

Note for Philosophy 1

Summary of David Lewis, “Evil for Freedom’s Sake?”

[[These notes are intended to help people engage with this reading, not to substitute for your own reading of the text and critical engagement with it.]]

Question: Is the existence of God as traditionally conceived compatible with the existence of evil in the world? God as traditionally conceived is omnipotent, morally perfect, and perfectly benevolent. Being omnipotent, God can prevent any evil. Why then doesn’t He?

I.

Let’s confine ourselves to a part of the problem. There is natural evil, e.g. harm from earthquake, flood and disease, and evil-doing. Is the existence of an omnipotent and perfectly good God compatible with evil-doing? We consider the proposal that the best world God can create includes creatures with free will and that with free will comes evil-doing.

II.

Our task is not merely to show that it is logically possible that God and evil-doing coexist but to show that this is a plausible, believable surmise.

III. Significant Freedom

Suggestion: God could create people like us with free will but arrange the world so that any evil choices such people make are harmless. This is the playpen universe. Given this possibility, an omnipotent, perfectly benevolent God could create a world with free will but without any significant evil-doing.

Objection: Such freedom would not be significant, and significant freedom is more valuable. When one has significant freedom, one has the choice either to refrain from evil-doing or to bring about significant evil.

IV. Compatibilism

Compatibilism is the doctrine that determinism (all events including human choices are fixed in advance by initial conditions and the basic physical laws) is compatible with free will.

Incompatibilism is the denial of compatibilism. If compatibilism holds, then God has the option of setting the initial conditions and the laws so that people have free will but never exercise it by choosing evil. So if the project of reconciling the hypothesis that the traditional God exists with the existence of evil-doing in the created world is to succeed, incompatibilism must hold. So for the sake of the argument, let’s assume incompatibilism holds.

The tentative suggestion then is that if the best world God can create includes significant free will, then God cannot guarantee that evil-doing does not occur. With incompatibilist free will in place, whether there is evil-doing depends on us (on our free choices), not on God. Lewis: “We cannot blame God because He has not actualized significant freedom without evil-doing. He could not have actualized that: He had no option that implied it.” No matter what sort of creatures He creates, with whatever traits, if He gives them free will, there is the chance they will abuse it.

V. God the Unlucky

However, it seems this tentative suggestion floated in section IV cannot be right. We are imagining God as in effect gambling when He creates the world with creatures with free will. As things transpire, He loses the gamble. But perhaps the best option God has, involves some gamble of this sort, so the best God can do is to pick the most favorable gamble, which He must have done.—At this point the tentative suggestion comes undone. We have a contradiction. Being omniscient, God cannot be consistently supposed to be a gambler. He must know in advance how the gamble will turn out. But if the gamble turns out badly, knowing this in advance, He does not choose it. So in an incompatibilist universe with free will, there will not be evil-doing, if the universe is created by an omnipotent and maximally benevolent God. In Lewis’s words: “Suppose for reductio that God actualizes a certain option O; and O turns out badly; and the

prospect for some other option is better than O when O turns out badly; so He prefers some other option to O. Then He actualizes another option instead of O. Contradiction.”

Perhaps the argument in the above paragraph is too swift. Perhaps God chooses with foreknowledge but does not regret His actual choice, even if things seem to turn out badly, because any other option He might have chosen would have been worse. How might this be? (Another possibility to consider: Maybe God chooses without foreknowledge. Maybe there is no avoiding creation as choice under uncertainty, because there is no fact of the matter as to what a person with free choice will choose prior to his actual choice. But then the choice to gamble in creating a universe looks very risky and threatens the claim that freedom is very valuable, worth the risk.)

VI. Molinism

Molinism is so-called because it was affirmed by the medieval theologian de Molina. The doctrine says God’s foreknowledge includes knowledge of what would have been chosen (a) by free creatures who actually exist in their actual circumstances, (b) by these free creatures in all other possible circumstances they might have faced, and (c) by all possible but nonfactual creatures in any circumstances they would have faced. The b and c knowledge is called “middle knowledge.” God also has foreknowledge of any indeterministic natural processes in the world. If we suppose God’s omniscience includes middle knowledge, then God does not have to gamble in creating a world, He creates with certain knowledge of what will ensue, and so we are back to the thought that the proposition that the traditional God exists is incompatible with the existence of evil-doing.

However, Molinism opens up another line of thought. Maybe there is no possibility that creatures with free will will never do evil. Lewis: “If so, evil would be the inescapable price of freedom.” This is the hypothesis of depravity. “God has no option such that, if He were to actualize it, there would then exist significantly free creatures and none of them would ever do evil.” Molinism plus depravity yields the result that God can create in full knowledge of all that will unfold and all that would unfold if He were to create a different world. He creates a world with significantly free creatures who will do choose to do evil, as He foresees. But He has no better option. He chooses the best.

Lewis raises a difficulty about Molinism that I pass over (on pages 117-118).

VII. Selective Freedom

So far, Molinism plus depravity enables a reconciliation between the claims that (1) human creatures created by God do a lot of evil and (2) the world is created by a God who is omnipotent and perfectly benevolent. Lewis raises a difficulty for this resolution of the puzzle.

If Molinism holds, and God knows in advance exactly when any person will choose evil, why not take away the person’s free will on just those occasions? People still have free will, but only sometimes—on those occasions when they will exercise it innocently. If this is the right way to view the situation, then we are back to our initial puzzle, and the reconciliation proposed in the previous paragraph falls apart.

The depravity hypothesis in effect denies this can happen, but this seems open to challenge. The fan of depravity might hold that some person is disposed, e.g., to sin on just the first of the days on which he has free will. Giving the person selective freedom then is not a possibility, because the only way to prevent this person from sinning is to deny him free will all the days of his life. And the same goes for any creatures with free will God might create. But the more one thinks about this possibility, the weirder it seems. It remains a logical possibility, just as it is logically possible that (1) and (2) are reconciled by good and evil being very different than we now think they are, so babies being tortured slowly over hot coals and genocide and cruel brutal dictatorship turn out really to be good not bad. But mere logical possibility does not yield a plausible reconciliation; more is needed (see section II above). So set this possibility aside as no help to the reconciliation project.

Is the selective freedom gambit vulnerable to any good objection? If there is a decisive objection, then we are back to the idea that Molinism plus depravity yields a successful reconciliation between (1) and (2).

On pages 120-127 Lewis canvasses several objections to selective freedom. He finds one objection that cannot so far as he can see be decisively rejected. It cannot be decisively supported either; so we end in a standoff. We aren't in a position to know whether, if we initially suppose God to exist, His involvement in the production of evil by human choices gives us decisive reason to reject the initial hypothesis that the world is created and sustained by a God as traditionally conceived, with all of the traditional perfections.

First objection: Selective freedom would involve deception on God's part. A perfect God cannot be a deceiver, so He cannot bring about selective freedom. That is, it would be contrary to His essential nature to deceive. Reply: Selective freedom could be brought about without deception.

Second objection: Selective freedom would involve God arbitrarily intervening in human affairs, but a just God would follow a fair policy that treats all like cases alike. Reply: The situations in which God would temporarily withdraw freedom differ from the cases in which God allows freedom—the former are just the cases in which sin would occur.

Third objection: Allowing freedom across the board, even if it is abused, results in an overall better state of affairs that selective freedom could bring about. Reply: It is not plausible, for example, to hold that the world in which Stalin and Hitler have the opportunity to perpetrate grave crimes involving the murder of millions is better than the world in which, by selective freedom strategies, the crimes are not allowed to occur. The objection imputes an implausibly high value to freedom on the occasions in which it is abused.

Fourth objection and reply: Irrelevant to our investigation, because the objection is driven by a conception of God that is untraditional and lacks the full complement of perfections.

Final objection: "If God resolves to leave me free when and only when He knows that I would not misuse my freedom to do evil, then whatever 'freedom' he sometimes gives me is bogus freedom" (p. 121). If I have real, non-bogus freedom, then it is an entertainable hypothesis that on some occasion on which I have selective freedom I abuse it. But then we are entertaining the hypothesis that God makes a mistake (gives me freedom when as He thinks I will not abuse it, when in fact I will), which makes no sense.

Reply to final objection: "Not so, or not indisputably so... Counterfactual suppositions contrary to essence are sometimes entertainable" (p. 122). This argument is developed in a discussion on pages 123-124 that I am not going to rehearse,

As Lewis notes, the issue raised here was discussed by medieval theologians. Is Divine foreknowledge compatible with freedom? If God is infallible and knows that in the next minute I will choose evil, am I really free not to choose evil in the next minute?

One view is Yes, I am really free. If I choose evil, I bring it about that God, being infallible, always knew I would choose evil. Or perhaps if I were to choose evil, then God would be mistaken (but I won't in fact choose evil and God is not mistaken, given the choice I actually make).

Another view is No, God's foreknowledge limits my freedom. If it is certain in advance that on this occasion for choice I will not choose evil, then I can't choose evil on this occasion of choice.

Lewis suggests we consider what we would say about a very good human predictor of people's choices. Suppose the predictor predicts that you will take a \$1000 gift you might instead have declined. Suppose we ask: what would have been the case if you had declined the gift? Lewis—

that depends on how the predictor operates. If he is a time traveler, watching me make my choice at time T2, then traveling back to the past at T1 to make his prediction, then Lewis thinks we should hold fixed his foreknowledge in evaluating the counterfactual. (If God's foreknowledge works like this, then any selective freedom would indeed be bogus freedom and selective freedom poses no threat to the reconciliation via Molinism plus depravity.) If on the other hand the predictor has very good knowledge of the past and the laws, so at T1 he is caused by the evidence he has to make his prediction that you will take the \$1000 at T2 and you are caused by the very same factors that led to his precondition to make the choice to take the \$1000, then, thinks Lewis, we want to hold the past fixed in evaluating the counterfactual, and we should say that if you chose not to take the \$1000, you would have brought it about that the predictor errs. If God's foreknowledge worked in the time traveler way, then the final objection stands. If God's foreknowledge worked in the expert observer way, then the reply to the final objection stands and we are left with no reconciliation of evil-doing with the traditional conception of God. But God's ways won't be much like either of these ways, so we don't know how to assess the reply to the final objection and we are left in a standoff.

Here Lewis relies on his theory of counterfactuals. What makes it true or false that, for example, if Bush had not initiated the invasion of Iraq, more people queried in opinion polls today would approve his conduct of office? Lewis's proposal is that we evaluate counterfactuals by asking, what would have been the case if the antecedent of the counterfactual conditional had been true? All kinds of things might have happened if the antecedent had been true. Maybe absent the war, the global warming issue would have come to center stage, and if it had, Bush's poll numbers would be lower than they now are. Or perhaps absent the war, terrorist attacks would have occurred in LA, and Bush's forthright handling of these crises would have caused his popularity as measured in opinion polls to soar. Or perhaps Martians intent on seeing to it that regime change occurred in Iraq before 2005 would have invaded earth in 2004 if Bush had not invaded Iraq by then, and in that case, Bush's popularity would have plummeted (or soared, maybe). Obviously we don't treat all possibilities on a par in evaluating counterfactuals.

Think of the way the world actually goes as the actual world. Think of other ways things might have been as alternate possible worlds. Each possible world is a complete story of how things might have been. According to Lewis, a counterfactual is true just in case, in any possible world in which the antecedent is true, and this world resembles the actual world as much as possible given the truth of the antecedent, the consequent of the conditional is true. If kangaroos had no tails, they would topple over. This is true just in case "in any possible state of affairs in which kangaroos have no tails, and which resembles our actual state of affairs as much as kangaroos having no tails permits it to, the kangaroos topple over" (Lewis, from his writing on counterfactuals). In evaluating similarity of possible worlds, we give first priority to continuity in the laws of nature and second priority to continuity in empirical facts.

Now go back to the selective freedom idea, which supposes that God can give people selective freedom and obtain the benefits of human freedom or free will without any evil-doing. Suppose God gives me freedom and I choose well on some occasion, what do we say of the counterfactuals, (A) If I had chosen badly, God would have known this all along and so not have given me freedom, and (B) If I had chosen badly, God would have made an error in giving me freedom on this occasion. If the first counterfactual comes out true, then the selective freedom idea does collapse, and if the second counterfactual is the one that comes out true, then the selective freedom idea is still viable. So says Lewis. (As he notes, "the logical situation is confusing because it involves a counterfactual within a counterfactual"—see the discussion on pages 123-124.)