



<https://doi.org/10.26520/mcdsare.2018.2.176-181>

MCDSARE: 2018
International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the
Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education

ON THE WONDER OF LIFE AND THE FREEDOM OF WILL

Steven Yue Heng Yang

(a) Vanderbilt University, 2301 Vanderbilt Place, Nashville, United States,
yue.heng.yang@vanderbilt.edu

Abstract

In this paper, I shall discuss the problem of evil and argue that our account of good and evil is at its core a deeply romantic narrative – it reflects our idealization of a perfect world. I will present the core arguments and responses from David Hume, Gottfried Leibniz, J.L. Mackie and Alvin Plantinga. I recognize that there are two types of evil – moral and natural, and that the problem of evil exists in two forms – logical and evidential. However, I shall limit my discussion to moral evil and focus on how the free will defense is an attempted logical but not evidential solution to the problem of evil. I aim to strengthen the free will defense with reference to William James’s religious hypothesis and argue that our active faith reconciles the notion of our free will with God’s divine attributes. Our active faith is a deeply personal commitment that transcends objective uncertainty. Our subjective, inward reflections elucidate our deepest meaning of life and our most passionate relation to God.

Keywords: problem of evil; faith; natural;

INTRODUCTION

“It takes some good to make it hurt. It takes some bad for satisfaction” (Mraz, 2010). These two lines from Jason Mraz’s pop song, *Life is Wonderful*, suggest that good and evil are intimately related. On a deeper level, one may even argue that these lines resonate with John Hick’s “soul-making” theodicy. Though Mraz’s lyric is not recognized as a piece of philosophical writing by any contemporary “professional standard”, it nevertheless invites our serious thought.

In this paper, I shall discuss the problem of evil and argue that our account of good and evil is at its core a deeply romantic narrative – it reflects our idealization of a perfect world. I will present the core arguments and responses from David Hume, Gottfried Leibniz, J.L. Mackie and Alvin Plantinga.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem of evil arises from the apparent tension between the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence, on the one hand, and the existence of evil on the other. The Judeo-Christian tradition has affirmed each of the following propositions (Pojman and Rea, 2015):

1. God is all-powerful.
2. God is all-knowing.
3. God is perfectly good.
4. Evil exists.

If God is perfectly good, it seems that God would not want evil to exist. Being omniscient, God must surely know what potentials for evil lurk in the world and what evils will arise apart from divine intervention. Being omnipotent, God is able to prevent any evil that God knows about and wants to prevent (Pojman and Rea, 2015). If God possesses all these divine attributes, then, in the words of Epicurus, “whence then is evil?” Yet, the fact that evil exists is beyond dispute. While both theists and atheists acknowledge the presence of evil, they differ in their interpretations of it.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

At the outset, we need to clarify several terms that are significant and widely used in the literature on the problem of evil. First, a *moral evil* is caused by a free agent (e.g. theft, murder), whereas a *natural evil* is caused by mother nature (e.g. hurricane, tsunami). Second, the problem of evil in its *logical form* poses rational challenges for reconciliation the existence of evil and all the divine attributes of the perfect being, whereas in its *evidential form* it presents empirical difficulties in accounting for the extent of evil in our world. Last but not least, a *theodicy* is a positive justification for the presence of evil, whereas a *defense* is simply a demonstration of consistency – an effort to show that there is no formal contradiction between the existence of God on the one hand and the existence of evil on the other.

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

I aim to strengthen the free will defense with reference to William James’s religious hypothesis and argue that our *active faith* reconciles the notion of our free will with God’s divine attributes. Our *active faith* is a deeply personal commitment that transcends objective uncertainty. Our *subjective, inward reflections* elucidate our deepest meaning of life and our most passionate relation to God.

5. RESEARCH METHODS

In *The Argument from Evil*, Hume argues through his persona Philo that not merely the fact of evil, but the enormous amount of evil, makes it dubious that a deity exists. Hume holds that each of us has strong empirical evidence for the existence of evil: “The miseries of life, the unhappiness of man, the general corruptions of our nature, the unsatisfactory enjoyment of pleasures, riches, honours – these phrases have become almost proverbial in all languages. And who can doubt of what all men declare from their own immediate feeling and experience?” (Hume, 1979). Beyond these moral evils, Hume also accounts for “the curious artifices of nature [which] embitter the life of every living being” (Hume, 1979). In particular, he raises the example of nature’s food chain: “before and behind, above and below, every animal is surrounded with enemies which incessantly seek his misery and destruction” (Hume, 1979). Even when “we surmount those wild beasts, our natural enemies”, we are still plagued by the problem of evil because “[m]an is the greatest enemy of man” (Hume, 1979). The instances of “[o]ppression, injustice, contempt, contumely, violence, sedition, war, calumny, treachery, fraud” (Hume, 1979) appear to be moral evils which are themselves an extension of natural evils in the wider world. In response to these empirical evidences for the prevalence of evil, Hume takes the agnostic position by “assert[ing] that these subjects (the logical problem of evil) exceed all human capacity, and that our common measures of truth and falsehood are not applicable to them” (Hume, 1979). In essence, Hume doubts that we can ever agree on a normative explanation and thus opts to settle on a descriptive account of evil. However, the cost of Hume’s stance is the weakening of God’s omnibenevolence attribute: If God’s goodness is beyond our human understanding, then can we reasonably claim that we know God is perfectly good?

Responding to Hume, Leibniz argues that the fact of evil in no way refutes theism in his essay *Theodicy: A Defense of Theism*. While not disputing the presence of evil, Leibniz offers an optimistic interpretation of it: “*evil is accompanied by a greater good*” (Duncan, 1890). Leibniz credits “St. Augustine, who has said a hundred times, that God has permitted evil in order to bring about... a greater

good, and... Thomas Aquinas (in libr. II. sent. dist. 32, qu. I, art. 1), [who argues] that the permitting of evil tends to the good of the universe” (Duncan, 1890). Building on the ideas of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, Leibniz offers his own example: “Adam’s fall [is a] *felix culpa*, a happy sin, because it had been retrieved with immense advantage by the incarnation of the Son of God, who has given to the universe something nobler than anything that ever would have been among creatures except for it” (Duncan, 1890). This “something nobler” is our free will: “it was in accordance with order and the general good that God allowed certain creatures the opportunity of exercising their liberty, even when he foresaw that they would turn to evil, but which he could so well rectify; because it was not fitting that, in order to hinder sin, God should always act in an extraordinary manner” (Duncan, 1890).

Leibniz’s answer, the free will defense, is one of the most famous theodicies addressing the logical problem of evil. If we accept Leibniz’s account that God knows (omniscient) that humans will commit evil, is capable of preventing it (omnipotent), but chooses not to do it in order to achieve a greater good (omnibenevolent), then there appears to be no contradiction between all of God’s divine attributes and the existence of evil. By preserving all four traditional Judeo-Christian propositions, Leibniz seems to have worked out a defense as well as a theodicy.

However, the immediate challenge against Leibniz’s free will defense is its limited effectiveness: while it may address moral evil, it definitely cannot account for natural evil. Moreover, even if we grant that the free will defense, to a large extent, solves the logical problem of evil, we still cannot rationalize why there is such a horrendous *amount* of evil in our world, i.e. the evidential problem of evil is unresolved. Though Leibniz addresses the second challenge by claiming that “it is possible, and in fact very probable, that the glory and the perfection of blessed are incomparably greater than the misery and the imperfection of the damned, and that here the excellence of the total good in the smaller number exceeds the total evil in the greater number” (Duncan, 1890), we are still intuitively unconvinced that any kind of “good” as we know it can justify such horrendous tragedies of our human race as the holocaust.

Perhaps, one way of saving Leibniz’s thought is to understand his claims as an argument-in-reverse: since God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and perfectly good, the world we live in must be the best of all possible worlds. In fact, Leibniz clearly articulates that “this universe must be in reality better than every other possible universe” (Duncan, 1890). Here, Leibniz’s defense of theism begins from a position of *faith*, much like how St. Anselm presents his entire ontological argument in the setting of a prayer. Situated this way, Leibniz’s free will defense paints a rosy picture of the superlative. We need to pay close attention to our most fascinating imagination in order to conceive the best of all possible worlds. In this deeply romantic narrative, we are the heroes of our own tales. Our story is one that passionately embraces all the wonders of our life: think of the awe-inspiring Mt. Everest in its magnificence and grandeur, or the hovering hummingbird fueling its tiny existence via the nectar of a blossoming flower. Better still, think of an amiable stranger who, without any hesitation, lends you a helping hand when you need it the most. These images offer us solace, temporary though it may be, from the blood and gore of many evils. By devoting our attention to the marvelous beauty of nature and the tender acts of kindness in our ordinary human encounters, we can anchor our faith in the wonder of our life. The power of our belief offers us the brightest hope even in the darkest hour of our existence. Indeed, most theists would argue that only a firm belief in God can open our heart to the grace and elegance in every moment of God’s creation. Only by applying the principle of charity can we appreciate Leibniz’s argument in its strongest form.

However, to some atheists our reliance on faith amounts to admitting that our belief lacks rationality. According to Mackie, the religious beliefs we have been discussing are positively irrational because several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another. In *Evil and Omnipotence*, Mackie argues that the argument from evil demonstrates the incoherence of theism: If there is a God who is all-powerful and completely good, he will be able and willing to eliminate all evil in the world. But there is evil, so no God exists. At the outset, Mackie defines the problem of evil as “a logical problem, the problem of clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs: it is not a scientific problem that might be solved by further observations, or a practical problem that might be solved by a decision or an action” (Mackie, 1955). Mackie also lays out other premises in what he calls the “additional principles... that good is opposed to evil, in such a way that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can, and

that there are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do” (Mackie, 1955). Based on these assumptions, Mackie identifies two types of solutions.

Firstly, Mackie recognizes as “adequate solutions” those that “[give] up at least one of the propositions that constitute [the problem of evil]” (Mackie, 1955). Here, Mackie explains: “If you are prepared to say that God is not wholly good, or not quite omnipotent, or that evil does not exist, or that good is not opposed to the kind of evil that exists, or that there are limits to what an omnipotent thing can do, then the problem of evil will not arise for you” (Mackie, 1955). Though these solutions can effectively address the logical problem of evil, they inevitably lead to other problems for the theistic tradition. For instance, biting the bullet that God is not omnibenevolent would directly contradict the claim on God’s omnibenevolence in the bible: “The LORD is righteous in all His ways And kind in all His deeds” (Psalm 145:17, *New American Standard Bible*). Here, a strictly coherent logic leads to a rejection of one of the fundamental teachings in the bible. In other words, the adequate solutions defined by Mackie would only strengthen the atheists’ position.

Secondly, Mackie calls to our attention “fallacious solutions which explicitly maintain all the constituent propositions, but implicitly reject at least one of them in the course of the argument that explains away the problem of evil” (Mackie, 1955). Mackie observes that “[t]hese fallacious solutions often turn upon some equivocation with the words ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ or upon some vagueness about the way in which good and evil are opposed to one another, or about how much is meant by ‘omnipotence’” (Mackie, 1955). Here, we need to make a distinction between formal and informal fallacies. On the one hand, a formal fallacy is a logical error that occurs in the form or structure of an argument. This type of fallacy is restricted to deductive arguments. On the other hand, an informal fallacy is a mistake in reasoning that occurs in ordinary language and is different from an error in the form or structure of arguments. Mackie’s idea of “fallacious solutions” appears to be the latter. Unlike formal fallacies which can only be resolved by correcting the argument form, informal fallacies require a clarification solution for the verbal dispute.

Of particular interest to us is Mackie’s objection of the statement “Evil is due to human free will.” The objective of the appeal to free will is to get God off the hook, i.e. we are blameworthy when we commit evil because we have the freedom to choose our actions. Here is Mackie’s presentation of the free will defense: “first order evil (e.g. pain) may be justified as a logically necessary component in second order good (e.g. sympathy) while second order evil (e.g. cruelty) is not *justified*, but is so ascribed to human beings that God cannot be held responsible for it” (Mackie, 1955). Mackie treats freedom as a “third order good” which is superior to deterministically produced second order goods. However, it also accounts for second order evils because they are “logically necessary accompaniments of freedom” (Mackie, 1955).

Mackie raises two challenges to the free will defense. First, “there was to [God] the obviously better possibility of making beings who would act freely but always go right... [God’s] failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good” (Mackie, 1955). Second, “there is a fundamental difficulty in the notion of an omnipotent God creating men with free will, for if men’s will are really free this must mean that even God cannot control them, that is, that God is no longer omnipotent” (Mackie, 1955). This leads to Mackie’s notion of the “Paradox of Omnipotence: can an omnipotent being make things which he cannot subsequently control?” (Mackie, 1955). At this point, let us concede that both of Mackie’s challenges indeed offer a solid proof of the logical incompatibility between God’s divine attributes and the existence of evil.

However, this prompted Alvin Plantinga to respond with his strengthened version of the free will defense. In *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Plantinga argues: “The heart of the Free Will Defense is the claim that it is *possible* that God could not have created a universe containing a moral good (or as much moral good as this world contains) without creating one that also contained moral evil. And if so, then it is possible that God has a good reason for creating a world containing evil” (Plantinga, 1974). Through his intensely logical rebuttal of Mackie by way of many examples, Plantinga concludes that “the price for creating a world in which they produce moral good is creating one in which they also produce moral evil.” Taking a step back, we can see that Plantinga’s counter is based on his disagreements with Leibniz and Mackie on how God “actualizes” instead of “creates” a possible world and what it means for an agent

to be “morally free”. While Plantinga’s defense has received wide acceptance among contemporary philosophers when addressing the logical problem of evil, it falls short of providing a justification strong enough for an agent to *act* in faith of God even when there is indisputable evidence of evil in our world.

6. FINDINGS

Instead, let us take the pragmatic route. William James’ seminal essay, *The Will to Believe*, is a defense of religious faith on pragmatic ground in the absence of conclusive logical argumentation or scientific evidence. James defines “the religious hypothesis” as two claims (James, 1879):

1. “[T]he best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak and say the final word.”
2. “[W]e are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.”

In essence, James’s “religious hypothesis” is hope writ large – it is a deep faith in the ultimate outcome of the cosmos which is so powerful that it stirs us to active belief at our present moment. For James, this life-transforming experience is a “*forced* option” because “[w]e cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light... although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve (James, 1879).” At our level of perceiving the world, we are free to adopt any theological position, including the skeptical position. In this positive sense, i.e. autonomy, our freedom of will is preserved. Indeed, James urges us “to respect one another’s mental freedom” (James, 1879). However, on a meta level, we do not have freedom in its negative sense, i.e. without constraints, because religious faith is of ultimate concern to all of us and we have no way of escaping from making a choice, whether explicit or implicit, about our will to believe. In reference to those mounting logical challenges to religion, James says: “...one who should shut himself up in snarling logicity and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods’ acquaintance” (James, 1879). As such, James lays out a strong pragmatic justification for religious faith that is independent of rationality.

More directly, the free will defense can be strengthened when we re-conceptualize our free will in the context of James’s pragmatic ideas. In *Freedom and Limits*, John Lachs explains James’s response to the problem of evil using the notion of “moral holiday”: “if our obligations are infinite but God picks up the slack and completes what we leave undone, then we might as well break from our labors and let the Deity take over. The urgency of moral action abates the moment we feel assured that God presides over a universe in which the good inevitably prevails” (Lachs, 2014). This is a direct response to Mackie’s first challenge to the free will defense. While we may concede that it is not logically inconsistent for an almighty God to create us as free agents who will always do right, we may still wonder why there is even a need for us to choose right over wrong when we know that God will right all the wrongs in the world. Here, we can attempt to resolve this part of the debate by further clarifying our idea of free will. James’s pragmatic approach to religion suggests that our faith should be *active* rather than *passive*. God offers us free will for us to practice our *active faith* such that the synthesis of our utmost effort to choose right (*active*) and God’s divine powers (*faith*) will always yield the best possible outcome. In this sense, our concept of free will is not *static*. Instead, by thinking about our free will as *freedom in flux* we place our faith in a divine being who will guide us, rather than compel us, towards a higher-order and perfectly stable eternal good.

Now, I shall end my paper by adding an existential spin to our discussion. In *Subjectivity Is Truth*, Søren Kierkegaard recognizes the evidential problem of evil: “When I consider nature in order to discover God, I do indeed see his omnipotence and wisdom, but I see much more that disturbs me” (Kierkegaard, 1844). Here, Kierkegaard also implicitly acknowledges the logical difficulty of reconciling all the divine attributes of God with the existence of evil. However, this “objective uncertainty [is]...precisely...the place for inwardness because inwardness apprehends the objective uncertainty with the entire passion of infinity.” (Kierkegaard, 1844) To Kierkegaard, the risk of objective uncertainty is a necessary condition for faith because “[f]aith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and objective uncertainty” (Kierkegaard, 1844). That Mackie frames his second challenge to

the free will defense, the *Paradox of Omnipotence*, as a paradox, in fact bolsters Kierkegaard's existential claim: "When subjectivity, inwardness, is the truth, the truth becomes objectively determined as a paradox, and that it is paradoxical is made clear by the fact that subjectivity is truth, for it repels objectivity, and the expression for the objective repulsion is the intensity and measure of inwardness. The paradox is the objective uncertainty, which is the expression for the passion of inwardness, which is precisely the truth" (Kierkegaard, 1844). While Kierkegaard concedes that "the eternal truth is not essentially in itself paradoxical", he probes us to a deeper, inner reflection by arguing that "it becomes so by relating itself to an existing individual" (Kierkegaard, 1844). In light of Kierkegaard's existential ideas, we need to perceive our *active leap of faith* as the embodiment of subjective truth – our passionately personal relation to God. While faith in this sense is not an epistemic state, it nevertheless constitutes our ultimate concern because the rich history of our current discussion testifies to the magnitude of our thoughts on religion.

7. CONCLUSION

The chorus of Jason Mraz's *Life is Wonderful* plays a soothing melody to a pensive lyric: "Ha la la la la life is wonderful...Ha la la la la life is meaningful..." (Mraz, 2010). Perhaps, to many of us, this seems too good to be true. In our imperfect world, the existence of many seemingly insurmountable evils is undoubtedly disheartening. Life, in its chillingly bleak reality, tests our most fervent faith. However, it is precisely upon this realization that we must give all our light. As Pierre de Coubertin, father of the modern Olympics, puts it: "The important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win, but to take part; the important thing in Life is not triumph, but the struggle; the essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well. To spread these principles is to build up a strong and more valiant and, above all, more scrupulous and more generous humanity" (Dixon, 1984). Only by holding on to our blazing passion – our *personal, active faith* – can we ignite a spark of hope that illuminates the wonder of our exquisite life and the freedom of our indomitable will.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- [1] Dixon, Peter L. *The Olympian*. Roundtable Pub., 1984. p. 210
- [2] Duncan, G. M. *The Philosophical Work of Leibniz*. New Haven: Tuttle, Morehouse, & Taylor, 1890. The Theodicy: Abridgement of the Argument Reduced to Syllogistic Form (1710)
- [3] Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. London: Longmans Green, 1979. Part X
- [4] James, William. *The Will to Believe*. New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1897. Parts I – X
- [5] Kierkegaard, Søren. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*. 1844. Translated by Louis Pojman
- [6] Lachs, John, and Patrick Shade. *Freedom and Limits*. Fordham University Press, 2014. Chapter 31
- [7] Mackie, J. L. *Mind*. Vol. 64, Oxford University Press, 1955. p. 200-212
- [8] Mraz, Jason. "Jason Mraz - Life Is Wonderful Music Video." *YouTube*, YouTube, 23 Nov. 2010, www.youtube.com/watch?v=esFAe2BDwIc&index=1&t=0s&list=LLKFVrTY4Uq89GJmgkRdFqjg.
- [9] Plantinga, Alvin. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Harper & Row, 1974.
- [10] Pojman, Louis P., and Michael C. Rea. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. Cengage Learning, 2011. p. 385
- [11] Pojman, Louis P., and Michael C. Rea. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. Cengage Learning, 2015. p. 228-229; 232-233; 236; 238-239; 256-258; 261-262; 584-586