

Unknowable worlds: solving the problem of natural evil

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Abstract: This paper draws attention to the way free choice participates in the occurrence of what is usually called natural evil. While earthquakes are natural phenomena, they injure only those who have chosen to live in places where they occur. But if God could not foresee these choices, then God could not foresee much about the amount and distribution of natural evil. Combining a libertarian notion of freedom with a denial of middle knowledge allows God to be much less implicated in the occurrence of natural evil. This gives some of the familiar theistic replies to the problem, such as Hick's soul-making theodicy, enhanced plausibility.

Alvin Plantinga concisely describes natural evil as 'suffering due to earthquake, disease and the like ... that can not be ascribed to the free actions of human beings'.¹ We might add to Plantinga's enumeration things like accidents, mistakes, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, and the potato blight of the 1840s in Ireland. The immensity of this suffering can be disturbing, even to convinced theists. Theism can respond to this concern by pointing out that suffering is logically necessary for the creation of certain moral goods such as courage and sympathy. But even if one concedes the success of this defence in principle, there remains the vast amount of natural evil that does not create opportunities for significant moral response. It is my aim to show that a considerable amount of this gratuitous suffering could not have been foreseen or prevented by God, and that consequently the usual theistic response is more plausible than it may presently seem.

Natural evil is contrasted to moral evil which is due to the free actions of human beings who as Plantinga puts it 'go wrong with respect to a morally significant action'. Plantinga does not claim great precision for this distinction, and I would like to clarify a relation between natural evil and the free actions of human beings which is not usually noticed. While natural evil is not due to bad moral choices, it often depends upon human choice in an incidental kind of way. For example, while a disease may not be created by anything that we do, it is often

transmitted by things we do or, in the case of so-called lifestyle diseases, induced and intensified by how we choose to live. Such actions often occur in ignorance of what we are doing to ourselves or others. Floods and earthquakes injure people who choose to live in certain places and accidents typically result from people deliberately trying to do things.

I am not suggesting that such choices are morally significant or that natural evil is really some kind of moral evil. But I want to note that the explanation of natural evil very often goes beyond the mechanical ‘operations of nature’, and includes the way in which free human choices and actions participate in producing natural evils. The solution for the problem of natural evil that I want to propose will depend on the fact that free human actions are very often causally involved in the production of natural evil, and that the system of nature with which we interact is not by itself in these cases a sufficient condition. Because of the crucial dependence on free will, I do not think that God can have knowledge of what these free actions are when choosing a natural system and the agents who will interact with it.

My proposed solution of the problem of natural evil has three elements. The first is an incompatibilist understanding of free action; the second is a rejection of middle knowledge, which is supposed to be knowledge of what free agents would do in various circumstances; and the third is an empirical claim about the causally necessary conditions of events which bring about the suffering generally regarded as natural evil. I will argue that, in any world including free agents, God is unable to foresee events whose necessary conditions include free actions. Even omniscience is limited to events due solely to natural necessity, and includes neither free actions nor events dependent on the occurrence of free actions.

The notion of incompatibilist freedom is familiar. Plantinga’s description will serve nicely:

If S is free with respect to a given action then ... no causal laws and antecedent conditions determine either that he will perform the action or that he will not. It is within his power at the time in question to perform the action and within his power to refrain.²

The second component of my defence is a rejection of ‘middle knowledge’, or knowledge of what a free agent would choose to do in various circumstances. If free choice is not causally determined or necessary in some other way, then knowledge of it is neither predictive nor a priori. Although this is a disputed point, I will assume that the indeterminacy of free choice precludes knowledge of what it will be, and that God creates persons without information concerning what free choices they will make.

The third element of my solution is the claim that there are, in fact, not so many instances of natural evil causally due to the operation of natural forces and laws alone without some contribution from the free choices and actions of human agents. Such contributions, for my purpose here, are not morally significant (otherwise I would be dealing with some part of the problem of moral evil). For

instance, while the operations of nature determine where earthquakes occur, they do not determine that earthquakes occur in densely populated areas. The decision to settle or move to an earthquake-prone location is typically a free choice of no moral significance. The Black Death (or Plague), intrinsically a natural phenomenon, was conveyed to Europe by the innocent activities of traders and merchants. Accidents and mistakes are typically the result of people making decisions and actions that are free. In short, the causal ancestry of much of what is viewed as natural evil is shot through with free actions whose non-occurrence would have prevented the destructive consequences.

Given the pervasiveness of free action in the production of natural evil, together with the impossibility of knowing what free actions would occur, God has much less knowledge of the instances of natural evil than is usually supposed. And there is consequently less that God can do to manage or limit the occurrence of natural evil than is usually supposed. Indeed, it would probably be impossible to design any system of nature which did not have the potential to injure unsuspecting humans. So, even if God had it in mind to create the kind of paradise that might have satisfied Hume, it is not clear that He would have been able to do so.

It will be noticed that the free actions involved in the causation of natural evil are performed in ignorance of their destructive effects, and so are not in that respect voluntary actions. It might seem reasonable to suppose that God might have moderated these effects by supplying agents with better information about what they were really doing without diminishing their freedom. Surely, if an airline mechanic knew about a crack in a jet turbine that would fail disastrously he could take steps to prevent that failure. But providence requires only that creatures have the capacity to learn the hidden perils of the world rather than an innate or revealed knowledge of such dangers. Of course the extent to which this capacity is exercised depends upon creaturely free choice, and so would be as unknowable as other facts determined by free choice.

With respect to worlds containing free agents, God's creative activity is limited to the natural systems of such worlds, and perhaps the character, personality, and psychological dispositions and such of these worlds' agents. While God can exercise control over these aspects of persons He created, their actions insofar as they are determined by such things are not free in the incompatibilist sense. Moreover, free agents are capable of altering through their free choices and actions whatever character they are initially given. God can decide to create the range of possible worlds determined by a system of nature and set of agents, but which becomes the actual world is determined only by the totality of the free actions of its agents. The identity of the actual world under these conditions is not discernible at the time of its (partial) creation. Consequently, the amount of suffering due to the conjunction of the operations of nature with free action is almost entirely unknowable.

My defence asserts two claims; first that God lacks useful knowledge of what the free agents that He creates would do in the various circumstances that might confront them, and second that even if God possessed such knowledge God is logically precluded from altering the free choices of His creatures. Thus, in two ways God is detached from responsibility for the suffering of natural evil; what Hick calls dysteleological evil is substantially neutralized as a problem for theism. The only issues of moral significance confronting the Creator would be first, whether to create free agents at all, and second whether to create a system of nature with the potential of causing human suffering. An affirmative answer to the first question would somewhat moot the second, in that the interplay of free actions and natural forces of almost any kind would evolve unpredictable events and circumstances with unknown effects on creaturely well being.

The ultimate question then is whether God is justified in creating free agents under conditions of such extensive uncertainty. John Mackie, in discussing the free-will defence, asks a question that is relevant here: Was the freedom to make unforeseeable choices so great a good that it outweighed the risk? He answers:

No concept of freedom has yet been proposed that both requires that free choice should be isolated from the antecedent nature (or essence) of the agent and from the possibility of divine foreknowledge, and at the same time shows this freedom to be, or to be necessary for, a good so great that it outweighs the certainty of all the unabsorbed evils that occur, or the risk of those that might occur.³

By 'unabsorbed evil', Mackie means instances of suffering which create opportunities for morally positive responses that are in fact not exploited by the subjects or observers of the suffering. And, as Mackie points out, the risk was even greater than might be apparent, since things could have gone even more badly than they have. However, I think that Mackie has evaded an answer to the real question by rejecting the incompatibilist account of freedom and allowing divine foreknowledge. Only under the assumptions that Mackie rejects can the question be raised because only those conditions create the uncertainty that constitutes the risk.

It may be that the actual world does contain more natural evil than some close possible worlds. But given what limited knowledge God had about the effect of combining systems of nature with sets of agents, there is no reason to suppose that God should have made different choices.

Notes

1. Alvin Plantinga *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), ch. 9.
2. *Ibid.*
3. J. L. Mackie *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 176.