



the basic
idea

does free
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any evil?

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THE FREE WILL DEFENSE

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The key premise of the last version of the argument from evil we considered was this one:

9*. Some pointless evil that is possible to eliminate exists.

This says that there is some evil which is such that there is no greater good that God could not have brought about without allowing that evil.

So, one who denies (9*) is committed to the following claim:

For every evil in the world, there is some greater good which even God could not have brought about without allowing that evil.

The key question is what this good could be.

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For every evil in the world, there is some greater good which even God could not have brought about without allowing that evil.

The key question is what this good could be.

The most prominent attempt to answer this question focuses on the good of free will:

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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This response to the argument fairly obviously relies on two assumptions.

The first is that we really do have free will.

The second is that having free will is a really good thing.

Are these assumptions plausible?

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There are two different kinds of objections to the free will defense.

Free will
cannot
explain any
evil.

Free will can
explain some
evil; but it can't
explain all of the
evil we find in
the world.

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Mackie thinks that the free will defense is a complete failure;
free will can't explain any evil at all.

Free will
cannot
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evil.

“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.”

It is key to the free will defense that it is impossible for God to give us the good of free will without also letting into the universe the evil we cause with that free will.

Mackie is giving us an argument against that assumption.

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

God can bring about any possible situation.

God could have made a world where all people have free will and yet never bring about any evil.

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MACKIE'S ARGUMENT AGAINST THE FWD

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

C. God could have made a world where all people have free will and yet never bring about any evil. (1,2)

If the conclusion of this argument is true, then evil caused by human free will is pointless — which is enough to make (9*) true.

9*. Some pointless evil that is possible to eliminate exists.

How should the proponent of the free will defense respond to this argument?

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MACKIE'S ARGUMENT AGAINST THE FWD

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

C. God could have made a world where all people have free will and yet never bring about any evil. (1,2)

Most people are initially inclined to reject premise (1).

But this faces some challenges.

First, God is free and yet never brings about any evil; so why should it be impossible to be free and never bring about any evil?

Second, many think that God wants us never to bring about any evil. Is God then wishing for something impossible? Was God simply confused in wishing for this?

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- C. God could have made a world where all people have free will and yet never bring about any evil. (1,2)

Could we reject (2) instead?

While this sounds odd at first, it fits with an intuitive thought about free will. It is tempting to say that while it is possible for me to freely scratch my nose in a minute, it is not possible for God to bring it about that I freely scratch my nose in a minute — since, if God brought it about, then my nose scratching would not be free.

But this is just a way of denying (2) — since it amounts to saying that there is a certain possible scenario that God cannot bring about.

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But this is just a way of denying (2) — since it amounts to saying that there is a certain possible scenario that God cannot bring about.

Suppose that we reject (2). This raises the question: what is omnipotence, if not the ability to bring about anything possible?

One might try:

A being is omnipotent if it can do anything that it is possible for that being to do.

But this seems too weak.

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Suppose that we reject (2). This raises the question: what is omnipotence, if not the ability to bring about anything possible?

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We could try instead:

A being is omnipotent if it can do anything that it is possible for any being to do.

But this definition seems too strong. Consider the action 'Jeff Speaks freely eating a hamburger for lunch.' I can bring this about — but God cannot.

Perhaps:

A being is omnipotent if it is as powerful as it is possible to be.

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Suppose that we can block Mackie's argument by revising our view of God's omnipotence.

One might think that a problem remains. 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. Suppose, for example, that we only ever had choices between different flavors of jelly beans.

Doesn't this possibility deliver the conclusion of Mackie's argument by itself, without the help of any assumptions about omnipotence?

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Here's what Richard Swinburne says about this:

“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. ... 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. ... A God who gave agents only such limited responsibilities ... 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.”

Swinburne seems to be thinking that certain kinds of important human relationships depend on the ability to harm one another. Is that plausible?

If Swinburne is right, the “free will defense” should be called the “free will and genuine responsibility defense.”

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“free will and genuine responsibility defense.”

But this addition to the free will defense gives rise to a puzzle. 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 **necessarily** 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.

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Summing up so far: we have seen that free will promises to explain how there could be evil in a world with an omnipotent and perfectly good God. It can explain that, it seems, if we make the following assumptions:

we have
free will

free will is
a great good

the ability
to harm others
is a great good

there are possible
situations which an
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Suppose that you think that all of these assumptions are true. That does not mean that we have a satisfactory treatment of the existence of evil from a theist perspective.

That is because even if we might have an explanation of why there is some evil in the world, we do not yet have an explanation of why we find in the world the particular kinds of evils we do.

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That is because even if we might have an explanation of why there is some evil in the world, we do not yet have an explanation of why we find in the world the particular kinds of evils we do.

One kind of example is what is sometimes called 'natural evil.' These are evils which do not seem to be caused by free will. Examples include the consequences of natural disasters like hurricanes and tsunamis, and the often terrible effects of disease.

Let's take a particular example: the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which is estimated to have killed about 228,000 people. The following seems very plausible:

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami is an evil.

However, the tsunami does not seem to have been the result of anyone's free choices.

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The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami is an evil.

However, the tsunami does not seem to have been the result of anyone's free choices.

So, for all we have said so far, the following seems plausible:

There is no good which outweighs this event and which is such that an omnipotent being could not have brought about the good without the evil.

But we have so far been assuming this:

A perfectly good being would eliminate every evil unless there was a good which outweighed that evil and it was impossible for that being to eliminate the evil without eliminating the good.

And this is enough to put together an argument.

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THE ARGUMENT FROM NATURAL EVIL

1. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami is an evil.
2. There is no good which outweighs this event and which is such that an omnipotent being could not have brought about the good without the evil.
3. A perfectly good being would eliminate every evil unless there was a good which outweighed that evil and it was impossible for that being to eliminate the evil without eliminating the good.
4. There is no omnipotent and perfectly good being.
(1,2,3)
5. If there is no omnipotent and perfectly good being, God does not exist.

C. God does not exist. (4,5)

One line of response to this argument is to say that even though tsunamis are not caused by human free will, the evil they involve is.

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One line of response to this argument is to say that even though tsunamis are not caused by human free will, the evil they involve is.

Here is one way of developing this thought:

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.

This 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.

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THE ARGUMENT FROM NATURAL EVIL

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Suppose that this is true. What premise in the above argument would this objection target?

Let's consider two replies to this objection.

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Let's consider two replies to this objection.

The first is due to the contemporary philosopher Marilyn Adams.



“Traditional free-will approaches - with their move to shift responsibility ... for evil away from God and onto personal creatures - are stalemated by horrendous evil. Human radical vulnerability to horrors cannot have its origin in misused created freedom, because - even if one accepted the story of Adam's fall as historical ... the way it is told, humans were radically vulnerable to horrors from the beginning, even in Eden. The framework within which the primal ancestors made their choices was such that obedient choices meant persistence of the status quo, while disobedient choices would result in the horrendous disarray such as humans have experienced ever since. Even if Adam's and Eve's choices are supposed to be somehow self-determined, the fact that the consequences amplify far beyond their capacity to conceive and hence to intend ... is not something for which humans are responsible. Rather it is a function of the interaction between human agency and the wider framework within which it is set, and God is responsible for creating human beings in such a framework!”

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A second reply focused on the fact that there were evils before human beings existed. Here's one prominent version of this reply, from William Rowe:

“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.”

Surely many events such as these occurred before human beings were on the scene; and surely at least some animal suffering of this kind is an evil.

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This gives us the resources to construct a new argument:

THE ARGUMENT FROM ROWE'S FAWN

1. Some instance of pre-human animal suffering is an evil.
2. There is no good which outweighs this event and which is such that an omnipotent being could not have brought about the good without the suffering.
3. A perfectly good being would eliminate every evil unless there was a good which outweighed that evil and it was impossible for that being to eliminate the evil without eliminating the good.
4. There is no omnipotent and perfectly good being.
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The reasoning given for rejecting premise (2) in the tsunami argument would not seem to apply here, because the fawn's suffering pre-dates any human choices.

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Let's look at one last argument from particular evils. This focuses on especially horrific examples of human-caused evil.

These might include rape, torture, murder, or child abuse.

Presumably God has the power to prevent these. Let's concede that for God to prevent these would involve God limiting someone's free will (the free will of the person who perpetrated the act). Let's also concede that to take away this free choice would be to take away a good.

But is it really plausible that the good of that persons free choice **outweighs** the evil caused by the act?

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But is it really plausible that the good of that persons free choice
outweighs the evil caused by the act?

If not, this gives us another argument:

THE ARGUMENT FROM HORRIFIC EVILS

1. Some instance of rape, torture, murder, or child abuse is a great evil.
2. There is no good which outweighs this event and which is such that an omnipotent being could not have brought about the good without the evil.
3. A perfectly good being would eliminate every evil unless there was a good which outweighed that evil and it was impossible for that being to eliminate the evil without eliminating the good.
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We have now laid out three arguments based, not on the existence of some evil in the world, but based on the existence of particular evils: the evil caused by natural disasters, the evil of pre-human suffering, and especially horrific evils.

We have now laid out three arguments based, not on the existence of some evil in the world, but based on the existence of particular evils: the evil caused by natural disasters, the evil of pre-human suffering, and especially horrific evils.

Each of these arguments relies on the following premises:

2. There is no good which outweighs this event and which is such that an omnipotent being could not have brought about the good without the evil.

3. A perfectly good being would eliminate every evil unless there was a good which outweighed that evil and it was impossible for that being to eliminate the evil without eliminating the good.

Let's briefly look at some ways in which one might object to these premises.

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3. A perfectly good being would eliminate every evil unless there was a good which outweighed that evil and it was impossible for that being to eliminate the evil without eliminating the good.

One argument against (3) uses the example of a prison sentence. Suppose that someone is justly convicted of a crime, and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Suppose further that this sentence is just.

Now suppose that you are given the chance to reduce the sentence by 1 day. If the above principle is true, it looks like you should.

But suppose we keep giving you this opportunity. Using the above principle, you will keep reducing the sentence, until it is 0 days in length.

But that seems like the wrong result. Is this a successful reductio of premise (3) of these arguments?

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2. There is no good which outweighs this event and which is such that an omnipotent being could not have brought about the good without the evil.

Let's now look at premise (2). One way to object to an instance of (2) is to point to a good which does outweigh the evil and which is such that even God could not have brought about the good without the evil. That's the approach taken by the free will defense.

But that is not the only kind of objection one can make to premise (2) of these arguments. One might also say that, despite the fact that we do not know what good outweighs the evil, we have no particular reason to think that there is not such a good, and hence have no particular reason to think that (2) is true.

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But that is not the only kind of objection one can make to premise (2) of these arguments. One might also say that, despite the fact that we do not know what good outweighs the evil, we have no particular reason to think that there is not such a good, and hence have no particular reason to think that (2) is true.

Here is one analogy used to support this. Children often have no grasp on the reasons why their parents allow them to experience evil; they cannot see what the greater good is that would justify this.

But the cognitive gap between children and parents is vastly, vastly smaller than the cognitive gap between us and God. So, even if there are goods which outweigh the evils we have discussed, why should we think that we would be able to identify those evils?

The idea is that our **cognitive limitations** are such that we have no reason to be confident that (2) is true, even if it seems true to us. There are two worries about this appeal to our cognitive limitations.

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The idea is that our **cognitive limitations** are such that we have no reason to be confident that (2) is true, even if it seems true to us. There are two worries about this appeal to our cognitive limitations.

The first is that, if we are this cognitively limited, that would seem to itself be an evil. If there were a perfectly good and all-powerful being, why wouldn't that being give us the resources to see why there is evil in the world?

The second is that it seems to call into question much of our ordinary reasoning about the world. In making decisions about what to do, we often implicitly rely on the assumption that a given decision will not cause untold evils down the road. But if we can be confident of that sort of thing, why not (2)?

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We've now discussed the main challenges to the free will defense, which is the most important response to the argument from evil.

You should separate out two questions. First, can free will explain the existence of some evil? Second, just how much can it explain?

The question you should ask yourself is: can these challenges to belief in God be withstood? Can free will, or free will plus some other assumptions, make it reasonable to believe in God despite the kinds of evil we find in the world?