A Sound Logical Argument From Evil

Quentin Smith

(iv) A Sound Logical Argument from Evil

The logical argument from evil aims to show that the following two propositions are implicitly self-contradictory:

> G. God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good.

> E. There is evil.

The argument for a contradiction is similar to the argument for consistency between (G) and (E) in that both aim to produce some third proposition (p). The free will defense and any other argument for consistency aims to produce a third proposition (p) that is consistent with (G) and whose conjunction with (G) entails (E), but the logical argument from evil aims to produce a third proposition (p) that is both a necessary truth and whose conjunction with (G) produces an explicit contradiction. An explicit contradiction is a conjunction of propositions one of which is the negation of the other.

I believe that an explicit contradiction can be produced and that the necessary truth (p I) we need can be discovered by way of a criticism of Plantinga's free will defense. The problem with Plantinga's defense is located in the implicit assumptions he makes. The relevant assumptions are about freedom. Consider the following passage (in which by "significantly free" Plantinga means freedom with respect to a moral action): "Now God can create free creatures, but he cannot *cause* or *determine* them to do what is right. For if he does so, then they are not 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." This suggests that by "free" Plantinga is referring (at least) to what I shall call *external freedom.* A person is externally free with respect to an action A if and only if nothing other than (external to) herself determines either that she perform A or refrain from performing A.

But Plantinga suggests in other passages that by "free" he also means *internal freedom:* "And a person is free with respect to an action A at a time t only if no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine either that he performs A at t or that he refrains from so doing" (170-71). A person is internally free with respect to an action A if and only if it is false that his past physical and psychological states, in conjunction with causal laws, determine either that he perform A or refrain from performing A.

Still later, Plantinga implies that he means *logical freedom* as well. This is implied by his claim that it is possible that each free creature chooses to do something wrong in at least one of the possible worlds in which the creature exists. A person is logically free with respect to an action A if and only if there is some possible world in which he performs A and there is another possible world in which he does not perform A. A person is logically free with respect to a wholly good life (a life in which every morally relevant action performed by the person is a good action) if and only if there is some possible world in which he lives this life and another possible world in which he does not.

It is possible to be internally-externally free but logically determined with respect to being morally good. This is the case with God, who is both internally and externally free but who does only

good actions in each possible world in which he exists. God's logical determination with respect to moral goodness is entailed by his individual essence, for God's individual essence is *being maximally great,* which entails *being maximally excellent in every possible world.* Maximal excellence, as I noted above, includes the property of being wholly good.

Plantinga's failure to discuss these three senses of "freedom" *explicitly* has led to confusion among his commentators. Wesley Morrison, for example, conflates logical determinism with internal determinism. He puts forth this criticism of Plantinga:

> As Plantinga defines it, then, significant freedom [freedom with regard to morally relevant actions] is not compatible with determinism. The reason for insisting on this point in the context of a free will defense should be clear. If a compatibilist analysis of freedom and responsibility were acceptable, it would be open to an opponent of the free will defense to argue that God does not have to permit moral evil in order to create significantly free creatures who are capable of moral goodness. For example, He could instill in each of His creatures an irresistible impulse to do what is right and to refrain from doing evil, without thereby diminishing their freedom and responsibility. ... [According to Plantinga] God's nature is such that it is logically impossible , for Him to perform a wrong action. He is determined-in the strongest possible sense of "determined"-not to perform any wrong actions. Thus it seems to me that, on Plantinga's analysis of significant freedom, God is not significantly free. And since *moral* goodness presupposes significant freedom, it also follows that God is not morally good [which contradicts Plantinga's definition of God as maximally great].

But Morrison's argument is based on a fallacy of equivocation with respect to "determined." According to the compatibilist theory of free will, humans are externally free but internally determined; nothing external to the agent causes her actions, but her past psychological or physical states cause her actions. If humans were internally determined, then God could make them so they always do what is right in this sense: he could make them with an "irresistible impulse to do what is right" that causally determines all their morally relevant actions. But, *pace* Morrison, this is not the sense in which God is determined to do only what is right. God is perfectly free and is not subject to any impulses, cravings, passions, urges, and so forth that causally determine his actions. God is internally free but *logically* determined to do what is right. In each possible world in which he exists, he is externally and internally free to choose what is wrong, but he chooses to do only what is right.

Morrison writes that "God has the power to perform wrong actions—in which case there will be possible worlds in which he does so" (262). This is false because the possession of a power to do something does not entail that one exercises it in some possible world. It is possible that one has the power to do A (that is, is externally-internally free to do A) but chooses not to exercise that power in each possible world in which one exists.

The distinction among these three senses of "determinism" enables us to reject Morrison's conclusion that God is not morally good. A necessary condition of being morally good, a libertarian may say, is that a person not be externally or internally determined with respect to morally relevant actions.

Yet it is not a necessary condition of being morally good that a person not be logically determined with respect to morally relevant actions; a person is morally good if he freely (in the external-internal sense) chooses to do what is right in each possible world in which he exists.

With the distinction among external, internal, and logical freedom in hand, I can begin my evaluation of Plantinga's free will defense. Consider the assumption Plantinga makes at the outset: "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. "

Now what does "free" mean in this quotation? Presumably, it means external + internal + logical freedom. But one must ask, Does a person who has only external and internal freedom have less metaphysical worth than a person who is free in these two respects and also has logical freedom? The answer implied by Plantinga's own premises must be no, for God has internal-external freedom but not logical freedom, and God has the greatest possible degree of metaphysical worth. God does not have logical freedom because God has the property of maximal greatness, which includes the property of being wholly good in each world in which he exists. Thus, there is a proof that being internally-externally free but logically determined has greater metaphysical worth than being free in all three respects, the proof being I.

1. God possesses the maximally valuable consistent conjunction of great making properties.
2. If it were intrinsically better to be logically free with respect to a morally good life than logically determined, and this logical freedom were consistent with God's omnipotence and omniscience, then God would possess this logical freedom.

3. Logical freedom with respect to a morally good life is consistent with omnipotence and omniscience.

4. God is logically determined with respect to a morally good life.

Therefore

5. It is false that it is intrinsically better to be logically free with respect to a morally good life than logically determined.

Premise (3) is true because "x knows all truths" does not entail "It is not logically possible for x to perform a morally wrong action," and "x is all-powerful" does not entail "It is not logically possible for x to perform a morally wrong action." Nor does the conjunction of omniscience and omnipotence entail this.

It follows that a possible world WI containing N number of persons who always do what is right and who are logically determined with respect to moral goodness is (all other things being equal) a more metaphysically valuable world than a world W2 containing N number of persons who are logically free with respect to a morally good way of life. And this suggests that God, if he existed, would have created W1 rather than W2.

Although Plantinga does not address this issue, an unspoken assumption of his argument is that there are no possible creatures who are internally-externally free with respect to a morally good life but logically determined. This assumption is false, for "x is an internally-externally free creature with respect to a morally good life" does not entail "x is logically free with respect to a morally good life." If it did, there would have to be some relevant difference between God and creatures that ensured the entailment goes through in the case of creatures but not God. But what could this difference be? As I have suggested, none of the divine attributes (other than necessary goodness) entails necessary goodness. Nor does a conjunction of two or more of these divine attributes entail it. Further, the relevant nondivine attributes do not entail logical freedom with respect to a morally good life. For example, "x knows many but not all truths" does not entail "x freely chooses to do something wrong in at least one possible world in which x exists." Nor is this entailed by "x has the power to do many but not all things."

Very little by way of argument has been given in the literature for the claim that only God is necessarily good. Morris attempts to deduce this thesis from the thesis that the divine attributes are necessarily coextensive, that is, that the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, and so forth are exemplified by God and only God in each possible world. But then the question reverts to whether there is any reason to believe the thesis of necessary coextensivity. Morris offers the justification that he has an "intuition" of this necessary coextensivity and that this intuition is justified because it can be traced to a reliable belief-forming mechanism, namely, that if there were a god of this sort, he would have implanted this intuition in us. But we have already seen that this sort of argument fails because the same sort of argument can be used to justify the intuition that there is a god whose attributes are not necessarily coextensive.

Swinburne presents a different sort of argument in *The Coherence of Theism,* namely, that the conjunction of omniscience and perfect freedom entails necessary goodness. This argument, however, even if sound, does nothing to show that if any being is not both omniscient and perfectly free, it is not necessarily good. Swinburne argues that a perfectly free person "cannot do what he does not regard as in some way a good thing" because the only constraint upon doing what one believes is right is a causal influence upon one's choices, and a perfectly free person is causally uninfluenced (as well as causally undetermined). A person other than God can be perfectly free in Swinburne's sense because there can be a finite disembodied mind, for example, an angel, who is not causally influenced by its prior psychological states or anything else. Further, a nonomniscient person can have only true moral beliefs, if only for the reason that it is possible to know all moral truths and not know all mathematical truths. Such a person would be necessarily morally good, given Swinburne's own premises. Indeed, using Swinburne's premises one can prove the possibility of necessarily good persons other than God:

6. It is possible that there is a nonomniscient mind x such that: for each possible world W in which x exists, and for each circumstance in which x is faced with a moral choice, x knows all the factual and moral truths he needs to know to make a correct choice.

7. This mind x is neither causally determined nor causally influenced by any external or internal factors.
8. Necessarily, if a perfectly free mind knows all the moral and factual truths needed to make the morally correct choice in any morally significant circum stance in which he finds himself, then this mind will make the correct choice.

If such persons are possible, worlds containing only such persons and God and no nature (a physical realm) are possible; in these worlds, there is no moral or natural evil. The counterfactual argument that it is possible that if God created these persons in certain circumstances, they *would* do something wrong, fails because these persons are necessarily good. Accordingly, Plantinga's free will defense cannot be used to show that a world containing these persons is not creatable.

The idea that there are possible creatures who are necessarily good and that God could have created a world containing only them does not depend on the truth of Plantinga's theory of counterfactuals of freedom. At first glance, it might appear there is a dependency because presumably God, if he existed, would have known logically prior to creation counterfactuals about these creatures and made his decision to create a world with them on the basis of this knowledge. For example, God would know prior to creation

9. If the individual essences of some necessarily good creatures were to be instantiated, the instantiations of these essences would always do what is right.

Proposition (9) *is* true logically prior to creation even if Plantinga's theory is false, for (9) is analytically true and thereby does not require similarity relations among worlds to make it true. Proposition (9) is true because the antecedent entails the consequent. Accordingly, if the Stalnaker-Lewis theory of counterfactuals is true, there are no *logically contingent* counterfactuals of freedom that are true logically prior to creation, but there are logically necessary counterfactuals of freedom that are true logically prior to creation, and the latter are all that God needs to know which world to create.

The fact that necessarily good creatures are possible supplies the missing proposition (p') that will enable the conjunction of (G), (E), and (p') to form an explicit contradiction. Statements (G) and (E) we recall, are

G. God exists and is wholly good, omnipotent, and omniscient.

E. There is evil.

There are several ways to formulate (p'), one being based on a proposition in Plantinga's first discussion of the free will defense in his article "The Free Will Defence" (1965). It reads as follows:

10. If God is all-good and the proposition *God creates free humans and the free humans He creates always do what is right* is consistent, then any free humans created by God always do what is right.

If the negation of (E) is to be deduced from (10) and (G), then (10) needs to be a necessary truth. But we need further premises. One is

11. It is consistent that God creates free humans and the free humans he creates always do what is right.

Another is

12. It is possible that: free humans who always do what is right exist without there being any natural evil, and if God creates these humans, he will not create natural evil.

If (10), (11), and (12) are all necessary truths, then the proposition (p') is the conjunction of (10), (II), and (12) because the conjunction of these three propositions with (G) entails

-E. There is no evil.

This would give a sound logical argument from evil, for it would show that the theist is committed to a proposition two of whose conjunctions are *there is evil* and *there is no evil.*

In "The Free Will Defence" Plantinga attacks (10). He writes, "There seems to be no reason for supposing that (10) is true at all, let alone necessarily true. Whether the free men created by God would always do what is right would presumably be up to them; for all we know they might sometimes exercise their freedom to do what is wrong."

In one sense Plantinga is right, for humans are logically free with respect to a morally good life and *being logically free* and *being logically determined* are plausibly thought to be essential properties. There is no possible world in which humans are logically determined with respect to a morally good life. But Plantinga over- looks the possibility that there are possible rational creatures who are internally-externally free but logically determined, and if we take "humans" in (10) in a broad sense as referring to any rational creature, then Plantinga's purported refutation of (10) fails. Thus, the logical argument from evil goes through unscathed by Plantinga's criticism.

The soundness of the logical argument from evil can be seen more clearly if we consider a relevant proposition from Plantinga's *God, Freedom and Evil,* a proposition that he concedes "for purposes of argument" is a necessary truth (although he subsequently makes no attempt to show it is not a necessary truth). The proposition is

13. An omniscient and omnipotent [and wholly] good being eliminates every evil that it can properly eliminate.

A being *properly eliminates* an evil state of affairs if it eliminates that evil without either eliminating an outweighing good or bringing about a greater evil. A good state of affairs g outweighs an evil state of affairs e if the conjunctive state of affairs *9 and e* is a good state of affairs. Given these definitions, it is plausible to think that (13) is a necessary truth. If a state of affairs is eliminated by its actualization being prevented, and if a possible world is a state of affairs (a maximal state of affairs), then (13) entails

14. God prevents from being actual any world W1 that contains evil if there is another creatable world W2 containing at least as much good as W1 and no evil.

There is no world containing evil that contains more good than a creatable world W2 that contains no evil and that consists of God and an infinite number of necessarily good and internally-externally free rational creatures who perform an infinite number of good acts. This is true by virtue of the mathematics of infinity, for the addition of more creatures or acts to a world containing an infinite number of them does not increase the amount of good, for infinity plus N for any finite number N equals infinity. Thus we cannot say that there is a possible world containing evil and infinity-plus-N good acts and that this world contains more good than a world containing an infinite number of good acts and no evil. Of course, we can get *more* good acts if we add to a world with aleph-zero good acts an additional aleph-one acts, where aleph-zero is the number of all finite integers and aleph-one is (by the continuum hypothesis) the number of all real numbers. But this sort of argument can be blocked by supporting there is another world with no evil but with aleph-one good acts. The same holds for any other transfinite cardinal greater than aleph-zero.

The above arguments about necessarily good free rational creatures show that

15. There is some possible creatable world W2 containing only God and an infinite number of necessarily good free rational creatures who perform an infinite number of good acts.

This gives us our explicit contradiction, namely, the conjunction of the following propositions:

G. God exists and is wholly good, omnipotent, and omniscient.

E. There is evil.

14. God prevents from being actual any world W1 that contains evil if there is another creatable world W2 containing at least as much good as W1 and no evil.

15. For any possible creatable world W I containing evil and an infinite number of free rational creatures who perform an infinite number of good acts, there is another possible creatable world W2 containing no evil and an infinite number of necessarily good free rational creatures who perform an infinite number of good acts.

-E. There is no evil (from G, (14], and (15]).

The logical argument from evil, then, appears to succeed, or at least Plantinga and nobody else known to me has given a good reason to think it does not. Accordingly, we must relinquish at least for the present the claim that human life has an objective, monotheistic religious meaning. It seems reasonable to believe on the basis of the considerations adduced in this chapter that the presence of evil makes human life religiously meaningless in the monotheistic sense.

Note that this logical argument from evil is not John Mackie's argument, which Plantinga is commonly credited with refuting. Mackie's argument is, "If God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion."

In a possible worlds formulation, this may be construed as the claim that there is a logically possible world in which humans always choose what is right. But Plantinga counters this by noting that the existence of such a possible world does not mean that God could have actualized it, for it is possible that if God had created the people in this world and placed them in the relevant circumstances, they would have made wrong choices. In short, Mackie's argument fails because he supposes the logically

possible world in which free creatures always do what is right contains *humans* who are *logically free* with respect to living a good life. Mackie's contention is that there is a possible world in which human beings are created by God and always do what is right; he does not argue for the stronger claim that there is a different sort of creature, rational persons who are internally-externally free but logically determined to do what is right, and that there is a possible world containing only them and God. This stronger claim is needed to withstand Plantinga's criticism that it is possible that if God created the persons in question, they would choose to do some wrong acts, even though they might not have.

A number of different arguments against Plantinga's free will defense are offered by Gale. He does not make a distinction among external/internal / logical freedom and tacitly assumes with Plantinga that finite rational creatures are logically free.

Gale's basic argument is that humans do not in fact have (external and internal) free will if they are created by God. He appeals to a principle about humans, namely, that if a person A's actions and choices result from psychological conditions that are intentionally determined by another person B, then A's actions and choices are not free. Gale supports this principle with the example of a cyberneticist operating on his wife's brain and replacing it with a preprogrammed computer analogue, which inculcates in his wife the desired psychological makeup, comprising desires, dispositions, and the like. This psychological makeup may incline toward or render probable certain choices by his wife, but these choices are not free because his wife does not have a mind of her own. Gale notes that, according to Plantinga, God intentionally causes a created person to have all of her freedom- neutral properties, which include her psychological makeup. This implies, according to Gale, that this created "person is rendered nonfree due to her not having a mind of her own."

Gale points out that his argument is not conclusive because it "applies the same freedom-canceling principles that apply to man-man cases to the God-man case," and the analogies may not be sufficiently strong. Nonetheless, Gale thinks his argument has some force against Plantinga's free will defense. But does it? I believe the disanalogies of the God-human case outweigh the analogies. Specifically, the human-human cases involve the husband altering the original, natural, psychological makeup of his wife and replacing it with a new, artificial one. But in the God-human case, God does not alter the person's original psychological makeup; rather, the person's original psychological makeup is precisely what is created by God. What is denoted by "a mind of her own" is precisely what is originally created by God. Thus, I think Plantinga's free will defense can survive this attack.

Gale has much more to say about the problems with Plantinga's free will defense, none of which he thinks conclusively refutes the defense. I believe that the distinction I made among external/internal / logical freedoms and the argument I based on this do conclusively refute Plantinga's free will defense, and thus we need not rely on Gale's many arguments to see that the defense does not succeed. But Gale's critique of the free will defense extends to versions other than Plantinga's, for example, Adams's, and Gale makes several plausible points in his extensive discussion of the various versions of the defense.

Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 166-67.

Wesley Morrison, "Is God 'Significantly Free'?" *Faith and Philosophy* 2 (1985): 257-64, esp. 57-58.

Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, 166.

Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1977), 146.

Plantinga, "The Free Will Defence" in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. S. Cahn (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 56-57. (10) is Plantinga's (6'). This article was originally published in Max Black, ed., *Philosophy* in *America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965).

John Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Cahn, 7-22, esp. 17.

Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God.* 160.

Ibid., 158.