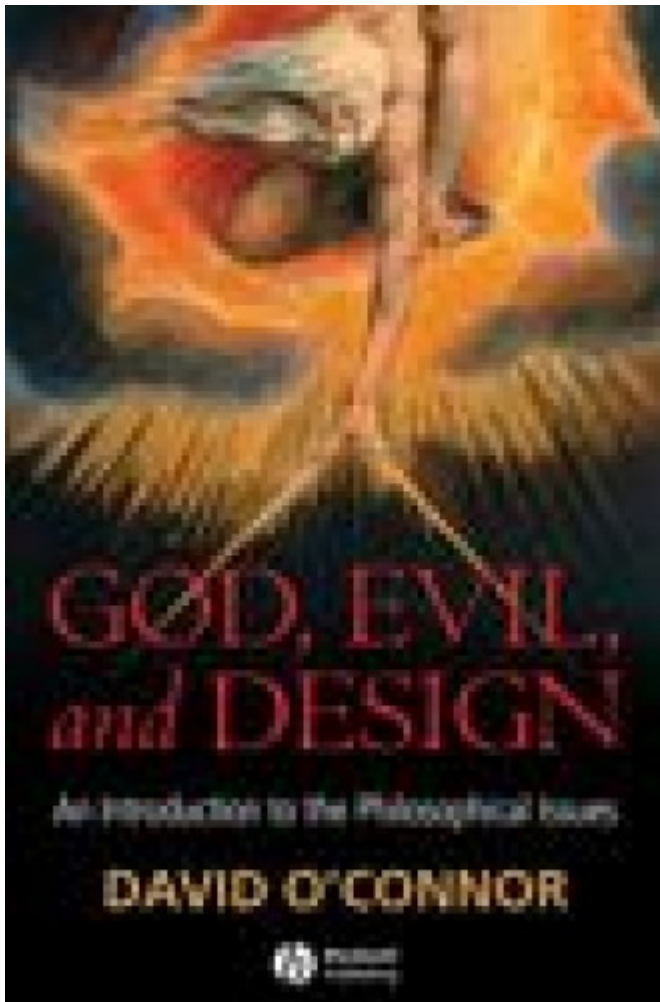# God, Evil, and Design: An Introduction to the Philosophical Issues

reviewed by [George Dennis O'Brien](#) in the [December 2, 2008](#) issue

In Review

God, Evil, and Design: An Introduction to the Philosophical Issues

David O'Connor

A world more full of weeping than [we] can understand." David O'Connor quotes this line from Yeats in the first sentence of his book on God and the problem of evil. His conclusion at the end of the book is that a world with both God and evil cannot be understood. One of the terms has to go, and it is God.

The book's subtitle is crucial for understanding the author's task. O'Connor, who teaches philosophy at Seton Hall University, makes this clear. "Our examination here is of philosophical questions only. Purely religious questions will receive no further discussion."

Therein lies both the strength of the book and its possible limitation. Michael Buckley, in his classic study *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, remarks that it has been a big mistake to leave the problem of God in the hands of philosophers. Maybe so. But whether Buckley is correct or not, O'Connor has written a clear, comprehensive and convincing—at least for philosophers—argument for the incompatibility of belief in a creator God with a world as full of suffering as ours is now.

The book is divided into two parts. The first section examines the logical problems of linking the idea of God to a world of suffering. The latter half deals with the plausibility of concluding that there is a Creator when our world is such a mix of delight and disaster. Along with a judicious temper, O'Connor has a knack for creating commonsense, down-to-earth examples that move the discussion from pious rhetoric to concrete meaning. As a philosophical cold shower on hasty religious apologies and excuses for evil, his book is valuable and important.

The argument for the logical impossibility of God is easily stated. O'Connor uses a version from the philosopher J. L. Mackie: If God is all good and all powerful, then God's existence is incompatible with a world that has suffering and evil. Either God is not all good and does not care about evil, or God is not powerful enough to prevent evil. Therefore, an all-good, all-powerful God does not exist.

The principal counter to Mackie's argument is to note a logical limitation to divine omnipotence. God cannot create a world with moral beings—ourselves, we hope—without allowing freedom of action. Mackie has a rejoinder: God is not only omnipotent, but also omniscient. Why did he not create human beings who, though they have free will, do not act immorally? Since it is logically possible for any

individual to be perfectly moral, why not shape such a race of humanity?

Alvin Plantinga, who favors the free-will limitation on God's power, counters this last challenge by alluding to inherent human depravity. At this point O'Connor's analysis of the logical possibility or impossibility of God reaches its limit. It seems logically possible that God could have created free humans who always act morally; it is also logically possible that our freedom inevitably leads to sin. God is at least logically possible—but by an implausible whisker.

In the second and longer section of the book, O'Connor starts with the facts of the world and asks whether it is plausible to hold that the world was shaped by a "perfect designer Creator." After noting problems with the basic terms with which one would define a Designer of the cosmos, O'Connor directs his most pungent arguments at those who would excuse or exonerate whatever might count as a divine Designer for the obvious pain and suffering in the Designer's final product. He raises the Goldilocks problem: philosophical defenders of a designer God claim that despite obvious evils, creation is "good overall." The problem with this defense is that unlike Goldilocks, who can see that Baby Bear's porridge is just right, we really have no clear idea of what would count as a just-right "good overall" on a cosmic scale.

In order to examine life, O'Connor deliberately steps behind John Rawls's construction, "the veil of ignorance." The veil prevents the investigator from knowing his or her personal status: man, woman, old, young, religious believer, atheist and so on. It prevents personal interest from distorting an argument. Rawls's veil is a powerful tool for analysis. If there is any answer to the dilemma of God and suffering, it is because, I would suggest, something is added to human reality when we come out from behind the veil. Life is not a spectator sport. The participants in all their concrete pain and triumph know something that the philosophical spectator in the examining booth does not.

David Burrell, in his recent book *Deconstructing Theodicy*: *Why Job Has Nothing to Say to the Puzzle of Suffering*, is on the right theological track for O'Connor's puzzle. Job's comforters offer various answers for the problem of suffering—Job's trials included. Job will have none of it. What he wants is to confront God directly. That is what happens with the voice from the whirlwind. "I had heard of you by the hearing of my ear, but now my eyes see you" (Job 42:5). Is there a solution to Job's suffering? Not in the sense of an answer. But somehow when one stands as a person before the Person of the Creator—no veils on either side—a wisdom about suffering

may be revealed.