God's Choice: Reflections On Evil In A Created World

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"Why did God create a universe with so much evil in it?" In the face of the evils surrounding us, anyone who believes in the existence of a God who is infinitely powerful, knowing, and good, finds this question arising spontaneously and repeatedly.

Although I have cited this question, I have no intention of trying to answer it—not only because evil is the most formidable of problems, but because the question, as I have put it and in its natural context, simply should not be asked! It is an unallowable question, because it takes for granted at least one of the following two illegitimate presuppositions:

(1) It may presuppose that God is a kind of Divine Playwright who has prescribed every action to take place in the world. We are talking here about cosmic and human history: not only about falling sparrows and hairs on our heads but about human moral decisions for good or evil. A Divine Playwright would be the direct author of every act, including morally evil acts. Such a view is both philosophically implausible, since it makes God the sole free agent, and also religiously repugnant, since it makes God the author of moral evil. I therefore dismiss it.

(2) Alternatively, and more likely, the question may presuppose that apart from God’s free decision to create the universe—ontologically antecedent, as it were, to his deciding actually to create—God knew precisely what would take place in human history if He should decide to create, and that He then (so to speak) decided to go ahead and create that universe anyway.

I do not see how this presupposition can be defended, in view of principles which I shall briefly develop. And since the original question makes no sense except in terms of one or the other of the above presuppositions, I reject the question altogether. God’s choice, I shall argue, was not among diverse competing possible cosmic histories (Leibniz’s “possible worlds”), but essentially a choice whether or not to create a universe, a universe containing free agents.¹

To construct my essential argument, I need only identify a few rather obvious metaphysical (or cosmological) principles. I owe them in part to the French philosopher, Henri Bergson, but also to reflection on what seems to be the metaphysical structure of becoming as I experience it. The reader is invited to
consider whether these principles do not describe his or her own experience. If they seem to, more than their opposites, that is for the present sufficient, since first principles are philosophically at the end—or rather at the beginning—of the line: you take or you leave first principles, you don’t demonstrate them. Should any of these principles be rejected, however, I fail to understand what other ones could more reasonably be put in their place. The principles which I have in mind all pertain to the relation between actuality, potentiality, and possibility; between what is and what might be, including the capability of the actual to be other than it is. These principles will not found a whole metaphysical view, but only a fragment of a cosmology, a partial metaphysics of our space-time world.

The First Principle, which might be called the Principle of Determinateness, is that settled actuality, (past actuality, whether immediate or remote) is determinate, exact, unambiguous. Thus, Dickens’ novel, *David Copperfield*, consists in a well-defined set of words in a particular order. In this respect the completed novel markedly differs from the vaguer outlines of it which gradually grew in Dickens’ mind. Similarly, Mozart’s *Forty-First Symphony*, taken as a musical score, is (if we may assume we have a definitive edition) a precise pattern of notes to be played in an unambiguous order.

The Second Principle, which might be called the Principle of Process or Determination, is that dynamic actuality (or existing actuality or concrete process) is, or at any rate involves, a process of determination whereby from the indeterminateness of potentiality there is educed the determinateness, the exactness, of settled actuality. This is a process of educing an exact pattern of existence from the limited indeterminateness given in the present for the immediate future.

Putting it another way, present activity is always, one way or other, a process of creating definite patterns of existence from within a certain ambit of possibility. Dickens’ activity of writing and Mozart’s of composing resulted in just those precise patterns of actuality which are the completed novel and the finished symphony.

Suppose you are driving a dune buggy along a beach bounded by sheer palisades on the left and the surf on the right. This width of beach constitutes a literal width of possibility for driving; within these limits you are free to steer as you like, and your very activity of driving creates a well-defined set of tracks, tracks which simply were not there, had no existence, prior to your driving. The activity of driving creates the tracks within the given ambit of possibility, it does not actualize a hidden set of tracks already there. The dune buggy (and human agency) is quite unlike a locomotive entering a yard of already laid-out tracks.

The Third Principle is that the activity of real (existing) agents alone educes the exact determinateness of settled actuality from the vague indeterminateness of Possibility.

Several clarifications are in order here:
(a) Throughout these reflections I use the term 'agent' broadly, to refer to an existential and originative cause, regardless of whether or not it is conscious.

(b) I distinguish between pure patterns of existence, 'possibilities' (or 'possibles'), and 'Possibility', which is the range or horizon of all possibilities. In the previous example, the range of Possibility is determined by the palisades and the surf, whereas the tracks in the sand exemplify possibilities.

(c) This Third Principle is the converse of the Second. The Second holds that real existential activity entails the production of determinate patterns of existence; the Third maintains that determinate patterns of existence entail the activity of agents which produced them. By this Third Principle the exactness of determinate possibilities has to come from somewhere; it does not just "happen," for no reason at all.²

A Corollary of the above principles is that particular patterns of existence (possibilities) do not temporally precede their actual existence as instantiated in the temporal world. This is what Bergson means when he says that the possible does not precede the real.³

Thus, the pattern of words which is the formal character of David Copperfield, or of notes which is that of Mozart's Forty-First, simply did not exist in time before Dickens and Mozart created them, any more than the tracks in the sand pre-existed the passage of the dune buggy. They were created by their respective authors, not chosen out of a limbo of ghostly possibilities awaiting promotion to temporal existence. David Copperfield and Mozart's Forty-First cannot be said to have been possible before their creation by Dickens and Mozart! True, they were not impossible, but antecedent to the writing or to the composing, there existed no pattern to refer to, no pattern which could be called either "possible" or "impossible." Only after their creation do we have anything to refer to.

To shift the example slightly, could one say that Mozart's Forty-Second Symphony was possible before Mozart died? (I am assuming that in fact Mozart wrote only forty-one). If he had written yet another, presumably it would have been called "the Forty-Second," but "Mozart's Forty-Second Symphony" was not possible before Mozart's death (nor at any other time) for the very good reason that there never was an actual one. Apart from its creation in time as a formal pattern, there is no existent pattern which could be referred to in any way at all; there is literally nothing to refer to.

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What results when we apply the above principles to the second of the two possible presuppositions underlying our initial question? That presupposition, in effect, thinks of God as walking into a kind of Leibnizian metaphysical super-
market in which all possible cosmic histories are arranged neatly on the shelves and coded according to their ontological or aesthetic value. Leibniz, as you know, concludes that God would naturally choose the best possible world.

Keeping the above principles in mind, I would not boggle at God's choosing the best, if only I could believe that there were any to choose from at all! I am afraid that the shelves in Leibniz's market either are quite empty or contain only items which may not be removed from the premises.

For since these 'possible worlds' are supposed to be possible cosmic histories, including the precise thoughts, words, and actions of all human beings throughout the span of history, one must ask where the determinateness of these exact actions comes from. Can it come from the individuals, the people? But as long as we are inquiring into what God can know apart from or 'antecedent' to, his decision to create, the agents must be only hypothetical (since He has not 'yet' decided to create them). But hypothetical agents are just not agents; they are incapable of educing the determinateness of patterned actuality from the indeterminateness of Possibility!

If, then, purely hypothetical people cannot produce the determinateness of a human history, the only alternative, as far as I can see, is to suppose that God provides this determinateness. But if we make this supposition, we return precisely to the first of the two conceivable presuppositions underlying our original question, the unacceptable presupposition of the Divine Playwright who alone has picked out all the details of human and cosmic history.

For although the principles developed above do not prevent God from envisioning as many detailed cosmic histories as He pleases, since He is certainly an agent capable of producing the required determinateness, we cannot allow that He then, so to speak, may utilize any such conjectured world as a blueprint for creation. For in that case He would be reserving to Himself all free agency and hence the originate responsibility for all human acts—and that I am unwilling to believe, though not by reason of the above principles. I think that God is not an author of evil, and I think that He has made us free.

To return to our analogy, God might conceivably stock the shelves of Leibniz's market, but if He does, He also prohibits Himself from taking any of these, his own hypothetical goods, out into the real world! Suppose, as a parallel, that Charles Dickens could arrange that the story he created in David Copperfield should take place in the actual world, right down to the last detail. Then neither young David Copperfield nor Mr. Micawber would be responsible for what they say and do, but only Dickens. He alone, after all, effected the determinateness of their words and their actions. Similarly, to suppose that the actual world is but the realization of a scenario for which God is solely responsible is to revert to the supposition that God reserves to Himself all free agency in the world, and hence has sole responsibility for every human action—and this is the supposition
which I have already rejected out of hand.

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Here then are the results of applying the proposed principles to our original question:

First, the principles, if they are anywhere near correct, rule out the availability for actual creation of any determinate cosmic histories ('possible worlds') apart from ('antecedent' to) God's actual decision to create a universe. Apart from that creative decree there are on the one hand no actual human agents to render human history determinate, and on the other, God Himself cannot be the source of this determinateness without robbing humans of all freedom and responsibility.

By these principles, then, it seems that 'prior' to (apart from) deciding to create, God simply did not know what would happen if He should decide to create, for there was literally nothing to be known, not even by God. To suppose, on the contrary, that there was a determinate, knowable history either posits determinateness without determining agents, or else reserves all freedom and responsibility to God—and neither option is defensible.  

Second, it follows that the original question, no matter how naturally it seems to arise, is in fact spurious, since neither of its necessary presuppositions can survive analysis.

Third, these conclusions go a long way towards mitigating, at least, the problem of the existence of moral evil in a world created by a good God. To speak anthropomorphically, one might say, more correctly than not, that God, knowing that the best possible universe would have to contain creatures capable of knowing and loving, and knowing furthermore that love, since it can only be given freely, may also be freely withheld, chose to take his chances, so to speak, in creating a world of free creatures.

Fourth, the above principles by no means preclude a divine transcendent knowledge of all actual events, whether (to us) past, present, or future. For such knowledge has to do with actual, not purely hypothetical, agents, and actual agents suffice to educe the determinateness of actuality from the indeterminateness of Possibility. The above principles have nothing whatever to say about the possibility of a divine knowledge which transcends time.

Fifth, the application of the above principles has so far centered on moral evil, the evil of the human will and its practical consequences. What, if anything, do they have to say about natural or physical evil? What can they tell us about God's choice in creating a world in which senescence and death are the rule, a world in which a mother loses all five of her small children in a single earthquake? If God cannot be responsible for the use which humans make of their freedom, does He not seem responsible, directly or indirectly, for natural evils, for what
society itself calls “acts of God?” Why did He choose to create a universe in which so much natural evil is not only possible but inevitable?

This is, in the end, Job’s question, and it may be presumptuous to attempt any answer other than that given him. Still, faith seeks understanding, and it is at least worth considering whether the above principles shed any light on the question.

(a) Would it have been possible for God to create a material universe in which natural evils simply do not occur? The above principles do not, so far as I can see, suggest any answer to this. Independently of them one might think such a possibility unlikely, given that extensiveness, by its very nature, grounds the possibility of division, hence of bodily dissolution. (That is, of course, unless God is to be thought of as a frantically busy divine Superman, everywhere intervening in the nick of time!) On the other hand—and again independently of the above principles—some kind of material cosmos free of natural evil can hardly be an impossibility if we are to accept the prospect in the Letter to the Romans of a renewed creation freed from decadence.

Perhaps Paul’s notion of a transformed cosmos is a clue to God’s being content with creating a universe in which natural as well as moral evil are possibilities. St. Augustine unforgettably remarked that God would never permit evil to occur in his creation if He were not so good and powerful as to be able to draw good even out of evil. Can Romans 8, in effect, be an application of such a principle to the evil-laden world so keenly felt by Job?

(b) If the above principles tell us little or nothing about why God should choose to create a cosmos in which natural evil is possible, do they at least give grounds for thinking that God is in some sense knowingly responsible for the actual natural evils occurring in the world, especially those afflicting humans? For apart from human decisions and the evil which may be consequent upon them, is not God the only free agent responsible for the course of cosmic events? Furthermore, would not God know, even apart from his decision to create, all the natural events of a hypothetical universe for which He would set all the conditions? With regard to natural events, at least, must He not have known precisely the history of this particular cosmos, including its catastrophes, apart from (‘antecedent’ to) his decision to create? If, for instance, He set all the conditions of the Big Bang, would He not thereby know its inevitable consequences? And if so, is He not responsible for the natural evils in the world, considering that He might have chosen differently?

The answer to this question depends mainly on the sort of cosmology one adopts, and in particular, whether or not one views natural events as taking place deterministically.

Now, in the face of quantum indeterminacy anything like a pure Laplacian determinism seems out of the question. Furthermore, even if one were to adopt
a rigidly deterministic view of natural events, it is difficult to see how that could satisfactorily account for a divine knowledge of cosmic events in general, given that free human agents inevitably affect what goes on in nature, whether it be by the simple burning of fossil fuels, the building of dams, or the detonation of nuclear weapons. The way a dwelling or a dam is freely built determines whether the next earthquake is catastrophic or only startling. If, as I have argued, God apparently cannot know, apart from his actual decision to create a universe, the outcome of free human decisions made in that universe, it is hard to see how He can have any comprehensive knowledge (again apart from that decision to create) even of the course of natural events, affected as they are by human decisions. By the above principles, then, it seems unlikely or even impossible that God should have a knowledge of natural evils which would befall particular human beings in a world considered purely hypothetically (apart, that is, from His decision to create a world).

Furthermore, there are in general strong reasons for rejecting any rigidly deterministic cosmological view. Not only does human freedom, I would contend, become impossible in such a view, but determinism has no credentials either from direct experience or from science. This surely is not the place to argue for any particular cosmological view, but it is noteworthy that if, with anyone from William James to Whitehead, we opt for a non-deterministic cosmology, we thereby acknowledge in the course of even natural events an uncertainty of outcome which is in principle irresolvable apart from the actual occurrence of the events themselves. For if there be no freedom in natural events (and only if there is none could God infallibly know future events simply by knowing their antecedent conditions), there is no place left for human freedom (Kant notwithstanding). If, however, there is that free play in natural events which human freedom requires and which direct human experience witnesses to, then it appears once again that God could not have infallible knowledge even of specific natural evils apart from his decision to create a cosmos.

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It seems, then, that God took his chances, so to speak, in choosing to create and to create us free. He did it, however, as Augustine pointed out, in full awareness of his own power to convert and to redeem.

God’s choice in creating was thus no Leibnizian calculated selection from among diverse particular possibilities, for there were simply none to choose from. The choice was more a lover’s gamble. The gamble was not without risk, as the history of Redemption shows, but it was ultimately assured of a happy ending.

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NOTES

1. I say that the choice was "essentially" one of creating or not creating, rather than of picking out an exact scenario of human history. This does not preclude God's setting whatever conditions He likes on the environment or on the initial situation of that history.

2. The Third Principle reminds one of Whitehead's 'ontological principle.' At the same time it rules out Whitehead's supposition of an autonomously existent and inexplicable multiplicity of discrete (though interrelated) atemporal patterns of existence ('eternal objects').


4. The reader will notice that the principles developed here flatly contradict not only Leibniz's presupposition of possible worlds available for creation, but also Molina's positing of conditional futures (or 'futuribles') open to divine inspection.

5. The majority of modern process philosophers deny any such transcendent divine knowledge, at least of what is to us future, but they do so because in one way or another they put God into time, a move I am unwilling to make and see no adequate reason for making.

6. "Neque enim deus omnipotens...cum summe bonus sit, ullo modo sineret mali esse aliquid in operibus suis nisi usque adeo esset omnipotens et bonus ut bene faceret et de malo." (Enchiridion, III, paragraph 11.)

7. The line of thought in these reflections is developed in a much wider context in my essay, "Impossible Worlds," International Philosophical Quarterly 23/3 (September 1983), 251-265.