

Evaluation of free will defense in the perspective of philosophy of science
Chong Ho Yu, Ph.D.

May 2002

Running head: Free will

Correspondence:

Chong Ho Yu

PO Box 612

Tempe AZ 85280

USA

Email: asumain@yahoo.com.hk

Website: <http://seamonkey.ed.asu.edu/~alex/>

Evaluation of free will defense in the perspective of philosophy of science

Chong Ho Yu

Since Alvin Plantinga introduced the free will defense in attempt to resolve the problem of evil (1974), there have been numerous counter arguments against Plantinga's approach. George Botterill (1977) framed the problem of evil and the free will defense in the context of philosophy of science. In Botterill's view, Plantinga employed certain ad hoc hypotheses to address an anomaly (the problem of evil), but this strategy had failed because of insufficient independent evidence for those auxiliary assumptions. Moreover, even though additional assumptions are added, the defense as a whole is still lacking explanatory power. This article evaluates Botterill's argument and points out why some of Botterill's objections are unwarranted, but some of them are worth consideration.

The problem of evil could be simply stated as the following: There is a logical inconsistency between the following two propositions: (1) God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good. (2) There is evil in the world. Plantinga insisted that (1) and (2) are not inherently inconsistent by showing a third proposition: (3) God actualized a world in which there free creatures whom produce some moral goodness; and all possible persons suffer from transworld depravity, so that God could not have actualized a world in which free creatures could choose only moral acts but not moral evil. Thus, it is possible that (1) and (3) are true and they entail (2).

Plantinga emphasized that his approach is a free will defense, but not a free will theodicy. A free will theodicy attempts to explain why God has created this actual world with evil. A free will defense tries to resolve the abstract, logical problem of evil. In other words, Plantinga was

not concerned with whether the propositions are true or not. Instead, what he did is to demonstrate that they are logically possible.

Theoreticity

Botterill argued that (1) is a statement of a high level of theoreticity, in which no testable consequences are deducible from that statement when it is conjoined exclusively with statements that are verifiable. Botterill identified this as a weakness of Plantinga's theory and evaluated his free will defense in the perspective of philosophy of science.

Botterill briefly reviewed the reasoning framework of philosophers of science as the following: According to Duhem (1954), researchers do not test a single theory. Rather, a web of theories, which include auxiliary assumptions, is tested together. Usually the auxiliary hypotheses are not conclusively verifiable or falsifiable, either because they are law-statements or because they are statements of remote facts. More importantly, using the standard set by verificationism and falsificationism, it is doubtful whether we could examine all possible auxiliary assumptions when researchers keep altering existing auxiliary assumptions and adding new ad hoc hypotheses.

In response to the preceding limitations, Lakatos (1970) modified falsificationism in the way that researchers could not justify adjusting assumptions as they please. Lakatos distinguishes between naïve methodological falsificationism (NMF) and sophisticated methodological falsificationism (SMF). In the former, falsificationism does not address the problem of the high degree of theoreticity in auxiliary assumptions but in the latter it does.

Lakatos maintained that hypotheses of a high degree of theoreticity constitute the hard core of a research program, which is assessed with regard to the series of theories that are developed in the history of the research program. When an anomaly occurs and certain assumptions are

adjusted or added, the modified theory would be evaluated in the context of the series of theory. If the research program equipped with the new auxiliary assumptions leads to verified empirical content, then this research program is said to exhibit *progressive problemshift* and the auxiliary assumptions are considered valuable. If the new auxiliary assumptions could not help the theory to predict new facts, they are mere *ad hoc expedients*.

To Botterill, the problem of evil is an anomaly and the theist's task is to find a plausible auxiliary assumption, which could help the theory to explain this anomaly. While the analogy between problems in philosophy of science and problems in philosophy of religion seems to be strange, Botterill defended the legitimacy of his approach by saying that both scientific theories and religious beliefs should have some explanatory power.

Anomaly and explanatory power

As mentioned before, Plantinga devoted efforts to address an abstract, logical problem. But Botterill's assessment shifted the nature of the problem from logical to evidential. Usually anomaly arises when new data could not be explained by the existing theory. For example, observations of comets in the superlunary sphere challenged the belief that heavenly bodies are immutable. Newtonian physics could not fully explain observations of the subatomic world and thus it was dethroned by theories of relativity and quantum mechanics. However, there are *no new facts* that make the problem of evil an anomaly. Evils like holocaust and September 11 happen throughout human history. It is not the case that our ancestors were not aware of sufferings. Neither is that suddenly in this century philosophers found out that there are evils, and therefore, (1) and (2) appear to be inconsistent.

By treating the problem of evil as an anomaly and Plantinga's defense as using untestable auxiliary assumptions, Botterill launched a powerful but unfair attack to Plantinga. It is true that

(1) is a statement of a high level of theoreticity. But so is (2). Interesting enough, the challenge against theism from the problem of evil also presupposes several arguable and even untestable assumptions. For the sake of argument, I follow Botterill to shift the problem from a logical one to an evidential one. When one says that the existence of moral evils negate the existence of God, one assumes that there exists morality. If the ultimate reality of the universe is just material, why Holocaust and September 11 are considered immoral? What is the problem when stronger species exterminate their weaker counterparts? In a world without absolute morality, the preceding events are just decompositions of DNA or rearrangements of subatomic particles. As Swinburne (1988) said, the problem of evil does not arise unless moral judgments have truth values. According to evidential-based scientific inquiry, if one asserts statement (2), “there is moral evil” is inconsistent with statement (1), “there is an all-powerful and loving God,” one must first define morality, and then show independent evidence that the degree of moral evils outweighs the belief of a caring God. Using Botterill’s standard, (2) is also a statement of a high level of theoreticity. As a matter of fact, all theorists employ hypotheses or assumptions with some degree of theoreticity.

The criterion of progressive programshift could be conceptualized in this way: Are the auxiliary assumptions simply patching holes for the existing theory or bringing the research community forward to new insight? Botterill justified the application of this criterion to the free will defense in terms of explanatory power. But it is problematic. Explanatory power consists of several facets: the fit between the existing data and the theory within one domain, the fit between these two in other domains (a broader generalization), as well as the fit between the data in the future and the theory (prediction) (Thagard, 1978). It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to assess the fit in all three senses because all of them are somewhat related to empirical adequacy.

As Mackie (1955) said, “It (the problem of evil) is not a scientific problem that might be solved by further observations.” (p.200) Again, Plantinga’s approach is logical and it is fair to judge its adequacy by its logical consistency.

Logical, epistemological, and existential problems of evil

Nonetheless, Botterill’s criticism carries certain merits that are worth further consideration. By introducing possible worlds that are inaccessible to us, Plantinga approached the problem of evil in a purely logical manner. Although Plantinga has devoted several publications to the evidential problem of evil, the focus of his argument is “logical possibility” rather than “plausibility.” The epistemological, or the evidential problem of evil is considered a more serious challenge to theism by Rowe (1973). According to the epistemological form of this problem, the variety and profusion of evil in our world, even though logically consistent with the existence of God, provides evidence for atheism. No wonder Walls (1991) urged Plantinga to move from the free will defense to the free will theodicy, in which explanation of why evil exists in this world is discussed. Moreover, even if the presence of evil cannot totally negate the existence of God, it raises legitimate questions about the attributes of God: Is He really omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good?

Plantinga used other terms to denote the above difference. He classified the problems of evil into the existential one and the philosophical one. The former has to do with attitudes towards God while the latter with the rational propriety of believing that God exists (Monasterio, 1992). This distinction resembles the difference between the epistemological and logical problems of evil. However, there is a subtle dissimilarity. As mentioned before, when the problem is regarded as existential, the primary concern is our attitude toward God and the situation. It may be irrational for me to accept a loving God when my life is miserable.

Epistemologically speaking, my belief in God is unwarranted. But existentially speaking, one's attitude could be "in spite of," "because of," or "regardless of." Among the logical, the epistemological/evidential, and the existential problems of evil, no doubt the first one is more solvable because there are strict criteria to follow (logical consistency). The existential one is a matter of attitude, which may belong to the domain of pastoral care rather than philosophy. The last one may be controversial. We can see difficulties in applying criteria of philosophy of science (e.g. generalization, prediction) to the evidential aspect of the problem, and perhaps that's why Plantinga chose to deal with the problem in a logical fashion. However, the evidential problem of evil is still a serious challenge to theism, and thus different criteria should be developed rather than evading the problem altogether.

Free will as a matter of degree

Botterill criticized that no matter whether Plantinga's third proposition is true or not, he sets the standards for a successful defense abysmally low. Plantinga held the libertarian free will position. And the free will defence depends on the auxiliary assumption that there is moral worth in an agent's exercising the sort of freedom that Plantinga has defined. However, if one does not agree that there is any greater moral value in human agents being unfettered rather than being free, the free will defense will not be convincing.

Botterill's argument is problematic. The perceived distribution of good and evil is not a logical question. If we place the issue in the evidential scale, who can judge whether there is a greater or lesser moral value in human agents being unfettered rather than being free? Flemming (1986) used a painting analogy to defend the coexistence of moral good and evil: A painting might have greater aesthetic merit if part of it consisted of an ugly combination of colors than if it were uniformly pretty. I would extend this metaphor: the pigment on the canvas can not judge

whether the balance of light and dark colors is optimal enough to make a beautiful picture. Only someone who views the picture from a far distance can tell.

Nevertheless, an old argument repeated by Botterill still carries some merits. Plantinga maintained that God can create free creatures, but He cannot cause or determine them to do only the right thing. Mackie (1955) questioned why God could not make humans in a way that they always freely choose the good. Botterill agreed with Mackie that it is logically possible that humans can act freely and always do what is right.

At first glance, this assertion is strange, but I also find it logically possible. Freedom is a matter of degree; there is no such thing as absolute and unlimited freedom. When humans are confined to choose from only a finite set of good things, our choices are limited yet it is still considered freedom. For example, assume that I master the technology of genetic engineering, and I am able to make my children abstain from eating high sodium, high fat, and high cholesterol food, but other than that they could eat anything. In this case, my children can still choose within the category of healthy food. Needless to say, they still have plenty of choices (e.g. seafood, turkey meat, chicken meat, vegetables, oat meals, cereals ... etc). In other words, my children can still enjoy a high degree of free will. On the contrary, it is difficult to understand why free will *must* include choices for both good and bad. Genetic engineering is an extreme case. But is it true that our genetic structure has already imposed certain limitations on us so that we cannot just eat anything? Obviously, we cannot swallow a rock. When free will is viewed as a matter of degree, it is possible that God can extend our genetic limitations to a more rigid degree, so that not only we cannot eat anything harmful, but also we cannot commit any immoral acts, yet it does not violate our free will.

Transworld depravity and ad hoc hypothesis

Further, Botterill raised questions about Plantinga's notion of possible worlds. According to Plantinga, God cannot bring it about or cause it to be the case that a person freely takes or freely refrains from an action. From this it follows that there are many contingent states of affairs such that it is not within God's power to cause them to be actual. Botterill questioned that if God cannot bring about or cause some states of affairs to be actual in a direct manner, why didn't God actualize the world in question in an indirect way. In other words, why didn't God weakly actualize a world without evil? God might avert a particular evil action, not by causing somebody to do the right thing, but by setting up a situation in which God knows that the person will freely do the right thing.

To face this challenge, Plantinga introduced the notion of transworld depravity, which is what an agent suffers from if God knows that, no matter what the circumstances in which He places that free agent, that agent will commit at least one morally wrong action. Botterill argued that this auxiliary assumption on its own would not suffice to establish that God could not have created a world which contained moral good without at the same time creating a world without moral evil. Instead of creating poor wretches who suffer from transworld depravity, God could have created a totally different population of persons who would not have suffered from transworld depravity.

To address this problem, Plantinga assumed that every essence suffers from transworld depravity. An essence, in Plantinga's framework, is a property or a set of properties of an individual that is present in any possible world. Botterill disputed that the examples of essences given by Plantinga are either arguably false or otherwise problematic. Further, Botterill argued that the essence's transworld depravity is a fine example of an entirely ad hoc hypothesis,

because there is no slightest independent reason for believing that it is true. In Botterill's view, perhaps everybody does indeed suffer from transworld depravity. But in the actual world not everybody is equally wicked. Some agents are conspicuously depraved. God should not have created these agents at all, or else He should place those agents in very different situations.

The validity of auxiliary assumptions depends on independent evidence for the assumption. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to judge the assumption of essence's transworld depravity by independent evidence. Indeed, the so-called evidence of transworld depravity may be circular. Hempel used the following example to illustrate the problem of circularity in reasoning: Suppose his friend asks Hempel (1965) why there are some tracks in the snow in front of his house. Looking at the tracks, he explains that a person on snowshoes recently passed the house. In this case, the snowshoes explain the tracks and the tracks provide evidence for the passing. In other words, treating the phenomenon as the evidence and also the explanation is circular. This problem could be found in the assumption of transworld depravity: the phenomenon that there is evil provides evidence to the notion that every essence is morally corrupt, and transworld depravity explains why evil exists. Because of the lack of independent evidence that transworld depravity is true, viewing this as an ad hoc hypothesis is a reasonable criticism.

Botterill is not alone. Some other philosophers such as Howard-Snyder and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1998) also questioned the notion of transworld depravity because Plantinga did not articulate sufficient arguments for it. They mocked that at most the notion of essence's transworld depravity is supported by the logic like "we are entitled to presume anything to be possible if there is no evidence that it is not." (p. 10) However, one could turn the table around and suggest that we can accept the absence of essence's transworld depravity if there is no evidence that it is out there. Semantically speaking, the term "essence" implies invariant

properties. In Plantinga's theory, when an essence has transworld depravity, it is an accidental rather than a necessary property (Plantinga, 1973; Gan, 1982). But if this property is contingent, then is it possible that God actualizes a world in which some essence does not possess the attribute of transworld depravity? Is there any reason to believe that it is not a possibility?

In my view, essence's transworld depravity is a fancy version of the doctrine of original sin: All human beings are morally corrupt, and hence, no one could achieve the moral standard set by God. When God gives us commandments, does He really expect us to obey those commandments? If God is omniscient and perfectly good, then why does He ask us to follow his words when He is positive that we are unable to do so? Given that essence's transworld depravity is true and God could not actualize a world without immoral acts, does God still have another choice? Yes, He could choose not to actualize any world at all. Assume that my wife and I have some genetic deficiencies and no matter what advanced medical treatments our doctor uses, our offspring would suffer from some kind of serious congenital disease. What choices do we have? We may give birth to a baby without an arm or a mentally retarded child. But we can also choose not to have any children by applying all kinds of birth control methods. The free will defense fails to explain why God actualize a world if He knows about essence's transworld depravity. The defense may be that there is still more good than evil to actualize the world. Again, the "weighting" of good and evil is problematic.

In Botterill's view, Plantinga's defense requires more auxiliary assumptions in order to answer the preceding challenge: (a) prior to God's creation of a given agent, God does not know whether the agent in question suffers from transworld depravity, or conspicuous transworld depravity, or just a few minor failings; and (b) now that God has created this agent, it is too late

for him to rectify the situation. Botterill complained that these assumptions are not compatible with God's omnipotence and omniscience.

Thagard (1978) argued that a simple theory is one with few ad hoc hypotheses. Simplicity is a complicated issue and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the role of simplicity in theory choice. Nonetheless, when more auxiliary assumptions must be considered, implied, or explicitly introduced to support another auxiliary assumption, as shown in Plantinga's argument, this tendency is alarming. In the geocentric astronomy, in which epicycles were employed to explain planetary motions, more and more circles must be added in order to support the existing model. Eventually the model was saturated and replaced by a better model, the heliocentric cosmology. By the same token, when more and more auxiliary assumptions are added to the free will defense, one may wonder whether there is a simpler way such that the controversy on God's omnipotence and omniscience could be avoided.

Interference, freedom and free will

Botterill stated that God ought to intervene to prevent the agent in question from committing the evil action that he had intended, even though this might mean restricting the freedom of the agent in question. But what harm is done by such a restriction of freedom? Botterill asserted that it is logically possible that God exercises supervision and take away freedom when it threatens to be abused. This is a different matter from causing people freely to do the right thing.

This is an interesting question: If God could take away one's freedom when something goes wrong, are human beings really free creatures? Prominent philosopher of religion Theodore Guleserian used the following example to illustrate the problem of the coexistence of interference and free will: He wants to keep the class staying in the classroom until 6:00 p.m. and

he has decided to lock the door if any student walks toward the door before 6:00 p.m.

Nevertheless, his lecture is so interesting that no one wants to leave until the class is over at 6:00 pm. Although all students choose to stay in the classroom of their own accord, they don't have genuine freedom. It is because if a student had chosen to leave before 6:00 pm, he would have been forced to stay.

However, there is a sharp distinction between free will and freedom. Free will, as a psychological state, is internal while freedom, as physical movements, is external. In the above example, it is true that those students do not have genuine freedom because interference would occur if they decide to leave the room. Nevertheless, their free will of determining whether they leave or stay in the room is genuine, regardless of what would happen to them. Consider the case of a Communist regime. The government might prohibit Christians from attending church, but it could not make them not to believe in God. In this view, it is logically consistent that God could stop us when things go wrong and we still maintain our free will at the same time. Again, the free will defense fails to consider this possibility.

Conclusion

The central theme of Plantinga's free will defense is "logical possibility," in which the assessment standard is logical consistency, instead of "plausibility," which requires evidence. It is understandable why Botterill, as a philosopher of science, charged that Plantinga set the standard for a successful defense abysmally low. It is logically possible that Chong Ho Yu is an outerspace alien, Bill Clinton is a Russian spy, and George Bush works for bin laden. In a logical defense, demanding evidence for substantiating the above statement is out of question.

By applying philosophy of science to philosophy of religion, Botterill shifted the problem of evil and the free will defense from a logical problem to an evidential and epistemological one.

This definitely places Plantinga in a disadvantaged position because explanatory power of the free will defense can hardly meet certain epistemological requirements. Nevertheless, even if we put aside the epistemological criteria and evaluate Plantinga's auxiliary assumptions in a logical sense, those auxiliary assumptions have certain logical flaws.

References

- Botterill, G. (1977). Falsification and the existence of God: A discussion of Plantinga's free will defence, Philosophical Quarterly, 27, 114-134.
- Duhem, P. M. M. (1954). The aim and structure of physical theory. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Flemming, A. (1986). Omnibenevolence and evil. Ethics, 96, 261-281.
- Gan, B. L. (1982). Plantinga's transworld depravity: It's got possibilities. International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, 13, 169-177.
- Hempel, C. (1965). Aspects of scientific explanation. New York: Free Press.
- Howard-Synder, D., & Leary-Hawthorne, J. (1998). Transworld sanctity and Plantinga's free will defense. International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion, 44, 1-21.
- Lakatos, I. (1970). Falsification and the methodology of scientific research programmes. In Imre Lakatos & Alan Musgrave (Eds.), Criticism and the growth of knowledge (pp. 91-195). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mackie, J. L. (1955). Evil and omnipotence. Mind, 64, 200-212.
- Monasterio, X. O. (1992). Plantinga and the Two Problems of Evil. Lyceum, 4, 83-103.
- Plantinga, A. (1973). Which worlds could God have created? The Journal of Philosophy, 70, 539-552.
- Plantinga, A. (1974). The nature of necessity. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Swinburne, R. (1988). Does theism need a theodicy? Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 18, 287-312.
- Thagard, P. (1978). The best explanation: Criteria for theory choice. The Journal of Philosophy, 75, 76-92.

Walls, J. L. (1991). Why Plantinga must move from defense to theodicy. Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 51, 375-378.