

Two Book Reviews
of
John S. Feinberg
The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problems of Evil,
revised and expanded edition,
Crossway Books, 2004.

The two book reviews below were copied from the Amazon.com web site page for this book on December 11, 2012, and reformatted a little. No words have been changed, deleted, or added.

Review 1, by Russ White:

The existence of evil is, perhaps, one of the hardest problems for Christianity to untangle. Why should a God who is all loving, all good, and all powerful, allow evil to exist? While the first reaction to Christianity in modern times is “science has proven God doesn't exist,” a logical fallacy of the first order, and the second is, “the Bible is just a bunch of made up writings of folks who lived a long time ago,” the final fallback position in almost every discussion over the existence of God is the problem of evil.

Dr. Feinberg has, in this book, penned one of the most thorough examinations of the problem of evil you will find. The tone is a bit philosophical, and the writing and references might be a bit difficult for the average layman to read and understand, but there are few other authors who put so much effort into breaking the problem of evil down into its component parts, and then examining each part in great detail. The author breaks the topic up into four major sections covering the logical, evidential, and religious problems of evil, and the problem of hell (or rather, the problem of eternal punishment for sin). It is critical to the author's argument that the reader absorb and understand this logical breakdown in the problem of evil in order to grasp the underlying arguments Dr. Feinberg makes.

The first chapter considers the problem of evil itself. Here the author explains and justifies the way he has broken the problem apart. Here he also explains the difference between defending God from the charge of being evil, or having evil intent, because evil exists (a theonomy), and simply providing a set of plausible reasons for the existence of evil. Dr. Feinberg argues we cannot know the mind of God, so it is folly to try and justify the existence of evil. The best Christians can hope for is to provide reasonable explanations; going beyond this invites unhealthy theological speculation.

From here, he moves into the logical problem of evil deals with the relationship of evil to theology; can theology explain the existence of evil in the abstract? Is it possible to explain why God would allow such a thing as evil in the world, and yet have a theological system that is consistent, or rather has a consistent view of God? Three different theological views are presented, and a defense for the existence of evil is presented and evaluated for each one. In each case, Dr. Feinberg finds the

theological system does, in fact, provide a valid explanation of evil. In chapters six and seven, he considers the different between the moral and natural problems of evil within the logical realm.

The second section deals with the evidential problem of evil, which posits that while God is possible (in that he could logically exist), the existence of God isn't probable. One reason they point to in order to claim God's existence isn't probable is the improbability of an all good, all powerful, all loving God who would, in fact, allow (or create) evil. This is the most technical of the sections, replete with formulas and constants in various forms. Is it reasonable to believe this is the best of all possible worlds? Should we, in fact, expect God to create the best of all possible worlds?

In the third section, which consists of a single chapter, Dr. Feinberg addresses the problem of hell. Once again he breaks the problem down into pieces, and addresses each piece. There are, on the whole, better defenses for the existence and justness of hell available, but given the length and positioning of this short chapter within the framework of the book, the author provides a solid and usable defense.

The final section is what most Christians living "in the trenches" will be interested in. Here, Dr. Feinberg addresses the question of individual evil. "If God is good, then why did that particular evil happen to me," or "to that really well known Christian over there?" The discussion on what to, and not to say, to someone who is dealing with what appears to be a massive evil in their own person life, given through the lens of someone who has suffered great pain, is helpful and useful in a very practical sense.

Overall, this is an excellent and practical book for the Christian trying to understand the nature and place of evil within the Christian belief system. The philosophical parts might be a bit deep for the average person, and the practical parts might leave the average theologian or philosopher a bit perplexed (or even bored), but the overall effect is a well rounded defense of God, and the Christian faith, in the face of the problem of evil.

Review 2, by J. F. Foster:

It is clear from this book that the problem of evil has long been a pressing concern of John Feinberg. What started out as a doctoral dissertation many years ago has morphed into an effective and mostly comprehensive exploration of this perennial problem from an evangelical perspective. While I don't agree with everything Feinberg proposes, I do think evangelicals of all theological stripes will be greatly informed by this book.

Among the strengths of the book is Feinberg's interaction with the ideas of non-evangelicals where the problem of evil is concerned. He effectively and thoughtfully interacts with a number of non-evangelicals as well as skeptics, and this alone is noteworthy. Feinberg seems to be interested in constructive, yet principled dialogue with those outside his own camp, and as an evangelical, it is

hoped by this reader that such dialogue will be reciprocated by theological liberals who claim to be interested in such dialogue.

I also thought that Feinberg's view that the problem of evil is actually a series of problems of evil is penetrating and really helps the comprehensive treatment of the subject that we see here. While I might quibble a bit with the degree to which Feinberg attempts to categorize these various problems, and thus arguably diminishes their interrelated nature, I do think this approach does justice to the issue and helps avoid a facile examination that too often plagues evangelical treatments of the subject. In particular, his 'religious problem of evil', which is really the existential problem of evil, is a valuable and thoughtful addition that evangelical scholarship in the theodicy area has been severely neglectful of. Feinberg deserves a standing ovation for devoting a solid portion of the book to discussing this aspect of the problem of evil, and it is hoped that other evangelicals will wake up and follow Feinberg's lead whenever they address the problem of evil in their writings, classroom lectures, and conversations with those around them.

I also strongly agree with the contention that one's theology will (and should) greatly influence how a Christian (or anyone for that matter) addresses the existence of evil. The problem of evil is not an isolated matter that can be addressed in a vacuum. Our theology should and will greatly inform how we address it, and I think Feinberg is mostly successful in examining how various theological commitments impact on how folks from various theological traditions will handle this particular issue.

The one minor drawback is that in my view, more Biblical exegesis was in order in this book than what I saw. Feinberg's general opposition to the greater-good defense was just one example of an objection that seemed to be based more on philosophical argumentation than exegetical demonstration. I have increasingly noticed that comprehensive scholarly works from evangelical authors that seem intended to go beyond the evangelical subculture and gain an audience among non-evangelicals too often downplay the centrality of the authority of Scripture that must continue to define what it means to be an evangelical. It seems to me that an evangelical work on any topic should be unapologetic in presenting a Biblical argument, since the Bible is (or ought to be) our final authority, even though it is not our lone authority. It seems to me that too many books like this one seem to put the Bible on the sideline in order to gain some respectability among circles of the academy that don't take the Bible seriously (meaning that they don't consider it to be particularly authoritative) and thus don't take traditional evangelicals seriously. Well, such an approach strikes me as an unnecessary capitulation, and I fear to some degree that this is what happened with this particular book. While I greatly appreciate the depth with which Feinberg engages non-evangelical scholarship, what this book needs is a melding of systematics and exegesis that results in systematics being better informed by Scripture.

But this little soapbox quibble aside, the book is, I think, a valuable contribution to the field of 'theodicy' that evangelicals will greatly profit from.