

NOTES ON PLANTINGA'S FREE WILL DEFENSE

Preliminaries

The logical problem vs. the evidential problem

Moral evil and natural evil.

Defense vs. theodicy.

Significant freedom and moral goodness.

Something even an omnipotent being can't do.

Technical stuff

States of affairs: may *obtain* or *not*.

So believe it or not, *Wes's being President of the United States* is a genuine state of affairs. Unfortunately, it does not *obtain*.

Some states of affairs may be *actualized* – i.e. made to obtain.

GW Bush being President of the US was actualized (made to obtain) by the ___s who were eligible to vote in the last US Presidential election.

$2+2$ *being 4* necessarily obtains, and was not actualized by anyone or anything.

Strong vs. *weak* actualization

Let $S =$ *my laptop computer being smashed up*.

Suppose that, through an exercise of power, I can smash up my computer. Then I can *strongly* actualize S .

But suppose I have had surgery removing all my limbs. In that case, I cannot *strongly* actualize S . However, suppose I know this about Lance Pechon: If I were to ask Lance to do it for me, he would do so willingly – of his own free choice. Then, according to Plantinga's usage, I can *weakly* (but not *strongly*) actualize S .

Application of this distinction:

Let P be any significantly free creature, let C be a set of circumstances in which P must choose whether or not to do some morally significant action, A , and let R be the state of affairs that consists in P 's *going right with respect to A in C* .

Then even God cannot *strongly* actualize *R*. But suppose God knows this: “If I were to put *P* in *C*, *P* would go right with respect to *A*.” Then God could *weakly* actualize *R*. All he has to do is put *P* in *C*.

A *possible world* is a *maximal consistent* state of affairs. (It either *includes* or *precludes* every possible state of affairs.)

The *actual world* is the possible world that does in fact obtain. (Note that there can be only one actual world.)

Propositions and “books”.

A proposition *p* is *true in a world* iff the state of affairs corresponding to *p* obtains in that world.

A proposition is *possibly true* iff it is true in at least one possible world.

A proposition is *necessarily true* iff it is true in all possible worlds.

A thing *exists in a world* iff the proposition that it exists is true in that world.

The *book* for a world is the set of propositions that are true in that world. (Equivalently, it is a *maximal consistent set of propositions*.)

The book for the *actual world* is the set of true propositions.

Note that God does not *create* possible worlds. All worlds (even the actual world) are abstract entities. Exactly one of them is actualized. None is created.

Leibniz’s Lapse

Contrary to Leibniz, there are possible worlds that God cannot actualize. Here’s an informal proof.

Imagine a situation *S* in which Curley is free to take, or not to take, a bribe. (*S* includes *every state of affairs relevant to Curley’s decision*.¹) Suppose God wants Curley freely to refrain from taking the bribe in *S*. The most God could do to bring this about would be to actualize *S*. Can God get what he wants? That depends on which of the following propositions is true. (For the moment, we are assuming that one of them must be true, and the other false,)

(t) If Curley were free in *S*, then Curley would take the bribe.

(r) If Curley were free in *S*, then Curley would not take the bribe.

If (t) is true and God makes Curley free in *S*, then Curley will take the bribe and God won’t get what he wants. Only if (r) is true will Curley do what God wants him to do.

¹ Things get pretty complicated when we try to spell out which things are relevant. But let’s pretend that we have at least an intuitive grasp of this notion.

Now let W_t be a possible world in which S obtains and Curley freely takes the bribe. And let W_r be a world in which S obtains and Curley freely refuses the bribe. Obviously, God cannot *strongly* actualize either world, since both include Curley's freely doing something with respect to that offer of a bribe. But we are also now able to see that *at least one* of these worlds must be such that God cannot even *weakly* actualize it. Here's why.

If (t) is true, then God cannot weakly actualize W_r . If, on the other hand, (r) is true, then God cannot weakly actualize W_t . But either (t) or (r) must be true. It follows that at least one of the two worlds is such that God cannot even *weakly* actualize it.

TWD ("transworld depravity") and the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom

For each possible person², and for each situation in which that person might exist and be free, there is a complete set of true conditional propositions (like (t) and (r)) about what that person would do if she were free in that situation. We shall call these a possible person's "counterfactuals of creaturely freedom."

Now the sad truth about Curley may be this: His counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are such that in no matter what situation God places him, if God gives him morally significant freedom in that situation, he would freely do at least one wrong action. He doesn't have to. Curley is free, after all. But God knows that he *would*. Curley suffers from TWD.

Of course, there are possible worlds in which Curley is significantly free and never goes wrong. But God can't actualize those worlds without Curley's help, and Curley's counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are such that God knows that such help is not going to be forthcoming. Paradoxically, it might be that only Curley can do the extra thing that is required to actualize one of those worlds.

How the FWD solves the logical problem of evil

The problem was to show that the following propositions are logically consistent.

- (1) God exists – and is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good.
- (2) There is evil in the world.

Plantinga supposes we can do this by finding a proposition implicit in the free will defense that is consistent with (1), and together with (1) entails (2). Now we can see what that proposition might be. Here is one candidate:

- (3) God actualized a world in which there are free creatures who produce some moral goodness; AND all possible persons suffer from TWD, so that God could not have

² In this connection, Plantinga speaks of "creaturely essences". A possible person's essence is a property that she has in every possible world in which she exists, and that is not exemplified in any world by an object not identical to her. (See p. 103 for more details.)

actualized a world in which there were free creatures who produced moral goodness and no moral evil.

It's possible that both (1) and (3) are true. Together they entail (2). It follows that (2) is consistent with (1).

So why doesn't God just make different counterfactuals of creaturely freedom true?

Because then they wouldn't be counterfactuals of creaturely *freedom*. For God to determine the truth values of your counterfactuals of creaturely freedom would be tantamount to *making* you do what he prefers. Plantinga thinks that God is stuck with the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom that happen (as a matter of contingent fact) to be true.

Objection: Since the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are contingent, their truth must depend on which world is actual, which in turn depends on which world God chooses to actualize.

Reply: The objection puts the cart before the horse. In the order of explanation, the truth values of the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom come first. Within the total set of possible worlds, they define a subset of worlds that are candidates for (weak) actualization.

Does this mean that God isn't omnipotent?

Not at all. As a matter of logic, there must be a complete set of true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom for each possible person. No one other than that person could make a different set of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom true of her. So no one, no matter how powerful, could set the truth values for all the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.

What about the *amount* of moral evil in the world?

It's possible that the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are such that the actual world contains a better overall balance of moral good and evil than that of any other world that God could have actualized.

Of course, there are much better possible worlds – ones with free creatures who never go wrong. But it's at least logically possible that the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are such that God couldn't actualize any of those worlds.

What about *natural* evil?

There might be non-human free spirits ("Satan and his cohorts") who are responsible for all natural evil, in which case all evil would fall under the category of "broadly moral evil."

Alternatively, the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom might be such that any diminution in the amount of natural evil would result in a compensating increase in the amount of moral evil.

What about the *evidential* problem of evil?

For all we know, the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are such that the actual world is the best that God could do. So for all we know, the amount and variety of evil in the actual world is just what one would expect if God exists. It follows that the amount and variety of evil in the world does not disconfirm the existence of God.

More questions

1. Is there a complete set of true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom for every possible person? Could the free will defense survive if there weren't?

(In answering this question, bear in mind that without true counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, there would be no reason to think that God could have actualized a morally better world.)
2. Are *we* limited by our own counterfactuals of creaturely freedom? (Could an argument be deployed for saying that they are outside our control so that everything we do is inevitable?)
3. Is significant freedom a good thing? Is it necessary for moral responsibility and moral goodness?
4. Is *God* significantly free? If not, then what's so good about significant freedom?
5. How much of the evil in the world is due to the exercise of significant freedom? (As opposed to ignorance of what's right, or to the influence of powerful but irrational desires and inclinations.)