O'Connor's "God, Evil, and Design: An Introduction to the Philosophical Issues Malden" - Book Review

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O'Connor’s book is very clear, easy to follow, and replete with excellent illustrations and analogies. Its clarity is outdone only by its virtuous attempt at overall fairness and sensitivity toward readers both religious and not. An excellent undergraduate book for classroom use, it is generally excellent in coverage of the issues as well as thoughtful and original in its own contributions. Although it is limited in its scope, covering the problem of evil, and arguments for God’s existence from design, it is a good book for general philosophy of religion courses, (if supplemented with others) but very good for more advanced undergraduate courses on the problem of evil or the design argument.

The book’s content is clearly laid out, with helpful summaries of the argument throughout. It is broken into six parts and twelve chapters. “Part I: Introduction” contains two chapters, one introducing the problems to be investigated and a second discussing terminology. “Part II: The Logic of God and Evil” has two chapters, covering the issue of whether God’s existence is impossible (the Mackie version of the logical problem of evil) and then
Plantinga’s freewill defense of the possibility of God’s existence. “Part III: Design and Evil” has both chapters consider natural order, natural selection and supernatural design. “Part IV: Evil and Design (1)” covers first, Draper’s and Rowe’s arguments on the improbability of God’s existence given evil and second (in two more chapters) skeptical defenses from Wykstra and Van Inwagen and an evaluation of those defenses. “Part V: Evil and Design (2)” explains greater-good defenses from Hick and Swinburne, with a second chapter of evaluation. “Part VI: Taking Stock” draws together the author’s considered opinion on the overall argument.

The entire book is framed as an investigation into two questions. First, does the idea of God mesh with the vast amounts of suffering in the world? Second, when that suffering is taken into account alongside the good things, would it be reasonable to conclude that the world is best explained by the existence of God? The starting point, and a pedagogically useful tool, is the veil of ignorance modeled on Rawls suggestion. The veil of ignorance for the first investigation is as follows: Imagine that we neither believe nor disbelieve in God. We retain all our knowledge of religion and other things. For the second investigation, the veil includes not just that we neither believe nor
disbelieve in God but that we know nothing at all about religion, not even about its existence. Nor do we know anything about philosophy either. But we are rational, lucid and as curious as ever. The veil of ignorance is introduced, of course, to help generate as much objectivity as possible in the course of the investigation.

There are several separately presented, but ultimately connected, issues. The book considers the logical problem of evil as classically described by Mackie, and argues, following Plantinga, that the case against God on strictly logical grounds fails. God’s existence is not impossible, given evil. What is particularly well done in this part of the book is the explanations of what is at stake in “logical” arguments dealing with possibility and impossibility and what needs to be done to “make a case.” O’Connor explains where the burden of proof lies and how heavy (or light) that burden is when discussing what is possible (or not).

Part III, chapter 5 includes sections on order and evolution, evolution and creation, evaluating the rival hypotheses. The hypothesis are a) this is the only universe and both natural order and the initial conditions are due to chance, b) this universe is one of many, those the chances of natural order and the initial conditions coming
about are greater than if only one universe exists and c) the universe exists by design, thus order and the initial conditions were intentional. Chapter 6 includes sections on simplicity, problems surrounding consciousness and causation, conditions at the big bang, the design hypothesis and the occurrence of terrible things, and finally, the verdict. Here I quote: “The basic facts in the investigation are the deep orderliness in the universe, the occurrence at the Big Bang of the right conditions for life to evolve, the mix of pleasure and pain experienced by some living things, and the apparent pointlessness of much of that pain…. [O]ur investigation indicates that the idea of God would not come up as the overall best explanation.” (p. 107). O’Connor is careful to admit that the idea of a personal cause might come up, but not the idea of God, given the veil of ignorance.

Part IV, Chapter 7 includes sections on keeping the problem in focus (making eight points about justified evils to provide a comparative standard), Draper’s indirect argument (which does not commit him to a naturalistic theory of the origin of the universe), and Rowe’s direct argument (which does so commit him). Chapter 8 presents Van Inwagen’s Goldilocks problem in a section on how much of a bad thing is too much, Wystra’s “noseeum” defense covering
unreasonable expectations for knowing how God works and then Van Inwagen’s pre- and post-Garden of Eden defense. Chapter nine evaluates the skeptical defenses noting a serious side-effect of both Wykstra’s and Van Inwagen’s defenses, viz. they seem to make the concept of God virtually incomprehensible. Wykstra’s view has the additional problem of undercutting the very concept of theistic morality.

Part V, Chapter 10 compares Hick’s and Swinburne’s overlapping but distinct positions in the first section. This is followed by a brief consideration of libertarian freewill and its affect on our understanding of God, concluding that the defense works at a general level but leaves us with many puzzles amongst the details. In a section on natural disasters and the free-will defense, O’Connor takes up the soul-making theodicy and animal suffering. Chapter 11 includes sections on justified and compensated suffering and also death and the afterlife, along with a theistic variation on the hypothesis of indifference, and finally a verdict on the greater-good defense. The basic conclusion of the chapter is that we find no good justification for the evils that occur and that the introduction of an afterlife simply reraises the issues there, both for humans and for animals, or it leaves
one wondering why God didn’t take humans and animals straight to the better life instead of dragging us through this one.

In the last chapter, O’Connor draws all his conclusions together in a clear presentation and balances them against individual religious experience. He concludes that although religious experience may ground a believer’s outlook, it is not evidence. We end up with a sort of détente between those who have the a certain sort of religious experience and those who do not.

As I said earlier, the book is a very good, clear introduction to two central and interconnected issues, design and evil, as they are related to the existence of God. I would recommend the book for use in the classroom for its clarity and fairness. But there are always some negatives. Here are a few minor notes. I’ll return to some larger issues below.

First, O’Connor suggests that “Hinduism has monotheistic leanings. For its many Gods and Goddesses are seen within that faith as ultimately offshoots of one great God.” (p. 20) This oversimplifies Hinduism quite a bit and could be misleading to students. For example, Advaita Vedanta Hinduism is atheistic completely. On p. 24 the suggestion is made there is a problem in moving from our
own experience of personhood to the personhood of God, for
we have no experience of personhood separate from
embodiedness, the latter of which God doesn’t have. I’m not
sure of the relevance of O’Connor’s point, since before we
discovered our brains “did the thinking” we thought our
souls or spirits did. (I’ll pick this up below as well).
Also, O’Connor more or less identifies moral evils with sin
(p. 26). This is a substantial short changing of the
Christian notion of sin. The notion of sin certainly
includes moral evils but much more as well, such as
relational issues toward God, ourselves, and nature.
Related to this issue is O’Connor’s handling of Plantinga’s
notion of original sin, which he says is stronger than the
Christian notion of sin. He bases this claim on a quotation
from Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary. Seems like a fairly
weak source for understanding something as complex as the
“Christian” notion of original sin (which not even
Christians agree on). One final quibble, I’m wonder why the
book doesn’t deal with Plantinga’s way out of the
evidential problem of evil.

On to something larger than a quibble. First, on page
29 the author writes, speaking of God and evil: “There is
no philosophical problem about the latter without the
concept of the former.” I demur. Surely there is a problem
of evil even without God. When my late wife died, my then eleven-year old son wondered about God’s existence. I suggested to him that the world is full of evil and badness. With God, the world is mysterious. Without God not only is it mysterious but a lot more lonely. I think my intuitions were right. O’Connor appears to disagree. In fact, it seems that evil is taken throughout the book as something a naturalist will just accept as obvious and (perhaps) to be expected in a universe without God. But why? There is a complicated and not so obvious story to be told by the naturalist about why we notice evil qua evil. Stated from the positive side, naturalist have what is sometimes called the “problem of the good.” Whence our sense of right and wrong? Is it objectively based, in a world sans God? If it is subjectively based only, then why would the human subjective understanding of morality really rule out God? Perhaps God has a different (even subjective) account of evil? In the end, don’t the claims of the book (recognizing that one author can only do so much in one book) need to balanced by a cogent evaluation of naturalism’s prospect of developing an objective moral view? And doesn’t that need doing before a conclusion can be reached on the subjects of the investigation?
A second substantial issue is to wonder about whether objectivity (or even something close to it) is possible in philosophy, even given a veil of ignorance. There are a number of related subpoints here. First, it’s not clear to me that O’Connor’s separation of evidence and grounds is the best way to think of these matters. For example, many philosophers of religion believe religious or theistic experience provides not just psychological grounds but evidential grounds for religious or theistic belief. The so-called Reformed epistemology of Alvin Plantinga or William Alston’s understanding of perceiving God fall into this camp.

Be that as it may, let’s focus on psychology and how it may play into rationality. An interesting analogy is found in the case of forgeries in the plastic arts. When a forgery is discovered, even though the experts have viewed and considered the fake as authentic before the discovery, after the fact many experts are suddenly able to see many features of the work of art itself in virtue of which it is obviously fake. Prior to the discovery of the piece’s inauthenticity, no one noticed these features. I wonder if the difference between the religious believer who has experienced God in her life is something like the art expert who has shifted from viewing the art piece as
authentic to viewing it as inauthentic. Maybe after conversion via religious experience, the believer simply sees things to which the religiously neutral person is blind. In short, I’d like to see some work done on the psychology of religious belief and experience themselves and how it plays into evaluating the presence of design or evil in the world. Not that I expect that in this book, but to take his approach, O’Connor and others who attempt such “neutrality” need, perhaps, to reconsider the role of the psychology of belief on what we can perceive or take in as believers.

But the problems with the veil of ignorance have to do with more than my last point. Let me illustrate a particular place in the book where I think the veil of ignorance may get a little out of hand. O’Connor writes:

What is the substance of this conjectured entity? Of what stuff is it made? Considering the stipulation that the basic laws of nature cannot apply to it, because it is represented as having no physical properties at all, what positive characterization is to be given of it?

Behind the veil of ignorance, what resources are available for an answer? Perhaps an answer can be found in terms of felt consciousness, that is, in
terms of how being conscious feels to us. Our awareness of pains and feelings and so on is not awareness of brain processes or any physical processes or states as such. In addition to pains and feelings, felt consciousness includes the experience of having intentions, making choices, and so on.

But there is strong reason to think such an account of the substance or nature of the alleged non-physical designer would not do. For, while felt consciousness does not present to us the physical base of our awareness as such, the fact is that we have no acquaintance whatever with conscious beings not having such a base. Every conscious being we know of has a body. And there is no reason to suppose that fact is just a coincidence. Instead, there is good reason to think that a physical base is a necessary condition of consciousness in the first place. Both our common experience and the scientific literacy we retain behind the veil of ignorance strongly support the point. (p. 93)

Here standing behind the veil of ignorance seems to do a disservice to the project. If we are ignorant of religion but not of science, aren’t we begging the question against the infinite vs. the finite person? While it is true that
we know of no finite person for whom felt consciousness exits without a physical base, why think this would apply to something that perhaps only religious thought would give us, viz. an infinite person? Could it be that the veil of ignorance is not so much a veil as simply an (unintentional) ignoring of data that might be useful?

Parallel to that set of issues is a question about a particular claim of O’Connor’s on p. 7 where he writes: “Our examination here is of philosophical questions only. Purely religious questions will receive no further discussion.” Well, I know this is common move in philosophy of religion texts, but isn’t it sort of like saying “Let’s discuss morality, but make no assumptions about human nature”?

Most of these quibbles and even the more substantive issues make for good classroom discussion. In some sense, then, they add to the value of the book. Like all good philosophy, there are toeholds toward a better understanding to be found in this work. So, my questions aside, the book is a fine one, and very good for classroom use. It is generally even-handed and fair and where it may not be, it is not obviously intentionally ignoring issues. It is very clear and has helpful illustrations. I would not
hesitate to use it in my own class room and recommend it to others.