Booknotes

There are fashions in philosophy, as in anything else. This can engender in the unreflective a sense of philosophical progress. Certain views (e.g. dualism) are pretty well consigned to the dustbin of history, useful only for students to cut their philosophical teeth on, to learn the moves by which they have been comprehensively refuted – according to the prevailing consensus, that is.

Uncomfortable as it may be to recognise this when one is riding on the crest of as fashionable wave, things are not really so simple. The targets of general philosophical derision may not be quite as feeble as one likes to believe. And there are always Kuhnian 'hold outs' within the philosophical community who may, perversely it seems, defend the socially indefensible. Nor are the hold outs necessarily more stupid or less sophisticated than their colleagues. They may indeed be less stupid and more sophisticated just because their positions have been forged and tempered in the face of professional incomprehension or worse.

In *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 2006) Peter van Inwagen imagines a dialogue on the topic between two protagonists he calls Atheist and Theist. Without going into detail it would be fair to say that Theist sees Atheist off in the sense that Atheist is unable to establish that a fairly standard Christian view on the topic is either contradictory or essentially indefensible, at least not given Theist's basic assumptions. Van Inwagen is not, of course, the first distinguished philosopher of recent times to adopt this general line of argument. He does, though, add some interesting thoughts of his own, particularly in the way he develops an account of the genesis of evil in the human and material worlds.

The picture is a re-working of the traditional story of the Fall. At an early stage of evolution human beings, having been raised by God to rational self-consciousness, separated themselves from God. They began to use their rationality to place 'their own desires and perceived welfare above everything else'. As a result they 'faced destruction by the random forces of nature, and were subject to old age and natural death', randomness becoming significant in van Inwagen's account because it allows him to argue that much of the evil we encounter is random, due to chance. After the Fall we become in part 'the playthings of chance'. As time goes on these baleful effects get progressively worse, as our own frames of mind

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and the genetically based dispositions underlying them become increasingly perverse and self-centered. Individually and collectively we realise, as we look around the world, that things are terribly wrong, but in our fallen state we are unable to do anything about it.

Phenomenologically, at the start of the 21st century and notwithstanding all the progress of which we are so proud, the picture van Inwagen paints of the fallen human condition is plausible, as are the similar pictures painted in greater depth and detail by Pascal and St Augustine. None of this, of course, means that Atheist is off the map. Atheist will simply reject van Inwagen's story of how our condition has come to be what it is, and she is also likely to interpret continuing human failure and wickedness in a less pessimistic light. Van Inwagen does not say, and does not want to say that Atheist is irrational to look at things in her way. One suspects, too, that van Inwagen and his fellow Christians will continue to remain a small minority, within the philosophical community at least.

Where does all this leave us argumentatively? For we seem to have two diametrically opposed philosophical positions, both still standing after centuries of argument. According to van Inwagen the atheistical argument from the existence of evil is what he describes as a 'philosophical failure'; that is Atheist would be incapable of persuading a genuinely impartial observer who listened carefully to Theist's replies of its plausibility.

'Philosophical Failure' is indeed the title of van Inwagen's third chapter, for he sees the Theist-Atheist stand-off on the problem of evil as an example of a more general phenomenon. In the sense that a genuinely impartial audience ought to be rationally convinced, there is, in his view, 'no philosophical argument for any substantive conclusion which is successful'. Philosophical success is confined to purely formal results and to conclusions which 'almost' everyone believes anyway without philosophical argument (such as the facts that there are other minds and that one runner can actually overtake another).

The argument to philosophical failure is itself challenging. Does it, for example, fall foul of its own strictures? And would accepting it lead us into a kind of Rortyean post-modernism regarding the scope and possibility of philosophy itself? What, under the doctrine, can we hope for from philosophical argument? Nevertheless there remains a nagging feeling that there might be something to what van Inwagen says. At a subterranean level, at least, clever arguments contiue to be produced to defined such

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positions as dualism, panpsychism and Platonism in various areas; and we can only wonder at the recent revival of Meinongianism and the current advocacy of paraconsistent logics, both unthinkable within living philosophical memory. We will, however, have chance to press van Inwagen further on the implications of his position as he has kindly agreed to part in the Royal Institute's annual lecture series in London next year, which is on the topic of 'Conceptions of Philosophy'.

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