

1-1-1989

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Recommended Citation

Aspenson, Steven (1989) "Discussion: Reply To O'Connor," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol6/iss1/8>

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REPLY TO O'CONNOR

Steven S. Aspenson

In this reply I consider David O'Connor's article "A Variation on the Free Will Defense" in which he tries to show that natural evil is necessary for free will by showing that it is required for the possibility of "morally creditable free choice." I argue that O'Connor's reply to an anticipated objection was unsuccessful in showing that humans can be moral without the property he calls "p," that an altered understanding of what "morally creditable free choice" is would not help, and finally, that if God's moral condition is fundamentally different than ours, it could not be used as an example of p being inessential for humans being moral.

In his article "A Variation on the Free Will Defense,"¹ David O'Connor tries to show that "natural evil" is a logically necessary condition for the possibility of "morally creditable free choice." I shall show,

1) that O'Connor's reply to an anticipated objection was unsuccessful in showing that humans can be moral without the property he calls "p," the property of being prone to choosing possible evils which he takes to be a natural evil,

2) that an altered understanding of what "morally creditable free choice" is would not help, and finally,

3) that if God's moral condition is fundamentally different than ours, it could not be used as an example of p being inessential for humans being moral.

I

O'Connor calls being "prone to choosing possible evils" property p and takes property p to be a natural evil according to a tradition that, if a kind of thing could be better without it, it is a natural evil.

He also claims

If moral credit is to be earned, the possible evils resisted or rejected have to be tempting to some significant degree . . . it is internal to the concept of moral achievement that we be, let us say, prone to choosing possible evils.²

That is, if one has moral achievement, then one has the natural evil p.

One of the objections he anticipates, the second, is



. . . 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.³

That is, since moral humans are better humans, p is not a natural evil of humans.

His reply to this objection was the following:

Being moral is not impossible without p, because, presumably God, by definition, would be both moral and without the attribute p.⁴

But that reply obscures the point of the objection because the question here is not “is it possible to be moral without the property p?” but rather “is it possible *for humans* to be moral without the property p?” If that point were explicitly addressed the reply would have read

Being moral is not impossible for humans without p, because, presumably God, by definition, would be both moral and without the attribute p.

That reply is ineffective because if we substitute for the property p, the property q, which is, let us say, the property of “having a body” and substitute “alive” for “moral,” we have the following:

Being alive is not impossible for humans without q, because, presumably God, by definition, would be both alive and without the attribute q.

Obviously that does not show that humans can “be alive” without a body, and similarly it does not follow that humans can be moral without the property p simply because God can. In fact, nothing about humans follows from any claim about only God. So O’Connor has not shown humans can be moral without the natural evil p, and the objection he anticipates (that on his view p is required for humans being moral and thus not a natural evil of humans) has not been successfully rebutted.

II

O’Connor might reply to this that all that follows is that since p is not a natural evil of humans, humans are incapable of moral achievement. But that is unlikely. Rather, he may claim MCFC (morally creditable free choice,) which he apparently takes to be necessary for moral achievement, is one of the following:

A) a free choice which is capable of rendering the agent praiseworthy, and *therefore* moral

B) a free choice which renders an *already moral* agent more mature and he may then claim he takes MCFC to be B whereas I have construed it to be A.

So, I may have misunderstood just what he takes morally creditable free choice to be, which is understandable since O'Connor's formulation of it is ambiguous between A and B. What would make B attractive to him is that an already moral agent might not need *p*, a possibility he brings up in a later context to which my remarks apply insofar as humans are the agents considered. In particular his replies to the third⁵ and fourth⁶ objections, as well as the posing of the fourth objection, are based on the supposed (logical?) possibility that there is a world ". . . in which human beings do not have *p* and are moral to begin with,"⁷ that is, they are correctly described by B and not by A, the topic to which I now turn.

What O'Connor needs for moral maturity if B describes what he takes it to be, apart from whether *p* is required, is some property, call it *r*, which would be something like "the capacity to gain moral virtues by practice and habit," *a la* Aristotle, and this property does not seem to be a defect.

What then becomes of A and B? That distinction breaks down because whether one is already moral or one becomes moral the following seems to be true of humans.

C) If there were no conditions in which a being S could find it attractive to refrain from what would make one morally praiseworthy, then S could never be morally praiseworthy and

D) any being that could never be morally praiseworthy could never be a moral being

then, given C and D, there is something required for being moral and becoming moral, and *p* is a candidate for it, or a condition of it, and the original objection that *p* is a property necessary for humans being moral, and therefore not a natural evil, retains whatever force it had.

III

Finally, O'Connor's reply that God can be moral without the property *p* calls for comment. This, I think, is part of a traditional view that God does not acquire His praiseworthiness from His choices. That is, since God is praiseworthy, His choices are also, rather than the alternative that since His choices are praiseworthy, He is rendered praiseworthy, as though it were possible that God not be praiseworthy.⁸ It would be a mistake, I think, to assume that beings who have their natures conferred upon them (rather than being self-sufficient e.g., God) could be praiseworthy, without becoming praiseworthy. At least an argument is needed to show humans could be created in a morally praiseworthy condition.

This is enough, I think, to show that O'Connor's reply to the second objection he anticipates to his view (that natural evil is a necessary condition for morally creditable free choice) was not effective; the objection that *p* is necessary for

humans being moral, and therefore not a natural evil, retains whatever force it had, which at present, prevents use of the replies he offers to the third and fourth anticipated objections, as well as his posing of the fourth objection.⁹

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NOTES

1. David O'Connor, "A Variation on the Free Will Defense," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April 1987.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 165-66.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

8. The character of this tradition is explored in: Hanick and Mar, "What Euthyphro Couldn't Have Said," *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 4, No. 3, July 1987.

9. I am grateful to Professors Ronald Glass and William P. Alston for their helpful criticisms and suggestions.