

The Failure of the Free Will Defence *Dermot O'Keeffe*

**Ah, Love! Could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp this sorry Scheme of Things entire,
Would not we shatter it to bits – and then
Re-mould it nearer to the Heart's Desire!**

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam

In retrospect, it is hardly surprising that a century as brutal and brutalising as the last should have involved a sustained conversation, ranging across many disciplines, on the nature and existence of evil. In a world of mass communications we are daily confronted by images both of man's inhumanity to man (and other animals) as well as the suffering caused by the forces of nature. It is a commonplace observation that these two aspects of suffering, moral (originating in human action) and non-moral (or natural) evil are in fact intimately linked. Droughts and epidemics can be man-made; we do not have to live under Vesuvius, for instance. It is also clearly the case that they are logically distinct; we can conceive of a world in which there is no non-moral evil, for example, but only the pain caused deliberately. We can also conceive the converse, where people do no wrong, but none the less endure the effects of earthquake, drought and flood.

One can easily see from this how we move to the problem of evil for the theist. As Hume (echoing Epicurus) put it: 'Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?'¹

Traditional attempts to reconcile suffering (or evil) with God's existence begin with a defence in the face of the logical problem sketched by Hume, and extend into positive theodicies (literally 'God-is-just', despite the appearance to the contrary) whereby evil is understood as an essential dimension of a divine plan. The problem of evil has frequently been divided in two. There is the *logical problem*, which states that the existence of God is logically inconsistent with the existence of evil. If evil is real God *cannot* exist. Then there is the *evidential problem*, which holds that the amount, extent, kind and scope of evil is such that we have compelling reason to doubt the existence of God. According to a major contemporary commentator, Peterson: 'It is now widely acknowledged that the Free Will Defence adequately rebuts the logical problem of evil.'²

In what follows this claim will be challenged. It will be argued that the Free Will Defence (FWD) fails, and with its failure the evidentialist debate is rendered redundant. For if freedom, God and evil are incompatible, then the question of the degree and scope of suffering becomes otiose: we shall see that no suffering is justifiable or necessary. So God and suffering are incompatible after all.

As we shall see, the reason why the FWD has been accorded an unmerited status is due to the fact that the central concept, freedom, has not been explicitly analysed. I shall adopt a positive over a negative conception of liberty, and therefore expose the

vulnerability of the FWD. The FWD is of course, an argument designed to render compatible the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God with the manifest existence of suffering. This reconciliation is effected, essentially, by arguing:

- 1) that suffering is merited, and therefore poses no problem for God's justice;
or
- 2) that suffering is necessary to the development of moral virtue, and as such part of a divine order.

These two positions, loosely attributable to Augustine and Irenaeus respectively, are broadly retributive and reformatory in tone, and have been characterised by Mark Corner as suggesting that: 'Where Augustine gives us a Hitler, Irenaeus gives us a Stalin'.³

Both positions rest upon libertarian premises and both will succumb to the following analysis. However, for the purposes of this short paper we shall focus on the Irenaean theodicy, which has been so prominent in philosophical discussions.

Irenaeus depicts evil as a necessary requirement if an imperfect humanity is to develop moral characteristics and to freely respond to an epistemically hidden God. Earthly existence concerns soul-making. Irenaeus asks, 'How could he (man) be trained in good without the knowledge of its contrary? For an object apprehended by experience has a surer effect than any theoretical inference.'⁴ John Hick defends this scenario with a counterfactual hypothesis involving a world in which the very possibility of suffering is excluded. In such a world every attempted act of wrongdoing would be magically thwarted and the laws of nature altered to ensure an endless supply of harmless and happy outcomes. Hick reasonably enough draws the moral of this tale to be that 'In eliminating the problems and hardships of an objective environment with its own laws, life would become like a dream in which, delightfully but aimlessly, we would float and drift at ease.'⁵ He goes on to observe that: '...such a world would be ill-adapted for the development of the moral qualities of human personality. In relation to this purpose, it might well be the worst of all possible worlds.'⁶ The Irenaeus-Hick (I-H) position immediately invites several queries: why is God such an arch-libertarian? As Ivan Karamazov asked, isn't this freedom bought at an unacceptably high price in terms of human suffering? Today we may well ask too why much of the suffering may not be rendered merely *virtual*? Our moral development would remain the same, provided we believed the suffering to be real. How would heaven differ from the world rejected by Hick? However, these questions are peripheral. The main difficulties for the I-H position concern a) the nature of the good and b) the nature of freedom. It is to these issues that we now turn.

The problem with the I-H thesis is that it treats moral virtues as intrinsic goods when they are in fact instrumental goods. The school of hard knocks may indeed promote certain dispositions and attitudes, but they are only valuable in a world of hard knocks. Generosity is valuable due to privation, courage due to danger, indignation due to injustice, etc. We value these characteristics because they *contingently* promote intrinsic or ontic goods such as wellbeing, peace, freedom and harmony. Consider how thrift was prized in the 1940s, and strength in pre-technological society; such 'virtues' may come and go. It is essentially the same with moral virtues, so it is to

argue in a circle to say that evil finds its justification in the generation of moral virtues, when the moral virtues themselves rely for their value on the existence of evil itself. The primary goods of happiness and wellbeing are satisfied, so the secondary goods are irrelevant. To return for a moment to Hick's counterfactual (evil-free) world; it is a *good* world, even though it contains no *moral* virtue (just virtues, or excellences).

The I-H thesis has attracted a celebrated, though perhaps not decisive, criticism from J.L. Mackie involving the relation of freedom and goodness. Mackie notes that there is no contradiction in the idea of a free agent invariably choosing the good, and draws the conclusion: 'God was not, then faced with a choice between making innocent automata and making beings who, in acting freely, would sometimes go wrong: there was open to him the obviously better possibility of making beings who would freely act but always go right. Clearly, his failure to avail himself of this possibility is inconsistent with his being both omnipotent and wholly good.'⁷

If Mackie is right here, and freedom and invariably choosing the good could be harmoniously pre-established, then the I-H thesis fails. However, Hick seems to have a robust response to hand in finding Mackie's position incoherent and self-contradictory: '...while God *could* have created such beings, there would have been no point in doing so – at least not in a God who is seeking to create sons and daughters rather than human puppets.'⁸ In other words, God could make free agents *or* good agents, but even omnipotence cannot guarantee that all free agents will be good, it being analytically true that true freedom offers no such guarantees. Mackie's paragon is indeed a logical possibility, but the responsibility for the freely chosen (and invariably good) acts needs to be located within the agent, and cannot devolve to God in this way. Thus the I-H thesis remains intact.

However, in his later writings on this issue Mackie intriguingly and subtly amends his thesis thus: 'There is no incoherence in the proposed alternative, that God should have made men...such that they would always act well rather than badly; and if so, the alleged overriding value of freedom provides no explanation of the occurrence of evils in a universe with a supposedly perfect creator.'⁹ In what follows I wish to prise open and occupy the metaphysical space Mackie alludes to and which the I-H position denies. Moreover, I wish to defend it in the name of libertarianism – the I-H position's chosen weapon. We will find that the position collapses, not as Ivan Karamazov thought, due to a surfeit of liberty, but due to a dearth of it.

Essentially, the view being advocated here is a Kantian-Socratic one, where wrongdoing is seen as a form of *akrasia*, or weakness of will or reason. People are not so much *wicked* as weak or irrational or both. Given full moral understanding and perfect freedom, it is difficult to see how evil could be *chosen*. Moral responsibility seems conceptually linked to rationality and freedom, such that good acts follow from our rational judgements. An immoral act would be irrationally chosen, and therefore not responsible. A responsible act would be rational, and so necessarily selected. Think of an *a priori* discipline, such as mathematics. Reason motivates us to believe the results of a calculation. We are constrained to accept it. Similarly a moral calculator could be constrained to accept a certain course of action, and thus be motivated to perform it. Before dismissing this as reducing moral agents to Hick's puppets, consider whether it would be a freer or more responsible mathematician if

they were irrationally tempted to accept numerous results which they knew to be wrong. Surely they would not be. Also, the mathematician who painstakingly learns arithmetic by trial and error is no better a mathematician than the naturally endowed one. This counts against the I-H work ethic view of moral development.

The best way to express the central criticism of the I-H view is by using a thought-experiment. Suppose a brilliant and pioneering scientist, Dr Freikenstein, decides to create two human individuals in his genetic research unit. One (the control) is a typical and fallible human being called Daimon. The other is a paragon, and his name is Eudaimon. Roughly speaking, Daimon is a good enough fellow, but he drinks and smokes too much, has a hot temper and a quick tongue and tends to get involved with the wrong women. He suffers from bouts of low self-esteem and guilt. Indolence and poor co-ordination add to his problems. Eudaimon, on the other hand, makes good friends, uses his time wisely, looks on the bright side and nourishes his ample talents to the full. He is no bore or prig, however, and his well-judged humour and penetrating insights are a joy and wonder to his varied entourage. Women are far from immune to his allure, and his discreet liaisons provide him and others with enduring comfort. Eudaimon cannot really understand envy, malice or even weakness of will. He gave up meat after reading an article in *The Guardian* about factory farming. This was really no hardship for him as his moral indignation effectively destroyed his taste for meat. He easily follows the path of disinterested good as he sees it, and he sees it very well. His college reference emphasised Eudaimon's human understanding, rationality and willpower – all non-moral virtues. Dr Freikenstein blushed with pride.

Let us ask two rather Greek-sounding questions: Given the *choice*, which of these individuals would you prefer to be? And which of these individuals do you consider the more *free*?

These questions are not intended as rhetorical. However, various reasons suggest that the clever money should go on Eudaimon. Note that he is no automaton. He deliberates and chooses freely, sometimes swimming, sometimes painting, etc. He is, admittedly singular when confronted by moral choices in that he invariably finds *consideration of the right thing to do a motivating reason*. Notice that Eudaimon understands that there are available to him, and he could theoretically choose to act upon, other considerations (glory, pleasure, idleness, etc) but he's just not motivated by them. Eudaimon is good simply by dint of following a moral algorithm modeled on a handful of (non-moral) virtues. Needless to say, he gets on very well with his other eudaimon friends, even though they have chosen very different careers, and argue fiercely over art, music and holiday destinations.

So it is far from clear that Irenaeus' empiricist claim that '...an object apprehended by experience has a surer effect than any theoretical inference' is true. An ability to perform *a priori* moral calculations, rather like algebra, would enhance rather than vitiate moral freedom. If this amplifies the paradox that moral freedom involves *constraints*, then so much the better. The FWD promotes freedom from external constraints at the expense of freedom to transcend the obstacles to rational and responsible action. It has confused true freedom on the one hand with licence and wantonness on the other. The wanton has many options but no real freedom or responsibility. The free agent's options may effectively narrow to just one choice; there is sometimes only one thing we should freely and responsibly do. ('He couldn't

hurt a fly', 'Here I stand, I can do no other.'). So freedom means a form of constraint; a state of being constrained by considerations of the good and the rational. In the words of Susan Wolf: '...What we need to know if we are to find out whether we are free and responsible beings is whether we have the ability to act in accordance with reason.'¹⁰ Sometimes, morally, we have no choice. And this is because freedom, reason and the good are analytically related.

The 'soul-making' view also overlooks the fact that we all need help if we are to be truly free and responsible. Such capacities are bestowed more than earned. If I am responsible I am not solely responsible for being so. Parents, teachers, writers and a host of influences beyond my choosing are essential. As Wolf says, 'We are not then, and never can be, fully responsible for whether and how much we *are* responsible.'¹¹ Conversely, the feckless will always have some very good excuses. So why doesn't God provide more help in our moral formation? Which brings us back to Daimon. We can now see that Daimon is not more but *less* free than Eudaimon. Certainly he's 'free' to do the wrong thing, but he's not free from the siren voices of lust, anger, fear, avarice and the rest of the dispositions that undermine and trump his best intentions. (One thinks of St Paul in Romans 7:15; 'The good thing I want to do I never do; the evil thing which I do not want – this is what I do.') This is a mean and mocking freedom, and it certainly seems too poorly nourished to do the work that has been asked of it by its advocates.

It appears, in conclusion, that the I-H theodicy fails. Given the choice, some of us would sooner be good than moral; and this is not just the good choice; it may also, incidentally, be the only moral one.

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¹ Hume, D. 1980 *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* Hackett p.63

² Peterson, M. 1998 *God and Evil* Westview Press p.41

³ Corner M. 1998 *Does God Exist?* Bristol Press p.97

⁴ Bettenson H.(Ed.) 1956 *The Early Christian Fathers* Oxford p.69 ff

⁵ Hick J. *Philosophy of Religion* Prentice Hall p.46

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mackie J.L. *Evil and Omnipotence* in Oxford Readings, *The Philosophy of Religion* Basil Mitchell (Ed.) 1986

⁸ Ibid. (5)

⁹ Mackie J.L. 1982 *The Miracle of Theism* Oxford p.172

¹⁰ Wolf S. 1990 *Freedom Within Reason* Oxford p.70

¹¹ Ibid. p.147 This article is an amended version of one that was printed in *The New Theologian* in the Spring of 2005. I am indebted to the editors of the RJP for detailed and penetrating criticisms of that piece, which have, to some degree, been addressed in this version.