

W. Paul Franks (ed.), *Explaining Evil: Four Views* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 180 pages. ISBN: 9781501331121 (pbk.). Hardback/Paperback: £50.40/£22.99.

The existence of evil is, in spite of its omnipresence, difficult to explain. It is this explanatory task that the contributors to *Explaining Evil: Four Views* set themselves. The book consists of an introduction by W. Paul Franks and four chapters; each chapter is comprised of a leading essay by one of four contributors, a response to that essay by the other three contributors, and a final reply by the writer of the leading essay. The four contributors – Richard Brian Davis, Paul Helm, Michael Ruse, and Erik J. Wielenberg – each seek to demonstrate that the worldview for which they argue best accounts for the incidence of evil in our common experience. The format of the book has several virtues. The specific grouping of contributors makes for a consistently engaging exchange, since they share a similar sense of the gravity of the phenomenon of evil yet have opposing views about how thought can accommodate it. And the responses which follow each essay draw out the sociality of thinking often obscured by the architecture of a book.

In dialogue with one another, the contributors explore what it might mean for thought to abide evil, to make sense of it rather than explain it away. W. Paul Franks' excellent introduction sets the tone for this project. Franks clarifies that the book will neither defend nor refute the theological problem of evil because "the task of explaining evil is not something that falls to theists alone ... Non-theists are just as prone to seek out explanations for evil as anyone else" (p. 2). Instead, "the aim of this book is for each contributor to present his own positive account of evil ..." (p. 2). To see how this is achieved, it will be helpful to turn to the four main essays. Constraints of space mean that I will have to leave out much that will be of interest and that I will not be able to discuss the substantive replies to each essay, so suffice it to say that the reader will find in these replies part of what makes this book distinctive.

The first essay, by Richard Brian Davis, is entitled "Evil and Agent-Causal Theism." We are, Davis tells us, "more aware ... of the depth and scope of evil than at any other time in human history. However ... it is not always easy to find room for it in our thinking" (p. 11). In order to find this room, Davis thinks it necessary to make recourse to a worldview (agent-causal theism) in which wrongful thoughts, decisions, desires, actions, etc., are able to be entertained or participated in with freedom and purpose; it is thus that what freely and purposefully leads to unjustifiable harms can be classed as properly evil. Davis consequently upholds the thesis that there are "immaterial, conscious agents endued (by God) with a power of self-motion" (p. 11). These agents must be able *themselves* to bring about volitions to act – they must have "the requisite

freedom for doing good or evil" (p. 16). Since archetypal cases of evil evince an intention to enact or allow harm when one could do otherwise, a worldview must admit of such agents if it is to include evil's reality. Davis critiques naturalistic Darwinism and theistic Calvinism on this basis. That there *is* evil in the world is not, as is often claimed, a problem for theism, because the very explanation of this evil, which calls for an explanation of free and conscious agents who have a power of self-motion, requires there to be God (p. 26). An argument for God can be an argument *from* evil.

Paul Helm's "Evil and Christian Classical Theism" follows Davis' essay. Helm begins by restating the question "why evil?" as two distinct questions. *First*, "What is God's purpose in permitting/ordaining evil?" And *second*, "Granted that God is the ordainer of evil, how does evil occur?" (p. 50). In approaching these questions, Helm names his method one of "faith seeking understanding" (Anselm's motto), writing that his viewpoint is "faith driven, not reason driven ..." (p. 49). In regard to the first question, Helm argues that the universe is arrayed for the illustration of God's perfection. The existence of moral evil in the universe is then intelligible because it is this that warrants the incarnation. Referring to Alvin Plantinga's *felix culpa* theodicy, Helm submits that a world which includes the incarnation, and thus evil, is better than one without both. In response to the second question, Helm puts forward a form of compatibilism: human persons are culpable for having departed from their original, created condition. Humans are responsible for causing all the moral evil in the world, even though their thoughts and actions are determined by their nature and situation.

The third essay, by Michael Ruse, is entitled "Evil and Atheistic Moral Skepticism." The problem with which Ruse contends is that of the coexistence of two views: a realism about evil and moral skepticism. In order to sustain both views, the case has to be made that "evil exists but is nonreal in the sense that it has no objective referent" (p. 101). While Ruse affirms that evil has a "value component" (p. 84), he does not think that its explanation makes necessary any recourse to theism or moral realism. Ruse dismisses the problem of natural evil as a "nonproblem" for an atheist and focuses on moral or agential evil (p. 85). This dismissal is not very convincing: perhaps the explanatory obligation concerning natural evil is different for the atheist than for the theist, but the atheist still inhabits a world in which naturally caused afflictions are not more endurable just because they are naturalistically comprehensible. Ruse's response to this is strained: "Pain and suffering happens. Get over it" (p. 87). Turning to moral evil, Ruse advances a Darwinian account to explain both evil's origin and nature. Human persons can make decisions in a compatibilist fashion, and some of these decisions lead to moral evil (p. 91). This

compatibilism allows humans to be brought “beneath the pertinent scientific theories of our day” (p. 92). The existence of evil, defined as that which goes against an evolutionarily-given sense of morality, can be understood by virtue of the fact that “[m]orality is ... working with natural adaptations. Adaptations rarely work perfectly” (p. 97). In this way, there is in Darwinism a “full place” for evil (p. 98).

The concluding essay of the book, by Erik J. Wielenberg, is entitled “Evil and Atheistic Moral Realism.” Wielenberg begins by arguing that ethical properties, such as *being evil*, cannot be reduced to natural or supernatural properties; they are *sui generis*. The property *being evil*, which can belong to “states of affairs, actions, intentions, and persons,” is irreducibly normative and an objective component of reality (pp. 123–124). Wielenberg helpfully contrasts the theological problem of evil with what he calls ‘the metaphysical problem of evil’: the atheist must explain how evil can exist despite the absence of any divinity who could have brought it into being. Having explicated a definition of evil, Wielenberg thus aims to illuminate its cause. The property *being evil* is instantiated by non-ethical properties, such as *causing pain just for fun*, by means of a ‘robust causal relation’ that holds between them. To show how this comes about, Wielenberg turns to research on dehumanization; in attending to dehumanization, he claims, we can see this causal relation at work. Neither a natural nor supernatural explanation is required for it: states of affairs involving ethical properties (e.g., *being evil*) are said to be basic givens whose obtaining demands no explanation exterior to themselves (p. 128). Thus, Wielenberg’s view “implies the obtaining of substantive, metaphysically necessary, brute facts,” including “*basic ethical facts*” (p. 130). These found “(the rest of) objective morality and rest on no foundation themselves” (*ibid.*). It is in this framework that evil can be “both objective and real in our godless universe” (p. 138).

A great deal worth considering has been left out of these synopses. That being said, *Explaining Evil* has several flaws. Its brevity coupled with its ambition means that some assertions are unsubstantiated and lie open to critique. Contributors address this by referencing their own work published elsewhere such that each chapter serves as a précis of a view partially elaborated, though a ‘Recommended Reading’ appendix helps to alleviate this. It is unfortunate that all of the views included are either Christian or atheistic; it seems to me that other religions, agnosticisms, and various speculative positions have much to add to this discussion. While the finite space of a book is surely a limiting factor, this volume would have been helped by a more pluralistic attendance to views that are not considered. These flaws aside, *Explaining Evil* will make an exceptional addition to undergraduate syllabi in moral philosophy and the philosophy of religion, both for its diverse content and for modeling the activity of

philosophizing itself, and it will appeal to graduate students and researchers concerned with the phenomenon of evil and its possibility. The great strength of this book is to be oriented in such a way as to leave several pictures of the world open for the reader to consider, choose between, and wonder about; this allows the book to capture philosophy in its assembly. For this reason among others, and with the hope that explaining evil, or struggling to do so, will allow us better to endure and stand against it, this is not a book to pass up. As Ruse writes: "It is now time for the reader to jump into the conversation" (p. 121).

*Matt Rosen*

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Oxford, Oxford,  
United Kingdom

*matt.rosen@philosophy.ox.ac.uk*