

Hud Hudson. *A Grotesque in the Garden*, Xerxes Press, 2017. 150pp., \$9.99 (paper).

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This is a delightful book. In terms of genre, it defies easy classification. But like Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, it is at once a gripping story of imaginative fiction, incorporating elements of history, myth, and allegory, as well as a deep and penetrating reflection on the problem of evil and the goodness of God. Given its length, the book would be ideal for use in the classroom (especially for undergraduate courses in philosophy of religion). But it will also be of independent interest to academic philosophers and theologians, as well as to educated members of the general public. Indeed, in terms of style, substance, and general appeal, it may be helpful to think of it as falling within the same class of works as C.S. Lewis's *Great Divorce* and *Screwtape Letters*.

The book is described on the jacket cover as a “novel on the difficulties of satisfying the two great commandments,” and its overall message is a simple one—there can be no true or lasting joy apart from the love of both God and neighbor. Its construction, however, is anything but simple, and its overall purpose, as we are told in the foreword (7), is to communicate in narrative form certain philosophical challenges to traditional theistic faith that the author, Hud Hudson, takes to be in error, but is unsure of how to resolve. In what follows, I will describe the structure and contents of the book in some detail before discussing the main challenges that it raises.

Nota bene: like other works of imaginative fiction, this one is best appreciated without any prior knowledge of its contents and structure. Readers of this journal in particular, for whom the discovery of certain aspects of the story is likely to bring special pleasure, are encouraged to purchase and read the book for themselves before continuing with my review.

Structure and Contents

Hudson's book is divided into three parts, one corresponding to each of its three main characters: Tesque (Part I, chs. 1–6), Joy (Part II, ch. 7), and Naphil (Part III, chs. 8–11). Since the relationship between the book's three parts is complicated, and only emerges fully over time, I will approach each part by way of its central character, and hold off saying anything about Part II until I have described the other two parts. I

should add that, in addition to the novel's three main characters, it also includes a narrator who makes an appearance in the last few pages to narrate the story's ending.

Tesque. In Part I, we are introduced to the novel's protagonist, Tesque, who is a mighty angelic being, identified as one "of the glorious second line of the hierarchy"—that is, as one of the cherubim of Judeo-Christian tradition. Unlike the angels of medieval lore, who are described in works of systematic theology as purely spiritual beings, Tesque is a wholly material being. And unlike the cherubim of popular imagination, who are depicted in art "as immature little embarrassments looking fat, confused, and heavenward," Tesque possesses "a body of terrible loveliness ... fierce, strong, and staggeringly beautiful" (13).

According to the Hebrew Bible (*Gen* 3.24–25), after God drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden as a result of their disobedience, He placed members of the cherubim on guard at the east side of the Garden, to bar further entrance and to protect the Tree of Life within it. Tesque is one of the cherubim tasked with this duty. Or better, he is the only one tasked with this duty. For as he himself tells us, the part of "the Holy Story" reporting these events and speaking of "angels (in the plural)" appears to have been mistaken (14–15). In short, Tesque is the "Grotesque in the Garden" of the novel's title.

True to his name, Tesque's character succeeds in simultaneously inspiring awe and wonder, conveying grief and pain, and inducing both empathy and a kind of repulsion. Indeed, the whole of Part I is a record of Tesque's reasons for considering abandoning his post and rebelling against the God who has tasked him with the duty of protecting the Garden. His plan, should he go through with it, is to follow the precedent of certain other fallen angels who, described as "sons of God" in another part of the Hebrew Bible (*Gen* 6.1–4), are reported to have "taken wives" among the daughters of men and produced offspring, the "mighty men of old, men of renown"—also referred to as '*nephilim*' in Hebrew or 'giants' in English. Tesque is not sure how far God will allow him to proceed with this plan, should he decide to carry it out. But if he ends up being allowed to find a suitable mate, he tells us that he will produce a daughter, since "determining that particular outcome is among the few things remaining in my control" (14).

With all of this by way of background, we're now finally in a position to understand the epistolary format of Part I. Indeed, the six chapters comprising this part are an extended letter from a father to his (as yet, non-existent) daughter, explaining the reasons for rebelling against his creator and for bringing her into the world, despite the fact that God will most likely annihilate him before she is born. It is this extended letter that contains the main challenges to theistic faith that the novel seeks to communicate.

Naphil. In Part III, we are introduced to the novel's antagonist, a woman whose given name we are never told, but who stumbles on Tesque's letter and whose gigantic stature—"What *woman* is six foot eleven?" (113)—leads her to refer to herself in jest as 'Naphil' (the singular of *nephilim*). Naphil is a professor of mathematics, and like Tesque, possesses a powerful intellect. But in temperament, she is his mirror image. Whereas Tesque is angry at God for his solitary confinement to the Garden, Naphil is angry at humanity for the ill treatment she has received at

their hands. And whereas Tesque is desperate for social interaction, and prepared to give up everything for a taste of its fruits, Naphil's temptations run in the opposite direction. Currently on sabbatical in a remote corner of Iceland, "with no university in the neighborhood, no other colleagues ... no one to spend social time with" (114), she is considering leaving humanity behind once and for all. In short, whereas Tesque is tempted by misotheism, Naphil is tempted by misanthropy.

As in the case of Part I, this part has an epistolary format. Indeed, the four chapters comprising this part are formally cast as a reply to Tesque's letter, though they take the form of multiple diary entries, spread out over the course of several days. Although Naphil is a Christian, with genuine faith and affection for God, she cannot help but regard Tesque's letter and its contents as anything but an interesting fiction. In fact, it is striking that Naphil is inclined, in general, to a much less literal or historical understanding of the Hebrew bible than Tesque is. Her main motivation for penning a response to Tesque's letter, therefore, has to do with the intellectual challenge it poses.

If Parts I and III were all we had to go on, we might be forgiven for thinking that Naphil is Tesque's daughter, whether she realizes it or not. But, in fact, as we learn in Part II, and as is reinforced at the end of the novel, this is not the case. Indeed, we are never told whether Tesque's daughter comes into existence at all.

Joy. In Part II, which comprises a single chapter, we are introduced to the novel's hero, a dog who initially does not have a name but ends up getting called 'Joy' by Naphil.¹ Joy serves two essential purposes in the novel. First, and most importantly, he shows us what true love of both God and neighbor looks like—that is, true obedience to both of the great love commandments. Indeed, he is the personification of joy. Second, he is the one responsible for getting Tesque's letter to Naphil, and hence serves a crucial link between the characters in the other two parts.

We learn early on in Part II that Joy has been present with Tesque since the beginning, accompanying him on his morning walks, on his afternoon visits to the river, and on his evening consultations with the Tree of Life, which is where Tesque learns about the world outside of the Garden. Despite this constant companionship, Tesque cannot see Joy: "I've tried many different things to get his attention, but he's always too busy with his thoughts ... I don't think he knows I'm here." (102) We also learn that, although Joy and Tesque both spend time with the Tree of Life, only Joy is able to communicate with the Tree. Joy hears Tesque's complaints about God, and admits that he doesn't know how to respond to them. Even so, he trusts completely in God's love and care for himself and others.

As it happens, both Joy and the Tree of Life are worried about Tesque. In fact, Joy initially considers leaving the Garden in order to find the daughter to whom Tesque is always directing his thoughts, thinking that if she were to visit, perhaps Tesque wouldn't leave. The Tree informs Joy that this isn't possible (perhaps because she's isn't born yet or perhaps never will be?), but that there is "someone else who might very much benefit from reading Tesque's letter (although it wasn't really

¹ Before meeting Naphil, and desiring a name, Joy christens himself 'Lazaraistones' from one of Tesque's stories (103). I leave to readers the pleasure of discovering the significance of this name.

written to her)" (106). This is all the persuading Joy needs. He brings the letter to Naphil and is very much surprised to be seen by her.

The literary format of Part II is difficult to determine. It may be a letter (perhaps written down by the Tree?) or it may be a song (the title of the sole chapter in Part II is "the Beast Sings"). In any case, it is clearly a record of Joy's thoughts, directed to Tesque's future daughter, telling her of his plans to help Naphil and his desire that the five of them (Joy, Tesque, Naphil, Tesque's daughter, and the Tree) all come together someday in the Garden.

The novel ends tragically, with Tesque and Naphil killing Joy by each giving into their respective temptations to disobey one of the great love commandments. As Tesque leaves the Garden and Naphil enters, they "softly brush one another unaware" and "Joy perishes at the Gate which shuts permanently behind both decisions" (146–7).

Philosophical Challenges to Theistic Faith

In addition to being imaginatively rich and engaging, the novel also contains a substantive and surprisingly accessible treatment of a host of subtle philosophical issues. Readers familiar with Hudson's published work in metaphysics and philosophy of religion will recognize a number of distinctive themes that crop up at various points in the story—especially regarding the nature of space, time, and spatio-temporal location. Thus, Tesque laments the impossibility of spatial contact, and hence the implication that "genuine embrace is illusory" (18–19), whereas Naphil is comforted by the same thing (119). Again, Tesque suggests early on that the Garden exists in a higher-dimensional space whose direction is unfamiliar to "lower creatures" (17–18), and Naphil is led to wonder at one point about the possibility of a higher-dimensional time "rendering compatible a scientifically respectable picture of the cosmos with the fall narrative" (119).² Even so, the real philosophical heart of the novel, and the place where it arguably advances current debates, is a set of issues that fall under the general rubric of 'the problem of evil and the goodness of God'.

As traditionally formulated, the problem of evil raises a doubt about the *existence* of God. How can a perfectly good God allow "the magnitude, intensity, duration, and distribution of horrific evil" (30) that we actually find in the world? As Tesque makes clear in his letter, he thinks this formulation of the problem is "toothless" (39). If God exists, he may or may not have a morally justifying reason for allowing such evil (Tesque thinks it is obvious both that God exists and that he has such a reason). Even so, it would be unreasonable, given our finitude, to expect that we would be aware of such a reason, if it exists, or even that we would recognize it as morally justifying, if we were aware of it (here Tesque admits that God's reasons are inscrutable to him, despite the fact that his intellect vastly outstrips our own).

² See in particular Hud Hudson, *The Metaphysics of Hyperspace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and *The Fall and Hypertime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) for exploration of these themes.

The real problem, as Tesque sees it, is not that the traditional problem of evil gives us grounds for atheism, but rather that its correct solution—known in the literature as *skeptical theism*—undermines any grounds we have for trusting and obeying the God of traditional theism. This for two reasons. First, if skeptical theism is correct, we have no way of excluding the possibility that God has a morally justifying reason for sacrificing our lives in the service of some greater good. But if that is right, how can we trust that God's care and concern will extend to us, especially if we remain obedient to his demands? It might seem that we could appeal, at this point, to the various promises that God has made according scripture and tradition. But this merely brings us to the second reason. If skeptical theism is correct, we have no way of excluding the possibility that God has a morally justifying reason for deceiving us in all that he has spoken and promised. But if that is right, can we really be morally obliged to cooperate with God's demands? Tesque thinks the answer is no, and he presents the conjunction of these two reasons as his grounds for rebelling against the demand that he remain in the Garden. What is more, the distinctive line of reasoning he develops is interestingly different from the familiar "too much skepticism" objection to skeptical theism.

Naphil's response to Tesque's argument is also interesting. She agrees with Tesque's skeptical theism, and hence is likewise untroubled by the problem of evil in its traditional formulation. She also agrees that God may well have reason to use us as "mere instruments" (130), and that this releases us from any obligation to cooperate with his demands. She is less moved by the worry about divine deception. "I can't spot the left turn in your reasoning that leaves you in the middle of nowhere ... but still, I bet you're wrong" (131). Even so, she thinks Tesque is a fool for leaving the Garden. Fallen human beings have no value or worth, either in themselves or in God's eyes, and hence there is no real good to be gotten from interaction with them.

This brief description fails to do justice to the depth and subtlety of the exchange between Tesque and Naphil, which I think genuinely advances current debates about the problem of evil and goodness of God, not only by taking them in new directions, but also by illustrating the extent to which different positions in these debates are shaped by personal history and experience. Obviously, this isn't the place for a detailed evaluation of Tesque's challenges to theistic faith. But I can't conclude without at least gesturing at what I take to be the most promising line of response.

There are, of course, many ways that one could respond to Tesque's line of reasoning. One could, for example, challenge his skeptical theism. Or one could insist, as Immanuel Kant did, that finite persons have irreplaceable value, and hence a type of value that cannot be sacrificed. Or again, one could insist, as various medieval philosophers did, that even if there is nothing in the principles of morality to exclude the permissibility of sacrificing the lives of finite persons, God's omnipotence guarantees that he will never be in a position to need to. Finally, one could simply insist, with the vast majority of philosophers from Augustine to Kant, that it is impossible for a perfect being to lie or violate promises. Tesque is, of course, aware of these sorts of responses and works hard to undermine them. Whether he succeeds in each case, is a genuine question. Still, I want to suggest that the most promising response is to grant each of Tesque's main claims and simply deny that they justify any sort of rebellion on his part.

It seems to me that paradigmatic theistic faith requires precisely the sort of trust in God's providence that Tesque is raising doubts for—that is, it requires trusting that God not only intimately loves and cares for each of us, but will not let anything happen to us that is inconsistent with our lives being good or meaningful on the whole. Is such trust compatible with the sorts of skeptical possibilities that Tesque is raising? I don't see why not. Consider an analogy. We trust our various cognitive faculties to provide us with reliable information about the world. Can we exclude the possibility that we're in the matrix or being deceived by Descartes's evil demon? Alas, we cannot, as we simply cannot have maximal certainty about such things. Even so, rational trust in our faculties doesn't require such exclusion. Indeed, if we suppose it does, we may undercut our only hope of rationally believing anything. So, too, I suggest, in the case of our trust in God's providence. We may not be able to exclude the possibility that he will sacrifice our interests or deceive us. But rational trust in God's providence doesn't require such exclusion. Indeed, if we suppose it does, we may undercut our only hope of rationally trusting in God for anything.³

³ I'm grateful to Michael Bergmann, Hud Hudson, and Michael Rea for comments on an earlier draft of this review.