Rowe's argument from freedom[*]

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1. Introduction

The famous *Free Will Defense* urges us to believe that there is some world
in which every creaturely essence is transworld depraved. If every creaturely
essence is transworld depraved in some world w, then God cannot instantiate
any free being in w that might do no wrong. Many have found that claim
incredible.[1] It is widely agreed that, for every essence e, there is some world
or other in which e is transworld depraved.[2] But, for all we know, there is in
every world some essence or other that is a *do-gooder*. If an essence e is a
do-gooder in w, then there is some set of circumstances T such that if God
were to instantiate T in w, then e's instantiation might do nothing wrong. If
there are *do-gooders* in every world, then there is no world in which every
creaturely essence is transworld depraved.[3]

Let's formulate more precisely the position that D there are do-gooders in
every possible world, and T every creaturely essence e is transworld depraved
in some possible world w.

D. $\Box(\exists e)(e$ is a do-gooder$)$

The precise English reading of D is that in every possible world there is some
essence or other e that is a do-gooder. D does not entail that there is any
essence e that is necessarily a do-gooder or any essence e that is a do-gooder
in every world.

T. $(\forall e)\Diamond(e$ is transworld depraved$)$

The precise English reading of T is that, for every essence e, there is some
world or other in which e is transworld depraved. T does not entail that there
is any world in which *every* essence is transworld depraved.

William Rowe has recently advanced an intriguing argument that
concludes that we cannot reasonably believe *both* D and T. According to
his *Argument from Freedom*, if T is true and every creaturely essence has
significant freedom, then T* is also true.[4]

T*. $\Diamond(\forall e)(e$ is transworld depraved$)$

In English T* states that there is some world w in which every creaturely essence e is transworld depraved. But if every creaturely essence is transworld depraved in w, then there are no do-gooders in w. And if there is some world containing no do-gooders, it follows that D is false. Therefore, according to Rowe, if it is reasonable to believe that T is true, then it is reasonable to believe that D is false.

The *Argument from Freedom* concludes that there is some possible world in which every creaturely essence is transworld depraved. If the *Argument from Freedom* is sound then we have a powerful argument for the central thesis in the *Free Will Defense*. In section 2 I present Rowe's *reductio ad absurdum* in favor of *Argument from Freedom*. In section 3 I show that Rowe's version of the *Argument from Freedom* is unsound. I consider several modified versions of the argument and argue that we have no reason to believe that any modified version is sound. I conclude that the significant freedom of creaturely essences makes it reasonable to believe that each world contains at least some do-gooders. In section 4 I offer some closing comments.

2. Rowe's *Argument from Freedom*

The *Argument from Freedom* has the following quasi-formal structure. Assumption (1) ensures that no essence is *forcibly* depraved or a do-gooder, and assumption (2) ensures that every essence is transworld depraved in some world or other.

1. An essence e is a do-gooder (transworld depraved) in w only if the significant freedom of e's instantiation determines that e is a do-gooder (transworld depraved) in w.   Assumption
2. $(\forall e)\diamond(e$ is transworld depraved)   Assumption
   ∴ $\overline{\diamond(\forall e)(e \text{ is transworld depraved})}$ Proposition T*

It is certainly true that no essence e is a do-gooder or transworld depraved unless e's instantiations freely choose to be a do-gooder or transworld depraved. So assumption (1) is true.[5] And since there is no dispute over proposition T, it is fair to assume that (2) is true. But from assumptions (1) and (2), Rowe provides an indirect proof of T*. Assume for *reductio ad absurdum* that (3) is true.

3. $\sim\diamond(\forall e)(e$ is transworld depraved)

In English (3) states that there is no world w in which every essence e is transworld depraved. There are infinitely many distinct essences, each existing in every possible world, but assume for the sake of simplicity a small model containing two and only two essences *named e_1 and e_2*. We might suppose, for instance, that e_1 names the essence of Mahatma Ghandi and e_2 names the essence of A1 Capone.

Propositions (4) and (5) follow directly from assumption (2) in the proof.

4. $\Diamond(e_1$ is transworld depraved)
5. $\Diamond(e_2$ is transworld depraved)

From (4) and (5) we know that for each essence e_1 and e_2 there is some world w at which each is transworld depraved. But assumption (3) entails that there is no world in which both e_1 and e_2 is transworld depraved. And so we arrive at proposition (6).

6. $\sim\Diamond(e_1$ is transworld depraved & e_2 is transworld depraved)

But given some simple logical transformations on proposition (6), we reach a conclusion that Rowe insists is inconsistent with the significant freedom of e_1 and e_2.

7. $\Box(e_2$ is transworld depraved $\supset e_1$ is not transworld depraved)

In English proposition (7) states that, necessarily, if e_2 is transworld depraved then e_1 is *not* transworld depraved. But then, in at least some worlds, the depravity of e_2 *necessitates* the goodness of e_1.[6] Therefore, in some worlds, the significant freedom of e_1 does not determine whether e_1 is a do-gooder. It is rather the transworld depravity of e_2 that determines whether e_1 is a do-gooder. But that is impossible. Rowe argues as follows.

> "... Could the fact, assuming it is a fact, that Capone is transworld depraved *logically necessitate* the fact, assuming it is a fact, that Ghandi is not transworld depraved? No. For then some fact *external* to Ghandi himself would necessitate what he would do with his freedom if he were created in certain circumstances ... If the matter of how he would use his freedom if any of those circumstances ... were actual were itself *logically necessitated* by Capone's being transworld depraved, then it would not really be up to Ghandi how he would use his freedom if any of those circumstances ... were actual. For in those circumstances it cannot be up to Ghandi whether or not Capone is transworld depraved."[7]

Rowe concludes that e_1 and e_2 both have significant freedom only if T* is true and there is some world in which both e_1 and e_2 are transworld depraved. Since proposition (7) entails that there is no world in which both e_1 and e_2 are transworld depraved, (7) is inconsistent with the assumption of significant freedom in (1). It follows by *reductio ad absurdum* that proposition T* is true, and the *Argument from Freedom* is valid.

3. Challenges to the *Argument from Freedom*

The *Argument from Freedom* assumes that there are two and only two essences named e_1 and e^2. But, as Rowe well knows, that assumption is

false. Suppose we make the slightly more realistic assumption that *some* possible worlds contain a few more essences that are do-gooders and a few more essences that are transworld depraved. It follows immediately that the *Argument from Freedom* is unsound. If some worlds contain a few more essences that are do-gooders and a few more essences that are depraved, then assumption (3) no longer entails proposition (7). More generally, for any two distinct essences i and j, we cannot conclude that there is no world in which both i and j are transworld depraved.

But assumption (3) does entail that there is no world in which every essence is transworld depraved. Suppose there exists a finite number k of essences $e_0, e_1, e_2, \ldots, e_k$ We cannot derive (7) but we can derive proposition (8).

8. $\Box(e_0$ & e_1 & e_2 & $\ldots$ e_{k-1} are all transworld depraved $\supset$ e_k is a do-gooder).

In English (8) states that necessarily the finite conjunction of essences e_0 & e_1 & e_2 & $\ldots$ & e_{k-1} are all transworld depraved only if e_k is a do-gooder. If we assume that there is some world w in which every essence other than e_k is transworld depraved, then we can preserve the validity of the *Argument from Freedom*. Every essence other than e_k is transworld depraved in w only if e_k is *forced* to be a do-gooder in w. Since that is inconsistent with assumption (1), we should conclude that T* is true.

The argument assumes of course that there is some world containing one and only one do-gooder. But what reason is there to believe that there is such a world? Perhaps the assumption of a *finite* number of essences somehow makes it more reasonable to believe that some world contains one and only one do-gooder. But that assertion is certainly not obvious and we are offered no reason to believe it. We are also offered no reason to believe – nor does it seem at all likely – that there are no more than finitely many essences in every possible world. We therefore have no reason to believe that the *Argument from Freedom* is sound.

But suppose instead we assume that there is an infinite number of creaturely essences and that each exists in every possible world. And suppose we enumerate creaturely essences along the natural numbers starting with 0 as follows, $e_0, e_1, e_2, e_3, e_4, \ldots, e_n$. Assumption (3) entails that for every world w, there is some essence e that is a do-gooder in w, but we cannot conclude that there is any world in which any essence is forced to be a do-gooder. For any possible world w, the fact that essence e_0 or e_1 or e_2 or $\ldots e_n$ is transworld depraved certainly does not entail that any other particular essence is a do-gooder. More generally, for any finite conjunction of essences, and for any possible world w, the fact that e_0 & e_1 & e_2 & $\ldots$ & e_{k-1} are transworld depraved does not entail that any other particular essence e_k is a do-gooder.

e_k is forced to be a do-gooder in w only if every creaturely essence in w other than e_k is transworld depraved. Since each world contains infinitely many essences, we know that e_k is forced to be a do-gooder in w only if there are infinitely many transworld depraved essences in w. Therefore no finite conjunction of transworld depraved essences e_0 & e_1 & e_2 & ... & e_{k-1} necessitates that some other essence e_k is a do-gooder.

But there remains the possibility that some world contains *infinitely* many transworld-depraved essences. Suppose there is a possible world in which every creaturely essence *except one* is transworld depraved. Since we have enumerated our essences along the natural numbers e_0, e_1, e_2, e_3, e_4, ..., e_n, we might suppose that for all e_i $(0 < i \leq n)$ it is true at some world w that e_i is transworld depraved. If assumption (3) is true and every essence other than e_0 is transworld depraved in some world, then we arrive at proposition (9).

9. $\Box$(For all e_i $(0 < i \leq n)$, e_i is transworld depraved $\supset e_0$ is a do-gooder).

In English (9) states that necessarily, every essence other than e_0 is transworld depraved only if e_0 is a do-gooder. Since the transworld depravity of all e_i $(0 < i \leq n)$ *necessitates* that e_0 is a do-gooder, we know that there is some world in which e_0 is *forced* to be a do-gooder. Since that conclusion is not consistent with assumption (1), the argument concludes that T* is true.

If some world contains infinitely many transworld-depraved essences, then the *Argument from Freedom* proves that there is a world in which every essence is transworld depraved. But the assumption that every essence except e_0 is transworld depraved in some world is no less controversial than the conclusion that every essence is transworld depraved in some world. The creaturely essences assumed to be transworld depraved number $\omega - 1$. The creaturely essences it is concluded are transworld depraved number ω. But of course there is no difference here in the number of essences transworld depraved, since $\omega = \omega - 1$. So those who find the conclusion incredible will rightly find the assumption incredible. The *Argument from Freedom* therefore contains at least one assumption that is not believable, and we have no reason to conclude that the argument is sound.

But suppose it is insisted that modal intuition or conceptual possibility lend at least some credibility to the claim that there is a world in which every essence *except one* is transworld depraved. It is not obviously inconceivable, for whatever that is worth, that there should exist a world in which virtually every essence is transworld depraved. And it is consistent with the theistic position that God can actualize some world containing moral good and no moral evil in any world in which he exists.[8] Perhaps the more cautious conclusion is that there is some reason to believe that the argument is sound and T* is true.

Suppose then that there is *some* reason to conclude that T* is true. Let's now show that there is at least as much reason to conclude that T* is false. Suppose we enumerate possible worlds along the natural numbers starting with 0 as follows, w_0, w_1, w_2, w_3, w_4, ..., w_n. Assume for *reductio ad absurdum* that T* is true. T* states that there is some world in the sequence of possible worlds such that every essence in that world is transworld depraved or $\Diamond(\forall e)(e$ is transworld depraved). But suppose that, for every world w_i $(0 < i \leq n)$, there is some creaturely essence or other in w_i that is a do-gooder. The supposition is that in every world except w_0 there is some do-gooder or other. Since we know that there is some world in which every essence is transworld depraved – we have assumed T* is true – we also know that proposition (10) is true.

10. $\Box$(For all w_i $(0 < i \leq n)$ w_i contains some do-gooder or other & there is some world in which every essence is transworld depraved $\supset$ every essence in w_0 is transworld depraved.

In English (10) states that necessarily, if every world other than w_0 contains some do-gooder and there is some world in which every essence is transworld depraved, then every essence in w_0 is transworld depraved. But it follows from (10) that no essence in w_0 is free to be a do-gooder. And that is not consistent with assumption (1) of the *Argument from Freedom*. We conclude that T* is false. Therefore every possible world contains some do-gooder or other.

So if every world except w_0 contains some do-gooder or other then every world *simpliciter* contains some do-gooder or other. But is it plausible to assume that every world except w_0 contains some do-gooder? There is at least as much evidence forthcoming from modal intuition that every world except w_0 contains some do-gooder as there is that every essence except e_0 is transworld depraved in some world. Certainly neither proposition expresses a conceptual impossibility. But since we have as much reason to believe that every world except w_0 contains some do-gooder as we have to believe that every essence except e_0 is transworld depraved in some world we cannot conclude that Rowe's infinite *Argument from Freedom* is sound.

Rowe's *Argument from Freedom* does not establish that there is some world in which every creaturely essence is transworld depraved and therefore does not establish the central thesis of the *Free Will Defense*. But it is not surprising that the significant freedom of each essence does not entail that there is some world in which every essence is transworld depraved. Suppose it could be shown that the significant freedom of each essence guarantees that for every essence e, and e-perfect world w^*, there is some world w in which God actualizes T of w^* and e's instantiation goes wrong. If we grant that supposition it does not follow that, for any essence e, and e-perfect world

w^*, it is possible that were God to actualize T of w^* then e's instantiation *would* go wrong.[9] But the supposition does establish that for every essence e, and e-perfect world w^*, it is possible that were God to actualize T of w^* then e's instantiation *might* go wrong. And that conclusion is compatible with the position that every world contains some do-gooder or other.[10]

But suppose there were a stronger conclusion forthcoming from the significant freedom of each essence. Suppose it followed that there is some world w such that, for every essence e, and e-perfect world w^*, if God *does* actualize T of w^*, then e's instantiation *will* go wrong. If we grant that supposition it does not follow that there is a world where, for any essence e, and e-perfect world w^*, were God to actualize T of w^* then e's instantiation *would* go wrong.[11] But the supposition does establish that there is a world where, for every essence e, and e-perfect world w^*, were God to actualize T of w^* then e's instantiation *might* go wrong. And that conclusion is also compatible with the position that every world contains some do-gooder or other.

Rowe's *Argument from Freedom* does not show that there is some world in which every creaturely essence is transworld depraved. But that conclusion is quite difficult to establish. It is perhaps a more likely conclusion that there is some world in which, for every essence e, e-perfect world w^*, were God actualize T of w^* , then e's instantiation might go wrong. But as we've seen that conclusion is consistent with each world containing some do-gooder or other. We should therefore conclude that the *Argument from Freedom* does not establish the central thesis of the *Free Will Defense*.

4. Concluding remarks

The initial version of the *Argument from Freedom* makes obviously unrealistic assumptions about the number of creaturely essences. Given slightly more realistic assumptions, the initial version is unsound. And since there is no reason to believe that there is a finite number of creaturely essences, we have no reason to believe that any finite version of the argument is sound. There might be some reason to believe that an infinite *Argument from Freedom* is sound. But we showed that there is at least as much reason to conclude that every world contains some do-gooder or other. We noted that it is not surprising that the significant freedom of creaturely essences does not entail that there is some world in which every creaturely essence is transworld depraved. It would be less surprising to learn that there is some world in which, for every essence e, and e-perfect world w^*, were God actualize T of w^*, then e's instantiation might go wrong. And perhaps there is such a world. We do know in any case that no version of the *Argument from Freedom* establishes T^* the central thesis of the *Free Will Defense*.

Notes

1. Among those who find that claim less than credible are Keith DeRose, 'Plantinga, Presumption, Possibility and the Problem of Evil', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21 (1990) 497–512, Michael Bergmann, 'Might-Counterfactuals, Transworld Untrustworthiness and Plantinga's Free Will Defense', *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999) 336–351, Jordan Howard Sobel, *Logic and Theism: Arguments for and Against Belief in God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, *forthcoming*), J.L. Mackie *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), John O'Leary-Hawthorne and D. Howard-Snyder, 'Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44 (1998), 1–21.

2. With the possible exception of Michael Bergmann who has argued that it is epistemically possible that some essence is necessarily not transworld depraved. That is not consistent with the claim that every essence is transworld depraved in some world or other. See his 'Might-Coutnerfactuals, Transworld Untrustworthiness and Plantinga's Free Will Defense', *Faith and Philosophy, op. cit*.

3. N.B. Do-gooders are not in general transworld sanctified, though every transworld sanctified essence is a do-gooder. An essence e is transworld sanctified in w iff. for *every* e-perfect world w^*, the following counterfactual of freedom is true in w: if God had strongly actualized the T of w^* (where T is the largest state of affairs God actualizes in w^*) then e's instantiation might not have gone wrong. Cf. John O'Leary-Hawthorne and D. Howard-Snyder, 'Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense' *op. cit*. sec. 2. Rowe's characterization of transworld sanctity is somewhat stronger. According to the definition Rowe uses an essence e is transworld sanctified in w iff. for *every* e-perfect world w^*, the following counterfactual of freedom is true in w: if God had strongly actualized the T of w^* then e's instantiation *would* not have gone wrong. In contrast, an essence e is a *do-gooder* in w iff. for *some* e-perfect world w^* the following counterfactual of freedom is true in w: if God had strongly actualized T of w^* then e's instantiation might not have gone wrong. An essence e is a do-gooder just in case e is not transworld depraved.

4. Cf. William Rowe, "In Defense of 'The Free Will Defense", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 44 (1998) 115–120. The argument in that paper I call the *Argument from Freedom*, though Rowe does not use that term.

5. I will sometimes refer to the significant freedom of certain essence e. But this is a manner of speaking easing exposition. For brevity, I call an essence e significantly free (unfree) in w if and only if the instantiations of e in w are significantly free (unfree).

6. The necessitation Rowe finds problematic is the following, for some world w.

   i. e_2 is depraved.
   ii. $\Box(e_2$ is depraved $\supset e_1$ is not depraved)
   iii. Therefore, e_1 is not depraved.

   Assume that premise (i) is true. We know that premise (ii) follows from (1), (2) and the denial of T* in Rowe's initial argument. If (i) and (ii) are true then, according to Rowe, the significant freedom of e_1 does not determine whether e_1 is a do-gooder in w. Since that is inconsistent with the assumption of significant freedom, Rowe concludes that (ii) is false and T* is true.

7. See William Rowe, 'In Defense of "The Free Will Defense", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, op. cit*. p. 119.

8. The assumption of the *Argument from Freedom* that there is some world in which every essence *except one* is transworld depraved is consistent with the theistic position that God

can actualize some world containing moral good and no moral evil in any world in which he exists. Of course, the conclusion of the *Argument from Freedom* is not. Many theists including Leibniz have held the "theistic position". But it should be noted that many atheists have, too.

9. The entailment requires the additional assumption of strong centering on counterfactual conditionals. Plantinga and Bergmann are among those who reject the strong centering assumption. Strong centering entails that, for each world w, no world is as similar as w to w. Among the controversial implications of strong centering is the reduction of counterfactual conditionals with true antecedents to material conditionals. So, the inference from (A & B) to A $\square \rightarrow$ B is valid, for *any* true propositions A and B. Cf. Plantinga's *Respondeo* in (ed.) Jonathan Kvanvig, *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology: Essays in Honor of Plantinga's Theory of Knowledge* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996) pp. 328-329. Bergmann rejects the inference in the context of revising *FWD* in a way consistent with Plantinga's views. See 'Might-Counterfactuals, Transworld Untrustworthiness, and Plantinga's Free Will Defense', *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1999) 336–351.

10. The precise definition of a do-gooder is as follows.

DG. A creaturely essence e is a *do-gooder* in w if and only if for *some* e-perfect world w^* the following counterfactual of freedom is true in w: if God had strongly actualized T of w^*, then e's instantiation *might* have freely performed no wrong actions.

So a do-gooder is an essence whose instantiations are not guarnanteed to go wrong under every set of circumstances T. Of course do-gooders might go wrong under every T anyway. And nothing precludes do-gooders from being *multi-world* depraved. Nothing in DG entails that any do-gooders might approximate moral sainthood. It is consistent with DG to assume, for instance, that no do-gooder could be a moral hero or that no do-gooder could do anything more than morality demands. DG entails only that do-gooders might not go wrong in some circumstance T.

11. The entailment requires the additional assumption of strong centering on counterfactual conditionals. Compare endnote 9 above.

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