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A VARIATION ON THE FREE WILL DEFENSE

David O'Connor

A proposition that theism has traditionally tried to establish, as part of its general effort to reconcile the existence of God and that of evil in the (supposedly God-made) world, is the following; that natural evil is logically a precondition of freedom of choice. Often the approach to this task has been through the free will defense. In my paper I argue that the standard formulation of that defense will not succeed in the specific task mentioned, and propose a variation upon the standard formulation. Then I try to defend the variation against some powerful objections.

In this paper I will attempt two things. First, after I have argued that the standard formulation of what is often called the free will defense fails to establish that natural evil is a logically necessary precondition of free choice, I will try to develop a variation on that general line of defense more adequate to the task mentioned, and second, I will test that variation against some significant objections.

Before going further I would like to qualify the first of these aims a little. My argument, specifically, will be for the conclusion that natural evil is logically necessary for what I will be calling morally creditable free choice to be possible. While this is narrower than the denotation of "free will" or "free choice," nevertheless it constitutes, insofar as theism is concerned, the most important kind of free choice at stake in the debate over the problem of evil. Presently I will have more to say about what I understand morally creditable free choice to be.

Let me add one more word of clarification in advance. Being interested here in the claim that natural evil is a precondition of the very possibility of morally creditable free choice, I will not be concerned at all with the question of whether, in a supposed God-made universe, natural evil could be shown compatible with freedom on grounds, say, of its being demonstrated to be a necessary byproduct of freedom. For no such demonstration would entail the specific conclusion aimed at here.

In trying to accomplish the things I mentioned above I am going to explore some possibilities that may be thought eccentric. I will not deny the description, but, even if applicable, I will consider it of little importance if the matters explored really *be* possibilities.



I

I will give two definitions, first of “theism,” then of “natural evil.” I use the word “theism” here in its standard sense to refer to a philosophical theory whose core-proposition I take to be the following; there exists a personal being who is simultaneously omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect, absolutely free, just, and benign, the creator of the universe, a being than whom none greater could be conceived. This definition I take to be uncontroversial in the sense that it does pick out accurately the theory in question. I will not be concerned here with the large question of whether this theory is true or false. The definition of “natural evil” that I will be using is broader than that found in most contemporary literature in the philosophy of religion, although it is not far from George N. Schlesinger’s understanding of natural evil.¹ Despite its not being the one used by such important present-day philosophers of religion as, for example, J. L. Mackie, Nelson Pike, or Richard Swinburne, the definition I am employing in this paper is firmly rooted in the theistic tradition. For example in *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3, VII, and following, it is the concept used by Aquinas, who does not claim to have originated it. But all this maneuvering over pedigree aside, what is the definition in question? It is this; that natural evil is something’s being inferior to how it might possibly have been, in the sense of its being imperfect through lacking something proper or appropriate to it, that is, its being somehow defective, measured on a scale of absolute perfection for things of that type, without this inferiority itself being a choice or volition. Beyond what I have said in support of its being in the mainstream of the theistic tradition, I will not here argue for the definition’s preferability over the (majority) contemporary tendency to equate natural evil with pain and suffering.

II

As I am maintaining that the standard formulation of the free will defense cannot succeed in the task I mentioned, I think I should begin both my attempt to make good on that claim and my effort to devise a successful variation by summarizing the standard version. The object of the free will defense is to show that moral evil is compatible with theism. Typically, the argument for that goes like this; it is logically possible that God has a plan for the universe and for the place within it of human beings; the heart of this plan is said to comprise human beings’ being given the opportunity of achieving, by dint of their own efforts, moral maturity; such an achievement’s being possible requires that human beings have sufficient freedom to make choices; and moral evil is a product of free choice. This is the top layer of the free will defense. But if we dig beneath it we will discover further layers. For instance, human beings would also require

sufficient knowledge for those choices to be well-informed, that is, for them to be choices for which people could appropriately be held responsible and for which they could take credit. One example of the kind of knowledge that would be in question is knowledge of the effects for ill, that is, for natural evil, of choices made and actions done. How is this knowledge to be got? Broadly, the options are, innately or experientially. The former is ruled out on the standard free will defense I am now sketching.² Hence the knowledge needed must be acquired in the usual ways from the usual sources, hands on, so to speak. But, given a point made above, this knowledge must include knowledge of natural evils. Accordingly, natural evil must exist in the world of our experience in order for the divine plan postulated to have a chance of working.

The further layer indicated above, then, is that, while specifically a justification of moral evil in a God-made world, the free will defense provides a framework which the theist can expand in order to try to account also for natural evil. In addressing the free will defense here and in proposing a variation upon it, the defense is understood in its full scope of providing an explanation for natural evil as well as moral.

III

As it stands I do not think this defense works. Here is one way in which it seems to be defeated, or at least blocked. Let us go back to the point about routes to the sorts of knowledge required for the kind of free choice needed for moral development. Here is an innatist viewpoint on that. Why couldn't, or wouldn't, God, given his powers and moral attributes, *provide* us with the requisite knowledge? Suppose that prior to our births God implants in our brains the needed data so that, upon our later being in a certain situation, the relevant information would come into our consciousness, say in the form of a strong intuition. Let me tidy up some features of this in order to deny in advance a foothold to certain likely objections. First, it is enough that the suggestion be possible. Second, to forestall objections that might take root in the idea that such an undertaking on God's part would entail our recognizing the source of the information as God, thus, so it might be argued, making it impossible for us to consider doing evil, let me say that God would implant the data incognito. Third, there is the determinist objection. This is that God could not possibly do what I suggest for it would involve programming us, thus robbing us of significant freedom, thus defeating the whole divine plan set out at the beginning. I don't see any force in this objection, for it is data alone that would be implanted, not commands, not even pre-dispositions to act in one way rather than another. A fourth and more powerful objection comes from Swinburne. He maintains that the implant idea provides for our having true beliefs, but not justified true beliefs.

And he goes on, "There is no merit in my acting on a belief for which I have not the slightest evidence . . ." In order for the proposed implants to be justified beliefs, then, Swinburne's position is that it is necessary for us to experience natural evil. But I do not think this objection goes through, and here is a sketch of the reason why. Consider the following situation: a mother, subtly, plants in her child's mind the idea that thoughtlessness and lack of consideration of others are undesirable and that he should deal thoughtfully and considerately with his friend; the child acts in the way suggested, things turn out well, and the child recognizes that they do; however, the child is unaware (say, does not remember) that the idea was implanted. To be sure there is no moral credit to the child here. But suppose the sequence described contributes to a pattern of thoughtful and considerate behavior throughout the life of that (onetime) child. In his life there are many opportunities for and temptations to thoughtless and inconsiderate behavior. To the degree he resists or rejects these, that (onetime) child does earn moral credit. I think I have described a fairly common sort of situation, one in which an originally unjustified belief becomes, by its success, both justifiably held and reinforced. The point of the example is that experience of natural evil is not logically necessary for the justified holding of the belief in question, as it is logically possible that the (onetime) child never experiences the pain caused by thoughtlessness or witnesses that pain in others. Now a parallel kind of justification through a pattern of success can be suggested for our accepting and acting on divinely implanted data. In this, albeit here undeveloped, way I think Swinburne's objection is circumvented.

On the face of it the divine implant idea looks like a possibility to me. Suppose I'm right. What importance does the idea have for the present discussion? This, it seems to me; given the implant possibility, the earlier described standard defense of natural evil's being logically necessary as a learning aid in any God-made world to which the divine plan was applicable fails. This may need a little expansion. Why would that defense fail? Because, briefly, of the following points; if God's moral properties and other attributes mean anything it would seem to be this—all things considered, God will always choose the lesser of unavoidable evils. Given the value of the world being aimed at through the divine plan, and given furthermore that the aimed-at world of self-made moral beings is no less possible on the implant hypothesis than on the experiential one, the implant hypothesis seems to be the lesser evil, because, for instance, it would not require any natural evil as a learning aid. As I remarked earlier, this looks like a failure of the standard line under scrutiny.

IV

Now to the variation promised. First, the theist grants the implant possibility.

Second, he grants its being done incognito. Third, he grants that no abridgement of free will is involved. Thus he grants, in effect, that the divine plan is not compromised, at least insofar as freedom of choice is concerned, on the implant hypothesis.

Let us try now to get at something implicit in those points. From the start the rationale of the standard defense has been that, *en route* to moral maturity, people earn moral credit by renouncing known choosable or doable evils. And that survives the switch to the innatist context. For the rationale mentioned to be intelligible the moral choices an individual faces must be between genuine, live options, not just between, say, an attractive, realizable good and a meagre, remote, only theoretically possible evil. If moral credit is to be earned, the possible evils resisted or rejected have to be tempting to some significant degree. They have to be possible evils that we have an inclination to choose to do. I am arguing that it is internal to the concept of moral achievement that we be, let us say, prone to choosing possible evils. (From now on, for brevity's sake, I will refer to our being prone to choosing possible evils as our having the property *p*.)⁴

If correct this point is important. For, under the meaning of the term "natural evil," our being prone in that way is itself an instance of natural evil. Then, if we couple this point that *p* is a natural evil with the previously argued point that having *p* is a logically necessary precondition of morally creditable free choice we get the conclusion that natural evil is logically prerequisite for morally creditable free choice. And that holds true even on the innatist hypothesis that blocked the standard formulation. This is the variation on the free will defense that I spoke of.

When unpacked a little the central idea can be seen to be this; our having *p* is an inferior condition to one in which we do not have *p*, assuming no other variables to be involved; so, under the meaning of "natural evil," our condition can be described as defective; and so on . . . , to the conclusion about the logical necessity of natural evil for morally creditable free choice.

V

Let us consider some objections. For reasons of economy I propose to concentrate upon objections that seek to establish either of the following, to my mind basic, counter-points; that having *p* is not an instance of natural evil under the meaning of the term in use here, or, that if *p* is a natural evil then theism is false by virtue of the fact of God's making defective creatures (i.e. us), given the possibility of making better ones.

In the context of the first of these disjuncts, I will set out three objections to my position. One objection might be this; that beings without *p* simply would not be human beings at all, and so having *p* cannot be a defective human

condition. If sustained this objection would be fatal. But I do not see any non-stipulative way to establish the point that *p* is an essential human attribute. For instance, it certainly does not seem intuitively correct to regard *p* as essential to something's being human. So I think we must table this objection. However it will come up again, albeit in a modified form, when we consider the third objection below.

A second objection might be this; that humans not having *p* could never be moral beings; that being moral is objectively a better human state than being non-moral; thus, that *p*, being necessary for the former, could not be a natural evil. But this objection fails to go through. Being moral is not impossible without *p*, because, presumably God, by definition, would be both moral and without the attribute *p*. It could, perhaps, be argued that in a world without *p* the word "moral" and its cognates might be redundant, but that is not to the point here.

A third objection might be this. According to the divine plan spoken of, human beings are to achieve morality. In the variation we are considering it is maintained that *p* is logically necessary for achieving morality to be possible. Therefore, *p* must also be logically necessary for the divine plan, as the possibility of humans' achieving morality is necessary for the divine plan. (The rule here is hypothetical syllogism.) Thus, granting the divine plan, it is impossible for humans to have non-*p*. And, as the variation endorses the divine plan idea it cannot intelligibly regard *p* as a defect, for, granting the divine plan, *p*'s (supposedly better) complement, non-*p*, is impossible to actualize. Before responding to this I would like to sketch and defeat the fourth objection. (This objection falls under the scope of the second of my earlier-mentioned disjuncts.)

That fourth objection is that if the variation, which is a pro-theistic argument, is true then theism must be false. The objection goes like this. According to the divine plan human beings are to achieve morality. Now, given that God could not devise an inferior plan (or world) to any possible superior one,⁵ the condition of becoming (and, let us suppose for simplicity's sake, remaining) moral must be an objectively better human state than that of just being (and remaining) moral.⁶ Let us accept that *p* is required for the former and non-*p* for the latter. But the variation argument, by referring to *p* as a natural evil, implies that being (and remaining) moral is an objectively (although, of course, not necessarily subjectively) better state than that of becoming (and remaining) moral. Hence, if the variation is true, God has devised an inferior plan and actualized an inferior world, and so theism is false; while, if theism is true, the variation is false.

In response let us consider two possible worlds, first a world *W* in which human beings have *p* and strive to become moral, and second a world *W** in which human beings do not have *p* and are moral to begin with. Now it is a logical possibility that, all things considered, the ratio of goodness to badness is equal in both these worlds, say through there being sufficient goods in *W* to

counterbalance W^* 's not having any natural evil p . God, being omniscient, would know this. And the truth of the proposition that being (and remaining) moral is, objectively speaking, a better human state than becoming (and remaining) moral is perfectly consistent with this state of affairs. The fourth objection can now be met, for, given an overall equal value of W and W^* , God is not obliged to choose to realize one over the other. His having chosen to actualize W , as theism has it, does not, then, entail the falsity of theism.

Now let us go back to the postponed third objection which, as I remarked, recalls an aspect of objection one. That third objection can be cast in *Modus Ponens* form as follows; if W is actualized; therefore, human beings have to have p ; and so, non- p being an impossible human state, p cannot be an evil. Now, borrowing from my counter to the fourth objection, the reply is straightforward. W just happens to be the actual world. Even granting theism and supposing God to be intent upon world-making, its being so is purely a contingent matter. Consequently, all that the objection can justifiably claim is that p will always obtain in W , not that p is an essential human attribute, i.e. an attribute possessed by humans in all possible worlds containing human beings. The reply to the fourth objection establishes that p is not that.

Briefly summarizing, these are the things I have been attempting to do. My aim has been to try to construct a better argument for the traditional theistic idea that natural evil is logically necessary for free will than that tradition itself offers. My procedure consisted in; first, showing a weakness of the standard version of the free will defense considered as a defense of the point mentioned; second, presenting a variation on the free will defense whose core is the idea that freedom requires p , and, as p is a natural evil, that natural evil is logically necessary for free will; third, I tried to counter some objections to the variation.

A byproduct of the foregoing argument would seem to be this; that Mackie's alleged *coup de grace* to the free will defense can be blocked. That *coup* is this; that God knowingly made man with p ; that God knew the enormous likelihood of moral evil resulting from man's having p , even if God could not have known in advance that evil doings *would* result; thus God's being (indirectly) to blame for such evil doings; thus God's not being morally perfect.⁷ But now this argument will not go through, for, if p is logically necessary for the divine plan earlier posited, then, given the possibility of W 's not being inferior, all things considered, to W^* , it follows that God could not have acted culpably in the way Mackie suggests, for, to have actualized W^* in place of W would not necessarily have resulted in a better overall world, and God being omniscient would have known that.⁸

NOTES

1. See Schlesinger's "Suffering and Evil," in S. M. Cahn and D. Shatz, editors, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), his *Religion and Scientific Method* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1977, 1981), and his "The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Suffering," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, I (1964).

2. For a clear example of this see R. G. Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 202-214.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 213, fn. 1.

4. In conversation my colleague G. J. Dalcourt has made the point to me that this idea, while it may be intrinsic to the notion of moral achievement when morality is understood primarily in terms of humans' making moral choices, does not seem to be essential to an Aristotelian conception of morality, say, one in which the notion of choice is not the primary factor. Roughly, this latter conception operates with a focus upon moral living as opposed to one upon moral reasoning and decision. *Prima facie* this strikes me as plausible, and warranting further thought. However, it may be the case that an argument for the intrinsicity of p to such an Aristotelian notion of moral achievement could be made, premised on the idea that, for the achievement of such Aristotelian-style morality, training and guidance are needed. For, so it might be argued, the need for such training testifies to an admission of (at least) temptation to do evil being a defining trait of human nature. And that would be enough for my point about p. But this is a large topic, and one that beckons us far afield from the present line of argument. This being so, I will not pursue the matter further here.

5. In order to prevent a possible line of misunderstanding coming up here, it should be noted that this point does not entail any notion of there being a best of all possible worlds.

6. By the expression "just being . . . moral" here I mean a person's having been moral from whatever is the first moment at which such a description could intelligibly apply.

7. J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 175-176.

8. I am grateful to G. J. Dalcourt for helpful criticisms, and to W. P. Alston whose criticisms both of an ancestor of this paper and of an earlier draft of the current version contributed significantly to my ability to avoid certain mistakes and red herrings in the present paper. I would like to acknowledge also assistance from the research council of Seton Hall University in the form of a research grant for the summer of 1985. Portions of this paper were written during the life of that grant.