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A RESPONSE TO THE MODAL PROBLEM OF EVIL

Laura L. Garcia

The argument from evil has appeared in many forms over the years, and this is not surprising in light of the fact that it has been one of the most formidable weapons in the atheologian's arsenal. It is only effective, of course, against the traditional theist, since any theist who is willing to surrender one or more of God's perfections has an easy explanation for the presence of evil in the world. Atheologians have generally drawn attention to the evil that exists in the actual world, suggesting that the amount or the degree of such evil is logically incompatible with the existence of a being who is omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect. This sort of attack on traditional theism has been effectively repelled by Alvin Plantinga in *The Nature of Necessity*.¹ However, Theodore Guleserian has proposed a different argument from evil which is meant to discredit not the simple claim that there is an omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect being, but the stronger claim of many traditional theists that such a being exists *necessarily* and has its perfections *essentially*.² Guleserian argues that the existence of such a being is logically incompatible with an obvious truth, namely, that morally objectionable worlds are possible, and that some part of this picture of God must therefore be abandoned. In what follows, I wish to defend the traditional description of God as a being who exists necessarily and who is essentially omniscient, omnipotent and morally perfect. I do not deny that the existence of such a being is logically incompatible with the possibility of morally objectionable worlds, but I argue that this consequence of the traditional doctrine of God is not an absurd one.

The Modal Argument From Evil

Philosophical reflection upon the nature of God as understood in the Judaeo-Christian tradition has often resulted in a picture of God as embodying all perfections or greatmaking properties. Perhaps through considerations such as those that motivated St. Anselm, many theists have endorsed the view that God exists necessarily and possesses all of his perfections essentially—his omnipotence, omniscience and moral perfection are such that he cannot exist without having them. Abbreviating "omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect" as

“OOM”, we might state the traditional theist’s claim as follows:

(G) There is a being, *x*, that exists necessarily and is essentially OOM.

This claim entails that:

(1) Necessarily, there is something that is essentially OOM.

The modal argument from evil is intended as a *reductio* of (1) and hence of (G).³ In order to see the supposed absurdity of (1), some other premises must be brought in. From our understanding of omnipotence we can derive:

(2) Necessarily, for every world *W* and every individual *x*, if *W* is actual and *x* is OOM in *W*, then *x* allows *W* to be actual.

Similarly, from our notion of the moral perfection of *x*, we can derive:

(3) Necessarily, for every *W* and every *x*, if *x* is OOM in *W* and *x* allows *W* to be actual, then it is morally permissible for *x* to allow *W* to be actual.

Here we must understand moral perfection as a character trait or disposition such that, if a being has this trait, it will at no time and in no circumstances do what is morally impermissible (where “do” includes quasi-actions like entertaining certain thoughts or having certain attitudes). Premises (1), (2) and (3) result in:

(4) For every *W*, *W* includes the state of affairs that there is an OOM being, *x*, such that it is morally permissible for *x* to allow *W* to be actual.

In other words, there is no possible world which a morally perfect being should not allow, no morally objectionable possible world. It may seem that such a world is possible, but the truth of (1), together with the unobjectionable premises (2) and (3), entails that such a world is logically impossible—*cannot* exist.

The *reductio* move at this point requires the acceptance of the following proposition:

(5) There is a possible world *W* such that, necessarily, for every *x*, if *x* is OOM, then it is not morally permissible for *x* to allow *W* to be actual.

Assuming that (2) and (3) are unproblematic, our options are to renounce (4), and with it (1) by *modus tollens*, or else surrender (5). At first glance, it might seem that either option is acceptable; someone who is willing to deny (5) can continue to endorse (1), and the traditional doctrine of God remains unmoved. But perhaps there is much more to be said in favor of (5) than of (1), so that someone who chooses (1) over (5) is irrational or, at best, intellectually perverse.

Are Morally Objectionable Worlds Possible?

What is needed to make (5) compelling is an argument to the effect that at least one possible world is such that it would be morally blameworthy for an OOM being to actualize it. Is there such a possible world? Given that every possible world contains an OOM being, a theist might argue that no conceivable contingent state of affairs is morally impermissible for an OOM being to actualize, because every possible world containing a morally perfect being contains enough goodness to outweigh any amount of contingently existing evil (moral or non-moral). Thus, every possible world has of necessity more good than evil. But perhaps this condition, that every world actualized by an OOM being should contain more good than evil, does not exhaust the moral requirements placed on such a being. Thinking particularly of worlds that contain no moral agents other than the OOM being, we might want to add the requirement that worlds in which there is more non-moral contingently existing evil than good and no contingently existing moral evil or good are worlds which an OOM being is morally barred from actualizing. Suppose we accept this as a moral requirement on an OOM being. Is there a possible world which satisfies this description?

Modal Intuitions

Theodore Guleserian attempts to show that the possibility of a morally objectionable world of the sort just described is more plausible, has a higher epistemic status, than the theist's claim that (1) is true. The basic argument here is that our modal *intuitions* are on the side of (5). An intuition, according to Guleserian, is a non-voluntary affirming of a proposition when that proposition is not inferred from others.⁴ Guleserian suggests that we can build up our intuitions about which states of affairs are possible and which states of affairs are consistent with one another to arrive at a kind of global intuition that tells us that a rather large state of affairs is possible, perhaps even that a certain world is possible. For example, suppose I know intuitively that I am a moral being capable of being conscious, and I also see (intuitively) that there is no incompatibility between this claim and the claim that there are other beings like myself. Eventually I arrive at the conclusion that:

- (a) It is possible that there are a great many contingently existing beings capable of being conscious and all such beings are moral and are now conscious of something.

What we have in this line of reasoning are two kinds of claims: (1) those known immediately by intuition, that is, self-evident or non-inferential claims, and (2) logical principles enabling us to combine these intuitions, such as the principle that "if the state of affairs S is possible and is consistent with the state of affairs

S', then the state of affairs S and S' is possible." Just as our intuitions support (a), says Guleserian, so we can intuit the possibility that there is somewhere a moon that is half-pink and half-purple, and that one such moon is not incompatible with the existence of others like it, thus arriving at:

- (b) It is possible that there are a great many moons and all such beings are half-pink and half-purple.

Applying this same strategy to the possibility of a morally bad world, we can imagine a world in which the only sentient creatures are non-moral animals (like rabbits, perhaps) and in which each of these animals experiences large amounts of intense pain and suffering alleviated by only the most minimal amounts of pleasure, and in which there are no moral agents other than the OOM being. Such a world would fit the description given above, since it contains more contingently existing non-moral evil than good and no moral good apart from the character of the OOM being. Consequently, if the rabbit world is indeed a possible world, then (4) is false and the traditional picture of God which motivates (1) must be abandoned, at least in part. What evidence do we have that the rabbit world is possible? That is, what would be the support for the following claim:

- (c) It is possible that there are a great many contingently existing beings capable of being conscious and all such beings are amoral and lead miserable lives, and that these are the only contingent beings there are.

Guleserian claims that just as we intuitively know propositions (a) and (b) that assert the possibility of various states of affairs, so (c) is a proposition with intuitive plausibility. The same considerations that might lead us to adopt (a) or (b) would also lead us to adopt (c). Our modal intuitions are not simply neutral with respect to (c), since we can conceive of (c)'s being true and we can detect no inherent contradictions in (c). But if (c) is true, then (5) is true also, and (1) must be rejected as it stands.

The challenge to the theist, then, is to provide some reason to accept (1) rather than (c), given the *prima facie* intuitive plausibility of (c). Here the theist might point out that (c) contradicts not only (1), but also the weaker modal claim that:

- (1') It is *possible* that necessarily, there is something that is OOM.

Proposition (1') entails that (5) is possibly false and, presumably, that (c) is possibly false as well. If we accept the S5 system of modal logic in which additional modal operators are redundant, then this is tantamount to saying that if (1') is true, (5) and (c) are necessarily false, in spite of their intuitive plausibility. What, then, do our modal intuitions tell us with respect to (1')?

The Possibility of the Traditional God

One could claim that (1') is justified in the same way that (a), (b) and (c) are justified, but Guleserian argues that (1') does not have what (c) has, the advantage of resembling (a) and (b). Rather, (1') resembles:

(M') It is possible that (M) necessarily, there is something that is marsupial.

Guleserian sees no reason to accept (M'), since it is not intuitively obvious and there is no known argument supporting it, and he concludes that (1') is in an exactly similar position. This is a mistake, I think. The claim of (M) is that every possible world must contain a marsupial creature. But marsupials do not seem to be necessary beings, and it is not at all clear why every possible world would have to include a marsupial, or any other contingent being. Thus, our intuitions militate against (M'). But perhaps our attention to (1') is rather misleading in this context. What the theist really claims to know intuitively is not (1) or (1'), but rather:

(G') It is possible that (G) there is a being, x, that exists necessarily and is essentially OOM.

Of course (1') does follow from (G'), but what the theist's intuitions justify is not (1'), the possibility that every world must contain a (perhaps contingent) OOM being, but rather (G'), the possibility that the traditional God exists. The kind of claims that resemble (G') are not statements like (M'), but rather statements about the possibility of a necessary being and statements about the possibility that this being has certain properties essentially.

One way of supporting the intuition that (G') is true would be to examine the intuitions we have concerning each of its parts and our intuitions as to whether the various properties mentioned are compatible with one another. We have rather strong intuitions in favor of:

- (i) It is possible that there is a being, x, that exists necessarily.

The remaining claims are more problematic. They are:

- (ii) It is possible that x (as described in (i)) is essentially omnipotent.
- (iii) It is possible that x is essentially omniscient.
- (iv) It is possible that x is essentially morally perfect.

Let us suppose that the problem is not whether a necessary being can have these properties, but whether it can have them essentially. The modal claims in (ii)-(iv) resemble statements like:

(S') It is possible that Socrates is essentially human.

This statement would be supported by an intuition to the effect that a non-human being could not qualify to be Socrates, that humanness is necessary to what Socrates is, unlike his height or his color. Similarly, I think, those who find (ii)-(iv) independently plausible usually contend that, since we are striving to explicate the concept of God, it is important that each of these properties be essential to him. A being whose power or knowledge could be diminished in some way would not qualify for being God, and it seems we can imagine a being whose power could not fail in any possible world in which that being exists, and so on with the other perfections.

This leaves us with the question as to whether all of these perfections can be exemplified at once by a given being without contradiction. Is omniscience compatible with omnipotence? Are both compatible with moral perfection? Here again, suppose we rely on our intuitions. We are now at a level of abstraction exceeding that of Guleserian's (a) and (c), but we are familiar with various claims that the co-exemplification of two distinct properties is possible, and we can compare (G') to claims like:

(S*) It is possible that Socrates is both wise and generous.

Just as we intuit that there is no inconsistency between these two attributes, so we intuit that there is no inconsistency between the various attributes mentioned in (G'), no internal contradiction. In fact, as perfections, these properties seem to fit quite naturally together. Thus, it seems that (G') has at least as much *prima facie* plausibility as does (c), the claim that the wretched rabbit world is possible. When we come to see that the two propositions conflict, then we must choose between them (or perhaps surrender both claims). But in making this decision as to which of the propositions to accept, I think our modal intuitions do not help us. These intuitions have to do with the perceived compatibility or incompatibility among the various elements that make up a concept or among the various components of a state of affairs. We intuitively see that certain properties (e.g., roundness and squareness) cannot characterize the same object at the same time while others (e.g., roundness and redness) can characterize the same object at the same time. Thus our intuitions pronounce only upon what I will call the *intrinsic possibility* or *intrinsic impossibility* of a proposition, upon whether or not it is conceivably true, taken alone and in abstraction from other propositions. Even here our intuitions can be mistaken, since it might be that something that appears conceivable to us is in fact intrinsically impossible, although we do not see the hidden contradiction within it. Further, not everything that is intrinsically possible is possible *simpliciter*, that is, possible all things considered. I am here only reiterating the familiar claim that the conceivable is not co-extensive with the logically possible. In particular, many things that are conceivable (intrinsically

possible) are not possible *simpliciter*, e.g., the claim that there exists a set of all sets not members of themselves or that there is a greatest prime number. Even if these states of affairs can be consistently described, they are judged to be impossible *simpliciter* (incapable of obtaining) because this would be incompatible with the truth of other propositions that we are unwilling to surrender.

Applying this distinction to the modal problem of evil as it has been presented so far, we have the following situation: our intuitions support the claim that (c) is true if we read the possibility operator there as indicating intrinsic possibility, and our intuitions also support the claim that (G') is true, where again "possible" should be read as "intrinsically possible." We also see intuitively that the joint truth of (G') and (c) is intrinsically impossible. Our minds are thus incapable of believing both at once. And even though the intrinsic possibility of a proposition does not entail its possibility *simpliciter*, it has traditionally been held that what is intrinsically impossible is also impossible *simpliciter*. So either the wretched rabbit world is impossible *simpliciter* or the existence of the traditional God is impossible *simpliciter* (or perhaps both).

My contention is that modal intuitions cannot decide the issue between (c) and (G') as regards their possibility *simpliciter*, and that the belief that they *can* decide it is based upon a confusion. We are accustomed to making the inference (and I think it is an *inference*) that what is intrinsically possible (intuitively plausible) is in fact possible *simpliciter*. As we have seen, this inference is sometimes mistaken, but more often than not it is a perfectly legitimate and harmless inference. However, it is not an intuitive judgment, and we must allow for the possibility that when we take into account all the factors bearing on the truth of an intrinsically possible proposition, we may have to conclude that it is not possible *simpliciter*. Note, however, that the *intrinsic* possibility of the proposition remains untouched; it is not vitiated by the claim that the proposition is impossible *simpliciter*. A proposition can be ruled impossible *simpliciter* on two different grounds: (1) it is impossible intrinsically or (2) it is impossible given the truth of a different proposition (that we are unwilling to deny). In the case of (c) and (G'), then, the theist who accepts (G') must also declare that the world described in (c) is impossible *simpliciter*. Guleserian infers from this that the theist is committed to the claim that the rabbit world is intrinsically impossible, but this does not follow. Similarly, if the theist admits that the rabbit-world is intrinsically possible, this does not commit him or her to the claim that it is therefore possible *simpliciter* and hence that the traditional God is impossible *simpliciter*. Based on modal intuitions alone, (c) and (G') have an equal claim to truth, since both appear intrinsically possible and the customary inference from "intrinsically possible" to "possible *simpliciter*" would apply to both equally. Our intuitions give us no conclusive basis for choosing between them, so that someone who opts for either one or the other is being intellectually responsible,

is within his or her epistemic rights. The only way to tip the balance toward one side or the other would be to provide *independent* reasons to accept the possibility *simpliciter* of one or the other state of affairs, to show that the state of affairs in question is in fact capable of obtaining, *simpliciter*. Such a strategy is present in the ontological and cosmological arguments for God's existence, since whatever obtains is of course possible *simpliciter*. We will not attempt to evaluate these arguments here, but just mention them as the kinds of considerations that would give further (non-intuitive) support to (G').

Does Traditional Theism Make Everything Possible?

The idea that a proposition that is intrinsically possible could turn out to be impossible *simpliciter* might easily lead to the fear that we will never be able to make any claims about possibility *simpliciter* with any degree of confidence. But this fear is unfounded. We often judge that certain claims are possible *simpliciter* on the grounds that (a) they appear intrinsically possible and (b) we can think of no other accepted truths that would entail their impossibility *simpliciter*. Thus, claims about what is possible *simpliciter* are corrigible, but they are not altogether unsupportable or epistemically inaccessible. For most propositions that appear intrinsically possible, there is no accepted truth we are aware of that would rule out their being possible *simpliciter*.

Guleserian worries that if (c) can be judged false (where "possible" is read as "possible *simpliciter*") by the fact that (G) is accepted as possible *simpliciter*, then virtually any claim about what is possible *simpliciter* could be overturned by accepting propositions similar to (G'), where again "possible" is read "possible *simpliciter*." For instance, the claim that:

- (b) It is possible [*simpliciter*] that there are a great many moons and all such beings are half-pink and half-purple,

which seems to be true, would be ruled false by the acceptance of:

- (P') It is possible [*simpliciter*] that (P) there is a being, x, that exists necessarily and is essentially omnipotent and essentially omniscient and essentially disallows pink and purple moons.⁵

Presumably, since the considerations in favor of (P') are no different than the considerations supporting (G'), anyone who accepts (G') should also accept (P'). Parallel arguments would show that any of our claims like (b) about what contingent states of affairs are possible could be overthrown by accepting propositions like (P').

However, the truth of (P') presupposes that (P), the proposition contained within it, is intrinsically possible, for what is not even intrinsically possible

cannot be possible *simpliciter*. Proposition (P) is intrinsically possible only if the necessary being it describes could exemplify at once all of the properties mentioned—essential omnipotence, essential omniscience and essentially disallowing pink and purple moons. Before making a judgment as to the logical compatibility of these attributes, let us first consider the attributes mentioned in (G), essential omnipotence, essential omniscience and essential moral perfection. Some have argued that essential omnipotence and essential moral perfection are incompatible on the grounds that omnipotence necessarily includes the ability to fail in one's moral obligations (since such failure is itself intrinsically possible or conceivable), but I think the correct response to this is to define omnipotence in such a way that it requires only that an omnipotent being should be able to do those (intrinsically possible) things that do not compromise other perfections, and the ability to fail in one's moral obligations is not a perfection but a defect.⁶ If this line of response is accepted, then the existence of the being described in (G) seems at least intrinsically possible, and further considerations might lead us to accept its possibility *simpliciter*.

Returning to (P), we must again consider whether or not the attributes mentioned there could be (conceivably) co-exemplified by a necessary being. Could an essentially omnipotent being be such that it essentially disallows pink and purple moons? Notice first that talk of "essentially disallowing" is rather odd in this context, since to say that the kind of being described in (P) *essentially disallows* pink and purple moons entails that such moons are impossible (*simpliciter*) and this in turn entails that it is impossible (*simpliciter*) for the being to create such moons. In other words, the being is such that it *cannot* create pink and purple moons. But since pink and purple moons are intrinsically possible, wouldn't this conflict with the fact that the being is essentially omnipotent? The answer is yes, *unless* creating pink and purple moons would compromise one of the being's other perfections. It has been suggested to me that if there is a being like the one described in (G) who has *aesthetic* perfection essentially, it might be that such a being could not allow pink and purple moons, just as a morally perfect being could not allow the rabbit universe. Perhaps pink and purple moons are as bad from an aesthetic point of view as the rabbit world is from a moral point of view. If this is true, then accepting something like:

(P*) It is possible [*simpliciter*] that there is a being, x, that exists necessarily and is essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient, essentially morally perfect and essentially aesthetically perfect.

would entail not only that (c) is false but also that (P') is true and hence that (b) is false.

I think that most traditional theists would be willing to accept something like (P*), and this may in fact entail that (b), though intrinsically possible, is impossible

simpliciter.⁷ Does this lead, as Guleserian suggests, to “the bankruptcy of our knowledge claims about nonactual possibilities”?⁸ Let us take another example of such a claim about nonactual possibilities:

(d) It is possible [*simpliciter*] that there are a great many ants in the universe and that all of them are black.

This claim could be overturned by accepting something like:

(A') It is possible [*simpliciter*] that (A) there is a being, x, that exists necessarily and is essentially omnipotent, essentially omniscient and essentially disallows black ants.

Here, it seems to me, we have no reason to accept even the intrinsic possibility of (A'). It does not seem that allowing black ants to exist could compromise any perfections of an omnipotent being, and since the existence of black ants is intrinsically possible, a being who *essentially* disallows them is just a being who *cannot* allow them and hence a being who is not essentially omnipotent. So whatever reasons we might have for accepting (G') or (P'), it does not seem to me that just any proposition of the same form as (G) or (P) should be judged even intrinsically possible, much less accepted as possible *simpliciter*. The traditional theist must reject the *simpliciter* possibility of any state of affairs (conceivable or not) that would not be allowed (could not be created) by an all-perfect being, but the theist need not hold that every intrinsically possible state of affairs is one that conflicts with one of God's perfections. For those that don't conflict in this way, we ought to assume that they are possible *simpliciter* unless and until we have independent reasons to think otherwise.

The Philosophers' God

In conclusion, we should note that any theist who is willing to give up one or more of the properties ascribed to God by the theistic philosophical tradition can easily escape the modal problem of evil. If God is essentially OOM but does not exist necessarily, then (5) would describe a possible world in which God does not exist. If God exists necessarily and is essentially omniscient and morally perfect but not essentially omnipotent, then perhaps (5) describes a possible world in which God is not omnipotent. More attractively, if God is not essentially morally perfect but can neglect his moral obligations, then (5) might describe a world in which he does so. Some theists have in fact chosen this alternative, since moral goodness seems to them to require the possibility of making a wrong choice. The arguments for this point of view do not seem particularly convincing to me, though I will not discuss them here. However, it seems to me that someone who accepts the possibility that God can do evil is contradicting not just the

philosophical concept of a perfect God but the religious intuitions of the typical believer as well. The concept of a necessary being who is essentially OOM arises very much out of the Scriptural and theological tradition of the Christian church, even though most of this tradition is not particularly concerned to describe God in the parlance of contemporary modal logic. In any case, I have only wished to argue here that the modal problem of evil does not *require* the theist to surrender any part of the traditional doctrine of God. It does require a choice between the acceptance of (5) and the acceptance of (G'), but the abandonment of (5) does not seem to me to be a particularly high price to pay for remaining a traditional theist.⁹

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NOTES

1. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

2. "God and Possible Worlds: The Modal Problem of Evil," *Nous* 17 (1983): pp. 221-38. A similar argument appears in Nelson Pike's article, "Omnipotence and God's Ability to Sin," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1969): pp. 208-16.

3. In the remainder of this section, I am attempting to summarize Guleserian's argument in "God and Possible Worlds," *op. cit.* Propositions (1)-(5) are either direct quotes of or very similar to propositions (1)-(5) in that article, pp. 223-24.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 228.

5. This is something like the difficulty Guleserian raises in his article on p. 232.

6. For a defense of this response, see Thomas P. Flint and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Maximal Power," in *The Existence and Nature of God*, ed. Alfred J. Freddoso (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 81-113, and Jerome Gellman, "Omnipotence and Impeccability," *New Scholasticism* 51 (1977): pp. 21-37.

7. If not (b), then some statements like it that describe aesthetically repugnant states of affairs.

8. Guleserian, p. 234.

9. I would like to thank Thomas V. Morris and Thomas D. Sullivan for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.