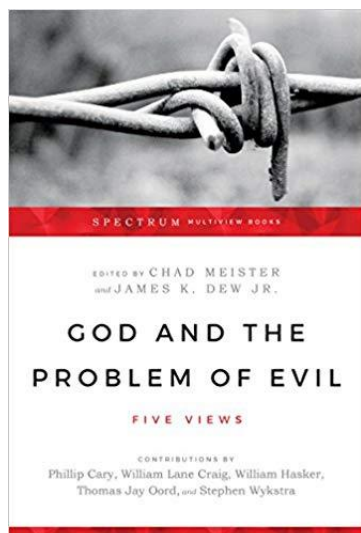


God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views, edited by Chad Meister and James K. Dew, Jr. Spectrum Multiview Book Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

Reviewed by Matt Cairns



God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views, edited by Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr., is a new addition to the works that attempt to help us understand how the idea of an all-powerful and all-loving God is reconciled with the evil and suffering we experience in the world. As the editors highlight, “the problem of evil is a constant challenge to faith in God”, and we probably all know people who have in fact lost faith in God based upon their inability to reconcile this issue. In this edition, Meister and Dew have engaged the minds of five scholars who all bring a different thesis to how we can overcome the problem of evil and suffering while acknowledging an all-powerful and all-loving God, and then in dialogue with each other, the authors provide insightful and stimulating responses to each other. The editors begin with a helpful explanation of the topic being debated, particularly outlining how the key terms are defined and used within the discussion. Then after a short biography of the five scholars, we move into the body of the book, and in the words of the editors “Now on to the arguments!”

A Classic View

The classic view is represented by respected Augustinian scholar Philip Cary, who provides a clear and thorough explanation of the classical view, and particular as developed and guided by Augustine. Cary, currently professor of philosophy at Templeton Honors College, Eastern University, methodically works through the key concepts within the classical view on the problem of evil including exploring evil as corruption, the theological reasoning for why God does not have to create evil, the role of the first people and the origins of sin, and why God might allow evil to exist within his creation. Affirming that creation had a benevolent beginning and will, thanks to the work of Christ, have a benevolent ending, it also affirms that everything in between is being used by God to bring out a greater good, even if in the midst of the suffering we cannot fathom it. The manner in which Cary explains these difficult and challenging ideas is very helpful, for he manages to find a balance between providing enough depth of thought for a budding scholar, and the use of language and examples that the lay person will find beneficial in helping them to begin to understand the debates around God and the problem of evil.

A further strength in Cary's writing is that he doesn't just take a cold and detached theological tone, but rather blends a genuine pastoral care in with the required theological and philosophical definitions, understanding that the challenges of reconciling the evils that occur within God's creation is a difficult and at times personal conundrum.

A Molinist View

Next to provide a response is well-known proponent of Molinism, William Lane Craig, who is research professor of philosophy at Talbot School of Theology and professor of philosophy at Houston Baptist University. Craig has written extensively about and further developed the theological works of sixteenth-century Jesuit thinker, Luis De Molina. For this publication, he explores how Molina's theory of divine providence deals with the concept of God and the problem of evil, particularly engaging with the Molinist notion of 'divine middle knowledge'. Craig begins well by clearly framing the issues being considered and moves on to provide a general rebuttal to the standard non-theistic claims about the 'logical' problem of God and the existence of evil, primarily engaging with the work of Alvin Plantinga, due to Molinism not having much to provide in way of arguments against the logical problem (Craig's own admission). He then turns his attention to probabilistic version of the God and evil debate, in that while it is difficult to argue logically that God and evil cannot coexist, given what we say about God (attributes, character etc.), it is highly improbable that they both coexist. It is to this dilemma that Craig believes Molinism is not only relevant but also useful in reconciling the problem.

Craig's basic premise as per Molinism is that due to God's knowledge of what creatures would choose to do in any given scenario (referred to as middle knowledge), that God allows evil to occur because he knows it will lead to a greater good. It is claimed that these moral and natural evils "might serve a redemptive purpose in God's plan" and that "only a God endowed with middle knowledge could so providentially order the world that through these evils people would freely come into God's kingdom." These evils also include what is often referred to as gratuitous evils, which when allowing for God's divine middle knowledge, can be no longer assumed to be gratuitous as they must play a part in drawing someone to God and eternal salvation. Craig claims the fact that so many people throughout history have come to belief in God and salvation despite the existence of evil as warrant that this might be true.

It is not surprising that the claims specific to Molinism regarding God allowing evil to occur in order for a greater good to occur based upon divine middle knowledge draw the most questions from the other authors, however Craig presents his case in a clear and thorough

manner. However, its thoroughness perhaps leads to technical presentation that feels cold and detached from the reality of evil and suffering as happening to real people. Craig tries to alleviate this by lastly turning to deal with the 'emotional' problem of evil, however the argument is based upon the notion that those who are suffering can find comfort in knowing evil only occurs because God has a morally sufficient reason for allowing it to occur. This response to the realities of evil and suffering of real people feels thin and a last minute addition. In the 18 pages William Lane Craig uses to promote the Molinist contribution to God and the problem of suffering, only a page and a half is allowed for a more pastoral aspect. And while the scholar will appreciate his technical and detailed exploration, those who are reading from a more lay perspective, may find it to heavily focused on the philosophical rather than the actual.

An Open Theist View

The third perspective shared is that of an Open Theist view, written by emeritus professor of philosophy at Huntington College, William Hasker. Having published widely on the topic of open theism, Hasker lends his considerable skills in presenting a theodicy that works within the framework of a dynamic, relational conception of a God that takes risks – a key concept within open theism.

As with the other authors, Hasker begins with a short and general introduction to the topic of God and the problem of evil, however he makes a slight shift in terminology from the previous two writers in that he makes a distinction between a 'theodicy' and a 'defence. A theodicy, according to Hasker, is an account that shows God has a morally permissible reason for allowing an evil to occur, therefore removing the typical charges against God that he is neither infinitely powerful and/or infinitely benevolent. While a defence usually blocks an argument from those who attempt to prove God cannot be both infinitely powerful and infinitely benevolent, showing up the weakness in the logic of the opposing argument, rather than attempting to prove God has a morally acceptable reason for allowing such evil.

Plantinga's 'free will defence', as used within Molinism, is an example of one such attempt according to Hasker, while his outline of an open theist view is a genuine theodicy.

Hasker then provides a brief overview of open theism and its key contributors. This is a useful explanation, for it is likely many lay readers will be unfamiliar with the concepts of open theism, and without this brief explanation the grounds for its theodicy would be difficult to follow. Of most importance is Hasker's explanation of a key tenant of open theism, dynamic omniscience, and in particular God's knowledge of the future. In an open theistic framework, much of the future God only knows what might happen, what probably will happen (and all infinite probabilities), but due to genuine free-will given to creation, God cannot know what will

definitely happen. This concept has serious implications for free-will, divine providence and the problem of evil.

What follows is a detailed explanation of how open theism accounts for evil, both natural and moral, appealing to what Hasker describes as a 'general-policy theodicy'. In Hasker's words, this distinction "justifies God's permission of certain evils as being the consequence of a general policy that a wise and benevolent God might well adopt" and given open theism's dismissal of meticulous divine foreknowledge, it becomes evident that this is the only serious position an open theistic theodicy could take.

William Hasker provides a comprehensive and very readable overview from an open theistic perspective, which is sensible given many readers may not be familiar with open theism as a theological concept. He finishes his essay with a short yet fascinating section in which he attempts to answer the question 'Shouldn't God be doing better?', which simply acknowledges the difficulty of the topic when it intersects with real life.

An Essential Kenosis View

The fourth instalment is provided by theologian Thomas Jay Oord, previously professor of theology and philosophy at Northwest Nazarene University, who over the last decade has developed his own brand of theological thought based upon the concept he has labelled as 'Essential Kenosis'. Oord is known for his brash and confident manner, which is why his opening line is not surprising – "In this essay, I offer a solution to the problem of evil." He begins this offer by claiming most Christians settle for a defence of God in regards to the issue of evil and creation (as also highlighted by Hasker) rather than a solution. Oord believes his theological framework avoids a solution that appeals to mystery, a common aspect found in many other theodicies. Oord also critiques the 'permission' arguments found in many theodicies as weak and unsatisfactory, claiming "a loving God does not just fail to cause evil. A loving God would prevent genuine evil, if it were possible to do so."

However, Oord does admit that to accept his complete solution requires the reader to rethink the traditional view of God that they have grown up with. Several of the five dimensions to his solution, most believers will have no issue with, such as the 'empathetic' dimension which affirms God empathises with all who suffer. Likewise, both the 'therapeutic' dimension, which claims that God heals, and is working in all situations to bring healing to suffering creation, and the 'strategic' dimension, which emphasises our role in responding to evil and suffering as per God's call in scripture, are claims which most believers could respond positively to. The 'didactic' dimension differs to more reformed versions of theodicy, for while in agreement with all versions that God can use evil for good, it differs in that it strongly claims God does

not cause the evil (or permit it). It will be the fifth dimension that causes the most debate – the ‘sovereignty’ dimension.

Oord rethinks the standard positions on the nature of God’s sovereignty, and uses 2 Timothy 2:13 to underpin the framework of his concept. If God’s nature, as per Oord’s claim, is “self-giving, others-empowering love, and this love is necessarily uncontrolling” then even in the face of an evil act, God ‘cannot deny himself’ and unilaterally intervene. It is against God’s nature and impossible for him to do. Oord continues on to explain how this theological step plays out, engaging in both scriptural warrants and philosophical ones.

Oord always writes in an engaging manner and his explanation clear and logical, however it is interesting that the editors have included a chapter on Oord’s view. On one hand it is good to engage with new and modern theological theories, yet on the other hand, apart from Thomas Jay Oord, it is hard to find a scholar who agrees with him. I guess this chapter will allow the reader to discern for themselves whether or not Oord’s solution has theological merit.

A Skeptical Theist View

The final addition is by Stephen Wykstra, who is professor of philosophy at Calvin College, and provides for us a detailed exploration of what is called ‘skeptical theism’ and how it helps us deal with the topic of God and the problem of evil. As the editors’ note in their introduction, it is important to understand that ‘skeptical’ as used here does not mean one is skeptical that God exists, but rather it is used in the following two ways as outlined by Wykstra. Firstly, that if God does exist (which most skeptical theists agree God does), then we should have reservations (that is, be skeptical) that we can understand most of what God does in the world. And secondly, if the first claim is true, then we can have reservations about most, if not all, of the charges atheists bring against the existence of God, including in the area of evil and suffering.

Wykstra begins his essay with the claim that philosophers should tell more stories so that their writing might be more accessible, and so he opens with several short stories to set the scene of why skeptical theism is a helpful theodicy framework to work from. After setting the scene, he introduces us to some usual atheistic philosophical arguments against God based upon the problem of evil, and then sets out to explain how skeptical theism counters these arguments.

After a general skeptical theism argument, Wykstra turns to his own work and the CORNEA framework (Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access), which he claims answers the majority of atheistic arguments which are based upon a ‘appears-claims’ structure. That is, they claim this or that ‘appears’ to be the scenario and therefore it is unlikely God exists, or

specifically in the context of the problem of evil, if there appears to be no reason for the suffering then it is pointless and weakens the likelihood that an all-powerful and all-loving God exists. For Wykstra, and skeptical theism in general, it is unacceptable to limit your reasoning to an 'appears-claim' model, for, as they claim, if God does exist, then it is unlikely we can reason all of God's action (or non-actions) in the world anyway.

Wykstra presents a detailed and logical argument for skeptical theism, however even he admits that it has its limits, and that "neither should we expect, when in the midst of life-rendering events, to find in skeptical theism much balm for grief, or even much help in just enduring." Rather, skeptical theism provides a solution that allows us to hold onto our faith in God while also questioning in faith why such calamities occur. While Wykstra's skeptical theistic response to the problem of evil is honest about its strengths and weaknesses, it's humbleness may leave some readers dissatisfied that in the end, skeptical theism is not really an answer at all.

The Responses

The extra benefit of the 'views' series is the responses each contributor makes towards their fellow co-contributor. After the niceties and platitudes are done, they each get down to why the reasoning of each argument fails, giving the reader several great critiques of each position. This is helpful in that each response is well thought out and clearly written, and potentially provides to the reader answers to questions and doubts they had as they wrestled with each position provided in the main body of the book. The responses are not too long as to waffle but also detailed enough to provide genuine debate over each of the five arguments given.

Overall, *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views* is a very helpful addition to the vast body of work on theodicy. Written at an introductory level, it provides the reader with enough depth to begin to understand this difficult age-old debate, yet remains intellectually accessible to most. The inclusion of several relatively new positions such as the Open Theist and Essential Kenosis positions are of real benefit, however one disappointment might be that, as is so often the case in theological literature, all five contributors are white, Western men, and given the move to introduce new and different ideas, a non-Western-white-male perspective would have really made this edition more comprehensive. That being said, "God and the Problem of Evil" does help move the theodicy discussion forward and indicates that this debate is ongoing and continuing to foster new and important ideas about who God is, and how the problem of evil might be explained from a theistic position.