

## **Resurrecting the Logical Problem of Evil**

[This is a work in progress. Comments are welcome.]

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### **Introduction**

I offer a version of the Logical Argument from Evil [LAE] that is immune to the Free Will Defense [FWD]. The LAE purports to disprove God's existence by arguing that evil's existence is inconsistent with God's existence.<sup>1</sup> As formulated by J.L. Mackie (1955) and others, the LAE claims that evil's existence is inconsistent with God's existence because God could and would eliminate evil completely. In response, Alvin Plantinga (1974a, 1974b), Peter van Inwagen (2006) and others have argued that evil's existence is consistent with God's existence because free will might be a good reason for God to permit evil.

Many philosophers believe that Plantinga, in particular, has solved the logical problem of evil, that he has decisively demonstrated the consistency of theism with evil's existence.<sup>2</sup> I will grant for argument's sake that the FWD suffices as a response to certain versions of the LAE, including Mackie's. But some of the central claims of these arguments – the ones called into question by the FWD – are unnecessary to formulate a plausible version of the LAE. I offer a reformulation that dispenses with these claims. It exploits the phenomenon of moral luck and certain features of the concept of moral perfection. I aim to show that free will defenders like Plantinga have not solved the

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of philosophers offering similar arguments see Pike 1963: 181.

<sup>2</sup> Mackie himself concedes this: "Since [Plantinga's] defence is formally possible ... we can concede that the problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another" (Mackie 1982: 154). Robert Adams (1985b: 226), William Alston (1991: 49) and William Rowe (1979: 335), among others, share this view. For an opposing view see Howard-Snyder and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1998). See Plantinga (2009) for a response to the latter.

logical problem of evil and that evil remains a logical problem for theists. The consistency of theism with evil's existence has not been demonstrated, for there are plausible versions of the LAE that the FWD leaves untouched.

I begin with an overview of Mackie's argument and of the FWD as articulated by Plantinga and van Inwagen. I then propose a new version of the LAE, defend two key premises and show that the argument is immune to the FWD. I conclude by considering how theists could respond.

## **1. The Traditional Debate**

Mackie argues that these two propositions are inconsistent:

P1) God exists and is omnipotent and morally perfect.<sup>3</sup>

P2) Evil exists.

He notes that additional principles are needed to demonstrate an inconsistency and proposes the following two.

P3) A good being eliminates evil as far as it can.

P4) There is no non-logical limit to what an omnipotent being can do.

Anticipating the FWD, Mackie points out the apparent logical possibility of free beings always freely doing what is right. Since God can do anything that is logically possible, and since it is logically possible that free beings always freely do what is right, Mackie concludes that God could and would create a world without evil.

Free will defenders deny P3. They acknowledge that an omnipotent being can eliminate all evil. But, so the defense goes, God might have good reasons for permitting evil. The trick is to counter Mackie's claim that God would create a world of free beings

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<sup>3</sup> Mackie characterizes God as wholly good. Philosophers seem to use the phrases "wholly good," "perfectly good" and "morally perfect" interchangeably in this context, however.

who always freely do what is right. According to the FWD, God might not be able to eliminate all evil without eliminating certain goods that may be worth the cost of evil.

Free will itself may be such a good or it may be necessary to secure such goods.

To press their case, free will defenders describe possible scenarios in which God has such a reason for permitting evil (formally speaking, they offer models to demonstrate the consistency of P1 and P2). Their aim is simply to demonstrate that God's existence is consistent with evil, not to spell out God's actual reasons for permitting evil.

According to Plantinga, the following is logically possible: any free creature God could create suffers from transworld depravity. That is, it is logically possible for there to be facts about what free creatures would freely do in any given situation and for those facts to be such that free creatures will sometimes go wrong (Plantinga 1974a: 48, 52-55, 1974b: 186-189).<sup>4,5</sup> Consider a world where God exists and such facts obtain. Logically speaking, these facts could have been different, but God is unfortunately stuck with a set of facts that make evil inevitable so long as he creates free creatures. Plantinga grants that Mackie is right to think that there are possible worlds with free creatures and no evil. But it is, he insists, logically possible for God to be in a position where he cannot create such worlds. The worlds would be inaccessible to God because of what his free creatures would freely do.

Van Inwagen puts things in terms of a dilemma. Either there are facts about what free creatures would freely do or there are not. If there are, Plantinga's hypothesis could

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<sup>4</sup> He also argues that natural evil is consistent with God's existence because it is logically possible for natural evil to be a species of moral evil, e.g., the result of the free actions of non-human spirits (Plantinga 1974a: 57-59, 1974b: 191-193).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Otte (2009) has recently noted and remedied a difficulty with Plantinga's original technical formulation of the hypothesis of transworld depravity. Plantinga (2009) acknowledges the difficulty and endorses Otte's reformulation. The argument I will present is compatible with both the original and reformulated hypothesis so I will not concern myself with the differences between the two.

be true. But if there are not, God is not in the epistemic position to ensure that free creatures always freely do what is right (van Inwagen 2006: 78-80; cf. Alston 1991: 49). For his part, van Inwagen does not find the hypothesis that there are such facts plausible. To show how and why God might permit evil, van Inwagen describes an elaborate scenario about the fall of humanity from loving union with God. In the scenario, God gave humanity free will because it is necessary for loving union with him – a great good. Humanity fell by abusing its free will and thereby became subject to terrible evils. God permits these evils because they are necessary for people to realize they have fallen and because it gives them a reason to freely accept God and rejoin him in loving union (van Inwagen 2006: 85-94).

Though elements of these scenarios may stretch the imagination, keep in mind that their purpose is merely to demonstrate logical consistency, not to describe the way the world actually is. Many philosophers accept that the FWD succeeds in demonstrating consistency. I shall argue that this view is mistaken.

Despite differences in detail, free will defenders' scenarios make similar claims. They all claim that free will may be a good worth the cost of some evil or that it may be necessary for such goods. They also claim that something about free will or free creatures may render God unable to secure these goods without permitting evil. This second claim is particularly significant.

A defense cannot simply take the form of a story about how God brings some great good out of the evils of the world, a good that outweighs those evils. At the very least, a defense will have to include the proposition that God was *unable* to

bring about the greater good without allowing the evils we observe (or some other evils as bad or worse). (van Inwagen 2006: 68)

The heart of the [FWD] is the claim that it is possible that God *could not have* created a universe containing moral good (or as much moral good as this one contains) without creating one containing moral evil. (Plantinga 1974b: 167; cf. Plantinga 1974a: 29; emphasis modified)

The incapacity claims posited by free will defenders allow them to deny P3 without compromising God's omnipotence. But one is entitled to wonder how much good these claims do God (so to speak), given that he is supposed to be morally perfect. Let me elaborate.

Incapacities can mitigate blame and culpability. Take someone who kills an innocent person. If the killer was unable to refrain because of powerful delusions brought on by mental illness, he is not blameworthy for the killing. There is a popular way of formulating the LAE that includes the claim that an omnipotent being would be blameworthy for permitting evil. Consider some remarks of Hume's suggestively quoted by Plantinga.

Is [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? (quoted in Plantinga 1974a: 10)

H.J. McCloskey's remarks on the LAE and the plausibility of the FWD are similar.

In attributing such behavior to God, and in attempting to account for moral evil along these lines, theists are, I suggest, attributing to God immoral behavior of a

serious kind – of a kind we should all unhesitatingly condemn in a fellow human being. (McCloskey 1960: 113)

Nelson Pike takes the argument this way and argues that, so long as God has good reasons for permitting evil, he will not be blameworthy and so will still qualify as morally perfect (Pike 1958: 119, 1963: 183). Van Inwagen says that his purpose is to determine whether God must be at fault for permitting evil (van Inwagen 2006: 108). And, at least at one point, Plantinga claims that we cannot be blamed for failing to eliminate evils as a result of some relevant incapacity (1974a: 197).

If the problem is framed like this, incapacity claims like those appealed to by free will defenders seem like ideal responses. God is not impotent because he suffers from a special kind of incapacity consistent with his omnipotence. And he is not blameworthy because he permits evil only to secure great goods he cannot otherwise secure. People can only be obligated to do what is within their power, so if God cannot create great goods without also permitting evil, he presumably cannot be blamed for this.

This ubiquitous, narrow focus on blame obscures much of importance. Moral perfection is a very high moral standard – presumably the highest moral standard. One can fail to meet it for any number of reasons, not just because one did something wrong. One can be blameless without being morally perfect. This suggests another way to frame the problem of evil. Consider the incapacity claims made on the delusional killer's behalf and that lie at the core of the FWD. Such claims can be used to deflect charges of blameworthiness. But they cannot be used to maintain just any claim about goodness or praiseworthiness. The delusional killer's incapacity constitutes or at least creates a kind of moral shortcoming. Because of his incapacity, he is not blameworthy for the killing.

Nevertheless, his incapacity limits his goodness and praiseworthiness in important ways. He is not as good or as praiseworthy as he would have been in different circumstances. He cannot do things that are necessary to qualify for a certain level of moral standing, things like refraining from killing innocents.

This example demonstrates that things beyond our control can limit our moral standing in important ways. This suggests a way to reframe the problem. We can frame it as a challenge, not to God's goodness per se, but to his moral perfection. Instead of insisting that permitting evil would make God bad, we can be more cautious and insist only that it would make him less than morally perfect.

There is an immediate, though only apparent, obstacle to this strategy. The proposed incapacity featured in the FWD is a special one, stemming partly from the nature of free will. According to the FWD, it is logically possible for God to be unable to secure the great good of free will (or associated goods) without permitting evil. Such an incapacity is importantly different from that suffered by the hypothetical killer. Refraining from killing innocents is something that can be done, even if some of us cannot refrain. In FWD scenarios, creating creatures with free will and ensuring that they always freely do what is right is not the sort of thing that can be done. No one can or could do that.

It is a commonplace in discussions of moral luck, however, that our moral standing can depend partly on factors beyond our complete control, among them the actions of others. If this is the case, the phenomenon of moral luck suggests a way to formulate a plausible version of the LAE that is immune to the FWD. I offer one such version in the next section.

## 2. Resurrecting the LAE

The LAE seeks to demonstrate that theism is inconsistent with evil's existence. To emphasize the argument's immunity to the FWD, I will formulate the argument in terms of whatever evil the free will defender thinks might be accounted for in terms of free will and whatever goods the free will defender thinks may be good reasons for permitting evil. The task is to find necessarily true propositions that result in a contradiction when conjoined with propositions asserting theism and the existence of these evils. Along with what I will call *Mackie's premise* (premise 7), I propose two others. One exploits the phenomenon of moral luck and its effect on moral praiseworthiness. The other is a plausible claim about moral praiseworthiness and moral perfection. They are propositions 5 and 9, below.

- 1) God exists and is omnipotent, omniscient and morally perfect.
- 2) E exists. (Where *E* can be all moral evil or a particular instance of or type of moral evil. Moral evil is freely committed wrongful action or evil that is the result of freely committed wrongful action)
- 3) If God exists and E exists, God has not eliminated E while securing G. (Where *G* is free will or whatever other important goods free will might be necessary to obtain) (necessary truth)
- 4) So, God has not eliminated E while securing G. (1, 2, 3)
- 5) If God has not eliminated E while securing G, God is not as morally praiseworthy as he would have been had he done so. (premise)
- 6) So, God is not as morally praiseworthy as he would have been had he done so.  
(4, 5)

- 7) There are possible worlds where this can be done and where God would do so.  
(Mackie's premise)
- 8) So, there are possible worlds where God is more morally praiseworthy than he  
in fact is. (6, 7)
- 9) Being more morally praiseworthy than a morally perfect being is logically  
impossible. (premise)
- 10) Contradiction (8, 9)

If 5, 7 and 9 are necessarily true, 1 and 2 are inconsistent. Since 2 is obviously true, it would follow that 1 – theism – is false. I will defend 5 and 9. 7 is uncontroversial, though some of what I will say in 5's defense will also speak in its favor. Note that 5, 7 and 9 are necessarily true if they are true. Regarding 5 and 9, it seems plausible that the standards for moral praiseworthiness, like the standards for moral rightness and wrongness, do not vary in any relevant way across possible worlds. Hence, my arguments that 5 and 9 are true, if compelling, should suffice to show that they are necessarily true. As for 7, 7 says that there are possible worlds of a certain sort, worlds where God secures certain goods at a lesser cost in terms of evil. If this is true, it is necessarily true.

## **2.1 Moral perfection and moral praiseworthiness**

I begin with 9 – the proposition that being more morally praiseworthy than a morally perfect being is logically impossible. First, what does it mean for a being to be morally perfect? This is a difficult question (cf. Plantinga 1974a: 91, Wierenga 1989: 202). Van Inwagen characterizes God's goodness as follows.

[God is] morally perfect (perfectly good). That is to say, God has no moral defect whatever. It follows that he is in no way a subject of possible moral criticism.

(van Inwagen 2006: 26; cf. Pike 1969: 208-9, Wierenga 1989: 202-203)

Here again we have the focus on blame and criticism. Van Inwagen's claims about moral perfection are true, but they reveal precious little about it. There is more to it than a lack of moral defects and immunity to criticism. Evaluating my version of the LAE requires that we investigate the matter further. What else is there to moral perfection?

Pike says that calling God morally perfect is a way of praising him (Pike 1969: 212). Richard Swinburne claims that God's moral perfection makes him deserving of a considerable degree of respect (Swinburne 1993: 298). It is partly why God merits a special kind of respect, namely worship: "[I]f God ... exists, he is in virtue of his nature supremely worthy of worship – more than any other being could be in virtue of his nature" (Swinburne 1993: 302).

Such praise can only be merited for two reasons: actions and character. God does not merely do no wrong. He also does what is right. But he also does more than that. Moral perfection, on the natural understanding of the concept, leaves no room for moral improvement. Morally speaking, then, God does the best he can.

In claiming that God is by nature morally perfectly good, I suggest that ... God is so constituted that he always does the morally best action (when there is one), and no morally bad action. (Swinburne 1993: 184)

I will momentarily table Swinburne's parenthetical qualification and a possible objection it suggests. I return to this issue while discussing an objection at the beginning of the next section. For now, notice that Swinburne also says that God performs the actions he does

because of his nature and constitution. This says something about God's character. God acts intentionally and for the right reasons. He is morally virtuous: benevolent, loving, just and so on (Wierenga 1989: 203). Indeed, he is maximally virtuous. If there were a being more virtuous, it would be disposed to perform, under some set of conditions, at least one act morally better than the act God would be disposed to perform in those conditions. This is impossible if a morally perfect being always performs the morally best action (or one of the morally best actions).

These remarks suggest a defense of 9, the proposition that being more morally praiseworthy than a morally perfect being is logically impossible. If actions and virtue are the grounds of moral praiseworthiness, one would have to perform morally better actions than God or be more virtuous than God to be more morally praiseworthy than God. Being morally perfect, however, God is maximally virtuous and always does the morally best action. So 9 is true. For it is impossible to be more virtuous than a maximally virtuous being. Likewise, it is impossible to perform an action morally better than the morally best action. Because God is morally perfect, then, being more morally praiseworthy than him is logically impossible.

## **2.2 Moral praiseworthiness and eliminating evil**

Now I will defend 5 – the proposition that if God has not eliminated evil while securing free will and associated goods, God is not as morally praiseworthy as he would have been had he done so.<sup>6</sup> 5 may seem extremely controversial, but the obvious objections to it are weak and there are compelling reasons for it grounded in the phenomenon of moral luck.

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<sup>6</sup> From now on I will simply speak in terms of evil, but this should be understood to mean whatever evil the free will defender is concerned to account for by appealing to free will.

It will help to begin by considering a weak objection to 5 (it can also be an objection to 9, or at least to my defense of 9). The FWD claims that God might not be able to eliminate evil while securing free will and associated goods. In light of this possibility, one might argue that 5 is too restrictive. 5 effectively requires, so the objection goes, the performance of impossible acts for one to qualify as morally perfect.<sup>7</sup> Such a requirement, one might argue, is unacceptable.

Why this requirement is supposed to be unacceptable is not clear, however. Maybe one reason for thinking it unacceptable is the worry that, given the incapacity claims featured in FWD scenarios, the requirement might violate ought-implies-can. But this is incorrect. Even if 5 requires the performance of impossible acts for one to qualify as morally perfect, it does not entail an obligation to do impossible things. Perhaps 5 is committed to a certain criterion of moral perfection, but that criterion need not be understood in terms of obligation. Being morally perfect is more than a matter of satisfying one's obligations.

God is typically thought to be morally perfect because he does more than just satisfy his obligations. God is thought to be loving and merciful, for example. But he is not obligated to act lovingly or mercifully in at least some cases where, being morally perfect, he would so act. Moral perfection has much to do with the supererogatory (Swinburne 1993: 185). 5 should be understood in such terms.

But one might complain that, understood in this way, 5 nevertheless requires too much in the way of supererogatory action. In the absence of a substantive argument,

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<sup>7</sup> Note that one who attempted to object to my argument on the alleged grounds that there is no such thing as the morally best action or a morally best action in certain situations would be voicing a version of this worry (see Swinburne's parenthetical qualification above). Considerations offered below and in the next footnote speak against this objection.

however, I see no reason to find this complaint compelling – especially given that we are dealing with criteria of moral *perfection*. The standards for moral perfection are no doubt extremely strict. An otherwise plausible, intuitive criterion of moral perfection is no less plausible even if it turns out, upon reflection, that those criteria cannot be satisfied.

Perhaps some of the criteria for moral perfection cannot be satisfied if evil exists. Perhaps some of the criteria cannot be satisfied outside of a best possible world.<sup>8</sup>

My argument for 5 is effectively an argument for the claim that plausible criteria of moral perfection cannot be satisfied given evil's existence.<sup>9</sup> So on to my argument for 5. By way of arguing for 5, it will help to consider van Inwagen's comparatively simple version of the FWD first. Its defects are instructive. I will then briefly consider Plantinga's version.

Recall van Inwagen's scenario: evil is a contingent, unfortunate consequence of free will, but God permits it because it is necessary to get us to freely rejoin him in loving union. This scenario is consistent with God eliminating evil in certain ways and securing the relevant goods. How? In obvious ways, say by endowing his creatures with reason

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<sup>8</sup> Note how this bears on the debate about whether God would create the best possible world. Leibniz famously reasoned that, since God exists and is morally perfect, and since a morally perfect creator would create the best possible world, this is the best possible world. Others have agreed with Leibniz about what a perfectly good creator would do, but have concluded that there is no God since this is clearly not the best possible world. Philosophers like Plantinga point out that there may be no such thing as the best possible world. It might be an incoherent notion, like the largest integer. Philosophers who point this out often think that the incoherence of the concept of the best possible world would count in the theist's favor since, they apparently think, it is inappropriate to assume that God would do something that, on reflection, turns out to be impossible (see, e.g., Adams 1972: 317, Brown and Nagasawa 2005, and Plantinga 1974a: 34, 1974b: 168). It is not obvious that this assumption is inappropriate, however. Whether the best possible world is a coherent notion obviously bears on whether it is appropriate to assume that an omnipotent being would create such a world (assuming omnipotence is taken to mean the ability to do only logically possible things). But it has no obvious bearing on whether it is appropriate to think that a morally perfect being would create such a world. If the notion of the best possible world is incoherent, that might just mean that the notion of a morally perfect being is likewise incoherent. I will not pursue this line of thought further here. The point is merely this: theists cannot take the coherence of the concept of moral perfection for granted – no more than atheists can take the coherence of the concept of a best possible world for granted.

<sup>9</sup> In light of the argument it will be easy to see how an argument that the criteria cannot be satisfied outside of a best world would go, but I will not pursue that argument here.

and the capacity for love and sympathy. He could inspire heroes, saints and prophets who could in turn inspire others. He could grant some people religious experiences. There are countless ways God could try to eliminate evil without threatening the relevant goods. He could, in short, try to convince us to be good. Being morally perfect, he would make – and on the standard theistic views has made – some such efforts.<sup>10</sup>

There are two crucial facts about these efforts that remain true on van Inwagen's scenario. First, God's efforts could succeed or fail (to varying degrees). Second, for those efforts to succeed, God and his free creatures must cooperate. Both Plantinga and van Inwagen use the language of cooperation to describe God's relations with his free creatures.

[I]f [God] aims to produce moral good, then he must create significantly free creatures upon whose co-operation he must depend. (Plantinga 1974b: 190)

Human beings must choose freely to be reunited with God and to love him, and this is something they are unable to do by their own efforts. They must therefore cooperate with God. As is the case with many rescue operations, the rescuer and those whom he is rescuing must cooperate. (van Inwagen 2006: 88)

This bears significantly on the FWD's prospects for success.

What acts God manages to perform – whether he eliminates evil, say – depends partly on his creatures' free choices. In this respect, God bears important relations to us that we bear to one another. The acts we manage to perform depend on factors beyond our control, among them others' free choices. Our moral standing depends partly on the acts we perform. Our moral standing therefore depends partly on what others do. This is a

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<sup>10</sup> Perhaps there are limits to the efforts he can make while preserving free will, but such limits do not matter to my argument. This will become clear.

kind of moral luck. If moral luck is real and God stands in the appropriate relations to his free creatures, his moral standing depends partly on what those creatures freely do. But then evil's existence threatens theism in a way that has been overlooked.

How so? In van Inwagen's scenario, God could succeed in eliminating evil and securing the relevant goods with sufficient cooperation from his free creatures. Succeeding at this endeavor would be a significant moral accomplishment. But whether God does this is not entirely within his control. It depends on his creatures' free choices. Success at such cooperative endeavors affects the moral standing of those involved. This is an example of moral luck.

Consider a particularly apt case discussed by Thomas Nagel.

However jewel-like the good will may be in its own right, there is a morally significant difference between rescuing someone from a burning building and dropping him from a twelfth-storey window while trying to rescue him. (Nagel 1979: 25)

The morally significant difference that luck makes in such cases is a difference with regard to what the rescuer does. What the rescuer does affects her moral standing. Luck affects whether someone rescues another as opposed to merely having tried to do so. "What has been done, and what is morally judged," Nagel points out, "is partly determined by external factors" beyond one's control, factors like the choices of others (Nagel 1979: 25).

Whether a would-be hero, H, can rescue someone from a burning building and whether God can, to use van Inwagen's language, rescue his free creatures from evil depends on factors beyond their control. Among these factors are the choices of others.

Whether H can rescue someone depends partly on whether the person helps or hinders her. There are many ways H can try to get the person to help her – or at least not hinder her. If she manages to rescue him, H will arguably be more morally praiseworthy than she would have been had she failed. She will have accomplished something that affects one's moral standing significantly. But her prospects depend on something beyond her complete control: the other person's choices. There are countless examples of cooperative endeavors whose outcomes similarly affect the moral standing of those involved (cf. Nagel 1979: 30).

5 can be defended with an argument by analogy. God bears relevantly similar relations to us that H bears to the person she tries to rescue. So, similar things can be said about God and H depending on their success or failure. Being morally perfect, God would want to rescue us and he would try to do so. Moreover, he must succeed. If God succeeds, he will accomplish something amazing, something that, like H's successful rescue, bears the marks of an action that significantly affects one's moral standing. If he fails, however, then, just like H would be if she failed at her rescue attempt, he will not be as morally praiseworthy as he would have been had he succeeded – even if he is nevertheless very morally praiseworthy.

So 5 seems true. And both 5 and my defense of it are consistent with van Inwagen's scenario. To rescue us is to eliminate evil while securing great goods. If evil exists, God has not done this. The rest of the reformulated argument follows naturally. Van Inwagen's version of the FWD says nothing against my version of the LAE.

Now consider Plantinga's version of the FWD. Plantinga's hypothesis of transworld depravity entails the denial of the claim that God can succeed in eliminating

evil while securing great goods. The hypothesis, however, is consistent with 5 and does not suffice to defend theism from my version of the LAE. Even in a world where all creatures God could create suffer from transworld depravity, logically speaking things could have been different. They could have been such that God's free creatures would have freely cooperated with him in realizing a world without evil. But then better actions would have been open to God, God would have performed those better actions in cooperation with his creatures and his moral standing would have been different.

Again, the case can be pressed with an analogy. The circumstances in which we find ourselves are largely out of our control. Even if, morally speaking, we always do the best we can, there are circumstances under which we would have done better, and so would have been more morally praiseworthy. Ironically, Plantinga's hypothesis puts God in the same position by placing relevant facts beyond his control. God can only do so much given the unfortunate facts about what his free creatures would freely do. But those facts – just like the facts about the circumstances in which we find ourselves – could have been different. Like us, God would have done better, morally speaking, if only he had been lucky enough to find himself in different circumstances. If the circumstances in which we find ourselves can affect our moral standing, it seems the same should be true of God. The standard versions of the FWD arguably put God in just such a position.

The hypothesis of transworld depravity and the related incapacity claim do not, then, suffice to defend theism from my version of the LAE. Such incapacities would suffice to defend God from blame, but they would not suffice to defend him from all charges of moral imperfection. I conclude that my version of the LAE is immune to the

FWD, that it demonstrates that the logical problem of evil has not been solved and that it makes a compelling case for the claim that theism is inconsistent with evil's existence.

### **3. Conclusion: Facing the Problem**

Despite ingenious efforts to defend theism from the LAE, the view that it poses a serious challenge to theism persists. Even if unconvincing, my version of it may help explain the persistence of this view. The problem arises from the apparent difficulty in reconciling the existence of evil with God's attributes, primarily the exceedingly perplexing attribute of moral perfection. It is not at all clear what moral perfection is and I think the worry that the concept is incoherent has significant force. Contemporary philosophers, including many theists, do not give us much help here.

These remarks suggest ways of trying to meet the challenge I have posed. Among them: clarify or qualify the understanding of God's goodness. Similar strategies have been used to deal with problems afflicting naïve understandings of God's other attributes. If, as some philosophers claim, God's moral perfection is non-negotiable, clarification is in order (cf. van Inwagen 2006: 62, Pike 1958: 117). All I have to say about this strategy is that those who want to pursue it have their work cut out for them. I see no obvious, plausible way to clarify the concept in a way that solves the problem. No doubt, ingenious theists will have proposals, but I doubt any will be compelling enough to maintain the view that there is a decisive solution to the logical problem of evil.

Moreover, the problem as I have framed it offers grounds for doubting that the concept of moral perfection can be suitably clarified. Morality is a messy, complicated affair. If it is as messy and complicated as it seems, the concept of moral perfection may be incoherent. For any morally good being, a morally better one may be conceivable.

And even if the concept is coherent, it will arguably not be applicable to anything that exists in a world with evil. If either of these claims is true, qualification is in order.

Theists will have to settle for something short of moral perfection. Qualification may be a significant compromise, despite the fact that, for all I have shown, one may still be able to make strong claims on God's behalf. I do not know whether it is too great a compromise, but we must acknowledge, just like Mackie did, that theists have this way out, however unpalatable they may find it.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, theists do have another way out. They could argue that there is no moral luck. Since I do not have space to defend the thesis that moral luck is real, I can only briefly comment on this strategy. There seem to be at least three reasons to be skeptical about its prospects.

First, moral luck seems pervasive. There are some alleged forms of it that many find problematic, but the forms of it upon which I have focused – cases where luck detracts from one's moral praiseworthiness without making one morally blameworthy – do not seem troubling or counterintuitive.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> One may be inclined to think that the attribute of moral perfection is just a vanity that can be easily dispensed with. This seems wrong, given the importance most theists place on worship. The concept of moral perfection arguably plays a significant role in explaining why God merits worship. Whether it is indispensable or non-negotiable, however, I do not know. Maybe theists just need willing negotiators. Yujin Nagasawa (2008) endorses a compromise position (though he leaves it open whether the compromise should be made in terms of moral perfection or another divine attribute). Nagasawa and Tim Bayne (2006) question the thesis that God's worshipfulness is grounded in his excellence.

<sup>12</sup> It is telling that many attempts to deny moral luck focus on cases of blameworthiness whereas Nagel and I emphasize cases of praiseworthiness. Moral luck's critics often use examples like the following. Consider two people who attempt a murder, only one of whom succeeds because a bird unexpectedly deflected the other's bullet. They are alike in all other respects. Many have the intuition that these two are equally blameworthy. I have no strong intuitions here, but there are several things those who do have this intuition should keep in mind. First, one example like this or a small set of such examples are hardly cause for being skeptical about moral luck in general. Second, moral luck's proponents need take no stand on how much luck affects our moral standing. Perhaps the successful murderer is only slightly worse than the unsuccessful one. Perhaps the difference is small enough that they can be treated as if they were equally blameworthy for practically all intents and purposes. So long as moral luck makes a difference, my argument can go through (maybe there is material here to address the concerns about worship, but I remain uncertain). Third, I see no obvious reason to assume that luck must affect how blameworthy we are as

Second, attempts to deny the occurrence of moral luck tend to have highly counterintuitive consequences. To take an extreme example, Michael Zimmerman's (2002) argument against moral luck entails that we are all as morally blameworthy as citizens of Nazi Germany who culpably assisted or failed to oppose their regime and its policies. This is because, in their circumstances, we would have or probably would have behaved similarly. There is nothing we are morally blameworthy for, however, since we did not do these things. We are simply morally blameworthy.<sup>13</sup> Zimmerman's position has these consequences largely because he is concerned to deny practically all moral luck, but the attempt to deny only certain kinds of moral luck has its own pitfalls. Drawing the line in a principled way is extremely difficult. If theists have to bite such bullets or find a way to draw such lines, theism is in a very difficult position.

Third, in other contexts prominent theists have forcefully argued that there is moral luck and that prominent ethical and religious traditions support this view (e.g., Adams 1985a). Theists who have independent religious grounds for accepting moral luck may face a particularly serious problem here.

Denying moral luck is easier said than done. Given these observations, the burden of proof seems to be on the theist who wants to deny moral luck – or even make its denial seem plausible.

To sum up, we should take away two things from this discussion. First, the concept of moral perfection deserves further investigation. Philosophers may have

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much as it affects how praiseworthy we are. Even if luck has little or no influence on the former, it may have a significant influence on the latter. The unlucky failed defender of human rights may not be as praiseworthy as her lucky successful (and otherwise identical) counterpart even if the failed murderer is as blameworthy as the successful one.

<sup>13</sup> There may be people who would have behaved despicably under certain conditions and heroically under others. What are we to make of such people if we take such hard a line against moral luck?

underestimated the consequences that different accounts of this concept hold in store for the coherence of theism. Second, the existence of evil provides powerful – possibly decisive – grounds for atheism, given important complexities attending moral theory. The most prominent attempt to reconcile theism with evil’s existence, namely the FWD, simply has nothing to say against my argument. The logical problem of evil has not been solved. Evil remains a serious – and I believe fatal – problem for theism.<sup>14</sup>

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