably the most serious challenge to theism. Evil and its ubiquity is thus one of those phenomena that vex the mind of both the man in the street and the professional philosopher. Chad Meister's and Paul Moser's *Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil* (CCPE) aspires to illuminate the most important contemporary strategies that a philosopher or a theologian might employ in the attempt to deal with the problem of evil (PoE), presents insightful overviews of the traditional answers that the proponents of the Abrahamic religions offered in defense of God's omnibenevolence, but also, without any bias, puts forward the atheologists' views that challenge the viability of a classical monotheistic faith.

CCPE is divided in two parts. The first one bears the title "Conceptual Issues and Controversies," and is comprised of seven chapters. John Cottingham (chap. 1) essays to demonstrate that, at least for a religious person, the instances of distress and anguish are not posing a detrimental threat to meaning and value of life, on account of suffering's redemptive power. Charles Taliaferro (chap. 2) ruminates on the role of beauty and ugliness in the exploration of PoE, and concludes that the theistic worldview is compatible with the human quest for goodness and beauty. Graham Oppy (chap. 3) argues that the logical argument from evil, which many consider to have been overturned already by Plantinga's free-will defense,

may be still recast in a form that will prove instrumental in pursuing the atheologian's cause. In chapter 4, Paul Draper makes a strong case against classical theism, and in favor of physicalism, by resorting to a novel version of the evidential argument from evil. Timothy Perrine and Stephen Wykstra (chap. 5) elaborate on the response to the evidential PoE known as skeptical theism, which is largely based on the principle of epistemic humility. J. L. Schellenberg, in chapter 6, explores the relation between the problem of divine hiddenness and PoE, and concludes that the former is different, more fundamental, and potentially even more damaging for the theistic position than the latter. N. N. Trakakis (chap. 7) underlines some possible backlashes of theodicean reasoning and defends the theistic position of anti-theodicy – especially against the challenge of existential pessimism – by falling back on a pastoral response to PoE.

Part 2 of this book, entitled “Interdisciplinary Issues,” includes six chapters. Christopher Southgate (chap. 8) addresses the issue of natural evil and proposes a cosmic theodicy which views suffering as a necessary concomitant of the created goods and values. In chapter 9, Margo Kitts discusses the Ancient Near Eastern literary and artistic perspectives on the concept of evil in its narrow sense of maleficent actions, performed by both superhuman and human agents. Lenn Goodman (chap. 10) offers a concise, but rather comprehensive, account of Judaism's answers to PoE, and the same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for Timothy Winter's exploration of the Islamic perspectives (chap. 12). Paul Fiddes (chap. 11) considers the intersection of the free-will defense and the Christological notion of atonement as a plausible response to PoE. The book ends with Michael Ruse's emphatic claim that the presence of evil is detrimental to the Judeo-Christian worldview (chap. 13).

Now I shall take the liberty to indicate several opportunities for further improvement of this fine volume.

Both in this book and in most of the general debate, only two items of the Leibnizian taxonomy of evil survive; the metaphysical aspect seems to have slipped out of the picture. Of course, Leibniz's notion of metaphysical evil remains open to interpretations,¹ but it is my opinion that, if understood in the sense of the creation's innate imperfection, it could serve as a useful tool in confronting certain questions, like, for example, those raised by Southgate in Chapter 8.

¹ See Antognazza, M. R. “Metaphysical Evil Revisited”. In *New Essays on Leibniz's Theodicy*. OUP, 2014.

In their “Introduction” (p. 2), Meister and Moser mention that PoE also pertains to Hinduism, Buddhism and Daoism – although I tend to agree with Ruse (p. 266) that it does so in a much less potent form – but then the reader could feel slightly disappointed upon realizing that no essay in the book actually engages with the Far Eastern philosophies.

Cottingham (chap. 1) makes a strong case for the inseparability of morality and meaning, manages to demonstrate that perpetuating evil dissolves meaning and that for evil doers suffering may be redemptive, but not that the Christian worldview protects the meaning of life even against horrendous suffering (especially when endured by infants, innocents, pre-Christian and non-Christian peoples), which, I believe, was the essay’s primary goal. Similar criticism can be leveled against Fiddes’ contribution, as he himself seems to acknowledge (chap. 11, p. 229).

Taliaferro’s essay (chap. 2) could benefit from references to Plato’s and Plotinus’ Aesthetic solution to PoE (*Leges* 903b4-c5; *Ennead* III.2.2.24-31), and their statements concerning the overall beauty of the world (e.g. *Timaeus* 29a 87c4-5 92c5-9; *Ennead* II.9.4), which so profoundly influenced St. Augustine.

Despite his obvious mastery over the subject and the well-argued case, Oppy (chap. 3) does not manage to resurrect the logical argument from evil (as he himself seems to admit on p. 63), on account of the same ole simple reason: the logical argument sets the bar too high, and all one needs to do to refute it is to demonstrate that logical consistency between the statements of God’s existence and the datum of evil is *possible*. Another point that remains unclear to me with regard to this essay is why would Oppy include Rowe’s position within a discussion of the logical problem of evil, bearing in mind that the latter’s work is emblematic of the evidential approaches.

I also beg to disagree with the view espoused by Trakkakis, that theodicean efforts are “uniquely ‘modern’ preoccupation” (p. 128); a mere glance at, for example, Plotinus’ rich theodicy, or the many *Peri Pronoias* treatises of Antiquity and Early Christianity, would suffice as an evidence to the opposite.

It could be also worth mentioning that “the only way strategy” elaborated on by Southgate (pp. 151-2), but also his cosmic theodicy as a whole, bear striking (and unacknowledged) similarities with the Platonic and Stoic explanation of natural evil as unavoidable consequence of purposeful action aimed at a higher good (*Timaeus* 75b-d; *SVF* II.1078, II.1170). Furthermore, by using the phrase “necessary concomitant” (p. 155), Southgate directly mimics the Stoic *kata parakoluthēsin* idiom.

To conclude, CCPE is a well-written book; the contributors did a good job in clearly presenting their ideas and convincingly arguing for their positions, as far as possible. An added value for the reader is the aesthetic pleasure that some of the essays offer (especially chaps. 4, 9 and 12). Thus, the present volume is a valuable addition to the existing compendiums on evil,² and a helpful guide for both students and scholars in the field of philosophy of religion. It successfully fulfils the main task set by the editors, which is not to solve PoE, but to generate new insights by highlighting some of the key points of the continuous debate between atheologians and theologians.

Viktor Ilievski,
Autonomous University of Barcelona

² Adams, M. M. and Adams, R. M. *The Problem of Evil*. OUP, 1990; Peterson, M. L. *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1992; McBrayer, J. P. and Howard-Snyder, D. *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*. Willey-Blackwell, 2013.