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St. Augustine's Free Will Theodicy and Natural Evil

Abstract

The problem of evil is an obstacle to justified belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God (O₃G). According to Saint Augustine's free will theodicy (AFWT), moral evil attends free will. Might something like AFWT also be used to account for natural evil? After all, it is possible that calamities such as famines, earthquakes, and floods are the effects of the sinful willing of certain persons, viz., 'fallen angels.' Working to destroy our faith, Satan and his cohorts could be responsible for the natural disasters that bring us to grief. Here, I develop this account alongside AFWT.

Although Satan may act in the world out of hatred for God, . . . and although his action may cause grave injuries – of a spiritual nature and, indirectly, even of a physical nature – to each man and to society, the action is permitted by divine providence, which, with strength and gentleness, guides human and cosmic history. (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*)

The problem of evil is an obstacle to justified belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God (O₃G). The atheist maintains that an O₃G would not allow moral evils such as murder, rape, and torture to occur. A 'free will theodicy' (FWT) is supposed to provide the reason why an O₃G would create a world in which these things must be endured. According to Saint Augustine's free will theodicy (AFWT), moral evil attends free will. The harms that befall one as a result of the actions of others are the result of the sinful willing of which all of us are capable, given God's decision to create us in 'his own image and likeness'—as having free wills. We ourselves have a compelling reason, this account continues, to prefer this choice over the alternative: better suffering persons than care free automata.¹

What of 'natural evil'? Might something like AFWT be used to account for things like famines, epidemics, and earthquakes? After all, these too, it could be maintained, are the effects of the sinful willing of certain persons, viz., 'fallen angels.' Working to destroy our faith, Satan and his cohorts could be responsible for the natural disasters that bring us to grief.² Thus, once we recognize that God

1. Cf. Étienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1960) pp. 145–7. Augustine's explanation of natural evil, however, differs from the one presented below. Also, God's having created beings capable of doing evil does not tell against him being incapable of doing evil himself: the capacity to do evil being no more than free will itself, which, as discussed below, is one of our highest *goods*—though it has been used by its possessors to effect evil that God himself did not intend and thus did not *do*.

2. Although he presents it within the context of a free will 'defense,' this view is taken from Alvin Plantinga. Natural evil is seen by him as a species of moral evil: that which is effected by non-human persons. Cf. *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

was respecting what would be our highest value in creating all persons, humans and angels alike, with free wills, then the existence of natural evil no longer justifies atheism: we can no longer rationally doubt God's benevolence. Here, I intend to develop this FWT alongside AFWT.

I begin by formulating AFWT so as to draw out the implications of its assumption that free will is our highest value, something a rational agent would not sacrifice for any other good. Then, having shown that the atheist herself is 'better off' having to endure moral evil, I rebut her reason to doubt that an O₃G exists, relying on a principle of rationality linking values and assessments of character. Our free wills, it is then shown, do not entail natural evil, which substantiates the charge that an O₃G would not have created a world in which it occurs. I next consider how this result impacts upon AFWT, arguing that it seems to undercut its effectiveness. In the end, AFWT is elaborated so as to cover both moral and natural evil. I first develop what was said above regarding the question why an O₃G must allow moral evil.

1 Why An O₃G Must Allow Moral Evil

AFWT is based on the following assumptions about human nature. A world devoid of the possibility of moral evil would be one in which we did not exist (assuming that free will is of the essence of personhood). To realize such a world, God would have had to create, if He intended to create agents at all, automatons capable only of doing His will. It would have been sufficient here to 'program' agents so that they could not develop evil inclinations. As things stand, a human agent is subject to temptations, some of her potential motives being evil desires. It is the 'will,' the set of capacities that enables a person to take decisions and carry them out, that determines whether or not she will seek the objects of such desires.³ (That is not to say that an autonomous agent would necessarily be tempted to do evil things throughout her life; she may have become and found it desirable to be the sort of person who is incapable of deliberately harming others. But, to have a free will, she must have become this way 'on her own': her lack of evil inclinations cannot be solely due to the activity of another person. She must have been capable of rejecting the values of those who influenced her development.) This faculty would obviously be superfluous were we programmed to do God's will and, thus, not a part of a perfect being's creation. Thus, if the existence of the power to freely will to do evil was entailed by the decision to create persons, then the risk of being a victim of its exercise is an ineliminable aspect of the human condition. Given the value that we place upon our free wills, we

3. I defend this compatibilist view of free will in 'Responsibility and Motivation,' *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. XXXV (1997): 289–99. What is the difference, someone might ask, between creating a deterministic universe in which moral evil occurs and one in which we can develop evil inclinations despite it being determined that such urges never become our motives (so that morally evil actions would not be performed)? Why should it be thought that agents in the former but not the latter universe would have free wills? The short answer is that in the latter universe we would have been precluded from acting against God's will, thus lacking free wills in the (compatibilist) sense of being able to transcend one's influences. In creating the former universe, on the other hand, God would have done something to keep his will from being a *fait accompli*.

should not, then, 'hold it against' God that we must endure moral evil. That is, our interest in preserving our personhood makes it irrational to question our Creator's benevolence by citing 'man's inhumanity to man.'

Our values, thus, play a critical role in AFWT. Did we not prize having free wills more than anything else—as being essential to our identity, we would not be irrational in doubting God's benevolence. For we would not then have a compelling reason to prefer a world in which moral evils are very likely to occur. The alternative appears unacceptable only in light of the harm it entails to our highest value. It is not simply that a world devoid of the possibility of moral evil would lack agents with free wills. Were free will not of the greatest value to us, we could legitimately doubt that God had acted benevolently in having us endure moral evil, since we would not be 'out anything' significant were it not to exist. In sum, that God is omnibenevolent is questionable only if He could have prevented the harms that befall us without depriving us of that which we find most valuable. It is hoped that the reader is now wondering in what way, if any, our wills would have impaired by the forestalling of natural evil.

2 The Forestalling Of Natural Evil

As noted above, natural evil can be seen as the effect of the sinful willing of Satan and his cohorts. Famines, plagues, and other disasters would not occur but for their *Schadenfreude* and their desire to destroy our faith in an O₃G. Prevent this subversion, then, and you eliminate such calamities. Why, then, the atheist asks, does God allow it to occur? The answer that parallels AFWT would be that preventing natural evil entails eliminating the free will of Satan and his cohorts. It is only by destroying their capacity for doing evil that we could be spared natural disasters. But, then, these beings would be as unfree as persons stripped of their potential for harming each other. God should not be thought of as not being omnibenevolent for being unwilling to restrict the actions of Satan and his cohorts, given that doing so would have been to act against our best interest, entailing the loss of their free wills.

But the last sentence of this answer seems false. It is obvious why a constraint placed upon our own wills would be undesirable. But what reason might there be for regretting that Satan and his cohorts are not automatons? We can easily see the loss entailed by an elimination of moral evil. It does not appear that *we* would be 'out of anything' were the assumed cause of natural evil not to exist. If preventing its existence means circumscribing the wills of non-human creatures, well, no big deal. The question is, would a world devoid of Satan and his cohorts' power to effect evil involve lessening what is most valuable to us? In a sense it would, since free will is of the greatest value to persons and there would be fewer persons with free wills in such a world than there would be in the one entailed by AFWT. But surely we can value free will without desiring that all persons be at liberty to effect evil—witness prisons. Our interest in preserving our free will does not include a concern for the liberty of non-human persons. We would expect an O₃G to maximize *our* share of that which we value the most, allotting others' measure so as to serve our interests.

But this response begs the question, why shouldn't those adversely affected by *moral* evil doubt the benignancy of the author of their malefactor's free will? What difference should it make whether the evildoer is 'one of us' or not? (Our assessment of a parole board's competence should not depend upon whether recidivists victimize strangers or their friends and family.) In demonstrating the unsoundness of the above explanation of natural evil, we seem to have also refuted AFWT as well. Just as there is reason to question the benevolence of God for allowing for the existence of natural disasters, from the perspective of those thereby harmed, there is cause for the victims of moral evil to dispute there being benevolence behind the decision to grant free will to those who were to become their malefactors. Why should the AIDS epidemic count against the existence of an O₃G if Buchenwald doesn't: simply because preventing the latter, but not the former, entails constraining the wills of certain members of our own species? Why, instead, shouldn't we view this prospect as we assessed the proposed loss of autonomy on the part of Satan and his cohorts, saying 'so much the worse for Hitler and *his* minions'?

We seem, then, to be on a slippery slope. Preferring a world *sans* natural evil appears to entail doubts regarding an O₃G given the existence of moral evil, and thus abdicating altogether hopes of constructing a FWT. It might be thought that this result is the inevitable consequence of evaluating the non-existence of evil from the perspective of its victims. At this point, the theist could attempt to show that we benefit from the existence of evil in ways that are independent of the value we place upon our free wills. If there are other highly important human purposes served by evil, we could not rationally prefer its non-existence. That may be the best account a theist can offer of natural evil.⁴ But I shall now demonstrate that applying AFWT to natural evil does not put one on a slippery slope, thus preserving it as an explanation of moral evil.

3 An Explanation Of Moral Evil

A victim of evil, whether it be natural or moral, seemed to have no reason to prefer a possible world in which her malefactor is capable of harming her to one in which he is not. She appears rational in regretting that which has brought her to grief. AFWT purports to show that the cost of eliminating the source of her suffering is too high: a loss of free will on *her* part. But we have just seen that this price need only be paid by the evildoer. Circumscribing him alone would suffice to deliver her from his evil. So why shouldn't she prefer having been thus delivered?

The answer, I believe, lies in the Gospel's denunciation of capital punishment: 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.' Rationality would seem to preclude a victim of evil from finding regrettable the free will of those who trespass against her while realizing that she herself is guilty of harming others. While she would not be harmed by the elimination of her would-be malefactor's free will, her liberty would be circumscribed were God to take the steps required to keep her from committing *her* misdeeds. The same claims can be made against her that she can make against others. Thus, unless it is rational for her to wish that she be

4. Cf. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Clarendon, 1979).

allowed to commit the misdeeds others are incapable of performing, she should not decry the free will of those who trespass against her and thus should not let their sins stand in the way of the acceptance of an O₃G. Only a morally perfect person, it appears, could justifiably question God's decision to allow one's fellows to commit evil. What loss would such a person have suffered had this decision not been taken? None it seems. Not having been abused, God could have left her free will intact without being unfair. The rest of us must suffer in silence the trespasses of others or change our sinful ways so as to become entitled to complain of such transgressions.

Perhaps there are morally perfect persons, although our hopelessly flawed world seems very unlikely to have produced persons of this stature. If so, then it appears that there are individuals who could rationally reject AFWT. That is to say, there may be persons in a position to reject the notion that *they themselves* are better off living in a morally imperfect world and thus to doubt the existence of an O₃G. Thus, to show that AFWT has universal appeal, I must either demonstrate the non-existence of morally perfect persons or show why even they benefit from living amongst sinners. The latter is obviously the best way to proceed.

So we must take back the claim that no benefit could accrue from the existence of free will to those for whom its abuse remains an unexercised option. But what might this advantage be? Simply, the opportunity to live amongst and interact with *persons* – creatures possessing a free will – rather than automatons. Lacking a free will, the latter would not only be incapable of moral transgressions, but beneficence as well. Perhaps there would be no way of telling the difference, but with such creatures there could only be sham kindness, love, gratitude etc.. Moreover, for this reason, their existence would involve God in the sort of deception of which Descartes *et al.* thought him incapable. All in all a most undesirable state of affairs even from, nay, especially from, the perspective of a would be saint. Better to be exposed to sinfulness so as to be in a position to relate to others as fellow persons, encouraging the transcendence of their self-imposed limitations, while worshipping a truthful Divinity. This imperative could not be met simply by living in a community of saints, for the community itself would desire to interact, if only as a model of worshipfulness, with an outside world populated with persons. Thus, neither would be saint nor sinner has a reason to reject AFWT.

Does the foregoing also suggest a way of applying it to the case of natural evil? I believe that it does. According to it, we should say that natural evil is a function of the willing of Satan and his minions. The atheist, it will be recalled, points out that God's thwarting of their plans *would* have been benevolent. Thus, our FWT does not seem to satisfy our demand for an explanation of why an O₃G would allow natural evil to exist: it seems to fail to show why it is in *our* best interest that such calamity may obtain. But the prevention of the fall of Satan and his legions would have required the destruction of their free wills, making any intermediaries between God and ourselves automatons. The question then becomes, would we have been demeaned by such an arrangement?

It appears so. For we would have taken God's intermediaries to be something that they are not, viz., persons who had *chosen* to reveal God's will. Moreover, such an arrangement would entail a flawed understanding of God himself, making him

party to a deception we would reject as foreign to his nature. Indeed, one might argue that it was not even open to an O₃G to realize this possibility, involving as it does the sending forth of impostures. (It should be noted that God's free will, unlike our own, does not entail the ability to do evil, since He is uncreated there is no need for Him to be able to transcend anyone's values in order to be autonomous.) If it is not in our best interest to be subject to deception, then the existence of natural evil should not shake our faith in an O₃G, since its elimination would have required God to mislead us. Thus, in the end, it appears that AFWT can be used to explain an O₃G's actualization of a world containing natural evil. On the assumption that the angels were to be God's messengers, its existence is a function of God's creation of beings worthy of fulfilling this role.

One might argue that the price of avoiding communications with angelic imposters is too high: that we'd be better off being deceived by such creatures if that meant the non-existence of the calamities for which the fallen angels are assumed to be responsible. Their creation, then, belies the existence of an O₃G. But could 'our own good' involve being deceived? Does it make sense to regret that was God unwilling to mislead us? Should we do so, our virtue appears diminished: we admit to valuing Truth less than safety and comfort. We would be asking for a particular falsehood to be an essential part of the world view of anyone to whom God must send an angelic intermediary. Such a request would seem to lower ourselves in our own eyes, making us appear to be like children, to whom it is sometimes best to withhold the Truth. Is that what we would have for ourselves: being *fated* to take at least one aspect of God's creation, should a divine messenger be encountered, for that which it is not? Or is the possibility of attaining a complete understanding of all of one's experiences preferably left open? Our framing of these questions indicates that we think it unworthy of beings capable of knowing the Truth to desire anything less. Thus, the decision to create angels capable of doing evil is consistent with the existence of an omnibenevolent God, as it respected what would be one of our highest values. That some in their number exercised this capacity, causing us great suffering and misery, then, is consistent with the existence of an O₃G.

Given the foreseeable harms some of them were going to inflict upon us, why were the angels created at all? Why didn't God choose instead to communicate with us *sans* intermediaries? Or having created them as robots, why couldn't God have avoided deception by revealing to us their true nature? The second alternative really isn't an option over and above the first, since God might just as well have saved himself the trouble of making such a revelation by communicating directly with us all the time having had to do it once. Nor could angelic automatons provide this information to us 'on their own', since it would undercut their credibility as messengers of God: we would not take seriously the claims of those who identified themselves as automatons. As regards the first, it shall be assumed, ala Kierkegaard, that the import of God's words would have escaped our understanding had they not been conveyed to us through angelic channels, as it was also necessary for him to speak to us through the prophets and himself become man—indeed taking the form of a servant to deliver the Gospel of salvation.⁵

5. Cf. *Philosophical Fragments*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology* ed., Robert Bretall (Princeton, *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003)

4 Conclusion

We began by detailing the role our highest value, free will, plays in AFWT. Any possible world in which one's free will is non-existent is not to be preferred to one in which it exists—no matter what other benefits it offers. From a single person's perspective, however, it appeared that this value would not be threatened were she placed in world in which a significant amount of evil had been eliminated, viz., all that for which she was not responsible. Why, it was asked, should a person prefer the actual world, in which she may suffer from the effects of both moral and natural evil, to a world in which she would not be subjected to the wickedness of others? Only a morally perfect person, though, could legitimately expect an O₃G to situate her in a world of the latter type. The rest of us need look no further than our own hearts to realize the necessity of being a potential victim of moral evil: it is a consequence of God's evenhandedness. For her part, a would be saint must accept the risk of being a victim of moral evil as an entailment of dwelling amongst persons rather than automatons, which she must be in order to fully realize her humanity. Finally, the handiwork of Satan and his cohorts is the 'price we pay' for being capable of fully comprehending all of our interpersonal experiences. AFWT, supplemented with an understanding of the consequences of eliminating the free will of *any* person, reconciles humanity's suffering with the existence of an O₃G. That is not to say that it would provide a victim of evil with even a small measure of comfort; it is 'only' meant to sustain her faith in an O₃G.⁶

NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 153–71.

6. Thanks to William Wainwright, Marcel Sarot, Michael Bergmann, and two referees from *Ars Disputandi* for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.