

**Andrew Ter Ern Loke. *Evil, Sin and Christian Theism*.
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In his recent monograph, Andrew Ter Ern Loke offers an extensive analysis of the problem of evil from a distinctly Christian perspective. Rather than approach the problem of evil from a generally theistic perspective, one of Loke's central contentions in this work is that the Christian tradition has much to offer in response to the problem of evil. To this end, Loke discusses how a variety of doctrines, such as the doctrines of the fall and original sin, provide theological context and resources to address the problem of evil. Moreover, Loke claims, such an approach can provide fuller answers to life's "Big Questions" such as "Where am I going?" and "Where do I come from?" (13). Loke's introduction of these doctrines to the conversation about evil concurrently introduces new problems and questions that he must address. For example, Loke discusses the question of evolutionary evils such as animal suffering (Ch. 4) in addition to the question of human origins (Ch. 5). Loke is aware of the attendant problems and addresses these as he introduces different doctrines into the conversation.

In my assessment, Loke's basic approach is correct and resonates with that of Marilyn M. Adams in her work, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (1999). Adams offered a fresh perspective of how the resources of the Christian tradition and theology can address and alleviate the problem of evil. So too does Loke aim to address the problems and questions of evil from a distinctly Christian perspective. For this reason, I can recommend Loke's work to those interested in the problem of evil from a Christian theological perspective.

After stating his approach and other preliminary material in the introductory chapter, in Chapter 2 Loke addresses the nature of evil as well as the logical and evidential arguments from evil. Here Loke takes a fairly standard privation theorist view on the nature of evil and maintains that "evil is a lack of a kind of goodness; something is evil if it is not what it ought to be," such as something being "contrary" to God's commands (16). Loke offers interesting arguments in response to the logical and evidential problems of evil. For example, Loke modifies Plantinga's proposal of transworld depravity (TWD) in order to maintain that God could not have created a world free from moral evil (20). While some have objected that it is unlikely that every human suffers from TWD, Loke proposes that TWD is a part of the individual's essence. In doing so, he aims to rebut the criticism that such a state of affairs is unlikely. He develops this idea more fully in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 3, Loke addresses the origin of evil and sin. He argues that sin is "an offence against a personal holy God, whether intentional or unintentional" and discusses a variety of biblical passages to support this claim (39). Loke also advances standard arguments in favor

of a libertarian view of free will and moral responsibility. He does so to claim that God is *not* the author of sin, for there is an obvious ‘break’ in the causal chain between God’s actions and a libertarian free action. Unsurprisingly, Loke claims that compatibilists cannot avail themselves of this answer. Consequently, it would seem that God is the author of sin if one maintains that creaturely agents do not initiate or cause their own choices in a significant sense.

While an intriguing discussion, Loke’s argument could have been improved with reference to more literature on primary and secondary causation. For example, when discussing whether or not compatibilism results in the claim that God is the author of sin (sections 3.2-3.4), Loke omits any discussion of Peter Furlong (2019), Hugh J. McCann (2012), and W. Matthews Grant (2019). These authors, especially Furlong and Grant, offer the most up to date discussion on the problems surrounding divine and human causation. Loke articulates standard worries and objections from a libertarian perspective and, because he does not engage in these conversations, does not obviously move this discussion forward.

In Chapter 4, Loke addresses the problem of evolutionary evils. I found the discussion of whether non-human creatures experience the phenomenon of pain to be fruitful (section 4.4). Loke maintains that many non-human animals *do not* experience pain as a negative phenomenon because, in part, it is not clear that non-human animals have the adequate cognitive capacities to evaluate pain negatively (80). Nevertheless, he maintains that there are good reasons to avoid needlessly harming non-human animals, not least because mistreating these creatures can harm one’s own moral character.

In Chapter 5, Loke addresses the topic of human origins and whether the human race fell into sin. One of the many interesting arguments offered in this chapter is about whether there was a historical Adam. Loke argues that God chose an anatomical *Homo* to bear His image from a group of individuals whose members are anatomically the same. He goes on to argue that present-day humans who require Christ’s work are those who bear God’s image and come from their God-chosen predecessor, Adam. Loke’s proposal is interesting because it attempts to stand between traditional creationist approaches as well as approaches that aim to be compatible in some way with evolutionary theory (98-103).

In Chapter 6, Loke proposes a new model of original sin. He denies the doctrine of original guilt which claims that we are guilty of Adam’s sin (132) and holds to a ‘corruption-only’ doctrine and maintains that humans are only guilty of actual sins that they personally commit. Loke’s proposed doctrine of original sin aims to ensure (i) that individual who have original sin will inevitably commit some sin while also ensuring (ii) that said individuals enjoy libertarian free-will (section 6.5).

In Chapter 7, Loke addresses the problem of divine hiddenness. He argues that God’s being partially hidden may be necessary for creatures to grow in their moral agency and, ultimately, to love God truly. After all, if God were to manifest himself to all persons at all times, people might simply choose relationship with God out of fear and not love.

In Chapter 8, Loke brings the foregoing discussions to bear on the topic of horrendous and pointless evils. He maintains that apparently pointless evils are not always in fact pointless because, in the eschaton, those who reject God ultimately deserve them, and those in union with God will ultimately have their pointless evils defeated. Indeed, experiencing evil in this present life can lead to blessing and is conducive to our growth.

The final chapter, Chapter 9, addresses the obvious objection at this point, namely, why one should attempt to redress evil if it is necessary or inevitable. Loke responds that redressing evil is a part of forming deep and valuable connections with other individuals that lead to a good and meaningful life (209-10).

Some of the major strengths of Loke's monograph are his method of approach and the vast number of topics he covers in relation to evil and sin. Another major strength is the consistent engagement with the biblical text and scholarship. Nearly every chapter has an entire section (or more) dedicated to biblical exegesis in addition to the standard philosophical and theological arguments.

Above I noted some concerns about omissions of literature. Another major point of concern with the monograph is that some of the arguments are conceptually underdeveloped. This is a bit unsurprising given the book's sheer quantity of proposals. Nevertheless, I shall highlight two related examples: one regarding the concept of sin, and the other regarding the inevitability of sin.

Regarding the issue of how to define sin, Loke concludes that sin is a moral concept, something he distinguishes from a theological concept (he does not specify what a theological concept is). He defines sin as "an offence against a personal holy God, whether intentional or unintentional" (39). Loke's classification of sins as being either intentional or unintentional seems to align well with the biblical text (e.g., Numbers 15:27-31), as does his claim that *states* or *dispositions* can be sinful. However, aside from citing the work of Marilyn M. Adams (1991), Loke does not detail what would classify as an unintentional sin and he does not detail what he has in mind when he claims that states or dispositions might also be classified as sinful (40).

While this might appear to be a minor oversight, Loke must specify these issues for at least two reasons. First, Loke also maintains that a person is morally responsible for an action only if that person was able to choose that action freely (or at least, could have historically committed free choices which contributed to the present action) (40 & 63). These claims—i.e., (i) that actual sin is something for which an individual is morally responsible (52 & 132-136), (ii) that there are unintentional sins and states of sin, and (iii) that libertarian free will is a necessary condition of moral responsibility—appear to be in tension. Could a person be morally responsible for being in a *state* of sin? Loke provides two answers. On the one hand, the sinful state or action could be the result of previous free actions. If this is the case, then the individual could be said to have had some significant control over the state of affairs and can thus be morally responsible. On the other hand, the state may not be the direct or indirect result of free action, but instead is sinful and not a state for which the individual is responsible. What does this mean, given Loke's description of things (40), to be in a state of sin for which one is not responsible? Loke does not clarify. The need to clarify this point is pressing. As we have seen, Loke claims that "sin is properly regarded as a moral category" (39), and he further maintains that the concept 'moral' pertains to "values (goodness, badness) and the rightness/wrongness of intentions and behaviour" (39). If sin is a moral category that is ultimately explained by the misuse of libertarian freedom, and morals pertain to the norms for intentions and behavior, then how is it the case that states of being are regarded as sinful? By my lights, states of being do not fall into the categories of intention and behavior, especially when the individuals exhibit states of being over which they do not have control (either presently or historically) such as being ritually impure after birth.

It appears that Loke is attempting to maintain that sin and moral wrongdoing are not coextensive. I suspect this is the case because Loke attempts to decouple sin from actions when he claims that there are sinful states, and because moral wrongdoing pertains to actions. However, because Loke treats sin as a moral category and defines this as pertaining to value *and* the rightness and wrongness of actions or behavior, I find that the account is presently underdeveloped.

Second, and to take the next example of a conceptually underdeveloped area, Loke must clarify the concepts of unintentional sins and states of sin because they affect his account of

the inevitability of sin and the conditions of needing salvation. While states of sin and unintentional sin play an important role in making Loke's definition align with the biblical text, these concepts have all but vanished in Chapter 6. Here Loke claims that persons require Christ's work only if they have committed actual sin. This leads Loke to maintain what is called the 'Inevitability Thesis', a thesis which claims that all fallen human beings will inevitably commit some actual sin in their lifetime due to being born in a state of original sin. Loke writes the following:

[T]he affirmation of the truth of the fundamental Christian proclamation that all humankind needs Jesus Christ as saviour and his forgiveness of sin does not require the claim that all humans could not avoid sinning at the very beginning of their existence; it only requires the claim that all humans (except Christ) would not avoid sinning (147).

Putting aside the technicalities of inevitability versus necessity, Loke is quite clear that a personal act of sin is required for the relevant person to need Christ as a savior. However, it is not apparent that this is the case. Do infants not need Christ's saving work? It would seem that they do, and it would also seem like they are people who have not committed actual sin. However, if actual sin is necessary for needing Christ's work, it follows that infants do not require Christ's work. While Loke's subscription to the idea that there are states of sin may be able to salvage this line of thinking, Loke is (again) not clear on what states of sin are and what it would mean to be in a state of sin for which one is not responsible. Therefore, it is also not clear that such a subscription can deliver what he needs. What appeared to be a minor oversight in defining sin above has turned out to affect his account negatively of the inevitability of sin and the conditions for needing salvation.

Loke may rejoin by doubling down: actual sin is in fact necessary for needing Christ's atoning work, and infants have committed actual sins. He states as much in section 6.5.2 (134-136). I will leave the reader to assess whether Loke's brief defense of this proposal is successful. However, the main concern about conceptual underdevelopment is still relevant—if Loke has already claimed that there are states of sin, why not claim that infants are born in these states of sin and thus require Christ's atoning work? While Loke is not entirely clear earlier in the book about what it means to be in a state of sin and how it relates to needing Christ's atoning work, it is further not clear why he introduces the concept earlier if he does not deploy it in a context like this.

Loke's monograph will generate fruitful conversation surrounding the topics of evil and sin from a Christian theological and philosophical perspective. I have discussed some areas of concern about the work's substance. These include a lack of attention to some relevant scholarly resources and some areas that are conceptually underdeveloped. Nevertheless, in my estimation, the monograph correctly approaches the topics of evil and sin and offers interesting proposals that will surely generate lively debate surrounding the topics of evil and sin.

References

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