

History of Philosophy A: Lecture Four

1. The Problem of Evil

Bad things happen.

Scenario One: Gunther Link

Scenario Two: Anne Frank

Obviously we could add in more scenarios of this ilk. Murder and death is rampant. Nor are the only bad things in the world those that involving dying: forced slavery; rape; torture etc.

What do philosophers generally mean by 'God'? God is that thing that is *omniscient* and knows everything that is knowable. God is that thing that is *omnipotent* and can do everything that can be done. So can't, for instance, make square circles. God is that thing this is *omnibenevolent* and is all-loving. Generally God is also meant to be a person, and a creator of the world.

So God is *omniscient*: He knows that evil things go on, and knows everything about every single one in intricate detail. God is *omnibenevolent*: He would want to prevent evil things from happening. He's a nice guy! When bad things happen to you, nice guys want it to be the case that they *don't* happen to you. So God, presumably, didn't *want* Gunther Link to die. Nor did he want Anne Frank to die. Finally, God is *omnipotent*: He has the *power* to do *whatever* He wants (as long as it's possible) But surely stopping these evil events aren't akin to making square circles? After all, presumably *we* could stop such events and *we* aren't even *nearly* omnipotent. So if God *knows* about evil things in the world; and He *wants* to stop them; and He has the *power* to stop them – why do they go on? Either God isn't one of those things (in which case, there isn't really a God) or *there isn't a God!*

Nor do we need to go as far as those horrible scenarios from before. It works for even minor evils as well.

2. The Free Will Defense

The FWD says that God isn't to blame for any of these things. It's all *our* fault, or some specific individual's fault, that these things go on. And if it's someone else's fault, that's consistent with God's goodness. Moreover, if God were to prevent these things from going on, none of us would have free will. None of us would be able to *choose* to do things.

So Gunther Link could've chosen not to hug a statue that was not tightly secured. The Nazis could've chosen not to brutalise Jews. I could've chosen to be a bit more careful about what I ate. I could've been more careful when rifling through sheets of paper.

If God interceded in these circumstances there wouldn't be any free will. If God *forced* the Nazis (and murderers etc.) not to do evil things then they wouldn't have any choice of what they did. To have a choice you have to be faced with genuine alternatives you can take.

Example: I'm locked in a cell and can't leave. So I don't *choose* to be there.

If God intervened to make sure only moral choices were made, you wouldn't be able to *choose* to do those moral things. *You'd be forced to be moral!* And that's not really being moral at all.

We then need to add in that free will is an important thing to have. God gave us free will *knowing* it would be abused and evil things would happen. So we have to add in that free will is somehow *worth* all the evils that go on. That's a debatable point. Is it better to be a mere automaton as long as I'm a happy one? But let's *assume* that us being free is either something we must necessarily have to have worthwhile lives (or otherwise very desirable)

3. Assumptions

Assumptions are fine things to make in philosophy. Just as in other disciplines (maths, physics etc.) we can *assume* things for purpose of argument. There are two reasons to assume things:

Because the assumption is reasonable and you have only so much time and space to work with.

It is ridiculous to think that any piece of work (philosophical or otherwise) has to accomplish *everything*. Philosophical works often concentrate on just a small number of issues (in many cases, such as papers, just one!) Because a *single* issue can require such large amounts of work, discussing other issues can be both tedious, misdirecting and time consuming. So assumptions are made. Bear this in mind in your own work. Spending time defending reasonable assumptions is pointless – if they're *reasonable* then we're happy for you to assume them. Tangential discussions of such assumptions is nothing other than word wasting.

Because you want to charitably assume something because further down the line you think bigger problems lie ahead.

Sometimes you might assume something because you think the *real* problem is independent of that assumption. So someone might believe P, and on the basis of that argue for Q.

Believe that the value of free will outweighs the evils we suffer, and use that to reconcile evil with the existence of God

You might or might not believe P, but assume it anyhow. Then show how you *still* have a problem.

As we shall see, believing the above might not even *help* with the problem of evil

Again, it's pointless to then have a discussion of the assumption – who cares if that's not the real problem?

4. Natural Evil

Scenario Three: The Tsunami

Other scenarios: Black Death, Aids/HIV, birth defects etc.

These natural evils seem to have nothing to do with free will. They do have everything to do with how God made the world. He made it 'defective'. And He *knew* it would be defective, and He had the *power* to not make it defective, but He did anyway! These natural evils cause problems for the free will defence. What to say in response? Here's two (non-exhaustive) possibilities

They *are* the result of free will

They aren't evil (next lecture)

5. Natural Evil as a Result of Free Will

We could blame Original Sin! Everything was peachy until the Fall. Then Adam and Eve were cast out into the horrible world. It's *their* fault. Or blame the Devil! Maybe Satan and his demons are responsible for natural disasters? Are these good answers? Maybe think of it like this: are they good answers for a *Christian* to rely upon.

6. Free Will and Omniscience

God is *omniscient*, so He knows everything. Does that mean He knows the future? Augustine certainly thought it did. Since God was perfect, He was *immutable*. Given He was immutable, and could not change, He could never acquire *new* knowledge. So He *had* to start off knowing *everything* – including future truths. But some people think this causes a problem. If God knows that I am going to do something in the future, then surely I *have* to do it? If I don't *have* to do it, then there's a chance God might *believe* I was going to do something but then turn out that I didn't. So He'd be *wrong* in that circumstance. And God *can't* be wrong – He knows everything! So God *knows* what I'm going to do this evening. And given He knows that, I have no *choice* in the matter of whether I do it or not. And this works for everything I have ever done. So I never had a choice about *anything* Ergo, I don't have free will.

The problem is clear. The FWD relies upon us having free will. But if *this* argument is right then we can't have free will. So if this argument works, the FWD fails. And, worse, it proves we don't have free will *even if* some other way can be found to avoid the problem of evil.