Suffering, Sorrow, and the Gift of Free Will

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God, being omnipotent, omniscient, and all loving and just, would not have created any world notorious for the extent and nature of the suffering and sorrow found within it. Therefore, no one who appreciates that our world is notorious for the extent and nature of the suffering and sorrow within it can rationally maintain the belief that God exists.

There are two lines of response to this argument. The first is that suffering and sorrow are necessary to the realization of many important goods. Without them, there would be no opportunity for courage or compassion, and no goad to the good work of putting things right. The second is that much suffering and sorrow can be assigned to God's hand only indirectly, for much of it follows on the freely made choices and freely performed actions of humans. God is, of course, responsible for bestowing the gift of free will on humans and, thereby, is *ultimately* the source of the suffering and sorrow humans wreak. But a world without free will is a worse world than any world with it, no matter how great the suffering brought forth by the actions freely performed in that world. The two lines of response come together when one reflects that responding well to suffering and sorrow, one's own or another's, or intentionally avoiding courses of action one believes will cause them, redounds to a person's credit only if she has responded in the way that she has out of her own free will. Not only, then, is free will a powerful good in itself, one worth untold suffering and sorrow, but it is also the source of the possibility of many

other goods. The existence of misery, pain and want in the world is no bar to rational belief in God, we are invited to conclude, for we can reasonably suppose that any incident of suffering or sorrow either is directly part of God's noble design or else is the result of some person's ignorant or evil employment of God's gift of free will.

One objection to the free will line of response to the original argument is that God surely could have organized things so that free willed creatures went about their business without choosing, at least without choosing as often as humans do, to make cruelty, greed and destruction part of their business. For instance, God could have made us better people. He could have made us more resiliant emotionally and, thereby, less prone to be depressed or frustrated or bitter at our disappointments and failures, and less given to self-recrimination, anger and hate. He could have made us more intelligent and better observers and reasoners, and also given us longer and clearer memories. He would thereby have made us more accurate estimators of the consequences of our actions, and more likely to learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of others. He could have made us naturally more caring and loving of others, more concerned for their well-being and happiness, and, thereby, slower than we are to perform actions we believe will hurt or harm them. Tougher, smarter and kinder people might still occasionally foul up, however, for it might be inconsistent with God's designs that any but he himself is infinitely tough, smart, and kind. But they would foul up much less often than we do, and they would at least notice that they have fouled up when they do. Certainly they would not factory-farm cattle, or wait for the seas to rise before turning off their engines, or insist that cuts in public spending on health or education actually help the poor. They would never construct a death camp.

There is, of course, a response to the above objection. The response to the objection that God could have made us better creatures is that God could *not* have made us better creatures (or have made better creatures instead of us), for such creatures would not in fact, contrary to the assumption in the objection, have possessed free will. To have made us better creatures, the response runs, is to make us such that we will choose rightly, and this is to guarantee that we will choose rightly. But no creature guaranteed to choose in one way rather than another is a creature who chooses freely. Thus our imagined tougher, smarter, kinder people are not people graced with the gift of freedom after all.

It is this response that I will discuss and criticise in this essay. The trouble with it is that creatures even a little bit better than u—creatures, say, such that the worst among them are simply at the level of our self-concerned but not intentionally cruel majority, while the best among them are no better or more numerous than our best—would make for a world much less hurtful and gruesome than ours, while not making it any less a world featuring creatures acting freely. To see that an omnipotent, omniscient, and all loving and just being could have made such creatures, all we need do is reflect on how we ourselves come to act rightly and wrongly with the frequency we do.

Now it might seem that much that divides those who accept and those who reject the objection that God could have made us better than we are turns on the issue in what free will consists. It is true that those who object that God could have made us better creatures than we are without sacrificing our free will, and, hence, who say that God could have created a world marked by much less suffering and sorrow than this one, tend to be soft determinists. They think that freedom consists, first, in our ability to choose the course of action we deem the best among the

options we envision, the one we deem the best on the basis of our values and preferences at the time we chose, and, second, in our ability to act on the basis of our choices. God could have given us better brains and bigger hearts, they contend, and by doing so he would have bestowed on us the sort of personalities from which kind and generous actions typically flow. On the other hand, it is just as true that those who deny that he could have made us better while still giving us free will tend to be libertarians. They think that freedom consists in the ability to make actual one of two or more potential courses of action, each of which was, right up to the moment of choice, as genuine an option, as open a possibility, as any of the others. They deny that facts about our personalities or values or preferences at the time of choosing determine which option we choose, when we choose an option freely. Thus, they say, creatures whose better personalities ensured that they made the right choices would not be creatures making choices freely.

It might seem, then, that this difference is an important source of division on the issue at hand, such that the real issue here is simply what conception of free will, a compatibilist or an incompatibilist one, soft determinist or libertarian, is the proper or best conception. Once this issue is resolved, so too is the issue whether creatures tougher, smarter and kinder than us would be just as free in their choices and actions as we are. But I do not think that resolving the issue of the proper conception of free will does entirely resolve the issue at hand. Perhaps soft determinists, for their part, cannot but hold that we could have been better than we are and yet still be possessed of free will. Even so, it is not at all clear that libertarians are constrained by their conception of free will to toe a party line on this question. The frequency of right choosing and acting could, in fact, increase dramatically without any decrease at all in the frequency of free

choosing or acting, even when "free" is understood as the libertarians understand it. Or so I will argue.

Because I will be assuming a libertarian conception of free will, and because standardly those who hold such a conception argue that God could not have made us better without thereby depriving us of our freedom, I should describe more fully both the libertarian conception of free will and the argument according to which to create creatures less notable for going wrong than we are is to create creatures less free to go wrong.

Central to the libertarian position is the idea that free choices are both the agent's own choices and yet are not determined or compelled to be the choices they are by any fact about the agent at the moment of choice. We all have likes and dislikes, plans and projects, and tastes and habits; and together they constitute much of our personalities, the personalities we possess when we find ourselves about to choose. But we each have the particular personality we have as the result of the play of causal factors over which we ourselves have exercised little or no control. If our choice were determined by our personality, then, say the libertarians, it wouldn't really be our choice, but rather one made through us by antecedent causal factors. Moreover, it would be false that other options were open to us, for we could not have chosen otherwise than we did. Thus the faculty of choice must operate independently of our personalities, if our choices are indeed to be ours and to be made freely. For a libertarian, the situation of choosing looks like this: The agent, with his particular personality, envisions a set of options, a set of at least two different courses of action. The agent reflects on what moral and other categories each option belongs to, and on what inevitably or likely will come to be as a result of performing each. Then the agent evaluates the options—against elements of his personality, of course—in order to discover what he has reasons

to do and the strength of those reasons; but he also, perhaps, evaluates them against his ethical beliefs, in order to discover what he ought to do. Now he chooses. He chooses either to do that which he most wants to do, or to do that which he believes he ought to do. And his choice itself cannot be determined by any antecedent causal factors, if it is to be his choice freely made.

Nothing in this description of free choice depends on the distinction between what the agent wants most to do and what the agent believes he ought to do. The libertarian can hold that a free choice is made when any two options both appeal to an agent, for whatever reasons, so long as those reasons cannot be evaluated against each other on the same scale. When reasons for acting point in different directions but cannot be evaluated against each other on the same scale, there is, says the libertarian, nothing left for one's tastes, interests and values to do in bringing one to a choice between them. One's choice must, then, be undetermined (at least underdetermined) by one's personality, and hence is made freely. (One's choice doesn't reveal what one most wanted to do, as if the option one chose had the feature of being most attractive to one before one chose it; instead, one's choice constitutes what one chose to do as that which one most wanted to do.) Presenting the libertarian conception of free choice by contrasting self-interested reasons for going one way with ethical reasons for going another way serves only to dramatize that conception.

Certainly the agent had a reason for choosing as he chose, even though his choice was made freely. If he chose to do that which he most wanted to do, his reason for choosing to do it was that it was what he most wanted to do. If he chose to do that which he believed he ought to do, his reason for choosing to do it was that it was what he believed he ought to do. But nothing determined that the particular reason according to which he chose would be his reason for choosing as he did.[1]

The agent's personality, his values and preferences, did, however, play at least two crucial roles in his coming to choose as he did. First, the agent's personality was causally responsible for his envisioning the options he envisioned. A different person might well have envisioned different options. Second, his personality was causally responsible for the results of his reflections on and his evaluations of the options he envisioned. A different person might well see the options differently, and value them differently. It is only at the moment of choice itself, the libertarian says, that the agent's personality recedes into the background, leaving the agent himself free to go one way or another.

We are now in a position to understand why libertarians tend to reject the view that God could have populated the world with creatures tougher, smarter and kinder, while no less free willed, than we are. The argument begins with the premise that creatures tougher, smarter and kinder than us would, in virtue of being tougher, smarter and kinder, be less likely than we are to perform hurtful or destructive actions. But this means that they would be inclined, by the nature of their personalities, to choose rightly. They would envision courses of action open to them, note that some of them, if pursued, will result in more pain and suffering than others of them, and, for that reason, they will refrain from pursuing them. But to be made such as to be inclined to choose one sort of course of action over other sorts is to be without the freedom to choose as one will. They, then, unlike us, would be constrained by their nature to choose what they do and to act as they do. Thus, these better creatures would lack free will. Because they lack free will, a world populated by them rather than by us would be a world worse than our own. Therefore, God would act to create people like us rather than like them, even though people like us will trail in the wake of our choices much destruction, pain and misery.

Another way of coming to this conclusion is to reflect on the change in the proportion of right choices to wrong ones that would follow God's creation of them rather than us. A world of people more inclined than we are to make the right choice would, over the years, become a world in which right choices formed a higher proportion of all choices than right choices have formed in our world. There must be a cause of this change. There must be something within the agents themselves that is responsible for it. God would know what it is about these agents that would lead them to choose rightly, and so he could issue a guarantee that the proportion of right choices would be high. But God could guarantee that they will act rightly more often than we will only if something about their ability to act wrongly has changed. That God could issue such a guarantee must, then, mean that their ability to act wrongly is diminished relative to ours. Thus, these rightly inclined creatures are without free will.

John Hick and Terence Penelhum are two philosophers, each with libertarian views on the nature of free will, who endorse the argument that creatures who choose and act rightly more often than we do would have to be creatures who do not choose or act freely. Freedom of will, they both say, means the freedom to choose wrongly, as well as to choose rightly, and surely they are right about this. Any free willed creature will run the risk of choosing to take paths productive of suffering and sorrowCand run this risk not just inadvertently, but often in full awareness that chosing that path will produce suffering and sorrow, and even sometimes tempted to choose it *because* it will produce suffering and sorrow. Thus, writes Hick, "the idea of a person who can be infallibly guaranteed always to act rightly is self-contradictory. There can be no guarantee in advance that a genuinely free moral agent will never choose amiss. Consequently, the possibility of wrongdoing or sin is logically inseparable from the creation of finite persons…."[2] Penelhum

concurs. God's creatures, he writes, "cannot be free unless they have the power themselves to bring about evils as well as good things. So it is logically impossible … for God to have created a world that contained free agents but that could not have evils in it."[3] Against the view that the creator's choice was between "a world in which free agents had the chance (which they might not take) to show fortitude and resignation" and a world bereft of the suffering and sorrow out of which that chance arises, stands only the "counterintuitive suggestion that God could have given men the chance to show these qualities and could have arranged it so that they would take it and not reject it, while preserving their freedom."[4]

We must be careful about the modalities in Hick's and Penelhum's contentions. Hick is right that a free willed creature cannot be infallibly guaranteed always to act rightly; nonetheless, a free willed creature might, just in fact, always act rightly, though nothing was guaranteed. That it is possible at each occasion of choice that he will choose the path of suffering and sorrow is perfectly consistent with his never choosing to walk that path. Likewise, a world that in fact has no evil resulting from free choices in it need not be a world that could not have such moral evil in it; of course, it must be a world that could have, or could have had, moral evil in it, for it is populated by free willed creatures, and yet it might be a world that doesn't have moral evil in it, for its free willed creatures simply have not choosen to do evil, capable though they were, and still are, of choosing to do evil. One who thinks God could have created creatures better than us and still endowed them with free will needs only to say that these creatures in fact never go wrong, not that they cannot go wrong, not that they are guaranteed not to go wrong. John Mackie makes this point when he notes that "If there is no logical impossibility in a man's freely choosing the good on one, or on several occasions, there cannot be a logical impossibility in his freely choosing the

good on every occasion."[5] Actually, Mackie and others need not go so far as to hold it possible for free willed creatures never to do wrong, though it seems there is no reason they should not; all they need to say to sustain their anti-theistic conclusion is that it is possible that free willed creatures go wrong much less frequently than we ourselves do.

Hick's and Penelhum's arguments are incomplete. The conclusion they want is that free willed creatures *will* go wrong—indeed, they want the conclusion that, in the long run, any sort of free willed creature we can imagine will go wrong with just the same frequency with which we go wrong. But the only conclusion they are entitled to, and the conclusion they in fact stop at in their explicit arguments, is that free willed creatures *might* go wrong, that there is no guarantee that they won't. To get from that conclusion, however, to the conclusion that would trouble those who maintain that free willed creatures needn't go wrong, they must add another premise. They must add the premise that creatures who *can* go wrong sometimes *will* go wrong. Support for this premise comes from the thought that whatever it is in virtue of which creatures who always choose the right path do choose the right path, that thing must function as a guarantee that they will do the right thing, or at least as a guarantee that they will often do the right thing. By making them such that they will do the right thing, then, or do the right thing most often, God is in effect guaranteeing that they will do the right thing. But creatures guaranteed to do the right thing, we have seen, do not do it freely. On the other hand, without a guarantee of right action, it would be incredible if a free willed creature didn't choose the wrong path now and again over the course of his adult life. The occasions on which he could have chosen wrong will just be too many for no bad options to get actualized.

Let us pause a moment to take stock. The conclusion theists want to reach is that free willed creatures will sometimes—indeed, either logically or statistically *must* sometimes—actually choose wrongly. The explicit premise in their argument, a contention no one denies, is that free willed creatures are able to choose wrongly. For that premise to support that conclusion, though, theists need to add the further premise that creatures able to choose wrongly will, indeed, sometimes choose wrongly. Must we grant this additional premise, though, and hold that free willed creatures, ones capable of choosing to create suffering and sorrow, actually will sometimes choose to create suffering and sorrow, if only because it would be statistically odd were they never to do so?

I don't see that we must grant this premise, not even on a libertarian conception of free will. First of all, the libertarian, as we have seen, holds that choices are made in situations, and much that makes a situation one of free choice is not within the agent's control. The agent who chooses freely does so from among options that occur to him, and he chooses after evaluating these options: that just those particular options occurred to him, and that he is tempted by these ones and not those, and that he is tempted or not to the degree that he is—all this is essential to his choosing freely and yet none of it is under his control. (That he made himself the person he is through previous free choices, if he did, is not relevant to the fact that he now finds himself in the situation he finds himself in without having chosen to find himself in precisely that situation.) Tougher, smarter and kinder people would envision more options than people like us do, and they would understand the nature and consequences of each better than we do. Moreover, they would consistently value more highly than we do options with felicific tendencies, or despise more intensely options that threaten harm, and for that reason they will feel less strongly than we do the

temptation to choose to actualize an option that threatens harm, though their reason for choosing it might well be the same as ours. Again, that these facts about the situation of choice are no less mechanistically produced in the course of nature than are any other facts is not something the libertarian can, or does, deny. That the agent chooses in a situation that must include the options he envisions and his evaluative attitudes toward them, does not imply that his situation determines his choice. Yet, even before the choice is made, changing the chooser can make it more likely that an option of one sort rather than of another is made actual. To think otherwise would be to deny that good people are more likely to choose rightly than evil people, or else to deny that they make most of their good choices freely.

Second, the libertarian is wrong to think that God's making it the case that the chooser tends to choose one way rather than another must mean that God has guaranteed that the chooser will tend to choose that way. At the moment of choice itself, on the libertarian view, each option the agent envisions is a genuine option, an option just as possible for the agent to actualize as any of the others. Each option is equally possibly the option that will be chosen, in that each could be the one option chosen. This does not mean that each option is just as likely to be chosen as each other—but not because some are more likely to be chosen and others less likely. Rather, it is not the case that each is as likely to be chosen as another because the concept of probability is wholly out of place here. We are, let us remember, discussing the mysteries of a choice an agent makes, and makes for his own reasons, where that choice is both the agent's own choice and yet is not a choice determined by the agent's reasons; very little here, we must allow, will be entirely clear. But one thing that is clear is that the libertarian does not wish to say that the outcome of a free choice among options is a random outcome. The libertarian does not think a free choice is a

lottery among options each of which has the same probability of becoming actual as any other. Suppose there are one hundred universes, all exactly alike up to the moment of some agent's free choice between two options. The libertarian need not, and ought not, hold that the agent goes one way in fifty universes and the other way in fifty universes. The agent could well have gone the same way in all hundred universes, though, of course, in each universe he *could* have gone the other way. One reason the libertarian does not want to say this is that a random choice hardly seems the sort of choice for which the agent is responsible. But aside from that, the libertarian would not want to say that the number of freely chosen hurtful acts is merely a function of the ratio of hurtful options people have envisioned to the helpful ones. Nor would he be happy to say that this ratio is projectible, that at each point of an agent's lifetime it will be the same. If the probability of his choosing the unique evil option is one-third when an agent envisions three options, then, it turns out, there is a specific tendency within his choosing on that occasion to choose evil; but if it is possible to assign a likelihood to his choosing one way rather than another, then his choosing is not free. The way out of these problems is, of course, to deny that any option has any probability at all, that the concept of probability simply does not apply to options in cases of free, that is, undetermined, choosing. There might well be a fact of the matter as to just what, at any moment of the agent's life, the ratio of evil choices to all choices is, or even to all options envisioned, but that will simply sum up how the agent has in fact chosen to date; it cannot, on a libertarian view, represent a natural law binding on the future. As such, should God have decreed that that ratio turns out to be very low, as low, say, as it is with the best people on our earth, it will not be by means of his decreeing a law that bound the agent to that ratio. But if God is to guarantee that an agent will tend to choose the good rather than the evil, then God would have had

to have written a natural law ensuring this result. God, then, even on libertarian grounds, could have created creatures who, as a matter of fact, choose the good, and choose it freely in the best libertarian fashion, without having guaranteed that these creatures will choose the good.

To put the point another way: Whatever a free agent's tendency towards choosing well turns out to be, that tendency must, for a libertarian, represent simply the results of his free choices. It cannot represent some natural law that subsumes this agent or describes a frequency or ratio built into the nature of things, nor can it simply describe, except by accident, the behaviour of a fair gaming device. If my tendency to act well were the result of a natural law, I would be a puppet; if it were the result of chance, I would be a pair of dice. And yet, at any moment in that agent's life, there is a ratio of crimes freely committed to crimes freely forgone. For each of us, there is some percentage that captures the times we have chosen rightly, though neither nature nor chance—and, thus, not God—has guaranteed that we would choose rightly just that percentage of times. Now part of what makes a good person good is that in his case the ratio of crimes committed to crimes forgone is low. The good man might well have envisioned crimes, misdemeanours, sins, and indulgences he could have committed, he has appreciated and maybe even deeply savoured his reasons for committing them, but then he chose, of his own free will, to do something else instead. Now, though, whatever one's tendency toward choosing rightly is, it is certainly something that comes under the purview of God's omnipotence, though not by way of his power over nature or chance. God's options, one might say, included worlds in which creatures happen to tend freely to choose the good, and ones in which creatures happen to tend freely to choose the bad. God could have made a world in which creatures freely choose the good more frequently than do creatures in this world, without, that is, having *determined* these creatures to be

such that they choose the good at the rate they do—or no more than he determined us to be such that we choose the good at the low rate we do. Thus, it is not impossible, neither logically nor statistically, for a creature freely to choose the good on every opportunity to do so that presents itself. Therefore, I conclude, even libertarians must allow that it is possible for there to be agents who choose freely, and yet who, simply as a matter of fact and without any guarantee, choose the good with greater, much greater, frequency than we do.

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The free will defence of the rationality of religious belief in the face of the world's suffering and sorrow is only a part of a full defence, but it is an important part. That defence works, it would seem, only if there is reason to think that any sort of free willed creature of which we can conceive without contradiction would have to bring to the world just as much pain and sadness as we do.

There are, I have argued, two reasons for thinking creatures tougher, smarter and kinder than we are, creatures who would bring much less pain and sadness into the world than we do, would be no less free agents in the world than we are. First, they would be better able to spot courses of action likely to cause pain and sadness than we are, and more inclined to forgo setting off down those courses of action. Their abilities and inclinations no more compromise their freedom than do ours our freedom, for abilities and inclinations form part of the situation in which choices are made, and the situation in which a choice is made does not, according to the libertarian, determine what choice will there be made.

Second, God's making a world in which, at the moment of free choice, right choices are made more frequently than they are made in our world, would not be the same as God's

guaranteeing that right choices are made with that frequency. The frequency with which right choices have been made freely in our world is what it is simply as a result of the free choices that have been made, not as a result either of natural law or chance. It could, then, be higher in some other world, and again as the result of neither law nor chance. The world could, then, have contained creatures who choose and act freely, but whose free choices and actions are much more often the right choices and actions than ours are; and yet these creatures choose and act rightly as often as they do despite the fact that nothing in their world, no law or physical fact, guarantees on any occasion that they will choose or act rightly.

Endnotes

1. The libertarian conception of free will I have described is that of C.A. Campbell, "Does the Self Have 'Free Will'?", *Selfhood and Godhood* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957).

2. John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 41-42. (In the second edition, the passage is on p. 38. Hick uses different words to the same point in subsequent editions.)

3. Terence Penelhum, *Religion and Rationality: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Toronto: Random House, 1971), p. 236.

4. Ibid, p. 238.

5. J.L. Mackie, "Evil and Omnipotence," *Mind* LXIV, #254 (1955), p. 209.