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UNJUSTIFIED EVIL AND GOD'S CHOICE

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In chapter 5 of *God and Other Minds*, Alvin Plantinga has critically examined some recent attempts to show that the fact of evil renders traditional theistic belief self-contradictory.¹ He argues that these attempts are unsuccessful and claims that success is more difficult than most atheologians seem to suppose. I want to discuss Plantinga's examination in an attempt to show that the atheologian has not exhausted his arsenal and that the theist needs further defensive weapons in order to sustain his position that theistic belief is not irrational.

Plantinga maintains, and I believe correctly, that in order for the atheologian to show that theistic belief is self-contradictory, it would be necessary to identify a set of propositions which both entails a contradiction and is such that each proposition in the set is either necessarily true, or essential to theism, or a logical consequence of such propositions. Clearly no set of propositions would present a problem for the theist if he were not committed, on some grounds or other, to each proposition in the set or if the set did not entail a contradiction. Furthermore, Plantinga maintains that the atheologians he is criticizing identify the set of propositions, (a) that God exists, (b) that God is omnipotent, (c) that God is omniscient, (d) that God is wholly good, and (e) that evil exists, as the set of propositions which is essential to orthodox theism and which is self-contradictory. But, Plantinga argues, while (a)–(e) is a set of propositions essential to theism, that set does not alone *formally* entail a contradiction.

Plantinga argues that in order to show that theism is self-contradictory, the

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atheologian must add some further proposition to (a)–(e) and that the additional proposition must also be either necessarily true, or essential to theism, or a logical consequence of such propositions. Now it is quite plain that the additional proposition needed by the atheologian must satisfy a further condition: it must be a proposition which specifies the conditions under which a person can permit evil without forfeiting his claim to moral goodness. After examining several formulations of such a proposition and rejecting them either because they were not adequate for the atheologian's need, or because they failed to satisfy the condition of being necessarily true, or essential to theism, or a logical consequence of such propositions, Plantinga claims that at least part of the proposition the atheologian needs is the proposition that

- (f₄) An omnipotent, omniscient person is wholly good only if he eliminates every evil which is such that for every good that entails it, there is a greater good that does not entail it.²

But Plantinga finds difficulties with this proposition as well. He points out that the conjunction of (a)–(e) and (f₄) is not a formally contradictory set either, because it does not entail the denial of (e), that is, it does not entail that there is no evil at all. Rather, that set of propositions entails

- (g) Every evil E is entailed by some good G such that every good greater than G also entails E.

So, since the conjunction of (a)–(e) and (f₄) does not entail a contradiction, the addition of (f₄) to (a)–(e) is not by itself sufficient to show that theism is self-contradictory. The atheologian must add still another proposition to this set and this new proposition must be either necessarily true, or essential to theism, or a logical consequence of such propositions such that when it is added to the set, the entire set entails the denial of (g):

- There is at least one evil state of affairs such that for every good that entails it, there is a greater good that does not.

According to Plantinga, then, the atheologian can convict the theist of inconsistency only if he can deduce the denial of (g) from (a)–(e) and (f₄) together with propositions which are either necessarily true, or essential to theism, or logical consequences of such propositions because since it is (g) and not the denial of (e) which is entailed by (a)–(e) and (f₄), theism can be shown to be self-contradictory only if it is possible to deduce the contradictory conjunction of (g) and the denial of (g) by deducing the denial of (g) in the specified way. Furthermore,

Plantinga indicates that if the atheologian can deduce the denial of (g) and we can say that an evil state of affairs is *justified* just in case it is false that for every good that entails it there is a greater good that does not, then the atheologian will have succeeded in showing that there is unjustified evil because the denial of (g) says that there is at least one evil state of affairs such that for every good that entails it there is a greater good that does not.³

Plantinga continues this phase of his examination with an honest but unsuccessful attempt to find a proposition which satisfies the necessary conditions for the deduction of the denial of (g) and concludes by saying, "If this does not show that there is *no* such proposition, it suggests that finding one is much more difficult than most atheologians seem to suppose."⁴ Now while Plantinga cannot be faulted for not exploring the entire range of propositions essential to theism, since after all the range is quite enormous, it would seem that he restricted his scope of examination unduly because he thinks that (e) itself is the only likely candidate for the proposition that is both essential to theism and relevant to the deduction of the denial of (g). Plantinga does not say why he thinks that (e) is the only likely candidate out of the enormous number of contenders, and I think that he rejects even this candidate too swiftly because it is not at all clear that his claim that (i) entails (k)⁵ is correct, and if it is not, then he himself has produced a plausible candidate for the proposition which will permit the deduction of the denial of (g). However, I do not want to argue this point. What I want to show is that there are other candidates. I want to show that there are three other propositions, and perhaps there are more for all I know, which are essential to theism and which jointly entail the denial of (g) such that when they are added to (a)–(e) and (f₄) the result is a set of propositions which entails the contradictory conjunction of (g) and the denial of (g).

It is quite plain that (a)–(e) does not even approach the limit of exhausting the possible list of propositions essential to orthodox theism. Furthermore, it would seem that

(1) God exists and created everything *ex nihilo* and in time,

is a proposition essential to theism and that (1) entails both

(2) Prior to creation there was nothing but God

and

(3) Subsequent to creation there is nothing which is not casually dependent upon God,

but the conjunction of (2) and (3) entails

(4) If God had not created there would be nothing but God;

and since another proposition essential to orthodox theism is that

(5) God is the greatest possible good,

then the theist is committed to the proposition that

(6) If God had not created there would be nothing but the greatest possible good,

because (4) and (5) jointly entail (6). Now since the theist also holds that God is wholly free, it would seem that the theist is also committed to the proposition that

(7) God need not have created;

but then (6) and (7) entail

(8) The existence of the greatest possible good does not entail the existence of any other thing;

and (8) entails

(9) The existence of the greatest possible good does not entail the existence of any evil state of affairs.

From (9) it would seem to follow that

(10) Every evil state of affairs is such that for every good that entails it, there is a greater good that does not;

and from (10) it follows that

(11) If there is any evil, then for every good that entails it, there is a greater good that does not.

Now the conjunction of (e), that evil exists, and (11) entails

(12) There is at least one evil state of affairs such that for every good that entails it, there is a greater good that does not;

and since (12) is the denial of (g) and (g) is entailed by the conjunction (a)–(e) and (f₄), the conjunction of (a)–(e) and (f₄) together with (1), (5), and (7) constitutes a set of propositions, let us call it *S*, which entails the contradictory conjunction of (g) and the denial of (g). So, it would appear that the atheologian can, contrary to what Plantinga believes, identify a set of propositions, (1), (5), and (7), which are essential to theism and entail the denial of (g) such that when these new propositions are added to the others they produce the set *S* which entails a contradiction.

But even so, Plantinga would reject the claim that *S* shows that theism is inconsistent and that evil is unjustified because he finds a further difficulty with (f₄). It seems quite clear that (f₄) entails

- (F) An omnipotent, omniscient person who is wholly good can permit an evil state of affairs to exist only if it is entailed by a good which outweighs it.

Now if (F) is false then (f₄) is false, and the theist can reject (f₄) and escape the charge of inconsistency because *S* would not then show that theism is self-contradictory or that evil is unjustified, and in chapter 6 of *God and Other Minds*, Plantinga says that (F) is by no means self-evident and that apologists for traditional theism have often denied it.⁶ These apologists, then, attempt to escape the charge of inconsistency in their theistic belief by claiming that (F) is false. They sustain their claim that an omnipotent, omniscient person can permit evil which is not entailed by some good without forfeiting His claim to moral goodness by arguing that perhaps there are certain good states of affairs that an omnipotent God *cannot* bring about without permitting evil, even though these do not entail any evil at all. An omnipotent God, for example, cannot bring about free will and its attendant moral goods without also bringing about the possibility of evil, even though these goods do not entail any evil. This position, according to Plantinga, is sometimes called the free will defense. The free will argument is an argument intended to sustain the theist's claim that (F) is false and to provide an escape from the charge of inconsistency.

But the free will argument does not get the theist off the hook. While it *may* be adequate to sustain the claim that (F) is false, the free will argument has as one of its essential premises that God is not morally culpable for the evil in the world because God could prevent moral evil only by preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs it. In Plantinga's formulation of the free will argument he states this premise by saying: "The fact that free creatures sometimes err, however, in no way tells against God's omnipotence or against His goodness; for He could forestall the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good."⁷ In other words, God escapes the charge of moral

culpability because preventing evil *entails* preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs it. So while the theist denies (f₄) he is presumably committed to the claim that

- (f₄') An omnipotent, omniscient person is wholly good only if he prevents every evil E which is such that preventing E does not entail preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs E

and it would seem, then, that we could say that an evil state of affairs is *justified* just in case it is false that preventing it does not entail preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs it.

Now while (a)–(e) and (f₄') do not entail the denial of (e), they do jointly entail

- (g') Every evil E is such that preventing E entails preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs E.

So the atheologian can still convict the theist of inconsistency and show that evil is unjustified if he can find a set of propositions which is such that each member of the set is either necessarily true, or essential to theism, or a logical consequence of such propositions and which is such that the entire set entails the denial of (g')

There is at least one evil state of affairs such that preventing it does not entail preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs it.

The issue, then, is whether or not the atheologian can find a set of propositions which satisfy these conditions. I think that he can and it is not necessary to go very far beyond the set of propositions (1)–(12) in order to produce a set satisfying these conditions.

Since the theist believes not only that God is the greatest possible good but also that His goodness is the highest moral goodness, it would seem that a further claim essential to theism is the claim that

- (13) The greatest possible good is moral good which outweighs any possible evil,

and that the theist is committed to the proposition that

- (14) If God had not created there would exist moral good which outweighs any possible evil

because (6), from (1)–(12), and (13) jointly entail (14). Furthermore, (4) from (1)–(12) entails

(15) If God had not created there would be no evil;

and (15) together with (7) from (1)–(12) entails

(16) God could prevent evil by not creating.

Now from the conjunction of (14) and (16) it follows that

(17) God could prevent evil without preventing the existence of moral good which outweighs it;

and since it would seem to be necessarily true that

(18) What is actual is possible,

then it would seem that the theist is committed to the proposition that

(19) God could prevent evil without preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs it,

because (19) follows from the conjunction of (17) and (18). But (19) entails

(20) Every evil state of affairs is such that preventing it does not entail preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs it;

and from (20) it follows that

(21) If there is any evil, then preventing it does not entail preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs it.

Now the conjunction of (e), that evil exists, and (21) entails

(22) There is at least one evil state of affairs such that preventing it does not entail preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs it;

and since (22) is the denial of (g'), and (g') is entailed by the conjunction of (a)–(e) and (f₄'), the conjunction (a)–(e) and (f₄') together with (1), (5), (7), (13), and (18) constitutes a set of propositions—let us call it S'—which entails the contradictory

conjunction of (g') and the denial of (g'). So, it would appear that the atheologian can identify a set of propositions which are either necessarily true or essential to theism and which entail the denial of (g') such that when these new propositions are added to the others they produce the set S', which both entails a contradiction and which is such that each member of S' is either necessarily true, or essential to theism, or a logical consequence of such propositions. In short, while S may not show that theism is inconsistent or that evil is unjustified, the atheologian can produce S' to convict the theist of inconsistency and to show that evil is unjustified.

Furthermore, since (20) says that every evil state of affairs is such that preventing it does not entail preventing the possibility of moral good which outweighs it, then (20) and (f₄') entail that if there is an omnipotent, omniscient person who is wholly good then he prevents every evil. But (a)–(e) asserts that there is such a person. So, (a)–(e) and (f₄') together with (20) entail that there is no evil, that is, they entail the denial of (e). Not only does S' entail (g') and the denial of (g'), S' also entails both (e) and the denial of (e).

It is not at all clear how Plantinga would answer the preceding argument because his ingenious proofs in chapter 6 are devoted to a defense of the free will argument against certain specific attacks, and since the preceding argument does not challenge the free will argument, Plantinga's proofs do not speak against it. What the preceding argument shows is that the issue about evil, which the free will argument raises between the theist and the atheologian, is one which really misses the main problem for theism because this issue is usually discussed in such a way as to suggest that God had only two choices with respect to creation: either to create a world with evil or to create a world without evil. The atheologian usually assumes that the theist has a problem just in case God could have created differently, that is, just in case God could have created a world without evil. The theist then counters that there is no problem because, after all, God could not have created differently, that is, God could not have created a world without evil or at least the possibility of evil which as a matter of fact became actualized.

But the question of whether or not God could have created a world without evil misses the point because it is false that theism has a problem *just in case* God could have created differently: the theist has a problem even if God could not have created differently. What the preceding argument shows is that if the theist is right in some of his claims about God, then God is the creator and a wholly free being who did not have just the options of either creating a world with evil or creating a world without evil: He had the further choice of not creating at all. No matter what is accepted about what God could or could not do with a creation, or what God ought or ought not to have done with a creation, it remains that the beliefs of orthodox theism entail both that God need not have created and that if God had not created then there would be no evil at all. On the theist's own view, then, in order to prevent evil God need not have created in a special way.

He could have failed to create altogether and without any loss of free will or moral goodness because the theist also holds that God is wholly free and the highest moral good. Perhaps God could not, for some perfectly plausible reason, create a world without evil, but then it would seem that He ought not to have created at all. If the theist is right in some of his claims about God and evil, then being omniscient and prior to creation God knew that if He created there would be evil, so being wholly good He ought not to have created.

In order to escape this argument, what the theist needs is an apologetic of creation and such an apologetic, it would seem, must come into conflict with at least one of the theist's other claims about God because on the theist's own view prior to creation there was nothing missing from the perfect value of God which would call for creation. One possible approach to a satisfactory apologetic of creation, for example, might be to point out that if God had not created, then there would be no *human* free will or *human* moral good. But this kind of an approach would require a further premise to the effect that a created, hierarchy of value adds to the overall value and, hence, God created. It would follow from this, however, that created value adds to God's value and, hence, that God is not the greatest possible good because His goodness can be increased by the addition of created value. So this approach would not appear to be very promising nor, would it appear, is any other kind of approach because such an apologetic would have to state that God had to create for some reason or other and this would seem to be in direct conflict either with the view that God is wholly free or the view that God has no motives, such as needs or wants, which would adequately explain the alleged creative act. So it would appear that theism is inconsistent and that the theist must give up one or more of his claims about God.

NOTES

1. Alvin Plantinga, *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 115–30.

2. Plantinga makes it clear on p. 120 that, to say that one state of affairs entails another state of affairs is to say that the proposition that the one obtains entails the proposition that the other obtains.

3. Plantinga, *God and Other Minds*, p. 122.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 125 for Plantinga's discussion of (i) and (k).

6. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 132.