

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

---

Volume 27 | Issue 2

Article 9

---

4-1-2010

## Bruce Langtry, GOD, THE BEST, AND EVIL

William L. Rowe

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Rowe, William L. (2010) "Bruce Langtry, GOD, THE BEST, AND EVIL," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201027221

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol27/iss2/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

*God, the Best, and Evil*, by Bruce Langtry. Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. ix + 237. \$70 (cloth).

WILLIAM L. ROWE, Purdue University

Langtry's book is a significant contribution to the seemingly eternal problem of trying to explain how there can be such a vast amount of evil and horrific suffering in a world that God has chosen to create. I suspect that some who read this book will believe that he makes his task considerably less difficult by declining to accept the standard Anselmian conception of God as "an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being" who necessarily exists; giving as his reason that to do so "would impede substantial debates currently taking place amongst theists, on such topics as whether God is omnipotent and omniscient, as distinct from supremely powerful and knowledgeable" (p. 7). In place of the Anselmian conception of God, Langtry proposes that we view God as a contingent being who is such that if he exists he is "the rational agent who brought the universe into existence and who is, either non-temporally or at all times, very powerful, very knowledgeable, and very good" (p. 7). Recognizing, however, that such a conception of God is considerably different from the idea of God toward which, for example, the problem of evil has largely been directed, Langtry states that, for purposes of this book, the claim 'God exists' "unless there is a local indication to the contrary" is to be understood as follows: "God is the rational agent who brought the universe into existence and who is, either non-temporally or at all times, omnipotent, infallibly omniscient, and perfectly good" (p. 9). He does not, however, go so far as to suggest that God is a necessary being, rather than a contingent being.

Langtry begins by considering some of the apparent implications of divine omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness for God's providence with respect to the world he creates. In particular, he investigates whether God is in some sense a maximizer. By 'a maximizer' I believe Langtry means one who always seeks to do the best he can, provided there is a best that can be done. Second, he critically examines objections to the existence of God that are based on the apparent fact that God could have created a better world than the one he has in fact created. And third, he assesses the strength of objections to the existence of God that focus on the problem of evil.

To create a (possible) world is to strongly or weakly actualize it. A world is prime if God can create it, and he cannot create a world better than it. Langtry's conclusions include the following:

- (1) If there is at least one prime world, then if God does create some world he will create a prime world.
- (2) If there are no prime worlds, then it does not follow that God does not exist. Instead, what follows is that if God creates a world he will create one that is good enough, despite the fact that he could create a world which is better.

- (3) This conclusion does not give rise to a good objection to theism, based on the apparent fact that the actual world is improvable and yet it is not good enough.
- (4) Even if there is a best world, or several equal-best worlds, God cannot create any of them.
- (5) A good partial theodicy for evil can be provided, appealing to goods bound up with human free will, moral responsibility, and the roles of individuals' own personal traits in shaping their own and other people's lives. The partial theodicy is neutral between Theological compatibilism and libertarianism.
- (6) The problem of evil does not provide a very strong objection to the existence of God.

As noted above, Langtry sets forth the following conception of God: "(if God exists) God is the rational agent who brought the universe into existence and who is, either non-temporally or at all times, very powerful, very knowledgeable, and very good" (p. 7). From this and other remarks he makes, it is reasonably clear that Langtry's own view is that God is a contingent being—he exists in some possible worlds, but in other worlds he does not exist. In my judgment this is a somewhat diminished view of God. For it allows one to imagine God as bowing down and thanking his lucky stars that the actual world just happens to be one of the worlds in which he exists. In its place, I would suggest the following: God, an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being, is such that if he exists in any possible world he exists in every possible world. On this conception, God is either a necessary being (exists in every possible world) or an impossible being (exists in no possible world). Moreover, unless I am mistaken, it is a conception of God that is acceptable to many theists, agnostics, and atheists.

Langtry carefully describes three distinct positions on divine providence: Theological Determinism, Molinism, and Open Theism, but focuses mainly on Molinism and Open Theism. Theological determinism is the view that God directly brings about every contingent state of affairs, a view that appears to preclude acts that are freely done by human beings. Molinism allows that God knows the "counterfactuals of creaturely freedom" (what a person would freely choose to do should that person happen to be in a certain situation), and therefore knows what a person will freely choose to do in situation *X*, should that person be in situation *X*; whereas Open Theism denies that God possesses such knowledge.

Putting aside Theological Determinism, a view which appears to preclude any significant degree of human freedom, so far as the debate between Molinism and Open Theism is concerned, my own view (for what it is worth) is strongly on the side of Molinism. For Molinism, while allowing for libertarian free choices among human creatures, provides a way in which God has some knowledge of what his human creatures will freely choose to do in their future free actions. For, according to Molinism, God knows the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom—and such knowledge

provides God with the means of having some degree of influence over the future of the world he has created. In Open Theism, God is understood to be somewhat in the dark concerning what his human creatures will freely choose to do in their future free actions.

It is reasonably clear, I believe, that Langtry's own view is much closer to Open Theism than it is to Molinism. His view appears to be this: if there is a best world, God (a perfect being) will or must create it. If there is no best world, i.e., if for every possible world there is a better possible world, God will create a world that is "good enough"; never mind that he could have created a much better world instead. Langtry doesn't suggest what conditions would render a world "good enough" should there be an unending series of increasingly better creatable worlds. Clearly, however, as a theist he believes that a world containing the holocaust—the extermination of approximately six million European Jews as part of a program of deliberate extermination planned and executed by the National Socialist German Workers' Party during Hitler's regime—is a world that is good enough for an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being to create, even supposing such a being could have created a much better world instead. However, as a theist who appears to side with Open Theism, Langtry, I suspect, must allow the possibility that God, in looking back at the holocaust, might say to himself: "if only I had known that this would happen, I would have endeavored to create a better world than this one." Theists who hold to the Anselmian view of God (an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being who necessarily exists) emphasize the importance of human free will and introduce interesting theodicies in an effort to set forth a plausible explanation of why an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being would permit so much horrendous evil to occur in the world. For on the Anselmian view, given that God knows the counterfactuals of freedom, God does have knowledge of the future free acts of his human creatures, and thus may know, for example, that apart from His intervention, the holocaust will occur.

As Langtry notes, in my book *Can God Be Free?* I advance the following principle as a necessary truth.

B: If an omniscient being creates a world (a maximal state of affairs) when it could have created a better world, then it is possible that there be a being morally better than it.

If Principle B expresses a necessary truth and there exists an infinity of increasingly better worlds, then no being who creates a world can be an omniscient and morally perfect being. Langtry denies Principle B, agreeing that if there is a best world, God, a perfectly good being, must create it; but allowing that should there be an unending series of increasingly better creatable worlds God would be free to create a good world, even though there is an infinity of increasing better creatable worlds. He calls this satisfying: selecting a world that is good enough even though there is an infinity of increasingly better worlds, any one of which is creatable

by an omnipotent, omniscient being. Such a view was set forth in his paper 'God and the Best' (*Faith and Philosophy*, 13 [1996], pp. 311–328). Now that I've read his recently published book, *God the Best, and Evil*, and understand more fully that he personally thinks of God not as a necessary being but as a contingent being, a being who, instead of actually being omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good, is only "very powerful, very knowledgeable, and very good," I can understand more clearly why he feels justified in rejecting the view that the vast amount of human and animal suffering on our planet counts significantly against the existence of God. For if God is merely a contingent being, a being who has considerable power and knowledge, but falls far short of being omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and eternal, it is to some extent understandable why there might be such vast amounts of evil and suffering in our world. For such a being as Langtry understands God to be may simply lack any significant knowledge of what his creatures may choose to do in their future free acts.

Moreover, if Langtry's God doesn't know what the future of our world will be so far as the free actions of his human creatures are concerned, it is understandable that although there may be other creatable worlds any one of which he could have created instead—worlds in which his human creatures freely choose to do much more good and much less evil—God, as Langtry conceives of him, may not know this, and thus might be in the dark as to whether his selection of a particular world to create would result in a better or a worse world than some other world he could have selected to create instead. So, given Langtry's conception of God, he is correct to conclude that principle B is simply inapplicable to God. For God, as Langtry conceives of him, fails to be omniscient in the sense of possessing knowledge of the future free acts of his human creatures. Therefore, although Langtry's God may be the greatest of existing beings, he falls far short of being "the greatest possible being." In fact, Langtry views God as displaying human emotions of anger, and perhaps despair. Thus, he quotes approvingly William Hasker's description of God as "taking risks" and as experiencing "aversion, anger, or disappointment over the actual course of events" (p. 28). Again, I believe, we are confronted with a rather diminished view of God—a being who does not know what he will confront in the future, who wonders what his free creatures will do tomorrow, hopes for the best, but fears the worst, and becomes angry and frustrated when things don't go as well as he hoped they would. Perhaps some, or even many human beings will find comfort and satisfaction in such a conception of God, but others, I suspect, will see it as a significantly diminished view of God in comparison with the Anselmian view in which God is understood to be the greatest possible being: a necessarily existing being who created the world and is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good.

Nevertheless, I suspect that the horrific evils, both natural and moral, that afflict human and animal life on our planet constitute somewhat less

of a problem if one holds the view that God is a contingent being and, although very good, powerful, and knowledgeable, falls short of being omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. For if God has little, if any, foreknowledge of what the future will bring he simply may be unable to take the appropriate steps to prevent horrendous evils from occurring. However, to avoid confusion, we must keep in mind Langtry's initial commitment that "unless there is a local indication to the contrary" the conception of God under consideration is to be understood as follows: "God is the rational agent who brought the universe into existence and who is, either non-temporally or at all times, omnipotent, infallibly omniscient, and perfectly good" (p. 9). So, it is only when Langtry is considering his own preferred conception of God that we need refrain from viewing the God under consideration as lacking omniscience, omnipotence, and perfect goodness.

Although Langtry rejects my principle B, he does endorse a somewhat weaker principle that approaches principle B: "Other things being equal, in intentionally bringing about the better state of affairs one acts in the morally better way" (p. 322). Moreover, at one point he explicitly states: "A being who could have acted in a morally better way is not morally perfect" (p. 323). While this remark may appear to be quite close to principle B, Langtry carefully adds the statement: "This principle can easily be misunderstood. It does not entail that if there are no prime worlds then God is not perfectly good." Even if we allow Langtry's claim that God's perfect goodness is compatible with there being no prime worlds, this question remains: does the statement: "A being created a world with free human creatures, when he could have created a much better world with free human creatures" imply that the being in question could have acted "in a morally better way"? If so, then I suspect that it remains reasonable to seriously question whether God, a perfectly good being, exists.

*Religion in Public Life: Must Faith Be Privatized?* by Roger Trigg. Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. 262. \$65 (cloth)

NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF, Yale University and University of Virginia

Roger Trigg's *Religion in Public Life* is a wide-ranging discussion of the many problems posed by the presence of religious diversity within modern liberal democratic states. The basic thesis which shapes the discussion is stated in brief summary form at the end of the book: "Public debate about the proper basis for society is necessary, and religious voices should be heard in that debate. Religion has not just been one of the most formative influences on human society; religions make claims, which, if true, would be of universal importance. Religious voices must be heard in the public life of every country" (p. 235).