

Editorial preface

Ronald L. Hall¹

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Clearly one of the most serious challenges that theism faces is the problem of evil. So, it is not surprising that in this journal much attention is devoted to following exchanges between philosophers of religion who offer proposals for rescuing theism and the sharp rebukes by those who do not think that these proposals manage to dispose of the issue. This is not to say that all of the critics of proposals that are offered to reconcile the existence of God and the fact of seemingly gratuitous and horrendous human suffering do not sympathize with the ambition to save theism; indeed, many do, and many do not. For me, it is a mark of great merit that philosophers of religion on either side of the issue, will not allow rescues or refutations of theism to pass without careful and thorough examination.

In this issue, we have further testimony to this merit. You will find here new arguments advanced regarding this very old issue. The first two articles concern the analogy between God and a loving parent. This analogy is used by defenders of skeptical theism to show that we humans are in a place relative to God as very young children are relative to their parents. Parents may allow suffering but always do so for a good that is obscure to their children given their undeveloped cognitive abilities and their undeveloped moral understanding. Critics of this defense of skeptical theism have found the parent analogy wanting.

Our first article by Jonathan Curtis Rutledge discusses the objections to the analogy raised by Trent Dougherty. As Dougherty frames it, the issue is between obscurity and transparency. He thinks that the parent analogy works only if the probability of obscurity is greater than the probability of transparency. But he argues that the way that sceptical theists understand it, both are equally probable. Clearly a good parent will want his permission of suffering to become more and more transparent as the child matures. Following Stephen Wykstra, Rutledge thinks

✉ Ronald L. Hall
ronhall@stetson.edu

¹ Department of Philosophy, Stetson University, Deland, FL 32723, USA

Dougherty is almost correct, but fails to distinguish between “obscurity light” and “obscurity.” This is a distinction between “many” and “most” instances of inscrutable suffering. For Rutledge, the critical issue is that the vast amount of evil in the world far exceeds what we might expect if theism were true. Sceptical theism must address this empirical issue if it is to survive.

Jeff Jordan takes up the parent analogy argument with a revisit to our old friend Bill Rowe, who presented what has become the standard evidential argument from evil against theism. According to Rowe, God, as a loving parent, would ensure that suffering persons are aware of his comforting presence. We know this because we know what we expect of loving parents and we should not expect less from God. But Jordan argues that this loving parent analogy fails and with it, Rowe’s evidential argument. The reason it fails is that the concept of love that the LPA presupposes, namely, the idea that God loves every human being maximally, is incoherent. This is because to love maximally is to identify with the interests of the loved ones. The problem is that because humans have incompatible interests, maximal love is logically impossible. Because the concept of divine love implied in the LPA is incoherent, skeptical theists should not employ LPA as part of its defense. It remains an unjustified human pretention to claim to know that we should expect the same thing from God as we do from loving parents. This expectation fails to account for the great gulf between God and humans. The failure of the LPA need not defeat skeptical theism.

In the next article, we find out once again that the influence of philosophical landmarks such as Hick’s *Evil and the God of Love* can and do stand the test of time. Hick, who was a long-time friend of the Society for Philosophy of Religion, bequeathed to us the concept of “soul-making” which has taken its place as a standard response to the problem of evil. Michael Barnwell revisits Hick’s classic work to raise some important issues regarding tensions in Hick’s soul-making theodicy—tensions between libertarian and compatibilist theories of freedom. He revisits some of Hick’s critics such as Mackie, Flew, David Ray Griffin, and Ninian Smart. Barnwell explores the possibility of resolving the tension between Hick’s concessions to compatibilism and his defense of libertarian freedom and argues that part of the tension is generated by Hick’s dual commitment to libertarian freedom and universalism.

N. N. Trakakis notes in the next essay that contemporary philosophers of religion have overlooked the potential ways that the metaphysics of absolute idealism can provide an alternative approach to the problem of evil. He turns to the work of the British idealists (in particular the work of F. H. Bradley) and to the work of the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism to show how the metaphysics of absolute idealism might address the problem of evil. And following the previous return to earlier thinkers, Trakakis revisits Flew’s famous gardener story and offers idealism as an alternative to Flew’s brand of empiricism, or as we say today, his naturalism. Unlike the naturalist, idealism does not start with the assumption of the ontological primacy and independence of an external world that is determinately there for us to discover, but with the ontological primacy of experience. The idealist begins with the primacy of experience and with the assumption that our experience of reality is rationally and morally ordered and further that experience *is* reality. This monistic

vision of reality as experience takes us beyond the dualistic conflicts between a morally perfect God and the facts of human suffering. It is a metaphysical vision that does not solve the problem of evil, but gives it no room to arise.

The problem of evil is usually, but not always, focused on human suffering. Rowe, of course, discusses the innocent suffering fawn. Dustin Crummett, however, suggests in the next article, that these discussions have by and large ignored the suffering of insects, indeed all creeping and crawling living things. This may be because the assumption is that at this level there is no suffering. But if we do think that these forms of life do suffer, then this vastly increases the amount of evil in the world and sharpens the question of why a loving God would allow or permit this? Crummett does not claim that attention to this matter will sink theism, but it is a matter that theodicy should no longer ignore. And it raises the question that critics of skeptical theism advance: Is there any conceivable good that could be brought about that would justify God's decision to create the possibility of such innocent suffering?

Skeptical theism of course will maintain that simply because we cannot think of such a good that no such good exists. But perhaps the idea that such goods are beyond our human comprehension implies that keeping these goods out of human reach entails that God is a deceiver. This is exactly the argument that Erik Wielenberg makes: by hiding these goods from our comprehension, God has deceived us. And the very thought that God is a deceiver is anathema to theism. In our next article, John M. DePoe argues that Wielenberg is mistaken.

To make his case, DePoe distinguishes between positive and negative skeptical theism. Positive skeptical theism differs from negative skeptical theism in providing second-order reasons as to why the appearance of gratuitous evils is *likely* to occur in the theistic framework. On the other hand, negative skeptical theism maintains that the appearance of gratuitous evil is inscrutable. In its negative version we simply do not know what good God will bring about by allowing or permitting what appears to be the existence of gratuitous evil. In its positive version, again referring back to John Hick, gratuitous evil actually exists (not just the appearance of it) and moreover, it is *likely* that God would permit this in order to advance soul-making. (As I read DePoe, this might be a version of the virtue defense.) In its positive version, God is no deceiver. He does not try to get us to believe any false proposition, such as, some suffering only appears to be gratuitous because we do not have the cognitive ability to perceive the good that God will bring about because of it. We are not deceived: there is gratuitous evil, but it is not without a purpose: confronted with it we are inspired to be compassionate and to develop the loving, caring character that God desires us to attain.