Religious Studies (2021) **57**, 563–573 © Cambridge University Press 2019

Book reviews

Religious Studies **57** (2021) doi:10.1017/S0034412519000295

W. Paul Franks (ed.) *Explaining Evil: Four Views*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019). Pp. 180. £18.68 (Pbk). ISBN 9781501331121.

Thousands upon thousands of pages have been written on the problem of evil. Is there really a need for another book? In *Explaining Evil: Four Views*, the reader is assured at the very beginning that 'this is not a book dealing with solutions to the problem of evil in either its logical or evidential forms . . . you won't find the problem of evil defended, refuted, or even stated' (2). This is because unlike most other treatments of the problem which attempt to show that the existence of evil either is or is not a problem for theism, this book contends that the reality of evil is something that both theists *and* non-theists have to explain in harmony with their particular world-view. Accordingly, the aim of the book 'is for each contributor to present his own positive account of evil' (2). This approach to the problem is intriguing and I suggest warrants yet another book on the problem of evil.

Two theists and two non-theists offer their perspectives on evil (mostly of the moral variety). For the theist philosophers, the question is not 'Given evil, how can there be a God?', but rather, 'Given God, how can there be evil?' (3). The answers provided to this latter question differ immensely but both philosophers appeal to human agency and free will: Brian Richard Davis argues for Theistic Libertarianism and Paul Helm for Theistic Compatibilism. As for the non-theistic philosophers, given that there is no God, are instances of pain and suffering *actually* evil and if so, does this suggest that morality is objective? Again, the answers differ: Michael Ruse argues for Atheistic Moral Non-realism and Erik Wielenberg for Atheistic Moral Realism.

Each chapter of the book consists of a contributor presenting his account in a lead essay, which is followed by three responses from the other contributors, and a final reply to the responses. This structure is a strength of the book, because it provides a conversational tone for a topic that can be extremely dense. In order to keep this review short, I omit many nuances in the contributors' arguments, only mentioning the most interesting response(s) (at least in my opinion) to the lead essays, and altogether avoid commenting on the final replies.

In chapter 1, Davis presents his explanation of evil on agent-causal theism (ACT), which is the view that 'human beings are immaterial, conscious agents endued (by God) with a power of self-motion: the power to think, decide, and act for ends in light of reasons, but without being externally caused to do so (even by God himself)' (11). Davis contends that two conditions must be met if evil is to exist: the freedom condition and the consciousness condition. Since he thinks that ACT satisfies both conditions but other world-views do not – specifically, those that affirm naturalism and/or compatibilism – evil exists only if ACT is true (11). ACT is true only if God exists and, therefore, evil exists only if God exists.

Davis argues that both Darwinian and theistic determinism leave no room for responsible agency and lead to fatal problems. On the one hand, if the universe is causally closed and all of our thinking is identical to physical event-states, then we do not have the power to act or think otherwise. On the other hand, if God determines everything that happens and if humans do not possess agent-causal freedom, then we likewise lack the power to act and think otherwise. Davis draws the conclusion that some systems 'rule this [agent-causal freedom] out *a priori*, and therefore on [them] evil cannot be said to exist' (16). Furthermore, systems such as Darwinian naturalism that cannot account for consciousness – and Davis argues that they cannot – face the same problem: 'if evil resides in sensation . . . then to account for evil requires that we account for consciousness – something without which there couldn't be pain or suffering' (26). By contrast, since ACT faces none of these problems, ACT does the best job of explaining evil.

I think Wielenberg offers the most substantial reply. He appeals to Timothy O'Conner's work on emergent properties to propose a naturalistic account of agent causation and consciousness which makes evil a possibility; Wielenberg calls this 'Naturalistic Emergentism' (39). On this view, 'agent-causal freedom and phenomenal consciousness are emergent properties of purely physical human beings (and/or their brains)' (39) and no appeal to God must be made. If this is right, then ACT is not the only view that can accommodate the existence of evil, and so Davis's claim that evil requires ACT is false.

Helm offers a Theistic Compatibilist explanation of evil in chapter 2. Helm seeks to answer two questions in his essay: 'Why does evil occur?' and 'How does evil occur?' His answer to the first question appeals to the A-Team (Augustine, Aquinas, and Alvin) and the *felix culpa* theodicy: 'The fault, the incarnation, and the offering of the Incarnate One is needed, for the display of the glory of God in the redemption of men and women' (53). For Helm, the key component of a theistic explanation for evil is 'God-centeredness', which is the position that 'the universe is arranged for God's good pleasure, or for the display of God's glory' (52). As such, evil exists because it is a necessary part of God's plan to manifest his glory and a world with the incarnation and atonement (and therefore, sin) is incalculably better than worlds without them.

Humans were created sinless, but the possibility of sinning was inherent in their natures and eventually realized when they chose to disobey God, a choice which

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000295 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Helm stresses was not a libertarian one; yet, God is not the author of sin. Helm recognizes that this is a problem but thinks his explanation is still better than that of libertarian theists and that of non-theists. Helm is quick to point out that he is operating in the 'faith seeking understanding tradition' which is 'faith driven, not reason driven' (49). This is worth noting because Helm does not shy away from appealing to mystery and 'necessary ignorance' (57) as components of his explanation of evil.

In response to Helm, Davis formulates a stimulating dilemma. Either the original humans chose to act on their motivation to disobey God or they didn't. If they did, and if motives cause acts of will, then there was a motive that caused *that* choice, and an infinite regress looms on the horizon. If they didn't choose to act on the motive to disobey rather than on the motive to obey, then what caused the disobedience? It couldn't be their good natures or environment, so that leaves either God or humans as agent-causes. Helm categorically rejects the first option. But he also rejects the second option. Davis thinks there is an inconsistency at the heart of Helm's explanation. It seems to me that this inconsistency has to be sorted out first in order for Helm's position to count as an *explanation* of evil.

Ruse is a moral sceptic, yet he claims that evil exists. He begins chapter 3 with what he claims is the most important statement in his essay: 'I believe in the existence of evil' (83). Ruse clarifies that while *natural* evil does not exist and therefore is not a problem for his atheistic perspective, moral evil does in fact exist and Ruse thinks he can make sense of it from a Darwinian perspective. On this point of view, 'the evil person is the person who goes against our biologically given sense of morality' (96). Evil exists because humans choose to do evil. Ruse reasons that this does not commit him to an objective morality, since we could have evolved 'to have a different set of moral beliefs' (100). It is based on this elucidation that Ruse's position comes into focus: 'evil exists but is nonreal in this sense that it has no objective referent. This is what I mean by being a moral skeptic' (101).

Ruse tells us that morality has no justification and 'is an illusion put in place by our genes to keep us good cooperators'; the illusion is 'not the existence of substantive ethics' but rather 'that it is objective' (100). Consequently, morality is an adaptation that brings with it an illusory sense of objectivity. Ruse calls his position 'Darwinian non-realism' and thinks it sufficient to explain evil's nature and origin, and appeals to God are superfluous. It would be helpful if Ruse said a word or two about why his Darwinian non-realism is not just nihilism (as Wielenberg also notes in disguise, for it is unclear how Ruse can consistently claim that evil exists and yet has no objective referent; at best, moral claims are contingent and require qualifiers, e.g. 'Sex with small children is, within the system, absolutely wrong' (99), since our set of moral beliefs could have been different and either set is 'as good as the other' (100).

Once again, I think Davis advances the most intriguing response to Ruse by arguing that consciousness is a necessary condition for there being moral evil and since Ruse's Darwinian naturalism can't account for consciousness, it can't

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000295 Published online by Cambridge University Press

account for evil. This is a strong claim, and while Davis provides several arguments for its truth (in his response and lead essays), I leave it to the reader to adjudicate the success of this line of reasoning.

In the final chapter, Wielenberg gives an account of moral realism in a godless universe. He argues that ethical properties (e.g. *being evil*) reduce neither to natural nor to supernatural properties, and are instead non-physical and *sui generis*, a 'type of property not reducible to or fully constituted by some other type of property' (127). Evil exists because the non-natural property *being evil* is directly and robustly caused by properties like *being an instance of suffering*. For Wielenberg, some states of affairs involve ethical properties, some of these ethical properties obtain, and some of them obtain necessarily. His theory revolves around the idea of *basic ethical facts*, which are facts that are substantive, metaphysically necessary, and brute. These facts 'are the foundation of (the rest of) objective morality and rest on no foundation themselves' (130) and so it is misguided to ask where these facts came from since they are fundamental features of reality.

But what is the connection between a natural property like *being an instance of suffering* and the non-natural property *being evil*? Wielenberg tells us that this relation is 'a causal one of a robust sort' (131) and that such connections are fundamental and lack explanation. This detail shouldn't worry either theists or atheists for both are committed to similar inexplicable details in their world-views. Surprisingly, Wielenberg frequently makes appeals of this kind (especially to theism) and perhaps his use of the 'if it's not a problem for you, it's not a problem for me' strategy weakens his thought-provoking explanation of evil.

Contra Wielenberg, Ruse thinks that evil exists only if humans exist. Their interaction will be of interest to those who want to know the relationship between evolutionary psychology, moral beliefs, and the status of objective morality: Wielenberg and Ruse propose two different answers without invoking theism.

Explaining Evil is a book that both theists and non-theists, academics and non-academics will find useful for their studies on the problem of evil. Many of the central topics relevant to this discussion – such as the existence of God, free will, and the foundations of morality – are all present, and we get to see how each thinker constructs his explanation of evil within the bounds of his particular world-view. This feature of the book makes each contributor's essay personal, a refreshing change from the abstract, impersonal dialogues one frequently finds in discussions on evil. Also a nice feature of this book is the Recommended Reading list, containing sections on evil, the problem of evil, free will, and ethics. For all these reasons, and many more, I highly recommend *Explaining Evil* for your consideration.

ANDRE LEO RUSAVUK
University of Birmingham, UK
e-mail: AXR853@student.bham.ac.uk

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412519000295 Published online by Cambridge University Press