

# Free Will Theodicy

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### Abstract

The issue at hand with the free will problem as it pertains to the existence of a god, is the following: if there were a god, he would be omniscient and omnipotent, then he would prevent or not create evil in the world. There is evil in the world, so god must not be omnipotent, or omniscient. If god is not omnipotent or omniscient then he is not god.

Where the free will question comes in is in the omniscient portion of the argument. If God is indeed omniscient then he knows all that has happened, all that is happening, and, most importantly, all that *will* happen. So if he will know all that is to happen, how much room does that leave for someone to have the freedom to do as he pleases.

## 1 The Problem of Evil

The Free Will Defence (FWD from here on) is but a subset of arguments used in an attempt to add consistency to the Problem of Evil (POE from here on.) In turn POE is but a subset of a greater argument, that if this can be “proved” it would make arguments for the existence of good somewhat stronger.

This POE theodicy consists of basically a defence for the goodness and omnipotence of God in light of the existence of evil. It’s based on the traditional Christian theology which states that God has the following attributes: omniscience, omnipotence, omni-benevolence, and the “unmoved mover” or uncreated creator of all things.

The problem with those attributes of God is that there exists a logical inconsistency. This inconsistency is that if God (this all-perfect, all-good being) created the universe then he would create a universe that is all-perfect and all-good. However, the universe is not all-perfect, and it’s not all-good. So the conclusion that one may draw from these premises is that either (a) God is able and unwilling to create a universe absent from all perfection, or (b) God is unable and wanting to create a universe absent from all perfection. As such, considering (a) would entail that God is not *all-good*, and considering (b) would entail that God is not *all-powerful*.

The FWD, then, consists of a line of attack to help resolve this seemingly contradictory set of statements. For clarification and simplicity, the set of arguments that constitute the anti-theist’s response is as follows (we shall call it set A):

1. God is all-powerful, all-knowledgeable and all-good
2. Since God is all-powerful, God can prevent Evil.
3. Since God is all-knowledgeable, God is aware of all evil and knows how to eliminate it.
4. Evil exists
5. Therefore, God is either not all powerful, not all knowledgeable, or not all good. But since (1), then God does not exist.

## 2 Theodicy and Defence

Before continuing, there must first be made a distinction between the Free Will Defence (FWD) and the Free Will Theodicy (FWT.) The FWD is an attempt to rebut the Problem of Evil (PoE).[9] It is an entirely defensive tactic aimed to respond to criticism. In this way Alvin Plantinga's essay[8] is, in part, a response to J. L. Mackie's essay[6] which criticises the problem of evil. On the other hand, the free will theodicy is an attempt to explain why God permits evil. I will briefly go over the free will theodicy for a better understanding of the free will defence.

### 2.1 Free Will Theodicy

In a nutshell, the free will theodicy asserts that God granted humans free will to make them "free moral agents." These "free moral agents" happen to chose evil. So evil is a human creation versus a creation of God himself. As such, God was not the direct cause of evil, but only an indirect cause. For many theologians this may count as an acceptable excuse.

The basic assumption of the free will theodicy is that God values free will (much more so is gained through free will, than what is lost through choosing evil with free will.) Free will brings about the possibility of evil. God then takes a "risk" at the possibility of evil for the greater value of free will, or the moral autonomy of humans.

### 2.1.1 Critical Analysis of FWT

Taking a look at the free will theodicy in some detail, we come up with some major points of this theodicy. First, however, we must assume (for the moment) that Christianity (above all other religions) is correct and true. Let's look at the three assumptions of the free will theodicy:

- (1) Man has free will
- (2) Free will is more valuable than the evil that it causes; and
- (3) Free will must result in Evil.

The first claim is in and of itself controversial. To use another controversial claim to support a controversial argument is question-begging. The second claim is not very strong. As an example of where it weakens we may take the free will of Adolf Hitler vs. the resulting evil caused by "choosing" incorrectly. The last claim (3) is not necessarily true. Does my choosing of chocolate ice cream over vanilla ice cream, consistently, show that I am not free? Further, does my consistently choosing to save someone's life (as a volunteer EMT, for example) mean that I have no free will, or that it will result in evil?

That last claim (3) may be replaced with the following:

- (3') God could not give man free will *and* ensure that man would use it to do good.

Then with that it would seem that:

- (4) Not even God could ensure results of a genuinely free act.

Now a few bells go off! It seems that (4) is against Biblical theism. (4) implies that God does not have complete control or is not omniscient. So God, then, sees all evil as not "really" being evil or not being able to control evil. However, there not "really" being any evil is counter Biblical theism which states evil as sin. So we have left the incontrollability of evil![6, p. 192]

There are some additional problems for the Free Will Theodicy argument. First off, it may explain moral evil, but it does not explain natural evil. It may even *require* natural evil (ie: dementia, or psychosis)[9] To further complicate things, many theologians have attributed these natural evils as "acts of god" or "acts of demons." If natural evils are caused by demons then we may say that this is a complication of the argument once again, but an assumption which is hypothetical at best.[7, p. 162]

## 2.2 Free Will Defence

The free will defence is a rebuttal on Mackie's claim that the problem of evil is a *logical* problem. Plantinga sets out to do just that: to show how set A is logically consistent. Plantinga demonstrates that set A is neither formally nor explicitly contradictory. Furthermore, that the set must be implicitly contradictory. However, all that Plantinga must do is show that the following is merely *possible*:

- (28) God is omnipotent and it was not within his power to create a world continuing moral good but no moral evil

If he can say that it is possible for (28) to be true, then it's also possible that:

- (22) God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so.

In an effort to demonstrate that among the worlds that God cannot create is one where there can exist all moral good and no moral evil he introduces the concept of "transworld depravity." By stating the difference between creation of the world and the possible state of affairs, Plantinga says that God did not create states of affairs. Many states of affairs may exist but only one obtains. Further, that since God may only exist in the worlds that he *did* create, he is contingent. Here is where transworld depravity steps into the picture:

- (33) A person  $P$  suffers from transworld depravity if and only if the following holds: for every world  $W$  such that  $P$  is significantly free [free to chose moral right from moral wrong] in  $W$  and  $P$  does only what is right in  $W$ , there is an action  $A$  and a maximal world segment  $S'$  such that

1.  $S'$  includes  $A$ 's being morally significant for  $P$ .
2.  $S'$  includes  $P$ 's being free with respect to  $A$ .
3.  $S'$  is included in  $W$  and includes neither  $P$ 's performing  $A$  nor  $P$ 's refraining from performing  $A$ .

And

4. if  $S'$  were actual,  $P$  would go wrong with respect to  $A$ .

Consider a world  $W'$  where a person  $P$  always did an action  $A$  what was morally right. And there were sets of pre-existing conditions  $S'$  upto the point of the action taken, not including his decision to fulfil that action. In the real world  $W$  we have the person  $P$  always making a moral wrong with respect to  $A$ . Then God cannot create a world  $W'$  where  $S'$  is actualised *and* person  $P$  was free. For if  $S'$  were actualised it would lead towards a particular action  $A$  that would then actualise the real world  $W$ . If God influenced person  $P$  then person  $P$  would not be a free person to make a moral right, or wrong.

### 2.2.1 Critical Analysis of FWD

So it would seem that Plantinga's analysis:

(1) God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omni-benevolent.

(33a) Everyone suffers from transworld depravity.

Is logically consistent with:

(2) There is evil

However, what if you make a conjunction (1) with "Jesus was a sinless human being." Very few Christian theists would refute the truth of that premise.[11, Sec 1.3] Clearly, it's at direct odds with Plantinga's statement that "*everybody* suffers from [transworld depravity]."[8, p. 211]

Another objection is in the afterlife, or heaven. Many theologians believe in the coming life (the afterlife.) God cannot make a perfect heaven without removing our free will. [2, Sec 3.2] But if he gives us free will, then God will give us the same set of problems to bring about evil! In fact, everything will start all over again with man (accidently or not) choosing evil. If he values free will so much as to allow evil, then why take away this "ultimate goodness" from us in Heaven?[1, Sec 3.3]

Another objection encountered that has the free will defence fail is one of God's motives. It states that God can logically achieve any goal that he wants. Yet, he chooses evil (or evil indirectly through God's created beings) to achieve the goal of "true worship." He could have used some other method to bring about true worship other than evil.

This objection holds up to the light that God still created evil, even if indirectly. To bring the analogy down to Earth (so-to-speak) consider: Guns

don't kill, people do.[4] In order to overcome this objection, the causal link between God and evil in humans must be overcome (something which is beyond the scope of this essay.)

### 3 Conclusion

There are many other objections to the Free Will Defence and Free Will Theological responses to the Problem of Evil. Furthermore, there are quite a number of works written by either side on strictly the Logical problem of evil. The focus of this essay was to highlight *some* of the explanations that have been brought to the table by both sides.

The problem of evil is not going anywhere, anytime soon as each side sets, and matches the other. In addition to the fact that this is just *one* of a possible dozen responses to the problem of evil. And furthermore, none of these responses, especially the Free Will Defence in any way helps to soothe those looking for the Truth.

“Neither a free will defence nor a free will theodicy is not designed to be of much help or comfort from such a storm in the soul...Neither is to be thought of first of all as a means of pastoral counselling. Probably neither will enable someone to find peace with himself and with God in the face of the evil the world contains. But then, of course, neither is intended for that purpose.”[5]

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