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An Atheological Argument
from Evil

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Abstract

Ever since ancient times it has occurred to many people, great and small, that the existence of evil constitutes evidence against that of God. The central claim of this thesis is that, contrary to theistic belief, this evidence is decisive.

In the introduction it is argued that all previous attempts to show this fact have been unsuccessful. These attempts have been vitiated by the fallacy of supposing that God, as an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good agent, is always required to do the best He is capable of doing. Though other possibilities remain, this supposition usually manifested itself in arguments which claimed that a God of the above mentioned sort cannot exist, because if such a being existed, He would have created a much better world than the actual one. Besides an appeal to God's above mentioned qualities, the sole justification offered for this claim usually has been only to point out the fact that it was in God's power to actualise a better world than the actual one.

But this argument is invalid. Given God's qualities, the mere fact that the creation of a better world was an option to God cannot constitute a sufficient reason for Him to take advantage of that option. For, given the fact that there is virtually no limit to what a being like God can do, it is true of *any* possible world which was in God's power to actualise that He could have created a better one than it. Consequently, if God decided to create, say value, He would have to be quite irrational to decide not to create some particular world just because it was in His power to create a better one than it. For, if He did that, He ultimately would altogether have to forego creating anything at all – which is absurd because it cannot be the case that a being like God is unable to perform His own will. And this is a problem for atheist endeavours because it

shows that the claim that *if God existed, He would have created a better world than the actual one* inevitably remains unsupported if we proceed from this traditional approach.

The chief novelty of this thesis lies in showing the way out of this particular difficulty. It is argued here that if God existed, He would have created a better world than the actual one not only because it was in His power to do so, but because the actual world fails to meet a certain adequacy threshold of being *good enough* for a product of the creative activity of a perfect being like God.

The justification offered for this claim relies on a distinction between *ends* and *means*. It goes in two steps: Firstly, it is argued that in God's hands the actual world could only be a means to an end. And secondly, it is argued that whatever God's purpose with the actual world might have been, on account of His benevolence it would have to be a morally good one. Consequently, He could have achieved that purpose by creating a world without superfluous, unnecessary evils in it. Failure to do this conflicts with His benevolence.

Further, in defence of this last claim it is argued that although God cannot be reasonably required to attempt realizing the best possible moral *goal* (for nothing qualifies as such), it conflicts with His benevolence if He fails to employ the best possible moral *means* available to Him for realizing His goals.

The rest of the thesis contains the details and defence of an argument from evil which is advanced within the framework of this new approach.

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1 Introductory

The Problem of Evil

The concern of this thesis is the problem of evil. More specifically, not so much what is known as *the empirical problem of evil* but rather what is known as *the logical problem of evil*.¹

Hume was one who seems to have thought that there was such a problem:

Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?²

The strong interpretation of Hume's argument is that if God exists, then by what miracle is there any misery at all in the world? If, as the theists contend, there exists an omnipotent (almighty) and benevolent (all-good) God, there could not be any evil in the world. That would be logically impossible. But since there is plenty of it around, despite all the theists of the world, there is no such thing as an omnipotent, benevolent God.³

¹ The empirical problem of evil is a weaker claim than the logical problem of evil in that it only claims that the existence of evil renders the existence of God improbable. By contrast, the logical problem of evil claims that the existence of evil logically precludes the existence of God.

² Hume, 1976, pp. 226 - 7.

³ Exegetically it is not certain that this is exactly what Hume meant in the quoted passage, for until recently the distinction between the empirical and the logical problems of evil had not been made. Furthermore, historically, Hume cannot be credited as the first formulator of the problem of evil either. As he also acknowledges his formulation of the problem is almost a direct quote from Epicurus.

The Problem's Significance

If the thesis regarding the logical incompatibility between the existence of God and evil is right, the implications are rather grave: To the extent to which one is convinced that there is evil in the world, it is irrational, self-contradictory to believe that God exists. This thesis therefore would be especially hard hitting for those theists who also believe in the reality of evil. Among them are found the majority of believers within the major monotheistic religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. So it seems that the issue at hand should be of the greatest interest to most, if not to all, for it cuts right to the roots of our deepest concerns: our origins, suffering, death and possibly our fate after death.

More About the Problem

Hume was confident that "nothing can shake the solidity of [his] reasoning, so short, so clear, so decisive".⁴ But he was overconfident with his argument. For, although he was on to something substantial here, as Alvin Plantinga has pointed out, there is much more involved in showing the inconsistency between the existence of God and the existence of evil than Hume realized.⁵ In fact, historically speaking, we are still awaiting the appearance of a rigorous argument which is successful in establishing the nonexistence of God from the fact of evil.

One reason for this is that, intuitively, the existence of certain kinds of minor evils such as the pain from a burnt finger or the characteristic pangs of hunger and thirst, do not seem to constitute a challenge to theistic faith. A world without any first order evils of this sort would be an utopia which not many of us would really welcome or choose for ourselves. The existence of at least some first order evils seems to be necessary to make the human

⁴ Hume, 1976, p. 230.

⁵ Plantinga, 1975, pp. 12 - 29.

life really interesting, stimulating and satisfying. And not only that, but some of it seems to be necessary in order to make the existence of certain higher order goods possible. For example, compassion and empathy would not be possible if no one ever suffered the slightest discomfort and, similarly, heroism and courage would be impossible if no one ever was in real danger of suffering some harm. So it is clear that the existence of at least some forms of evil is quite compatible with the existence of God. A theistic framework is quite capable of explaining and justifying their existence by reference to the outweighing good they are the necessary preconditions for.⁶

The problem for the theist, though, is that not all evils are justifiable in this way. Not all suffering and misery is the object of kindness and sympathy whose goodness could outweigh their badness. There are, what Mackie calls, *unabsorbed evils* which, as he argues, present the theist with the insurmountable and impossible task of justifying their existence within any traditional monotheistic framework:

Can the theist maintain that the only evils that occur in the world are absorbed evils? When this question is squarely put, it is surely plain that he cannot. On the one hand there are surplus first-order evils, suffering and the like which are not actually used in any good organic whole, and on the other there are second-order evils; these will not be incorporated in second-order goods, but will contrast with them: malevolence, cruelty, callousness, cowardice, and states of affairs in which there is not progress but decline, where things get worse rather than better. The problem, therefore, now recurs as the problem of unabsorbed evils, and we have as yet no way of reconciling their existence with that of a god of the traditional sort.⁷

⁶ For arguments and discussions of this nature see Swinburne, 89, pp. 145 – 7.

⁷ Mackie, 1982, p. 155.

How good is this argument? In answering this question we must be able to give reasonably clear cut answers to at least the following two questions:

(a) Is it really the case that the theist must admit the existence of unabsorbed evils?

(b) Is it really the case that belief in the existence of unabsorbed evils is logically irreconcilable with belief in an all-powerful, all-knowing and wholly good God?

It is clear that in order to give real bite to the argument from evil the atheologian must be able to show that the only acceptable answer to both of these questions is the affirmative one. Can this be shown? I think it can be, but I also think that up to this date no one has quite succeeded in doing so. For, although it is not difficult to point out that, historically, belief in the world's exceeding and unnecessary sinfulness is an essential element of monotheistic cosmologies, demonstrating the inconsistency referred to in (b) has proved to be exceedingly hard. And it seems to me that although ultimately the correct answer to the second question (b) is also affirmative, we are still awaiting a rigorous argument which is successful in establishing this in a philosophically satisfactory way.⁸

The Fallacy in the Traditional Approach

This in turn, I believe, is partly due to another historical fact which is one of the central claims of this thesis: virtually without exception, discussions on the problem of evil have been carried out without giving due weight to the fact that if any being with God's qualities decided to create a world like the actual one, He would do so for some reason or other. In other

⁸ Strictly speaking, Mackie's notion of unabsorbed evils will also have to be firmed up and rendered more precise in order to enforce the intuitive appeal of the strategy employed in this thesis. I have given a precise definition of the notion below (p. 17.)

words, we must make a distinction between God's goals and God's means to achieve those goals. Failure to incorporate and stress this fact as one of the central assumptions results in a fatal flaw in any argument designed to establish the nonexistence of God from the fact of evil.

To put it differently, historically the basic mistake was to ask questions like *What sort of world would a being with God's qualities create?* The intuitively obvious answer: *a world without evil*, or more precisely, *a world without unabsorbed evils, of course*, never evaded sceptical and atheistic philosophers who proceeded from this approach. However, because of another conceptual truth, namely that there isn't a best possible world, it is impossible to defend it satisfactorily as *the* right answer and conclusion.

This can be demonstrated with an example of the controversy which rages over the question of what sort of world a being with God's qualities would create. Plantinga is set to demonstrate that it is possible for God to have good reasons for allowing evil which He otherwise, in the absence of those reasons, not only could but also would eliminate. He does this by a Free Will Defence. A Free Will Defence is a particular line of argumentation utilized by theists and is an attempt to specify what could constitute a good reason for God's allowing evil. As such, it is not an attempt to say what God's reason for allowing evil actually is, but only what God's reason might possibly be and then argue that it could be a good one. More specifically, the first part of the defence goes something like this:

(i) A world containing significantly free moral agents who do some good and some evil is more valuable than one in which no one is free and everyone does what is right. This is because the creation of moral value is possible only in the former.

(ii) However, as it happened, some of the free agents God created decided

to do what is wrong. It is logically impossible for God to stop them from doing this and at the same time leave them free with respect to their actions. Hence the evil allowed by God is perfectly compatible with His omnipotence, omniscience, benevolence and existence.

In other words the claim in (ii) is that in creating free agents God could not have brought it about that all free agents always do what is right. For if this means that He somehow caused them always to do what is right, then they would not be free. And how else could we make sense of that phrase?

This is a clever argument no doubt. However, it misses what Mackie considers to be a crucial point, namely that there are many possible worlds which are much better than ours. There are possible worlds which have much less evil than ours and worlds which have no unabsorbed evils at all and in which significantly free moral agents always freely choose what is right. Therefore, Mackie wants to conclude, if God existed, instead of creating our world, He would have created one of these better worlds in which either there is no evil whatever or just a minimal amount of it and in which significantly free moral agents always freely choose what is right. (For the sake of brevity let these special, superior worlds be called *alpha worlds*.) But since our world is not one of these alpha worlds, according to Mackie, it follows that it has not been created by God. By implication it also follows that there is no such God, for if there was one, He would not have allowed the actualisation of a world with evils like ours. Thus, Mackie wants to conclude, the Free Will Defence is unsuccessful.⁹

By way of another example we can mention Antony Flew who argues along similar lines when he contends that

⁹ For the original formulation of this argument see Mackie, 1971, p. 100.

Omnipotence might have, could without contradiction be said to have, created people who would always as a matter of fact freely have chosen to do the right thing.¹⁰

And lastly, we must mention Matson:

But it is logically possible for there to be a world in which there would be no moral evil, or at least not nearly so much; and such a world would be better than this one. Therefore this is not the best of all possible worlds, hence God (with a capital G) does not exist.¹¹

The arguments of these philosophers display the characteristic flaw of the old approach. For even if God could have created an alpha world of this sort, a problem arises because it is not at all clear whether anything fits Leibniz's description *the best of all possible worlds*. As several theists have pointed out, regardless of what world one specifies, it is always possible to specify a better one with more happiness and goodness in it.¹² For, in a way, the description *the best possible world* is like the description *the greatest prime number*, which is not satisfiable by any particular number.

However, perhaps because so far nearly everyone has failed to capitalize on this observation¹³, atheologians seem to be quite oblivious to the fact that this will eventually present difficulties for their arguments. To point out that there are alpha worlds actualisable by God which are far better

¹⁰ Flew, 1955, p. 152.

¹¹ Matson, 1965, p. 166.

¹² See, for instance, Plantinga, 1975, p. 34.

¹³ Schlesinger and Journet, for instance, are exceptions to this. See Schlesinger, 1982, pp. 25 - 31; and Journet, 1963, pp. 117 - 8.

than ours simply isn't enough for their purposes. From the mere fact that there are possible worlds which are much better than ours, and from the fact that God could have created moral agents who would always freely chose the good, it does not follow that if God existed He *would* have created an alpha world with agents like that instead of this present one. Why doesn't it? Because given that there is no best possible world, it would be irrational for a divine creator to attempt creating the best one of all the possible worlds. That would be like trying to find the greatest possible number. For any particular world God might want to actualise there would always be a better one than it.¹⁴ Hence a divine maximiser of value would necessarily fail to create anything at all if there being better worlds than the one He intended for actualisation constituted a sufficient reason for not creating it. If there isn't a best possible world which God can create, the reason in question would be sufficient by itself to persuade the Creator to decide against actualising any one particular world.

Given these states of affairs, and God's goal to create, say value, it would be irrational for him to aim at maximizing value. The only rational strategy for Him, therefore, is to be a satisficer regarding value.¹⁵

¹⁴ Schlesinger tries to dissolve the problem of evil by an argument relevantly analogous to this one. It does not occur to him, however, that the problem he legitimately dismisses on maximizing grounds resurfaces on satisficing ones. This is why his argument fails to touch the problem as reformulated in this thesis.

(Schlesinger, 1982, p. 29.)

¹⁵ A moral satisficer is one who does not attempt always to do what is the best, but only what is good enough. And, according to moral satisficing principles, there are times when less than the best may be good enough. According to satisficing consequentialism, for example, "an act might qualify as morally right through having good enough consequences, even though better consequences could have been produced in the circumstances". (Slote and Pettit, 1984, p. 140.)

Of course, moral satisficing need not be tied to consequentialism alone. The more general idea behind it is that an action is morally right if it is above a certain satisficing threshold of "good enoughness", however specified. For more details on moral satisficing see Slote and Pettit, 1984.

Otherwise, we would have the consequence that, despite all His perfections, God can fail to exercise His own will. But this is absurd and, therefore, the only rational expectation anyone can have of a divine creator of worlds is that the world actualised for this or some other purpose should be a *good enough* one.¹⁶ But, if so, Mackie and Flew are hard put to task, for they will have to argue that the actual world does not meet the adequacy threshold of being good enough.

It will be useful, perhaps, to indicate briefly the enormity of their task. It seems that it is a plausible way to explicate the notion of a good enough world as one in which the sum of the goods is *significantly* greater than the sum of the bad. In other words, according to this satisficing criterion, a world meets the adequacy threshold just in case it has some significant positive sum-value after the sum of its evils is subtracted from the sum of its goods. But if this is a satisfactory way of explicating the notion of a good enough world, showing that this criterion is not satisfied in the case of the actual world seems to be an insurmountable task. Considering the eschatological nature of monotheistic religions, it seems extremely unlikely and, therefore, implausible to say that God could not in the future transform this world in such a way that eventually the sum of the evils accumulated in it during its history will be quite significantly outweighed by some not yet seen (but already promised) infinite future good.

And this is where and how all atheological arguments from evil that proceed from the old approach are bound to fail. They cannot rationally

¹⁶ McCloskey fails to make this simple deduction after defending the view that Leibniz's notion of the best of all possible worlds is an incoherent one. Instead he goes on and insists that this "in no way invalidates the basic ethical principle . . . that an all-perfect being ought/must always to choose the better rather than the less good".
(McCloskey, 1974, p. 82.)

This position is especially puzzling in view of the fact that he also accepts the view that not even an omnipotent being can be required to do the logically impossible. (p. 45.)

support the intuitively attractive claim that if God existed He would have created a world without evil. For there doesn't seem to be any better reason to support this claim than the fact that such a world would have been a better world than the actual one. And, as we have already seen, this is not enough for the purpose because the same lack would be present in *any* particular world which God might have actualised. It would be irrational of God to decide against actualising some world, say, a world like the actual one, just because there are better ones which He could create. For it is true of *every* such world that God can create better worlds than it. Therefore, if the argument from evil is to be given support in a philosophically satisfactory way, an altogether different approach is needed.

The New Approach

The backbone of the approach suggested in this thesis essentially consists in putting the emphasis on the fact that if, as monotheists universally claim, the world has been created by God, *it was done so with some purpose or other*. Furthermore, if we distinguish between morally acceptable and unacceptable *goals* and morally acceptable and unacceptable *means*, the contradiction between the claim that (unabsorbed) evils exist and the claim that the creator of this world is an all-good God should become easier to show. It is necessary to elaborate on these ideas in a bit more detail.

The first thing to note is that the question *What sort of world would a being with God's attributes create?* is an incomplete one for the purpose at hand. It is analogous to asking something like *What sort of computer programme would the world's best programme writer create?* Clearly, this is an incomplete question as it stands, for we cannot specify the features of the programme unless we know at least roughly the purpose the programme is

intended for. Similarly with God. We must approach the whole issue of creation with this fundamental assumption that it has been created with some particular purpose which is different from creation itself. In other words, given that on account of His benevolence God would never create evil for its own sake, the creation of the actual world with its large amount of evil and moral wickedness can only be a *means* to an end. But on account of God's benevolence we know that He could only have a good purpose in mind when He decided to create the world. With these observations in mind the dilemma I propose for monotheism is this:

Either God created the world and allows it to be as it is for its own sake, or He created it and allows the world to be as it is for the sake of something else. It is clear, however, that He could not have created it as it is for its own sake. For since God is in all respects perfect and is intrinsically opposed to evil, He cannot will or allow its existence either directly or out of negligence.

But He could not have created the world for the sake of something else either. For, since He is benevolent, His purpose would have to be a morally acceptable one. And, if so, since He is omnipotent and omniscient as well, He could have accomplished such a purpose without the existence of evil – more precisely, He could have accomplished it without the existence of unabsorbed evils.

So either way, God, if He existed, would neither have actively created nor would have allowed the actualisation of an evil world like the actual one. Therefore, God cannot exist.

Failure to see the issue from this perspective, led some philosophers to assert that God would not eliminate evil in all conceivable circumstances. And among the defenders of monotheism the most cherished circumstance of this sort is believed to be one in which God has a good reason for allowing

evil. But these philosophers are mistaken and I shall attempt to show in this thesis that the concept of God together with the fact that God could have accomplished His purpose without the existence of unabsorbed evils deductively implies that God cannot have a morally acceptable reason for allowing or purposefully employing these evils for achieving any morally permissible goal.

If my arguments are correct, the atheist need not make the strong, and prima facie implausible, claim that *whatever* the circumstances, insofar as it is logically possible for Him to do so, God will eliminate and prevent all evil. He can afford to assert instead the weaker and obviously true version of that claim by inserting in front the qualificatory clause *all other things being equal*: the claim that *all other things being equal, insofar as it is within His power, God will eliminate and prevent all evils of the relevant sort*. And once this is granted, it is easier to argue that whatever purpose God might have had in mind, insofar it was a morally agreeable one, the qualificatory clause is or can be satisfied in all circumstances. One of the major contentions of this thesis, then, will be that God cannot have a good reason for allowing unabsorbed evils because, given His qualities and excellences, for Him all other things *are* and *must be* equal. Therefore, irrespective of His purpose, since it was within His power God, if He existed, would have prevented at least the existence of evils of the above mentioned sort.

Some of my claims are bound to be controversial and it would be overly optimistic to expect a universal acceptance of all my arguments in support of my main thesis. But even so, I hope that this new approach has the virtue of allowing a clearer view of the most fundamental assumptions held by the debating parties and thereby an easier way of bringing the controversy, one way or another, to a conclusion.

2 The Argument

(1) Unabsorbed evils exist.

(2) God is omnipotent and, therefore, he is able to bring about any logically possible state of affairs the bringing about of which is compatible with being brought about by a being with God's other attributes.

(3) God is essentially omniscient and therefore He knows for certain at any particular time any detail of the past, present and the future, as well as all the possible ways things could have been and also how things would in fact have been if certain things were contrary to fact. In short, God has certain and complete knowledge of everything there is to know.¹⁷

(4) There are many possible worlds actualisable by God which are just as good or even better than the actual one for realizing any morally acceptable goal. Many of these worlds are without unabsorbed evil and are ones in which every significantly free moral agent always freely does what is right. (For brevity's sake I shall call these *alpha worlds*.)

(5) God is an all-good, perfect moral agent and is totally and intrinsically opposed to evil. He is not selfish, careless, stupid or childish enough to mess around with people's lives. Consequently, whatever the circumstances, *all other things being equal*, God will seek the prevention and elimination of all evil the elimination of which constitutes a logically possible task for him.

¹⁷ Another way of saying this is to say that God knows everything relevant to the actual history of the world and He has middle knowledge as well. Middle knowledge is knowledge about what would be or would have been the case if certain things were different from the way they in fact were, are or will be.

(2), (3), (4), and (5) imply (6):

(6) God, as an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good agent, cannot have a good, morally acceptable reason for allowing the actualisation of a world containing unabsorbed evils and, therefore, if God existed, the actual world would be an alpha world devoid of them.

But undoubtedly

(7) The actual world is not an alpha world because a lot of unabsorbed evil exists. (Implication from (1) given the definition of an alpha world as given in premise (4).)

Therefore, equally undoubtedly

(8) God does not exist.

As far as I can see this argument is deductively valid and therefore if it could be plausibly argued that all of its premises are true, we would have a justification for the thesis that there indeed is a logical problem of evil.

3 The Premises

(1) Unabsorbed evils exist.

Since the discussion and defence of a number of the subsequent premises will involve the claim that evil exists, it is best if I clarify from the outset its intended scope. For, as I already indicated, for present purposes I do not intend to extend the scope of the concept of evil to everything which is unpleasant or disagreeable to us for one reason or another. The existence of certain kinds of minor evils such as the pain from a burnt finger or a bee sting, may or may not constitute evidence against the existence of God. A world without what is sometimes termed *primary* or *first order* evils would be, perhaps, an utopia which not many of us would really welcome or choose for ourselves. Many first order evils may well be necessary to make the human life really interesting, stimulating and satisfying. Therefore, I do not intend these evils to fall under the scope of my claim that *Evil exists which is problematic for belief in God*.

Instead, I shall unconditionally grant the possibility that many first order evils are necessary for the existence of second order goods, such as heroism, empathy, mercy and compassion. My claim, however, is that second order evils and some forms of intense and, what seem to be, utterly purposeless forms of first order evils do present a problem for theistic belief and it is these ones that I have in mind when I say that evil exists or that God should not have allowed evil into the world. It is the presence of these, what Mackie called *unabsorbed* evils, which disqualifies the actual world from being an alpha world.

The notion of an *unabsorbed evil*, however, must be refined and rendered more precise before good use can be made of it. This is because in its present shape it could be interpreted in such a way as to give the impression that a sound, defensible theodicy is possible. It could be taken to mean, for instance, evils which in some vague sense, are *unacceptable*.

In fact, John Hick seems to be arguing exactly along these lines:

The greatest difficulty in the way of [a successful theodicy] is, I think, the stark question whether we can [reasonably] believe that the postulated end can justify the known means; whether all the pain and suffering, cruelty and wickedness of human life can be rendered acceptable by an end-state, however good.¹⁸

And his position is that "[there can be] a future good so great as to render acceptable, in retrospect, the whole human experience, with all its wickedness and suffering".¹⁹

Unfortunately Hick leaves it a total mystery as to how exactly we should understand this notion of *evil being rendered acceptable in retrospect*. But, if his notion is to bear real relevance to the problem at hand, whatever else he might mean by it he must mean at least this much: that the existence of the evils concerned will, in the future, be made compatible with the existence of God as an all-good, all-powerful and all-knowing agent. Consequently, all I have to show here is that there is a defensible way of explicating the notion of an unabsorbed evil according to which many familiar evils, such as rape and child abuse for instance, will turn out to be impossible to absorb even in the long run, in the sense that their existence cannot be reconciled with that of God regardless of what wonders the obscure future might bring.

¹⁸ Hick, 1977, p. 385.

¹⁹ Hick, 1977, p. 386.

For this purpose I propose the following candidate:

An evil is unabsorbed just in case either

(1) it outweighs the amount of good facilitated by it; or

(2) the good in question could have been achieved through the employment of some lesser evil.

And conversely,

An evil is absorbed just in case

(1) it is outweighed by the amount of good facilitated by it; and

(2) the good in question could not have been achieved through the employment of some lesser evil.

These definitions should enable the atheologian to say the intuitively right thing: namely that unless the actual world is the best one possible, many evils in the world are unabsorbed and there is no way they could be absorbed at a later stage by a future good, however great.²⁰

For, on this account, even if some evils are going to serve some very useful purpose, if the purpose in question could have been achieved without them or if it could have been achieved by employing less evil, the evils in question are unabsorbed. Their absence is compatible with the existence of all the positive good found in the world. For example, although being burned and disfigured for life on the face may deter a child from ever again playing with matches in the future, a good spanking, more education, closer supervision and perhaps a painful, burned finger would have been just as effective in achieving the same result. On this account, being disfigured and disabled for life is an unabsorbed evil despite the fact that, strictly speaking,

²⁰ And there are very few theists who will not admit that the actual world is not the best one possible.

it happens to serve some very good purpose (beside the bad ones) right through the individual's life.

And even if we take into account all the benefits of such an experience and find that they jointly outweigh its badness, it still would be demonic to even think that this is good enough, that it is acceptable that a child should learn this important lesson in such a harsh manner when less brutal and less disastrous ones are available. We all agree that accidents of this sort should never happen and we take many precautions to prevent them. And no doubt even the theists hold the same about whole hosts of other evils as well, such as the ones already referred to: rape and child abuse.²¹

Clearly, there are innumerable unabsorbed evils like these around and, consequently, the actual world does not and cannot meet the adequacy threshold of being a good enough world for any morally permissible purpose. For, even if God is a moral satisficer, not only regarding goals but also regarding means, only alpha worlds with no unabsorbed evils in them can meet that threshold.²² This is because God is intrinsically opposed to evil and it conflicts with His benevolence to say that He allows unabsorbed evils which He could eliminate or prevent. There is simply no justification for doing this and this fact certifies to the appropriateness and legitimacy of the definitions proposed. These definitions also accord well with monotheistic views of the state of the world. According to these faiths there is much unnecessary evil in the world and they relentlessly exhort mankind to stop committing any more of them.

²¹ For a good, lively discussion on the various types of goods and evils see Matson, 1965, pp. 149 - 53. More importantly, however, see McCloskey, 1974, pp. 13 - 9.

²² This doesn't, of course, mean that all alpha worlds meet that threshold. Being an alpha world is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being a good enough world for God's creative act.

All this, however, is not to say that in some other sense God will not be able to render acceptable in retrospect all of the world's wickedness and suffering. It is possible, for instance, that God is going to resurrect the dead and beg for our forgiveness for allowing us to be unnecessarily harmed and tortured in all sorts of ways. He could, perhaps, spoil us all so lavishly that we will be moved to forgive Him for everything despite all the terrible experiences He failed to spare us from. Such a situation could be made possible, perhaps, by a natural extension of our pragmatic attitude expressed in the saying *All is well that ends well*. However, it would be a mistake to suppose that such a rendering acceptable in retrospect is sufficient to justify the existence of unabsorbed evils in the sense of reconciling their existence with that of an omnipotent, omniscient and benevolent God. If it was in God's power to achieve His goals without allowing unabsorbed evils into the created order, there simply cannot be a morally satisfactory justification for His allowing them in the first place.

As far as I can see, the monotheistic concept of God by itself guarantees that God not only *could* have but also *would* have achieved any morally agreeable goal by employing as little evil as it was absolutely necessary for its realization. And this claim has brought us to the next premise of the argument because a justification of it is impossible without a detailed analysis of the concept of God as the highest possible, the uniquely all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good agent.

(2) God is omnipotent and, therefore, He is able to bring about any logically possible state of affairs the bringing about of which is compatible with being brought about by a being with God's other attributes.

The first part of this premise simply states an essential element of the monotheistic belief system, namely, that God is all-powerful. The second part renders the first one more precise by placing two restrictions on the concept of omnipotence:

(a) The first one is that an omnipotent being is not required to be able to perform the logically impossible in order to qualify properly as all-powerful. For example, it would be most unreasonable to accuse anyone (including God) of impotence just because he was unable to draw a round square or because he was unable to find the greatest prime number. The difficulties in performing such feats lie not in anyone's shortcomings, but in the conceptual incoherence of the tasks proposed.

(b) The second restriction absolves an omnipotent being from being required to be able to bring about possible states of affairs which are inconsistent with His bringing them about. For example, the creation of a world is a logically possible task for God, but the creation of a world which is not created by God is not. Again, climbing a tree is a logically possible task, for even children do it. But it is nevertheless impossible for God to climb trees which aren't ever climbed by him. This restricted construal of the concept of omnipotence is relatively uncontroversial and, therefore, it is unnecessary for me to pursue it here at any greater length.

However, what is commonly known as *the stone paradox* or *the paradox of omnipotence* seems to pose a serious threat to this understanding of the concept. The simplistic and familiar version of the paradox is as

follows: Can an all-powerful being create such a huge stone that He Himself cannot lift it? Either way we would want to answer that question, it seems that omnipotence is an impossible attribute to have. For if one can create such a stone, then one cannot lift it. Because of this one cannot be said to be omnipotent. On the other hand, if one cannot create such a stone, then one is equally disqualified from being omnipotent on that account. It seems that either horn of the dilemma is equally disastrous to omnipotence.

More generally, we can ask whether an omnipotent being is capable of restricting any one of His powers. If the answer is *Yes*, then a being whose power is restricted cannot be omnipotent. On the other hand, if the answer is *No*, then the candidate cannot be legitimately said to be omnipotent either, for there is one thing that He cannot do, namely, restrict His own powers. So, either way we go, it seems that omnipotence is impossible; there must be something wrong with the concept.

But this only *seems* to be the case. The paradox of omnipotence is solved by pointing out that an omnipotent being can exist and can remain omnipotent as long as He does not exercise His self-limiting power. Similarly, the answer to the stone paradox is that an omnipotent being with the ability to create a stone so huge that He could not consequently lift can exist and remain omnipotent as long as He does not exercise His creative ability in such a self-destructive way.

Ingenious as it is, this solution seems to involve a cost for traditional theology: namely that it requires the abandonment of the doctrine of divine immutability – at least in its strongest form. Although we have to keep this in mind, this should not alarm the theists too much, for the abandonment of this doctrine need not damage any of the other, vital parts of the theistic stance.²³

²³ See, for example, Kvanvig, 1986, p. 165 and also Swinburne, 1977, pp. 211- 5.

(3) God is essentially omniscient and therefore He knows for certain at any particular time any detail of the past, present and the future, as well as all the possible ways things could have been and also how things would in fact have been if certain things were contrary to fact. In short, God has certain and complete knowledge of everything there is to know.

That God is omniscient is an universal monotheistic claim, but there seem to be wide disagreements on how exactly the concept of omniscience is to be understood. For example, Journet insists on the interpretation as understood above:

God who knows all things not by foresight or memory but by pure vision , only gave his plan effect once he had already made allowance from all eternity for all the free refusals of his creatures.²⁴

Hick also seems to support this interpretation of omniscience, at least in passages like the following:

[Evil] cannot be unforeseen by the Creator . . . We must not suppose that God intended evil as a small domestic animal, and was then taken aback to find it growing into a great ravaging beast ! The creator to whom this could happen is not God. ²⁵

Jesus' death was an experience of agonizing pain and suffering . . . which was worked by human wickedness and moral failure. The avarice of Judas; the blood-lust of the Jerusalem mob; the cowardice of Pilate; the brutality of the soldiers, all contributed to it: and all were contrary to God's will. . . . [Yet] all this was

²⁴ Journet, 1963, pp 231 - 2.

²⁵ Hick, 1977, p. 289.

divinely foreseen [by God].²⁶

But others disagree and think that this is just another misconception of the theologians and that omniscience ought to be more narrowly construed. According to Hartshorne, for instance, although an omniscient being is required to know all the details of the past, the present and, perhaps, most of the future, He is not required to know those details directly or indirectly dependent on the future free decisions of actual and possible agents. "Otherwise would not God be 'knowing' the future as what it is not, that is, knowing falsely?"²⁷

Is there a way to decide which of these two rival interpretations is correct? The *prima facie* difficulty in straightforwardly answering this question lies in the apparent existence of three considerations that could be taken into account in deciding the theologians' disagreement:

1. An examination of the scriptures of monotheistic faiths.
2. An examination of the actual beliefs of the adherents of these faiths, taking, perhaps, the view of the majority as the criterion.
3. A judgement upon which of the two interpretations allows for the construction of a viable theodicy.

²⁶ Hick, 1977, p. 355.

However, in other places, in the face of atheistic arguments which he believes appeal to such divine foresight, Hick blatantly contradicts himself and claims that "the Christian conception of the divine purpose for man requires as its postulate the stronger notion of free will as a capacity for choice whose outcome is in principle unpredictable". (Hick, 1977, p. 268; see also p. 343)

It is worth noting that besides contradicting other passages, this claim is question begging as well. It is question begging because rather than giving arguments Hick simply *assumes* that there can be such a thing as a capacity for choice whose outcome is unpredictable in principle. For it is still at issue whether the thoughts and actions of free beings are in principle unknowable until they occur or not.

²⁷ Hartshorne, 1984, p. 27.

But in actual fact we need not bother at all with these considerations for deciding the matter at hand. For if it can be plausibly argued that all the actual and counterfactual free decisions of actual and possible free agents are predictable in principle and consequently can be known beforehand, the narrow construal of omniscience is not an option for the theists – not without virtually giving up the concept of God as the Most High, the Supreme Being, that of which a greater one cannot be conceived.

A good way to start this imposing task is to dispel some of the most serious misgivings about the conceptual feasibility of construing God's omniscience as widely as I am suggesting it has to be construed. For it has been quite commonly doubted whether it is logically possible for anyone to have complete knowledge of the sort specified in premise (3). There are several reasons which seem to warrant such doubts:

The first one of these I shall call *the fatalist objection* which rests on the thesis that foreknowledge entails the unavoidability of the foreknown event.

The second one is what I shall call *the anti-realist objection* which essentially relies on the claim that there are no truths about what free agents will do in the future or would do in situations contrary to fact.

And lastly I shall consider what I shall name *the lack of justification objection* which is the claim that it is impossible to have adequate justification for making *knowledge claims* regarding counterfactuals of freedom or the future free decisions of significantly free agents, even if such claims happen to be true.

I shall argue that none of these three objections constitutes a threat to the proposed wide construal of omniscience. For one reason or another, they all fall short of the truth. To show this I shall take them one by one.

The Fatalist Objection

Briefly, the heart of this objection is that if someone has foreknowledge of every detail of the future then, at least on a libertarian account of freedom, freedom of the will is impossible. But because we are free, on the assumption that the libertarian account is the correct one, it is impossible to have foreknowledge of every detail of the future.

More formally, if someone knows some proposition p about the future, then, by the definition of knowledge as justified true belief, p is true. And if this is so, it cannot be the case that p might not be true. This seems to show that foreknowledge entails the *unavoidability* of whatever is foreknown. Hence the claim that it is impossible in principle to have foreknowledge of the actual future free decisions of significantly free agents. Although it can be conceded that on a compatibilist account of the freedom of the will this would be possible, it is believed that on a genuinely libertarian account it is not.

This objection may have some *prima facie* plausibility, but a little reflection makes it clear that it rests on the general fatalist fallacy of arguing from the truth value of propositions to what is possible and ultimately what agents can do. To see that this indeed is a fallacy, consider just one of its implications: if it is true now that tomorrow morning you will have corn flakes for breakfast then it is not in your power to refuse to have corn flakes for breakfast. Put this way it should be clear that the strategy is wrong. The simple answer to the objection is that it is perfectly possible for it to be true now that tomorrow I will have corn flakes for breakfast precisely *because* tomorrow I will *freely* choose to have corn flakes. The truth values of propositions about the present and the future are fixed by

what takes or will take place in the world; and what takes or will take place in the world often depends on what people do and on what they will freely decide. Hence, truth and foreknowledge about the future neither determine the future nor show that the future is inevitable. They only show what is going to take place as a *contingent* matter of fact. And, presumably, what will take place in the world partly depends on what people will freely decide to do.

The above argument shows that detailed foreknowledge of an undetermined future is logically possible. There is no contradiction involved in that claim. On the contrary: positive arguments can be given to the conclusion that foreknowledge of future contingents is not only possible in the weak logical sense but that it is quite commonplace. Take as an example the common experience of approaching the traffic lights. When I sit beside the taxi driver and see the approaching lights turn amber and then red I know that the driver will decide to brake and not enter the intersection before the lights turn once again green. By way of another example, I also know that the driver upon taking off will not start in the fourth gear straightaway but will start from first, change to second, to third and finally to fourth in that order. I know these things by foresight, by knowing the correct way of driving a car in the traffic and knowing that taxi drivers are experts at it.

It would be rather odd to claim that my foreknowledge of some of the taxi driver's decisions somehow shows that his decision to stop at the red light, say, was not really free. It was up to him to stop or speed through the lights and if I knew beforehand that he would stop, that was partly because *he* decided to stop out of his own free will. To deny this is extremely implausible. This point has also been made by Schleiermacher:

We estimate the intimacy between two persons by the foreknowledge one has of the actions of the other, without supposing that in either case, the one or the other's freedom is thereby endangered. So even the divine foreknowledge cannot endanger freedom.²⁸

The Anti-Realist Objection

The essence of this objection is the anti-realist claim that propositions about the future and counterfactuals of freedom are truthvalueless and hence they cannot be the objects of knowledge. But intuitively this thesis seems wrong and, therefore, we need to take a scrutinizing look at the reasons advanced in support of it. Though other arguments may be found, I would like to consider here only the three most threatening ones:

The First Anti-Realist Argument

Essentially, this first argument is that there aren't any true propositions about the future at all because so-called propositions about the future are in fact propositions about the present.²⁹ Along these lines Geach argues as follows:

²⁸ Schleiermacher, 1928, p. 228.

There are, of course, many other arguments in support of the incompatibility thesis contested here. But these attempts aren't any more successful than the one already presented above. Nelson Pike, for instance, gave a rather sophisticated argument to show that although human foreknowledge is compatible with free agency, *divine* foreknowledge is not. See Pike, 1965, pp. 33 - 4. (Also reprinted in Cahn and Shatz, 1982.)

But Plantinga thoroughly refuted Pike's argument in his 1975. For an excellent, lucid account of the Pike - Plantinga showdown on the compatibility of human freedom and divine omniscience see Quinn, 1985, pp. 271 - 287.

Jonathon L. Kvanvig in his 1986 has also considered and refuted three other arguments in considerable detail. See Kvanvig, 1986, pp. 72 - 116.

²⁹ I shall restrict my discussions here only to propositions about the future but presumably the very same arguments and counter arguments with little modifications could be developed regarding counterfactual propositions.

Future-land is a region of fairytale. 'The future' consists of certain actual trends and tendencies in the present that have not yet been fulfilled. What was going to happen at an earlier time may not be going to happen at a later time, because of some action taken in the interim. This is the way we can change the future: we can and often do bring it about that it will not be the case that p , although before our action it was going to be the case that p ; . . . Before the operation it was right to say 'Johnny is going to bleed to death from the injury': after the operation this was no longer the case.³⁰

Geach's position can be summarized in a two-step argument as follows:

(1) All propositions apparently about the future are propositions about what is going to be the case.

(2) Propositions about what is going to be the case refer to the present, not the future.

Therefore,

(3) There are no propositions about the future.

The problematic premise in this argument is the second one. The first thing to note about it is that it is ambiguous. It can either mean that

(2a) Propositions about what is *really* going to be the case refer to the present, not the future;

or it can mean that

(2b) Propositions about what is going to be the case *if not prevented* refer to the present, not the future.

Putting aside the question whether (2b) is true or false, it is obvious that (2a) is false. And this is a problem for Geach's argument because it is valid only if premise (2) is understood as (2a). It is obvious that the desired conclusion does not follow if we read the second premise as (2b).³¹

³⁰ Geach, 1977, pp. 52, 50.

³¹ For an elaborate defence of this objection to Geach's argument see Kvanvig, 1986, pp. 7 - 11.

Further, if we assume that Geach's first premise (1) is true, we can reinforce the conclusion that his second premise (2) is false. For this purpose consider the following statement:³²

(4) The present tends towards p 's being true, but p will in fact be false, even though no one prevents p from being true.

The important thing to note here is that (4) isn't a contradiction. In an indeterministic universe tendencies of the present are no guarantee that what are tended towards will in fact occur. For example, when Joe is travelling at 120 km/h and his car goes out of control on an extremely busy motorway, states of affairs tend very strongly towards Joe's ending up either in the morgue or in the hospital. But does it follow from all this that he will in fact end up in either of those places? Clearly not.

And even if his car's going out of control in those conditions causally determined that he would be killed, it would still not be contradictory to say at that moment that Joe will not in fact be killed. Of course it would be *false* to say it, but not contradictory. This is because although from that moment onwards his survival would be a causal impossibility, it would nevertheless remain *logically* possible that he survives. This shows that (4) would not be contradictory even if universal determinism was the case.

But Geach's argument denies this obvious truth. If both of his premises are true, then the statement " p will in fact be false" (which is a statement about the future and forms part of (4)) is to be understood as meaning "the present does not tend toward p 's being true" or something equivalent to it. This means that Geach is forced to regard (4) as a blatant contradiction because on his thesis (4) is to be understood as (4'):

(4') The present tends towards p 's being true, but the present does not tend toward p 's being true, even though no one prevents p from being true.

³² For the argument which follows I am indebted to the one in Kvanvig, 1986, pp. 11–3.

But, as I already argued, (4) is not a contradiction. It has no trace of the silliness embodied in (4'). Therefore, both of Geach's premises cannot be true. And since there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the first one, the culprit must be the second one.

But however that may exactly be, it is clear that reductionist attempts to show that there are no propositions about the future along the lines suggested by Geach are doomed to failure. The reason is that for any argument which attempts to prove the reducibility of propositions about the future to propositions about the present a corresponding version of (4) can be found. And if such a non-contradictory analogue can be found for any reductionist attempt of this sort, such attempts are clearly futile. No argument of this sort can lend support to the anti-realist thesis I am contesting here.

The Second Anti-Realist Argument

This second argument is specifically directed against the possibility of middle knowledge. The claim here is that there can't be any true counterfactuals or subjunctives of freedom because such propositions lack the necessary truth makers. More specifically, the issue here is whether it is possible that counterfactual propositions such as (1) and (2) are true:

(1) If David stayed in Keilah, Saul would besiege the city.

(2) If David stayed in Keilah and Saul besieged the city, the men of Keilah would hand David over to Saul.

The problem with propositions such as these, according to Adams, is that there do not seem to be any grounds in virtue of which they could be true. His chief reason seems to be that there was not, is not and will not be actual states of affairs to which they might correspond:

We must note that middle knowledge is not simple *fore*knowledge. The answers that David got from the ephod – “He will come down,” and “They will surrender you” – are not understood by the theologians as categorical predictions. If they were categorical predictions, they would be false. . . . For there never was nor will be an actual besieging of Keilah by Saul, nor an actual betrayal of David to Saul by the men of Keilah, to which those propositions might correspond.³³

Adams also lists a number of other ways in which it is impossible to ground adequately the truth of subjunctives of freedom such as (1) and (2). But instead of listing them all, I shall move on to meet his basic criticism that subjunctives of freedom can't be true because there doesn't seem to be a satisfactory way of grounding them.

The first thing to note here is that Adams' argument is too swift. Instead of giving arguments he simply *assumes* that the truth of these subjunctives must be grounded in some way or other. But it is not immediately obvious that this is correct. For example, one might quite sensibly claim that the proposition “Cats are generally lazy” is true because most cats are most of the time lazy. This simple explanation does not seem to mention any *grounds* for the truth of “Cats are generally lazy” and Adams has not shown that explanations of this simple sort are unsatisfactory for the purpose. Consequently, it may well be that (1) and (2) are true simply because had David stayed, Saul would have besieged and if Saul besieged Keilah, David would have been surrendered to Saul. Note that I am not arguing here that explanations of this simple sort are all that are needed for the purpose. My point is simply that, apart from his assumption to the contrary, Adams has not given us the slightest reason to think it otherwise.

³³ Adams, 1987, p. 80. Adams refers here to the Biblical passage found in Samuel I, Chapter 23. I have a bit more to say on this passage below (pp. 64 – 6.)

But even if Adams is right in his assumption, he is once again hasty in expressing doubts regarding the *possibility* of middle knowledge.³⁴ His only reason for these doubts seems to be his own failure to find the requisite grounds for the truth of the subjunctives in question. This is puzzling, for even if the right grounds were never found by anyone, that would still be insufficient evidence for the conclusion that it is *impossible* that there should be true subjunctives of freedom. Otherwise, the claim that "because no one has ever seen a white crow, it is *impossible* that there should exist any" would be a perfectly good argument.

However, the truth of subjunctives of freedom can be grounded in an analogous fashion to the way in which Adams seems to be happy to ground the truth of propositions about the future. He correctly observes that "most philosophers . . . have supposed that categorical predictions, even about contingent events, can be true by corresponding to the actual occurrence of the event that they predict".³⁵ As Kvanvig pointed out, such an account of the truth of propositions about the future accords well with the following thesis regarding the ontological priority of the present:

Since it is what is occurring now that is most truly real, any contingent proposition that is true must be true in virtue of some relation to some "now" or other.

Such a position generates simple explanations for the truths about the past and future. There are truths about the past because there was a time in the past at which some particular event, state or process, etc was "present". Further, there are truths about the future because there will be such "present" events at some future time.³⁶

³⁴ Adams, 1987, p. 81.

³⁵ Adams, 1987, p. 80.

³⁶ Kvanvig, 1986, p. 136.

We cannot of course explain the truths of subjunctives of freedom in exactly the same terms as are used to explain either the truths about the past or the future. But this cannot be counted against the present proposal because the same holds good both about the past and the future: we cannot explain the truth of propositions about the past in exactly the terms used to explain the truth of propositions about the future and we cannot explain the truth of propositions about the future in exactly the terms used to explain the truth of propositions about the past. We can only explain either of these by reference to their respective (then) present: the truth of propositions about the future by reference to some later present and the truth of propositions about the past by reference to some earlier present. Otherwise the so-called truths about the past and the future would not be truths about, respectively, the past and the future after all.

The same holds good when it comes to explaining the truth of counterfactuals in terms of some *present*. If we could explain their truth in terms of a time which either *was*, *is* or *will be present*, these so-called counterfactuals would turn out not to have been about things counter to fact after all. So the crucial question at hand is whether we can explain the truth of counterfactuals by reference to some *present* or other? From what went before, there is a simple and natural step to such an explanation:

Take the claim that if S were in \mathcal{C} , S would do A . This claim asserts that if there were a (present) time at which S was then in \mathcal{C} , at that time S would (then) do A .³⁷

³⁷ Kvanvig, 1986, p. 136.

In order to see the practical application of this proposal for grounding the truth of counterfactuals consider the earlier claim (1), that if David stayed in Keilah, Saul would besiege the city. Adams' worry was that he could not find a satisfactory way of grounding its truth. We are now in a position to dispel this worry by saying that (1) is true because if there were a (present) time at which David stayed in Keilah, Saul would (then) have besieged the city. Similarly with (2): (2) is true because if there was a (present) time at which David stayed in Keilah and Saul besieged the city, the men of Keilah would (then) have handed David over to Saul.

We can satisfy ourselves that this is a legitimate and satisfactory account of grounding the truth of subjunctives of freedom by considering the way the truth of propositions regarding the present are grounded. Obviously, what makes contingent claims about the present true is the way the world *is* in fact at *this* particular time, now. Similarly, what makes claims about the future true is the way the world *will* in fact be at the appropriate later "present" times, at later "nows". In the same way, what makes claims about the past true is the way the world *was* in fact at the appropriate earlier "present" times, at earlier "nows". Analogously, what makes subjunctive claims true is the way the world *would be* or *would have been* at the relevant "present" times, at which the conditions specified in the antecedent of the subjunctives concerned obtained.

It might be objected here, however, that all this hardly explains anything: the whole explanation *assumes* the very thing we sought to explain. But if this explanation of counterfactuals is question begging, so are our analogous explanations of how the truth of propositions about the future and the past are to be grounded:

If one becomes skeptical that there are truths about the future, and insists on a clarification of what makes these claims true, all that can be offered is *what the present will be like*. If the objector then insists that one has begged the question by appealing to the reality of the future already, there is not much more that can be said. Similarly with regard to the past; if one insists on a clarification of what makes claims about the past true, all that can be offered is *what the present was like*. And again, if the objector insists that one has begged the question by appealing to the reality of the past, there is not much more to be said. Finally, the same goes for claims about subjunctives of freedom.³⁸

In short, if these circularity objections are to be taken seriously, with the consequence that the truth of subjunctives of freedom cannot be grounded in the way proposed here, the truth of propositions about the future and the past can't be grounded either for the very same reasons. And I trust that there will be general consensus that if the truths of the future and the past are to be abandoned with subjunctives of freedom for these reasons, so much the worse for Adams' worries about the grounding of subjunctives of freedom.

On the other hand it may be that Adams had something entirely different in mind in requiring that the truth of subjunctives be adequately grounded. If so, it is not at all clear what that might have been. He says that "those who believe [that middle knowledge] is possible have some explaining to do".³⁹ This, of course, is true. However, before setting us to the task, it would have been only fair if Adams took his fair share in explaining, or at least broadly indicating his requirements for the satisfactory explanation he is purportedly looking for.

³⁸ Kvenvig, 1986, pp. 136 - 7.

³⁹ Adams, 1987, p. 81.

The Third Anti-Realist Argument

This third argument is perhaps the most powerful one that can be made against the possibility of middle knowledge. The argument, once again, is Adams' and it is a short but powerful attempt to show that the law of conditional excluded middle (CEM) is false.⁴⁰

Unfortunately the argument is a disconcertingly swift treatment of a highly complicated and delicate issue. This, I believe, is the chief reason why some authors, like Jonathan L. Kvanvig, who gave an otherwise remarkable criticism of Adams' article, completely missed both its point and its force. Kvanvig quite appropriately criticises Adams for denying the CEM without giving a decent counterexample of his own to it. He also correctly points out that the ones which Adams makes reference to in the literature are not particularly convincing because they invariably fail to make the needed metaphysical point that would show that the law in question is indeed false:

The examples that are used are of the following kind. First, it is claimed to be true that:

(10) If Reagan and Chernenko had been compatriots, then either Reagan would have been a Russian or he would not.

Yet, it is claimed, neither of the following is true:

(11) If Reagan and Chernenko had been compatriots, then Reagan would have been a Russian.

(12) If Reagan and Chernenko had been compatriots, then Reagan would not have been a Russian.

I do not find examples of this sort especially compelling, for it is easy to confuse whether either (11) or (12) is true with whether and how one might determine which of the two is true. I have no idea which is true; but that is an

⁴⁰ I have already considered this particular argument of Adams' in my essay "Where Did Jackson Err? (In Defence of Actualism)". There I have construed it as one of the best arguments against the ethical doctrine of actualism. However, since Adams specifically employs it against the possibility of middle knowledge, completeness requires that its discussion, with the appropriate modifications, should also be included here.

epistemological point, not a metaphysical one – and it is a metaphysical point that needs to be established to show that neither of the two is true.⁴¹

Kvanvig is right in what he says. But his words also betray that he failed to recognize Adams' argument for what it really is: A brief but powerful attempt to establish just the metaphysical point he has been asking for. It is worth presenting and examining the argument in greater detail. Adams is arguing against the view that *by the CEM either (3') or (4') is true*:

(3') If David stayed in Keilah, Saul would not besiege the city.

(4') If David stayed in Keilah, Saul would besiege the city.

Adams' argument is that since as a matter of fact David didn't stay in Keilah, neither of these claims is true and, therefore, the CEM is false. This is because "[we can] deny both of them by asserting, 'If David stayed in Keilah, Saul might or might not besiege the city'".⁴²

Is the Argument Valid?

I shall set out the argument in greater detail and elaborate on it. A relatively minor point to note is that, strictly speaking, Adams' argument is invalid. The claim that "If David stayed in Keilah, Saul might or might not besiege the city" can be true without both (3') and (4') being false. For example if it is true that Saul might besiege the city but false that he might not (say, because determinism is true and Saul cannot help but besiege) then the claim that "If David stayed in Keilah, Saul might or might not besiege the city" is still true but this is quite compatible with the truth of (4').

⁴¹ Kvanvig, 1986, pp. 131 – 2.

⁴² Adams, 1987, p. 79.

An exactly analogous, but more detailed, argument against subjunctive conditionals is made by Michael Tooley. So anything I say here concerning Adams' argument equally holds against Tooley's. See Tooley, 1980, p. 364.

Similarly, if it is false that Saul might besiege the city but true that he might not then the claim that "If David stayed in Keilah, Saul might or might not besiege the city" is still true but this is quite compatible with the truth of (3'). The upshot of all this is that if Adams wants to deny *both* (3') and (4') then instead of saying "If David stayed in Keilah, Saul might *or* might not besiege the city" he has to affirm "If David stayed in Keilah, Saul might *and* might not besiege the city". With all likelihood this is in fact what Adams really wanted to say and, therefore, this is what henceforward I shall assume.

In other words, what Adams is saying is that both (3) and (4) are true:

(3) If David stayed in Keilah, Saul might besiege the city.

(4) If David stayed in Keilah, Saul might not besiege the city.

Furthermore, Adams would want to claim that (3') and (3) are incompatible and, therefore, they imply each other's negation. The same goes for (4') and (4) respectively. Therefore, since both (3) and (4) are true, both (3') and (4') are false; in which case we have the metaphysical point Kvanvig has been asking for.

The argument from (3) to the denial of (3') has the following form:

(1) If A were the case, B might be the case.

Therefore, (1') is false:

(1') If A were the case, B would not be the case.

Similarly, the argument from (4) to the denial of (4') has the following form:

(2) If A were the case, B might not be the case.

Therefore, (2') is false:

(2') If A were the case, B would be the case.

These argument forms are clearly valid. To take the first one, it is impossible to affirm (1') without denying (1). If given A , B would not be the case then it is contradictory to say that given A , B might nevertheless be the case. Similarly, it is impossible to affirm (2') without denying (2). If given A , B would be the case then it is contradictory to say that it nevertheless might not be.

Are the Premises True?

The only thing in dispute, therefore, remains the truth of the premises. Given the argument's validity, the credibility of the conclusion will be only as good as the strength of the arguments advanced in support of the premises are. The main, if not the only, argument for the claim that in the case of arguments of these forms both premises, [i.e., both (1) and (2)], must be affirmed, is that this is necessitated by the indeterminist supposition that the future is really open, in the sense of not being determined. If we really suppose, for instance, that in the hypothetical situation where David stays in Keilah Saul was free to besiege the city and also free not to besiege it, then, on pain of inconsistency, we must affirm the truth of both (3) and (4). That is, on the plausible supposition that the correct account of freedom is the libertarian one, we must say that in case David stayed in Keilah, it is true to say that Saul might have besieged the city and it is also true to say that he might not have.

But these claims are wrong. And this can be demonstrated by having a closer look at just how much of the meaning of "might" in those sentences needs to be affirmed in order to allow for the libertarian assumption regarding the indeterminacy of the future. For although the general meaning of the term *might* logically entails *it is not the case that it would not* and similarly the meaning of *might not* logically entails *it is not the case that it would*, these implications are not secured by that particular reading of

might and *might not* which must be affirmed in order to allow for the indeterminist assumption. Simply put, my thesis is that

(a) There is another, weaker reading of *might* and *might not* beside the rather strong one which Adams' argument employs. This is what David Lewis would call the *would-be-possible* reading of *might* which is to be contrasted with its *not-would-not* reading which Adams' argument assumes and employs.⁴³

(b) The assumption of indeterminism guarantees only the truth of this weaker, *would-be-possible* reading of the relevant premises and not the truth of their *not-would-not* reading which Adams' argument employs.

(c) These *would-be-possible* readings of the relevant premises are not strong enough to entail the desired anti-realist conclusions and, consequently, Adams' argument fails.

As part of substantiating these claims, I suggest that the following, somewhat restricted interpretation of (1) (or something equivalent to it) is all that is secured by the supposition that the future is genuinely undetermined:

(1-) If *A* were the case then it would be that: *B* is possible.

(Or what is the same thing: If *A* were the case then it would be possible for *B* to be the case).

Furthermore, I also suggest that the very same supposition is capable of securing nothing more than the following, similarly restricted, interpretation of (2) (or something logically equivalent to it):

(2-) If *A* were the case then it would be that: *not B* is possible.

(Or alternatively: If *A* were the case then it would be possible for *not B* to be the case).

⁴³ Lewis, 1986, pp. 63 - 4.

Defence of These Claims

I trust that, on reflection, the truth of these claims becomes obvious. Nevertheless, it is prudent to anticipate distrust from certain quarters. Because of incompatible commitments in other fields or because of a long held conviction to the contrary, one may wonder whether there is anything more to be said in favour of this thesis beside this appeal to intuition. In other words, it may be doubted whether this allegedly *prima-facie* plausible position is coherent and sound enough to form the basis of a viable research programme which could eventually succeed in substantiating my thesis (consisting of (a), (b) and (c) above).

As a satisfactory response to such skepticism what must be shown here is that on the relevant assumptions the truth conditions of these two readings are different. This can be done by showing that there is at least one situation in which one of them is true while the other one is false. More specifically, on indeterministic assumptions a possible situation must be specified in which the *not-would-not* readings of the relevant premises are false but their *would-be-possible* readings are true. This would conclusively show both that the truth conditions of the two readings concerned are different and that indeterminism fails to support satisfactorily the requisite readings of the relevant premises for Adams' argument.

It is evident, however, that the construction and specification of such a situation will inevitably have to be done in the context of, and with resort to, some sort of system of counterfactual semantics. Without that it is impossible to explicate further those two types of readings and additional support can be given neither to the intuition that their truth conditions are not the same nor to the intuition that indeterminism assures us of the weaker one's truth alone.

Currently it is beyond me to develop such a semantics of counterfactuals from scratch. It is also beyond the purposes of this thesis to defend any such semantics that may happen to exist already. For the time being I shall have to satisfy myself only with showing how my thesis can be made good within the framework of an already existing and widely accepted possible worlds semantics for counterfactuals. The particular system I have chosen for the purpose is that of David Lewis and, I must hasten to add, it may not be flawless. But I think that it is as promising a research programme as any other one of its kind that is currently available on the market. And in the circumstances this ought to be enough to give us confidence that the thesis I am arguing for need not rely on its intuitive appeal alone. This much said, it is time to explicate the relevant readings:

On Lewis' similarity account of counterfactuals we can make sense of the two readings as follows:

(1) means that in some of the most similar worlds to ours where A is the case, B is also the case; whereas (1-) means that B is possible in all of them.

Similarly, (2) means that in some of the most similar worlds to ours where A is the case, *not* B is the case; whereas (2-) means that *not* B is possible in all of them.

Obviously, the two readings are not the same. On indeterministic assumptions, they have different truth conditions. To see this, take the situation in which there is an unfulfilled possibility of B in all of the most similar worlds to ours where A is the case. In this situation (1) is false but (1-) is true and so is, of course, (1'). But this means that unlike (1), (1-) is quite compatible with (1') and, therefore, the earlier conclusion to the denial of this last one no longer follows.

Similarly, on the assumption that indeterminism is the case and, therefore, that there are genuine, objective but unfulfilled possibilities, in the situation in which there is an unfulfilled possibility of *not B* in all of the most similar worlds to ours where *A* is the case, (2) is false whereas (2-) is true and so is, of course, (2'). But, once again, this means that unlike (2), (2-) is quite compatible with (2') and, therefore, the earlier conclusion to the denial of this last one fails as well.

The Failure of Adams' Argument

This shows that my criticism of Adams' argument holds good. Firstly, the indeterminist assumption does not secure by itself the particularly wide, *not-would-not* readings of (1) and (2) which are assumed by Adams. We have seen that on a Lewisian-type account the indeterministic assumption that the future is genuinely open only guarantees the truth of their more parsimonious counterparts (1-) and (2-).

And secondly, unlike (1) and (2), (1-) and (2-) are quite compatible with (1') and (2') respectively and, therefore, the earlier implication to the denial of these latter ones no longer follows. This is because unlike on the *not-would-not* interpretation, on the *would-be-possible* interpretation *might* does not logically entail *it is not the case that it would not*. And, similarly, although on the former interpretation *might not* logically entails *it is not the case that it would*, this implication no longer holds if *might not* is interpreted as *it would be possible that not*.

More to the point, contrary to Adams' suggestion, in the hypothetical situation where David remains in Keilah the supposition that Saul is genuinely free does not guarantee by itself the *not-would-not* reading of either (3) or (4). I trust that it is obvious that the libertarian supposition on its own only guarantees their *would-be-possible* readings (3-) and (4-):

(3-) If David stayed in Keilah, it would be that: Saul besieges the city is possible. (Or alternatively, it would have been possible for Saul freely to besiege the city.)

(4-) If David stayed in Keilah, it would be that: Saul does not besiege the city is possible. (Or alternatively, it would have been possible for Saul freely to omit besieging the city.)

And it is clear that, unlike (3) and (4), (3-) and (4-) are quite compatible with (3') and (4') respectively. Consequently, the earlier implication to the denial of these latter ones no longer follows.

Let us summarize: Anti-realists sympathetic to Adams' argument are faced with the following dilemma: Either they accept the *not-would-not* interpretation of *might* in the relevant premises or they accept the *would-be-possible* interpretation of it. If the former, their arguments are deductively valid but they don't seem to be able to justify the premises. Contrary to anti-realist suggestions, the indeterministic supposition is insufficient by itself to necessitate the *not-would-not* readings of (1), (2), (3) and (4) which would be incompatible with (1'), (2'), (3') and (4') respectively. Obviously, such readings stand in need of defence and how such a defence might proceed, without assuming the falsity of these latter ones from the very start, is hard to see.

But grasping the other horn of the dilemma is equally disastrous to anti-realist ambitions. For, although in this situation the truth of the relevant premises is guaranteed by the indeterminist assumption that the future is open, the *would-be-possible* readings of these premises are too weak for the purpose. They fail to imply the desired anti-realist conclusions.

The conclusion to draw here is that what seemed to be Adams' best anti-realist argument against subjunctives of freedom is a sophism. It can't give support to the anti-realist position which philosophers like Adams advocate. The thesis in question still stands in need of an adequate defence, and how such a defence might go still remains to be seen.

Positive Support for the CEM

On the other hand we have good reasons to think that the law Adams sought to deny is true. As an appeal to intuition, consider the following passage from Alvin Plantinga:

... I do not know how to produce a conclusive argument for this supposition, in case you are inclined to dispute it. [But] I do think it is the natural view, the one we take in reflecting on our own moral failures and triumphs. Suppose I have applied for a National Science Foundation Fellowship and have asked you to write me a recommendation. I am eager to get the fellowship, but eminently unqualified to carry out the project I have proposed. Realizing that you know this, I act upon the maxim that every man has his price and offer you \$ 500 to write a glowing, if inaccurate, report. You indignantly refuse, and add moral turpitude to my other disqualifications. Later we reflectively discuss what you would have done had you been offered a bribe of \$50,000. One thing we would take for granted, I should think, is that there is a right answer here. We may not know what that answer is; but we would reject out of hand, I should think, the suggestion that there simply is none. ⁴⁴

There is a myriad of everyday situations of the sort mentioned here where we suppose that the law in question obviously holds. This, coupled with the fact that there are no good reasons to suppose it otherwise, is good enough to show that the supposition that God can have middle knowledge is a legitimate and reasonable one to make.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Plantinga, 1974, p. 180.

⁴⁵ I shall consider later another argument against subjunctives by Tooley (pp. 87 - 8.)

The Lack of Justification Objection

Richard Swinburne has given an interesting argument to show that justified true belief regarding the future free decisions of individuals is impossible. Though he doesn't have an argument to show that for the same reasons knowledge of subjunctives of freedom is impossible as well, it seems that with some modifications the same sort of argument could be constructed against subjunctives. But since such an argument would have all the strengths and weaknesses of the one concerning knowledge of the future free decisions of individuals, there is no loss in concentrating only on the argument Swinburne actually gives.

The first thing to note is that Swinburne's argument is different in nature from the ones already considered. The fatalist and anti-realist objections against the wide construal of omniscience have been made on *metaphysical* grounds while Swinburne's reasons are purely *epistemological*. This can be seen from the following passage:

In normal use, propositions about a named future time (including claims about any future free actions) are true or false – timelessly. We may not *know* them to be true or false, until the occurrence of that of which they speak. That which makes them true or false may also lie in the future. But what I claim may be true, even if I do not know it to be true, and even if what I claim has yet to occur.⁴⁶

So it is clear that Swinburne has no quarrels whatsoever with claims that propositions about the future free decisions of agents have truth values. Rather, he insists that these cannot be known in advance because in his belief it is *impossible* to have satisfactory justification regarding them. In other words, the claim here is that even if divine foreknowledge is compatible with

⁴⁶ Swinburne, 1977, p. 175.

freedom and even if there are true propositions about the future and also true counterfactuals of freedom, none of these propositions can be *known* because it seems impossible to have adequate justification for knowledge claims about them. In favour of this strong epistemic inaccessibility thesis Swinburne offers two arguments:

Swinburne's First Argument

It appears that the only way Swinburne can think of providing an adequate justification of such claims would involve an appeal to backward causation, which Swinburne rules out as impossible.

It seems clear that [a person] *P* could not hold justified true beliefs about the future actions of a perfectly free agent *A* [where nothing in the past in any way influences what *A* does]. . . . If *P* is to be justified in supposing that his beliefs about *A*'s actions are true, he must be justified in believing that there are correlations between [his] beliefs about them and *A*'s future actions. . . . [But] *P* could only be justified in supposing that there was a correlation between his beliefs and *A*'s actions if he were justified in supposing that *A*'s actions made a difference to his beliefs; that his beliefs about them were caused (or largely influenced by) *A*'s actions. But to make this supposition is to allow backward causation, which as I have suggested, is apparently something logically impossible.⁴⁷

This argument is clear enough in itself but it is puzzling why it has been made in the first place. For even if Swinburne is right regarding backward causation, he commits a fallacy by supposing that this is the only way in which future events (such as free actions) can make a difference to current beliefs about them. Later on I shall present two conceptually feasible ways in which such future events can make a difference to what an agent

⁴⁷ Swinburne, 1977, pp. 171 - 2. Note also that on p. 172 of Swinburne's book there are three errors in the passage I have quoted. The original passage talks about "P's actions", but it is clear that "A's actions" should have been meant.

believes about them before they actually take place.⁴⁸ And even if there was no plausible account available on *how* the thing in question is possible, that could hardly justify the claim that the thing in question is *impossible*. Consequently, any considerations of backward causation in establishing Swinburne's thesis are simply beside the point.

Swinburne's Second Argument

Swinburne's *prima facie* more meritorious argument by which he attempts to make good his strong epistemic inaccessibility thesis goes as follows:

Now consider the free action of an agent *S* performed at a time t_1 , later than t . We saw earlier that if *S* acts freely, which action he performs at t_1 is ultimately determined by his choice at t_1 and not necessitated by earlier states. Now consider any person *P* at t who has beliefs about what *S* will do at t_1 . By his choice *S* has it in his power at t_1 to make the beliefs held by *P* at t true or false.⁴⁹

In this passage "any person P" is intended by Swinburne to include within its scope God. Understood this way, if Swinburne's argument was correct, the upshot of it would be that, quite generally, free agents have it in their power to make false any one of God's beliefs regarding what they were freely going to do in the future. Under such circumstances it would indeed seem impossible that any one (including God) should have adequate justification for the beliefs in question. And even if by some "very fortunate coincidence" all of God's beliefs turned out to be true, Swinburne is quite correct in observing that not many a theist would want to claim that God is omniscient in this "very precarious way".⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See below the sections on Timeless Knowledge and Molinism. (pp. 53 - 63)

⁴⁹ Swinburne, 1977, p. 169.

⁵⁰ Swinburne, 1977, p. 170 - 1.

But is Swinburne correct in claiming that free agents have it in their power to make false the relevant beliefs that might be held by God? I think not. His argument, which has also been made by Nelson Pike,⁵¹ makes the critical claim that the following argument is a deductively valid one:

(1) God believed at t that S would do, say X , at a later time t_1 .

Therefore:

(2) It was within S 's power at t_1 to do something (namely, omit doing X) that would have brought it about that God held a false belief at t .

But this argument is invalid. (2) is not entailed by (1). What (2) says is that it was within S 's power at t_1 to do something such that if S had done it then God would have had a false belief at t . But does (1) entail this? Clearly not. All (1) entails is that it was within S 's power at t_1 to do something, namely refrain from doing X , such that if S had done it, then a belief to the contrary, i.e., the belief that God had in fact held at t , would have been false.

Swinburne and Pike have lost sight of the crucial point that we are working here with the basic assumption that God is essentially omniscient. For the theistic claim regarding God isn't merely that God is omniscient, but that He is *essentially omniscient*. To say that God is essentially omniscient is to say that God's beliefs are infallible in the sense that none of them can be false and God has foolproof justification for all of them. In other words, all of God's knowledge is *certain* knowledge.

Keeping this assumption in mind it should be relatively easy to see that if S had in fact refrained from doing X at t_1 then God, whom we have

⁵¹ Pike, 1965, pp. 33 - 4. As I already mentioned in an earlier footnote (p. 27), Plantinga thoroughly refuted Pike's argument in his 1975. Swinburne makes no acknowledgement of this refutation and repeats Pike's fallacies.

assumed to be essentially omniscient, would not have held the belief at t that S would do X at t_1 . Rather, God would instead have held the belief that S will refrain from doing X at t_1 . This follows from the assumption that God is essentially omniscient.

The same point can be made by resorting to an explication of it in terms of possible worlds ontology: According to (1), in the actual world God believed at t that S would do X at t_1 . Since, by hypothesis, God is essentially omniscient, in the actual world all his beliefs are true and so in the actual world S does X at t_1 . We have also assumed, of course, that in the actual world it was within S 's power to refrain from doing X at t_1 . This assumption entails that there is at least one possible world, other than the actual one, in which S does refrain from doing X at t_1 . Consider one such world: Because God is, by hypothesis, essentially omniscient, if He exists in that possible world, then all His beliefs are also true in that world. It follows that in *that* world God believes at t that S will refrain from doing X at t_1 . Therefore, neither in the actual world (where S does X) nor in the possible world (where S omits doing X) does or would God hold any false beliefs regarding S 's decisions with respect to X .

It should be obvious by now that the power S has in the actual world to refrain from doing X at t_1 , (a power that S , of course, does not exercise in the actual world), cannot be a power to bring it about that God in the actual world held a false belief at t . Rather, it is a power which could bring it about at t_1 that God would have held a false belief at t if He in fact believed at t that S would do X at t_1 . But of course God would not have held such a belief at t if S in fact chose to exercise his power to refrain from doing X at t_1 . To suppose it otherwise would be to contradict the earlier assumption that God is essentially omniscient.

But S was just any free agent and X' was just any free action of S . This means that on the basic assumption that God is essentially omniscient, no agent has it in her power to make any one of God's beliefs false. For whatever an agent might decide to do, God always has the right beliefs about her decisions. If an agent chose to do otherwise than she in fact did, if God exists, He would have known that too. This means that Swinburne's second, perhaps, most promising argument is also unsuccessful. It cannot establish his strong epistemic inaccessibility thesis regarding the future free decisions of significantly free agents.

To sum up the discussion of the three objections considered here, the claim that *the future free decisions of significantly free agents, for whatever reasons, are unknowable in principle* is wrong. It is perfectly possible, at least in principle, to know what free agents will in fact decide. Furthermore, it is also possible to know what they would decide in situations contrary to fact. And this is so regardless of whether freedom of the will is given a compatibilist or a libertarian account.

The Nature of God's Knowledge

The right conclusion to draw from the previous section is that God's omniscience can only be construed widely. There are two reasons for this, each of which is sufficient on its own to guarantee it.

The first one of these is that otherwise we could imagine another being who knew all the details of the past, present and the future, as well as all the possible ways the world could have been, including all the actual and counterfactual future free decisions of all significantly free (actual and possible) agents and in a relevant sense this being would be more knowledgeable, and therefore greater, than God who was omniscient only in

the narrow sense. But this is plainly absurd. No one can be more knowledgeable or greater than God.

The other reason is that if we regard (not implausibly, I contend) knowledge as one of the powers an agent can have or lack, since it is in principle *possible* for God to be omniscient in the wide sense, God's omnipotence requires that He *be* omniscient in the wide sense. Otherwise, God would be less powerful than He in fact could be – which means that God could not perform everything which is logically in His power to perform. But this is, once again, absurd. For, by the definition of omnipotence, an omnipotent being is one who can do anything which is logically possible for Him to perform.

From this much, the conclusion to the wide construal of God's omniscience already follows. If God exists, He can only be omniscient in the wide sense. Nevertheless, it would be nice if in addition we could at least briefly indicate *how* God can be essentially omniscient in the wide sense. For even if we have shown that God can only be omniscient in the wide sense and that His complete and certain foreknowledge is compatible with free agency and that it is possible for Him to know what free agents would do and what they would have done in any logically conceivable situation, none of this provides an explanation of *how* God can know any of these things.

An Inadequate Suggestion

In human experience the most familiar way of having foreknowledge of the future, including the future free decisions made by significantly free agents and the events which are the direct outcome of such decisions, is by foresight. It was by foresight, for instance, that I had foreknowledge of some of the future free decisions of the taxi driver in the earlier example. So it might be thought that God can know the future by foresight of this kind.

But this sort of approach is unlikely to be very successful. For when I foreknow some of the future free decisions of the taxi driver, I do not foreknow them for *certain*. There is always a chance, no matter how remote, that my beliefs regarding the future free decisions of this man will turn out as mistaken. It is clear however that this cannot be the case with God. As we have already seen, a being whose beliefs can turn out to be false cannot be God. If God exists, He must believe all and only true propositions as well as have fullproof justification for all of His beliefs so that all of them are certain and unmistakable. In this sense, all of God's beliefs qualify as certain knowledge and the shortcomings of this proposal is that it would only explain *probabilistic* foreknowledge and *probabilistic* middle knowledge regarding the actions of significantly free agents. It would not suffice to explain how God can have *certain* knowledge of such actions.

Timeless Knowledge

A more promising suggestion is made by Journet who says that "God . . . knows all things not by foresight or memory but by pure vision".⁵² No doubt, this claim could use a lot more clarity, but it must be quickly pointed out that the concept employed is not an atheist or agnostic invention but a theistic one and it is supported by several passages in the Bible. For example, we are told that in a vision an angel sent by God told Daniel: "I have come to make you understand what will happen to your people in the future. This is a vision about the future."⁵³ So, if the concept is in need of any explanation at all, ultimately, the onus is on the *theists* to explain to us these words which, by their own lights, are the unmistakable, true words of God. It turns out, however, that there is a rather promising interpretation of Journet's notion of *knowledge by pure vision*. This is, what is sometimes called, *timeless knowledge* and on this account God does indeed turn out to know all things

⁵² Journet, 1963, pp. 231 - 2.

⁵³ Daniel, Ch. 10, vs. 14.

for certain as required by the notion of essential omniscience. It is worthwhile to explore this in some detail.

The doctrine that God is outside time and that therefore His knowledge is also timeless is part and parcel of a particular interpretation of the essential theistic belief that God is an *eternal* being. Aquinas presents the view as follows:

Now although contingent events come into actual existence successively, God does not, as we do, know them in their actual existence successively, but all at once; because his knowledge is measured by eternity, as is also his existence; and eternity, which exists as a simultaneous whole, takes in the whole of time. . . Hence all that takes place in time is eternally present to God . . . because he eternally surveys all things as they are in their presence to him . . . ⁵⁴

So according to this view God sees all things and events of the past, present and the future in one simultaneous, eternal present. It is not readily obvious how this is even possible but the following metaphor may be of help in grasping the idea:

Suppose there is a long line of travellers, in a single file, walking in the same direction, along a road which branches only in the direction in which they are travelling. A traveller on the road cannot see the travellers in front of her beyond the next fork. Each traveller is thus like a different temporal stage of a single person who faces various future choices. Aquinas's observer from a height would see not only the ways the file of travellers could proceed, but also the way it proceeds in fact. This in no way prejudices the fact that the road does branch in front of each traveller.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, Ia. 14.

⁵⁵ Oddie and Perrett, forthcoming.

Two Objections and Their Refutations

Assuming that the idea is sufficiently clear, I shall consider two criticisms of it. For it has appeared to some philosophers that "the claim that God is timeless . . . seems to contain an inner incoherence and also to be incompatible with most things which theists ever wish to say about God".⁵⁶ It seems to me that both these charges can be satisfactorily blocked. To show this, I shall take them one by one.

Briefly, the charge of incoherence goes as follows:

If God's eternal knowledge is simultaneous with the occurrence of some event E and it is also simultaneous with some later event E* then, (by the symmetry and transitivity of simultaneity), E and E* are also simultaneous with each other. But, the objection goes, this is absurd: by assumption E occurs at an earlier time than E* and, therefore, they would have to be both simultaneous and not simultaneous with each other – which is impossible. It follows that there must be something wrong with the idea of timeless knowledge.⁵⁷

But it is not at all clear whether the source of the contradiction should not be traced to the objection itself.⁵⁸ This is because the objection essentially rests on the dubious assumption that simultaneity is a *two-place* relation. But, if the Special Theory of Relativity (STR) is to be given any credence, this assumption is false. Simultaneity is not a *two-place* relation between events but a *three-place* relation between events and some particular observer (or frame of reference). The novel but well-known

⁵⁶ Swinburne, 1977, p. 220 – 1.

⁵⁷ This argument was originally formulated by Aquinas' opponent Alvaro Suarez but it has some contemporary defenders as well such as Anthony Kenny and Richard Swinburne. See Kenny, 1969, p. 264; 1979, pp. 38 – 9; Swinburne, 1977, pp. 200 – 1.

⁵⁸ For a detailed presentation of the argument which follows see: Oddie and Perrett, forthcoming

consequence of understanding simultaneity in this way is that events which are not simultaneous from one point of view may be simultaneous from another point of view, and vice versa.

The upshot of this for the issue at hand is that on this understanding of simultaneity the incoherence objection simply disappears. The thesis of God's timeless knowledge can be understood as the thesis that all the events of the past, present and the future are simultaneous from God's point of view. And this is obviously compatible with the claim that those events are not simultaneous from, say, our point of view.

I shall turn now to the irreconcilability objection which basically questions the possibility of such a knower being capable of fulfilling certain roles which are familiarly ascribed to God. The concern here is with person-making properties such as the ability to think, know, warn, punish, forgive and the like. It is hard to see how any of these activities could be possible for an atemporal, changeless being. It seems that if these things are really actions of an agent, they must be performed at some time or another. For example, if God punishes some particular sin, He must do it *after* it is committed. But it is inconceivable how this could be done if for God there is no *beforeness* or *afterness*. In view of these seemingly insurmountable conceptual difficulties the conclusion to be drawn seems to be that an immutable, timeless being would be incapable of fulfilling certain roles which must necessarily be ascribable to full-blooded agents and which indeed are matter of factly ascribed to God.⁵⁹ Consequently, it seems that there is no chance for Journet's claim (that God knows all things by pure vision) being cashed out as God knowing all things timelessly, in one gigantic eternal present.

⁵⁹ For detailed arguments of this sort see Pike, 1970, pp. 121 - 9.

But in fact things do not stand as badly as that. The essential elements of a resourceful and ingeniously conceived research programme in this respect are already emerging. This programme's central notion is that of an *eternal action*.⁶⁰ This novel notion in turn rests on a fine distinction between that aspect of an action which is *internal* to the agent and that aspect which consists of some *effect* produced by that agent in performing the action concerned. At least some of the effects of our actions often occur at times other than when the original act was performed. For example, one may try to kill the weeds in one's garden by spraying them at some particular time, though the weeds don't actually die until two or three weeks later. Clearly, the dying of the weeds is only an aspect of the action in question. It is still part and parcel of one's action of *killing the weeds*; for if the weeds somehow managed to survive, one's spraying by itself would not amount to killing them. At best it would be an attempted killing, but not a complete and successful one.

This much said it isn't difficult to see how this kind of distinction allows an explanation of an eternal action. Of this William P. Alston has given a particularly lucid account:

The crucial point is that the two aspects can differ in temporal status. The worldly effect (of God's actions) will be at a time. But that is quite compatible with this that the divine volition should be timeless, should be embraced with all other divine activity in the one eternal *now*. The action is in time by virtue of its effect, but not by virtue of the immediate activity of the agent. . . . [So a timeless being can act in the temporal world] by timelessly performing acts of will that have temporal effects.⁶¹

⁶⁰ See, for example, Kvanvig, 1986, p. 163.

⁶¹ Alston quoted in Kvanvig, 1986, p. 163.

So an eternal action is one the internal aspect of which is timeless but its effects occur in time. On this understanding God, as a timelessly eternal agent, acts in history by timelessly performing acts of will which have temporal effects.

If this account of the notion of an eternal action is coherent, there is no conceptual difficulty in a timeless being fulfilling the roles which are familiarly ascribed to God. The claim that God is timeless is quite compatible with ascribing to Him the relevant person making properties. Consequently, Swinburne's incompatibility objection can be put aside as harmless as well.

The Possibility of Timeless Knowledge

Furthermore, the strategy used to give an account of the notion of an eternal action can also be used to develop a parallel account of the notion of *eternal knowledge by pure vision*. For, just as there is a distinction between the internal aspect of an action and the effects of that action, there is a parallel distinction between what is known and the knowing itself whenever knowledge occurs. In the light of this distinction we should be able to make good sense of the following passage:

When a timeless being knows a fact infected with temporality, what is known is certainly temporal. However, the knowing of that fact can none the less itself be timeless. . . . I see no principle[d] reason for thinking that a timeless being cannot grasp the essence of every temporal moment directly, regardless of whether that moment is present for us or not.⁶²

So eternal knowledge by pure vision of some temporal fact is one the knowing of which is timeless but its object, the fact known, is in time. On this understanding God, as a timelessly omniscient agent, knows or "sees" every single event of history by timelessly being aware of every single

⁶² Kvanvig, 1986, p. 164.

temporal event as a temporal event. In practical terms this means, for example, that God timelessly knows what I had for dinner on 28/12/89 and also that I wrote this particular sentence at 1.00 AM 29/12/89 in Palmerston North.

To sum up the arguments of this section, there is a very promising research programme within which Journet's notion of knowledge by pure vision can be quite fruitfully explicated. Appropriately interpreted, Journet's notion lends positive support to the intuitively correct claim that God can have *certain* foreknowledge not only of determined events but also of the future free decisions of free agents. For if God knew, or "saw", all events of history timelessly happening in a gigantic eternal *nunc*, He would indeed know all things for certain even if He would not, strictly speaking, *fore* know them in the same way as temporal agents foreknow future things.

A Molinist Account of God's Omniscience⁶³

An alternative framework (which is possibly compatible with the previous one discussed) within which God's omniscience in the wide sense can be successfully explicated is a Molinist one. This account assumes the objective existence of unique individual essences in the sense defined below. These essences in turn are to be understood as properties or universals which are regarded in the realist's sense as necessary beings.⁶⁴

Further, we must also clarify certain key notions that surround essences and their instantiations.

⁶³ The Molinist account I shall briefly outline in this section owes a lot to Jonathon L. Kvanvig's work. (Kvanvig, 1986, pp. 121 – 6.) He presents certain aspects of the account in more detail than I do, others in less. His defence of it is also quite extensive. See pp. 126 – 49.

⁶⁴ Naturally, those who for some reason are reluctant to admit Platonic universals into their ontology are not going to be over impressed with this particular explanation.

E is an essence = def. E is a property which is necessarily such that
(i) it is possible that something exemplify it; and
(ii) it is not possible that more than one thing exemplify it.

A subset of essences are person essences. These are essences the instantiation of which has to be a person. More specifically, we can define a person essence as a complete and consistent set of (world indexed) properties the instantiation of which would be a person. These properties are of the form *being- α -in- W -at- T* or, alternatively, of the form *not-being- α -in- W -at- T* . For example *being-human-in- W -at- T* and its complement *not-being-human-in- W -at- T* and, similarly, *being-blue-eyed-in- W -at- T* and its complement *not-being-blue-eyed-in- W -at- T* are such properties. Consequently, they may be included in sets that properly qualify as person essences – provided, of course, that such inclusion does not render the set in question inconsistent. From all this, it follows that any complete and consistent set of world-indexed properties the instantiation of which would be a person, does qualify as a person essence.

We can also accept:

Necessarily, every individual (which exists in some possible world or other) has an essence.

And, since there cannot be things which lack an essence, God when creating creates objects with essences. Of course, this cannot be taken to mean that in His creative activity God creates objects *and* essences. That is impossible, for essences are properties and as such they are necessary beings. On realist assumptions it is simply impossible that they do not exist.

Rather, God's creative activity is to be taken to consist in creating particulars which *instantiate* essences in the actual world. So, for example,

the claim that God creates Adam and Eve should be understood as saying that God actualises or brings into existence two particulars, which are named "Adam" and "Eve" respectively, one of which instantiates the complete set of world-indexed properties that jointly constitute the personal essence of Adam while the other one instantiates the complete set of world-indexed properties that jointly constitute the personal essence of Eve.

Now if we take the theistic assumption that through God's creative activity a subset of essences instantiated are free agents, it follows that, strictly speaking, God's creative activity does not by itself amount to the actualisation of any particular possible world. For there is a distinction between those features of the actual world which are actualised by God and the ones resulting from the creative activity of the free creatures in it. So on the above assumption, God has not in fact actualised any particular world through His creative activity. What He actualised by His instantiation of essences is a *range* of possible worlds – call such a range "a galaxy" (of worlds) – and left it up to the free creatures He created to decide on which particular world out of that galaxy should become the actual one.

This feature of the account so far satisfies the intuitively essential requirement that God's pre-creative knowledge is to be understood in such a way that after His creative activity the future remains genuinely open. For since the agents created by God are significantly free, from the time of their creation it is partly up to them what the future will in fact be like and not entirely up to God. But, of course, the most important feature of our account of God's essential omniscience will have to be the ability to demonstrate how God can have complete and certain knowledge in advance of all the free decisions of the creatures He will in fact actualise, as well as of all the free decisions of the creatures He could have actualised. The crucial time at which God's

knowledge must have this feature is, obviously, the time immediately preceding creation; before He sets about to actualise some galaxy of worlds or other. Otherwise, we could not claim that we have shown *how* God knew exactly what He was doing at creation.

This second requirement can be captured by showing that essences are such that, even before being instantiated, they reveal what an instantiation of them would be like. This can be done by complementing the above account with a version of the Molinist doctrine about subjunctives of freedom. For this purpose let us adopt the following principle:

Necessarily, for every essence E such that it is possible that an instantiation of E is free, an essential property of E is of the form: being such that some maximal subjunctive of freedom regarding a free instantiation S of E is true.

This principle says that each individual's essence includes a maximal subjunctive of freedom regarding what its instantiation (i.e. that individual) would do if the circumstances at the relevant time were maximally specific. A maximal subjunctive of freedom is of the form *If S were in circumstances C at t, S would do (or would omit doing) A at t*, where circumstances *C* at *t* are maximally specific in the sense that they include every single fact up to *t* about the galaxy the actual world is a member of – except, of course, *A*'s freely doing (or omitting to do) *A* at *t*.

According to this account, whenever the antecedent of a subjunctive is maximally specific regarding the history of the galaxy actualised by God (and the free agents in it), there is always a true subjunctive of freedom regarding what any free agent in that galaxy would do in those circumstances. This account also implies that every possible free action figures as the consequent of a true subjunctive the antecedent of which is maximally specific.

Obviously, it is the fact that every essence includes a maximal subjunctive of freedom regarding any occasion on which its instantiation is free to do (or omit doing) some particular act that enables us to explain *how* God can know exactly at the time preceding creation what the instantiations of these essences will or would do in any situation. God can know for certain what free individuals would in fact do under any conceivable circumstances by knowing the *essences* they are the instantiations of. And he can know for certain what free individuals will in fact do by knowing in addition which particular galaxy of worlds He is going to create. And God can know what He is going to do because His vast knowledge of essences was there to aid Him in this respect. (In fact, to get ahead of ourselves for a moment, this means that God could have chosen to actualise a galaxy which included only creatures whom He knew would always freely do the good and thus, in cooperation with Him, freely actualise an alpha world.)

To sum up: if the account outlined here is an acceptable explanation of how God can know what He is doing at creation, we have here the additional support to consolidate and foster more confidence in the earlier conclusion that God can be essentially omniscient in the wide sense.⁶⁵ For reasons I have already given,⁶⁶ this means that, contrary to the suggestions of some philosophers – some of whom are theists – we are obliged to accept the widest possible construal of omniscience as the correct one.

The Biblical Support

Indeed, it seems that the theists who give any real credence and not merely lip service to the scriptures ought to be the last to want to construe God's omniscience narrowly. For, to take an example, in a great many passages

⁶⁵ Since Kvanvig has given an extensive defence of this account, (see pp. 126 -49), I shall not engage into further defence of it here.

⁶⁶ See above pp. 51 - 2.

of the Bible an apparently undetermined future including the future free decisions of agents is foretold. For example, to stick with the Book of Daniel,

In the third year that Cyrus was emperor of Persia, a message was revealed to Daniel, who was also called Beltshazzar. The message was *true* [my emphasis] but extremely hard to understand. It was explained to him in a vision; [in which an angel sent by God told him:] "I have come to make you understand what will happen to your people in the future. . . . I came . . . to reveal to you what is written in the Book of Truth." ⁶⁷

And then there follow some three pages packed with information about which king will do what, who will become arrogant and who will have a change of heart, who will sin and who will not, . . . etc, etc,.

It is worth taking another example, where God is said to be scolding the Jews through the prophet Isaiah:

The Lord says to Israel, "Long ago I predicted what would take place; . . . I knew that you would prove to be stubborn, as rigid as iron and unyielding as bronze. And so I predicted your future long ago, announcing events before they took place"⁶⁸

Whatever the explanation, the claim in this passage is that God *knew* *beforehand* what the Jews will freely decide to do. Presumably, their stubbornness was at least to some extent the result of their own free choice, for otherwise *blaming* them for their stubbornness would be unjustified (on plausible assumptions about the relation of blameworthiness to freedom).

Scriptural passages also give support to the claim that God has not only complete foreknowledge of the future, but that He has middle knowledge as well. For example, when David is said to have consulted God regarding Saul's

⁶⁷ Daniel, Ch. 10, vs. 1, 14 & 20.

⁶⁸ Isaiah, Ch. 43, vs. 3 - 5.

plans to capture him at Keilah, God's answer was that Saul will besiege Keilah and that he will be handed over to Saul.⁶⁹ But following this consultation David left Keilah and hid in the hills. Consequently, learning of his escape, Saul never bothered to go to Keilah and David was not in fact handed over to him. Nevertheless, and this is a crucial point, we presume that David was wise to trust God's words. But this simple and natural assumption makes no sense if God had no knowledge of what He was talking about with David. For God's knowledge could not have been about the actual future because David wasn't in fact handed over to Saul; nor did Saul, for that matter, ultimately go to Keilah. Consequently, since His knowledge could not have been of the past or the (then) present either, it could have been only about what *would* have been the case *if* certain things were different from how they in fact turned out to be. That is to say, if God knew what He was talking about then He could only have known the following:

(1) If David stayed in Keilah, Saul would besiege the city.

(2) If David stayed in Keilah and Saul besieged the city, the men of Keilah would hand David over to Saul.

Assuming that Saul would be free to besiege and also free not to besiege the city if David stayed there, knowing the first one of these counterfactual conditionals amounts to middle knowledge. Similarly, on the assumption that the men of Keilah would be free in their decision to hand David over to Saul, knowing the second statement also amounts to middle knowledge in the most straightforward sense of the word.

As we have seen earlier, Robert Adams tried to show that this interpretation of the Biblical passage in question is wrong. He tried to show this by denying that (1) and (2) "ever were, or ever will be, true."⁷⁰ But if

⁶⁹ Samuel I, Chapter 23.

⁷⁰ Adams, 1987, p. 79.

Adams was right, we would have the absurd consequence that in the passage in question God and David didn't know what they were talking about. Nor would we, for given Adams' position on the issue and also the fact noticed by him that "there never was nor will be an actual besieging of Keilah by Saul, nor and actual betrayal of David to Saul by the men of Keilah"⁷¹, it is impossible to see how we should understand the conversation between God and David. In view of this it isn't surprising that in this regard Adams makes no suggestions whatever. For on the assumption that God is essentially omniscient (which means that none of His beliefs are probabilistic, but rather involve certain knowledge⁷²), the question of *what* David came to know from God is one on which Adams must remain mute.

Considerations of these scriptural passages can leave little doubt that the earlier conclusion, once again, is unavoidable: God's omniscience must be construed widely and we have seen that such a construal is quite compatible with a libertarian account of free agency. We are, in other words, obliged to say with the other Bible passage that if God exists, He is the one who is "telling from the beginning the finale, and from long ago the things that have not been *done*".⁷³ Indeed, many respected and distinguished defenders of theism admit this and thereby remain honest both to themselves and to the tradition they are set to defend.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Adams, 1987, p. 80.

⁷² This is what excludes the possibility that David might have come to know from God that Saul will *probably* come to get him. But, although not incoherent, this would be an implausible suggestion anyway because when David heard of Saul's preparations to besiege Keilah he already knew that Saul will probably come to get him. Therefore, a far more plausible suggestion in the context would be that what David wanted to find out (and ultimately did find out from God) was whether Saul would in fact come to besiege Keilah if he stayed there.

⁷³ Isaiah, Ch. 46, vs. 10. (My italics)

⁷⁴ See, for instance, Plantinga, 1975, p. 43; Kvanvig, 1986; and the better parts of Hick, 1977. e.g., p. 289, the passages already quoted above. (pp. 22 - 3.)

(4) There are many possible worlds actualisable by God which are just as good or even better than the actual one for realizing any morally acceptable goal. Many of these worlds are "alpha worlds" without unabsorbed evil and are ones in which every significantly free moral agent always freely does what is right.

This premise has quite a bit in common with J. L. Mackie's contention that God could have chosen to create an alpha world instead of the actual one.⁷⁵ Plantinga responds to this claim by a series of sophisticated and somewhat technical arguments which are shrouded in the language of possible worlds. His reply, which can be equally made against the above claim in (4), essentially consists of the following two claims which are an essential part of his Free Will Defence:

(a) Although there are many possible worlds which are better than the actual one, it is false to claim that God could have created just any one of them because some possible worlds are logically impossible for God to actualise. The relevant reason here is that once God chooses to create free agents, He necessarily loses control over certain features of the world to be actualised. Depending on the degree of their freedom, it is up to these agents to actualise (at least in part) some particular world and thus not entirely up to God. For example, if I am really free to complete this thesis and also free not to complete it then it isn't entirely in God's power to actualise either the world in which I complete this thesis or the world in which I do not complete it. At least in part it is up to me and if I chose not to complete it, for instance, then it is logically impossible for God to actualise the world in which I freely completed it. In short, Plantinga claims that there are possible worlds that God could not have actualised.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ For this argument see Mackie, 1971, pp. 100 - 1.

⁷⁶ Plantinga, 1975, pp. 34 - 44.

(b) It is possible that all those worlds which are better than ours, including the alpha worlds in which there is no evil at all and in which significantly free moral agents always freely choose what is right, are among the ones that God could not have actualised.⁷⁷

Clarification of the Debate

In order to clarify in more detail the exact nature of this debate, below is a map of logical space which shows all the possible world-types (WT 1 – WT 16) which could be actualised by some particular individual who upon being created is significantly free on four occasions to do (or omit doing) the morally right thing with respect to some action or other. (Figure 1.)

World-types	Choice 1	Choice 2	Choice 3	Choice 4
WT 1	Right	Right	Right	Right
WT 2	Right	Right	Right	Wrong
WT 3	Right	Right	Wrong	Right
WT 4	Right	Right	Wrong	Wrong
WT 5	Right	Wrong	Right	Right
WT 6	Right	Wrong	Right	Wrong
WT 7	Right	Wrong	Wrong	Right
WT 8	Right	Wrong	Wrong	Wrong
WT 9	Wrong	Right	Right	Right
WT 10	Wrong	Right	Right	Wrong
WT 11	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Right
WT 12	Wrong	Right	Wrong	Wrong
WT 13	Wrong	Wrong	Right	Right
WT 14	Wrong	Wrong	Right	Wrong
WT 15	Wrong	Wrong	Wrong	Right
WT 16	Wrong	Wrong	Wrong	Wrong

Figure 1.

⁷⁷ Plantinga, 1975, pp. 45 – 53.

(Notice that WT1 – WT16 are not particular possible worlds, but only world-types, because the agent can do the right or the wrong thing within each situation with respect to an infinite number of possible actions depending on the particular circumstances that obtain in the particular possible world in which the agent might find herself at any particular world time. For instance, on the first occasion in one world she might do the right thing by repaying her debts, whereas in another one she might do the right thing by returning some lost property to its rightful owner and so on.)

Mackie's Argument

Recall that Mackie's contention was that:

(1) There are many possible worlds in which an agent only does what is right and, by extension, there are many possible worlds (alpha worlds) in which every agent always freely does the same. Therefore, on account of His perfection,

(2) If God existed, He would have created an alpha world.

A quick glance at our map of logical space (Figure 1) makes it plain that Mackie's contention in (1) is right. There are worlds in which an agent freely does what is right on all four occasions (or at all four world times). These are within world-type WT1. From this it seems to follow that it is possible that all significantly free agents should do the same and the world they would thus actualise would be an alpha world in which everyone would freely do what was right. Consequently, it is true to say that there are alpha worlds.

Plantinga's Reply

Plantinga grants this. But he disputes the second contention that it was up to God to actualise one of these alpha worlds. His argument is that (a) and (b) are true because it is up to each particular agent (whose deeds and misdeeds we are considering) to actualise an alpha world and not entirely up to God. If

an agent really is free with respect to the actions concerned at the four world times, then there is simply no way God could have ensured that an alpha world, or for that matter, any particular world within those world-types, is actualised without interfering with that agent's freedom of choice. If this agent chooses to go wrong at some (or even at all four) world times, there is little that God can do about it unless He interferes with the agent's freedom. And, clearly, the same goes for *all* free agents. Consequently, it is false to say that it was within God's power to ensure the actualisation of an alpha world with significantly free agents within it.

Two Criticisms of Plantinga's Argument

But this argument is invalid. We can concede all that Plantinga claims in his premises without conceding his conclusion. First of all, Plantinga's argument for claim (a) that *there are some worlds that God cannot actualise* is vitiated by a fallacy. Tooley has shown that the argument in question is invalid because Plantinga fails to take into account the following distinction between two ways of actualising some state of affairs:⁷⁸

One *strongly actualises* state of affairs *B* if and only if one makes it the case that *B* is actual.

One *weakly actualises* *B* if and only if one makes it the case that

(i) some state of affairs *A* is actual and

(ii) the subjunctive conditional "If *A* were the case then *B* would be the case" is true.

Plantinga asks us to consider an example in which a free agent, Curley, is free to accept and is also free to reject a bribe:

⁷⁸ The criticism which follows has been made by Tooley in his 1980, pp. 365 - 6. Generously enough, Tooley also gives another interpretation to what Plantinga might be saying but on that interpretation the argument fails just the same. (p. 366.)

There is a possible world W where God strongly actualizes a totality T of states of affairs including Curley's being free with respect to taking the bribe, and where Curley takes the bribe. But there is another possible world W^* where God actualizes the very same states of affairs and where Curley *rejects* the bribe. Now suppose it is true as a matter of fact that if God had actualized T , Curley would have accepted the bribe: then God could not have actualized [W^*]. And if, on the other hand, Curley would have rejected the bribe, had God actualized T , then God could not have actualized [W]. So either way there are worlds God could not have actualized.⁷⁹

But this argument is invalid. Taking the situation where Curley accepts the bribe when God strongly actualises T , there is nothing in the premises which would preclude either the possibility that if God *weakly* actualised T , then Curley would have rejected the bribe, or the possibility that God could have *weakly* actualised T . Consequently, it may well be that while God actualises W by *strongly* actualizing T , He could actualise W^* by (merely) *weakly* actualising T .

An exactly analogous objection can be given against Plantinga's argument that if instead Curley rejected the bribe it would not have been in God's power to actualise W . For his argument's premises exclude neither the possibility that God could have *weakly* actualised T , nor the possibility that if God had weakly actualised T then Curley would have accepted the bribe. Consequently, it may well be that if as a matter of fact Curley rejected the bribe, God could actualise W^* by *strongly* actualizing T while at the same time it was also in His power to actualise W by merely *weakly* actualizing T . Hence, Plantinga's justification for his first claim (a) *that there are some worlds that God cannot actualise* is inadequate.

⁷⁹ Plantinga, 1974, pp. 180 - 1.

Notice that the bracketed "W" and "W*" are mistakenly interchanged in the original text.

Furthermore, even if this particular argument of Plantinga's was not beyond repair, his second claim (b) *that it is possible that all those worlds which are better than the actual one are among the ones that God could not have actualised* is wrong. For it seems that given the above mentioned distinction between strong and weak actualisations, God *could* have weakly actualised an alpha world of the desired sort. As we have seen earlier, (on account of His knowledge of essences, perhaps), God knows in advance which particular creature would freely sin and which one would not if actualised under such and such circumstances. If so, He could have created those ones which He knew would freely go right on all occasions. So it seems that it was in God's power to actualise an alpha world because He could have availed Himself of such an opportunity.

Plantinga's Reply

Plantinga seems to be oblivious to the problem raised by Tooley but he attempts to meet the second difficulty. He argues that we are making an illegitimate assumption by thinking that there definitely are possible persons who in fact would go right on all occasions when the opportunities arose. There may be, but also there may not be such persons. For it may be the case that all possible persons suffer from what he calls "transworld depravity". A person suffers from this condition just in case she would in fact go wrong with respect to at least one action if she were actualised. It must be noted that it is not that on such occasions she *could not* go right. Rather, it is simply that, as a matter of fact, out of her own free choice, she *wouldn't*. And, Plantinga reasons, if it is possible that *one* person suffers from such a condition, it is also possible that *all* possible and actual persons are affected in the same way.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Plantinga, 1975, pp. 45 - 9.

Has the Problem Been Solved?

Some contemporary philosophers believe that through this Free Will Defence Plantinga has conclusively established the logical compatibility of evil and the existence of God. John Hick, for example, in the last chapter of the second edition of his book *Evil and the God of Love* claims that "Alvin Plantinga, Nelson Pike and others have shown that the claim of some philosophers that the reality of evil makes possible a strict logical disproof of God's existence is mistaken".⁸¹

But this view is wrong. If anyone, Plantinga cannot be credited with such an accomplishment.⁸² For even if Plantinga's first claim (a) happened to be true, in his second claim (b) he is wrong without qualification. As we have already mentioned, Plantinga's reason for holding (b) is his belief that it may be that every possible person (actual ones included) suffers from the rather nasty condition of transworld depravity.⁸³ But this is a false belief and to show this we must take a closer look at the notion involved.

Transworld Depravity and Persons

Transworld depravity essentially consists in this: that if a person F suffers from it, then in any possible world in which F exists, if and when that world was actualised, F would freely go wrong with respect to at least one action A . A very strange feature of this condition though is that in some possible worlds F may not go wrong with respect to any actions whatever but always freely does what is right. (This is how Plantinga allows for the possibility of alpha worlds.) The symptoms of the condition appear only when one of these alpha worlds, or any other world in which at least one such affected person exists is just about to actualise. Upon the actualisation of its

⁸¹ Hick, 1977, p. 365. A similar claim is being made by Adams who says that "it is fair to say that Plantinga has solved this problem". See Adams, 1985, p. 226.

⁸² Nor can Pike. But I shall deal with his argument later. See below pp. 90 - 1.

⁸³ For the rest of the details see his 1975, pp. 45 - 53.

affected person exists is just about to actualise. Upon the actualisation of its maximal world segment S (where S is all the states of affairs in that world except P 's freely choosing what is right with respect to A), P freely chooses to go wrong with respect to A . He chronically does this no matter which one of the (alpha) worlds he exists in is just about to actualise. Consequently, since it is possible that every person suffers in this way, although there are many possible alpha worlds in which all significantly free moral agents always freely choose the good, it is possible that none of them are in principle actualisable by God. For if they were, when actualised these affected people would always freely choose to do what is right, which contradicts the assumption that they are suffering from transworld depravity.

This argument is both ingenious and subtle. But why should we suppose that it is possible that *every* possible person suffers from transworld depravity? Plantinga's reply is that because it is possible that every possible *person essence* suffers from it.⁸⁴ And if this is correct then, since every person must be an instantiation of some person essence or other, there may not be any persons free from this condition.

Transworld Depravity and Person Essences

It is worth investigating this allegation in more detail. After some necessary preliminaries I intend to dispute this crucial claim that it is possible that every person essence suffers from transworld depravity, for it seems to me that this claim is false. But by way of preparing the scene, let us consider, once again, essences and their instantiations.

Recall that we defined an essence as a property which is necessarily such that one and only one thing can exemplify it and that a subset of essences are person essences. These are ones the instantiations of which would be persons.

⁸⁴ Plantinga, 1975, pp. 49 - 53.

We also noted earlier that God's creative activity is to be taken to consist in creating particulars which instantiate essences in the actual world.⁸⁵

A fruitful discussion of the issue at hand, however, also requires the employment of an extension of Leibniz's law (of the non-identity of the diverse) regarding the identity and diversity of essences:

(L) Necessarily, for any two essences x and y, if x has or includes a property that y doesn't or vice versa then x and y are not the same but distinct essences.

Another thing which is also important to note here is that it is not a requirement on any particular essence that it be co-exemplifiable with just any other essence in any particular world. Indeed, this would be an unreasonable requirement as it can happen that two different essences share some property which cannot be instantiated by more than one thing in any one world. For example, *being-the-first-born-child-of-(some-particular)-so-and-so* is a property that can be instantiated at most by one individual in any one world. Nevertheless, it is a property which can be included in more than one essence. It can be part of an essence which also includes the property *being-a-daughter-of-so-and-so* and it can also be part of a different essence which includes the property *being-a-son-of-so-and-so*. This is because it is possible that so and so has a daughter as her first child and it is also possible that she has a son as her first child, but it is not possible in any world that she has both a daughter and a son as her first child. (I assume here that in the case of twins, for instance, one of them will be born earlier than the other.)

These preliminaries over, we must find satisfactory answers to the following two questions:

⁸⁵ See above pp. 60 – 61.

(i) Is it possible, as Plantinga claims, that some person essences suffer from transworld depravity? And if the answer to this question is found to be affirmative,

(ii) Is it also possible that *all* person essences are infected in the same manner?

Briefly, my position is that although the answer to the first of these questions is affirmative, the answer to the second one is negative. As before, the drawing up of a clear cut map of person essences (Figure 2) will be of considerable assistance in illustrating these points.

Person Essences	1-st Op. to sin at T1	2-nd Op. to sin at T2	3-rd Op. to sin at T3	4-th Op. to sin at T4
PE1	Good	Good	Good	Good
PE2	Good	Good	Good	Bad
PE3	Good	Good	Bad	Good
PE4	Good	Good	Bad	Bad
PE5	Good	Bad	Good	Good
PE6	Good	Bad	Good	Bad
PE7	Good	Bad	Bad	Good
PE8	Good	Bad	Bad	Bad
PE9	Bad	Good	Good	Good
PE10	Bad	Good	Good	Bad
PE11	Bad	Good	Bad	Good
PE12	Bad	Good	Bad	Bad
PE13	Bad	Bad	Good	Good
PE14	Bad	Bad	Good	Bad
PE15	Bad	Bad	Bad	Good
PE16	Bad	Bad	Bad	Bad

Figure 2.

But before we can start reading off the answers from this map it is necessary that an outline is given regarding some important distinctions

between two types of properties concerning essences and a clarification of their respective categorisations. The distinction I wish to draw attention to is that between

- (a) The properties which are *included* in essences; and
- (b) The properties that *characterise* those essences.

I shall call the first type of these "atomic properties" and those of the second type I shall call "nonatomic properties". In the present context this terminology is appropriate because it is the properties of the former type that ultimately make up or constitute essences (in the same way that individual numbers make up and ultimately constitute the various sets of numbers) whereas those of the latter type *characterise* the essences so obtained.⁸⁶

These two types of properties in turn can be further categorised as follows: Atomic properties are either determinate or indeterminate. Nonatomic properties are either necessary or contingent.

These last two categories are familiar but the first ones might not be. The indeterminate properties included in an essence are the ones with respect to which the agent instantiating that essence is significantly free and the determinate ones are the ones with respect to which the agent isn't free. For example, it is a determinate property of my essence that I be born of a human being because this particular event was simply out of my control. By contrast, it is an indeterminate property of my essence that I be racking my brains over this thesis because, unless I am grossly mistaken, it is up to me whether to exert myself with respect to this project or not.

⁸⁶ In the discussion that follows it is crucial to keep in mind this difference between atomic and nonatomic properties. The distinction can be illustrated with an analogy: The number 5 is *included* in the set consisting of 3, 5 and 7, but the property of being a three-membered set *characterises* the set in question. I have signified the distinction between these two types of properties by hyphenating the former type but not the latter.

With the help of these observations we can render the earlier definition of a person essence more precise: *A person essence is a complete and consistent set of atomic properties the instantiation of which would be a person.*

The requirement of completeness guarantees that an essence either includes or does not include a particular property among the ones that constitute it. (More formally we can say that, necessarily, for every atomic property A_p an essence E either includes A_p or it includes the complement of A_p [which is $Not A_p$]). And the requirement of consistency guarantees that all essences are in principle exemplifiable.

Now for the purpose at hand I suggest that we regard PE1 to PE16 (in Figure 2) as individual person essences. In fact they are, what I shall call, *sister essences* of each other. Sister essences are the ones which share all the same determinate properties with each other and only differ with respect to the indeterminate ones. So, for the sake of simplicity I shall assume that PE1 - PE16 have all their determinate properties in common and for the same reason I shall also assume that their instantiations would find themselves faced with the very same choices in the very same circumstances on four different occasions if actualised. Being significantly free, these instantiations have it in their power on each such occasion to do the good and they also have it in their power to do the bad. But they can't, of course, do both of these on any given occasion and so "Good" indicates when the instantiation of a particular essence would freely do the good and "Bad" shows when the instantiation of that essence would freely do the bad. In other words, "Good" and "Bad" show the indeterminate properties included in each essence.

We must satisfy ourselves that PE1 - PE16 are indeed 16 different essences. In the light of the earlier mentioned law (L) that governs the identity and diversity of essences, it is easy to see that they indeed are. Each

one of them includes some property which the other ones don't. For example, PE13 includes the indeterminate and complex atomic property *does-the-bad-thing-at-T1-and-T2-but-does-the-good-thing-at-T3-and-T4*, while none of the others include it.

With these preliminaries over, we can turn now to Plantinga's two claims regarding person essences and transworld depravity. In a nutshell, according to him a person essence is characterised by, or suffers from, this condition just in case it has, or it is *characterised by*, the property *instantiation goes wrong at least on one occasion* or, what is the same thing, *instantiation performs at least one morally wrong action*.⁸⁷

Glancing at our map of person essences (Figure 2) we can see straightaway that Plantinga is right in claiming that *some* person essences are characterised by transworld depravity in this sense. It is clear that 15 out of the 16 essences are indeed of this sort. With the exception of PE1 they all include at least one atomic property of the form *does-bad-on-such-and-such-occasion*. As a consequence of this they indeed are characterised by the property *instantiation goes wrong at least on one occasion* – which amounts to the essences in question being transworldly deprived.

It is also easy to see that the agents instantiating these essences would all go wrong on some occasion or other if actualised. Otherwise, contrary to assumption, they would not be the instantiations of deprived essences.⁸⁸

As a consequence, if these possible instantiations were made actual, the world they would freely actualise within one of the 15 world-types would not turn out to be an alpha world.

However, PE1 is an exception. This person essence is not characterised by

⁸⁷ Plantinga, 1975, pp. 52 – 53.

⁸⁸ This, of course, need not prejudice their actions in nonactual possible worlds in any way, which means that they are free to actualise an alpha world if they wanted to.

the malady in question and, consequently, its instantiation, although free to go wrong, would freely go right on all four occasions. It is easy to see that this particular essence is not characterised by the property *instantiation goes wrong at least on one occasion* because it does not include any atomic property of the form *does-bad-on-such-and-such-occasion*. And this amounts to saying that Plantinga is wrong in his crucial claim (ii) that it is possible that *all* person essences suffer from transworld depravity. Necessarily, some of them do not, although it is true that, necessarily, some of them do.

In fact, it is not difficult to see that, necessarily, for any essence that suffers from transworld depravity there is a sister essence which does not. It will be expedient to call these *alpha essences*. To find the corresponding alpha essence to any depraved essence we simply take all the determinate and indeterminate properties of the depraved essence with the exception of those indeterminate properties with respect to which the instantiation of the depraved essence would go wrong. Clearly, these are of the form *does-bad-on-such-and-such-occasion(s)* and we need to substitute for every such negative indeterminate property the corresponding positive indeterminate property *does-good-on-such-and-such-occasion(s)*. The essence so arrived at is the sister alpha essence of the depraved one.

The Failure of Plantinga's Argument

Plantinga's basic mistake lies in regarding transworld depravity as a contingent feature of essences. But this assumption is indefensible. As already noted, essences are properties or sets of properties and, consequently, both these sets and the properties composing them are necessary beings. Of course, these sets do have contingent features such as the property of *being (or not being) instantiated in (some particular) world W*. But the relevant question here is whether any set of properties which qualifies as a person essence has contingently the following critical,

depravity signifying property: *instantiation goes wrong at least on one occasion*; or what is the same thing: *instantiation performs at least one morally wrong action*. Plantinga thinks that essences do have this property contingently. But the truth of the matter is that, they do not.

There are three facts which jointly justify this claim:

(1) Part of the first one is that the critical, transworld depravity signifying property *instantiation performs at least one morally wrong action* is a nonatomic one. It is not a property essences *include* but one which *characterises*, or is predicated of, them. And an essence has this crucial depravity signifying property only if it *includes* among the properties that constitute it an atomic property of the form *freely-does-the-bad-on-such-and-such-occasion*.

To put this last point in a different way, whether a person essence is characterised by transworld depravity or not depends entirely on whether the set includes as one of its members at least one atomic indeterminate property of the form *freely-does-the-bad-on-such-and-such-occasion*.

(2) The second crucial fact is that the inclusion in an essence of an *atomic* property of this last sort is not a matter of accident or contingency. To endorse the contrary view is like holding the analogous view that the membership of any particular number in the various sets of numbers is a matter of contingency.⁸⁹ Although, as already noted, essences have some *nonatomic* contingent properties, unlike the situation with the atomic ones, it makes no difference to the essences in question whether they have or lack such properties. They can gain and lose them at any time and still remain the same essences. But essences include all their determinate and indeterminate properties necessarily, for had they failed to include a property which in fact constitutes them, they would not be the essences they actually are.

⁸⁹ Examples of such claims would be that it is a matter of contingency that 2 is a member of the set consisting of 1, 2, 3 and 4, or that 7 is a member of 5, 6 and 7.

(3) And lastly, the third crucial fact is that since the *inclusion* of an atomic property in an essence is not a matter of contingency, the *having* of the crucial nonatomic property *instantiation performs at least one morally wrong action* cannot be a matter of contingency either. To deny this would be on a par with the making of the spurious claim that the set consisting of 2, 5 and 8 is contingently characterised by the property *contains an odd number*.

In order to satisfy ourselves that this last claim is correct, let us analyse and isolate the relevant features in virtue of which the claim "the set consisting of 2, 5 and 8 is contingently characterised by the property *contains an odd number*" is a spurious one. The reason is a composite one:

- (a) The set has the property *contains an odd number* simply in virtue of one of its members being of a certain sort (i.e. 5 being an odd number); and
- (b) This member (5) being included in the set not as a matter of contingency, but one of necessity.

Now notice that the very same conditions hold against the claim that essences may be contingently characterised by the crucial, transworld depravity signifying property *instantiation performs at least one morally wrong action*. We have the same sort of reasons for this as in the analysis above:

- (a') The set of properties (which qualifies as a person essence) has this crucial property simply in virtue of one (or more) of the atomic properties which make up its membership being of a certain sort, (i.e. being a negative indeterminate property of the form *freely-does-the-bad-on-such-and-such-occasion*); and
- (b') This member being included in the set is not a matter of contingency, but one of necessity.

Clearly, these analyses conform to the same pattern and if correct entail that Plantinga's crucial assumption that essences are characterised by transworld depravity as a matter of accident or contingency must be rejected as absurd.

Objections and Their Refutations

Some objections might come to mind against my arguments here. It might be objected, for example, that it is perverse, or at best mistaken, to identify PE1 - PE16 as 16 different individual essences. Rather, we should regard them as the 16 different ways in which a free individual might act when faced with 4 choices of doing either the good or the bad.

But objections of this sort are based on confusions; and in particular, the confusion involved in conflating:

- (i) the properties *included* in some particular essence; and
- (ii) the possible ways in which the instantiation of that essence *could* act in certain circumstances.

But (i) and (ii) are clearly different. The former is captured in Figure 2 which shows the indeterminate properties of the 16 essences in question, while the latter is captured in the first table which shows the 16 different ways the instantiation of any one of the 16 essences could act and thus actualise a possible world within one of the 16 different possible world-types. The structural similarity of these two tables is no excuse for confusing what they each represent. Person essences are necessary beings and they are quite distinct from the possible ways in which their instantiations could act.

Other doubts may arise regarding whether the exemplification of, say PE5, is really free to act otherwise than the way she in fact does if and when actualised. For, if she really has it in her power to go wrong, say, on the first

occasion, then it seems that she has it in her power to change her essence from PE5 to one of the other ones. But this would be absurd because no individual can lose or change its essence.

In response, we must agree that such a state of affairs regarding essences and their instantiations would be unacceptable. We cannot allow either that particulars be able to lose or change their essence, or that essences be exemplifiable by more than one particular at any one time. But the system I have outlined here does not allow for such an outcome. The short answer to the objection is that the mere fact that it is in that agent's power to act otherwise than she in fact does, doesn't show that it is in her power to change her essence. If some particular really is the instantiation of PE5 then it is necessarily true of that individual that, although she is free to go right and also free to go wrong (in the full-blooded libertarian sense of that word) on all four occasions, as a matter of fact she freely chooses to go right on the first and the last two occasions and freely chooses to go wrong on the second occasion if instantiated. This is necessarily true of her in virtue of the fact that she is the instantiation of PE5 which includes the relevant properties which ultimately guarantee this. But this should not be confused with the claim that she necessarily goes right on the first and the last two occasions and necessarily goes wrong on the second occasion if instantiated. This last claim does indeed entail that the agent in question is not free to do otherwise than she in fact does. But that is perfectly all right for, as far as I can see, it cannot be deduced from the system I am bent on defending here.⁹⁰

On the other hand, if any particular agent doesn't in fact go right on the first and the last two occasions and doesn't in fact go wrong on the second occasion if instantiated in *W*, then that only shows that she is not the instantiation of PE5 after all but of some other essence. And it is simply

⁹⁰ In fact this sort of objection is based on the fatalist fallacy which we have already encountered. See above pp. 25 - 6.

contradictory to suggest that the instantiation of PE5 wouldn't in fact go right on the first and the last two occasions or wouldn't in fact go wrong on the second occasion if instantiated in W, for it flies right into the face of the necessary truth embodied by the denial of that claim. The denial of this claim is a necessary truth in virtue of the stipulated fact that the agent in question is the instantiation of PE5.

It will also be noticed that because of their being sister essences, not more than one of PE1 – PE16 can be instantiated. But, as we have already seen, this is perfectly in order. What really matters is not that PE1 – PE16 be co-instantiable but rather that, individually, each one of PE1 – PE16 be exemplifiable. And this condition is satisfied if the properties included in each of these essences form a complete and internally consistent set.

Summary of These Discussions

To sum up, it is not true that it is possible that all person essences suffer from transworld depravity and it is not true that it is possible that there aren't any persons who upon being instantiated wouldn't always go right. I have endeavoured to show that for any essence characterised by transworld depravity there is a corresponding alpha essence among its various sister essences which is not so characterised. Consequently, for every possible person (actual ones included) who as a matter of fact sometimes (or all the time) freely does what is wrong, there is a corresponding sister person who upon being actualised would always freely do what is right. And since God's creative activity is to be understood as the activity of instantiating essences, there doesn't seem to be any contradiction in saying that by creating God instantiates alpha essences the instantiations of which He knew would always freely go right. Had God done this, the galaxy actualised would have been an *alpha galaxy* which included only creatures who would always do the good and thus, in cooperation with God, would have freely actualised an

alpha world.

The conclusion to draw here is that even if Plantinga was right in claiming that it is possible that it is not up to God to actualise just any particular world subsequent to His creation of free agents (because from that moment onwards it is partly up to these agents which particular world will be the actual one), he is wrong in his suggestion that it is possible that there might not have been *anything* that God could have done to ensure the eventual actualisation of an alpha world. For, since it is not possible that all person essences suffer from transworld depravity, it is not possible that all possible persons suffer from it. Plantinga cannot deny the claim that it was in God's power to actualise an alpha galaxy which only included significantly free creatures who, although free to go wrong, always freely chose to go right. Had God availed Himself of such an exciting possibility, His creative activity would eventually have resulted in the cooperative actualisation of an alpha world with no unabsorbed evils in it.

One More Objection

It is relatively easy to see that the above argument in support of premise (4) doesn't rely on the claim that there are alpha essences which God could instantiate alone. It also takes advantage of the distinction made earlier between two ways of actualising some state of affairs.⁹¹ More specifically, this argument claims that, although God could not have *strongly actualised* some alpha world \mathcal{W} , He could have *weakly actualised* one. God could have done this by strongly actualising some galaxy of worlds \mathcal{G} which contained only instantiations of alpha essences of whom it was true that if they were instantiated in \mathcal{G} , their instantiations would always freely go right and thus eventually make it the case that \mathcal{W} is actual.

⁹¹ See above, p. 70.

This looks as it should, but some philosophers find arguments of this sort objectionable. Michael Tooley, in his otherwise excellent critical paper on Alvin Plantinga, dismisses arguments of the sort I have advanced above for the truth of (4) on the grounds that on full-blooded libertarian assumptions the second condition (ii) in the notion of weak actualization can never be satisfied.⁹² After presenting his argument with characteristic clarity, his conclusion is that "conditionals of the form 'If p were the case, then x would have done A ' are necessarily false if one adopts the [above mentioned libertarian] view".⁹³

But Tooley is not entitled to this conclusion any more than Adams is.⁹⁴ Just like Adams, Tooley uses the strong *not-would-not* interpretation of *might* conditionals in deriving his conclusion. But as I have already shown, the libertarian assumption in question is insufficient by itself to justify such a strong reading of them. On its own, that assumption only guarantees the weaker *would-be-possible* reading of *might* conditionals with the result that on this particular reading the arguments in question become invalid. Hence, Tooley is faced with the same dilemma as Adams: he can either have true premises or a valid argument for the conclusion in question, but not a valid argument with true premises – not until satisfactory support is found for the strong *not-would-not* reading of *might* conditionals. What possibly could fulfil that task, still remains to be seen.

But in order to do full justice to Tooley's position on the question of subjunctives we must also acknowledge what seems to be an independent argument to support the same sort of conclusion. Consider subjunctives of the

⁹² For the definition see above p. 70.

⁹³ Tooley, 1980, p. 365.

⁹⁴ See the earlier section "The Third Anti-Realist Argument", pp. 36 – 45 above.

- (7) If *A* were the case, *B* would be the case; and
(8) If *A* were the case, *B* would not be the case.

Of these Tooley says:

Another reason why it is very difficult to see why one should think [that either (7) is true or (8) is true] is that neither a consequence analysis of subjunctive conditionals nor a possible worlds analysis of the Lewis variety entails that either (7) is true or (8) is true. A Stalnaker type account does have this consequence, but it does so because it collapses 'would' conditionals and 'might' conditionals, and is implausible for precisely that reason.⁹⁵

Just how much support is this argument capable of lending to the conclusion Tooley favours? Some, but certainly not enough. For even if we suppose its claims are correct, it only shows that we have not yet found the ideal way of accounting for the truth of subjunctives. It certainly does not show that neither of (7) and (8) is true, (and Tooley doesn't deny this). On the other hand, as I have already shown,⁹⁶ on a Lewisian type of possible worlds analysis we can make good sense of the two readings of "might" conditionals in such a way that Tooley's crucial argument against subjunctive conditionals clearly fails.

I conclude, then, that premise (4) of the main argument of this thesis cannot be denied in the ways suggested by Plantinga, Pike and Tooley. And in the absence of a better argument for their position in this regard, I shall move on to consider the next premise of the argument.

⁹⁵ Tooley, 1980, p. 364.

⁹⁶ See p. 42 above.

(5) God is an all-good, perfect moral agent and is totally and intrinsically opposed to evil. He is not selfish, careless, stupid or childish enough to mess around with people's lives. Consequently, whatever the circumstances, all other things being equal, God will seek the prevention and elimination of all evil the elimination of which constitutes a logically possible task for him.

It might be tempting to think that the Supreme Being is some sort of impersonal force or that it is the collection of natural and cosmic laws governing the universe. But such an understanding of the God of monotheism would be misguided for several reasons, the relevant one here being that, a priori, something impersonal cannot be an agent, let alone a positively and actively good one as God, the Supreme Being, is supposed to be.

For example, an impersonal being wouldn't be able to know anything. But God is supposed to be omniscient. Such an impersonal being being would not be able to act either, and hence it could not be the omnipotent creator God is supposed to be. Furthermore, an impersonal God would be incapable of affection, caring and love. But the God of monotheism is conceived of as a *God of love* who relates to His creatures in the most personal of terms. Among other things this means that God is a mature, responsible agent and not selfish, careless, stupid or childish enough to mess around with people's lives. And, although the list could be continued, this much is enough to make the point that nothing impersonal can fall under the concept of God we are dealing here or be the proper referent of the term "God" in this sense.

It must also be observed here that it is part and parcel of the concept of benevolence that a benevolent being does not and cannot attach the minutest

intrinsic worth to evil. Therefore, even if such a being decides to allow or put up with evil at any one time, that can be only because either the evil in question is necessary for some greater good or because it is beyond the power of that agent to eliminate it.

(6) God, as an all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good agent, cannot have a good, morally acceptable reason for allowing the actualisation of a world containing unabsorbed evils and, therefore, if God existed, the actual world would be an alpha world devoid of them.

Premise (6) is the conclusion from premises (2), (3), (4) and (5). All these premises are a priori truths and, therefore, so must be (6) which logically follows from them. Notwithstanding, virtually every theist denies its truth. I shall consider briefly three of the most significant ones: Plantinga, Pike and Hick.

The Failure of Plantinga's Attempt

Plantinga thinks that (6) is false because he believes that (4) is false. He holds that it is possible that all those worlds which are better than ours, including the alpha worlds in which significantly free moral agents always freely choose what is right, are among the ones that God could not have actualised.⁹⁷ However, as I have already endeavoured to show in defence of premise (4), this claim is false. Consequently, Plantinga has no grounds for denying premise (6).

The Failure of Pike's Attempt

Nelson Pike also assumes the falsity of premise (6) in his attempt to resolve the problem:

⁹⁷ Plantinga, 1975, pp. 45 - 53.

If the proposition, "There is a good reason for evil in the theistic universe" (i.e., "there are motives or other factual conditions which, *if known*, would render blaming God for evil inappropriate") *could* be true, then the logic of the phrase "perfectly good person" allows that the propositions "God is a perfectly good person" and "God allows evil in the world even though he could prevent it" *could* be true together. ⁹⁸

However, in the light of the earlier discussion on unabsorbed evils,⁹⁹ it is clear that Pike's argument has a false premise. For although it is possible that there is a good reason for the existence of *some* evils in a theistic universe, it is impossible that this should be the case concerning the existence of unabsorbed evils. Taking into account the excellences of God, the proposition "There is a good reason for evil in the theistic universe" cannot be true when the evils referred to are of the unabsorbed sort. There cannot be a morally acceptable justification for God's allowing these to enter the created order.

Hick's Attempt

At its heart Hick's theodicy claims that God's reason for allowing a world with unabsorbed evils in it was that He wanted to be freely trusted, loved, obeyed and worshipped in faith by his creatures. The way Hick arrives at this absurd conclusion is quite interesting in itself.

First of all, he holds that the divine will wasn't just to create morally righteous souls who would always freely relate to each other in morally impeccable ways but souls who would also *freely come in faith to love, trust, obey and worship God*. This is what Hick calls "the religious dimension" to God's purpose.¹⁰⁰

Furthermore, Hick claims that given this purpose it was necessary that the world should be constituted in such a way so as to keep mankind at an

⁹⁸ Pike, 1957-58, p. 119.

⁹⁹ See above pp. 15 - 9.

¹⁰⁰ Hick, 1977, p. 372.

epistemic distance from (i.e. ignorant of) God. The purported divine reasoning behind this move was that only then would human beings have the creaturely independence in relation to their Maker for it to be possible for them freely to reject or freely to worship God.¹⁰¹ For, in the absence of an epistemic distance between a creature and its Maker there would be no possibility of the former freely choosing to love, worship and obey the latter. A constant awareness of God's glorious existence would make it impossible for anyone to reject Him.

But, the reasoning continues, ignorant of God and left at the mercy of a harsh environment (which is also necessary for the purpose of soul making), man could not help but be self-centred. This self-centredness in turn is the root-cause of all sin and moral failure. Thus we have the rather unusual but interesting Christian picture of God creating mankind in a fallen state through the long and painful process of evolution with the hope that at some stage they will all come to always freely do the morally right thing towards each other and, most importantly, that eventually all of them will freely decide in faith to love, trust, worship and obey God.¹⁰²

The Failure of Hick's Attempt

If my earlier claim is right that (6) is an a priori truth because it follows from a priori reasons, Hick's denial of (6) will necessarily have to go hand in hand with the denial of one of the other premises which jointly entail it. It is not difficult to show that this indeed is the case, for Hick's theodicy fails to incorporate and preserve the essential theistic claim that God is an all-good, perfect moral agent. For even if epistemic distance is a prerequisite to our freely choosing to worship and obey God, the obvious thing that God should have morally done would have been to create human beings whom He knew

¹⁰¹ Hick, 1977, p. 373.

¹⁰² Hick, 1977, pp. 253 - 261.

would always freely act rightly towards each other and at the same time would freely choose in faith to love, trust, obey and worship Him if and when created at an epistemic distance from Himself in the midst of a harsh environment. Failure to do this is incompatible with God's benevolence. Hick has altogether overlooked the fact that this possibility was open to God.

An Internal Criticism

Furthermore, Hick's theodicy is open to an objection which can be raised from within his particular system. Hick believes that there was a way (call it "method X") by which God could have made morally righteous creatures in such a fashion that they always freely acted rightly towards each other. God didn't do this, reasons Hick, because that would have defeated His religious purpose of freely being loved, trusted, obeyed and worshipped in uncompelled faith by His creatures.¹⁰³

But, regardless of the exact reasoning that may lie behind this last claim, even if it was right, does not God's benevolence still remain in question? For if God could have employed method X in making human beings who would always freely chose to be moral towards each other, there should be a much better and weightier reason for deciding on an epistemic distance than a desire to be freely loved, worshipped and obeyed in faith by others. Since in Hick's system, this "religious dimension" to God's purpose is the sole justification for the epistemic distance between God and man, (and consequently the sole justification for allowing unabsorbed evils), we are forced to ask why it is so important for God to be loved, worshipped and obeyed in faith by His creatures in the first place? For, surely, anything similar would be considered to be a serious moral flaw in the character of any one of us. And it is hard to see how and why God should be exempt from this rebuke, especially when we consider the costs involved in the form of the misery and suffering which humans consciously inflict on others in the world.

¹⁰³ Hick, 1977, p. 274.

In view of these considerations Hick's Creator would have had to be either extremely selfish, or careless, or just very stupid, to have decided to create mankind at an epistemic distance from Himself just to satisfy His desire to be freely loved, obeyed, trusted and worshipped in faith by His creatures. It is clear that Hick's theodicy violates the fundamental theistic claim that God is an all-good, perfect moral agent. But since this tenet cannot be denied by the theist, we have to deny the suggestion that God's religious reason for allowing unabsorbed evils is a morally acceptable one.

Other Possible Attempts

An initially more promising line of argument might go like this: Just because there are possible worlds which are much better than ours, and because God could have created moral agents who would always freely chose the good, it does not follow that if God existed He *would* have created an alpha world with agents like that. Given that there is no best possible world, it would be irrational for a divine creator to attempt creating the best one of all the possible worlds. Clearly, for any particular world He would want to actualise there would always be a better one that He could create. Given these states of affairs, and God's goal to create, say value, it would be irrational of Him to attempt to maximise value. The only rational strategy for Him, therefore, is to be a satisficer regarding value and create a world which, although isn't the best, is good enough. And, it might be added, the actual world is a good enough one.

But, as I already pointed out, this argument works only against the traditional atheistic approach to the problem of evil. It has no grip whatsoever on the strategy employed in this thesis. For although there isn't a best possible world, and hence alpha worlds cannot be preferable for this reason, there is a best possible way to achieve any particular purpose and for this reason alpha worlds are definitely preferable to ones with unabsorbed evils in them.

In other words, it must be the case that God created whatever He created for some purpose or end. Clearly, even if this does not hold good of intrinsically good things, it must hold good of the evil aspects of the created order. Monotheism in general is committed to the instrumental value of any evil. It is one of its *essential* characteristics to deny the minutest amount of intrinsic value to evil. And my argument here is that *whatever* God's purpose may be with regard to evil, there was a better way of achieving that purpose. This is why creating the actual world would not have been a morally good enough act on God's part.

One possible reply to this argument could be to claim that *there is no morally best possible way* of achieving any possible purpose. But, unlike the parallel claim that *there is no best possible world*, this is clearly false. It is self-evident that there is a best logically possible way of doing anything – unless, of course, there are two or more equally best ways to achieve the same thing. Consequently, a similar argument to the one to the irrationality of a divine maximiser cannot arise with this approach.

But what if God is a moral satisficer not only regarding goals but also concerning means? Given that He has a morally satisfactory goal to achieve through the creation, perhaps He is only obliged from a moral standpoint to bring His goal about through a *morally satisfactory way* and not obliged to bring it about in the *morally best possible way*.

The reply to this objection is that, all other things being equal, an all-good being would and must choose the best possible moral means to actualise whatever goal He wants to achieve. For otherwise we could imagine another being who always chose the morally best possible means for achieving His morally equally good goals and, clearly, in this case this latter being would be

a better one. But this is absurd, for by definition there cannot be a better, more loving being than God. Therefore, if God exists, necessarily, He will be a moral maximiser regarding the means through which He achieves His goals. This, of course, in no way prejudices the fact that He will have to be only a moral satisficer with respect to goals if, and since, there is no morally best possible goal.

Furthermore, we must also observe that since God is not only benevolent but omniscient and omnipotent also, for Him all other relevant things *are and must be* equal. Therefore, He cannot be a satisficer with respect to means in the way suggested, but only a maximiser.

But even if God could be a satisficer regarding means, that would still be of little consolation to the theists. Given that there are innumerable unabsorbed evils of the sort already mentioned (like many cases of rape and child abuse), the actual world does not and cannot satisfy the adequacy threshold of being a good enough world for any morally permissible purpose. Only alpha worlds with no unabsorbed evils in them can satisfy that threshold. This is because God is intrinsically opposed to evil and it is incompatible with His benevolence to say that He unnecessarily allows evils which He could eliminate or prevent. There can be no justification for Him doing this.

To repeat, (6) is an a priori truth because it follows from a priori reasons, despite the fact that theists often choose to make it their favourite scapegoat when the tenability of their beliefs are called into question. Consequently, any Free Will Defence or theodicy which is built on the assumption that the central claim of premise (6) is false, can be found to conflict in some way or other with at least one of monotheism's core tenets.

(7) The actual world is not an alpha world because a lot of unabsorbed evils exist.

This last premise logically follows from premise (1) in virtue of the definition of an alpha world as given in premise (4). Consequently, there is no need to further defend it here.

Conclusion of the Main Argument:

(8) God does not exist.

This conclusion deductively follows from premises the truth of which I have defended. Therefore, to the extent to which that defence is adequate, we can have confidence in accepting this conclusion as stating the truth of the matter.

4 Conclusion

The Nonexistence of God

In this thesis I have argued that, contrary to the beliefs of many, the existence of certain kinds of evil makes possible a strict logical disproof of God's existence.

In the first section of the thesis I have argued that previous attempts to show this are unsatisfactory because they all make the unreasonable assumption that God is invariably obliged to be a moral maximiser of value.

I argued, however, that an atheologist can dispense with such a strong assumption, in favour of a weaker one which allows God to do less than what He is capable of. This principle only requires that whatever God engages in, He should not slip below a certain moral satisficing threshold because that would have the unacceptable consequence that on moral considerations His actions or goals will fail to be good enough. And I have claimed that this weaker principle is quite adequate for the construction of a sound atheological argument from evil.

In the course of attempting to make good this claim by the construction of such an argument, besides giving a detailed analysis of the concept of God, I tried to demonstrate how the incorporation of this weaker assumption is capable of delivering the aforementioned atheological conclusion. Taking advantage of the familiar distinction between *ends* and *means*, I argued that since there is no limit to the amount of good which God can create He is not required to be a maximiser with respect to ends. However, on account of there always being a best possible way of achieving any morally acceptable purpose, at least insofar as others are affected by His actions, God is morally required to be a maximiser with respect to means.

Further, I argued that, on account of its evils, the actual world could only be a means to an end in God's hands. And, because it was in God's power to actualise a world which was very much like the actual one but without unabsorbed evils in it, by creating the actual world God would have had to fail to employ the best possible means to achieve whatever end He might have had in mind.

In the form of a reply to a possible objection I also argued that even if God is not required to be a moral maximiser with respect to means, the actual world would still fail to be a good enough means for the achievement of any morally permissible purpose by God. Given that His decisions affect other agents, it is incompatible with God's benevolence to allow the minutest amount of unabsorbed evil in the course of realizing His goals. Therefore, if premise (1) is correct and a lot of unabsorbed evils exist, it cannot be the case that the creator of the actual world is an all-powerful, all-knowing and morally perfect agent. Furthermore, it also follows that such a being cannot exist, because a person of that sort would not have allowed the actualisation of a world with the amount and kinds of evils we sadly enough have to witness in the actual world.

To sum up, if God existed He could not be absolved from being the object of *moral* blame for the existence of a great many evils of the created order. A being like God cannot have a good, morally acceptable reason for allowing them. For, whatever God's purpose with the creation might have been, if that purpose meets the minimum moral requirements necessitated by His benevolence, He could have accomplished it without allowing the unnecessary evils and suffering we witness in the actual world. Therefore, the ultimate conclusion to be drawn is that the only possible, morally acceptable excuse for God is that He does not exist.

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