

## Transworld Sanctity and Plantinga's Free Will Defense

Daniel Howard-Snyder and John O'Leary-Hawthorne  
*International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 1999

It used to be widely held by philosophers that God and evil are incompatible.<sup>1</sup> Not any longer. Alvin Plantinga's Free Will Defense is largely responsible for this shift. Indeed, Robert Adams avers that "it is fair to say that Plantinga has solved this problem. That is, he has argued convincingly for the consistency of [God and evil]."<sup>2</sup> And William Alston writes that "Plantinga...has established the *possibility* that God could not actualize a world containing free creatures that always do the right thing."<sup>3</sup> You might expect praise like this from Christian philosophers. You might not expect it from William Rowe, one of the foremost atheistic philosophers of our day, but this is precisely what we find. Rowe writes:

Some philosophers have contended that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of the theistic God. No one, I think, has succeeded in establishing such an extravagant claim. Indeed, granted incompatibilism, there is a fairly compelling argument for the view that the existence of evil is logically consistent with the existence of the theistic God. (For a lucid statement of this argument, see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom and Evil*.)<sup>4</sup>

With testimonies like these, perhaps we will be considered foolhardy right from the start when we announce our aim in this essay. For we aim to show that Plantinga's celebrated Free Will Defense fails. His argument that God and evil are compatible is neither "convincing" nor "fairly compelling," contrary to what Adams and Rowe attest; and he has not "established" the possibility Alston describes. Of course, we are not the first to make such a claim. Unlike Plantinga's other critics, however, we deny no substantive metaphysical or moral assumption on which he relies. Nevertheless, we contend, his defense fails. Lest we be misunderstood, we hasten to add that our aims are not ultimately unfriendly; indeed, by understanding why Plantinga's defense fails, one can see what he should have said, which by our lights is every bit as decisive as his defense has been thought to be.

---

<sup>1</sup> What philosophers study under the rubric "the problem of evil" is a host of different arguments, standardly divided into two families: logical and evidential. The difference is this: a logical argument from evil has a premise that says theism is *incompatible* with some fact concerning evil that is *known with certainty*, while an evidential argument from evil does not (either because it has no incompatibility premise at all, or, if it does, because the fact concerning evil that is alleged to be incompatible with theism is not known with certainty). In this essay, we are concerned with a version of the logical argument from evil. For more on this distinction, see "The Evidential Argument from Evil: an Introduction," in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed, *The Evidential Argument from Evil* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1996), xi-xvi.

<sup>2</sup> "Plantinga on the Problem of Evil," in Peter van Inwagen and James E. Tomberlin, eds, *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985), 226.

<sup>3</sup> "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition," *Philosophical Perspectives* (1991), collected in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 113.

<sup>4</sup> "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1979), collected in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 1-11; see 10, n1.

## 1. Plantinga's Free Will Defense

Plantinga targets those who argue that God and evil are incompatible.<sup>5</sup> He objects, first, that their arguments have false premises and, second, that God and evil are compatible "in the broadly logical sense."<sup>6</sup> We accept Plantinga's first judgment; our focus is the second.

### 1.1 Plantinga's defense: the epistemic amendment

Plantinga identifies the second, positive task as a *defense*. A defense is like a theodicy--it specifies reasons that would justify God's permitting evil--but, unlike a theodicy, it does not aspire to specify reasons which involve *actual* good states of affairs; rather, the reasons specified in a defense need only involve *possible* good states of affairs.<sup>7</sup> More accurately, a Plantinga-style defense aims to show that

G. God is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good  
is compatible with

E. Evil exists

by producing a proposition D which (i) specifies a reason for God to permit evil, (ii) is compatible with G, and (iii) in conjunction with G entails E.

But surely this is not enough. One can't show that G is compatible with E by producing a proposition with these features. Of course, D "need not be true or known to be true; it need not be so much as plausible". And, granted, if there *is* a proposition with these three features, then G *is* compatible with E. So what's our worry? This: to *show* that G is compatible with E is in part an epistemological task; thus, one succeeds at it only if the claims that constitute one's defense meet certain epistemic standards.

Without argument, we lay down this minimal standard:

- One shows that G is compatible with E by deploying a Plantinga-style defense only if it is not reasonable to refrain from believing those claims that constitute it. Call this the *epistemic amendment*. The epistemic amendment applies to a Plantinga-style defense in a fairly straightforward fashion. Three explicit claims constitute such a defense; it must not be reasonable to refrain from believing any of them:

1. D specifies a reason for God to permit evil,
2. D is compatible with G, and
3. the conjunction of G and D--G&D--entails E.

Now, given our aim to assess Plantinga's defense while granting his metaphysical and moral assumptions, we grant that his version of claim 1 meets the condition laid down by

---

<sup>5</sup> In what follows, we focus on Plantinga's *God, Freedom and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1974)--hereafter GFE--Part I, and *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974)--hereafter NN--chapter IX. Page references in the text are to these works. Although Plantinga has clarified his position elsewhere, our arguments do not hang on any later fine-tuning. Plantinga's main target is Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* (1955), collected in Nelson Pike, ed, *God and Evil* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1964), Robert and Marilyn Adams, eds, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), and Michael Peterson, ed, *The Problem of Evil* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992). Mackie gave up on the logical argument from evil found in "Evil and Omnipotence" for an evidential version, what he called "the problem of unabsorbed evils," evils that are not justifiably permitted by God. See his *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 150-76, especially 155.

<sup>6</sup> Unless we indicate otherwise, we shall use modal terms in Plantinga's sense of "broadly logical" possibility and necessity; see NN 1-9 and GFE 12-16.

<sup>7</sup> This isn't quite the way that Plantinga draws the distinction. He says that a theodicy aims "to tell us what God's reason for permitting evil *really* is," while a defender aims, at most, to say "what God's reason *might possibly be*" (GFE 28). This way of drawing the line can be (unhappily) read as implying that God exists; ours cannot.

the epistemic amendment; likewise for claim 3. Moreover, we accept incompatibilism, counterfactuals of freedom, possible worlds semantics, individual essences, etc.--in short, we accept all the metaphysical machinery Plantinga uses in his Free Will Defense. That leaves claim 2. Naturally enough, D is compatible with G only if D is possible. Let's make that explicit:

4. D is possible.

The epistemic amendment implies that a Plantinga-style defense fails if it is reasonable to refrain from believing claim 4, and hence claim 2. The crux of our objection to Plantinga's Free Will Defense is that it is indeed reasonable to refrain from believing his candidate for claim 4.

We need to clarify three things before we proceed. First, we have *not* said that it must be reasonable to believe *D*; nor have we said that it must not be reasonable to refrain from believing *D*. The epistemic status of *D* is irrelevant to the success of a defense. The epistemic status of the claim that *D is possible*, however, is absolutely crucial. That fact motivates the epistemic amendment. Second, it might be reasonable for one person to refrain from believing a proposition while it is reasonable for another not to refrain. That is a consequence of the fact that people can differ in what they have to go on in forming a belief. But one will not have *shown* anyone (including oneself) that G is compatible with E by deploying D in a Plantinga-style defense if it is reasonable to refrain from believing that D is possible. Third, without argument, we stipulate that

- If one believes that D is possible solely on the basis of a particular argument and it is reasonable to refrain from believing at least one premise of that argument, then it is reasonable to refrain from believing that D is possible.

This principle is a natural extension of the epistemic amendment, a corollary if you will. Since Plantinga *argues* that his candidate for D is possible, this corollary will prove useful.

### 1.2 Plantinga's defense and transworld depravity

Plantinga finds a proposition to play the role of D in the following familiar story:

A world containing creatures who are significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but He can't cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if He does so, then they aren't significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, He must create creatures capable of moral evil; and He can't give these creatures the freedom to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. As it turned out, sadly enough, some of the free creatures God created went wrong in the exercise of their freedom; this is the source of moral evil. The fact that free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against His goodness; for He could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by removing the possibility of moral good.<sup>8</sup> (GFE 30)

---

<sup>8</sup> A reminder of Plantinga's use of some technical terms may be in order: (1) If a person is *free with respect to a given action*, then he is free to perform that action and free to refrain from performing it; no antecedent conditions and/or causal laws determine that he will perform the action, or that he won't. It is within his power, at the time in question, to take or perform the action and within his power to refrain from it. (2) An action is *morally significant*,

Lurking here is the thought that

R. God created a world containing moral good; however, it was not within His power to create a world containing moral good without creating one containing moral evil.

Plantinga argues that since R is "evidently consistent" with G, and since G&R obviously entails E, G is compatible with E.

It goes without saying that R is compatible with G only if R is possibly true. But why believe that? After all, even if some of the creatures God created were such that they would freely go wrong--indeed, even if *all* of the creatures God created were like that--why not just create other possible creatures who in the exercise of their freedom would always freely go right? To answer such questions, Plantinga develops the concept of transworld depravity and applies it to individual essences (GFE 49ff).<sup>9</sup>

An essence *E* suffers from transworld depravity if and only if for every world *W* such that *E* contains the properties *is significantly free in W* and *always does what is right in W*, there is an action *A* and a maximal world segment<sup>10</sup> *S* such that

- (1) *S* includes *E*'s being instantiated and *E*'s instantiation's being free with respect to *A* and *A*'s being morally significant for *E*'s instantiation,
- (2) *S* is included in *W* but includes neither *E*'s instantiation's performing *A* nor *E*'s instantiation's refraining from *A*,

and

- (3) if *S* were actual, then the instantiation of *E* would have gone wrong with respect to *A*. (GFE 52-53; NN 188)

(As Plantinga notes, in this definition we are to remember that (3) is not true at *W*, GFE 48.) With the concept of transworld depravity in hand, Plantinga argues that R is possible on the grounds that "it is possible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity" (GFE 53).

What should we make of this short, snappy argument? Clearly enough, the inference holds. For suppose there is a possible world at which every essence suffers from transworld depravity. Then, if that world were actual, God would find Himself in this unfortunate situation: to create a world containing moral good but no moral evil, He must actualize a maximal world segment *S* as described in the definition of transworld depravity; but, if He does, then "no matter which essences [He] instantiates, the resulting persons, if free with respect to morally significant actions, would always perform at least some wrong actions" (GFE 53).<sup>11</sup>

---

for a given person, if it would be wrong for him to perform the action but right to refrain or *vice versa*. (3) A person is *significantly free*, at a time, if he is then free with respect to a morally significant action (GFE 29-30).

<sup>9</sup> Each thing that exists in any possible world has a unique (and perhaps complex) property which distinguishes that individual from every other possible thing. That property is an "individual essence". Since an individual essence--or, "essence," for short--is a property, and properties necessarily exist, each essence exists at every possible world. But many individuals are contingent things, they don't exist at every possible world; nevertheless, their essences do.

<sup>10</sup> Plantinga confesses not to be entirely clear about how to spell out this notion of a maximal (or initial) world segment. A rudimentary expression of the idea is this: imagine a person who is free to do *A* at *t* and who is free to refrain from *A* at *t*. If she does *A* at *t*, then she brings it about that a certain world, *W*, is actual; however, if she refrains from *A* at *t*, she brings it about that another world, *W'*, is actual. Note that both *W* and *W'* share a segment of a world up until the time she acts or refrains from acting. A maximal (or initial) world segment is that segment of each of *W* and *W'* that is (intrinsically) the same up until *t*. For more on the matter, see GFE 46, NN 175-76, and "Self-Profile," *Alvin Plantinga*, 50-52.

<sup>11</sup> Since essences are necessary beings, God does *not* have the power to create essences other than those that exist and instantiate them.

That leaves us with the premise, namely, that it is possible--in the broadly logical sense--that

TD. Every essence suffers from transworld depravity.

What does Plantinga have to say on behalf of his premise? Very little. He notes that it is an "interesting fact" and claims it is "clearly" true (NN 186, 188; GFE 53). But that's about it. So the claim that there is a possible world at which every essence is transworld depraved constitutes the bedrock of Plantinga's defense. Given the corollary to the epistemic amendment, if it is reasonable to refrain from believing that TD is possible, then, if that's all we're going on, it is reasonable to refrain from believing that R is possible, and hence reasonable to refrain from believing that G is compatible with R. Given the epistemic amendment, it follows that Plantinga has failed to show that G is compatible with E. We shall now argue that it is reasonable to refrain from believing that TD is possible.

## 2. Transworld Sanctity

Our strategy is this. We shall define the concept of transworld sanctity; then we will deploy it to produce a proposition which is impossible if TD is possible; however, since it is no less reasonable to believe that this proposition is possible than it is to believe that TD is possible, it is reasonable to refrain from believing that TD is possible; hence, Plantinga's defense fails by virtue of running afoul of the epistemic amendment.

### 2.1 *Transworld sanctity defined*

What, then, is it for an essence to be transworld sanctified? This:

An essence *E* is blessed with transworld sanctity if and only if for every world *W* such that *E* contains the properties *is significantly free in W* and *always does what is right in W*, for **no** action *A* and for **no** maximal world segment *S* such that

- (1) *S* includes *E*'s being instantiated and *E*'s instantiation being free with respect to *A* and *A*'s being morally significant for *E*'s instantiation, and
- (2) *S* is included in *W* but includes neither *E*'s instantiation's performing *A* nor *E*'s instantiation's refraining from *A*,

it is the case that

- (3) if *S* were actual, then the instantiation of *E* would have gone wrong with respect to *A*.

(The bold type indicates changes from Plantinga's definition of transworld depravity.)

With the concept of transworld sanctity firmly in mind, consider the proposition that it is possible that

TS. Necessarily, some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity.

(Note: we did not ask you to consider the proposition that it is possible that some particular essence is necessarily blessed with transworld sanctity.) We shall now argue that if TD is possible, then TS is impossible.

But first, a brief digression.

### 2.2 *Two types of incompatibilism*

Plantinga's defense presupposes incompatibilism. Incompatibilists, however, disagree over what we might call the Principle of Alternate Possibilities:

PAP. *S* is free with respect to *A* only if *S* has it within his power to do otherwise. Of course, compatibilists like to understand the power to do otherwise in such a way that one has it even though there is no possible world in which one does other than what one

did, given the distant past and the laws of nature. Incompatibilists, however, tend to deny this. As one prominent incompatibilist likes to put the point: if someone is free with respect to an action when deciding whether to do it, they are "in a situation strongly analogous to that of someone who is hesitating between forks in a road."

To say that one has free will is to say that when one decides among forks in the road of time (or, more prosaically, when one decides what to do), one is at least sometimes able to take more than one of the forks . . . . One has free will if sometimes more than one of the forks in the road of time are "open" to one. One lacks free will if on every occasion on which one must make a decision only one of the forks before one--of course it will be the fork one in fact takes--is open to one.<sup>12</sup>

On this picture of freedom, the power to do otherwise requires that there *be* "forks" in the road of time, not merely that there *seem* to be such "forks".

Some incompatibilists reject PAP and the picture of a forking road that comes with it. They replace it with something like the Principle of Ultimate Causes:

PUC. *S* is free with respect to *A* only if the ultimate cause of *A* is *S*'s own will and cognitive faculties.<sup>13</sup>

Incompatibilists who replace PAP with PUC say that it is possible for one to act freely even if there are no alternatives "open" to one. But, they say, it does not follow that it is possible for one to act freely if one's action is determined by the distant past and the laws of nature since, in that case, the ultimate cause of one's action is not one's own will and cognitive faculties. Thus, they say, their view remains resolutely incompatibilist.

This is not the place to settle this dispute. We mention the difference only to note that Plantinga does not clearly draw the distinction and endorse one or the other. This presents something of a difficulty for us: we aim to show that Plantinga's defense fails even if all of his basic metaphysical and moral assumptions are true but it isn't entirely clear which version of incompatibilism he presupposes. He does, however, seem to be inclined toward PAP. His sketch of an initial world segment bears a striking resemblance to the picture of a forking road and in conversation he seems to fall on the PAP side of the line. In what follows, we shall follow suit.

Now to the argument.

### 2.3 *Transworld sanctity deployed*

We aim to show that if TD is possible, then TS is impossible. Suppose, for conditional proof, that TD is possible; that is, suppose there is a possible world *W'* at which TD is true. Then,

- at *W'*, every essence suffers from transworld depravity.

Suppose we unpack the implications of this proposition. Consider some essence at *W'*. Call it *E<sub>m</sub>*. And suppose we name the person who would exist if *E<sub>m</sub>* were instantiated "Mary". Our proposition entails that Mary's essence, *E<sub>m</sub>*, is transworld depraved. That is to say, at *W'*, it is true that for any world *W* in which Mary is significantly free in *W* and

---

<sup>12</sup> Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1993), 184.

<sup>13</sup> PUC is adapted from Eleonore Stump, although she is explicitly concerned with moral responsibility. See her "Libertarian Freedom and the Principle of Alternative Possibilities," in Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder, eds, *Faith, Freedom and Rationality* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996). A similar line is defended by Evan Fales in "Divine Freedom and the Choice of a World," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* (1994), and by Thomas Morris in *Our Idea of God* (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1991), chapter 4.

always does what is right in  $W$ , there is **some** action  $A$  of Mary's and there is **some** maximal world segment  $S$  such that (1)  $S$  includes Mary, her being free with respect  $A$  and  $A$ 's being morally significant for her and (2)  $S$  is included in  $W$  but includes neither Mary's performing nor refraining from  $A$ , and (3) if  $S$  were actual, Mary would go wrong with respect to  $A$ . This is a bit of a mental mouthful. To simplify, let's say that a world in which an essence  $E$  is instantiated, and  $E$ 's instantiation is significantly free and always does right, is an *E perfect world*--or, for short, an *EPW*. And let's say that a maximal world segment  $S$  in an *EPW* is a *neutral segment* just in case  $S$  includes  $E$ 's instantiation and  $E$ 's instantiation is significantly free with respect to some action  $A$ , and  $S$  is included in *EPW* but includes neither  $E$ 's instantiation performing  $A$  nor refraining from  $A$ . With these conventions in place, we can reduce the impolite mouthful above like this:

- at  $W'$ , for any  $E_mPW$ , there is some neutral segment  $S$  such that if  $S$  were actual, Mary would go wrong with respect to some action  $A$ .

Now suppose, for reductio, that TS is possible; that is, suppose that there is a world  $W''$  at which TS is true. Then,

- at  $W''$ , necessarily, some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity.

If a proposition is necessarily true at a world, then it is true at every world and so it is true at  $W'$ . That is,

- at  $W'$ , some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity.

It does not matter to us which essence or essences are so blessed at  $W'$ . It is important, however, to see that, given our initial supposition, whichever one or ones are blessed with transworld sanctity at  $W'$  also suffer from transworld depravity at  $W'$ --and we want to talk about one of them, one of those essences which, at  $W'$ , are at once blessed with transworld sanctity and cursed with transworld depravity. It will be convenient to suppose that Mary's essence,  $E_m$ , is such an essence. So, suppose we assume that  $E_m$  is transworld sanctified at  $W'$ . Using our notation, that is to say,

- at  $W'$ , for any  $E_mPW$ , there is no neutral segment  $S$  such that if  $S$  were actual, Mary would go wrong with respect to some action  $A$ .

And thus we get a manifest contradiction:

- at  $W'$ , for any  $E_mPW$ , **there is some** neutral segment  $S$  such that if  $S$  were actual, Mary would go wrong with respect to some action  $A$ , **and** at  $W'$ , for any  $E_mPW$ , **there is no** neutral segment  $S$  such that if  $S$  were actual, Mary would go wrong with respect to some action  $A$ .

Therefore, TS is impossible, given our initial supposition that TD is possible--which is what we aimed to show in this sub-section.

#### 2.4 *Why it is reasonable to refrain from believing that TD is possible*

We know on the basis of the above argument that if there is a world at which every essence suffers from transworld depravity, then there is no world at which, necessarily, some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity. Now, for any proposition  $p$  and  $q$ , if we know that  $p$  entails  $q$  and it is reasonable to refrain from believing  $q$ , then it is reasonable to refrain from believing  $p$ . It is reasonable to refrain from believing that there is no world at which, necessarily, some essence or other is transworld sanctified. In that case, it is reasonable to refrain from believing that there is a world at which every essence is transworld depraved. Now, Plantinga wants to use the claim that R is possible--i.e., that it is possible that God created a world containing moral good but it was not within His power to create a world containing moral good without creating one

containing moral evil--to show that G is compatible with E. And, he says, R is possible simply because it is possible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity. Unfortunately, it is reasonable to refrain from believing that last statement. Two things follow: first, given the corollary to the epistemic amendment, it is reasonable to refrain from believing that R is possible and, second, given the epistemic amendment, Plantinga's defense fails to show that G and E are compatible.<sup>14</sup>

Conspicuously absent from the last paragraph is any reason to think that it is reasonable to refrain from believing that there is no world at which, necessarily, some essence or other is transworld sanctified. We invite those who are inclined to disagree to reflect on what they have to go on in believing this impossibility. When we do so, we find ourselves stumped. We don't know what to say. Try as we might, no method for discovering whether a proposition is impossible is helpful here.

One might offer us the following line of thought: "It is reasonable to believe that there is a world at which every essence suffers from transworld depravity. And, as we know from section 2.3, in that case there is no world at which, necessarily, some essence or other is transworld sanctified. So, it is reasonable to believe that there is no world at which, necessarily, some essence or other is transworld sanctified, in which case it is not reasonable to refrain from believing in that impossibility."

We are not opposed in principle to this kind of move, what William Rowe dubbed in another context "the G. E. Moore shift."<sup>15</sup> We submit, however, that in this case the shift fails. For it is *not* reasonable to believe that there is a world at which every essence suffers from transworld depravity. At least no plausible argument suggests itself.

One friend replied to this last claim like this: "You agree that it is possible for *one* essence to be transworld depraved, don't you? And you agree that it is possible for *two* essences to be transworld depraved, right? Thinking things through from this starting point, isn't it reasonable to believe that it is possible that *every* essence suffers from transworld depravity?" How should we answer this question? Well, note that our friend encourages us to think that for every natural number *n*, it is possible for there to be *n* essences that suffer from transworld depravity. We concede that it is possible that there are an infinite, nay, an indenumerable number of transworld depraved essences. Should we infer that it is possible that *every* essence suffers from transworld depravity? Of course not. Consider the following analogue to our friend's reasoning: "I'm going to show you that it is reasonable to believe that at no possible world do Bill and Jane marry. You can imagine *one* world where they don't. And you can imagine *two* worlds where they don't. So, is it not reasonable to think that at *every* possible world they don't marry?" Seen for what it is, our friend's argument is no better than this one.

There are other arguments one might offer, but none we know of is such that all of its premises are more reasonable to believe than their denials. Our inquiries lead us to suspect that if arguments are all we have to go on, it is most reasonable to refrain from

---

<sup>14</sup> Here's the structure of the argument:

1. We know that [ $\diamond TD \rightarrow \sim \diamond TS$ ].
2. For any proposition p and q, if we know that p entails q and it is reasonable to refrain from believing q, then it is reasonable to refrain from believing p.
3. It is reasonable to refrain from believing  $\sim \diamond TS$ .
4. So, it is reasonable to refrain from believing  $\diamond TD$ . (from 1-3)
5. So, it is reasonable to refrain from believing  $\diamond R$ . (from 4, corollary to epistemic amendment)
6. So, Plantinga's Defense fails. (from 5, epistemic amendment)

<sup>15</sup> "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 6.

believing that there is a world at which every essence suffers from transworld depravity, and to refrain from believing that there is no world at which, necessarily, some essence or others is blessed with transworld sanctity.

Of course, there are sources for reasonable acceptance other than argument: for example, memory, sense perception, and the light of reason, as some might put it. The first two won't help here; what about the last? Perhaps it is just obvious by the "natural light" that it is impossible that, necessarily, some essence or other is transworld sanctified; alternatively, perhaps it is simply self-evident that there is a world at which every essence is transworld depraved. (Somebody actually insisted on this, but it wouldn't be polite to say who.)

The main thing to note about this suggestion is that it is patently *false*. It is not *obviously* impossible that, necessarily, some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity; nor is it just *evident* that there is a world at which every essence is blessed with transworld depravity. Of course, there are propositions to which we properly accord that status: the law of non-contradiction and the conditional corresponding to modus ponens, for instance. But neither of the propositions with which we are concerned as epistemically exalted as these.

Plantinga's discussion of his version of the ontological argument suggests an alternative approach. There he says that we properly accept certain propositions even though we have no compelling arguments for them--Leibniz's Law, for example, the proposition that for any objects  $x$  and  $y$  and property  $P$ , if  $x = y$ , then  $x$  has  $P$  if and only if  $y$  has  $P$ . He writes:

. . . there seems to be no compelling argument for [Leibniz's Law] that does not at some point invoke that very principle. Must we conclude that it is improper to accept it, or to employ it as a premiss? No indeed. The same goes for any number of philosophical claims and ideas. Indeed, philosophy contains little else. Were we to believe only [that] for which there are incontestable arguments from uncontested premisses, we should find ourselves with a pretty slim and pretty dull philosophy....

So if we carefully ponder Leibniz's Law and the alleged objections, if we consider its connections with other propositions we accept or reject and still find it compelling, we are within our rights in accepting it--and this whether or not we can convince others (NN 220-21).

Plantinga goes on to claim that the central premise of his ontological argument--that maximal greatness is possibly instantiated--is like Leibniz's Law in that we are within our rights to believe it without argument.

One might urge that the same goes for one or both of these propositions:

- It is impossible that, necessarily, some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity.
- Possibly, every essence suffers from transworld depravity.

Reflecting on them and their connections with other propositions we accept or reject, we may find them compelling, even if we don't find them just obvious; if so, we are within our rights in accepting them.

This seems to us to be wrong. Granted: sometimes we are within our rights to accept a proposition we find compelling on careful reflection but for which we have no argument. But clearly, not every proposition for which we have no argument but which we find compelling on reflection is one which we are within our rights to believe. Consider an

analogy.<sup>16</sup> Suppose we call a real number *septiquaternary* if '7777' occurs in its decimal expansion; and suppose we call a real number *perimetric* if it measures the circumference of a circle whose diameter measures 1. Consider the proposition that

1. It is impossible that, necessarily, some number is both septiquaternary and perimetric.

Alternatively, consider the proposition that

2. Possibly, no number is septiquaternary and perimetric.

Now, suppose we met a workaday mathematician who argued as follows: "I have no argument for believing 1 or 2. Still, as I reflect on them and their connections to other propositions I accept and reject, I find them compelling. So I am within my rights to believe 1 and 2." What should we say about such a person? While our diagnoses might differ, isn't it clear that we should say this: she is *not* within her rights to accept 1 and 2. The propositions with which we are concerned are no different in this respect from 1 and 2. Those who think otherwise must explain exactly what the difference is.

Plantinga might find an unlikely ally in Jonathan Bennett.<sup>17</sup> Following Leibniz, Bennett asserts that "we are entitled to presume anything to be possible if there is no evidence that it is not," or, more accurately, "that that principle is correct only in application to possibilities that do not themselves have modal concepts nested within them" (72). One might urge us to accept this last (restricted) principle, and then bid us to infer that we are entitled to presume that, possibly, every essence suffers from transworld depravity while we are not thus entitled to presume that that there is a possible world at which, *necessarily*, some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity.

What should we make of this line of thought? Firstly, even if the Leibniz-Bennett principle is true, it does not imply that we are entitled to presume that possibly every essence suffers from transworld depravity. For the proposition that at some world every essence suffers from transworld depravity is stuffed with modal concepts; for example, it entails that *necessarily*, at some world every essence suffers from transworld depravity, and that *necessarily*, at some world not every essence is blessed with transworld sanctity.

Perhaps a more charitable reading would have it that we are entitled to presume that *possibly p* if there is no evidence to the contrary and provided that *possibly p* does not entail *necessarily p*. One might then argue that since we have no evidence against the proposition that

- possibly, every essence suffers from transworld depravity

and it does *not* entail that

- necessarily, every essence suffers from transworld depravity,

we are entitled to presume that it is true. On the other hand, although we have no evidence against the proposition that

- possibly, it is necessary that some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity,

it does entail that

- necessarily, some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity,

and so we are not entitled to presume that it is true.

---

<sup>16</sup> The analogy is Peter van Inwagen's, although he used it to a different end. See his "Ontological Arguments," *Nous* (1977), 375-95, collected in his *God, Knowledge & Mystery* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell, 1995), 22-41, especially 39-41.

<sup>17</sup> See *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett, 1984), 70-72.

While an improvement, the recommended principle has a fatal flaw: there is no reason to accept it (which Bennett admits). Indeed, any reason to accept it would imply something like the converse of Ockham's Razor: more possibilities are more likely than fewer. But why believe *that*? It seems especially strange given that we are talking about broadly logical possibilities. We have here no more than the expression of an odd bias against propositions whose possibility entails their necessity--a regulative principle about as fitting for philosophical theology as it is for metaphysics, which is to say it is not fitting at all.

We have been at pains to suggest that it is reasonable to refrain from believing that there is no world at which, necessarily, some essence or other is transworld sanctified, and that therefore it is reasonable to refrain from believing that, possibly, every essence is transworld depraved. It is in the nature of the case, that we cannot provide a knockdown argument for our suggestion. The best we can do is to expose rationales given for the contrary suggestion and to appeal to our readers' sense of epistemic propriety when it comes to such exceedingly obscure modal matters. Perhaps the most intuitive way to present our position is this: Look. We know that Plantinga's premise that there is a possible world at which every essence suffers from transworld depravity is incompatible with the proposition that at every world some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity. But when we consider what can be said for and against each independently of each other, we come up short. We're nonplussed. In that case, isn't it just a little ingenuous, unwary--perhaps even mischievous--for us to go ahead and use Plantinga's premise to do some (admittedly magnificent) work on such a substantive issue as the compatibility of God and evil?

To strengthen our case further, consider a metaphysic which is amenable to the possibility that, necessarily, some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity. It is a metaphysic that posits a veritable plenitude of essences rather in the spirit of the "Principle of Plenitude" that David Lewis urges upon us.<sup>18</sup> The idea is this: Take any dispositional profile that is coherent and, according to this metaphysic, *some* essence at *every* world has that profile. Suppose, then, that some essence *E1* has a dispositional profile which includes going wrong with respect to some action *A* in some choice situation *C*, were that essence instantiated in maximal world segment *S*. According to the metaphysic in question, in every possible case of this sort, there is another essence *E2* which is just like *E1* except that were *E2* instantiated in *S*, *E2* would go right with respect to *A* in *C*. Such is the plenitude of essences. In effect, the essences differ in the distance relations they bear to various worlds in which they are instantiated: for *E2*, the *S* world which includes going right with respect to *A* in *C* is closer than the *S* world which includes going wrong with respect to *A* in *C*, while for *E1*, the *S* world which includes going right with respect to *A* in *C* is further away than the *S* world which includes going wrong with respect to *A* in *C*. If we assume the plenitude that this metaphysic posits, the thought that every possible essence that suffers from transworld depravity has a complement (so to speak) that is blessed with transworld sanctity becomes very compelling.

Is there a good argument for this metaphysic? No. But there is no good argument against it either. Lacking any reasonable grounds for rejecting it, we suspect that there

---

<sup>18</sup> See *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

are no reasonable grounds for rejecting its corollary, that, necessarily, some essence or other is blessed with transworld sanctity.<sup>19</sup>

The simple fact of the matter is this: there just isn't anything epistemically laudable about believing that there is a possible world at which every essence suffers from transworld depravity. At any rate, nobody who has understood the argument of this section and who, like us, is nonplussed when faced with the propositions in question can consistently assert that Plantinga's defense *shows* that God and evil are compatible.

### 3. What Plantinga should have said

Our assessment of Plantinga's defense leaves us with an uncomfortable question, uncomfortable because, well, we'd like for him to be right. But he isn't, so far as we can tell; and so we need to ask the hard question: is there *anything* of value in Plantinga's defense? Or does it just rest on a colossal epistemological *mistake*? We think it more than just a bit hasty to write off Plantinga's defense. In what follows, we articulate how it can be reformulated to avoid our objection.

#### 3.1 Broadly logical and epistemic defenses

We begin with a distinction. A *Plantinga-style broadly logical defense* aims to show that G and E are compatible by producing a proposition D such that (1) D specifies some reason that would justify God's permission of evil, (2) D is possible and compatible with G, and (3) G&D entail E. On the other hand, a *Plantinga-style epistemic defense* aims to show that, *for all we reasonably believe*, G and E are compatible by producing a proposition D such that (1) for all we reasonably believe, D specifies some reason that would justify God's permission of evil, (2) for all we reasonably believe, D is possible and compatible with G, and (3) G&D entail E. Note that a Plantinga-style broadly logical defense asserts that D is possibly true, that is, that *there is a world* at which D is true, while a Plantinga-style epistemic defense does not. Given the epistemic amendment, this difference is absolutely crucial. If one deploys a Plantinga-style broadly logical defense, then it must not be reasonable to refrain from believing that there is a world at which D is true. This proved to be the Achilles' heel of Plantinga's defense. If one offers an epistemic defense, on the other hand, the epistemic amendment (suitably modified) implies that it must not be reasonable to refrain from believing that *for all we reasonably believe* D is possible in the broadly logical sense. The latter condition is tantamount to a simple challenge to proponents of the logical argument from evil: specify something that is reasonable for us to believe and which entails that D is impossible in the broadly logical sense. If the challenge cannot be met, the condition is satisfied.

With these differences in mind, we can now see what Plantinga should have said: "You--the proponent of the logical argument from evil--bid us to believe that that G and E are incompatible. But it is eminently unreasonable to do so. Here's why. Recall the fundamental idea underlying the Free Will Defense mentioned earlier, the proposition labeled R: God created a world containing moral good; however, it was not within His power to create a world containing moral good without creating one containing moral

---

<sup>19</sup> No doubt, it will have occurred to our reader that the metaphysics of plenitude posits free-floating modal properties. After all, the modal differences between E1 and E2 don't seem to be grounded in anything. Of course, this is true. But the metaphysics Plantinga deploys in his defense also posits free-floating modal properties. The counterfactuals of freedom to which he ascribes truth values hardly seem to have a categorical base. Thus the admission of such facts does not deprive the metaphysics of plenitude of any dialectical force against Plantinga.

evil. Now, we know that if R is possible, compatible with G, and G&R entails E, then G and E are compatible. So, by contraposition, we know that if G and E are incompatible, then the following conjunction is false:

C. It is possible that R, and G and R are compatible, and G&R entails E.

Now, C is false only if one of its conjuncts is false, and therein lies the worry: it isn't reasonable to deny any one of those conjuncts.

Consider, for starters, the third conjunct. Clearly, it is not reasonable to deny it since we *know* that G&R entails E. As for the first conjunct, matters are a bit more complicated. Note, firstly, that it is not reasonable to believe that TD is *impossible*; for all we reasonably believe, it is possible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity. Secondly, we know that if TD is possible, then so is R, and so we also know that if R is impossible, then TD is impossible. But it is a general epistemic truth that if we know that p entails q and it is not reasonable to believe q, then it is not reasonable to believe p. So it is not reasonable to believe that R is impossible--that is, it is not reasonable to deny the first conjunct.

That leaves the second conjunct, that G and R are compatible. Now, the only possible reasons we could have for denying the compatibility of G and R are these: (1) G is impossible, (2) R is impossible, and (3) while G and R are severally possible, they are jointly impossible. Since R entails G, it is not reasonable to say they are jointly impossible; so option (3) is out. And we saw in the last paragraph that it is not reasonable to affirm that R is impossible; so option (2) is out. That leaves (1). But there is no reason to affirm that G is impossible; and, even if there were, it is not reasonable to affirm that G is impossible in the present argumentative context since, *in that context*, evil is supposed to be doing the evidential work, not a *prior* commitment to the impossibility of God's existence. Therefore, we have no good reason to deny the compatibility of G and R, the second conjunct of C.

To sum up: it is not reasonable to believe that C is false. But, as we saw a moment ago, we know that if G and E are incompatible, then C is false. Therefore, it is not reasonable for you--the atheist who offers the logical argument from evil--to believe that G and E are incompatible."<sup>20</sup>

That, in effect, is what Plantinga should have said. To be sure, it is not as elegant as what he in fact said; but what it lacks in beauty, we believe it makes up for in truth.

### 3.2 The inevitable objection

Crucial to a Plantinga-style epistemic defense is the claim that, for all it is reasonable to believe, it is possible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity. Here

---

<sup>20</sup> The structure of the argument is this:

1. We know that  $[\Diamond R \ \& \ \Diamond(G\&R) \ \& \ ((G\&R) \ \rightarrow \ E) \ \rightarrow \ \Diamond(G\&E)]$ .
2. We know that  $[\sim\Diamond(G\&E) \ \rightarrow \ \sim(\Diamond R \ \& \ \Diamond(G\&R) \ \& \ ((G\&R) \ \rightarrow \ E))]$ . (from 2)
3. We know that  $[(G\&R) \ \rightarrow \ E]$ .
  - 4a. It is reasonable to refrain from believing  $\sim\Diamond TD$ .
  - 4b. We know that  $[\Diamond TD \ \rightarrow \ \Diamond R]$ .
  - 4c. We know that  $[\sim\Diamond R \ \rightarrow \ \sim\Diamond TD]$ . (from 4b)
  - 4d. If we know that p  $\rightarrow$  q and it is reasonable to refrain from believing q, then it is reasonable to refrain from believing p.
4. It is reasonable to refrain from believing  $\sim\Diamond R$ . (from 4a,4c,4d)
5. It is reasonable to refrain from believing  $\sim\Diamond(G\&R)$ .
6. It is reasonable to refrain from believing  $\sim[\Diamond R \ \& \ \Diamond(G\&R) \ \& \ ((G\&R) \ \rightarrow \ E)]$ . (from 3,4,5)
7. It is reasonable to refrain from believing  $\sim\Diamond(G\&E)$ . (from 2,6,4d)

Plantinga is on firmer ground. After all, what do we reasonably believe that entails that it is absolutely impossible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity? Is there some compelling argument for it? Is it just obvious? Are we within our rights to accept it without argument? We think not. So far as we can see, our epistemic situation vis-a-vis the proposition that it is impossible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity is precisely that which we are in vis-a-vis the proposition that it is possible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity.

Most of Plantinga's critics will reject our contention here. They will say that it is reasonable to deny some metaphysical or moral presupposition Plantinga brings to the table. Thus, they will say, we are on firm epistemic ground in denying that, for all it is reasonable to believe, it is possible that every essence suffers from transworld depravity. This, of course, is how it should be since we aimed to reformulate Plantinga's defense whilst preserving his metaphysical and moral presuppositions. We have not tried to alter his defense in that respect. One sympathetic with the overall goal of a defense might wish, however, for something like a Plantinga-style epistemic defense that would appeal to even these stalwart critics. Can it be done? Perhaps.

### *3.3 Full-dressed vs. bare Plantinga-style epistemic defenses*

We begin again with a distinction. Recall that a Plantinga-style epistemic defense aims to show that, for all it is reasonable to believe, G and E are compatible by producing a proposition D such that (1) for all it is reasonable to believe, D specifies some reason that would justify God's permission of evil, (2) for all it is reasonable to believe, D is possible and compatible with G, and (3) G&D entail E. Plantinga's metaphysical and moral assumptions enter into the picture by way of the particular proposition that the epistemic defender substitutes for D--namely, R--and the particular proposition he uses to defend the claim that, for all we reasonably believe, R is possibly true--namely, that, for all it is reasonable to believe, TD is possibly true. TD and R both deploy metaphysical and moral presuppositions that Plantinga's critics reject.<sup>21</sup> One might, then, try to use propositions which are more palatable to Plantinga's critics. But a more radical reconstruction of our Plantinga-style epistemic defense would strip it of virtually *any* particular metaphysical and moral presupposition that critics have heretofore found objectionable. This, you might say, would be a Plantinga-style epistemic defense stripped down to its bare essentials. Let us, then, distinguish a full-dressed Plantinga-style epistemic defense from its bare cousin in the following fashion. A *full-dressed Plantinga-style epistemic defense* is just what we have been calling a Plantinga-style epistemic defense whereas a *bare Plantinga-style epistemic defense* aims to show that, for all it is reasonable to believe, G and E are compatible by producing a proposition D such that (1) it does not specify a reason that would justify God's permission of evil, (2) for all it is reasonable to believe, D is possible and compatible with G, and (3) G&D entail E.

The most visible difference between the two is that a bare Plantinga-style epistemic defense does not specify a reason that would justify God in permitting evil. To this extent, critics have fewer moral presuppositions into which they can sink their teeth. The

---

<sup>21</sup> The literature on this matter is voluminous. But references through the early 1980's are contained in Christopher Menzel's bibliography in *Alvin Plantinga*. Some recent worries about Plantinga's moral assumptions are expressed by Thomas F. Tracy in "Victimization and the Problem of Evil: A Response to Ivan Karamozov," *Faith and Philosophy* 9 (1992), and by Marilyn McCord Adams in "Problems of Evil: More Advice to Christian Philosophers," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988).

bare epistemic defender can also minimize the metaphysical assumptions she brings to the table by carefully selecting a candidate for D that has that consequence. In this way, nothing like Plantinga's R and TD, with their metaphysical and moral garb, needs to enter the picture.

A bare Plantinga-style epistemic defense would then proceed along familiar lines: "You--the proponent of the logical argument from evil--bid us to accept that G and E are incompatible. But it is unreasonable to do so. For consider the following proposition: it is possible, in the broadly logical sense, that

J. God has a reason for permitting evil that we do not know of; and, were God to permit evil for that reason, evil would result.

We know that if J is possible and compatible with G and G&J entails E, then G and E are compatible. So, by contraposition, we know that if G and E are incompatible, then the following conjunction has at least one false conjunct:

C. It is possible that J, G and J are compatible, and G&J entails E.

And here we have cause for concern. After all, nothing we reasonably believe rules out a single one of those conjuncts.

Consider the third conjunct first: we *know* that G&J entails E. As for the first conjunct, the only reason to think that J is impossible would involve a general moral principle that precludes the permission of known, preventable evil. There is no such principle, and so nothing we reasonably believe rules out the first conjunct. That leaves the second conjunct. There are only three possible reasons to deny it: (1) G is impossible, (2) J is impossible, or (3) while G and J are severally possible, they are jointly impossible. But, for reasons mentioned earlier, we have no good reason to say these things. Thus, nothing we reasonably believe rules out C.

But, as we saw at the outset, we *know* that if G and E are incompatible, then C is false. And, as we have just seen, it is not reasonable to believe that C is false. Now, if we know that p entails q and it is not reasonable to believe q, then it is not reasonable to believe p. Thus, for all it is reasonable to believe, G and E are compatible. Apprised of these facts, it can hardly be reasonable to affirm the incompatibility of God and evil, as you--the proponent of the logical argument from evil--do."

Crucial to our bare epistemic defense is the claim that the only reason to think that J is impossible involves a general moral principle that precludes the permission of known, preventable evil. Such a principle is notoriously hard to come by. But perhaps such a principle would be more readily available were we to focus on known facts concerning evil other than the mere fact that there is some, which is all we have discussed. For example, one might point to the existence of natural evil, or the vast amount of undeserved evil and suffering, or some particular instance of the innocent suffering horribly, and urge that one of these facts are incompatible with theism. And there are other options as well. To appeal to a moral principle which precludes God's permitting these things, however, would be to move from one version of the logical argument from evil--one which says that evil *per se* is incompatible with theism--to another version, one that is (perhaps) more plausible. We have not tried to show that these other versions fall victim to Plantinga-style epistemic defenses; we hope, however, to have displayed the resources for constructing a variety of such defenses for each of them.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> This paper was first written in 1986. Recently, we discovered that Marilyn Adams distinguished an "epistemic defense" from a "demonstrative defense," a distinction much like ours, in the essay mentioned in the previous note. There she rightly credits Nelson Pike with the idea of an epistemic defense; see his seminal essay "Hume on Evil,"

---

*Philosophical Review* (1963), collected in her *The Problem of Evil*, 38-52. On the epistemic/demonstrative line, see the Introduction to the latter work, 4-5. We also discovered Keith DeRose's intriguing epistemic critique of Plantinga's Free Will Defense, which--thankfully--did not render ours otiose: "Plantinga, Presumption, Possibility and the Problem of Evil," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21 (1990), 497-512.

We are grateful to William Alston, Andrew Cortens, Jan Cover, Evan Fales, Phil Goggans, Mark Heller, Paul Herrick, Jeff Jordan, Steve Layman, George Mavrodes, Trenton Merricks, Tim O'Connor, Alvin Plantinga, and Quentin Smith for comments pertaining to earlier drafts. Michael Bergman, Frances Howard-Snyder, Hud Hudson, and William Rowe deserve special mention for their invaluable input. We also thank our audiences at the Northwest Conference for Philosophy, 1996, the Society for the Philosophy of Religion, 1997, and the Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, 1997. Much of the work on this paper was done with the support of a Faculty Research Grant from Seattle Pacific University, 1996.