C.S. Lewis Is Great But You Should Be Reading Alvin Plantinga

Analytic Philosophy, The Problem Of Evil & Christian Belief

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April 5, 2015 Picture: Alvin Plantinga (University Of Notre Dame)

Many theists find resources to defend their beliefs in the important literary and apologetic work of C.S. Lewis. There is much to be said for Lewis's popular style, rhetoric, and incisiveness. It is persuasive and pleasurable reading, and perfectly effective when we are in what we might call the ***popular room***. But philosophers and laymen sometimes—perhaps often, these days—find the standards on cogent argumentation raised, and indeed want them raised.

Consider, for instance, the powerful critical assessment, by academic philosophers, of the currently popular arguments against theistic belief. Popular atheological arguments wither under such scrutiny.[1] Of course, serious atheists may be unimpressed. The standards for atheological argumentation also go much higher than anything imagined in **Dawkins**, **Hitchens**, **Dennett**, and a host of other popular writers. The work of atheistic thinkers such as **John Mackie**, **Jordan Howard Sobel** and **William Rowe**, for example, is much more powerful, if much less popular. So, how well does theistic belief do when the standards and expectations on good reasoning are at their highest? How well does religious belief do when, as **David Lewis** described it, we are in the ***philosophy room***?

In the philosophy room, the otherwise impressive work of C.S. Lewis is much less helpful. His work will not serve to defend theistic belief in the face of the sheer critical power and breadth of, say, John Mackie's ***The***

Miracle of Theism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) or Jordan Sobel's ***Logic and Theism*** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

For illustration, it will be useful to consider the interplay between John Mackie's most forceful—and often underestimated—challenge to theistic belief, and Alvin Plantinga's ingenious—and often misunderstood—response to that challenge. The debate concerns a single issue, but the standards of reasoning invoked in addressing the issue are worthy of emulation.

In the well-known essay, '**Evil and Omnipotence**', John Mackie reformulated a familiar challenge to theistic belief that has come to be known as the logical problem of evil.[2] It's not uncommon in philosophy that a familiar argument receives a powerful and compelling reformulation.[3] Mackie argued that (1) – (3) form an inconsistent triad:

(1) God is omnipotent, (2) God is wholly good and (3) Evil exists

Any two of the propositions entails the falsity of the third. How does the inconsistency arise?According to Mackie, the inconsistency is explicit once we add the quasi-logical rules that (4) necessarily, a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can and (5) necessarily, there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do.

There have been counterexamples offered to the propositions in (4) and (5)—these are purported exceptions that show the principles are not perfectly general. Perhaps a good thing might not prevent a person from drowning when he can do so. Perhaps he might fail to do so in order to save another person. And perhaps an omnipotent being is limited by the metaphysically possible or the logically possible—he cannot make 2 + 2 = 5 and he cannot make Plantinga identical to Mackie.[4]

Of course, Mackie really intends (4) and (5) to be applied to an absolutely perfect being. But even granting the suggested restrictions on perfect goodness and omnipotence, it follows from (5) that an absolutely perfect being can do anything that is metaphysically (or, broadly logically) possible. But since it is surely metaphysically possible to eliminate all evil, it seems to follow from (4) and (5) that an absolutely perfect being would bring about a world that includes no evil at all.

But Mackie concludes that, since it is evident that there is evil in the world, it must be false that (1) God is omnipotent or that (2) God is wholly good. Mackie does not suggest that there is no solution to this problem. He does suggest that an adequate solution to the logical problem of evil requires abandoning the traditional view of God as both omnipotent and wholly good.

John Mackie's version of the logical problem of evil presents a spectacular challenge to the philosophically serious theist. How do we address the challenge? On the one hand, we don't want to abandon the traditional view of God as omnipotent and wholly good. What would it mean to abandon such a view anyway? Wouldn't that just be abandoning the position that God exists in favor of the position that some pretty good and pretty powerful being exists? On the other hand, there appears to be no seam in Mackie's argument to slip through: it's as seamless an argument as any in the literature. So there's no obvious way to avoid his conclusion without giving up (1) or (2).

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Alvin Plantinga's response to John Mackie's logical problem of evil does not obviously involve abandoning either (1) or (2).[5] Plantinga instead gives us some interesting reasons to abandon (even the restricted versions of) (4) and (5).

Plantinga aims to show that, contrary to (5), possibly, an omnipotent being cannot do everything that is metaphysically possible. Strictly, he aims to show that, possibly, an omnipotent being cannot do everything that is both metaphysically possible and consistent with being wholly good, all knowing, and necessarily existing.

So, Plantinga is not merely aiming to show that God cannot do things like fail to keep a promise or fail to recall some event or cease to exist. Rather God cannot do some things that are metaphysically possible and perfectly consistent with his nature.

Does abandoning (5) entail abandoning (1)? Mackie would surely insist that it does.[6] He'd no doubt urge that abandoning (5) is just a way of saying that God is not really omnipotent. And are there any good reasons to abandon (5)?

Again, Mackie would surely insist that there are not; the reasons Plantinga advances assume that God cannot bring about certain metaphysically possible states of affairs, e.g., the free actions of rational agents. But that is just to assume—not to argue—that (5) is false. But more on this in what follows.

In addition, Plantinga aims to show that, contrary to (4), possibly, a wholly good being does not always eliminate evil as far as it can. There are evils that serve no larger purpose—evils that can be eliminated without moral cost—that a wholly good being can blamelessly fail to eliminate. So, even the restricted version of (4) is false, if Plantinga is right.

For all the ingenuity in Plantinga's argument, the idea behind his response to Mackie—the famous Free Will Defense—is rather straightforward. The central assumption is that, possibly, there are *significantly free* agents or creatures. A significantly free agent is one

that is free to perform a morally impermissible action A or, instead, to perform a morally permissible action ~A.[7]
But, according to Plantinga, in order for the action involved to be genuinely free and morally valuable, it must be undetermined or uncaused by anything outside the agent—it must be uncaused by nature, for instance, and uncaused by God. If you perform some action because God caused you to do it, or nature caused you to do it, you did not perform the action freely.

Now Plantinga asks you to imagine whether, before creation, God could have found himself in the following situation. God is wondering what sorts of things to create, and he decides to create all of the wonders and beauties in the vast universe. And he then wonders whether he should create any beings like you and me. He wonders whether he should create beings that are both *rational and free*.

"If you perform some action because God caused you to do it, or nature caused you to do it, you did not perform the action freely"

The decision might be a difficult one; he already has a great universe. And God might know that if he were to create me, and place me in this universe, that I would freely do something wrong. He might know that I would do something (perhaps many things) morally evil.

If God creates me with genuine freedom, then, of course, he could not cause me to go morally right. But God might also know that rational and free agents are good things to create, even if they sometimes go wrong. And God might know that, if he creates me, it will involve some moral good and some moral evil, but the good will outweigh the evil. Perhaps he might know all of that.

But even those considerations will not be enough for God to decide to create me. God might wonder whether he could create *some other* rational and free being that would never go wrong. God might then have his cake and eat it too. He'd have all the value of the created rational and free

beings, and none of the disvalue. In that case, God would surely not create me.

Now Plantinga asks you to imagine whether, before creation, God could have found himself in a much worse situation. God might know that, *no matter which rational and free being* he creates, and *no matter what circumstances* he creates that being in, that being will freely do something wrong. And Plantinga asks whether, in those circumstances, God could create some rational and free beings. The answer does seem to be yes, despite the fact that creating some free and rational agents—such as ourselves—will ensure that there is some moral evil.

But it will do us good to pause for a moment and ask whether we've been blinded by all the details. Let's back up and ask: why doesn't God just actualize a morally perfect world? Why doesn't he just bring about a world that includes free moral agents who always do the right thing? God's omnipotent, isn't he, why couldn't he just do that? This is in fact a question that Mackie continued to press in his debate with Plantinga.

"If God has made men such that in their free choices they sometimes prefer what is good and sometimes what is evil, why could he not have made men such that they always freely choose the good? If there is no logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on one or several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the good on every occasion. God was not, then, faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong; there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right. Clearly his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being omnipotent and wholly good".[8]

Plantinga agrees that it is not (broadly) logically impossible that God should create rational and free agents that always go right, and he agrees that God is omnipotent, but insists that God might be *unable to do what it is logically possible for him to do.*

There are morally perfect worlds—that is, worlds where every free agent always goes morally right—and it is (broadly) logically possible that God actualizes a morally perfect world. But God might still be *unable* to actualize a morally perfect world.

Let's revisit how this is possible. Plantinga asks us to imagine the possibility that every rational and free being that God could create would freely do something wrong, no matter what circumstances they were created in. In the world we are imagining, all of these beings suffer from what Plantinga describes as ***transworld depravity***.

God knows, for instance, that if he creates Almeida and places him in difficult and trying circumstances, he'd freely do something wrong. And he knows that, if he creates Almeida, and places him in nice and comfortable circumstances, he'd still freely do something wrong. No matter where he creates this guy, he is going to freely do something morally wrong. And, unfortunately, in the world we are imagining, the same goes for anyone else he might create.

What God cannot do is create Almeida, or anyone else, and *cause him* to go freely right. He cannot do that since, if God causes someone to go right, then they do not freely go right.

So here is God's dilemma: If I create rational and free beings, the world might thereby be improved, but I'm guaranteed that they do something wrong. There is nothing I can do about that; I cannot cause these free beings to go right. My options seem to be (1) Choose not to create any of them or (2) Choose to create the ones that, at least, won't go horribly wrong. It is not among my options, contrary to Mackie, to choose to bring about a morally perfect world. The rational and free agents I create could bring about such a world—they could all choose always to go morally right—but *I'm* not able to do it.

"What God cannot do is create Almeida, or anyone else, and *cause him* to go freely right. He cannot do that since, if God causes someone to go right, then they do not freely go right"

Given God's dilemma, what should he do? Plantinga argues that God is permitted to create rational and free beings that he knows will sometimes go wrong if it is true that some world with such beings—even granting the moral evil that they will bring about—is better than any world with no rational and free beings.[9]

If God might face a choice in which some world with such fallible beings is better than any world without them, then, Plantinga concludes, it is possible that God coexists with evil. That, in brief, is Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense.

Is the Free Will Defense successful? There are at least two conditions that must be met for it to succeed. First, the Free Will Defense must be consistent with God's omnipotence. Recall that God is omnipotent only if, necessarily, God can do anything that is (broadly) logically possible.[10] It might not be unreasonable to consider, instead, the weaker notion that God is omnipotent only if, necessarily, God can do anything that is (broadly) logically possible and consistent with his nature as essentially omniscient, perfectly good, and necessarily existing.

But, second, the Free Will Defense succeeds only if it is consistent with God's perfect goodness. There are many reasonable conditions on God's perfect goodness. Here's one, rather weak, condition: God is perfectly good only if, necessarily, God actualizes a morally perfect world.

Now Mackie might complain that the Free Will Defense violates both of these conditions. According to the Free Will Defense, it is possible that God is unable to bring about a (broadly) logically possible state of affairs that is consistent with his divine nature. It is possible, according to Plantinga, that God is unable to actualize a morally perfect world. But there are morally perfect worlds! And actualizing such a world would not entail that God lacks any of the traditional attributes!

If God is omnipotent, Mackie might urge, then, necessarily, he can actualize such a world. Mackie can agree that God's omnipotence is compatible with, possibly, God's being unable to cause significantly free agents to always go right. There are, we agree, no possible worlds where that happens. But it is not compatible with God being unable to actualize a morally perfect world. After all, there *is* a world where that happens! Or, so Mackie might insist.

Mackie might also complain that an essentially morally perfect being necessarily actualizes a morally perfect world. If that is true, then there simply are no possible worlds that are not morally perfect. The existence of such worlds is not compatible with the existence of God! But the Free Will Defense simply assumes that there are morally imperfect worlds and aims to show that, possibly, God is unable to actualize a morally perfect world.

Of course, Mackie's complaints can be resisted in a variety of ways. I will not pursue those lines of response here. My aim has been to show that the level of discussion among serious theists and serious atheists is extraordinarily high. Clearly, arguments for and against theism (and for and against atheism) can be carried on at a level of discourse that leaves popular discussion of these views far behind, beside the point, and largely irrelevant.

Atheists would do well to emulate the work of, among others, John Mackie, J. Howard Sobel, William Rowe, and Michael Tooley [See Oppy on **the work of academic atheists**]. Theists would be equally well served to emulate the work of, among others, Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen, Brian Leftow, and Richard Swinburne. These are among the best representatives of their respective positions. Of course, these thinkers are also much less accessible and much more demanding and, alas, much less popular.

Footnotes & References

[1] For a particularly nice example, see Alvin Plantinga's review of Richard Dawkins here http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2007/marapr/1.21.html.

[2] See John Mackie, 'Evil and Omnipotence' in Michael Rea and Louis Pojman (eds.)*Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology, Sixth Edition* (Boston; Wadsworth, 2012) 299-306.
[3] Compare, for instance, Peter van Inwagen's consequence argument for incompatibilism in his *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), and Nelson Pike's argument for theological fatalism in his 'Divine Omniscience and Voluntary Action', *Philosophical Review* 74 (1) (1965) 27-46.
[4] These and many other exceptions are discussed in Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1977).
[5] Plantinga presents the argument in several places. See his *The Nature of Necessity*(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974) p. 165 ff. and his *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdman's Publishing, 1974) p. 29 ff. The version with the fewest controversial assumptions is in James Tomberlin and Peter van Inwagen (eds.) *Profiles: Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing, 1985) p. 36 ff.
[6] 'Evil and Omnipotence', op. cit., p. 300 ff. on Adequate and Fallacious Solutions.

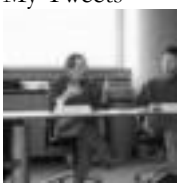
[7] This assumption alone, Mackie might rightly complain, entails that the logical problem of evil is invalid. It follows from the assumption that, possibly, there are significantly free moral agents that there is possible world in which there is evil and God exists.

[8] Ibid., p. 304

[9] Actually, Plantinga takes the position that God might actualize a world that includes rational and free agents that he knows will do something wrong if he knows that it is not possible to actualize a world

with moral good without actualizing one with moral evil. See *The Nature of Necessity* op. cit. p. 167. The position is too weak, since, it might be the case that every world with moral good is on balance bad. So, it must be possible that there is some world with moral good and moral evil that is at least as good (or better) than any world with neither moral good nor moral evil. See Michael J. Almeida,*Freedom, God and Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) p. 50 ff.

[10] Note that ' God is omnipotent only if, necessarily, God can do anything that is (broadly) logically possible' is equivalent to 'necessarily, God is omnipotent only if God can do anything that is (broadly) logically possible' under the assumption that God is essentially omnipotent, omniscient, morally perfect and necessarily existing.



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