

Analysis of J.L. Mackie's Refutation of Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense

To what extent has J.L. Mackie refuted Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense?

Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of God is an integral part of various religions, especially in those of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. The three monotheistic religions believe in this idea, and they practice their rituals and values out of belief in a God that is benevolent and a hater of evil. However, if such a kindhearted and good God exists, why has he preserved or even created the hindrance of pain and suffering in the first place? How is evil logically compatible with an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God? These questions have caused the theist and atheist to be at odds, each attempting to provide evidence for or against the existence of God. As a believer in Christianity who has pondered on these questions, I will explore the reasoning behind differing perspectives on this problem.

One of the most notable responses, which will be the focus of this paper, was put forth by theist analytical philosopher, Alvin Plantinga, which was known as the Free Will Defense. Though the defense received widespread acceptance, critics like the atheist analytical philosopher, John Leslie Mackie, have brought up counter-arguments to contradict Plantinga's defense. This series of criticisms and responses from these philosophers raises the research question: "To what extent has J.L. Mackie refuted Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense?" My focus will be to analyze both Plantinga's arguments in his works like *God, Freedom, and Evil* and *Is Theism Really a Miracle?* as well as Mackie's counterarguments in *Evil and Omnipotence* and *The Miracle of Theism*. In conclusion, I will examine both arguments and settle the question of whether Mackie has succeeded in refutation and conclude with my questions and answers to specific definitions and aspects of the debate.

A. Concept of Logical Problem of Evil

The 3rd-century Christian theologian, Lactantius credits Epicurus as the creator of this paradox. Epicurus' trilemma concerns itself with a god that is omnipotent and omnibenevolent. He questions that if such a god is willing to prevent evil but is not able to, god is then not omnipotent. If a god can eliminate evil but is not willing, then he is malevolent. However, if god is willing and able, where from where does evil come? Finally, if god is neither able nor willing, why is he a god?¹ Based on Lactantius' sources, Epicurus is an atheist who argues that that the gods are distant and uninterested. These same questions remain at the core of the statements that constitute the modern logical problem of evil: 1) God is omnipotent 2) God is omniscient. 3) God is perfectly good and 4) Evil exists.² Upon these assertions, atheists claim that evil is a hindrance to the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God, and the theists have sought to prove otherwise through attempting to falsify both the logical and evidential problem of evil. However, it must be made clear that this essay will not be discussing the evidential problem of evil which attempts to determine the extent the evidence of evil counters the existence of God. Instead, this paper will focus on the logical problem concerning the compatibility of a world with God and evil so that the concept of God in monotheistic religions can either be upheld or debunked. For the remainder of the essay, this definition of the logical problem of evil that constitutes of the four statements will be used and will remain constant for both philosophers to argue on the same premises.

¹Fletcher William, *The Works of lactantius* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), 28.

² Reebe, James R., *Logical Problem of Evil* (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. ISSN 2161-0002) <http://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-log/>.

PLANTINGA'S DEFENSE

A. Problems and Definitions according to Plantinga

As a theist philosopher, Plantinga's purpose is to show that it is possible for a universe in which God and evil exist. He puts forth a defense with the intention of it being a reasonable explanation as to how the propositions of the problem are consistent. He explicitly claims that his purpose is not a theodicy which is a plausible argument that answers why God permits evil and is used primarily for the evidential side of the problem. Coming from the school of Libertarianism, Plantinga believes that one is free from physical determinism which is the philosophical concept every action is inevitable and is the result of antecedent causes. For the Libertarian theist, being free means that one is free concerning an action if they are free to commit or refrain from that action. However, one can receive praise or blame for their actions, so Libertarian free will is morally significant as it affects the moral status of an action. An important question to consider is what acts are good and evil. Since actions are not caused by previous actions and are wholly out of one's own will, anything is described as good if it is deserving of praise while any evil action is worthy of blame. To further understand Plantinga's point, it is necessary to look into physical determinism. This idea says that every state of affairs, even actions out of will, are unavoidable consequences of antecedent affairs, and those who believe this is compatible with free will are known as compatibilists. This idea raises criticisms from people who say that those two concepts could never work together, and they are known as incompatibilists. Though he opposes Mackie's compatibilist beliefs, Plantinga is not an incompatibilist because he believes that though God is capable of foreseeing the future, he merely chooses to not meddle with one's actions to preserve free will. This modified definition of "unfettered" free will acts as a part of

his implications of free will, and therefore, this paper will refer to him as the non-compatibilist instead of incompatibilist. Now that definitions of good, evil, compatibilism, and free will are clear, the sole remaining concept that needs clarification is Plantinga's view of omnipotence. The largely accepted view of omnipotence, especially according to the Christian faith, is that "For nothing will be impossible with God".³ Though a theist, Plantinga argues that God can do anything except the logically impossible which means that he can not violate the laws of logic. For this theist, God can not even violate laws to create $2+2=5$ or a round square. These erroneous statements will never be valid according to logic, and the same applies to the omnipotent being. With these words now put into proper perspective, it is now appropriate to apply Plantinga's definitions to his argument.

B. Plantinga's Argument

To explain his free will defense, Plantinga utilizes the concept of possible worlds. They are worlds like ours, but the actions of God and people in them will differ because they present different scenarios of how the actual world could have been. He chooses to describe them as states of affairs, and the fact that they are possible means that they could or could not have become a logically consistent world for God to have created. Out of all these possible worlds, only one could have managed to become actual because the actual world is where there is a maximum-not necessarily the happiest- set of valid or logical propositions. He also implies that not all possible worlds have to be actualized and believes some of these worlds are highly improbable and unlikely.

³ Lk. 1:37 ESV (English Standard Version).

World 1 or W1⁴ is the first scenario that Plantinga presents in which: 1) God creates persons with a morally significant free will; 2) God does not causally determine people in every situation to choose what is right and to avoid what is wrong, and 3) There is evil and suffering in W1. This world might sound familiar because it is the actual world as humans know it: God has not forced any previous actions to sway our own decisions, and there is, as expected, evil. W1 is possible and actual.

Moving on to W2, a different sight is seen as in this world: 1) God does not create persons with a morally significant free will; 2) God causally determines people in every situation to choose what is right and to avoid what is wrong, and 3) There is no evil or suffering. This world does not appear to be the world known to human beings because it has taken away free will. Though this is an issue according to the world humans are familiar with, the rest of the argument seems utterly logical because a world with God determining and controlling actions would only lead to goodness and no evil.

Following W2 is W3 which is arguably the most controversial one as it includes: 1) God creating persons with a morally significant free will; 2) God causally determining people in every situation to choose what is right and to avoid what is wrong, and 3) There exists no evil or suffering. Plantinga, as an unbeliever of determinism, naturally argues that this world is not possible because God determining actions and actions out of free will cannot work together. In this world, Plantinga argues that even if one had an intention to perform evil, they would be restricted by antecedent causes that forced them always to do right because there can be no evil in W3. They would be like “innocent automata,” but to avoid this, God chooses to provide free

⁴ Reebe, James R. *Logical Problem of Evil* (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. ISSN 2161-0002) <http://www.iep.utm.edu/evil-log/>. The information for W2, W3, & W4 are obtained from the same source.

will because it is more valuable to him than the cost of evil. Plantinga implies that God finds it more of worth when one prefers to freely choose good rather than being forced to, so W3 is impossible with his definition of “unfettered” free will.

W4 is the final world of Plantinga’s possible worlds and it includes: 1) God creating persons with a morally significant free will; 2) God not causally determining people in every situation to choose what is right and to avoid what is wrong; and 3) There being no evil or suffering. At first glance, it is understandable why most would automatically claim this world as being impossible because wrong actions are inevitable with free will. Plantinga, however, reminds that these are just possible worlds, not actual nor even probable to have been likely to occur. Though improbable, W4 remains possible because there is nothing logically contradictory about people with free will always choosing to do right. In fact, this world was the first world that Judeo-Christian God had created for Adam and Eve until they wronged and brought evil into the world.

Out of these four worlds, W1 and W2 are logically possible, but W3 and W4 are disagreed on by theists and atheists. Both agree that there are various worlds God could have created, but the controversy arises as Plantinga believes free will can only exist in W4 where actions are not causally determined. Plantinga opposes W3 because beings in that world supposedly have free will but are still being causally determined by God to choose right. The problem with this world is that God could not eliminate moral evil without also removing some greater good; if God has made a person capable of good, then they need to be capable of evil as well. However, if God’s determinism restricts them in W3, then they would not be able to perform evil actions to reflect their capability of evil. In addition to this idea of evil as necessary

for good, Plantinga proposes Transworld Depravity (TWD). It is an explanation stating that there are possible worlds God could not even have weakly actualized, so he could not have avoided evil in the actual world. He claims that every person has a set of properties or characteristics specific to a person which is known as an Essence(E), and every E suffers from TWD, so they must commit at least one wrong in every world that God has weakly actualized in which that person is free⁵. It does not mean that there is no possible world in which a person can be free and choose to do right, as proposed in W4, nor does it imply that TWD is essential to a person. TWD is crucial to Plantinga's argument because it shows how God cannot avoid evil and remain omnipotent. Plantinga believes that without these kinds of limits, God would not have detailed knowledge about what he would actualize in the real world and other possible worlds.

MACKIE'S REFUTAL

A. Problems and definitions

Mackie attempts to refute Plantinga, and his ultimate goal is to demonstrate that an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good God is contradictory with the existence of evil. It is necessary to view Mackie's definitions because they contrast vastly from Plantinga's. Mackie's compatibilist views influence his interpretation of free will because he believes that it is entirely reasonable for one to have free will that is causally determined by God and always result in good. To clarify, Plantinga also thought it was possible to do right all the time, but it could not have been actual because TWD would make it so that an individual commits at least one wrong. Mackie, however, believes compatibilism can exist in an actual world. Mackie also presents different definitions of good and evil. Good and evil have orders: 1st order good is pleasure and

⁵ Plantinga Alvin, *Transworld Depravity, Transworld Sanctity, & Uncooperative Essences* (International Phenomenological Society, 2009), 178.

happiness; First order evil is pain and misery. Second order good works alongside second order evil to heighten first-order good so that it outweighs first order evil. The first orders are contrasts of each other, but the second order goods attempt to exceed each other. There is also third order good which is God's goodness because it tries to maximize second-order good which brings about first-order happiness so that good outweighs evil⁶. Mackie also differs in his definitions of omnipotence as he thinks an omnipotent God should be able to overcome logical limitations such as impossible worlds so that the actual world could exist with only moral good.

B. Mackie's argument

Mackie's main argument against Plantinga is that it is possible for God to allow men to freely choose the good always so that free will and compatibilism can go hand in hand. He argues that if theists hope for a heaven like this and have had a Garden of Eden in which this was the rule, why can it not happen in the actual world? Mackie agrees with Plantinga that there were other choices open to God than just making humans as innocent automata under W3. To begin, he suggests his argument is slightly different from W3 in that God does not determine the choices of beings, but instead they "freely" choose good. He also argues why an omnipotent God has to put up with only a range of possible free agents with TWD. Mackie claims that if every essence(E) suffers from TWD, then it becomes essential to a person and would concede the point that even if actions are causally determined, a person can freely choose. This interpretation of Mackie on Plantinga's TWD will become his justification of an unlimited range of logically possible worlds out of which an actual world of people freely choosing good becomes a logically consistent world for God. Another argument that Mackie puts forth is against Plantinga's idea that freedom

⁶ J. L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 64, No. 254. (Apr., 1955), pp. 200-212.

outweighs evil. Plantinga argued that free will was much more valuable to God than the risk of evil because it would cause good actions to come out an individual's own will. However, Mackie wonders if freedom is a higher good that outweighs the evil of bad actions. Theists claim that God refrains from controlling though he is wholly good and wants good because the value of freedom is greater than evil. However, theists do not claim that sin is acceptable just because free will is more valuable than complete goodness. This contradiction causes Mackie to question whether free will is more valuable as theists claim. Mackie believes that if at least one wrong is necessary for free will according to TWD, then freedom is random. If freedom was truly based on will, why would it need at least one wrong action? Therefore, Mackie amusingly claims, freedom is not dependent on one's nature which means that God would have to make free agents without any nature so their actions would be "Springing up from nowhere."⁷ If freedom is random, then actions would not be out of one's will and thus, there would be no free will. If free will is random, it also means that God also would not know the action of a person until they did it which would undermine his omniscience that comes with Plantinga's unfettered free will. Mackie claims that freedom can exist without variation which eliminates the risk of bad choices and allows human beings to freely choose the good. According to Mackie, freedom eliminating the risk of evil is the only way that freedom can be a higher good like Plantinga and theists claim. As known, Plantinga does not support this thought because his concept of TWD involves freewill bringing about at least one evil act. Moreover, Mackie provides a paradox of omnipotence which he hopes will prove the irrationality of God. The paradox of omnipotence claims that if free will is really "free" then God can not control it which would not make him

⁷ Mackie JL., *The Miracle of Theism: Arguments For and Against the Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 172.

omnipotent, but it raises the question of can God make something that he cannot control or can he make rules that bind himself?⁸ Does he merely refrain from controlling as Plantinga believes or can he not control? For Mackie, saying yes to either of these questions means God is not omnipotent because then there would be actions he cannot do. Answering no leads to another dead end as there would be evil allowed by God which goes against his benevolence, and there would also be something he cannot control.

CONCLUSION

A. Synthesis

To consider refutation, both ideas must be referred to and see if they concede the other's point. Before I expound on my thoughts, it is necessary to point out the reason for why Mackie has not achieved refutation, and it is because both philosophers argue on different definitions. For clarification and reference, I provided individual definitions for both philosophers, but rather than aiding, it has only emphasized the disparity between the arguments. Also, Mackie seems to have misunderstood Plantinga's TWD as applied to every world a person is free in rather than using it for the weakly actualized ones advocated for by Plantinga. When two people discuss on such distinct definitions that stem from two starkly contrasting religious and philosophical beliefs, one only expects clashes unless one side decides to concede the other's points or compromise in premises. In addition to individually-specific definitions, the approaches from both sides of the argument vary. Plantinga has put forth a defense with suppositions to discuss the logical problem. However, Mackie has approached with a theodicy because he attempts to prove God as nonexistent through the existence of evil. Plantinga also points this out through

⁸ J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 64, No. 254. (Apr., 1955), pp. 200-212.

Mackie boxing up the argument on the premise that it is only logical under Libertarian and non-compatibilist views. Mackie appears to argue that human nature can be innately good because he believes that it is always possible for a person to do the right action. It also seems as if Plantinga supports Hobbes' view of human nature because he creates the concept of TWD to justify the belief that human nature is innately selfish and unable to always do right. Though these are assumptions based off of the implications of their arguments, they support the fact that the philosophers approach the logical problem of evil differently. Arguing from different definitions have led both philosophers to distinct premises and conclusions rather than agreement, so Mackie has not refuted Plantinga.

Though Mackie has not refuted Plantinga and the logical problem remains, I can take a stance on this central issue to my Christian beliefs. I would lean towards Plantinga and be a non-compatibilist because compatibilism would not allow libertarian free will. If I am responsible for my actions, God cannot determine them because then he would be the one responsible for it. A lack of libertarian free will poses a danger to laws in the justice system because people could justify evil actions by saying it was all pre-determined instead of being punished for wrong actions. Another question arises when Mackie presents the unique concept of different orders of goodness and evil: can evil be seen as acceptable when chosen because it ultimately led to good? This question is also applicable to Plantinga as he also claims to believe in Libertarian free will but feels that God could use evil for good. For both philosophers' arguments, thinking that evil can lead to good is reasonable. However, all evil actions, despite their long-term positive effects, deserve punishment in the real world so that an individual will remain responsible for the wrong action. In fact, punishing immoral actions will ultimately lead

to benefits such as less evil in the future with lower rates of crime. People would be less likely to commit a crime knowing that the action will come with consequences. If no one corrected an immoral act on the basis that it ultimately led to good, then the lines between good and evil would be blurred to the point where there would not exist a distinction between two because there would be nothing to contrast evil. Another issue with compatibilism is that it promotes the idea of people freely choosing to always do good. People have the limited ability to always choose good; if people were able to always choose good, there would be no evil in this world. Thus, there would be no need to place a dependency on a God. The reason is because evil compels people to depend and hope for an omnipotent God who seems to be the only one capable of preventing it. The problems that come with Mackie's compatibilism cause unfettered free will to seem like the most logical stance to take to solve the logical problem because it allows God to be omniscient but still preserves his omnipotence as he chooses to not intervene in choices. However, there are issues I have with Plantinga when he claims that God can be omnipotent but cannot be against the rules of logic. Logic is a human system of knowledge, so confining such an all-powerful entity within set laws just to have an explanation as to why God did not create worlds without evil does not make sense. If God is as sovereign as he is, he could surpass logic and have created those worlds without evil. I would even go as far to agree with Mackie in claiming that it is contradictory for an omnipotent God to stay trapped within limits like TWD that prevent him from creating a perfectly good world. However, an almighty God could have chosen out of his desire to be restricted under limitations of TWD, so that humans would depend on him and come to him willingly out of the realization that they are flawed and in need, as said before. Like C.S. Lewis once said and like the monotheistic religions believe, God

wants humans to come back to him upon their own choice, glorify, and have knowledge of him.⁹ The genuine devotion of believers is what he desires and would be a possible reason as to why he chooses to place limitations on his power.

B. Conclusion & Further study

Though this essay is concerned with the logical problem, Mackie argues that the Evidential problem needs attention as well. Why Plantinga has not done so is unsure of, but an assumption is that the evidential problem attempts to disprove God. Perhaps both philosophers can come to agreements or discover concession through approaching the issue with a different intention. As seen, if one needs to reach an argument, it needs to be based on the same definitions. However, philosophy is meant to question the practicality of all actions, and debates that arise from different definitions bring about new discussions. Discussions that lead to confusion and gray areas compel individuals to continue searching for an answer, and that is what philosophy is all about.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1958), pp. 93–97.

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