

Review of Paul K. Moser, *The Severity of God: Religion and Philosophy Reconceived* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

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Whether due to Copernican astronomy, Darwinian biology, biblical criticism, or the technocratic biases of humanist, materialistic culture, for many today, the evils besetting humankind hedge one toward agnosticism if not full denial of the God of Christianity and Abrahamic monotheism.¹ Even apart from sociocultural and intellectual currents, a global pandemic, natural disasters, unjust resource distribution, mass genocides, political unrest, economic destabilisation, and untold “quotidian” suffering (e.g., personal loss, illness, and death) commonly dispose to doubting the existence of an omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent deity. Indeed, these instantiations of the problems of evil/suffering often dispose to the spirit of the melancholy Psalmist(s) or the dark, sarcastic wisdom of *Qohelet* at least as much as Job’s indefatigable faith.² That is, of course, when the ineffable pain occasioned by these phenomena does not bypass apostasy altogether but rather underwrite misotheism/dystheism and thus drive the will to decide. Inasmuch as present times reflect any of these phenomena, then, this review reaches back to Paul Moser’s 2013 book, *The Severity of God*, to examine what is a timely read for an age submerged in crisis and clutching for the theological and religious wherewithal with which to stay the pain.

The “severity” to which Moser’s work refers is the provisioning of “...difficulty, discomfort, anxiety, stress, or insecurity...” (3) and Moser undertakes an ambitious investigation into the tenability of holding severity as an integral feature of the character and wisdom of God. Specifically, guided by the question “...not so much whether God exists as what the character and purposes of a God

¹ James L. Crenshaw, *Defending God: Biblical Responses to the Problem of Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 26.

² Pss. 10, 14; Eccl. read without the epilogue (12:9-14); Job 27:3-4.



worthy of worship would be, if God exists” (52), Moser sets as his central thesis that only a severe God would be worthy of worship (i.e., morally perfect) and that such a God, manifesting divine *agapē*, would be robustly transformative in his/her/their commitment to a salvific goal for humans. That is, as Moser contends:

God would intend this world’s rigorous flux [e.g., distress, impermanence, difficulty] to be a remedial school of character formation for humans as they depend on divine noncoercive...[encouragement to achieve the goal of lasting, cooperative life with God]....This divine redemptive school would be a place of rigorous human challenge and struggle, because selfish human ways, being deep-seated and stubborn, do not yield easily to the unselfish ways of divine *agapē* (75).

To this end, Moser presents his argument across five substantive chapters. In Chapter 1, Moser delineates how worthiness of worship requires moral perfection and, while refusing to extinguish human free wills, a morally perfect God would work, however severely, to encourage the volitional transformation and redemption of human agents. In Chapter 2, Moser addresses the ways in which the “flux” of life bears on the existence of God and contends that a severe *agapē* struggle between the wills of humans and that of God (exemplified in earnest willingness to follow Christ in the pathos of Gethsemane), wherein God exclusively provisions divine moral correction, provides the elusive evidence for God’s stabilising existence and changelessness.³ In Chapter 3, Moser highlights the inability of traditional natural theological arguments for the existence of God to accommodate the motives that a God worthy of worship would want in human inquiry/belief regarding God. Absent attention to the conative nature of human inquiry/belief, Moser asserts that the various arguments (e.g., ontological, cosmological, teleological) of natural theology routinely run roughshod over the imperative evidence of God, as argued for in Chapter 2. In Chapter 4, Moser distinguishes between human acts that (a) earn and (b) receive salvation and contends that, *pace* Pelagianism, humans in no way earn their salvation but rather may act by choosing to, amidst the cacophony of the world’s flux, faithfully trust in God and thereby *receive* God’s grace. A God worthy of worship, for Moser, would offer grace, but the reception of such inheres God’s severe expectations (e.g., to actualise veridical enemy-love rather than succumb to Nietzschean *ressentiment*) and thereby entails the rigorous activity of volitional transformation. Finally, in Chapter 5, and given the preceding chapters, Moser offers a rejoinder to philosophical atheism, espousing reconsideration of, if not monotheism, then at least agnosticism on the basis of greater evidential support. That is, a greater evidential basis for monotheism or at least agnosticism relative to atheism after taking into consideration the evidence for God which is disclosed to those willfully participating in what is, for Moser, foundational for Christian philosophy: a severe *agapē* struggle with a God worthy of worship.

³ Matt. 26:39

Overall, Moser offers a largely meticulous argument within the sorely under-researched area of Christian response to the problems of evil/suffering that obviates the liabilities of Leibnizian theodicy, as they are acerbically diagnosed by Voltaire.⁴ In addition, Moser's enterprising presentation of subjectively-disclosed and self-authenticating evidence of God in the context of a Christ-based "Gethsemane union" (174) between human and divine wills is especially commendable for, if not its originality, then its suasive intrepidity.⁵

Despite Moser's typical fastidiousness, however, his book would have benefitted from greater clarity at several junctures. Of note, though he references myriad impediments to uniting human wills with the perfect moral will of God (e.g., selfishness, pride, despair, superficiality), Moser often presents these polysemous phenomena as self-explanatory, which, in begetting undue opacity, impairs the cogency of his argument. To isolate just one example, those familiar with Moser's oeuvre will charitably discern his invocation of "despair" as denoting Kierkegaard's particular conception of spiritual sickness rooted in the latter's philosophical anthropology.⁶ However, those not primed with the Kierkegaardian lexicon may recruit the more familiar English definition to grasp "despair" as a synonym of depression or dysphoric mood state and, in so doing, lapse into a conflation of concepts, which is, at best, erroneous.⁷ As though, to distill an absurd inference, and one surely not intended by Moser, entering into a severe *agapē* struggle with God could be mitigated in any way by psychotropics, psychotherapy, or other human artefact. Had Moser's invocation of "despair" contained clearer delineation of, to use Kierkegaard's idiom, the "infinite qualitative difference" between humanity and God, the work would more unequivocally assert, as Moser putatively wants to have done, that the *agapē* struggle and divine correction is *not* reducible to that which humans may, at least in principle, provide. In this way, the cogency of Moser's argument would have been enhanced such that one could not mistake his argument as subserving an "unyielding despair" (35) or, perhaps worse, eliding with what Moser derides as "cheap theism" (38) in the spirit of, for example, Feuerbach or Lacan/Žižek.⁸

⁴ Voltaire, *Candide and Other Stories*, trans. Roger Pearson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵ Eph. 3:13. As well, Moser's notion of a Christ-based "Gethsemane union" bears remarkable resemblance to many of Kierkegaard's philosophical treatises and religious discourses e.g., Søren Kierkegaard, "All Things Must Serve Us for Good—When We Love God" in *Christian Discourses/The Crisis and A Crisis in the Life of an Actress*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 188-201.

⁶ e.g., Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

⁷ Gordon Marino, "Making the Darkness Visible: On the Distinction between Despair and Depression in Kierkegaard's Journals" in *Kierkegaard in the Present Age*. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 99-111.

⁸ As embodied in the *mutatis mutandis* inversions of Feuerbach ("Love is God") and Lacan via Žižek ("if God exists, then everything is permitted"). Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot

Nevertheless, despite these imprecisions, *The Severity of God* contains a wealth of unique and significant insights into establishing a robust religious, and distinctively Christian, epistemology with which to engage the problems of evil/suffering. Insofar as an age of crisis thrusts such problems to the fore, Moser's work is felicitous and essential reading for any student of Christian theology, philosophy of religion, or ethics in such an age.

(Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1989), 264; Slavoj Žižek and Boris Gunjević, *God in Pain: Inversions of Apocalypse* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012), 28.