Review of God, Freedom, and Evil

In *God, Freedom, and Evil* Alvin Plantinga (AP) attempts to rebut the logical problem of evil [i], which posits that the following two propositions [i] are inconsistent:

1. God (an omnipotent and perfectly good being) exists
2. Evil exists

**Where is the Inconsistency?**

AP spends the first section of the book attempting to demonstrate an inconsistency between the two premises. He argues that (1) and (2) are neither explicitly nor formally [ii] contradictory, and (following J. L. Mackie) decides that the most promising course for the atheologian [iii] is that the propositions are implicitly contradictory. A set of premises is implicitly contradictory if one or more of the terms violates a logically necessary truth. What the atheologian is looking for, then, in pressing the logical problem of evil is a necessary truth which, when added to (1) and (2) above, yields a contradiction.

**The Inconsistency Stated**

Eventually AP settles on the following formulation:

1. God (an omnipotent and perfectly good being) exists.
2. God, being omnipotent, could create any world he wanted.
3. God, being all good, would prefer a world with no evil.
4. Evil exists.

Conclusion: Therefore, God does not exist.

To put it more simply, God could and would create a world with no evil. But the world has evil. So, there must be no God.

**God and Evil Have Not Been Shown to Be Inconsistent**

It is important to understand what is being claimed here. It is not that evil is somehow disconfirming of God’s existence in that we are less justified in believing in God. The claim is much more ambitious than that. The claim is that, given the existence of evil, it is impossible that God exist. The argument, if successful, is devastating. On the other hand, rebutting the argument requires showing only that it is possible that God and evil coexist. And that is what AP aims to show. [iv]

Recall that for a set of premises to be implicitly inconsistent, they must violate a logically necessary truth. The purportedly logically necessary truths added were premises (2) and (3). All AP has to show, therefore, is that these added premises are not necessarily true, therefore rebutting the argument. AP addresses (3) briefly, but spends the most of his time on (2). In addressing (3), AP notes that some goods entail evils. Consider, for example, the situation in which a person endures pain with patience and gratitude towards God. Such a good state of
affairs ‘contains’ the fact that evil exists. [v] It seems, then, at least possible (which is all that a defense requires) that (3) is false and thus is not logically necessary.

In arguing that (2) is not logically necessary, AP notes two things. First, some atheists have lumped in (2) with Voltaire’s sneering at the Leibnizian thesis that this is the ‘best of all possible worlds’. Surely, Voltaire judged, the world we see is not the best world there is. AP argues that Leibniz made a mistake, which he memorably coins Leibniz’s Lapse. The basic idea here is that, like numbers, there may simply be no logical maxima. Put differently, any world we imagine might be made better by adding more people, or more planets, or…etc. So, just as there is no highest number, there may be no best possible world.

Second, and most central to AP’s defense, is the idea that—granted a certain view of human freedom—it may not lay within God’s power to create just any world he wishes. To do AP’s defense justice, we have to introduce a handful of terms: libertarian freedom, possible worlds, feasible worlds [vi], and transworld depravity.

Turning first to libertarian freedom, AP argues that libertarian freedom can be cashed out as ‘the power of contrary choice’. AP notes that moral good (agents doing the morally right thing) seems to imply libertarian freedom—the ability to do good or to do evil. And this surely seems logically possible. [vii, viii] Next, consider what a possible world is.[ix] For our purposes, a possible world might be defined as a total, internally consistent description of how reality might be. [x] Marrying the concepts of libertarian freedom to possible worlds, AP discusses a possible world containing a fellow named Curley who is being offered a bribe. Given their contradictory natures, one and only one of the following two propositions is true:

Proposition #1 : Curley takes the bribe.

or

Proposition #2: Curley rejects the bribe.

Let’s call the possible world containing Proposition #1 PW1, and the possible world containing Proposition #2 PW2. Now, both PW1 and PW2 are possible worlds – they contain no contradictions. So God should be able to create either of the two possible worlds. [xi] But remember—Curley has the power of contrary choice. It is thus up to Curley which proposition is true, and therefore up to Curley which of the two possible worlds God can create.

Before proceeding further, let’s clarify what is going on here. In constructing the logical problem of evil, the atheologian is implicitly arguing that God cannot do the logically impossible. If the atheologian is not arguing that, then how on earth is the logical problem of evil supposed to get off the ground? What AP is pressing here is the argument that it is logically impossible to make someone freely do something. And this leads us to our next term: feasible worlds.

Return to the Curley example. Let’s say that Curley (unfortunately) chooses to take the bribe. What this means is that, although PW1 and PW2 are both possible worlds, only PW1 is a
feasible world. [xii] That is, although it is logically possible (there are no logical contradictions in supposing that PW2 could exist) that Curley not take the bribe, he will in fact do so. And it may be that Curley would commit at least one morally wrong act in any possible world in which he was placed. If so, then there is no feasible world in which God can place Curley and Curley not commit evil. This property AP has dubbed transworld depravity. Further, it may be the case that not only Curley but all persons (actual or possible) suffer from transworld depravity. If this is the case, then it is possible that God could not create a world with no moral evil in it. [xiii] Given the demonstration that these things are possible, AP judges that God and the existence of evil have been shown to be compatible.

Atheologist Rejoinder: God is Incompatible With the Amount of Moral Evil

However, the atheologist can regroup [xiv] and say (roughly) the following: fine, you’ve demonstrated that God and the existence of some evil are compatible. But surely God’s existence is incompatible with the amount of evil we see. That is, God could have created a world with a better balance of moral good over evil than this one. Once again, naturally enough, the distinction between possible and feasible worlds comes into play. In essence, Planting argues that, yes, there are possible worlds with a better balance of moral good over moral evil than the actual world. But it is possible that there are no feasible worlds with a better balance of moral good over moral evil.

Summary

God, Freedom, and Evil is a fascinating book, and one that anyone interested in the problem of evil should read. As far as I can tell, it does successfully undermine the logical problem of evil. On the one hand, that is gratifying for the theist—this was for centuries the ‘go to’ argument for the atheist. On the other hand, it is a testimony to how fallible human reasoning can be. Once one grasps the logic of the free will defense, it is a bit hard to see how atheistic thinkers put such confidence in the logical problem of evil.

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Footnotes

[i] Defusing the logical problem of evil is the core (but not the whole) of the book. AP also takes a very cursory look at three theistic proofs from natural theology (the cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments). AP judges that the cosmological and teleological arguments are failures, but that the ontological argument holds some promise. If the reader wants to think of the book summary as a scoreboard, it was Atheism (logical problem of evil) and Theism (the ontological argument) going toe-to-toe. The final score was Theism wins over Atheism, 1 to 0. (This is obviously tongue-in-cheek, and Plantinga’s vetting of the ontological argument is heavily caveated.)

[ii] As AP judges that the premises are neither explicitly nor formally contradictory, definitions of these terms can be relegated to a footnote. Explicitly contradictory would require that one of the premises is a straight forward denial of the other. That is, in addition to premises (1) and (2)
above there would be a premise like (3) God does not exist and/or (4) Evil does not exist. (3) explicitly contradicts (1), and (4) explicitly contradicts (2). Formally contradictory means that, although not explicitly stated, there is a contradiction ‘hiding’ in the stated premises which can be brought out by the rules of logic. AP gives the following example: (5) All men are mortal. (6) Socrates is a man. (7) Socrates is not mortal. This set of premises does not contain an explicit contradiction, but it does contain a formal one. Namely, (5) and (6) entail (8) Socrates is mortal, which contradicts (7).

[iii] AP’s term for someone putting forward arguments for atheism.

[iv] In technical terms, AP is offering a defense as opposed to a theodicy. A defense merely offers possible reasons for God’s permitting evil and suffering, whereas a theodicy goes further and specifies what God’s reasons for permitting evil and suffering are in fact. In one sense, as AP notes, a theodicy is going beyond what is required for rebutting the logical problem of evil.

[v] Although AP for a long time eschewed a theodicy and stuck to ‘defenses’, he has more recently adopted a ‘greater good’ theodicy (akin to the ‘greater good defense’ above, wherein a good ‘contains’ an evil). In this case, the greater good is the Atonement. See his “Supralapsarianism, or O Felix Culpa” in Christian Faith and the Problem of Evil.

[vi] ‘Feasible’ worlds is not a term that AP uses in God, Freedom, and Evil. To the best of my knowledge the term was coined by William Lane Craig, who adapted AP’s ‘free will defense’ in discussing soteriological problems. See http://www.reasonablefaith.org/no-other-name-a-middle-knowledge-perspective#ixzz35SdVZJDr

[vii] I would go much further and argue that libertarian freedom is not only possible but almost self-evidently actual. The discussion would take us too far afield, but I would urge the reader to take a look at the role that libertarian freedom plays not only in moral accountability but also rationality.

[viii] This type of freedom is sometimes termed ‘incompatibilism’. Libertarian freedom can thus be contrasted with compatibilist views of freedom, which are propounded both by many atheists and some theists (e.g., staunch Calvinists).

[ix] For a more technical discussion of possible worlds, see Location 388-461 of God, Freedom, and Evil (Kindle edition).

[x] The actual world is, quite obviously, a possible world.

[xi] I’m sliding over a subtle point involving the terms ‘creating’ and ‘actualizing’. It doesn’t affect anything of import here.

[xii] Another way of putting this point is to say that while all feasible worlds are possible, not all possible worlds are feasible. Giving human beings libertarian freedom may take certain possible worlds ‘off the table’. This should not give even the most orthodox theist
pause, as this is simply a self-imposed constraint. If God gave human beings libertarian freedom, then he chose to accept such a constraint.

[xiii] The atheologian can, of course, press an argument based on natural evils (e.g., earthquakes) rather than moral (e.g., rape) evils. AP extends the free will defense to embrace fallen angels and points out that they might be responsible for natural disasters. AP is well aware that this will strike skeptics as absurd, but he points out that as a person mounting a defense all that is needed is that it be possible (not even plausible, much less true).

[xiv] AP presses his argument even further and attempts to show that this approach also undercuts versions of the evidential argument from evil. (Where evil is taken as evidence against, but not a logical, irrefutable disproof of, theism.) I am unsure what to make of this, as atheist philosophers do tend to agree that Plantinga’s approach has defanged the logical problem of evil—and yet these atheists also tend to propound versions of the evidential argument.