

## *Book Reviews*



**Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer (eds.)**

*Skeptical Theism: New Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.  
Pp. xx + 337. ISBN 978-0-19-875739-9.

Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer's *Skeptical Theism: New Essays* is a collection of twenty-two essays by leading lights in religious epistemology. The essays are well-argued and briskly presented, and Dougherty and McBrayer's preface and analytic table of contents for the essays are helpful and clear. The most impressive feature of this collection is how consistently the editors have encouraged the contributors to critically interact. Plenty of collections have contributions that are mutually relevant, but this collection has four well-organized exchanges in addition to stand-alone articles. We will pay particular attention to these more dialectical components of the volume and then turn to a few questions regarding how the issues with skeptical theism impact questions in philosophy of religion and skepticism more generally.

Skeptical theism, itself, is a picture of a dialectical philosophical view, as one appreciates its significance only as a move designed to undercut justification for a critical premise in atheistic arguments from evil. The argument from evil runs that there seems to be no justifying reason for God to allow horrendous evils, and since God would not be God were He to do so, we have grounds for atheism. The skeptical theist's challenge is to the connection between there *appearing to us to be* no successful theodicy and there *being* no successful theodicy. We, limited creatures as we are, surely cannot fathom all the consequences of some events or successfully weigh out the goods from God's perspective. And so, we must be *skeptical* of the thought that just because we cannot grasp or provide God-justifying reasons for horrendous evils, God does not have them. His ways are not our ways, we are reminded. And so we should consider, given the skeptical theist's line, the atheistic argument from evil as being presumptuous about how much we can know about the moral world.

The collection is organized around four important questions that arise from this skeptical strategy of replying to the atheistic argument from evil. They are:

1. What is the connection between skeptical theism and intellectual humility?
2. Is the CORNEA defense of skeptical theism plausible?
3. Does the skeptical element of skeptical theism undercut grounds for any positive theology?
4. Is skeptical theism destructive of our first-order moral judgments?

In each of these areas, Dougherty and McBrayer have arranged substantive and well-ordered exchanges. With regard to the question of the connection between intellectual modesty and skeptical theism, Jon Matheson defends the view that a properly qualified skeptical theism is consistent with phenomenal conservatism, the view that if it seems to a subject that *p*, then the subject has defeasible justification for believing that *p*. Matheson's take is that given skeptical theism's weaker version (that if we have on balance reasons to think skeptical theism is true), we have defeaters for thinking that there are no God-justifying reasons for horrendous evils. Given what we know about our intellectual weakness and the vastness of the world's complexity, the fact that it *seems* there is no justifying reason for evils is no reason that justifies holding that there *are* none. Our limitations and the vastness of the domain are undercutting defeaters. Trent Dougherty's reply is that it is not the case that such undercutting defeat must go only one way. Sometimes, in the conflict between skeptical theism and phenomenal conservatism, it is skeptical theism that is defeated. For the skeptical theist's commitments to defeat the evidence provided by irreligious experience, they themselves must be justified—and Dougherty is skeptical about that prospect. John Depoe's answer to this sort of challenge, however, is to argue that there are reasons to expect "epistemic distance" between God and created beings—there is a "positive value to mystery" (37), as we discover God's existence and find our own way toward Him. What appears as gratuitous evil, as it turns out, is the most effective way to create this epistemic distance.

The Condition of Reasonable Epistemic Access (CORNEA) is regularly invoked as a consideration that cuts in favor of skeptical theism. The CORNEA requirement is one that restricts what counts as evidence. Roughly, if a subject has cognitive inputs, those inputs are evidence for a hypothesis only if were the hypothesis false the inputs would be different. The skeptical theist holds that because our inputs would be the same were atheism or skeptical theism true (i.e., that we cannot conceive of an appropriate theodicy), the fact that there