

## NATURAL EVIL AND THE FREE WILL DEFENSE

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Recently Richard Swinburne has argued that the well-known Free Will Defense can provide an explanation of God's permitting moral evil (i.e., evil intentionally brought about by human agents) only if there is also natural evil (i.e., evil not intentionally brought about by human agents).<sup>1</sup> Ultimately his argument aims to show that there must be natural evil if we are to have the knowledge we need to have in order to bring about moral evil. Thus, if Swinburne's argument is sound, then, contrary to common opinion, if the Free Will Defense can meet objections to God's existence arising from moral evil, then that Defense can also meet such objections arising from natural evil.

My aim in what follows is twofold. First, in Part I, I shall restate Swinburne's argument in succinct form, and show why it is ultimately unsuccessful. And secondly, in Part II, I shall sketch an alternative argument that purports to improve on Swinburne's argument.

### I

In essence, Swinburne's argument is as follows:

- (1) To acquire knowledge of what will follow in the future from a present action or state, we need to rely on normal induction, i.e., on induction from what we know to have happened in the past (p. 203).
- (2) If we are knowingly to bring about states of affairs (or to allow them to occur through neglecting to prevent them), we must know what consequences will follow from our actions (p. 204).
- (3) Hence, we can come to know that certain of our actions will have evil consequences only through prior experience (in some degree) of such evil consequences (p. 206).
- (4) In the case of the extreme evils (e.g., those resulting in prolonged incurable suffering and death), one's knowledge cannot be based on experience of what has happened to *oneself* before (p. 206).

- (5) Hence, one's actions or negligence can, to one's knowledge, have extremely evil consequences only if others have suffered such evil consequences before (p. 206).
- (6) For any evil one person knowingly inflicts on another, there must have been a first time in history at which this was done, and although in each such first case the immoral agent knows the evil consequences of his action, he, by hypothesis, cannot know this through his having seen another person perform such an action to bring about such consequences (p. 207).
- (7) Hence, some persons' knowledge of the evil consequences of certain actions must come from their having seen or heard of those actions accidentally leading to evil consequences. (And a similar point applies to persons who knowingly refrain from inflicting evil or prevent evil from occurring.) (p. 207).
- (8) Hence, there must be natural evils (whether caused accidentally by persons or by natural processes) if we are to know how to bring about moral evil or to prevent moral evil. And there must be many natural evils, for our knowledge of the future comes only by induction from many past instances (p. 207).

On the basis of this argument, then, Swinburne claims that the existence of natural evil is a logical precondition of our knowing how to bring about and to prevent moral evil, and thus that there is good reason for the existence of natural evil. But I find the above argument to be objectionable on at least two major counts.

One major problem with Swinburne's argument is that it does not provide support for the conclusion it purports, and needs, to support. In more than one context (see, e.g., pp. 202–203), Swinburne claims his argument shows that natural evils "are necessary if agents are to have the *knowledge* of how to bring about [moral] evil or prevent its occurrence, knowledge which they must have if they are to have a genuine choice between bringing about [moral] evil and bringing about [moral] good." This, of course, is what the argument should show if it aims to extend the Free Will Defense to provide an explanation of natural evil, and this, according to the final conclusion (8), is what the argument does show. But (2)–(8), as I shall argue, do not state logical preconditions of one's *knowing how to bring about moral evil*; at most they state preconditions of one's *knowingly bringing about such evil*.

To begin my argument, let us consider the (sadly realistic) case of the habitual foot-stomper – call him 'Frederick' – who knows how to bring about moral evil by intentionally stomping on the feet of the person nearest to him. Frederick's knowledge how to foot-stomp is largely self-taught. Of course Frederick's parents might have played a role in the young Frederick's learning how to lift his feet, but only the adult Frederick is responsible for applying his foot-stomping to his victims' feet. Further, when foot-stomping, Frederick intends to foot-stomp, and he has a reason, albeit of course not a good one, for performing such an action, viz., in doing so he temporarily satisfies a distracting desire to foot-stomp. However, Frederick refrains from believing that his foot-stomping has evil consequences; in fact, Frederick is confident that his foot-stomping is morally good, because it

has brought him some pleasure. Thus, although of average intelligence, Frederick is perversely egoistic.

Evidently, then, Frederick not only knows how to bring about moral evil, but also is guilty of bringing about such evil. However, to resist this claim one might propose the following:

- (i) One can bring about moral evil with an action  $A$  only if one knows  $A$  to be evil.

Given (i), we could insist the Frederick's foot-stomping is not morally evil, on the ground that Frederick does not believe, and thus does not know, that his foot-stomping is evil. But (i) is quite unacceptable. For, given (i), we shall be committed to the absurd view that so long as one refrains from thinking of one's actions as evil, one is not guilty of bringing about moral evil. But, obviously, moral innocence is not so easily achieved.

A plausible replacement for (i) is:

- (ii) One can bring about moral evil with an action  $A$  only if one intends to perform  $A$  and  $A$  is evil, regardless of whether one knows  $A$  to be evil.

Clearly, (ii) does not commit us to the implausible view that one is innocent of moral evil so long as one does not believe one's actions to be evil. Thus (ii), unlike (i), does not imply that Frederick's foot-stomping is not morally evil. That is, (ii) allows us to maintain the plausible view that Frederick's foot-stomping is morally evil even though Frederick does not believe it is. Hence, (ii) permits us to hold the plausible view that Frederick can know how to bring about moral evil with his foot-stomping even though he does not believe such action is evil.

Moreover, in accordance with the foregoing characterization of Frederick, (ii) allows us to hold that Frederick can know how to bring about moral evil with his foot-stomping even if he does not know that such action is evil. For, by definition, if Frederick does not believe that foot-stomping is evil, then he does not know that it is evil. But since Frederick can know how to bring about moral evil with his foot-stomping without knowing that such action is evil, it follows that Frederick can know how to bring about moral evil with his foot-stomping even if he does not knowingly bring about moral evil with his foot-stomping. Furthermore, it seems that Frederick can know how to bring about moral evil with his foot-stomping even if he does not knowingly bring about moral evil with any action. For one's knowingly bringing about moral evil with some action logically entails one's knowing that some action has evil consequences. (Note that (2) and (3) above suggest as much.) But given the foregoing characterization, it is doubtful that Frederick must know that some action has evil consequences.

More generally, then, we have good reason to believe that one can know how to bring about moral evil with some action even if one does not know that that action has evil consequences. Similarly, we have good reason to believe that one can know how to bring about moral evil with some action even if one does not

know that any of one's actions has evil consequences. For one's knowing that some action performed by oneself has evil consequences entails one's being justified in believing that some action performed by oneself has evil consequences. But we can easily imagine the perverse egoist Frederick, for instance, believing that all his actions are good, since they satisfy his desires to perform them, and thus refraining from believing that some action of his has evil consequences. Or, alternatively, we can easily imagine Frederick believing, and having good reasons to believe, that some action has evil consequences, but failing nonetheless to be *justified* in believing, and thus to know, that some action has evil consequences. For Frederick could have such good reasons, but fail to put them together in such a way that they provide a sound justificatory argument for his belief that some action has evil consequences. This failure might be due, for instance, to Frederick's inexperience at the often difficult task of constructing justificatory arguments. In any case, such a failure could prevent Frederick from having the justified belief, and thus knowledge, in question, even if he believed that some action has evil consequences. Consequently, we have good reason to believe that one can know how to bring about moral evil with some action even if one does not know that some action has evil consequences.

Returning to Swinburne's argument, then, we now can raise a forceful objection. Since one's knowing how to bring about moral evil with some action does not entail one's knowing that some action has evil consequences, and thus does not entail one's knowingly bringing about moral evil with some action, it follows that Swinburne's argument is invalid. For (2)–(8) of his argument provide at most logical preconditions of one's knowingly bringing about moral evil with some action. But given the foregoing considerations, we cannot infer that the logical preconditions of one's knowingly bringing about moral evil with some action are also the logical preconditions of one's knowing how to bring about moral evil with some action. Hence, even if Swinburne's argument shows that there must be natural evil if one is knowingly to bring about moral evil with some action, we still cannot infer that there must be natural evil if one is to know how to bring about moral evil with some action. But since (8) is supported by the latter inference, Swinburne's argument is invalid.

However, it is not very difficult to imagine how one could be misled to draw the invalid inference involving (8). Conceivably, one might be led to construct an argument like (1)–(8) on the basis of the following considerations:

- (a) One knows how to bring about moral evil with an action *A* only if one can bring about moral evil with *A*.
- (b) One can bring about moral evil with *A* only if one intentionally brings about evil with *A*.
- (c) One intentionally brings about evil with *A* only if one knowingly brings about evil with *A*.
- (d) One knowingly brings about evil with *A* only if one knows that *A* has evil consequences.

- (e) Hence, one knows how to bring about moral with *A* only if one knows that *A* has evil consequences.

On the basis of (a)–(e) one might assume that the logical preconditions of one's knowing that an action has evil consequences are also the logical preconditions of one's knowing how to bring about moral evil with that action. But (b), of course, is false. For, clearly, one can have the capacity to bring about moral evil with *A* without *actually* intentionally bringing about evil with *A*. Further, as I noted above, one can bring about moral evil with *A* without *knowingly* bringing about evil with *A*. Thus, the notion of moral evil provided by (c) is unacceptable. Consequently, (a)–(e) cannot salvage the invalid inference involving (8).

Note, however, that even if the logical preconditions of one's knowing that an action has evil consequences were also the logical preconditions of one's knowing how to bring about moral evil with that action, the argument (1)–(8) would still be open to a forceful objection. For the argument assumes in premise (1) that normal inductive inference is the only possible route to the (allegedly) needed knowledge of the consequences of our actions. But why should we grant this assumption? Could not God give us the needed knowledge by verbal communication, i.e., by telling us what the consequences of our actions will be? Swinburne (pp. 211–212) briefly considers such a possibility, but rejects its relevance on the ground that the relevant successful predictions from God would “make us know for certain” that there is an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God, and thus would give us every reason to obey God while removing almost all temptation to do wrong. Consequently, given such divine predictions, according to Swinburne, we would not have a genuine “choice of our destiny,” for we would not have sufficient reason for pursuing *either* good *or* evil courses of action. (Swinburne, of course, is here assuming that one can perform an action only if one has some reason to do so.)

But, in effect, Swinburne's position on the present issue trades on a false disjunction. For it assumes that we can acquire the needed knowledge only by normal induction from past experience or by a verbal communication from God whereby we also acquire certainty that there is an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God. But surely God could delegate the responsibility of giving us the relevant successful predictions to some superhuman agent who is capable of giving us the needed knowledge via verbal communication, but who does not, and cannot, enable us to conclude with certainty that God exists. This superhuman agent could reliably give us knowledge of the consequences of our actions, yet provide us with good reason to believe that he himself is not omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. Thus, given such a superhuman agent, we would acquire the needed knowledge without relying on normal induction from our past experiences of evil, and we would justifiably refrain from believing that our superhuman predictor is divine. Consequently, given the possibility of such a predictor, we should reject Swinburne's basic assumption that our knowledge of our actions' consequences must come from normal inductive inference from our past experiences of evil.

In sum, then, I have argued that Swinburne's argument purporting to extend the Free Will Defense is unsound. The argument is unsound, I have argued, not only because it is invalid, but also because it contains a false assumption, viz., premise (1).

## II

Although Swinburne's argument fails, it obviously would be premature to conclude now that we cannot extend the Free Will Defense to account for natural evil. In fact, I believe there is an alternative to Swinburne's argument that avoids the forementioned problems and enables us to extend the Free Will Defense.

In outline, the argument I have in mind is as follows:

- (1) In creating human agents who are morally responsible and free, God did something that is reasonable and good.
- (2) A human agent is morally responsible only if he has some understanding of what he must choose between, i.e., good and evil.
- (3) Hence, a human agent is morally responsible only if he has some concept of evil, i.e., only if he has some understanding of what it is for something to be evil.
- (4) But a human agent will acquire a concept of evil only if he experiences the occurrence of some kind of moral evil or natural evil either in connection with himself or in connection with some other sentient being.
- (5) A human agent cannot acquire a concept of extreme evil (e.g., the evil resulting in prolonged incurable suffering and death) by having experienced such evil *himself*.
- (6) Hence, a human agent will acquire a concept of extreme evil only if other sentient beings have experienced such evil.
- (7) Further, for any kind of evil of which a human agent has a concept, there must have been a first time at which a human agent experienced and thereby acquired a concept of such an evil; and at that time that agent, by hypothesis, could not have acquired the concept in question by having experienced some human agent intentionally bringing about the kind of evil in question. (Here I am assuming, of course, that a human agent can *intentionally* perform an action *A* only if that agent has some concept of *A*.)
- (8) Hence, some morally responsible human agents must acquire a concept of evil through experience of natural evil.
- (9) Hence, there must be natural evil if human agents are to be morally responsible; and there must be much natural evil if human agents are to have much moral responsibility.
- (10) Hence, in creating morally responsible human agents, God is justified in allowing natural evil.

Note that, as before, I am assuming that natural evil is evil not intentionally brought about by human agents; it is evil brought about either accidentally by human agents or by natural processes. Also as before, I am assuming that one can experience or intentionally perform an action that is evil even if one does not believe that that action is evil.

Premise (1), of course, is a fundamental assumption of the Free Will Defense. The assumption here is that our being morally responsible and free is very valuable, at least insofar as it provides an opportunity for us to become morally good persons.<sup>2</sup> I shall return to this assumption in conclusion.

Steps (2) and (3) of the argument deserve comment together. They enable us to distinguish a morally responsible agent from a moral brute in terms of the former's having some concept of evil. Without some concept of evil, according to (3), one is not morally responsible, but is at best a moral brute. One's having some concept of evil, as I understand it, is just one's having some understanding of what it is for something to be evil. Or, in other words, it is just one's having an ability of one's own to distinguish something evil from something not evil on the basis of ethical considerations. But I see no reason to suppose that one's having such an ability requires one to be competent at formulating justificatory arguments of some sort. Thus I doubt that one's having such an ability entails one's being justified in believing that something is evil.

According to (4), one needs to experience some kind of evil to acquire some concept of evil. But this does not mean that to acquire some concept of evil via experience at a certain time, one must believe that what one experiences at that time is evil. It means only that one must be aware of what one experiences in such a way that one acquires an ability of one's own to distinguish, on the basis of ethical considerations, what one experiences from a different kind of action, viz., one that is not evil. But one might object to (4) on the ground that we could acquire a concept of evil via divine verbal communication, without actually experiencing evil ourselves. This is a natural objection, yet I believe it is misguided. For as I have construed (3), one's having a concept of evil entails one's having a certain ability *of one's own*. But given the circumstances envisaged by the present objection, only God would have a concept of evil; we would not. For only God would have an ability of his own to distinguish something evil from something not evil. We would not have the latter ability on our own, but only insofar as God intervenes with the appropriate verbal communication enabling us, by proxy, to make the needed distinction. Thus, given the circumstances envisaged by the present objection, only God could be morally responsible; we could not. Hence, in accepting (3), I find that the present objection precludes our being genuine moral agents.

Another natural objection to (4) arises from the following observation: We have some concept of a unicorn, for instance, even though we have not experienced any actual unicorn. But I doubt that this observation supports any objection to (4), since it is plausible to hold that we have some concept of a unicorn only because we have experienced actual horses and single-horned animals, and have put to-

gether our resultant concepts of horse and single-horned animal to form our concept of a unicorn. More generally, according to the kind of empiricist account of concept-acquisition supporting (4), any concept we have of something unexperienced is modeled in some way on some concept or set of concepts of what we have experienced. But since it is difficult to see how one's concept of evil could be modeled on other concepts, I find (4) to be a plausible assumption.

Steps (5)–(8) of the foregoing argument obviously have affinities with steps (4)–(7) of Swinburne's argument. But, in conjunction with (1)–(4), they lead to a conclusion different from that supported by Swinburne's argument. Nonetheless, in leading to the conclusions (9) and (10), steps (5)–(8) lead us to raise a difficult question that challenges Swinburne's argument as well as any other variant on the Free Will Defense, including the argument at hand. The troublesome question concerns the *quantity* of evil in the world: Has not God allowed too much evil and given humans too much moral responsibility? Such a question underlies the common objection that an omnibenevolent God would not allow the large amount of evil found in our world. And, I suspect, one cannot help but feel *some* sympathy with this objection.

But the Free Will Defender need not concede that the foregoing objection is decisive. What the objection, in effect, is asking, as Swinburne notes<sup>3</sup>, is that God should make a world in which our choices matter somewhat, but not very much. In such a world, apparently, God would not allow us the choice of doing serious evil. Thus, in such a world, God would be like the over-protective parent who refuses to permit his child to make serious choices. But insofar as one finds it more valuable what a person does and can do (e.g., the choices one makes and can make) than what happens to a person (e.g., the sensations one experiences), one can justifiably resist the foregoing objection and support the Free Will Defense.

In conclusion, then, I submit that on the basis of the argument (1)–(10) we can extend the Free Will Defense to provide an explanation of the occurrence of natural evil.

#### NOTES

1. See Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford:Clarendon Press, 1979), chapter 11, pp. 202–221. All subsequent parenthetical page-numbers in the text refer to this book. Swinburne has set forth his argument also in "Natural Evil," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978), 295–301.
2. For a detailed discussion and defense of this assumption see Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Chapters 9 and 10.
3. See Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, pp. 219–220, 224. For a representative proponent of the present objection see, for instance, Michael Tooley, "Alvin Plantinga and the Free Will Defense," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 58 (1980), 373f.