

Please cite the Published Version

Strickland, L (2017) Review of "God's Goodness and God's Evil" by James Kellenberger. American Academy of Religion.

Publisher: American Academy of Religion

Version: Accepted Version

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God's Goodness and God's Evil

James Kellenberger

Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017. 147 pages. Hardback. ISBN 978-1498547512.

In *God's Goodness and God's Evil*, James Kellenberger seeks to devise an "approach to evil" that involves adopting a particular attitude towards evil rather than attempting to explain it. Of the book's two parts, part 1 broadly concerns the problem of evil and the failure of attempts to resolve it through theodicy, while part 2 is devoted to outlining Kellenberger's own approach to evil, based on what he calls "Job-like belief."

Among other things, in part 1 Kellenberger considers three different theodicies: Leibniz's theodicy, the free will theodicy, and the Irenaean theodicy. Given the vast literature on these theodicies it would be a very tall order to do justice to them all in the twenty pages Kellenberger devotes to them here, and not surprisingly his treatment often falls short.

I mention three obvious shortcomings: First, the exposition of the theodicies is overly brief; Leibniz's theodicy, for example, is sketched out in two pages. While the sketch is accurate as far as it goes, it omits a great deal that is both clearly important for understanding Leibniz's theodicy and highly relevant to Kellenberger's own concerns; specifically, nothing at all is said about the practical side of Leibniz's theodicy, that is, how Leibniz thought his theodicy could help us orientate ourselves in the face of evil. As we shall see, this omission is especially unfortunate given the clear overlap with the position Kellenberger develops in part 2 of his book. Second, the outline of each theodicy is followed by a summary of some objections, but no attempt is made to assess the strength of the objections or to consider responses to them. Third, Kellenberger does not utilize the recent literature on the problem of evil, often relying on the work of John Mackie, H. J. McCloskey, and John Hick, much of which is more than fifty years old. Indeed, throughout the entire book, Kellenberger cites only two items published in the last ten years, one of which is another of his own works.

As a result of these issues, part 1 of Kellenberger's book reads more as a set of (outdated) lectures for a survey course on the problem of evil than as a serious attempt to show the failure of the project of theodicy, which appears to have been his aim. For as he explains, the aforementioned three theodicies have attracted objections, which in turn have elicited replies, but, says Kellenberger, "such replies do not end the controversy. In fact the intellectual exchange between the defenders and the opponents of these theodicies holds no promise of a terminus with an agreed-upon resolution" (135). His concern with the project of theodicy is therefore that it has not yielded "a definitive resolution of the religious problem of evil" (136). But to require there to be a definitive, universally accepted answer to *any* philosophical or theological problem is surely to set the bar unrealistically high, especially when one has not even mentioned—let alone assessed—the replies that have been made to the objections to these theodicies. As it turns out, part 1 of the book was unnecessary, as the "approach to evil" Kellenberger develops in part 2 does not require the rejection of theodicy at all but arguably is itself a version of Leibniz's theodicy, as we shall see.

The heart of Kellenberger's "approach to evil" is adopting what he calls "Job-like belief," which consists of: (1) the recognition that there is great evil in the world (moral and natural); (2) the conviction that God and his creation are good, which underwrites an unwavering trust in God; (3) the belief that God's goodness can be experienced in his creation (78). According to Kellenberger, while the Job-like believer is convinced of God's goodness, she also accepts that some evil comes from God. Rather than seek to explain this, she accepts that God's goodness is a mystery, which has dimensions beyond our understanding (131). Accordingly, the Job-like believer does not seek an explanation for the evil she encounters but simply maintains her trust in God and his goodness: "Job-like believers... can maintain their faith and the joyfulness of faith in the face of evil and accept all

that comes, the good and the evil they receive from God, as the best and be fully at peace, as long as they remain Job-like believers” (89). Kellenberger further notes that accepting that what comes from God is the best does not license passivity: the Job-like believer should still have projects and a desire to reduce or remove evil. Moreover, she may also approach evil by practicing forgiveness.

Although Kellenberger does not envisage his “approach to evil” as a theodicy, it can be seen in precisely that way. After all, his claim that whatever comes from God is the best is the cornerstone of Leibniz’s theodicy. Moreover, Leibniz insisted that it is not possible for humans to determine the reason for any given evil (because of the complexity of the world rather than the inscrutability of God’s goodness), and that we have to trust that whatever God does is ultimately for the best even if it does not appear that way. Indeed, the parallels between Kellenberger and Leibniz go even further, as Leibniz also insisted that we should pursue goals and seek to reduce evil but be content whatever the outcome, secure in the belief that God acts for the best; as he wrote to [Marie de Brinon in 1699](#), “For my part, I have two maxims: one, to make use of everything in order to contribute towards some good, the other to be perfectly content when I am not successful, being persuaded that in the latter case it is for the best, as currently God does not want it. I do my part so long as there is hope, and I am pleased with his part when there is hope no longer.” Accordingly, in its essentials, Kellenberger’s “approach to evil” is sufficiently similar to Leibniz’s theodicy to be reasonably construed as a variation thereof, one that lays more stress on mystery than does Leibniz’s and makes more explicit claims about the positive value of forgiveness.

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