

A CRITIQUE OF THE FREE WILL DEFENSE

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In *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Alvin Plantinga addressed several issues. He broke the book down into two major sections dividing the material under the headings of Natural Atheology and Natural Theology. Plantinga defined Natural Atheology as the atheistic attempt to prove that God does not exist. Here, he introduced the atheistic claim which proposed that the existence of evil in light of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent God was not only inconsistent but also contradictory. In the second section entitled Natural Theology, Plantinga commentated on the three major philosophical arguments used to rationalize God's existence: the cosmological argument, the teleological argument, and the ontological argument.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and discuss Plantinga's Free Will Defense as represented in his section concerning Natural Atheology in order to determine whether or not his argument solved the logical problem of evil. This task will be accomplished by critiquing the Free Will Defense at various impotent points in the argument in order to identify this defense as a sufficient response to the logical problem of evil.

After a brief introduction, Plantinga affirmed that his undertaking was in contrast to the traditional Free Will Theodicy. The function of a theodicy was to answer the problem of evil with a specific reason stating why God permits it. According to Plantinga, he did not desire to set forth a particular reason for the existence of evil; rather he preferred to demonstrate the logical possibility and probability of the coexistence of God and evil. Thus, Plantinga referred to his argument against the atheist as the Free Will

Defense. The defense's nature suggests that the premises and argument only need be consistent and non-contradictory. Whether or not the propositions are in fact known to be true is irrelevant to the validity of the defense. Therefore, Plantinga repeated the claim that in order to vindicate the Free Will Defense, he only needed to prove the consistency of his argument void of a specific reason concerning God's permitting evil.¹

Before Plantinga fully introduced his concept of the Free Will Defense, he argued for the consistency and non-contradiction of the theist's affirmation of (1) an omnipotent, omniscient, and omni-benevolent God in accordance with (2) the existence of evil. According to the atheologian, this claim conveyed an explicit contradiction. Plantinga contested that the atheist's proposition which stated that (1) would eliminate every evil state of affairs must be necessarily true in order for the theist to hold an explicitly contradictory belief. Therefore, this atheistic claim inferred that good may only exist in the absence of evil. The atheist must affirm this implication due to their denial of the existence of a wholly good God in the midst of a world of evil, pain, and suffering. Plantinga further solidified this point illustrating how some good states of affairs may only obtain as long as evil obtains as well. Ultimately, the atheist's accusation is not a necessarily true proposition, and thus it fails to properly indict the theist with an explicit contradiction.

As far as the claim to the theist's propositions being implicitly inconsistent, Plantinga followed a similar route in dismantling the atheologian's criticism. Here is where the waters became muddy within Plantinga's defense. Previously, in order to demonstrate how the theologian's beliefs concerning (1) and (2) were not contradictory, he indicated the logical possibility of the existence of good without the necessary absence

of evil. Thus, the existence of a wholly good God was compatible with the reality of evil. However, as Plantinga proceeded to refute the idea of inconsistency within the theist's claims, his argument slipped into the very thing which he intended to avoid. Earlier as noted, Plantinga articulated the differences between a theodicy and a defense. In a theodicy, the agent attempts to specify the reason why God permits evil; however, in a defense the defender only needs to identify the logical possibility and consistency of the propositions in order to validate the argument. With this contrast in mind, one may notice how Plantinga overstepped his self-outlined boundaries when he asserted the premise, "(22) God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so."ⁱⁱ He enlisted this statement in order to show the consistency of the theist's argument. Plantinga viewed this claim as a possible state of affairs which was necessary to demonstrate the logical validity of (1) and (2).

However, where does Plantinga draw his conclusion that God must have a *good* reason for permitting evil? A statement such as this demonstrates the consistency of the theist's claims only upon the basis of the truthfulness of such a given reason. As noted above, in a defense one need only show the possibility of a certain state of affairs. Plantinga succeeded in his goal but at the expense of sustaining his distance from a theodicy. The statement which conveys that God has a *good* reason for permitting evil is a specific reason in and of itself. Although the particularities of the proposition may be further developed, Plantinga's declaration attempts to "justify the ways of God to man."ⁱⁱⁱ The fact that God's reason for permitting evil is *good*, engages into the discussion of *why* God permits evil. Point in fact, Plantinga may only avoid weaving in and out of a Free Will Theodicy as long as he disassociates God from every active role in creation. For

instance, if the proposition communicated that God creates a world containing evil without emphasizing the he has a reason for doing so, then the premise relieves the Free Will Defender from becoming specific in terms of explaining this *reason* with respect to consistency or contradiction. However, once the Free Will Defender responds to the atheologian with the idea of (22) an immediate commentary is needed on justification of this unknown *good* reason in order to enable the possibility of logically considering the proposition as a sufficient premise to demonstrate the consistency of the theist's presuppositions. These criticisms are not intended to disapprove of Plantinga's argument for the consistency of the theologian's claims. Instead, the evaluation of Plantinga's ability to remain separated from displaying a theodicy is impossible due to the fact that any given *reason* is a reason on its own. Furthermore, Plantinga's claim denoted a *good* reason which is much different than an arbitrary *reason*. Moreover, a *good* reason is a specific reason with a descriptive nature loaded with unexplained presuppositions despite the fact that there may be opportunity to further decipher what makes the reason *good*.

Plantinga was not ignorant towards this type of criticism of the Free Will Defense. He acknowledged the automatic apprehension one may have in an attempt to use such an ambiguous argument for pastoral counseling or theological comfort. According to Plantinga, even the Free Will Theodicy in which the theist delves deeper into the specification of God's reason for permitting evil fails to meet the emotional needs of true victims of evil, pain, and suffering. Both theistic approaches to the problem of evil address the same issue across a broad plane. Hence, neither argument satisfies the longing for an answer as to why certain individuals suffer, and are the recipients of varying amounts of evil. This fact admitted by its own proponent carries significant

weight in accepting the sufficiency of the argument. A defense based upon a logically possible premise which offers no gratification to the reality of the issue, seems to be nothing more than a reluctant approach to sooth an issue that is instinctively confrontational. Although Plantinga failed to withhold a simple defense, still he succeeded by the methods chosen to prove there is no contradiction or inconsistency in the theist's claims.

Next, he further characterized the Free Will Defense. According to Plantinga, the Free Will Defense functioned under a particular explanation of what constituted moral good and moral evil. Supposedly, in order for good or evil to be *moral*, a person must be free to either execute or not execute any given action without the presence of any causal law or condition which might determine his choice.^{iv} Moral good may only exist while the creature is free to exercise its will in a good or evil action. Therefore, God creates creatures capable of freely choosing to go right or wrong with respect to any action. In addition, Plantinga introduced a second kind of evil, namely natural evil. He defined natural evil as "any other kind of evil."^v However, Plantinga reserved this discussion for later in his book. In light of the two sets of evil, he began to argue for the vindication of the Free Will Defense anticipating two main objections.

First, Plantinga referenced his previous conclusions which conveyed that it was logically possible for God to create a world containing moral good only by creating a world which also contained moral evil. He identified the first objection to this view as causal determinism and freedom. Despite certain arguments for the compatibility of determinism and free will, Plantinga denied its credibility due to the fact that free will is only significantly free so long as the person has the ability to refrain from any given

action at any given time. Thus, these two factors were not compatible. The atheologian posed the second objection which stated it is possible that God in his omnipotence can create a world containing no evil. In addition, the atheist posited that God in his omnibenevolence would have created the best possible of all worlds. According to Plantinga, the Free Will Defender responds to this claim questioning the ability to measure a “best possible world”. For every best possible world, there is a better possible world imaginable.^{vi} With respect to the context of the Free Will Defense, this debate was irrelevant to the overall issue. Plantinga argued that the Free Will Defender does not hold that God could have actualized any world he pleased. Furthermore, Plantinga also affirmed God’s inability to create a world containing moral good void of moral evil. He supported both of these premises by presenting an explanation of God actualizing states of affairs rather than creating them. According to the atheologian, if God could create any possible world he pleased, then it follows that he would have created a world containing only moral good. Plantinga answered “no” to both of these claims through establishing an indepth analysis of states of affairs and the nature of essences.

God does not create states of affairs; he only actualizes them. Therefore, God creates the world, but does not create the states of affairs that consist in the existence of the world. The result of his creative activity is the actualization of the certain states of affairs for any given creature.^{vii} At this point, Plantinga has not refuted the atheistic claim that God could have created a world only containing moral good. The atheologian may attest that God in his omniscience would only actualize the certain states of affairs that would involve free creatures refraining from ever doing evil. Once again, Plantinga was not unaware of the probability of this accusation. In response to the atheologian, he

introduced the concept of transworld depravity. Plantinga defined transworld depravity as the possibility that a person will go wrong performing at least one action as a free creature. He continued to propose that it is possible that every person suffers from transworld depravity. Here, Plantinga's presentation of this idea becomes hazy. First, his affirmation that some people suffer from this flaw is plausible; however, he assumed too readily that it was possible that every person suffered from transworld depravity. Once he arrived at this conclusion, he remained steadfast upon the concept that everyone was possibly tainted by transworld depravity, thus rendering God unable to create a world without moral evil. However, this conclusion only survives under the broadly logical understanding of a universal application of transworld depravity of which Plantinga does not provide sufficient reasoning.

Subsequent to the unfolding of this idea, he distinguished between transworld depravity and total depravity.^{viii} Total depravity differs from Plantinga's concept through its reference to the affirmation of a theological sort, namely the doctrine of original sin. Unlike transworld depravity, total depravity has a referent for its reasoning. Plantinga never gave a referent for his automatic assertion of the possible universal scope of his concept. Therefore, the Free Will Defender is left only to make conclusions based upon a hypothetical situation which only works if the opponent complies to assign transworld depravity to all creatures for no logical reason other than persuasion. In order to solidify his argument for transworld depravity, Plantinga attached this concept to the essential properties of every actualized creature.^{ix} Therefore, the essence contains the transworld depravity which is responsible for the actualized creature's wrong action. This notion seemed to better undergird Plantinga's position; however, this proposition questions the

validity of free will. If the essence suffers from transworld depravity, then it follows that the significantly free creature is determined by its essence to perform at least one moral evil action. In other words, a person is not free to refrain from wrongly performing at least one action. If this point is actual, then transworld depravity is incompatible with the Free Will Defense. Thus, the ambiguity of transworld depravity delivered a weak final blow to the atheologist's contestation of the theist's claims. In conclusion, Plantinga declared the vindication of his Free Will Defense based upon the possibility that all essences suffer from transworld depravity. The failure to substantiate his final argument concerning the uncertainty of this concept leaves the defense unconvincing.

After his personal affirmation of the Free Will Defense, Plantinga determined to demonstrate the probability of the existence of God with respect to the amount of evil in the world. Plantinga refuted the atheistic attack rather quickly with the aid of his Free Will Defense. Similar to the illustration of the "best possible worlds", an attempt to measure evil was futile and irrelevant to the probability of the existence of (1) and (2). However, another instance of vagueness in Plantinga's Free Will Defense appeared in relation to his understanding of natural evil. Natural evil included properties such as hurricanes, floods, viruses, and diseases. Here, Plantinga drew from St. Augustine's teachings concerning the source of these evils. In agreement with Augustine, Plantinga assigned the cause of all natural evil to Satan and all other free non-human persons.^x In addition, Plantinga asserted that all nonhuman persons suffer from transworld depravity. However, the designation of all natural evil to the activity of free nonhuman persons is not a logical conclusion. This concept is a purely theological premise. Once again, Plantinga failed to sustain a proper defense in contrast to a theodicy. Again, Plantinga

posed this claim without providing any reasonable evidence to comply with his premise. Though this thought may be possible, once the defense treads the waters of theodicy, the argument requires a reasonable referent in order for the proposition to be sufficient.

Plantinga's failure to supply a defense rather than a theodicy demonstrated the breakdown in the ability to remain arbitrary in association with substantial theology to answer the logical problem of evil. One may find evidence of this fact by noting at various locales in the argument where Plantinga resorted to reliance upon theological presuppositions such as God's *good* reason for permitting evil and the satanic source of natural evil. Also, his inability to give reasonable evidence for conformity to his propositions in relation to the acceptance of transworld depravity as a universal trait of all free creatures as well as to his charge to Satan and all nonhuman persons as the cause of all other evils, displayed the deficiency of the Free Will Defense's ability to solve the logical problem of evil.

In conclusion, Plantinga's Free Will Defense was convincing at times, yet lacked the potential to solve the logical problem of evil apart from theological analysis. Since his argument entailed various theological presuppositions, Plantinga ought to have enlisted much more from biblical theology in order to present a case which was not based upon philosophical uncertainties. His attempt to solve a primarily theological problem by means of only drawing from philosophical premises which contained hints of Christian doctrine prevented the defense from being a sufficient response to the atheologist's objection.

NOTES

i. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1977), 54.

ii. *Ibid.*, 26.

iii. *Ibid.*, 27.

iv. *Ibid.*, 29.

v. *Ibid.*, 30.

vi. *Ibid.*, 34.

vii. *Ibid.*, 39.

viii. *Ibid.*, 48.

ix. *Ibid.*, 53.

x. *Ibid.*, 58-9.