PLANTINGA'S PUDDLE

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Alvin Plantinga's attempt to defend theism against the problem of evil marks several significant departures from the position taken by Leibniz in his Theodicy. Leibniz held that of the infinite number of worlds that God could have created he chose the very best. For only on the ground that this is the best of all possible worlds did Leibniz think that God's attributes of moral perfection, omnipotence, and omniscience could be reconciled with the occurrence of evil in the world. Thus, one of the essential tenets of Leibniz' Theodicy was that God could have created any logically possible world, and that the existent world is the best of all possible worlds.

Plantinga refers to this claim by Leibniz as Leibniz' Lapse--i.e., the claim that God could have created any possible world that he pleased.[1] Plantinga acknowledges that there are many possible worlds containing moral good and no moral evil, but he denies that these are worlds that it was possible for God to create.[2] I shall argue that while Leibniz may indeed have had a "Lapse" in developing his Theodicy, he nevertheless correctly saw the problem which the existence of evil raises and he tried to face it squarely. I shall contend that in trying to overcome some of the deficiencies of Leibniz' Theodicy, Plantinga has created a "Puddle" which does not rescue the theist from the problem of evil; instead, he has generated more problems and confusions than he has laid to rest.

Leibniz' Lapse may be seen to involve these claims: (1) God could have created any possible world; (2) The actual world is the best of all possible worlds; (3) There is a real distinction between moral and natural evil but both can be shown to be necessary and justified, although on different grounds. The most important element in Leibniz' theodicy is the recognition that there cannot exist in the world evil which is unnecessary or gratuitous; else there would be a contradiction in affirming God's moral perfection and omnipotence while acknowledging the existence of evil.

Plantinga's attempt to deal with the problem is confused on several counts. I shall develop, very briefly, only three instances of his confusion, each bearing on what he calls Leibniz' Lapse. First, Plantinga denies that God could have created any possible world. His argument is essentially that free will entails being free to choose good, thereby eliminating moral evil, without denying human agents the capacity of free will, the value of which outweighs all the evil which thereby results. Now this argument is correct if and only if: (1) the enormous suffering men inflict upon other men outweighs the good which could be achieved by supernatural intervention, or the creation of different creatures, and (2) if "free will" is to be understood as a radical form of metaphysical indeterminism. Consider only the second part of this argument. The notion of "free will" as employed by Plantinga must be such that it is logically irreconcilable with all forms of compatibilism in which an

action can be regarded as both free and caused. Plantinga never squarely faces this issue. In fact, he never says what is meant by a "free action" other than that it must be uncaused. He rests his argument on such assertions as: "The essential point of the Free Will Defense is that the creation of a world containing moral good is a co-operative venture: it requires the uncoerced concurrence of significantly free creatures".[3]

By uncoerced action of significantly free creatures Plantinga must mean some form of indeterminism. It is widely recognized that there is a very important difference between an action in which the agent is coerced or constrained to do or forebear, and hence not morally responsible and an action which, although the result of antecedent causes and influences is one for which the agent is morally accountable. This distinction, which finds forceful expression as far back as Aristotle, is one which Plantinga completely ignores, perhaps with good reason. For if human actions can be regarded as free and as the result of causal or influencing factors such as training, teaching, exhortation, examples, advice, reasons for acting, etc., then God could have governed causes, or provided reasons, in such a way as to produce morally good and free actions. But in this case, there is a contradiction in asserting God's moral perfection and omnipotence in the presence of moral evil.

At the very least we can demand from Plantinga a cogent refutation of compatibilism, but none can be found in his writing. I should hasten to add that I am not denying the coherence of all forms of "causal agency" such that an agent is not only acted upon but also initiates actions. What I am denying is that the initiation of morally evaluable action occurs ex nihilo. Rather, it occurs against a complex background of antecedent influencing conditions, including reasons for acting which themselves are not spontaneous generations out of nothing. It is widely acknowledged that people can, and often do, act for reasons. While reasons may not be causes, they can influence a person's choice or conduct. Thus, either God could have given men reasons for acting in morally good ways without interfering with their freedom or there is no such thing as moral action. So, at the very least, Plantinga has not made his case for he has not shown that freedom and causality (or acting from reasons) are incompatible. Indeed, the only reading of his free will defense that makes sense implies that free action must require freedom of an indeterministic sort. But there are good reasons for rejecting indeterminism, since on that view morally evaluable actions must be utterly free of causal or influencing conditions and are thus undistinguishable from random actions. Plantinga has not, therefore, dissolved the alleged contradiction between a morally perfect God and a world full of evil.[4]

Second, Plantinga attacks a variation of Leibniz' Lapse--that this is the "best of all possible world"--as a notion that is incoherent. For whatever world we can conceive, replete with beautiful dancing girls and deliriously happy sentient creatures, we can always conceive a world with even more beautiful girls and happier creatures who enjoy even more intense pleasure.[5] Plantinga is probably correct in challenging the coherence of the concept of the "best possible world". But he is surely mistaken in the inference which he draws from that incoherence. In the context of this discussion Plantinga asks: "How, indeed, could anyone

argue from the existence of evil, that it is unlikely that God exists?"[6] This is a very odd question for Plantinga to ask, particularly in the light of his voluminous effort to provide a theistic resolution to the problem of evil. More to the point, however, is whether it follows from the fact that no world is the best possible world that God is blameless whatever world he creates. And Plantinga apparently believes that because there cannot be, conceptually, a best possible world, that God could have created just any world with just any amount of suffering without being morally culpable. Plantinga's mistake can be illustrated in the following example. There is no such thing as the "best possible car". For any car, no matter how safe, luxurious, economical, beautiful, etc., there can be conceived a car even more luxurious, efficient, reliable, etc. But from the fact that there is no such thing as the "best possible car" it certainly does not follow that we cannot judge the relative merits of actual cars and make judgments about the competence, motives, and character of automobile manufacturers. A car designed so that the exhaust pipe expels its deadly fumes inside the car can be judged obviously inferior, and its designer(s) is not excused from culpability simply because there is no "best possible car" with which to compare it. And it is worth noting that the designers of a car are judged good to the extent that their car is good. So if the car cannot be perfectly good, neither can its creators. This point takes on added significance when applied to God, for if the created world is necessarily imperfect then it is inconsistent to ascribe moral perfection to its author.

If it were necessary that a "best possible" should exist (or be conceivable) before judgments about both the thing (artifact, person, etc.) or the author of such things were possible, then no evaluative judgments would ever be possible. The whole of human experience, however, shows that such judgments can be made in the absence of a "best possible". Indeed, it is often the deficiencies of such objects that makes it possible to form the idea of a "best" or an "ideal" by which to make evaluative comparisons and judgments. And precisely the same considerations apply to judgments about the world and its relative merits, as well as to the alleged author of the world.

The upshot of this is that although the concept of a "best possible world" may be incoherent, it in no way follows that we are not in a position to make judgments about the moral attributes of its author. It therefore does not benefit the defender of theism to point out that the concept of the "best possible world" makes no more sense than talk of the largest possible prime number.

Third, although Leibniz may have been mistaken in thinking that this is the best of all possible worlds and that the theistic defense rests upon such a claim, he was surely not mistaken in thinking that a world containing unnecessary and gratuitous evil is incompatible with God's attributes. Plantinga recognizes the extremely serious problem posed by natural evil. Hence, he attempts to overcome the problem by denying the distinction between natural and moral evil. His argument takes the form of denying not only that there is a contradiction between God's attributes and the occurrence of evil, but of holding that the presence of so much evil in the world does not even make it probable that such a God does not exist. In trying to make his case, Plantinga attempts to re-

duce all natural evil to a form of moral evil. Thus, if he can show that moral evil requires freedom which God could not deny without worsening the world, and that all instances of natural evil are really variations of moral evil, the free will defense will cover all cases of evil. Accordingly, Plantinga criticizes those who argue that there is no reason to think that natural evil is the result of anything but natural causes.[7] His argument on this source, which he does not elaborate in much detail and does not defend at all, is that natural evil may be the work of free nonhuman rational beings who cause or bring about "natural evil". He claims that simply because we do not have evidence that natural evil is the result of nonhuman free agents (such as Satan and his cohorts), it does not follow that such beings do not exist. That is, Plantinga admits that there is no evidence that there exists a Devil who, through the exercise of his free agency brings about terrible earthquakes, droughts, cancer, etc. But he does not think that it follows from this lack of evidence that such a being does not exist and is not the cause of such indescribable suffering in the world.

Plantinga is correct in saying that because there is no evidence for the existence of a Devil it does not follow that there is no such being. But it certainly does not follow from this that it is reasonable to believe that such beings exist. Indeed the only claims which are worthy of belief are those which are supported by the best available evidence. Since there is enormous evidence that natural evil is the result of natural causes, and no evidence that it is the result of nonhuman free action, it can only be reasonable to believe that natural evil is the result of natural causes. Thus, the distinction between moral and natural evil has not even been effectively challenged, much less undermined.

Plantinga's efforts to collapse natural evil into moral evil are evidenced in the following passage: "(40) Natural evil is due to the free actions of nonhuman persons; there is a balance of good over evil with respect to the actions of these nonhuman persons; and it was not within the power of God to create a world that contains a more favorable balance of good over evil with respect to the actions of the nonhuman persons it contains".[8] Plantinga contends that it is not required that this proposition be true for the success of the Free Will Defense; it only needs to be compatible with the claim that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect.[9] Plantinga criticizes those who reject the possibility that natural evil is the result of non-natural causes on the ground that they have not provided reasons for rejecting the possibility of free activity by nonhuman rational beings. He says: "Perhaps they only mean that we have no reason to think that natural evil is caused by such beings. Perhaps so; but again this gives us no evidence for the proposition that it isn't so caused".[10]

It has already been pointed out that Plantinga's argument fails to establish that it is reasonable to believe that nonhuman free agents exist. But there is a deeper problem in his argument. Even if we grant that there is no evidence against the existence of devils, Plantinga has shown, at most, that if there are devils, then it is possible that there is a God. By attempting to reduce natural evil to moral evil and resting his argument on the Free Will Defense, Plantinga produces a case for God

that is only as strong as his case for devils. And it does Plantinga no good to hold that proposition (40) need not be true, or that we need no evidence to believe it to be true. Indeed, proposition (40) must be true if Plantinga's case is to hold. Otherwise, similar reasoning would save the proposition that Hitler was the greatest humanitarian and public benefactor who ever lived. For it is possible that Hitler had good reasons for the systematic extermination of six million Jews, and that the world would have been appreciably worse had they lived. Were we only privy to the secret workings of Hitler's mind, and were we gifted with prescience, it is possible (logically) that we would regard Hitler as a global benefactor rather than as one of the most hideously evil men who ever lived. If this is not a reductio ad absurdum then nothing is.

Plantinga's Devil theory is mistaken and confused, in part, because he asks entirely the wrong questions. After suggesting that natural evil is the result of nonhuman, rational, and significantly free creatures, Plantinga inquires whether we have evidence against this idea. While acknowledging that many people find this idea preposterous or repugnant, Plantinga himself remains unmoved. He says: "The mere fact that a belief is unpopular at present (or some other time) is interesting, no doubt, from a sociological point of view; it is evidentially irrelevant. Perhaps we do have evidence against this belief; but if we do, I do not know what it is".[11] Now this approach is utterly wrongheaded. It amounts to nothing more than the claim that it is reasonable to believe A just because not-A has not been proved.

An exact parallel with Plantinga's claims about the Devil can be seen in the following. Suppose that there is an owner of a car which burns excessive oil, often fails to start, or, once started, often sputters and dies in the most inconvenient places. Suppose that a mechanic, after a careful examination, assures the distressed owner that there are no mechanical causes for his car's peculiar behavior. Instead, the mechanic claims that the man's car is the victim of the "White Flash". When pressed, he says that the "White Flash" is a diabolical spirit who, by exercising his free will, randomly interferes with the operation of the car. That the mechanic can produce no evidence that there exists such a spirit does not logically entail that no such spirit exists. But in the presence of so much evidence that problems of this sort are mechanical in nature, and in the absence of any evidence to support the existential claim about the spirit called the "White Flash", it would certainly be irrational to believe that the car's failure to run is the effect of the causal agency of such a spirit.

It is important to remember that Plantinga must claim not only that natural evil is the work of devils, but also that there is a greater balance of good over evil with respect to these nonhuman persons. Since these devils are so much more powerful than men it would only seem reasonable to think that they could tip the scale in favor of evil over good. That they cannot do so is, presumably, because God keeps them in check or else has constructed them so that their power is limited. In either event, God does regulate the exercise of their free wills. But in this case they are not free, and consequently there is no justification for the evil they bring about. Yet another reason why the devil hypotheses won't help Plantinga, is that if they do devote their considerable powers

entirely to evil, God is blameworthy for creating them at all. And if they were created, God is blameworthy for not limiting their powers.

Leibniz may have had a lapse in claiming that God could have created just any world that he pleased, and that the existent world is the best of all possible worlds. But Plantinga's attempt to remedy the lapse entails a notion of freedom that has disastrous implications for moral understanding, since it renders incompatible morally evaluable action and action which is the result of causal or influencing factors. Further, his Devil Theory is not only one for which there is no evidence whatsoever, but one which would not help his case in any event. For either God is blameworthy for creating devils at all, or he could have, and should have, restricted the exercise of their free action and thereby eliminated all, or some, of their evil doings. Plantinga has therefore created a Puddle which is hardly an attractive alternative to Leibniz' Lapse.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Plantinga, Alvin, God, Freedom and Evil. New York: Harper & Row, 1974, p. 44.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Plantinga, Alvin, The Nature of Necessity. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974, p. 190. (emphasis added)

[4]This issue is discussed at some length in my paper, "Free Will and Moral Evil," Rice University Studies, Summer 1974, 61(3), 45-57.

[5]Plantinga, God, Freedom and Evil, p. 61.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid, p. 58.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid, p. 62.

[11]Plantinga, The Nature of Necessity, p. 195.