

FREE WILL REIMAGINED

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God is omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent, which means he is all-knowing, all-good, and all-powerful, respectively. A common objection to the existence of God is the existence of evil, because it implies that God is not all-good. However, the problem of evil can be explained by his desire for humans to be free moral agents. This paper will discuss how free will justifies the existence of evil and how this kind of free will can occur alongside a limitless God. These points will be understood by examining Immanuel Kant's views on moral freedom, J. L. Mackie's objections, Richard Swinburne's defense of free will, John Hick's arguments about divine guidance, and how these theories relate to modern monotheistic religions.



One of the common beliefs among theist philosophers and many religions is that God is omniscient (all-knowing), omnibenevolent (all-loving) and omnipotent (all-powerful). In J.L. Mackie's *Evil and Omnipotence*, Mackie argues that if God exists, he can only possess two of these three properties.¹ He reasons that if God were all-knowing he would know how to prevent evil, if he were all-loving he would want to prevent evil, and he could do both if he were all-powerful. Mackie concludes that the existence of evil suggests that God is either unwilling or unable to prevent it or he is unaware of its future emergence.²

This is a compelling argument that some theist philosophers like Richard Swinburne, a professor of Philosophy of Christian Religion at Oxford University, try to make sense of from

¹ J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence." *Mind*, vol. 64, no. 254, April 1955, 200-202. *Oxford University Press*, doi:10.1093/mind/lxiv.254.200.

² Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," 203.

a theological perspective. Swinburne partially accepts this concept in his defense of free will. He argues in his book, *The Existence of God*, that God is omniscient with one limitation: he does not know the future acts of a free agent.³ Therefore, God is unable to interfere in free will because he does not contain the necessary foreknowledge.⁴

Several concerns come to mind with this perspective. If God is unable to perceive the future, then he cannot be considered all-knowing because this means he lacks knowledge surrounding future events. This absence of foreknowledge conflicts with how most major religions view God. For example, Jews, Muslims, and Christians all have prophecies written into their holy texts. For many theists, the fulfillment of prophecy seen in many religions acts as evidence that God is able to predict what people will choose. In the Old Testament, for example, God warned the ten tribes of Israel that they would succumb to immorality and sin upon arriving at the Promised Land, and they did.⁵⁶ A Christian then would be unable to simultaneously accept Swinburne's interpretation of free will and the teachings of the bible which include God's predictions about the future. Therefore, it is a logical contradiction to believe in the bible, including God's ability to see what will happen, while also believing that humans have free will due to God's lack of foresight.

Another concern is that if God is unable to see the future and thus cannot control it, he is not only limited in knowledge, but in power as well. Swinburne's God cannot control the future due to a lack of knowledge.⁴ If God is unable to see or change the future, and unable to know and do everything, then he is neither omniscient nor omnipotent. If God has these limitations on his

³ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 210.

⁴ Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion. 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 1993, 33-34.

⁵ *King James Bible*, Isaiah 7:8

⁶ *King James Bible*, Deuteronomy 28.

power and knowledge, can he truly be the same all-powerful and all-knowing God that many theists perceive him to be?

One response to the stated problems is to view free will as God's choice rather than as a limitation of his perfect properties. Observe the following example: A man comes to a fortune-teller who is never wrong and asks if he will receive a promotion at work. She responds with confirmation that he will be given one the next day. She accurately describes the event, predicting the exact time, location and conversation that is to take place. The fortune teller does not exert a direct influence over the future, but instead views it from the stance of an observer. In this example, the fortune teller is analogous to an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-loving God who consciously chooses to view the future passively without interfering in it. This version of God has the ability to know and change the future but decides not to, consequently allowing us to exercise our free will. It is also more consistent with the all-seeing God depicted in religious texts. Moreover, this God is also omnibenevolent because, according to the free will defense, which is employed by thinkers like St. Augustine, if God were to thwart evil actions and outcomes, he would be interfering with free will.⁷ Based on this line of reasoning, God can be omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient, despite the existence of evil, because of his deliberate plan for free will.

Mackie argues that because people can choose good on multiple occasions, God could logically allow people to choose good on every occasion.⁸ Since this is not the case, this means that God is either unable to force people to always choose good or He is not all-loving and all-knowing. In addition, Immanuel Kant argues that freedom does not exist unless there is an ability to choose evil and that people are unable to choose evil or good consistently.⁹ Therefore, whether a person is morally corrupt or

⁷ Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2001, 40-45.

⁸ Burgess-Jackson, *Free Will, Omnipotence, and the Problem of Evil*, 182-183.

⁹ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 533-534.

commendable depends on the frequency with which they consciously choose good or evil. Even though there is no logical contradiction to Mackie's argument that God should only allow positive choices, Kant would argue that without the option to choose evil, there can be no freedom;¹⁰ God would have to force the consistently good choices that Mackie is referring to. By removing the possibility of evil, God would be infringing on free will. Ultimately, free will ceases to exist in the face of explicit divine intervention.

Another compelling aspect of free will is how God balances his desire for us to be free agents with the expectation that we will eventually seek faith in him of our own volition. The intention that God has for people to find him, understand him, and worship him is taught in many monotheistic religions. However, free will and God's divine desire have potential to conflict. According to John Hick, if people come to the realization that God is, "...the infinite divine being and glory, goodness and love,"¹¹ then they would no longer have free will. In other words, if God were to reveal himself and make his presence ubiquitous in the world, evidence of his existence would be disambiguated. People would no longer need to worship God or find him through their own accord, because his existence would be interpreted as truth. Challenging the existence of God, if his being were universally observable, would be a denial of reality. However, by disguising himself from plain sight and attenuating the transparency of his existence, God's ambiguous nature prevents atheism and theism from being definitively proven. This preserves free will because logical arguments can be made for and against theism and beliefs can be chosen without divine coercion. Therefore, according to Hick, God has to hide his true

¹⁰ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 533.

¹¹ Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 33-35.

nature from society so that people can exercise their free will and seek him through their own accord.¹²

Similar to Hick, who advocates that the revelation of God's true nature (revealed through his obvious existence) would hinder free will,¹³ Swinburne likewise argues that a verbal message from God is sufficient to diminish free will.¹⁴ If God gave verbal confirmation about the truth of reality, including the consequences of our actions and how to rectify them, then it is likely that people would have no choice but to accept his existence and the potency of free will would consequently diminish. Take radios, for example: if everyone in the world were to have a radio that they would listen to daily, it would be illogical and unlikely for someone to assert that the message delivered through the radio does not exist. In a similar way, Swinburne posits that if everyone were to receive consistent verbal direction from God, it would be illogical and unlikely to be an atheist or to doubt his abilities. His verbal descriptions of precise causes and effects would confirm his powers and diminish doubt. The belief in God would become universal, and as a result counter one's will to choose atheism. Therefore, according to Swinburne, the ability to seek God without his guidance is a necessary component of free will.

Swinburne claims that if God came out and revealed everything, from the true nature of reality to the purpose of evil, this revelation would tamper with free will.¹⁵ Take a thief for example: part of his thrill is trying to get away with stealing. If the probability of his success were minimal, the thief probably would not even make an attempt to begin with. Now consider that God tells the criminal that if he is to proceed with his crime, then he will be imprisoned for five years. Swinburne argues that such verbal guidance would hinder the burglar's ability to choose freely

¹² Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 33-35.

¹³ Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 33-35.

¹⁴ Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 34.

¹⁵ Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 34.

because he would be influenced by the definite consequence of incarceration as revealed to him by God.¹⁶ Therefore, Swinburne's point emphasizes that in order to have free will, humans should gain wisdom through the process of induction, rather than gaining knowledge through persistent and explicit revelation from God. This approach to learning requires humans to be morally free agents. Without free agency, free will is not possible.

Hick and Swinburne are correct in asserting that if God were to provide too much divine guidance, as discussed in Swinburne's idea of concise verbal guidance and Hick's too-obvious God, we would no longer have free will. Hick extends this argument by stating that the present purpose of evil is that adversity often leads to moral learning and growth: "A world without problems, difficulties, perils, and hardships would be morally static. For moral and spiritual growth comes through response to challenges; and in a paradise there would be no challenges." Therefore, while Swinburne posits that verbal guidance about the nature of evil would inhibit true moral agency, Hick on the other hand advocates that evil serves an important purpose; without evil, there can be no spiritual growth and thus it is necessary for free will.

Kant claims that humans will always be forced to choose evil because human nature prohibits them from only choosing good.¹⁷ It seems cruel for God to provide ways of understanding the consequences of evil, while simultaneously instilling within us a nature that forces us to sometimes choose evil depending on our circumstances. According to Kant, a moral evil would still exist in the world depicted by Swinburne, where God outlines what we should do to avoid pain and evil. Therefore, Hick's idea of creating a worthwhile purpose for evil seems plausible.

¹⁶ Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 34.

¹⁷ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 534.

In Swinburne's world the consequences of people's actions would already be known as a result of divine guidance. Considering that God's guidance is assumed to never be wrong, the thief in the previously stated example would know that if he were to steal after God informed him that he would end up in jail, then indeed, the thief would go to jail. Therefore, in this context, humans would always know the consequences of their errors, without actually having to make those mistakes in the first place. As a result, they would be stripped of the opportunity to learn from the immoral actions they commit, because God would already have revealed the outcome beforehand. Without the process of learning, the result might serve less of a teachable purpose. In such a world, evil has no function other than to solely elicit suffering. However if free will does exist, then humans must have the option to choose evil, or as Kant asserts, we cannot refrain from occasionally being immoral.¹⁸ Creating a world where immorality has no benefits, such as moral growth from suffering, seems unjust and inconsistent for an omnibenevolent God. This is because being able to experience the consequences, as opposed to receiving divine verbal confirmation of what is to happen, allows humans to learn more profound lessons of a higher caliber.

God only has two options: either to remove evil and thus free will or to take an uninvolved approach where people can learn from their suffering and choose to seek him of their own volition. If moral responsibility is to be meaningful, then free will must exist. Thus, personal experience with evil provides humans an opportunity to make good and bad moral decisions. Making these sorts of decisions is an act of free will, which can further promote personal growth and allow the individual to seek faith in an omnibenevolent, omniscient and omnipotent God.

As an omniscient, omnibenevolent and omnipotent being, God is expected to be able to see and do everything,

¹⁸ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 534.

especially that which can be understood within the parameters of human intelligence. God's inability to know the future, as Mackie and Swinburne describe, conflicts with the monotheistic teachings that also stress the existence of free will. From Swinburne's perspective, this is logically inconsistent since any evidence of divine guidance would create bias and hinder free will. Thus, God is indeed able to see and change the future, but in order to allow for the existence of free moral agents, he consciously decides not to interfere. He allows evil to play an uncomfortable but purposeful role in humanity that encourages spiritual and moral growth and acts as a prerequisite for free will.

If humans were to comply with their nature by choosing evil but at the same time were unable to learn from it because of access to clear verbal foresight from God, then human existence might prove to be very frustrating. While the natural tendency would be to experience evil, humans would not be able to learn any moral lessons from those experiences because they would be made aware of the consequences prior to their occurrence. However, one of the benefits of making mistakes and committing wrongful acts is having the opportunity to experience the consequences and subsequently learn what is right. Seeing as divine guidance would reveal the outcome of an act prior to its manifestation, committing the act would no longer provide people with any more insight than what they had before. Not only is evil necessary for free will to exist, but it allows us to grow spiritually and forces us to seek God independently without being coerced by him. Being able to triumph over evil and learn from our mistakes is a virtue that gives us a reason to live— theists and atheists alike.

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