Should We Use the Free Will Defense?

Introduction

I'm sure you've heard it before; perhaps you've even said it yourself. A conversation comes up; with a friend, with a stranger, in the gym, on a plane. You say you are a Christian, the other person says they are not, and inevitably the reason is given: they cannot believe a good God would allow so much evil in the world. The back and forth begins; and then, perhaps, you mention it, or you refer to someone who does, but even as you say it, you might not even believe it; you know it's not a good enough answer, but you are desperate, so you say it anyway.

Free will. That is why evil exists.

If I've heard it once, I've heard it a hundred times; from all manner of Christians, ministers and lay people alike; those who believe firmly in free will and often those who don't. But even if you have never used it, I'm sure the idea is familiar to you: we *have to* have free will, of course, because without it our moral actions wouldn't mean anything, but precisely because we do have free will, bad things will happen, because some people will use their free will to hurt others.

But is this really a good response? For one thing, do we actually have free will? And what about bad things that happen in nature—diseases or natural disasters? If your conversation partner was thoughtful enough, probably these and similar questions were explored; perhaps the conversation ended in deadlock. But my aim in this paper is to explore this matter in some detail. There are certainly many who are more qualified to address this topic, but as someone who has seriously studied the issue as a graduate student in analytic philosophy, and who has been involved in evangelism and apologetics for over two decades, I believe what I am offering here will perhaps help us at least to some degree reach an answer. And my answer to the question of whether we should use free will in this whole discussion of the problem of evil is, like the issue itself, a bit complicated. But this is perhaps the main reason for this paper. For I have found that those who use the free will defense as a response to the problem of evil often have not seriously studied the issue; they use it readily and willingly, even flippantly, perhaps, when they should be using it cautiously and carefully—if at all.

We will be obligated to tour the philosophical landscape a bit, where most of the heavy lifting on this topic has taken place, but I shall do my very best to stay as close to the surface as possible, making use of just enough of the relevant material to make each point clear. This paper is thus not for professional philosophers but for thoughtful general readers. I cheerfully acknowledge that little of what I say will be entirely original or new, but I nonetheless hope to help Christians of all ages, education levels, and theological persuasions to understand this issue more thoroughly and to be able to think and converse properly about what is undoubtedly a very important topic. For as we shall see, this issue more than anything else has to do with one's view of God, about whom we are obligated to think and speak correctly.

I. What is the "Problem of Evil"?

First of all, a brief review: what do we mean when we say "the problem of evil"? A Christian has perhaps been taught to think that "evil" is the same as "sin"; evil is doing something contrary to the will of God. But this is only one meaning of "evil." There is also the evil of pain, suffering, and death; these might not be directly or immediately tied to an act of sin, and yet they are evil

nonetheless. How so? Because they were not part of God's original revealed will for mankind. In the biblical story, it was clearly not God's initial intention that human beings experience pain or die; the Bible makes it clear that these are the result of the curse imposed after the Fall. So when these things occur today, it makes sense to say that they are evils. In fact, we can even say, as many thinkers in history have, that the problem of evil is really the problem of pain; of why there is mental and physical suffering in the world, and so much of it. And so here we can also observe, as philosophers have over the years, that there are two broad types of evil in our world: *moral evil*, which is the bad things caused by moral agents (such as fallen angels or human beings); and *natural evil*, which is the bad things not caused by moral agents, but by things like disease, accidents, natural disasters, etc. These categories are not always perfectly distinct from one another, of course, but they are helpful to make our initial point—that when we discuss the problem of pain and suffering, we are referring to all the causes of pain and suffering that exist in our world.

But more to the point: what do we mean when we say that evil a *problem*? Though evil involves pain and suffering–obviously a problem in itself–this is not exactly what we mean when we say "the problem of evil." Quite simply, evil becomes a problem when it seems unfair, unjust, or simply unnecessary. The thoughtful reader will have no doubt read the previous paragraph and protested that at least some of the pain and suffering in our world should not be called *evil*; some of it might in fact be called *justice*. The mental pain and suffering of a guilty soul in prison, for example, might not be perceived as evil; at least not evil *simpliciter*, or without any qualification. But evil becomes a problem, again, when there is seemingly no justice involved; when the evil appears to be clearly beyond what is fair or equitable. Some Christians, again, may wish to argue that there is no such kind of evil in God's universe; all evil is ultimately just and therefore defensible, being the result of sin. Or, some Christians may wish to argue that evil is justified because it brings about a greater good; for example, we were taught by our parents that it is precisely the suffering of hardship that produces good character (though many of us left to experience the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," as Hamlet put it, likely came away with a peck of character and a bushel of bitterness). But to argue this is to go against what seems to be everyday experience and even the teaching of Scripture itself.

Think about it: each of us can point to numerous examples of evil that we have either encountered or heard about that truly seem unjust or pointless: the drawn out suffering and death of a starving child in a developing country; the abduction, torture, and rape of a promising college student; the soul-destroying torment of a woman trapped in an abusive marriage; and even more horrendous or gratuitous evils than these. Tragedy, which the illustrious Greeks built an entire literature around, was defined by Aristotle as that which elicits sympathy; the misfortune that befalls the main character is "not through vice or depravity, but…because of some mistake."[1] The Greeks realized full well that life is full of suffering and pain that seems fundamentally unjust; so do we all. This is not to say, again, that *all* such pain and suffering is ultimately unjust; it is just to say that much of it seems so. In other words, it cries out for explanation. And when we bring in the testimony of Scripture, we see this sentiment expressed over and over again. The Psalms, for example, are full of cries to God over the injustice in the world; and there is an entire book, the book of Job, centered around this theme. In short, then, there are evils in the world that seem for all intents and purposes to

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[1] Aristotle, *Poetics,* translated by James Hutton (Norton, 1982), pg. 57. It is interesting to note that the word "mistake" here translates the Greek word "hamartia," which the New Testament uses as the word "sin;" but for Aristotle "hamartia" was meant to imply only light responsibility, otherwise the audience would feel a sense of *justice* at the character's misfortune, and not *sympathy*.

be unfair; and this is clearly a problem for the reflective or sensitive soul, even for the true believer.

By now we can see that the problem of evil fully realized has to do more than anything else with God. The question in its purest form is as follows: Why would God allow so many bad things to happen? God, of course, is supposed to be perfectly good; and this must mean that he wishes no harm upon the creatures he has made, especially unjust or gratuitous harm. He is also supposed to be all-knowing and all-powerful; surely he knows about any evil that might take place and can prevent it from occurring. Considerations of this sort go back to ancient times; in the modern period, they were brought again to the fore by Hume;[2] in recent times the topic has been written on extensively. Several notable 20th philosophers, including, famously, J.L. Mackie, attempted to make this into a robust philosophical argument.[3] Mackie and others claimed that the problem of evil is a problem of *logical contradiction*, which simply means that one or more propositions[4] in a group (or "set" as philosophers like to call them) contradict each other, or can't all be true at the same time. Mackie's claim is that the propositions "God is good," "God is omnipotent," and "evil exists" can't all be true; but because it is clear and obvious that evil exists, then one of the other two propositions must be false. Mackie correctly notes that there is no *formal* contradiction between these three propositions; that is, none of the three are direct negations of the other (such as "God is good" and "it is false that God is good"). In order to say there is a contradiction here, then, we would need some additional propositions added to the set. Mackie proposes the propositions "A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can" and "there is no limit to what an omnipotent thing can do."[5] These additions would make it clear, Mackie concludes, that there is a contradiction somewhere in the set; for if God can do anything and always eliminates evil as far as he can, then why does evil exist?

By the mid-twentieth century, then, through essays by Mackie and others, the problem of evil was presented as a logical problem; a problem of logical consistency.[6] As we will see, however, after robust responses from Christian philosophers, most notably Alvin Plantinga, the problem took on a new form. Philosophers no longer viewed the logical problem as paramount; the aim was to show not that God and evil were logically incompatible, but that based on the evidence of the evil in the actual world, the existence of God was *improbable*. This became known as the *evidential* argument from evil. To argue for improbability, of course, is a bit less brazen than to argue for logical inconsistency; Christian thinkers the world over viewed this development as a triumph. Many claimed that Plantinga had successfully demonstrated that there is no logical incompatibility between the existence of God and the existence of evil, and that the problem of evil had thus lost some of its bite. We will examine this claim in this essay; for now, however, it is very important to understand that Plantinga's response to the problem of evil, which he

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[2] See, for example, his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Part Ten.

[3] See, for example, J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* 64 (254), 1955: 200-212.

[4] In philosophy, a proposition, roughly, is a declarative statement that may be either true or false. It is not properly a *sentence*, as the same proposition can be expressed in different languages (and thus different sentences); it is best explained as the thought or content behind a sentence.

[5] Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 201.

[6] The logical problem of evil can be stated in the negative (as a problem of contradiction or inconsistency) or in the positive (as a problem of consistency or, less commonly, compatibility); in propositional logic, contradiction and consistency are opposites.

called the "free will defense," was directed primarily at the *logical* problem of evil—at the idea that there is some logical inconsistency between the claim that a good and omnipotent God can coexist with evil. Failure to appreciate this distinction lies at the heart of much confusion in this discussion.

Now, it need not take a philosopher or logician to understand that showing logical incompatibility between propositions that are not explicitly contradictory is a very tall order indeed; still, Plantinga felt compelled to address the issue. Let us now seek to determine if he succeeded.

II. What is the "Free Will Defense"?

It is widely known that the idea that free will might to some degree explain the existence of evil goes back at least to Augustine. This idea is thus not original to Plantinga, but as we have said, no one has mounted a more robust—and some would say, successful—version of this response. Plantinga's answer to Mackie and others unfolded over a numbers of years in a collection of essays and books. Each time, Plantinga further developed and refined his argument; in this overview, we will be looking at one particular version that is fairly succinct and relatively easy to grasp.

First, though, a brief word about free will. Of course, questions about whether our wills are free go back to the beginning of civilized thought; perhaps no philosophical issue has received more attention, especially in modern times. A wide variety of theories on what constitutes free will have emerged; unsurprisingly, and to put it mildly, no consensus has emerged, regarding either the question of whether we have free will or not or the question of what sort of thing free will might be (more on this a bit later). Plantinga keeps it simple. For him, free will is as follows: "If a person is free with respect to *A* at a time *t*, then at *t* it is within his power to perform *A* and within his power to refrain from *A*. Causal laws and antecedent conditions determine neither that he performs *A* at *t* or that he refrains from so doing."[7] The casual student of philosophy will recognize this understanding of free will as more or less the traditional view, which is often called *libertarianism*; it aligns with the "garden of forking paths" metaphor or the "leeway" model of incompatibilism,[8] as it has come to be known. The basic idea here is that a person is free if he truly has the power or ability to choose between two alternatives; whatever choice he makes, he could have chosen otherwise. His actions are thus not determined or made necessary by the laws of nature or anything else. Again, this is more or less the typical view of free will that many seem to have, including those who have never studied philosophy; in light of this, it may be surprising to learn that this is more or less the extent of Plantinga's comments on free will across all of his writings.

Next, a brief word about a "defense." Plantinga uses this term to refer not to an explanation for evil—in other words, not an actual reason for why God might allow evil, which is called a

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[7] Alvin Plantinga, "Which Worlds Could God Have Created?," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXX, No. 17 (October 11, 1973), 542.

[8] Compatibilism is the thesis that determinism and free will might both be true (compatible)—that is, that our actions might be determined (we cannot do otherwise), and yet we still might have free will. Incompatibilism denies this. Sometimes compatibilism is the thesis that both determinism and moral responsibility (not necessarily free will) are compatible.

theodicy—but merely a possible one.[9] As we have seen, Plantinga's aim is to overthrow Mackie and friends; to answer those who claim that the problem of evil is a problem of logical compatibility. His purpose is thus not to attempt to list the actual reasons, theological or otherwise, for why God would allow evil, especially specific evils; Plantinga views this as falling at least partly under the domain of the pastor.[10] Plantinga rightly understands that logical possibility is all one needs here; whether the reason he gives is actually true or not is for all intents and purposes irrelevant. We will come back to this issue in more detail later.

With this distinction in hand, where Plantinga goes from here is anything but simple. In crafting his defense using free will, Plantinga proceeds to unpack what has become one of the most discussed and debated arguments in the recent literature, one that made quite the impression on his fellow philosophers. Nelson Pike refers to it as "one of the most demanding" arguments ever created on the subject, one that would be studied for years afterward;[11] Peter van Inwagen calls it "enormously elaborate";[12] Alexander Pruss deems it "subtle and complicated."[13] [14] Now, here I must confess that the ground will get a little rocky; but I know of no way to seriously address this matter other than to actually present the main section of Plantinga's argument. For those unschooled in philosophy, the going will be rough, but the reward worth it.

To preface the argument: what Plantinga is doing is answering Mackie's own objection to the free will defense. Noting that free will is a popular answer to the question of why God allows evil, Mackie's response to the counterargument he raises, in the essay we have already cited, is to pose the question of *why God couldn't create creatures capable of freely doing good all the time*. Clearly he can create creatures capable of freely doing good some of the time, says Mackie; why can't he do it all the time? Mackie dismisses the notion that doing some evil is a necessary component of free choice; while this may seem intuitive—if doing something bad is not really an option, then do I really have free choice?—if free will has anything at all to do with men's *character*, says Mackie, as it seems it must, then surely God could have made us such that we always freely choose the good.[15]

Here is the main section of Plantinga's reply. Fasten your seatbelts.

> Let's suppose that Curley Smith, the mayor of Boston, has in fact been offered a bribe of $35,000 to take some improper action; and let's suppose further that he has accepted the bribe. We may speculate as to what Curley would have done had he instead been offered a bribe of

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[9] Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 28.

[10] Ibid., 28-29.

[11] Nelson Pike, "Plantinga on Free Will and Evil," Religious Studies, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Dec., 1979), 450.

[12] Peter Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil (*Oxford University Press, 2008), 79.

[13] Alexander Pruss, "A New Free will Defense," Religious Studies, Vol. 39, No. 2 (June 2003), 211.

[14] It is worth pointing out that Plantinga would later call his most detailed formulation of the argument, the one found in *The Nature of Necessity*, "complicated," "messy," and "hard to follow." See James E. Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen, *Alvin Plantinga* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1985), *Self-Profile*. A great deal more logical rigor is given to his argument in *The Nature of Necessity*, but the gist of it is neatly summarized in the Tooley essay, represented here.

[15] Mackie, 209.

$20,000 to perform that same improper action. Clearly there are possible worlds in which (a) God strongly actualises (among others) the state of affairs consisting in Curley's being offered a bribe of $20,000 and Curley's being free with respect to the action of taking the bribe, and in which (b) Curley freely accepts the bribe. Now let *W* be any such world, and let *T* be the largest state of affairs God strongly actualises in *W*; that is, God strongly actualises *T* in *W* and *T* includes every state of affairs God strongly actualises in *W*. I argued...that there are other possible worlds in which God strongly actualises the very same states of affairs as he does in *W*, and in which Curley rejects the bribe; let *W** be any such world. In *W** God strongly actualises the very same states of affairs as he does in W; hence *T*, the largest state of affairs God strongly actualises in *W*, is also the largest state of affairs he strongly actualises in *W**. *W**, therefore, includes God's strongly actualising *T*. I then assumed that either

> (4) If God had strongly actualised Curley's being offered the bribe and being free to accept or reject it, then Curley would have accepted it

or

> (5) If God had strongly actualised Curley's being offered the bribe and being free to accept or reject it, then Curley would not have accepted it

is true. I went on to argue that if (4) is true, then so is

> (6) If God had strongly actualised *T*, then Curley would have accepted the bribe;

and if (5) is true, then so is

> (7) If God had strongly actualised *T* then Curley would not have accepted the bribe.

I then argued for two theses:

> (8) If (6) is true, then God could not have weakly actualised *W** (that is, if (6) is true, then there is no state of affairs *C* such that God could have strongly actualised *C* and such that if he had strongly actualised *C*, then *W** would have been actual), and
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> (9) If (7) is true, then God could not have weakly actualised *W*.

…Accordingly, if (6) is true, then God could not have weakly actualised *W**; if (7) is true, he could not have weakly actualised *W*; so either way there is at least one possible world God could not have weakly actualised.[16]

If you are reading this sentence, then you are still reading this paper; congratulations! Such arguments as these are not for the faint of heart; had you turned away in disgust, dismay, or bewilderment, you could hardly be blamed. Now for the explanation. Despite the tedium and formality of Plantinga's argument (which is rather standard fare for analytic philosophers), the basic line of thought here is relatively easy to grasp. Plantinga's move in this famous argument is to attempt to show that given a traditional understanding of free will, perhaps God actually *couldn't* create men such that they always freely choose the good—meaning that there are

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[16] Alvin Plantinga, "Tooley and Evil: A Reply," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 60, No.1, March 1981, 67-68.

actually some things that God cannot do (God is thus not omnipotent in the way it is usually understood).[17] He begins by differentiating between what he calls "strong" actualization and "weak" actualization, the former referring to God directly causing someone to do something, and the latter being God placing someone in circumstances in which he knows that person would do the action on his own. Plantinga then argues that given the traditional view of free will, that one's actions are not determined or made necessary by God or anything else, there are two “possible worlds”—roughly speaking, ways things might have been[18]—in which God strongly actualizes the exact same states of affairs and Curley does two different things. In one possible world in which God strongly actualizes a certain state of affairs, Curley accepts the bribe; in another, Curley rejects it; all due to his autonomous free will. If this is the case, says Plantinga, then God cannot do anything about it; he cannot *strongly* actualize one of the worlds, for that would violate Curley's free will; and he cannot *weakly* actualize one or the other of the worlds either (depending on which one Curley chooses), for strongly actualizing *T* is the most he can do by way of weak actualization. Thus, given that either (4) or (5) above is true, there is at least one possible world that God cannot bring about.

A fairly ingenious approach; but of course, this does not entirely settle the issue. For suppose God does create a world in which people have free choices outside of his control; still the question persists: why must they make free *bad* choices? Couldn't God create people who make free choices but always freely choose the good? Must Curley really accept the bribe? Mackie believes this is possible; again, given the idea that men's character might play a role in their choices, surely God could create us such that we would be inclined toward the good, while still remaining free.[19] Plantinga's reply here is simple, and with it his response is complete: it may be that all persons suffer from what he famously calls "transworld depravity.” This is the idea that no matter what possible world a person might inhabit, they might still go wrong with respect to a certain action; being depraved may simply be part of their essence. Of course, we do not know if people actually suffer from this, says Plantinga; nevertheless, it is at least *possible* that everyone suffers from it, and if this is the case, then we have a potential answer for why evil might exist. And that is all we need.[20]

III. Some Problems With the Free Will Defense

Now, we have attempted (perhaps recklessly) to condense into two paragraphs what Plantinga takes pages to unpack (which is why his esteemed colleagues deemed the argument complicated; but given Mackie’s bold challenge, perhaps a bit of tedium—or rather, precision and rigor—was warranted). We will look at certain parts of the argument in more detail later; for now, in the interest of full disclosure, we should acknowledge once again that a fair number of philosophers have judged Plantinga’s argument successful as a response to the logical problem of evil, though others have not. My aim now is to highlight a few of the critical responses; for the sake of brevity, we will limit ourselves to those that seem to be the most significant. Our purpose here, again, will be to demonstrate that while impressive, Plantinga’s

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[17] Plantinga is keen throughout his writings to show that traditional ideas of God’s omnipotence need to be qualified; God can’t do what is logically impossible, for example, and perhaps, as he argues here, he can’t create just any possible world he pleases.

[18] More fully, a possible world is a logically possible state of affairs that is *maximal* or *complete;* see Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 44.

[19] Mackie, 209.

[20] Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity,* 188.

argument, and free will responses to the problem of evil in general, face formidable difficulties, and as we said at the beginning, should be utilized with a significant degree of caution, if at all.

A. The Problem of Free Will Itself

The first problem is one we have already mentioned, and it is one that many lay advocates of free will commonly overlook. It is simply this: whatever we might think or say about free will, however much we value the notion, the undeniable fact of the matter is that we have no idea what free will is or even might be. That is, no clear or successful explanation of it has ever been put forward, let alone widely accepted. Now, as we have already said, Plantinga is not interested in whether free will is actually real or not; he is only interested in its possibility. That is all he needs to make his defense. But it is very important when addressing free will responses in general to point out the serious difficulties accompanying this notion. Plantinga's move, like so many others', is mostly to say what free will is *not*; but to say what it *is*, of course, is an entirely different thing. One might say that free acts are not determined; but how then do such free actions come about? The problem is even compounded a bit by consideration of what free will is not, for if we say, with Plantinga, that free will means acting without determination or necessity from causal laws and antecedent conditions, then what sort of causation are we left with?

It could be argued that we have general clarity regarding what it might mean to say that one thing directly or immediately causes another, and that an effect is made necessary by its cause (it seems to be a widely shared intuition that if the exact same circumstances were to occur, the exact same effect would come about). This was the view of nature and natural processes in general that became solidified in the modern period; arguably, what seem to be such cause and effect relationships can be observed every day. (As an exercise, ponder a mundane cause and effect relationship that is occurring near you at this moment; try to imagine a different effect occurring under the exact same causal conditions). Whether we accept that this is the whole truth of the matter in light of recent advances in theoretical physics (such as quantum models) is another thing altogether; but at least the notion appears intuitively plausible. If we remove this sort of causation, however, then how do certain events or states of affairs come about, including those that come about by way of human choice? Philosopher Robert Kane, himself a defender of free will, puts the problem this way:

> In order to explain how free actions can escape the clutches of physical causes and laws of nature (so that free actions will not be determined by physical laws), libertarians have posited transempirical power centers, immaterial egos, noumenal selves outside of space and time, unmoved movers, uncaused causes and other unusual forms of agency or causation–thereby inviting charges of obscurity or mystery against their view...The problem...has to do with an ancient dilemma: If free will is not compatible with determinism, as libertarians contend, free will does not seem to be compatible with indeterminism either (the opposite of determinism). Events that are undetermined, such as quantum jumps in atoms, happen merely by chance. So if free actions were undetermined, as libertarians claim, it seems that they too would happen by chance. But how can chance events be free and responsible actions?[21]

There are at least two issues with free will that are in view here: first, there is the question of how free (undetermined) actions come about at all, and second, how they might confer moral responsibility. As Kane points out regarding the first of these, there seem to be only two options here, determinism according to physical laws, or indeterminism, which is essentially

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[21] Robert Kane, "Libertarianism," in *Four Views on Free Will*, Fischer et al., editors, (Oxford: Blackwell 2007), 9.

randomness. That is, either an effect is made necessary by its cause, or the event comes about randomly. But how might a choice of the human will come about randomly—that is, without any determining cause? And if we concede that it can indeed do so, then the second problem comes into view: how can we say it is under our control, and thus that we are responsible for it?

For millennia in philosophical thinking, the idea that causation is essentially deterministic passed unquestioned. In her famous essay "Causality and Determination," in which she attempts to undermine this time-honored notion, Elizabeth Anscombe acknowledges the persistence of this belief from Aristotle all the way to Bertrand Russell, surviving even the attack on causation put forward by Hume.[22] Nevertheless, very recent proponents of libertarian free will such as Christopher Franklin appeal to Anscombe's essay as some sort of defining moment in the history of thought, in which this notion of determined causation was once and for all cast aside.[23] But as Mulder notes, Anscombe's essay is famously "often quoted, sometimes read, rarely understood."[24] And whereas there may be no logical necessity inherent in causation, as philosophers have noted, the problem of indeterminate action still looms. I find it interesting that Anscombe's essay appeals frequently to the supposed indeterminism discovered by modern physics; Franklin himself appeals frequently to quantum mechanics in his discussion of the subject.[25] As this theory remains shrouded in mystery, this is shaky ground indeed. But this is the primary point: even if there appear to be random physical events happening according to some interpretations of this model, or even if there indubitably are, how in the world they might factor into human decision making would be quite the mystery to unravel. And this leads to the second issue raised by Kane: even if it is allowed that some events, even human choices, come about in an indeterministic way, how might we say that we have control over them, a control that confers a sufficient degree of responsibility? To put it simply, if all free choices are matters of *luck*, then we cannot be praised or blamed for them. This notion has received an enormous amount of attention in the literature, and the discussion is likely to go on for some time; suffice it to say, no easy solution appears in sight. Like so many other topics in 20th century philosophy, clarity and unanimity appear nowhere on the horizon.

The free will defender, then, if he is to be taken seriously, must first deal with the problem of indeterminism and responsibility: how free, undetermined human actions might come about at all, and how we might have control over them, a control that confers responsibility. This problem alone, I contend, is sufficient to make any free will defender proceed with caution. To state it once again, the picture of the universe we received from classical physics, that of natural laws and deterministic processes inferred from observable phenomena, remains reasonably clear and understandable; thus far there is no such clear and understandable notion regarding indeterminism or randomness. It may be unsettling to think of human behavior as being part of this "ruthless" scientific picture, but I contend that this is likely to remain the more plausible option.

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[22] G.E.M. Anscombe, "Causality and Determination," in *Causation*, Sosa and Tooley, eds. (Oxford University Press, 1993), 88-91.

[23] See Christopher Franklin, "Farewell to the luck and *Mind a*rgument," *Philosophical Studies* 156 (2011), 209.

[24] Mulder et. al, "Causality and determination, powers and agency: Anscombean perspectives," *Synthese* (2022) 200, 452.

[25] Franklin, 209.

B. Problems with Some Underlying Assumptions of the Free Will Defense

Moving in a slightly different direction, another problem regarding use of the free will defense involves some of the foundational ideas assumed in it. The first of these was explored by Nelson Pike in an early response to Plantinga.[26] The problem stems from the following question: what might it mean to say that free will is of *sufficient value* to warrant the existence of pain and suffering? Clearly, without this notion of value, the free will defense collapses; the whole point of this response to evil is that the existence of free will is something of great value, great enough to justify the existence of evil. This is what makes it a "greater good," a notion which is essential to any response to the problem of evil (evil exists to bring about a greater good than would exist without it). But how in the world might this value be calculated? Plantinga's assumption regarding the value of free will is stated 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."[27] Now, the notion that free actions are more valuable than actions that are not free, we can grant for the sake of argument; this has intuitive plausibility. But here Plantinga asks us to compare *worlds;* and his conclusion is that a world in which creatures are free and perform *more good than evil actions* is more valuable than a world with no freedom at all, all things being equal. Here the waters begin to muddy. What exactly is the thinking here? That having more free good actions "outweighs" the bad by simple majority? By how many? One or two? Five or six? Surely other things would have to be considered here—in particular, the existence of consequences.

To illustrate the problem, suppose a group of free creatures commits, in total, ten good deeds and seven bad ones; but then suppose that the majority of the good deeds were relatively trivial (such as rescuing a neighbor's cat from a tree), while one or two of the bad deeds were far more significant, involving horrendous consequences. Surely one such bad deed would "outweigh" a large number of trivial good deeds; it cannot be that a good God would think the higher number of trivial good deeds balances out the acts with horrendous consequences. What is becoming clear, then, is that the whole notion of the *value* of free will is fraught with obscurity, and it is fair to say that Plantinga's statements on the matter do not provide much help. To be fair, again, Plantinga's whole project depends on the *possibility* of the ideas in question; that is, it need only be possible that a world with free will outweighs a world without; thus Plantinga's attempt to posit "all else being equal." But our point is that clearly involved in this whole idea of value is the idea that the existence of free will must be weighed not against the lack of free will, but *against the actual evil and suffering of any world in which it exists*. This might lead one to argue that to a perfectly good God, no free good actions are worth horrendous suffering or death. At the very least, then, Plantinga's discussion of value here leaves much to be desired. Marilyn McCord Adams puts it this way:

> I would expect Mackie to press Plantinga on the vagueness of "*A* is on balance a very good world," to query whether a world containing evils in the amounts and of the kinds found in the actual world *could* be a world good enough for God to make, to suggest that the burden of proof is on Plantinga to explain how this could be, and to conclude that-without further argument to the contrary-it is more plausible to suppose the opposite: *viz.,* that if God cannot create significantly free creatures without getting evils in the amounts and of the kinds found in the

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[26] See Nelson Pike, "Plantinga on Free Will and Evil, *Religious Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Dec., 1979), 470-471.

[27] Ibid.

> actual world, He should forego making them altogether and rest content with the beauty of the mountains, etc.[28]

The point, I trust, is sufficiently clear; to say that a world with free will is more valuable than one without it is to miss the point. Something else would have to be factored in order to make a world worth creating; to balance out the evils that exist. So in this case, free will is a sort of philosophical smokescreen; it has no inherent power to balance out any evils. Much more would need to be said here.

A second—and perhaps far more serious—assumption is mentioned by Plantinga in passing: "He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so."[29] Among all the claims in Plantinga's free will defense, this is perhaps the most breathtaking. Plantinga's entire project is built upon the notions of *possibility* and *necessity*; his one aim is to show that it is at least logically possible that an omnipotent and perfectly good God can coexist with evil. But why then this statement? In what sense can it be said that God "can't" prevent his creatures from certain evil acts? There is a bit of disingenuity, perhaps, in Plantinga's statement here; for God hasn't, of course, given free will so that his creatures might commit evil acts. He has given them freedom so that they might perform good acts; so again, in what sense might it be said that he can't prevent them from committing evil ones? It is certainly not a moral one. It might indeed be said to be somewhat inconsiderate of God to grant free will only to take it away on occasion; but if he is able to do so, and is unwilling, then this brings us back to the original problem of evil: we might be forced to conclude that God is not, after all, perfectly good. To put the problem sharply, there is no apparent contradiction, logical or otherwise, in supposing that God might at least sometimes prevent an evil act from occurring.

It should be noted that Plantinga's argument, considered above, suggests that there are at least some free actions that God could not prevent; given libertarian free will, Plantinga argues, there are some possible worlds that God cannot weakly actualize. Perhaps, then, there are some evil choices that cannot be prevented no matter what God does. As we will see shortly, there are serious problems with Plantinga's account; but even if we grant the plausibility of his argument, surely God could prevent situations in which a potentially evil course of action has a high likelihood of occurring. It could certainly be argued that a massive bomb loaded on an airplane and headed in a certain direction after months of planning and discussion is surely not an event a perfectly good God would leave to chance. Again, Plantinga's main argument concerns the truth of one of two possible counterfactual conditionals; but surely when the risk of significant evil is great, the entire situation is something God would want to prevent. Here we are getting ahead of ourselves a bit; but the main point, again, is that Plantinga's statement that God can't grant free will and at the same time prevent it is surely shortsighted.

So glaring is this issue that it remains, in the eyes of many, a serious problem for the free will defense.[30] And there are other closely related criticisms lurking here. Steven Boër argues that acts can be separated from their consequences; allowing free acts to occur does not mean that their intended consequences must also occur (just because one fires a gun doesn't mean

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[28] Marilyn McCord Adams, "Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy,* Vol. 5 : Iss. 2, Article 1, footnote 30. For fuller discussion, see pp. 130ff.

[29] Ibid.

[30] See, for example, Michael Tooley's SEP entry on the problem of evil, 7.2. This issue was also raised by Pike, "Plantinga on Free Will and Evil," 470-472, in addition to Boër and McKim.

the bullet has to find its mark).[31] God could thus allow free acts to occur but prevent any evil consequences. Frank Dilley counters by arguing that since in Boër's world evil acts would no longer have any meaning, people would cease trying to do them; he also argues that the resulting world would be chaos.[32] But surely McKim is right in concluding that Boër's essential claim holds: "Boër's point is just that you cannot get a justification of the evil consequences of choices from the free will defense."[33] Other reasons must factor in; at the very least then, once again, much more needs to be said.

C. The Problem of Natural Evil

There is a third and well-established problem with the free will defense; the problem of natural evil. Natural evil, as we have seen, is any evil not caused by moral agents, such as the evils of diseases or natural disasters. The suffering and death in our world caused by diseases alone dwarfs any other cause; so even if the free acts of moral agents might account for some evil, the vast majority of evil in the world is left unexplained. Here it is critical to return to the difference between a defense and a theodicy. This distinction, as we saw in the beginning, is Plantinga's; his free will defense is not designed to give an *actual* explanation for the existence of evil, but merely a *possible* one. But Plantinga's response to natural evil is to posit, following Augustine, the following remarkable claim:

> Augustine…believes that in fact natural evil (except for what can be attributed to God's punishment) is to be ascribed to the activity of beings that are free and rational but nonhuman. The Free Will Defender, of course, does not assert that this is true; he says only that it is possible…He points to the possibility that natural evil is due to the actions of significantly free but nonhuman persons.[34]

A couple of things should be mentioned in response. First of all, is this a plausible assertion? On the face of it, it seems not; the causes of most diseases and natural disasters are rather clearly understood. Positing additional unseen supernatural activity seems a rather desperate move. One might then ask whether this claim has any biblical or theological basis; but while there are some examples in the Bible of spiritual forces acting on nature or human bodies, the idea that this occurs on a regular basis is not supported in Scripture. It would seem, then, that this suggestion cannot be taken seriously.

Second, though, why does Plantinga feel the need to make this assertion? His job is merely to create a defense; to provide a possible reason why God and evil can coexist. If we grant that at least some evil exists because of free will, isn't that enough to solve the logical problem of evil? Recall that the logical problem of evil, in its simplest form, asserts that there is a logical contradiction in the set of propositions *God is omnipotent, God is perfectly good,* and *evil exists.* To avoid a logical contradiction, all one needs to show that p (an omnipotent and perfectly good God exists) is consistent with q (evil exists) is "a third proposition r whose

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[31] Steven Boër, "The Irrelevance of the Free Will Defense," Analysis 38, no. 2 (1978), 110-111.

[32] Frank Dilley, "Is the Free Will Defence Irrelevant?" Religious Studies 18, no. 3 (1982), 357-358.

[33] Robert McKim, "Worlds without Evil," International Journal for Philosophy of Religion 15, no. 3 (1984), 161.

[34] Plantinga, "God, Freedom, and Evil," 58.

conjunction with p is consistent and entails q."[35] Plantinga's claim that it is possible that God decides to create a morally good world (one that has free will) and that people suffer from depravity would seem to work as r. Thus, in terms of logical consistency, only one free evil act would be enough to overturn the logical problem of evil; one instance of evil is all that is needed.[36] Why Plantinga seems compelled to take on the problem of natural evil remains a mystery.

So the question might be raised why natural evil is a problem for the free will defender; perhaps there is no need to address it at all. A moment's reflection, however, will surely make it obvious that the problem of natural evil is indeed worth raising; thus Plantinga's attempt to do so, lest the free will defense be seen as only a partial response. For when we seek to apply the free will defense to any possible world that contains natural evil, such as the actual world, we begin to see in earnest the weaknesses of a defense in general. What is needed in this whole discussion, surely, is not a possible reason why evil exists, but an actual, serious reason; a theodicy. The problem of natural evil, then, and how Plantinga approaches it, provides an initial look at the extreme limitations of defenses: of proposing mere possibilities or hypotheticals. It may indeed be the case that the problem of evil is not best posed as an abstract or logical problem; but if this is true, then answering the logical problem does little to resolve the issue.

D. Some Problems with Plantinga's Argument

But now we must move on to discussion of Plantinga's main argument itself, and here we will more directly address his attempt to show that there is no logical contradiction in our set. As we have seen, at the heart of his free will defense is an attempt to show that possibly it was not within God's power to create a world with moral good and no moral evil. The claim he finds the most compelling from Mackie, as we have seen, is the idea that God could create creatures who always freely choose the good. To counter this, Plantinga argues that perhaps God could not have created such a world. We summarized his response above, but now it is time to go a little deeper. First of all, we should note that in formulating his argument, Plantinga uses what are called "counterfactual conditionals," or more specifically, counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. A conditional in philosophy is simply an "if-then" statement of the kind we use in everyday language, where there is a relationship between the "if" part of the statement (called the antecedent) such that if it is true, it ensures the truth of the "then" part of the statement (called the consequent). A "counterfactual conditional" is simply a conditional in which the "if" part of the statement is assumed to be false, or contrary to fact.[37]

Applied to the free will defense, Plantinga assumes that there are certain things that people would freely do under certain conditions (for example, if God had strongly actualized a certain state of affairs, Curley would have accepted the bribe). This is where the phrase "counterfactuals of creaturely freedom" comes in. As we saw, however, because of Curley's libertarian free will, there are possible worlds in which God strongly actualizes the same state of affairs and Curley rejects the bribe. If one of these worlds is true, then the other is impossible; they cannot both be true. The entire argument, then, depends on the *truth* of counterfactual conditionals of freedom: there are worlds such that if a certain state of affairs obtains, then an agent *will* do a certain action (either accept the bribe or reject it).

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[35] Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity,* 165.

[36] This point was first made by Richard Otte; see his "Transworld Depravity and Unattainable Worlds," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. LXXVIII, No. 1 (January 2009), pg. 174.

[37] For more, see the SEP entry on counterfactuals, 1.1.

But here we can raise a serious objection. For how can there actually be true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom? Plantinga is careful to argue that he is not saying for certain that there are; only that there might be. But because of the very nature of libertarian free will—that actions are not determined or made necessary by any causal law or prior event—the truth of counterfactuals of freedom is the very thing that falls under suspicion. It can rather confidently be argued that according to the principles of libertarian free will, there is no *truth* regarding a person's choice until the choice is made; for up until the choice is actually made, a person might do either of the two things in question. So the entire foundation of Plantinga's argument is suspect.[38]

Let's dive a bit deeper still. There have been many thinkers over the centuries who have been keen to maintain both God's sovereign control over all things and libertarian free will. This famously spawned the doctrine of Molinism, named for medieval theologian Luis Molina, who argued that both could be maintained because of God's "middle knowledge": his knowledge of what free creatures might do in certain circumstances.[39] Because God has this knowledge, Molina argued, then God can place creatures into whatever circumstances in which they freely choose that he wants; thus both God's sovereignty and man's freedom are preserved. Molinism, however, is famously a hotly contested topic, and open to serious objections. More to the point, it can argued that Plantinga's free will defense fails precisely because it depends on this doctrine. Indeed, Plantinga himself acknowledged that it would be better if the free will defense did not depend on Molinism.[40]

To see the problem, let us look at an objection to Plantinga's argument raised by Alexander Pruss. Pruss notes that Plantinga accepts the following interesting claim about Curley: "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."[41] Recall that the original bribe was $35,000; Plantinga's point is that if it is true that Curley will take $35,000, then he certainly would take $36,000, all else in the example being equal. Pruss argues that if this is so, it is so *necessarily*; and this constitutes a problem for Plantinga's free will defense. For once it is established that Curley takes $35,000 in a world *w*, then his choice to take $36,000 in world *w** will, to use Pruss's language, *dominate* the choice to take the lesser bribe. Pruss's claim is that if this is the case, then presumably God could create a world in which, using the domination principle, he ensures that a free choice is made, and that no sin occurs.[42] All of this, of course, is due to standard Molinist thinking, in which God knows for sure what free agents will do in certain circumstances.

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[38] The most famous critique along these lines was raised by Robert Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil" (*American Philosophical Quarterly* volume. 14 no. 2, April 1977). See especially 110-111.

[39] It was called "middle" because it fell between God's knowledge of necessary truths (what is) and his knowledge of contingent truths (what will be but might not have been). Middle knowledge consists of "what would be true if." For more, see David Hunt's SEP article on foreknowledge and free will, 2.6.

[40] See Alvin Plantinga, "Reply to Adams," in Tomberlin van Inwagen, *Alvin Plantinga*.

[41] Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity,* 177.

[42] Alexander Pruss, "A Counterexample to Plantinga's Free Will Defense" (*Faith and Philosophy* vol. 24, issue 4, article 2, 2012), 407-408.

We do not have space to examine Pruss's fully-fleshed counterexample, but if it holds, then there is indeed a serious flaw in free will defenses based on Molinism; Plantinga's very use of it seems to have been his undoing. For again, if we allow that there are true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom that God knows, then it would seem that he could foresee scenarios in which agents would respond in certain ways, and act to bring only those scenarios about. Pruss's example is aimed directly at the notion that despite God's maximal efforts (the limits of his strong actualization), we still might perform bad actions, given libertarian free will and transworld depravity; for again, it would seem that on the basis of Molinism itself, God still could have created worlds in which this did not occur. Robert Adams agrees:

> God uses his middle knowledge to make such predeterminations effective, choosing conditions and helps of grace that He knows will elicit a favorable response…this presupposes, of course, that for every possible free act of every possible free creature…there are some incentives or helps of grace that God could supply, to which the creature would respond favorably though he could have responded unfavorably…is it not also plausible to suppose that for many possible free creatures, and even for whole worlds full of them, there are possible series of divine operations to which those creatures would respond by *always* freely doing right, never doing wrong?[43]

On Molinism, then, which assumes the truth of counterfactuals of freedom, it would seem that God could avoid those situations where people freely choose to sin. And here it is worth pointing out a strange ambivalence in Plantinga's thinking; on the one hand, he endorses true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, but on the other, he seemingly denies their full potential power. But it could be argued that there is no way out; if one employs Molinism, then there is in fact no satisfactory response to Mackie's original claim, that God could have, in fact, created free creatures who always do what is right.

E. The Problem of the Amount of Evil in the World

There is one final problem with Plantinga's free will defense worth mentioning, and I have reserved it for last, as it I contend it leads to perhaps the most important problem of all for free will defenders. After attempting to take on natural evil, Plantinga then turns his attention to the *amount* of evil in the world; how can the free will defense address this? I would argue, once again, that this is a mistake; if Plantinga's only purpose is to reply to the logical problem of evil, then all he needs to do is show that there is no logical contradiction between the existence of God and the existence of evil. In other words, if it can be shown that *any instance or degree of evil at all* is possibly compatible with God's existence, then it is not clear that there is a logical contradiction here, and the logical problem is resolved. Despite this, as we have seen, Plantinga takes on both natural evil and the amount of evil in the world. The question he considers here is as follows: couldn't God have created a better world than the one we have? In his response, Plantinga keeps it simple; he argues that this question is susceptible to the same line of thought he has already argued. For due to the possibility of libertarian free will, it is at least possible that there are some better worlds God cannot actualize; for it is possible that someone would go wrong in respect to certain action, in which case the actual world might be worse than any possible world. As long as people have free will, then it is possible they will use it to perform wrong actions; thus it is possibly not within God's power to create a better world than the one that actually exists. The amount of evil in the world is therefore up to us.[44]

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[43] Adams, "Middle Knowledge and the Problem of Evil," 116-117.

[44] See Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil,* Part One Chapter Nine.

One way to respond to this line of thinking is to utilize the same counterarguments we have already raised; for as we have seen, a large number of issues exist with the whole free will defense. But there are more serious problems lurking here. For it is in fact quite easy to imagine a world in which free will and moral good and evil exist, but far less evil—in particular, far less pain and suffering—exist as well. And this, in the end, might in fact be the greatest problem of all for the free will defense. This line of thought can be traced back at least to David Hume, who pondered the following possibility:

> I require not that man should have the wings of the eagle, the swiftness of the stag, the force of the ox, the arms of the lion, the scales of the crocodile or rhinoceros; much less do I demand the sagacity of an angel or cherubim. I am contented to take an increase in one single power or faculty of his soul. Let him be endowed with a greater propensity to industry and labour; a more vigorous spring and activity of mind; a more constant bent to business and application…Almost all the moral, as well as natural evils of human life, arise from idleness; and were our species, by the original constitution of their frame, exempt from this vice or infirmity, the perfect cultivation of land, the improvement of arts and manufactures, the exact execution of every office and duty, immediately follow; and men at once may fully reach that state of society, which is so imperfectly attained by the best regulated government.[45]

What Hume is saying here is that if human beings were made just a little bit differently—a bit more industrious, for example—a great many evils would be avoided. The point for our purposes is clear, and we have already alluded to it: the problem of the amount of moral evil cannot be attributed to free will alone, or to depravity, but to *the actual nature or extent of the depravity that afflicts us.* Stated more broadly, the evil that exists in any world depends on a wide variety of factors, including the nature of human beings apart from free will; for we surely could have free will but be less inclined to do evil. And from here it is just a short step to see as well that the evil in any world also depends on the makeup of the natural world itself, on the physical laws that govern it, and on a number of similar things. And so it turns out that it takes very little imagination indeed to see that a great deal of the evil that exists in the world could be avoided if the world itself, including every creature in it, were even a bit different.

What free will defenders such as Plantinga seem momentarily to be forgetting here is that evil is not simply a moral action; evil consists as well of any instance of pain and suffering. But if we were able to eliminate or mitigate a great deal of pain and suffering, whether it results from moral or natural evil, then of course it would be a better world—a world with far less evil. For example, if we did not possess the ability to kill or seriously injure other humans, due to a difference in the makeup of our physical bodies, say, or a slight change in natural laws, the world would be vastly different. Hume imagines a world where we are less inclined to laziness. The point is that it seems very plausible to suppose that free will could be preserved even if the world was safer or less conducive to evil; in terms of the nature and extent of the evil in the world, then, free will is but one of many factors or considerations that come into play. Free will may be a *necessary* condition of any moral action, but it is by no means a *sufficient* one; and this point directly impacts how much evil any world contains.

We see, then, that even the logical problem of evil inevitably goes back, in the end, to the creative will and power of God. For while it may not have been within God's power to create a world with moral good and no moral evil, due to libertarian freedom and transworld depravity, the kinds of creatures we are, and the type and extent of the evil we can do, depends not on

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[45] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London: Penguin Books, 1990, Kindle Edition), 86.

our freedom, but on the physical makeup of the world and the laws that govern it, things that are clearly under God's control. So just as in the problem of natural evil, it would seem that Plantinga's attempt to reconcile the existence of God with the amount of evil the world contains falls woefully short; indeed, it can be said to fail altogether. For the nature, degree, extent, etc. of evil depend on very different things; in particular, on what sort of larger world God chose to create. The real questions regarding the problem of evil *in any possible world*, then, are these: Why this particular world? Why this particular physical composition, why these natural laws? In the actual world, for example, why viruses and other diseases? And on and on we could go. And these sorts of questions are serious indeed; for if it is possible that God had power over these decisions, and if we can indeed imagine a far better world where free will is maintained, then new arguments against the omnipotence and perfect goodness of God emerge.

Now there are some theists who have argued that in order for free will to be valuable, we must not live in an overly safe world; the argument here is that the value of free actions increases as the danger or seriousness of the consequences increases.[46] But it is not at all clear what this means. What exactly does it mean to say that free actions are valuable or not? How is this to be calculated? It seems to me that this line of thinking is subject to a confusion. An action may have a degree of value based on its consequences; for example, an attempt to shield a person from a hail of bullets might be considered more courageous than an attempt to shield a person from a barrage of water balloons. But the value of *freedom* cannot increase; whether the act is free or not is a simple question of whether the act of shielding another was a matter of necessity or not. The simple mechanism of freedom, once again, may be a condition of the moral goodness of the act, but whether one free act is morally superior to another depends on the nature of the other things involved—in this case, the precise danger of the situation and what is at stake. So it is a bit misleading to speak of degrees of value of free acts; the choice to make actions more valuable or not is not directly related to the issue of freedom. As we have just seen, freedom may be a necessary condition of morality (as free will defenders would argue), but one might have freedom but live in a much different world than ours, and so be capable of far less or far more. So it would seem that this objection is subject to the same critique that we have just mentioned; the value of free actions depends on the nature of the world, which leads directly back to the creative intention of God. And so the point in all of this is simply to show that attempts to use free will to address the amount or extent of evil in the world fail.

IV. Should We Use the Free Will Defense?

We have barely scratched the surface on this whole topic, of course; but perhaps at this point it is time to finally seek an answer to our original question: should we use the free will defense as a response to the problem of evil? We have seen that Plantinga's version has a variety of problems, including some that would seem to apply to any attempt to use free will as a response to the problem of evil, not just to Plantinga's free will defense. For there are, of course, ways to argue for the value of free will without resorting to Molinism; some of these have begun to appear in the literature of late. In this paper, however, we are responding to Plantinga's argument because it is widely acknowledged to be the most sophisticated and even successful version that has yet been produced, at least by the Christian philosophical community. I said at the beginning that my answer was, like the issue itself, a bit complicated, and so it is; but when the smoke clears, it can at least be stated in a rather straightforward

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[46] See, for example, Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 264.

way: I do not believe Christians should resort to using the free will defense, but if they must, they should do so with careful explanation and an abundance of caution.

The first reason, as we argued above, concerns free will itself; if it does exist in some form that implies indeterminism, it remains a mystery as to what exactly it is, or how to understand it. We have pointed out some serious issues with indeterminism; but again, even if it is acknowledged that some indeterministic model of free will is possible, no agreement has been reached as to what that model might look like. Of course, the field of free will is as flourishing as ever; certain current theories ask only that an agent be the ultimate source of her actions, not that she be able to do otherwise, and that indeterminism merely take place at some point along the way in the decision making chain. This is indeed a significant shift from the traditional model, including the one Plantinga uses; but what all this might mean is as debated as ever, and likely will be for some time. One sees the wisdom in appealing to science to seek to resolve these issues, but as it turns out, even science itself has not reached a consensus. My own opinion is that due to the general success and relative clarity of the classical model of physics, in which what appear to be deterministic causes and effects in the natural world are observed and known, it will likely remain extremely difficult for indeterministic models of free will to succeed. We have noted the rise of quantum theory, but again, it remains hotly contested and deeply mysterious, both in the natural world and certainly when applied to human behavior. This might explain why a majority of philosophers are *compatibilists,* meaning they subscribe to the compatibility of free will and determinism (that both might be true).[47] Note here, however, that if compatibilist free will is true, then the free will defense collapses; for then God could directly cause someone to freely choose the good, and no problems would remain.

Besides this, there are issues with the ethics or axiology (values) of the assumptions required for the free will defense, and the question of why, in the end, God could not allow good free actions and prevent bad ones; indeed, there is nothing in the free will defense that makes it logically necessary that God allow every instance of a bad free action or its effect. For my part along these lines, I remain unconvinced that Plantinga has resolved Mackie's original paradox of omnipotence, for at the very least surely God could foresee when bad actions were likely to occur and work to prevent them. There are also problems with natural evil and the degree or extent of evil in our world. And, of course, there are questions with Plantinga's argument itself, and its dependence on Molinism. All of this would seem to make citing the free will defense for all intents and purposes a waste of time. Case closed.

Because of the nature of logical contradiction, however, we simply cannot go so far as to say that Plantinga's argument is useless. For, once again, all that is required to show that a set of propositions is not contradictory is to show that some proposition that makes them consistent is *possible.* Plantinga's free will defense is designed as nothing more than this. Plantinga puts his free will defense formally as follows:

$$(\Diamond(P \wedge R) \wedge ((P \wedge R) \rightarrow Q)) \rightarrow \Diamond(P \wedge Q)$$

(If possibly P and R, and if P and R then Q, then possibly P and Q), where P represents traditional claims about God (that he is perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent), Q represents the existence of evil, and R represents the conjunction of claims that make up the free will defense (God decides to create a morally good world and people suffer from transworld depravity). As Plantinga explains it: "It is important to see that R need not be true, or

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[47] Here I am referencing the 2020 PhilPapers poll of nearly 8,000 working philosophers around the world; roughly 60% leaned toward compatibilism; 19% toward libertarianism; and 11% toward no free will at all. See https://survey2020.philpeople.org/survey/results/4838.

probable, or plausible, or accepted by the scientists of our culture circle, or congenial to "man come of age," or anything of the sort: it need only to be such that its conjunction with P is possible and entails Q."[48] The standard for logical contradiction, then, is high indeed; or rather we should say that the standard for overturning it is rather low. But has Plantinga succeeded even in this? In my opinion, as we have seen, he has not; legitimate questions linger, and counterexamples lurk. In the world of professional philosophers, however, no consensus has emerged.

The crucial larger point here is that before anyone should attempt to use the free will defense, he must understand the nature of the logical problem of evil; and he must understand that both the problem and Plantinga's reply are *abstract* in nature—that is, they do not refer to any actual evil or to the actual world. As we have already seen, anyone attempting to use free will as a reply to the evil in the actual world would have to address a host of other concerns, including the nature and extent of the evil consequences that occur. Plantinga thinks of actual evils, as we have seen, as a pastoral problem, but surely this will not do. For how then in the world is someone supposed to address the problem of the evil in the actual world if they are not religious, or are questioning religion? Surely the problem of the evil in the actual world is the only one that matters.[49] As we have said, this has become known as the "evidential" problem of evil, and it has indeed become the central way of discussing the matter; most philosophers think the matter is no longer a question of logical consistency, since Plantinga has shown at least that the logical problem of evil is questionable. I believe the matter is inconclusive, as I have said. I think that logical arguments can perhaps still be raised; but the main reason I believe free will should not be utilized goes beyond this. To sum up, then: while the logical problem of evil and Plantinga's free will defense may retain some value, it seems clear that the problem of the evil that occurs in the actual world is the only one that matters; and while this paper has been aimed primarily at Plantinga's free will defense, I think it is clear that free will is also largely insufficient as a response to the problem of the evil in the actual world. For natural evil, the nature and extent of the evils we face, and other issues require deeper and fuller responses. All of this leads to the doorstep of heaven; a robust theodicy is needed.

V. Conclusion

What then are the believer's remaining options? What else can he say in reply to the problem of the actual evil in the world; how might he begin by way of a theodicy? I wish to conclude this essay by sketching a very brief outline of a possible line of response. First of all, a few words about free will. It so happens that I do not believe we have free will, at least not in an indeterministic sense; I believe our choices are determined, or necessary, and that they come about as a result of a variety of complex factors coming into play. In saying this, of course, I am identifying with a distinguished line of theologians and philosophers down through history, and even with the overwhelming majority of working philosophers today, as I have noted. But of course as a Christian I also believe in moral responsibility, and that our choices have moral value, however they come about. The Bible quite clearly affirms this; it assumes that our choices are up to us in some sense required for moral responsibility. This does not imply either determinism or indeterminism, of course; the Bible is largely silent on this matter. But when it comes specifically to the matter of choosing to believe in God, or exercising saving faith in Jesus, the church has affirmed through the ages the doctrine that we cannot do so without God's grace first assisting us. The modern notion of being able to choose God freely on our own is for all intents and purposes heretical; yet somehow it has become the mainstream

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[48] Plantinga, "Self Profile," 42-43.

[49] Tooley agrees; see his SEP article on the problem of evil, 1.2 and 1.3.

view.[50] This tells us that something has perhaps gone seriously wrong with the modern's church thinking. And this, in my view, adds extra weight to the claim that Christians should be wary of the whole project of appealing to free will in the discussion of evil. The only real reason to bring it up at all, perhaps, is to downplay its significance. Of course, we could say more; for it is also my view that free will responses have grown in prominence because the larger Christian world no longer has a robust and biblical view of God's sovereignty.

So, how then can the Christian justify evil? What, in the end, does the Bible say?[51] First of all, the Bible indeed affirms God's omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness. It also affirms his sovereignty over all things, including evil and the choices of human beings, whether free or not. And while it may make sense to say that not even God can do what is logically impossible, the idea that God would not be able to hinder someone's free action is theological nonsense; so too the idea that he would not be just or fair in doing so. I have argued that Plantinga has not philosophically demonstrated that it is logically impossible for God to stop a free evil act from occurring; far from it. But the point here is that there are serious theological grounds for rejecting this proposal. For the Bible presents God's sovereignty in the most robust terms; nothing comes to pass without his express allowance. More to the point, there are many instances in the Bible of God hindering or preventing someone's action; the only remaining question is why he doesn't do so all the time.

Let us also recall that the Bible affirms that evil is generally a result of the fall. The punishment for the first sin was banishment from the garden; being forced out of a world of perfect peace and divine protection, and being subject from then on to the aforementioned "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." This is no small point; and as the Bible makes clear, because we all share in Adam's sin, his fate is our fate.[52] And it indeed is a terrible fate. The horrendous things that occur each day make it clear how serious sin is in God's eyes. This is not to suggest that the fall fully explains every instance of pain and suffering, of course; it is simply to claim that without it, pain and suffering would not have entered our world.

Despite this truth, of course, we still could argue that much of the evil in the world is simply unjust. There are cases of gratuitous evil; there are things beyond words. Here it is no light matter to note that the Bible itself is full of such sentiments; one has only to turn to the book of Psalms to find them in abundance. But perhaps the book of Job offers the greatest example of such thinking. The tragedy inflicted upon righteous Job, a case of gratuitous evil if there ever was one, seems unfair in the extreme. Job was the most righteous man on earth, and he lost all of his children and everything he owned in the space of a few hours; and then, as if that wasn't enough, was afflicted with a horrible disease. But when considering the case of Job, as in the case of every living soul, it is helpful to consider *the entire narrative*. God restored Job's fortunes in full; he paid him back with interest, so to speak. There is a lesson here. For the Bible teaches that this earthly life is temporary; the pain that afflicts our earthly minds and bodies is but one small part of our story, our existence. We may indeed suffer pain and suffering, to a degree worse than death itself; but such is, again, only temporary. For those who are righteous, ultimate justice will be achieved, but this is reserved for the eternal realm, when all things will finally and fully be made right. Indeed, says Paul, the suffering of this present life, which is experienced by the whole of creation, is not worth comparing to the glory to be

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[50] See Lynn Rudder Baker, "Why Christians Should Not be Libertarians," *Faith and Philosophy* 20(4), 463.

[51] For an accessible and faithful more lengthy presentation of what the Bible says on the problem of evil, see Greg Welty, *Why is There Evil in the World (And So Much of It?),* Christian Focus Publications, 2018.

[52] See Romans 5:12ff.

revealed to us (Romans 8:18ff). This “light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Corinthians 4:17ff). The witness of the Bible is clear: earthly, temporal suffering, no matter how crushing and horrific, will be more than “balanced out” by the eternal glory that is to come.

And still—questions remain. For what about the souls who will not ultimately be redeemed, whose temporal suffering will not turn into eternal glory, but into eternal suffering? And another: why did God allow evil in the first place? The difficulty of the former question has caused many professed Christian thinkers to abandon certain doctrines about the coming judgement, such as the eternal conscious suffering of the lost. And the latter question is perhaps the most pressing of all. So here we must back up even further, and begin, as it were, at the beginning. And at the beginning must be the idea that before God created the world, he had in view certain “greater goods,” and that without the evils that give rise to them, these goods would not have come about. Make no mistake: as we have mentioned, the “greater goods” response to the problem of evil is an intrinsic part of the Christian story. But the greater goods the Bible puts forth are not any supposed libertarian free will, over which God has no control; the goods are as rich as they are varied. They include the virtuous acts we perform: the faith in the midst of darkness, the love in the face of hostility, the joy in the grip of suffering. But they are so much more.

As we have seen, there is no answer to the problem of evil that doesn’t ultimately arrive back at the doorstep of God. And yet as Christians we must insist that God does not commit evil directly; as in the case of Job, he allows it, but only for a greater good that justifies it. We must insist as well that all will be made right in the end, as we have said. It should be part of every theodicy, for example, to argue that the judgement God has in view for the unredeemed will be perfectly just. Not every judgement will be the same; the Bible is clear that punishment will be meted out in direct proportion both to the evil one has committed and the spiritual knowledge and advantages one has had. We should also add that in the case of children in particular, it is the view of many theologians that every child who dies is received by Christ into his kingdom. And yet—despite all this—Job might still complain about the loss of his first love and his first children, seeing no good purpose in it; the fawn that dies in the forest will not have a chance at life again; the child that is tortured to death did not have to pass into eternity in such misery; not every afflicted soul in this life will know eternal joy in the next. If the Bible is indeed true, that God is sovereign, that nothing happens outside his control, and that not every creature will know the joys of final redemption, then the only biblical response is to say that the ultimate reason why evil exists is something greater still.

I believe the Bible makes it clear that when God willed to create the world, having absolute control over every detail, his ultimate (though not his sole) aim was to display *his* virtues: his vast, great faithfulness toward our wayward souls; his unfailing forgiveness of our sin and rebellion; his own joyful triumph over the powers of evil; and yes, his righteous judgement of those who do not finally bow to his rule. The greatest goods, then, the only ones that ultimately and finally justify evil, are centered on God. And while some might argue that this implies that God is not perfectly good, I would respond that misunderstanding on this point is, indeed, perhaps the ultimate reason why the problem of evil has gotten so much traction in our day. For the Bible of course teaches that God is perfectly good, but also that his goodness is above all centered on himself (I will not argue this point here, as many others have ably done so). It is not a goodness that circumvents the joy of his creatures altogether, of course, but it is one whose ultimate aim is to display the totality of the virtues of the greatest of all possible beings. In the end, then, it is perhaps not the omnipotence of God that needs to be reconsidered, as Plantinga has argued; nor the omniscience of God, as some today have done; but the *goodness* of God that needs once again to be fully and properly apprehended.

For without a fully biblical understanding of the nature and ultimate purpose of God, then no answer to the problem of evil will suffice. And this, of course, is the great lesson of the closing chapters of the book of Job. Here it is not “might makes right,” as some have claimed; it is the simple assertion that the purpose of the existence of the entire universe is that the true worth and value of an infinitely great God be displayed; and that we, like Job, acknowledge in the end that knowing and assenting to God’s greatness, and staying true in faithful patience no matter how great our suffering becomes, is ultimately the greatest good that we humans could ever achieve: demonstrating that our God is worth it, no matter what the cost. For to this ultimate end we were created. We may not understand every reason for every instance of suffering in this life; but we must persevere in faithful devotion to God as we experience it. For this, of course, is the very thing at stake in the wager between God and Satan at the beginning of the book: the worthiness of God himself.

And then not only do we display God’s greatness by our persevering faith, but it is in these instances of faithful suffering that we in some small but eternally significant way *become like* this infinitely virtuous of all beings—who, after willfully creating the world and allowing it to turn to sin, gave his very son over to the most unjust of all evils, in order to demonstrate the vast greatness of his love, mercy, and faithfulness to the undeserving creatures he had made. And here I think it fitting to give Plantinga himself the last word:

> Given the truth of Christian belief, however, there is also a contingent good-making characteristic of our world—one that isn't present in all worlds—that towers enormously above all the rest of the contingent states of affairs included in our world: the unthinkably great good of divine Incarnation and Atonement. Jesus Christ, the second person of the divine trinity, incomparably good, holy, and sinless, was willing to empty himself, to take on our flesh and become incarnate, and to suffer and die so that we human beings can have life and be reconciled to the Father. In order to accomplish this, he was willing to undergo suffering of a depth and intensity we cannot so much as imagine, including even the shattering climax of being abandoned by God the Father himself: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” God the Father, the first being of the whole universe, perfectly good and holy, all-powerful and all-knowing, was willing to permit his Son to undergo this suffering, and to undergo enormous suffering himself in order to make it possible for us human beings to be reconciled to him. And this in face of the fact that we have turned our back upon God, have rejected him, are sunk in sin, indeed, are inclined to resent God and our neighbor…Could there be a display of love to rival this?[53]

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[53] Alvin Plantinga, “Supralapsarianism, or 'O Felix Culpa’,” in Peter van Inwagen, *Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil (*Eerdmans 2004), 6.

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