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Plantinga's version of the free-will argument: the good and evil that free beings do

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Abstract: **According to Plantinga's version of the free-will argument (FWA), the existence of free beings in the world who, on the whole, do more good than evil is the greater moral good that cannot be secured by even an omnipotent God without allowing some evil and thereby shows the logical compatibility of God with evil. In this essay, I argue that there are good empirical and moral reasons, from the standpoint of one plausible conception of Christian ethics, to doubt that Plantinga's version of the FWA succeeds as a theodicy. In particular, I argue that, given this understanding of Christian ethics, it seems reasonable to think it false that free beings are doing more good than evil in the world. While there are surely possible worlds in which free beings do more good than evil, this material world seems clearly not one of those. Thus, while Plantinga's version might succeed as a defence against the logical problem of evil, it will neither rebut the evidential problem of evil nor, without more, ground a successful theodicy that reconciles God's existence with the evil that occurs in this world.**

Introduction

There are two versions of the free-will argument (FWA) that respond to the logical problem of evil. The first takes free will, by itself, to be a greater moral good that cannot be secured by God without allowing some evil, and thus purports to reconcile the existence of an all-perfect God with evil.[1] The second, developed by Alvin Plantinga, takes the existence of free beings in the world, whom, on the whole, do more good than evil, as being the greater moral good that cannot be secured by even an omnipotent God without allowing some evil, and thereby shows the logical compatibility of God with evil.

The logical problem of evil is, of course, easily rebutted by each of these two strategies either alone or supplemented by other claims, like the soul-making defence. The reason is that the claim that the logical problem of evil relies upon is

implausibly strong – namely, that a morally perfect God would not allow any evil at all. The FWAs show the compatibility of a morally perfect God with some evil, regardless of whether their foundational claims are true: surely a morally perfect God would allow whatever evil is necessary to secure a greater moral good.

While FWA has been traditionally directed at the logical problem of evil, some philosophers believe it can also ground a solution to the evidential problem of evil, which claims that, as an empirical matter, there is more evil in this world than can be explained as necessary for the achievement of a greater moral good.[2] This is a powerful claim that is not only the principal grounds for accepting agnosticism or atheism, but also causes great doubts about God's existence in even the most devout of believers from time to time. No conscientious Christian can look at all the terrible suffering and evil deeds in the world without sometimes wondering, with great pain, how or why a morally perfect God would allow so much suffering if He loves us so much.

This suggests that we want something more from these arguments, because construed as showing only that some evil is logically compatible with God's existence, they cannot alleviate the doubts that plague so many and affect the views of conscientious agnostics and atheists who might otherwise be believers, as well as believers. What we want these arguments to do is to serve as a theodicy that shows that all the evil in this world can be reconciled with the legitimate purposes of an all-loving God in a way that assuages the doubts even we believers sometimes feel, along with the pain that accompanies it.

In other words, we want the FWAs to show that God's allowing such evil is *actually* justified. Augustine, for example, argues for the classic version as theodicy, claiming that '[n]either the sins nor the misery are necessary to the perfection of the universe, but souls as such are necessary, which have the power to sin if they so will'.[3] Construed as a theodicy, Plantinga's claim is that a world with free beings who do more good than evil is, other things being equal, morally preferable to a world without such beings; and that the actual world happens to be one in which free beings do more good than evil. Accordingly, on this construction of Plantinga's version of the FWA, the evil in this world is justified in virtue of its being the only way to ensure the existence of free beings who do more good than evil. If this is correct, then FWA functions not only as defence, but also as one component of a theodicy that shows that what evil there is in this world is compatible with God's existence. If successful *qua* theodicy, FWA would rebut both the logical and evidential problems of evil.

In this essay, I argue that there are good empirical and moral reasons, from the standpoint of one plausible conception of a Christian ethics that is far more demanding than ordinary secular moral intuitions, to doubt that Plantinga's version of the FWA succeeds as a theodicy – at least not one that will satisfy the doubts of Christians who accept the conception of Christian ethics I describe. In particular, I argue that, given this understanding of Christian ethics, it seems

reasonable to think it false that free beings are doing more good than evil in the world. While there are surely possible worlds in which free beings do more good than evil (heaven is surely one such), this material world seems clearly not to be one of those. Thus, while Plantinga's version might succeed as a defence against the logical problem of evil, it will neither rebut the evidential problem of evil nor, without more, ground a successful theodicy that reconciles God's existence with the evil that occurs *in this world*.

At the outset, I need to emphasize here that my argument is grounded in a particular, and contestable, interpretation of what Christian ethics requires of us. I happen to think that this interpretation is correct, and it is certainly accepted by many Christians and would have to be regarded as at least prima facie plausible by all; however, I cannot do more here than sketch a defence of this interpretation. A Christian with a less demanding interpretation of Christian ethics will not be persuaded by the line of reasoning I advance against Plantinga. But even those readers, as well as thoughtful agnostics and atheists, should find value in the idea, certainly established by my argument, that whether Plantinga's FWA succeeds depends on a contested issue of what, according to scripture, our ethical obligations are to other human beings. My argument should be of interest to both believers and non-believers – those who share the ethical commitments argued for below, as well as those who do not.

Plantinga's version of the FWA

FWA is based on the plausible claim that an all-perfect God could be willing to allow some evil if necessary to achieve a greater moral good; after all, a morally perfect God would want to create, if not the morally best of possible universes, one that is morally worthwhile. Thus, if it could be true that God cannot secure some more important moral value without allowing some evil, then God could be justified in allowing such evil, which is hence logically consistent with God's moral perfection. Accordingly, the occurrence of evil *per se* is not problematic for classical theism; what would be problematic for classical theism is the occurrence of evil that *could not* be justifiably allowed by an all-perfect God (i.e. evil that is not justified at any possible world as necessary to secure a greater moral good).

FWA reconciles the existence of evil with a morally perfect God by pointing to the good things that free beings in the world do that outweigh the evil. As Alvin Plantinga puts it:

> *A world containing creatures who are significantly free* (*and freely perform more good than evil actions*) *is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all*. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't *cause* or *determine* them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right *freely*. To create creatures capable of *moral good*, therefore,

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> He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so … . The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.[4]

Although the clause that free beings perform more good than evil actions appears in parentheses as if an afterthought, the occurrence of that clause, parenthetical or not, suggests that Plantinga does not think, in contrast to the more common version of FWA, that the very existence of free beings is, by itself, a greater moral good that would justify God in allowing evil. Indeed, the sentences following the italicized sentence seem principally concerned with what free beings *do*, and suggest that the judgment that free beings do more good than evil is critical to the argument. While Plantinga might believe, along with proponents of the more common version of FWA, that the existence of free beings by itself is a morally valuable feature of the world, it is evident that this value by itself is not enough to address the problems of evil. A world in which free beings do nothing but evil things does not appear to be sufficient, on Plantinga's view, to solve the evidentiary problem of evil; on Plantinga's view, it must be true that these free beings do more good than evil. Only if free beings are doing more good than evil in this world can God's existence be reconciled with the evil in this world.[5]

At the outset, there is an ambiguity that must be addressed and resolved. First, one could construe Plantinga's thesis (construed as theodicy) as saying no more than that all the evil in our world can be reconciled with an all-loving morally perfect God if there is, at least, one free being, among the many existing free beings, who does more good than evil. Second, one could construe Plantinga's thesis as making the stronger claim that all the evil in our world can be reconciled with an all-loving morally perfect God if, taking into account all the free beings who exist, have existed, and will exist, they wind up doing more good than evil.

The first construction must be rejected for two reasons. First, it is trivially satisfied by the existence of Jesus, who was fully human and without sin; indeed, the three divine persons of the triune God satisfy this condition in their mutually loving interaction. There are two problems here. To begin, the existence of the three divine beings who freely do more good than evil is enough to show that this is not a greater good that can be secured only by creating people who do evil. Moreover, the existence of Jesus alone would justify evil in worlds much worse than ours in which everyone else continuously did evil – and that simply cannot be right from the standpoint of moral intuitions. From that standpoint, if God knows that such a world will be actualized if He creates the world, He should, on my view, clearly refrain from creating that world. Whether the evil is the result of free choice or not, that simply results in a world of never-ending suffering as everyone will ultimately find themselves in hell – and it is hard to make sense of the idea that a loving God would bring about a state of affairs like that. It seems

clear that Plantinga's thesis has to be construed as claiming that taking the deeds of all free beings together, free beings do more good than evil in the world, and it is this fact about us that explains why an all-loving God would bring about this world, knowing there would be so much suffering. On balance, the idea is that the good in the world will outweigh the evil in the world.

There is a second ambiguity here that must be addressed and eliminated centring on the question of whether we should consider the good and evil done by free beings in this world and *in the afterlife*. I think the answer to this question has to be 'No' for the following reason. The problem of evil concerns what is done in this life and would seem to require an answer that justifies the evil done in this life with some greater moral good that accrues from what is done in this life. If free beings are doing more good than evil in this life, then that is a reason to think that even a morally perfect God would allow so much evil because it is counterbalanced by the good done in this world. Once that is established, it seems to be a good reason to create the world with its rewards and punishments in the hereinafter – and that, after all, is what is needed. For my part, as someone who was an agnostic for much of my life, taking into account the good and evil that might be done in the afterlife would have struck me when I was an agnostic as utterly irrelevant, and continues to seem that way to me even as a serious Christian. What happens in the afterlife is not at all relevant with respect to justifying the suffering done here – even if universalism turned out to be true. God could, after all, set up the world quite differently to achieve a universalist outcome.

In what follows, I argue that it is highly questionable that free beings are *currently* doing more good than evil in this world. On a plausible understanding of what the foundational Christian ethical principles *require* of us as a minimum standard of not doing wrong, the claim that free beings in this world are currently doing more good than evil seems pretty clearly false because of the very high standard that Christian ethics establishes. Of course, I am assuming that whether or not free beings do more evil than good must be evaluated from the standpoint of Christian morality. Certainly, a Christian must do so, as a Christian must believe that our moral commitments are the objectively correct ones. It would not make sense to determine whether free beings do more good than evil according to a less demanding secular view if that view is not accepted as correct.

Christian theodicists are not, of course, the only theodicists. In addition, there are Jewish and Muslim theodicies, and I assume that Judaism and Islam have their own distinctive conception of the correct ethical principles; Jewish and Muslim theodicists, unlike Christian theodicists, would have to determine whether free beings do more good than evil in this life from the standpoint of their own distinctive ethical commitments, but this analysis (like that which follows) must be made with those commitments in mind. I am, however, concerned with whether Plantinga's view can work as a Christian theodicy, and do not address the question of whether free beings do more good than evil under the

ethical principles of other theistic religions. Thus, the reader should look for an argument that is grounded in exclusively Christian ethical commitments.

Accordingly, I attempt to show that, from the standpoint of (again, one plausible, but contested conception of) Christian ethics, free beings in this world seem currently to be doing more evil than good. If this conception of Christian ethics and my interpretation of Plantinga's version of FWA are correct, then the latter fails as a theodicy that would work for Christians.

Some initial difficulties in addressing the issue

Although I will argue that it is implausible to think that free beings in this world do more good than evil, once we have identified the appropriate ethical standard, it is worth noting some difficulties involved in resolving this issue. This claim might seem a simple one to get a handle on, but it is not. There are a number of difficulties that might seem at the very outset to pose insuperable difficulties.

Difficulties addressing the empirical issues

One might initially be tempted to think that the issue is not so difficult after all. The question of what acts are performed in this world is an empirical one, and hence subject to empirical investigation using the scientific tools that sociologists and other social scientists have employed to great success. Indeed, it is true that we have some reliable empirical information about certain kinds of bad and good acts. For example, we certainly have a good deal of information, at least in the US, about how many crimes have been reported and what kinds of crimes they are. It is also true that we have some reliable information about how much the US government and its citizens contribute to alleviating poverty. If we had such information about every country, one might think that we would have sufficient information to begin to address this issue.

This line of reasoning underestimates the difficulties. First, it is doubtful that all other countries have as detailed information about such matters as the US does. Less affluent nations simply lack the resources to devote to keeping such statistics. Second, these statistics purport to give us only limited information that is relevant to assessing the issue. The question of how many crimes are reported is a distinct, though obviously related, question from that of how many bad acts are performed. Many crimes go unreported; and many bad acts, such as ordinary lying, are not crimes. And this does not at all take into account how many mental sins, such as acts of lust or acts of making uncharitable judgments about people, are committed. Similarly, statistics about charitable donations of money omit many other acts of kindness, such as donating time to a cause, or even lending a helping hand to someone who is struggling in attempting to carry some heavy weight.

Third, whatever statistics we have would provide information only about those periods during which such statistics were collected and stored. It is doubtful that we could go back more than 100 years and get reliable statistics on such matters even in the US. The problem is that the claim that free beings do more good than evil is, as I interpret it here, a claim that includes the deeds performed from the very beginning of our existence to the present and, even more problematically, from the present until the very end of our existence. Obviously, we have no reliable statistics for acts yet to be performed.

We simply cannot even begin to address the empirical issues one would have to resolve in order to determine that Plantinga's FWA can work as a theodicy. Our empirical statistics provide only a partial portrait of a specific time period; and purport to tell us nothing at all about the distant past and the future. The inquiry would seem doomed – quite frankly, a problem for both Plantinga and his would-be critics.

Meta-ethical issues

But even if we could resolve *all* of the empirical issues, we should still have a second difficulty. It is not clear how one would go about weighing the good acts against the bad to see whether free beings do more good than evil in the world.

There are a number of possibilities but all seem problematic. First, we could adopt a very simple methodology of holding that it is sufficient simply to count the good and bad acts, and conclude that free beings do more good than evil if and only if the number of good acts exceeds the number of evil acts. Unfortunately, this fails to take into account that some good acts are better than others and some bad acts are worse than others. The idea that pausing a moment to give a tourist directions to some tourist attraction cancels out a murder is clearly problematic. One would think that good deeds and evil deeds also have a dimension of weight that has to be considered in addressing the issue of whether free beings do more good than evil.

Second, it is simply not clear how to weigh good acts against bad acts. It would seem that, at least in some cases, we can easily determine which of two bad acts is worse and which of two good acts is better. For example, it seems clear that murder is worse than stealing and stealing is worse than lying (in most cases); and it seems clear that giving $20,000 to charity is better than giving $2,000. But even here there are complicating factors. It is not obviously true that, say, Bill Gates giving a total of $20,000 to charity over the course of a year is better than a minimum-wage earner giving a total of $2,000 over the course of a year, since the latter amounts to about 20 per cent of her income while the former contribution is nearly negligible. Nor is it obviously true, looking at bad acts, that assisted suicide is worse than, say, Kenneth Lay's cheating Enron's investors out of their life savings. As far as I can tell, the difficulties of trying to

counterbalance good deeds and bad deeds, as well as of determining which of two acts is better, or which of two bad acts is worse, are insurmountably difficult in many cases.

And this seems true even if one adopts a comparatively straightforward account of the appropriate metric. Assuming these acts are to be assessed and weighed solely in terms of their effects on human happiness, there are great difficulties in making these assessments. The consequences of actions are simply not readily identifiable for a number of reasons. Some might extend indefinitely into the future; surely, for example, the effects of slavery in the US are still being felt today, but there is no way of knowing how long they will be felt or what impact they have, even now, on human happiness. Moreover, it is difficult to determine what would even count as an effect of an act. For example, should we count the Holocaust as an effect of the act of sexual congress that brought Hitler into existence?

Indeed, it might be, as some theorists suspect, that certain moral values are simply incommensurable. The idea here is that there simply is no single measure by which the moral quality of acts can be determined and weighed. On this view, there might be good acts of which we simply cannot say either that one is better than the other or that they are equally good. If there are incommensurable values, then it would appear that there is no way to determine whether Plantinga's FWA would work as a theodicy.

Choosing an ethical theory

Assuming moral values are commensurable, the final concern involves the choice of an appropriate ethical theory for identifying and weighing good and bad acts. There are many ethical theories competing in the philosophical marketplace these days, and all have their supporters and detractors, because all have merits and demerits from the standpoint of our ordinary moral intuitions from which they are commonly assessed. There are, for example, a variety of general approaches to choose from: consequentialism, deontology, and contractarianism. Within any category of approach, there are different theories of morality. Consequentialism includes ethical egoism, act utilitarianism, and possibly rule utilitarianism. Likewise, there are a variety of different deontological theories, including Kant's and a number of theories that have been deeply influenced by Kant, and are fairly, though loosely, characterized as Kantian in spirit.

Christian ethics: the two great commandments

As it turns out, choosing the appropriate ethical theory is easy, and, as we will see, alleviates the other difficulties discussed above. Plantinga is a Christian; and his version of the FWA, construed as a theodicy, purports to give a distinctively Christian answer to the question of why an all-perfect God would allow

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so much evil. Accordingly, the appropriate ethical theory for addressing the issue of whether free beings in this world do more good than evil is the one that is correct from the standpoint of Christianity – namely, the ethical principles identified in scripture as being foundational to Christianity.

At this point, it would be helpful to assess a line of reasoning that might strike the reader as both plausible and avoiding the difficulties described above. It might be tempting to see bad choices as sporadic disruptions in a world in which people are otherwise behaving well. On this line of reasoning, people frequently do bad things – e.g. in 2005, there were 16,692 murders in the United States,[6] and a total of 1,390,695 violent crimes – but, even taking into account all the other physical and mental wrongs – like theft, lying, lusting, making bad judgments, etc. – bad acts are the exception and not the rule. Most people in the US and other parts of the world live quiet decent lives pursuing projects that give their lives meaning and making a living without hurting other people. They go to schools, perhaps universities, settle down, have careers, get married, have and love their children, and go to church on Sundays. They work hard and save their money, but find ways to have fun: socializing with friends, going to restaurants, movies, and shows – and sometimes just cocooning at home with family. On this not implausible picture, the norm is the person described above quietly leading a good life, occasionally committing bad acts.

The problem with the above reasoning, as stated, is that it counts as bad only acts that violate obligations to *refrain* from certain acts: killing, violent acts, stealing, lying, lusting, and making bad judgments all violate *negative* obligations that require us to refrain from certain acts. This line of reasoning is plausible only if it is true, as far too many people believe, that the only moral obligations we have are *negative* in the sense that they require us only to refrain from committing certain acts – and do not provide positive moral obligations that *require* that we sometimes perform affirmative acts, usually involving significant sacrifices, to help others in need. On this view, helping the poor is morally optional and praiseworthy as being beyond the call of duty – no matter how much wealth one has at one's disposal. Indeed, as a conceptual matter, that is why helping others is thought to be 'charitable' – the term being construed as entailing, by definition, that the act is not obligatory.

Although the view that we have no positive moral obligations is unfortunately common – even sometimes among Christians unfamiliar with Scripture – it is pretty clearly false from a Christian standpoint. Indeed, even the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament, if taken to exhaust our moral obligations, provide such a code. According to these Commandments (KJV: Exodus, 20):

> (1) Thou shalt have no other gods before me.
> (2) Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for

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> I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.
> (3) Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain;
> (4) Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it;
> (5) Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee;
> (6) Thou shalt not kill.
> (7) Thou shalt not commit adultery.
> (8) Thou shalt not steal.
> (9) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour; and
> (10) Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

It is worth noting that all but two of the commandments state negative obligations, and the ones that state positive obligations, with the exception of the commandment to worship God as conceived by Christianity, are comparatively minor. In particular, Commandment 5 obliges us to honour our parents, which presumably entails that we do more than just refrain from acts that would dishonour them, but perform positive acts that express our love and respect for them. Perhaps most notably, there is no obligation whatsoever stated here to alleviate suffering from disease, poverty, ostracism, ridicule, or wrongful acts of violence – although Commandment 2 seems to imply a obligation to show mercy to others who believe.

Even if we assume that most people are complying with their negative obligations and honouring their mothers and fathers, there are a couple of problems for Plantinga's claim that we are doing more good than evil – and this is not only a problem for the commandments listed above, but the two great 'commandments' Jesus says are the foundations for the moral law. First, there are only two billion Christians in the world, out of a population of more than six billion people; on the traditional view, only two of six billion people are honouring their obligation to worship God as conceived by Christianity. If failure to worship the true God constitutes an evil, then there is more evil being done by free beings, relative to Commandment 1, than good – much more, assuming with many Christians that people of other faiths are not worshipping the triune God of Christianity. And this is a continuous evil, as God must be uppermost in our minds all the time as, according to traditional Christian views, we should seek in all we do, first and foremost, to glorify God and do God's will.

Second, as a conceptual matter, not violating an obligation only entails that one is not committing a wrong; it does not entail that one is doing good. Satisfying an

obligation merits neither praise nor esteem; obligations set the minimum standard of behaviour one is expected to meet. This is why blame, censure, and punishment are proper responses when people fail to meet their obligations and cannot excuse or justify such failures; praise is not a proper response when people meet their obligations, other things being equal. One does not do something good when one refrains from murder, theft, rape, property crime, dishonesty, lust, or making bad judgments about other people; one simply meets one's minimum obligations. So even if the above line of reasoning were correct in claiming that bad acts are the exception and not the rule, it would not follow that all the other acts were good. Indeed, the quiet decent lives, according to the argument above, were described in terms of acts that do not involve doing morally good things. Pursuing careers, educations, and active social lives, as well as going to restaurants, shows and concerts, are surely morally permissible, but none of these constitutes morally good acts.

To do good requires more – and a quick look at a few facts about the distribution of material benefits and burdens suggests that, albeit does not prove that, although it is surely true that much good is being done, much less good is *currently* being done to justify the claim, presupposed by Plantinga's version of the FWA, that free beings are doing more good than evil. A billion people in the world live on less than $1 per day in absolute – or life-threatening – poverty.[7] Three billion people live on less than $2 per day; 1.1 billion people lack consistent access to clean drinking water; 1 billion, out of approximately 2.2 billion children worldwide, live in poverty. Of these, 25,000 to 30,000 children die *every day* for reasons related to poverty; 15 million children die of malnutrition every year; 2.2 million children die each year because they are not properly immunized; 15 million children are orphaned due to HIV/AIDS; and millions of children suffer irreversible brain damage from protein deficiency. It seems reasonable to conclude that there is a great deal of good that is not being done here – even if there are many people, like Mother Teresa, who have devoted their lives to alleviating suffering.

It is utterly implausible to think that such suffering is not being alleviated because we lack the ability.[8] The Gross Domestic Product of the US in 2005 was over $12.36 trillion. Average per capita income among US citizens in that year was over $40,000. In 2005, individual charitable donations amounted to approximately 1.6 per cent of GDP.[9] US government foreign aid expenditures for 2004 amounted to 0.2 per cent of the $2.3 trillion federal budget – that is, two-tenths of 1 per cent![10] We in the US could easily do much more, but we are largely concerned with achieving an increasingly higher standard of living – driving bigger cars, engaging in more conspicuous consumption, and other activities that actually have the effect of exacerbating the suffering in the world because of the pollution they cause.

Factor in the wealth of all the world's affluent nations, and the continuing existence of all this suffering becomes even harder to understand. The GDP of the

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European Union in 2007 was over $15 trillion, while the GDP in the US for that year was over $13 trillion.[11] The GDP for all of Africa in 2006 was just over $2.5 trillion.[12] The poorest 40 per cent of the world's people have 5 per cent of the world's wealth; the richest 20 per cent have 75 per cent of the world's wealth. It should be clear that the affluent world ignores, on a continuing basis, the numerous opportunities to do good here.

Still, relying on the argument that attempts to quantify how many people are being affected by bad choices per second, one might think that it is still the case that free beings are doing more good than evil – not because they are doing so much good but because they are doing so little evil; however, that reasoning is fallacious. To defend that claim, one must say something about the amount of good being done *and* the amount of bad. Even if we assume that the amount of bad being done is aberrational (an assumption that strikes me as implausible in our increasingly fear- and hunger-ridden world), the amount of bad will still exceed the good if people are doing little to no good deeds. To point to those instances in which people go to work and get through the day without killing, stealing, raping, assaulting others, committing tortuous acts, and without telling more than a few lies tells us nothing about how much good is being done.

But there is more trouble here for this line of argument. From the standpoint of Christian ethics, it can be plausibly argued that failure to help alleviate suffering is not just failure to perform a good act; it is commission of a wrong. In the New Testament, Jesus teaches that all of morality rests on two fundamental principles:

> When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets (Matthew, 22.34–40).

Now this much about these verses is uncontroversial. First, these are 'commandments' that ground the 'law' and hence state moral obligations. Second, these commandments constitute, so to speak, Christianity's first or foundational principles for all other moral laws or principles, and are the ultimate ground for all of our moral judgments. There might be Christians who see these as somehow metaphorical for some more Kantian-like first principle, but these Christians will clearly fall outside the mainstream traditional view – and, for what it is worth, probably do not include Plantinga himself.

Of course, this does not tell us much about the content of these verses. Obviously, these verses must be interpreted to be understood, and biblical interpretation is a notoriously difficult and contentious matter. I cannot claim, as I have noted above, that the interpretation on which my argument is grounded is

universally accepted; there are surely dissenters. However, this much I think I can affirm with confidence: no-one can plausibly deny the prima facie plausibility and potential viability of the interpretation I present and defend (all-too-briefly) below.

So let us begin with my interpretation of the first of these foundational laws to see what it might tell us about whether Plantinga's version of the FWA succeeds as a theodicy. The first requires that we love God with our all hearts, souls, and minds. Since we do not have direct volitional control over whom we feel the joyous emotional state usually picked out by 'love', it is probably best to construe 'love' as requiring continual worship of God as manifested through our devoting our live to doing God's will, and subordinating our interests to those of God. Again, on the traditional exclusivist view, it seems that more evil is being done than good, since only one-third of the world's population claim to be Christians who worship the triune God.

The second of the two commandments above requires that we love our neighbours as we love ourselves. It seems counterintuitive to interpret 'love' as the joyous emotional state we feel for our partners, friends, and family because we do not have direct volitional control over this emotional state, and cannot simply will it for anyone, but we also do not feel this emotion for ourselves. If I ever feel for my image in a mirror what I feel for my two nieces when I see them, I am clearly in need of spiritual and psychological counselling. Surely, there are few more certain paths to hell than this kind of narcissism. On my view, this commandment is properly construed as requiring that we treat the interests of other people as important as our own – something we do have volitional control over.

If this is the correct interpretation, then living even the quiet decent life described above becomes morally problematic. When I spend $30 on two tickets to a movie and popcorn instead of giving it to a charity that can use that money to keep a child who is in absolute poverty alive for a month, I am clearly violating that principle. After all, my interest is in nothing more important than amusement; the child's is in her life. The person who quietly pursues her own professional advancement and amusement without breaching negative obligations but without devoting any help to others is living a life that, on the whole, does not satisfy the second of the two great foundational laws.

But the argument does not turn on my interpretation of the second commandment Jesus describes. However one interprets this law, it should be clear that, when I spend $30 on a shirt that I do not need instead using that sum to keep a child alive for a month, I am not loving that child as I love myself; the child's life is at stake and outweighs the interest in amusement which I have at stake. The money that affluent people spend on mere amusement that could be used to save lives is not just a missed opportunity to do good; it violates an obligation and constitutes an evil.

While there are surely alternative plausible interpretations of the second law, it is difficult to imagine that they could deny that we have a substantial obligation to help alleviate suffering. It might not require that we do so whenever we can do so without sacrificing something of *comparable* worth, as is famously argued by utilitarian Peter Singer; but it surely requires doing so when we can without sacrificing something of morally significant worth – and it is hard to imagine that, in most cases, a $30 shirt could count as having morally significant worth when balanced against the life of a child.

Indeed, that Jesus' concern for the poor is secondary only to his concern that we devote our lives to God should be obvious to anyone who has read the Gospels even quickly. Consider, for example, Matthew, 25.33–47:

> And He shall set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on His right hand, 'Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I hungered, and ye gave Me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took Me in; naked, and ye clothed Me; I was sick, and ye visited Me; I was in prison, and ye came unto Me.' Then shall the righteous answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when saw we Thee hungering and fed Thee, or thirsty and gave Thee drink? When saw we Thee a stranger and took Thee in, or naked and clothed Thee? Or when saw we Thee sick, or in prison, and came unto Thee?' And the King shall answer and say unto them, 'Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me.' Then shall He say also unto them on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I hungered, and ye gave Me no meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave Me no drink; I was a stranger, and ye took Me not in; naked, and ye clothed Me prison, and ye visited Me not.' Then shall they also answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when saw we Thee hungering or athirst or a stranger, or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister unto Thee?' Then shall He answer them, saying, 'Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me.'

While I am tempted to argue that our response to suffering is partly constitutive of a saving personal relationship with Jesus, this would require much more argument than can be given here. What should not require much interpretive argument regarding these verses read against the context of the second commandment: *Helping the poor, suffering, prisoners, elderly, ostracized, disposed, and oppressed* (*to some extent that I cannot specify in detail here*) *is an obligation.* Failure to meet this obligation is a wrong and hence an evil.

That affluent persons have positive obligations to help the absolutely poor (i.e. people in life-threatening poverty) is also easy to see from a secular perspective. Peter Singer persuasively argues that people have a duty to make some sacrifices to save the lives of others. I have taught his famous example of the drowning infant to at least 1,000 undergraduates in a public university, and fewer than 1 per cent of students believe that it would be permissible for me to let an infant drown in a shallow pond when all I need to do to save her life is simply tip her over on her back and call 911. Students react so vehemently to even the

thought that I might let a child die in those circumstances that I sometimes have to remind them that it is a philosophical thought-experiment, contrived to refute the view that we have no positive obligations to help the poor, and that I would help an infant in such circumstances without hesitating. When I point out that the $30 they spend on a movie can sustain a child's life for a month they are committing the same wrong, they have a second emotionally charged reaction – about how selfish their own behaviour is. Although they usually know about these programmes, Singer's example and ensuing discussion help them to see the potential moral implications of their own behaviour that they had not noticed before.

There is an irony here. Singer attempts to infer from the common response to the infant example, largely based on his own utilitarianism, a strong principle that defines the obligation to help others. On his view, we have an obligation to help others whenever we can do so without sacrificing something of *comparable* significance; on this principle, one might be obliged to risk physical injury to save the life of another. But the example itself supports a weaker principle: we have an obligation to help others when we can do so without sacrificing something of any real significance. After all, one merely has to take a few seconds to call 911 and put the infant on her back to save her life – this does not involve the sort of sacrifice that would justify the inference that Singer's utilitarianism seems to license.

But if 'love your neighbours as you love yourselves' is properly construed, as I have suggested, as 'treat the interests of others as important as your own', then Christian ethics implies the stronger principle to which Singer's utilitarianism logically commits him – even if his example and analysis does not imply it. The reason is that, on my interpretation of the second commandment, the second commandment has this in common with utilitarianism: it will not allow us to treat our own interests as more important than those of others simply because they are our own. Perhaps such a demanding principle might be considered a *reductio* of my interpretation – although it seems strange for a Christian to object to an ethical principle on the ground that it is too demanding, given that so much of what Jesus asks of us seems so demanding.

But it is clear that, even we interpret the second commandment as expressing a weaker principle than utilitarian Singer believes correctly defines the contours of the obligation to help the poor, every time we make a *frivolous* purchase with discretionary income, we are violating an obligation and committing a grave wrong. I do not love my dying neighbour as I do myself when I can save her life with a small commitment of cash that I opt to spend on my own amusement. By that admittedly demanding standard, it is not unreasonable to think that we in the affluent world are fairly characterized as doing more bad than good from the standpoint of Christian ethics.

The problem arises here because the discretionary income being used to satisfy mere wants (and, in many cases, wants that would not even exist without the sophisticated methods of the advertising industry and are hence fairly

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characterized from a moral point of view as 'frivolous') could be used to save the lives of the millions of people who die from poverty. Under no plausible interpretation of 'love your neighbour as you love yourself' could a person who spends money to satisfy mere wants, knowing that it could save the lives of other people, be characterized as loving the latter persons as much as she loves herself. Sadly, too many of us in the developed world simply do not care enough for God's less fortunate children. Such neglect is morally wrong, and hence an evil that is done.

Perhaps one can hold out hope that these statistics do not tell the whole story and that it remains true that free beings do more good than evil, until one realizes what would have to be true according to our ethics for this claim to be true. If loving our neighbours as we love ourselves defines our obligations towards other people, then failure to meet that highly demanding standard is wrong. Every time we fail to help someone in need, when it would cost us less to expend the energy than the good that would accrue to the recipient (something I hypothesize we do more often than not), then we have done wrong and done something that counts as evil. I hypothesize, and this is an empirical claim that would need an empirical argument to support it adequately, that we rarely satisfy this standard and hence have done a great deal of evil – beyond the obvious evil that occurs when we commit genocide, murder, and other acts that oppress and stigmatize others.

To do good, we have to meet a much higher standard. If loving your neighbour as you love yourself sets the minimum standard, then to do good we must love our neighbours more than we love ourselves. That is, on my interpretation, we must treat the interests of others as more important than our own, a standard that would sometimes require us to sacrifice our own more important interests to satisfy the less important interests of other people. This is, of course, an empirical hypothesis, but I doubt that anyone can seriously think that free beings have done this more frequently than their failures to satisfy the 'great commandments'.

And to the reader tempted to respond that such an ethical standard cannot be true, I would simply gesture in the direction of the many scriptural passages which, for example, inform us of the sacrifices Jesus wants us to make – many of which call upon us to give up our materially comfortable lives to gain our spiritual lives. Consider, for example, a verse in which Jesus explains how to achieve perfection – a perfection which clearly goes beyond merely satisfying the standards that define our obligations. To a rich man who keeps the Ten Commandments and wants to know what more he needs to do to be saved, Jesus replies, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me' (Matthew, 19.21). Similar verses teach Christians to strive for the higher good by giving up all their material possessions. No-one, of course, can achieve perfection, so it is doubtful that Jesus intends to explain our obligations to us here; the use of 'perfection' indicates that

he is describing the ideal – i.e. what we must do to go beyond satisfying even the demanding obligations defined by the two great commandments.

These are, in one sense, demoralizing verses that seem to ask so much that we desperately want to believe that they cannot mean what they say. But, as far as I can tell, Jesus' statements about ethics and our positive obligations to help others clearly imply that the standard for doing good is so much more demanding than is conceived of by ordinary secular conceptions of what ethics minimally require that I can see no other plausible interpretation.

Although it seems intuitively obvious, given what most of us know about the world and its history, that this demanding standard for good has rarely been met,[13] and certainly not frequently enough to conclude that free beings do more good than evil (at least from the standpoint of Christianity), I think it is fair to say that, at the very least, I have shifted the burden of persuasion back to Plantinga, or to someone who would defend his argument. He would need to show either that I have mischaracterized our obligations from the standpoint of Christian ethics, or even provide a prima facie plausible gesture that we have exceeded them more often than we have failed to meet them – which is what is needed to show that free beings do more good than evil in this world.

There is surely a logically possible world in which free beings do more good than evil, and that is enough to rebut the logical problem of evil; however, it is not enough to provide a theodicy that enables us to justify the existence of evil and suffering in the actual world. It is true, of course, that once God creates free beings it is up to them to determine which logically possible world is the actual one; God simply does not have that much control over which world is actualized once He creates free beings. And if God cannot choose which possible world is actualized by free beings without compromising their free will, He surely knows which logically possible world will be actualized if He knows what choices we will make. If, as seems plausible, He knows that we actualize a world where free beings do more bad than good, then He is not justified, on Plantinga's version of the FWA, in creating this world. And if He does not know because He cannot predict the free choices of free beings, He can surely see the probabilities, and is not justified in creating the world because the probabilities that a world in which free beings do more good than evil are comparatively small. If my interpretation of the two great commandments (or even a somewhat weaker interpretation) is correct, then a successful theodicy must be sought elsewhere.

Although somewhat counterintuitive, the conclusion that free beings do more bad than good in this world should not surprise us. It is central to the Christian worldview that this is a thoroughly fallen world which many conservative Christians, like Plantinga, accept. All of us, even those who live in Christian faith, remain incorrigible, if repentant, sinners unable to conquer our fallenness despite our best efforts; this is, of course, why regular prayers for forgiveness are needed to sustain a proper relationship with God. Given the centrality of this view

of humanity to a worldview endorsed by so many Christians, including Plantinga, I am tempted to think it is almost obvious that Plantinga's version of the FWA could not succeed. Fallen, incorrigible sinners, try as we might to reform and repent, will inevitably fail in our attempt to follow the path of Christ and do his will as expressed in the first and second laws – much less go beyond these two standards of what we are *obliged* to do in order to do something fairly characterized as not merely 'not wrong' but 'morally good'. This, of course, does not mean that salvation is beyond our reach: on the traditional view, (1) salvation is a matter of grace; and (2) sin, after all, is forgiven if sincerely asked for by a genuinely repentant Christian. So the failure of perhaps even committed Christians to do more good than evil should not be thought of as inconsistent with their salvation; however, the doctrine of the Fall does suggest that the prospects for a FWA of the kind Plantinga defends are quite dim. The kind of move that Plantinga wants to make in his version of the FWA seems almost precluded by mainstream Christian theology.

Moreover, the analysis offered above of what Christian ethics requires helps to explain the sense in which we are so thoroughly fallen. Although taken for granted by people inculcated in the faith, the doctrine that we are incorrigibly fallen seems to make little sense to intuitions unconditioned by a history of Christian faith. It is sometimes explained in terms of our rejecting God in order to be God, which would surely be very bad if that were a universal human sentiment, but I think that this is an utterly uncharitable reading of a very natural desire that seems ethically reasonable: the relevant desire is not to be God, but rather to exercise autonomy over our lives. That desire simply cannot be what makes us incorrigibly fallen and deserving of hell because it is morally appropriate that we value autonomy. What this analysis suggests is that it is the fact that we are inherently self-interested and always find it exceedingly difficult to overcome our self-interestedness that makes us fallen.

It is true that we develop attachments to other people, but many of these are ultimately self-regarding to some extent; we choose friends who amuse us, fall in love with people who arouse in us sexual desire, and so on. Even when we exhibit genuinely altruistic concern for, say, children, it is the exception and not the rule. Christian ethics requires of us something that is exceptionally difficult, and something that the vast majority of us fail to exhibit for the vast majority of our time here – namely, *agape* in the form of a non-self-regarding universal altruistic concern for others. It is our inability to achieve this concern for all others that explains our fallenness and shows how deeply sin permeates our lives. That this analysis enables us to make sense of a doctrine which is otherwise terribly difficult to make intuitive sense of counts, I think, as a merit of the analysis.

At the very least, I think this much is fair to say: the arguments in this essay pose a serious, albeit somewhat demoralizing, challenge that requires an answer if Plantinga's version of the FWA is to remain even remotely viable as a possible

theodicy that would explain why a morally perfect God allows so much evil in the form of suffering.[14]

Notes

1. Put otherwise, the strategy of this version of the FWA is as follows: the FWA attempts to show the claim that (1) an all-perfect God exists is consistent with the claim that (2) evil exists, by showing that the claim that (3) the existence of free beings, by itself, is a moral good outweighing the evil that cannot be achieved without allowing such evil. I have criticized this version in Kenneth Einar Himma 'The free-will defence: evil and the moral value of free will', *Religious Studies*, **45** (2009), 373–395. This paper should be considered a companion piece to that one.
2. See, e.g. William Rowe 'The problem of evil and some varieties of atheism', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **16** (1979), 335–341.
3. Augustine *The Problem of Free Choice*, XXII of *Ancient Christian Writers* (Westminster MD: The Newman Press, 1955), book 3, 9. Other attempts to defend free-will theodicies include Richard Swinburne 'Some major strands of theodicy', in Daniel Howard-Snyder (ed.) *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Indianapolis IN: Indiana University Press, 1996); Peter van Inwagen, 'The problem of evil, the problem of air, and the problem of silence', in Howard-Snyder *Evidential Argument from Evil*; and Stephen T. Davis 'Free will and evil', in *idem* (ed.) *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Atlanta GA: John Knox Press, 2001).
4. Alvin Plantinga *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 30 (emphasis added). Strictly speaking, the last sentence in the quotation is false. Moral good is possible in a world if there is at least one moral agent in the world; since, by hypothesis, God exists and is a moral agent, God's existence is enough to ensure the *possibility* of moral good in the world.
5. One might think that I am interpreting Plantinga too literally here. The claim would be that Plantinga does not intend to suggest by use of the locution 'freely perform more good than evil actions' that the FWA succeeds only if the totality of good deeds (or positive utility) exceeds the totality of bad deeds (or negative utility). For my part, I cannot see a more plausible interpretation or even a plausible one that coheres with this wording. But if so, the burden is on the proponent of that interpretation to produce and defend it.
6. See 'Crime in the United States: murder', *Uniform Crime Reporting Program*, Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation, available at: http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/05cius/offenses/violent_crime/murder_homicide.html; see also 'United States Crime Rates 1960–2006,' http://www.disastercenter.com/crime/uscrime.htm, which summarizes other crime rates from 1960 to 2006.
7. The source for all of the statistics in this paragraph is http://www.globalissues.org.
8. This is where the source of the weakness in the argument becomes apparent. We have had the ability to fully alleviate global poverty for a comparatively short period of time.
9. US Statistical Abstract 2005; CIA World Factbook 2005.
10. Sources: Historical Tables – Budget of the United States 2007; and CRS Report for Congress 2004.
11. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Economy_of_the_European_Union.
12. http://politicalcalculations.blogspot.com/2007/08/africa-gdp-rankings-for-2006.html.
13. Mother Teresa is presumably an exception who has met this standard. Bill Gates with all his new humanitarian work probably has not; after all, he still has US$25 billion to live on.
14. I am greatly indebted to Mark Nelson whose insightful comments on this essay helped me to improve it considerably.

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