

Challenges for the free will defense

PHIL 13185

February 8, 2007

One way to raise the problem of evil is to ask why, if God is all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful, he created a world containing so much evil. The proponent of the free will defense says, in reply, that God did not create the acts of torturing, murders, and other cruelties we find in the world — these acts are done freely by free agents, who are therefore responsible for them.

The objections to the free will defense we have talked about break into two different categories: the first two objections below are about whether free will can really explain any evil, whereas the second two are about whether free will can explain enough evil.

- [1] God could have created free agents, and then made sure that they always freely chose the right thing. So the fact that we have free will does not justify God in creating our world, since God could have created a world in which we had free will but there was no torture, murder, or cruelty.

The proponent of the free will defense typically responds by saying that it is impossible for God to both give us free will, and ensure that we always do the right thing. If God determined our acts, they would not be free. This response rests on the incompatibility of free will and determinism.

- [2] The idea that God gave us free will can't explain any evil because it is contradictory. God is supposed to be all-knowing; but, if he is all-knowing, he must know what we are going to do in the future. But if God has always known what we are going to do in the future, we do not have free will.

The response to this problem is usually some version of the view that foreknowledge and free will are compatible, though you can also deny that God knows what we are going to do in the future.

There are also two objections to the idea that free will can explain enough evil:

- [3] Suppose that free will is compatible with divine foreknowledge, and incompatible with determinism. Still, free will, even if it is a good thing, is not good enough to justify all the evil in the world that results from it.

This objection has primarily to do with the amount of evil we find in the world. The next objection has to do with the kind of evil we find in the world:

- [4] Let's suppose that free will can explain all of the evil caused to exist by the actions of free agents. Still, this would not explain all of the suffering which is not caused by the actions of free agents, like the suffering that results from natural disasters.