

# **Plantinga and the Problem of Evil**

**Heimir Geirsson, Iowa State University**

**Michael Losonsky, Colorado State University**

The logical problem of evil centers on the apparent inconsistency of the following two propositions:

- (1) God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good
- (2) There is evil in the world.

As Mackie notes, the inconsistency of these propositions depends on what he called “quasi-logical” principles, such as “good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.”<sup>1</sup> This is the problem that Alvin Plantinga takes to task in his celebrated response to the problem of evil. Succinctly, Plantinga denies that (1) and (2) are inconsistent, and aims to show so by arguing that Mackie’s principle that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do is false. In particular, Plantinga argues for the claim that

- (3) It is possible that God is omnipotent, and it was not within his power to create a world containing moral good and no moral evil.<sup>2</sup>

We aim to defend Mackie’s case and question Plantinga’s free will defense.

## **1. Plantinga’s Free Will Defense.**

According to Plantinga, to strongly actualize some state of affairs is to be the cause of that state. So if God were to strongly actualize that human beings choose to do something, then God would be causing them to do it, and Plantinga believes that this is incompatible with freedom. So

according to Plantinga, God cannot strongly actualize a totality T that includes free actions, although, as we will see, God can, on Plantinga's view, strongly actualize a world that subsequently includes free actions. Accordingly, God cannot strongly actualize worlds where a person *freely* chooses to either do or not do act A. Doing so, Plantinga claims, would involve God actualizing worlds where the person both is and is not free.

Although God cannot strongly actualize a totality that includes free beings, God can weakly actualize such a world. God weakly actualizes a world W with free beings performing free actions by strongly actualizing T, a subset of world W that includes beings that have the potential to act freely, and the free beings complete the creation of W with their free acts.<sup>3</sup> So, if God strongly actualizes a totality T, then God's actions are sufficient to cause the states of affairs and events in T. But if God weakly actualizes a totality W, then God's actions are not sufficient to cause the states of affairs and events in W. Instead God's actions plus the free actions of some other agent(s) would cause some of the states of affairs and events in W.

With the distinction between strong and weak actualization in mind, we can refine (3). What Plantinga aims to show is:

- (3') It is possible that God is omnipotent and it was not within God's power to strongly or weakly actualize a world with moral good but no moral evil.

There are two important premises Plantinga uses to defend (3'). One has already been mentioned above, namely that the concept of freedom is such that it is logically not possible for God to strongly actualize, that is cause, someone to act freely. The second premise is about transworld depravity. Plantinga introduces the notion of transworld depravity when discussing a world in which a person named "Smedes" offers a bribe to Curley, who is free with respect to this bribe. This world

is such that if it were actual and Curley is offered the bribe, Curley freely accepts the bribe.

Plantinga then writes:

God knows in advance what Curley would do if created and placed in these states of affairs. Now take any one of these states of affairs *S*. Perhaps what God knows is that if he creates Curley, causes him to be free with respect to *A*, and brings it about that *S* is actual, then Curley will go wrong with respect to *A*. But perhaps the same is true for *any other* state of affairs in which God might create Curley and give him significant freedom; that is, perhaps what God knows in advance is that no matter *what* circumstances he places Curley in, so long as he leaves him significantly free, he will take at least one wrong action.<sup>4</sup>

Plantinga continues and says that if the story *is* true, then Curley suffers from transworld depravity.

However, all Plantinga needs for his argument is that it is *possible* that everyone suffers from transworld depravity. Consequently, it is possible that God is omnipotent and that it is not within God's power to strongly or weakly actualize a world with moral good and no moral evil, that is (3'). So if (3') shows that (1) and (2) are consistent, Plantinga has shown that the logical problem of evil has a solution.

## **2. The Problem Triumphant.**

Even if we grant Plantinga his argument for (3'), it does not follow that it is not possible that God has the power to weakly actualize a world in which Curley does not take the bribe. Plantinga's discussion is compatible with the following scenario. God surveys all the relevant possible worlds, including the ones in which Curley freely does not take the bribe and ones in which Curley freely does take the bribe. Although God cannot strongly actualize worlds in which Curley makes a free decision, we will argue that God knows in which possible worlds Curley will complete God's

creation by taking the bribe and in which worlds Curley will complete the creation by not taking the bribe and that he can weakly actualize these worlds.

To see this, we need to take a closer look at counterfactuals of freedom and God's knowledge of them. A counterfactuals of freedom, or CF, is a counterfactual with the following form:

If p were in c, then p would freely do a

where p is a possible free agent, c is a possible situation, and a is a possible free action. Plantinga, as do we, assumes that God has knowledge of CFs. But if God has such knowledge we can argue that God could have done better without eliminating free will. For suppose that God knows what Curley will do, although God does not determine Curley's actions. If God knows the truth of CFs then he can consider all alternatives and after doing so strongly actualize the world segment that continues with Curley not accepting the bribe. For example, God knows that if he strongly actualizes segment  $T_1$  then Curley will accept the bribe, and he knows that if he strongly actualizes segment  $T_2$  then Curley will not accept the bribe. Clearly, God can choose to strongly actualize different world segments without undermining the freedom of the agents in the relevant worlds. For when God avoids having his subjects caught in situations and events that allow the wrong action, then he is not eliminating free will. He is at most affecting what options are open for the subjects while they still can choose one action over another. But if that is so, then God can choose whether to strongly actualize  $T_1$  or  $T_2$  without undermining Curley's freedom. For, as Plantinga acknowledges, it is compatible with indeterminism being true that we know the truth of at least some CFs, and with God's wisdom being infinitely greater than ours he could certainly know the truth of all CFs.

Once we acknowledge that God knows the truth of CFs and that he can actualize different world segments without undermining freedom there is nothing to prevent the possibility of God creating a world in which Curley exists and does not take the bribe. Further, if Curley made some

other immoral choice, then nothing prevents the possibility of God creating a world in which Curley does not make that choice, and in which he refrains from both that act and from taking the bribe. Since the same can be said of every other morally significant choice Curley is faced with, there is nothing to prevent the possibility of God creating a world in which Curley never takes a wrong decision; i.e., nothing prevents the *possibility* of there being a world where no one is transworld depraved. Other things being equal, that world would surely be a better world than the one that contains the corrupt Curley. And if we now apply the same possibility to other persons, then we see that there is nothing to prevent God from creating a world in which everyone chooses to do what is right. In other words, even if Curley's free actions are undetermined, the existence of the world in which Curley chooses evil is still subject to God's control, and since God knows CFs he knows Curley's future undetermined actions.

This argument can be generalized. Even if we grant that it is possible that God does not have the power to *strongly* actualize worlds with free human beings and no moral evil, it does not follow that it is not possible that God does have the power to *weakly* actualize worlds with free human beings and no moral evil. In fact, clearly it is possible that God has this power. God surveys all the possible worlds, including how they are completed by free beings, and has a choice between worlds that are completed by free beings in such a way that there is no moral evil and worlds that are completed by free being in such a way that there is moral evil. A perfect God, namely one that is omniscient, omnipotent and wholly good, will weakly actualize the world that is completed with no moral evil. "Clearly," as Mackie writes, "his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good."<sup>5</sup> God's perfection, that is, God's omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence, on the one hand, and the existence of evil on the other hand remain incompatible.

In sum, if (4) is true, that is, if it is possible that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good and it was within his power to create a world containing moral good and no moral evil, then God would have created a world with good and no evil. To deny that he would do so is to assume either that he does not know of that world, or that he has no preference to create that world over a world that contains evil. The logical problem of evil thus remains because there are possible worlds in which God exists with free beings, moral good and no moral evil. A perfect God would have weakly actualized one of those worlds instead of the one we occupy. As we have shown, *pace* Plantinga, God has the power to do this without denying freedom.

---

<sup>1</sup>J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955), p. 201.

<sup>2</sup> Plantinga, A., *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 184

<sup>3</sup> A maximal world segment, T, of world W, would include everything in W up to a time. For example, one maximal world segment of the actual world includes everything up to George W. Bush being sworn into office.

<sup>4</sup> *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 185-186. Regarding the concept of significant freedom: a person is significantly free, on a given occasion, if he is free with respect to an action that is morally significant for him. And an action is morally significant for a person at a given time if it would be wrong for him to perform the action at that time but right to refrain from the performing the action, or vice versa. See *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 166.

<sup>5</sup> Mackie, , p. 209.