

Perry Hendricks. *Skeptical Theism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. xi + 307 pp. \$129.99 (hbk); \$109.99 (ebook).

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Epicurus succinctly formulated the problem of evil during the era when Aristotle's most famous student was razing the late classical world. Epicurus reasoned that an all-powerful being can eliminate any evil, an all-knowing being knows everything relevant to eliminating any evil, and an all-good being aims to eliminate any evil. Hence, God—an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being—prevents any evil from occurring. The fact of evil is inconsistent with God.

There's been some discussion on the problem of evil since Epicurus's formulation. For the most part the positions in logical space are well-understood. There are greater good defenses appealing to goods that outweigh evils. There are limitation defenses (moral and structural) appealing to necessary constraints on what a perfect being can do. Skeptical theism aims to explore a different route: epistemic limitations on the ability of humans to map out the space relevant to God and evil.

Hendricks's book is the first scholarly monograph entirely devoted to skeptical theism. Hendricks aims to defend several skeptical theist theses. The book consists of an introduction and then eight main chapters. The introduction briefly discusses the objection that theodicy is immoral (4–8). Hendricks isolates two objections: that the project of theodicy causes moral harm by displaying an insensitivity to sufferers and that the project of theodicy causes epistemic harm by minimizing what the sufferer knows. Hendricks initially dismisses these objections somewhat lightly with “Oh please” (5), but a more careful and nuanced response would better address the seriousness of these concerns. His more considered response is that these are reasons to practice theodicy more carefully (7). While this is true, I wasn't convinced that the ‘be careful’ lesson is the main lesson to draw from the epistemic harm objection. A sympathetic skeptic may hold that we aren't in a position to understand what the sufferer understands. Our epistemic limitations with respect to God and evil prevent us from engaging in a theodicy that threatens to minimize the sufferer's knowledge.

Chapter 2, “Axiological Skeptical Theism Proved,” defends the idea that we have no good reason to think that an evil's perceived value resembles its actual value (16). Let us call this thesis AST. Hendricks's initial formulation of the thesis is complex (13), and his simplified formulation is more complicated than it needs to be (16). A virtue of Hendricks's approach is his stress on public reasons, reasons which are “in principle, equally available to everyone” (13). His argument for AST is curious. He writes, “Axiological Skeptical Theism is true *definitionally* until and unless we are given a good public reason for thinking it's likely that for some evil *E*, its perceived value resembled its actual value” (17, emphasis in the original). After this brief definitional argument, he spends the remainder of the chapter (18–48) replying to objections where the reader is treated to a tour of much recent discussion of skeptical theism. A virtue of Hendricks's monograph is that every stone on the skeptical theism path is turned over.

Chapter 3, “Deontological Skeptical Theism Proved,” focuses on the thesis that we have no good reason to think that the perceived weight of God’s reasons resembles the actual weight of his reasons (53). Call this deontological form of skeptical theism DST, which, for Hendricks, is the more important form of skeptical theism (50). Hendricks’s first formulation of DST (51) and his simplified formulation (53) are both distractingly complex. At issue is whether the reasons *we have* regarding whether it is permissible for God to allow an evil to occur track the reasons *God has*. Before presenting an argument for DST, Hendricks has a valuable discussion on the nature of reasons (53–59). He then offers another definitional argument for DST and spends the rest of the chapter responding to objections to the thesis (61–70).

Chapter 4, “Skeptical Theism and the Problems of Evil,” is a lengthy discussion of how AST and DST undermine many popular arguments from evil (71–118). He discusses the noseem axiological argument from evil (75–87), the noseem deontological argument from evil (87–90), the equiprobability argument from evil (90–108), and Humean arguments from evil (108–118). A common move throughout this chapter is to appeal to AST or DST to undermine an inference from a *sample* to a *population*. For example, we have some reasons pertaining to whether it is permissible for God to allow an evil (the sample) and we want to know if these reasons are representative of God’s actual reasons (the population). This is one way to construe the inference that it is impermissible for God to allow an evil, but is it the only way? Is it right, in general, that an impermissibility inference is an inference from a sample to a population? Or is it an inference at all? Hendricks doesn’t explicitly address these questions. However, his discussion of Tooley’s equiprobability argument is worth spending the time to work through (90–108). More generally, while it’s helpful to see how AST or DST undermines specific arguments from evil, it also isn’t surprising that a view aimed at undermining a crucial premise in arguments from evil does (if true) undermine that premise.

Chapter 5, “Skeptical Theism and Other Arguments for Atheism,” continues the theme of how skeptical theism undermines arguments for atheism. Hendricks argues that Wielenberg’s contention that there is inscrutable suffering relies on the move that there are no reasons that justify God in permitting inscrutable suffering (120–24). He considers the evil-god challenge (124–29) and argues that Law’s contention that maltheism is unreasonable given that there are apparently gratuitous goods is undermined by skeptical theism. He also considers the problem of divine hiddenness (129–34) and the evolutionary argument for atheism (135–37). The structure of all these arguments is that there is some problematic truth such that if there were a God, this wouldn’t be the case. Skeptical theism casts doubt on that implication (138).

Chapter 6, “Skeptical Theism Defeated,” considers the charge that skeptical theism is so deeply skeptical that it undermines our knowledge of commonsense beliefs. If skeptical theism were genuinely incompatible with commonsense knowledge (such as knowing we have hands), that incompatibility would pose a severe challenge, demanding careful reconsideration. Hendricks begins with a discussion of the nature of defeaters (142–48) and then turns to the skeptical arguments (148–67). Hendricks removes several non-serious skeptical arguments before tackling a more serious challenge. He argues that skeptical theism only undermines a noseem inference (152). Consequently, a skeptical challenge to knowledge (or justification) of commonsense beliefs must be construed as undermining a noseem inference from the perceived value of a state of affairs to its actual value. It is unclear precisely how such an argument is supposed to go, but the worry seems to be that we know (e.g.) that we have hands only if God isn’t deceiving us. But skeptical theism implies

that we lack sufficient reason to think that God isn't a deceiver. Hendricks's response to this worry is curious. He thinks that Christian theists have sufficient reasons to think that God isn't a deceiver (159–63). But it's hard to see how the epistemic merits of Christian theism are better than the epistemic merits of the belief that I have hands.

Chapter 7, "Faithful Skeptical Theism," is directed toward Hud Hudson's and Erik Wielenberg's objections. These challenges focus on the following theses:

INSCRUTABLE: For any instance of divine testimony, the probability of it being true is inscrutable. (173)

EVIDENCE: For any instance of divine testimony, we have evidence against its truth. (173)

Hendricks concedes the truth of these claims and argues that a long-term risky commitment to religious claims is still rational. Hendricks offers the example of Sally who is attending college to become a medical doctor but where the odds of becoming a medical doctor depend on some state of affairs whose probability is inscrutable (198). He writes, "It's clear that Sally can have [rational] *faith* that she will complete her degree: despite her success being inscrutable, it's no doubt possible for her to have faith that she'll complete the degree" (199). The rationality of her faith depends on his view of rational faith—it's responsive to evidence and self-justifying and enables long-term projects.

Chapter 8, "Theodicy and Natural Theology," considers whether skeptical theism conflicts with theodicy and natural theology. Hendricks argues that both the *felix culpa* theodicy and a deontological theodicy conflict with skeptical theism. If skeptical theism is true then it undermines justification for a crucial premise in both theodicies. Hendricks then considers two examples of natural theology. He argues against Ben Page's argument from conscious agents which requires that the probability of conscious agents given God is high. Hendricks argues that skeptical theism undermines this inference because it relies on equating the perceived value of conscious agents with the actual value of conscious agents. The same move is made with the other natural theology argument—the argument from psychophysical harmony. Skeptical theists can't endorse the move from perceived value to actual value. Hendricks ends the chapter with an attempt to square skeptical theism with theodicy and natural theology by justifying the key claims without relying on a noseum inference. One way is to appeal to private reasons. Hendricks isn't optimistic about this move. Another way is to appeal to conceptual analysis. He suggests that judgments rooted in conceptual analysis are immune from skeptical worries (229). For those sympathetic to both skeptical theism and natural theology this section may reward close study.

Chapter 9, "The Commonsense Problem of Evil," Hendricks aims to tackle the objection that we can perceive the world contains unjustifiable evils. If this is correct then the justification we have that some evils are inconsistent with God's existence does not rely on a noseum inference. Hendricks distinguishes between an axiological and deontological way to construe the key claims and responds to them. A key issue is whether we can perceive that an evil is unjustified. Hendricks focuses on seemings and argues that "it's highly dubious to suppose that our seemings are able to see through the maze of connections between evils and the set of good and evil states of affairs (known and unknown) they logically entail in such a way that they reliably indicate whether the evil is outweighed" (244). The more general issue is how moral perception works. Assuming we perceive moral facts, can we

perceive that an evil is gratuitous? It's not implausible to think that we can perceive such a thing in ordinary contexts—Joan perceives that Jan's insult was unwarranted. But if we can perceive that, might Joan perceive that God's permission of some evil is unwarranted? It'd be useful for skeptical theist to think more generally about the nature and limits of moral perception.

Hendricks's book is a lengthy discussion of a multitude of issues relating to skeptical theism. At several points, the book repeats nearly identical arguments and responses across chapters, especially concerning axiological and deontological forms of skeptical theism. Objections to skeptical theism are formulated and separately discussed in terms of axiological and deontological varieties. The discussion over theodicy and natural theology repeats the basic reply several times. Consolidating these repeated points into single, focused sections would greatly enhance readability and highlight the book's central insights. Even so, the reader comes away with a thorough knowledge of the literature relevant to skeptical theism.

My two primary philosophical issues with the discussion are the definitional argument Hendricks offers for AST and DST and the issues surrounding noseem inferences and moral perception. Since I've already discussed the last issue, I'll focus on the first. The default argument for DST is formulated as this: "Deontological Skeptical Theism is true *definitionally* until and unless we are given a good public antecedent reason for thinking it's likely that the perceived weight of God's reasons for permitting E resembles the actual weight of his reasons for permitting E" (60). Hendricks notes that this argument "has the same structure as the Default Argument for Axiological Skeptical Theism" (60). One could quibble over the nature of definitions and adequacy conditions for definitions. But at the heart of the issue is the epistemic standing of a resemblance claim: Do we have adequate justification for thinking that our reasons resemble God's reasons? The truth of the relevant claim here is *not* true by definition; it is true or not depending on how the epistemic facts pan out. Do the facts about our epistemic powers and limitations imply that we have such justification or lack it?

A skeptical theist is, by the nature of the position, prohibited from showing that God's reasons do not resemble our reasons because the view is that we aren't in a position to knowingly grasp God's reasons. The argument needs to be more theoretical. Hendricks seems to think DST follows definitionally from the meaning of "having a good reason to think X" (60). He writes that this means "we currently recognize a reason as being a good one for thinking X" (60). First, having a good reason doesn't require (by virtue of meaning!) the second-level thought that we think of it as a good reason. But second, having a good reason to think X doesn't speak at all to the thesis of skeptical theism that we lack a good reason for thinking that our reasons resemble God's reasons. The definitional argument doesn't get off the ground.

The goal of the definitional argument is to show that skeptical theism is a default position and that objections to it must provide more than mere plausibility to knock skeptical theism off its pedestal. A more promising way to proceed is to consider the limitations of human judgment with respect to theodicy. But this kind of argument is different in nature from a definitional or default argument for DST. Moreover, one wonders just how much of Epicurus's old argument is undermined by a reasonable skepticism. The enduring challenge that evil poses to traditional theism is some evidence that even a modest skepticism about human judgment is not completely adequate to remove the thorn evil poses to theism.