

IS GOD “SIGNIFICANTLY FREE?”

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In an impressive series of books and articles, Alvin Plantinga has developed challenging new versions of two much discussed pieces of philosophical theology: the free will defense and the ontological argument.¹ His treatment of both subjects has provoked a tremendous amount of critical comment. What has not been generally noticed², however, is that *when taken together*, Plantinga’s views on these two subjects lead to a very serious problem in philosophical theology. The premises of his version of the ontological argument, when combined with the presuppositions of the free will defense, appear to entail that God is not free to choose between good and evil and thus is not “good” in the distinctively moral sense of this word. In the present paper, I shall explain how this problem arises, and explore two different ways of trying to deal with it.

I

According to the free will defense, God can’t prevent human beings from doing evil without depriving them of what Plantinga calls “significant freedom”—of the freedom to choose between good and evil.³ But if human beings were not significantly free in this sense, they would not be responsible for their moral choices, and a distinctive kind of goodness—moral goodness—could not be realized in their lives. Of course, many human beings abuse their freedom, and the result is a fearful amount of moral evil. But many others choose good over evil, and enough moral goodness is realized in their lives to outweigh all the evil that human beings do.⁴

Significant freedom is thus asserted to be a necessary condition of moral goodness. But what, exactly, are we to understand by “freedom” in this context? In *God, Freedom, and Evil*, Plantinga gives the following answer:

If a person is free with respect to a given action, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won’t. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it. GFE, p. 29.

As Plantinga defines it, then, significant freedom is not compatible with deter-



minism. The reason for insisting on this point in the context of a free will defense should be clear. If a compatibilist analysis of freedom and responsibility were acceptable, it would be open to an opponent of the free will defense to argue that God does not have to permit moral evil in order to create significantly free creatures who are capable of moral goodness. For example, He could instill in each of His creatures an irresistible impulse to do what is right and to refrain from doing evil, without thereby diminishing their freedom and responsibility.

With these points in mind, I turn briefly to Plantinga's defense of the ontological argument. The feature of the argument that is relevant to our discussion is Plantinga's account of "maximal greatness" and "maximal excellence." Plantinga offers the following analysis of these concepts:

(27) A Being has maximal greatness in a given world only if it has maximal excellence in every world.

(28) A being has maximal excellence in a given world only if it has omniscience, omnipotence, and moral perfection in that world. GFE, p. 108

Given (27) and (28), Plantinga argues that if it is possible that there is a being possessing maximal greatness, then such a being must actually exist.⁵

Now it is easy to see that, on the presuppositions of the free will defense, the God of the ontological argument is neither significantly free nor morally perfect. For suppose that God exists and is a being with maximal greatness. Taken together, (27) and (28) entail that God is *morally perfect in every possible world*. Since moral perfection is incompatible with wrongdoing, it follows that there is no possible world in which God performs a wrong action. In other words, God's nature is such that it is logically impossible for Him to perform a wrong action. He is determined—in the strongest possible sense of "determined"—not to perform any wrong actions. Thus it seems that, on Plantinga's analysis of significant freedom, God is not significantly free. And since *moral* goodness presupposes significant freedom, it also follows that God is not morally good, which is as near as makes no matter to saying that God is not morally perfect!

The problem, in short, is that the presuppositions of the free will defense entail that moral goodness cannot be an essential property of any person, whereas the premises of the ontological argument entail that moral goodness is an essential property of at least one person, *viz.* God. Thus it seems that a theist cannot consistently give the free will defense if he accepts the ontological argument, and *vice versa*.

It's worth noting in passing that even if God were not *significantly* free, He might still be free with regard to some actions. If it would not be wrong for God to perform an act, and also not wrong for God not to perform it, then, for all I

have shown, He might be free either to perform that act or to refrain from performing it. One recent author⁶ has exploited this point in connection with God's freedom to decide which possible world to actualize. If, among the worlds God could have actualized, there is no one *best* world, then God's essential perfection does not completely determine his choice among worlds. Perhaps there are two or more equally good possible worlds, in which case God would be free to actualize either of them. Or perhaps for any given possible world, there is a world better than it. Then, assuming that God's goodness permits him to actualize some world or other, he would be free to choose among a variety of worlds. Thus it seems that God's essential goodness is not inconsistent with his being free to choose among some alternative courses of action.⁷

I think this is probably correct. But it does nothing to solve the problem I have raised.⁸ For even if God has the maximum amount of freedom allowed by his essential goodness, the fact that he is *essentially* good entails that he is never free when anything morally significant is at stake. Whenever, from the moral point of view, it matters what God does, his decision is completely determined by his nature. So given the incompatibilist assumptions of the free will defense, it still follows that God is not *morally* good. We can say, if we like, that in any given situation God would do what is morally required of an agent who is significantly free in that situation. But since God cannot fail to act as a significantly free agent ought to act, it follows that He is not Himself *significantly* free, and cannot therefore be the subject of genuinely *moral* praise or blame.

II

Short of jettisoning either the free will defense or the ontological argument, how might a theist try to deal with this problem? I can think of two different strategies. The first would be to admit that God is not significantly free, accepting the implication that he is not good in the distinctively *moral* sense that is involved in the free will defense, while denying that this constitutes an imperfection in God's nature. Thus it might be said that He is unable to do evil only because He possesses *maximal greatness*. He lacks *moral* goodness only because He is *essentially and perfectly good*. Indeed, it might be said that His kind of goodness is infinitely superior to the sort of goodness that is realized when one of His significantly free creatures chooses good over evil.

On this view, we are right to praise God for his goodness, as long as we do not praise him in that distinctively moral sense that presupposes moral responsibility and significant freedom. In somewhat the way that we might praise a beautiful sunset, we can praise the absolute perfection of God's nature. (Other religious attitudes, such as gratitude, might be more difficult to deal with.)

We can even continue to speak of God's freedom if we are careful not to use

the word “free” in the incompatibilist sense required by the free will defense. We can say, for example, that God enjoys absolute freedom from temptation, that he is completely free from the sorts of mental conflict that human beings experience when a base desire overcomes a higher one, and so on. All of this is compatible with denying that God is “significantly free” in Plantinga’s sense of this expression.

Doubtless there is a great deal to be said for this way of speaking about God’s goodness and freedom. But will it really help us reconcile the free will defense with the ontological argument? It might seem so. For the present proposal in no way challenges the claim that *moral* goodness presupposes significant freedom in Plantinga’s sense. At the same time, it leaves the ontological argument largely intact. At most it would force us to drop *moral* perfection as a requirement for maximal excellence, replacing it with the requirement that a maximally excellent being be *perfectly good* in a sense of “good” that does not presuppose significant freedom.

The trouble is that if we are to exploit the concept of significant freedom in a free will defense, we must believe that the distinctively *moral* sort of goodness—the sort of goodness that can only be realized in the lives of significantly free beings—is a very superior sort of goodness: we must believe it to be superior to any alternative sort of goodness that could have been realized in the lives of creatures who are not significantly free. If we don’t believe this, we can’t reasonably claim that God is justified in permitting so much moral evil. For as I pointed out earlier, an omnipotent God could have instilled in each and every one of his creatures an irresistible will to do what is right. And while it is true that such creatures would be neither significantly free nor *morally* good, it is also true that *other kinds of goodness could be realized in their lives*. They could be kind, compassionate, forbearing, etc. Best of all, they would *always do what is right!* If this kind of goodness were not inferior to the sort of goodness that presupposes significant freedom, we would have to say that God could have realized just as much goodness, while preventing a great deal of evil, by creating innocent automata instead of significantly free creatures. Instead of being the cornerstone of a convincing defense against the atheological argument from evil, significant freedom would itself be an evil in need of explanation!

Now recall that, on the proposal under consideration, God’s own perfect goodness prevents him from being either significantly free or morally good. It seems to follow that the sort of innocent automata I described in the last paragraph would be much closer to the image of God than would significantly free creatures. Their sort of goodness is a much closer analogue of God’s kind of goodness than is the moral goodness of significantly free creatures. This strongly suggests that the goodness of innocent automata is superior to the moral goodness of significantly free beings, contrary to what is required for a successful free will

defense. So it looks as if we still have to choose between the free will defense and the doctrine that God is essentially perfect.

In order to get around this problem, we would have to claim that God’s kind of goodness should be judged by a standard different from the one by which we judge the goodness of His creatures. We would have to claim that the inability to do evil is not an imperfection in God, even though it would be a grave imperfection in His creatures. In the absence of a well worked out and defended justification, however, such a double standard is bound to seem unacceptably arbitrary and *ad hoc*. I do not myself see how it can be defended.

III

Assuming that the argument of the last section is correct, it seems that a theist who wants to hang onto the free will defense should say that God is *morally* perfect, accepting the implication that God is significantly free. But he will then have to deny that God is morally perfect in every possible world; for if a person is significantly free, there must be worlds in which he goes wrong with respect to some action, and in those worlds he is not morally perfect.

The very notion of a being that is morally perfect in every possible world thus turns out to be self-contradictory. But on Plantinga’s analysis of maximal greatness, a maximally great being must be morally perfect in every possible world. So it seems that the notion of a maximally great being is equally self-contradictory. There simply could be no such thing as a maximally great being in Plantinga’s sense.

Does this mean that a theist who is committed to the free will defense must give up the ontological argument? Not necessarily. I believe that the argument can be revised in such a way that its premises do not entail that God is morally perfect in every possible world. But a heavy price must be paid for such a revision. For the premises of the revised ontological argument will not entail that God is morally perfect in the actual world.

To see how Plantinga’s version of the ontological argument might be revised, we need to distinguish in a rough and ready way between two sorts of excellences: moral excellences and nonmoral excellences. Moral excellences would include such things as “never doing anything wrong.” Nonmoral excellences would include such things as omnipotence and omniscience. Next, we draw a corresponding distinction between two sorts of *maximal* excellence. *Maximal moral excellence* would be the best possible combination of moral excellences; it would be identical to what I have been calling moral perfection. *Maximal nonmoral excellence* would be the best possible combination of nonmoral excellences. A being possessing maximal nonmoral excellence would have to be omnipotent and omniscient.

Since we are operating on the assumption that the presuppositions of the free will defense are correct, we must say that nothing could possess maximal *moral* excellence in every possible world. But the same need not be true of maximal *nonmoral* excellence. As far as the argument of this paper is concerned, it might perfectly well be the case that something is omnipotent, omniscient, etc., in every possible world.

With these distinctions in mind, we can construct weaker analogues of Plantinga's (27) and (28):

(27*) A being has maximal *nonmoral* greatness in a given only if it has maximal *nonmoral* excellence in every world.

(28*) A being has maximal *nonmoral* excellence in a given world only if it has omniscience and omnipotence in that world.

Obviously, (27*) and (28*) are constructed in such a way that they do not entail that God is morally perfect in every possible world. As far as (27*) and (28*) are concerned, it may perfectly well be the case that God has the power to perform wrong actions—in which case there will be possible worlds in which he does so. So (27*) and (28*) would enable us to construct an argument for saying that if it is possible that there is a being having maximal nonmoral greatness, then such a being must actually exist. All we have to do is to replace “maximal greatness” and “maximal excellence,” throughout Plantinga's version of the ontological argument, by “maximal nonmoral greatness” and “maximal nonmoral excellence.”⁹ Thus revised, the ontological argument gives the theist only part of what he wants. It gives him an argument for the existence of a being that is omnipotent and omniscient. But it does not give him any grounds for saying that this being is also *morally good* or *morally perfect*. Consequently, it does not give him an argument for the claim that there is a *maximally great* being in Plantinga's sense of “maximally great.”

From the present perspective, of course, we don't want an argument for the claim that there is a being that is “maximally great” in Plantinga's sense. Such a being would have to possess maximal moral excellence in every world, and this, as we have seen, is logically impossible. Does this mean that we must completely abandon the Anselmian conception of God as a maximally great being, as the being greater than which none can be conceived? I don't think so. What we need to do is simply to substitute for Plantinga's account of the nature of maximal greatness an analysis that is more in keeping with the requirements of the free will defense. I suggest that we think of a maximally great being as a being possessing the best possible combination of perfections, both moral and nonmoral. More precisely:

(27**) A being is maximally great in a given world if and only if: (i)

it possesses maximal moral excellence in *that* world; and (ii) it possesses maximal nonmoral excellence in *every* world.

Or, equivalently, in the light of our definition of “maximal nonmoral greatness,” we might express (27**) as follows:

A being is maximally great in a given world if and only if it possesses maximal moral excellence and maximal nonmoral *greatness* in that world.

An important implication of (27**) is that no being—not even a maximally great one—could be maximally great in every possible world. To see why, let Sam be a maximally great being (in *our* sense of maximally great). It follows that Sam is morally perfect, and thus significantly free. But then there are worlds in which Sam performs wrong actions. In those worlds, Sam is not morally perfect. In those worlds, therefore, Sam is not maximally great. But this need not be due to any imperfection in Sam's nature. It is simply an implication of the fact that Sam is maximally great.

Adopting Nelson Pike's convention,¹⁰ I suggest that we use the term word “God” to designate a title that belongs to anyone who is maximally great, and that we use the expression “Yahweh” as a rigid designator for the individual (assuming there is one) who holds this title. It follows from what I said in the last paragraph that Yahweh might not have held this title. For there are possible worlds in which Yahweh lacks maximal moral excellence, and in those worlds, Yahweh is not maximally great and thus is not God.

If this is what we mean by “God,” then the revised ontological argument is not an argument for the existence of *God*. It is an argument for the existence of a being who has some of the most important qualifications for being God. But its conclusion leaves out the most important qualification of all—it provides no warrant for saying that there is a morally perfect being. At best, it gives us a warrant for saying that there is a being who has it is within his power to be morally perfect. Whether this being exercises that power is a question that is left completely up in the air, as far as our revised ontological argument is concerned.

For many this will be a disappointing conclusion. Part of the charm of the ontological argument has always been that it appeared to give the theist *everything* he wanted. Unfortunately, I think the revised version is the best that can be done without giving up the free will defense.

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NOTES

1. See, for example: Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Wm. B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1977). Referred to hereafter as GFE. See also: Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford University Press, 1974), especially chapters IX and X.
2. The author who comes closest to discussing this problem is Thomas Flint. See notes 6, 7, and 8 below.
3. More precisely, Plantinga defines “significantly free, on a given occasion, if he is then free with respect to a morally significant action,” where “an action is *morally significant*, for a given person, if it would be wrong for him to perform the action but right to refrain or *vice versa*.” GFE, p. 29.
4. Even if all of this were true, it would not by itself be sufficient to justify God in permitting as much moral evil as He does permit. For there are possible worlds in which there are significantly free agents who do more good and less evil than the creaturely inhabitants of the actual world. It’s natural to ask why God didn’t create one of those worlds instead.
Plantinga answers this question by arguing that even an omnipotent God might not have been able to create any of the possible worlds that contain a better overall balance of good over evil than the actual world contains. Plantinga’s defense of this claim is the most original aspect of his treatment of the free will defense. Whether he is right about this is a question that lies outside the scope of the present essay. The aspect of the free will defense that concerns us in the present context is the claim—not original with Plantinga—that moral goodness presupposes significant freedom.
5. See GFE, pp. 108-09. Roughly, the argument runs as follows: Suppose that it is possible that there is a maximally great being. Then there is a world, W, in which there is a maximally great being. In W, therefore, it must be true that there is a being that exists and possesses maximal excellence in every possible world. In other words, it must be true in W that it is *logically impossible* that there is no being possessing maximal greatness. Since logical possibilities and impossibilities do not vary from world to world, it follows that in *every* world it is logically impossible that there is no being possessing maximal greatness. But then it is impossible in the *actual* world that there is no such being. Consequently a being possessing maximal greatness actually exists.
6. Thomas Flint, “The Problem of Divine Freedom,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20 (1983): pp. 255-64.
7. The bulk of Flint’s article is devoted to the defense of the stronger thesis that God may be both *essentially* free (with regard to which world to create) and *essentially* good.
8. In fairness to Flint, his article is not concerned with precisely the same problem that I have raised, and he does not claim to have shown that God can be both essentially good and “significantly” free in Plantinga’s sense.
9. See not 5 above.
10. See Nelson Pike, “Omnipotence and God’s Ability to Sin,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 6 (1969): pp. 208-16.