

God and Inscrutable Evil: In Defense of Theism and Atheism. By David O'Connor. Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield, 1998. Pp. xiii, 273. Reviewed by Daniel Howard-Snyder, Seattle Pacific University.

For *Philosophical Review*, 2001

'Orthodox theism' (OT) is "the cognitive core" of mainstream religious belief in the Abrahamic tradition, according to which God is the omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good designer, creator, and sustainer of the world, who made us so that we might develop into morally mature agents capable of choosing freely to love God, on the basis of which we will be judged and our eternal destinies determined (77-79). O'Connor aims to pose a problem for this view, namely, that given the 'standard assumption' governing discussion of God and evil since Hume, a certain fact about natural evil that results solely from natural processes (NERNP, he calls it) constitutes good reason to think that OT is false. The standard assumption is that we can compare by way of thought experiment how things are with how they would be if there were a God and with how they would be if there were no God, and thereby, we can, in principle, ground a justified verdict about whether God exists (39-44). The fact in question is that it seems that, necessarily, NERNP is gratuitous.<sup>1</sup> Since God and gratuitous evil are incompatible, it follows that we have fairly strong prima facie reason to think that there is NERNP that is incompatible with God, and consequently that OT is false.

Nearly two-thirds of the book refines and defends this argument, beginning in chapter 3. There, O'Connor refutes Hasker's bizarre argument for the compatibility of God and gratuitous evil, but sensibly sidesteps van Inwagen's argument for their compatibility by shifting from gratuitous NERNP per se to the amount of gratuitous NERNP.<sup>2</sup> For even if God and some gratuitous NERNP are compatible, there is way too much for any possible divine purpose, no matter how vague the purpose may be. For consider the billions upon billions of animals stalked and killed or eaten alive by predators or who died slowly and painfully, decimated by disease, famine, or drought, all before we even came on the scene. That's a lot of NERNP. Now, at any world at which God exists, He can actualize a world--Wp, O'Connor calls it--in which the purposes envisioned by OT are fulfilled just as well as they are in the actual world and whose natural laws and history are just like those in the actual world, with the exception that God intervenes systematically to prevent pre-historic NERNP.<sup>3</sup> It seems that no good would have been lost if He had created Wp instead of the actual world (hence no good articulated by OT), and so it seems that pre-historic NERNP constitutes a massive amount of NERNP that is necessarily gratuitous. By the end of chapter 4 we have O'Connor's considered argument:

1. There is a massive amount of NERNP.
2. It seems that, necessarily, a massive amount of NERNP is gratuitous.

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<sup>1</sup> An evil is gratuitous just in case God could prevent it without thereby forfeiting any greater good (52).

<sup>2</sup> For more on the matter, see my "Is Theism Compatible with Gratuitous Evil?," American Philosophical Quarterly, 1999, co-authored with Frances Howard-Snyder.

<sup>3</sup> O'Connor never explicitly asserts that at every world at which God exists, He can actualize Wp, but without it or something comparable--e.g. at every world at which God exists, He can actualize an overall morally much better world than Ws--we can't affirm premise 2 below.

3. God and massive amounts of gratuitous evil are incompatible.
4. So, we have fairly strong prima facie reason to think that there is a massive amount of NERNP that is incompatible with God. (from 1-3)
5. So, we have fairly strong prima facie reason to think that OT is false. (from 4)

Add that the best attempts by orthodox theists fail to defeat this fairly strong prima facie reason, and its strength increases considerably.

In chapters 5-7, O'Connor argues that Swinburne's, Plantinga's, and Schlesinger's defenses fail. While his treatment of Swinburne and Schlesinger are convincing, his treatment of Plantinga is not. Plantinga would claim that there is a possible world such that, prior to creation, it was not within God's power to actualize any world that was on balance morally better than Ws--a world just like the actual world except that what looks like NERNP is, unbeknownst to us, really 'broadly moral evil', evil wrought by powerful, nonhuman, free agents, Satan and his minions, say--and so, extending the divine purposes expressed by OT to these creatures, God weakly actualized Ws. In that case, it is possible that a massive amount of NERNP is not gratuitous, i.e. premise 2 is false; moreover, in that case, we also have a defeater of our prima facie reason for believing premise 4. O'Connor might object that, at any world at which God exists, He can actualize Wp, again, a world in which the purposes envisioned by OT are fulfilled just as well as they are in the actual world and in whose natural laws and history are just like those in the actual world, but in which neither Satan, his minions, nor the broadly moral evil (specifically, NERNP) they bring exist. After all, says O'Connor, no matter what possible world we consider, prior to creation God could have refrained from making Satan and his colleagues (124-25); moreover, he adds, "all other relevant factors are the same in [Wp and Ws], including the full realizability of the divine plan in Wp" (128). So what God-justifying reason could there be for God to weakly actualize Ws over Wp? There's nothing to be gained by it.

Here O'Connor misunderstands Plantinga's defense. The relevant factors at Ws include these:

Prior to creation, God sees Wp, sees that it is overall morally superior to Ws, notes that a certain set Sp of individual essences is instantiated in Wp (a set that does not include the individual essences of Satan and his cohorts), sees that to weakly actualize Wp He must create persons who are the instantiations of the members of Sp, and sees that to do that He must strongly actualize the largest state of affairs Tp in Wp that is compatible with creating those persons. But, due to extensive transworld depravity,<sup>4</sup> God regretably sees that:

If He were to strongly actualize Tp, the instantiations of the members of Sp at Wp would freely behave so badly that Wp would not result but rather a world which is on balance morally worse than Ws.

Indeed, God sees that *every* world Wn that is morally better than Ws shares this feature with Wp. Since God justifiably aims to create a world that is on balance as morally good as any world He can create, and in light of the above facts there is no world He can create that is on balance morally better than Ws, God strongly

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<sup>4</sup> For Plantinga's definition of transworld depravity, see *Nature of Necessity*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974, 188. O'Connor grossly mischaracterizes transworld depravity (122).

actualizes Ts of Ws, creating Satan, his cohorts, and the rest of us. Ws results, along with a massive amount of NERNP.

These factors are not included in O'Connor's Wp. The most salient difference is that in Wp but not in Ws God sees that:

If He were to strongly actualize Tp, the instantiations of the members of Sp at Wp would freely behave in such a way that the resulting world--Wp, naturally enough--would be overall morally superior to Ws.

Clearly, this difference between Ws and Wp--a difference grounded in a difference in counterfactuals of freedom at each world--makes all the difference to whether premise 2 is true and premise 4 defeated.

So O'Connor is wrong to say that Ws differs from Wp in that in Ws but not in Wp Satan and his cohorts exist, along with the evil they bring about, and "all other relevant factors are the same in both worlds". Consequently, he fails to defeat Plantinga's defense,<sup>5</sup> and the reformed logical argument fails.

The last third of the book focuses on a different argument from evil, namely William Rowe's. In chapter 9, O'Connor shows how the denial of the standard assumption leads to the demise of both Rowe's and his own argument. In Chapter 10, however, he says that atheists justifiably believe the standard assumption, and hence the arguments from evil based on it. Orthodox theists, on the other hand, are justified in denying the standard assumption, although the denial comes at a high cost, namely a certain sort of skepticism about our cognitive powers. If this skepticism is restricted to arguments from evil, it is ad hoc; if it is not, it "require[s] a serious curtailment of traditionally significant intellectual dimensions of theism" that rely on a robust assessment of our cognitive abilities (220), e.g. knowledge of God by way of natural theology, knowledge of what God wants, intends, or expects of us, and knowledge of objective morality. In the end, O'Connor advises orthodox theists to pay the price since the alternative is worse.

O'Connor is on to something here, although I wish he had assessed principled attempts to restrict the skepticism induced by denying the standard assumption. For example, William Alston argues that his skepticism only requires a perfectly sensible, everyday skepticism about certain negative existential claims, specifically those that rely heavily on our inability to discern something in a certain domain to justify inferring that there is nothing of that sort in that domain, especially when we have good reason to think that we are in the dark about the contents and boundaries of that domain, e.g. when we rely heavily on our inability to discern any extraterrestrial life to justify our inferring there is none.<sup>6</sup> It isn't obvious that Alston's principled skepticism requires wholesale theological or moral skepticism.

As for O'Connor's rosy assessment of the atheist's accepting the standard assumption, he

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<sup>5</sup> Which is not to say that Plantinga succeeds. See my "Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 1998, and "Transworld Sanctity, Intraworld Plenitude, and Plantinga's Free Will Defense," unpublished, both co-authored with John Hawthorne.

<sup>6</sup> Alston, "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," esp. 120-21, and "Some (Temporarily) Final Thoughts on Evidential Arguments from Evil," esp. 321-22, both in ed. D. Howard-Snyder, *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996.

might be right, but I wish he had said more. Specifically, I wish he had explained how an atheist is justified in believing that he would be able to discern God's purposes in permitting so much evil, if OT were true. The best reason he offers (208-10)--one which I introduced into the discussion several years ago<sup>7</sup> and which O'Connor incorrectly reports I "endorse"--is roughly this: If OT were true, then, if we were unable to discern God's purposes in permitting so much evil, He would explain them to us, and if we couldn't grasp them, He would, like a good parent, assure us that His purposes are for our ultimate good--and how else could He do that but by making His love and concern, and therefore His existence, sufficiently clear to us? Instead, we get silence or, at best, severe ambiguity. There was a time when I thought this argument settled the matter in favor of the standard assumption as it applies to arguments from evil. I now think it displays more epistemic hubris than epistemic virtue. It relies heavily on our inability to discern any good that serves God's purposes in remaining silent for now or permitting us to ruin ourselves in such a way that His evident presence and love is but seen through a glass darkly, which merely raises slightly elsewhere the worry it was supposed to alleviate. O'Connor dismisses this criticism with a mysterious and uncharacteristically curt "[that] seems distinctly ad hoc" (209). His dismissal is doubly mysterious in light of the fact that one of the explicit theoretical posits of OT, according to him, is that "there is a great deal of evil in the world, including much for which we cannot discern a sufficient reason for God to permit" (79). If that's the case, then whether you are an atheist or not, you should not infer that on OT we justifiably expect to discern God's purposes in permitting evil or His purposes in remaining silent.

I have gone out of my way to disagree sharply with matters central to O'Connor's book. That should not, however, be taken as an overall negative assessment. O'Connor should be praised for forcefully bringing to our attention the centrality of the standard assumption in the debate over God and evil. That insight, and its proper assessment, can no longer be responsibly ignored.

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<sup>7</sup> Inscrutable Evil and the Silence of God, dissertation, Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1992, and "Seeing Through CORNEA," International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, 1992. See also, "The Argument from Inscrutable Evil," in The Evidential Argument from Evil, and "The Argument from Divine Hiddenness," Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 1996. For more on divine hiddenness, see the essays and bibliography of New Essays on the Hiddenness of God (forthcoming), edited by me and Paul K. Moser.