ATONEMENT'S AXIOLOGICAL BOUNDARIES

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Abstract. According to the *Felix Culpa Theodicy*, possible worlds that contain atonement and incarnation have a high value, and in light of this value God is justified in actualizing such a world, despite all of the moral evil that has accompanied it. Focusing upon Alvin Plantinga's articulation of this theodicy, this paper investigates *FCT* on the basis of normative ethical considerations, and argues for the following position. On the one hand, the deontic status of at least some actions depends upon the consequences of those actions. On the other hand, the existence of atonement depends upon the deontic status of at least one action. Under certain circumstances, this two-way dependence yields a contradiction if atonement has the kind of value conferred upon it by *FCT*. So this theodicy cannot be true. This paper concludes by discussing some implications for Molinism and evidential arguments from moral evil.

In certain theological contexts the value of atonement is considered to either surpass many states of affairs of great value, or be unsurpassable in value. The *Felix Culpa Theodicy* (*FCT*) taps into this theological perspective from the Christian tradition.[1] According to this theodicy, God is morally justified in actualizing a world with divine atonement (and incarnation), despite all of the moral evil that has accompanied it, precisely because of the great value of atonement (and incarnation).

Alvin Plantinga offers a characteristically thorough articulation and defense of this theodicy within a Molinist framework.[2] While this *FCT* has raised a variety of philosophical and theological questions that merit serious attention,[3] this paper wishes to explore new territory by arguing that *FCT* cannot be true because there must be limits to the value of atonement. This conclusion is reached in the following manner.

While the deontic status of at least some actions depends upon the consequences of those actions, the existence of atonement depends upon the deontic status of at least one action. If atonement is assumed to be unsurpassable in value, then, under certain circumstances, such a two-way dependence yields a contradiction. The lesson to be gleamed is that atonement cannot be unsurpassable in value, or surpass the value of at least some possible states of affairs in which someone freely does the right thing for the right reasons. After presenting this argument, this paper concludes by discussing some implications for Molinism and evidential arguments from moral evil.

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[1] Stemming from the Roman Catholic Easter Vigil liturgy, 'Felix Culpa' means happy/blessed fault/fall. In other words, humanity's "fall" into sin is, all things considered, a good thing since it results in incarnation and atonement.

[2] Alvin Plantinga, "Superlapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa'," in Peter van Inwagen (ed.), *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil* (Eerdmans Press, 2004), 1–25.

[3] See Marilyn McCord Adams, "Plantinga On "Felix Culpa": Analysis and Critique," *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008): 123–140; Kevin Diller, "Are Sin and Evil Necessary for a Really Good World? Questions for Alvin Plantinga's *Felix Culpa* Theodicy," *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008): 87–101; Hud Hudson, "*Felix Culpa!*" in Trent Dougherty and Jerry Walls (eds), *Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). This paper sidesteps concerns with the Christian concept of atonement as raised in David Lewis, "Do We Believe in Penal Substitution?" *Philosophical Papers* 26 (1997): 203–209.

THE FELIX CULPA THEODICY

Let's define moral evil in theological terms: it is an evil that results from an agent freely performing a sinful action. Now consider the following two types of worlds:

> A **No Evil** world is one in which free (creaturely) agents exist, at least some of these creatures freely perform morally right actions, and none of them freely perform sinful actions. Moreover, there is no evil whatsoever.

> A **Moral Evil** world is one in which at least one (creaturely) agent freely performs at least one sinful action.[4]

With these two types of worlds in mind, Plantinga's *FCT* may be characterized as follows:

> **The Felix Culpa Theodicy** (**FCT**) God has most reason, all things considered, to prefer a *Moral Evil* world that contains incarnation and atonement, rather than a *No Evil* world because the following two claims are true:

> **The Strong Value Assumption (SVA)** Any world W that contains incarnation and atonement is such that any other type of world is worse than W.[5]

> **Necessary Moral Evil** (**NME**) Moral evil is a necessary condition for incarnation and atonement.[6]

Plantinga suggests that the *SVA* can be replaced with either of the following two assumptions:

> **The Moderate Value Assumption** (**MVA**) For any pair of worlds W and W*, such that:

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[4] This paper remains agnostic as to whether we should consider an action or attitude that is outside of the volitional control of an agent to be sinful. See Robert Merrihew Adams, "Involuntary Sins", *Philosophical Review* 94 (1985): 3–31.

[5] Plantinga's description of *SVA* has been simplified. Here is the full quote by Plantinga:

> "[A]ny world with incarnation and atonement is of infinite value by virtue of containing two goods of infinite value: the existence of God and incarnation and atonement. Under this assumption, there will be a certain level *L* of excellence or goodness, among possible worlds, such that all the worlds at that level or above contain incarnation and atonement" ("Superlapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa'," 9).

[6] Plantinga says that "a necessary condition of Atonement is sin and evil" ("Superlapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa'," 10–11), although he seems to suggest in other places that sin is also a necessary condition for incarnation since he seems to treat these goods as inseparable (Adams, "Plantinga On "Felix Culpa"", 131; Diller, "Are Sin and Evil Necessary for a Really Good World?", 91–92). While it appears that incarnation can exist without atonement (or sin), this paper assumes for the sake of argument that incarnation and atonement are in fact inseparable goods, and that both require sin.

- In W there are creatures that always freely perform morally right actions, and there is no incarnation and atonement.
- In W* the same (and only the same) creatures that exist in W exist in this world, and at least some of those creatures sometimes freely perform sinful actions, and such actions result in incarnation and atonement.

W* is a better world than W.[7]

The Weak Value Assumption (WVA) Among worlds of great value, some of them include incarnation and atonement.[8]

As Marilyn Adams notes, *WVA* is consistent with the hypothesis that a world in which all creatures freely refrain from sinning is better than a world in which all of those creatures freely sin and incarnation and atonement occur.[9] So, it appears that *WVA* is too weak for *FCT* to count as a successful theodicy. After all, if the *FCT* proponent accepts *WVA* and rejects the other two assumptions, then God prefers less than the best.[10] While this paper will continue to assume that *FCT* is committed to *SVA*, the forthcoming argument may similarly apply to a version of *FCT* that is only committed to *MVA* (see footnote 21).[11]

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[7] Plantinga's description of *MVA* has been simplified. Here is the full quote by Plantinga:

> "Contrast two kinds of possible worlds. In the first kind, there are free creatures who always do only what is right, who live in love and harmony with God and each other, and do so, let's add, through all eternity. Now for each of these worlds W of this kind, there is a world W* of the second kind. In W* God creates the very same creatures as in W; but in W* these free creatures rebel against him, fall into sin and wickedness, turn their backs upon God. In W*, however, God graciously provides a means of salvation by way of incarnation and atonement. My claim is that for any such worlds W and W*, W* is a better world than W" ("Superlapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa'," 9).

[8] Ibid., 10.

[9] "Plantinga On "Felix Culpa"," 126–127.

[10] The present discussion assumes that all worlds are comparable in value. For a challenge to this assumption, see e.g. Klaas J. Kraay, "Incommensurability, Incomparability, and God's Choice of a World," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69 (2011): 91–102.

[11] *MVA* is consistent with the hypothesis that there is some good beyond our ken that is greater than the combined goods of incarnation and atonement, and that this good is incompatible with the existence of creatures (or at least free creatures). Call this hypothesis '*H*'. If *H* is true, then God apparently prefers less than the best, which is once again an unacceptable result. So, in order for *FCT* to be a successful theodicy, it must reject *H* since it must reject the claim that God prefers less than the best.

A skeptical theist apparently cannot consistently deny *H*, as argued by Hud Hudson, "Felix Culpa!" in Trent Dougherty and Jerry Walls (eds.), *Two Dozen (or so) Theistic Arguments* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). After all, the skeptical theist's central point is that we should not be overly confident in our evaluative judgments for the following reason: there may be goods and evils beyond our ken, and there may be various entailment relations between goods and evils that are similarly beyond our ken (cf. Michael Bergmann, "Skeptical Theism and Rowe's New Evidential Argument from Evil," *Noûs* 35 (2001): 278–296). Plantinga appears to endorse a version of skeptical theism given his agnosticism about the following principle in Alvin Plantinga and Michael Tooley, *Knowledge of God* (Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 173:

> (C_1) If *A* is an action that, judged by known rightmaking and wrongmaking properties, is *prima facie* very seriously wrong, then the probability that action *A* is morally wrong, all relevant rightmaking and wrongmaking properties considered, both known and unknown, is greater than one half.

Notice that the above formulation of *FCT* crucially depends upon how we define a sinful action, as well as how we view the relationship between a sinful action and various normative concepts. There appear to be three ways in which we may characterize a sinful action:

(a) An agent *S*'s ϕ–ing is sinful *iff S*'s ϕ–ing is objectively morally wrong.

(b) An agent *S*'s ϕ–ing is sinful *iff S* is blameworthy for ϕ–ing.

(c) An agent *S*'s ϕ–ing is sinful *iff S* is blameworthy for ϕ–ing and *S*'s ϕ–ing is objectively morally wrong.

Some of these accounts are consistent with one another. To illustrate, according to the Objective View of blameworthiness, necessarily, if *S* is blameworthy for ϕ–ing, then it was objectively morally wrong for *S* to ϕ.[12] So, if one accepts the Objective View and (b), then one is rationally committed to (c).[13] But, to repeat, this paper remains neutral about which of the above accounts of a sinful action is correct.[14, 15]

THE ARGUMENT

In order for the argument to work on any of the three accounts of a sinful action, we must first take a closer look at blameworthiness. Offering necessary and sufficient conditions for blameworthiness is no easy task. For example, there is the controversial issue of whether blameworthiness requires a dual power to either do something or refrain from doing it, or whether blameworthiness only requires some sort of "one-way" power, such as being reasons-responsive.[16] For our purposes, we can set aside the highly contentious

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Whether skeptical theism warrants an agnostic stance towards (C_1) is an issue that cannot be resolved here.

[12] Cf. Ishtiyaque Haji, *Moral Appraisability: Puzzles, Proposals and Perplexities* (Oxford University Press, 1998), 141.

[13] For an argument against the Objective View, see e.g. Justin Capes, "Blameworthiness Without Wrongdoing," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 93 (2012): 417–437.

[14] A reviewer suggests that, within the Judeo-Christian tradition, atonement is also necessary for unintentional sin. This is a case in which one sins by performing an action that is an unavoidable part of achieving a greater good. Perhaps Sophie's infamous choice is sinful even though it was an unavoidable part of achieving a greater good—the greater good of not sacrificing both children. One concern with this account of a sinful action is that God has apparently performed numerous sinful actions since many of God's actions (including God's omissions) involve harming other individuals, even if for the sake of a greater good. This paper assumes, however, that it is necessarily false that God performs sinful actions, whether intentional or unintentional. The theist could attempt to explain why such an account of a sinful action doesn't apply to God's activity in light of some features that are unique to God. This strategy cannot be fully evaluated here.

[15] This paper implicitly assumes that all actions are either objectively morally right or objectively morally wrong. However, for various reasons this position is not unanimously endorsed. See Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1999); Alastair Norcross, "The Scalar Approach to Utilitarianism," in Henry West (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Mill's Utilitarianism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006): 217–232; John Hacker-Wright, "Virtue Ethics Without Right Action: Anscombe, Foot, and Contemporary Virtue Ethics," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 44: (2010): 209–224.

[16] Cf. John Martin Fischer and Mark Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

control condition for blameworthiness.[17] Instead, this paper will focus on the epistemic condition.

Many uphold the view that an agent is blameworthy for ϕ–ing only if she *believed* that ϕ–ing was objectively morally wrong. This view is not entirely uncontroversial, however, since some defend the position that psychopaths can be blameworthy for their actions,[18] or that one can be blameworthy for an action that is due to a morally reprehensible belief that is the result of motivated irrationality.[19] So, in order to avoid this controversy, this paper only upholds a weak claim concerning jointly *sufficient* conditions for blameworthiness:

> ***BLAME*** An agent *S* who ϕ–s is blameworthy for ϕ–ing if the following conditions obtain:
>   i. *S* satisfies the control condition for moral responsibility (whatever exactly that amounts to).
>   ii. *S* nonculpably believes that *S* can either ϕ or refrain from ϕ–ing.
>   iii. *S* nonculpably believes truly that ϕ–ing is objectively morally wrong.
>   iv. *S* nonculpably believes truly that refraining from ϕ–ing is not objectively morally wrong.

If some further condition needs to be supplemented to *BLAME*, one is at liberty to add it in since doing so will arguably not affect the forthcoming argument. Now, in order to see how *BLAME* poses a challenge for *FCT*, we need to consider two cases. The first one is fairly ordinary:

> ***iPod 1*** Diego picks up an iPod that fell out of the back pocket of the person walking in front of him. Diego nonculpably believes that he can either keep the iPod or give it back. Additionally, Diego nonculpably believes truly that keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong, and that returning it to the owner is not objectively morally wrong. Moreover, Diego satisfies the control condition for moral responsibility.

According to *BLAME*, if Diego keeps the iPod, then he is blameworthy for doing so. Now consider a variant of this case that brings *FCT* into focus:

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[17] Although the present discussion takes for granted the truth of libertarianism, we cannot assume that blameworthiness requires the ability to do otherwise. This is because there are incompatibilists who reject the Principle of Alternative Possibilities on the basis of Frankfurt-style cases. See, e.g., Eleonore Stump, "Libertarian Freedom and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities," in Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard Snyder (eds.), *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1996): 73–88; Derk Pereboom, *Living Without Free Will* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-22; David Hunt, "Moral Responsibility and Unavoidable Action," *Philosophical Studies* 97 (2005): 195–227.

[18] See, e.g., Patricia S. Greenspan, "Responsible Psychopaths," *Philosophical Psychology* 16 (2003): 417–429; Matthew Talbert, "Blame and Responsiveness to Moral Reasons: Are Psychopaths Blameworthy?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 89 (2008): 516–535.

[19] Cf. Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 103.

iPod 2 Ida finds herself in the same situation that Diego finds himself in as described in *iPod 1*, but with the following modifications. Ida knows the following: No one else ever has or will perform a sinful action, and Ida has never performed a sinful action. Moreover, after she decides to either keep the iPod or give it back, Ida will unfortunately die as a result of an unexpected heart failure one minute later. So, whether Ida performs a sinful action in the next moment will determine whether there is any sin at all in Ida's world since this is the last opportunity for Ida to perform a sinful action. Ida satisfies the control condition for moral responsibility. **So Ida satisfies condition (i) of *BLAME*.** Ida also nonculpably believes that she can either keep the iPod or give it back to the owner. **So Ida satisfies condition (ii) of *BLAME*.** Between the acts of keeping the iPod and returning it, whichever act is in fact objectively morally wrong, Ida nonculpably believes (*de re*) that that act is objectively morally wrong. And whichever act is in fact not objectively morally wrong, Ida nonculpably believes (*de re*) that that act is not objectively morally wrong. **So Ida satisfies conditions (iii) and (iv) of *BLAME*.** Ida performs the action that she knows is in fact objectively morally wrong. So, given *BLAME*, Ida is blameworthy for performing one of these actions (and Ida knows this). Since Ida knowingly performs a sinful action, and Ida knows that *FCT* is true, Ida thus knows that her sinful action will result in incarnation and atonement because (as a matter of stipulation) she knows that all other requirements for incarnation and atonement will be satisfied if she performs a sinful action.

Although *iPod 2* doesn't specify which action is in fact objectively morally wrong, the following is nevertheless true:

1. If keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong, then Ida keeps the iPod.

Since Ida performs an objectively morally wrong action for which she is blameworthy, it is dialectically permissible to stipulate that Ida performs a sinful action on any of the three aforementioned accounts of a sinful action. So the following is true:

2. If Ida keeps the iPod, then Ida's keeping the iPod is sinful.

It follows from premises (1) and (2) that:

3. If keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong, then Ida's keeping the iPod is sinful.

Since *iPod 2* says that Ida knows that *FCT* is true, and since knowledge is factive, *iPod 2* assumes that *FCT* is true. Now, recall that a component of *FCT*, *Necessary Moral Evil* (*NME*), says that atonement and incarnation require a sinful action. So, since *iPod 2* says that all *other* requirements for incarnation and atonement will be satisfied, the following is true:

4. If Ida's keeping the iPod is sinful, then Ida's keeping the iPod results in atonement and incarnation.

It follows from premises (3) and (4) that:

5. If keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong, then Ida's keeping the iPod results in atonement and incarnation.

The problem for *FCT* now begins to emerge. If keeping the iPod results in atonement and incarnation then keeping the iPod cannot be objectively morally wrong on any remotely plausible normative ethical theory for the following reason. It would not be objectively morally wrong to keep the iPod if doing so resulted in the great good of eradicating global poverty. To the contrary, one would have an objective moral obligation to keep the iPod in such circumstances. Moreover, according to the *Strong Value Assumption* (*SVA*) atonement (and incarnation) are apparently even greater goods than the good of eradicating global poverty. So, *a fortiori*, it would not be objectively morally wrong to keep the iPod if doing so resulted in incarnation and atonement.[20] So it follows from *SVA* that:

6. If Ida's keeping the iPod results in incarnation and atonement, then it's not the case that Ida's keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong.[21]

It follows from premises (5) and (6) that:

7. If Ida's keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong, then it's not the case that Ida's keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong.

Notice that by replacing the act of *keeping* the iPod with *returning* it to the owner throughout this entire line of reasoning, we can similarly establish the following conclusion:

8. If Ida's returning the iPod is objectively morally wrong, then it's not the case that Ida's returning the iPod is objectively morally wrong.

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[20] Some normative ethical theories maintain that certain types of actions (such as torture) are necessarily objectively morally wrong, irrespective of the consequences of such an action. Even so, no remotely plausible normative ethical theory maintains that *all* types of actions are either necessarily objectively morally right or wrong respectively. See Douglas W. Portmore, "Consequentializing," *Philosophy Compass* 4 (2009): 329–347.

So in order to construct the intended argument against *FCT*, all we need to do is pick out a type of action that one will not consider to be necessarily objectively morally wrong, such as the act of keeping someone's iPod. If you think that this type of action is necessarily objectively morally wrong, then pick instead a type of action that will accomplish the same desired result.

[21] If the *FCT* proponent were to replace *SVA* with *MVA*, then incarnation and atonement may not be goods of infinite value. Nevertheless, *MVA* implies that these goods are of such a great value that it would be better, all things considered, if Ida were to perform a sinful action. So premise (6) also follows from *MVA*.

Given the truth of (7) and (8), we can show that *iPod 2* yields a contradiction, and thus is impossible. For any world W, if proposition P is true in W, then the following material conditional is false in W: 'if P, then not-P'. Now suppose that 'K' refers to the proposition, 'Ida's keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong', and that 'R' refers to the proposition, 'Ida's returning the iPod is objectively morally wrong'. K is true *iff* R is false. If K is true, then (7) is false. If R is true, then (8) is false. So whether K is true or R is true, we arrive at a contradiction.

Since *iPod 2* results in a contradiction, *iPod 2* is impossible. This paper contends that the best explanation for why *iPod 2* is impossible is that it assumes the truth of *FCT*. The argument may be formalized as follows:

9. If (7) and (8), then *iPod 2* is impossible.
10. *iPod 2* is impossible. [(7), (8), (9)]
11. If (10), then *FCT* is (necessarily) false.
12. *FCT* is (necessarily) false. [(10), (11)]

Premise (11) is the crucial one in this argument. The thought behind this premise is that, with the exception of *FCT*, there are no controversial normative or metaphysical assumptions at play in *iPod 2*, or in the argument that led to (7) and (8). So, since we need an explanation for *why iPod 2* is impossible, the best explanation is that *FCT* is (necessarily) false.

Notice that if *FCT* were *possibly* true, then we wouldn't have an explanation for why *iPod 2* is impossible. Moreover, since *SVA* and *NME* are either necessary truths or necessary falsehoods, and since *FCT* concerns God's reasons for preferring the actuality of the best type of world, it is safe to assume that *FCT* is either necessarily true or necessarily false anyway.[22]

Can the *FCT* proponent explain the impossibility of *iPod 2* in some other manner? Let's take another look at the assumptions that led to (7) and (8). There doesn't appear to be any plausible account of a sinful action that is incompatible with (a) – (c). So, the assumption that the disjunction of (a) – (c) is true seems safe. Next, *BLAME* offers merely sufficient conditions for blameworthiness while simultaneously sidestepping the ongoing debate about the control condition for moral responsibility. So *BLAME* also seems reasonable. Moreover, as previously indicated, even if one thinks that some condition must be added to *BLAME*, we could simply stipulate that Ida also satisfies that condition in *iPod 2*. So, revising *BLAME* would arguably not allow one to escape (7) or (8). In that case, it does appear that the only assumption in *iPod 2* that can plausibly be given up is the truth of *FCT* itself. Nevertheless, we do not yet have a sufficient grasp as to *why* the truth of *FCT* in *iPod 2* leads to a contradiction.

Recall that, according to *FCT*, whether some action results in incarnation and atonement depends upon the deontic status of that action. More specifically, whether an action results in incarnation and atonement depends upon whether that action is sinful. Under certain circumstances, whether an action is sinful can depend upon whether that action is objectively morally wrong, regardless of which account of a sinful action one adopts, as shown above with respect to *iPod 2*. However, according to any remotely

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[22] I am assuming that, unlike God's reasons for actions, God's reasons for preferring a certain possibility don't depend upon God's abilities, or upon which worlds are feasible for God.

plausible normative ethical theory, the deontic status of at least some actions depends upon the consequences of those actions.

So, under the right circumstances (such as *iPod 2*), an impossible two-way dependence obtains which results in a contradiction: on the one hand, whether Ida's keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong depends upon the consequences of that action. But on the other hand, according to *FCT*, the consequences of Ida's keeping the iPod depend upon whether that action is objectively morally wrong; and similarly for the act of returning the iPod. So, the culprit that leads to a contradiction in *iPod 2* is the assumption that *FCT* is true. In order to demonstrate this point further, let's inspect a non-theological case that is structurally similar to *iPod 2*.

> ***iPod 3*** Jill finds herself in the same situation that Diego finds himself in as described in *iPod 1*, but with the following modifications: Jill knows that there is a powerful agent, Bob, who will make millions of people infinitely happy if and only if Jill performs an objectively morally wrong action in the next moment, and such happiness will not be outweighed by any bad states of affairs that result from Jill's action.

Just like *iPod 2*, *iPod 3* appears to be impossible, and for similar reasons. On the one hand, whether Jill's keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong depends upon the consequences of that action. On the other hand, the consequences of Jill's keeping the iPod depend upon whether that action is objectively morally wrong. So, just like *iPod 2*, *iPod 3* is impossible because it leads to an impossible two-way dependence that results in a contradiction. The source of this contradiction is the following stipulation: Jill's keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong *iff* that action results in an outcome that would render that action objectively morally right (viz. the outcome of millions of people enjoying infinite happiness). Similarly, the source of the contradiction in *iPod 2* is *FCT* since it implies the following: Ida's keeping the iPod is objectively morally wrong *iff* that action results in an outcome that would render that action objectively morally right (viz. the outcome of incarnation and atonement).

Regardless of the extent to which incarnation and atonement are great goods, they cannot play the impossible role of depending upon the existence of an objectively morally wrong action if refraining from performing this action would result in a much worse outcome (viz. the absence of incarnation and atonement). So, it is precisely the assumption that atonement and incarnation are unsurpassable goods that precludes the possibility of these goods depending upon at least one objectively morally wrong action. I now turn to the final section that discusses some implications for Molinism and evidential arguments from moral evil.

MOLINISM AND MORAL EVIL

In order to connect the argument's conclusions with broader issues concerning theism and evil, it will be useful to first summarize Plantinga's response to Mackie's logical problem of evil.

In defense of the logical problem of evil, J.L. Mackie argued that God and evil cannot coexist because the following is true:

> **(*)** "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."[23]

Plantinga (1974: ch. 9) developed the *Free Will Defense* (*FWD*) in order to show that (*) is false, and that God and evil can in fact coexist. Plantinga's *FWD* employs a Molinist framework, such that logically prior to God's decision to weakly actualize[24] some world, there are contingently true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom (*CCF*s), where such freedom is understood in accordance with libertarianism.[25]

Since the truth-values of these *CCF*s are beyond God's control, there are limits to what an omnipotent being can do. God can only weakly actualize the *feasible* worlds. A world *w* is feasible (for God) *iff* the creaturely world-type that is in fact true is true in *w*. A creaturely world-type is an exhaustive set of *CCF*s. So a creaturely world-type is true *iff* all of the *CCF*s that are members of this world-type are true (Flint 1998: 46–54). Since God cannot control which creaturely world-type is in fact true, God must choose a world in which the true creaturely world-type is also true in that world.

A world containing creatures that sometimes act freely is more valuable, all other things being equal, to a world in which there are no free creatures (Plantinga 1974: 166). Hence, it is possibly true that the *best* world God can weakly actualize is one that contains at least some moral evil. So God and evil *can* in fact coexist, and thus (*) is false.[26] Given this summary of how Molinism is supposed to refute the logical problem of evil, we can now turn to certain implications for the relationship between Molinism and evidential arguments from moral evil.

As Josh Rasmussen has argued,[27] within the Molinist framework, an *infinity* of possible persons renders it (at least) very probable that the pattern of true *CCF*s is such that there are many (if not infinitely many) feasible *No Evil* worlds.[28] If that's right, then a Molinist such as Plantinga needs an explanation for God's permission of moral evil that

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[23] J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (1955): 200–212, 201.

[24] God strongly actualizes only what God causes to occur, whereas God weakly actualizes only what God does not cause, but permits to occur. See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Clarendon Press, 1974), 173.

[25] According to libertarianism, free will and moral responsibility exist, and both are incompatible with causal determinism, the view that a complete state of the world at any time, in conjunction with the laws of nature, are compatible with only one possible future.

[26] For critical discussions of *FWD*, see Richard Otte, "Transworld Depravity and Unobtainable Worlds," *Philosophy and Phenomenlogical Research* 78 (2009): 165–177; Michael Almeida, "The Logical Problem of Evil Regained", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 36 (2012): 163–176; Alexander Pruss, "A Counterexample to Plantinga's Free Will Defense", *Faith and Philosophy* 29 (2012): 400–415; Daniel Howard-Snyder, "The Logical Problem of Evil: Mackie and Plantinga," in Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 19–33. See also Plantinga's defense of *FWD* in "Transworld Depravity, Transworld Sanctity, and Uncooperative Essences," *Philosophy and Phenomenlogical Research* 78 (2009): 178–191.

[27] Josh Rasmussen, "On Creating Worlds Without Evil—Given Divine Counterfactual Knowledge," *Religious Studies* 40 (2004): 457–470

[28] Rasmussen's argument is even stronger than this. He claims that if the number of possible persons is infinite, then the probability that all *No Evil* worlds are not feasible is zero.

does not resort to the claim that there probably aren't any feasible *No Evil* worlds. In other words, in order to adequately respond to evidential arguments from moral evil,[29] there appears to be significant pressure upon the Molinist to maintain the following position:

> **Reason** God has most reason, all things considered, to weakly actualize a *Moral Evil* world rather than a *No Evil* world.[30]

FCT provides one way to motivate *Reason*. Plantinga's endorsement of *FCT* thus plays a larger role in his work in philosophy of religion than one might otherwise think. But if the previous argument is sound, then Plantinga will need to motivate *Reason* in some other manner. Moreover, it appears that one can generalize from the argument against *FCT* to any theodicy that says that some good *G* of great value (finite or infinite) depends upon an objectively morally wrong action *A*. After all, if *A* is objectively morally wrong, then it cannot be the case that *G* counterfactually depends upon *A*, such that performing *A* would result in a much better outcome than the outcome of refraining from performing *A*.

There may be (at least) one way for the Molinist to motivate *Reason* that remains unscathed by the considerations we've reached so far, *even if* there are many feasible *No Evil* worlds. Suppose that there is a feasible world in which every possible person exists, enjoys a good life, and only one of these persons, Monty, commits exactly one sinful action, such as breaking a promise, and suppose that this action is sinful at least partly because this action is objectively morally wrong. Call this world '*Break*'.[31] If *Break* is feasible, then *Reason* looks quite plausible, even if there are many feasible *No Evil* worlds. After all, while God can weakly actualize a *No Evil* world in which, e.g., one billion people exist, God presumably has more reason to weakly actualize a world in which *all* possible people exist, even if it includes exactly one sinful action.[32] The same point holds for other feasible *Moral Evil* worlds in which all possible persons exist, and the level of goodness in such worlds surpasses the level of goodness that is present in all feasible *No Evil* worlds. Call this the *All Possible People Theodicy* (*APPT*).[33]

Since *APPT* appears to refute the logical problem of evil by demonstrating that *Reason* is possibly true, it is unclear as to whether *APPT* demonstrates that *Reason* is probably true for the following reason. When we consider all of the worlds that contain all possible free creatures, the majority of these worlds contain more than one sinful action. The prior probability that a world like *Break* is feasible thus appears to be low.

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[29] See, e.g., William Rowe, "Evil and Theodicy," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 119–132; Bruce Russell, "The Persistent Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 6 (1989): 121–139.

[30] Notice that *Reason* is consistent with the claim that God has most reason, all things considered, to *prefer* the actuality of a *No Evil* world. As previously noted, I am assuming that God's reasons for *action* depend upon which worlds God is able to bring about, i.e. which worlds are feasible, whereas which worlds God has most reason to *prefer* to be actual, all things considered, does not depend upon which worlds happen to be feasible for God.

[31] No matter which of the three accounts of a sinful action we adopt, we can specify *Break* in such a manner that Monty's action is sinful at least partly because it is objectively morally wrong, just as we saw with respect to Ida's sinful action in *iPod 2*.

[32] Since there is at least one sinful action in *Break*, *Break* could also include the goods of atonement and incarnation, which in turn would provide God with further reason to actualize *Break* rather than a *No Evil* world.

[33] I am grateful to a reviewer for making this suggestion.

Similarly, the prior probability that there is a feasible world containing all possible people (or even a large finite number of people) in which only a few sinful actions occur appears to be low, although not as low as the feasibility of *Break*. Consequently, it is far from obvious that there is a high prior probability that the best feasible world is a *Moral Evil* world that contains all possible free creatures, especially once we take into account the high prior probability of feasible *No Evil* worlds that do not contain all possible people. Moreover, putting prior probabilities aside, we can rule out the feasibility of worlds like *Break* in which only one (or even a few) sinful actions occur since the actual world clearly contains many sinful actions. The *APPT* proponent must thus claim that although the actual world contains many sinful actions, the infinite number of people in the actual world renders the value of the actual world higher than the value of all of the feasible *No Evil* worlds. Since this claim is contentious, it is an open question as to whether *APPT* demonstrates that *Reason* is probably true.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

One might remain suspicious of the argument against *FCT* since it appeals to *iPod 2*—a case that is both bizarre and rare across logical space. But why think that bizarre and rare worlds cannot teach us important philosophical lessons? Since it is dialectically permissible to appeal to Gettier cases in order to critique the *JTB* theory of truth, why would it be dialectically impermissible to appeal to a case like *iPod 2* in order to critique *FCT*? However bizarre or rare, *iPod 2* shows us that neither atonement nor any other good that depends upon an objectively morally wrong action can be unsurpassable in value. This is because a good *G* cannot counterfactually depend upon an objectively morally wrong action *A*, such that performing *A* would result in a much better outcome than not performing *A*.

We have also seen that Plantinga's commitment to *FCT* plays a significant role in his work in philosophy of religion. Since there is a high probability that there are feasible *No Evil* worlds (as Rasmussen has argued), and since the actual world is a *Moral Evil* world,[34] the Molinist must endorse *Reason*, which says that God has most reason, all things considered, to actualize a *Moral Evil* world, rather than a *No Evil* world. Subscribing to *FCT* is one way to motivate *Reason*. Another way is to subscribe to *APPT*, the view that the best feasible world is a *Moral Evil* world because it contains all possible free creatures. But, as we have seen, it is an open question as to whether *APPT* is consistent with the general point deduced from the argument against *FCT*.[35]