Laura W. Ekstrom. *God, Suffering, and the Value of Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 238 pp. $83.54 (hbk).

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Laura Ekstrom offers one of the most valuable defenses of Rowe-style arguments from evil against theism in recent memory. Most uniquely, the book argues that for leading theodicies to be successful, they must appeal to significant values attainable only through libertarian freedom on the part of creatures; yet, the book forcefully challenges whether there are any goods attainable only through libertarian freedom that are worth the cost of the evils required to secure them (Chapters 2-3). The book also seeks to close off other lines of response to Rowe-style arguments, including skeptical theism (Chapter 4), rejecting God's essential moral perfection (Chapter 6), and defending a theistic religious lifestyle in the absence of belief in God (Chapter 7). Finally, one chapter applies some of the key ideas of the book about free will to the problem of hell, developing in further detail an argument from David Lewis in order to construct a particularly challenging version of the problem of evil based on traditional teaching about eternal separation from God (Chapter 5). Here I will focus on the book's proposals about evils this side of an afterlife.

After noting some of the attractions of theism, the first chapter offers an overview of different versions of the problem of evil, ultimately articulating two versions of Rowe-style arguments that the book defends. One version is based on the claim that there are some pointless evils—evils not required for securing greater goods or preventing worse evils—which wouldn't exist if there were a God (15). The other version concedes that God may allow individual evils that are pointless, but claims that God must have a justification for global facts about evils, including the amount, intensity, and distribution of them; yet, there is no such justification available, and so God does not exist (19-20). Because this chapter covers both the "logical" problem of evil and various "evidential" versions of the problem of evil, and introduces basic ideas needed for understanding its topic, it may be of pedagogical value as a reading even at the undergraduate level when accompanied by adequate guidance from instructors. One critical comment I would offer is that while one of Peter van Inwagen's key reasons for rejecting the incompatibility of God and pointless evils is appealed to in order to motivate the move to the second version of the problem of evil defended, another of van Inwagen's key reasons for rejecting this incompatibility—his appeal to the idea that there are no minimum amounts of evil required for securing certain goods (van Inwagen 1988; Cullison 2011)—is not addressed anywhere in the book, which is unfortunate because the latter idea is also relevant for evaluating the second version of the argument, especially the claims about the amount and intensity of evils.

The first chapter already begins to make the case that punishment theodicies, character-building theodicies, and free will theodicies all rely upon the idea that evils are necessary in order to secure goods attainable only via the free will of creatures (33-34). Chapter 2 continues this line of thought, arguing that the kind of free will to which these theodicies must appeal must be libertarian free will; the theodicies must claim that free will is incompatible with causal determinism. Chapter 3 extends this point to divine intimacy theodicies (90f). Thus, all of the best available theodicies must claim that human beings

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have incompatibilist free will; that evils of our world are required in order for human beings to exercise this freedom in certain valuable ways; and that the goods attainable through these exercises of freedom that necessitate evils are so valuable as to outweigh the badness of the evils required for them (69). Ekstrom highlights that it is a tall order to defend these claims. She focuses especially on the claim that there are goods attainable only through incompatibilist free will that are sufficiently valuable to outweigh the badness of the world's evils. She considers several candidates for such goods: the intrinsic value of free will, love, moral responsibility, meaning, a veridical sense of self, and truly good acts. She argues that of these, it is only plausible that moral responsibility and a veridical sense of self require libertarian freedom; yet, she contends that these goods do not outweigh the badness of the world's evils. Faced with a choice between creating a world in which creatures satisfy the requirements for libertarian freedom but the evils of our world are present or creating a world in which only the requirements for compatibilist freedom are met but the evils of our world are absent, it ought to be straightforward that God would prefer the latter option (68).

I want to highlight briefly two ways that discussion of this important aspect of Ekstrom's argument could be carried forward fruitfully. First, I think it would be valuable to give greater attention to the question of whether and to what extent the best available theodicies really do require libertarian freedom. Ekstrom's argument for thinking that they do is given in only two paragraphs (42-43), which are repeated in roughly the same form a few times throughout the book. But, several authors whose work is not discussed have contended to the contrary that free will theodicies may indeed be employed fruitfully within a compatibilist framework (e.g., Byerly 2017; Perszyk 2000; Turner 2013). The topic should be explored more thoroughly. Second, it is tempting to think that there may be additional goods beyond those that Ekstrom considers that the libertarian theodicist may appeal to. They may think, for example, that it is valuable for one's decisions to make a qualitative *difference* to the world in a sense available only given libertarianism, or that it is valuable for God to *trust* human beings in a way that renders God vulnerable to their decisions and for that trust in some cases to be met with adequate *faithfulness* on the part of humans. Additionally, Ekstrom's reason for excluding consideration of goods that obtain in an afterlife (which might include goods attainable through libertarian freedom)—namely, that they rest on the assumption that there is a God (130, n.55)—seems clearly unconvincing, given that other goods she is happy to discuss, such as intimacy with God, also require the existence of God.

Ekstrom's main criticism of skeptical theism is that it is "simply implausible" (129). Following Michael Rea and others, Ekstrom identifies the core thesis of skeptical theism as the claim that "*no one* is *ever* justified in believing of any evil that it is pointless" (127, emphasis original). Ekstrom criticizes several attempts to defend this thesis, for example by appeal to analogies, or by appeal to claims about human beings' cognitive limitations. She offers specific criticisms of each of these strategies—e.g., pointing out flaws with the analogies and the tension of hubris alongside humility in the appeal to cognitive limitations. Yet, her more direct argument is that it is reasonable for a person to believe that there are pointless evils when they have identified a case of an apparently unjustified evil and then reflected carefully about both theodicies and skeptical theism and found both of these strategies wanting (128).

I would suggest that it may be fruitful to think differently about skeptical theism. Skeptical theists needn't claim that no person is ever justified in believing that there is a pointless evil. After all, one person's evidence may differ radically from another's. Rather, their view should be understood as claiming that the evidence presented by defenders of the first Rowe-style argument in favor of the claim that there are pointless evils does not strongly support the claim that there are in fact pointless evils. A different version might

be formulated to address the second Rowe-style argument. For my part, I have found the approach articulated in Dougherty and Pruss (2014), which Ekstrom does not consider, to be a helpful starting point for evaluating this type of skeptical theism. On their approach, we should evaluate the evidence that apparently unjustified evils provide against theism in much the way we evaluate the evidence against scientific theories provided by anomalies.

Ekstrom's argument from evil is targeted at a perfect being theism which is committed to God's omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence. The theist might contend that God needn't be understood as a perfect being, or as possessing all of these attributes. Ekstrom criticizes one strategy of this type, defended recently by Mark Murphy (2017), which claims that God can be a perfect being without being omnibenevolent—particularly, without having and fulfilling obligations to promote creatures' well-being or to prevent their unnecessary suffering. Ekstrom contends that, *pace* Murphy, God's sovereignty may be adequately safeguarded if we claim only that God does not have requiring reasons to create sentient creatures in the first place, but once God has created such creatures God has requiring reasons to care for them. Ekstrom develops both an argument from the intrinsic value of creatures and an argument from creator obligations to contend that God would have *pro tanto* obligations to care for creatures by at least preventing their suffering. These obligations cannot be defeated by just any non-moral divine purposes which the suffering might serve, such as the value of orderliness suggested by Murphy. I would suggest that future work on creator obligations may benefit from consideration of whether obligations to prevent unnecessary suffering may sometimes be shared between a creator and their creatures rather than always possessed individually by the creator. It may also be that the purpose of creating a world where creatures' choices make a difference in the sense identified earlier is an alternative and better candidate for a non-moral (perhaps political?) purpose that may play a role in justifying God's permission of suffering.

One final way out for certain religious practitioners is to give up belief that there is a God in the face of Rowe-style arguments from evil, but to insist nonetheless on continuing to live a theistic religious life. Ekstrom argues against this "religion on the cheap." Her main target is religious anti-realist views which involve no positive cognitive commitment to God's existence, and may even incorporate a cognitive commitment to God's non-existence. Ekstrom grants that there are values to be gained through a theistic religious lifestyle, but she contends that these must ultimately be sacrificed for those who lack cognitive commitment to God, because this sort of religious participation without cognitive commitment compromises a person's integrity (193) or rational coherence (194) and is misleading to fellow congregants (207), and may involve mistaken or wrongful worship (201). Ekstrom only acknowledges in footnotes (193, n.17; 213, n.40) the possibility of sincere religious participation on the part of someone who lacks belief that God exists but maintains a different kind of cognitive commitment to God's existence, such as assuming or having faith that God exists. It would be fruitful to consider to what extent her concerns for full and sincere religious participation without belief continue to apply to individuals with that kind of cognitive profile.

This is a rich and important book on Rowe-style arguments from evil, sure to prompt widespread discussion.

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