

The free will defense

Last time we began discussing the central argument against the existence of God, which I presented as the following *reductio ad absurdum* of the proposition that God exists:

1. God exists.
2. If God exists, then God is wholly good.
3. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.
4. If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can. (2,3)
5. God eliminates as much evil as God can. (1,4)
6. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.
7. If something is omnipotent, it can do anything.
8. If God exists, then God can eliminate all evil. (6,7)
9. God can eliminate all evil. (1,8)
10. God eliminates all evil. (5,9)

C. There is no evil. (10)

Since the argument seems valid and seems to have a false conclusion, one of its premises must be false.

It is then up to the believer in God to say which of these apparently true premises is, contrary to appearances, false. The options are (assuming that the believer does not simply accept the argument and give up belief in God): (2), (3), (6), (7).

I argued last time that it is not easy for the religious believer to give up (2) or (6).

I also argued that although (7) was plausibly false as it stands -- since not even an omnipotent being could bring about contradictory or impossible states of affairs -- Mackie's argument can be modified to correct for this flaw.

If all of this is correct, it looks like the best strategy for the religious believer is to deny (3). Let's look at some ways of carrying out this strategy.

3. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.

Mackie considers, and rejects, a few reasons for denying premise (3). Here are some:

- Good cannot exist without evil; since evil is a *necessary* counterpart to goodness, even an omnipotent being could not make a world with goodness but no evil. So, God creates a world with evil because it is the only way to make a world which contains good.
- A related reason for denying premise (3) is what van Inwagen calls “the appreciation defense.” He says: “many undergraduates at the University of Notre Dame, for example, seem inclined to say something like the following: if there were no evil, no one would appreciate - perhaps no one would even be aware of - the goodness of the things that are good. You know the idea: you never really appreciate health till you’ve been ill, ...”
- A universe with some evil will often be better than a universe with none, since certain kinds of goods logically require the existence of a certain sort of evil. For example, certain kinds of mercy are clearly goods, but these would be impossible without the existence of suffering.

Mackie also considers one final objection to premise (3): the objection that God allows evil for the sake of our free will. It is impossible for us to have free will and always act rightly; so it is impossible for God to create a world in which we have free will and there is no evil. So, God creates a world with evil because it is the only way to make a world which contains free beings, like us. This is the core of the *free will defense*. Here is the way that van Inwagen describes this sort of objection to premise (3):

God made the world and it was very good. An indispensable part of the goodness he chose was the existence of rational beings: self-aware beings capable of abstract thought and love and having the power of free choice between contemplated alternative courses of action. This last feature of rational beings, free choice or free will, is a good. But even an omnipotent being is unable to control the exercise of the power of free choice, for a choice that was controlled would *ipso facto* not be free. In other words, if I have a free choice between x and y , even God cannot ensure that I choose x . To ask God to give me a free choice between x and y and to see to it that I choose x instead of y is to ask God to bring about the intrinsically impossible; it is like asking him to create a round square, a material body that has no shape, or an invisible object that casts a shadow. Having this power of free choice, some or all human beings misused it and produced a certain amount of evil. But free will is a sufficiently great good that its existence outweighs the evils that have resulted and will result from its abuse; and God foresaw this.

Let's try to get clearer on why this is an objection to premise (3) of our original argument. That premise was:

3. If something is wholly good, it always eliminates as much evil as it can.

The key points of van Inwagen's objection to (3) seem to be:

- (a) A wholly good being might make beings with free will.
- (b) It is impossible to make a being with free will and ensure that it never does any evil.
- (c) Even an omnipotent being cannot bring about an impossible state of affairs.

It seems to follow from these that

- (d) Something can be wholly good, but still do something which leads to the existence of evil.

But this seems to contradict (3). So, if what van Inwagen says is correct, it seems that premise (3) of our original argument must be false.

However, the free will defense faces some important challenges. Here's one, from Mackie:

“if God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good.”

Mackie's idea seems to be that it is clearly possible that everyone acts freely and performs only good actions. But if a state of affairs is possible, then it seems clear that an omnipotent being could have brought it about. So God could, contra the free will defense, create a world in which people have free will but there is no evil.

Is Mackie correct that it is possible that people have free will and yet that no one ever brings about any evil?

Recall the three elements of the free will defense, as sketched by van Inwagen:

- (a) A wholly good being might make beings with free will.
- (b) It is impossible to make a being with free will and ensure that it never does any evil.
- (c) Even an omnipotent being cannot bring about an impossible state of affairs.

The conflict between Mackie's objection and the free will defense seems to be with point (b), since Mackie seems to be saying that it is possible, not impossible, for beings with free will never to bring about any evil.

However, if we take a closer look, it is not obvious that there really is a conflict here. Let's state Mackie's point like this:

(M) It is possible for every being with free will to do no evil.

van Inwagen's point was this:

(b) It is impossible to make a being with free will and ensure that it never does any evil.

But are (M) and (b) really inconsistent? In other words, is it really the case that both can't be true?

Here is an argument that they are not inconsistent, and hence that the free will defender can simply accept Mackie's point that it is possible for every being with free will to do no evil: perhaps it is possible that Bob, a free being, always freely chooses the good, but that it is *impossible* that I *ensure* that Bob always freely chooses the good. If this is right, the conflict is not between free will and always choosing the good, but between free will and someone else ensuring that Bob always chooses the good.

Let's apply this to (M) and (b). Perhaps it is possible for every being with free will to always choose the good (as (M) says), but *impossible* for God to *ensure* that this is the case (as (b) says). If this is correct, then (M) and (b) are consistent, and the free will defender needn't be worried by the sort of scenario that Mackie discusses.

However, it is worth noting that this sort of response to Mackie brings out an important commitment of the free will defender: they must say that the following sort of scenario is impossible:

God determines, or ensures, that I freely do such-and-such.

That is, they must say that our having free will is inconsistent with our actions being *determined*. This is a substantive claim about free will, and we will discuss the question of whether or not this is true in our next lecture.

So to respond to Mackie, the proponent of the free will defense has to adopt certain controversial views about the nature of free will.

The free will defense also faces some other challenges which are in some ways more difficult than Mackie's. van Inwagen mentions two of the most important of these:

How could anyone possibly believe that the evils of this world are outweighed by the good inherent in our having free will? Perhaps free will is a good and would outweigh, in Theist's words "a certain amount of evil", but it seems impossible to believe that it can outweigh the amount of physical suffering (to say nothing of other sorts of evil) that actually exists.

Not all evils are the result of human free will. Consider, for example, the Lisbon earthquake or the almost inconceivable misery and loss of life produced by the Asian tsunami of December 2004. Such events are not the result of any act of human will, free or unfree.

The first objection asks the free will defender to explain not the existence of some evil, but the existence of the sheer *amount* of evil that we find in the world.

The second objection begins with the observation that many evils are caused by events which are not the results of free human choices -- how should the free will defense explain the existence of *natural evil* of this sort? Surely God could have prevented evil of this sort without infringing on our free will.

Let's consider the first of these objections: that while the existence of free will might be a good sufficient to explain some evil, it is not sufficient to explain the radical sort of evil we find in our world. Why, for example, could God not give us free will, but restrict the amount of evil that our actions could cause?

One might think that restricting the amount of evil that our actions could cause would take away our free will. But this seems not to be correct. Humans are so constituted that they can't fly -- no matter how much we flap our arms, we cannot cause ourselves to rise into the air. But this limitation on the sorts of actions we can perform does not take away our free will. Couldn't an omnipotent and omniscient being figure out a way to similarly limit our evil-causing powers?

One response to this sort of worry has been given by the English philosopher Richard Swinburne:

It is good that the free choices of humans should include *genuine* responsibility for other humans, and that involves the opportunity to benefit or harm them. God has the power to benefit or to harm humans. If other agents are to be given a share in his creative work, it is good that they have that power too (although perhaps to a lesser degree). A world in which agents can benefit each other but not do each other harm is one where they have only very limited responsibility for each other. If my responsibility for you is limited to whether or not to give you a camcorder, but I cannot cause you pain, stunt your growth, or limit your education, then I do not have a great deal of responsibility for you. A God who gave agents only such limited responsibilities for their fellows would not have given much. God would have reserved for himself the all-important choice of the kind of world it was to be, while simply allowing humans the minor choice of filling in the details.

Let's turn now to 'the problem of natural evil': the problem of explaining the existence of evil which is caused by events not due to human free actions, like earthquakes.

The free will defense as we've explained it so far does not explain this sort of evil, and it is very hard to deny that there is evil of this sort. So why did God not create a world which lacked this sort of evil?

This is a difficult question; it might be the most difficult question for the theist to answer as regards the sort of evil we find in the world. Here are some of the answers which have been proposed in answer to this question:

- Though earthquakes and the like are not the result of human free actions, they are the result of the free actions of nonhuman agents, like fallen angels. So the free will defense applies to these events just as directly as to events caused by human choices.
- It is important that the world be governed by laws of nature; otherwise, it would be impossible to know the effects of our actions, and hence impossible to take responsibility for the outcomes of those actions. However, it is impossible to create a world governed by laws of nature which does not also include some natural events which cause suffering; so even an omnipotent being could not have created a law-governed world which was free of natural disasters.
- Though earthquakes and the like are not caused by human free actions, our inability to avoid the harm caused by them is. In particular, the event of human beings removing themselves from the care of God - an event symbolized in the Judeo-Christian tradition by the story of the Garden of Eden - placed human beings in a world in which they were subject to natural forces which they were then unable to avoid.

It's also worth noting that the theist needn't adopt just one of these explanations; it might be that some apply to some instances of evil, and others to other instances. It might also be that much of the evil that we first think of as natural evil is really human-caused evil; though Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster, its effects were certainly made worse through poor management of the relief effort and insufficient protection for the city; perhaps hurricanes are made more violent by human-caused climate change; etc.