

Free Will is No Defense
or
The Logical Argument from Evil – Not Dead Yet

Introduction

The problem of evil is a problem for theism. Theism has for a long time been committed to the existence of a creator God who has, among “his” features, the properties of being omnipotent, omniscient and all-loving, providing him with the ability and incentive to protect his creatures from evil. And yet evil exists in great profusion, both in the form of wicked acts performed intentionally—moral evil—and so-called “natural” evil: suffering resulting from diseases, misfortunes and “acts of God”. To focus the discussion, consider just one particularly cruel example: Hallopeau-Siemens syndrome. Here is one description, taken from a popular Bioethics text:

The disorder involves a genetic defect that affects the collagen fibers that anchor the epidermis to the overlying dermis. [This] results in the formation of large blisters on the skin’s outer layer, and even a light touch can rupture the blisters and make the skin slough off, causing excruciating pain. When a baby with Hallopeau-Siemens syndrome is fed, the mechanical action of her sucking and swallowing can tear off the mucosal layer lining her mouth and esophagus. The scar tissue that then forms can block the esophagus and restrict the motion of the tongue. Feeding through a surgically implanted gastric tube is then necessary. The... conjunctiva and the cornea may also be affected, and the heavy scarring of these tissues can result in blindness... [C]hildren with this disorder... may live for three or four years or, when the disorder is not so severe, nine or ten. But they remain in constant pain throughout their lives... If they don’t die of infection, they eventually die of invasive skin cancer.¹

How could it be that an all-loving God could allow this syndrome to exist? How could it be that an all-powerful God could not prevent it? Anti-theists have used the existence of evil to argue that no God who matches the definition required by theism could exist: when such arguments are deductive, they are called instances of the Logical Argument from Evil (LAFE). However, all versions of LAFE have been widely considered mortally wounded by Alvin Plantinga’s “defense” against such arguments that appeals to a particular conception of “free will” (hence, Free Will Defense, henceforth FWD) to show that it is possible that God cannot avoid allowing evil into his creation if he is to achieve greater goods. Despite this wide consensus, even amongst what he calls “atheologists,” Plantinga has recently conceded that his seminal presentation of the

¹ Munson 2008, p. 623. In 2001, in Groningen University Medical Center in the Netherlands, Karin and Edwin Hindriks had a daughter called Bente who suffered from a severe form of the syndrome. Seeing her suffer (she shrieked unceasingly and had abnormally high blood pressure and rapid pulse), her parents asked their pediatrician, Eduard Verhagen, to put her out of her suffering. This was illegal. Eventually, the Hindriks took Bente home, and she died soon after, probably, Edwin has said, because of the high doses of morphine she was given. Bente’s case prompted Dr. Verhagen to produce The Groningen Protocol, a set of guidelines for the kind of cases when, he argues, it should be permissible for physicians actively to end the life of seriously impaired infants. As a result, “his email in-box is full of hate mail, much of it from America’s Christian Right. ‘Hitler is alive and he lives in Groningen’, read one. But he also received letters from parents around the world revealing that they ended up taking their own child’s life after the medical profession refused to help.” “In the baby’s last seconds you see the pain relax and then they fall asleep,” *The Times* (UK), April 26, 2005. Presumably the senders of the emails believe that God’s will requires that babies like Bente live out the (excruciating) lives that are part of God’s plan. (Although why Dr. Groningen’s actions wouldn’t *also* be part of the plan is unclear.)

defense “won’t do the trick.”² However, the same critic who persuaded him that his notion of “transworld depravity” (TWD) was fatally flawed, presented him with a new and improved defense that Plantinga is happy to accept.³ I believe, however, that TWD is the least of the problems with the FWD. I contend that once we spell out the parameters that a defense against LAFE must meet, Plantinga’s defense can be shown to be wanting. I argue first, that Plantinga’s “freedom” betrays the libertarian intuitions on which it supposedly rests (see discussion of NGAP), second that the FWD does *not* demonstrate that it is possible that God could not actualize a world containing creatures who, while free, only choose the good (see “The Switcheroo Argument”), but that *even if* the FWD did establish this, third, it would do so at a cost that could not be met without abandoning core theistic beliefs (see “The Unacceptable Diminishment Argument”). Thus, in effect, the FWD is either impotent or redundant: the latter because it is no feat to show that one can avoid LAFE by abandoning theism.

I believe that part of the reason that Plantinga’s defense has retained support over the years (even in a form that its author has conceded did not work) is because of the cloud of obfuscation that surrounds it. This is evident in the profusion of inadequate and often inaccurate summaries of it to be found in even in guides to Philosophy of Religion.⁴ This has meant that criticizing it has required taking the time to lay the full argument bare, and expose the commitments and implications of Plantinga’s many assumptions, especially those about freedom. It has also required contrasting it to its major theistic rival, the defense offered by Open Theism. Open Theism has fatal flaws, but its willingness to confront its unpalatable implications head-on stands in bracing contrast to Plantinga’s defense.

Free Will Theodicy vs. Free Will Defense

Leibniz coined the term “theodicy” for any account of how evils like Hallopeau-Siemens syndrome might be consistent with the existence of the God of theism. Of all theodicies, the type that has had the most legs has appealed to free will in its justification of the presence of evil in God’s creation. All free will theodicies are committed to two basic principles. The first of these, the Principle of the Value of Free Choice (VFC), asserts that the possession of free will by at least some of God’s creatures is essential for the achievement of some sublime goal (whether this be love, morally good actions or simply the possession of freedom itself), so that in creating the greatest universe possible God would necessarily grant some beings in it free will. The second principle reveals the Faustian bargain: freedom unavoidably brings with it evil. Call this principle the Inevitability of Evil Given Freedom (IEF).

The free will theodicy, while better than the others, still strains credulity in several ways, all of which have been well-canvassed. To name one, how would it absolve God from the infliction on “his children” of Hallopeau-Siemens syndrome? There seems to be no

² Plantinga 2009, p. 178.

³ The critic is Richard Otte, in Otte 2009. Plantinga’s response is “yea and amen (and thanks),” Plantinga 2009, p. 183.

⁴ See for example discussion of Stairs and Bernard 2006 in *n*36 below. Bergmann 1999 has a couple of other notable examples (see *n*46 below).

plausible explanation where (a) this is the result of a free choice, and (b) God could not have prevented it being so without some greater loss to the world.

Against all the ridicule that it is easy to pile on any free will theodicy has come the response: “it doesn’t matter that it’s *implausible*, it just has to be *possibly* true.”⁵ The reasoning is that the theist can make a tactical retreat from the goal of a theodicy – to explain to a tortured would-be believer why it is that evil is an essential part of the plan that the all-powerful father of us all has for those he loves – to the strategy of simply providing a *defense*, whose sole goal is to reassure the already-believing theist that evil does not *prove* anything about God, even if we can’t necessarily hope to know why God allows it.⁶ A defense might be thought of on the lines of a defense in court: just as the burden of proof rests on the prosecution, and the sole role of the defense is to raise reasonable doubt about any single vital element of the prosecution’s case, so a defense against the problem of evil has simply to show that, for any valid argument that uses the existence of evil to argue for the conclusion that the God of theism does not exist, one premise is possibly false. So a defense can employ the free will theodicy to suggest that it is *possible* that even an omnipotent God could not have created a world containing some sublime good that cannot be achieved without freedom without evil accompanying that freedom.

However, if either of the principles of the theodicy can be shown to be not just implausible but *false* then the defense fails too. Of the two, the easier target is IEF. IEF relies on the idea that freedom and evil are *necessarily* related. But why should this be? Apart from anything, it seems to undermine the point of freedom for a theodicy. What, after all, is the core idea of a free will theodicy? That evil cannot be blamed on God, creator though he may be, because those who do evil *could have done otherwise*. But if evil is *necessitated* by freedom, then there is no sense in which evil-doers *could* have done otherwise. To press the point, imagine God creating a tiny universe that exists for just an instant and contains a fully-formed free agent, who exists for just long enough to make a single, morally significant choice. Surely this being (call him “Ned Flanders”) could choose the good. And indeed, if he *has* to choose evil, then he is not free. So he can choose good. Then imagine he has time for two decisions. Surely he could choose good in both. And, in fact, he could *in principle*, exist for an infinity of decisions, and choose the good *every time* – and do it entirely freely. What this example appears to demonstrate is that it is possible for God to create a being with “saintly freedom,” freedom whereby the being who has it only ever chooses the morally right action. (This should come as no surprise, if God creates beings in his own image, because surely, if God has freedom, it is saintly freedom.) And if God can create one such being, then he

⁵ Consider Plantinga’s suggestion for the source of natural evil: “Satan, so the traditional doctrine goes, is a mighty non-human 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,” Plantinga 1974a, p. 192. We are apparently asked to believe that, to focus solely on the case of Hallopeau-Siemens syndrome, it is more important that Satan be free to torture babies (and in a different way, their parents and caregivers) than that God step in and undermine some of his efforts. “Implausible” doesn’t do it justice.

⁶ Plantinga concedes that a defense does not serve a “pastoral” function, but suggests that a theodicy would not do so either (Plantinga 1974b, p. 28).

can people a universe with Ned Flanderses. The implications for any free will theodicy of this possibility were summed up by J.L. Mackie:

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.⁷

The Logical Argument from Evil

It is worth noting that Mackie claims to have shown more than is necessary to undermine the free will theodicy. Mackie asserts that a universe with freedom and *no* evil is possible. It should be sufficient simply to demonstrate that God could have knowingly created a *better* universe than this one (perhaps identical, except for that small headache you had yesterday). But, as every defense is tailored to the prosecution, so FWDs have, since Mackie's article's appearance, taken undermining his challenge as their appropriate goal. After all, it is no fault of the defense if the prosecution takes on too ambitious a task. With that in mind, let us present the Logical Argument from Evil that a FWD must undermine:

- LAFE 1. God by definition has to be (among other things) omnipotent, omniscient and all-loving.
 - LAFE 2. Evil is such that an all-loving being would aim to eradicate it, except where it is an essential part of the achievement of some greater good (in the case in point, the possession by some of God's creatures of free will).
 - LAFE 3. An omnipotent being has the power to achieve any good aim without being required to bring evil into the world (in this case, to create free beings who never choose evil).
 - LAFE 4. An omniscient being would know which, among the potential free beings he could create, would be the ones who would never choose evil.
 - LAFE 5. (From 1, 2, 3 and 4) If God existed, there would be no evil.
 - LAFE 6. There is evil.
- Therefore: God does not exist.

Parameters of a Defense

With that target in view, we need to specify the ground rules for a successful defense against it. Consider the following as a putative candidate:

It is possible that one of the premises of LAFE is false.

Clearly, given the intricacy of the FWDs that we will consider, even those who have lowered the bar from theodicy to defense think they have more to do than this: as with a defense in a law court, a particular premise must be targeted and specific reason(s) given why it could possibly be false. Furthermore, undermining a premise of LAFE is a different task from that required by a defense in a court case. Defenses in court cases typically have to show that claims like "The defendant was in Morrilton, Arkansas at the time the Bank of Morrilton was robbed" are possible false. These are contingent, empirical claims; the reasons to believe them depend on things like eyewitness testimony. In contrast, the premises of LAFE are (apart from the subconclusion 5) *definitional*.

⁷ Mackie 1955, p. 209.

(Even the apparently empirical LAFE 6 rests on a definition of “evil.”) So a defense against LAFE is going to have to put forward challenges to the folk-definitions of the terms in LAFE (evil, freedom and the perfections) in order to undermine LAFE. But crucially, any such putative definitions must be *acceptable to theists*. Call this the Theistic Acceptability Test (TAT for short), and it is a central parameter for any defense. It is because of TAT, for example, that we can rule out challenges to LAFE 1: questioning God’s possession of the three central perfections requires abandoning theism, and the point of a defense is to *save* theism. (It’s easy for a *non-theist* to avoid the problem of evil!)

What of the others? For example, consider the proposal that we analyze “omnipotent” as meaning “as strong as a small pony.”⁸ If that were the case, then clearly there would be a massive number of evils that an “omnipotent” being could not prevent, and the possibility that LAFE 3 is false would be high. But even this Pyrrhic victory is ruled out by TAT, which requires that God’s omnipotence ensure that God could right all wrongs, that God be able to make us live forever in whichever afterlife we deserve, and that God preside over a universe that he created and that he ensured would make sense. These are non-negotiable elements. Any so-called God who cannot accomplish tasks such as these is not the God of theism.⁹

In summary, then, a FWD has to give definitions according to which it is clear that it is possible that an omnipotent, omniscient, all-loving creator God could *not* in fact have created a world whose free beings all exhibited saintly freedom, but according to which it is at the same time *not* possible that God could fail to achieve the goals that are vital to theism.

Two major defenses have emerged over the years, each committed to a different conception of freedom, and each incompatible with (not to say abhorrent to) the other. Of these, the more lauded has undoubtedly been Alvin Plantinga’s. Since Plantinga unveiled the full version of his FWD in his twin 1974 works *The Nature of Necessity*¹⁰ and *God, Freedom, and Evil*,¹¹ it has been written that “most philosophers have agreed that the free will defense has defeated the logical problem of evil,”¹² “it is fair to say that Plantinga has solved this problem,”¹³ and “most philosophers of religion [agree] that theists face no serious logical problem of evil.”¹⁴

The Open Theist Defense

⁸ This is an Eddie Izzard allusion. If it is unfamiliar, then the reader should immediately watch *Dress to Kill* (Ella Communications, 1998).

⁹ It might turn out, then, that a serious theological investigation of the central perfections should lead to an abandonment of theism, much as an analysis of the concept of substance led Spinoza to a “God” that no contemporary theist would accept.

¹⁰ Plantinga 1974a, henceforth *NoN*.

¹¹ Plantinga 1974b, henceforth *GFE*.

¹² Meister 2009, p. 134.

¹³ Adams 1985, p. 226.

¹⁴ Draper 1996, p. 26. See also Stairs and Bernard 2006, p. 209. Richard Otte has more examples on p. 178 of Otte 2009.

Before we turn to Plantinga's defense, however, it is instructive to consider the alternative. This is the Open Theism FWD. As Open Theism is a movement, I shall pick a particular exponent of the defense as an exemplar: the English Christian Philosopher Richard Swinburne.¹⁵ Swinburne's response to the challenge that God could have created a universe in which the free creatures always only choose good is to assert that even God would not be able to predict what truly free individuals will do, so God *cannot* plan ahead in this fashion:

It seems to me that it is logically impossible to know (without the possibility of mistake) what someone will do freely tomorrow... So no one (not even God) can know today (without the possibility of mistake) what I will choose to do tomorrow.¹⁶

How could it be that an omniscient being could not know what any free being will do ahead of time? Surely omniscience includes foreknowledge of choices? Not so, insists Swinburne:

I suggest that we understand God being omniscient as God knowing at any time all that is logically possible to know at that time. That will not include knowledge, before they have done it, of what human persons will do freely.¹⁷

To determine how it is that Swinburne thinks freedom should undermine God's foreknowledge in this way we need to take a bit of time to lay out the divergent conceptions of it.

Probably the predominant philosophical position on free will is *compatibilism* (sometimes known as "soft determinism"). This stipulates that, first, determinism is true, and that every event, including the actions of humans, is predetermined by laws of nature, but that second, this does not, in itself, undermine human freedom. Compatibilism, among whose most notable advocates are Locke, Hume and Mill, stipulates that an agent is free so long as her action is a result of *her* intentional choice. Call this the "requirement of control" (ROC) for an action's being free. Some compatibilists would put this in terms of the agent's action being caused (a) in the right way, by (b) her *self*, where her self might be comprised of (a subset of) her particular tendencies and characteristics. Her (in)action is *unfree* if her (in)action is forced on her against her will. But it is no impediment to her freedom if that self is the result of an entirely predictable combination of laws and environment.

If compatibilism is the correct account of freedom then the problem of evil for theists becomes intractable. If our actions are predetermined by laws brought into being by God then IEF seems indefensible: God could have made other laws that would pre-empt all evil, and thus all evil must be laid at God's feet. Furthermore, God's punishing us or rewarding us would make as much sense as a scientist punishing a robot he programmed

¹⁵ I shall avoid discussion of whether or not Swinburne's views in general classify him neatly as an Open Theist, or exactly what that would require. Suffice it to say that his version of the FWD is amenable to Open Theism.

¹⁶ Swinburne 1996, pp. 7,8.

¹⁷ Swinburne 1996, p. 8.

to do “evil” for carrying out the program, and rewarding a robot that he programmed to do “good” for similar success.¹⁸

Unsurprisingly then, theists are overwhelmingly *incompatibilists*, insisting that an action’s being entirely determined is enough to ensure that it cannot be free.¹⁹ Incompatibilists accept ROC as a condition for an action’s being free, but would add that another necessary condition is the *necessarily undetermined nature* (NUN) of free choice. (Incompatibilists who believe that both conditions can be met, and that some creatures are free are *libertarians*.) Here is Plantinga’s statement of NUN:

If a person *S* is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain; no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine either that he will perform the action, or that he will not. . . . Consider the state *U* of the universe up to the time he takes or decides to take the action in question. If *S* is free with respect to that action, then it is causally or naturally possible both that *U* hold and *S* take (or decide to take) the action, and that *U* hold and *S* refrain from it.²⁰

It is just this condition that Swinburne believes determines that even an omniscient being cannot foreknow the actions of free beings. His position can be bolstered as follows: consider what is required to *know* what someone will choose before they choose it. It is not sufficient simply to believe that she will choose *A* and to turn out to be right. One must also have what is usually called “justification” for this. But if the entire state of the universe up to the point of choice is equally consistent with a person choosing *A* or choosing *not-A*, then there is no basis for justification. Even an omniscient being²¹ would, at best, be able to make a *very good guess*, just as anyone who knew that person well would.

Open Theism thus offers a defense that attacks LAFE 4. The advantage of this defense is that God’s power is not threatened (except insofar as foreknowledge is seen as a power) and it does not deny that a world of saintly freedom is possible, just that God could know whether the world he chooses to create would turn out to *be* that one.

Problems for Open Theism

However, the disadvantages of this defense are many. They can be grouped into two (overlapping) clusters: features that a mainstream theist would find objectionable (i.e., that appear to fail TAT), and those that would drive away agnostics genuinely troubled by the problem of evil. For the theist, the most obvious downside is that omniscience appears unacceptably diminished. (The agnostic about the existence of omniscient beings might also object that, whether or not anything is omniscient, what it is to *be* omniscient cannot be tampered with in an *ad hoc* fashion.) There is clearly *something* that I am going to do next, so it seems odd that God would not know what it is. While it would be

¹⁸ Robert Kane writes: “Compatibilists believe that freedom (in all the sense worth wanting) could exist in a *determined* world. But if we did live in a determined world and it was *also* true that *God had created that world*, then everything that happened in that world would have been predetermined, and hence predestined, by God’s act of creation. The ultimate responsibility for all that occurs would go back to God,” Kane 2005, p. 149.

¹⁹ Theistic *philosophers*, that is. Calvinism, which has a compatibilist account of freedom remains, according to Dean Zimmerman, widely popular amongst theologians. Zimmerman 2009, p. 5.

²⁰ *NoN*, pp. 165-6. See also *GFE*, p. 29.

²¹ At least one that experiences time as we do—see below.

a stretch to say that this view allows me to “catch God off guard” or surprise him because he knows all *possible* actions I could perform (if not which one), it still seems to make God significantly less Godly. And even if we find this acceptable as an analysis of omniscience, it has other controversial corollaries. For one thing, it requires that the God who is normally conceived of as eternal and unchanging, be *in time*, experiencing time as a “moving now” just as we do (and, worse, has to change and adapt in response to the impossible-to-foresee choices of his free creatures). Again, there are many theists who accept this view, but since Augustine at least, there have been many who believe that God’s power and his position of creator of the universe requires that he be external to time and able to look upon all events at once, the universe as a four-dimensional object.²² For another, it seems to rob us of any certainty we can have that Things Will Turn Out Right In The End, or that existence in Heaven will be better than existence on Earth.²³ It is, as Dean Zimmerman puts it, a “risky” view of providence:²⁴ God can’t really plan out the universe in any detail once he unleashes free beings, and there has to be a genuine possibility that those beings will make choices that will lead to a universe worse than any Hell we can imagine. (And if we say that God would intervene before that happened, that removes a major platform of the FWD that freedom *unavoidably* leads to evil, otherwise its value is lost.) Risky indeed!

Conversely, to turn to the concerns of those genuinely troubled by the problem of evil, is it really plausible that God could not have planned things a bit better? The Open Theist seems caught in a dilemma. Is he claiming that free actions are *completely* unpredictable? This just seems false. The vast majority of free actions are “in character”. (And free agents invariably feel the need to justify and/or explain those that are not.) In that case, it seems like God could, even on the Open Theist view, have done a considerably better job of setting up the universe so that characters were pure, temptations were removed, and large numbers of disadvantaged people were not put in positions where they were faced with only bad options. Even if we allow that some people, no matter how fortunate and well-placed by God, will choose wrong, it is unfair that their choices disadvantage people down the line so that they almost *have* to choose wrong. Why did God create humans with addictive personalities, and a universe with such a ready supply of iniquitous and habit-forming stimulants? But if, on the other hand, Open Theism insists that free actions *are completely* unpredictable, then it is open to the compatibilist complaint that *that* kind of freedom amounts simply to randomness (because it is clearly unaffected by the totality of the agent’s character and dispositions), and thus NUN undermines ROC, and the result is not the kind of freedom that can ground moral responsibility to be a source either of moral good or moral evil. As Hume wrote:

Actions are, by their very nature, temporary and perishing; and where they proceed not from *cause* in the character and disposition of the person who performed them, they can neither redound to his honour, if good; nor infamy, if evil... According to the principle, therefore, which denies necessity,

²² Swinburne’s view seems to entail a Newtonian view of absolute time, rather than an Einsteinian view whereby time is a feature of the universe. It would be odd if God created the universe and then found himself trapped within one aspect of it.

²³ Why should it be? If VFC is true, then inhabitants of Heaven must be free. And if IEF is true, they will inevitably do evil. If God can do something to ensure life in Heaven will be better and yet Heavenly inhabitants remain free, then he could do that on Earth and should be blamed for not doing so.

²⁴ Zimmerman 2009, p. 6.

and consequently causes, a man is as pure and untainted, after having committed the most horrid crime, as at the first moment of his birth, nor is his character anywise concerned in his actions, since they are not derived from it, and the wickedness of the one can never be used as a proof of the depravity of the other.²⁵

This criticism is particularly fatal to a supposed FWD whose point is to show both that freedom is worth creating (VFC) and that it produces evil (IEF). If Hume is right, then the freedom on offer by the Open Theist (call it “open libertarian” freedom) provides neither.

Plantinga’s Molinism

Plantinga’s FWD is, predictably, more concerned with avoiding the first cluster of criticisms of the Open Theist defense. In particular, Plantinga flatly rejects the idea that an omniscient being could fail to foreknow free actions, as he makes clear in one of his key examples, a counterfactual situation where Curley Smith, eminently corruptible mayor of Boston, is offered a bribe:

Would an omniscient being know what Curley would have done—would he know, that is, either that Curley would have taken the bribe or that he would have rejected it?

The answer, I should think, is obvious and affirmative. There is something Curley would have done had that state of affairs obtained.²⁶

This does not mean that Plantinga is a compatibilist: in fact he “find[s] it hard to take compatibilism with the seriousness it no doubt warrants”:²⁷

It seems to me altogether paradoxical to say of anyone all of whose actions are causally determined that on some occasions he acts freely. When we say that Jones acts freely on a given occasion, what we say entails, I should think, that either his action on that occasion is not causally determined, or else he has previously performed an undetermined action which is a causal ancestor of the one in question.²⁸

So, Plantinga shares the incompatibilist commitment to NUN. At the same time he clearly believes that ROC, far from being undermined by NUN, *requires* it. He finds the charge that NUN implies randomness “closer to being outrageous than obvious”:

Why shouldn’t it be, for example, that I am not caused to write this review by forces outside my control and (even given the past causal history of the world) could have refrained from doing so, while nonetheless my action is not merely random?²⁹

²⁵ Hume 1988, pp. 90-91.

²⁶ *NoN*, p. 180. He goes on: “But I do not know how to produce a conclusive argument for this supposition, in case you are inclined to dispute it. I do think it is the natural view, the one we take in reflecting on our own moral failures and triumphs.” See also the discussion of Maurice, *GFE* pp. 42-3.

²⁷ Plantinga 1985, p. 372.

²⁸ Plantinga 1967, p. 134. Readers of *GFE* are directed to this passage by a note on page 32.

²⁹ Plantinga 1986a, p. 125. He goes on: “Why should we think that if God was not *caused* to create the world, or to provide redemption for his creatures, then his actions in so doing were merely random? I can’t see any reason at all for making this supposition. If Mackie [who has repeated Hume’s charge] *had* a good reason, however, then he would have an initially good argument against theism itself (not just the free will defense), for it is clearly part of most varieties of theism to hold that God’s actions are not caused by anything outside himself but nonetheless are not random.” This is important, because it reveals that Plantinga thinks that God is free in the same way that we are, despite the fact that God’s freedom never results in evil acts, whereas ours invariably do.

How is it that Plantinga is able to commit *both* to NUN *and* to the possibility of God's foreknowing free actions? One way that this might be possible is if God is, as Augustine and Boethius argued, outside of time (is "timeless" or "eternal" rather than "everlasting").³⁰ That would allow all of time to appear to God as the past does to us. We don't think that the fact that we, from our vantage point, know what Caesar "will" decide, compromises the freedom of his choice to cross the Rubicon. By the same token, the fact that God from *his* vantage point knows the result of every decision anyone will ever make does not in itself render them unfree. Both, of course, are compatible with the Open Theist idea that *before* each choice is made, there is no fact of the matter about what choice will be made.

Plantinga, however, does not take this approach.³¹ One disadvantage with it is that, because this isn't really *foreknowledge*, providence is still left risky. That is, if we are to believe that God has a plan for the universe that he knows will unfold as intended, and without any chance that the free actions of his creatures could sabotage it, then it must be that he knows how they will choose *before they are created*. Furthermore, he must be able to compare *possible* free agents to decide which one to create, which requires that he knows how a free being *that will never exist* would choose if placed in a particular circumstance. But an eternal God creating beings who have open libertarian freedom would still have to gamble: create the free agents and "then" (in a sense that is not temporal) *discover* the results of all their actions. Plantinga instead is committed to Molinism.³² This is a view about the relationship between freedom and God's omniscience that attempts to hit the "sweet spot" between open libertarianism and compatibilism. Dean Zimmerman characterizes it as

A theory of providence that allows for libertarianism about free will (and libertarianism of a sort that helps to explain the existence of moral evil); but a theory that also affirms complete foreknowledge and rejects the Open Theists' "risky" view of providence.³³

According to Molinism, while NUN is true, it is also true that God can know, for any possible free creature, what that creature would choose to do in any possible circumstance. This is possible because God has knowledge ("middle knowledge") of what are called *counterfactuals of freedom* (CFs).³⁴ These are conditionals (if...then... statements) whose antecedent describes a particular state of affairs consisting of a particular free agent in particular circumstances and whose consequent describes the result of a free decision made in those circumstances. So, to return to the corruptible Curley, the relevant CF might be: "If Curley had been offered a bribe of \$36,000 then *he*

³⁰ Technically God would not have "foreknowledge" here because he is not in time so cannot be said to know "before" the act what would be chosen. But God's knowledge does include how all free beings that will ever exist will choose.

³¹ Plantinga 1986b, pp. 262-4.

³² The view is named after its first proponent, Luis de Molina (1535-1600).

³³ Zimmerman 2009, p. 6.

³⁴ Because counterfactuals, strictly speaking, refer to things that are other than the actual world, but Plantinga wants to include statements that apply to what free beings actually did, some people prefer the term "subjunctives of freedom." (See, for example, McCann 2006.) But we will stick with the majority usage.

would have accepted it.”³⁵ Molinists assume that such statements *are either true or false* and, of course, an omniscient being would know which. (In this case, Curley being Curley, the CF is true.)

Plantinga’s Free Will Defense

How does all this affect Plantinga’s FWD? In effect it means that, where Swinburne accepts LAFE 3 but rejects LAFE 4, Plantinga does the reverse (or rather, this being a defense, believes that he can show that it is *possible* that LAFE 3 is false). God can know exactly what a free being would do before she is even created—thus allowing for God to plan the best possible universe to achieve his providential plan—but, depending on how the CFs shake out, it may turn out that God cannot create a world of creatures who exhibit only saintly freedom. Plantinga does not deny that such a world is *possible*; indeed, he cannot deny that. He is, after all, committed to NUN, which requires that, for a person to perform an action *A* freely, there must be at least two possible worlds identical up to the point of the decision, in one of which the person does *A*, and in the other she does *not-A*. So, even if free beings always do evil, a world in which they do not must be *possible* or the evil deed is not free (and therefore not evil). So, what is most strange and interesting about his defense³⁶ is that Plantinga thinks there are worlds that are *possible* that God cannot cause to be *actual*. Strange, because I believe that most people, and certainly most theists, would (at least prior to reading Plantinga) readily assent to the following principle:

Possible Entails Actualizeable by God (PEA): The limits of possibility are coextensive with the limits (if any) of what God can cause to be actual.

This principle certainly has a *prima facie* plausibility: after all, if something cannot be made actual by God, who is all-powerful, then in what sense was it ever possible? “With God, all things are possible.”³⁷ Some philosophers and theologians have suggested that God can even do things that appear logically impossible,³⁸ but typically it is accepted by theists and atheists alike that God could still be omnipotent even if he could not perform logical impossibilities such as making square circles, or stones-too-heavy-for-beings-capable-of-lifting-anything-to-lift, as such challenges are simply “pseudo tasks” and nothing conceivable could count as succeeding in them.³⁹ By that way of thinking, the upper limit of God’s powers is all that is logically possible. According to PEA, that is also the lower limit. Plantinga rejects PEA, dubbing it “Leibniz’s Lapse.”⁴⁰ I have to say

³⁵ Of course, the full version of the CF might be incredibly involved, because presumably it would have to describe Curley and his circumstances in great detail. Exactly how much detail is necessary is an interesting issue, and one that Zimmerman uses as the basis for an Anti-Molinist argument.

³⁶ And apparently confusing, as Plantinga and his defenders have pointed to many cases of his FWD being misunderstood. This can happen even when those describing it appear sympathetic. For example: “for God to create free creatures and guarantee they only chose to use their freedom for moral purposes is not logically possible” (Stairs and Bernard 2006, p. 225). As we shall see, Plantinga believes it is *logically* possible, just possibly not actualizable.

³⁷ Matthew 19:26.

³⁸ Most notably Descartes but more recently Frankfurt (1964), although Frankfurt *might* be being facetious.

³⁹ See Mavrodes 1963.

⁴⁰ *NoN*, p. 184. Leibniz assumed PEA to argue that this must be the best of all possible worlds (to the derision of Voltaire). A convincing defense of Leibniz against Plantinga is Burch 1979. Mackie would

that it seems to me that in so doing Plantinga appears to be making a concession of the kind he cautions other theistic philosophers against giving. In an article regarded as seminal by contemporary Christian philosophers, he chastises a fellow Christian for attempting to conceive of God in a Quinean framework:

This is...profoundly misdirected. Quine is a marvelously gifted philosopher...[b]ut his fundamental commitments, his fundamental projects and concerns, are wholly different from those of the Christian community...indeed antithetical to them. And the result of attempting to graft Christian thought onto his basic view of the world will be at best an unintegral *pastiche*; at worst it will seriously compromise, or distort, or trivialize the claims of Christian theism.⁴¹

One would think a theist leery of making *pastiches* would reject the very notion that what it is to be possible could be anything other than what God can actualize. *God* is in charge of what is possible.⁴² What sense can we even make of the idea that a world is possible that God cannot actualize? Whose power makes it possible, then? Or is “possible” being used so loosely as to strain credulity? We shall see when we look at Plantinga’s argument for why it is acceptable to deny PEA. But first, to put it into context, it helps to give a brief summary of the crucial elements of his version of the FWD:

- FWD1: VFC: “A world containing creatures who are sometimes significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all.”⁴³
- FWD2: IEF: “To create creatures capable of *moral good*...[God] must create creatures capable of moral evil; and he cannot leave these creatures *free* to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so.”⁴⁴
- FWD3: Rejection of PEA (Leibniz’s Lapse): “[W]hat is really characteristic and central to the FWD is the claim that God, though omnipotent, could not have actualized just any possible world He pleased.”⁴⁵
- FWD4: Possibility that Worlds of Sainly Freedom are Unobtainable: “it could be that it wasn’t within God’s power to actualize a world containing free creatures who always do what is right... [because] there will be worlds such that it isn’t within the power of God to actualize them...[and] [w]hat’s required, for the proposition that it wasn’t within God’s power to actualize a perfect world, is just that all the perfect worlds are among the unobtainable worlds.”⁴⁶

disapprove, however, because Burch suggests that Leibniz can argue that worlds of saintly freedom are not even logically possible.

⁴¹ Plantinga 1984, p. 298.

⁴² Now, maybe Plantinga can concede this and, in the spirit of MCA (see below) suggest that he only wanted to defeat the atheologist on his own terms. There is perhaps some evidence for this in that Plantinga’s first suggestion for evidence that God cannot actualize all possible worlds is that God could not actualize the possible worlds *in which God does not exist* (*NoN*, p. 170) - but of course Plantinga believes that there are no such worlds. On the other hand, aside from the fact that this would render “Leibniz’s lapse” an uncalled-for slur, to claim this would be to admit that the whole FWD has no chance of meeting TAT.

⁴³ *NoN*, p. 166.

⁴⁴ *NoN*, p. 167.

⁴⁵ *GFE*, pp. 33-4.

⁴⁶ Plantinga 2009, p. 182. The version of FWD4 that I give here is not the one that Plantinga first gave in *NoN* and *GFE* and that has proven so influential. There is no mention of the element of Plantinga’s defense over which the most ink has been spilled over the decades, his concept of transworld depravity. This is a fact not to be mourned, because, first, it turned out that TWD was notoriously easy to misunderstand—see

The first two claims are familiar from the Free Will Theodicy (with the precise value of freedom now specified as its necessity for moral good⁴⁷) except that IEF is watered down so that it is no longer plainly false: Plantinga does not say that free beings *inevitably* do evil. This means that Plantinga's versions of VFC and IEF do not by themselves produce a workable theodicy *or* defense. The proponent of LAFE can agree that beings *capable* of moral good must also be capable of moral evil, but "capable of" is very far from "must inevitably perform." Many theists hold that God is *capable* of moral evil, but will never do it. It is up to FWD3 and 4 to rescue God from LAFE.

In fact, it should be clear that the weight of Plantinga's defense rests on FWD3. FWD1, while contested by many metaphysicians and metaethicists, would meet with broad agreement amongst the public, theist or non-theist. FWD2, since it is now about *capabilities*, is even less controversial. And FWD4 depends on FWD3: if *some* possible worlds cannot be actualized, then it is surely *possible* (remember, this is a defense, not a theodicy) that the worlds of saintly freedom should be among them.⁴⁸ That being so, let us now investigate in detail Plantinga's case that the CFs of Molinism undermine PEA.

The Strangeness of Plantinga's Counterfactuals of Freedom

Remember the bribery case and how NUN implies that there are (at least, but let's keep it simple) two logically possible worlds that are *identical in every respect* right up to the point at Curley is offered the bribe. After the offer is made, they diverge: in one, he accepts the bribe, while in the other he rejects it. What Plantinga is asserting is that the CFs determine which of them can be actualized, because they specify *what Curley's free choice is*. Assuming (given his venality) Curley will choose to accept the bribe: that means that God *cannot* actualize a world in which Curley *freely* turns it down. Now, he *can* actualize a world in which Curley *does* turn it down (he is God, after all!), but Curley would not be doing so *freely*.⁴⁹ *Pace* Rousseau,⁵⁰ even God can't *force* someone to be free.

for example Bergmann 1999 on how John Hick and J.L. Mackie (dummies neither) apparently misunderstood it—and second because Plantinga now concedes that Richard Otte has proven it to be necessarily false (Otte 2009, Plantinga 2009). This momentous achievement did not produce any change of heart about LAFE, however, because Otte also went on to provide a patch for the Defense, and Plantinga endorsed the resulting new and improved terminology of "unobtainable worlds" that you see here.

⁴⁷ The claim that freedom *as understood by Plantinga* is necessary for the capacity for moral goodness is open to challenge for reasons even beyond Hume's assertion. Most obviously in the literature that begins with Frankfurt 1969. But time and space do not permit.

⁴⁸ Presumably, of course, *any world better than this one* (in terms of achieving a better balance of goods over evils) would have also to be unactualizable for God to have been adequately defended.

⁴⁹ Plantinga makes a distinction between God *strongly* actualizing, where he brings about everything that is the case, and *weakly* actualizing, whereby some of the things that come about are the result of free actions. God can only weakly actualize a state of affairs whereby a being does something freely. If God made it so that Curley turned down the bribe, it would be a case of strong actualizing, and Curley would not be free. Of course, Curley could be made to *believe* he was free, and there is no way for any created being to know when or where their actions are truly free in the Plantingan sense, because we have no magic "freedom-meter," we only know what we've done and that we thought we chose to do it.

⁵⁰ See *On the Social Contract*, Book I, chapter VII.

If it is not already clear how vital the Molinist notion of CFs is to Plantinga's FWD, he spells it out clearly in this full quote from a recent work on the topic:

The whole point of introducing TWD was to show how it could be that it wasn't within God's power to actualize a world containing free creatures who always do what is right; it is possible that the counterfactuals of freedom should fall out in such a way as to preclude God's doing that. (And of course the truth or falsehood of those counterfactuals of freedom isn't within God's power.) But clearly the proposition that all essences suffer from TWD, while sufficient for that task, isn't necessary; there are weaker propositions that will do just as well. Consider the fact that no matter how the counterfactuals of freedom are disposed, there will be worlds such that it isn't within the power of God to actualize them; following Otte, say that such worlds are unobtainable. (That a world is unobtainable, of course, is contingent.) What's required, for the proposition that it wasn't within God's power to actualize a perfect world, is just that all the perfect worlds are among the unobtainable worlds.⁵¹

Let us summarize what Plantinga is committed to concerning CFs:

- PCF(a) For every set of circumstances in which any possible free being could possibly find herself, there is a fact of the matter about what she will freely choose that can be captured as a CF, and this CF has a truth value before the action is made.
- PCF(b) More strongly, all CFs for all possible free choices have truth values prior to any creative act of God's (so, in effect, Curley accepted the bribe before the universe existed – even if he ends up not being created). This is required to avoid the risky view of providence of Open Theism.
- PCF(c) Unlike, say, the basic rules of Logic (whose truth values are also determined prior to any creative act on God's part) CFs are *contingent* truths. This has to be the case for NUN to be satisfied. That is, it has to be *possible* that "If Curley were to be offered the bribe then he would accept it" could be false, because if it is *necessarily* true then there is no possible world in which he turns it down, and his accepting it is not a free action.
- PCF(d) Unlike, say, the laws of nature, the truth values of the CFs are determined *independently of God's creative power* ("the truth or falsehood of those counterfactuals of freedom isn't within God's power").

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these commitments are controversial. Mackie himself found them intolerable:

But how could there be logically contingent states of affairs, *prior to the creation and existence of any created beings with free will*, which an omnipotent god would have to accept and put up with? This suggestion is simply incoherent.⁵²

Mackie is not the only one to criticize Plantinga's reliance on such strange claims about CFs in his FWD. Plantinga's response to this criticism is, I think, rather disingenuous. In effect, he claims that it is the proponent of LAFE who is committed to counterfactuals of freedom, not him:

[M]y argument in *the Nature of Necessity* for the consistency of God's existence with the amount of evil α [the actual world] contains does indeed presuppose that some counterfactuals of freedom can be true. As I see it, however, this presupposition is a concession to the atheologian. Without the assumption of middle knowledge it is much harder to formulate a plausible deductive atheological

⁵¹ Plantinga 2009, p. 182.

⁵² Mackie 1982, p. 174. I am fairly certain that Leibniz would be more likely to share Mackie's attitude than concede that he had made a "lapse": if given a choice between accepting PCF(d) or sticking with PEA, the former would be most unappealing, especially given the Principle of Sufficient Reason.

argument from evil; and it is correspondingly much easier, I should think, to formulate the free will defense on the assumption that middle knowledge is impossible.⁵³

Call this claim about the use of CFs in the FWD the “Magnanimous Concession to Atheologians” claim (MCA).⁵⁴ There are at least two ways in which MCA is disingenuous. First, Plantinga is a Molinist, and so has separate reasons for asserting that CFs have truth values. Denying that CFs have truth values before agents act (PCF(a)) would commit Plantinga to some variant of the Open Theist view with all its attendant problems. Second, Molinism is not the only view open to the atheologian who wants to press the idea that God could have known in advance what his free creatures would do and thus should have created a world of saintly freedom; if Plantinga were really prepared to meet the most common atheologian on her own turf then he would assume *compatibilism*. Compatibilism asserts the following claims about CFs:

- CCF(a) For every set of circumstances in which any possible free being could possibly find herself, there is a fact of the matter about what she will freely choose that can be captured as a CF, and this CF has a truth value before the action is made.
- CCF(b) More strongly, all CFs for all possible free choices can have truth values prior to the creation of free beings, *but* not before the establishment of the laws of nature that govern the universe in which the beings will operate.
- CCF(c) The truth value of any CF is determined entirely by the laws of nature, because it is they that determine what a free being will do in any circumstance. Inasmuch as the laws of nature are contingent (because God could come up with different laws), the CFs are contingent.
- CCF(d) Because the laws of nature are, the truth values of the CFs are determined entirely by God, according to his wishes, as befits an omnipotent being.

These claims are a good deal less strange than PCF(b)-(d), so why doesn't Plantinga assume the truth of compatibilism if he's prepared to be so gracious to the atheologian? Because he thinks compatibilism is *false* (no willingness to make concessions *there*), and also because with compatibilism the problem of evil is *especially* acute. So, at best, MCA is a red herring. He *needs* CFs to have truth values, and he also needs the outlandish assertions of PCF(b), (c) and (d), and therefore cannot dodge criticisms of them by resorting to MCA. And there are several serious criticisms, to which we now turn.

Plantinga's Half-Hearted Libertarianism

If Molinism were self-evident, it would be hard to see the appeal of Open Theism, with its requisite dilution of omniscience and lack of reassurance about providence. So why are there Open Theists if Molinism allows for libertarian freedom without the costs? Answer, because the Open Theist thinks that Molinism has only a token commitment to libertarianism, but in effect precludes it just as surely as compatibilism does. Open Theism rejects PCF(a) because of NUN. If it is genuinely possible that the complete state

⁵³ Plantinga 1985, p. 379.

⁵⁴ Plantinga is clearly fond of MCA because it comes up previously in *ibid*, p. 373, and later in Plantinga 1986a, p. 125. Richard Otte also repeats it in Otte 2009, 175*n*: “if there were no true counterfactuals of freedom, the objector could not say that if God had acted differently, then a world with moral good and no moral evil would have been actual. **Because of this**, Plantinga granted the objector the truth of counterfactuals of freedom in order to have a strong statement of the problem of evil. Without true counterfactuals of freedom, it is difficult to even state the deductive argument from evil” (emphasis added).

of the universe up to the point of Curley's Temptation is equally consistent with his accepting or declining his bribe, then one would assume that it must be possible both that a world in which Curley accepts and a world in which Curley declines could both become actual. Not so, on Plantinga's view. Plantinga wants it both to be true that it was *possible* that Curley could be good, but false that Curley being good could be *actual*. Actually, Plantinga's position is even stranger than that. As he puts it:

There are many possible worlds God could not have weakly actualized, despite the fact that it is logically possible that he weakly actualize them—despite the fact, that is, that there are possible worlds in which he does weakly actualize them.⁵⁵

How can there be possible worlds in which God actualizes choices foreclosed by the CFs? How can it be *possible* for God to actualize a world where Curley declines the bribe—and yet it be beyond God's power to do it? Answer, because the CFs are contingent (PCF(c)), so it *has* to be possible that they be otherwise, in which case God could have actualized Curley declining the bribe, because that's what Curley would have done freely. Notice that this is a sort of "meta" possibility. The CFs that God was *actually* faced with do not allow this. So *relative* to the CFs we have, it is *not* possible for God to actualize a world where Curley turns down the bribe, and, more importantly, not possible for Curley to do it. In effect, the only sense in which the world where Curley freely declines the bribe is "possible" is in the context of an alternative possible "galaxy" (i.e., setting for all the possible worlds) where the CFs were *not* as they in fact are and always have been, beyond the power of God to alter. Plantinga's claim here sounds suspiciously like a compatibilist move of the sort that Plantinga (with his incompatibilist hat on) long ago asserted can be "dealt with in fairly summary fashion."⁵⁶ Antony Flew suggested that a person can be said to be free even if his action is causally determined because "if he had chosen to do otherwise he would have been able to do so."⁵⁷ The libertarian points out that the laws of physics mean that he *couldn't* have chosen otherwise. Ah, says the compatibilist, "but if the laws of physics had been *slightly different*, then he could, and of course, since the laws of physics are *contingent*, then there is a possible world in which he is caused to choose other than he did in *this* world, and if there is a possible world where this happens, then it is possible, and if it is possible, then he *could* have chosen differently." Plantinga, however, rejects such a suggestion as "utterly implausible."

One might as well claim that being in jail doesn't really limit one's freedom on the grounds that if one were *not* in jail, he'd [sic] be free to come and go as he pleased.⁵⁸

Of course, you could make just the same charge against the Molinist claim that Curley "could have" declined the bribe in the context of the truth value of that CF being set against that.

Why does this compatibilist maneuver seem unsatisfactory as a defense of the idea that Curley could have declined the bribe, despite being determined? Presumably because we do not think that that possible world is *accessible for Curley*. It is like the possible

⁵⁵ Plantinga 1986b, p. 289.

⁵⁶ Plantinga 1967, p. 133.

⁵⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *GFE*, p. 32.

worlds where Curley flies unaided or can jump high buildings in a single bound. Now, in theory, even those worlds *could* be accessible to Curley *if God chose to actualize them*. And there is actually no barrier to his doing so—it would just require a miracle. So in effect, they are *more* accessible to Curley than the supposed possible world (on Plantinga’s view) where Curley freely declines the bribe, because God supposedly *cannot* actualize that one, given the truth values of the CFs. The Open Theist can plausibly charge that Plantinga is betraying the underlying spirit of NUN. NUN is a *necessary* condition but satisfying NUN is not sufficient for a being to be free in the true libertarian sense. NUN, in fact, is just a stand-in for a more complete libertarian principle that can be stated as follows:

Necessity of Genuinely Accessible Alternative Possible Worlds for Freedom (NGAP): for any action *A* to have been done freely by person *P*, it must have been the case that *P* could have accessed the world in which *P* does *not-A* given the facts of the universe *U* in which *P* has always resided.

This principle is violated by Molinism, because the facts of our universe include the truth values of the CFs, and as such, Molinist “freedom” is not true libertarian freedom.

There is another problem with PCF(c), at least for Plantinga. If the CFs are truly contingent, then it has to be *possible* that Curley be *exactly as he is* (venal, and so on) and yet that he freely turn down the bribe. (This would be in the alternate possible “galaxy” where the truth value of “If Curley is offered the bribe then he will accept it” is *false*.) But Plantinga doesn’t seem to really believe that this *is* possible. Consider what he says to illustrate that the claim that CFs have truth value is intuitively correct: imagine, first, that Curley is offered a smaller bribe:

We do not know, after all, whether Curley would have accepted the bribe—it is a fairly small one and perhaps his pride would have been injured. Let us ask instead whether he would have accepted a bribe of \$36,000, everything else being as much as possible like the actual world. **Here the answer seems fairly clear: indeed he would have.**⁵⁹

Why is it clear that counterfactual Curley “would have”? It can’t be because we, like God, have middle knowledge. We don’t have direct, unimpeded access to the truth values of the CFs. Plantinga seems to be suggesting that the truth values of the CFs can be “read off” from the facts of the world. But that would follow from the *compatibilist* claim CCF(c), but *contradict* the conjunction of PCF(c) and (d). And if CCF(c) were true, then the truth values of the CFs *cannot* be other than they are *given the world as it is* (laws of nature included), which suggests that the “possible world” *identical to this one* but with a different truth value for that CF is *not* possible. That is, Plantinga wants to support the plausibility of CFs having truth values by suggesting that we can *know* what certain people would do in counterfactual situations. But if CFs are truly both contingent and unconnected to things over which God has control, then we *couldn’t* know that, because there is no contradiction in the CFs being otherwise: nothing about the universe that we know should settle the value of the CFs. Perhaps Plantinga is a closeted compatibilist!

Ungrounded Truths

⁵⁹ *NoN*, p. 177, emphasis added.

There are further problems still. The compatibilist has a plausible account of how it is that CFs could have truth values: CCF(c). So the CFs that compatibilist proponents of LAFE would allow are a good deal less mysterious than the ones Plantinga assumes: his CFs appear to have a truth value that is completely arbitrary and inexplicable, because not grounded on any fact. That is, there appears to be no underlying reason for the supposed connection between the antecedent and the consequent. Let us introduce another principle, which, like PEA, seems intuitively true, is accepted by opponents of Plantinga on both sides, but which Plantinga rejects:

Truths Need Grounding (TNG): for a proposition to be true, there must be something *in virtue of which* it is true.

Notice that both open libertarianism and compatibilism share this assumption: as we have just seen, compatibilists believe in grounded CFs, while on the other hand, open libertarians believe that *even God* cannot know what a free being will do next, precisely because there are no “truths” about what she will do before she does it, because there is nothing to ground those truths. Robert Adams pointed out that Molinist counterfactuals of freedom violate this well-accepted principle, which prompted this response from Plantinga:

It seems to me much clearer that some [non-grounded] counterfactuals of freedom are at least possibly true than that the truth of propositions must, in general, be grounded in this way.⁶⁰

In other words, “*I don’t see the problem.*” Of course, he can’t afford to: Molinists have to insist on this point because presumably what would ground a counterfactual would be some kind of necessary connection between the antecedent (the state of the universe up to that point) and the consequent (the free choice), then NUN would be false, and it would not be *logically possible* for the agent to choose otherwise.

Inadequate Candidates for Grounding

But the explicit reason Plantinga doesn’t see the problem is that he appears to think that his variant of Molinism is the best analysis of our commonsense understanding of freedom. That becomes clear in what he goes on to say:

Adams apparently believes that in fact human persons *are* free... Suppose, then, that yesterday I freely performed some action *A*. What was or is it that grounded or founded my doing so? I wasn’t *caused* to do so by anything else; nothing relevant *entails* that I did so. So what grounds the truth of the proposition in question? Perhaps you will say that what grounds its truth is just that in fact I did *A*. But this isn’t much of an answer; and at any rate the same kind of answer is available in the case of Curley. For what grounds the truth of the counterfactual, we may say, is just that in fact **Curley is such that** if he had been offered a \$35,000 bribe, he would have freely taken it.⁶¹

There are several points to be made here. First, Plantinga assumes his audience employs “free” in an incompatibilist sense, because otherwise his claim that he wasn’t caused to do his free act simply begs the question. Not content with dismissing compatibilism, second, Plantinga is simply ignoring the open libertarian position which would assert that yes, *nothing* grounds the “fact” of any genuinely free choice *and for that reason the counterfactuals of freedom lack truth value*. (Perhaps he would point to MCA to explain this, but we have seen the dubiousness of this move.) Third, his (perhaps facetious)

⁶⁰ Plantinga 1985, p. 374.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, emphasis added.

suggestion for a grounding will not do the job that a Molinist requires. His suggestion can be interpreted in two ways. In the first, the counterfactual of freedom is “made true” when Curley makes his choice. But that requires that Curley *exist*. Thus, PCF(b) could not be true, which, for Molinism, it must be.⁶²

Perhaps, then, we should focus on the phrase “in fact Curley is such that...”: that is, the suggestion is that what Curley freely chooses is dependent on his *essence*. But that cannot be so, because if what Curley freely chooses when actualized is necessitated by his essence, then there is no *possible* world in which he chooses otherwise. For what settles the identity of a possible Curley in a possible world is whether or not that being has Curley’s essence. And on this suggestion, a being with Curley’s essence couldn’t have chosen otherwise. This would undermine NUN.

God’s Power and the CFs

Finally, there is a serious problem with PCF(d). Mackie complains that the idea that an omnipotent God would “have to accept and put up with” pre-established truth values for the CFs is “simply incoherent.” It is bad enough that God has to “put up” with necessary truths, but *contingent truths*? This just seems (a) blatantly *ad hoc* (the only plausible reason for this assertion is that it is required to ensure the possibility of FWD 4) and (b) to violate TAT fairly comprehensively. Presumably Plantinga would insist that without PCF(d), created beings could not have freedom. But why not? If the answer is because then God could determine what humans will (freely) do, then there are two problems with that claim.

The first problem is that PCF(d) *doesn’t actually prevent* God determining what people will do.⁶³ There are two senses in which this is true. The first is demonstrated very ingeniously by Dean Zimmerman: the weirdness of Molinist CFs has the odd effect that by tinkering with facts that are completely unrelated to the free actions of created beings, it is possible that God could ensure that (for example) Curley *does* decline the bribe. (For details, see Zimmerman 2009.) But there is a different way to press this point. Suppose we grant Plantinga the claim that the CF “if Curley were offered the bribe then he would accept” is true. As we have seen, Plantinga cannot both reject compatibilism and at the same time insist that this CF is true because of *facts about Curley* (other than the CF, of course). It has to be the case that the CF *just is* true in some “ungrounded” manner. Well then, consider the following suggestions. First, let us suppose that God just *forces Curley’s hand* and *strongly* actualizes the world where Curley declines the bribe. What would be so bad about that? Of course, there would be nothing *good* about Curley’s “choice” (if we believe libertarians) because it was not

⁶² This appears to be an “Ockhamist” suggestion. In Plantinga 1986b he commits to “Ockham’s way out” of the classic puzzle that God’s foreknowledge poses for human freedom. But, as I suggest, Molinism and Okhamism are odd bedfellows. See also Widerker 1990, pp. 467-9 for a different criticism of Plantinga’s particular variant of Ockhamism.

⁶³ Both Molina himself (who held that “both Jesus and Mary were preserved from all sin throughout their whole lives by God supplying them with gifts and aids that He knew would always elicit a favorable free response from them”) and his most influential follower Suarez (who stated that “it is alien... to the divine perfection and omnipotence...to say that God cannot predetermine...an honorable free act, in particular and with all [its] circumstances, by His absolute and effective will, the freedom of the created will still being preserved”) believed this, according to Robert Adams (Adams 1977, pp. 123-4).

chosen freely. But would Curley have been violated in some way? No, and the reason is NUN, according to which every conceivable fact about Curley, including every belief and desire and principle that he holds leaves undecided whether or not he will accept or decline the bribe. What *that* means is, as the contemporary libertarian Robert Kane makes explicit, *whichever* world God actualized, Curley would endorse the result as his own decision.⁶⁴ Thus, although the sum total of *good* would not have been increased, the sum total of *evil* would have been decreased. So why isn't this a better course for God to pursue than the current system? Presumably Plantinga has some story to tell in response that in doing this God is treating Curley like a puppet, and to some extent that is true. But if *some* decisions are *not* free, which most contemporary libertarians accept (and Plantinga appears to be among them⁶⁵) then God does this all the time. What's one more unfree decision if (a) it cuts down the amount of evil in the world, and (b) Curley has no grounds to complain?

So the first problem for the claim that PCF(d) is necessary because without it God could determine what people choose and thereby undermine freedom is that PCF(d) *doesn't* stop God determining what people choose. (The "Switcheroo Argument" below aims to show that it doesn't even stop God determining what gets *freely* chosen.) The second problem is that PCF(d) is not necessary for human freedom *according to Plantinga's definition*. That is, if people really are free given Plantinga's claims about the CFs, then they would be just as free if God could control what the CFs are. This is the flipside of the Open Theist charge that Molinism doesn't fully ensure libertarian freedom. If all that is required for freedom is that NUN be satisfied, then beings the content of whose free choice is determined by the CFs are free *whether or not* God controls each CF's truth value. Why is it that Plantinga claims that NUN is satisfied even though the CFs determine that (for example) Curley cannot freely decline the bribe? Because the contingency of the CFs ensures that there is a possible world where Curley declines it. Well, so long as the CFs are contingent, this is true *even if God controls what the CFs are*. If Plantinga now insists that NUN (plus ROC) is not sufficient to ensure free choice, then it behooves him to explain exactly what *is* sufficient. If it is something like NGAP, then he is forced either to admit that if CFs have truth values prior to the relevant decisions being freely made then humans are *not* free and thus either deny that freedom is as important as previously thought (i.e., deny VFC and abandon the FWD) or deny PCF(b) and perhaps commit to Open Theism.

Of course, one thing that PCF(d) does appear essential for is the FWD. If God *can* control the truth values of the CFs consistent with people choosing freely, then God *could*

⁶⁴ For example, Kane imagines a businesswoman genuinely undecided between two options: "The businesswoman who wants to go back and help the assault victim is the same ambitious woman who wants to go on to her meeting and close the sale. She is a complex creature... but hers is the kind of complexity needed for free will. And when she succeeds in doing **one** of the things she is trying to do [and which one it is is undetermined], she will endorse **that** as *her* resolution of the conflict in her will, voluntarily and intentionally... **She will not disassociate from either outcome**", Kane 1999, p. 232, my emphasis.

⁶⁵ "It is, of course, up to God whether or not to create Maurice and also up to God whether or not to make him free with respect to the action of taking oatmeal at time *t*. (God could, if He chose, cause him to succumb to the dreaded *equine obsession*, a condition shared by some people and most horses, whose victims find it *psychologically impossible* to refuse oats or oat products.)" *GFE*, p. 44.

ensure Mackie's world of saintly freedom, and the FWD collapses. Can Plantinga abandon all pretense that there is any independent reason to commit to PCF(d) and just say that, since it is *possible* that PCF(d) is true, that is all his defense needs? Aside from the fact that, if this is allowable, then it would've been a lot quicker just to say "it's possible that a premise of LAFE is false," as we have just as much reason to believe either, I believe it can be shown that PCF(d) doesn't even appear to be sufficient to ensure that the defense works.

The Switcheroo Argument

Suppose we accept PCF(a)-(d) and further, accept that the true CFs God has been presented with count among their number "if Curley is offered the bribe then he will accept it"; all of this is still not sufficient to ensure that the bribe cannot freely be declined. Curley may not be able freely to decline it, but God can get somebody else to *freely decline it for him*. That is: God could, at the moment where Curley is tempted, have him replaced by a saintlier individual (who, in this context, would just be someone whose CF "if ___ were offered the bribe then s/he would accept" is false). This person would even have all of Curley's characteristics and memories and so on, and would in fact answer to the name "Curley". But the person would not *be* Curley, because of the crucial difference of the truth value of the CF. Given that this decision is taken freely, presumably the moral good that, according to VFC, requires freedom, would be realized. So, according to this suggestion God *could* achieve a world of saintly freedom, even with all the conditions Plantinga has specified. Now, notice that I have not saved PEA with this maneuver. One could still insist that a world in which *Curley* freely declines the bribe is unactualizable. But a world in which the free being presented with the bribe declines it *is* actualizable.

What could be said in response to this suggestion? Could Plantinga say that it is possible that *no* free being could be created such that, on being presented with that choice, would decline it? But why should we believe that? There is an infinite number of potential free beings that God could place in that situation. If *not one* of them could decline the bribe, then it sounds like the bribe is undeclinable, which suggests that there is no possible world where it is declined, which would mean that this isn't a free choice anyway. Perhaps it seems odd to suggest that there is an infinity of distinct free beings that could be placed in this situation, sharing Curley's memories and characteristics. But isn't that what libertarianism requires? If the sum total of Curley's memories and characteristics do not determine any choice (as NUN asserts) then there are many possible beings that could have Curley's memories and characteristics whose CFs could have radically different values. (Remember: the truth values of Plantinga's CFs are not determined by facts about the experience or physical makeup of the person making the choice – their truth value is determined completely independently of such things.) If some differences are required to make each potential Curley replacement distinct, then God could revive long-dead individuals, wipe their memories, and place them in Curley's shoes for just that decision. In this way each of the possible Curley stand-ins could have different histories. They could even be living people just briefly standing in for Curley (as he could stand in for them for other decisions – perhaps he would decline a cigarette, while they wouldn't).

We are, of course, entering into issues of personal identity. But theists almost universally accept the idea that personhood can survive loss of one's body and instantaneous relocation, so why not put that feature to good use to prevent evil?

The Unacceptable Diminishment Argument

I have one last complaint against Plantinga's FWD. Even if I were wrong in all of my other criticisms (indeed, especially so, given all the suggestions I have given for ways God might be able to avoid evil), FWD, once its implications are clearly understood, fails TAT. Plantinga's argument suggests that there is some property "freedom"⁶⁶ that is both required for the achievement of some vital purpose and yet connected with which there are counterfactuals beyond the power of God to determine that mean that evil unavoidably enters our universe. Molinism is supposed to comfort us that God will be able to achieve his providential plan nonetheless. But if God is forced to allow *this much evil* (far more than Plantinga's FWD would seem to suggest) in at *this* stage of the game, why should we be reassured that God's plan *will* be achieved? According to the FWD, Earthly evil is something God just can't prevent. But why would he be able to prevent it in Heaven, then? Would he take away our freedom? Or would the CFs magically shake out so that our freedom no longer involves evil choices? That would be a convenient coincidence! Worse yet, if it is possible that this strange metaphysical property "freedom" both exist and be required for a great good, then it is also possible that there is some property "phreedom" that is both required for the achievement of some other vital purpose (unknown to petty humans) and yet which opened the door to further suffering. And furthermore, there is some *other* property "schmeedom"... and so on. If it is possible that some thing we think we *do* understand (and which many respectable philosophers think *does not* require the features Plantinga assigns to it) has such unfortunate side effects, then it is also possible that other properties we are too primitive to comprehend also do. Indeed, perhaps such properties would obviate the need for blaming Hallopeau-Siemens syndrome on Satan, and make a more plausible case for the sheer quantity of misery in this world of ours. However, all hope that God is left with enough range of control to achieve all the things that theism requires for him would be gone. Allowing, as PCF(d) does, that it is even *possible* that there be contingencies over which God has no control opens the floodgates to any number of such contingencies that would so dilute God's "omnipotence" that it would render the very term a hollow mockery. And that should be unacceptable to *any* theist.

Conclusion

"Free will" has been put to use to shelter God from blame for the vast quantity of suffering in this world he is supposed to have created since the first free will theodicy. Even Plantinga would not claim that his *defense* achieves this goal: he would have to concede that, even if it worked, it only showed that it couldn't be proved beyond all doubt that the God of theism doesn't exist. However, I believe the legend of his defense looms large, and lack of clear understanding of its commitments and assumptions has spread the belief that something like a free will theodicy actually works. I have tried to show that, even with the low expectations of a defense, Plantinga's FWD should be

⁶⁶ Or, if you like, "being unfettered" – see Plantinga 1967, p. 135.

unacceptable to anyone committed to the core principles of theism. But on top of this, the FWD doesn't even achieve what it set out to do. Does this mean that LAFE succeeds? I think so, but I don't necessarily believe that is a great achievement. The central perfections themselves are both so paradoxical and so distanced from the religious feelings of most actual believers that, ultimately, a defense has nothing much worth defending. Certainly a God so weak that he is forced to allow this much misery to beings he supposedly loves unconditionally certainly needs all the defending he can get, but anyone who has had to deal with such horrors as Hallopeau-Siemens syndrome would be heroic indeed if they had pity left to spare.

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