

# God, Evil, and Design

*An Introduction to the Philosophical Issues*

David O'Connor

 **Blackwell**  
Publishing

# Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vi
<b>Part I Introduction</b>	1
1 What We Are Going to Investigate, and How	3
2 Terminology	19
<b>Part II The Logic of God and Evil</b>	33
3 Is the Existence of God Impossible?	35
4 A Free-Will Defense of the Possibility that God Exists	50
<b>Part III Design and Evil</b>	73
5 Natural Order, Natural Selection, and Supernatural Design (1)	75
6 Natural Order, Natural Selection, and Supernatural Design (2)	91
<b>Part IV Evil and Design (1)</b>	111
7 Is the Existence of God Improbable?	113
8 Skeptical Defenses	129
9 Evaluating Skeptical Defenses	146
<b>Part V Evil and Design (2)</b>	171
10 Greater-Good Defenses	173
11 Evaluating Greater-Good Defenses	190
<b>Part VI Taking Stock</b>	207
12 Taking Stock	209
<i>Index</i>	223

## Is the Existence of God Impossible?

Does the idea of God as perfect creator square with the fact that terrible things happen, or does that fact provide good reason to judge there is no God?

*Two senses of squaring and not squaring,  
and our first investigation*

Things may not square with one another in either of the following ways.

One way is when something counts against the probability that something else is true, or against the reasonableness of believing it to be true. In this sense, when one thing gives us reason to think that another is either false or unreasonable, there are degrees of not squaring. In this first sense, one thing may count heavily against another, or it may count against it only a little, or something in between.

Another way is when one thing rules out even the possibility of another. In this second sense, the two things are logically inconsistent with each other, and there are no degrees of that. In this sense of not squaring, two things are absolutely mutually exclusive.

In this chapter and the next, we will investigate whether the existence of evil in the world is logically inconsistent with the existence of God. If it is, then the fact that evil exists means, not just that there is no God, but that there could not possibly be a God.

A decision on the issue turns upon the precise meanings of certain concepts, more than on facts in the world. Accordingly, we will need those precise meanings clearly before us. The concepts in question are logical possibility and impossibility, logical necessity, and contradiction.

## I Logical Possibility and Impossibility

### *Possibilities and impossibilities*

“Anything is possible.” How often have you heard people say that? Perhaps you have said it or thought it yourself. Usually people say it to hedge their bet, or to remind someone of the difference between reality and fantasy. Typically, when we qualify something by saying “anything is possible,” we mean that we want to focus on realistic options, as opposed to wild conjectures far beyond the range of things that we need to worry about in a particular situation.

So, is anything possible? No. Lots of things are not possible at all, for instance, something’s being a circle and not a circle at exactly the same time, or something’s being a shapeless circle, or a five-sided triangle. What about traveling faster than the speed of light, or surviving a 10,000-foot fall, or a brain transplant? Are they possible?

Now here the answer is not so simple. For there are different meanings of the terms ‘possible’ and ‘impossible,’ and we need to be clear about which meaning is in play in a particular question. In the questions about going faster than light and about surviving that fall, it is physical possibility/impossibility that is meant. But in our investigation into the possibility or impossibility of God’s existence, we are using the terms in their strictly logical sense. Then there is the meaning when we say something is medically possible or impossible – a brain transplant, for instance. In addition, we talk about something’s being politically possible or impossible, psychologically possible or impossible, financially possible or impossible, possible or impossible as a practical matter, and so on. There are many contexts where things are said to be possible or impossible, and there will often be overlaps among them. Let us bring the strictly logical sense into focus by way of contrast with two other meanings.

### *Practical possibility/impossibility*

It was impossible for me to meet you for lunch yesterday. The plumber was due to come between ten and four, and I had to be home to let him in, and you know how difficult it is to get an appointment with a plumber. Here, ‘impossible’ means inconvenient. For of course I could have met you for lunch, of course it was possible, in a different sense of

the term. After all, I hadn't been taken hostage, or fallen into a coma, or otherwise become incapable of moving.

Some things are more inconvenient than others, and sometimes we exaggerate the inconvenience of doing something. The word 'impossible,' used to express impracticality and inconvenience, is always an exaggeration, relative to strictly literal impossibility, which is logical impossibility. Similarly, we sometimes exaggerate the difficulty of doing something, which takes us to, or at least close to, physical impossibility.

*Physical possibility/impossibility*

"Given Agassi's position and world-class quickness, Federer had to send that ball down a two-inch pipe of space in order to pass him, which he did, moving backwards, with no setup time and none of his weight behind the shot. It was impossible."

Thus, the *New York Times*.<sup>1</sup> Was it impossible? Well, it happened. Thousands saw it in person at the final of the 2005 US Open tennis tournament, and millions more, myself among them, saw it on television. Here, the word 'impossible' means exceedingly difficult, perhaps unprecedented, awe-inspiring.

And then there is Tom Cruise. At face value, *Mission: Impossible* suggests something that, quite simply, cannot conceivably be done. An impossible mission, understood literally, is a far more daunting prospect than even a suicide mission. A suicide mission offers the hope of success at least, even if the cost is going to be steep. But a mission that is impossible suggests that the best thing would be to stay home.

As it turns out in the movies, though, the success rate for supposedly impossible missions is remarkably high. The reason of course, as everyone in the cinema knows, is that for Tom Cruise the impossible is not, strictly speaking, impossible at all. Instead, it is something very improbable or difficult, at least for the rest of us – fending off a helicopter while clinging to a train speeding through the chunnel, say, or surviving a fall from an airplane in flight.

Compared to the tennis and falling-from-an-airplane examples, the strict meaning of physical impossibility is violating a law of nature. To travel faster than the speed of light is perhaps the best or purest

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times Sports Magazine*, Sept. 2006, 48.

example of this strict sense of physical impossibility, at least above the level of sub-atomic particles.

This raises the question whether the strictest sense of physical impossibility is the strictest sense of impossibility, period. For instance, can we meaningfully speculate about something above the level of sub-atomic particles traveling faster than light, or does the speculation simply cancel itself out?

In a science-fiction context, or in contemplating discoveries that physicists may make centuries from now, or as an example of a miracle, perhaps we can speculate about it. Even David Hume (1711–76), perhaps the best-known skeptic about miracles, accepts that a miracle is theoretically possible.

At any rate, the point is that, if we can coherently speculate about the possibility of traveling faster than light, then there is exaggeration even in the idea that a violation of a law of nature is absolutely impossible. And if that is so, then there is always exaggeration in the term ‘physical impossibility.’

By contrast, when something is logically impossible, it is literally impossible, impossible without exaggeration, so not just at present but at all times. Not even a miracle could violate it.

### *Logical impossibility*

He survived a 10,000-foot fall from an airplane. Just from hearing or reading that sentence, you do not know with absolute certainty that it is false. For instance, you do not know that a miracle didn’t happen and he survived.

He survived that 10,000-foot fall, but was dead before he hit the ground. X is a circle and X is not a circle at the very same time. Just hearing or reading those sentences, you know with absolute certainty that, if meant literally, they have to be false. Charitably, you might suppose there was a typo in them, or that, for some other reason, what the sentences literally say is not what is meant. For there is no exaggeration in the judgment that those sentences have to be false, that they are necessarily false. Saying such things are impossible would be the strict and literal truth of the matter.

Consequently, we do not have to check all the places where this alleged X might be found, as there are no places for things that are all over simultaneously circular and non-circular. Nor do we have to see the

faller afterwards, or see the film of the fall, and especially the landing, to know for sure about his simultaneous survival and death. The impossibilities here are not physical, or practical: they are logical.

In logical impossibility, there is no space whatever into which an exception, no matter how remote or fantastic, could creep, not even a miracle. (True, some theistic philosophers and theologians have maintained that God can do what is logically impossible. But saying this does nothing to get around the fact that the very idea of doing a logically impossible thing is incoherent, so we will ignore it.)

When something is logically impossible, the very concept of it is self-defeating or self-canceling. That, essentially, is what logical impossibility is. It is an absolute concept. Its meaning is not relative to context. There are no degrees of it.

We can say or write examples of logical impossibilities, but we could never find an example in reality. For, by definition, things that are logically impossible could not occur even in a dream, or fantasy, or exaggeration, or miracle. We can imagine seeing a picture of the person who survived the 10,000-foot fall and marveling at his luck, or whatever did the trick. But we cannot imagine seeing a circle that at the very same time is not a circle at all, or a circle that is a square. We can, of course, imagine a circle and a square overlapping, or a circle transforming in a flash into a square. But neither is imagining a circle that is also not a circle at all but a square.

### *Logical possibility*

If logical impossibility is the kind of impossibility that comes from the very idea or concept of something, when the idea is necessarily self-defeating or self-canceling, what is logical possibility? Well, the short answer is that it is anything which is not impossible in that way, no matter how wildly far-fetched or improbable. Anything not ruled out by the very intrinsic nature of itself is a logical possibility.

It is the most permissive kind of possibility. For instance, not only is it logically possible for you to survive the 10,000-foot fall, it is logically possible for you to survive such a fall each hour, on the hour, for the next twenty years.

The two concepts, logical possibility at one end, logical impossibility at the other, are each maximally extreme. Something can be logically possible, although physically impossible. Think of surviving that fall every hour for the next twenty years. But, at the other end of the spectrum,

something that is logically impossible is impossible in all the other ways that things can be impossible too, that is, physically, medically, psychologically, and so on.

### *Contradiction and logical necessity*

A statement or idea that self-cancels in the way that “X is a circle and at the same time X is not a circle” does is a self-contradictory statement or idea. Likewise, two statements that cannot possibly both be true at the same time, no matter what, and that cannot possibly both be false at the same time either, contradict each other. Taken either way, their combination necessarily self-destructs. For instance, the statement “X is a circle” and the statement “X is not a circle” cannot possibly be true simultaneously, or false simultaneously either.

This use of the word ‘contradiction’ is more restrictive than its everyday use. In effect, we are restricting the term to the meaning it has for logicians, which is to refer to necessarily self-canceling statements and to combinations of statements that would necessarily self-cancel. Such statements and combinations are necessarily false.

By contrast, the everyday use of the word ‘contradiction’ is more liberal and tolerant than this. For sometimes in everyday life we say two people contradict each other when all we mean is that they disagree.

Not every false statement or belief is a contradiction. But every contradiction is false. Furthermore, as we saw in the examples above, a contradiction is necessarily false. The following contrast will bring out the meaning of this key word, ‘necessarily,’ that I have been using.

“John Kerry is the president of the United States.” This statement is false. But it didn’t have to be false. And for you to know it is false, you have to know certain facts about the world, over and above knowing the meanings of the words in the sentence itself. You have to know something about the result of the 2004 presidential election in the United States. If, this minute, you just woke up from a coma that started on October 31, 2004, you would not know, merely from reading that sentence, that it is false. For the sentence is not forced to be false by the literal meanings of the words that comprise it. What makes it false is the non-linguistic fact of the electoral vote for George Bush in November 2004.

Some false statements are false because they misrepresent facts in the world. They are false for reasons beyond their own internal make-up,

and they would be true if the external facts were different. Most false statements are like that. They are not contradictions. But other false statements are beyond reprieve, for instance, "He survived the 10,000-foot fall that killed him." Taken literally, they could never be true, no matter what facts in the world change. They are false because, in their very meaning, they self-cancel. They are strict contradictions. They don't just happen to be false, they are necessarily false.

The argument we are going to consider claims there is a strict contradiction between the two following statements: "God, understood to be an omnipotent and perfectly good being, exists" and "Evil exists." The claim is that, because the second statement is true, the first is necessarily false.

### *Explicit and implicit contradictions*

Sometimes a contradiction is explicit. A case in point is our earlier example, "X is a circle and X is not a circle." In real life, however, it is very rare to find an explicit self-contradictory statement, apart from typos and statements used to illustrate the error. And the reason is the obvious one, namely, the obviousness of the error.

Typically, then, contradictions are implicit. They occur between statements or beliefs that, when interpreted, show themselves incapable of forming a conjunction that could ever possibly be true.

Consider these two statements: "X is a circle" and "X is not a curved shape." Could both statements be true at the same time of the same X? No. Why not? After all, they do not explicitly affirm and deny the same thing at the same time, namely, being a circle. The second statement does not even mention circularity.

But just a very small bit of analysis and interpretation reveals that being a circle necessarily means having a curved shape. Having a curved shape is part of the essential meaning of being a circle. So, with the add-on of that implication, namely, the necessarily true point that a circle has a curved shape, we find that the statement "X is a circle" does contradict the statement "X is not a curved shape." Implicitly, although not explicitly, they contradict one another. That is, the conjunction of the three statements "X is a circle," "Being a circle, X necessarily has a curved shape," and "X is not a curved shape" amounts to an explicit contradiction.

In real life, implicit contradictions will typically require more analysis and interpretation than that example. Nonetheless, the example suffices to illustrate the point at issue. It is that seeing an implicit contradiction

between two statements, or within a two-part statement, requires some additional interpretation. Just looking at the two statements themselves is not usually enough to see the contradiction. Consequently, pointing to the statements themselves is not usually enough to explain it.

Furthermore, the example shows the principle involved in proving an implicit contradiction between two statements. It is that the additional interpretation must include a third statement which is necessarily true and which, when added to the original two, results in a three-part conjunction that contains an explicit contradiction. In the example above, the third statement is "Being a circle, X necessarily has a curved shape," while the original two are "X is a circle" and "X is not a curved shape." Conjoining the three of them generates an explicit contradiction.

Now let us apply this principle to the claim that there is an implicit contradiction between the two statements "God, understood to be an omnipotent and perfectly good being, exists" and "Evil exists." To prove this claim, a third statement must be found which is necessarily true, that is, which could not even possibly be false, and which, when conjoined with the original two, results in an explicit contradiction. Short of this, an implicit contradiction will not be proved.

As we take up the claim to prove a contradiction between God and evil, the questions to keep in mind are these: What is the pivotal third statement, the one that is necessarily true? And do the three statements together generate an explicit contradiction? As these questions suggest, the burden of proof in proving this claimed contradiction is heavy.

## II J. L. Mackie's Argument

Approximately fifty years ago, the Australian philosopher J. L. Mackie (1917–81) argued for the following position:

I think . . . that a . . . telling criticism can be made by way of the traditional problem of evil. Here it can be shown . . . that religious beliefs . . . are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another . . . so that the [believer] can maintain his position as a whole only by . . . [being] prepared to believe . . . what can be disproved from other beliefs that he also holds.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," in M. M. Adams and R. M. Adams, eds, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 25.

I will examine Mackie's argument for a contradiction between God and evil in two installments, one here in this chapter, the other in the next. My division of labor reflects a division in Mackie's presentation of his case. He develops his argument, first, by presenting what he calls the "simplest form" of it, then, second, by responding to various attempts to show there is no contradiction between God and evil. I will concentrate on the first stage now, postponing the second until the next chapter.

Mackie begins with the following synopsis of his attempted proof:

In its simplest form the problem is this: God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false . . . However the contradiction does not arise immediately.<sup>3</sup>

His task is to bring this alleged implicit contradiction out into the open.

The core of the enterprise is his analysis of the essential meaning of each of the two concepts, goodness and omnipotence. Mackie sets forth his understanding of their respective essential meanings as follows:

good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can,

and

there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.<sup>4</sup>

### *Essential meaning*

Since Mackie's argument turns on his understanding of the essential meaning of each of those two terms, we need to be clear what the essential meaning of a term (or concept, or idea) is.

It is what the term or concept has to mean, what it necessarily means. The contrast is with the conventional, or merely agreed-upon, thus changeable, meaning of a term or concept. The conventional meaning of a concept can change with context or circumstance. But its essential meaning cannot change. It is always the same, regardless of context.

<sup>3</sup> Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 25–6.

<sup>4</sup> Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 26.

For instance, it is part of the essential meaning of the geometrical concept 'circle' to be a closed plane curve, every point of which is the same distance from a fixed point within the curve. Anything not having those properties is not, and could not possibly be, a circle, in the geometrical sense, at all.

By contrast, the confectionery concept of a biscuit, for example, is different in different places. If you go shopping for biscuits in Ireland you will get one sort of thing, whereas in America you will get something quite different. And an Irish child may be disappointed in America, when the promised biscuits are produced.

Before the suffragette movements in Great Britain and the United States, being a voter meant being a man, as does being a priest in the Roman Catholic branch of Christianity. But in the Episcopalian branch, the word 'priest' can mean either a man or a woman. Even in their respective confectionery, electoral, and clerical contexts, then, the words 'biscuit,' 'voter,' and 'priest' can mean different things. But in the context of geometry, the meaning of the word 'circle' is fixed. That is not the only meaning of the word 'circle,' of course, nor its only context. After all, there is the Circle Line in the London Underground and the famous group of philosophers and scientists in the 1920s and 1930s known as the Vienna Circle.

In a line quoted just above, we saw Mackie emphasize that, in its essential nature, omnipotence means unlimited power. In a moment, we will see him qualify this, but in a way that will not affect any crucial point in his argument. In another line quoted just above, we saw him emphasize that, in its essential nature, the goodness of a good person means eliminating evil as much as possible.

#### *Mackie's proposed 'third' statement and his conclusions*

Putting those two things together, Mackie concludes: "From these it follows that a good omnipotent thing eliminates evil completely."<sup>5</sup> This is the sought-after third statement, the one that will bring success to his argument if it meets the two criteria mentioned earlier. They are: (1) in its own right, the statement must be necessarily true, and (2) when the statement is conjoined with the original two statements, the result is an explicit contradiction.

<sup>5</sup> Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 26.

Now, it is a plain fact that evil exists in the world. So Mackie further concludes, “the propositions that a good omnipotent thing exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible.”<sup>6</sup>

By the word ‘incompatible’ in the second conclusion Mackie means contradictory, so that the simultaneous existence of both God and evil is logically impossible. Either alone would be possible, but not the conjunction of both together, just as either one alone of “X is a circle” and “X is not a curved shape” is possible, but the pair together is not. So, as the existence of evil is a plain and obvious fact, Mackie’s conclusion is that the existence of God is logically impossible.

### *Measuring success*

A circle is a figure that does not have a curved shape. A reliable car is one that breaks down a lot. These two statements seem to be implicit contradictions, that is, statements forced to be false by the essential meanings of their key terms.

It seems obvious, and so it seems easy to prove, that a car that breaks down a lot could not possibly be a reliable car. Suppose we are talking about that, wondering if it is really true. And suppose I say I’m going to prove that a reliable car could not possibly be one that breaks down a lot, because there is an implicit contradiction between reliability and breaking down a lot. Suppose I take the example of the cars in that car dealership over there. Suppose we both know they have been breaking down a lot.

Suppose that, while discussing the matter, we hear a rumor that possibly the car dealer’s disgruntled son-in-law has been tampering with the cars in the showroom, causing them to break down a lot. As rumor has it, the possible tampering is both very effective and very hard to detect, because of the son-in-law’s expertise.

Now look at these two statements about a particular car: “This car is a reliable car” and “This car breaks down a lot.” What effect does the rumor have on my attempted proof that the second of the two statements necessarily falsifies the first?

It has the effect that, unless I rule out the rumored possibility of tampering, I am not entitled to claim the second statement is an guaranteed

<sup>6</sup> Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” 26.

falsifier of the first. After all, I am trying to prove that it is not even possible for a car that breaks down a lot to be a reliable car. But now there is a rumor to the effect that breaking down a lot is possibly not this car's fault, thus possibly not an indicator of unreliability in the car in its own right.

Notice, I am not trying to prove it is very unlikely that a car that breaks down a lot is a reliable car. We would all agree on that. I am trying to prove it is literally impossible. So, to succeed, I must rule out even a rumored or speculated possibility that something external to the car itself is the cause of the breakdowns. I must prove that, in its own right, the statement "This is a reliable car, even though it breaks down a lot," necessarily cancels itself out. I must prove there is no possible exception to the mutual incompatibility of the two ideas, reliability and breaking down a lot. I must prove that no mitigating circumstance is even a possibility. With this in mind as the measurement of success, let us return to Mackie.

Mackie told us that because goodness, in its essential nature, is opposed to evil, a good person eliminates evil as far as possible. And he told us that, in its essential nature, omnipotence means power without limits. (In developing his case, he mentions that he is prepared to accept omnipotence as meaning the power to do anything that is not logically impossible. This is the concept of omnipotence we discussed in the previous chapter. This qualification has no bearing on the success or failure of his argument, so we do not need to dwell on the difference between power without limits and power without logical limits. We will simply accept the second concept as the essential meaning of omnipotence.)

Suppose we combine the two points, first, that a good person eliminates evil as far as possible, and second, that an omnipotent person can do anything that is logically possible. Mackie's stated expectation is that any world issuing from a perfectly good and omnipotent person would necessarily contain no evil at all; no exceptions are even possible, so any rumored exception would be guaranteed to be false. On this reasoning, a three-way conjunction of omnipotence, perfect goodness, and evil is a logical impossibility.

Could there possibly be some additional relevant fact that could introduce the possibility of an exception, in the way that the rumor of the son-in-law may perhaps introduce the possibility of an exception in the case of the cars that are breaking down a lot? That is a key question. For if I do not rule out even the speculated possibility of tampering, then I fail to prove it is strictly impossible for a car that breaks down a lot to be, of

its essential nature, a reliable car. Similarly, if Mackie does not rule out even the possibility of an exception, he will not have met his burden of proof, and his argument will fail.

### *The burden of proof*

At the conclusion of a trial, the judge explains the law to the jury, as it applies to the evidence they have heard. Their duty as jurors is to reach a verdict on the evidence, relative to the law as explained. Our situation here is broadly similar.

Mackie must prove there could not possibly be an exception which would make it possible for God and evil to co-exist. In order for him to fail to prove this, there does not have to be an exception in fact. An exception does not even have to be possible.

Of course, if there were either an actual or possible exception, then Mackie would certainly fail to prove his point that no exception is possible. An actual or possible exception would be sufficient for him to fail. But neither an actual nor a possible exception is necessary for him to fail. For he would fail to prove his point if his argument contained a serious flaw: some logical fallacy, for instance. If his argument had a serious flaw, he would fail to prove his point, even if his point were right. Once again, think of the Al Capone example in chapter 1.

The two essential ideas to keep in mind, as we estimate Mackie's burden of proof, are these: first, that he does not have to be wrong about the point he is trying to prove in order to fail to prove it; second, he does not have to be proved wrong about that point in order to fail to prove it. He could fail for reasons that are internal to his own argument itself. The burden of proof is on him to prove no exception is possible, and that is the only basis on which to judge his success or failure, in this first stage of his argument. This is a heavy burden of proof. But it is the right burden, rightly placed.

Suppose you are charged with a crime and brought to trial. Suppose the prosecution lays out its case against you. In response, suppose your lawyer emphasizes to the jury the correct legal point that, for you to be convicted, the prosecution must prove you are guilty. Suppose she says nothing further. That is, she makes no attempt to prove you are not guilty, and she does not even claim you are not guilty. Suppose she is content to let the jury decide whether the prosecution met its burden of proof, which is to prove your guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Suppose

the prosecutor fails to do that. Then the prosecution's case fails, even though the defense neither claimed nor proved anything to the contrary. Now, in a final twist on the example, suppose that, unknown to anybody but yourself, you did commit the crime with which you are charged. The prosecution might still fail to prove you guilty.

Now think of Mackie as like the prosecutor. The burden of proof is on him to prove that God and evil strictly contradict each other. He must prove it, not beyond a reasonable doubt, which, in itself, is a high order of proof, but beyond even the possibility of doubt. He must prove it beyond even the conceivability of an exception.

The burden is not on the theistic defense to claim an exception, or even the possibility of an exception. Nor does it have to prove there is an exception, or even that an exception is possible. The defense is not required to do anything at all.

### *Good overall, and good in all respects*

In the previous chapter, we settled on the idea that God would always and only do what is overall good. Here in this chapter, let us work with a weaker version of that idea. It is that, perhaps, it is possible that God would always and only do what is overall good. Now, is it logically possible that some overall good situation brought about by God might not be good in all respects? Mackie must prove that it is not possible.

Let us speculate about a possibility, both for context and for a concrete example. Perhaps it is possible that no world containing human beings could be overall good that did not make provision for justice. If so, then even omnipotent power would have to make provision for justice, in bringing about an overall good world containing human beings. But perhaps it is possible that restraint and correction are essential mechanisms of justice. If so, then possibly some amount of frustration or disappointment, for instance, would be an unavoidable byproduct of achieving justice.

But in themselves those are not good things. True, they may sometimes be good as means to valuable ends, that is, they may be instrumentally good. But they are not good as such. In themselves, they are evils. So perhaps it is possible that not even God could bring about an overall good world, containing human beings, without evil occurring in it.

We are not in a position right now to claim this as a possibility. Nor do we need either to claim it is a possibility or to prove that it is. The burden of proof is Mackie's entirely. Accordingly, it is up to him to prove

there is no such possibility. Until he does, his claim about an implicit contradiction between God and evil is not proved. Until he does, it remains just a claim. And so far in his argument, Mackie has claimed there is no such possibility, but he has not proved it.

### **III Interim Verdict: ‘Not Proved’**

We must be careful not to overstate things. ‘Not proved’ is not the same as ‘disproved.’ And it does not imply it either. ‘Not proved’ means the burden of proof is not met.

But that does not mean the conclusion itself is false. That is a separate matter, unaffected by failure to prove it true. Nor does a failure to prove the conclusion true mean that it has thereby been disproved, that is, proved to be false. That too is a separate matter, requiring a proof of its own. To illustrate both points, recall Al Capone from chapter 1. Furthermore, it does not mean that the conclusion could not possibly be proved in some other way. All those possibilities remain open.

### **Suggested Reading**

Mackie, J. L. (1990) “Evil and Omnipotence,” in M. M. Adams and R. M. Adams, eds, *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. This 1955 article, now a classic, is widely available in anthologies.

# A Free-Will Defense of the Possibility that God Exists

In the first stage of his argument, J. L. Mackie failed to prove a contradiction between the idea of God and the fact that terrible things happen. But his claim of logical inconsistency between them was not itself disproved there either. So the question naturally arises whether it can be disproved, or whether the argument fares better in its second than in its first stage. In this chapter we take up those issues.

## *The free-will theory of God and evil*

Attempting to disprove Mackie's claim, Alvin Plantinga draws on the resources of a venerable theory in the theistic tradition, the free-will theory of evil in a world supposedly made by God. The theory figures prominently in the work of St Augustine (354–430) and, almost 900 years later, in the work of Thomas Aquinas as well. Later, we will see some prominent contemporary theistic philosophers use it too.

## **I To Prove a Possibility**

To disprove Mackie's claim, Plantinga must prove a possibility. This is different from the situation in the previous chapter, when there was no burden on the theistic defender to prove anything. Then, the prosecutor, Mackie, was attempting to prove a contradiction, and the verdict – 'proved' or 'unproved' – turned solely on his success. But now the defense is attempting to do something. It is attempting to prove that Mackie's claim of a contradiction is itself false. Accordingly, the defense now has a burden of proof of its own. It must prove the possibility that, even though terrible things happen, God exists. Plantinga does not have

to prove that God actually exists, or that it is probable that God exists. Proving the mere logical possibility of it will do.

The premises, which is to say the statements of evidence, in an argument to prove a logical possibility do not themselves have to be true. They do not even have to be believed to be true. They do not have to be claimed to be true, or proved to be true. All that is required is that they could possibly be true, in the bare logical sense of possibility, explained in the previous chapter.

If you are now thinking that the burden of proof is a lot lighter for Plantinga's free-will-based defense than it was for Mackie, you are right. And that it is a lot lighter reflects the intrinsic natures of logical possibility and impossibility respectively, and the difference between proving the one and proving the other. We covered these points in the previous chapter, so I will not go through them again. This disparity between the requirements for success in the two cases does not reflect any bias or tilt in favor of theism over atheism. My thumb is not on the scale behind the scenes.

Let us look at the understanding of free will, that is, freedom of choice or decision, that is pivotal in Plantinga's defense against Mackie's argument.

### *Freedom to choose*

Writing this section of chapter 4, I have before me right now two alternative possibilities. I could begin the next paragraph with the word 'since,' or I could begin it with another word instead.

I could have gone either way. It was entirely up to me. Right now, it is entirely up to you whether you read on in this book or whether you stop. You could do the one thing or you could do the other. (As for me, I'm going to assume you made the right decision just now.)

Plantinga's understanding of free choice is reflected in those two examples. The core of it is the idea that, in various circumstances, it is entirely up to me or you to decide what to do. I will state Plantinga's understanding of freedom of choice more explicitly, to be sure we have it right, and available for use as we go on.

### *Libertarian free choice*

The essence of Plantinga's idea of free will, freedom of choice, is this. I have freedom to choose between courses of action only if, at the time of choosing, I have before me genuinely open alternative possibilities

and it is entirely up to me which of them I choose. In philosophical discussion, this two-part understanding of freedom of choice is often called 'libertarian' freedom.

Consequently, I do not have libertarian free will on any occasion when I am caused or forced to choose or to do some action, or when, for whatever reason, there is no genuine alternative available to me. So, for instance, if my hormones made me do it, or my medication, or I did it at gunpoint or under hypnosis, then I did not have free choice on that occasion. And the same is true if my temperament, or my bad upbringing, or processes in my brain, or anything else made me do it, or if, for whatever reason, there was no other option available to me as a genuine alternative.

In Plantinga's view, if I do not have free choice of the sort just sketched, I am not morally responsible for my behavior. At face value, this libertarian view seems to reflect the commonsense understanding of freedom of choice and, for that reason, to be plausible, perhaps even obvious. For instance, think of a situation where you held people morally responsible for something they did or didn't do. You blamed or praised them because you thought they deserved it. And it seems to make sense for you to think that only if you also think they could have chosen or done something else instead. After all, it doesn't seem to make much sense to blame me for doing something if I genuinely couldn't help it, or to praise me for doing something if not doing it was never even an option for me.

Despite its initial appearance of obviousness, libertarianism is a controversial theory, with each of its two core points in dispute. Once again, they are: free choice means that I myself am the sole agent of choice; and free choice means there is a genuine alternative available to me at the time of choosing. Briefly, I will illustrate a disputed feature of each point.

Typically, when we make choices, we are aware of nothing in our brains, or temperament, or upbringing, influencing us. But we are all familiar with the saying "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." That is, we are all familiar with the cautionary idea that, just because we are not aware of anything influencing the outcome in a particular situation, it does not follow that in fact there is nothing influencing the outcome in that situation. For instance, when I spoke on the phone a little while ago, answering a question from a friend, I had no awareness whatsoever of the processes in my brain or in the muscles and sinews of my throat, or of the movements of my tongue, without which I could not have

answered the question at all. But, while unaware of all those things and much more besides, I do not doubt for a moment that they occurred, or that I could not have answered the question otherwise. Now, I obviously did not choose any of those occurrences. For one thing, I know next to nothing about most of them, and so could not have chosen them even if I had had a mind to.

All of those processes are cause–effect occurrences in parts of a physical thing, my body, and they are subject to the same forces and laws of nature as everything else in spacetime. Given that, how confident can we be that it is not, for instance, things happening inside our brains, things of which we have no consciousness and which we do not control, that are the real sources of our choices and decisions? Just because we are not aware of any causally determining processes behind our choices, how confident can we be that there are no such processes behind them? After all, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. In addition, don't we need good reason to suppose that the forces and laws of nature stop at us, when we deliberate and make choices, while applying to everything else in the universe?

Now to the second libertarian claim. It is that, whenever I make a free choice, I recognize a genuine alternative which I could just as easily have chosen instead, even though everything else is exactly the same. In the 2004 presidential election in the United States, I voted for John Kerry. Could I have voted for George Bush instead? Or for a third candidate, or not voted at all? Was any of those a genuine alternative for me? Before you answer, consider that I believed it was very important to vote Bush out of office, that I considered Kerry by far the best of the candidates, and that I thought he would be a very good president. With all of that remaining exactly the same, could I really have just as easily voted for Bush as for Kerry, or voted for a third candidate, or not voted at all? Surely not. Nonetheless, I maintain that I voted freely for Kerry.

### *Compatibilist free choice*

The principal rival to libertarianism is the compatibilist theory of free will. It argues that the libertarian theory has unrealistically high standards for choices to be free. As its name suggests, the compatibilist theory characterizes freedom of choice in terms that are compatible with cause-and-effect processes.

The compatibilist theory does this by distinguishing between causes that are internal to me and causes that are external to me. Examples of the

former would be my own desires and wishes, while our earlier references to acting under hypnosis or at gunpoint will do nicely as examples of the latter. Equipped with this distinction between internal and external causes or sources, the compatibilist then maintains that choices caused by my own internal psychological states, for instance, my own desires, wishes, preferences, and so on, are free choices. Even though they are caused, the compatibilist theory considers them to be free. The reason is that they have the right sort of causal pedigree.

Here is an example. Suppose you ask me why I walked home instead of taking the bus. I tell you that I chose to walk because I felt I needed the exercise, or because I wanted to enjoy the cool weather, or because I like to walk in the rain. I would be telling you that my choice issued from what I felt I needed, or from what I wanted or liked. On this point – classifying choices that issue from the chooser’s own needs and desires and so on as free choices – the compatibilist theory further maintains that it is reflecting the commonsense view of the matter.

Furthermore, the compatibilist theory does not make it a necessary condition of free will that, all things being equal, I could always just as easily choose something else instead.

Compatibilism and libertarianism, then, disagree on both of the core claims in the libertarian theory.

There are serious philosophical difficulties in the compatibilist theory too. Very briefly, here are two, one for each of the foregoing points of difference. Earlier we had an example of choices made as a result of hypnotic suggestion. We saw that the compatibilist theory, like its libertarian rival, would classify such choices as unfree. Now, in order to facilitate a brief description of a problem facing the compatibilist theory, let us vary that example a little. Suppose now that, under hypnosis, I am told to have a certain desire when I wake up. For instance, think of people who go for hypnotic treatment to stop smoking, because their previous efforts have failed. Sometimes the treatment involves their being told, under hypnosis, to no longer want or desire to smoke when they wake up.

Notice that, in the modified example, I am not told to make a certain choice after waking up. Instead, I am told to have a certain desire. That is the difference in the example. Now suppose that I do have that desire when I wake up, and suppose it causes me to make a certain choice. Would it be a free choice?

It is not clear that it would be. Why not? The reason is that, while my choice came from my desire, my desire did not come from me, but from

a source beyond my control. True, the hypnosis example dramatizes the point. But doing so serves to highlight the fact that, typically, my desires are caused by things over which I do not have control. For instance, my temperament seems to be among the causes of my desires, but I am not the cause or source of my own temperament.

The challenge to the compatibilist theory now is to justify isolating one segment in the unbroken chain of causes and effects – the segment that goes from desires to choices – and calling it free, while classifying the other segments in the same chain as unfree. And keep in mind, as you consider this challenge to compatibilism, that the word ‘cause’ has exactly the same meaning in the segment under consideration as it does in all other segments of that unbroken chain of causes and effects. And so does the word ‘effect.’

The second problem arises concerning the compatibilist idea that, in order for my choices to be free, it is not necessary for me to have the option of choosing something else instead. Here, too, let our example be a situation where it is my own desire that is the source or cause of my choice.

Suppose I am a drug addict, and I choose to take this drug now. I do so because of my desire to take it. And, being addicted, I do not have the ready option of choosing not to take it. In this example, then, the condition of easily choosing something else instead is absent, but my choice does come from my own desire. Under the compatibilist theory, it seems we should consider my choice to be a free choice. But I think we would hesitate to do so. Why? The reason is that the addict’s inability to avoid choosing the drug is part of the very essence of his addiction. And it seems strange to consider a choice to be free in such circumstances.

True, the example of addiction dramatizes the point at issue. But it does not change the essential nature of the point. Instead, it highlights the compatibilist idea that the ready availability of a viable alternative is not necessary for free choice or free will.

We cannot explore either theory here, or adjudicate the debate between them. For one thing, that debate is among the most vexing in the whole of philosophy. Fortunately, to assess Plantinga’s use of libertarianism, we do not need to. That being so, and with the libertarian theory of free choice being an essential part of Plantinga’s defense against Mackie, let us accept the theory for the sake of argument. Doing so permits us to examine Plantinga’s defense on its own terms.

As we do so, it is worth noting that Plantinga's defense does not require the theory to be true. It requires only the logical possibility that it could be true. Accordingly, what we are accepting for the sake of argument is proportionately modest. It is that, possibly, the libertarian theory of free will is true. That stipulation in hand, let us now turn to Plantinga's argument, the aim of which is to disprove Mackie's point that there is an implicit contradiction between God and evil.

*A God-made world with the possibility of moral goodness*

If God is perfectly good, then everything God does is done with good intentions. So, if God made the world, it was with the intention of bringing about an overall good world. Of course, we don't know just what a God-made world would be like, but it is possible that it would contain human beings, and possible that it would provide sufficient opportunity for us to achieve moral goodness.

But, given the correlation mentioned between freedom and responsibility, God could not just go ahead on his own and create a world with moral goodness built in. For, on that correlation, moral goodness can come about only as an achievement, by beings who have sufficient freedom, knowledge, responsibility, and experience.

Consequently, while a person's moral goodness can be nurtured from the outside, no person can be made morally good, or morally bad either, from the outside. Human beings could come factory-equipped, so to speak, with libertarian freedom of choice, but not with moral goodness. Moral goodness is an option, not standard equipment.

There is a downside to creating beings with libertarian freedom. Being omniscient, God would know it. God would know that a libertarian free choice is beyond the power even of omnipotence to bring about. That is because a caused free choice, in this sense of freedom, is a contradiction in terms on a par with an uncurved circle. So the inability of even omnipotent power to cause or bring about the free choices of beings possessing libertarian freedom does not negate divine omnipotence.

For various reasons, among them the compatibilist theory of free choice described above, you might hesitate to accept that last point. After all, compatibilism suggests an idea of freedom on which choices could be both free and caused. Given compatibilism, perhaps the failure of omnipotence to cause certain free choices, namely, good ones as opposed to bad, could be grounds to deny divine omnipotence or divine

perfection, thus grounds to deny there is a God. And perhaps the compatibilist theory is right.

However, none of this is to the point. For, as we saw, all that Plantinga's argument requires is that his libertarian concept of freedom could possibly be true, not that it is true, or even plausible. And as we have stipulated the libertarian theory, we are agreeing for the sake of argument that there is no logical possibility of an externally caused free choice. Thus Plantinga has his crucial premise, which is that it is logically possible that the free choices of human persons are beyond the power of an omnipotent God to cause or bring about.

Perhaps you are unconvinced for a different reason. Perhaps you are thinking that, if circumstances called for it, God could over-ride libertarian freedom. That may be true. However, it is not cause to be doubtful about the idea of libertarian freedom itself. Indeed, it accepts libertarian freedom, just not in all circumstances. So it is not a doubt about the concept of libertarian freedom as such.

Nonetheless, the doubt highlights an important point in Plantinga's use of the concept of libertarian freedom. It is that his concept is of full-time libertarian freedom. It may be useful to think of it as like the full-time all-wheel-drive system in certain kinds of cars.

In essence, then, the logical possibility Plantinga is proposing is that God, consistent with his intentions in granting full-time libertarian freedom in the first place, could not subsequently interfere with it, control it, or over-ride it. This opens up the possibility of horrors like the Holocaust, the Pol Pot mass exterminations in Cambodia, the genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan, and so on. The possibility of moral evil is an unavoidable byproduct of libertarian freedom.

### *Intending and foreseeing*

How could a perfectly good being intend to bring about a world in which the Holocaust could possibly occur? It is a good question. There are two parts to the answer.

The first part of the answer itself makes two points. Point one is that such a world would have to be as good overall as, or better overall than, a world without the possibility of the Holocaust. Point two is that, possibly, either the occurrence of the Holocaust was necessary for the world to be as good as, or better than, any alternative world, or it is an unavoidable but regrettable byproduct of bringing about an overall good world.

Given Mackie's failure, so far, to prove a contradiction between God and evil, that two-part scenario has not been proved impossible. So, until we have proof to the contrary, we must keep an open mind on those logical possibilities.

The second part of the answer stresses the point that God, intending to bring about such a world, would not thereby have to intend to bring about the Holocaust itself, or any of the other evils in the world. This idea turns on a distinction between intending something and foreseeing that it will occur. God, being omniscient, may foresee the evils of the world. But God, being perfectly good, would not intend them to occur. That is, God would not select them for their own sake. So, even if they are a necessary part of the means of bringing about an overall good world, or an unavoidable byproduct of doing so, God could permit or tolerate them without intending them.

Consider an analogy. As the parent of a young child who broke his leg playing on the jungle gym, you hold the child's leg steady while the doctor sets the bone. You know this procedure will cause great pain to your child. And, of course, you do not intend your child to suffer. But you foresee that he will. Yet you allow the procedure to go ahead. For the greater good of the child is served by setting the bone now, painful as that is, compared to either not setting it at all, or setting it later. You foresee the pain, you permit your child to suffer it, but you do not intend it. What you intend or want is the proper healing of your child's leg. If an anesthetic had been available, you would have insisted on your child getting it, unless there was a good medical reason for the child not to get it.

On this analogy, then, the idea is that, possibly, God intends to bring about a world that is at least as good overall as any world without the evils that exist in the actual world. God might foresee that certain terrible evils are inevitable byproducts at various stages in the development of that world. But God would not intend or want those evils to occur, and would not choose them as such.

#### *Plantinga's free-will defense summarized*

The basic ingredients of Plantinga's defense are now at hand. Let us put them together. It is possible that God intended to make a world that contains human beings and in which moral goodness could occur. It is possible that worlds like that are better overall than worlds not

containing any moral goodness or any moral evil. But it is possible that worlds like that must contain freedom of choice. There are rival conceptions of free choice, but it is possible that full-time libertarian freedom is the only kind on which moral responsibility, thus moral goodness, can occur. But libertarian free choices are beyond the power of God to cause or bring about, even though that kind of freedom can result in very bad choices and actions. God would possibly foresee such outcomes, but would not intend them.

Consequently, it is possible that God could go ahead and bring about that kind of world, without any contradiction between those evils that could occur and divine perfection. On this chain of possibilities, God could justifiably bring about a world that, through the free choices of human beings, would contain terrible evils.

In this way, Plantinga claims to prove that the existence of God remains logically possible, even though the world itself contains evil. If he is successful, he will have disproved Mackie's claim to the contrary.

## II Mackie's Response

Plantinga's argument is simple and powerful. But Mackie offers a simple and powerful response that puts this free-will defense in serious question. Plantinga himself describes the core of Mackie's response as "subtle and important."<sup>1</sup>

### *Lifelong moral blamelessness*

The first step in Mackie's response is to grant, for the sake of argument, all of the premises in Plantinga's defense. Even having done that, he then suggests an alternative, and far better, possibility that, it seems, would have been available to God.

The alternative would have been to create free human beings who, unlike us, would be known in advance to lead morally blameless lives. Looking back on this idea about twenty-five years after formulating it, Mackie called it the "central thesis" in his argument.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 33.

<sup>2</sup> J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 164, n. 14.

The core idea is that it is logically possible for a person to have full-time libertarian freedom, yet never make a bad moral choice. And if it is logically possible to have one such person, it is logically possible to have the entire world's population consist of such people. Thus, there could be full-time libertarian freedom of choice, moral responsibility, moral goodness, but no moral evil.

An example will bring the idea into sharp focus. But first, we need to bring something obvious out into the open. It is that there is some age at which human beings become mature enough to be morally responsible. I do not mean that there is some split second when we go through a transition from non-moral to moral status. All I mean is that there is some period in which we become mature enough to understand moral issues as such, and to make moral choices. The period does not have to be identical for all persons. Neither does it matter just what the age is. Perhaps it is seven years old, or eight, or ten; it doesn't matter. The point to focus on is that there is some such period. And surely there is. After all, when you were an infant you weren't capable of moral choices, but now you are. So, at some age between then and now, you got mature enough. Let us call it the age of moral maturity. With that idea in place, here is the example of what Mackie is proposing.

Suppose that, shortly after a child reaches the age of moral maturity, an issue comes up where a moral choice must be made. The child has full libertarian freedom to decide any way he or she wishes. Suppose the child thinks the matter over carefully, then freely decides on a course of action. Suppose the choice is a good moral choice. It makes no difference what concept of morality is in force, consequentialist, non-consequentialist, or something else entirely. Use any you wish. Then suppose that, the good choice having been made, the child dies. All of his or her moral choices, all one of them, have been for good.

In itself, this is enough to establish the point, which is that it seems to be logically possible for all of a free person's moral choices to be good moral choices.

The example works for longer lives too, which is not surprising, as it reflects the fundamental point that it is logically possible for all of a free person's moral choices to be good. Suppose a child comes to the age of moral maturity, a moral issue comes up, and the child, exercising full libertarian freedom, makes a morally good choice. Suppose that, later on, the second moral issue in the child's life comes

up, and again the free choice is a good choice. Suppose further that, later on again, a third issue comes up, and then a fourth, and so on, and, in each case, a good moral choice is freely made. Suppose the child's winning streak continues through all occasions when moral issues come up. Then, suppose the child dies. The basic idea is that there seems to be nothing incoherent or logically impossible in the concept of a morally blameless person, regardless of the length of the streak of free and good moral choices.

To avoid a possible misunderstanding, we should distinguish that basic idea from a neighboring idea that might be confused with it. This different idea is that, because a first (or second, or third, or any individual) moral choice could be a good choice, all subsequent moral choices could be good choices too. That second idea involves an unjustified generalization. But the first idea, the basic idea in my examples of Mackie's central point, does not. For one thing, it does not involve any generalizing at all. It does not go from one choice or several choices to all choices or many choices. Instead, it is the idea, illustrated by the example of a person who makes only one moral choice in his or her whole life, that a morally blameless life seems to be a logically possible life for a person who possesses full libertarian freedom.

The concept of such a life is the core of Mackie's rebuttal to Plantinga's argument. Perhaps religious people have the idea that some icons of their faith actually led lives of that sort.

### *God at pre-creation*

Switching now from the human side of Mackie's scenario to the divine side, let us focus on omniscience. Following the majority view within the monotheistic tradition, let us stipulate on behalf of Mackie's counterargument that omniscience includes knowing the future.

Now imagine God at pre-creation. Suppose, with Plantinga, that God intends to make an overall good world in which there will be full opportunity for moral goodness to emerge. Consequently, in time, this world will contain human beings possessing full libertarian freedom. But, at pre-creation, God has not yet begun to bring about the world according to those specifications. In particular, no human beings have yet been made.

Before making any human beings, God has to decide which ones to make. After all, God does not just make every person that there could

possibly be. For instance, it is possible I could have had another sister, or a twin. But those possible persons were never actual.

Furthermore, God would be very interested in, and careful about, the life-histories-to-be of all possible persons he makes into actual people. After all, divine creation of actual persons would presumably involve more than God just hoping for the best.

For comparison, consider that, for instance, manufacturers of CD players, before committing themselves to a new model line, want all relevant information on performance projections, market demographics, advertising costs, and so on, for their yet-to-be-made CD players. And if projections over a certain period are not good enough, it is reasonable to suppose that production of that line of CD players will be halted at the research and development stage. Surely God is no less smart or conscientious than Sony. But God has a big advantage over Sony. God knows the future. So, before settling on which possible persons to bring about as actual persons, God knows their full life-histories in advance. No hunches or statistical projections are required before starting production.

Now, among the infinite number of possible persons that God might make are all those possible persons who, if they were actual persons, would freely lead morally blameless lives. And God, whose omniscience includes foreknowledge, knows at pre-creation who they would be.

*The essence of Mackie's rebuttal: controlling  
who gets libertarian freedom*

So Mackie's rebuttal comes to this. Although God could not control libertarian freedom, God could control who gets it. No curtailment of freedom would be involved.

The essential idea in Mackie's rebuttal seems right. For instance, we would never grant total freedom to a person if we felt pretty sure that she would seriously abuse it and harm others. We would not leave the babysitter alone with the children, if we knew she would harm them. We wouldn't do it, even if we only had a hunch she might harm them.

Consider parole boards. They exist precisely to control who, from a certain population, gets freedom and who does not. The basic idea they operate on is that, if they think a convict will abuse his freedom, they withhold that freedom from him. For they know that, once the freedom is granted, it is beyond control for a time and up to a point, perhaps enough time for serious harm to be done.

At face value, then, understood in real-world or commonsense terms, what Mackie is suggesting about the sorts of people who would be good candidates for libertarian freedom, and the sorts of people who would not, looks right.

His challenge to the free-will defense of the logical consistency of God and evil, then, turns on the question of why God wouldn't give full-time libertarian freedom only to the people who would not abuse it. After all, it's what we would do, if we had the power and opportunity.

Morally blameless people are rare. So how could God populate the earth with sufficient people? Maybe it would be objected that, on Mackie's hypothesis, God could not meet necessary population targets, whatever they might be. So, maybe for that reason, God would have to lower his standards and so could not do what Mackie is proposing.

To examine this objection, suppose for the sake of argument that the current population of the earth, plus its population at all past and future times, is the desired population of morally blameless persons, or at least in the desired population range. Now it is true that this number, the total number of morally blameless persons, is only a tiny fraction of the total number of possible persons. But the total number of possible persons is infinite. So, no matter how small a percentage, or a fraction of a percentage, of the number of possible persons that number of morally blameless persons turns out to be, God would have a big enough pool of possible persons to choose from. So, God would have no population-shortage problem.

How could an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God, intent on making a world with full opportunity for moral goodness, not choose this option? No murder, no rape, no lying or cheating, no death camps, no pogroms, no ethnic cleansing, no religious persecution, no religious bullies imposing their beliefs on others, no child abuse, no torture, no moralistic hypocrisy. Furthermore, not only would there be full libertarian freedom and full opportunity for moral goodness, but the net surplus of moral goodness over moral evil would be vastly better than in the actual world, assuming there is such a surplus in the actual world.

Consequently, all other things being equal, the possible world that Mackie is describing would appear to be far better overall than the actual world, while still containing human beings, all with full-time libertarian freedom. It is a powerful challenge to the free-will defense.

Mackie folds this response to the free-will defense into his original argument as follows: "Clearly, [God's] failure to avail himself of this

possibility [that is, actualize only morally blameless persons] is [logically] inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good.”<sup>3</sup>

The criticism seems to give powerful support to his original conclusion. A suspension of our interim verdict of ‘not proved’ seems warranted.

### III Proving a Possibility

#### *First response: logical limits on the power of omnipotence*

A crucial element in Plantinga’s response to Mackie’s rebuttal is the previously mentioned idea that bringing about a world containing moral goodness is necessarily a two-step process, with God controlling only the first step. Plantinga’s conclusion from this is that God could not, strictly speaking, bring about a world which contains moral goodness, either with, or without, moral evil. Even if the world were to turn out to contain moral goodness and no moral evil, Plantinga’s point is that God would not, because he could not, have brought that about.

To see why Plantinga thinks this, let us consider the two stages in world-making that he has in mind.

#### *Stage one*

In stage one of world-making, it is within the creative power of God to make the laws of nature, particles, the entire universe, including human persons with full-time libertarian freedom. Furthermore, God could make any persons he wished, within the limits of logical possibility.

#### *Stage two*

To simplify our consideration of the development of stage two out of stage one, let us suppose that God makes only one person in stage one. The number of people does not matter any more now than it did when we were examining Mackie’s concept of a morally blameless life, so we may legitimately focus on just a single person to keep things simple. Let us suppose, then, that God brings into being one person with libertarian free choice, for instance, the child in the example of moral blamelessness. That is stage one accomplished.

<sup>3</sup> Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” 33.

Now suppose a moral issue comes up for this person. It is entirely up to him or her what happens next. That is the essence of libertarian freedom. Consequently, whether he or she makes a right or wrong moral choice is not in God's control. It is entirely up to the person alone. That is how stage two is accomplished.

The point here is that God cannot bring about what happens next, once the moral issue comes up. Stage two, where moral choices get made for good or ill, is beyond the power of omnipotence to bring about. God alone does not have the power to bring morality into being.

How could God be omnipotent, yet be unable to do this? Plantinga's answer, which Mackie is committed in principle to accepting, is that God could not do this for purely logical reasons. For, to bring it about that a free person makes the right moral choice at stage two, God would have to bring about that person's free choice. But the essence of libertarian freedom is that no outside agency can be the cause of a free choice.

So, Plantinga concludes, there are worlds that, for purely logical reasons, God cannot cause or bring about. An example would be any world containing the conjunction of libertarian freedom and morality. Whether those worlds come to be or not is not fully within the power of God. After stage one is reached, what happens next is up to human freedom.

The world that Mackie described as a possibility, a world populated entirely by morally blameless people who exercise full-time libertarian freedom, is one such world. Therefore, for logical reasons that do not compromise either omnipotence or perfect goodness, Plantinga's conclusion is that God could not do what Mackie describes.

### *Back to Mackie's challenge*

Plantinga seems to be right about this. But it may not be the end of the matter. For perhaps Mackie's point could be recast as follows. Why wouldn't God facilitate the occurrence in stage two of moral goodness, without any moral evil? How? By making only the right people at stage one. It is what we would do, if we had foreknowledge at pre-creation. Who are the right people at stage one? They are those who are foreknown by God to go on to lead morally blameless lives. Being known to lead such lives freely, they would in fact go on freely to lead such lives.

Retooled, the challenge turns on the difference between bringing something about, in the sense of causing it to happen, and facilitating something. To facilitate something means to bring about the right conditions for

the desired outcome to come about without further causal interference. It is a serious challenge, even granting Plantinga's point that God could not bring about a world containing moral goodness.

### *The possibility of depravity*

Plantinga's response to this recast challenge develops a rather bleak possibility. It is the possibility that, to some extent, human nature is essentially corrupt. 'Fallen' is the term used by some religious people for such a condition. The idea is that, possibly, human nature is such that, in exercising freedom, each human being goes wrong at least once. Plantinga calls it "transworld depravity."

The idea here is not that all people would inevitably go wrong at least once. After all, Plantinga is committed to libertarian freedom. It is the idea that, possibly, each person does in fact freely go wrong at least once.

This suggestion seems arbitrary, and perhaps your first response is complete disbelief. But let us recall two things: first, conditions behind the veil of ignorance; and second, the lightness of Plantinga's burden of proof.

First, behind the veil of ignorance, we do not know our individual religious preferences, but we retain our knowledge about religion. So we know about the Christian idea of original sin. Second, to succeed in proving a point to be logically possible, it is not necessary for that point to be true, or plausible, or believed, or even believable in any realistic sense. Indeed, it could be both disbelieved and massively implausible, and that would make no difference to the enterprise at hand. Recall the logical possibility of repeatedly surviving a 10,000-foot fall.

The possibility that Plantinga is relying on here, the possibility of a depravity inherent in human nature, is a gloomier version of the Christian doctrine of original sin. Here, from *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, is part of the entry for 'original sin.' It is, the dictionary says, "a tendency to sin and depravity which, in Christian theology, is held to be inherent in mankind as a result of Adam's sin of rebellion . . ."

Plantinga's concept is stronger than the notion of original sin. The difference is that the concept of original sin is the concept of a tendency to go wrong, whereas Plantinga's transworld depravity is the concept of each person actually going wrong.

In essence, then, Plantinga's response is that, because of the logical possibility that human nature includes this innate fallenness, God could not

do what Mackie suggests. For, according to the 'depravity' hypothesis, no matter which people God brings about, each of those people will go morally wrong at least once.

What about the morally blameless child? Where is Plantinga's conjectured depravity in him or her? This is a natural challenge to Plantinga's hypothesis. But it is not sufficient to defeat it. For, granting the possibility of an essential depravity in human nature, the result is the possibility that there could be no such child. True, this seems very implausible and far-fetched, but, as we saw, implausibility has no bearing on what is logically possible.

We have already granted the possibility that God could not bring about a world with moral goodness and no moral evil. Now, granting the logical possibility of Plantinga's 'depravity' hypothesis, we must grant the possibility that God could not facilitate the coming about of such a world either.

The upshot is both that the existence of God is a logical possibility, despite evil in the world, and that Plantinga proves it. And so Mackie's claim about a contradiction between them is proved false.

*A second response to Mackie: the possibility  
of omniscience without foreknowledge*

The foregoing response to Mackie's challenge involves finely sliced logical distinctions and technicalities, for instance, the strict meaning of 'bringing about.' A second, more commonsensical, response is also available to the theist. In presenting it, we depart from Plantinga, who does not endorse it.

The key to this second response is that, possibly, God does not know the future. Without foreknowledge, God could not know which possible people would be morally blameless. So, without foreknowledge, God could not know which people to actualize without risking evil behavior.

Is it logically possible that omniscience does not include foreknowledge? If the answer is yes, Mackie's rebuttal to the free-will defense fails, and so too his attempt to prove his original point by way of that rebuttal.

It is a disputed question within the theistic tradition whether omniscience could exclude foreknowledge. There were serious debates about it among philosophers and theologians of the Middle Ages, and the issue

remains unsettled today. We saw in chapter 2 that one of the main reasons to think it is possible that God does not know the future is that the future does not at present exist. On this idea, there are simply no future facts to be known. True, there are other philosophical theories about the future, and about knowledge of the future, on which omniscience does include foreknowledge. But none of those theories has successfully proved that it would be logically impossible for God to be omniscient, if the future were unknowable.

So, absent that proof, it seems we must allow the logical possibility that God, while omniscient, does not know the future. But if it is possible that God does not know the future, then it is possible that God could not have done what Mackie is proposing in creating only people who will be morally blameless.

This response to Mackie may turn out to have some costly implications, as follows. It is a fundamental tenet of many believers' faith that God knows the future. Consequently, the possibility that God does not know the future may shake that bedrock idea and perhaps weaken the believer's confidence that things will turn out well in the end. Furthermore, the possibility seems to make the concept of God subject to the concept of time. After all, not knowing the future means not knowing now what happens later. And, for many theists, the concept of God is that of a being outside of time, and independent of it. For that reason too, then, the possibility may shake the believer's faith, by seeming to diminish the concept of God.

### *Final verdict*

Granting the logical possibility of so-called transworld depravity, our final verdict on Plantinga's specific version of the free-will defense is that it is successful in defending the possible co-existence of God and evil. This means that Mackie's claim is not just unproved, but disproved.

Similarly, and independently, if it is possible that omniscience does not include foreknowledge, then, for that reason too, Mackie's claim about a strict contradiction between God and evil is disproved.

About twenty-five years after the publication of his original argument, Mackie made the following concessions:

We cannot, indeed, take the problem of evil as a conclusive disproof of traditional theism, because . . . there is some flexibility in its doctrines,

and in particular in the additional premises needed to make the problem explicit. There may be some way of adjusting these which avoids an internal contradiction without giving up anything essential to theism.<sup>4</sup>

The first sentence in this quotation suggests Mackie's acceptance that his claim is unproved. The second sentence suggests his acceptance that it is disproved.

For contrast, recall Mackie's original claim: "it can be shown . . . that religious beliefs . . . are positively irrational, that the several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another."

### *Compatibilism and the free-will defense*

We have been discussing Plantinga's defense against Mackie on its own terms. Principally, this means we granted, for the sake of argument, the logical possibility that the libertarian theory of free will is true. But, for all we know, all formulations of that theory may in fact be false and some version of compatibilism may be true. Would that make a difference? In the present context, no.

The reason is that, as I noted earlier, the premises in an argument to prove a logical possibility do not have to be true. It is enough for them to be logically possible. So it makes no difference to Plantinga's defense if the libertarian theory is false, or even if it is known or proved to be false. To make a difference, the theory would have to be logically impossible. And being false, supposing for the moment that the theory is false, does not mean being impossible. For instance, it is false that John Kerry is the president of the United States, but his being the president is not impossible. As we saw, the burden of proof is very light when all that is being attempted is a proof of a mere logical possibility. So, even if Plantinga came to believe that libertarianism about free will is false and announced it, the position of Mackie's argument would not be improved. Later on, however, when we are examining arguments for and against the probability, as opposed to the mere logical possibility, of God's existence, we will find that the burden of proof is heavier for the libertarian theory of free will than it is here.

<sup>4</sup> Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 176.

#### IV The Logical Argument from Evil

Two loose ends need tidying away.

The first concerns the common description of the issue we have examined through this and the previous chapter. In philosophical circles, it is usually called the logical problem of evil, or the logical argument from evil. Those names are a bit inaccurate, inasmuch as all arguments are logical arguments.

The point in the name is that, in the core issues in dispute between Mackie and Plantinga, as well as in the wider debate on the topic, it is the fundamental concepts of logic that are decisive. Those concepts are logical possibility, logical impossibility, mutual consistency and inconsistency, necessity, and contradiction. It is on those that the give and take of arguments and counter-arguments in this and the previous chapter turned, and on which success and failure are decided.

So the names 'logical argument from evil' and 'logical problem of evil,' while a bit misleading, do point toward the concepts on which success and failure turn. Furthermore, the names are well-established by precedent. For both reasons, then, it would be confusing to replace them.

By contrast, in the arguments to which Plantinga's proof of logical possibility frees us to now turn, success and failure will depend on the comparative weight of probabilities. Nothing as clean as a contradiction will be in play. And nothing as broad and receptive as logical possibility will be enough to establish success.

The second loose end concerns the fact that, while Mackie's point was disproved, not all life was knocked out of the logical problem of God and evil. Mackie's point was quite general. It was that the idea of God and the existence of any evil at all, the very fact of evil as such, could never possibly co-exist. To disprove it required only proving the possibility of an exception. And Plantinga did, as does the detachment of fore-knowledge from the concept of omniscience.

But just because it is possible that some evil (the exception) can co-exist with the idea of God, it does not follow that all the evils which actually occur in the world are logically consistent with the idea of God. So the possibility still remains that some particular amount of evil, or some particular kind or instance of evil, could be shown to contradict the idea of God. And if so, then the co-existence of God and evil would be proved impossible after all.

### **Suggested Reading**

- Kane, Robert (2005) *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. This is a good introduction to libertarian and compatibilist accounts of free will.
- Mackie, J. L. (1982) *The Miracle of Theism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. See esp. ch. 9.
- Mackie, J. L. (1990) "Evil and Omnipotence," in M. M. Adams and R. M. Adams, eds, *The Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, Alvin (1996) *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans. See esp. chs 4–8.