

## PLANTINGA ON THE FREE WILL DEFENSE

Hugh LAFoLLETTE  
*East Tennessee State University*

I

In his recent book *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Alvin Plantinga formulates an updated version of the Free Will Defense which, he argues, successfully counters all attacks by the atheist. This account, he contends, shows that "it is not within God's power (as an omnipotent being) to create a world containing moral good without creating one containing moral evil" (54). Hence, moral evil must exist, since God has created a world with moral good. Under this interpretation, the presence of moral evil in the world is no longer a problem for the theist—at least not the type of problem which the atheist had attempted to describe. According to this account, evil is not, as the atheist believes, evidence against the existence of God. Since an actualized world with moral goodness must also contain moral evil, then God could not be reprehensible for creating *this* world. The problem of evil thus becomes primarily a religious one: Why am I suffering? How can I deal with this suffering? Will this suffering destroy my faith? etc.

However, I find myself unconvinced by Plantinga's arguments. My intuition is that there are successful responses to this problem—I just don't think Plantinga has provided them. His arguments are too vulnerable to potent criticisms. Accordingly, the task of this paper will be to raise those criticisms against Plantinga. I will begin by briefly setting out his version of the Defense, and then proceed to criticize it.

## II

Plantinga's treatment of the problem of evil centers around the atheistic claim that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God could create a world which contains moral good but no moral evil. This objection, Plantinga contends, is mistaken. Arguments of this sort are clearly erroneous. To consider this general argument, Plantinga selects one particular version offered by J.L. Mackie. Briefly stated, the argument is as follows:

- 1) God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.
- 2) Any omnipotent God can create any logically possible world.
- 3) There is at least one logically possible world which contains significantly free creatures who perform only moral actions.
- 4) A perfectly good God would want to create such a world (3).
- 5) The actual world contains moral evil.
- \*\*6) God, so described, does not exist.

Plantinga readily accepts 1), 3), 4) and 5), but rejects 2). That is, he argues that God would have, if he could have, created a world with only significantly free creatures who always act morally. But, he argues, God cannot create such a world. "What is really characteristic and critical to the Free Will Defense is this claim that God, though omnipotent, could not have actualized just 'any possible world he pleased' (34).

Plantinga begins his defense by trying to show that there are some possible worlds which God cannot actualize. For example, he argues. If God were a contingent being, i.e., did not exist in all possible worlds, then there are obviously possible worlds he could not actualize, namely those in which he did not exist. Of course, the response to this claim is simple: Plantinga provides it himself in his development of his ontological proof later in the book. A crucial premiss of this proof is the claim that God is a necessarily existent being, i.e., that he exists in all possible worlds. And, since he strongly endorses this proof, he is unable to consistently hold that God's non-existence in some possible world (s) is sufficient to show that God could not have actualized those worlds. On the other hand, if he wants to maintain this assertion in his Free Will Defense, he will have to abandon his ontological proof. Yet even if he does maintain this argument by abandoning his on-

tological proof, the atheist can, as even Plantinga admits, successfully revise 2) to say:

- 7) An omnipotent God can actualize any possible world in which he exists.

However, since it is apparent that Plantinga wants to hold that God is a necessarily existent being, the atheist does not need 7); he can continue to assert the stronger proposition 2). Plantinga is aware of these responses, so he takes another tack.

He begins this argument by setting forth an example which he contends will establish his claim. Consider, he says, some human, Maurice, who will, at some time *t* in the near future, be free with respect to some insignificant action-like having oatmeal for breakfast. That is, at time *t*, he will be free to take oatmeal, but also free to take something else, say, shredded wheat. "Next suppose we consider *S'* a state of affairs that is included in the actual world and includes Maurice's being free at time *t* to take oatmeal and free to reject it" (42). This *S'*, Plantinga tells us, includes neither Maurice's taking nor rejecting the oatmeal. For the rest, *S'* should be considered as much as possible like the actual world. But even though *S'* does not include Maurice's taking or not taking the oatmeal, God knows that one of the following conditionals is true:

- 8) If *S'* were to obtain, Maurice will freely take the oatmeal.

or

- 9) If *S'* were to obtain, Maurice will freely reject the oatmeal.

Now, Plantinga says, let us suppose that 8) is true. Then there is a possible world which God, though omnipotent, cannot create.

...For consider a possible world *W'* that shares *S'* with the actual world (which for ease of reference, I'll call Kronos), and in which Maurice does not take the oatmeal. (We know there is such a world because *S'* does not include Maurice's taking the oatmeal.) *S'* obtains in *W'* just as it is in Kronos. Indeed everything in *W'* is just as it is in Kronos up to time *t*. But whereas in Kronos Maurice takes oatmeal at time *t*, in *W'* he does not. Now *W'* is a perfectly possible world; but it is not within God's power to create it or bring it about. For to do so he must actualize

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S' But 8) is in fact true. So if God actualizes S' (as he must to create W') and leaves Maurice free with respect to the action in question, then he will take the oatmeal; and then, of course, W' will not be actual. If, on the other hand, God causes Maurice to refrain from taking the oatmeal, then he is not free to take it. That means, once again, that W' is not actual; for in W' Maurice is free to take the oatmeal (even if he doesn't do so). So if 8) is true, then this world W' is one that God can't actualize; it is not within his power to actualize it even though He is omnipotent and it is possible world. (43)

Similarly, Plantinga argues that if 9) is true, then there is a similar result, i.e., there are worlds which even an omnipotent God cannot actualize. So since either 8) or 9) is true, then there are possible worlds that God can't create. "If we consider a world in which S' obtains and in which Maurice freely choose oatmeal at time t, we see that whether or not it is in God's power to actualize it depends upon what Maurice would do if he were free in a certain situation. Accordingly, there are any number of possible worlds such that it is partly up to Maurice whether or not God can actualize them" (44). Thus, concludes Plantinga, there are many possible worlds which God cannot create.

I would contend, however, that Plantinga is mistaken. This, and other similar examples which he forwards do not support this conclusion. These examples do not specify instances of logically possible worlds which God cannot actualize. Rather, they are, as he has set them up, *not* logically possible at all. Let me explain: Plantinga's Kronos includes the state of affairs S', Maurice's being free with respect to taking the oatmeal, and either 8) or 9) is true. And, he continues, assuming 8) is true, W' includes S' and Maurice's freely rejecting the oatmeal, then God cannot actualize W'. Now I agree with Plantinga: God cannot actualize W'. But the reason he cannot actualize this world is that W', as described, is not a logically possible world-and everyone would agree that God could not actualize something which could not ever be actualized, namely, a world which is not logically possible. That is, if 8) is true in W', S' obtains, and Maurice is free with respect to eating his oatmeal, then he will freely choose to *take* his oatmeal. Or to put it another way, to state that 8) is true in W', S' obtains, and Maurice freely chooses not to take his oatmeal, is to utter nonsense-something which is logically contradictory to utter.

There is no way to consistently utter all three statements. And since a logically possible world cannot contain inconsistent propositions, *W'*, so described, is not logically possible. So if 8) is true, and *S'* obtains in *W'*, then Maurice will freely eat his oatmeal, and if *W'* includes *S'* and Maurice freely rejecting his oatmeal, then 8) is *not* true.

Now Plantinga might want to counter this contention by somehow arguing that 8) refers to (is true only of) Kronos, and not to *W'*. But if that's the case, then God could have actualized *W'* in which *S'* obtained and Maurice freely rejected his oatmeal, i.e., a world in which 9), not 8) was true. Thus, it appears that Plantinga has still not produced an example of a logically possible world which God cannot create.

### III

In section II I have demonstrated that Plantinga has failed to produce an example of a possible world which God cannot actualize. However, for purposes of more fully examining Plantinga's further arguments in the book I will, for the purposes of this paper, assume that Plantinga can somehow elude my criticisms in the last section. However, even if I do make such an assumption, I think I can demonstrate that his crucial contention is not supported by his arguments.

For example, his Maurice argument only refers to beings with which we are familiar in the actual world, i.e., beings who do morally wrong acts-who bring about evil. Such an argument would not be surprising to Mackie; he would certainly agree that the inhabitants of the actual world do evil-that's exactly why he concludes that God doesn't exist. Mackie's contention was that there were possible worlds with *other* people, people other than those who inhabit the actual world. These other people, Mackie contends, would always freely choose to do what is right. So Plantinga's argument, even if successful, would only tell us that (some?) inhabitants of this world can be morally good only if they also produce moral evil. It does not tell us anything about these other possible worlds, nor does it explain why God did not actualize one of these "better" worlds. Plantinga, of course, realizes this problem, and attempts to rectify it.

To do so he introduces the notion of transworld depravity. Now for purposes of explaining this notion, let me slightly modify our earlier

story about Maurice," Let us assume that Maurice is no longer faced with a morally insignificant decision like eating oatmeal. Instead, he is faced with a decision to take or refuse to take a large bribe. By an argument parallel to that in II, Plantinga asserts that there are worlds which God could not actualize, e.g., worlds in which Maurice always freely chooses to not accept" the bribe. In fact, Plantinga wants to claim that every world which God can actualize is such that if Maurice is significantly free in it, he takes at least one wrong action. Plantinga calls this malady 'transworld depravity'. Or to put it a little differently. a person A suffers from transworld depravity if in every possible world in which he is significantly free and which God can actualize, he sometimes acts morally wrong.

Plantinga thinks he has clearly demonstrated that Maurice suffers from transworld depravity. He then argues that "if (Maurice) suffers from transworld depravity, then Maurice's essence has this property: God could not have created any world W such that Mauricehood (Maurice's essence) contains the properties *is significantly free in W* and *always does what is right in W*" (52). Hence it is not within God's power to create a world in which Mauricehood is instantiated and in which its instantiation is significantly free and always does what is right.

In light of this 'Maurice' argument, Plantinga then moves to the core of his argument:

And the interesting fact here is this: it is possible that every creaturely essence .... suffers from transworld depravity. But now suppose that this is true. Now God can create a world containing moral good only by creating significantly free persons. And since every person is the instantiation of an essence, He can create significantly free persons only by instantiating some essences. But if every essence 'suffers from transworld depravity, then no matter which essences God instantiates, the resulting persons, if free with respect to morally significant actions, would always perform at least some wrong actions. If every essence suffers from transworld depravity, then it was beyond the power of God Himself to create a world containing moral good but no moral evil. He might have been able to create a world in which moral evil is very considerably outweighed by moral good; but it is not within his power to create worlds containing moral good but no moral evil-and this despite the fact that He is omni-

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potent. Under these conditions God could have created a world containing no moral evil only by creating one without significantly free persons. But it is possible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity; so it's possible that God could not have created a world containing moral good but no moral evil. (53)

Before I begin examining this account, I would like to make one methodological note: instead of referring to essences, as does Plantinga, I will substitute the term "possible person." I think this is warranted since essence is simply a fancy way of speaking of the essential characteristics of any possible person. Hence, if an essence suffers from transworld depravity then every possible person contains some essence, and, in virtue of that containment, would also suffer from transworld depravity. I also chose to make this methodological shift because: 1) eventually J would have to make such a shift since the problem of evil is stated-by both sides of the debate-in terms of possible persons, and 2) J find talk of possible persons both easier and metaphysically more palatable.

Plantinga's claim here is crucial: the Free Will Defense-at least his version of it-turns on this argument. He needs to show that there are no possible worlds which contain moral good but no moral evil-at least not worlds which God could actualize. For even if there is one such possible world, then either God is reprehensible for failing to actualize it, or else he doesn't exist. It is Plantinga's contention that there are no such worlds. The Free Will Defender, however, need not demonstrate that there *are* no such possible worlds. but only that there could possibly be no such possible worlds. That is, since Mackie's atheistic argument is intended to demonstrate that the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God is logically inconsistent with the existence of evil, the Free Will Defender only need show that it is logically possible that 1) and 5) are compatible to rebut this strong atheistic argument.

That is Plantinga's intention: to show that it is logically possible that 1) and 5) are compatible. First he shows, or thinks he shows, that Maurice suffers from transworld depravity, and then concludes that:

- 10) It is possible that: every possible human being suffers from trans world depravity.
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This is where he goes wrong-in asserting that it is possible. True, it is conceivable. But is it logically possible? Given the nature of this claim, I think it is either blatantly false or non-demonstrable. Let me explain.

Plantinga's assertion 10) is not simply a claim about some contingent state of affairs, i.e., it is not a claim that it is possible that 10) is true in the actual world or even in worlds sufficiently "similar" to the actual world. He is not making that weak claim, neither would such a weak claim help his argument (see the argument early in this section).

To say something about every possible human is to say something about each possible world. It matters not whether there are possible worlds which do not contain possible people. Even if there are such possible worlds, Plantinga is still asserting a proposition concerning all possible worlds, namely:

- 11) **It** is logically possible that: for every possible world  $W_x$ , if there are any possible persons in  $W_x$ , then all the inhabitants of  $W_x$  would suffer from transworld depravity.

Since any assertion about the possibility of some proposition  $x$  being true in all possible worlds is, by definition, an assertion that it is logically possible that it is necessarily true that  $x$ , then Plantinga is, in essence, claiming:

- 12) **It** is logically possible that: it is logically necessary that: all possible humans suffer from transworld depravity.

But now, by 12) and the characteristic S5 axiom (the axiom of a modal system which Plantinga wholly endorses) we have:

- 13) **It** is necessarily true that: all possible persons suffer from transworld depravity.

Plantinga is in a double dilemma, he is unable to support 12)-a claim which he needs to rebut Mackie's argument-without at the same time being plagued by the undesirable consequences of 13).

First, it appears that there is no evidence for 12). For the evidence needed to establish that any proposition is possibly necessary is very stringent indeed. Consider some mathematical conjecture-say, Goldbach's conjecture: every even number is the sum of two primes. Goldbach's conjecture is truly a mathematical *conjecture*, i.e., we have no



evidence against the theorem, but neither do we have a proof for the conjecture. Each and every even number which has been examined has turned out to be the sum of two prime numbers, yet there appears to be no available mathematical proof to establish the truth of the conjecture. So the status of the conjecture is this: if it is true, then, like all mathematical truths, it is necessarily true. And, like all mathematical truths the knowledge that it is possibly true is sufficient to determine that it is true ( $\Diamond \Box p \rightarrow \Box p$ ). But if we do not *know* that it *is* true (and hence necessarily true), then we do not, nor cannot, know that it is possibly true. In fact, the *only* evidence we can have that Goldbach's conjecture is possibly true, is if we can demonstrate that it *is* true.

It appears, in fact, that it is this way with all necessary truths, and Plantinga's claim here appears to be no different. Hence, the only way he can assert that 12) is true is if he already knows that 13) is true. But since: 1, he makes no claim to know 13) is true; 2, 13) intuitively appears to be false; and 3, the best he claimed that he could muster from his Maurice-type examples was that he thought it was possible (conceivable?) that 10) was true, then it appears unlikely either that 13) is true or that he could produce any additional evidence which would lead us to believe that it was true. Now it may be that Plantinga was aware that 10) entails 13) (although it doesn't seem that he was) and believed that his Maurice-type examples were sufficient to establish that 10) was possibly true, but given the above analysis, such a belief is not justified.

It would also seem that even if Plantinga could adequately evidence 12) that he would not want *to*, i.e., that 13) appears to have undesirable consequences for his Defense.

For example, 13) logically entails:

- 14) It is necessarily true that: no possible human beings can produce moral good without also producing moral evil.

And, since the characteristic which is responsible for morel goodness as well as moral evil is each person's being significantly free (Plantinga, 53), then 14) entails:

- 15) It is necessarily true that: no significantly free possible human can produce moral good without also producing moral evil.

But 15) seems to generate some problems. Human beings are al-

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legedly significantly free and rational creatures who share these two primary characteristics with God. Yet Plantinga is (or, I would think, should be) committed to saying that God is a significantly free and rational creature who always acts morally, and that it is a necessary truth that humans, who share these same characteristics, cannot produce moral good without also producing moral evil.

Thus, it would appear that Plantinga is guilty of an inconsistency here unless he can produce some general and relevant reason why God would have the ability to act morally without ever acting immorally, while humans can only produce moral good if they also produce moral evil. Now Plantinga might want to try to identify such a difference by appealing to the human 'essence'. But even if that response would allay this criticism, it would produce additional questions, namely, Plantinga would need to explain why it isn't possible that there are other, non-human possible creatures who are both rational and significantly free and always choose to do what is morally right. To avoid this criticism he would, it seems, be committed to arguing that:

- 16) It is necessarily true that: no significantly free possible creatures except God can produce moral good without also producing moral evil.

And such a claim seems clearly undemonstrable (if not preposterous).

However, Plantinga might want to argue that God is not significantly free, and consequently, my immediately preceding argument fails. But such a concession on his part would appear to be disastrous for the Free Will Defender. For if God is not significantly free, yet is perfectly good (in the moral sense), then why cannot God create humans (or non-human, rational creatures) who are not significantly free, yet produce only moral good? There is no good answer to this question which is consistent with the main thrust of his argument.

#### NOTES

1. Plantinga prefers using the term 'actualize' here, but for this paper, I, like Plantinga, will loosely use the terms interchangeably.
  2. Plantinga creates a different example to make this point ;for simplicity's sake, I will simply modify the earlier example.
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