

Evil and  
freedom of the  
will



1. God exists.

2. If God exists, then God is omnipotent.

3\*. If something is omnipotent, it can bring about anything which is possible.

4\*. If God exists, then God can bring about anything which is possible. (2,3\*)

5. If God exists, then God is wholly good.

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

7. If God exists, then God eliminates as much evil as God can. (5,6)

8\*. If God exists, then God eliminates all evil that it is possible to eliminate. (4\*,7)

9\*. If God exists, then there is no evil that it is possible to eliminate. (8\*)

10\*. There is no evil that it is possible to eliminate. (1,9\*)

11\*. Some evil exists that it is possible to eliminate.

C. There is and is not some evil that it is possible to eliminate (10\*,11)

Last time we were discussing the argument at left.

The conclusion is, obviously, false; since the argument seems valid, it must have a false independent premise. We noted that the only options open to someone who believes in God – at least someone who believes in God, and has a conception of God like that of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity – must reject one of premises 3\*, 6, and 11.

Since 3\* and 11\* seem difficult to reject, attention naturally focuses on 6. In order to reject 6, we must meet the following challenge:

**The challenge: provide an explanation of why a wholly good being would permit evil which applies to every kind of evil that we find in our world.**

Mackie emphasizes a constraint on meeting this challenge: in explaining why God allows some evil, we must not forget that God is omnipotent.

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

This is often called the 'free will defense':

**The challenge:** provide an explanation of why a wholly good being would permit evil which applies to every kind of evil that we find in our world.

### The free will defense

Because free will is a good, a wholly good being might wish for others to have free will. But it is impossible to both give free will to creatures and stop them from using that free will to do evil. (To do the latter would be to take away, to that extent, their free will.) Hence a wholly good creature might well not eliminate evil which it was within its power to eliminate, when doing so would be an infringement on the free will of the creature causing the evil.

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Let's call an explanation of why a particular evil E exists a **justification** for E. Any justification, it seems, will point to something good which explains E's existence; let's call this **E's corresponding good**. Then, it seems, in order to reject premise 6, what we want is some theory which allows us to provide the following:

An immediate worry about this sort of free will defense is that it won't apply to all of the evils in the world – how about the evils wrought by natural disasters, for example?

For every evil E, a corresponding good G which is such that it is impossible for God to bring about G without E.

But let's set that to the side for the moment. Mackie has a more basic worry about this strategy: not only does he deny that free will can explain all of the evil in the world – he denies that it can explain **any** of it.

Let's now turn to the idea mentioned at the end of last time: that we could somehow provide a justification for the evils of the world in terms of the good of free will.

The reason why, he thinks, is that the free will defense covertly denies God's omnipotence.

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### **Mackie's objection to the free will defense**

"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."

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What exactly is the argument here?

The conclusion seems pretty clear.

As is at least one of the premises.

How do we get from the premise to the conclusion? We already know how to do this; we simply employ definition 3 of omnipotence.

1. It is possible for all people to have free will and yet never bring about any evil.

2. If it is possible for the world to be some way, then God could have made it that way.

C. God could have made the world such that all people have free will and never cause evil.

Mackie is, in effect, reminding us of what, before, we agreed we had to provide:

For every evil E, a corresponding good G which is such that it is impossible for God to bring about G without E.

Free will simply won't be a corresponding good for the relevant evils if God could have given us the free will while ensuring that none of the evils obtained.

Hence any proponent of the free will defense must find some way of rejecting the conclusion at right. The argument looks valid; so one of the premises must be rejected. Which?

One response would be to deny premise 1. But, in the end, this does not seem very plausible. Surely God wished that we would not use our free will to bring about evil; was God, irrationally, wishing for something impossible to be the case?

Intuitively, what one wants to say is that it is possible for everyone to always freely do the right thing, but impossible for God to make them freely do the right thing. This suggests that the free will defense's best objection to Mackie's argument is to reject premise 2, not premise 1.

### *Mackie's objection to the free will defense*

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But this leads to some puzzles about the nature of omnipotence. Earlier, we discussed the idea that even an omnipotent being could not bring about an impossible state of affairs, like a round square. But now we are saying that there are some possible states of affairs that even an omnipotent being could not bring about. So what does omnipotence mean, anyway?

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This turns out to be a tough question. If we are going to reject Mackie's premise 2, then we have to reject both of the definitions of omnipotence that we have been working with:

(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

(3) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible.

At this stage, a natural thought is that we should focus on the idea that there are some states of affairs which are (i) possible but (ii) such that it is impossible for God to bring them about.

This might suggest that omnipotence is not the ability to bring about anything possible, but rather the ability to bring about anything that it is possible for that being to bring about.

This leads us back to Aquinas' second, rejected definition of omnipotence:

(2) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything that it is possible for that being to do.

Aquinas, however, immediately rejected this definition, on the grounds that it leads to a 'vicious circle'. According to definition 2, if we want to understand what God's omnipotence is, we have to first know what it is possible for God to do — but, one might think, that's exactly what we want our definition of omnipotence to tell us.

Let's think about whether Aquinas is right to reject the definition on these grounds. A first step is to distinguish the following:

(a) **the actions that are possible for X**: roughly, the collection of every action A such that the claim that X does A is not incoherent.

(b) **X's abilities**: roughly, the collection of every action A such that X can do A.

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Aquinas's definition 2 says that a being is omnipotent if its abilities = the actions that are possible for it.

This is, as Aquinas says, circular if there is no way to figure out the (a) facts – the facts about what is possible for a being – without first knowing the (b) facts – the facts about what that being is able to do.

Is Aquinas right that this is circular?

It's not obvious. It seems like we can see that it is possible that I sprout wings and fly even if I am not able to sprout wings and fly, and we can tell this without knowing much about my abilities.

But, on the other hand, if we want to know whether it is possible for God to perform some action, definition 2 will be of no help at all. Given that we might want our definition of omnipotence to tell us whether we can legitimately say that an omnipotent being cannot bring about a state of affairs in which someone freely does something, this is a weakness of definition 2.

A case can also be made that definition 2 is too weak. Suppose that there is a creature, McEar, who is able to scratch his ear, and is such that it is impossible for him to do anything but scratch his ear. Surely such a creature would not be omnipotent; but definition 2 implies that he would be.

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Here's a possible way to improve upon definition 2. Let's begin with the fact that it doesn't just seem impossible for God to bring about a situation in which someone freely performs a specific action; it also seems impossible for me to bring about a situation in which someone else freely performs a specific action. So perhaps we could replace Definition 2 with

(4) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything that it is possible for any being to do.

This avoids Aquinas' circularity objection, and avoids the problem of McEar.

The problem with it, though, is that it seems to imply that God is not omnipotent. For consider my action of freely eating a hamburger for lunch. It is possible for me to bring this about, but not for God to bring this about. So there is an action which is possible for me but not for God which, given definition 4, implies that God is not omnipotent.

(1) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything.

(2) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything that it is possible for that being to do.

(3) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can bring about anything which is possible.

(4) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being can do anything that it is possible for any being to do.

So each of definitions 1-4 seem to face substantial difficulties.

A different approach is simply to describe omnipotence as follows:

(5) A being is omnipotent if and only if that being is maximally powerful — i.e., is such that it is not possible for any being to be more powerful than it.

This doesn't face any of the problems of the others, and leaves open the response to Mackie's argument we have been discussing. But it tells us disappointingly little about what an omnipotent being can do.

It also, implausibly, leaves open the possibility of a being which is pretty unimpressive and yet omnipotent — if it turns out that very powerful beings are impossible.

So there are real puzzles about what omnipotence could be – puzzles which Mackie's objection to the free will defense makes more pressing.

Let's set aside these puzzles about omnipotence; there's a different way in which God could have given us free will while preventing the evil to which it actually gives rise: God could have only ever given us choices between alternative actions which lead to no evil.

Is this possible? If it is, does this mean that the free will defense can't explain evil, after all?

I think that the answers are "Yes", and "Not by itself." God could have given us free will, and only ever let us choose between different flavors of jelly beans. This could have been genuine free will but without the evil.

What the proponent of the free will defense must say is that this free will would lack something of the value of our own free will. Not just free will, but something about the sorts of choices we have open to us, is valuable.

Here's what Richard Swinburne says about this:

### The free will defense

Because free will is a good, a wholly good being might wish for others to have free will. But it is impossible to both give free will to creatures and stop them from using that free will to do evil. (To do the latter would be to take away, to that extent, their free will.) Hence a wholly good creature might well not eliminate evil which it was within its power to eliminate, when doing so would be an infringement on the free will of the creature causing the evil.

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.

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So really, the “free will defense” should be called the “free will and genuine responsibility defense.”

But this addition to the free will defense gives rise to a puzzle, to which we will return next time. One way to bring out the puzzle is to ask: Can God do evil?

The standard answer to this question is that God cannot; that God is not just good, but **essentially** good.

But suppose that this is right. This makes it somewhat mysterious why it should be so important that we have the ability to bring about evil. If God does not have this ability, and God is morally perfect, why should it be so important for us to have this ability? And it must be **very** important, given the amount of suffering which it has caused.

Let's set this problem to the side. Suppose that we've come up with a view of omnipotence sufficient to answer Mackie's objection that God could have created a world of free beings who never caused evil, and that we've explained why it should be so important for us to not only have free will, but for us to have the opportunity to use that free will to bring about evil. Would we then have a satisfactory response to our challenge?

Let's consider these in turn.

**The challenge:** provide an explanation of why a wholly good being would permit evil which applies to every kind of evil that we find in our world.

We would not, for at least two reasons.

1. It seems that not all evil is caused by human free actions; we still have no idea why God permits this evil to exist. Let's call this the 'problem of non-moral evil.'

2. We've explained, perhaps, why God allows some evil which is caused by human free actions. But take a particularly horrific abuse of free will; surely the consequences of such an act could be worse than the good of that one free act. But then why doesn't God limit free will in just those cases, to prevent human beings from doing their worst? Let's call this the 'problem of horrors.'



## The problem of non-moral evil

What is an example of non-moral evil?

It is worth noting that many of the examples on which we naturally focus are actually mixed cases: cases in which the natural disaster in question is partly the result of human free action, and partly not. So, for example, 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. But it is very implausible that we can explain all of the evil which results from natural disasters in this way; it is presumably true that there would be hurricanes, volcanoes, and earthquakes without human intervention, just as these events occurred many times before human beings were on the scene.

Nonetheless, one might think that free will is still relevant to the explanation of the existence of evil not immediately caused by human free actions, for one of two reasons.

First, one might adopt the view suggested by Alvin Plantinga:

a more traditional line of thought is indicated by St. Augustine, who attributes much of the evil we find to *Satan* or to Satan and his cohorts. Satan, so the traditional doctrine goes, is a mighty nonhuman spirit who, along with many other angels, was created long before God created man. Unlike most of his colleagues, Satan rebelled against God and has since been wreaking whatever havoc he can. The result is natural evil. So the natural evil we find is due to free actions of nonhuman spirits.

On this sort of view, there really is no genuinely non-moral evil; all evil is caused by the free actions of something.

Plantinga doesn't claim to know that this is the correct explanation for the evil not caused by human free actions; but he does think that we have no particular reason to doubt that it is true.

One puzzle about this story concerns the value of Satan's free will. Given that, on the standard view, Satan cannot repent, why should God continue to allow Satan to exercise free will, especially when this is the cause of great evil?

## The problem of non-moral evil

There is, however, another way in which one might try to explain the evil caused by natural disasters and the like using the free will defense, which is proposed by Peter van Inwagen in the reading for today.

van Inwagen explains, in more depth, a story with the following features:

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 Judaeo-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.

van Inwagen's story capitalizes on the fact that natural disasters don't seem to be evil as such, but only evil insofar as they bring about suffering. Hence, if the suffering caused by natural disasters can be explained as the result of human free choice, we will have successfully explained all that needs explaining.

Like Plantinga, van Inwagen does not argue that his story is true; what he does think is that we have no reason to believe that it is not true, and hence no reason to think that the suffering caused by natural disasters rules out the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly good being.

One might wonder, though, whether van Inwagen's story can explain every sort of apparently non-moral evil. A particularly troublesome case is the case of animal suffering before the existence of human beings; William Rowe gives the following example:

"Suppose that in some distant forest lightning strikes a dead tree, resulting in a forest fire. In the fire a fawn is trapped, horribly burned, and lies in terrible agony for several days before death relieves its suffering. ... So far as we can see, the fawn's intense suffering is pointless. For there does not appear to be any greater good such that the prevention of the fawn's suffering would require either the loss of that good or the occurrence of an evil equally bad or worse."

van Inwagen's response to this sort of case is discussed in one of the optional readings for today.

## The problem of horrors

Let's set aside animal suffering and other sorts of (apparently) non-moral evil and turn to the problem of horrors. This is the problem of explaining why God does not limit free will in cases where the use of that free will is going to cause massive suffering.

In today's reading, van Inwagen considers the following sort of argument:

1. The world contains horrors.
2. Some horrors are such that the world would be no worse if it did not contain that horror.
3. If a perfectly good being could omit a horror from the world without making the world any worse, he would.
4. An omnipotent being could omit some of the relevant horrors from the world.

Together, these premises entail that there is no perfectly good and omnipotent being. Which, if any, of these premises could be rejected?

van Inwagen suggests that we reject (3). This premise, he thinks, only seems plausible insofar as we accept some general claim like

If one is in a position to prevent an evil without causing any more harm or preventing any good, one should do it.

But van Inwagen argues that this principle is false, using the example of prison sentences.

Note that the free will defense does not require us to say that God never prevents horrors; van Inwagen thinks that, for all we know, God is preventing horrors all of the time. But God can't prevent every horror without removing a significant good, and any way of 'drawing the line' will be arbitrary.

It's worth emphasizing a point that van Inwagen makes: none of the justifications of evil we've discussed are put forward as true by their authors. None of them claims to know why there is evil in the world. What each tries to do is to provide some story which we have no reason to think is false, and which, if true, would explain the existence of evil in a world created by a perfectly good and omnipotent being.

Some philosophers, however — sometimes called **skeptical theists** — doubt that we even need to provide this much.

They point out that in order to see evil as a problem for belief in an omnipotent & perfectly good being, we have to think that some evils are 'gratuitous' — in the sense that they are not explained by the provision of some corresponding good, or the avoidance of some worse evil. But how do we know that any evil is gratuitous? It must be just that we can't see any justification for the relevant evil.

So we're relying on some inference of the following sort:

I can see no justification for a particular evil E.

∴ There is no justification for E.

This is sometimes called a 'noseeum' inference — we're inferring from the fact that we can't see an X the conclusion that there is no X.

It is obvious that noseeum inferences are sometimes legit. (How else could I know that there is not now a polar bear in the room?) It is also obvious that they are sometimes very unreliable. ('I can't see any electrons in this room, so there must not be any.')

The question is: when, exactly, are inferences of this sort reliable, and are they reliable in this case?

Skeptical theists think that, given our cognitive limitations, there is no particular reason to think that we'd be in a position to see God's justification for permitting the evils of the world — and hence that the inference needed to get the problem of evil off the ground is more like the electron inference than the polar bear one.