

Handout 9: The Problem of Evil

I. The Leibnizian (or “Best World”) Version of the Problem of Evil

“The wisdom of God, not content with embracing all the possibilities, penetrates them, compares them, weighs them one against the other, to estimate their degrees of perfection or imperfection, the strong and the weak, the good and the evil. ... By this means, the divine Wisdom distributes all the possibles it had already contemplated separately, into so many universal systems which it further compares the one with the other. The result of all these comparisons and deliberations is the choice of the best from among all the possible systems, which wisdom makes in order to satisfy goodness completely; and such is precisely the plan of the universe as it is.”

- G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy* (1710)

“Whoever does not choose the best course is lacking either in power, or knowledge, or goodness.

God did not choose the best course in creating this world.

Therefore God was lacking in power, or knowledge, or goodness.

...

... the second premiss of this syllogism ... the opponent proves ... by this. ...

Whoever makes things in which there is evil, and which could have been made without any evil, or need not have been made at all, does not choose the best course.

God made a world wherein there is evil; a world, I say, which could have been made without any evil of which need not have been made at all.

Therefore God did not choose the best course.”

- G.W. Leibniz, *Theodicy* (1710)

A. The Argument

The Leibnizian (or “Best World”) Version of the Problem of Evil

1. If God exists, then this is the best of all possible worlds.
2. But this is not the best of all possible worlds.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

B. Comments

1. The Traditional Conception of God
2. The Concept of a Possible World
3. Intrinsic Value vs. Instrumental Value
4. Suffering As a Paradigm Intrinsic Evil
5. On the Word ‘Evil’.

C. Five Weak Replies

1. Skeptical Theism

2. Manichaeism

3. Evil As a Privation

“ ... whatever things exist are good, and the evil into whose origins I was inquiring is not a substance, for if it were a substance, it would be good. ... Hence I saw and it was made clear to me that you made all things good, and there are absolutely no substances which you did not make.

- Augustine, *Confessions* (397), 7.12.18

4. Evil As a Counterpart of the Good

5. A Divine Command Theoretic Response

D. A Stronger Reply: No Best World

II. A Second Version of the Problem of Evil

A. The Argument

The Second Version of the Problem of Evil

1. If God exists, then there is no evil.
2. There is evil.
3. Therefore, God does not exist.

B. Support for Premise 1

A Principle About Good Persons:

A good person will prevent an evil that she knows is about to occur and that she is able to prevent (at least if it can be done at absolutely no cost to herself).

Illustrations: Disaster at McGuckin Hardware, The Blind Pedestrian, Kitty Genovese

C. Counterexamples to A Principle About Good Persons

1. Leibniz' Army General (p. 217 in *PR*)

“ ... the best course is not always the one which tends towards avoiding evil, since it is possible that the evil may be accompanied by a greater good. For example, the general of an army will prefer a great victory with a slight wound to a state of affairs without wound and without victory.”

- Leibniz, *Theodicy* (1710)

2. Plantinga's Rock Climber (p. 265 in *PR*)

"You've been rock climbing. Still something of a novice, you've acquired a few cuts and bruises by inelegantly using your knees rather than your feet. One of these bruises is fairly painful. You mention it to a physician friend, who predicts the pain will leave of its own accord in a day or two. Meanwhile, he says, there's nothing he can do, short of amputating your leg above the knee, to remove the pain. Now the pain in your knee is an evil state of affairs. All else being equal, it would be better if you had no such pain. And it is within the power of your friend to eliminate this evil state of affairs. Does his failure to do so mean that he is not a good person? Of course not; for he could eliminate this evil state of affairs only by bringing about another, much worse evil."

- Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (1974)

A Feature of Both Cases: the connection between the evil and the greater good is merely *contingent*.

D. Does This Kind of Counterexample Apply Directly to Premise 1?

A Key Distinction:

- An evil that is *causally necessary* for some good.
- vs.
- An evil that is *metaphysically necessary* for some good.

Why these sorts of counterexamples (involving mere causal necessity) don't undermine Premise 1:

"We turn next to the hypothesis that God permits evil-doing for the sake of its good effects. And indeed we know that sometimes good does come of evil, and doubtless in more ways than we are able to discover. But omnipotence is not bound by laws of cause and effect. God can make anything follow anything; He never has to allow evil so that good may come. Cause-and-effect theodicy cannot succeed."

- David Lewis, "Evil for Freedom's Sake?" (1993)

II. Attempts to Show Premise 1 False

Attempts to show Premise 1 false are attempts to explain why God allows evil. Such an attempt is called a *theodicy*.

A. Cause-and-Effect Theodicy

B. Aesthetic Theodicy

"Thus one must suppose that, among the general rules which are not absolutely necessary, God chooses those which are the most natural, which it is easiest to

explain, and which also are of greatest service for the explanation of other things. That is doubtless the conclusion most excellent and most pleasing The ways of God are those most simple and uniform: for he chooses rules that least restrict one another. They are also the most *productive* in proportion to the *simplicity of ways and means*. ... Even if the effect were assumed to be greater, but the process less simple, I think one might say that, when all is said and done, the effect itself would be less great, taking into account not only the final effect but also the mediate effect. For the wisest mind so acts, as far as it is possible, that the *means* are also in a sense *ends*, that is, they are desirable not only on account of what they do, but on account of what they are. The more intricate processes take up too much ground, too much space, too much place, too much time that might have been better employed.”

- Leibniz, *Theodicy* (1710), §208

“what delights in a portion of place or time may be understood to be far less beautiful than the whole of which it is a portion. And furthermore, it is clear to a learned man that what displeases in a portion displeases for no other reason than because the whole, with which that portion harmonizes wonderfully, is not seen, but that, in the intelligible world, every part is as beautiful and perfect as the whole.”

- Augustine, *De Ordine* (386 C.E.), 328-9.

“... maybe He is a fanatical artist who cares only for the aesthetic quality of creation – perhaps the abstract beauty of getting rich variety to emerge from a few simple laws, or perhaps the concrete drama of human life with all its diversity – and cares nothing for the good of the creatures whose lives are woven into His masterpiece. (Just as a tragedian has no business providing a happy end out of compassion for his characters.) But no; for Christianity also teaches that God is morally perfect and perfectly benevolent, and that He loves all of His creatures; and that these things are true in a sense not a million miles from the sense in which we attribute morality, benevolence, or love to one another.”

- David Lewis, “Evil for Freedom’s Sake?” (1993)

C. Hick’s “Soul-Making” Theodicy

“... this world must be a place of soul-making. And its value is to be judged, not primarily by the quantity of pleasure and pain occurring in it at any particular moment, but by its fitness for its primary purpose, the purpose of soul-making.”

“The value-judgment that is implicitly being invoked here is that one who has attained to goodness by meeting and eventually mastering temptations, and thus by rightly making responsible choices in concrete situations, is good in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created *ab initio* in a state either of innocence or of virtue.... I suggest, then, that it is an ethically reasonable judgment... that human goodness slowly built up through personal histories of moral effort has a value in the eyes of the Creator which justifies even the long travail of the soul-making process.”

- John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (1966)

Hick's "Soul-Making" Theodicy:

God is justified in allowing evil because evil is necessary (metaphysically, not causally) for soul-making, a process that yields a result so valuable that it outweighs the disvalue of the evil it requires.

D. Plantinga's Free Will Theodicy

"we can make a preliminary statement of the Free Will Defense as follows. A world containing creatures who are 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. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good" (PR, p. 272).

- Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (1974)

1. Some Definitions

Significant Freedom: a person is *significantly free* at some time iff she is free at that time with respect to some morally significant action (and the more morally significant the action, the more significant the freedom).

Moral Significance: An action is *morally significant* iff it's not morally neutral – i.e., iff performing it would be either morally obligatory or morally wrong (and the more serious the obligation or the wrong, the more morally significant the action).

Moral Evil: evil that results from the activity of significantly free creatures.

2. The Theodicy

Plantinga's Free Will Theodicy (an initial statement):

God is justified in letting moral evil occur because it is the only way for there to be something very good: the existence of significantly free creatures. If God had been ready to intervene to prevent every horrendous evil, there would have been no significantly free creatures, and this would have been a great loss.

3. A Constructive Objection: Mackie's Objection to Free Will Theodicy

"If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several, occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing

the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good.”

- J.L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence” (1955)

a. Mackie’s Objection

Mackie’s Objection to Free Will Theodicy

1. There is a possible world in which every creature is free to do evil but, as a matter of fact, never does evil.
2. An omnipotent God can bring about any possible world.
3. Therefore, an omnipotent God can bring about a possible world in which every creature is free to do evil but, as a matter of fact, never does evil.

b. Plantinga’s Reply: Reject P2

To make his rejection of Mackie’s Premise 2 plausible, Plantinga must do two things:

- explain how some possible worlds could be inaccessible to God
- explain how this is compatible with God’s being omnipotent

c. How Some Possible Worlds Could Be Inaccessible to God

i. Counterfactuals of Freedom

- For every creature that God could have created, and for every situation in which that creature could have found itself, there is a fact of the matter as to what that creature would have freely done had it been in that situation. For example:

“If Gore had been president, he would not have chosen to invade Iraq.”

- These facts are called *counterfactuals of freedom*. They describe what some free creature would have done had he been put in some situation.
- Although God knows which counterfactuals of freedom are true, the counterfactuals of freedom are not under God’s control.

ii. How Counterfactuals of Freedom Make Some Worlds Inaccessible to God

- The Story Paul and the Aardvark
“What would Paul have done if I’d offered him \$700?”
CF1: If I had offered Paul \$700, he would have accepted the offer.
CF2: If I had offered Paul \$700, he would have declined the offer.
- Whichever is true – CF1 or CF2 – there will be a world God could not have actualized.

d. How This Could Be Compatible with God’s Being Omnipotent

4. The Theodicy, Expanded

Plantinga’s Free Will Theodicy (an expanded statement):

God is justified in letting moral evil occur because it is the only way for there to be something very good: the existence of significantly free creatures. This is the only way for there to be significantly free creatures because, due to the way all the counterfactuals of freedom worked out, none of the possible worlds containing free creatures who never do evil was accessible to God.

III. Problems with Hick’s and Plantinga’s Theodicies

A. A Problem with Hick’s Theodicy: the Magnitude and Distribution of Suffering

“[But] the problem of suffering remains The problem consists ... in the fact that instead of serving a constructive purpose pain and misery seem to be distributed in random and meaningless ways, with the result that suffering is often undeserved and often falls upon men in amounts exceeding anything that could be rationally intended.”

- Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (1966)

1. Hick’s reply: the value of evil-requiring virtue:

a. Compassionate Love

“... in a world that is to be the scene of compassionate love and self-giving for others, suffering must fall upon mankind with something of the haphazardness and inequity that we now experience.”

b. The Good Will

“Further, the systematic elimination of unjust suffering, and the consequent apportioning of suffering to desert, would entail that there would be no doing

of the right simply *because* it is right and without any expectation of reward. ... Under such a regime virtuous action would be immediately rewarded with happiness, and wicked action with misery. What Kant called the good will, which does the right simply and solely because it is right, and of which he said that this is the only intrinsically good thing in the world or out of it, would be excluded.”

c. Courage, Mercy, Charity

2. A Rejoinder: seems implausible that these goods require *this* magnitude and distribution

B. A Problem for Plantinga’s Theodicy

“Why should we not do as God does, and leave victims to their fates so as not to make the freedom of evil-doers less significant? ... Why is the significance of the evil-doer’s freedom a weightless consideration for us, not merely an outweighed consideration?”

- David Lewis, “Evil for Freedom’s Sake” (1993)