A Defence of Plantinga's Response to the Omnipotence Paradox and Free Will

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A common debate in the philosophy of religion domain concerns the problem of evil, where some philosophers argue that there is a logical inconsistency in the core propositions held by theists, i.e. God is wholly good, God is wholly omnipotent, and that evil exists. J.L Mackie highlights this argument as an opposition to theistic doctrine, while also raising what he calls the Paradox of Omnipotence, which concerns the nature of God and his own omnipotence, particularly around the question of whether an omnipotent being could make things that they can then no longer control. Alvin Plantinga offers a response to Mackie, suggesting that Mackie's attempt at demonstrating logical inconsistencies in the set of theistic propositions is unsuccessful. This paper supports Plantinga on the account that not only does he successfully defend against Mackie's argument concerning the problem of evil, his Free Will Defense offers itself a candidate in resolving the Paradox of Omnipotence.

Key words: Plantinga, Free Will, Paradox of Omnipotence, J.L Mackie.

The Omnipotence Paradox and Free Will: Plantinga's Response to Mackie J.L. Mackie argues that there is a logical inconsistency between God's goodness and omnipotence, and the existence of evil. In this paper, I will argue that Alvin Plantinga successfully refutes this by demonstrating that there is no such inconsistency while also undermining Mackie's Paradox of Omnipotence with his Free Will Defense.

To begin, we must understand what Mackie outlines as the problem of evil. In his paper "Evil and Omnipotence", Mackie argues that there is a contradiction amongst three propositions of which are held by theists: God is wholly good, God is omnipotent, and that evil exists, where if two of them were held to be true, the third would be false[1]. Each of these assertions are essential to theistic doctrine, yet all three cannot be consistently held. For the purposes of this paper, we will direct our focus onto Christian religious doctrine, as Mackie involves himself in debate with Plantinga, a Christian. From a glance, the contradiction does not seem apparent, so Mackie introduces additional premises: good is opposed to evil where good can eliminate evil as far as it can, and that there is no limitation to what an omnipotent being can do; a good omnipotent being, therefore, is one that eliminates evil entirely[2]. This leads to the core of the problem of evil - the propositions that a good omnipotent being exists, and that evil exists, are incompatible[3]. Mackie is discussing the problem of evil through an *inconsistency* argument: it is logically inconsistent to have an omnipotent good being like that of God to exist while also accepting the existence of evil[4].

The problem of evil, Mackie argues, is not a concern for those prepared to deny one of the propositions; that God is not wholly good, that he is not omnipotent, or that evil doesn't exist[5]. However he doesn't want to focus on these cases, because the problem of evil hones in on the inconsistency of the propositions essential to theological doctrine; willing to deny any one of these propositions is a whole other topic. Mackie

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[1] J.L Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence" in *Mind* Oxford University Press, 1955, 200.
[2] Mackie, 201.
[3] Mackie, 201.
[4] Mackie, 200.
[5] Mackie, 201.

introduces what he considers *adequate* solutions from which the problem of evil does

not arise; severely restricting the meaning of *omnipotence*, or defining evil as a privation

of good[6]. Yet these solutions in themselves are, as Mackie states, only *almost* adopted[7].

In the former solution, Mackie suggests that even for those that restrict God's power yet

maintain the term *omnipotence*, they may still think that in other contexts that God's

power *is* unlimited[8]. In addition to *adequate* solutions, Mackie also introduces *fallacious*

solutions. The subsequent solutions are considered fallacious because, in order to solve

the problem of evil, one of its constituent propositions is given up, however in a way that

it is retained, where it therefore can be asserted "without qualification in other

contexts"[9]. For the purposes of relevancy, I will only explore one of these fallacious

solutions: evil as being a product of human free will.

A solution that posits that evil is due to human free will follows the premise that

evil is not ascribed to God but is the product of the independent action of human beings

by virtue of free will given by God[10]. Mackie defines certain evils and goods in terms of

order, such that something like pain, a first order evil, would be justified as logically

necessary for a second order good like sympathy, whereas a second order evil (e.g.

cruelty) isn't justified, but is something pertaining to human beings for which God is not

responsible[11]. Mackie argues that in order to account for a wholly good God giving

humans free will, one must argue that it is ultimately better for men to act freely and

[6] Mackie, 202.
[7] Mackie, 202.
[8] Mackie, 202.
[9] Mackie, 202.
[10] Mackie, 208.
[11] Mackie, 208.

sometimes tend towards evil, than for men to be "innocent automata", acting rightly all the time in a completely determined way[12]. On this account, freedom must be regarded as a third order good, more valuable than second order goods, and it must be assumed that second order evils like cruelty are logically necessary preconditions of freedom[13]. However, Mackie questions this assumption; if God did make men free, and that such freedom sometimes leads to men choosing evil over good, why couldn't God have made it such that men always freely choose good?[14]. If there is no logical impossibility of man choosing good on many occasions, then there shouldn't be a logical impossibility in a man's choosing freely all of the time; God didn't have merely two choices of either making beings as automata or free beings who sometimes do wrong — God could have made a world in which there were free beings who would always act right; the failure to actualize this world, according to Mackie, is inconsistent with God's omnipotence and wholly goodness[15].

A theist may argue that God hasn't any control over human will, such that for any free being who may act wrongly, God could not intervene to prevent evil[16]. This would be a solution to the problem that Mackie raises: if God *could* intervene, but doesn't, and if he is truly good, then even a wrong act of free will isn't evil because freedom is a value outweighing any wrongness — there would be a loss of value if God took away both freedom and wrongness[17]. The theist must be willing to argue that God has made

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[12] Mackie, 208.
[13] Mackie, 208
[14] Mackie, 209
[15] Mackie, 209.
[16] Mackie, 210.
[17] Mackie, 210.

men so free to the point of him being unable to control their wills. This leads Mackie to introduce his Paradox of Omnipotence: can an omnipotent being make things that he can then no longer control? Furthermore, can an omnipotent being be bound by the rules of that which he creates?[18]. The latter question follows from Mackie's claim that an omnipotent God creates causal laws and the rules of logic. This is a paradox because if one were to answer *yes* to these questions, God would stop being omnipotent after the creation of free beings; if one were to answer *no,* there is an immediate assertion that there are things God cannot do, which already undermines his omnipotence[19].

Mackie's argument for the problem of evil is a logical argument, meaning that it rests on logical inconsistencies found within propositions essential to the theological doctrine as noted in the aforementioned premises. Moreover, by raising the Paradox of Omnipotence, he further develops that the nature of God himself is inconsistent and irrational. Whether Mackie succeeds in arguing this, however, depends on whether such an inconsistency truly exists.

In Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil*, he argues against the idea that the three propositions as listed by Mackie are logically inconsistent. Firstly, Plantinga defines what he means by inconsistency: an *explicit* contradiction entails that, within a conjunctive proposition, one conjunct negates the other — an example of this would be *I am a decent philosopher* and *I am not a decent philosopher*[20]. Plantinga takes the three propositions Mackie introduces, i.e. God is omnipotent, God is wholly good, evil exists,

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[18] Mackie, 210.
[19] Mackie, 210.
[20] A. Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil* (Michigan, William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 12.

and lists them as set A. He questions whether set A is actually an inconsistent, contradictory set; there is no explicit contradiction within the propositions of this set, and there is no formal contradiction that allows for any laws of logic to permit us to deduce a denial of one of the propositions in A from the others[21]. Thus, perhaps it is the case that set A is *implicitly* contradictory: for any set of propositions *S*, the addition of a necessarily true proposition *p* to *S* would render it a formally contradictory set[22]. By considering the additional premises introduced by Mackie, i.e. that a good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can (Plantinga calls this premise 19), and that there are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do (premise 20), Plantinga contemplates whether there is an implicit contradiction[23]. Notably, Mackie must hold that those two additional premises are necessarily true. Premise 20 raises the question of whether it's actually true that an omnipotent being is entirely limitless; could God create square circles or married bachelors?; it would be difficult to argue this, and thus we may reformulate it to say that there aren't *nonlogical* limits to what the omnipotent being can do[24]. From this, Plantinga grants that we can suppose premise 20 as necessarily true[25].

Plantinga argues that premise 19 is not necessarily true. In cases where one is unaware of someone's peril, which we can consider an evil, one does not forfeit one's claim of being a good person simply by not acting, or doing a *good* thing — it was merely the case that the other's peril was unbeknownst to the individual[26]. Thence,

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[21] Plantinga, 14.
[22] Plantinga, 16.
[23] Plantinga, 17.
[24] Plantinga, 17.
[25] Plantinga, 18.
[26] Plantinga, 18.

Plantinga tries to reformulate premise 19 to "every good thing always eliminates every evil that *it knows about* and can eliminate"[27]. This new formulation, 19a, is neither necessary nor true; in cases where there are two perils and an individual can only eliminate one, they aren't considered *not good* by their failure to eliminate both[28]. Plantinga tries to offer premise 19b, which posits that a good being eliminates every evil E that it knows about, and that can eliminate E without bringing greater evil or eliminating a good state of affairs that outweighs E[29]. Suppose a scenario in which two people were in peril, where an individual, with a party of others, could save them, however they have a time limit in which, if they take the time to save both, they risk the wellbeing of the others, e.g. by an inevitable storm; one evil may be eliminated by rescuing one person, without causing more evil — yet it cannot be the case that both evils could be properly eliminated, therefore the individual cannot be blamed for the failure of eliminating the other[30].

It seems that Plantinga cannot find a variation of premise 19 such that it is necessarily true. He argues that the atheologian has yet to find a plausible addition of *p* to set A that yields a formally contradictory set[31]. Plantinga thus turns to whether set A *can* be consistent. He introduces premise 22: "God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so"[32]. The theist wants to hold that premise 22 is consistent with set A, and there are a couple different ways in which he might attempt this. Unlike

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[27] Plantinga, 18.
[28] Plantinga, 19.
[29] Plantinga, 20.
[30] Plantinga, 20.
[31] Plantinga, 24.
[32] Plantinga, 26.

St. Augustine, who offers a theodicy for the *reasons* behind premise 22, Plantinga wants offer what God's reason for evil might *possibly* be; he must try to find a proposition *r* that is consistent with God being good, omniscient, and omnipotent, and that the conjunction between the two would entail premise 22 — he doesn't need to claim to know that *r* is true, he is merely aiming to show the consistency[33].

At this point, it already becomes apparent that Plantinga is successful. Plantinga has already shown that Mackie lacks the sufficient propositions to make set A logically inconsistent, and given that his entire argument was based on the inconsistency of set A, it appears that it has failed. Mackie made the problem of evil a logical problem, but was unsuccessful in demonstrating just *how* set A is inconsistent and irrational. All that was required of Plantinga was to undermine the inconsistency — he provided accounts for the possibility of an inconsistency by raising propositions that *could* have worked to demonstrate a formal contradiction, however he was unable to do so, and concluded that no atheologian has been successful. The inconsistency argument for the problem of evil, then, appears to fail by Plantinga's account. However, a further evaluation of Plantinga's solution, i.e. his Free Will Defense, is necessary to see whether he can account for the problem of evil. Additionally, Mackie's paradox raises important questions on the nature of evil and human free will, and to simply declare him unsuccessful would be to ignore these issues; if Plantinga can account for the problems that Mackie raises, his argument will become more compelling.

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[33] Plantinga, 28.

Plantinga's Free Will Defense aims to show that there is perhaps a different kind of good that God can't bring about without bringing evil[34]. It follows that a person is free with any given action, while he is also free to refrain from performing it; no causal laws determine either cases[35]. Actions are morally significant if, for a given person, it would be wrong to perform the action, but right to refrain, and *vice versa*[36]. Also, a person is significantly free if they are free with respect to morally significant action. Plantinga offers a preliminary statement regarding the defense: a world containing beings who are significantly free is more valuable than a world containing no free beings at all[37]. God cannot cause or determine beings to act rightly, because this would mean that beings are not significantly free. Therefore, by creating beings capable of moral good, it must be the case that God made beings also capable of evil, i.e. moral evil. The fact that free beings can sometimes act wrongly cannot count against God's omnipotence nor his goodness, because if God wanted to prevent the occurrence of moral evil, he would have had to remove the possibility of moral good[38]. The heart of Plantinga's defense rests on the claim that it is possible that God couldn't have created a universe containing moral good without creating one that also had moral evil[39].

For Mackie, one must be prepared to argue that it is better on the whole to have free beings who sometimes do wrong things, than to have innocent automata who deterministically always act rightly. Plantinga, resting on libertarian free will, *is* prepared

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[34] Plantinga, 29.
[35] Plantinga, 29.
[36] Plantinga, 30.
[37] Plantinga, 30.
[38] Plantinga, 30.
[39] Plantinga, 31.

to argue this point, and already has. Mackie also asks why God, this omnipotent being, couldn't have created a world in which men could always freely choose the good. What is characteristic of Plantinga's defense rests upon a refutation of Mackie, such that God, although omnipotent, couldn't have actualized any possible world that he pleased[40].

In order to illustrate this point, Plantinga turns to possible worlds. He notes that God does not *create* a ny possible world or states of affairs; there are states of affairs consisting in God's existence, as well as his nonexistence — given that there are two propositions of *God exists* and *God does not exist*[41]. Only one of these states of affairs obtains; God created neither of them since there was a point in time when either existed. God actualizes states of affairs, and he actualizes the possible world that does obtain, but he does not create it[42]. To address Mackie's concern, Plantinga first discusses whether God is a necessary or contingent being; a necessary being exists in every possible world, while a contingent being exists in only some[43]. If God was a contingent being, there would be possible worlds that he couldn't have actualized, like those in which he doesn't exist — there would also be possible worlds beyond his power to create[44]. However, in possible worlds in which God *does* exist, could there be free beings who do no wrong? Plantinga argues that there are a number of possible worlds in which it is partially up to a free being whether or not God can actualize them[45]. If any state of affairs obtains, of whether a being freely accepts or rejects something, the

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[40] Plantinga, 34.
[41] Plantinga, 38.
[42] Plantinga, 39.
[43] Plantinga, 39.
[44] Plantinga, 40.
[45] Plantinga, 44.

actualizing of the possible worlds is dependent on which state of affairs is chosen by the being. God, the omnipotent being, creates free beings with respect to their actions, but the ability to refrain from or perform actions is up to the being themselves, not God[46]. This does not threaten God's omnipotence.

Therefore, addressing the paradox: can an omnipotent being make things that he can then no longer control? According to Plantinga's defense, yes he can, but this doesn't forfeit God's omnipotence — the two can be mediated in such a way that the paradox is avoided. As he has noted, there are no *nonlogical* limits to what an omnipotent being can do; God cannot actualize certain possible worlds because they are logically impossible, such as the case of a world in which there is consistent freely chosen right action. The reformulation of Mackie's paradox, i.e. of whether an omnipotent being makes rules to which he is then bound, warrants the same response. Mackie is assuming that God is the creator of the rules of logic, whereas Plantinga seems to suggest that he isn't, for God is bound by logical limits. If Mackie wants to argue that God *is* the creator of the rules of logic, then that is an entirely different, more complex debate. The fallacious solution that Mackie suggests which leads him to pose the paradox, i.e. that God has made men so free that he cannot control their wills, is at the very core of Plantinga's Free Will Defense. In Mackie's terms, Plantinga treats freedom as a third order good, given his libertarian stance. If we were to grant libertarian free will as right, then I believe Plantinga has significantly weakened the

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[46] Plantinga, 44.

threat of such a paradox. If we don't accept the libertarian view, then further, more arduous work must be done to give reasons as to why we shouldn't.

In the face of Plantinga, Mackie's inconsistency argument fails, as there is no indicated formal contradiction in the theologian's set of propositions A. Plantinga's Free Will Defense seems to evade Mackie's paradox, and while this does not prove the paradox false, it reveals further assumptions that Mackie would need to account for if he were to posit his paradox as a genuine threat to God's omnipotence.

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