

A critique of Plantinga's free will defense against the problem of evil

Alvin Plantinga constructed his free-will defense to argue for the existence of God against the problem of evil. I will attempt to analyze and critique the free will defense. I will show that the free-will defense fails to sufficiently address the problem of evil due to its flawed view of morality and free will, its implausible response to the problem of natural evil, and the unresolved contradictions that arise about God's attributes due to its claims. I will also discuss how its worldview is far removed from the practical concept of God and religion as well its implications on real life.

Alvin Plantinga's free will defense was written in its final form in *God, Freedom, and Evil*. This was a response to J.L. Mackie's formulation of the logical problem of evil. The problem states that the commonly accepted attributes of God- omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omniscience taken together are in contradiction with the existence of evil. It asks the question of why God lets evil exist in the world. If evil exists because he is unable to stop it, he is not all-powerful and all-knowing. On the other hand, if he can, but does not prevent evil, he can not be all good (Mackie 200-212). In contrast, the evidential problem does not contest the logical consistency of the existence of evil with that of God; it only seeks to show that the existence of evil lowers the possibility of God's existence. It claims that the existence of evil makes it highly unlikely that God with the above-mentioned attributes exists (Trakakis). Some have attempted to refute the problem of evil by attempting to disprove the existence of evil itself (Kelly 42). However, Plantinga does not do so in his free-will defense, so we will proceed with the assumption that evil does exist. We will also accept the three characteristics of God although they may be interpreted differently by various theologians and philosophers. Even though the defense was formulated in response to the logical problem of evil, it has also been used to refute

the other arguments from the problem of evil including the evidential problem of evil. Therefore, I discuss and argue against the free will defense in a broader context including the evidential problem of evil.

Plantinga's defense can be understood with two core statements. First, God cannot have created a world with creatures that do not commit any evil and simultaneously possess significant free will. Plantinga believes this world to be contradictory and states that even God is unable to do the logically impossible (Plantinga 17). If people could do only good, their actions will not be morally significant and thus, they could not be praised for their good deeds. Second, a world that has significant free will of creatures, even if it has evil in it, is more valuable than a world that does not. Evil is allowed for the greater good of giving people libertarian free will (Plantinga 166,167).

I believe the most significant obstacle to Plantinga's argument comes from the second statement above. His defense is heavily reliant on the implicit and inherent value of free will above everything else. It suggests that preserving absolute free will is the morally correct thing to do, even at the tremendous cost that we seem to be paying for it. Free will carries the weight of all the wars, genocides, murders, and rapes that plague our world. At its core, the free will defense accepts the unparalleled importance of free will, but Plantinga doesn't elaborate on why it does so. The assumption of a higher ethical value of free will against the prevention of evil deserves more scrutiny. We can understand this by discussing some examples.

First is the idea of God as a parent as is observed in many religions. How should a parent act in face of wrong actions of or against his children? Can a parent who doesn't stop his children from harming each other be considered good? Is his inaction justified because he seeks to preserve the children's free will? Perhaps, this analogy is not apt as children eventually grow

up to be adults and become morally equal to their parents. However, the idea still stands true. Consider a police officer not intervening on seeing somebody engaged in a violent act (Pavelich). Inaction would be immoral, not only for him but also for any other spectators with the power to stop the violence. The way our societies have structured themselves suggests that humanity disagrees with the assumption, and so do I. Even with our limited understanding of morality, we come to a consensus that rape or genocide is immoral, and we must put an end to it, even if that diminishes the free will of a few people. Another atrocity that further illustrates the morality and contradictions of this argument is slavery. Even if we believe that the free will of the perpetrator is above the sexual autonomy of somebody's body or the rights of millions to not be murdered, it is logically inconsistent to allow the free will of a few to completely take away the free will of so many. This is more than just an obvious case of numbers. We must also consider the matter of the magnitude and quality of free will. The will of a man to take away others' freedom to enrich himself is respected while so many find themselves unable to make any substantial choice about their own lives.

We hold humans liable for not acting to prevent such evils and deem them complicit. God's morality can not be fundamentally different from ours. God being maximally good means he is good in a way that is similar to us, just superlative in degree (Pavelich). If God can stop evil and does not do so, he is morally responsible for it and deserves to be similarly judged for it. Free will is thus, not a morally acceptable excuse for such horrendous evils.

The second objection comes from the concept of free will itself, with Plantinga supposing an erroneously simplistic view. The concept of libertarian free will remains contested and unresolved with a lack of consensus in understanding its causation (O'Connor and Franklin). Further, violence is often not merely a moral choice made in a vacuum. It is also a product of

evolution and biology. Human beings' tendency towards violence may come from their instinctual need for survival and immediate gratification (Buss 608-610). God could have created a world that does not favor violence as a means of survival and is less competitive. Some animals have high dispositions toward violence while others are incredibly peaceful. Human brains with a higher tendency to favor long-term solutions and cooperation were possible. All of this and more could have been done to mitigate evil without restricting free will, especially by an all-powerful God.

Another major flaw in the free will defense is its inability to account for natural evils, something over which human beings have very little control over. It also fails to address the issue of suffering of other sentient creatures due to natural causes. The line between natural and moral evils may be blurry in some cases. However, a large number of diseases, pandemics, wildfires, earthquakes and other disasters could have been prevented without ever interfering with the actions of human beings. There are even disasters like meteorite crashes that can be conclusively judged as being without any human influence. Plantinga attributes natural evil to non-human supernatural creatures like Satan. This evil goes unstoppable because Satan too has been granted free will (Plantinga 57, 58). With this, he attempts to transform natural evils into moral evils. Such assertion is quite difficult to accept when we have discovered not only the causes but also the solutions to so many natural evils like diseases. Even if we accept his claim of the existence of such non-human creatures, we can only assume that these beings are God's creations. Why would God create beings capable of the worst forms of evil and further grant them such extensive powers, especially with the foreknowledge of the terrible consequences?

God's omniscience also contradicts the free will presented by Plantinga. If God has the foreknowledge of our actions, then it is essential that human beings act in a way that has been

foreseen by God. This suggests humans do not have free will. However, if they have significant free will as Plantinga believes, God's omniscience fails (Hunt and Zagzebski). In order to resolve this, Plantinga draws on the Molinist idea of 'middle knowledge'. It is called so because it lies between God's natural knowledge (which is independent of God's actions) and free knowledge (dependent on his actions). Middle knowledge is God's knowledge of what would happen, given a certain set of circumstances. It is knowing what a free creature would choose to do, given a specific situation. However, the metaphysical grounds for middle knowledge remain uncertain (Laing). What is the justification for believing that an independent actor would take a specific action in a certain situation? If human beings are truly free, there will be no certain knowledge of such actions and thus, God will lack omniscience. Thus, middle knowledge fails to resolve the contradiction.

Similarly, the formulation of the defense also threatens God's own free will. Plantinga says that if human beings were created to be essentially good and unable to perform evil actions, they will not be significantly free. Therefore, they are not deserving of praise for their good deeds because their only choice was to do good actions. It is unclear why similar logic should not follow God's own inability to do evil; thus, questioning his divine freedom (Franks).

In order to address the problem of evil, Plantinga makes concessions to God's essential attributes. Plantinga's God doesn't even remotely resemble the God that millions of people believe in. What is the point of praying to such a non-interventionist God? Regardless of the actual power of this God, if he cannot make any significant positive change to the life of its believers, doesn't that render him effectively powerless? The belief that causes people to worship him is that everyone has God in their corner to support them through hardship and hopelessness. The idea of a God that is a mere spectator and leaves people defenseless betrays the sentiment

that drives religiosity. The worldview of this defense does not match that of most major religions. For example, the defense precludes tales of divine intervention that are so essential to the world's religions. The lack of sin and evil in heaven means there is no free will there either. It also causes the rejection of the notion of heaven as more ideal and desirable than Earth.

The real-life implications of the free will defense are even direr. We are unable to judge God's inactions in face of horrendous evil and even hold them up as maximally good. It leaves us in a truly desperate situation while judging the morality of our fellow beings. If we derive our meaning of goodness from this God, this translates into a morality that is completely divorced from our own. Accepting this worldview necessitates us to radically transform our own approach regarding laws and ethics. I find it difficult to believe that even the most earnest proponents of this worldview will find the application of such God's ethics in real-life reasonable.

Alvin Plantinga's defense, unlike theodicies, only needs to show a possibility that the statements presented in the logical problem of evil may not be contradictory in order to refute Mackie's argument. It just needs to show that there is a logical possibility of the co-existence of God and evil (Beebe). Even an argument as absurd and implausible as assigning Satan the responsibility for natural evils on Earth succeeds in providing a possibility. I believe that Plantinga's free will defense succeeds against the logical problem. However, Plantinga's interpretation of God's omnipotence and other essential attributes may cause some theists to not employ his defense against the logical problem of evil. As far as the evidential problem of evil is concerned, mere possibilities are not enough, and Plantinga's conceptualization of morality, free will, natural evil, and God's attributes causes it to fail.

Works Cited

- Beebe, James R. "Logical Problem of Evil." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,
<https://iep.utm.edu/evil-log/>.
- Buss, David M. "Human Aggression in Evolutionary Psychological Perspective." *Pergamon*,
1997, pp. 608-10.
- Hunt, David, and Linda Zagzebski. "Foreknowledge and Free Will." *Stanford Encyclopedia of
Philosophy*, Stanford University, 2 Nov. 2021,
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/>.
- Kelly, Joseph Francis. *The Problem of Evil in the Western Tradition*. Liturgical Press, 2002, p.
42.
- Laing, John D. "Middle Knowledge." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,
<https://iep.utm.edu/middlekn/#H1>.
- Mackie, John Leslie. "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind*, 1955, pp. 200-12.
- O'Connor, Timothy, and Christopher Franklin. "Free Will." *Stanford Encyclopedia of
Philosophy*, Stanford University, 21 Aug. 2018,
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freewill/>.
- Pavelich, Andrew. "The Moral Problem with the Free Will Defense Against the Problem of
Evil." *Heythrop Journal*, 8 May 2017,

<https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.library.sheridanc.on.ca/doi/full/10.1111/heyj.12654>.

Accessed 10 Mar. 2022.

Plantinga, Alvin. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. William B. Eerdmans, 1977.

Trakakis, Nick. "Evidential Problem of Evil." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

<https://iep.utm.edu/evil-evi/#SH4b>.