

**Loewen, Nathan RB 2018. *Beyond the Problem of evil. Derrida and Anglophone Philosophy of Religion*. Lanham: Lexington Books. ISBN: 978-1-4985-5572-2. 151pp.**

Nathan Loewen's book is to be commended for the “weak bridge” (103) it tries to build between continental philosophy, in the guise of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, and Anglophone philosophy of religion, mostly in the guise of Alvin Plantinga's argument for theism deriving from a free will defence which states that as long as there are free beings God could not have created a world in which evil would not exist.

As it draws from two traditions of thought, the book takes quite the build-up: It discusses the logical argument from evil, the argument against theism from natural evil and the evidential and probabilistic arguments that come in the wake of the latter. If the logical argument states simply that theism is unbelievable because an omniscient and good being could not have created a world in which evil exists, the argument from natural evil tries to demonstrate that as long as but one “fawn” (31ff) dies in a forest fire, theism cannot be true because God could have easily prevented the suffering and death of this particular fawn.

Derrida, for his part, is not known for the attention he paid to the problem of evil, although his attempt at dismantling the “metaphysics of presence” might teach us a thing or two about how to deconstruct the old Augustinian and Thomistic theory that evil is a *privatio boni*, a lesser good that is, with no being of its own. Loewen, however, focuses mostly on the later Derrida and his call for the least violence possible and tries to connect Derrida's thought on violence with the Anglophone tradition on evil.

With this stress on the later Derrida, Loewen again needs to spell out the importance (and the basics) of Derridean deconstruction, for his audience seems to be of analytic philosophy of religion rather than continental philosophy. Be that as it may, Loewen forges some nice connections between the later Derrida's themes of violence and sovereignty, and early Derrida's thoughts on *différance*, translation and grammatology and,

overall, manages quite well to link these deconstructions to the (often atheistic) arguments from evil.

Loewen's starting point is, in a sense, to deconstruct the distinction between the continental and analytic tradition. This “exercise in creating borders” (11) is, according to Loewen, itself in need of deconstruction as is the binary thinking in Anglophone philosophy of religion that keeps on circling between either theism or atheism. The latter, often described as a “zero sum game” (13) by Loewen, is the main target of the book. In general, he tries to contextualize the debates surrounding this discourse on theism through focusing, with Derrida, on the “history of practices” (12) and through complicating matters considerably: what if the task of the philosopher is not to be either for theism or for atheism? What if, for instance, a world without evil is as utopic as a world without violence would be? And what if the plea for the least violence possible (like Derrida's) can be made without advocating all the parameters needed in the current discourse on theism?

Chapter one makes it plain that Loewen is struck by Plantinga's argument, for Plantinga is said to have “defeat[ed] the logical problem of evil with the free-will defence” (20). Later in the book, though, we will find that Plantinga is the target, too, of the challenge that Derrida has offered to Levinas, namely that a peaceful, nonviolent relation to the Other is impossible. At best, Derrida will argue, one can hope to have relations with others that are as little violent as possible. It is furthermore argued that Plantinga's defence does not “obstruct the natural and probabilistic problems of evil” (20). These two latter arguments, too, will be targeted in a Derridean fashion.

Loewen summarizes quite well the “axiom” behind the logical, evidential and probabilistic problems of evil with the concept of “predatory goodness” (29). This concept conveys that not a single evil should occur if theism is to be true, for if there is but one instance of evil then it is quite likely that a being that is omniscient and good does not exist, whether this evil is evidenced for by instances of natural evil, as done by Rowe's fawn dying in a forest fire, or whether evil is weighed in a probabilistic argument stating that when and if humans would do everything to remove any evil from the world then how much more could and should a good God do

to remove evil from the world? And since evil do exist within the world, Bruce Reichenbach and Paul Draper argue, it is quite likely that there isn't any such being as God. Yet they all presuppose, Loewen states, that if such a thing as goodness "is", it is all over the place and all over the world, just as much as this one example of evil "narrows rather than broadens the content of 'evil'" (62). By giving but one example of evil, be it a fawn or a natural evil, it leaves all other evils to the imagination and yet again presupposes that we all know what counts as evil and what not. "Good" and "evil" remain incompatible and "theism" and "atheism" remain a zero-sum game: If there is a tiny bit of evil then there is no goodness; if goodness there be, it is a total and absolute goodness.

Hence Loewen's attempt to rethink the "up and running assumptions" (41, 77) of this discourse on evil. For such a deconstruction of Anglophone philosophy of religion, the work of Derrida of course is useful. Loewen focuses on three theses of Derrida. First, that all discourse is contextual – no matter how universal its claims, these claims of a particular discourse nonetheless arise out of a certain place and at a certain time. Secondly, the relation between ideality and actuality that pervades Derrida's work should also be applied to the relation of God (ideality) and the world wherein actual evils occur. Thirdly, insofar as God can be compared to an actual sovereign, Derrida's lessons on sovereignty teach that the "challenge to theism is a political challenge" (77). It is the latter that is the ultimate focus of Loewen's book because it allows to "consider the problems of evil beyond theism" (67/106)

One of the characteristics of the divine that modern theism took from medieval Thomism, if there is such a thing, is in effect that the divinity is, pretty much like a sovereign, an entity to which everything is related (even only if through its being created) but which, itself, does not relate to anything beyond itself. There is, in this sense, 'no real relation' between God and God's creation. The modern, sovereign ruler, in turn, rules all beings in his realm but is not, itself, ruled. The sovereign is he or she who can make, as Carl Schmitt argued, an exception of him- or herself. Loewen rightly argues that Derrida shows us that "theological concerns are just barely under the surface of Western political thought" (81): just as the creator stands over and above created beings, so the modern sovereign governs all but is itself not governed.

Derrida, however, has taught that such sovereignty is but a phantasm (mostly one of the sovereigns himself), for the one ruler here is always and already checked and balanced by the phantasm of the other ruler there. One might say that most of the modern, religious wars were just this: the illusions of the one monarch clashed with the fantasies of the other. Loewen, for his part, wants to apply Derrida's criticism of sovereignty, namely that its ideality (its dreams and its illusions of an absolute rule) is always and already kept in check by reality (the other monarch across the border), to the discourse of theism which has its own peculiar dream of divine sovereignty. It is to such a relationality that Derrida's theory of sovereignty hints: the one sovereign, willingly or not, is always and already related to the other. In Derrida's early works, such a *différance* (simply) meant that for there to be an X at all (definable, conceptualized), there always needs to be an Y to which it stands in relation. Yet, if there is this particular Y, this also means that X never simply is X. There is no X as such, *an sich*. What worried a lot of the thinkers after Derrida is that such relations are anything but romantic. It is a relation to otherness that knows not of any primacy, whether it be an ethical one (like Levinas would say) or a loving one (like Marion and other theologians would say). It is the brute fact of us being related to one another, and of everything being related to everything. This is Derrida's materialism as it were: a sort of rudimentary make-up of being, the building-blocks of all language. This is, by the way, why Loewen is not convinced by the evidential argument about evil: for the meaning of the evil happening to the fawn is not, and can never be, simply identical to other evils one might imagine (although the argument supposes this). To consider X as evil, for Derrida, is to consider it in its context, its particular place, knowing fully well that this context and this place will never reveal the entire meaning of this particular evil. It will need to be compared and weighed to other evils and so be stripped of its status of absolute evil and in the end, perhaps, no longer seem evil at all. Loewen therefore opts for considering a "conjunction rather than a contradiction" (69): where the discourse of atheism sees either good or bad, either evil or predatory goodness, it is necessary to, with Derrida, "place them in proximity to each other" (73), to ask where the good begins and where exactly evil would end.

Such proximity is best reflected in Derrida's great piece on Nelson Mandela "The Laws of Reflection": despite Apartheid's violent insistence to suppress and put to death all resistance, such resistance, symbolized (but more than that) by Mandela immediately reflected back to the regime, but eventually to the world as well, the sheer possibility of another order. Mandela, in Derrida's terms, was a threat to the indivisible sovereignty of the South African regime which saw itself divided by his very presence: it would not have felt the need to imprison Mandela if it were otherwise. It is this "specular paradox", this haunting of every order, every regime and every structure, by other orders and regimes that is *différance* brought to life as it were: there is not one possibility, there are always other options and these options already determine and define this particular choice. Even if Mandela's specular reflection in the end radiated to the entire world, this characteristics of time and duration do not entail Derrida did not have a very mundane, material and spatial meaning in mind too: of course, the Apartheid regime was questioned and unsettled by the "necessity of relationality of entities within and beyond its borders" (83) just as well.

Sovereignty, in its very dream of absoluteness, is disrupted by matters of time and space: it is valid at a certain time in a certain place and *since* a particular time. This is one more characteristic of sovereignty that Derrida underlines: even though it pretends that its laws and its realm (1 000 years) will last endlessly, these laws always have a beginning in time just as well, and these realms, luckily, have an ending too. There is something worthy of thought though about a law that wants to be valid for everyone and everywhere yet is instituted by someone very particular at a given point in time. More than food for thought, because all too real, is that a law, given all these contingencies, needs force and violence to perpetuate its legitimacy – the law needs to last, it cannot bear having a beginning or an ending. The law that would not be the law eternally, simply, is not the law. Yet there is no law without beginning or ending. This, for Derrida, is one of the peculiarities of law: a just law appears as unnecessary, since everyone would recognize that this is, and needs to be, the case. The less violence a law needs, the more just a law seems. The less just a law is, the more violence needed to enforce it. This does not mean that there never is any violence at all when it comes to the laws: if no violence would be effectuated, then people would not even recognize that this is a law. There

only are, for Derrida more and less just laws that need more or less violence to be enforced.

Yet the dream and the illusion of sovereignty is such that it pretends to be without context, without condition in time and space: “each law performs itself as if it were *sui generis* and mystically without precedent. A law cannot recognize that its origins are extra-legal without putting into question its legitimacy” (88). The sovereign, in short, cannot imagine a moment that his or her laws would not have been or would no longer be in effect. In this regard, “the sovereign declaration of laws takes place only by virtue of assuming it to be outside the law” (93). This is the sovereign’s transcendence and the ‘theological phantasm’ that Derrida mentions in his *Without Alibi*: the “mystical element” of the law, its “pretense” (95) to be valid always and everywhere, comes from without and the sovereign is and needs to be an ‘outlaw’. The laws that he (or she) introduces do not pertain to him- or herself. The sovereign can make an exception for him- or herself. In *Rogues*, Derrida will then say that the sovereign is he (or she) who does not stand in relation to anyone or anything, whereas everyone needs to relate, precisely, to the sovereign. One can compare this to hierarchies in general. The last and highest in the chain of command is able to command everyone below him or her. Those lower in the chain receive their authority (to command) from the ones superior to them. But from whence the authority of the highest in the chain of command? This authority, for Derrida, is always a bit ‘from nowhere’, *ex nihilo* or anarchic even: those that enforce justice will do this from a more or less unjust position.

“In other words, Derrida postulates that injustice is the condition of justice” (97). A world in which no evil or injustice would occur would in effect be the greatest injustice: no one would relate to anyone, and nothing would really happen. There would be a complete standstill, and nothing would ever touch anything. Yet, since everything is always and already on the move, and the one thing touches the other, it is quite likely that injustices and evils occur and, with this, the need for justice and laws arises. Yet these systems of justice, too, are never stable and always threatened from within and from without. The ‘specular paradox’ is such that not one system of justice can complacently flatter itself with being the most just. On the contrary, it is quite likely that true justice is elsewhere. This is why Derrida is not a utopian thinker: “the point is not to argue for a best of all possible

worlds. Quite the contrary, Derrida [tries] to locate justice in the possibility of better worlds" (96). There is no world that would be the best: with every law coming into effect, just or unjust, another law can always be imagined, for better or for worse.

Slowly but surely, Loewen turns back to the problem of evil in Anglophone philosophy of religion: "Taking up Derrida's construal of justice shuts down all theodicies that presume a rule-bound world in which all states of affairs may be calculably resolved into a coherent whole. The zero-sum game presumed [...] by the participants in the discourse on the problem of evil is questionable" (98). Indeed, not every evil is kept in check with and through a greater good. A taking into account of an uncontrollable future would mean that one needs to reckon with the fact that it is not automatically certain that "good will prevail" and such a rethinking will lead to a "discourse beyond theism" (100).

In chapter five, Loewen elaborates on the "weak bridge" established between Plantinga and Derrida: for the latter "the unobtainability of perfect worlds has little to do with either the existence of God or free-willed beings" (105) but all the more with that which Plantinga calls "transworld depravity" (104), the fact namely that in all imaginable worlds a human being will perform at least one wrong action" (104) and that, therefore, violence is more common, in a way, than the discourse on theism is willing to assume.

For such a debate on violence, Loewen turns to Derrida's argument against Levinas. Levinas' explicit aim was a 'non-allergic' relation to the other, in which a "positive peace" that is not just "the cessation of hostilities" (113) between the other and myself would reign. Derrida's argument in his *Violence and Metaphysics* is indeed complex but he does suggest that such a Levinasian positive peace is somewhat utopian and cannot be maintained without some belief in God. It is to such a theological underpinning of Levinasian thinking that Loewen hints when he compares Levinas' thought, "not simply non-violent, the least violence, [but a thought] where no violence obtains" 114) to the discourse used by "participants in the discourses on the problem of evil" (114). The latter, for Loewen, "do not stray very far from Levinas' ambitious vision in their construal of a world ruled by a wholly good, omnipotent sovereign" (114).

Although this interpretation of Levinas would need some caveats—I’m thinking especially of Levinas’ explicit rejection of theodicy in texts as *Useless Suffering* – this debate between Derrida and Levinas does in effect gain momentum when applied to the ‘discourse on theism’ concerned as it is with “remov[ing] the contradiction of goodness to evil” (114) something which is at least dreamed of in Levinas’ philosophy as well and simply declared unobtainable by Derrida’s dictum of the least violence in the least bad world. Interesting things happen when one does not attempt to remove this contradiction. If the discourse on theism (and atheism) would ask whether God exists given that there is evil, a theology that is less naive about banning all violence from this world would indeed query what kind of God would be compatible with the fact that evils in this world are unavoidable and that “not even a God can avoid participation in this network of violence” (116). For this indeed, a wholly other God than the sovereign standing as the highest being in the great chain of causes would be needed. I think that Loewen would agree when saying that contemporary theology or philosophy of religion is still very far from imagining what such a God might be.

Loewen’s book quite forcefully demonstrates the one-sidedness of the discourse on evil. Derrida’s “outside help” is needed “pursue unexamined assumptions that unnecessarily close off [...] potential avenues for discussion” (125). Loewen’s dissatisfaction with how the problem of evil is treated within theism is clear. And although the book’s aim is truly too ambitious to be successful – its scope is too big and the discussions at times stray too far from the point that is being made – it is true just the same that Loewen raises some intriguing points, both when it comes to what becomes of theism these days in classical Anglophone philosophy of religion and to Derrida and Levinas’ counter positions in these debates.

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